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Q&A: Miracles

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Miracles:

Question: I've been debating with a friend the issue of whether or not we have any historical verification of particular biblical stories of miracles. Do we have any data for the Gospel miracles excluding the resurrection?

Answer: If any of Jesus' miracles are confirmed, that is significant for the discussion. Two recent researchers, both leading scholars in the historical Jesus discussion, have written almost 500 pages each on Jesus' miracles. If my memory serves me correctly, John Meier found that in almost half of the miracle accounts recorded in the New Testament, we have enough data to conclude that something like that particular historical scene occurred. (For details, see Vol. 2 of Meier's set A Marginal Jew.) The second, Graham Twelftree, concluded that about three-quarters of the Gospel miracle accounts were confirmable, again, at least that historical details in the accounts could be verified. (For details, see Twelftree's volume, Jesus the Miracle Worker.) They did not say that all these accounts were verifiable miracles, but that these particular miracle scenes have verifiable historical checks and balances, according to the normal standards applied in recent historical Jesus research. Admittedly, that's still rather outstanding, as well as surprising. Traditionally, many have said that if the resurrection occurred, then lesser miracles are more easily confirmed. But in light of this research, now we have specific historical considerations in favor of the miracle account themselves.

Question: I have some questions concerning answering a priori objections to miracles based on the "laws of nature." (a) In the way that the "laws of nature" are understood by Hume, Flew, etc., we say that they rely on the Deductive-Nomological (D-N) approach to explain the perceived patterns of nature. Correct? (b) On the other hand, Swinburne (in *The Existence of God*) articulates a different approach, Substances-Powers-Liabilities (S-P-L), to explain the perceived patterns of nature in order to better incorporate personal agency and intention (specifically God's miraculous/divine intervention) into the actions we observe. (c) Would you agree with Swinburne's approach over Hume's?

Answer: The Deductive-Nomological approach to the laws of nature (and the ensuing discussion of "covering laws") was made famous by Carl Hempel and Karl Popper almost a half century ago. It was rejected by many philosophers. I don't think I've read Tony Flew on this, but I wouldn't be surprised if he and Hume agreed with the D-N approach. I've heard Tony say that he doesn't agree with Swinburne and others speaking of nature's laws as statistical descriptions of what usually occurs. What I've read by Swinburne on this subject comes chiefly from two of his books on miracles from 1970 (*The Concept of Miracle*) & 1989 (*Miracles*, edited). From some very recent things that I've heard, I'm not sure, but Swinburne may have changed a bit. But I agree fairly closely with his earlier treatments over against Hume and Flew.