



Miracles by Chris Swanson

If you are like me, some miracles in the Bible are hard to believe. On the one hand, ample evidence shows the Bible is true and inspired. On the other hand, making sense of some miracles in the context of our understanding of the physical world is not easy. Miracles create a tension in our belief system that is not easy to resolve in many cases. For instance, figuring out what it means in Joshua 10:13 for the sun to have stopped in its course is a bit mind-boggling.

One approach to addressing the tension is to pursue the well trodden paths of assessing the two sides of the tension through careful analysis of both the Bible and our scientific understanding. This requires a sensitive reading of the Bible, an exploration of the reliability of the text, an understanding of the person of Jesus (who believed in the truth of the Scriptures), and an understanding of the intention of the authors. It also requires a nuanced understanding of science, the nature of scientific claims, and the limits of scientific knowledge.

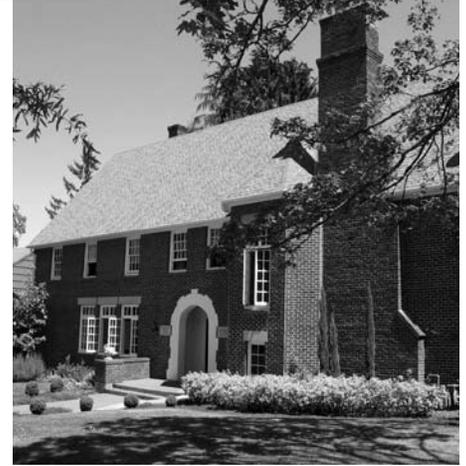
Over the years, talented people have produced an enormous amount of work regarding these questions, some of which is extremely cogent and clear. Ultimately, the best resolution and understanding come from these sorts of analyses and pursuits. But such pursuits are difficult and time consuming. Few have the ability, inclination, or skills to thoroughly explore the ins and outs of the questions. The sheer number of questions is daunting, and for many people, they are not burning issues. Most people will decide based on other sources.

In this article, I want to explore some of the non-analytical factors that direct most people's thinking about miracles. To do so, I want to look at one of the primary historical arguments against miracles and how it fared in Western culture. But first we need some background.

Prior to the Renaissance, there was little if any question about miracles. It was not difficult to believe in miracles; everybody did. The disciple Thomas may have doubted that Christ rose from the dead, but I do not think the reason was because he had a hard time believing miracles were possible. After all, he had spent years witnessing Jesus perform miracles.

In the medieval period, miracles and the supernatural permeated life in Western society. Lewis writes in the *Discarded Image* that the model people accepted of the world was full of supernatural beings and activity. Ghosts, angels, and demons walked and worked in the world. The motions of the heavenly bodies influenced our fates and characters. Further, people accepted that relics, pilgrimages, and papal bulls could affect one's soul and spiritual condition. Bread and wine turned into the blood and body of Christ every day. Thus, when a medieval person heard that Moses parted the Red Sea or that the sun stood still, there was little cause to doubt. There was no reason to question the possibility that such things could and did happen. Background presuppositions supported a view in which supernatural activity was accepted, even expected. The medieval response to the sun standing still was *WOW*, not *how*.

Our culture no longer holds these assumptions. Why is that, and how did it happen?



The common explanation goes something like this: As modern science began to develop, people began to see that previously held beliefs were no longer supportable. The earth is not the center of the solar system. The planets move according to impersonal Newtonian principles. Magic does not work. The body acts in many ways like a complex machine without a "vital source." When society had no scientific explanations, many things were explained by supernatural or non-mechanical causes. But since we now have science—so the story goes—we no longer accept the supernatural.

While this explanation does give part of the picture, it does not fully account for the shift from a world where miracles were expected to a world where miracles are hard to swallow. To see why this is the case, it will be helpful to look now at a specific argument against miracles put forward during the period of the Enlightenment by Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776).

Hume made a strong and influential argument against the likelihood of miracles, which he published in 1748 as part of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. The essence of his argument was that we should assign probabilities to events in accordance with the amount of empirical evidence that supports them. He reasoned that there was an overwhelming amount of empirical evidence for the existence of natural laws; we see such evidence every day. The evidence for miracles, on the other hand, was minimal and relied not on empirical observation but on testimony.



Miracles, continued

He expanded on his theme at some length, but the core of the argument relied on an appeal to the experience of our senses—that is, cold hard data.

The argument is a good one *if*, and only if, you accept his premises—namely, that we must judge based purely on the amount of empirical evidence. Miracles are believable only if we have a large quantity of miracle observations. He presupposes that other sorts of judgments, analyses, and sources of evidence are invalid. For instance, Hume attacks the validity of apostolic testimony and disregards the internal coherence of biblical and historical evidence. If one *assumes* that all that exists is what we observe, then that which we cannot observe cannot exist. Hume's argument, then, is flawed because it assumes what was to be shown.

Nevertheless, the argument took hold in the culture's imagination. It was, and still is, persuasive to many and continues to be discussed and widely debated. If this argument had been written a hundred years earlier, however, it would have been either ignored or (perhaps more likely) censored. What was the appeal of Hume's argument? Why did it gain traction? Was it the cogency of the argument or something else?

I would argue that people saw Hume's argument against miracles in a favorable light because of their desire for morality. On the face of it, such a claim seems like an outright contradiction. If people were interested in morality, why turn from the truth of the Bible? Why reject the goodness of God and the resurrection of Jesus for the sake of morality? The answer lies in the cultural context of Hume's time.

When Hume published his treatise on miracles in 1748, Scotland had experienced two Jacobite rebellions in 1715 and 1745. The Jacobites, whose name came from a Latin form of "James," sought to restore the Roman Catholic Stuart King James VII of Scotland (James II of England and Ireland) and his heirs to the thrones of England, Scotland, and Ireland. The famous battle of Culloden in 1746 resulted in a final loss for the Jacobites at the hands of the British. It signaled the end of the attempts to put James's son Charles Stuart, a.k.a. Bonnie Prince Charlie,

on the British throne. These uprisings were, in a sense, the culmination of over a century of civil war and religious persecution in the British Isles.

In the early 1600s, several non-Anglican protestant churches were growing: Puritans, Quakers, and Congregationalists. Catholicism, on the other hand, was severely repressed and restricted. Catholics could not hold any positions of power and were often persecuted. The animosity between Protestant England and Catholic France tended to make those tensions worse. In the 1640s and 1650s, Cromwell, a Puritan, successfully led a civil war against King Charles I who was perceived to be too friendly to Catholics. Cromwell was successful for a time, but eventually the monarchy was restored. After the restoration in 1660, the new king, Charles II, took steps to outlaw all religions except the Anglican Church.

Later in 1685, after the death of Charles II, James II (Bonnie Prince Charlie's father) ascended to the British throne. He was, as it turns out, a Catholic. He began to overturn all the statutes against Catholics and appoint Catholics to positions of power. For many this was anathema, and he was deposed three years later in the so-called "Glorious Revolution." He avoided the usurpers and made his escape to France. The Jacobite rebellions of the 1700s were the trailing edge of these struggles.

Although these wars, rebellions, and uprisings were political in nature, they also had a strong religious aspect. One's fortunes as a Puritan, Catholic, or Anglican depended a great deal on who was in power. Persecution was common. Catholic priests could be tortured. Religious intolerance was often extreme.

The result of all these struggles was not primarily the growth of religious tolerance, although that did begin to grow. Instead, the late 1700s saw the growth of religious indifference. People were no longer zealous for their perspective. Dogmatism was out.

I certainly cannot claim to know the hearts of those living in the late 1700s, but I cannot help but make some guesses about their frame of mind. The people of the British Isles must have looked back on the sins of the previous generations in disgust. They called for a new and different way, a moral way without all the animosity. They desired to distance themselves from the bloody feuds and intolerance of the past. Each generation

rejects the moral failures of the past, and Enlightenment rationality must have seemed like a powerful alternative.

According to Enlightenment thinkers, a just society could be established by using reason and science. Appeals to the Bible and to God were potentially divisive. For instance, John Locke proffered Reason as a solution to political differences. Newton used Reason to understand the solar system. Francis Bacon claimed scientific induction held the key to understanding the natural world. Immanuel Kant, in his essay "What is Enlightenment," claimed, "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity"—that immaturity being to appeal to authority rather than to think for oneself. He aimed squarely at leaders who promoted a religious, authoritative intolerance.

This was the context of Hume's argument against miracles. He did not need to have a flawless and elegant argument to sway the men of Reason. He needed simply to appeal to the sensibility of the culture. He needed to appeal to the possibility for a better way, a more "moral" approach to solving differences.

History shows that any attempt to take Hume's argument seriously and show its failures was a pointless exercise. During Hume's life, Thomas Reid did exactly that. He clearly and cogently exposed the vacuousness of Hume's whole philosophy. And for a while Reid was widely adopted. But in the end, he fell into disrepute and obscurity. According to most philosophers and authors, Reid was backward looking; he stood for the past, for Aristotle, and for Christianity.

Hume's argument against miracles still exists in various forms in the psyche of our culture. The amount of scholarship, even recently, on Hume's argument is enormous. For many, Hume's argument has overwhelming persuasive power. The power of the argument and its many forms, however, resides not in the elegance of the logic or the obviousness of the premises. I believe its power resides in a perception that conformity to the Bible will lead to bad things.

To a lesser extent, the same scenario that played out in Hume's day is being repeated today. Our cultural elite are attempting to paint a picture that associates immorality and injustice with strong religious conviction. Of course, the "sins" of such convictions are fan-

tastically tame in comparison to the religious intolerance and wars of the 1600s. Nevertheless, those “sins” are broadcast widely and loudly. Religious confidence and conviction, we are told, lead to intolerance and bigotry and dogmatism and oppression.

For those who accept this story, who wouldn't want to find a better, more moral way? We all want something better than intolerance and bigotry. Most want a path in which morality can flourish. In such a cultural context, people give credence to any argument that questions perspectives seen as dogmatic or unscientific.

In the end, the supernatural view of the world has passed us by. We are in a secular world where anything that smacks of the supernatural starts on the back foot, taking a defensive posture. Clearly, part of that secularist view derives from the materialistic perspective on nature that has grown out of Enlightenment and scientific thinking. But I

suggest that a significant source of that secular materialist view comes not from science but from a desire for a better cultural path, as did Hume's case against miracles.

I realize I have not addressed the issues I first raised about miracles. I did not intend to delve into an argument for or against miracles. What I hope to have done instead is to step back and examine beliefs and how they are formed. As much as I would love for it to not be true, it seems as if many of our cherished beliefs (and I include my own) are held based on our desires and assumptions, not based on careful and thoughtful examination.

Naturally, some of those desires are selfish, related to our baser instincts. We try to fight those. Other desires, though, are noble. Many people desire some sort of morality. Because those desires are good, we feel justified and satisfied in pursuing them.

To the extent that our culture wants morality (although I think many probably are

not interested in such things), it should be applauded. There is a common ground upon which to dialog. However, simply wanting morality is not enough. The desire needs to be coupled with a sober-minded examination of what constitutes morality. We should look at the source of intolerance and what it looks like in all its different forms.

Without careful examination, a desire for a better way, as honorable as it may seem, can lead us down dark paths. The Enlightenment may have delivered us from religious wars, but it also led directly to the bloody French Revolution. Good intentions, indeed, pave roads, but not all are good.

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Dr. Charley Dewberry is the dean and a tutor at Gutenberg College and a practicing stream ecologist. He has authored two books, *Intelligent Discourse: Exposing the Fallacious Standoff Between Evolution and Intelligent Design* (2006) and *Saving Science: A Critique of Science and Its Role in Salmon Recovery* (2004). He holds a Ph.D. in philosophy.

Dr. Eliot Grasso is a tutor at Gutenberg College and an internationally recognized performer, scholar, composer, and recording artist. He holds a M.A. in ethnomusicology from the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick and a Ph.D. in musicology from the University of Oregon School of Music and Dance.

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