Book Review: Water Into Wine: An Investigation Of The Concept of Miracle

David Basinger

DAVID BASINGER, Roberts Wesleyan College.

At least since the time of Hume, most philosophers have defined a miracle as a violation of a natural law brought about by a divine agent. Larmer agrees that miracles should be understood as events brought about by transcendent agents. However, he argues in Chapters 1, 2 and 5 that belief in miracles is in no sense incompatible with our scientific understanding of natural phenomena.

Natural laws, we are told, are conditional statements. They tell us that under certain natural conditions, certain events will occur. They tell us, for example, that under certain natural conditions, water does not turn into wine. But let us assume that some transcendent being turns water into wine by creating or annihilating "units of mass/energy" (20). In this case, something has occurred which is beyond the power of nature to produce. But no law has been violated since the relevant natural causal conditions are no longer exhaustive. We now have additional transcendent causal factors not presupposed in the relevant laws in question.

However, if a transcendent being creates or annihilates mass/energy, hasn't it at least violated the First Law of Thermodynamics? No, Larmer argues. We certainly do have good reasons to believe that "in an isolated system the total amount of energy remains constant" (25). But the claim that the universe is an isolated system—the claim that the universe is not open to reordering by a transcendent agent—is simply an arbitrary metaphysical assumption that the theist need not grant.

Chapters 3 and 4 are concerned with philosophical objections to belief in miracles. Larmer first considers the arguments of those who claim the miraculous is a pseudo-concept. He considers, for example, Hume's famous contention that the evidence in favor of a miracle can never, in principle, outweigh the evidence for the natural laws it purportedly violates. And he considers Alastair McKinnon's influential claim that the concept of miracle is self-contradictory because it is impossible for any specific event to be labeled a violation of a natural law when such laws are ultimately only summarized descriptions of what actually occurs. Larmer concludes that criticisms of this type are misguided since they normally presuppose unjustifiably that miracles are to be understood as violations of natural laws.

Larmer then turns his attention to those who grant that the miraculous is a coherent concept but maintain that the claim that an event is beyond the power of nature to produce could never justifiably be made. He grants that
such a claim would always be corrigible but argues that there are conditions under which it could justifiably be affirmed.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 are concerned with positive grounds for belief in miracles. Those who believe in miracles, he tells us, must establish three things: that the notion of an immaterial causal agent is coherent, that there is a positive body of evidence which supports the claim that such an agent has actually overridden nature, and that theism (the world-view within which belief in miracles is housed) can explain all that physicalism (a wholly naturalistic world-view) can explain and more. He concentrates on the latter two issues, concluding that “testimonial evidence could conceivably justify belief in miracles” (103) and that such evidence can, in principle, “help to establish the truth of theism in general and Christianity in particular” (113).

This book has much to recommend it. It is written in a style that will make it accessible even to thoughtful undergraduates. And much of what Larmer argues is convincing. He is correct, I believe, in arguing that it is not best to conceive of miracles as violations of natural laws. His response to the standard attacks on the miraculous are thoughtful and sometimes innovative. And his insistence that belief (or disbelief) in miracles be discussed in the context of the relevant world-view out of which it arises is an important point often overlooked.

I do, though, have some concerns. Larmer’s characterization of the miraculous as an unusual physical event which would never have occurred except through the activity of a transcendent agent immediately raises two related, but distinct epistemological questions. Under what conditions can it be maintained justifiably that an unusual event has occurred? And under what conditions can it be maintained justifiably that a given unusual event, assuming it has occurred as reported, was brought about by a transcendent agent?

But Larmer at points does not appear to recognize the relevance of this distinction. For example, he tells us that there are “three basic types of evidence relevant to establishing the occurrence of a miracle” (95): personal observation, relevant physical traces, and the testimony of others. However, as Richard Swinburne and others have noted, such evidence is primarily related to the question of whether the unusual event in question has actually occurred. And it may be sufficient, in principle, for this purpose. Such evidence, for example, may well allow us to determine whether water has actually turned into wine or a withered arm has actually returned instantaneously to its normal size. But two individuals can agree, on the basis of such evidence, that a given unusual event has occurred and yet justifiably differ on the question of whether a transcendent agent was responsible, and, thus whether the event ought to be considered miraculous. In short, the types of evidence Larmer discusses are certainly not sufficient to establish the transcendent causation necessary to label an event miraculous.
I am also somewhat perplexed by the relationship Larmer sees between miracles and world-views. Specifically, I am perplexed by Larmer’s claim that “if an event can be satisfactorily explained by theism as being a miracle, but physicalism can offer no satisfactory explanation of it, then we are justified in seeing it as independent evidence for the superiority of theism over physicalism” (114). To say an event is independent evidence for the superiority of theism has at least two possible readings: that the evidence for this specific event stands as one reason to believe that theism is superior or that the evidence for this specific event is a sufficient reason to believe that theism is superior. If Larmer means the former, then his claim may well be true. If we are only considering the evidence related to one specific ‘miracle,’ theism may well appear more strongly confirmed. And if we are only considering the evidence related to one specific instance of seemingly gratuitous evil, nontheism may well appear more strongly confirmed.

But all this can be granted with impunity by both the theist and nontheist. As Alvin Plantinga has so forcefully argued, one must consider all the relevant data when assessing the plausibility of a world-view. Accordingly, a theist can grant that theism may seem implausible when considered only in light of all the evil in the world, yet still justifiably argue that theism is most plausible when considered in light of all the other relevant data—e.g., changed lives, the starry heavens. And a nontheist can grant that nontheism may seem implausible, given consideration of only the evidence for one alleged miracle, yet still justifiably argue that nontheism is most plausible when considered in light of all the other relevant data—e.g., the amount of evil we experience. Thus, if Larmer thinks that the evidence for a miracle (or even all miracles) can, in principle, stand as a sufficient reason (or even a very strong reason) for preferring theism to nontheism, I believe he is mistaken.

Overall, though, I recommend this book for those who are interested in the current state of the philosophical debate concerning the miraculous.