

# HISTORIANS AND MIRACLES: THE PRINCIPLE OF ANALOGY AND ANTECEDENT PROBABILITY RECONSIDERED

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## ABSTRACT

Most Biblical scholars and historians hold that the investigation of a miracle report lies outside of the rights of historians acting within their professional capacity. In this article, I challenge this assertion and argue to the contrary: Historians are within their professional rights to investigate miracle claims and to adjudicate on the historicity of the events. I present a positive case for the historian's right to adjudicate on miracle claims and address two major objections to this conclusion: the principle of analogy and antecedent probability. At times I use the resurrection of Jesus as an example. This is the first of two articles. In the second, I will address three additional common objections: the theological objection, the lack of consensus and miracle claims in multiple religions.

## INTRODUCTION

A number of years ago, my wife was in a car accident and sustained a serious injury. The other driver's insurance company was stubborn and refused to pay most of the expenses we incurred. So, it went to trial. I was one of the first witnesses called and at one point I stated that the insurance company did not even want to provide a rental car while ours was being repaired. The moment I said this, the defence attorney objected and made a motion. The judge then dismissed me, dismissed the jury, and a few moments later I learned that the judge had declared a mistrial. I was not aware that 'insurance company' was a forbidden term in a trial.

Something similar often happens in the field of historical Jesus research. There is a lot of discussion over what the 'real' Jesus actually said and did. But when anyone mentions the term miracle it is not uncommon for some scholars to jump to their feet and shout, 'Objection! You cannot go there as a historian.' Although I am not an attorney, I am willing to bet that there are some good reasons for barring the mention of the insurance company involved. After all, insurance companies are big, impersonal corporations with deep pockets. Reminding jurors of this might bias them toward finding for the plaintiff. There are likewise reasons provided for why historians are forbidden from investigating miracle claims. If these are valid, then anyone interested in checking out the truth claims of particular religions such as Judaism or Christianity is forbidden from doing so. Historians, for example, could acknowledge that Jesus died by crucifixion and that a number of people had experiences they believed were post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to them. But they would be unable to answer the question of whether Jesus actually returned alive from the dead. In this article I challenge this paradigm.

## A POSITIVE CASE FOR HISTORIANS INVESTIGATING MIRACLE CLAIMS

Most historians are realists and hold that if a past event left traces, it can be the subject of historical inquiry. But what about when the event in question is a miracle? By 'miracle' I mean an event in history for which natural explanations are inadequate. The nature of a miracle is such that there could be no natural cause of it.<sup>1</sup> And, given the above definition, how may we distinguish a miracle from an anomaly? I would like to suggest two criteria. We may recognise that an event is a miracle when the event (a) is extremely unlikely to have occurred, given the circumstances and/or natural law and (b) occurs in an environment or context that is charged with religious significance (Martin 2005:147; Moreland & Craig 2003:569). In other words, the event occurs in a context where we might expect a god to act. The stronger the context is charged in this manner, the stronger the evidence becomes that we have a miracle on our hands, if the historical evidence for the event itself is good. Let us consider the hypothetical example provided by David Hume of reports concerning Queen Elizabeth returning to life after her death.

*But suppose, that all the historians who treat of England, should agree, that, on the first of January 1600, Queen Elizabeth died; that both before and after her death she was seen by her physicians and the whole*

1. The term miracle is an essentially contested concept and numerous definitions have been offered: Bartholomew (2000:81): 'a miracle is an act by some power external to the natural world. If, therefore, something happens which cannot be explained by the natural processes of the world and which cannot be attributed to human agency then there is a prima facie case for supposing that a miracle has occurred'; Beaudoin (2006:116): 'events in the natural world that would not occur but for the interposing of a supernatural force'; Bultmann (1958:173): 'miracles are events which in themselves have no religious character, but which are attributed to divine (or dæmonic) causation'; Ehrman (2008:241): 'events that contradict the normal workings of nature in such a way as to be virtually beyond belief and to require an acknowledgment that supernatural forces have been at work'; Hume (2000 (1777):114–115): 'A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature' and 'a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent'; Lewis (1978:5): 'an interference with Nature by supernatural power'; Meier (1994:512): 'A miracle is (1) an unusual, startling, or extraordinary event that is in principle perceivable by any interested and fair-minded observer, (2) an event that finds no reasonable explanation in human abilities or in other known forces that operate in our world of time and space, and (3) an event that is the result of a special act of God, doing what no human power can do'. Interestingly, Meier does not regard the resurrection of Jesus as a miracle, since it does not meet his first criteria of a miracle (1994:525). Moreland and Craig (2003:567–568) distinguish between *providentia ordinaria* and *providentia extraordinaria*, or acts of God that are ordinary and extraordinary. Classifying miracles as *providentia extraordinaria*, they define miracles as 'naturally (or physically) impossible events, events which at certain times and places cannot be produced by the relevant natural causes'. Purtil (1997:62–63): 'an event in which God temporarily makes an exception to the natural order of things, to show that God is acting'; Swinburne (1989:2): 'an event of an extraordinary kind brought about by a god and of religious significance'; Theissen and Merz (1998:309): 'A miracle is an event which goes against normal expectations and has a religious significance: it is understood as the action of a god'; Tucker (2005:378): 'divine feats of strength'; Twelftree (1999:25–27) provides a list of eight general definitions of a miracle.

*court, as is usual with persons of her rank; that her successor was acknowledged and proclaimed by the parliament; and that, after being interred a month, she again appeared, resumed the throne, and governed England for three years: I must confess that I should be surprized at the concurrence of so many odd circumstances, but should not have the least inclination to believe so miraculous an event. I should not doubt of her pretended death, and of those other public circumstances that followed it: I should only assert it to have been pretended, and that it neither was, nor possibly could be real.*

(Hume [1777] 2000:128)

Hume would rather believe that a hoax had taken place than draw the conclusion inferred by the presence of good evidence that a miracle had occurred. Now let us assume with Hume that his example reflects actual reports. What if the historian likewise had credible data supporting the conclusion that the Queen had claimed to be a prophetess and that she had performed a number of acts during her lifetime that convinced both herself and others that she possessed a degree of supernatural power? And what if she had predicted that she would rise a month after her death? Although the historian may have grave hesitations when attempting to make a judgment on whether Elizabeth had actually risen from the dead, such a context would only complicate matters for Hume, since according to his example, a great deal of strong data exists for the reality of the event. If both the data supporting her post-mortem appearances and her claims and miraculous deeds were strong, this would significantly strengthen any case purporting Elizabeth had, in fact, risen. And what if there were no plausible natural explanations for the event to boot? Context can make a big difference.

Let us apply the context factor to a cancer patient who goes into remission. Katja has been experiencing severe upper abdominal pain that radiates to her back. She notices a yellowing of her skin and of the whites of her eyes. She has no appetite, is depressed, and has lost a considerable amount of weight. An entrepreneur and never one to take time off from work, Katja finally visits her physician and, after undergoing a number of tests, is diagnosed with advanced pancreatic cancer and is given less than six months to live. Distressed over the news, she leaves the office in tears with an appointment to return the following day to discuss treatment. The following morning, the physician and staff discuss among one another how each had experienced a dream that night in which some saw an angel who told them it was not Katja's time to die while the others saw Katja cancer-free. When Katja arrives for her appointment, the staff are surprised to observe her positive countenance and hear her describe how for some unknown reason her pain and jaundice have vanished. The physician readministers the tests and finds Katja to be completely cancer-free. Because the context in which Katja's remission occurs is charged with religious significance given the dreams of the staff, I see no reason why the physician cannot declare that a miracle has occurred. One cannot here dispute the conclusion that a miracle has occurred by defaulting to metaphysical naturalism. In other words, a metaphysical naturalist cannot argue that since a miracle contradicts the known fact that miracles do not occur, a specific miracle claim is disconfirmed. The argument begs the question, since Katja's healing may be the defeater for metaphysical naturalism. However, one may object that students in medical school are not taught how to diagnose a miracle. That is correct. But physicians are not limited to practicing medicine by employing only what they learn in medical school. Otherwise, advances in the medical sciences could not take place. Moreover, a physician may write a journal article proposing criteria for identifying when a miracle has occurred and introduce a new component in the practice of medicine.

Let us look at one more example and apply the second criterion for identifying a miracle to the claim that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead. There is a strong consensus today among scholars that Jesus thought of himself as an exorcist, miracle worker, and God's eschatological agent. Therefore, the claim

that Jesus rose occurs in a context that is charged with religious significance.

### Jesus the miracle-worker and exorcist

That Jesus performed feats that both he and his followers interpreted as miracles and exorcisms is a fact strongly evidenced and supported by the majority of scholars (Bultmann 1958:124; Crossan 1991:311, 332; Ehrman 1999:198; Evans 1999:12; Funk & the Jesus Seminar 1998:527; Meier 1994:970; Sanders 1985:11; 1993:157; Theissen & Merz 1998:281). Borg concedes that there are 'very strong' reasons for concluding Jesus performed healings of a sort and that a supernatural cause cannot be ruled out (Borg 1987:67–71; cf. Borg 2006:56). Twelftree, perhaps the leading authority on the miracles and exorcisms of Jesus, argues in several works that the evidence that Jesus was a miracle worker is so strong that it is one of the best attested historical facts about Jesus and that there is an almost unanimous agreement among historians of Jesus that he performed powerful works (Twelftree 1999:258, 345; Twelftree 2004:206).

Extrabiblical reports indicate that Jesus had the reputation of being a miracle-worker. Although a disputed passage, at the end of the first century Josephus reports that Jesus was a 'worker of amazing deeds' (*paradoxōn ergōn poiētēs*) (Jos *Ant* 18:3). Josephus employs *paradoxōn* elsewhere to mean 'miracle' or 'strange' (I am indebted to Twelftree 1999:411 n52, n55 for the following references: Jos *Ant* 2:91, 223, 285, 295, 345, 347; 3:1, 30, 38; 5:28, 125; 6:171, 290; 9:14, 58, 60, 182; 10:21, 214, 235, 266; 15:379; Jos *Ag Ap* 2:114. See also Theissen & Merz 1998:297). Moreover, *paradoxōn* does not seem to have been a conventional Christian term for miracle. It occurs only once in the New Testament (Lk 5:26) and, therefore, is unlikely to be a later Christian interpolation in the text of Josephus. One would expect a Christian interpolator to use the word 'signs' or 'wonders.' In the middle of the second century Celsus accused Jesus of being a magician (Origen *Contra Celsum* 1.38). Still later, the Talmud reports that Jesus practiced sorcery (*b Sanh* 43a). It was also reported that Jewish exorcists were attempting to cast out demons in the name of Jesus, an indicator that Jesus had been regarded even outside his group of followers as an exorcist (Twelftree 1999:411 n60, 411 n62).

Jesus' miracles are multiply attested, as they are found in every Gospel source (Mark, Q, M, L, John) and Josephus. These also appear in multiple literary forms including narratives, summaries of his activities, and references to his miracles in logia attributed to him (Meier 1994:622; Theissen & Merz 1998:299–304). Meier comments that:

*if the criteria of historicity do not work in the case of the miracle tradition, where multiple attestation is so massive and coherence so impressive, there is no reason to expect them to work elsewhere*  
(Meier 1994:630; cf. pp. 619–622; cf. Theissen & Merz 1998:298–299)

Moreover, the reports are quite early when compared with most other miracle claims in antiquity. Mark reports the miracles of Jesus within forty years of his death, whereas the reports of miracles attributed to Apollonius of Tyana, Honi the Circle-drawer, and Hanina ben-Dosa are at least 125 years removed from the alleged events. The earliest extant text of Apollonius' first century miracles is Philostratus' biography of Apollonius (c. AD 225; 3.38–40; 4.45; 6.43) while Josephus provides the earliest report of the miracle of Honi the Circle-drawer in the first century BC (c. AD 90; *Ant* 14:22) and the miracles of the first-century figure Hanina ben-Dosa are in the Mishnah (c. AD 200; TB Berarkhot 34b; 61b; Yevamot 21b; TB Sotah 9:15; TB Baba Batra 74b; TB Ta'anit 24; 25a). Meier concludes:

*[t]he miracle traditions about Jesus' public ministry are already so widely attested in various sources and literary forms by the end of the first Christian generation that total fabrication by the early church is, practically speaking, impossible.*

(Meier 1994:630)

Tucker's suggestion, namely that the miracles of Jesus were wholesale inventions and that this provides wider scope and is more fruitful than literal interpretations (Tucker 2005:385, 388),

might be warranted only in the absence of such evidence and, even then, only when such a solution creates fertile ground in cases of underdetermination.

That Jesus had the reputation of a miracle-worker was corroborated by his critics, who asserted that his power came from Satan and that they had colleagues who could perform exorcisms too (Mk 3:22; Mt 12:27 [cf. Lk 11:19]. See Dunn 2003:670–671; Ehrman 1999:197–200; Meier 1991:617–645). The plausibility that Jesus was an exorcist is quite high, since we know of others of the period who were regarded as exorcists or were purported to have performed one or more miracles, although the number of miracles and exorcisms attributed to them is far less than the number specifically attributed to Jesus in the canonical Gospels. Twelftree notes that ‘in the period of two hundred years on each side of the life of the historical Jesus the number of miracle stories attached to any historical figure is astonishingly small’ (Twelftree 1999:247). When theme, motif and form are considered, the number of pre-Christian accounts is reduced to only three (Blackburn 2003:200. See also Blackburn 1991). It appears that the traditions of Jesus’ exorcisms were known among those who were sympathetic and those who were in opposition to Jesus (Eve 2005:33).

### Jesus: God’s eschatological agent

That Jesus viewed himself as God’s eschatological agent – the figure through whom the kingdom of God would come – is also widely recognised by Biblical scholars and amply attested in the sources (Theissen & Merz 1998:512–513). Jesus is reported to have said, ‘If, by the Spirit of God, I am casting out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you’ (Mt 12:28; cf. Lk 11:20). He is also said to have told John’s disciples that John could be assured that Jesus was the Messiah since he was doing those things others believed the Messiah would do (Mt 11:4–5; cf. Lk 7:22; cf. 4Q521; Is 61.1). If Jesus actually uttered statements like these, then it would seem that he believed his status of being God’s Messiah was confirmed by his miracles and that God’s kingdom had come through him (Twelftree 1999:247, 263, 346–347).

The ‘kingdom of God’ was a central part in the content of Jesus’ preaching, although precisely what he meant by it continues to be disputed (Meier 1994:289–506; Theissen & Merz 1998:246–278). That the kingdom of God was at the core of Jesus’ preaching is secure (Meier 1994:289–506; Theissen & Merz 1998:246–274. See also Dunn 2003:707; cf. 762). Meier notes that Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom is found in Mark, Q, M, and indirectly in L and John, and appears in multiple literary forms: prayer, eschatological, and the beatitudes (Meier 1994:349. See also Ehrman 1999:152–154). Moreover, that Jesus preached the arrival of the kingdom of God through him is consistent with the facts of Jesus’ life and execution, such as his preaching about the coming judgment and destruction, especially relative to the temple (Sanders 1985:222–241. See also Ehrman 1999:154–160 and Theissen & Merz 1998:264–278).

These data create a significantly charged religious context in which the reports of Jesus’ resurrection occur. And this context becomes even more charged if with a growing number of scholars we grant that Jesus predicted that his violent and imminent death would be followed shortly thereafter with God’s vindication of him. Accordingly, if the hypothesis that Jesus rose from the dead is superior to competing hypotheses in its ability to explain the relevant historical bedrock, we are warranted in concluding that a miracle occurred.<sup>2</sup>

2. By ‘historical bedrock’ pertaining to the fate of Jesus, I am referring to (1) Jesus’ death by crucifixion, (2) the beliefs of Jesus’ disciples that he had risen from the dead and had appeared to them in both individual and group settings, and (3) the conversion of a persecutor of the Christian church later known as Paul based on an experience he perceived was an appearance of the risen Jesus to him. See McIntyre (2001:8); Habermas (2006:79); Habermas and Licona (2004:74). There are a number of criteria commonly employed by historians outside the community of Biblical scholars for arguing to the best explanation, such as explanatory scope, explanatory power, less ad hoc, plausibility, and illumination. See McCullagh (1984:19); McCullagh (2004:51–52).

In summary, I am defining miracle as an event in history for which natural explanations are inadequate and I am contending that we may identify a miracle when the event (a) is highly unlikely to have occurred, given the circumstances and/or natural law and (b) occurred in an environment or context charged with religious significance. If these criteria are met and a miracle is the best explanation of the relevant historical facts, the historian is warranted in affirming that a miracle has occurred.

### A NEGATIVE CASE FOR HISTORIANS INVESTIGATING MIRACLE CLAIMS

Long ago, David Hume objected to the investigation of miracle claims by historians. More recently, a number of scholars have offered various objections. These include Meier (1994:512–517, 524–529), Wedderburn (1999:3–23), Dunn (2003:876–878) and Ehrman. Ehrman has thrice debated the issue publicly: once with Craig and the others with this author (Craig & Ehrman 2006; Ehrman & Licona 2008; Ehrman & Licona 2009). The subject has even been the focus of historians outside of the community of Biblical scholars (Tucker 2005). In fact, the 2006 theme issue of *History and Theory* was devoted to the subject of ‘Religion and History.’

Because of space limitations, I will focus on five major arguments supporting the position that historians can never conclude that a miracle has occurred. These concern the principle of analogy, antecedent probability, theological conclusions, lack of consensus, and miracle claims in multiple religions. I will address the first two in this article and the latter three in a subsequent article. I will argue that none of these stands up under critical scrutiny.

#### Principle of analogy

Ernst Troeltsch wrestled with miracle claims (Troeltsch 1913:729–753). He argued that events of the past do not differ in kind from those in the present. Therefore, if miracles do not occur today, they did not occur in the past (see also Anchor 1999:115). Dunn explains the application of analogy to the resurrection of Jesus:

*When we add the initial observation – that departure from this life (death) can indeed be described as a historical event, whereas entry on to some further existence can hardly be so described – it can be seen just how problematic it is to speak of the resurrection of Jesus as historical. . . . [T]he historical method inevitably works with some application of the principle of analogy.*

(Dunn 2003:876–877)

Craffert similarly comments:

*The principle of analogy which is one of the basic principles of all social scientific study, is not restricted to the sceptical historian, but applies to all historiography as well as to everyday life. There is no other option but to apply [sic] to present practical standards of everyday life to determine whether the decision of the historian to reject the claims of some events narrated in ancient sources, is valid.*

(Craffert 1989:342)

While analogy demands our attention and caution in a study of a particular miracle claim, there are drawbacks to its unqualified usage. Numerous established modern beliefs would fail using the principle of analogy. For example, we could not conclude that dinosaurs existed in the past. After all, historians and scientists do not experience them today. One may object that we can still establish scientifically that dinosaurs once existed, since their fossils remain. However, this is in spite of the principle of analogy and we may likewise be able to establish miracles historically if we have credible testimony that remains.

The principle of analogy also appears to assume metaphysical naturalism, since it presupposes that miracles do not occur today. But how is such an assumption justified without arguing in a circle? Another historian may hold that miracles do, in fact, occur today. And ‘[i]f miracles are presently occurring, then Troeltsch’s principle of analogy could be granted and used to

support the reality of past miracles' (Beckwith 1997:97. See also Meier 1994:516). In other words, if miracles occur today they could have occurred in the past. Therefore, the worldview of historians plays a large role in their use of analogy. Pannenberg explains:

*If somebody considers it with David Hume (or today with John Dominic Crossan) to be a general rule, suffering no exception, that the dead remain dead, then of course one cannot accept the Christian assertion that Jesus was raised. But then this is not a historical judgment but an ideological belief.*

(Pannenberg 1998:26)

The principle of analogy is also limited by the knowledge and experience of the particular historian, which may be insufficient and misleading:

*Our knowledge of the world around us is gained by gathering information. When we cast our net into the sea of experience, certain data turn up. If we cast our net into a small lake, we won't be sampling much of the ocean's richness. If we make a worldwide cast, we have a more accurate basis for what exists. Here is the crunch. If we cast into our own little lakes, it is not surprising if we do not obtain an accurate sampling of experience. However, a worldwide cast will reveal many reports of unusual occurrences that might be investigated and determined to be miracles. Surely most of the supernatural claims would be found to be untrustworthy. But before making the absolute observation that no miracles have ever happened, someone would have to investigate each report. It only takes a single justified example to show that there is more to reality than a physical world. We must examine an impossibly large mountain of data to justify the naturalistic conclusion assumed in this objection.*

(Habermas & Licona 2004:144)

Since investigating every miracle claim is an impossible task, Hume's assertion that the uniform experience of reality supports the nonexistence of miracles is equally impossible to support. C.S. Lewis notes:

*[W]e know the experience against [miracles] to be uniform only if we know that all the reports of them are false. And we can know all the reports to be false only if we know already that miracles have never occurred. In fact, we are arguing in a circle.*

(Lewis 1978:102, cf. Gregory 2006:137–138)

A few have argued that if historians fail to employ the principle of analogy, there is nothing to prevent them from accepting fairy tales as historical (Goulder 1996:55 and comments by Price in Craig & Price 1999. See also Evans (1970:177) and Moltmann (1996:78–80). I see no reason why this must be the case if proper historical method is applied. We do not interpret Aesop's fables as history because a highly plausible natural hypothesis is available when considering genre. The one miracle reported of Vespasian was probably staged, as Meier explains:

*Suetonius and Tacitus seem to tell the whole story with a twinkle in their eye and smiles on their lips, an attitude probably shared by Vespasian. The whole event looks like a 1st-century equivalent of a 'photo opportunity' staged by Vespasian's PR team to give the new emperor divine legitimacy – courtesy of god Serapion, who supposedly commanded the two men to go to Vespasian. Again, both in content and in form, we are far from the miracle traditions of the Four Gospels – to say nothing of the overall pattern of Jesus' ministry into which his miracles fit.*

(Meier 1994:625)

Allison recognises the fear among scholars of being labelled superstitious:

*People do not want to be stigmatized, to have others think them shackled to superstition. But the censoring of testimony does not allow us to remain loyal to the realities of human experience; and although the facts are too little known, surveys from various parts of the world indicate that perceived contact with the dead is, however we interpret it, a regular part of cross-cultural experience.*

(Allison 2005:271)

Eddy and Boyd go further:

*No longer should scholars feel justified in calling their work 'critical' when they foreclose the nature of the conclusions they will find in their historical research by arbitrarily restricting the pool of experience they base their analogies upon to the myopic experience of their own secularized academic subculture.*

(Eddy & Boyd 2007:82; cf. 67, 70)

Miracle claims must be judged on an individual basis. Accordingly, the threat of superstition should not deter historians from proceeding when being careful to apply sound method (Beaudoin 2006:123). Wright explains:

*The natural/supernatural distinction itself, and the near-equation of 'supernatural' with 'superstition', are scarecrows that Enlightenment thought has erected in its fields to frighten away anyone following the historical argument where it leads. It is high time the birds learned to take no notice.*

(Wright 2003:707 n63)

We may add that the strength of cumulative data is more important than analogous events, as Pannenberg suggests:

*Does not the postulate of the fundamental homogeneity of all events usually form the chief argument against the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus, for example? But if that is so, does not the opinion, which has come to be regarded as virtually self-evident, that the resurrection of Jesus cannot be a historical event, rest on a remarkably weak foundation? Only the particular characteristics of the reports about it make it possible to judge the historicity of the resurrection, not the prejudgment that every event must be fundamentally of the same kind as every other.*

(Pannenberg 1983:49 n90)

Accordingly, we observe a number of reasons why analogy should not deter historians from adjudicating on miracle claims.

### Antecedent probability

Ehrman contends that hypotheses that include a miracle are by definition the least probable of all hypotheses. Since historians must choose the most probable explanation, they are never warranted in selecting a miracle hypothesis (see Ehrman's opening statement in Ehrman and Licona 2008, and Ehrman in Craig and Ehrman 2006:9, 12–13).

*Since historians can only establish what probably happened in the past, and the chances of a miracle happening, by definition, are infinitesimally remote, historians can never demonstrate that a miracle probably happened.*

(Ehrman 2008:243–244)

Similar statements have been made by other Biblical scholars. Goulder opines that 'even if speculative, a natural explanation is to be preferred' (Goulder 1996:52) and Dawes speaks of a 'world in which miracles are (at best) an explanation of last resort' (Dawes 1998:35).

Why must a miracle hypothesis necessarily be the least probable explanation? Ehrman answers that miracles 'do not happen all the time' and 'defy all probability' (Ehrman 2008:243). Moreover, he continues, while we personally do not know anyone who can perform miracles, we all know that everyone has 'been mistaken about what they thought they saw, or have been misquoted, or have exaggerated or have flat out lied' (Ehrman 2008:244). Accordingly, it is more probable that others are incorrect in their reports of the occurrence of a miracle than that a miracle had actually occurred. Hume argued in a similar manner (Hume 2000 (1777):119–120).

All would agree that a miracle is extremely improbable if we were to assess the probability of the event's occurrence by natural causes. However, this is where context changes the equation. Related to the resurrection of Jesus, the early Christians did not claim that Jesus was raised by natural causes, but that God had raised him. If we knew that God (probably) does not exist,

then a miracle would be the least probable explanation. And if we knew that God (probably) exists and (probably) wanted to perform a certain act such as raising Jesus from the dead, then a miracle would be the most probable explanation (see Tucker 2005:380; contra is Fergusson 1985:297). The challenge, of course, is that historians are not privy to such knowledge. In order to demonstrate that a miracle is improbable, Ehrman would have to provide the necessary background knowledge that God's existence is improbable or that, if God exists, it is improbable that he would want to act in a particular situation.

The proper method for doing this would be through the use of Bayes' theorem. However, the challenges posed by using Bayes' theorem for this purpose are insurmountable, since the required information is often unclear or unavailable (Bartholomew 2000:34; McCullagh 1984:46–47, 57–58; Tucker 2005:381). Moreover, if God exists, he is a free agent and it is, therefore, impossible to determine whether he desired to act in a particular situation (Craig's comments in Craig & Ehrman 2006:32; Davis 1999:8; McIntyre 2001:5). As a result, calculating the antecedent probability of a particular miracle is inscrutable. As suggested above, probability should be determined by how well a hypothesis meets criteria for the best explanation (n2) and not according to the assumptions imported by a historian prior to an examination of the data. To do otherwise places historians in a dangerous position, since bad philosophy corrupts good history.

Ehrman is correct that most of us know many others who have been mistaken, been misquoted, have exaggerated and lied, while not knowing anyone personally who can perform miracles. But Ehrman does not take into account or even grant the possibility that Jesus of Nazareth may have been who he claimed. None of my acquaintances are making the sort of claims made by Jesus and so I do not expect any of them to perform miracles. But if Jesus was actually God's eschatological agent whom he desired to vindicate through raising him from the dead – and historians cannot a priori rule out that possibility – his resurrection is very probable.

## CONCLUSIONS

A significant number of scholars reject the notion that historians can investigate miracle claims. However, it is noteworthy that the climate is changing and historians are warming up to the idea. In the 2006 theme issue of *History and Theory*, which focused on 'Religion and History,' Shaw opened with the following words:

*We appear to be at a moment when we need new intellectual and professional approaches to deal with religion. Accounting for our own position is tricky, but always worthwhile, if only to try to appreciate our prejudices and assumptions in advance of doing our scholarship. . . . this Theme Issue shows historians and others concerned with the study of religion to be at a sort of confessional watershed, a moment of collective acknowledgment that the interaction between religion and history is not at the position that most historians have thought, especially when we fall back only upon our own learned memories, graduate training, prejudices, or our grand narratives of historical development. The Issue's papers pulse with a sense that religion has turned out in a variety of ways to be more important and a more clearly permanent factor in history than our paradigms had supposed. The consequences of this include a need to reassess the historian's attitudes toward religious phenomena and religion's trajectory within the mass of forces we call historical.*

(Shaw 2006:1, 3–4; cf. in the same theme issue Butler 2006:53; Cladis 2006:93, 94, 96)

A number of other contributors in the same issue addressed the unrecognised negative attitude many historians presently hold toward miracles, and questioned the assumptions of modernity (Butler 2006:53; Cladis 2006:94; Gregory 2006:138). Gregory referred to this approach as a 'secular bias' that 'assume[s] metaphysical naturalism or epistemological scepticism about

religious claims' and that this 'yields a secular confessional history. This goes unrecognised to the extent that such metaphysical beliefs are widely but wrongly considered to be undeniable truths' (Gregory 2006:146). He ended with the admonishment that 'critical self-awareness should lead us to acknowledge this fact and to move beyond secular confessional history in the study of religion' (Gregory 2006:149). A number of biblical scholars have made similar observations (Davis 1993:39; Marsden 1997:30; Miller 1992:17 n33; Pannenberg 1996:71; Stewart 2006:3). Witherington writes:

*Even some contemporary Bible scholars assume that miracles must be left out of account if we are going to do 'scholarly' work like the 'other critical historians'. This is a carryover from the anti-supernatural bias of many Enlightenment historians, but it seems a very odd presupposition today. Our postmodern world is experiencing a newfound openness to miracles, magic, the supernatural, the spiritual, or whatever you want to call it.*

(Witherington 2006:5)

In this article I made a positive case for why historians may investigate miracle claims in order to adjudicate on their historicity. I defined miracle as an event in history for which natural explanations are inadequate and proposed that we may identify a miracle when the event (a) is highly unlikely to have occurred, given the circumstances and/or natural law and (b) occurred in an environment or context charged with religious significance. When these criteria are met and the reported event is the best explanation of the relevant historical bedrock, the historian is warranted in affirming that a miracle has occurred. I then examined two major arguments supporting the position that historians can never conclude that a miracle has occurred: the principle of analogy and antecedent probability. I concluded that neither of these should deter historians from investigating miracle claims and rendering a positive adjudication on them when the relevant criteria are met and the event is the best explanation of the relevant historical bedrock. In my second article, I will examine three additional common objections to the adjudicating of miracle claims by historians.

If my assessments are correct, historians are within their professional rights to give attention to miracle claims. Moreover, there are signs from the community of professional historians that the epistemological Ice Age of anti-supernaturalism appears to be coming to an end. Given this warming attitude toward miracles, those scholars who claim their rights to investigate miracle claims will find themselves in the company of a growing number of colleagues.

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