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Miracles: True and False
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Introduction

Interest in miracles reviving in recent years.
Especially interest, in contrast to my own college days at Duke, 1959-63.
We see a resurgence of the occult also.
Perhaps the experiences of Carlos Castaneda have been influential.

Definition of Miracle

Do we properly define “miracle” as a “violation of natural law”?
It is true that a miracle is thought of as something that doesn’t naturally happen.
But how do we know it *violates* natural law?
Does a human action (say, picking up a pencil) violate natural law?

How well do we understand the universe?
Sub-atomic level (an epistemological floor w/ events penetrating it)
Cosmological level (time before the big-bang; space beyond telescope range)
Local level (space curvature & its implications re/ more than three spatial dimensions)
Human level (cybernetics & the problem of a machine initiating an action; consciousness & integration of stimuli; out-of-body experiences)

A suggested definition:

Based on NT terms for miracle: δυναμις, θαυμα, σημειον
(act of power, marvel, sign)

A miracle is a highly unusual event or combination of events which purports to be the result of personal interaction with natural phenomena by means which transcend known physical laws.

Do Miracles Occur?

Some arguments against miracles:

Deductive: *reduction ad absurdum*: based on miracle defined as violation of natural law vs God as lawful.

Inductive:

Hume (*Concerning Human Understanding*, §10): uniform experience against miracle, so accept any natural explanation first.

Harnack (*What is Christianity*, 24-25): ancients expected miracles, didn't understand nature.
 Bultmann (*Jesus Christ & Mythology*, 15): universe is a closed system of cause and effect.

Evidence for the miraculous:

Uniform human experience is *not* against the miraculous!
 Miracles reported in every culture & age.
 Yet nature is scientifically reliable.
 A general tendency for miracles to be done "in a corner."
 But not universally so:

e.g., Fatima, 13 Oct 1917, seen by 70,000 people

Do one right here?

Sorry! God's general procedure is to remain silent (Ps 50:3, 21).

Fulfillment of prophecy: some examples

- (1) Babylon deserted (Jer 51:42-43)
- (2) Idols of Memphis disappear (Ezk 30:13)
- (3) Tyre's dust scraped up & thrown in sea (Ezk 26:4, 12)
- (4) Israel's future (Hos 3:4-5)
- (5) Time of Messiah (Gen 49:10; Dan 9:24-27)
- (6) Light to Gentiles (Isa 49:6)
- (7) Israel regathered (Isa 11:11ff)
- (8) Jeconiah cursed (Jer 22:30)
- (9) Control of Jerusalem (Luke 21:24)
- (10) Status of Temple (Matt 24:2; 2 Thess 2:4)
- (11) Capernaum, Chorazin, Bethsaida (Matt 11:20-24)
- (12) Moral conditions of last days (2 Tim 3:1-5)
- (13) NT model of Messiah (see my paper)
- (14) Christ buried (Isa 53:9)

True & False Miracles

Two possible distinctions can be involved in these terms:

#	True	False	Comment
1	Really miraculous	Not really miraculous	Not all strange events are miraculous.
2	Good guide	Misleading	Re/ meaning of life

Therefore, we need to be able to test miracles.

But how?

For #1, use knowledge of nature, but may well be mistaken;
 will probably have numerous borderline cases.

For #2, Bible indicates this problem exists, gives important tests:

Recall Moses & magicians (Exodus 7 and 8)

Antichrist (2 Thessalonians 2:9)

1 John 4:1 – try the spirits

The tests:

(1) No failures:

Prophecy (Deut 18:20-21)

Miraculous acts (1 Kings 18, esp. vv 21, 37)

(2) Same God (Deut 13:1ff; 1 John 4:1-2)

(3) Same Gospel (Gal 1:6-9)

Conclusions

Life is dangerous; we have to make many decisions which have long-range consequences; some such decisions cannot be avoided; remember Pascal's wager.

Two foolish errors here:

(1) To deny the miraculous because you don't like the kind of world in which such would exist.

(2) To accept the miraculous without any concern whether all that is miraculous is on the side of good.

This is far too important a decision to leave to others to make for you.