
A Critical Assessment of Gospel Miracles and the Laws of Nature

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ABSTRACT

The clamor for miracles in virtually all situations in life is an everyday phenomenon in contemporary Nigerian society, which is perpetuated by the numerous miracle claims by religious ministers. These multiple miracle claims among adherents of different religious confessions have raised the question of the possibility of an authentic miracle. Gospel miracle is a divine operation that transcends what is normally perceived as natural law; it cannot be explained upon any natural basis. On the other hand, the laws of nature bring all elements of the universe to harmony, anything that brings suffering, anguish, pain illness, happens because we are going against the laws of nature, and that is how we are going to recognize them. What relationship exists between gospel miracles and the laws of nature? According to Hume, a miracle may be accurately defined as a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent. On the contrary, Francis Beckwith defines miracle as “a divine intervention (by God)”. The study therefore seeks to critically examine the reconciliation of gospel miracles and the laws of nature.

KEYWORDS: Gospel miracles, Laws, Nature

Introduction

Gospel miracles as divine interventions in the visible world are as old as the history of God's revelation to man. At the dawn of the Old Testament, they were the instruments used by Yahweh to organize the chosen people under Abraham Eichhorst in Jeffery (2013). In the time of Moses and Aaron, they were the heavenly aids by which the Jews were liberated from the bonds of Egypt. In the days of Elias and Eliseus, they were the signs and wonders, which the Lord showed through His prophets to ratify their divine commission. With the opening of the New Covenant, miracles served to announce the coming of the Savior. During His public life on earth, Jesus appealed to His works of power in confirmation of His divinity and before He ascended into heaven, He gave to His Church the power to do the same miraculous works which He did, as a pledge of His assistance and a proof of her authority. During the first three centuries after Christ, Christian apologists and the early Fathers more than once referred to the miracles of the Gospel to establish the rational foundations of the faith.

The noticeable effect of miracle claims in present day Nigerian society is seen in the multiplicity of religious denominations, religious houses, shrines, churches, prayer houses, imposing billboards and posters, crusades, miracle programs, miracle displaying television channels, radio and television miracle advertisement jingles and promos for personal, family and

village deliverance programs, etc. These multiple claims and promos leave the average believer in God confused and bemused, thus raising the question of the authenticity of these claims. It is a known truth that many people have been defrauded in the name of receiving these promised miracles Berti (2016).

Nature is that which we observe in perception through the senses. In this sense perception, we are aware of something which is not thought and which is self-contained for thought. This property of being self-contained for thought lies at the base of natural science. It means that nature can be thought of as a closed system whose mutual relations do not require the expression of the fact that they are thought about. Thus in a sense nature is independent of thought. Anything that brings suffering, anguish, pain illness, happens because we are going against the laws of nature, and that is how we are going to recognize them. The results we obtain when we go outside the law enables us to recognize their existence. Natural laws are designed so that we ourselves make a change, not so that we try to change the law or others.

Concept of Gospel Miracles

Etymologically the word miracle is derived from the Latin words *miraculum*, *mirari* and *mirus*. *Miraculum* which means ‘to wonder at’, ‘an object of wonder’ is derived from *mirari* which means ‘to marvel’, ‘to be astonished’, ‘to wonder at’ which is in turn derived from *mirus* meaning ‘wonderful’ ‘astonishing’ ‘amazing’.

From the root words, therefore, a miracle signifies any amazing, astonishing, marvelous or wonderful event or thing. The New Testament of the Christian Bible employs four Greek words to designate the concept of miracle namely; *semeion* (sign), *terata* (wonder, potent), *dunamis* (mighty works) and *erga* (works). According to Merriam Webster Dictionary, “a miracle is an extraordinary event manifesting divine intervention in human affairs” (www.merriam-webster.com).

A miracle in a strict, exclusive sense operates outside any known or existing natural or scientific law. This is because if it can be explained by any of such known laws it cannot be called a miracle in the strict sense however astonishing it may be. In the same exclusive sense Fisher defines a miracle as “an event which the forces of nature, including the natural powers of man cannot themselves produce, and which must therefore be referred to supernatural agencies. Following Fisher’s line of thought, Jackson sees miracle as “a divine operation that transcends what is normally perceived as natural law; it cannot be explained upon any natural basis” (www.christianwurier.com).

The Augustinian concept of miracle remained standard in the Church until the time of St. Thomas Aquinas. The latter adopted Augustine's terminology, with added clarification, and then made several formulations of his own that have since become classic in speculative theology. The following is his summary of the concept of gospel miracle (John, 2001):

- 1) That which is arduous is called a miracle not because of the greatness of the thing produced, but in comparison with the faculty of nature. Consequently, every effect is reckoned to be difficult—and therefore miraculous—no matter how insignificant the effect, if the latter surpasses the powers of nature.

- 2) A miracle is described as something unusual because it is contrary to the usual course of nature, even were it to be repeated every day.
- 3) A miracle may surpass the powers of nature in three ways:
 - (a) *Substantially*, as when two bodies are together in one place, or the sun is made to turn back, or when the human body is glorified. Such miracles are absolutely above the capacity of nature, and represent the highest degree.
 - (b) *Subjectively*, when the miracle consists not in the substance of what is produced but in the subject in which it occurs; for example, the resuscitation of the dead and restoring sight to the blind. Nature can indeed produce life, but not in a corpse; and it can give sight, but not to the blind.
 - (c) *Qualitatively*, when a miracle exceeds the mode or manner in which nature produces a given effect. Thus, for example, when a person is suddenly cured of a long-standing disease, without medication and without a period of convalescence which is usual in such cases.
- 4) Finally, when a miracle is said to be beyond the expectation of the one who beholds it, the hope in question is the hope of nature and not of grace, as, for instance, our hope in the future resurrection of the body.

Examples of gospel miracles includes the Virgin conception and birth of Jesus Christ, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, the healing of a blind man with mere words, the feeding of the five thousand with five loaves and few fish, spontaneous healing of a terminally sick person solely by prayer, etc. Hence, miracle consists of an unnatural phenomenon which raises people's eyebrows, causing disbelief from critical minds with regard to its possibility.

Categories of Gospel Miracles

According to Dowler 2008, gospel miracles can be categorized into:

- Power over nature (walking on water, turning water to wine).
- Bodily healings (power over disease and sickness)
- People raised from the dead (power over death itself)
- God communicating with man (Burning bush, Ex 3:2; Balaam's donkey, Num 22:21-35)
- Defeating enemies of people of God (Jericho, Joshua 6:20; Assyrians, 2Kings 19:35)
- Punishments (70 men of Bethshemesh, Isam 6:19; Ananias and Sapphira, Acts 6:5-11)

Standard Approaches to Gospel Miracles

According to Jeffrey 2013, the approaches to gospel miracles include literalism/fundamentalism & reductionism:

One might be called the literalist or fundamentalist approach: everything in Scripture is to be taken at face value & must have happened exactly as it said. If you ask such a person about the meaning of a particular miracle story, they generally answer that the point was to prove the supernatural nature of Jesus. "Well, it goes to show that Jesus is God, doesn't it? After all, God

can do what he likes.” For such a person, doubting that a miracle story happened exactly as it said in the Gospels is tantamount to doubting the divinity of Christ. Compassion comes into it too, at least in the healing miracles. However, essentially the miracles are about evidence, a demonstration of divine power.

By contrast, the other approach is not concerned with defending the divinity of Christ or the literal truth of Scripture. It is what might be called a reductionist approach: the person wants to reduce the miraculous element to something that could be readily grasped in this-worldly terms. Most of the explanations are naturalistic – “demythologizing” in the most obvious sense. Therefore, for example, when Jesus walked on the lake, there were convenient stepping-stones just under the surface of the water – the disciples just *thought* Jesus walked on the water, & this mistake was handed on in the tradition. When the explanations are not naturalistic, they are often moralistic. When Jesus fed the 5000, what *really* happened was that Jesus & the disciples shared out their own loaves & fishes just with the people nearest them; but then others, seeing this good example of unselfishness, were inspired to share what they had too, & so there was enough to go round everyone. They claim the *real* miracle is when everyone discovers the joy of caring & sharing with others. That may be edifying but it’s not especially miraculous.

These approaches – literalism & reductionism – may look like diametrically opposite approaches, but they are not as different as they seem at first sight. Both treat the miracle stories as if they were straightforward descriptions of what happened or at least what appeared to happen. The only difference is that the reductionist wants to look for this-worldly explanations of the apparent happening, while the literalist is more than satisfied with the supernatural one. Both assume that the most, indeed the only interesting thing about the miracles is the question of what did or did not happen. While they focus so narrowly on this unanswerable & ultimately fruitless question, they miss the point. The real nature & purpose of the Gospel miracles, & the depths & dimensions of meaning which they are written to convey, passes both of them by completely.

The Abuse of Miracles in the Contemporary Nigerian Churches

In the contemporary Nigerian Society, the love of and quest for miracles in virtually everything is the order of the day. This hunger for miracles not only promotes the multiplicity of churches specializing in performing miracles but also a culture of laziness, superstition and mobility of worshippers who change places of worship with questionable regularity in search of miracles. It is common place in Nigeria of today to be overwhelmed in public places by the sight of billboards, banners, posters and fliers publishing crusades, programs and churches where miracles take place. The social, print and electronic media are not left out as potent medium in this advertisement for miracles. Many television channels are devoted to the promise and display of unauthenticated and apparently stage-managed miracles. Among the miracles advertised in these churches and programs include: Miracles of fruit of the womb, deliverance from demonic possession and obsession, family root healing, promise of life partners, employment, admission into institution of learning, raising the dead, healings, miraculous promotion in places of work, open doors to wealth, and miraculous appointment into political offices, etc. The scenario created by this abuse of miracles has created both excitement and skepticism, Jakub et al. (2015). While some people keep running from one church to another in search of miracles, many others are skeptical about these claims especially as it is known that people have to pay money in order to

receive these miracles. The incredulous see these so-called miracle centers as mere business centers set up to exploit the gullible members of the society.

There are series of unauthenticated instances of miracles which are stage-managed by Nigerian pastors. Most of these are well organized to deceive the unsuspecting and gullible worshippers. In 2016 the police in Enugu State arrested an alleged notorious syndicate which specialized in going round churches helping pastors to fake miracles. Uzodinma Emmanuel reported in Daily Post newspaper of August 21, 2016 of the confession of the syndicate while in police custody. According to one of them, they can be detailed to go to any state, connected by a linkman in the church or ministry who informs them of the nature of job to be done at the program. They usually state their names, nature of problem and other necessary information, which is given to the pastor of the church/ministry for his guidance during the prophetic hours. With such information, the pastor will prophecy and they will confirm it as true, then they will be prayed for and they will instantly testify their healing or the end of their problem.

Several questions have continuously been raised as to the credibility of the claimed miracles by many Nigerian so-called men of God who advertise miracles on television screens, pages of newspaper, radio jingles, roadside billboards, banners and posters.

Philosophical Positions on the Possibility and Credibility of Gospel Miracles

Owing to the non-natural nature of miracles as well as the many spurious claims of it, some philosophers have risen in defense of miracles as well as in objection to its possibility and existence. According to Murray (2000), both St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas equivocally affirmed the possibility and existence of miracles. This affirmation is hinged on the existence of God who is absolutely powerful and who can intervene in nature to accomplish a purpose commensurate with his goodness and justice. For St. Augustine a miracle “is something difficult, which seldom occurs, surpassing the faculty of nature, and going far beyond our hopes as to compel our astonishment.” (De Utilitate Credendi xvi). Confirming Gods power to intervene in the order of nature, Augustine says; “where God does anything against that order of nature which we know and are accustomed to observe, we call it miracle” (Contra Faust xxvi, 3). Joining Augustine to confirm God as the author of miracles as well as the reality of miracles St. Thomas Aquinas says “... miracle is so called as being full of wonders, as having a cause absolutely hidden from all; and this cause is God. Wherefore those things which God does outside those causes which we know, are called miracles.

Confirming both the reality and possibility of miracles as Gods intervention in the world Aquinas further says; “it is not against the principle of craftsmanship if a craftsman brings about a change in what he makes, even after giving it its first form”. For Augustine and Aquinas therefore, miracle can happen and miracles do happen.

Philosophers like Bonaventure, Descartes, Taylor, Williams Paley and Copleston hold that the possibility of miracle becomes evident when we accept the existence of God who is all powerful in his nature. A rejection of any proof of Gods existence as well the possibility of his existence will imply a denial of the existence of miracle as well as the possibility of having one.

Concept of Nature

According to Beebe (2000), Nature is not a simple concept – for at least three reasons. First of all, nature, meaning the physical universe, is in itself an evolving nature. It is neither fixed nor always the same. There is biological evolution (genetic diversity and variation) and derivatively (though the concept is problematical) cosmic evolution, e.g. stellar evolution. Therefore, concepts of nature follow nature in its evolution or ought to follow it.

Second, nature has, at least in a historical perspective, different meanings in different cultures. For example, the Greek tradition distinguishes between creative nature (*naturanaturans*) and created nature (*naturanaturata*), the Indian tradition identifies nature and earth and speaks of the Goddess Earth. Today, under the influence of the modern sciences, historically divergent concepts of nature have lost their scientific significance. Nature is now what is governed by universal laws, although, as we know now, a universal determinism is limited in many ways by the occurrence of probabilities, i.e. by probabilistic laws.

Third, though initially nature was just that part of the world that man had not made, it has now, to a great extent, become part of an artificial world built by science and technology. This makes it difficult to distinguish clearly between what is natural and what is not.

In the following, some examples are given of how different scientists pictures nature and the world, from Plato's and Aristotle's world to Einstein's and Heisenberg's world. Mittelstrass (2007):

With Plato's world, *Timaios*, a powerful craftsman creates the world according to a perfect model, namely the 'cosmos' of the Platonic ideas. Like a perfect living being, the cosmos turns out to be an animated rational being, as a visible god in the form of a perfect sphere. Its soul, the 'world soul', has an astronomical nature: it is formed by the mathematical order of the trajectories of the planets. Later on, in Christian thought, i.e. in Christian Platonism, the world of Platonic ideas to which the craftsman refers as a perfect model, becomes the realm of thoughts of God creating the world.

Aristotle's world is a world of natural things that consist of matter and form and have within themselves a source of motion. It is characterized by the notion that every movement requires a mover. Thus, not only the change of motion, but also the uniform motion of a body requires a causal force. This force must either reside in the moving body itself (in the form of a motivating 'soul' or as a natural movement), or exist in direct contact with it; action at a distance is not permitted. The scientific propositions describing this world are confirmed by the experience acquired in everyday life, or are derived through generalizations made on the basis of experience. Example, gravitation, inertia, theory of elements with its familiar concepts derived from the experience of daily life.

The Newton world, moreover, is the assumption that a fundamental dualism exists between passive matter and active immaterial principles. According to this notion, matter can be the origin only of mechanical effects, that is, effects mediated by pressure and impulse. Matter itself does not exert force, but only withstands the effects of forces (through its own inertia). Matter, 'inanimate and brute', is not able to guarantee even halfway stable processes of development through its essential characteristics. Mechanical interactions lead to a steady loss of movement, which cannot be fully compensated for by the active principles that bring forth new movement.

The stability of the world (compensation for the energy loss) therefore, is a matter only for God or an occasional divine intervention in this world.

In Einstein's world, space is constituted only by matter, with energy also being matter. In order to do justice to the special effects of rotation discovered by Newton, Einstein refers to 'Mach's principle', which considers the centrifugal forces not as the result of true rotation (rotation against absolute space) but as the effect of rotation relative to distant masses (that is, the center of gravity in the universe). Einstein's general theory of relativity attempts to give Mach's programmatic idea a physical dimension in order to establish the validity of a theory of relational space in terms of epistemology as well as physics.

Laws of Nature

According to Whitehead (1999), anything that brings suffering, anguish, pain illness, happens because we are going against the laws of nature, and that is how we are going to recognize them. The results we obtain when we go outside the law enables us to recognize their existence. Natural laws are designed so that we ourselves make a change, not so that we try to change the law or others.

Table 1: Laws of Nature

| LAW | POSTULATES | EFFECTS OF VIOLATING THE LAW |
|--------|---|---|
| NATURE | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. All things that are complementary attracts each other. 2. Every living being requires the specific food for its species. 3. Every manifestation of nature requires favorable conditions. 4. Every living being has an instinctive sense of the law. 5. All cycles of nature have specific functions. 6. Every violation of the law produces serious consequences. 7. Every living being has its functions. | <p>Physical ailments: under-nourishment, illness, vices, degeneration, misery, hunger, physical and mental defects, physical malformations, ecological imbalance, erosion, plagues, Shortening of longevity, etc.</p> |

SOURCE: *The Laws of Universe and Life (1999)*

Laws of nature are defined as general statements about the properties of natural entities, relating various variables and constants. Perhaps the earliest of all the laws of nature that man has discovered is the phenomenon of generating fire by hitting two stones against each other. More sophisticated laws of nature were discovered once man had recognized numbers and was able to calculate things. At this point, man started identifying laws of nature which were periodic; for example, the recurrence of solar and lunar eclipses, which is an indication of an order in the universe. This is one of the earliest laws of nature to attract the attention of humans. (Altaie, 2016). A law of nature is a regular phenomenon that occurs once certain conditions are present. We need not know the details of the process that leads to the natural phenomenon, but the phenomenon needs to be repeated with some regularity in order for it to be designated as a law. For example, a stone could fall once dropped from my hand, which is holding it; this is the law of gravity acting naturally. We know that cotton burns once thrown into fire and that vapor condense once set on a cold surface. We need not know the mechanism by which such a law acts to observe a law of nature at work. For example, we need not know the mechanism by which cotton begins burning, as this will be part of our identification of the factors contributing to this phenomenon and the relation between such factors, which is usually described by the laws of physics and chemistry. History of thought tells us that humans have given different explanations for the same natural phenomena over the ages, depending on their intellectual level and the dominating culture of their age.

A law of nature is thought to have counterfactual implications, to presuppose certain idealized conditions, and to have quantitative aspects and explanatory power. Many historians of science hold to the view that laws of nature became an essential concept in scientific practice and theory from the seventeenth and even eighteenth century onward (Needham 1969; Henry 2004). They contend that before that time, the use of "law" in connection with natural regularities had been in use –if at all –merely as a loose metaphor or a restricted statement of principles of mathematics, never as explanatory proposition in natural philosophy (Henry 2004).

Reconciliation of Gospel Miracles and the Laws of Nature

Some researchers in their study attempted to analyze the relationship existing between gospel miracles and the laws of nature. David Hume, in his conception of miracle, disregards religious significance entirely and emphasizes the aspect of law violation! Transgression - that aspect in which Hume famously sees the seeds for the destruction of miracle testimony, as pointed out in the introduction of this dissertation. According to David Hume, a miracle may be accurately defined as a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent. Also, says Hume, "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.

Hume's definition, however, although popular, poses a few problems for those interested in creating a dialogue between religion and nature. Although Hume's definition seems to, at first, define a *real* event, by the end of the definition, Hume ends up concluding that divine action is actually impossible. He himself confessed that his definition was aimed at ending the debate on divine action. Some to this day, think he did. Hume's attack on religion lies in the view that the laws of nature are prescriptive, deterministic and control a closed universe. If miracles are ever possible, they should be taken as violations of the laws of nature; laws which, by the way, cannot be broken.

On the contrary, Francis Beckwith defines miracle as "a divine intervention (by a god) which occurs contrary to the regular course of nature within a significant historical religious context. In addition, Beckwith understands the aforementioned definition of miracle to entail logically the following proposition (among others): "A miracle is rationally inexplicable by scientific law. With regard to the above proposition, it is interesting to note that Beckwith holds that miracles should not be defined as permanently inexplicable in terms of scientific laws (where scientific laws are taken as true statements of natural laws). Rather, according to Beckwith, a miracle should be defined merely as "inexplicable in terms of what we know about currently well-established scientific laws. This seems mistaken, however. Beckwith is motivated to understand miracles this way because a miracle's inexplicability in terms of what we know about currently well-established scientific laws may be very helpful in identifying a miracle when one occurs. But this concern, though important, is an epistemological concern. Defining a miracle i.e., setting out the conditions of what a miracle is (which is what Beckwith is purportedly doing), is an ontological concern. Because the project is to define the concept of miracle, and because, as Beckwith agrees, a miracle is caused directly by a "god", it should be defined as permanently inexplicable in terms of scientific laws. After all, scientific laws have to do with nature, and God's or a God-like being's causal interventions in nature are from outside of nature. Regarding

the epistemological issue of recognizing a miracle when one occurs, it seems that the criterion of inexplicability in terms of what people know about currently well-established scientific laws can provide the basis for a reasonable case for thinking that events such as Jesus' virgin birth or Jesus' resurrection are in fact permanently inexplicable in terms of scientific laws. In the words of St. Thomas Aquinas, "the miracles of the gospel is set to reveal God's power over everything, including nature. Therefore, whether He chooses to go against the laws of nature or not, man is in no position to question or doubt His divine works".

Conclusion

As an evidence for the truth of Christianity, the miracles form a part of Christ's self-revelation. Only when He is accepted by an act of personal faith can they be properly appreciated. However, when they are accepted on that basis, they reveal His eternal glory as the Creator-God; they confirm His doctrines as the words of a heavenly messenger; and they arouse a faith that is rooted in His incomparable person. Thus, Gospel miracle in a strict, exclusive sense operates outside any known or existing natural or scientific law, while the miracles are not opposed to the law of nature, nevertheless, they are interfering with it, being above and beyond its limitations and controls. It is a divine operation that transcends what is normally perceived as natural law; it cannot be explained upon any natural basis. They are the direct results of the power of Christ who performed them as an expression of His Lordship and Savior hood.

Recommendations

Based on the study, the following recommendations were drawn:

1. The gospel miracles cannot be explained by any known law; it signifies any marvelous event. Rather than causing uproar as to whether it contradicts the laws of nature or not, the gospel miracles should strengthen our faith in Christ's existence and power.
2. The gospel miracles form a part of Christ's self-revelation and it is an evidence of truth of Christianity. Therefore, to believe in Jesus Christ, one must believe in the gospel miracles.
3. Anything that brings suffering, anguish, pain illness, happens because we are going against the laws of nature. Therefore, nature must not be altered as this is bound to cause disasters.

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