

# Magic and Miracles

By Dr. Norman Geisler

Crucial to the apologetic use of miracles is the ability to distinguish true miracles from false ones. Many religions claim to be “proven” by miraculous deeds. While Judaism claims that Moses’ rod became a serpent and Christianity holds that Jesus walked on water, Islam’s Muhammad is supposed to have moved a mountain, and Hindu gurus claim the power to levitate themselves.

New Age prophet Benjamin Creme offers a spirit of power and divination that “overshadowed” Jesus and is now available to followers of “the Christ”: “It is this which has enabled them to perform what at that time were called miracles, which today are called spiritual or esoteric healing. Daily, all over the world, there are miracles of healing being performed....”

If a miracle is properly an act of God that suspends natural laws with a purpose of confirming the source of truth in God, what are we to make of such sales pitches? Can we tell what is truly miraculous from what is not of God and could be demonic? Is it possible to define a miracle in such a way as to exclude false claims and other kinds of unusual events?

**The Problem of Definition.** According to theism, a miracle is a supernatural intervention by a transcendent God into the natural world. But pantheism, like atheism, says that there is no God beyond the universe. Hence, all events have natural causes. They disagree only on whether “natural” is limited to the physical or can include the spiritual. As the pantheistic “Jesus” of the *Aquarian Gospel of Jesus Christ* says, “All things result from natural law.” Even Christian Science says that a miracle is, “that which is divinely natural, but must be learned humanly; a phenomenon of Science.” Instead of saying that there are no miracles, pantheists redefine miracles as a manipulation of natural law. In a classic view of pantheism, the *Star Wars* films, Luke Skywalker learned to use “the force” (natural law) in an almost spiritual power that enabled him to do his incredible deeds. Pantheists have even tried to incorporate advanced physics into explanations of the supernatural. Fritjof Capra’s book *The Tao of Physics* is an updated version of the pantheistic doctrine that all matter is at heart mystical: “The basic oneness of the universe is not only the central characteristic of the mystical experience, but is also one of the most important revelations of modern physics. It becomes apparent at the atomic level and manifests itself more and more as one penetrates deeper into matter, down into the realm of subatomic particles.”

So the source of pantheistic “miracles” is not an all-powerful personal God who is beyond the universe. It is an impersonal Force within the universe. Hence, these unusual events are not really supernatural; they are only *supernormal*.

**Supernatural versus Supernormal.** Christianity does not deny that supernormal events take place, but we deny that they are truly unique or have any apologetic value in confirming religious truth claims. The definition of a true miracle has three basic elements that are reflected in the three words associated with miracles in the Bible: *power*, *sign*, and *wonder*.

The *power* of miracles comes from a God who is beyond the universe. The nature of

miracles are that they are *wonders*, which inspire awe because they transcend natural laws. The word *sign* tells us the purpose of miracles: They confirm God’s message and messenger. The theological dimension of this definition is that miracles imply a God outside the universe who intervenes in it. Morally, because God is good, miracles produce and/or promote good. In their doctrinal dimension, miracles tell us which prophets are true and which are false. Teleologically (purposefully), miracles are never performed for entertainment. They have the purpose of glorifying God and directing people to him.

Pantheistic “miracles” don’t meet this definition because their power is not from God. New Age writer David Spangler identified the source of miracles for pantheists when he wrote, “Christ is the same force as Lucifer but moving in seemingly the opposite direction. Lucifer moves in to create the light within.... Christ moves out to release that light.” So the power for supernatural events in pantheism comes from Lucifer, or Satan, even though it is called Christ when it goes out from the individual.

From a biblical perspective, Lucifer, also called the Devil and Satan, is not the same as God or even equal to God. In the beginning, God created everything good: the earth (Gen. 1:1, 31), humanity (Gen. 1:27-28), and angels (Col. 1:15, 16). One angel was named Lucifer (Isa. 14:12). He was beautiful, but “lifted up with pride” (1 Tim. 3:6) and rebelled against God saying, “I will make myself like the Most High” (Isa. 14:14). One-third of all the angels left their home with God to follow him (Rev. 12:4). These beings are now known as Satan and his demons (Rev. 12:7 and Matt. 25:41). They do have unusual powers, in the sense that all angels have supernatural powers as part of the spiritual world. They are said to be “working in [energizing] the sons of disobedience” (Eph. 2:2). Satan is able to “disguise himself as an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14) even to appear to be on God’s side, but it is only a disguise.

***Miracles versus Magic.*** From a biblical perspective there are tests to distinguish miracles from New Age or occultic influences that might be called “magic.” Miracles are God-ordained supernatural interventions. Magic is supernatural manipulation of natural forces. The following chart summarizes these differences:

<b>Miracles</b>	<b>Magic</b>
Under God’s control	Under human control
Not available on command	Available on command
Supernatural power	A supernatural power
Associated with good	Associated with evil
Associated only with truth	Associated also with error
Can overpower evil	Cannot overpower good
Affirm Jesus is God in the flesh	Denies Jesus is God in the flesh
Prophecies always true	Prophecies sometimes false
Never associated with occult practices	Often associated with occult practices

Magic uses occult means to perform its acts. These are practices which claim to conjure powers from the spirit realm. In many cases they do just that; but it is demonic power. Some practices directly linked to demonic power in the Bible are:

- Witchcraft (Deut. 18:10)
- Fortune-telling (Deut. 18:10)
- Communicating with spirits (Deut. 18:11)
- Mediums (Deut. 18:11)
- Divination (Deut. 18:10)
- Astrology (Deut. 4:19; Isa. 47:13-15)
- Heresy (false teaching) (1 Tim. 4:1; 1 John 4:1-3)
- Immorality (Eph. 2:2-3)
- Self-deification (Gen. 3:5; Isa. 14:12)
- Lying (John 8:44)
- Idolatry (1 Cor. 10:19-20)
- Legalism and self-denial (Col. 2:16-23; 1 Tim. 4:1-4)

Many who practice and teach pantheistic “miracles” admit that they use occult practices and recommend them for others. These tests clearly show that such claims to supernatural powers are not miracles.

***Unique Biblical Miracles.*** Biblical miracles are superior and unique. The magicians of Egypt tried to reproduce Moses’ works by means of illusions with some success (Exod. 7:1 9ff.; 8:6ff.), but when God brought forth gnats from the dust, the sorcerers failed and exclaimed, “This is the finger of God” (Exod. 8:19). Elijah silenced all claims of the prophets of Baal when he called down fire from heaven when they could not (1 Kings 18). Moses’ authority was vindicated when Korah and his followers were swallowed up by the earth (Numbers 16). Aaron was shown to be God’s choice as priest when his rod budded (Numbers 17).

In the New Testament, Jesus healed the sick (Matt. 8:14-17), made the blind to see (Mark 8:22-26), cleansed lepers (Mark 1:40-45), and raised people from the dead (Luke 8:49-56). His pattern continued in the apostles, as Peter healed the beggar at the Temple gate (Acts 3:1-11) and raised Dorcas from the dead (Acts 9:36-41). Hebrews 2:4 tell us the purpose of these miracles: “God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.” As far as the purposefulness, goodness, and confirmation of God’s message, there is no comparison between these miracles and bending spoons.

***Unique Biblical Prophecy.*** Biblical prophecy is also unique in that, while most predictions are vague and often wrong, the Scriptures are remarkably precise and accurate. God foretold not only the coming of the destruction of Jerusalem (Isa. 22:1-25), but also the name of Cyrus, the Persian ruler who would return them (Isa. 44:28; 45:1).

This was 150 years before it all happened. The very place of Jesus’ birth is cited in about 700 B.C. (Micah 5:2). The time of his triumphal entry into Jerusalem was predicted

accurately by Daniel in 538 B.C. (Dan. 9:24-26). No fortune-teller can boast of anything like this accuracy or consistency. Christ predicted his own death (Mark 8:31), the means of his death (Matt. 16:24), his betrayal (Matt. 26:21), and his resurrection from the dead on the third day (Matt. 12:39-40). There is nothing like this anywhere in the occult prophecies or miracles. The prediction and resurrection of Jesus stands alone as *the* unique and unrepeatable event of history.

(from *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker Book House, 1999)

### **Sources**

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