

Can We Rationally Believe in Miracles?

Hume's Argument, Its Critics, and What the Evidence Is Actually Like

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I. The Question Behind the Wonders

Whether miracles can be rationally believed is not, at bottom, a question about any particular wonder. It is a question about method: whether testimony to an extraordinary event can ever, in principle, be worth examining. The skeptical tradition since David Hume answers no—and the answer matters enormously, because if it holds, the central Christian claim is disposed of without a hearing. The Resurrection need not be investigated if no evidence could ever suffice for it.

The Christian reply is not that Hume undervalued the evidence, but that his rule, taken strictly, is not a rule of evidence at all but a way of never having to look at any, and that the objection has been pressed most sharply not by apologists but by philosophers of science who have no interest in defending miracles. What follows is about the argument, not about any particular wonder—the evidence for the Resurrection itself is weighed on this site’s companion pages.

II. What the Skeptic Claims

The skeptic’s case deserves to be stated at full strength, in Hume’s own words. “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.” From this he derives his famous maxim: “That no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish.” And nothing, the skeptic adds, ever is: that witnesses lie, misremember, or believe what they hope is among the most ordinary facts about human beings, while a dead man rising is not ordinary at all. So the balance can never come out the other way.

Around the central rule stand supporting observations. Miracle reports come chiefly from places and periods where checking was impossible; they multiply in conditions of religious excitement; they attach to the founding of movements that benefit from them. Every religion has its wonders, offered as proof of contradictory doctrines, so they cancel one another. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence—Sagan’s wording for a principle as old as Laplace. And wherever a claim can be examined under controlled conditions, it is said, it dissolves: studies of intercessory prayer show no effect, and Lourdes, after a century and a half and millions of pilgrims, has certified only about seventy cures. The miraculous, on this account, is simply the not-yet-explained, retreating as explanation advances.

III. What Is Granted

Most reported miracles are not miracles. Credulity is real, pious fraud is real, and the appetite for a marvel is one of the most reliable things about human nature. Whole categories of claim (weeping statues, faces in plaster, healings announced from a stage) deserve the flat skepticism they get, and a Christian who defends them indiscriminately has made the skeptic’s argument for him.

The Church is in fact stricter than her critics assume. Lourdes has recorded roughly seven thousand claimed cures and certified about seventy, which is a rejection rate of ninety-

nine percent, imposed by a medical bureau that has included non-Catholic and unbelieving physicians. That figure is quoted against the Church as evidence that nothing happens—and taken alone, the skeptic is right that it proves nothing: a filter that passes one claim in a hundred would pass some background remissions even if nothing miraculous ever occurred. The ratio shows only the rigor of the Bureau. The argument rests, and has to rest, on the character of the cases that pass: cures instantaneous, complete, and durable, in organic disease—which is not the shape spontaneous remission takes. Remission is gradual, partial, and confined to diseases known to remit. The question the certified cases pose is not how many? but what could do that?

“Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence” owes its force to an ambiguity. If it means the evidence must be extraordinarily good—early, independent, public, costly to the people who gave it—the principle is granted; that is ordinary historiography, and the Christian case asks to be judged by exactly that standard. If it means the evidence must be of some higher kind than testimony and circumstance can ever supply, then it is not a standard but a refusal: no conceivable evidence qualifies, and the conclusion was fixed before the inquiry began—the very habit of mind the skeptic deplores in believers. And how extraordinary a claim is depends on what is already known: a resurrection is maximally improbable only if there is no God, so the slogan, as deployed, quietly assumes the atheism it is brought in to defend.

The prayer experiments test a god no theology asserts: one who performs on protocol, for scripted petitions from strangers, under randomized conditions designed to exclude everything personal—which is to say, everything Christian prayer is. Scripture rules the experiment out in advance; the command not to put God to the test is one Christ Himself quotes (Matt. 4:7), and a God who is free cannot be assayed like a reagent precisely because His answers are not mechanism. The null result refutes the vending-machine god. No Christian ever believed in him.

IV. Hume, Read in Order

Hume’s section “Of Miracles” has two parts, and they make different claims. Part 1 argues in principle: experience is our only guide concerning matters of fact; the laws of nature rest on “firm and unalterable” experience; testimony rests on the weaker regularity that people usually tell the truth; therefore when testimony reports a violation of natural law, the stronger proof crushes the weaker, and the wise man rejects the report without further inquiry. Part 2 then argues in fact: no actual miracle report has ever come from enough witnesses, of enough education and integrity, in a public enough setting; the passion for the marvelous corrupts testimony; such reports “abound among ignorant and barbarous nations”; and rival religions’ wonders destroy each other’s credit.

Notice first that the two parts sit uneasily together. If Part 1 succeeds, Part 2 is unnecessary: there is no need to grade the quality of witnesses to events that no testimony could ever establish. The effort Hume spends impugning actual witnesses is a quiet admission that the in-principle argument does not close the question by itself. Notice, second, that Hume himself bends the rule when he sees where it leads. He grants that if all historians and all peoples agreed that a darkness had covered the earth for eight days, we ought to accept the fact as certain and search for its causes. So universal testimony to a prodigious public event *can* outweigh uniform experience after all—the door Part 1 was built to close. And his own illustration cuts the other way: the Indian prince who refused to believe in frost, having never seen water harden, reasoned justly from his experience, says Hume, and was wrong. Experience can be parochial. The question is always whether the reported exception lies outside the reporter’s experience or outside the possible—and that is exactly the question the maxim was supposed to spare us.

Read charitably, the maxim itself is a truism no one disputes: believe the lesser improbability. The Christian does not object to weighing; he objects to the thumb on the scale—the assumption, smuggled in with the word “violation” and the phrase “firm and unalterable,” that the improbability of a miracle is effectively infinite, so that the weighing is over before it begins. Each of the next three sections takes up one of the places where that assumption does its work.

V. A Miracle Is Not a Broken Law

The definition is doing hidden work. If a miracle is by definition a violation of a law of nature, then laws of nature are by definition exceptionless, and the question is closed by the dictionary before the evidence arrives.

But that is not what a law of nature states. A law says what happens in a system left to itself; it does not say the system is never interfered with, and no amount of observation could establish that. C. S. Lewis put it as a piece of arithmetic: if I leave money in a drawer and come back to find it gone, the laws of arithmetic have not failed. They told me what would be there if nothing intervened, and something did. The laws are what make the interference detectable in the first place. As Lewis writes, the laws “produce no events: they state the pattern to which every event—if only it can be induced to happen—must conform.” And so “the divine art of miracle is not an art of suspending the pattern to which events conform but of feeding new events into that pattern.” The miraculous wine at Cana still intoxicates; the miraculous conception leads to an ordinary pregnancy; nature receives the new event and carries on exactly as before. That is why the Christian expects the world to be regular, and would have nothing to report if it were not.

This is not a modern repair job on the definition. Seven centuries ago Aquinas defined miracles as works done by divine power “beyond the order commonly observed in nature” (*praeter ordinem communiter observatum in rebus*)—beyond the observed order, not against nature’s integrity, since nature’s whole order has God as its author. The “violation” definition belongs to the seventeenth century, to Spinoza and the world-machine of the early Enlightenment, in which the laws of nature were conceived as necessary truths no agent could touch. On that metaphysics the case against miracles is over before it starts—but it is a metaphysics, not a finding of science, and a Christian has never held it. Science describes how nature runs; it does not and cannot certify that nature is a closed system, because that is a philosophical claim about what exists, not an experimental result.

VI. The Circle in “Uniform Experience”

The heart of Hume’s case is that uniform experience stands against every miracle. Ask how the uniformity was established. Not by examining all human testimony and finding it false, because he explicitly declines to do that; the argument is offered as a shortcut that makes the examination unnecessary. So the experience counts as uniform only if the reports of exceptions are set aside in advance, and they are set aside because experience is uniform.

This is not a Christian complaint about an unfriendly conclusion. John Earman, a philosopher of science and no believer, devoted a book to the argument and titled it *Hume’s Abject Failure*, holding that the reasoning is confused, that Hume lacked the probability theory the case would need, and that his eighteenth-century admirers have been quoted ever since without being checked. When the most thorough modern critic of the argument is an unbeliever, its authority is doing more work than its logic.

Earman’s reconstruction can be stated without symbols. In the probability theory Hume did not have, the question is never simply how improbable the event is; it is how improbable the event is *compared with* the improbability of the testimony existing if the event did not happen. Even a very small prior probability can be overcome if the evidence would be sufficiently hard to explain away—that is how science itself accepts revolutionary results, which is why Earman observes that Hume’s argument, taken strictly, would also forbid belief in well-attested marvels of nature on eyewitness evidence. Multiple independent witnesses compound: if their testimonies are genuinely independent, the probability that all are wrong in the same way shrinks multiplicatively, and can shrink below any fixed threshold. Hume’s “proof against miracle” works only if the prior probability is set at zero or the witnesses are assumed never to be independent—the first begs the question against theism, and the second is an empirical claim requiring exactly the case-by-case examination the maxim was designed to avoid.

VII. The Rule Proves Too Much

Test the maxim on a case where we know the answer. For most of the eighteenth century, educated opinion held that stones do not fall from the sky. Peasants reported them; the reports were dismissed as superstition, and the French Academy of Sciences declared against them, one committee concluding that the stones had been struck by lightning rather than fallen. The testimony came from uneducated people in rural places, it described something contrary to uniform experience, and it was rejected on exactly Hume's grounds.

The peasants were right. After the fall at L'Aigle in 1803, investigated by Jean-Baptiste Biot, meteorites entered science. Nothing about the reports had improved; what changed was that somebody examined them instead of ruling them out. A principle that would have kept us wrong about meteorites is not a principle for distinguishing truth from falsehood. It is a principle for protecting whatever we already think.

A cousin of Hume's argument deserves an answer here: Antony Flew's claim that critical history itself depends on assuming the regularity of nature, so that a historian, *as* historian, can never certify a miracle. The premise is half true. The historian assumes regularity as a working method—that documents age normally, that witnesses forget at familiar rates, that most events have mundane causes. But a method's working assumption is not a metaphysical discovery. The historian's regularity tells him what usually happens; it cannot tell him what always must, and when the evidence in a particular case resists every mundane explanation, reporting that fact is not a failure of method but its honest result. To convert a useful presumption into an unbreakable law is to repeat Hume's circle in the historian's study: the past is uniform because the exceptional reports have been excluded, and they are excluded because the past is uniform.

VIII. Rival Miracles Do Not Cancel

The cancellation argument assumes that all miracle claims are of the same kind and equally supported, and they are not. Many are not public events at all; many are attested centuries after the fact by a single source; a great many are the sort of thing this essay has already conceded. Claims have to be weighed individually, and weighing them individually is precisely what the Humean rule forbids.

The logic also fails on its own terms. False sightings of a person do not show the person never existed, and rival claims to have found a cure do not show that nobody is ever cured. That two witnesses contradict each other is a reason to examine both, not to dismiss the pair unheard. And the theological premise of the cancellation argument—that a genuine wonder in one tradition disproves wonders everywhere else—is not one the Christian

holds: the Catholic Church has never taught that God acts only inside her visible boundaries, only that a purported sign must be judged by what it attests. One historical fact deserves more fame than it has. The earliest sustained pagan attack on Christianity — Celsus, writing around A.D. 178 — did not deny that Jesus worked wonders. He conceded the works and disputed their source, alleging (in Origen's report) "that it was by means of sorcery that He was able to accomplish the wonders which He performed." The charge is the Gospels' own: "he casts out demons by the prince of demons." Skepticism of the modern kind, which denies the events outright, was not the position of the ancient enemies who were closest to the evidence; they attacked the interpretation because the facts were not deniable. A critic eighteen centuries nearer the events than Hume found the works themselves beyond dispute.

IX. The Modern Evidence

Hume's Part 2 rested on a factual claim: that miracle reports come from the ignorant and the distant, never from educated witnesses open to cross-examination. Whatever its force in 1748, the claim is now simply false, and the demonstration is the largest modern study of the subject: Craig Keener's two-volume *Miracles*, which surveys eyewitness healing claims across the contemporary world and finds them numbering in the hundreds of millions, including reports from physicians, professors and former skeptics, some with before-and-after medical documentation. Keener's own claim is deliberately modest—not that every report is genuine, but that the premise "eyewitness miracle testimony is rare and remote" is dead, and with it Part 2's empirical foundation. What can be made of any single report still requires examination; what can no longer be made is the wave of the hand.

The Lourdes record shows what examination looks like when it is institutionalized. The Medical Bureau applies criteria descended from those drawn up by Cardinal Lambertini, the future Benedict XIV, in the eighteenth century: the disease must be certain in diagnosis, grave, and organic; the prognosis established; the cure sudden, complete and lasting; and not attributable to any treatment received. Files that survive the Bureau go to an international medical committee of specialists, believers and unbelievers among them, and only files that survive both are passed to the Church, which then applies its own judgment. Seventy-two cures have been recognized in a century and a half. Among them: Vittorio Micheli, whose hip, consumed by a biopsy-confirmed sarcoma, reconstructed itself after he bathed at Lourdes in 1963, the recognition following thirteen years of documentation; Sister Bernadette Moriau, whose forty-year cauda equina syndrome, four failed operations behind it, resolved in days in 2008—the seventieth recognition; and Antonia Raco, cured in 2009 of a progressive motor-neuron disease, the most recent. These are not stories from a distant province; they are contemporary medical

files, published, signed, and standing open to refutation. A skeptic is free to hold that some natural explanation will eventually be found for each. What he is not free to say is that no claim survives investigation, when the investigation in question was designed by physicians and rejects ninety-nine of every hundred claims put to it.

The prayer studies prove less than they are made to carry. The best known, the 2006 Benson study, arranged for strangers to pray for cardiac patients by first name and found no effect on complication rates. What such a design tests is whether intercession functions as a dosable mechanism—whether prayer works like a drug, reliably, on schedule, for whoever administers it. Christianity has never claimed that it does; the Lord’s own signs, the Gospels note, were not performed on demand for Herod or the crowd, and the Catechism observes that they were “not intended to satisfy people’s curiosity or desire for magic.” A negative result against a claim no one makes leaves the actual claim untouched: that God acts freely, personally, and for His own reasons—which is precisely what distinguishes an agent from a mechanism.

X. What Would Actually Count

The right question is not whether miracles happen in general but whether any particular one did, and that is answerable in the ordinary way: is the event public, is it datable, is it attested early and by people with something to lose, is there a natural explanation that fits the whole of the evidence rather than part of it? These are historical questions with historical answers.

Which is why the Christian case does not rest on wonders in general. It rests on one event, in a known place, under a named Roman governor, proclaimed within a few years in the city where it was said to have happened, to people in a position to contradict it. Whether that evidence holds is the subject of the companion pages on the Resurrection and on the case for Christianity in particular. The point here is narrower: nothing in Hume entitles anyone to refuse to look.

XI. What Miracles Are For

One skeptical question remains, and it is a fair one: if God works miracles, why are they not more frequent, more public, more repeatable—why does He not simply settle the matter? The answer lies in what miracles are for. The New Testament’s own word for them is not “wonders” but “signs”: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” (John 20:30–31). A sign points; it exists to be read, not merely to astonish. Nicodemus read the signs exactly so: “no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him” (John 3:2), and Jesus Himself appealed to them

as credentials: “even though you do not believe me, believe the works” (John 10:38). Peter’s first sermon presents Him as “a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know” (Acts 2:22).

The Catechism draws the two sides of this together: the signs “attest that the Father has sent him” and “invite belief in him,” yet “they are not intended to satisfy people’s curiosity or desire for magic,” and some who saw them still did not believe (CCC 547–548). That is why the demand for a miracle on tap—repeatable under laboratory conditions—misconceives the thing demanded. A sign given to a person, at a moment, for the sake of faith, is an act of address, not a natural phenomenon awaiting instrumentation. God, on the Christian account, is not a force to be detected but a Person to be answered; and a Person who wished to invite trust rather than compel assent would act, one might think, in just the pattern the record shows: rarely, purposefully, and in ways that leave the unwilling free.

XII. The Reply in Brief

The definition begs the question, since a law of nature tells us what happens when nothing interferes and cannot tell us that nothing ever does. The appeal to uniform experience is circular, because the uniformity is obtained by discarding the very reports at issue. The rule proves too much, since applied consistently it would have kept the Academy of Sciences wrong about meteorites for another generation. And the cancellation of rival miracles works only if claims are never weighed individually, which is what the rule was designed to avoid.

None of that shows a miracle has occurred. It shows only that the question is open, and that it is a question about evidence rather than about the dictionary. If there is a God, the order of nature is His and He is not trespassing in it. Whether He has ever done anything unusual there is not settled by insisting in advance that He cannot have.

Endnotes

1. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), §X, “Of Miracles.” The definition and the “firm and unalterable experience” passage are at 10.12; the maxim at 10.13; the Indian prince at 10.10; the eight days of darkness at 10.36; the “ignorant and barbarous nations” argument in Part 2. Text at davidhume.org.
2. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition.

3. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (1947; Touchstone ed., 1996), ch. 8, pp. 79–81: the pennies-in-the-drawer illustration; “they produce no events: they state the pattern to which every event—if only it can be induced to happen—must conform”; “the divine art of miracle is not an art of suspending the pattern to which events conform but of feeding new events into that pattern.”
4. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, 100–101: miracles are works of divine power “beyond the order commonly observed in nature” (*praeter ordinem communiter observatum in rebus*). On Spinoza’s necessitarian account of natural law as the source of the “violation” definition, see Norman Geisler, “Miracles and Modern Scientific Thought,” which traces the anti-miracle arguments from Spinoza forward.
5. John Earman, *Hume’s Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles* (Oxford University Press, 2000). Earman’s Bayesian analysis, including the multiplication of independent witnesses and the observation that Hume’s argument would exclude well-attested natural marvels, is summarized here rather than quoted.
6. On the meteorite episode: the French Academy’s rejection of reported stone-falls, including the lightning-strike explanation, and the reversal after Jean-Baptiste Biot’s investigation of the fall at L’Aigle (1803), are standard history of science; see the accounts summarized in modern treatments of the Hume debate.
7. Antony Flew’s argument that critical history presupposes the regularity of nature appears in his “Miracles and History” discussions; David Basinger’s survey of the exchange is the source used here, summarized rather than quoted.
8. Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 2 vols. (Baker Academic, 2011): the scale of contemporary eyewitness claims and the refutation of the rarity premise are his central theses, summarized here from the published work.
9. On Lourdes: the Medical Bureau’s criteria descend from Prospero Lambertini (Benedict XIV), *De servorum Dei beatificatione et beatorum canonizatione*; the current process (Bureau, then the International Medical Committee of Lourdes, then the Church) and the count of seventy-two recognized cures, with Antonia Racó the most recent, are from the Sanctuary of Lourdes. On Vittorio Micheli (cure 1963, recognized 1976) and Sister Bernadette Moriau (cure 2008, recognized 2018, the seventieth), see the Sanctuary’s published dossiers.
10. H. Benson et al., “Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer (STEP) in Cardiac Bypass Patients,” *American Heart Journal* 151 (2006): 934–42.
11. Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (Random House, 1980), ch. 12, for the familiar wording of the extraordinary-claims maxim; the substance is Laplace’s.

12. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 547–548, on the miracles of Christ as signs that attest and invite rather than compel.
13. The evidence for the Resurrection in particular is weighed on this site's pages *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?* (yarn) and the Passion (weft), and the general case on *Why Christianity in Particular?*
14. Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.6 (Ante-Nicene Fathers translation), quoted exactly from the copy in the site's reference library; cf. 1.38 on the Egypt-and-magic form of the charge. Mark 3:22 and parallels for the Gospels' own record of the accusation.

For Further Reading

An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, by David Hume—§X, “Of Miracles,” the argument itself. Free online at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/9662/9662-h/9662-h.htm>.

Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles, by John Earman—a philosopher of science, and no believer, on why it fails.

Miracles: A Preliminary Study, by C. S. Lewis—on what a law of nature does and does not assert.

Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts, by Craig S. Keener—a two-volume survey of reports ancient and modern.

The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes, the Bureau des Constatations Médicales and its criteria for a certified cure.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§156, 548–550 on signs, and the limits of what they compel. Free online at <https://usccb.cld.bz/Catechism-of-the-Catholic-Church2>.

Contra Celsum, by Origen (c. 248)—the earliest book-length answer to a miracle skeptic. Free online at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0416.htm>.

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.

John 20:30–31

* * *

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of *the Christian defense of the rationality of belief in miracles*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.