

Historical Inquiry

L. McGrew, May, 2010

Introduction

The question of the relation of history to theism is in no small part the question of the relation of history to miracles. Whether or not the hand of Divine Providence can be seen in the broad sweep of history or in the historical facts of man's search for God, it is in specific miracles that we can see most clearly, if we can see at all, that God is active in human affairs.

The position that miracles cannot be investigated by the historian is associated first and foremost with the names of Ernst Troeltsch and F. H. Bradley, who argued that the very condition for the possibility of history--the assumption of exceptionless physical law--makes the admission of a miracle by an historian untenable. I shall not have much to say here about the Troeltschian view, especially as it has been dealt with by so many others and with particular care by J. Houston (1994, pp. 66ff, 191ff).

There are other distinctively epistemic objections besides the Troeltschian one to historical investigation of miracles. On the theological side, we have those who insist that miracles are matters of faith and that, while one may legitimately believe that they have happened, one may do so only in some role other than that of historian. On the philosophical and probabilistic side, it can be argued that the immense differences between God and man make it impossible to use rational means of investigation to draw the conclusion that a theistic hypothesis is the best explanation for some event.

Both of these epistemic positions, however, mean that the Christian theist is required to hypothesize a God who is unable to manifest himself unmistakably in the world. Since the God of traditional Christian theism *is* able thus to manifest himself, the theist ought to be permitted to test the explanatory force of the hypothesis he is actually interested in, unless that hypothesis can be shown to be incoherent. The position that we cannot rationally detect God's action in history can thus be said to be question-begging against traditional Christian theism, since it rules out *ab initio* the very form of theism the traditional Christian theist wishes to argue for.

Demarcationism and worldview relativism

It would be space-consuming and tedious to survey the many theologians and New Testament scholars who have opined that miracles cannot be the subject of direct historical investigation. While anyone claiming to be in any sense an orthodox Christian cannot take the Troeltschian position that the historian must rule out the occurrence of miracles *a priori*, an epistemic cognate of that position holds that the historian *qua* historian works with empirical data while the theologian or philosopher is permitted to transcend that data and draw conclusions which mere reason and evidence could not reach. Thus the "scientific" realm of history is kept clean of any taint of the ostensibly more subjective judgement that a miracle has occurred.

Theologian George Hunsinger's statement is typical:

Christ's resurrection could theoretically be disproved by historical evidence, but it could not be proven on historical grounds alone, because, in the nature of the case, it confronts us with something more than a merely historical claim — something much more terrifying and radical....Affirming or denying Christ's resurrection — or better, affirming or denying the Risen Christ — is well beyond the competency of mere reason....The Christian faith is far more a matter of radical conversion than it is of rational persuasion. The claim that a marginal Jew who was put to death on a cross should have been raised from the dead so that he now reigns as Lord and Savior is never going to be plausible to rational or evidential considerations (Hunsinger 2010).

The reference to a “marginal Jew” is an allusion to John Meier's massive work by that same title, and Hunsinger's position on history and miracle is much like the position discussed at greater length by Meier. Says Meier,

[T]he historian can ascertain whether an extraordinary event has taken place in a religious setting, whether someone has claimed it to be a miracle, and--if there is enough evidence--whether a human action, physical forces in the universe, misperception, illusion, or fraud can explain the event. If all these explanations are excluded, the historian may conclude that an event claimed by some people to be miraculous has no reasonable explanation or adequate cause in any human activity or physical force. To go beyond that judgment and to affirm *either* that God has directly acted to bring about this startling event *or* that God has not done so is to go beyond what any historian can affirm in his...capacity as a historian and to enter the domain of philosophy or theology (Meier 1994, pp. 514-15).

Meier repeats this same point emphatically in the pages surrounding this quotation, and at times it seems that he is merely making a rather pedantic demarcationist claim with no argument behind it beyond a desire for a tidy taxonomy of disciplines.

Matters become clearer, however, when we see the following:

The atheist's judgment [that a miracle has not occurred] may be as firm and sincere as the believer's; *it is also just as much a philosophical or theological judgment determined by a particular worldview*, and not a judgment that arises simply, solely, and necessarily out of an examination of the evidence of this particular case. (Meier 1994, p. 514, emphasis added)

And there is also this:

As G. F. Woods...observes, “...the evidential value of the miraculous is closely interwoven with the metaphysical views of those to whom the evidence is

offered....the weighing of historical evidence is affected by the metaphysical presuppositions of those who weigh the evidence. *There are no metaphysically neutral scales.*" (Meier 1994, p. 527, n. 17) (Emphasis added)

It is, in other words, a kind of epistemic relativism that is doing the work in Meier's demarcationism. The wall of separation Meier posits separates the neutral and objective investigations of the historian from the supposedly worldview-determined conclusions of the philosopher or theologian. Dale Allison (2005, p. 342) takes a similar position when he says, "It is our worldview that interprets the textual data, not the textual data that determines our worldview."

A Christian who objects to an arbitrarily bifurcated mental universe will not appreciate the implication that his Christianity is the result of a leap of faith beyond the evidence, even if the theologians assure him that worldview subjectivism is both unavoidable and legitimate. But a further, fundamental theological problem with the separation between the discipline of history and the miraculous concerns the very concept of God in traditional theism, a concept that is incompatible with demarcationist views such as Meier's.

Miracles as public signs

The nineteenth century Dominican Henri Lacordaire ridiculed the deistical view of God thus:

That is to say, gentlemen, that it is impossible for God to manifest himself by the single act which publicly and instantaneously announces his presence, by the act of sovereignty. While the lowest in the scale of being has the right to appear in the bosom of nature by the exercise of its proper force,...to God alone it should be denied to manifest his force in the personal measure that distinguishes him and makes him a separate being!...God can no longer act, appear, communicate himself. That is denied to him. (Hazeltine 1905, p. 5858)

Lacordaire here emphasizes the importance of a miracle as a sign, a public, manifest indication to mankind that God exists and is acting in the world. It has been central to Christianity from biblical times that God does thus manifest himself and that we are able, by these manifestations, to know more about God than we otherwise could know. St. John is particularly insistent on the point:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life. (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) (I John 1:1-2)

In John's Gospel, the account of the miracle at Cana has this postscript:

This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory; and his disciples believed on him. (John 2:11)

Nicodemus puts the point succinctly:

Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. (John 3:2)

And Jesus makes a similar point when he urges his disciples, “[B]elieve me for the works’ sake.” (John 14:11)

Nor does this emphasis seem at all unreasonable, for it is worth asking how God *could* verify a new revelation to man except by a miracle. A private vision or feeling, which could be interpreted in multiple ways and the veracity of which could be doubted by others, would not show mankind as a race that a particular teaching is from God, especially if it were not even indirectly related to some more publically verifiable miracle. When Moses protests (Exodus 4) that the people will not believe that he has been sent from God to deliver them, God does not respond by telling Moses that the people must consult the *sensus divinitatis* nor that God can be known only by those who are willing and able to see with the eyes of faith. Instead, he gives Moses the power to perform signs immediately, and the plagues of Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea are further signs to the children of Israel that God is leading them. When God gives the Ten Commandments, he identifies himself as a particular God with a particular character by reference to his acts in the world: “I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Exodus 20:2).

While theologians and New Testament scholars who deny the possibility of historical investigation of miracles need not be, and often are not, deists, they deny no less than do deists the ability of God to manifest himself publically by way of signs. That is to say that they deny the main purpose of miracles as taught in Scripture and Christian tradition.

We can see this point clearly if we consider David Hume’s ironic conclusion to “Of Miracles”:

I am the better pleased with the method of reasoning here delivered, as I think it may serve to confound those dangerous friends or disguised enemies to the Christian Religion, who have undertaken to defend it by the principles of human reason. Our most holy religion is founded on Faith, not on reason; and it is a sure method of exposing it to put it to such a trial as it is, by no means, fitted to endure....So that, upon the whole, we may conclude, that the Christian Religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: and whoever is moved by Faith to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience. (Hume 1748, pp. 98-99)

Hume here asserts that, since miracles cannot be recognized by human reason, they can be accepted only by an on-going, internal work of God in the heart of individuals to make them believe irrationally. Hume does not say, though he might have done so, that if God must continually work in the hearts of individuals to make them willing to believe in him and his truth against reason, there is no point in his doing external miracles in the first place. If such an on-going, individual work is necessary and is consistent with God's character and intentions for human salvation, people could similarly be moved and inspired by the Holy Ghost, against reason, to believe in the Trinity, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting while contemplating a sunset or a flower.

A miracle that is irrational to believe in is the miracle of a hidden God, not of a God manifesting himself. God could, of course, perform all sorts of pointless, hidden miracles. He could rearrange the molecules in a wall in such a way that someone using the room could not detect the rearrangement. But such a miracle, precisely because no one would have any reason to believe in it, would teach us nothing. It could not verify a revelation. It could not tell us that a teacher was come from God. It could not tell us that God is acting in the world. It would have no point. Similarly, if the traditional Christian miracles are signs, they are signs precisely because and insofar as we *have reason to believe that they actually happened*. If we must be irrational to believe in them, then they are not signs but merely pointless exercises of Divine power which God arbitrarily chooses to use as an opportunity to overcome man's rational faculties and to inspire men, on a private, individual basis, to believe theological doctrines. All of which is patently absurd from the perspective of Christian orthodoxy, which is, of course, the point of Hume's insinuations. We should be false friends to Christianity, indeed, if we concurred with Hume on this point.

The devastating consequences of privatizing belief in God's actions are particularly evident in the "objective vision" theory of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. On this view, the resurrected Jesus was not physically present to his disciples in the world of space and time and hence was visible only by special Divine enablement. Peter Carnley makes the apologetic loss in the objective vision theory strikingly evident when he compares it to the theory that the witnesses had merely psychogenic visions, for which the less polite term is "hallucinations." Asks Carnley (1997, p. 35), "If one is relying on the evidence of the appearances to provide the historical ground of faith, then, in strictly historical terms, where is the evidence to come from to rule out the possibility of psychologically induced visions as one explanation of the available evidence?"

There are answers to Carnley's question about grounds for ruling out subjective visions. One could, for example, refer to the details of the disciples' reports, such as Jesus' tangibility and his ability to eat. Most important of all, the disciples claimed that Jesus' appearances were intersubjectively verifiable. But if an objective vision theorist were to use this data to answer Carnley, he would undermine his own hypothesis, for the very details that argue against hallucinations also argue for the physically literal presence of Jesus and for the physical nature of interactions with him.

It is, in fact, because Meier (1991, p. 201, n. 2, 1994, p. 529, n.24) evidently accepts the objective vision theory that he does not seem to consider the resurrection to be a miracle at all, for one of his criteria for a miracle is that its results must be perceptible by any fair-minded observer (Meier 1994, p. 512). But there is something interestingly arbitrary about this

requirement for a miracle given Meier's own relativistic approach. What point is there in empirical, public accessibility for the results of miracles if the final decision as to whether a miracle has taken place is merely a matter of one's worldview? If the evidence *cannot* lead one rationally to conclude that the best explanation is the intervention of God, and if it is nevertheless legitimate for the theologian or philosopher to apply a worldview to the situation in order to leap to that conclusion, it is difficult to see why the theologian or philosopher requires empirical evidence at all, or what distinctively epistemic role empirical evidence is supposed to play.

Here it may seem that I am overstating the case. It is, someone might point out, possible for evidence to play *some* rational role without its being conclusive. The distinction between an argument that provides some confirmation of an hypothesis and an argument that provides sufficient confirmation for belief is an important one. Whether one's criterion for belief is that a proposition be more probable than .5 or more probable than some other, higher cut-off, one can obviously have some evidence for a proposition which is partly or entirely outweighed, leading to a reasonable position of continued disbelief, agnosticism or, at most, weakly positive credence. Perhaps those who wish to relegate the final conclusion that a miracle has taken place to a special "worldview applications" realm tenanted by philosophers and theologians but not by historians should say that historical evidence can be to some degree positively relevant to the conclusion that a miracle has happened but can never justify that conclusion. (This appears to be the position taken by Hunsinger.)

The trouble with this line of thought is that it is utterly unsupported by any defensible epistemological principle. If evidence can rationally confirm a proposition, it is always *in principle* possible that there should be a sufficient amount of evidence to make it rational to believe the proposition and even irrational to disbelieve it. Conversely, if evidence can never, in the nature of the case, make it rational to believe a proposition, if that proposition can be believed only by a sort of "faith" that goes beyond evidence, then evidence must not be able rationally to confirm that proposition. There is no principled reason to permit ordinary epistemic confirmation for a miracle claim only to some weak level and then to declare that, however much evidence we receive, it can never confirm the conclusion past that point. Confirmation is confirmation and is all of a piece.

If evidence is not able to confirm the action of God in a miracle, then the miracle is not a sign at all but merely a cipher placed mysteriously in the world to be decoded by the arbitrary and magical acts of the Holy Spirit upon the minds and hearts of individual men who cannot otherwise see what God is doing, or indeed that God is doing anything at all.

Thus the *a priori* position that miracles cannot be historically investigated turns out, perhaps surprisingly, to be question-begging against traditional theism. For traditional theism holds not only that God can *do* miracles but also that man can *recognize* miracles--without which recognition a miracle would have no revelatory purpose.

Sober's theological skepticism and historical miracles

It may seem that the foregoing argument will be of interest solely to Christian theologians. Why should a non-Christian philosopher care whether or not John Meier's view of miracles and history is compatible with the traditional Christian idea that miracles are used by God as public

signs? But the idea that it is impossible for us rationally to conclude that God has acted in the world is by no means the exclusive province of theologians, nor is dogmatic demarcationism between history and theology its only manifestation. Philosopher of science Elliott Sober does not deal directly with the question of historical miracles, since his arguments are made in the context of the debate over intelligent design in biology. But Sober does insist on a radical separation between the acts of God (if God were to exist) and what Sober considers to be the normal, rational method of scientific investigation--the comparison of the probability of evidence on competing explanatory theories.

Sober presents his opponents, tacitly, with a dilemma--either the theistic hypothesis is completely uninformative about the evidence (and therefore cannot be the best explanation of the evidence) or it is ad hoc.

The problem is that the design hypothesis confers a probability on the observation only when it is supplemented with further assumptions about what the designer's goals and abilities would be if he existed....There are as many likelihoods as there are suppositions concerning the goals and abilities of the putative designer. Which of these, or which class of these, should we take seriously?

It is no good answering this question by assuming that the eye was built by an intelligent designer and then inferring that the designer must have wanted to give the eye features F1 ... Fn and must have had the ability to do so since, after all, these are the features we observe. For one thing, this pattern of argument is question-begging. One needs independent evidence as to what the designer's plans and abilities would be if he existed....

This objection to the design argument is...continuous with the precepts of "negative theology," which holds that God is so different from us and the world we already know about that it is impossible for us to have much of a grasp of what his characteristics are....We are invited...to imagine a designer who is radically different from the human craftsmen we know about. But if this designer is so different, why are we so sure that this being would build the vertebrate eye in the form in which we find it? (Sober 2007, pp. 10-11)

Just before this passage, Sober merely says that we need to have "an argument that shows that this probability [that design gives to the observation] is indeed higher than the probability that Chance confers on the observation." But elsewhere, his demands are less modest. Sober's approach involves making a clear separation between a "main hypothesis"--for example, that God exists--and "auxiliary assumptions," which he says in theistic design inferences must be assumptions about what God's goals and abilities would be if he existed. (Sober focuses most on the problem of knowing God's goals, since he acknowledges [2007, p. 13] that the God of traditional theism is usually assumed to be omnipotent.) Repeatedly, Sober claims that one must have independent, solid support for these auxiliaries. Just a few pages after the more modest characterization of his requirement, he ups the ante, implying that we must be able to "justify [auxiliary assumptions] independently" (Sober 2007, p. 13). Elsewhere he endorses as normal

scientific practice the use of auxiliary assumptions that scientists “already have good reason to think are true” (Sober 1999, p. 54). He also characterizes his position as “the demand that one have independent reason to think that one’s auxiliary assumptions are true” (Sober 1999, p. 57), he says that “testing the design hypothesis requires that we have information about the goals and abilities the designer would have, if he existed” (Sober 1999, p. 54), and, in his most recent work on the subject, he states that one hypothesis can be tested against another only if there exist true auxiliary assumptions which we are “now justified in believing” (Sober 2008, p. 152). These are very strong requirements for independently justified information about the Divine mind.

There are indeed states of affairs which cannot be used as arguments for miracles because there is no more reason to expect them to come about miraculously than non-miraculously. If, for example, a state of affairs were apparently utterly trivial or insignificant, such as a seemingly pointless particular arrangement of molecules in the wood grain of a table, we would not be able to make a case for a miracle by noting the specifics of that arrangement. It would be possible that God had some unknown reason for intervening to make the molecules come out in just that wood grain pattern, but absent any evidence on the matter, we should plausibly either not assign any probability at all to that state of affairs given Divine intervention or at least regard the probability as being no higher than if only natural causes were at work.

Or consider the case of a lottery. Suppose that we know nothing particular about the religious beliefs or activities of any of the ticket-holders. If an omnipotent God wished Bill to win the lottery, of course God would cause Bill to win. But Bill’s winning the lottery is not evidence that God intervened miraculously in the lottery, for the hypothesis “God intervenes in the lottery” gives (because of our lack of any special information) equal probability to God’s intervening on behalf of Bill and on behalf of each other participant. Hence, for some n participants, the probability of Bill’s winning given Divine intervention is $1/n$, which is the same as the probability of Bill’s winning given no Divine intervention, and there is no confirmation for a miracle.

But the requirement of *justified* auxiliaries regarding God’s goals to supplement the theistic hypothesis is far too strong, if the concern is merely to make the theistic hypothesis probabilistically non-vacuous. It would be sufficient merely to say that the theistic hypothesis must not be totally uninformative about the probability of the evidence or, even more modest, that we must have some way of getting a grip on the comparative probability of the evidence given the theistic hypothesis and its rivals.

Sober’s ad hoc concern regarding theistic hypotheses is especially evident where he considers the possibility of investigating specific design hypotheses that incorporate the goals and abilities of a designer. Counters Sober,

[This] is a game that two can play. Consider the hypothesis that the vertebrate eye was created by the mindless process of electricity. If I simply get to invent auxiliary hypotheses without having to justify them independently, I can simply stipulate the following assumption – if electricity created the vertebrate eye, the eye must have features $F_1 \dots F_n$. The electricity hypothesis now is a conjunct in a conjunction that has maximum likelihood, just like the design hypothesis. This is a dead end (Sober 2007, p. 13).

But while Sober may fear that any theistic hypothesis or design hypothesis will be either entirely uninformative or demonstrably ad hoc, he has certainly not come close to showing that it *must always* be so, nor that it must be so absent independently justified auxiliary hypotheses about Divine goals. A mere reference to negative theology and to God's being very different from human beings is a weak basis indeed for such a robust conclusion.

The distinction between testing auxiliaries and testing the main hypothesis is, in any event, far from being as cut and dried a matter as one might gather from Sober's discussion. On the contrary, it has been a vexed issue and the subject of much technical discussion. (See, for example, Strevens 2001 and Dorling 1982.) It is rather puzzling, given the controversy in this area, that Sober should choose to place so much weight on the use only of auxiliaries that are so far beyond question that surprising results will never be attributed to their falsehood. It is arbitrary to subject theistic hypotheses to such a requirement when it is difficult to be sure one is satisfying that requirement even when doing science within a framework of methodological naturalism.

Moreover, in the case of agent action, the separation between a "main" theory--that the agent exists--and "auxiliaries" regarding the agent's goals and abilities, is especially artificial. The possibility of a well-confirmed conclusion regarding agent action which does not appear to be ad hoc, without the presence of previously well-justified auxiliaries of the kind Sober is looking for in the theistic case, is evident from everyday examples. Suppose that I have never heard of such a person as Madeleine Flanagan, a New Zealand law student with an interest in philosophy. While it might be difficult to pin down exactly how low the prior probability of her existence is under those circumstances, it is presumably quite low, given the specificity of the hypothesis. Moreover, I do not have good reason to think that if such a person existed, she would desire and attempt to make contact with me. It is not as though most of the people in the world with an interest in philosophy try to make contact with me. If I could even put a probability on the proposition "If Madeleine Flanagan, a New Zealand law student with an interest in philosophy, existed, she would wish to make contact with me," it would be quite a low one. That "auxiliary" concerning her goals would not be a justified belief, nor anything close to a justified belief. Nor do I have any other justified beliefs about what her goals would be, relative to the question of her making contact with me. But one day, I find an e-mail in my inbox purporting to be from a person by that very name and description, asking for a copy of a paper of mine that she has heard about. Do I have any problem with considering this to be evidence for the highly specific hypothesis that she both exists and wishes to make contact with me? Is there any need for me to separate that hypothesis into those composite parts and to find independent support for the part about what her goals would be if she existed? Of course not. The evidence supports the composite qua composite. My only reason for believing that Madeleine Flanagan exists is the very e-mail that purports to be an attempt on her part to make contact with me. (See also Houston 1994, pp. 193-4, 228.) What is true here is also true in the case of theistic hypothesis: Probability theory itself does not in any way require that we separate God's existence from his more specific attributes, such as his goals, and confirm propositions about the latter separately.

Nor does there seem to be anything ad hoc about the composite hypothesis that Madeleine Flanagan exists and wishes to make contact with me. While the analysis of ad hocness is a vexed issue in probability theory and the philosophy of science, there is certainly nothing self-

evidently ad hoc about the ordinary agent inference in question to the fairly specific agent hypothesis. For example, there was no more general hypothesis originally in question which was modified and made more specific so as to avoid the appearance of disconfirmation by contrary evidence.

One obvious means of gaining a conception of God that is informative involves not separately justifying auxiliaries about Divine goals but merely considering a specific theological context in which an act is attributed to a Deity with specific traits. But Sober (1999, p. 62) attempts even to block the modest inferential move of testing a particular religious tradition for its explanatory power:

It is important not to be misled here by the assumption that we know what characteristics God would have if he existed. First, we should not be parochial; we should not assume that the tenets of the religion with which we are most familiar somehow define what God must be like if such a being exists.

But a person who makes use of a particular theistic hypothesis in considering comparative probabilities need not be *assuming* that he knows what God “would be like if he existed.” The likelihood comparison does not require that the hypotheses in question have high prior probabilities. Regardless of whether we *know* what God would be like if he existed, there is nothing to prevent us from gaining evidence from occurrences in the world regarding the hypothesis that *that* God--for example, the Judeo-Christian God--exists. There is nothing remotely question-begging about using a more specific religious tradition to generate the very likelihood comparison Sober claims to be seeking. Sober quickly goes on to add that, even if we do choose to use some particular theistic hypothesis, we must see whether that theistic hypothesis would enable us to make a likelihood comparison for the evidence in question--in the context of his discussion, the features of some biological entity. And he clearly does not think that even specifying the God of a particular theological tradition will be helpful.

Whatever may be the case in biology, it seems obvious that a likelihood comparison would indeed favor such a specific theistic hypothesis in many cases of putative historical miracles--further evidence that a theistic hypothesis can be informative without being ad hoc. For example, suppose that we are considering the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal (I Kings 18). That fire should fall on Elijah’s altar is obviously much more likely on the hypothesis that the God of Israel exists than on the hypothesis that he does not. The God of Israel, being the creator of all nature, has the power to send down fire on the altar, and even if we have no highly specific probability for his desire to show himself in this way (it is *possible* that he would decide instead to rebuke Elijah for presumption), as a *comparative* matter there seems to be no doubt of the explanatory power of the hypothesis that the God of Israel exists. There is, for example, some reason to think that he would send fire on the altar because of the Mosaic commandments against the worship of other gods. While this will not give us a specific number on the “Judaic theism” side of the likelihood comparison, a specific number is not (on Sober’s own account) strictly necessary (Sober 1999, p. 58). What is required is a comparison. If the God of Israel does not exist, then there is every reason to think that fire will not fall on Elijah’s altar--either because there are no gods of any kind or because, even if there are, none of them would wish to appear to

confirm the existence of the monotheistic God of Israel. The likelihood comparison for “Fire falls on Elijah’s altar” heavily favors “The God of Israel exists” over “The God of Israel does not exist.”

The fire on the altar example is perhaps too easy, but the religious and factual context of a putative miracle is relevant to a comparison between the miracle hypothesis and its rival(s) in other ways as well. For example, given the Ten Commandments’ strictures on bearing false witness and adultery, we can be fairly sure that the Judeo-Christian God would not perform a miracle validating a person as a prophet if that person were a charlatan or an on-going, unrepentant adulterer. Most important of all, we know that if the God of Israel exists, he is capable of making himself known and is supposed in the past to have used miracles to validate the ministry and message of a messenger (e.g., Moses).

While none of these points gives us strong reason definitely to *expect* that, for example, the God of Israel would wish to raise Jesus of Nazareth from the dead--that is, gives a specific high probability to that proposition given the existence of the God of Israel--the comparative question should pose no difficulty whatsoever. The probability of the resurrection of Jesus even if we merely hypothesize the existence (without specifying particular desires) of the God of Israel is a good deal higher than its probability if the God Jesus claimed to represent does not exist at all. The probability of a resurrection after three days given purely naturalistic causality is nearly nil--a point correctly recognized by those who insist, incorrectly, that we can conclude that Jesus rose from the dead only if we give a high prior probability to traditional theism (McGrew & McGrew 2009, pp. 639-40). As we have already discussed, some other putative god (such as Baal or Zeus), if he existed, would be motivated not to perform a supernatural act that would be attributed to the monotheistic God of Israel, who condemned their worship. There is also reason to doubt that some merely finite supernatural being (whatever, exactly, that concept means) would have the power to raise the dead.

What all of this shows is that it is simply false to say that we must have *independent* knowledge about God’s goals before we can take historical evidence to confirm a miracle. Indeed, to require such independent evidence about Divine goals consistently would be to make the requirement impossible to satisfy. For, in any given case that might act as such independent evidence--a voice from heaven, a vision report, another miracle--the demand for independent evidence regarding the goals God would have could be made yet again. What justified information do we have independent of the event itself about whether God would wish to send that vision, affirm Jesus’ ministry by a voice from heaven, and so forth? Thus, no putative act of God could ever be interpreted *as* an act of God unless we knew about God’s goals in some purely theoretical way apart from his acts. There is no reason for us to make such a requirement, and indeed such a requirement is completely inconsistent with our interaction with personal agents in other areas of life.

As already noted, Sober says that his position is related to the great differences between God and man (Sober 2007, p. 10). But if there is good reason to believe the traditional Christian position that God *has* revealed Himself in history--if that is the best explanation of evidence regarding certain putative miracles, for example--then there is no point in discussing *a priori* the question of whether miracles are amenable to investigation, including scientific and historical investigation.

If a Christian theist argues that the best explanation for the occurrence of some event is that it was a miracle, those who wish to deny the force of the argument need to respond to the hypothesis on its own terms. That hypothesis claims, *inter alia*, that there exists a God who is at least sufficiently like ourselves as to be capable of revealing himself to us. If the disanalogy between God and ourselves is so great that no communication from God to man is possible, then the Christian view of God is false. But it would be question-begging for a non-theist to foist upon the theologian, apologist, or (for that matter) design theorist the hypothesis that there exists a God who is so radically unlike us that *ex hypothesi* it is impossible for us ever to interpret an occurrence as an act of that God. Since Christianity entails that a God who is able to reveal himself through mighty acts has indeed done so, that is the hypothesis the non-theist needs to counter, not a hypothesis he perhaps wishes the Christian held instead--the existence of a being so arbitrary, so radically different from us, and hence so unknowable, that we could never be justified in concluding that he had acted.

Conclusion

The God of the Bible is a God who acts perceptibly within human history--calling his people, judging them, protecting them, and revealing his nature and his laws to them through tangible acts of power. Such revelation is possible only if miracles are rationally discernible.

Any theological or atheological position that attempts to place God's action strictly outside the realms of history and science, in the sense that it can be perceived only aationally, requires an in-principle argument that the God who is not silent, who has spoken to man, cannot exist. But no such argument is forthcoming, and mere assertions that these are matters of faith or that God is too unlike ourselves for rational investigation of his acts to be possible will not suffice. Until and unless the critics of rational investigation present something better, we are free to look at evidence on a case-by-case basis and to decide whether the action of God in history is truly its best explanation.¹

(Word count without works cited or further reading: 6631)

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