Miracles

By Dave DeWitt

Definition Distinction

The numbering of miracles in the Bible varies from 110 to 160. ChatGPT says there are: 110 miracles in the Bible, 60 miracles in the Old Testament, 50 miracles in the New Testament, 35 of which are those performed by Jesus.

The New Oxford American Dictionary has three definitions of the word "miracle":

1. "A surprising and welcome event that is not by natural or scientific laws. The work of a divine agency: *the miracle of rising from the grave*."
2. "A highly improbable or extraordinary event. *…it was a miracle that more people hadn't been killed or injured."*
3. "An amazing product or achievement, *a miracle drug*."

The problem is, the dictionary gives us two very different definitions for the same word, with no way to distinguish between the natural and the supernatural.

Two Common Bad Examples

Is the Birth of a Baby a Miracle?

Answer: No. If you want to call things like the birth of a baby a miracle, then what is your word for contrary-to-nature events? A few years ago, the pro-life people put up a billboard near the entrance to my town with a large picture of a newborn baby. Under it was a caption which read, "I am a miracle." No, a newborn baby is not a miracle. Babies are born all the time. They are wonders of God's creation, but they are natural, not supernatural. Crossing the Red Sea on dry land, being surrounded by chariots of fire, walking on water, feeding over 5,000 people from one boy's lunch, raising the dead—these are what I suggest we should call "miracles," events contrary to what is observable in the natural universe. The birth of a baby, the migration of birds, the development of a flower, the contradictory nature of light and time dilation are unexplainable, but they are natural, not supernatural. It is illegitimate and deceptive to use the word "miracle" for both or to imply the natural is a miracle.

Is Healing a Miracle?

Answer: Not necessarily. Suppose I pray for someone to be healed from a sickness and they are healed. Is that a miracle? If I prayed for it, I should certainly thank God for it. It is an answer to prayer, but not necessarily a miracle. With many sicknesses, there are examples of healing which are not medically explainable. For example, some forms of cancer just go away. ChatGPT says, "…in rare cases, some cancers can partially or completely disappear without conventional treatment." This phenomenon is known as "spontaneous regression." So, if we pray for it and it happens, we can certainly say it is a work of God and an answer to prayer because it is extremely rare. But, unless we can watch the tumor disappear, we should not call it a miracle because it does happen in the natural world. Unexplainable means it is not explainable. It does not mean it has a supernatural explanation. And being a work of God does not necessarily mean it is contrary to nature.

Interpretation Explanation

An interpretation point should be made here. The authors of the Old and New Testaments did not have our English word for "miracle." Today's Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek scholars often use the word "miracle" to translate the Hebrew and Greek words for "power" and "sign." Whether the power or sign was contrary to nature or just contradictory to probability would be determined from the intention of the author, which is determined from the context.

The key to identifying a biblical event as (what I have called) miraculous is not just about the word that is used in our English Bibles. The deciding factor, as in all interpretation, is the author's intended meaning. It is (what I am calling) a miracle if the author intended to describe it as a contrary-to-nature event. For example, liberals have said that the parting of the Red Sea, so the Israelites could cross on dry land, was actually the Reed Sea where it is shallow enough to cross in the dry season. But Moses clearly explained it as the crossing of a significant body of water that closed behind the Israelites, drowning Pharaoh's army. Moses' intended meaning is that it was a miraculous event, one that would not happen by itself in the natural world.

The Connection Between the Natural and the Supernatural

C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) wrote extensively about this subject in his book titled *Miracles* (originally written in1947, revised in 1960). He made a significant observation about miracles that I would like to point out. [I will quote a few of his thoughts from chapters 2 and 3 of that book. Then I will make some comments of my own. The indented quotes are from C.S. Lewis.]

> "A miracle is an interference with Nature by supernatural power… If a miracle is said to have occurred, it does not follow that Nature has been violated, but that something beyond Nature has happened… The moment [the miracle] enters [nature's] realm, it obeys all her laws. Miraculous wine will intoxicate, miraculous conception will lead to pregnancy, inspired books will suffer all the ordinary processes of textual corruption, miraculous bread will be digested."

I agree with Lewis that miracles do not cancel out nature. They are not an exception to nature. They are a higher power imposed upon the natural world which interferes with and overpowers the laws of nature at the time they occur. But miracles do not change those laws. Once a miracle has occurred, it is subject to the laws of nature. When Peter walked on the water with Jesus, the laws of nature were overpowered by the miracle. But the natural laws, which make people sink in water, never went away, as Peter found out when he took his eyes off Jesus.

Miracles Are Verified by History, Not Science

Miracles could only be verified by science at the time they occurred. The scientific method applies reason to repeatable observations to make conclusions about the natural world. Although some natural things are rare, science requires that they have enough regularity to be observable. And since miracles are (by definition) rare events, not regular events, a scientific understanding of a miracle would only be relevant at the time the miracle occurred.

But science is not the only way, or even the best way, to verify reality. A more reliable way to determine truth is through history, textual verification, archeology, and in the case of the Bible, fulfilled prophecy. Take for example, the assassination of U.S. President Abraham Lincoln in Ford's Theater on April 15, 1865. We can be certain of that beyond reasonable doubt. But the event cannot be examined scientifically because it cannot be observed. We are certain that it happened, because of the many historical accounts of it, many by people who were there.

Socrates died in 399 B.C. from drinking poison hemlock. We know that beyond reasonable doubt because it was recorded by his student Plato in his work titled "Phaedo." ChatGPT estimates there are about 100 manuscript copies of "Phaedo." I know of no one who challenges its description of the death of Socrates.

Biblical miracles are verifiable by fulfilled prophecy and the historical evidence for the reliability of the biblical record. The web site reasons.org claims, "Approximately 2,500 prophecies appear in the pages of the Bible, about 2,000 of which already have been fulfilled to the letter—no errors." As to the

reliability of the biblical text, the manuscript evidence is overwhelming. For example, there are ~5,800 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, plus ~10,000 in Latin and ~9,000 in other ancient languages, totaling over 20,000 manuscripts worldwide. [Information from Wikipedia] For example, there is more historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth than there is for the assassination of Abraham Lincoln or the death of Socrates from drinking Hemlock. Evidence for the reliability of the Bible today includes confirmation from archeology, ground-penetrating radar, light detection, as well as high-resolution aerial photos from drones and satellites.

The Purpose of Biblical Miracles

Gotquestions gives this summary:

> "The biblical record shows that miracles occurred during particular periods for the specific purpose of authenticating a new message from God. Moses was enabled to perform miracles to authenticate his ministry before Pharaoh (Exodus 4:1-8). Elijah was given miracles to authenticate his ministry before Ahab (1 Kings 17:1; 18:24). The apostles were given miracles to authenticate their ministry before Israel (Acts 4:10, 16). Jesus' ministry was also marked by miracles, which the apostle John calls "signs" (John 2:11). John's point is that the miracles were proofs of the authenticity of Jesus' message. After Jesus' resurrection, as the Church was being established and the New Testament was being written, the apostles demonstrated "signs" such as tongues and the power to heal."

I think that is basically true. But some miracles do not seem to be "authenticating a new message from God." Abraham received revelation, Moses received revelation, as did the prophets and the apostles. And Jesus was a source of revelation. He repeatedly pointed to His miracles to validate who He was. But this is probably not exclusively true. It seems that Enoch was taken by God in some miraculous way. Joshua experienced miracles at Jericho and Gibeon. Naaman was healed of leprosy dipping himself in the Jordan River. Daniel's friends were unharmed in fiery furnace." But it is always true that miracles occur to bring glory to God. Nonetheless, it is usually true, most of the time, that biblical miracles were "for the specific purpose of authenticating a new message from God."

Does God Do Miracles Today?

[Note, in order to narrow my focus to the nature of miracles, I am not addressing the subject of Satan and demons doing miracles today.]

God did <u>not</u> say He would do away with miracles. In the New Testament, Paul said that the gifts of prophecy and tongues would cease (1 Corinthians 13:8). And the biblical record of them ceased about halfway through the first century. The Apostle John also wrote that new revelation from God would cease (Revelation 22:18-19). In other words, a biblical case can be made for the cessation of prophecy, tongues, and new revelation from God, but nowhere in the Bible does it say miracles would cease. So, we have no basis for discounting the possibility of miracles today. But I would like to make four personal observations:

1. I have never seen a miracle. My charismatic friends feel sorry for me, but the reality is in over 50 years of full-time ministry, I have never witnessed what I could call a supernatural event done by God. Have you? I believe (understand) that God can do whatever He wants, including miracles, today. I am just saying, I have never seen one. I believe (understand) that the miracles recorded in the Bible are real supernatural events because I can verify the reliability of the Bible, beyond reasonable doubt. I am only saying, I cannot verify miracles today by personal experience.

2. Nobody can show me a miracle. These same charismatic friends, who feel sorry for me, can also not show me a miracle. They can tell me stories about miracles, but they cannot show me one. I realize that miracles are (by definition) rare, not regular. So they may well happen some place or sometime when I am not there. Nonetheless, it means miracles today cannot be generally, publicly, verified, whereas the ones in the Bible could be. Over two million people witnessed the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, even

Rahab knew about it 40 years later. Everybody in Judah knew about Jesus' supernatural healings. Everybody in Jerusalem knew about the empty tomb and the lame man Peter healed at the temple gate.

3. None of the Bible teachers I grew up with ever mentioned seeing a miracle. The thing is, I grew up with biblical parents, in good Bible-teaching churches, with Bible-oriented pastors and teachers. I went to Dallas Theological Seminary and heard teaching from the best Bible teachers of the day. It seems strange that none of them ever mentioned experiencing a miracle or suggested that I should look for one. And all of them believed in the miracles of the Bible.

4. The leading Bible teachers through the 2000+ years of Christianity did not claim they saw a miracle or imply we should look for one. Of course, there were people who claimed they experienced a miracle. But if you bear down on these examples, you usually find they are not talking about supernatural events, they are not verifiable, and they are not taught by our main Bible scholars. For example, here is a list of very prominent Christian theologians, scholars, missionaries, teachers and evangelists who make no claim of ever seeing a miracle defined as a supernatural event. If supernatural miracles occur or should be recognized as occurring, we would expect the men in the following list to have talked about it. Somewhere. But they did not.

> Augustine* (354-430), Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296–373), Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), John Wycliffe (1328–1384), Martin Luther (1483–1546), Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531), John Calvin (1509–1564), John Wesley (1703–1791), Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), William Carey (1761–1834), J. N. Darby (1800–1882), D. L. Moody (1837–1899), Harry Ironside (1876–1951), C. I. Scofield (1843–1921), Billy Graham** (1918–2001), John Walvoord (1910–2002), Charles Ryrie (1925–2016). [*Augustine claimed to witness miracles, but he qualified it saying that a miracle does not violate nature itself, but our understanding of nature. That makes the event natural, not supernatural. ** Billy Graham claimed to see miracles, but he defined them along natural lines, such as the spiritual and moral transformation of a sinner who receives Christ. This is indeed supernatural, but secular psychologists would claim the same transformations from counseling and therapy.]

Conclusion

The word "miracle" is used different ways. So, the first thing we need to do when we talk about miracles is to decide how we are going to use the word. It is crucial to distinguish between wonderous natural events, like the birth of a baby, and supernatural events, like walking on water. I am suggesting that we agree to restricting the word "miracle" to supernatural events. Having done that, we can think about: the nature of miracles, the purpose of miracles, and ask if we should expect to experience miracles today.

The nature of a miracle is that of a higher power imposed on the natural world that does not cancel out nature. Once miracles occur, their results are subject to nature. "Miraculous wine will intoxicate, miraculous conception will lead to pregnancy, inspired books will suffer all the ordinary processes of textual corruption, miraculous bread will be digested." [C. S. Lewis]

The purpose of miracles often has a lot to do with verifying new verbal revelation from God, but not always. What is always true is that the purpose of miracles is to glorify God.

As to expecting miracles today, God never said, nor does the Bible say, miracles will cease. As a matter of fact, during the end times, miracles will increase (such as in the book of Revelation). But most of the leading Bible teachers through the 2000+ years of Christianity did not claim they saw a miracle or imply we should look for one. I believe the miracles recorded in the Bible happened as the biblical authors described them, because I can verify the reliability of the Bible. I have heard stories about miracles, but I have never seen one or been shown one.

Have you?