# Biblical Miracles

## Biblical accounts of miracles

### Overview

Miracle in the Bible fall under two main categories:

1. They are forms of revelation about God and our relationship with God.
2. They are events that appear to operate outside the normal workings of the laws of nature suggesting that they have a divine origin.

In the **Old Testament**, they are part of an ongoing narrative of the relationship between God and the Israelites; when God performs miracles there is usually some reason for it that either rewards or punishes one or more of his followers or enemies. God appears to act immanently and take a clear interest in the Israelites assisting them in battle and in the establishment of Israel.

In the **New Testament**, Jesus and his disciples, use miracles as signs that Jesus is the Son of God. There are two main types of miracles in the New Testament: nature miracles and healing miracles.

### Resources

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| **Key Terms** | **Anagogical**: *adj.* A mystical interpretation of a word, passage, or text, especially scriptural exegesis that detects allusions to heaven or the afterlife.  **Miracle**: *noun* From the Latin “miraculum” meaning wonder or marvel.  **Propositional**: *adj.* Reading something, e.g. the Bible, as though it were a series of propositions to be taken literally.  **Non-propositional**: *adj.* Reading something, e.g. the Bible, as though it were not intended as a series of propositions but rather need to be read in context. |
| **Extracts** | ***Genesis 1:1-5 1****In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*  ***3****And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.****4****God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness.*  ***Joshua 10:12-14 12****On the day the Lord gave the Amorites over to Israel* … *The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day.*  **Mark 4:35 *39****He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.*  **Mark 10:51-52 *51****Jesus asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man answered, “Master, I want to see!”* ***52****Jesus told him, “You may go. Your eyes are healed because of your faith.”* |
| **Videos** | • [Why might God work miracles](https://sda.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/media/big-questions/keener/why-work-miracles/)? |

### Knowledge of the argument

1. Give an example of an Old Testament miracle that reveals something about God.
2. Give an example of an Old Testament miracle that appears to break the laws of nature.
3. Give an example of a New Testament nature miracle. What does it reveal about Jesus?
4. Give an example of a New Testament healing miracle. What does it reveal about Jesus?
5. What might be a problem about reading Old Testament miracle as only propositional?
6. What might an argument be for interpreting an Old Testament miracle as non-propositional?
7. Why does God work miracles?
8. Why are miracles works of wonder?

## Maurice Wiles’ response to biblical accounts of miracles

### Overview

Maurice Wiles rejected the idea that God acts in the world at all. God’s job being to create the world alone. In *God’s Action in the World*, Wiles made a number of conclusions opposing the idea of miracles occurring:

1. If miracles are violations of nature they must be rare to not undermine the laws of nature.
2. It is strange how many miracles occurred in biblical times and how few occur now. God appears to be flippant, favouring some and not others.
3. If God were an active miracle worker, it is strange how much evil and suffering He allows e.g. God was absent during the Holocaust and during the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Some criticisms of Wiles’ position are as follows:

1. Christian tradition: Wiles appears to ignore the revelatory element of miracle tradition.
2. Human rationality: The conclusion that God is flippant is to judge God by human standards.
3. Biblical God: Wile’s position that God’s only miracle was creation is a deistic view and contrary to the theistic view of God within biblical tradition.

### Resources

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| **Extracts** | **Maurice Wiles, *God’s Action in the World***  *If the direct action of God, independent of secondary causation, is an intelligible concept, then it would appear to have been sparingly and strangely used. Miracles must be by definition, relatively infrequent or else the whole idea of the laws of nature… would be undermined, and ordered life as we know it would be an impossibility. Yet even so it would seem strange that no miraculous intervention prevented Auschwitz or Hiroshima, while the purposes apparently forwarded by some of the miracles acclaimed in traditional Christian faith seem trivial by comparison.* |
| **Videos** | • [How did Augustine’s attitude to miracles change](https://sda.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/media/big-questions/keener/st-augustine/)?  • [Are there genuine miracles](https://sda.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/media/big-questions/keener/genuine-miracles/)? |
| **Further Reading** | • James A. Keller, [The Problems of Evil and the Power of God](https://www.jstor.org/stable/40270248?seq=1)*.*  • Ellen Lennox, [Miracles and the Problem of Evil](https://prezi.com/bydki1mqprsf/miracles-and-the-problem-of-evil/). |

### Evaluation of the argument

“Miracles should be interpreted as solely propositional events.” Discuss.

**Consider the following:**

* What are miracles? Give examples of miracles in the Old and New Testament.
* In what way can biblical miracles be interpreted propositionally and non-propositionally?
* How convincing is the case the miracles should be interpreted propositionally and non-propositionally?
* Who can you use to support each position?
* What aspect of miracle events can be challenged by Maurice Wiles’ conclusions?
* How convincing are Wiles’ conclusions?
* Who can you use to support Wiles?
* Can biblical miracles have value in response to Wiles’ conclusions?

# Hume’s Criticisms of Miracles

## Hume’s two challenges against miracles

### Overview

David Hume was an 18th Century Scottish philosopher and atheist. He stated *“A miracle may be accurately defined, as a transgression of a law of nature.”* Given this position, he concluded that miracles could not happen. He presented two arguments to support this conclusion:

1. **Lack of probability**

Hume asserted that if you were to take the all the testimonies of a miracle event and compare them with our understanding of the law of naturethat the miracle seems to violate, it will always be more probably that the event did not take place.

1. **Lack of practicality**

Hume asserted that there is a lack of convincing evidencefrom “educated people” who can be relied upon. He argues that if we were to rely solely on the Bible for miracles then we would be trusting the words of fishermen not scientists. He asserted that miracles from each religious tradition cancelled the other out, as each has no problem disbelieving each other.

### Resources

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| **Key Terms** | **Corrigible:** *adj.*Laws of nature are subject to change. |
| **Extracts** | **David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding***  *There is not to be found in all history any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men of such unquestioned good sense, education and learning, as to secure us against all delusion in themselves. With what greediness are the miraculous accounts of travellers received, their descriptions of sea and land monsters, their relations of wonderful adventures, strange men and uncouth manner? … Eloquence, when at its highest pitch leaves little room for reason or reflection. This is our natural way of thinking, even with regard to the most common and credible event. For instance: there is no kind of report which rises so early and spreads so quickly, especially in county places and provincial towns, as those concerning marriages; in so much as two young persons of equal condition never see each other twice, but the whole neighbourhood immediately join them together. It forms a strong presumption against all supernatural and miraculous relations, that they are observed chiefly among ignorant and barbarous nations.* |
| **Videos** | • [What is the objection to miracles](https://sda.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/media/big-questions/keener/objection-to-miracles/)?  • [Do miracles break the laws of nature, as David Hume claimed](https://sda.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/media/big-questions/mcgrew/break-the-laws/)? |

### Knowledge of the argument

1. Why did David Hume define miracles as transgression of the laws of nature?
2. What is the argument from probability?
3. What is the argument from practicality?
4. What did Hume mean when he said miracles from different religions cancel each other out?
5. What did Hume mean by “men of such unquestioned good sense, education and learning”?
6. Why did Hume compare “accounts of travellers received” with miracles accounts?
7. Why did Hume compare “report[s]…concerning marriages” with miracles accounts?
8. What did Hume mean when he said that miracles are observed “chiefly among ignorant and barbarous nations”?

## Richard Swinburne’s response to David Hume

### Overview

Richard Swinburne made some famous challenges of Hume’s criticisms. He asserted that we should accept as many sources of evidence as possible, including: memories of experiences, testimonies of others and physical changes and traces.

Swinburne applied two principles when considering miracle evens:

1. **The principle of testimony**: All things being equal, we should accept testimonies of miracles in the same way we accept any testimonies.
2. **The principle of credulity**: All things being equal, we should not dismiss our own experiences just because they appear to be out of the ordinary.

Importantly, Swinburne did not is notclaim that **any** miracle has ever happened, only that we should not dismiss them without really analysed it.

### Resources

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| **Extracts** | **Richard Swinburne, *For the Possibility of Miracles***  *One wonders here at Hume's scale of evidence. Suppose two hundred witnesses claiming to have observed some event E, an event which, if it occurred, would be a non-repeatable counter-instance to a law of nature. Suppose these to be witnesses able and anxious to show that E did not occur if there were grounds for doing so. Would not their combined evidence give us good reason to believe that E occurred? Hume's answer which we can see from his discussion of two apparently equally well authenticated miracles is-No. But then, one is inclined to say, is not Hume just being bigoted, refusing to face facts? It would be virtually impossible to draw up a table showing how many witnesses and of what kind we need to establish the occurrence of an event which, if it occurred, would be a non repeatable counter-instance to a law of nature. Each purported instance has to be considered on its merits. But certainly one feels that Hume's standards of evidence are too high. What, one wonders, would Hume himself say if he saw such an event?* |
| **Videos** | • [What attitude to should we take to reports of miracles](https://sda.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/media/big-questions/scruton/miracle-reports/)?  • [What are reports of miracles like across the world](https://sda.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/media/big-questions/keener/across-the-world/)? |
| **Further Reading** | • David Hume, [*In Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/9662/9662-h/9662-h.htm)*.*  • Richard Swinburne, [*For the Possibility of Miracles*](https://www.qcc.cuny.edu/SocialSciences/ppecorino/INTRO_TEXT/Chapter%203%20Religion/CH-3-Documents/ch3-Swinburne-possibility-Miracles.pdf).  • Richard Otte, [*Mackie’s Treatment of Miracles*](https://www.jstor.org/stable/40012742?seq=1). |

### Evaluation of the argument

Is it fair to say that miracles *“are observed chiefly among ignorant and barbarous nations”*?

**Consider the following:**

* What are miracles according to David Hume?
* In what way does Hume argue his position regarding the unlikelihood of miracles.
* How convincing is Hume’s case against miracles?
* Who can you use to support Hume’s position?
* What aspect of Hume’s position can be challenged by Richard Swinburne’s position?
* How convincing are Swinburne’s conclusions?
* Who can you use to support Swinburne’?
* Can Hume’s position be defended against Swinburne’s?

# Contemporary Miracles

## Miracles as proof of God’s existence

### Overview

While many criticisms of miracles focus on the miracles of the Bible, it is important to acknowledge that miracles are reported even now, however, miracles are not just accepted on someone’s word. In order for the Catholic Church to officially acknowledge a miracle has taken place, a panel of doctors must research the event thoroughly to see if there are any possible alternative explanations. For example, of the thousands of miracles reported at Lourdes since 1858, only 67 have been authenticated by the Church. “*the Catholic Church doesn’t run after miracles” Dr Patrick Theillier.*

The existence of miracles counts as proof of God’s existence. Whereas other arguments rely on accepting certain terms or interpretations of the world, the witnessing of a miracle can be very convincing proof of God’s existence and action in the world.

1. **Divine origin**: If miracles take place then they have a divine origin, which is God.
2. **God’s activity**: The 67 miracles of Lourdes demonstrate that God is still active in the world.
3. **Prayer**: If people are healed following prayer, it shows God answers prayers.
4. **Jesus Christ**: If Jesus truly rose from the dead, it proves He was the Son of God.

### Resources

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| **Key Terms** | **Apparition**: *noun* When a person/saint appears to another.  **Corporate**: *adj.* Shared by others, when an apparition is to a group or people not just one person. |
| **Extracts** | **Fr John Polkinghorne, *From Belief in God in an Age of Science***  *A minimalist response is to decline to speak on particular divine actions [miracles] and to confine theological talk to the single great act of holding the universe in being [Creation alone]. Not only is such timeless deism inadequate to correspond to the religious experience of prayer and an institution of providence but it also interesting that it has not commended itself to those scientist-theologians who have written on these matters.*  **Richard Swinburne, *Is there a God?***  *The existence of detailed historical evidence for the occurrence of violations of natural laws of a kind which God, if there is a God, would have had reason to bring about, is itself evidence for the existence of God. Though not nearly enough on its own, it makes its contribution; and with other evidence … it could be enough to establish the existence of God.* |
| **Videos** | • [What is needed for additional research on the subject of miracles](https://sda.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/media/big-questions/keener/miracle-reports/)?  • [Why do you call the Resurrection of Jesus Christ a “super-miracle”](https://sda.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/media/big-questions/swinburne/super-miracle/)? |

### Knowledge of the argument

1. Research one miracle from Lourdes. What happened?
2. What does it mean to say that the Catholic Church does not “run after miracles”?
3. How might miracles prove the truth of Christianity?
4. How are miracles evidence that God exists?
5. Why are miracles more convincing for some that God exists?
6. What is deism?
7. What did Fr John Polkinghorne mean when he said deism is inadequate?
8. What did Richard Swinburne mean when he said that miracles are not “enough on its own”?

## Contemporary criticisms of miracles

### Overview

Peter Atkins, a modern-day chemist and renowned philosopher, believes that anyone who claims to have witnessed a miracle is either hallucinated or seek publicity. He grants that, as Swinburne put, you cannot assume that all those who claim to have witnessed miracles are ill-educated, as Hume maintained, however, he does not accept miracles as part of his paradigm for the universe as they are violations of nature.

Richard Dawkins presented a number of challenges against miracles:

1. **Miracles are bizarre experiences**: People have strange and disturbing experiences, such as ‘dreaming of someone for the first time and walking up to discover they are dead’, none of this proves that they are genuine experiences.
2. **Miracles can be rationally explained**: Occasionally people experience freak coincidences and then assign a religious significance. This does not prove that they are really divine.
3. **The placebo effect**: People who go to Lourdes are more likely to find themselves returning home feeling “better”. This is not a miracle, it is the placebo effect.

### Resources

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| **Extracts** | **Richard Dawkins, *The Magic of Reality***  *Suppose something happens that we don’t understand, and we can’t see how it could be fraud or trickery or lies: would it ever be right to conclude that it must be supernatural? No! … It would be lazy, even dishonest, for it amounts to a claim that no natural explanation will ever be possible.*  **Peter Atkins, Dialogue**  *Everything in the universe can be explained in terms of physical science. [Science offers a mechanistic view of the universe: it runs according to scientific principles and natural law, and these can be established and determined by empirical investigation. Knowledge of the universe can be found without reference to religion] … God is the last resort of feeble minds masquerading as truth. Science… respects nobility of the human spirit.* |
| **Videos** | • [What attitude should we take to reports of miracles](https://sda.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/media/big-questions/tallis/miracle-reports/)?  • [Why might people be hesitant to talk about miracles](https://sda.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/media/big-questions/keener/why-hesitant/)? |
| **Further Reading** | • Rudolph Bultmann, [*Demythologizing the New Testament*](https://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/ctsa/article/download/2439/2072). |

### Evaluation of the argument

“Miracles prove that God exists.” Discuss.

**Consider the following:**

* Is the argument that miracles prove God exists logical (the conclusion follows from the premises) and sound (the premises are true)?
* To what extend is the case for miracles *a posteriori* (based in experience)?
* How convincing is the argument that miracles prove God’s existence?
* Who can you use to defend the case for miracles?
* What part of the argument is challenged by Peter Atkins and Richard Dawkins?
* How convincing are Atkins’ and Dawkins’ challenges?
* Who can you use to support Atkins and Dawkins?
* Can the argument from miracles survive the challenges by Atkins and Dawkins?

# Contingency Miracles

## Paul Tillich’s defence of miracles

### Overview

In the New Testament Jesus is described as a worker of *semeion* (signs) and *dunamis* (power), never a miracle maker. The early church began calling Jesus’ acts *miraculum* (miracles) to identify them as wonderful and remarkable acts, but always as signs from God.

Paul Tillich defended miracles as forms of revelation. He argued:

1. Miracles are not violations of the laws of nature, they are astonishing and *‘without contradicting the rational structure of reality’*.
2. Miracles point people to the *‘mystery of being’*, God, and reveal something of his nature.
3. Miracles are *‘received as a sign event in an ecstatic experience’*, God is not a worker of magic tricks.

### Resources

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| **Key Terms** | **Dunamis:** *noun* Power; Jesus possessed power.  **Semeion**: Sign; Jesus was a worker of signs. |
| **Extracts** | **Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology***  *The supernaturalistic theory of miracles makes God a sorcerer and a cause of possession. It confuses God with demonic structures in the mind and in reality.*  […]  *Jesus as the Christ, the miracle of the final revelation, and the church, receiving him as the Christ or the final revelation, belong to each other. The Christ is not the Christ without the church and the church is not the church without the Christ. The final revelation, like every revelation is correlative.*  *[…]*  *It is the abysmal character of the divine life which makes revelation mysterious; it is the logical character of the divine life which makes the revelation of the mystery possible: and it is the spiritual character of the divine life which creates the correlation of miracle and ecstasy in which revelation can be received.* |
| **Videos** | • [Was Jesus known by his contemporaries as a worker of miracles](https://sda.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/media/big-questions/keener/miracle-worker/)?  • [What first interested Craig S. Keener in the topic of miracles](https://sda.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/media/big-questions/keener/interested-in-miracles/)? |

### Knowledge of the argument

1. What does it mean to say that Jesus performed *Semeion*?
2. What does it mean to say that miracles are signs of Jesus’ *dunamis*?
3. What does it mean to say that Jesus’ miracles are *miraculum*?
4. Why is it important for Paul Tillich that miracles do not contradict the structure of reality?
5. How do miracles point to the “mystery of being”?
6. What does Tillich mean when he says that Jesus was the miracle of the final revelation?
7. Why does God make revelation possible?
8. Was Jesus known as a miracle worker?

## R. F. Holland’s response to contingency miracles

### Overview

R. F. Holland suggested that the word “miracle” is applied to a set of coincidental events that are given religious significance and continue to have this significance after the event. He recognises that people look at miracles as signs of the divine but he refutes that they can prove it. People read divinity into miraculous events to satisfy their needs, hopes and fears.

For Holland, a miracle is a normal, albeit fortunate, event that has been labelled with religious significance. He gave the example of the child on the tracks to show how a set of coincidences can be given special significance by the observers after the fact and thus be called a miracle.

### Resources

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| **Extracts** | **R. F. Holland, *American Philosophical Quarterly***  *Although a coincidence can be taken religiously as a sign and called a miracle and made the subject of a vow, it cannot without confusion be taken as a sign of divine interference with the natural order.*  **[R.F. Holland, “The Miraculous,” American Philosophical Quarterly (1965)]**  *child on a railroad track who is playing around the bend from an approaching train, so that neither the child nor the train’s engineer know of the other’s location. The child’s poor mother is up the hill from this developing tragedy, and can see both her son and the train, but because of distance, is unable to do anything. Suddenly, the train slows, and comes to a halt, only a few feet from her child.*  *The mother thanks God for the miracle, which she never ceases to think of as such although, as she in due course learns, there was nothing supernatural about the manner in which the brakes of the train came to be applied. The driver had fainted, for a reason that had nothing to do with the presence of the child on the line, and the brakes were applied automatically as his hand ceased to exert pressure on the control lever.* |
| **Videos** | • [Is there a symbiosis between the idea of miracle and the idea of nature](https://sda.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/media/big-questions/harrison/symbiosis/)?  • [Apart from Jesus who else was known as a worker of miracles in antiquity](https://sda.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/media/big-questions/keener/other-miracle-workers/)? |
| **Further Reading** | • Marshall W. Fishwick and Ray B. Browne, [The God Pumpers](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=OsfyU-W7APUC&pg=PA20&lpg=PA20&dq=contingency+miracles&source=bl&ots=TpR8LVtOkK&sig=ACfU3U3XCgAJv-OafZ6sSxTGL4I8g6_Lng&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwie3LnvkcvqAhWHTsAKHUSrCLkQ6AEwBHoECAgQAQ#v=onepage&q=contingency%20miracles&f=false), pp 19-29.  • [Arguing God from miracles and revelations](https://www.closertotruth.com/series/arguing-god-miracles-revelations). |

### Evaluation of the argument

Assess the claim that miracles are nothing more than mere coincidences given religious significance.

**Consider the following:**

* Is R. F. Holland’s position logical (the conclusion follows from the premises) and sound (the premises are true)?
* To what extend is Holland’s argument based in an understanding of the Bible?
* How convincing is Holland’s argument?
* Who can you use to support Holland?
* What part of Holland’s argument is contradicted by Paul Tillich?
* How convincing is Tillich’s position?
* Who can you use to support Tillich?
* Can Holland’s argument respond to Tillich’s interpretation?

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This publication was made possible through the support of a grant from Templeton World Charity Foundation, Inc. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Templeton World Charity Foundation, Inc.