

LUKE TIMOTHY JOHNSON

Miracles

God's Presence and Power in Creation

INTERPRETATION *Resources for the Use of
Scripture in the Church*

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SERIES FOREWORD

This series of volumes supplements *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. The commentary series offers an exposition of the books of the Bible written for those who teach, preach, and study the Bible in the community of faith. This new series is addressed to the same audience and serves a similar purpose, providing additional resources for the interpretation of Scripture, but now dealing with features, themes, and issues significant for the whole rather than with individual books.

The Bible is composed of separate books. Its composition naturally has led its interpreters to address particular books. But there are other ways to approach the interpretation of the Bible that respond to other characteristics and features of the Scriptures. These other entries to the task of interpretation provide contexts, overviews, and perspectives that complement the book-by-book approach and discern dimensions of the Scriptures that the commentary design may not adequately explore.

The Bible as used in the Christian community is not only a collection of books but also itself a book that has a unity and coherence important to its meaning. Some volumes in this new series will deal with this canonical wholeness and seek to provide a wider context for the interpretation of individual books as well as a comprehensive theological perspective that reading single books does not provide.

Other volumes in the series examine particular texts, like the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Sermon on the Mount, texts that have played such an important role in the faith and life of the Christian community that they constitute orienting foci for the understanding and use of Scripture.

A further concern of the series is to consider important and often difficult topics, addressed at many different places in the books of the canon, that are of recurrent interest and concern to the church in its dependence on Scripture for faith and life. So the series will include volumes dealing with such topics as eschatology, women, wealth, and violence.

The books of the Bible are constituted from a variety of kinds of literature such as narrative, laws, hymns and prayers, letters, parables, miracle stories. To recognize and discern the contribution and importance of all these different kinds of material enriches and enlightens the use of Scripture. Volumes in the series will provide help in the interpretation of Scripture's literary forms and genres.

The liturgy and practices of the gathered church are anchored in Scripture, as with the sacraments observed and the creeds recited. So another entry to the task of discerning the meaning and significance of biblical texts explored in this series is the relation between the liturgy of the church and the Scriptures.

Finally, there is certain ancient literature, such as the Apocrypha and the noncanonical gospels, that constitutes an important context to the interpretation of Scripture itself. Consequently, this series will provide volumes that offer guidance in understanding such writings and explore their significance for the interpretation of the Protestant canon.

The volumes in this second series of Interpretation deal with these important entries into the interpretation of the Bible. Together with the commentaries, they compose a library of resources for those who interpret Scripture as members of the community of faith. Each of them can be used independently for its own significant addition to the resources for the study of Scripture. But all of them intersect the commentaries in various ways and provide an important context for their use. The authors of these volumes are biblical scholars and theologians who are committed to the service of interpreting the Scriptures in and for the church. The editors and authors hope that the addition of this series to the commentaries will provide a major contribution to the vitality and richness of biblical interpretation in the church.

The Editors

PREFACE

It was only in the last year, already long past the publisher's due date, that I finally got going on this project. And once I did, I found that what started as a job of work, a project generated by another's desire, quickly became a work of love, a project driven by my own passion. The change in my own attitude occurred for at least four reasons.

First, I began to see how the topic of miracles is not one subject among others—as, say, the parables of Jesus—that can be restricted to the study of the biblical text alone; the issue of God's presence and power in creation is as real now as in Scripture. Second, miracles cannot be dealt with in a detached and dispassionate manner, for the mystery of God's presence and power inevitably involves us personally and demands a personal stance. Third, I saw more clearly that the question of miracles pervades the entire structure of Christian identity: we cannot engage the topic of the miraculous without taking on as well the central affirmations of the creed, such as the incarnation and the resurrection. Fourth, I realized more clearly that intellectual integrity demands taking on modernity's epistemological and cultural challenge to miracles, not least because many Christians today find their own faith compromised by a sort of double-mindedness.

This last point takes up all of part 1, "Framing the Discussion," and all of part 4, "Pastoral Implications." I spend all this time on the question of competing symbolic worlds because I am convinced that Christians have more or less given away the game by debating things like miracles in terms dictated by Enlightenment epistemology. Thus is the effort to demonstrate the possibility, probability, or reality of miracles by using historical methods. I argue, in contrast, that Christians need to recover singleness of vision by embracing a truly alternative vision of the world—not one that denies or dismisses the things that secular reason does well, but one that insists on the inherent and crippling limitations of secular reason in life's most important questions. That alternative vision, I show in chapter 3, involves imagining the world that Scripture imagines, recovering a proper and strong sense of creation, recognizing the validity

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of personal experience and narrative, and asserting the truth-telling quality of myth. The final chapter, in turn, suggests ways in which this project might affect the pastoral practices of teaching, preaching, prayer, and counseling.

Parts 2 and 3 of the book offer a way of thinking about the miracles of the Old and New Testaments. I do not attempt any defense of, or explanation for, specific signs and wonders. Instead, I offer an interpretation of miracles consonant with the biblical construction of reality that I argue in the other parts of the book. I hope that this approach will be of more benefit to Christians than the standard apologetic mode.

A word about the translation of scriptural texts. The default translation for the series in which this book appears is the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). All my longer citations follow this version; a few follow the Revised Standard Version (RSV). In discussion, I sometimes cite more loosely, and occasionally I offer my own translation (AT = author's translation), based on the original language. In every instance, readers can consult the translations they use by means of the chapter and verse references.

Luke Timothy Johnson
Atlanta, Georgia
April 15, 2017

PART ONE

Framing the Discussion

Miracles in Christian History

From the very first, Christians based their religious claims on the evidence provided by miracles—that is, experiences that could not be ascribed to merely human agency. They committed themselves to Christ, they said, because they experienced God’s presence and power through Christ. In the Gospel of Luke (7:18–23), Jesus responds to John’s question “Are you the one to come, or are we to wait for another?” with a list of wonders that support the claim that he is indeed the one: “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (Luke 7:22; see also Matt. 11:4–5). Peter declares to the crowd gathered at Pentecost concerning Jesus: “Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know” (Acts 2:22).

The apostle Paul tells the Corinthians, “The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, signs and wonders and mighty works” (2 Cor. 12:12). He reminds the Galatians of the “miracles” the Spirit supplied among them (Gal. 3:5). He affirms to the Romans that his ministry among the Gentiles was carried out “by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God” (Rom. 15:18–19). The Letter to the Hebrews similarly states that God has borne witness to the proclamation of the good news “by signs and wonders and

various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will” (Heb. 2:4).

The heart of the Christian message was, in turn, the greatest sign and wonder of all, the resurrection of Jesus and his exaltation to the right hand of God. That Jesus was the firstborn of the dead, raised by the power of God to become “life-giving spirit,” was not simply one wonder among others, witnessed to by many believers (1 Cor. 15:1–11, 45): it was a reality experienced as well by those who were not witnesses to his appearances, but whose lives were being transformed by the power of God in the name of Jesus and through the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17). For believers, the resurrection experience was a “new creation” (Gal. 6:15; 2 Cor. 5:17) and the basis for a “new humanity” shaped in the image of Christ, who is the image of God (Col. 3:10; Eph. 2:15). The power of the Spirit deriving from the resurrected Lord was the source of all the other “miracles” (Gal. 3:5) worked among believers, including the gifts of glossolalia and prophecy (1 Cor. 12:4–11).

Such assertions concerning the immediate and present experience of God’s power in the empirical realm—that is, among and within and through actual human bodies here and now—go together with a second bold claim: the messianic age proclaimed and celebrated by believers is in fulfillment of the prophecies contained in Scripture. The conviction is stated succinctly by 1 Peter 1:10–12:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who have brought you the good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look!

In like manner, Paul declares that the proclamation of the gospel is the “revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles” (Rom. 16:25–26). Indeed, the good news from God concerning his son was “promised beforehand

through his prophets in the holy scriptures” (Rom. 1:2). The evangelists similarly take pains to show, as John puts it, that the Scriptures testify in Jesus’ behalf (John 5:39). Mark is especially concerned to demonstrate that the beginning (Mark 1:1–3) and end (9:11; 14:21, 27) of Jesus’ work is in fulfillment of what was written. Matthew aligns every aspect of Jesus’ birth, ministry, and passion with specific passages in Scripture (e.g., Matt. 1:23; 3:3; 12:18–21; 13:13–15; 27:9–10). Luke has the risen Jesus himself connect his ministry, death, and resurrection to the writings of the prophets:

“These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day.” (Luke 24:44–46)

Luke extends the fulfillment of prophecy to his account of the earliest church: among the things written, Jesus continues, are that “repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47). Throughout the narrative of Acts, the powerful presence of God among believers through “signs and wonders” is said to be in fulfillment of prophecy (e.g., Acts 1:15–20; 2:16–36; 3:23–26; 13:26–47; 15:10–17), even as his followers continue to interpret the story of Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy (see 8:26–35).

Claiming the fulfillment of prophecy was, in its own way, as much an appeal to the miraculous as were assertions concerning healings and exorcisms. The prophets of old, after all, were thought to have spoken not on their own authority but through the impulse of the Holy Spirit—as clear an affirmation of God’s present activity in the world as could be desired. Their utterances, in turn, were collected into writings that were themselves “spirit-inspired” (2 Tim. 3:16, *theopneustos*, AT). Finally, the experiences and events witnessed to by the first believers were, under God’s control of history, a “fulfillment” of these ancient texts. The statement that Christ died and rose “according to the scriptures,” then, is not a banal observation concerning literary concinnity, but a claim concerning God’s presence and power in the empirical world (1 Cor. 15:3). For Christians throughout history, Scripture is no less an indication of

God's activity than are the "signs and wonders" of his continuing action among believers.

After the time of the New Testament, the experience of miracles continued to be celebrated by many, perhaps most, Christians. The second- and third-century apocryphal Acts of Peter and Thomas and John and Andrew feature signs and wonders even more spectacular than those found in the canonical Gospels. Similarly, apocryphal gospels like *The Protevangelium of James* and the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* and *The Gospel of Peter* are replete with wondrous events. The writing of such compositions and their rapid dissemination through multiple translations over following centuries testify to the ready acceptance of the miraculous among believers.

By no means did believers consider the miraculous to be confined to the time of Jesus and the apostles. The power and presence of the living God continued to work in palpable fashion among the saints, those holy men and women who were understood in a mystical sense to be "other Christs" (Moss 2012). Miracles of various sorts, for example, were a standard feature of martyrologies, beginning already with the second-century *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, for the martyr above all was thought to be the one who perfectly realized conformity to the image of Christ: the power of God displayed itself in the triumph of the martyr's faith over death, just as the exaltation of Jesus with its outpouring of the Spirit on others vindicated the faithful death of Jesus. The celebration of the miracles worked through the martyrs—and the relics associated with them—is memorialized through the composition and reading of such collections as the *Martyrology of Usuard* (9th c.) and the authoritative *Roman Martyrology* (1583). The miraculous is also generously expressed in Christian art through the centuries (Jefferson 2014).

The evidence for God's continuing presence and power in the world continued to be displayed even after the age of persecution, among those whose lives could be regarded as conforming to the image of Christ. The *Lausiac History* of Palladius, for example, shows how miraculous deeds were attributed to the holy men and women who cultivated a radical discipleship in the wilderness. But even among those in a privileged social position, the wonders of God could be perceived to be at work. Thus Eusebius of Caesarea conceives of the pivotal career of Constantine in terms of "signs and

wonders,” from his vision of the cross at the Milvian Bridge, to his devout mother’s finding the holy cross of Jesus in Jerusalem. The entire triumph of the Christian religion, its escape from persecution and establishment within the empire—however ambivalently later generations might regard it—was understandably perceived by those who experienced it as a miracle attributable to God alone (*Life of Constantine*).

Throughout the history of Christianity, ordinary believers considered the working of wonders as closely connected to sanctity: the presence and power of God was displayed above all through the bodies of those totally dedicated to God, not only during the life of the saint, but also (through relics) after their death. Thus, in his *Dialogues* (book 2), Gregory the Great (540–604) ascribed biblical-style miracles to the monastic founder Benedict of Nursia as a natural concomitant to his life of holiness. Growing collections of stories about the martyrs and other saints abounded in accounts of miracles, from Gregory of Tours’s *Seven Books of Miracles* (6th c.) to the *Golden Legend* (1260)—the best-selling book of the Middle Ages, and to the *Roman Martyrology* (1583) and Alban Butler’s *Lives of the Saints* (1756–59). Such a massive body of miraculous lore had been assembled by the seventeenth century that the Bollandist Society—a group of scholars dedicated to the study of the saints in order to distinguish the historical from the legendary—compiled the *Acta Sanctorum* in sixty-eight folio volumes, with publication of the first two volumes in 1643.

Despite the skepticism directed toward the miraculous by Enlightenment figures, as we shall see, a stout belief in the manifestations of God’s presence and power within creation continued among Christians less influenced by the rationalistic premises of critics (Shaw 2006). The same enthusiastic embrace of the miraculous continues today, not only among Roman Catholics but also among many evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, and is shown by the many popular books devoted to the subject (Lewis 1947; Wakefield 1995; Metaxas 2014), as well as by the constantly proliferating sites on the Internet devoted to contemporary miracles associated with saints and places, such as Padre Pio, Lourdes, and Medjugorje (see, e.g., <http://www.miraclesofthesaints.com/>). Patterns of speech are also revealing. Many Christians continue to speak of miracles spontaneously and unself-consciously: “It was a miracle she was born healthy.” “His escape from danger was

miraculous.” “We are praying for a miracle.” “The disappearance of her cancer can only be called miraculous.” In short, the majority of Christians have celebrated the presence and power of God in creation through signs and wonders, not only in the stories of the Old and New Testament, but also in their own lives.

Suspicion of Miracles

Other Christians, however, have regarded miracles with deep suspicion. They do not deny that signs and wonders can occur, but they question the source of such miracles or the religious value of them. This tendency begins with the attitude of Christian apologists toward the miracles claimed for pagan cults. The apologists regard such claims as deceptive, or worse, as the work of demons. Tatian (*Address to the Greeks* 18) and Justin (*1 Apology* 14) ascribe the revelations that people receive in dreams to demons; Tertullian (*Apology* 22–23) and Origen (*Against Celsus* 8.61) claim that the healings done at pagan shrines are doubly deceptive, because the demons both cause the illness and take it away; above all, prophetic revelation or divination is a sign of demonic power and deception (Tatian, *Address* 19; Tertullian, *Apology* 22–23; Origen, *Celsus* 4.89, 92).

The same sort of anxiety concerning the miraculous affects the apologists’ attitude toward miracles claimed by Christians. Thus, although Justin’s argument in his *Dialogue with Trypho* depends so heavily on the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, he pays little attention to the wonders performed by the ancient prophets and is suspicious of those claimed by recent prophets: Justin notes that “certain wonderful deeds” have been performed by false prophets to astonish people and “glorify the spirits and demons of error” (*Dialogue* 7). He declares that both true and false prophets did miracles (*Dialogue* 7) and concedes that the wondrous deeds worked by Jesus could be ascribed to magic (*1 Apology* 30). As for miracles performed in the present, he tends to attribute them to the work of demons who work through the rivals of the true Christian message, as in the miracles claimed for Simon, Menander, and Marcion (*1 Apology* 26, 56).

In sharp contrast to those writings (apocryphal gospels and acts, martyrologies) that celebrate the continuing power of God at work,

not only in Jesus but also through the risen Jesus in his apostles and other saints, the apologists of the second and third centuries are astonishingly reticent even concerning the wonders ascribed to Jesus in the canonical Gospels. Tatian, indeed, does not even mention Jesus in his apology (*To the Greeks*), presenting Christianity entirely in terms of its sane teaching about God, freedom, and the immortality of the soul. Similarly, Theophilus of Antioch makes only an oblique reference to the “voice of the Gospel” and makes no mention either of Jesus or of his wonders (*To Autolytus* 3.13–14). Athenagoras presents Christianity entirely in terms of its superior understanding of God and its moral instruction, referring to Jesus’ teaching in Matthew and Luke, but without any reference to the wonders worked by Jesus (*Embassy* 4–12, 32–36). We find the same reticence concerning Jesus’ wonders, along with silence concerning contemporary miracles, in the explicitly philosophical constructions of Christianity by Clement of Alexandria and Origen: for them, Jesus is above all the teacher whose words can transform, and the greatest miracle is the triumph of virtue over vice in the lives of transformed believers (see Clement, *Exhortation to the Greeks* 1.10–11; *Christ the Educator* 3.12; Origen, *Celsus* 1.67). For Origen, the healings reported of Jesus in the Gospels are continuous with the healing of believers’ souls in the present (*Celsus* 1.67; 2.48).

How do we explain such a different perception of wonders than that found in popular Christian literature? The neglect of the miraculous among the early apologists, and the suspicion in which miracles are held, probably owes something to a specific religious disposition. In another study I have argued that Christianity inherited from Greco-Roman religion (and for that matter, also from Judaism) four distinct ways of being religious (Johnson 2009). The first way is participation in benefits: the divine power is seen as present and accessible in the empirical world, through a variety of phenomena, not least prophecies, ecstatic utterances, and miraculous deeds. The embrace of the miraculous by the Gospels and Acts—canonical as well as apocryphal—and by the majority of Christians through the centuries testifies to the continuing presence of this disposition.

The second way of being religious, however, is the way of moral transformation. Here the divine power may be acknowledged as active in empirical phenomena, but it is perceived as especially

operative in the minds and hearts of humans and is intended for their transformation. In this athletic form of religion, an emphasis on wonders “out there” may distract from the importance of change “in here” and lead to self-deception about what is religiously important. The third way of being religious is via transcending or fleeing the world; found among ancient Orphics and Christian gnostics, this way of being religious regards the entire visible world as deceptive precisely because it partakes in the material realm, which must be surpassed if the soul is to be saved. Among such spiritual adepts as well, the miraculous would be of little interest, above all when it involves a concern for materiality.

The second- and third-century apologists perfectly represent the second sort of religious disposition, found in the New Testament in the letters of Paul, James, and Hebrews. Right thinking and right acting is the point of religion and the proper expression of the divine power. Mature Christianity is not expressed so much by signs and wonders, as by the quiet moral change in humans and in the structures of human life. Insofar as the apologists and their successors defined themselves as philosophers and Christianity as the best of philosophies, they continued the tradition of such Greco-Roman moralists as Epictetus and Dio Chrysostom. We are not surprised, then, to find such writers suspicious of Christian wonders in the same way they were of pagan healings and prophecies, even attributing them in the same manner to demonic forces. The wonders may be real enough, but they can be deceptive or even destructive (Johnson 2009, 32–213).

Still other Christians were chronically suspicious of miracles. In Greco-Roman religion, a fourth way of being religious could be called “the way of stabilizing the world.” For teachers like Plutarch, who was also a priest of Apollo at the famous prophetic shrine at Delphi, the most important expression of religion was the way in which it maintained “the city of gods and men” that constituted Greek civilization (Johnson 2009, 93–110). Christian bishops, many of whom were also monks and therefore committed to religion as moral transformation, carried on this concern for stability and security; thus many of them patrolled the borders of Christian identity by disputing with heretics and schismatics and by working to refine boundary-marking creeds (Johnson 2009, 234–54). They tended to resist claims to the miraculous because of what was perceived as their revolutionary and disruptive potential.

The case of speaking in tongues, or glossolalia—a gift of the Spirit that empowers humans to speech unavailable to them otherwise—illustrates the point. Although Irenaeus of Lyons has knowledge of the practice in churches, he excoriates the prophecy and ecstatic speech found among the followers of the Valentinian gnostic known as Marcus, whom Irenaeus regards as a charlatan and magician (*Against Heresies* 5.6.1; 1.14–16). Although forms of ecstatic utterance continued within some orthodox communities (see Origen, *Celsus* 7.9), it was progressively marginalized. By the beginning of the fifth century, bishops even professed ignorance of what Paul meant when he spoke of tongues in 1 Corinthians 14. John Chrysostom says, “This whole place is very obscure; but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and their cessation, being such as used to occur but no longer take place” (*Homilies on First Corinthians* 29, 32, 35). Similarly, Augustine of Hippo dismisses glossolalia as a special dispensation of the primitive church and of no pertinence to the church of his day (*Homilies on First John* 6.10; *On Baptism* 3.18).

The suspicion, if not the outright denial, of the miraculous continued among bishops and more philosophically inclined Christians through the following centuries. Claims to prophecy, ecstatic speech, or signs and wonders were consistently associated with doctrinal and moral deviance, requiring the authorities’ most careful oversight. Such expressions of religion represent an unfortunate “enthusiasm” at odds with sober orthodoxy (see Knox 1950; Heyd 1995; Lim 2016), or as signs of a lapse into superstition (Lehner 2016, 125–53). Even within a Roman Catholicism that requires the proof of miracles by those who would be designated as saints, the hierarchy exercises an almost obsessive caution with respect to the demonstration of such wonders as “supernatural”; it tends to approach any freelance claim to the miraculous—be it Marian appearances at places like Lourdes and Fatima, or the claims to stigmata for such as Padre Pio or Therese Neumann—with the presumption of fraud or psychopathology.

Protestant Christians, in turn, are shaped by the bias of the early Reformation against miracles, not least the extraordinary gifts of prophecy and glossolalia, and tend to follow the position of Augustine: miracles were a distinctive manifestation of God’s power during the period of the New Testament but are not to be credited today. The position that miracles ceased after the age of the

apostles (Cessationism) was argued most vigorously in the last century by the Princeton Reformed theologian Benjamin B. Warfield in his work *Counterfeit Miracles*. Warfield denied the authenticity of any but biblical miracles (1918, 5–6): “They represent the infusion of heathen modes of thought into the church” (61). But he spends so much energy discrediting the miraculous claims of the medieval and modern periods that he runs the risk of falling into a theologically perilous position. If God intervened in the time of the apostles through wondrous deeds, why should God not continue to do so in the life of the church through the ages? And if every claim to the miraculous in the life of the church can be dismissed as fraud or self-deception, does that not cast greater doubt on the miracles found in the New Testament? Restricting miracles to the Bible alone in effect reduces the living God of Israel to a *deus otiosus*, a god who may once have been active but now is removed, remote, and idle. It is a position that also stubbornly refuses to take seriously the witness of human experience through the ages.

Denial of Miracles

The systematic denial of the miraculous does not begin with modernity. The fourth-century-BCE philosopher Epicurus was not strictly an atheist in the modern sense: he did recognize a higher order of beings, “the blessed ones,” whose happiness was directly correlated to their noninvolvement with the world (*Sovereign Maxims* 1). Epicurus sought to establish the same “freedom from disturbance” (*ataraxia*) among his followers by denying the reality of omens and portents and prophecies and by insisting that all phenomena can be explained by natural causes, rather than by appeal to divine powers. The first fear that Epicurus sought to banish was fear of the gods. His denial of the gods’ involvement in the world is fundamental to his entire program: “If we had never been molested by alarms at celestial and atmospheric phenomena, nor by the misgiving that death somehow affects us, we should have had no need to study natural science” (*Sovereign Maxims* 11). Epicurus, in short, replaced the religious understanding of the gods as rewarding and punishing humans, teaching a vision of the world that excluded such external causality: the natural order is explicable on the basis of the accidental collision of atoms; the notion of a divine providence is

illusory. In ancient terms, Epicurus was thought to be an “atheist” precisely because he denied the presence and power of the divine among humans.

In his poem *On the Nature of Things* (*De rerum natura*), Epicurus’s first-century-BCE disciple Lucretius celebrates poetically what he regards as the philosopher’s liberation of humans from alienating religion: humans were “laying foully prostrate upon earth crushed under the weight of religion,” until the man from Greece stood up to religion and defeated it: “Religion is put under foot and trampled on in turn: us his victory brings level with heaven.” Lucretius’s poem provides samples of the natural science that displaces religion. Natural phenomena, above all the earthquakes, thunders and lightning that ordinary people thought to be divine portents, had completely natural causes (5.181–199). Providence was simply an empty notion (6.379–422).

The Epicurean attitude toward miraculous claims is applauded, in turn, by the brilliant second-century-CE satirist Lucian of Samosata. He reports how the Epicureans consistently resist the bogus religious claims of the charlatan Alexander of Abonoteichus, who started a cult of Asclepius in 150–170, based on elaborately rigged revelations (*Alexander the False Prophet* 25, 38, 44–45). Lucian displays the same attitude in his scathing portrait of the poseur philosopher Proteus Peregrinus (*The Passing of Peregrinus*, esp. 1–8, 42–45). Lucian’s ideal philosopher, Demonax, displays a similarly distanced view of religion (*Demonax* 11, 23–24, 27, 34, 37), and in one of his more extravagant parodies, Lucian delights in recounting the absurd character of healings and prophecies and exorcisms (*The Lover of Lies* 16, 40).

Epicurus’s denial of divine involvement with the world met with little approval in antiquity. His views were regarded as being destructive of the social order (see Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.23.1–10), and he was vigorously rebutted by Plutarch (*Is “Live in Obscurity” a Wise Precept?* [*Moralia* 1128B–1130E]; *Against Colotes* [*Mor.* 1107D–1127]; *A Pleasant Life Impossible* [*Mor.* 1086C–1107C]), who was a staunch defender of divine providence (*The Delays of the Divine Vengeance* [*Mor.* 548B–568]). Not until the European Enlightenment did a vigorous and principled denial of miracles again appear, now within a Christianity already shaped by the Reformation’s rejection of all forms of catholic “superstition” (Johnson 2009, 10–12). Although the philosopher John Locke himself by no

means rejected the notion of divine revelation (or the miracles of Jesus), his principle that revelation is to be judged by human reason speeds the way toward an interpretation of Christianity on purely rational terms (Locke 1695 = 2014). In his *Discourse of Miracles*, Locke says, “A miracle, then, I take to be a sensible operation, which, being above the comprehension of the spectator and in his opinion contrary to the ordinary course of nature, is taken by him to be divine” (Locke 1701 = 1823, 9:256–265).

But it was the British Deists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who, under the rubric of “superstition,” eliminated any trace of the supernatural from Christianity, including above all any claims to the miraculous. Works by John Toland (*Christianity Not Mysterious*, 1696) and William Wollaston (*The Religion of Nature Delineated*, 1724) argued that religion, including Christianity, must be measured solely by its reasonableness—with what is “reasonable” being measured in turn by the standards of an educated Englishman of the seventeenth century. The first British lives of Jesus followed suit, portraying Jesus as a purely human figure without any miraculous power (see Thomas Chubb, *The True Gospel of Jesus Christ*, 1739).

This background of a Christianity already defined almost entirely in rational terms provides the setting for the pivotal work of David Hume (1711–76), a Scottish thinker apparently devoid of any strong passion and having at best an attitude of superior condescension toward traditional Christianity. In the second edition of *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1751), Hume includes an argument concerning the possibility of miracles (or better, their nonpossibility) that he hoped would be “an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion, and consequently, will be useful as long as the world endures” (1.86). As the title to his work suggests, Hume’s approach is not ontological (“do miracles happen?”) but epistemological (“can we assent to the assertion that miracles happen?”). Humans can assent to something only if it is probable; probability in the case of human experience rests on the preponderance of evidence in favor of something happening. The essay concerns, then, the degree to which people should give an assent to claims of miraculous events (1.87–88).

Hume provides a definition of a miracle that he already turns, in the same sentence, to a denial of the miraculous: “A *miracle is a violation of the laws of nature*; and as a firm and unalterable

experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined” (1.90). In a footnote, he offers an alternative definition: “A miracle may be accurately defined, *a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent*” (1.90; italics added).

Several aspects of his definition are at once noteworthy. First, the world of “nature” is conceived of as a closed system of cause and effect. Second, the “laws of nature” are known by humans because of their consistent experience; the “laws” therefore are deductions concerning reality that humans make based on experience (and experiment). Third, a miracle is defined in terms of a “violation”—or in his alternate definition, a “transgression” of these laws; the terms themselves are freighted with a negative nuance. Finally, in his alternative definition, the laws of nature are violated or transgressed by the “volition of the Deity” or the “interposition of some invisible agent.”

Hume could, in fact, have defined a miracle in more neutral terms without altering his basic position. He could have spoken of an event that is the exception to ordinary human experience, or one that transcends ordinary human expectations (see Locke’s definition above). Augustine, for example, had stated that “miracles do not happen in contradiction to nature, but in contradiction to what we know about nature” (*City of God* 21.8.2). By Hume’s own account, the “laws of nature” are nothing more than the cumulative assessment of reality based on what people have already experienced. Moreover, since “the interposition of some invisible agent” necessarily maintains the invisibility of the agent, and since the “volition of the Deity” is likewise an inference from an experience rather than a fact verifiable by shared observation, Hume’s entire discussion comes down to the weighing of human testimony: he pits the majority against the minority, the ordinary against the extraordinary.

On any matter of fact, Hume states, we correctly suspect witnesses who contradict each other, or are too few in number, or when they have a doubtful character, or when they have an interest in what they affirm, or when they are either hesitant in their assertions or too confident; these and other factors can “diminish or destroy the force of any argument, derived from human testimony” (1.89). But it is the sheer weight of “uniform experience” that counts most for Hume: “As a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is

here a direct and full *proof*, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle; nor can such a proof be destroyed, or the miracle rendered credible, but by an opposite proof, which is superior” (1.90, emphasis original). Note here the slight but significant shift, from the credibility of witnesses concerning an event, to the existence of the event; it is not now for Hume whether we can reliably know about the miraculous, but that the miraculous does not exist at all.

Hume concludes his first section with a lengthy maxim, which sums up his position: “That no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact which it endeavors to establish; and even in that case there is a mutual destruction of arguments, and the superior only gives us an assurance suitable to that degree of force, which remains after deducting the inferior” (1.91). He gives the pertinent example of someone claiming to have seen a dead man raised to life: the possibility that the person is either deceiving or being deceived convinces Hume to reject the claimed miracle; the pertinence of this rejection to classical Christian belief is obvious.

If in the first part of his essay Hume is able to maintain some degree of neutrality, his contempt for traditional belief in miracles is explicit in the second part, where he sets out four arguments against the probability of miracles. The arguments are not actually distinct but represent variations of the same theme: that which is ordinary in human experience is always to be preferred to that which is extraordinary. Hume first observes that there is no record in human history of witnesses so credible as to compel belief in the claim to miracles. Second, he states that witness to miracles is made suspect by the strong propensity of people to commit themselves to what is spectacular: they want to believe. Hume’s tone reeks of contempt: “But what a Tully or a Demosthenes could scarcely effect over a Roman or Athenian audience, every *Capuchin*, every itinerant or stationary teacher can perform over the generality of mankind, and in a higher degree, by touching such gross and vulgar passions” (2.93, emphasis original).

His third argument is a simple variation of the first two: most accounts of miracles “chiefly abound among ignorant and barbarous nations” (2.94), or have been derived from such uneducated and credulous peoples. In this connection, Hume cites the example

of Alexander the false prophet, who was able to advance his religious scam precisely because he started it among ignorant and stupid Paphlagonians. He states, “*It is strange*, a judicious reader is apt to say upon the perusal of these wonderful historians, *that such prodigious events never happen in our days* (2.94, emphasis original). Hume’s clear implication is that miracles are believed only among the ignorant of the past, and among the ignorant today; the educated person would never believe the stories that originated among such types and would never themselves claim to have experienced anything that could be called miraculous.

Hume’s fourth argument is that all religions appealing to the miraculous as evidence for their faith claims cancel each other out. Because their teachings are contradictory, they cannot all be true, and the principle of contradiction applies to their claimed miracles as well. “This argument may appear over subtle [*sic*] and refined, but is not in reality different from the reasoning of a judge, who supposes that the credit of two witnesses, maintaining a crime against any one, is destroyed by the testimony of two others, who affirm him to have been two hundred leagues distant, at the same instant when the crime is said to have been committed” (2.95). He summarizes: “Upon the whole, then, it appears, that no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof; and that, even supposing it amounted to a proof, it would be opposed by another proof; derived from the very nature of the fact, which it would endeavour to establish” (2.98). In the end, the stable laws of nature trump any claim to a transgression of the laws of nature.

Hume ends his vigorous—but not nearly so logical as he supposes—treatment with a twofold dismissal of the miracles basic to the Christian tradition. First, all the miraculous events recounted in the Bible he regards as falsehoods (2.100). Second, he includes all claims to prophecy to have the same improbability as other miraculous claims (2.101). Hume’s conclusion is that traditional Christianity is simply incompatible with the rationality celebrated by his peers of the late eighteenth century: “So that, upon the whole, we may conclude, that the *Christian Religion* not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one” (2.101, emphasis original), by which, he means, that faith is itself a kind of miracle, contrary to reason.

The Enlightenment position finds one of its most sophisticated spokespersons in David Friedrich Strauss, whose *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (first ed., 1835; 4th ed., 1860) was one of the pioneering efforts of what came to be called the historical-critical approach to the Bible, and whose specific approach to the miracle stories in the Gospels remains influential on later scholarly (and popular) efforts to interpret stories about the signs and wonders ascribed to Jesus. Strauss sought a middle ground between what he termed “supernaturalistic” interpretations of the miracles, which simply accepted them as real—the action of God active in Jesus—and “rationalistic” interpretations, which explained them away by reducing them to purely natural events (thus the feeding of the multitude is “explained” as the “miracle” of generosity stimulated by Jesus, by which everyone shared the food that they had brought).

Strauss advocated a “mythic” interpretation, not only of the explicit miracles, but also of the entire portrayal of Christ in the Gospels (1860, 33–76). Jesus is so clothed with the images attached to messianic expectations among Jews that it is extraordinarily difficult even to find a core of historicity in the Gospel accounts. Because the messiah was expected to work miracles, in short, those who believed in Jesus attributed miracles to him. In the long section of his work explicitly devoted to miracles, Strauss systematically examines each category of wonder (exorcism, healing, power over nature), dismissing in turn the rationalistic and supernaturalistic explanations before supplying his own mythical interpretation. It is possible, he states, that Jesus could have in fact “healed” a deranged person through his personal influence, but the entire realm of the divine and the demonic is mythic in character, so the picture of Jesus as introducing the rule of God by casting out demons cannot be regarded as properly historical, but as the interpretive work of believers employing the symbols of their age rather than our own (451–600).

Strauss’s approach is brought to full realization in the twentieth-century work of Rudolf Bultmann, who applies “demythologization” not only to the miracles of Jesus, but also to the entire symbolic world of the New Testament. Readers in the twentieth century, he argues, cannot honestly affirm as true both the scientific explanation of the world, and the mythic construction of the world portrayed in Scripture (Bultmann 1941 = 1988); the task of the theologian is to

find within the New Testament the core of existential truth that lies covered over by mythic (that is, false) understandings of reality (Bultmann 1951–53).

Conclusion

As this brief survey has shown, miracles have been contested within Christianity from the beginning: while the majority of ordinary believers have gladly embraced the miraculous as the sign of God's presence and power among them, a significant minority of believers, especially those in leadership positions, have been chronically suspicious of miraculous claims.

Until recent centuries, however, such suspicion never rose to the level of a systematic denial of miracles. Suspicion might be attached to present-day claims to God's manifest presence and power, never to the miraculous events reported in Scripture. But under the influence of the European Enlightenment, a significant shift occurred. Now the denial of miracles along the lines of the ancient Epicurean critique is not repelled in the name of faith but is embraced as the sign of mature faith: in Deism and its continuing manifestations in mainstream Christianity, skepticism regarding miracles becomes the mark of an enlightened Christianity. A numerical majority of believers may continue to celebrate the miraculous past and present, but their witness is effectively marginalized by the dominant cultural order and by forms of Christianity that claim to speak for the tradition as a whole. The crisis of the present age is that the culturally most influential forms of Christianity have capitulated to a worldview that effectively eliminates the miraculous from serious consideration.

The reasons are not hard to discover. Rationalistic skepticism characterizes the classic historical-critical approach to the Old and New Testaments: academic engagement with miracle stories tends to be dismissive when it appears at all. In so-called historical Jesus research, the miracles ascribed to Jesus are regularly "bracketed" in favor of a portrayal of Jesus based on his sayings or on his prophetic (political) actions (Johnson 1996a). Such a reductionistic approach, in turn, is inculcated (sometimes flagrantly, sometimes subtly) in the study of the Bible in seminaries and schools of theology, in the name of "higher learning."

The formation of future ministers in such academic settings, in short, has become complicit in producing preachers of the good news who are embarrassed by talk of signs and wonders, and who (along with Hume) tend to regard claims to the miraculous as the sign of an ignorant and perhaps stupid population, a population that turns out to be, more often than not, the very people to whom ministers are called to preach. Symptomatic is the way the writings of the Episcopal bishop John Spong are taken by many “thoughtful Christians” as the only alternative to a dreaded “fundamentalism,” even though his work is both derivative and puerile (Spong 1992, 1994).

Small wonder, then, that in congregations led by ministers formed in this fashion, claims to contemporary miracles are a cause of embarrassment rather than celebration, while sermons on biblical miracles become exercises in avoidance or interpretive sleight of hand. One of the central convictions of faith—traditionally, indeed, one of the bases for faith—has become, for the most educated and sophisticated of Christians, a deeply problematic category.