

Miracles: Providing Validation of the Christian Faith— Part One

By Dr. Norman Geisler

The central claims of Christianity are dependent on the apologetic¹ value of miracles. If miracles have no evidential value, then there is no objective, historical evidence to support the claims of historic, orthodox Christianity.

Some contemporary naturalists argue that, no matter how unusual an event is, it cannot be identified as a miracle. If true, this has serious implications for those who believe in miracles. No unusual event that lays claim to divine origin could be considered a miracle. Further, theistic religions such as Judaism and Christianity, in which miraculous claims are used apologetically, could not actually identify any of their unusual events as miraculous confirmation of their truth claims, no matter how much evidence they could produce for the authenticity of these events.

Identifiability of Miracles. There are two aspects to the case for the identifiability of miracles. First, miracles in general must be identifiable before a particular miracle can be identified. Second, one must be able to point to distinguishing marks in order to identify a specific event as a miracle. The focus here will be on the identifiability of miracles.

According to some, miracles cannot be identified because the concept of a miracle is not coherent. Alistair McKinnon, for example, claims that “the idea of a suspension of natural law is self-contradictory. This follows from the meaning of the term.”² For if natural laws are descriptive, they merely inform us about the actual course of events. But nothing, says McKinnon, can violate the actual course of events. He wrote: “This contradiction may stand out more clearly if for *natural law* we substitute the expression the *actual course of events*. Miracle would then be defined as ‘an event involving the suspension of the actual course of events.’” Therefore, “someone who insisted upon describing an event as a miracle would be in a rather odd position of claiming that its occurrence was contrary to the actual course of events.”³ McKinnon’s argument can be summarized as follows:

1. Natural laws describe the actual course of events.
2. A miracle is a violation of a natural law.
3. But it is impossible to violate the actual course of events (what is, is; what happens, happens).
4. Therefore, miracles are impossible.

McKinnon’s Argument. There are several problems with this argument. Three are particularly worth noting:

Begging the Question. If McKinnon is correct, miracles cannot be identified in the natural world, since whatever happens will not be a miracle. If whatever happens is *ipso facto* a natural event, then of course miracles never happen. This, however, simply begs the question; this definition of natural law is loaded against miracles. No matter what happens within the natural world, it will automatically be called a “natural event.” This would eliminate in advance the possibility of any event in the world being a miracle. But this fails to recognize

even the possibility that not every event *in* the world is *of* the world. For a miracle can be an effect *in* nature by a cause that is *beyond* nature. For the mind that makes a computer is *beyond* the computer, and yet the computer is *in* the world.

Misdefinition. The problem is that McKinnon has misdefined *natural laws*. Natural laws should not be defined as what *actually* happens but what *regularly* happens. As Richard Swinburne points out, “laws of nature do not just describe what happens.... They describe what happens in a regular and predictable way.” Therefore, “when what happens is entirely irregular and unpredictable, its occurrence is not something describable by natural laws.”⁴ In this way miracles can be identified as events within nature that fall into the class of the irregular and unpredictable. There may be more to a miracle than an irregular and unpredictable event in the natural world, but they are not less than this. At any rate they cannot be ruled out simply by defining a natural law as what actually occurs. Even though they occur in the natural world, miracles are distinguishable from natural occurrences.

Confusing Kinds of Events. Since natural laws deal with *regularities* and miracles with *singularities*, miracles cannot possibly be violations of natural laws. They are not even in the same class of events. A miracle is not a mini-natural law; it is a unique event with its own characteristics. Therefore, to claim that miracles don’t happen (or should not be believed to have happened), because they do not fall into the class of natural events is a category mistake. By the same logic, we might as well say that no book has an intelligent cause because its origin cannot be explained by the operational laws of physics and chemistry.

Flew’s Argument. A stronger attack on the apologetic value of miracles is laid out by Antony Flew. The basic objection to miracles by contemporary naturalists is not ontological but epistemological. That is, miracles are not rejected because we know they did not occur. Rather, we do not and cannot know that they *did* occur. Flew’s objection fits into this category. If successful, Flew’s argument shows that miracles have no apologetic value.

Miracles Are Parasitic to Nature. Flew broadly defines a miracle as something that “would never have happened had nature, as it were, been left to its own devices.”⁵ He notes that Thomas Aquinas demonstrated that miracles are not properly a violation of natural law. Aquinas wrote that “it is not against the principle of craftsmanship... if a craftsman effects a change in his product, even after he has given it its first form.”⁶ Not only is this power inherent in the idea of craftsmanship; so is the *mind* of the craftsman. A miracle bears the unmistakable mark of power and divine mind. A miracle, then, is “a striking interposition of divine power by which the operations of the ordinary course of nature are overruled, suspended, or modified.”⁷

Accepting this theistic definition, Flew insists that “exceptions are logic dependent upon rules. Only insofar as it can be shown that there is an order does it begin to be possible to show that the order is occasionally overridden.”⁸ In brief, miracles to Flew are logically parasitic to natural law. Hence, a strong view of miracles is possible without a strong view of the regularity of nature.

The Improbability of Miracles. Flew argues that miracles are *prima facie* improbable, quoting historian R. M. Grant that “credulity in antiquity varied inversely with the health of science and directly with the vigor of religion.”⁹ David Strauss, a nineteenth-century Bible critic, was even more skeptical. He wrote, “We may summarily reject all miracles, prophecies, narratives of angels and demons, and the like, as simply impossible and irreconcilable with the known and universal laws which govern the course of events.”¹⁰ According to Flew,

such skepticism is justified on a methodological basis.

(to be continued)

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Notes:

¹ The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines “apologetic” as “a presentation intended to justify or defend something”.

² Richard Swinburne, *Miracles*, p. 49.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 78).

⁵ Antony Flew, “Miracles,” *EP*, p. 346.

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, Book 3, p. 100.

⁷ See Flew, p. 346.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, p. 347).