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Miracles and Christian Apologetics

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Abstract: In this final instalment of the series I examine the question of whether miracles can serve as evidence for one religious form of theism over and against other religious forms of theism.

In the previous instalment of this series I argued that the occurrence of events best explained as miracles, that is to say events which an unaided nature could not be expected to produce and which advance what can reasonably be believed to be divine purposes, provide evidence for theism. In this final article I explore in what sense well-evidenced contemporary miracles and the miracles described in the New Testament count for Christianity, as opposed to the other major theistic religions of Judaism and Islam.¹

In what follows, I take there to be strong evidence that the New Testament accounts, as well as many contemporary reports, of events best understood to be miracles, are accurate, that is to say that the events they describe actually took place. Lest it be objected that I am being too bold, that I write as a philosopher and not as a historian, it bears emphasis that the rejection of such events as actually occurring is typically based on philosophical, rather than historical, grounds. When one sets aside unjustified philosophical prejudice, a strong case can be made for the occurrence both of contemporary miracles and the miracles described in the New Testament.²

The issue, in arguing that miracles provide confirmation for theism generally, and more specifically Christianity, is to explain how such events, considered as physical occurrences, are best explained on the basis of Christian theism, since, as has already been stressed, the question of whether an event occurred must be distinguished from the question of whether it is properly viewed as a miracle. In the case of confirming theism at a general level, the recalcitrance of such events to naturalistic explanation, that they are analogous

¹ Elsewhere, I have argued that non-theistic religions are unable to accommodate the concept of miracle. See *The Legitimacy of Miracle* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington, 2014), pp. 153-157.

² See: Craig Keener, *Miracles* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2011).

to acts of human agents, and that they can be seen to further what can plausibly be understood as divine purposes, allows them to function as evidence for theism over and against other world-views. It is one thing, however, to argue for a general theism, quite another to argue for a specific form of theism such as Christianity over and against other theistic religions. Thus John Earman, while allowing that “the evidentiary function of miracles . . . which . . . was envisioned by Hume’s more able eighteenth-century opponents is more sophisticated than is allowed by many modern commentators”³ nevertheless feels it necessary to assert that “the weak point in the envisioned evidentiary function lies in the fact that even after the miraculous event has been probabilified, there is still work to be done in assessing the support it gives to some religious doctrine.”⁴ He is careful to point out, however, that this difficulty is paralleled in science in deciding how empirical events bear on competing hypotheses, and “that there are no in principle obstacles to a positive outcome in either science or religion.”⁵

Earman’s comment concerning the analogy with science is helpful, though also somewhat limited, as we shall see. Various forms of theism can be thought of as competing versions of a large-scale hypothesis. The question, then, is whether miracles generally better fit within Christianity than other developed versions of theism? More particularly, can certain miracles that play a central role in Christianity be accommodated by its rivals? It is to these two issues that we turn our attention.

Abrahamic Religions and Miracles

In terms of comprehensive, theologically and philosophically articulated, theistic religions, Judaism and Islam are Christianity’s major competitors. All three appeal to the idea of a theistic God revealing himself in history. Specifically, they all appeal to a common revelation given to Abraham, and thus are commonly described as Abrahamic religions. Although all three have conceptual room for miracles and in their traditions acknowledge miracles, they have significant differences in their views concerning miracles.

Insofar as Judaism is committed to viewing Christianity as a heretical offshoot, and insofar as the miracles associated with Jesus could be seen to lend credence to the claim that he is the Messiah, the miracles reported in the New Testament tend to be dismissed in Jewish thought as unhistorical on ideological grounds. Judaism does not reject the possibility of contemporary

³ John Earman, *Hume’s Abject Failure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 67.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

miracles, but it does not take their actuality very seriously.⁶ The commitment to miracles seems to largely eschatological in the sense that their role is understood to be that of ushering in a new age that will mark the end of history.

Islam is ambivalent in its view of miracles. The Qur'an views Muhammad as the culmination of a line of prophets, "each sent to a particular community with a proclamation from God and usually accompanied by evidential miracles."⁷ One would expect that he, like his prophetic precursors would perform miracles, but, when challenged to perform a sign, he replies that he is only a moral messenger (Surah 17:90-93). It is true that some Muslim commentators on the Qur'an have attempted to credit Muhammad with miracles. David Thomas notes that,

the reference in 94.1-4 - 'Have we not expanded thee thy breast? And removed from thee thy burden, the which did gall thy back? And raised high the esteem [in which] thou [art held]?' - was understood by some interpreters to mean that Muhammad's chest had physically been opened by angels and his insides cleansed, . . . [and that] the reference in 54.1-2 - 'The hour [of judgement] is night and the moon is cleft asunder. But if they see a sign, they turn away, and say 'This is [but] transient magic' - was interpreted as a physical occurrence in the heavens witnessed by Muhammad and people around the world.⁸

These later amplifications of texts which, on the most charitable reading, only vaguely hint at the possibility of supernatural intervention, seem an attempt to "boost [Mohammad's] status to that of at least the equal of the greatest of his predecessors."⁹ Although not denying that in Islam, as in Christianity and other religions, there is a demographic which is 'miracle-happy' in the sense of readily accepting miracle reports, however poorly evidenced,¹⁰ it is fair to say that Islam generally downplays the significance of miracles, with the exception of

⁶ Louis Jacobs, "Miracles" in *A Concise Companion to the Jewish Religion* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁷ David Thomas, "Miracles in Islam" in *The Cambridge Companion to Miracles*, ed. Graham Twelftree (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 203.

⁸ Ibid. 204.

⁹ Ibid. 204-205.

¹⁰ David Clark reports having in his possession Turkish newspaper clippings to the effect "that when American (read *Christian*) astronaut Neil Armstrong stepped on the moon, he distinctly heard a strange sound that he only later recognized as the Muslim call to prayer." David Clark, "Miracles in World Religions," in *In Defense of Miracles*, ed. Douglas Geivett and Gary Habermas (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 204.

what it takes to be the supreme miracle, namely the Qur'an itself. The Qur'an is regarded by Muslims as a miracle insofar as they view its literary form to be so sublime that it could not have been produced by natural means.¹¹ Indeed, for many Muslims, the production of the Qur'an is the only miracle they are prepared to accept.¹²

Christianity, it seems fair to say, places a greater emphasis on the miraculous than does Judaism or Islam. Jesus, while recognizing that even the most dramatic of miracles would not convince his critics, when asked whether he is the Messiah, points to his miracles as validating his claim (Luke 7:18-23). Peter preaches the first evangelistic sermon at the miraculous event of Pentecost where disciples from Galilee were able to speak in languages they had no knowledge of (Acts 2:1-13). Peter's message is that prophecy of Joel has been fulfilled; that Jesus's resurrection has ushered in a new age in which supernatural interventions of God are to abound (Acts 2:14-41). A great deal of the growth of Christianity both historically and in contemporary times is attributed to non-Christians converting on the basis of what they take to be miraculous events, these being primarily healings, though reports of other events analogous to those recorded in the New Testament also exist.¹³ Keener notes that a large cause of church growth in Asia is attributed to miraculous healings. He points out,

that those who witness or are close to those who witness such reports take them quite seriously. Often these are people reared in entirely different religious traditions, for whom changing their faith tradition is socially costly, sometimes even leading to ostracism or persecution. Nevertheless, they act as if they fully regard the cures as qualitatively or quantitatively strongly different from the sorts of recoveries to which they are accustomed.¹⁴

One finds miraculous healing playing a similar role in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean.¹⁵

It appears, therefore, that at a very general level, Christianity is more accommodating of miracles than either Judaism or Islam. While all three acknowledge the possibility of miracles, Judaism and Islam are less comfortable with their actual occurrence than Christianity. If, therefore, there exist

¹¹ Thomas, "Miracles in Islam", p. 205.

¹² Clark, "Miracles in World Religions", p. 204.

¹³ Keener, *Miracles*, 579-599.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 309-358.

numerous well-evidenced accounts of events best explained as miracles, this counts in favour of Christianity.

Jesus' Miracles and Self-Understanding

At a much more specific level, it may be asked whether there are miracles which, if taken as occurring, confirm the central claim of Christianity, and disconfirm Judaism and Islam to the extent that these religions find it necessary to deny Christianity's central claim. The claim I am referring to is, of course, Christianity's claim that Jesus was God incarnate. It would be hard to argue that the answer is not a clear yes. It is for this reason that critics of Christianity are at pains to attack the historicity of the New Testament accounts. One does not meet individuals who, accepting the miracles surrounding Jesus's life and death, deny his divinity, though historically there have been some inclined to deny his humanity. The task then is not to explain whether if the occurrence of these miracles is granted they count in this way, but how they do so.

A central point which was made earlier in this series, but which bears emphasizing in our present discussion, is that the miracles recorded in the New Testament occur in the context of a larger teleological whole. Clark Pinnock very forcefully makes this point concerning Jesus's resurrection, the central miracle of the Christian faith, insisting that,

in the historical apologetic based on the bodily resurrection of Jesus, it is important to observe the full *context* of the putative event. If the occurrence be wrenched from its setting like a severed toe and held up to view, of course the Christian significance of it cannot be registered . . . The resurrection event is part and parcel of a much longer narrative.¹⁶

The resurrection, as Pinnock points out, is intricately connected to a web of other events. Jesus takes himself to be fulfilling Jewish prophecy, announcing that because he was present a new age of salvation had arrived (Lk 4:16-21). He both explicitly¹⁷ and implicitly¹⁸ claims to be God. He understands himself

¹⁶ Clark Pinnock, "Fails to Grasp Ontological Basis for Problems," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 30 (1978): pp. 158-9.

¹⁷ Jesus claimed the authority to forgive sins which in Jewish culture was a prerogative only possessed by God (Mk 2:1-12). Note how Jesus links his ability to heal the man to his authority to forgive sins.

¹⁸ When asked by the priests and elders to explain by what authority he was teaching in the Temple, Jesus tells the parable of the evil tenant farmers (Mt 21:33-45). In the parable the vineyard is a well-recognized symbol of Israel and the vineyard owner is God. The

to be the suffering servant described in Isaiah 52 and 53, who will give his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45), but have his life restored by God (Mk 10:34). The resurrection functions as evidence for Christianity not as some starkly anomalous event, but rather in the fact that it is embedded in a larger narrative that shows it to be the culmination and validation of Jesus's ministry.

An element of this embeddedness which should be remarked is the links between miraculous and 'ordinary', that is to say non-supernatural, events, which one should have no hesitation in accepting as historical. These links are such that if one denies the occurrence of the miracle one then has no satisfactory account of the ordinary event one has no reason to doubt. Consider the account of Jesus' bringing Jairus's daughter back to life (Lk.8:40-56). Suppose one wishes to accept the 'ordinary' details of the story, but wishes to excise the miracle. One accepts that Jairus had a very sick daughter, that he approached Jesus for help, that Jesus agreed to come but was delayed on the way, that word arrived while on the way that the daughter had died, that Jesus comes anyway, and that the daughter's regaining consciousness coincided with Jesus' visit to her sickbed. What one does accept is that the girl was dead rather than simply unconscious and hence that a miracle really occurred.

Suppose we adopt the hypothesis that the girl was not really dead, but simply unconscious. Have we really done away with the supernatural as an element of the account. It seems not, since we must still explain Jesus' absolute assurance that he could heal the girl, even though to the best of his knowledge she was dead. Such assurance seems inexplicable in the absence of miraculous power. Suppose that we excise this event from the report. Have we now done away with the supernatural. It seems not, since we have an extraordinary event as the cause of Jesus being delayed, namely his healing of the woman with the issue of blood. Does eliminating this presumably fantastic element from the narrative finally free us from any element of the miraculous. It seems not, since it was Jesus' alleged ability to heal that explains both the crowds which meet him and Jairus' approach to him in the first place. Unless there is reason to take the miraculous elements of this story as historical, there is little reason to accept the ordinary elements as historical. The point, of course, is that in many instances in the New Testament accounts, the natural and supernatural are so intertwined that there can be no question of accepting its testimony concerning ordinary events, yet rejecting its testimony concerning extraordinary events. The consequence of attempting to excise the supernatural from the natural in the New Testament does not take one to a historical core shorn of

servants sent by the landowner are the prophets. The landowner's heir is Jesus and has a far higher status than the servants.

superstition, but rather leads one to disregard its claim to be a historical document, even in the face of strong reasons to trust its historicity. It is clear that “it is not possible to do justice to the historically verifiable material in the Gospels without seeing . . . Jesus as being as much a miracle worker as a teacher”¹⁹ and that “any critical reconstruction of the historical of the historical Jesus must not only include but also, indeed, emphasize that he was a most powerful and prolific wonder worker.”²⁰ It will not do, therefore, to attempt to divorce the historical Jesus from accounts of his miracles. As Graham Twelftree observes in this respect,

He [Jesus] cannot be seen only, or even primarily, as a wise sage or as a wandering cynic or as a Jewish holyman. He was first and foremost a prolific miracle worker of great power and popularity, expressing in his activity the powerful eschatological presence of God.²¹

Also of note are the numerous links between supernatural events that include not only miracles, but visions and prophecies, such that in many instances the miracles occur in conjunction with a supernatural interpretation of their significance. The miracle of the virgin birth—more accurately, the virgin conception—is accompanied by visions and dreams which provide an interpretation of the event’s significance. When Jesus is baptised his special relationship to God is confirmed not only by the prophet John, but by an audible voice from heaven (Lk 3:21-22). When Jesus performs exorcisms, he is recognized by demonic powers as Son of the Most High God (Mk 5:6-7). Jesus is not only raised from the dead; he predicts his being raised, and, during the event of the transfiguration, is reassured and prepared for his coming ordeal (Mk 9:2-10). When non-Jews first receive the miracle of being able to speak in languages unknown to them, this is prepared by coordinated visions given to Cornelius and Peter respectively (Acts 10:1-48). Paul Helm is thus correct in his comment that “not only does the miraculous in [Christian] Scripture cohere with its other elements of prophecy and teaching, it is also congruent with the main thrust and message of that revelation.”²²

This element of supernatural interpretation makes it difficult for Christianity’s theistic competitors to acknowledge the occurrence of the miracles accompanying Jesus’ life and ministry as historical events, yet integrate

¹⁹ Graham Twelftree, *Jesus: The Miracle Worker* (Downer’s Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1999), p. 330.

²⁰ Ibid. 358.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Paul Helm, “The Miraculous,” *Science and Christian Belief* 3, no. 1 (1991): p. 88.

them into a different belief system. For example, Muslims accept Jesus as a prophet, who, like the prophetic messengers before him, is given evidential miracles to validate his message. They are thus inclined to accept the Virgin Birth. They cannot, however, accept the angelic announcement to Mary that her baby be the ‘Son of the Most High’, that is to say will have an ontological status not shared by any other human (Lk 1:26-38) or Simeon’s prophetic recognition that the infant Jesus is the promised Messiah (Lk 2:25-32). There is, however, no principled reason for accepting the claim that Mary while a virgin became pregnant, but denying the reality or content of her vision or Simeon’s prophetic announcement. To do so, seems to strain at a gnat, but be willing to swallow a camel. If there is good reason to trust Luke’s report that Mary virginally conceived, there seems equally good reason to trust his report concerning the other supernatural events associated with the Virgin Birth.

What this means is that there can be no question of other theistic religions simply co-opting Jesus and his miracles into their own theologies. It seems impossible in any consistent way to accord Jesus the status of a great Jewish prophet, yet hold that he was massively and fundamentally deceived in his self-understanding. No Jewish prophet would dare to forgive sins, that being the sole prerogative of God alone, yet Jesus does so, asserting that his ability to work miracles is a sign of his authority to grant forgiveness (Mk 2:1-12). No Jewish prophet points to his own significance but rather to God, yet Jesus is prepared to say “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28). Jesus clearly regards himself as greater than a prophet, and both explicitly and implicitly makes claims concerning his divinity. On the view that we must take seriously the reports of miracles in the New Testament, we have coinciding with Jesus’ understanding of his own identity, supernatural events which do not simply point to a general divine benevolence, but which explicitly serve to confirm his self-understanding. The very uniqueness of that self-understanding prevents religions other than Christianity doing justice to Jesus’ own understanding of his life and works.

It bears emphasis that the analogy suggested by Earman, namely that the relation of miracles to doctrine is similar to the relation of data to competing scientific hypotheses, although useful, is too limiting in certain instances. In the case of relating experimental data to scientific hypotheses we are attempting by the best use of our faculties to make inferences. In the case of a miracle and its relation to doctrine there exists, however, the possibility that the agent producing the event will also provide an interpretation of that event. Thus, a father may not only bake a batch of cookies and leave them on the counter where they will be found and enjoyed, he may also provide a note explaining

why they are there, for example, he knew that his daughter would be hungry after soccer practice. The cookies unaccompanied by the note could be taken as a general indicator of the benevolent intentions of the agent - the daughter could infer that she will likely be able to enjoy eating the cookies but does not know if her father intends her to enjoy them now or later at supper - but their being accompanied by the note makes it clear what exactly the intentions of the agent are. The note as a self-revelation of the baker, serves to make clear what exactly his specific purpose was in producing the cookies.

In the same way, a miracle may come with an accompanying supernatural interpretation. For example, Ananias in a vision is told to heal Saul of the blindness miraculously inflicted upon Saul on the Damascus road. Ananias concerned for his safety questions the instructions, but is told that Saul is God's chosen instrument to further the message of the gospel not only to Jews, but to the Gentiles. Saul is told at the time he is struck blind to go to Damascus, where he will be shown what to do. While praying in Damascus, Saul is shown in a vision that Ananias will come to heal him of his blindness. The purpose of the interlocked miracles of Saul being struck blind, while receiving instructions to go wait in Damascus, and Ananias' healing of Saul is revealed through the coordinated visions experienced by Saul and Ananias (Acts 9:3-18).

I have argued at a general level that the comprehensive developed form of theism most capable of accommodating both New Testament and contemporary accounts of miracles is Christianity. At a much more specific level, I have argued that, in the case of the New Testament, one is presented with miracles uniquely accompanied by the self-disclosure of God. It is this element of self-disclosure, such that the significance of the miracles of the New Testament is not simply inferred from the occurrence of the events, but rather revealed by the producing agent, which makes them impossible to incorporate in any non-arbitrary way into versions of theism other than Christianity. To the degree then that they have a strong claim to be considered historical events, they serve to confirm Christianity rather than other forms of theism.

Nothing in what I have said is to be taken as claiming that miracles do not occur in other religions or secular environments. Rather, I am arguing that the New Testament miracles, taken in conjunction with Jesus' self-understanding, and moral character, serve as the lens by which other miracles can be best understood. More accurately, I am claiming that the New Testament miracles are an essential part of the fullest expression of divine self-disclosure, and thus help to serve as a means by which to understand the significance of ongoing miracles, whether these occur in explicitly Christian settings or not.

Thus, although all miracles serve to some degree to reveal God's nature and purposes, not all miracles are equally revelatory. A life-long atheist who has gone blind from macular degeneration but who allows herself to be persuaded to go to a healing service at which she receives her sight might become persuaded that there is a God, but on the basis of that single event be unconvinced of anything but God's existence and general benevolence. Such an experience may lead her to investigate the claims of various religions, but as a single event it has limited revelatory significance.

For this reason, Christian apologists need to be careful not to claim more for the doctrinal implications of various miracles than such events reasonably warrant. Healing miracles, which by far seem to be the most common type of miracle, can reasonably be taken as a sign of God's care and mercy, and can be taken to confirm the central aspects of Christianity inasmuch as they appear to especially occur in conjunction with Christian outreach or revival. To go further than this, however, and take them as confirming very specific points of disputed doctrines is to project onto them an interpretation that does not seem warranted. Put differently, although miracles can include a very large and very specific element of self-disclosure from God, it is important that whatever element of self-disclosure there is be distinguished from what we attempt to infer on our own concerning the significance of the event.

It deserves emphasis in this regard that Jesus insists that genuine miracles are to be identified by their 'fruits', that is to say can they be seen over the course of time to further human flourishing and a deeper understanding of God and His purposes. As has been argued earlier, events are not to be judged miracles simply on the basis of whether they appear to be events nature would not otherwise produce, but also on the basis of whether they can be reasonably understood to further divine purposes.

Miracles and the Pyrrhonic Fallacy

It is frequently objected that, while it is true that if one admits the occurrence of certain New Testament and contemporary accounts of miracles that a strong case can be made for Christianity as compared to its competitors, the acceptance of such accounts amounts to special pleading? Thus Bart Ehrman claims that if one were to admit the miracles of Jesus one must also accept "the tradition of miracles done by Apollonius of Tyana, Hanina ben Dosa, Honi the Circle-Drawer [and] Vespasian."²³ This, unfortunately, is to commit the

²³ Ehrman made this claim in a debate with William Lane Craig at the College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Massachusetts, March 28, 2006. It is found in his first rebuttal to

Pyrrhonic error of *a priori* insisting that all miracles must be judged equally significant and equally well evidenced.

Leaving aside the already mentioned point that there is no reason to think that God might not perform a miracle for a non-believer or in a religion other than Christianity, it bears emphasis that Ehrman is simply wrong to claim that all miracle reports are on the same evidential level. Thus, commenting on Ehrman's example of Honi the Circle Drawer, Michael Licona notes that Honi is first mentioned in Josephus as a devout person whose prayers for rain were answered.²⁴ However,

around three centuries after Josephus, the story is reported in the Jerusalem Talmud, with many more details. Honi prays for rain. When it does not come, he draws a circle and stands inside of it, promising not to leave his spot until it rained. When only a few drops came, Honi said this is not what he had prayed for. Then it rained violently. But Honi said he had prayed for 'rain of good will, blessing, and graciousness.' Then it rained in a normal manner.²⁵

Further, whereas Josephus places Honi in the first century B.C., the Jerusalem Talmud places him in the sixth century B.C., five centuries earlier.²⁶

Ehrman's assertion that all reports of miracles must be considered as having identical evidential backing is based on the assumption that the occurrence of miracles is maximally improbable.²⁷ If miracles are maximally improbable then all reports of them can be treated as on the same evidential level; the conclusion being that, to the degree that a document contains reports of miracles it is historically unreliable. As we have seen, however, this assumption is question-begging, inasmuch as it *a priori* rules out the possibility of taking seriously reports of extraordinary events which, if they occur, are best

Craig. (<http://academics.holycross.edu/files/crc/ resurrection-debate-transcript.pdf>) Accessed August 12, 2012.

²⁴ Michael Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus* (Downers Grove, Indiana: InterVarsity Press, 2010), p. 178.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid. 179.

²⁷ "Historians can only establish what probably happened in the past, and by definition a miracle is the least probable occurrence. And so, by the very nature of the canons of historical research, we can't claim historically that a miracle probably happened." Ehrman made this claim in a debate with William Lane Craig at the College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Massachusetts, March 28, 2006.

(<http://academics.holycross.edu/files/crc/ resurrection-debate-transcript.pdf>) Accessed August 12, 2012.

understood as miracles. To rule out taking seriously what would usually be good grounds for thinking an event occurred, on the grounds that accepting the occurrence of the event suggests the action of a supernatural agent, is to assume that one can know in advance of ever examining the evidence that either God does not exist or if He does he would never intervene in history. The job of the historian is not to decree in advance what can or cannot happen, based on his or her metaphysical predilections, but rather to seek to ascertain what did in fact happen. The question of whether events best understood as miracles actually occur is an empirical one, not to be decided by an arbitrary fiat that refuses to countenance the possibility of supernatural causes.

In what has been said, it should be clear that my argument presupposes serious historical inquiry. There can be no special pleading on the part of the Christian apologist that acceptance of the miracles reported in the Christian tradition requires less evidential support than reported miracles in other traditions. If, for example, the apologist is to make the case that the reported miracle of Jesus' virgin birth is to be taken as actually occurring, whereas the reported miracle of Buddha's virgin birth is to be viewed as unlikely to have occurred, then she must be prepared to make the case why the New Testament accounts of Jesus's birth are to be considered more reliable than the accounts of Buddha's birth. Similarly, faced with the hypothesis that accounts of Jesus' virgin birth are the result of New Testament authors borrowing from pagan accounts of the birth of extraordinary figures, the apologist must be prepared to give good reasons for rejecting such a hypothesis as less than plausible. She is under no obligation, however, to accept as part of her methodology the assumption that - no matter how speculative - a natural explanation is always to be preferred to a supernatural one. She is, therefore, quite at liberty to point out how disanalogous the proposed similarities are, and the paucity of any kind of concrete evidence to support the idea that the New Testament accounts borrowed from pagan mythology.

Indeed, she may wish to point out that, although historians can scarcely avoid making causal judgments, pride of place goes to determining what actually took place. At least theoretically, the historian *qua* historian might reach the conclusion that the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke provide good evidence that Jesus was indeed born of a virgin, yet remain agnostic regarding whether the event had a supernatural cause. To insist, however, that because it would be difficult to provide any adequate account of what a natural cause might look like, the event cannot be accepted as happening, even if the sources have good claims on other grounds to be accepted is to put the cart before the horse. Similarly, it is at least possible in principle that a historian might reach the conclusion on the basis of the historical reliability of the

Gospels that Jesus, being dead, did in fact return to life, even if he does not wish to take a stand on what the cause of that event was. Gary Habermas is correct in his judgment that,

the charge that miracles cannot be investigated in terms of normal research methods would obtain only if we knew that such events did not occur at all, ... since it is an open question whether miracles occur in normal history, it would seem to be at least possible to investigate *the historical portion* of these claims with regard to their accuracy.”²⁸

Even if one denies the possibility of the historian accepting the event, but not making a judgment about its cause, it will not do to insist that to view an event as a miracle must be an ‘explanation of last resort.’ If there are good grounds for thinking that the authorial intent of the sources is to report what was viewed as a miracle, if the event occurred in a context in which it can plausibly be seen to have religious significance, if the sources have characteristics that favour the historicity of the event, and if no plausible naturalistic explanations exist, then any insistence by a historian that either the event could not have occurred or must have a natural explanation, however unlikely, is based not on historical evidence, but the historian’s insistence that supernatural causation is not to be considered. Such an insistence is based not on the evidence, but rather an assumption one brings to the evidence. Historians can scarcely escape the influence of interpretive horizons based on assumptions they bring to their work, but to the degree that such assumptions cannot be challenged or overthrown by actual evidence, they cease to function as genuine historians and become merely dogmatists.

Conclusion

Although all three major theistic religions provide a conceptual home for miracles, Christianity is the most accommodating of the concept. Further, given that the miraculous events described in the New Testament actually occurred, they, in conjunction with Jesus’ self-understanding and character provide strong reason to take Christianity as the fullest revelation of God. To the degree that the latter claim is made purely hypothetically such a conclusion might seem to have little apologetic value. This, however, is to ignore the fact that once mistaken philosophical presuppositions are set aside the New Testament documents have strong claims to being historically accurate. Once

²⁸ Gary Habermas, “The Resurrection of Jesus and Recent Agnosticism,” in *Reasons for Faith*, ed. Norman Geisler and Chad Meister (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007) p. 288.

these strong claims are granted, the Christian apologist is in a position to make the case that the New Testament miracles, as an essential part of the life and ministry of Jesus, witness to the supreme revelation of God in Jesus.

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