

4-1-1996

Book Review: Reported Miracles

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Recommended Citation

Keller, James (1996) "Book Review: Reported Miracles," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 2 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol13/iss2/11>

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Thomas understood himself—as a speculative biblical theologian who sought philosophical proficiency in order better to expound the content of Sacred Scripture.

NOTES

1. *Le thomisme : Introduction à la philosophie de saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1989), p. 7.
2. *Le thomisme*, p. 8.
3. *Elements of Christian Philosophy* (New American Library: New York, 1960), p. 106.

Reported Miracles: A Critique of Hume, by **J. Houston**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Pp. xii and 264. \$59.95.

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This book is a defense of the idea that reported miracles can make a positive contribution to a case for theistic belief. After a brief introduction Houston turns to a discussion of reported miracles in the work of Augustine, Aquinas, Locke, Hume, and Bradley and Troeltsch. He claims that these figures made contributions which are important to contemporary reflection about miracles. However, he makes almost no reference to the first three thinkers after the chapters in which he discusses them, though his understanding of the nature and purpose of miracles is generally in line with theirs. But the material on the others is clearly essential to the balance of his book. Hume's critique of miracles is the main argument to which Houston replies, and the analyses of historiography given by Bradley and Troeltsch provide a more focused, detailed position to which Houston also responds.

Hume defines a miracle as "a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent."¹ Houston accepts and defends this definition, pointing out that *transgression*, in Hume's sense, does not imply any inconsistency in plans or purposes on the part of the agent of the miracle. Houston also notes that on this definition a miracle must be worked by the Deity or some invisible agent. It follows that an event cannot be classified as a miracle simply because it seems to (or even does actually) transgress some law of nature; it must also be assigned to the proper sort of agent. Therefore, Houston designates an event which seems to violate a law of nature but which has not yet been attributed to an agent of the proper sort as a supposed or putative or conjectural miracle.

The thrust of Hume's critique of reports of miracles is well known. A miracle by definition is an event which transgresses a law of nature, but laws of nature are supported by all human experience of events of the sort in question. Therefore, it is always more rational to believe that the testimony to the miracle is mistaken, deceptive, or in some other way erroneous than it is to believe that the event happened as reported.

Houston responds to this argument by pointing out that it seems to

assume that there is no Deity (or other invisible agent).² For human experience of the sort of event in question is also consistent with the theory that nature is governed by a Deity who almost always causes events to occur in those patterns which we have come to identify as laws of nature, but that on occasion the Deity causes the course of nature to vary from one of these patterns. Of course, to assume that there is a Deity of this sort also seems to beg the question, but in the other direction. In the context of this impasse, Houston makes what is, I think, his most helpful and important proposal in the book: the honest inquirer can regard these two assumptions as alternative hypotheses to be evaluated in light of a range of considerations, including reports of miracles.

In more detail, his proposal is this. What we begin with is the report of the supposed miracle and various possible explanations of how this report got generated. One possibility is that the report of the event is accurate and that the Deity or some invisible agent caused a violation of a law of nature. Another is that the report is accurate but the event conforms to some unknown law of nature. Another is that the reporters are mistaken. Another is that they are being deceptive. Still another is that the report has been garbled in its transmission to us or that we have misunderstood the report. There may also be others. What we seek is the total account (description of the event and of how the report came to us as we have it) which is the most coherent with what we have in the report and with everything else that we know or reasonably believe which seems relevant to arriving at this overall account. We will need to consider what we know about relevant laws of nature (e.g., could a healing be explained as the alleviation of psychosomatic illness?) and about the situation and character of those who reported the purported miracle (e.g., what did they have to gain by reporting the event, were they known to be liars or to be highly reliable witnesses, were they careful in what they claimed to know or given to exaggeration, how did they come to know about the event, etc.?).

In proposing this approach he meets and disarms much of the criticism of belief in miracles built on the nature of modern historiography as analyzed by Bradley and Troeltsch, among others. According to Houston, Bradley pointed out that often a historian will have several accounts, often not consistent with each other, of an event by different reporters, and possibly also several different reports of different events by each of these reporters. The historian's task is both to "arrive at a true account of the event" and to "account for the differences between the sources. The views which are respectively taken of the event, and of the varying accounts of it which have reached us, will be parts of a wider, self-consistent version of what has happened in which each element is intelligibly accounted for" (68). To intelligibly account for something is to explain it "in terms of known patterns of causal connexion" (68). Therefore, the historian's reconstruction will have to account for all the elements by relating them in known patterns of causal connection.

The mention of "known patterns of causal connection" suggests that a historian must construct her overall account by analogy with her critically appropriated knowledge of the world apart from that account. The sorts of causal connections which she will use in her new account will be like those

she already accepts; the sorts of events she believes happened will be analogous to those she already believes happens. However, the relation between her critically appropriated knowledge of the world and the new account need not be one-directional. Elements of the new account could lead her to change what she takes to be her critically appropriated knowledge of the world. If she has adequate grounds to trust the testimony of particular others, she can secure knowledge of non-analogous events and expand the stock of causal relations she accepts (76).

Now suppose that we wish to give an overall account of a report of a supposed miracle. Could it ever be that the best account of this report is that it is accurate? Hume, Bradley, Troeltsch, and many others argue that it could never be. Houston argues that it could be. But how? Can we understand the action of the Deity by analogy with our actions? Houston replies that we can if we describe that action not as the action of the Deity but as the action of an intelligent agent, for the Deity and we are intelligent agents. But if the miracle is performed by the Deity, can we ever relate it causally to other events? Houston replies that its consequences can be causally related as can those of any non-miraculous event and that its antecedents also can in a sense be causally related to it. For if the Deity is an intelligent agent, then the Deity's actions will be directed to the accomplishment of some discernible purpose and relevant to the circumstances. Of course, the action will not be causally determined by creaturely antecedents, but no nondeterminist believes that all human actions are completely determined by creaturely antecedents and historians qua historians are not committed to determinism. Just as the historian need not provide causally sufficient conditions for every human action she explains, so she need not do it for the Deity's action in some miracle she is explaining. Thus Houston concludes that the possibility of including miracles in historical reconstructions is not precluded by the historian's methodology any more than it is precluded by Hume's line of argument.

However, this conclusion does not open the door for an uncritical acceptance of every miracle report at face value. Houston claims only that a critical reconstruction of the report of a miracle could conclude that a miracle happened. But for this to be the proper conclusion, two conditions will have to be met.

1. Other explanations of how the report was generated will have to be shown to be less likely than the explanation that it is an accurate report of the event as it happened. This involves showing the relative unlikelihood of infelicities such as mistakes, deceptions (conscious or not), exaggerations, distortions, and inventions by the reporters, and (if the reporters were not themselves eyewitnesses) showing the relative unlikelihood of such infelicities in the transmission of claims about the event to those whose direct report we have (131-32).

2. The activity of the Deity (or some other invisible agent) will have to fit into the critical reconstruction of the event and the report and thus into the critically appropriated knowledge of the world, of which the account of the event and the report will form a part. This condition requires that we be able to identify the purpose of the agent and that we be able to fit the event in question into a pattern of activity by that agent which manifests a consistent

purpose in relation to humans. Houston is both clear and demanding on this point. He says that if "an invisible agent may at any time or place disrupt the regular patterned character of events in nature" and these disruptions may be capricious or designed to mislead us, "then the notion of 'being evidence for . . . ' will be useless. Equally if the mind of a miracle-working agent is supposed to be wholly inscrutable to us, possible exceptions to nature's normal course will be capricious or random from our point of view, and once more we will be unable to put any trust in an argument which rests on evidence" (138). The requirement that there be a pattern of activity manifesting a consistent purpose implies that there must be a pattern of miracles; were there only one, we could never have good grounds for ascribing it to an invisible agent rather than giving some other explanation for the report.

What purpose might the Deity have in working a miracle? The only purpose suggested by Houston is "to endorse the god's prophet, or signal the import of significant events" (139). That endorsement of a prophet is the point of a putative miracle can be concluded provided (1) "there are other well-attested reports of supposed miracles associated with the same prophet"; (2) his teaching, when practiced, illuminates and enriches human life; and (3) "the content of the miracle . . . accords with the prophet's teaching" (139). Signalling the import of events "may be the obvious point of a supposed miracle if these events fulfill long-held hopes about what God will accomplish in his good purpose and if the supposed miracle strikingly exemplifies what the community expects as a sign of the awaited events" (139).

Thus Houston would say that not every reported event which seems to violate a law of nature is thereby a candidate for being a miracle, for there may be no reason to suspect that a god brought it about.³ In other cases, reasonable people may be unsure. But other cases suggest a miracle.

Take the case of a teacher whose words sublimely illuminate the human condition and who has previously been the subject of well-attested reports saying he was involved in events contrary to natural law in ways which suggest that he may thereby be divinely approved. Then suppose that this person is further reported, by reports of some weight, as having been resurrected, putatively miraculously, after having been put to death by his enemies. In such circumstances reasonable people may perhaps be justified without further aid from natural theology, in concluding that God may well have raised him up, so that in this instance evidence for natural law may be no guide to what occurred. (161)

The foregoing summary suggests the main line of argument in Houston's book, though there are interesting and worthwhile discussions of related topics. For example, Houston criticizes twentieth-century theologians who argue that miracles ought not to be used for apologetic purposes (chp. 6) and those who argue that miracle stories are not intended to describe actual events (chp. 12). He also criticizes those who argue that modern science shows that miracles do not occur or that it is impossible for an event to violate a law of nature because laws of nature simply describe what occurs. And he replies to Hume's objection that miracle stories in other religions diminish or destroy the apologetic value of those in any one religion. Houston's discussion of these topics is generally well done and, I think, on

target.

But what of the main line of his argument? I think that he is correct about the methodology for assessing reports of miracles. There is no non-question-begging way to dismiss them as not worthy of belief without investigating their quality as reports and without asking how those reports and the events of which they speak fit into a coherent picture of the world. And no doubt many, perhaps most, of those who believe that no miracles have ever occurred are like Hume in holding this belief without ever considering these matters. Nevertheless, I have far less optimism than I believe Houston does that the sort of consideration he calls for will support the belief that miracles have occurred. Though Houston never commits himself on how strong a case can be made that miracles have occurred in connection with people and events that are central to Christianity, I think that he believes that a reasonably strong case can be made. Otherwise, why would he write this book arguing for a methodology which opens the possibility of reaching such a conclusion? But he does not delve into actual considerations necessary to assess the strength of the case. Thus the reservations I am about to express do not contradict anything he says, but rather they explore difficulties in making a case for the occurrence of miracles using his methodology.

1. The possibility of a naturalistic explanation of events whose report has been construed as the report of a purported miracle must be borne in mind. This possibility has often been mentioned in connection with healings, but it might also apply to other types of events. Moreover, since we have only sketchy reports of the details of many reported miracles, it is hard to assess how likely it is that they violate a law of nature.

2. Since we do not know who wrote most of the books of the Bible, it is difficult to assess what Houston says we must assess: the authors' veracity, their care in relating what they have heard and seen, their purpose in writing (to set forth "the facts" in our sense or to express their faith understanding, etc.).⁴

3. The Synoptics are not independent; thus they do not constitute three independent witnesses to the events which they narrate. So we may have only one source for many of the reported miracles. (The reported miracles in Gospel of John are mostly different miracles from those in the Synoptics.) The best attested miracle is the resurrection, which is reported at some length in two of the Synoptics and the Gospel of John, as well as being mentioned often (but not described) in other New Testament documents.⁵

4. Since it is very likely that, except for Paul,⁶ no eyewitness of a purported miracle wrote about the miracle, the problem of the reliability of the transmission of accounts of miracles from eyewitnesses to the authors of various biblical books looms large. Since we do not know with any certainty the process by which the accounts of the eyewitnesses were transmitted until they were written down, it is uncertain how confident we should be about the grounds on which the eyewitnesses held their beliefs and about the events which are reported or narrated or mentioned in the documents.

The conclusion from these four considerations is at least that our basis for evaluating the evidential value of the reports is far less clear than it might be and far less clear than we could legitimately wish it to be. Conservative scholars typically suggest that we have adequate reason to trust the accura-

cy of the reports; they claim that great care would be taken in transmitting these accounts, as well as accounts of Jesus' teaching. Liberal scholars deny that we have adequate reason and say that purposes other than what we would regard as reliable transmission of account of Jesus were dominant in the very early church. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that general theological convictions at least somewhat influence the judgment of both groups on this matter.⁷ Nevertheless, it still seems to me undeniable that we could have reports which would give us far better grounds for concluding that the reports were accurate descriptions. We could have several independent accounts written by eyewitnesses at the time of the events which they witnessed; this would eliminate many of the grounds to question the accuracy of the accounts we have. The Risen Lord could also have appeared to hostile or neutral witnesses (other than Paul) convincing them and motivating them to write an account. But why think that God should cause such things to be done?

Here we must remember that Houston says that the evaluation of a reported miracle must also give an account of the event which fits into a coherent picture of the event and how it came to be reported. If an event is a miracle and we are to be able to recognize it as such, then we must have an idea of God's purpose in doing it, and the only purpose Houston suggests is to confirm some person or event as revealing God. If that is God's purpose, then presumably God would want to make the status of the event as a miracle, and therefore as a transgression of natural law,⁸ very clear; otherwise, it would not confirm the revelation. Admittedly, some biblical narratives often considered to be reports of miracles, if taken as accurate descriptions, do seem to refer to events which clearly transgress some law of nature. But is the documentation we have for these events consistent with saying that they are accurate reports of miracles? Let me explain why I doubt that it is.

As we have seen, the evidential value of the miracle reports we have in the Bible is controversial. What does not seem controversial is that it could be much stronger. If we attribute to God the purpose of confirming the revelatory status of some person or event, then we must conclude that the testimony we have is far short of what it could be. Perhaps matters were clearer for the eyewitnesses, but we today are not eyewitnesses, nor do we have their direct testimony. Therefore, there seems to be an inconsistency between the claim that God wished to confirm revelation by miracles and the admission that God permitted us to have documentation of the supposed miracles which is no better than we have. This inconsistency is all the more glaring because no other purported miracle is nearly as well documented as the resurrection, but (Houston says that) there must be a pattern of purported miracles if any particular purported miracle is to fit into a coherent pattern of activity by the Deity.⁹ Presumably at least a good number of these purported miracles must be well documented, but they are not.¹⁰ (Many are only singly attested in a document written years after the event by a non-eyewitness; many of those attested in more than one Synoptic Gospel probably trace their source back to one document.)

Note that my objection in the foregoing paragraph is not simply that the documentation is not enough to make it not irrational to believe that the event was accurately described; that is controversial. The objection rather is

that attributing to God the action of performing a miracle with the purpose of confirming revelation is inconsistent with admitting that God allowed (or caused) no better documentation of the miracle than we have.¹¹ This inconsistency seems to me to be the strongest reason to doubt that following Houston's methodology will allow the Christian apologist to conclude that purported miracles provide some confirmation of Christianity.¹²

NOTES

1. Houston, p. 103, citing Hume, *Enquiries*, ed. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 114. Hereafter, page references to Houston's work will be given in parentheses in the text.

2. I shall not continue to add this alternative unless there is some specific reason to do so.

3. Houston does not give any examples, but the history of science contains many reports of observations which, at the time they were made, seemed to imply the occurrence of events which violated some law of nature and which spurred investigations which led to formulating new ideas about what the laws of nature are; these observations never prompted anyone to suspect that a god was involved. One such example was Lord Rutherford's observation of traces on unexposed film which had been stored near a sample of a certain material; these observations led to the discovery of radioactivity.

4. That various Christians suffered and died for their beliefs shows at most that they sincerely held them, not necessarily that they held them on good grounds. And the ones whom we have good reason to believe died for their faith were not the ones who wrote the New Testament documents, so far as we know the authors. Paul is an exception, though he mentioned only one possible miracle (the resurrection) and did not describe it. Most scholars doubt that either First or Second Peter was written by the Apostle Peter, who reportedly was crucified for his faith. But even if either was, neither describes any purported miracles.

5. Strictly speaking, the resurrection itself is never described. What is described are various appearances by the Risen Lord and the discovery of the empty tomb. (The Gospel of Mark reports the empty tomb, but no appearances.)

6. Paul is an exception because he claimed to have seen the Risen Lord. However, he says nothing about what that appearance was like, and it is controversial to take the account in Acts as descriptive of Paul's experiences. Acts dates from 40 or so years after Paul's claim in I Cor, and its author's connection with Paul is controversial. (In any event, it clearly is not eyewitness testimony, for Acts was not written by Paul.) Thus one must question the value of Paul's testimony in supporting the claim that the resurrection was a miracle, for we do not know what Paul's experience was like. So it is difficult to use his claim to reconstruct the purported miraculous event.

7. Nevertheless, some conservative reasons for trusting the accuracy of the documents seem to me suspect. I have in mind those which claim that no inaccuracy would be introduced because other members of the Christian community would immediately identify and denounce an inaccuracy. This reason presupposes a unity in the first-century Christian community which seems to me dubious and an ease of communication which simply did not exist. If an author wrote a Gospel in one city, how long would it be before Christians hundreds of miles away would hear of it and respond to something they disagreed with? And if they did, would the author change his writing?

8. The biblical writers did not have our modern concept of a law of nature,

but they did have the concept of the natural powers of things. So an event which we might describe as transgressing a law of nature they might describe as exceeding the natural powers of the creatures involved.

9. In his fullest example of how a reported miracle might be assessed (on p. 161), he makes use of a pattern of supposed miracles. (The example is contained in the offset material above in the text.)

10. In his example on p. 161, Houston speaks of "well-attested reports" and "reports of some weight." Moreover, part of his reason for discounting miracle reports in other religions is the poor quality of their attestation (204-205).

11. Of course, if God continued to perform highly public miracles today to confirm revelation, the quality of the documentation of biblical miracles would not matter. But God does not do this either. To be sure, some people do claim that God is performing miracles today, but most people never experience anything which seems to be a candidate for being a miracle; moreover, those who claim to experience miracles usually are already believers, so they have far less need for the confirmation than does the neutral, open inquirer to whom Houston proposes his methodology.

12. The tension between attributing a revelation-confirming purpose to miracles, on the one hand, and the pattern of occurrence of purported miracles and the quality of their documentation, on the other, is explored in my article "A Moral Argument against Miracles," *Faith and Philosophy*, 12 (January 1995).

The Greater Good Defense: An Essay on the Rationality of Faith, by **Melville Y. Stewart**. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993. Pp. xi and 202. \$55.00.

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Stewart's text should become a standard on reading lists for students of philosophical theology. As a classroom text, it offers an accessible introduction to the dominant trends in contemporary Christian apologetics. This is not meant to imply that Stewart's treatment is in any way superficial, but that he elucidates in a straightforward manner such complexities as Plantinga's "transworld depravity" and Molina's "middle knowledge." As a precursor to primary sources, this text lays out with precision and clarity the basic conceptual problems and lines of defence to be studied in greater depth.

Stewart's thesis is that much of Christian theodicy can be subsumed under a general category of defence, viz. the greater good defence (GGD). He then focuses on several specifications of that defence: the free-will specification; the growth to moral maturity/soul-growth defence specification; and the redemption specification (related to the *O Felix Culpa* approach). In consideration of each of these specifications Stewart presents a concise review of the works of Keith Yandell, Alvin Plantinga, John Hick, and refers to Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas. He offers a knowledgeable account of the important critiques each of the three contemporary thinkers have attracted, and provides some able rescue attempts for each account. Stewart, however, does not attempt to provide a theodicy himself. In the end he offers his own specification of the GGD, the R-specification (R = redemption), as a prop for the claim that belief in God is rational despite the existence of evil. Rational justifi-