

## Introduction: Miracle in an age of diversity

GRAHAM H. TWELFTREE

In their various ways, atheist, agnostic and believer alike negotiate the problem of miracle: their possibility, their apprehension and, if any, their meaning. But for the first time in recent history it is increasingly obvious that we do not travel alone. Not only is this the experience of those living in the West, those cultures extending from the rim of the north Atlantic. With greater communication, travel, immigration and trade, it is apparent that miracle is also a problem in the East for the Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist, as well as for the Christian and Jew in the global south.

Not since the religions of Egypt, Syria, Persia and Asia Minor found their way into the Graeco-Roman world have the boundaries between so many cultures been so porous<sup>1</sup> and the problem of miracle so interesting. In the Graeco-Roman world, late in the second century CE, the philosopher Celsus (probably in Alexandria) was pouring scorn on Christians who, 'for a few obols make known their sacred lore in the middle of the market-place and drive demons out of people and blow away disease' (Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.69). In the same period, the philosopher-satirist Lucian of Samosata (modern Samsat in south-east Turkey) says in relation to the followers of Peregrinus: 'By Zeus, it would be nothing unnatural if, among all those dolts [who witnessed his death] that there are, some should be found to assert that they were relieved of quartan fevers by him' (*The Passing of Peregrinus* 28). In poking fun at such views he said, 'we have a powerful antidote to such poisons [the stories] in the truth and in sound reason brought to bear everywhere. As long as we make use of this, none of these empty foolish lies will disturb our peace' (*The Lover of Lies* 40).

But the temper of our time is different. It is not simply that we live in a postmodern world in which some members of the intelligentsia have exchanged their dogmas and absolutes for a plurality of possibilities and narratives. Nor is it that Charles Taylor can

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89986-4 - The Cambridge Companion to Miracles

Edited by Graham H. Twelftree

Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *Graham H. Twelftree*

pronounce our Western world 'disenchanted'.<sup>2</sup> That is, it is not that the enchanted world of our predecessors with its spirits, demons, moral forces, and a cosmos testifying to divine activity and purposes, is lost to us.<sup>3</sup> Rather, as Taylor goes on to discuss, our age is also characterized by a religious diversity that is experienced not only by social elites, but by everyone in society. There is, especially in the West, no longer a cultural obligation to believe in God to the point that many feel it easier not to believe. Moreover, it is not simply that there is a decline in Jewish and Christian believers, nor is it that it is now possible to be a Hindu or a Muslim or a Buddhist. It is, in short, that there is a variety of ways of being a materialist or spiritual or religious, and relating to a god.<sup>4</sup>

Not surprisingly, one expression of the variety of possible ways of existing in relation to a god and the world is seen in the responses to the idea of miracle. We will see in the chapters below that the category of miracle has been abandoned by many. Also, some religious traditions have distanced themselves from miracle at various times in their histories, and more so in recent times. As well, there are ongoing deep philosophical objections to miracle from some quarters, even among thinkers who claim affiliation to major religious traditions. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, what follows will also show that a significant proportion of the population of the Western world – for example around three-quarters of those in the United States<sup>5</sup> and 38 per cent in Britain<sup>6</sup> – continue to believe in miracles. At least in part, these figures give voice to R. G. Collingwood's view that 'if the rationalist had any intelligence he would see that his attacks on religion are too easy to be sound, and that there must be a catch somewhere'.<sup>7</sup> Or, perhaps, this persistent belief in miracle can be claimed as evidence that we are religious animals.<sup>8</sup>

In the light of our experience of this increasing diversity and, therefore, potential misunderstanding of each other, part of the purpose in writing these essays, and bringing them together, is to aid dialogue among readers to help mutual understanding of how a particular faith (or lack of it) relates to the issue of miracle. Some of the chapters, such as those related to Christianity, bring order and clarity to, and guide the reader through, the growing mountain of literature in that particular field. Chapters on other areas, such as the Hebrew Bible and traditional religions, are either charting new ground or bringing to our attention material that may be little known and understood; this is especially the case with respect to the chapters on the major religions that arose in the East.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89986-4 - The Cambridge Companion to Miracles

Edited by Graham H. Twelftree

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: miracle in an age of diversity* 3

The various chapters on miracle in antiquity and the Middle Ages in Part II of this volume are of intrinsic value in contributing to our knowledge. They also provide depth and historical perspective for discussing miracle in Islam, Christianity, Judaism and in contemporary secular society. Moreover, a number of these chapters help understand and interpret the gospel traditions about Jesus, who has dominated and continues to be important in Western debates about miracle. Hence, the miracles of Jesus will come into view again, for example, in the chapter on the history of the debates about miracle.

However, the following pieces, written independently by diverse specialists, are not intended to be an exhaustive treatment of the subject. Instead, these chapters are best read as a number of core samples recovered by those who have drilled down at strategic points in the past and in the cultures we now share, at least to some extent, exposing not only the surface expression evident in the various claims to miracle, but also the deep-seated structures that have given rise to the views on miracle in these times and traditions.

## FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES

In the opening chapter of Part I, David Basinger shows there is no standard way of defining a miracle. While most theists assume a miracle to be due in part to intentional divine activity, there is debate over the type of divine activity. Some assume that God directly manipulates the natural order while others assume that God predetermines that nature will bring about miraculous events. Theists also differ on the natural explicability of the event. Some limit miracles to events that could never have a natural explanation while others claim that an event can be a miracle even if a natural explanation is available.

Robert Larmer (Chapter 2) defines a miracle as a dramatic supernatural intervention in nature that furthers God's purposes. He explores the meaning of a miracle, so defined, for science, philosophy and theology. With regard to science, he argues that miracles do not violate the laws of nature and thus there is no necessary conflict between the evidence for miracles and the evidence which supports belief in the laws of nature. At the philosophical level, he argues that methodological naturalism is not metaphysically neutral and it questionably restricts what form explanations may take and whether God can be conceived as acting directly in the world. Theologically, he argues that miracles can serve both for believer and non-believer alike as evidence for God and his ongoing activity in creation.

#### MIRACLES IN ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

In the first of the historical chapters of Part II, Walter Moberly (Chapter 3) notes that as divine activity in the Hebrew Bible can vary from the ordinary to the extraordinary it is understandable that there is, arguably, no Hebrew word for miracle. Instead, characteristic terminology such as 'signs and wonders' depicts existentially engaging moments which are meant to engender Israel's praise of God. Moberly also notes that 'miracles' in the Hebrew Bible are associated primarily with Moses, Elijah and Elisha, and not more widely. Although the stories about these figures can give the impression that they are wielding magical power under their control, hints in the text direct the reader towards understanding the power as deriving from YHWH. It is tempting for both sceptic and believer to offer rationalized explanations for 'miracle' stories, yet such an approach tends to produce an alternative account rather than explaining the existing narrative. The great distance in time between us and the accounts, and the difficulty in determining their literary genre, as well as other traditions having similar stories, make it probably impossible to determine what actually happened. So a more fruitful approach, Moberly suggests, is not to isolate the 'miraculous' from its narrative context but to seek the possible original and enduring significance of the material as a whole.

According to Robert Garland (Chapter 4), terminological difficulties also abound in the study of 'miracle' in the Greek and Roman world. This is due largely to the fact that there was no clear division between religion and magic. In contrast to the Christians, for whom miracles were the signifiers *par excellence* of God's power over the phenomenal world, the Graeco-Romans regarded such events primarily as a cause of wonder. A particularly rich source of evidence for miraculous occurrences is the battlefield, where such occurrences commonly took the form of the fulfilment of a contractual agreement between a human and a deity in which the deity, perhaps operating within the parameters of cause and effect, paid humans either retrospectively or prospectively for cultic activity. Another important function of miracles was to advance the cause of a new god who was seeking incorporation within the community. This aspect of the miraculous finds important expression in the collections of healing accounts associated first with Isis and then, more prolifically, with Asclepius. Miracle workers, evidence for whom is largely confined to the Archaic period, seem to have operated for the most part at the edge of the Greek-speaking world. Such figures are frequently regarded with scorn in our

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89986-4 - The Cambridge Companion to Miracles

Edited by Graham H. Twelftree

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: miracle in an age of diversity* 5

sources. Though Tacitus tells the story of the Emperor Vespasian curing two invalids, the second-century CE satirist Lucian continues the tradition of mocking those with pretensions to working miracles. Reports of miracles featured prominently in the battle between Christianity and polytheism, being cited as evidence on both sides of the superior power of each other's God or god.

Recognizing the difficulty of finding a uniform understanding of miracle across the various expressions of Judaism in the Second Temple and early rabbinic period, in Chapter 5 Lidija Novakovic identifies three groups of miracle workers that were active in this period: exorcists, sign prophets, and charismatic miracle workers. An increased interest in exorcism is documented in a number of writings, but there are only two full accounts about a contemporary figure engaging in such practice. The so-called sign prophets include various individuals in pre-70 Palestine who promised, though failed, to perform miraculous signs similar to those in the biblical traditions about the exodus and conquest. The two most prominent charismatic miracle workers were Honi and Hanina ben Dosa, who were known not only for their miraculous abilities but also for their piety and kindness. Yet, early rabbinic literature does not show much interest in miracles until the transition to the Talmudic era because of their contested use in halakhic arguments.

Generally speaking, Jewish authors from this period take pains to distinguish extraordinary events taking place in their midst from magical practices, especially in cases that require the employment of certain objects and rituals. The most common strategy was to ascribe miracles to God's power and magic to human agency. The last section of this chapter offers a short discussion of the expected eschatological wonders. Even though no Jewish text unambiguously ascribes the execution of such miracles to a human figure, this is done in the accounts of Jesus' miracles in early Christian literature.

No figure in antiquity has more miracle stories associated with him than Jesus. Barry Blackburn (Chapter 6) notes that the importance of miracle stories in the portrait of Jesus in the gospels, including how they were used to convey his self-understanding, his relationship to God, his ministry, along with the later significance Jesus was given by Christians, has led to the development of sophisticated critical tools for evaluating the historicity of the stories. Blackburn concludes that central to his ministry, Jesus probably performed many miracles, exorcizing demons, healing the sick and raising the dead. In turn, Jesus believed himself to be God's agent or royal Messiah, overthrowing the evil one, inaugurating the kingdom of God and heralding its

6 *Graham H. Twelftree*

consummation. Further, for those with the eyes of faith, the miracles, taken in the light of the Resurrection, became revelations of the cosmic identity of Jesus.

In Chapter 7, James Carleton Paget then examines the miraculous in Christianity until the middle of the third century CE, noting that, from the perspective of twenty-first-century scepticism, it is difficult to evaluate this aspect of Christianity which was taken for granted. Nevertheless, significant questions remain. Is there a clear development in miracle from the sober Paul to the extravagance of the apocryphal literature? Why are miracles so little mentioned in some of the important early Christian writers such as Justin, Irenaeus and Tertullian? How important was miracle as the trump card in the expansion of Christianity? How important was the charge of magic against Christians in their attitude to and use of miracles?

In the Middle Ages, Benedicta Ward (Chapter 8) tells us, miracle stories proliferate in relation to saints, shrines, holy places, relics, pilgrimages, liturgy and daily life. They were taken to attest to the reality of God's presence on earth, and in this the stories were consistent with those in the gospel. A change, however, took place in the eleventh and twelfth centuries; the outward mechanics of miracle mattered less than the interior miracle of salvation and goodness of life. For example, with no historical warrant, miracle stories accrued to the figure of the Virgin Mary who, in turn, was credited with miracles connected with her relics. Although the question of 'how' rather than 'why' returned to centre stage, stories (disengaged from any actual events) could be changed and elaborated at will. In any case, though St Bernard said that love was the greatest miracle, the sick and needy remained keenly interested in him and other such figures as practical miracle workers. The very vagueness of some of the records of the cures, Ward suggests, may point to their authenticity. However, in seeking details and in the concern for character (in the face of heretics and bad people being able to perform a miracle), the evolving canonization process set aside these stories, favouring signs (*signa*) of redemption linked to virtue. Nevertheless, that miracle remains of interest in the major religions of the contemporary world is obvious from the second part of this book.

#### MIRACLES IN THE MAJOR RELIGIONS

Recognizing and defining a 'traditional' people and 'traditional' religion can be problematic. In Chapter 9, Fiona Bowie notes that the term 'traditional' is often used as a residual category for all those who

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89986-4 - The Cambridge Companion to Miracles

Edited by Graham H. Twelftree

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: miracle in an age of diversity* 7

do not fit into a named world religion. It also carries connotations of primitivism on the one hand and authenticity or purity on the other. Those who practise so-called traditional religions in many parts of the world are also followers of or are influenced by world religions, and are part of wider global economic systems. Accepting a category of 'traditional religion' we do, however, recognize that for many people so defined the Western positivist distinctions between natural and supernatural, or science and religion, do not hold. For these people there is an expansion of the category of nature to include unseen forces, discarnate entities and an active force that links animate and inanimate people and objects within a single moral system. What might appear as miraculous to a Western observer may to traditional religionists appear to be a normal, if unusual, occurrence. The acceptance of unseen forces and their operation in the world is not confined to traditional religions, but their place within the scheme of things is more normative and easily accepted in 'traditional' societies that do not operate with a predominantly materialist paradigm. The paradox Bowie alludes to is that if we define something as miraculous, it is almost by definition not part of the cosmology of a 'traditional religion'. The ways in which spirits, deities and psychic powers operate will vary from one society to another, but their veracity and ubiquity are taken for granted.

Gavin Flood (Chapter 10) shows that Hinduism links cosmology and a psychology of meditation, seeing state of mind and the world of experience as coterminous. What appear to be miracles or disruptions of natural law, therefore, are not seen to go against natural law, but are the result of a yogin's mastery of the higher levels of the universe using natural law to change causation in the natural world. These feats include leprosy being cured, a girl being transformed into a plant, levitation, bilocation, and ash or fruit or red powder for tilak marks being manifest on finger tips. However, as detachment from the world of sense and desire is the goal of liberation, these miraculous powers are discouraged as distractions and dangerous in creating desires in the yogin. In more recent times, Western understandings of miracles have been fused with traditional Hindu accomplishments so that while the wonder of an event is maintained, rationalists offer their explanations.

For Muslims not only did Muḥammad perform miracles (for example, miraculous feedings, healings, an army drinking from water emerging from his fingers, and his foretelling the future), but everything associated with him, such as his clothing, was thought to have miraculous powers. Further, the Qur'ān is also considered miraculous in its beauty and in being the presence of the eternal among people.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89986-4 - The Cambridge Companion to Miracles

Edited by Graham H. Twelftree

Excerpt

[More information](#)*8 Graham H. Twelftree*

The development of Islamic religious thought took place in the context of engagement with other faiths, including Christianity. This gave rise to literature that includes miracles associated with the Prophet. In Chapter 11 on miracle in Islam, David Thomas shows that miracles were part of the disagreements between Muslims and Christians in particular. Muslims argued that Jesus' divine status is not guaranteed by miracles, for miracle working is also associated with figures such as Moses, Elijah, Elisha and Ezekiel. And Muḥammad is also credited with providing food for his followers, just as Jesus provided wine for his. As the debate matured, Muslim interest turned from comparing miracles to arguing that God alone is to be credited with miracles, removing human agency so reducing Jesus to no more than a channel of God's power. These debates, and even Muslim theologians who took a rationalist approach, had little impact on the followers of saintly individuals. These Ṣūfis were seen as so close to God that he became visible through them and their marvellous activities.

In Chapter 12 on miracle in early Indian Buddhism, Rupert Gettin points out that, in common with other religions of that sub-continent, Buddhist texts consider an individual's ability to carry out extraordinary feats – flying through the air, passing through solid objects and making things appear or disappear, for example – as not due to direct divine circumvention or modification of the natural order. Rather, the wondrous feats of the Buddha and his followers are taken to be the direct and natural consequence of the extraordinary power of the mind, that is accomplished through the mastery of deep concentration by the individual. Yet, the Buddha is said to be alerted by the excitement caused by miracles and to pronounce the monastic rule that such powers should not be displayed before the laity as they neither aroused nor strengthened faith. However, the wish to marginalize the miraculous is a more recent feature to be credited to the rationalist and ethical sensitivities of some Buddhist apologists. Notwithstanding the monastic rule, there is no question of the value of the Buddha's and monks' practice of miraculous powers, which in manifesting reality can also attract followers and encourage the faithful. In any case, individuals besides those who have attained full mastery of the mind can be protected and healed by the power of truth, while the miracles associated with various points in the career of the Buddha are accessible to all in the literature and the representations at sacred sites.

Although sometimes marginal to Christianity, as for some of the sixteenth-century Reformers, and sometimes its focus of attention, as among contemporary Pentecostals, Ralph Del Colle says in Chapter 13

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89986-4 - The Cambridge Companion to Miracles

Edited by Graham H. Twelftree

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: miracle in an age of diversity* 9

that the testimony of miracles has never been absent from Christianity. In turn, Del Colle argues that Christians understand miracles in terms of two foci. St Thomas Aquinas expressed one, the ontological aspect. Presupposing the relations between God and creation in terms of causality, Thomas defined a miracle as the work of God against the order of nature. Yet, God does not violate the created order, but acts in miracle to perfect it. With the Enlightenment considering the laws of nature no longer reflecting divine participation, miracle came to be understood as either a violation of what God or nature had constituted, or miracles were thought irrelevant to reason which grasped truth. However, some continued to defend the authenticity of at least the biblical miracles so that the other focal point for Christians' understanding of miracle, its intentional aspect, is that it becomes the basis for witness or Christian apologetics. Miracles are signs, perhaps received in ecstatic experience, that point to the mystery of God.

According to Kenneth Seeskin, in Jewish philosophy miracles have been regarded with ambivalence (Chapter 14). Denying them would be to set aside the story of God's saving power, but their acceptance may court chaos. Some early rabbis concluded, therefore, that they could have no significance in a legal dispute. Medieval thinkers attempted to reconcile divine freedom (implying the possibility of extraordinary action) and metaphysical perfection (implying immutability). Maimonides, for example, sought a middle ground between arguing not that miracles occurred, but that they could, and are to be explained rationally. However, if, according to the common view, God is revealed only in the extraordinary there must be a power at work other than God. Spinoza would not have this and famously proposed an identification of God with nature. In more recent times some Jewish thinkers have distrusted the numinous aspect of religion, of which miracle is a part, as a distraction from the clear commands of God. For, as Seeskin concludes, no matter how extraordinary, miracles raise as many questions as they answer so that they can only be effective in the light of prior convictions.

## MIRACLE TODAY

The twenty-first-century reader of this book is likely to have been at least significantly shaped by Western thought and to be an heir to the history of debates about miracle that is outlined in Chapter 15. Colin Brown shows not only that miracle was a potent factor in the early growth of Christianity, but also that, early in Western tradition,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89986-4 - The Cambridge Companion to Miracles

Edited by Graham H. Twelftree

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 *Graham H. Twelftree*

individuals such as Eusebius of Caesarea and St Augustine were caught up in the need to defend miracle both in the Christian canon as well as among their contemporaries. Brown draws attention to critical periods and figures – the fourth and fifth centuries, St Thomas Aquinas, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the Age of Enlightenment and the flowering of scepticism, the nineteenth-century struggle with rationalism and supernaturalism – ending with the twentieth century. He concludes that there was a tendency for philosopher and apologist to interact with each other, while ignoring biblical scholars, historians and sociologists.

This conclusion sets the scene for Chapter 16, Michael Levine's discussion of philosophers on miracle. In his view, of all the questions raised in relation to miracle, the only philosophically significant one is whether anyone is or has ever been justified epistemologically in believing not that a miracle *could* but *has* occurred. In his discussion, Levine engages with, for example, Francis Beckwith, John Haldane, Richard Swinburne and Nicholas Wolterstorff. He shows that no advance has been made on David Hume's argument that even if miracles have occurred, no one has ever been justified (on epistemological and sound evidential grounds) in believing that a miracle has taken place. It has been the fashion to use Bayes' theorem to calculate the probability of a miracle occurring. However, Levine asserts that this approach is otiose until the prior question of evidence is resolved, at which point the theorem adds only complexity rather than clarity to Hume's argument. Above all this, Levine suggests that it is the significance of miracle for religious belief and life that is both important and ignored, philosophers preferring to give attention to the problem of whether miracles are consistent with science.

This question of the significance of miracle can be taken as the point of departure for Niels Christian Hvidt and his exploration of the impact on patients of faith in healing miracles in Chapter 17. Relying on a number of contemporary studies he is able to show that faith in an active and interactive God is an important factor in a patient's handling of a health crisis. However, although nothing indicates that belief in miracles itself is a sign of any religious pathology, particular conceptions of God, perhaps as using sickness as punishment, can lead to coping negatively. Believing in miracles can in some instances also cause patients to refuse treatment or in other cases demand unwarranted extension of treatment. Yet, belief in a living and active God has been shown to sustain believers by strengthening their relationship of trust with God as they pray, even when no miracle occurs. Although,