

MIRACLES AND THE HISTORIAN

Quote: Robert M. Price wrote in 2003: Those who claim that only a naturalistic bias prevents critics from accepting the biblical miracle stories as factual have to explain why they themselves are by no means willing to accept all the wonders of nonbiblical scriptures and legends. It is obvious that they are simply trying to substitute for historical method the old doctrine of the inerrancy of the Bible. Their real gripe is not that critics hold a theoretical bias, that of naturalism, but rather that they fail to hold one, namely the belief in the historical infallibility of the Christian Bible.

Nothing in the past can be proven beyond reasonable doubt or proven 100% because you cannot bring the past back to check it. You cannot repeat it to experiment on it. When a historian says his conclusions are beyond reasonable doubt he means something different from what is usually meant. If you are talking about 10,000 BC you will have little evidence to work on so you just come to the most reasonable conclusion you can. It is beyond reasonable doubt with regard to what evidence you have got. But it is not beyond reasonable doubt in the sense that it is extremely likely to be correct.

Miracles and supernatural events are by default not as believable as any natural event.

For a historian, even if magic can happen and he can verify it, a highly unlikely non-magical event is more likely than a magical one. It does not matter even the non-magical is even a tiny bit more likely than the magical. That is not the point.

Today's believers in miracles such as the resurrection of Jesus are told, "But science cannot show that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day and science says dead people stay dead." The Christian answer is, "But it is a historical question not scientific one." Is it really? The Church uses theologians not historians!

There are attempts to argue that God probably exists for God probably raised Jesus from the dead. But if Jesus probably was seen alive after his body vanished from the tomb that does not mean he was probably resurrected. And if he was probably resurrected that does not mean that God probably did it.

And there is no evidence that the resurrection has any importance for there is no evidence that Jesus is alive today.

Believers say that if you say there is no reason to believe in any miracle then you should admit that you cannot know if miracles have never taken place at all in the past. They say, "You cannot look at the evidence for and against every claimed miracle. Only doing that can settle the question." But that argument can be turned against them too. They cannot look at every event that is possibly a miracle to get evidence that overall people are trustworthy or too untrustworthy when they report miracles. It is better to assume that miracles have never really happened in the past than to assume that they have ever happened. It is for the same reason that you should assume that some illness killed your cat and not some black magic spell. You assume because you have to assume something and it is sensible to assume all you need to assume.

FROM THE STANFORD DICTIONARY OF PHILOSOPHY

A classic formulation of a criteriological argument for miracles is employed by Charles Leslie (1697/1815: 13), who argues that we may safely believe an historical claim that meets four criteria:

- 1 That the matters of fact be such, as that men's outward senses, their eyes and ears, may be judges of it.
- 2 That it be done publicly in the face of the world.
- 3 That not only public monuments be kept up in memory of it, but some outward actions to be performed.
- 4 That such monuments, and such actions or observances, be instituted, and do commence from the time that the matter of fact was done.

The first two criteria, Leslie explains, "make it impossible for any such matter of fact to be imposed upon men, at the time when such fact was said to be done, because every man's eyes and senses would contradict it." The latter two criteria assure those who come afterwards that the account of the event was not invented subsequent to the time of the purported event. Leslie points out that these criteria are not necessary conditions of factual truth, but he insists that they are—taken jointly—sufficient. Hence we may speak of Leslie's principle: If any reported event meets all four of these criteria, then its historicity is certain.

1#A miracle is by definition the most improbable of events; the probability of a miracle is infinitesimally remote.

2#A historian can establish only what probably happened in the past.

Therefore,

#A historian can never establish that a miracle happened.

Waiving the tendentious definition in premise 1, the supposed contradiction involved in denying the conclusion—"that the most improbable event is the most probable" (Ehrman 2003: 229)—is merely verbal, arising from a failure to distinguish between the probability of a miracle claim considered apart from the evidence and the probability of the claim given that evidence.

ANALYSIS

The above argument says that a historian depends on evidence to see what probably happened in the past and the evidence can point her or him to assert that a miracle probably happened. It says that a miracle being very unlikely does not mean that the evidence for it can be dismissed as unpersuasive.

Christianity claims to be a historical faith thus it needs to be based on the principles used by the historian. If it is historical, then it is a religion for historians.

Philosophy can never show or prove that any miracle took place. Suppose it showed the need for a saviour to return from the dead as a resurrected being. That would not prove the gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus to be right.

Philosophy may be able to prove that belief in miracles is intrinsically absurd.

Miracles claim to be and are presented as a HISTORICAL QUESTION. A miracle report of any kind is never a philosophical question. All philosophy may be able to do in theory is show that miracles are not necessarily absurd. If it shows they are absurd then no evidence for a miracle can be good enough.

Miracle reports do not "ring true." This instinct needs to be taken seriously. We have to resist this to believe in miracles. That raises questions about objectivity and honesty.

Religion says that if the evidence says a miracle report is probably true according to the evidence then it must be accepted as historical fact or as probably historically factual. But it is not as simple as that. Suppose the evidence says that Joan of Arc was alive after she was burned to ashes. It does but nobody says it was a miracle. An imposter is believed to have been at work. The historian will simply say that it was claimed she was seen after. He would say this even if it were reported as a miracle. And even if there was a Church based on the death and resurrection of Joan of Arc.

And if there is force raising the likes of Joan from the dead how do we know that is actually what it did? Maybe it made the people have a false vision of Joan being burnt at the stake? Maybe false memories were planted in the record keepers? A historian who accepts a miracle on the basis of history is unprofessional unless he admits that the evidence says something supernatural took place but he does not know what it is. The historian's tool can never tell us what the miracle was.

Criminology and history have something in common. A man is found murdered. Criminologists will not say, "There is no point in trying to find the killer for we cannot prove the killer did it anyway. It could be that a fairy or demon or a god murdered him." They have to leave the case open. They have to put supernatural possibilities out of their minds and hunt the killer and maybe accuse those who are pointed at by the evidence even though the supernatural casts doubt on the evidence. The possibility of the supernatural has to be considered a non-possibility. Historians do the same thing. The tools of the historian cannot show that Jesus really was conceived without a father or that Elijah went to Heaven in a chariot of fire.

It seems humble to say that you don't know for sure if you can exclude supernatural activity from any event. Perhaps your mother was sterile and didn't know it for God miraculously made her get pregnant. But is it humble? You are saying you know the supernatural or magical might be involved. But you cannot understand the natural so how can you understand if the supernatural might happen? You do not know if it might happen at all. But you might say you don't know if it might not happen either! But at least you cannot be blamed for you have to take a default position and that is the only wise default to take for you cannot really know if something supernatural did something. In other words, see the miracle as something that is somehow natural for improbable things can and do happen naturally.

A historian will find testimonies to ghosts and different kinds of miracles. In some cases, there is no testimony as good as those testimonies that contradicts them. So is the historian to say that the evidence favours the miracle as a real event and not as a pack of lies or exaggerations or based on some error? No professional historian can or will answer yes. If he did, he

would have to insist that we should believe a miracle no matter how ludicrous it is as long as there is testimony in its favour that outweighs any evidence or testimony that contradicts it.

Out of respect for historians and the tools of the historian, we should never use history as an excuse for accepting that a miracle has happened. Miracles are presented as good when they implicitly insult one of our most important academic disciplines. Disgraceful!

The Christian is supposed to judge if a miracle is a sign from God by the teaching it gives or implies or supports. Some say that all miracles that support untrue teaching are hoaxes even if we don't know how it was done. Perhaps the testimony for it was false or mistaken in some way. So you judge a miracle by its doctrine - it is not the other way around. Many Christians complain about those who chase after miracles because they want signs that false doctrine or stupid doctrine is true.

Historians both Christian and non-Christian find miracle tales or far-fetched yarns in the material they examine from decades and centuries gone by. They do not take them seriously if they seem to have been written down long after the alleged events. The longer the gap between the event and its being written down the more suspicion is aroused.

Some say they are biased because something could be true and written about a long time later. Yes but the point is plausibility. We cannot be expected to assume that the tales are true.

Others say that a miracle can happen but through another miracle, the evidence only comes to light and gets written down decades or centuries later. So in other words, God miraculously can suddenly provide evidence for a miracle tale that is centuries old. But this argument is stupid. You could produce evidence and claim it is a miracle. Also, what if God say cures Johnny of paralysis today to verify somebody saying that Noah rose from the dead in 2000 BC? A God that can't master the evidence when he does the Noah evidence and has to resort to providing evidence years later is hardly trustworthy.

FINALLY

History is an art. It is a science too but not as much as it is a form of art. It is about what probably happened in times gone by. The probable is as far as you are going to get for it is impossible to work out what actually happened. The historian has to realise that people in the past made mistakes and often lied and often got away with it. So the historian does not read something in an ancient writing and assume it is true for there is no evidence against it. No. He looks with suspicion at it. If he agrees with it he only means he is going to assume that it is probably true until new light might come. In history, it is vital not to think that because something is possible it is therefore probable. A historian says something seems probable but that is not the same as saying it is probable. The historian cannot even consider miracle stories as probably true or possibly true. It is not that he is biased. It is just that history is ruined if you imagine its full of miracles. The historian who says that Hitler was a saint and an evil alien double replaced him would have credence.

James McGrath: "All sorts of fairly improbable scenarios are inevitably going to be more likely than an extremely improbable one." Mary, though a virgin, getting pregnant by a stray sperm makes more sense than the Holy Spirit impregnating her. Jesus being put in the wrong tomb and being stolen from it while another tomb that is found open is mistaken for his is better than imagining that he rose bodily from the dead leaving his tomb empty.

Religion says it is biased to say that miracles do not happen. But when history is a system of errors and guesses about what probably happened history cannot say for sure if a miracle took place. We are not being biased but being consistent with what history is. And religion agrees with us about history and defiantly puts forward miracles for belief.

Christians say it is biased to just assume without investigating that miracles never happen. But how do you know which ones to investigate? If miracles are about showing God's personal love for each person then you need to pick the best ones that seem to show it. A historian cannot do that. A historian would have to just investigate anything that comes up in his chosen subject or topic. So clearly miracles oppose in principle and often in practice the good sense that is needed to be a historian. That alone is a warning sign and another example of how miracles truly are superstition and harmful to belief.