

transported from cold 'scientific' objectivity to awe and wonder and even reverence. A second person would define a miracle as a supernatural event. It has no 'natural', that is, 'scientific', explanation. The 'laws of nature' are 'suspended' or 'violated'. Something outside of nature interrupts the course of nature.

A third definition of a miracle is an act of God which does not run counter to the 'laws of nature' but is special because of its context. Prayer, for example, is offered for someone dying of cancer. The cancer goes into remission and the person lives. Medical science can claim that the remission is part of the 'natural' process; those who prayed can claim it is the work of God.

A fourth definition could be that a miracle is a special event which has religious significance. We are told that random events, inexplicable to the scientist, occur at the subnuclear level. These are not to be seen as miracles, since they seem meaningless, but a special event which demonstrates the love or truth or goodness of God would rightly be called a miracle.

Fifthly, some would say that everything is a miracle. All that happens is God's action. Gravity, say, happens because God makes it happen. For the most part God works in regular and predictable ways, which we observe and assume to be 'laws of nature', but he is entirely free to work in unexpected ways, which we then label as special miracles.

All of these definitions have helpful insights, and, given the wide range of types of miracle, it may be wisest to allow that they all have a place in building up our understanding of the concept. Though we may wish to retain a strong element of the supernatural in any concept of miracle, it does not seem necessary to insist that every miracle must entail a strict violation of a natural law. This is illustrated by R. F. Holland's story of the mother who cries to God for a miracle when she sees her child stuck on the level crossing and hears the train approaching round the corner. The train shudders to a halt within inches of the child, not because the driver has seen him on the line, but because he was taken ill a quarter of a mile back and the train's automatic emergency braking system came into play. The mother rightly thanks God for a miracle, even though there is a perfectly 'natural' explanation for the train stopping.

The debate over miracles is at root a clash of rival world-views. Those whose world-view

has no room for the supernatural will resist any concept of miracle that involves supernatural intervention, and will seek to find alternative explanations for anything that does look miraculous. Those whose world-view includes the supernatural will, generally speaking, have no problem with the miraculous. If they would say, there is a God, if he made the world in the first place, if he upholds all things by the word of his *power, if he loves his creation and is concerned for his creatures, if his might and wisdom are infinite, then it is not at all surprising that on occasion evidences of his special activity should be seen in the world.

Miracles have traditionally been used in Christian apologetics to provide evidences for the existence of God and the authenticity of his *revelation in Christ and the Bible. Despite the philosophical weakness of an argument that says 'Your prayer has been answered, therefore God must exist', there can be no doubt that when an individual does experience a spectacular event in answer to prayer, he or she will be very inclined to accept it as evidence for the existence of God and thus a validation of the claims of Christianity. More recently, the value has been recognized of presenting this argument in the broader presuppositional perspective: 'We may view the world in one of two ways. Either it is the fixed machine of the naturalistic "scientific" world-view, or it is the handiwork of a living active present personal God. Given the occurrence of a miracle, which of these two world-views is most likely to be the right one?'

Both these approaches carry with them the risk that their use may be counterproductive. If a miraculous answer to prayer is evidence for the existence of God, then, some would say, an unanswered prayer is evidence that God does not exist. If the presence of miracles confirms a supernaturalistic world-view, the absence of miracles (and most would admit they are few and far between) can be seen to disconfirm it. Apologists need therefore to state their case with care. Sweeping statements like 'God answers prayer' or 'God heals today' need suitable qualification. Too many people have 'lost their faith' because such claims appear to have been falsified.

Besides using miracles to convince people of the truth of Christianity, Christian apologists need to defend the concept of miracle against the attacks that have been made on it. The most common attack is that miracles are

inconsistent with a truly scientific world-view. In response, the apologist can point out that the inconsistency only applies in the case of one specific scientific world-view, the 'clockwork universe' mechanistic view that claims that everything that occurs happens according to rigid scientific laws which totally control everything. Most contemporary scientists have a much less deterministic understanding of the world. Radical changes in many areas, especially quantum physics and in the philosophy of *science, have taken away the old inflexibility and replaced it with a much more 'open texture'. Many scientists believe in miracles and find no contradiction between that belief and their scientific world-view.

A traditional attack on the concept of miracles, going back to David *Hume, claims that the evidence for a miracle will always be small compared with the evidence that miracles do not happen, and since we should proportion our beliefs according to the evidence, we are never justified in believing a miracle has happened. Both parts of this argument are open to challenge. Granted, if one blind person miraculously sees, and a million blind people continue to be blind, the evidence in general seems strong that blind people do not become sighted. But as far as concerns the one person who sees the evidence is by no means small, it is totally overwhelming. And in practice it is very questionable that we do, or even should, proportion our beliefs according to the evidence. It is now recognized that we hold our beliefs for all sorts of reasons, and comparatively rarely do we balance up the sum of evidences for and against any specific belief. Rather, for example, we hold a belief because it is part of a package of beliefs, and the overall package appears to us to be the most satisfactory on offer.

A third line of attack challenges the value of miracles as evidence for the truth of Christianity, since other religions also claim miracles. In response the Christian apologist can point out that the Christian world-view readily accepts the existence and miraculous influence of other supernatural powers besides God. Most Christians would also be ready to allow that in his grace God does not limit his miraculous workings to Christians. And, again, though the supernatural effects worked by a West African juju practitioner may have no evidential value for the Christian God, a miracle that occurs in a specifically Christian context, in answer to

Christians praying, and demonstrating the love and goodness that are the heart of Christianity, will be accepted by most people as positive evidence for the truth of the Christian world-view.

Bibliography

R. D. Geivett and G. R. Habermas, *In Defence of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History* (Leicester, 1997).

P. HICKS

MIRACLES IN SCRIPTURE

Miracles and apologetics

Alongside the appeal to prophecy, miracles in Scripture have always had a prominent role in Christian apologetics. However, they have not always been regarded positively. As Colin Brown states, 'Miracle was once the foundations of all apologetics, then it became an apologetic crutch, and today it is not infrequently regarded as a cross for apologetics to bear.'

The appeal to miracles has been met with scepticism from earliest times (some of the Athenians scoffed at Paul's mention of resurrection, Acts 17:32). In the middle of the first century, thinkers such as Pliny the Elder argued that 'not even for God are all things possible'. God 'cannot, even if he wishes, commit suicide nor bestow eternity on mortals or recall the deceased, nor cause a man that has lived not to have lived or one that has held high office not to have held it, and that he has no power over what is past, save to forget it.'

Miracles and the Christian gospel

Arising in the wake of a 'recalling of the deceased', the Christian proclamation is miraculous at its core. The apostolic preaching recalled *Jesus' marvellous deeds (Acts 2:22; 10:38) and repeatedly testified to his resurrection from the dead (e.g. Acts 2:24; 4:33; 10:40). What Pliny deemed impossible had occurred in human history, and now the risen Christ promises to bestow eternity on mortals as well (see 2 Tim. 1:10; cf. Acts 4:2; 23:6; 24:15-21; 25:19; 26:6-8, 23).

God working marvellous deeds should have been no surprise to the Jewish people (cf. Acts 26:8), for the OT bore eloquent testimony to God's miraculous activity and promised a

future age in which miracles would occur (e.g. Isa. 35:5-6; 61:1-4). The Jewish people waited for a Messiah to arrive, performing these mighty works (cf. Matt. 11:2-4; Luke 7:18-23). Jesus' wonderful deeds attested to the fact that this age had arrived.

Apologetic issues raised by the miraculous

Since the gospel is miraculous at its core, various questions may have to be answered in its defence.

The problem of definition

Since any definition should arise empirically, i.e. from the events themselves, it is simplest to begin with the observation that miracles are noteworthy events that appear to be out of the ordinary and create wonder and amazement. This definition allows for the possibility of such wonders being performed by others, such as false prophets (Deut. 13; Mark 13:22), and it also allows for 'negative' miracles (e.g. Mark 11:12-14, 20-21; Acts 5:1-11; 13:11).

Did the miracles in the Gospels really happen?

The normal rules of evidence seem to indicate quite clearly that Jesus did many marvellous deeds that provoked wonder in those who observed them. The Gospel records show us that Jesus' *power to heal drew huge crowds, and the very public nature of the miracles could be taken as an indication of their authenticity (e.g. Acts 2:22; 26:26; 1 Cor. 15:3-11). The NT is based on the testimony of eye-witnesses (Mark 3:13-19; Luke 24:48; Acts 10:39-42) who, after Jesus' *resurrection, spoke about the marvellous powers he had displayed beforehand. Each Gospel contains numerous reports and descriptions of Jesus' various miracles, culminating in his resurrection. Matthew and Luke, each in his own way, also proclaim a great miracle at the beginning of Jesus' life, namely his virginal conception (Matt. 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-56; cf. John 8:41). On the standard critical understanding of the Gospels' composition, six independent sources (Mark, Q, M, L, John, apostolic preaching) attest to Jesus' miracles. Furthermore, sources outside of the NT, such as *Josephus and the Talmud, also clearly affirm the fact that Jesus did some amazing things. On the historical 'criterion of multiple attestation', the miracles are well supported.

How could they happen?

The Bible itself does not often provide information about how miracles occurred. Some may be explained phenomenologically, i.e. from the point of view of how it seemed to the observer. This may be the case, for example, for Joshua's long day (Josh. 10:12-14) or for Philip's journey to Azotus (Acts 8:40), but, then again, these may be instances of something that is simply inexplicable.

Naturalistic explanations are sometimes possible, and even occasionally are supplied by the biblical account (e.g. Exod. 14:21). Some miracles can be understood as an acceleration of natural processes, but this kind of explanation is not possible for all miracles. Sometimes Jesus appears to use 'magical' means (e.g. Mark 7:31-37). If the world contains secret powers that can be unlocked by those with greater insight, why should the Son of God not know about such things?

Are they unique?

Stories of great wonders and miracles have survived from elsewhere in the ancient world. The prophets Elijah and Elisha performed healings through divine power; first-century Gentiles attributed miracles of healing to the Greek god Asclepius and the Egyptian god Sarapis; and Apollonius of Tyana was a first-century wise man later reputed to be a healer. Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa, who lived in the first century, was known as a man who could predict the outcome of his prayers for healing, and also much later gained a reputation for actually doing marvellous deeds.

Exorcisms were a different matter. Although the idea of demon 'possession' (and so exorcism) does not seem to have been a feature of the Greek world prior to the time of the NT, Ancient Near Eastern materials indicate a familiarity with the notion. The NT itself knows of Jewish exorcists operating both inside (Mark 9:38-39; Matt. 12:27) and outside (Acts 19:13-16) the Jewish homeland.

People of the first century would have had a sense of the 'ordinary', which would then have alerted them to the extraordinary, and one of the reasons for the success of the early Christian movement was probably the fact that the stories of Jesus' miracles were sufficiently like the stories of miracles in the pagan world to earn them a hearing.

However, if Jesus' miracles were not unique, what made him so special? History clearly demonstrates that Jesus *was* regarded as special and that his wonder-working was an integral part of the remarkable impact that he had on this world.

To come at it from another angle, as citizens of the Graeco-Roman world, the NT writers themselves would have been aware of other miracle stories and yet they show very little interest in them. Other miracle workers appear at the edges of the NT story (Matt. 12:27; Mark 9:38-39; 13:22; Luke 11:19; Acts 19:13-16), but, in spite of such things occurring, the crowds can still recognize that something genuinely new was happening in Jesus' miracles (Matt. 9:33; Mark 1:27). What is this newness that was detected?

Attempts to differentiate biblical miracles, as 'signs', from mere pagan 'wonders', fail when the usage of the various terms is carefully assessed. Jesus most certainly stands out because of the sheer number of miracles attributed to him, and in their variety. It is also clear that his miracle-working drew huge crowds, large enough to be a factor in the call for his execution. These points should not be underplayed in the discussion of what made him remarkable. It is also possible to identify other unique features in the character of Jesus' wonder-working, and when other miracles are dealt with individually, the parallels with Jesus' miracles are not as close as when they are referred to *en masse*.

The basic difference lies in the connection between Jesus' miracles and the kingdom of God. The NT does not deal with Jesus' miracles in isolation from his teaching and other activities, or from the OT prophetic material which he fulfilled.

Isaiah promised an age of miracles (Isa. 35:5-6), associated with the Servant of the Lord (61:1-4), whose ministry would issue in a whole new era for Israel and for the world (Isa. 55-66). Daniel spoke of this as the kingdom of God, when all ungodly human power would be removed and one like a Son of Man would reign for ever (Dan. 2:44; 7:13-14). When Jesus acted as the Servant (Matt. 12:15-21), through performing miracles, this signalled that the kingdom of God was about to arrive (Matt. 12:28). When he rose from the dead and was exalted to the right hand of God as the Son of Man, he was installed as king in God's kingdom (Matt. 28:18).

Do miracles suspend the laws of nature?

The philosophical definition of a miracle as a 'suspension of the laws of nature' immediately raises a variety of problems. In the first century, Pliny declared that the things that are impossible for God to do (see above) 'demonstrate the power of nature, and prove that it is this that we mean by the word "God"'. For Pliny, as for many moderns, nature was the 'given', so powerful that it could not be overturned.

In the biblical world-view, nature is not autonomous, for the Creator is always active, sustaining and ruling over his creation. From a human point of view, his order can be discerned in what we might call 'laws of nature', which are provisional, descriptive and subject to the limitations of our time (e.g. human flight was once deemed impossible).

God's marvels are objectively present all around us, even if his role in them is ignored by sinful humanity (Rom. 1:20), and he is active in the ordinary course of events. This means, in one sense, that everything is 'miraculous', because everything is capable of provoking wonder at God's almighty power. However, against this backdrop of God's all-pervasive sovereignty, he still works extraordinary events that produce awe, wonder and excitement. Rather than being a suspension of some autonomous law, these are occasional, startling displays of the same almighty power with which God upholds the universe. By creating awe and wonder, these unusual events point human beings to the fact that God is Lord over the usual course of events. They show that behind 'nature' lies 'grace'.

The grace of God is supremely disclosed in his self-*revelation in human *history. When he revealed his name to Moses, he said, 'I AM WHO I AM', or, better, 'I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE' (Exod. 3:14). This was a promise that God would gradually disclose himself to human beings. Extraordinary events in the Scriptures tend to cluster around a new stage in God's self-disclosure (the exodus, the beginning of the prophetic period with Elijah and Elisha, the coming of Christ, the expansion of the gospel into new territories). As noted in the discussion on God and nature, any extraordinary event in human history wrought by God displays the almighty power that is normally operative behind ordinary historical processes and events. The climax of God's self-revelation in

history was in the incarnation (John 1:14, 18; Heb. 1:1–3).

Should we expect miracles to continue?

The continuance of Jesus' miracles was a key factor in the progress of the gospel recorded in Acts. Such things were recognized as the 'signs' of an apostle (2 Cor. 12:12), part of the first generation of gospel preaching (Heb. 2:4).

There are also hints that the miraculous continued into the life of the early church (cf. 1 Cor. 12:28; Jas 5:13–18). Some Church Fathers placed a great deal of emphasis on miracles occurring in their day, thinking as we can tend to do today that contemporary miracles endorse the reality of the biblical miracles.

The temptation to forge too close a relationship between any contemporary miracles and those of Christ, however, should be resisted. In the freedom of God, he can continue to act in extraordinary ways for ill (1 Cor. 11:30) or for good (Jas 5), although he does not promise to do so. Such occasions are dramatic reminders of who is sovereign in this world, in both the extraordinary and the ordinary course of events. As the activity of God is discerned behind all of life, so believers can bear testimony to a continuity between the God of their present experience and the God who became flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Contemporary miracles should not be permitted to eclipse the specialness of that time.

What did the miracles mean?

What his contemporaries noted as 'powers', Jesus called 'signs'. What did they signify?

Jesus has been accused of being a magician (Mark 3:22; 6:14; cf. Justin, *Dialogue*, 69; Origen, *Against Celsus*, 1.6, 28; Babylonian Talmud tractate *Sanhedrin*, 43a; Suetonius; Lucian, *Passing of Peregrinus*, 13), but his failure to use magical techniques, the variety and number of his miracles, and the wider character of his ministry show that he was much more than a magician. On the analogy of Elijah and Elisha, the wonders Jesus performed could signal that God was with him as a prophet (cf. Mark 6:15; Luke 7:16), but, acting and speaking on his own authority, he was much more than a prophet.

Drawing on prophecy, the Gospels depict Jesus as the long-awaited Christ, the Servant of the Lord who comes to bring in the kingdom of God. His coming amongst Israel manifested many wonderful signs, as promised, and these

signs brought renovation to Israel as a foretaste of the cosmic renovation that was soon to come. They also showed that the Messiah, 'the Son of God' (cf. Ps. 2:7), was 'God the Son'. His Father had shown him what to do (John 5:19) and had committed to him divine prerogatives (John 5:21–29).

In the long run, Jesus' miracles show that 'God became flesh'. They are signs of the freedom and sovereignty of God. Some miracles, in particular, are special demonstrations of his divinity (e.g. walking on the sea; raising the dead, bread in the desert). These tend to be the ones in which Jesus takes the initiative, as if his self-disclosure as the great 'I AM' (see Mark 6:50 and John's 'I am' sayings) was of paramount importance. This is endorsed by his resurrection and exaltation, in which he is declared to be the Son of God (Rom. 1:4), installed as Lord (Acts 2:36), and given the name above all names (Phil. 2:11).

The miracle of grace

This miracle of grace is at the core of the Christian proclamation. God became flesh and dwelt amongst us poor sinners. The miracles of the OT anticipate, and the miracles of the NT endorse, this event. The nature of this event is consistent with the virgin birth at its beginning, the wonders performed as its result, and the resurrection at its historical end.

The incarnation is the final great self-revelation of God in human history. It led to the cross, where the miracle of grace is so clearly displayed for those with eyes to see (Phil. 2:5–8). As Jesus hung on the cross, the Jewish leaders recognized that he had performed many miracles (Mark 15:31) and called for a final miracle by which he would avoid death (Mark 15:32). He did not accede to their wishes and died the death of a cursed man. Ironically, however, this was in order to secure the biggest miracle of all, for at the cross, God supremely displays the miracle of grace.

This also has its counterpart in the human heart. The Spirit of God brings about a deep conviction that the gospel word is, in fact, the word of God (1 Thess. 1:5; 2:13). It may be foolishness to those who do not understand, but the cross is the power of God for those being saved (1 Cor. 1:18–25). God's grace is discovered in this weakness, rather than simply in great displays of power. Thus, conversion is the greatest of all miracles (John 5:20–21).

If this miracle of grace in the believer is accorded the wonder that it truly deserves, then the other 'lesser' miracles can be understood in its light. The extraordinary events which we see displayed in the Scriptures as the almighty God acts in out-of-the-ordinary fashion are consistent with the miracle of conversion, bringing new life out of the old. As Jesus temporarily restores life to those who suffered under the various versions of human suffering, we catch a glimpse of that life to come in the restoration of all things.

The miracles display God's commitment to save human beings. In this fallen world, human beings live under the shadow of death, manifested in all kinds of suffering. Jesus' miracles show that God is opposed to this state of affairs. In this way, these signs of divine reality are a picture and a foretaste of future reality in the kingdom of God (cf. Rev. 21:1–4).

Bibliography

P. W. Barnett, *Is the New Testament History?* (Sydney, 1986), ch. 9; K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh, 1958), IV/2, pp. 212–247; C. Brown, *Miracles and the Critical Mind* (Grand Rapids and Exeter, 1984); W. Cotter, *Miracles in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook* (London, 1999); J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York, 1994), vol. 2, pp. 509–971; Y. Zakovitch, 'Miracle (OT)', and H. Remus, 'Miracle (NT)', *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 4, pp. 845–869.

P. G. BOLT

MITCHELL, JOHN CAMERON

John Cameron Mitchell (b. 1963) wrote, directed and starred in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), a film that might too easily be dismissed as a 'gender-bending' musical in the tradition of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Much to the contrary, *Hedwig* is a profound tale of a young man who seeks freedom but finds only confusion and rejection. When his sex change operation is botched, Hansel becomes Hedwig and masquerades as a woman. Caught in limbo between the sexes, Hedwig seeks companionship and answers, only to be abandoned by those who promise to rescue her.

The film captures some of the schizophrenic androgyny that is so much a part of post-

modern sexuality. In an almost worshipful climax, Hedwig becomes whole again, reunited with his true self, and the story is ultimately hopeful. Helped along by a powerful and even catchy rock score, *Hedwig* asks some pretty big questions about *sexuality, personal identity and role-playing.

Of special interest to theologians would be the song *The Origin of Love*, which remythologizes the creation myth in *Plato's *Symposium*. This myth becomes thematic to the film and should serve as a strong example of how such stories, when cast in a contemporary context, can capture imaginations and even devotees in a unique and powerful fashion.

D. S. RUSSELL

MODERNISM/MODERNITY

The term 'modern', used in connection with 'modernism' and 'modernity', refers to whatever is characteristic of the Western intellectual tradition during the 'modern period' (the period following the Reformation era). It should not be confused with 'whatever is most recent'. Modernism refers to a framework of ideas that define Western intellectual culture during the modern period. Modernity is often used as a synonym for modernism, but it may also refer to the ethos of modernism wherever and whenever that ethos is manifested, even if the modern period as such has come to an end.

In philosophy, the post-Reformation period begins with the work of French philosopher, René *Descartes (1596–1650). It happens that Descartes is also the most widely recognized emblem of all that is thought to be characteristic of modernity. Heir to the waning *scholasticism of the late medieval period, and troubled by internecine squabbles among religious authorities during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation periods, Descartes was especially interested in the possibility of putting all knowledge on a firm foundation. He was a man of unusual genius, with a penchant for charting new territory in the realm of ideas. Two of his ideas, regarding the problem of scepticism, and scientific investigation, reflect centrepieces in the modernist ethos. Both emerge in his masterpiece *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641).

Descartes gave the problem of scepticism unusually trenchant formulation. Yet he