

## In Defense of Biblical Miracles

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### Introduction

The Bible and its contents, when tested honestly for *scientific* and *historic* veracity, are vindicated as being factually accurate, and in general harmony with established facts in these areas of knowledge. However, in two aspects, the Bible *seems* to contradict the evidence of physical science, and of history, namely, with regard to *miracles* and *predictive prophecy*.

The Bible clearly and repeatedly affirms the reality of both miracles and prophecy. Since by definition miracles go beyond or against so-called “natural laws” (more correctly, *standard* or *ordinary* processes), those who presuppose pure “naturalism” (or, in reality, *anti-supernaturalism*) *de facto* reject not only the reality of miracles, but also their very possibility--“They *can’t* happen” (which affirmation arrogantly and absurdly assumes that the one so affirming has absolute omniscience). Similarly, since miracles are not readily evident in our contemporary world, or in verifiable history in the non-Biblical records of the past, therefore it is *assumed* by some secular historians that Bible miracles are non-historical, *i.e.*, fiction or myth.

In reply, be it noted, that in the very areas in question--science and history--where the Bible can be and has been tested, it stands **fully vindicated** as to its scientific accuracy and its historical reliability. If it has shown itself consistently trustworthy where it can be tested, the Bible should be given at the very least a hearing in the *supernatural* areas that history and science cannot directly reach.

In short, if in all else the Bible is scientifically and historically reliable, then we have excellent grounds for believing it reliable in its accounts and descriptions of miracles as well.

### Definition of Miracles

Before proceeding further we must answer some basic questions: What are miracles, and what are their purposes in the Divine scheme of things? A miracle in the Biblical sense involves—

- a. a direct act of God (versus indirect “providence”);
- b. the realm of the physical creation (versus the spiritual or immaterial realms);
- c. superceding or suspending ordinary operation of “natural laws”;

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Judging on the basis of Bible patterns, such miracles may occur with or without a human instrument.

In ordinary speech, we often use the word “miracle” in a loose and imprecise, non-biblical way. We will say—

“It was a miracle that I passed that history test!”

“It was a miracle we won the game.”

“His recovery from surgery was a real miracle.”

“His conversion after years in sin is a real miracle.”

The first two of these examples are merely expressions of surprise, but obviously *not* direct divine intervention in the physical realm, while the last two examples above are not “miracles” in the Biblical sense used here either--the former may be instead *providential*, and the latter is in the realm of the *spiritual*, rather than the physical. Yes, both are acts of God, the latter *exclusively* a supernatural act of God, but outside of our definition of “miracle” as an event in the physical realm.

For the sake of discussion here, we will also place outside our definition of “miracles” such Divine acts of self-revelation as theophanies, dreams, visions, and similar things.

There are several biblical words for miracles--

1. “Sign” (Hebrew: *’ot*; Aramaic: *’at*; Greek: *semeion*)--a marker, indicator, pointer (namely, that God is active and involved, that the miracle worker is a Divinely-sanctioned messenger, *etc.*)

2. “Power” (Hebrew: *geburah*; Greek: *dunamis*)--emphasizing the super-human / super-natural nature of the event.

3. “Wonder” (Hebrew: *pele’*; *mifla’ah*; *mofeth*; Aramaic: *temah*; Greek: *teras*)--emphasizing the astonishing, amazing, attention-arresting nature of the event.

(And of course, these words are also sometimes used in contexts where they are not referring to miracles, e.g. “sign” in Luke 2:12)

The very words used in the Bible for miraculous occurrences point to the generally *unusual, extraordinary, uncommon* nature of miracles. If “miracles” were merely the usual, the ordinary, the common, they would go unnoticed, and be therefore ineffective in fulfilling their divine purpose. Their rarity and nature makes them special.

### Purpose of miracles

The Bible notes specifically several purposes for the occurrence of miracles, chief among them--

1. To confirm the messenger as Divinely commissioned. Exodus 4:1-9; I Kings 8:36, 37; John 3:2; 5:36; 7:31; 9:30-33; Acts 2:22; Hebrews 2:3-4.
2. To mark God's direct involvement in events. Exodus 8:19; Daniel 5:23-28.
3. To meet real human needs. Exodus 17:1-7; Mark 2:11; Mark 8:1ff:

### Pattern of Miracles

Most Biblical miracles have an immediately apparent reason. They are not petty or trite (in sharp contrast with many of the apocryphal "miracles" in so-called "gospels" of the 3<sup>rd</sup>/ 4<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. regarding Jesus). Biblical miracles are never performed to entertain, or "on request" from unbelievers. Nor are they regularly "announced" and publicized in advance (how unlike today's charismatic charlatans who pretend to perform miracles at widely advertised "healing and miracle" meetings).

Yet Biblical miracles are not "stereotyped"--all following a set formula or pattern (no two of the four healings of the blind reported in the four Gospels follow the same pattern, but each is unique)--, and are in marked contrast with extra-biblical "miracles" which regularly involve enchantments, sorcery, magic formulas, pagan deities, etc. *There are no Biblical "magic words"*--no "hocus pocus," "alakazam" "abracadabra" or "open sesame"--uttered in their performance.

And, Biblical miracles are strictly, and surprisingly, quite limited in time and place and purpose (what we may call the principle of "conservation of miracles").

### Periods of Biblical Miracles

A careful and complete listing of all Biblical miracles reveals that they are of common occurrence in only five periods, four in the historic past and one yet future. Each of these periods is limited to at most 60 years' length, though usually a bit less. And outside these periods--before, between and after these five periods of frequent miracles,--there are long periods of hundreds of years with very few or no reported miracles.

Or, to state it briefly: God's usual and ordinary pattern of working in the world is NOT through miracles. Only rarely and briefly does He commonly work in miraculous ways in the world. We should not be surprised if our era is one without miracles, since that is His usual *modus operandi*.

(And if I may say, as an aside: if Biblical miracles were mere myth and fable, we would naturally expect them to occur indiscriminately in all periods with about the same amount of frequency in all periods. But this is exactly what we do NOT find).

### A. *First period of common miracles*

Beginning with Moses and the Exodus, extending to the initial conquest of Canaan. (Exodus 3 to Joshua 24). This period spanned about 55-60 years (ca. 1448-1393 B. C.)

There were numerous miracles in Egypt over a period of several months, daily miracles in Sinai, with occasional special miracles, for a period of forty years, but there came the termination of these regular miracles upon entry and settlement in Canaan. Joshua 5:10-12.

It is to be noted that there is a scarcity of reported Biblical miracles in the centuries from Abraham to Moses. Yes, previously in Genesis 1-11, a period covering several thousand years, there are a number of miracles: the creation itself (Genesis 1), the curse on creation (Genesis 3), the "translation" of Enoch (Genesis 5), the Flood (Genesis 6-8, though natural causes--meteor impacts?--may have in part triggered the event), and the confusion of languages at Babel (Genesis 11).

In the life of Abraham, there is the one possible miracle of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19), though a natural but well-timed massive explosion of petroleum products--tar, methane, sulfur compounds--is not outside the realm of possibility. But where else in the life of Abraham are there miracles (I would ascribe the birth of Isaac--as well as the later unusual births of Samson, Samuel and John the Baptist--to *providential* intervention, rather than direct miracles). And there are *no* miracles in the lives of the Patriarchs Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, or during the 400 years of Israel's bondage in Egypt. Lots of examples of providential working, of course. But no miracles as defined above.

Daily miracles in the forty years from Egypt to Canaan? Certainly, but with the entrance of Israel into Canaan, the miracle of daily manna ceased (Joshua 5:12) and only two miracles are reported thereafter in Joshua--the fall of the walls of Jericho (Joshua 6) and the sun standing still in the sky (Joshua 10), however the actual mechanics of that miracle may be explained (actually stopping of the earth's rotation, a special refracting of the light, or some other way).

But from the settlement in the land, until the time of Elijah (I Kings 17), a period of about 550 years, there is another dearth of miracles. Gideon even complained about their *absence* (Judges 6:11-13), and we need not resort to the miraculous to explain Samson's great strength, as a consideration of such modern men as 1956 Olympic weight-lifting champion Paul Anderson (who publicly lifted an elephant on more than one occasion) attest. Yes, there was the toppling of Dagan's statue, and the physical affliction of the Philistines while the ark of the covenant was in their possession (I Samuel 5) though, again, natural means *may* readily account for these things.

The glory cloud that filled the temple when it was dedicated by Solomon (I Kings 8) is indisputably a direct miracle, but otherwise, *where* are the miracles in the lives of such

Biblical notables as Samuel the prophet, and kings Saul, David and Solomon? More than anything, miracles in their lives are notable for their absence. Were the Bible a book of fiction, we can be sure that miracles would litter the pages of the lives of such famous men, but they do not.

### B. *Miracles of Elijah and Elisha*

Biblical monotheism was seriously threatened by the incursions of Baal worship in the period of the divided monarchy. The northern kingdom Israel ultimately was destroyed as an act of judgment by God because of their unshakeable adherence to image worship (the Assyrian captivity of 722 B.C.). The credentials of Elijah and Elisha as God's prophets who vigorously opposed this paganism were vindicated as God's appointed spokesmen by miracles which they performed. Note particularly Elijah's remarks on Mount Carmel, I Kings 18:36-37; and later in II Kings 1:9-14.

These two, Elijah (after 874 B.C.) and his successor Elisha, performed approximately six and twelve miracles, respectively, as reported in I & II Kings. And, incidentally, the historical veracity of these accounts of their miracles was expressly confirmed by Jesus (Luke 4:25-27).

After Elisha's death *circa* 800 B.C., there was a continuous line of writing prophets extending for four centuries (from Hosea to Malachi), but a simultaneous near or complete absence of miracles, with only one brief interlude, until the ministry of Jesus. The incident of Jonah and the great sea creature--which Jesus again expressly confirmed as fact, Matthew 12:39-41--need not be a miracle; there are confirmed 19<sup>th</sup> century reports of whalers being swallowed by whales and being rescued *alive* from the whales' stomachs. Of course, there is the miraculous retreat of the shadow in the ministry of Isaiah around 701 B.C. (Isaiah 38:7, 8), though the contemporaneous healing of King Hezekiah (Isaiah 38:21) was accomplished by medical means (application of a poultice). But beyond this--where are the miracles in the lives of godly King Josiah or Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the other pre-exilic prophets?

### C. *Daniel in Babylon*

After this two-century long dearth of miracles in the Biblical narrative, we do find once again a brief period of multiple miracles in the life and ministry of Daniel. Only three (perhaps four) miracles are recorded in *Daniel*: the rescue from the burning furnace (chapter 3); perhaps Nebuchadnezzar's insanity (chapter 4, though several similar documented cases exist in modern psychiatric annals); the hand-writing on the wall (chapter 5) and Daniel's night among the lions (chapter 6). From first to last, these occurred in the space of not over 55 years. And then, the reports of miracles in Scripture cease once again: there are no miracles in Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Ezra, Nehemiah or Esther--in short, all the post-exilic historical books.

And there are no verifiable miracles in the four centuries from Malachi to Jesus (the Jewish legend of the menorah with oil sufficient only for one night which remarkably burned for eight at the re-dedication of the temple in 165 B.C. perhaps comes the closest). From the death of Daniel to the birth of Jesus is a period of about 535 years.

#### D. The *New Testament Era of Christ and the Apostles*

The first of the New Testament miracles is of course the virginal conception and birth of Jesus, and the miraculous star that guided the magi (no naturalistic explanation of this star is even remotely possible), but thereafter there are none until the ministry of Jesus begins 30 years later.

Jesus' forerunner, John the Baptist, commended by Jesus Himself as the greatest man born of woman, is reported as having performed *no miracles* (John 10:41). That fact in itself should caution those today who put great stock in the pretenders who claim to perform many miracles today. Having "miracles" to your credit is not a *sine qua non* of spiritual greatness.

Jesus Himself performed many miracles (there are at least fifty references to such in the Gospels; the list given by A. T. Robertson in his *A Harmony of the Gospels*, while extensive, is not quite exhaustive). The apostles, too, performed miracles on limited occasions during Jesus' ministry, and more after the ascension, as did other believers, through the miraculous *charismata* given by the Holy Spirit. These miracles were the divine "credentials" for Jesus and the Apostles as God's messengers (John 3:2; Acts 2:22; 2 Corinthians 12:12; Hebrews 2:3-4; *etc.*).

Paul expressly declares that miracles though common in his day were not a permanent feature of Christian experience, but would definitely cease (I Corinthians 13:8-10) though he does not in context specify when. The consistent pattern of Biblical miracles (brief periods of intense miracles followed by long periods with few or none) suggests that this cessation would likely be soon (within decades, rather than centuries or millennia).

The answer to the question, "*When would the cessation of miracles written about by Paul [I Corinthians 13:10] take place?*" is found in the answer to another question, "*How were the 'gifts of the Holy Spirit' (charismata) conveyed/ bestowed on Christians in the NT era?*"

In the Gospels, the apostles and the seventy performed a small number of miracles, limited (in both time and place), at Christ's command--Matthew 10:1, 8; Mark 6:13; Luke 9:6; 10:1, 8, 17--with one possible exception (Mark 9:38). Beyond these, all Gospel account miracles are performed by Jesus.

In Acts, Divine miraculous enablings (*charismata*) are given directly to people, without human intermediaries, in chapters 2 & 10 (the Jewish and Gentile "Pentecosts"), and

*possibly* in the case of Paul (his first recorded miracle occurs in chapter 13, a decade or so after his conversion). But note, the miracles of “tongues” (languages) of Acts 2 & 10 *are not repeated* in the lives of those there involved, and *no other miracles by them are* anywhere reported. All miracles in Acts from 2:42 to 6:7 were performed by the apostles only (2:43).

From Acts 6:8 on, miracles are performed by others in addition to the apostles (6:8; 8:6; 19:6; etc.), but *only after the apostles laid hands on them and thereby conveyed the charismata to them* (note especially 8:14-19). Other NT passages support the view that only through the imposition of apostolic hands were the charismata conveyed. See Romans 1:11; II Timothy 1:6 (*cf.* I Timothy 4:14 and A. T. Robertson’s remarks on the grammar of the passage in his *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. IV, p. 581; for a fuller discussion of the transmission of the *charismata* in the NT period, see my study “How Were the *Charismata* Transmitted in New Testament Times?” *As I See It*, 7:1)

*If* it is true that 1) other than Acts 2 & 10, all *charismata* were transmitted through apostolic hands; and 2) the apostles have no successors in office (no successor to James or any other apostle except the betrayer is reported in Acts, and the requirement of being an eye-witness of the resurrected Christ, Acts 1:21, 22, means there have been *NO* qualified candidates for the Apostolic office since the first century under any circumstances), *then*, the gifts of the Spirit (*charismata*) *necessarily expired* no later than the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century, if not earlier. The end of the period of miracles after a period of about sixty years would be perfectly in keeping with the Biblical pattern of brief periods of miracles followed by long periods with few or no miracles.

#### Alleged “miracles” of post-apostolic and modern eras

The second century A.D. was characterized by exceptionally few claims of miracles in extant Christian writings. There was a large increase in such claims in later centuries. However, such alleged “miracles” are regularly highly dubious, questionable, unsubstantiated, trivial, or sound like “magic” rather than Bible-type miracles.

Modern Catholic (*e.g.*, at Lourdes) and charismatic claims of miracles simply do not fit the Biblical pattern of type, confirmation or credibility. Some *may be* “lying wonders” performed by false prophets utilizing demonic powers.

#### *E. Tribulation period.*

During the future tribulation period, there will be numerous miracles, including divinely-empowered ones performed by the two witnesses (Revelation 11:3-7); there will also be in this period false and diabolical signs and wonders performed by the antichrist and false prophet (II Thessalonians 2:8-12; Revelation 13:11-15; 19:20), and by demons (16:14). At most, this period of miracles, both true and false ones, will last seven years.

Following the tribulation and the return of Christ to earth, the earthly millennial kingdom will be established. The curse on nature will be lifted and the original paradisiacal conditions of Eden will be restored. One foretold miracle of the millennium occurs at the end, when fire consumes Gog and Magog (Revelation 20:8-9). I am not aware of other miracles being ascribed to this future period.

## Summary

Biblical and historical periods without miracles are long--this is God's *usual* method of working; periods of miracles are *brief* and characteristically periods of intense spiritual crises. We should therefore not *expect* our age to be one of frequent or even any miracles. It is not a question of what God *can do*, but what He *chooses* to do.

## False miracles

Not all miracles are from God. The Bible expressly tells of false (i.e. not God-caused) miracles and "miracle-workers," designed to deceive and mislead. Such are found in several periods in history.

--the Exodus and later, Exodus 7:22; 8:7; Deuteronomy 13:1-3

--the NT era, Matthew 7:22

--the Future Tribulation, Matthew 24:24; II Thessalonians 2:9; Revelation 13:13; 16:14; 19:20

Miracles, *per se*, are not certain and definite proof that those who work the wonders are from God; the content of their message must also be tested by the Bible as the standard of truth (see I John 4:1-3)

## The Limitations of Miracles

Miracles--true, Biblical, Divine miracles--can and often did arrest the attention, amaze, surprise even stun but are insufficient in themselves to convert the skeptic, cynic or committed unbeliever. Those who claim we need miracles today to convert the unbelieving fail to note the inability of miracles to convince the ungodly in Biblical times. What miracles could not do then, they cannot do now.

The Bible is awash with accounts of individuals and groups who witnessed undeniable miracles yet persisted in their unbelief and rejection of God's man and message:

There was Pharaoh in Egypt and his court magicians. These latter, practitioners of the magic arts, soon recognized that Moses' miracles were not mere tricks, nor demonic empowerments, but "the finger of God," (Exodus 8:19). Pharaoh himself ultimately came around to recognizing the obvious as well. And yet, he refused to yield, refused to submit, and compelled God to as it were bludgeon him into



submission by plague upon plague. Miracles had no impact on softening his hard heart or bringing him to faith

The Israelites in Egypt and the desert experienced *every miracle that Pharaoh did, and thousands upon thousands more*--daily manna from heaven, daily sights of the pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night, plus numerous extraordinary miracles--in the desert leading to Mt. Sinai, for a year while encamped at Sinai, and for 39 more years during their extended stay in the desert when the promised land *could have been* their residence. How much of the generation that came out of Egypt and saw all those miracles died in the desert because of unbelief at Kadesh Barnea? *ALL* of it--that entire generation--except for Joshua and Caleb (Deuteronomy 1:19-36). Miracles beyond counting did not produce faith in their corrupt, disobedient hearts.

And think of the miracles witnessed by Ahab and Jezebel. He knew full well of the *fact* of Elijah's praying down fire from heaven, and yet their response, especially that of Jezebel, was not repentance and submission, but murderous rage and fury directed at the prophet! (I Kings 19:1-2).

Belshazzar, the final Babylonian ruler, with full knowledge of what God had done to his grandfather and how God had humbled him (Daniel 4), and who must have heard all his life of God's other miracles in Babylon (Daniel 5:18-23), nevertheless chose to defy God, desecrate the sacred vessels dedicated to his service, and praise instead the false gods made of metal and wood and stone. And as a consequence Belshazzar had his own miraculous encounter with God--an inscription declaring his unalterable and immediate doom.

Besides Jerusalem, the only cities Jesus expressly singled out for condemnation were Bethsaida, Chorazin and Capernaum, places where many of His miracles were openly and publicly performed, yet without their repenting (Matthew 11:20-24 = Luke 10:13-15). Miracle upon miracle found the residents of these towns yet in unbelief.

And then there is Judas. Judas personally witnessed hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of miracles of all sorts--calming the storms, healing the sick, feeding thousands, and multiple resurrections of the dead, and what is more, *even performed miracles himself!* (Mark 6:7-13)--yet these superabundant and astonishing miracles could not overcome his heart of unbelief and greed. If miracles could change men's hearts, Judas would have surely been a changed man.

And we have the Sanhedrin. The widespread reports of Jesus' miracles came to them, and upon investigation, they *recognized them as genuine* (John 9:24-34; 11:45-50), but instead of accepting them as Jesus' credentials as a messenger from God (as Nicodemus had done, John 3:2), they chose rather to ascribe His

miracles to Satan (Matthew 12:24) and conspired to destroy Him at the first expedient moment. Later after the crucifixion and resurrection, when given a second chance to change their minds when they witnessed undeniable miracles by the Apostles, they sought to suppress them rather than yield to their obvious implications (Acts 4:13-18).

During the Tribulation period, when a torrent of miraculous judgments will be unleashed on the world, such as will make the plagues in Egypt to pale by comparison, the response of sinners against God will be continued devotion to their abominable actions and sins, but not repentance (Revelation 9:20-21).

Miracles can give *sufficient* proof that a message and messenger are from God, but not *irresistible* evidence that compels repentance and submission. The problem of course is not in the miracle but in the observer. Sinners love sin, they are addicted to their stubborn rebellion against God, and even clear, plain, undeniable, unmistakable Divine miracles cannot transform a sinner into a saint.

There is something far more effective in converting sinners, something far more powerful than mere miracles, and that is the message of the Gospel, Ezekiel 33:7; Matthew 12:41; Romans 1:16; 10:17; 1 Corinthians 1:22-24; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:2. And John 10:41, 42--John performed no miracles, *but everything he said about Jesus was true*. And as a consequence, *many* believed on Jesus there. Faith comes, not through seeing miracles, but by hearing the message about Jesus. Let us give people that, the genuine article. *That* is the "power of God" for salvation.

(We will note in passing that there are a number of times when Jesus was called upon to perform miracles and did not do so, in essence, miracles He refused to perform, NOT "miracles He *could not* perform." See John 2:18-21; Matthew 12:38-40; 16:1-4; Luke 9:51-56; John 6:25-34; Matthew 26:52-54; Luke 23:6-11; Luke 23:35, 36-37, 39; and our published study of these, "Miracles Jesus Did NOT Perform," *As I See It*, 10:4. Again, if Biblical miracles were fable, Jesus would never be presented as refusing to perform a miracle).

So, then, Divine miracles are good and useful in their appropriate Divinely-appointed--and limited--circumstances, but not a "cure-all" for unbelief. If miracles are somehow "essential" to faith, then we today are condemned as unbelievers, having seen none.

In truth, and to the contrary, the present pre-occupation with signs and wonders whether by professing Christians (charismatics) or unbelievers is *not* evidence of faith, but of *unbelief*-- Matthew 12:38-40; 16:1-4. Those who seek and insist on miracles today are not commended as people of greater faith, but condemned as those controlled by carnality.

"Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed."