



Does challenging superstition or faith protect people?
 Is it mistaken to support organised religion in membership or donations?

If people do good because they are human, not because God prompts them,
 is it right to risk giving God any credit when they alone own their good?



THE CASE AGAINST MIRACLES EDITED BY JOHN W LOFTUS

John W Loftus the editor of this excellent anthology is an atheist author who has earned three master's degrees from Lincoln Christian Seminary and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Loftus, a former student of noted Christian apologist William Lane Craig, got some of the biggest names in the field to contribute to this book, which represents a critical analysis of the very idea of miracles.

REVIEW OF THE BOOK

A miracle is perhaps best described by examples. Jesus died and rose again. Joseph Smith met an angel who led him to gold plates. Muhammad got the Koran from God.

Nobody tells us why events such as witches calling up storms successfully would not count!

PHILOSOPHY

Philosophers look at miracles apart from any evidence for them. They just do the logic. The book mentions atheist philosopher Michael Levine who says there are three questions.

- 1 You ask if a miracle is even possible.
- 2 You ask if it makes sense to believe in miracles on the basis of experience or evidence.
- 3 Then you ask if there have been any miracles with proper evidence that justifies belief that they have happened.

I would mention that asking if a miracle could be possible is one thing but asking if it is possible in a particular case is another.

Religionists say that it is an evidence matter and they condemn any approach that just wonders if they happen without considering evidence. But there is nothing wrong with it for you do the logic first and see if miracles are possible. Then you go to the evidence. Evidence is no good if it is evidence for something that cannot be true so logic has to underpin it.

A QUESTION OF EVIDENCE?

Believers and unbelievers agree that we should not believe in miracles easily. If they are very different from the norm or have a message from God then they need careful verification. Nobody says a miracle can be proven but in theory it can be shown to be the most reasonable belief based on the evidence available. The evidence needs to be good and if God creates then evidence is a gift from God too as much as the miracle is.

Believers say there is good evidence. Unbelievers say there is not. Believers only mean there is good evidence for certain miracles but other believers will dispute that. It is very messy.

This book says that extraordinary miracle type claims need extraordinary evidence - the ECREE Principle as John Loftus calls it in his chapter. I prefer to say, "Extraordinary claims need hard evidence". It is clearer and avoids the questioning person being accused of bias. It means the same thing.

If a miracle is reported we don't know if the person is reporting something that is simply impossible for nature to do or for anything to do. What happens then? Obviously if it is impossible then it never happened so there is no need for evidence but what if we just look anyway? If we make that choice then you need as good evidence for it as possible just like you

would need excellent evidence that somebody is a killer. Anything else would be unreasonable.

Loftus shows that there is nothing wrong with ECREE.

Objections such as:

#unbelievers cannot give us an ECREE for saying their ECREE is true so ECREE is self-defeating (like saying $1 + 1 = 2$)

#ECREE applies yes but cannot apply for every extraordinary claim or miracle claim (an excuse for not applying it to your favorite miracles)

#Lottery wins are extraordinary claims we don't need extraordinary evidence (confuses unusual with extraordinary and a lotto win is hardly like a miracle!)

all fail.

I would say that if there is nothing wrong with ECREE that permits us to accept it. It is the best and wisest choice.

In negative terms we accept it for at the end of a process of elimination we are left with it.

In positive terms it speaks for itself.

Either way of accepting it is fine but we prefer both! This highlights how solid it is.

THE BREAKDOWN FOR REQUIRED EVIDENCE

How do you show a miracle makes sense to believe in? You need evidence both for a natural law ceasing to apply or the impossible happening. The two are not the same thing. A natural law stops working. Another law maybe something supernatural steps in.

This is the breakdown or list of what you need,

#You need exceptionally good evidence that a natural law has ceased to apply. This is a matter purely for science. It shows attempts to put miracles beyond the reach of science are cheats.

You need exceptionally good evidence that another law or something stepped in.

You need exceptionally good evidence that this new law is not natural and must be paranormal or magical or supernatural. This needs an exceptional pile of good evidence because it must be near impossible to prove that nature is not playing a trick and imitating a miracle.

So a miracle needs three lines of hard evidence.

What happens when you get them? All you end up with is AN ASSERTION that nature did not do something. You cannot test paranormal or magical or supernatural forces so that is as far as you can go. "Its not a natural event but I can say no more than that." You end up with an anomaly that interests science. You do not get to a miracle. The miracle conclusion goes beyond evidence and logic.

The evidence sifting and checking is a lot of work. And it is never done. Half doing it is as bad as not bothering. Evidence half done sends the innocent person to the gallows.

DAVID HUME

The book covers David Hume who famously observed that if a miracle is reported it is more likely that a lie has been told or a mistake been made. He did not say miracles do not happen. He only said that thinking they have happened when somebody says so is dangerous.

PROPHECY

Hume correctly said that prophecies and miracles are in the same boat. So to refute miracles is to refute prophecies for it is a miracle to be able to tell the future in a way that will "exceed the capacity of human nature". "What we have said of miracles may be applied, without any variation, to prophecies."

Is one who says a miracle happened claiming to be a prophet in the sense, "This event happened and some power given to me beyond what human nature can do is informing me that it was a miracle from God"? Yes. Prophecy is only the power to reveal what only a God could tell you. God giving you knowledge about the past is as much prophecy as God giving you knowledge about the future.

The New Testament stresses prophecy a lot. Jesus repeatedly claimed to have been predicted by the God who knows the past and present and future through the Old Testament prophets. This matters even more than the data that he rose from the dead for it is all about it being predicted beforehand.

ZERO PROBABILITY

Hume was talking about miracle probability.

Something that is a non-zero probability can be true. A probability is not about showing something definitely is true but how likely it is to be true. An improbability is the reverse. (Zero probability is a euphemism for impossible.)

If there is almost a zero chance that nature is accidentally making a lookalike miracle, one that you would swear was a real miracle, it may still be a natural event.

You never ever need to be definite that something is beyond what nature can do. Ever.

POSSIBILITY DOES NOT COUNT

We cannot live worrying about what is possible. We must worry about what is probable or likely instead and prioritise the options that are the most likely.

The book warns that possibilities do not count. It cautions us that something being theoretically possible does not mean it should be taken seriously. It is a fallacy to argue that if somebody was cured by medicine that maybe it was a miracle. It should not be mentioned for it is only an attempt to complicate something simple and manipulate another to believe in miracles.

Take Jesus rising from the dead. If it is possible that he did it is possible that it was some kind of psychic trick. Nature fakes or simulates miracles. Nobody denies that. But why can't magic or the supernatural fake a miracle too? You find something miraculous but where the miracle came in you cannot know. The possibilities are endless in relation to any miracle not just the resurrection. There are possibilities we cannot even think of. Saying Jesus rose is cherry-picking one possibility over many.

Many things are more possible than others. A possibility hinted at by the evidence is stronger than one that comes from thin air. You would need to be there when the tomb was empty and when Jesus appeared to find those suggestions.

So though all possibilities are not equal, none matter enough to count.

What matters is probability. Only nature teaches us what that actually is.

WHAT IS A MIRACLE SUPPOSED TO SHOW?

What does a miracle allegedly validate?

1 A specific doctrine? Eg that Mary rose bodily to Heaven. This assumes God is truthful and works through the miracles. A doctrine will be part of a worldview so it indirectly verifies the worldview.

2 A religious body of doctrine - a worldview? This too assumes God is truthful and works through the miracle. Medjugorje does this by telling you to read the Bible as God's word and the Bible teaches a worldview. The book says, "The question of whether miracle reports are credible turns on a larger question, namely, whether we ought to hold the supernaturalistic worldview, or the naturalistic one." But a everybody can invent or think of a supernaturalistic worldview that contradicts everybody else. The supernatural is always only an assumption both in itself and in what kind of supernatural you think it is.

If hard evidence is ever needed it is needed here for we are not talking about Donald Trump rising from the dead which would be a fascinating occurrence. We are talking about something of huge magnitude a world view. And not just any

worldview, one that claims to connect you to God the only being who truly matters and to put you in a relationship with him if you choose.

3 That there is a supernatural trickster?

4 Maybe it just happens. The book says "it may turn out that nature is not uniform after all." The book denies that this gives grounds for believing in miracles. This is basically saying a miracle should be assumed to be an act of nature so it is not really magic but just looks like it is. "In order to identify the event as a miracle, we must find some way to rule out the possibility of ever finding a natural cause for it." "There can be no observable difference between an event that has a supernatural cause, since such a cause in principle unobservable and one that fails to have any cause at all". I would say that if a miracle is even A POSSIBLE threat to cause and effect it needs serious evidence and you need proof not evidence that it is not a threat. A potential threat in such a fundamental matter is to be hated as much as an actual one. It is an actual threat to our confidence in cause and effect.

5 Maybe it tries to show a message but fails or gives the wrong impression.

Take the first two points. A worldview is a very big thing and a miracle then even the resurrection of Jesus or the spinning sun at Fatima falls short of what is needed. The miracle tries to prove too much and that is a bad sign. By a process of elimination it is either just a natural or supernatural anomaly/mistake and nothing important.

DIVINELY INSPIRED SCRIPTURES

In religion, God uses men and books to speak for him and to be his voice. That is the framework in which miracles are reported. The scripture is the grounding of the miracle and what it is about. The Bible claims to be the word of God and the New Testament proclaims it godbreathed and Jesus promises to protect every dot of the Old Testament - another way of saying he approves of its doctrines and claims.

As even the brightest people are prone to error, the idea is that if you are open to it God will set up your life to bring you lessons. He sort of communicates. If miracles are about loving God and connecting to him then this is necessary. It is the personal touch. It is not merely trying to figure things out.

Even if Hume were wrong and there is miracle testimony out there that we should believe this makes a case not for believing the Bible account of miracles but rejecting it. Of the Bible he writes, "I desire any one to lay his hand upon his heart, and after a serious consideration declare, whether he thinks that the falsehood of such a book, supported by such a testimony, would be more extraordinary and miraculous than all the miracles it relates; which is, however, necessary to make it be received, according to the measures of probability above established." The Christian religion is actually an insult to miracle testimony.

So the Bible goes with the miracle and vice versa. To condemn one is to debunk the other.

OTHER INFORMATION IN THE BOOK

The book says that God is defined as a being that you have no real experiential evidence for his existence. He is spirit so he cannot be heard or touched. "Nor does anybody see God do a miracle either." In other words you don't see who is doing it and why or how - you just see an effect.

Thomas Paine is quoted, "Revelation [from God] when applied to religion, means something communicated immediately from God to man. It is revelation to the first person only, an hearsay to every other, and, consequently, they are not obliged to believe it. It is a contradiction in terms and ideas to call anything a revelation that comes to us at second hand, either verbally or in writing. Revelation is necessarily limited to the first communication."

Against Elisha getting bears to attack children - The bears in the story are actually Syrian brown bears and they are small and shy and would not be near those children for their home as the mountains. These bears then if they were away from home were hungry and that was why they were aggressive.

The Bible speaks of the miracle of the flood. But lots of other miracles are implied. For example, take how such a flood would make the world spin more so the ark of Noah would not have survived the turbulent and insane waves that would result. And all that water would have taken the salt out of the oceans. The salt came from the oceans just being the oceans instead of disappearing and coming back when the flood settled - there being no flood - period.

Nothing in the Bible speaks of female angels.

Jesus says angels do not marry and are not given in marriage. This is because angels are married to God in a sense.

When Jesus ascended he would have died the higher he went up. I would add that the Christian answer which is that he went up on a cloud only means that he used symbolism to go. The cloud is an image of God taking Jesus away. The text does not say the cloud was not real or that it was a stand-in for God. A cloud transporting you made sense in those days.

There are several clues that people thought Paul had a mental problem. He even admitted to speaking like a man deranged. He admitted to worrying that people were thinking that he had an unsound mind.

It is pointed out that the New Testament writers used prophecies out of context to argue that Jesus was predicted. They fabricated prophecies. They even rewrote them to retrofit them - this was to get them to match Jesus's life. Far fetched interpretations were used. The book says you would need to see their motives to accuse them of lying and says their techniques were common among Jewish teachers at the time. "The Christian authors were not violating what we would call the professional standards of their day."

I wish to say, writers can and did use prophecies that way. The idea was that God's word gave lessons in 500 BC that could help and speak to parallel situations in 30 AD. This was treating the Bible as a guide but was never meant to be seen as actual prophecies of the the current situation. The Jews however did have some prophecies that the Bible did not say were fulfilled yet that they speculated were directly predicting their day but they did not use far fetched interpretations or alter the text or retrofit. The New Testament writers violated Jesus' own command that the Jewish Bible text must be absolutely respected even to the smallest iota.

The New Testament never claimed to care about the current culture. In fact it condemns Jewish and Pagan scholarship.

The New Testament writers were deliberate frauds trying to deceive those who had not the time or the money to check the sources of the prophecies.

CONCLUSION

Christians base faith in miracles on a refusal to demand and look for hard evidence. Religion just causes the whole discussion to be riddled with lies. Miracles are assumed and evidence cannot point to them. This is not bias. It is fact. Evidence for miracles always involves overreaching. That is not evidence. What is built on a miracle allegation is entirely disproportionate and excessive. It is like trying to build a cathedral on the point of a needle.

APPENDIX

THE NOTE ABOUT THE GOSPELS AND JESUS

Joseph's dream is used in Gospel of Matthew's narrative to help explain why Mary was not put to death for dishonoring him because of adultery. There are five other dreams in this gospel account which were all intended to save someone's life. So, Joseph's dream was probably meant to save Mary's life too (Matthew 1:19-23; 2:12; 2:19-23; & 27:19). Matthew J. Marohl shows in Joseph's Dilemma: "Honor Killing" in the Birth Narrative of Matthew (Wipf & Stock Publisher, 2008), that "Joseph's dilemma involves the possibility of an honor killing. If Joseph reveals that Mary is pregnant, she will be killed. If Joseph conceals Mary's pregnancy, he will be opposing the law of the Lord. What is a 'righteous' man to do?" "Early Christ-followers understood Joseph's dilemma to involve an assumption of adultery and the subsequent possibility of the killing of Mary." This was part of their culture. Honor killings were justified in both the Old and New Testaments. Jesus even agreed with the Mosaic Law (Exodus 21:17; Leviticus 20:9) against his opponents on behalf of honor killings of children who dishonored their parents (Mark 7:8-13). The tale of the woman caught in adultery, where Jesus exposes the hypocrisy of her accusers, doesn't change what Jesus thinks of the law either (John 8; Matthew 5:18).