

Symposium on Miracles

WHY MIRACLES?

by *Terence L. Nichols*

Christian theology has traditionally understood miracles as signs of God's action in the world. This is emphasized in John's Gospel: "Now Jesus did many other signs . . . but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God . . ." (John 20:30–31 RSV). Jesus himself appeals to his miracles as justifying his divine authority (John 5:36, 10:25; Mark 2:11–12). Thus, miracles are part of God's revelation to humanity: Jesus not only teaches, he performs miracles as signs of God's power and eschatological kingdom (roughly one-third of Mark's Gospel concerns miracle stories). The greatest of these is Jesus' own resurrection.

Yet miracles have long been suspect in the sciences. Several of the following papers, particularly those by natural scientists (R. J. Berry, John Polkinghorne), address this suspicion and argue that there is no inconsistency between natural science and miracles.

Miracles would seem to be relevant to the dialogue between theology and science, for a principal concern of that dialogue has been God's action in the world. Does God act in special ways in nature? If so, how is that possible? What is the causal joint between divine activity and nature? If some miracles are indeed instances of God's action, they ought to disclose something about divine action in the world.

Miracles, however, entail many problems. First among these is definition. What is a miracle? A number of biblical terms are translated as "miracle": in the Hebrew Scriptures *'ot* (sign) and *mopet* (symbolic act), in the New Testament *semeia* (signs), *terata* (wonders), and *dunamis* (acts of power). Contemporary journalistic parlance has further stretched the meaning of *miracle*, diluting it to mean anything extraordinary, from an apparition to an unusual catch of a football.

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This fluidity of meaning is reflected in the following papers. Most of the essays are concerned with an objective understanding of the term—miracle as a special action of God in nature. Two of the articles, however (those of Wolfhart Pannenberg and Ilkka Pyysiäinen), focus on a more subjective notion: miracles are those events that we cannot explain and are taken by religious persons as signs of divine activity.

Miracles are problematic also in their relation to science and the laws of nature. David Hume's famous definition of miracles as "violations" of the laws of nature, and his rejection of them on that basis, epitomizes this difficulty. Hume's definition of miracles, and the idea that science has "disproved" their existence, is severely criticized in most of the following papers. As Berry (himself an eminent biologist) points out, Hume's reasoning is circular. In fact, Berry argues, "Science per se can neither prove nor disprove the occurrence of miracles" (see p. 725).

There are theological difficulties with miracles also, for they might seem to imply a God who acts unnaturally or capriciously. This is addressed by several of the authors in this section: Polkinghorne, Terence Nichols, and Keith Ward.

Apparent transcendence of the laws of nature is not the only important criterion of the miraculous. Also important is the religious context. A rock floating in the air would be inexplicable but would not be considered a miracle unless it were connected to a religious context. Jesus' resurrection was taken to be a great miracle precisely because it was understood as vindicating his claim to be sent from God. Both Christian tradition and scripture mention apparent miracles that do not come from God. This brings us back to the importance of miracles as signs. God, in Christian theology, does not work miracles capriciously but as pointers to a reality that transcends and yet is consonant with our universe. Nor are reported miracles unique to Christianity; Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and other religions also claim their occurrence. If indeed miracles are events in which God acts in an extraordinary way, then, like laboratory experiments that isolate one causal factor for study, they may have much to tell us about God's action in and through nature.