

Miracles?

To test a theory, a scientist conducts a series of controlled experiments. Say he wants to determine if goldfish eat worms. He puts a goldfish in a tank, throws in a worm, and sees what happens. He may expect the fish to gobble up the worm, or he may expect the fish to show no interest in the worm, or he might expect the worm to eat the fish. Doesn't matter. What matters is what actually happens. Either way, the scientist cannot conclude from one trial run how likely it is that a goldfish will or will not eat a worm. So, he tries it again, and again, recording the result each time. That's science.

The historian is forced to use an entirely different approach to his work. He doesn't have the option of fighting the battle of Gettysburg 100 times to see if Pickett's Charge is always a failure for the Confederacy. He must rely on probability, based on the best available evidence. The evidence is overwhelming and uncontested that the South lost that battle. What would have happened if General Lee had done things a bit differently? That is a matter of speculation that historians may indulge in, and their arguments may be persuasive, but they cannot prove anything about it one way or the other in the sense of scientific proof.

With that in mind, let's consider the matter of Jesus' "miracles" – the ones he performed and the "miracle" of his resurrection. Miracles are not within the purview of history. No historian, no matter how good he is, can ever prove that a miracle occurred. He might be able to prove that Lazarus unexpectedly recovered from what was thought to be a terminal illness, but he cannot prove that it was a miracle. That's because historical proof depends on evidence and probability. But a miracle is, by definition, the least probable explanation for any event. Any other plausible or even remotely possible explanation is more likely than a miracle. Otherwise, it wouldn't be a miracle.

Did Jesus actually perform miracles, as the New Testament says? Did Jesus actually rise from the dead, never to die again, and ascend at some point into heaven? Some say yes, and they claim there is proof. Jesus' miracles are reported by several sources. So is Jesus' resurrection. The disciples and others are reported by multiple sources to have witnessed the resurrected Jesus, and talked with him. That's strong evidence, isn't it? Several people saw for themselves that the tomb was empty. That's strong evidence isn't it? What more proof do you need?

The problems with that are many. For one thing, all those witnesses were not eyewitnesses at all. The earliest reports we have are the gospel of Mark and the writings of Paul. But Mark's gospel wasn't written until some 35 or 40 years after Jesus died. Paul started writing shortly before that, but still many years after the events. So, where did Mark and Paul get their information? From eyewitnesses? No. From people who had heard things from other people, who had heard stories from other people, etc, for decades. We all know from experience that facts get lost and fiction gets invented and embellished in the process of handing down oral traditions from one generation to the next. Heck, things get changed and distorted within minutes usually. So all those reports are highly suspect.

What makes them all the more suspect is the fact that those early Christians had plenty of motivation to make up such stories. They wanted people to believe that Jesus had performed miracles and had been miraculously resurrected. They may have not deliberately misled anyone, but they were predisposed to believe what they heard and to trust the people who told them. They may have strongly, passionately believed the stories. After all, it is very common today for people to have realistic visions of recently deceased loved ones. It can be so real that people swear they talked to a departed loved one, gave them a hug, etc. They aren't trying to trick anybody. They absolutely believe what they are saying. No doubt that was the experience of many early Christians.

Are there other possible explanations for the empty tomb? Of course. Lots of them. One is that whoever buried the body had two assistants who later, in the middle of the night, decided to move the body to someplace more appropriate. In the process, they encountered Roman guards who demanded an explanation. There may have been a sword fight in which the body-snatchers were killed, leaving the soldiers with three dead bodies. They may have simply dumped all three bodies outside of town and went to breakfast at the local McLazarus.

Is it possible that this scenario actually happened? Is it possible that the people who claimed to see the resurrected Jesus were imagining, dreaming, or hallucinating? Neither scenario seems very likely. But they are possible. And they are more plausible than the miracle explanation.

But, maybe you, in spite of all that, still cling to the sincere belief that Jesus did in fact perform miracles and that he was miraculously raised from the dead. Then you must, if you wish to be intellectually honest, apply the same criteria to other similar situations. And there you have a couple of pretty big challenges. For one thing, there were lots of miracle workers in Jesus' time. He was hardly the only one to cure the sick and raise the dead. Those events must be viewed as equally miraculous and the people who performed them equally divine.

One such miracle worker was Hanina ben Dosa, a Jew. Apollonius of Tyana, a pagan holy man and philosopher, purportedly healed the sick, cast out demons, and raised the dead. He was alleged to have been born supernaturally. He reportedly ascended to heaven at the end of his life. How about that? Another Jesus! In fact, these kinds of stories had been common in religions for centuries. Horus, for example. The similarities are astonishing to the true believer in Jesus' miracles. And very disappointing, no doubt. Even if one accepts the miracle explanation, Jesus was far from unique. Where does that leave Christianity?

Another big problem for those who accept the miracle explanation is that the gospel accounts of the events leading up to Jesus' death, and especially the events on Easter morning, are a jumbled mass of contradictions, inconsistencies, and absurdities. There is simply no single

coherent, consistent story of the resurrection in the gospels. One would reasonably expect the gospel authors to get that story straight above all others. Without the resurrection, Christianity disintegrates. The fact that the gospel authors do not agree on so many critical details clearly demonstrates that the stories are based on oral traditions which are notoriously unreliable as history. If the Holy Spirit was guiding the thoughts and words of the Bible authors, producing God's inerrant, infallible Word, how come it is such a garbled mess instead of a consistent narrative? There simply is no believable, plausible, intellectually honest answer to that question consistent with fundagelical claims.

Anyone who believes in the miracle of Jesus' resurrection and ascension into heaven as part of the Holy Trinity, thus establishing the means of salvation for mankind, does so strictly on faith, not as a matter of logic, reason, fact, or probability. Is that kind of faith something that should be considered noble and worthy of respect or praise? If so, then Islam is equally worthy of praise and respect. Same for every other religion. Christianity is no better than any of the rest of them. Once a believer decides to suspend disbelief, abandon reason and logic, and adopt blind faith as a substitute for reality, his ability to reason is badly compromised, and his judgment is extremely questionable. If a Christian can allow his mind to drift so far from logic and reason on matters of religion and faith, it is reasonable to conclude that he is fully capable of believing just about anything.

There are some notably brilliant and sincere believers that do deserve some respect. C S Lewis springs to mind. At least he made an admirable attempt to back up his beliefs with sound reason and logic. It doesn't mean he was right, but he didn't just go on blind faith. That kind of intellectual honesty is hard to find among believers. Most Christians don't know the Bible, and they don't know the history of Christianity, and they don't particularly want to know anything other than what they are spoon-fed by Christian hawkers and apologists.

One would expect a true believer to easily defend his faith forcefully, honestly, convincingly, and eagerly. But that is not what happens in (my) experience. Instead, they tend to just stomp off in a huff, full of self-righteous indignation that anyone would dare challenge their faith. Well, I dare. If you don't like it, you can easily shut me up. Just prove that I am wrong. After all, you have your omniscient, omnipotent God, your inspired, infallible Bible, the power of prayer, and your Holy Spirit against little old me. Should be easy for you to prove me wrong. Nobody has been able to yet. Few have even tried. Be the first.