

NoodleCast # 342

Argument from Miracles

Part 1 of 2

People often claim that reports of miracles in their chosen scripture or church history gives them rational grounds for belief in God. Miracles demonstrating the magnificent power of God are still commonly reported today by believers of various (incompatible) religions. The basic question raised by such reports—and discussed in these readings—is: “Are claims of miracles rational grounds for belief in God?” —DMH



Of Miracles

By Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Part 3, Sections 101.
(http://www2.nd.edu/Departments/Maritain/etext/gc3_101.htm)

In this passage from *Summa Contra Gentiles* (written in the early 1260s), Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas describes the nature of miracles and differentiates between types of miracles.

Things that are done occasionally by divine power outside of the usual established order of events are commonly called miracles (wonders). We wonder when we see an effect and do not know the cause. And because one and the same cause is sometimes known to some and unknown to others, it happens that of the witnesses of the effect some wonder and some do not wonder: thus an astronomer does not wonder at seeing an eclipse of the sun, at which a person that is ignorant of astronomy cannot help wondering. An event is wonderful relatively to one man and not to another. The absolutely wonderful is that which has a cause absolutely hidden. This then is the meaning of the word “miracle,” an event of itself full of wonder, not to this man or that man only. Now the cause absolutely hidden to

every man is God, inasmuch as no man in this life can mentally grasp the essence of God. Those events then are properly to be styled miracles, which happen by divine power beyond the order commonly observed in nature.

Of these miracles there are several ranks and orders. Miracles of the highest rank are those in which something is done by God that nature can never do. Miracles of the second rank are those in which God does something that nature can do, but not in that sequence and connection. Thus it is a work of nature that an animal should live, see and walk: but that it should live after death, see after blindness, walk after lameness, these things nature is powerless to effect, but God sometimes brings them about miraculously. A miracle of the third rank is something done by God, which is usually done by the operation of nature, but is done in this case without the working of natural principles, as when one is cured by divine power of a fever, in itself naturally curable, or when it rains without any working of the elements.



Reports of Miracles

These passages from the Gospel of Luke recount some of Jesus’ extraordinary miracles. According to *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, this gospel was probably written around 80-85 CE, i.e. about 50 years after the death of Jesus. While traditionally attributed to Luke, its author is unknown.

Jesus’ Miracles (Bible, NRSV, Gospel of Luke)

(Chapter 5) 1 Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, 2 he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. 3 He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. 4 When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” 5 Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.”

6 When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. 7 So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. 8 But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" 9 For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; 10 and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." 11 When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

12 Once, when he was in one of the cities, there was a man covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he bowed with his face to the ground and begged him, "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." 13 Then Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, "I do choose. Be made clean." Immediately the leprosy left him. 14 And he ordered him to tell no one. "Go", he said, "and show yourself to the priest, and, as Moses commanded, make an offering for your cleansing, for a testimony to them." 15 But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. 16 But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray.

17 One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting nearby (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. 18 Just then some men came, carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; 19 but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. 20 When he saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." 21 Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, "Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" 22 When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? 23 Which is easier, to say, "Your sins are forgiven you", or to say, "Stand up and walk"? 24 But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the one who was paralyzed—"I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your

home." 25 Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God. 26 Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, "We have seen strange things today." ...

(Chapter 9) 10 [Jesus] took [the apostles] with him and withdrew privately to a city called Bethsaida. 11 When the crowds found out about it, they followed him; and he welcomed them, and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed to be cured.

12 The day was drawing to a close, and the twelve came to him and said, "Send the crowd away, so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside, to lodge and get provisions; for we are here in a deserted place." 13 But he said to them, "You give them something to eat." They said, "We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people." 14 For there were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, "Make them sit down in groups of about fifty each." 15 They did so and made them all sit down. 16 And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. 17 And all ate and were filled. What was left over was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces. ...

37 On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. 38 Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. 39 Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It throws him into convulsions until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. 40 I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." 41 Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." 42 While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. 43 And all were astounded at the greatness of God.



This story of Buddha's miraculous birth and childhood is based early canonical texts. No biography of Buddha was written during his lifetime.

The Birth of Buddha (Paul Carus, “The Enlightenment” in *Buddha, The Gospel*)

There was in Kapilavatthu a Sakya king, strong of purpose and revered by all men, a descendant of the Okkakas, who call themselves Gotama, and his name was Suddhodana or Pure-Rice. His wife Mayadevi was beautiful as the water-lily and pure in mind as the lotus. As the Queen of Heaven, she lived on earth, untainted by desire, and immaculate.

The king, her husband, honored her in her holiness, and the spirit of truth, glorious and strong in his wisdom like unto a white elephant, descended upon her. When she knew that the hour of motherhood was near, she asked the king to send her home to her parents; and Suddhodana, anxious about his wife and the child she would bear him, willingly granted her request.

At Lumbini there is a beautiful grove, and when Mayadevi passed through it the trees were one mass of fragrant flowers and many birds were warbling in their branches. The Queen, wishing to stroll through the shady walks, left her golden palanquin, and, when she reached the giant sala tree in the midst of the grove, felt that her hour had come. She took hold of a branch. Her attendants hung a curtain about her and retired. When the pain of travail came upon her, four pure-minded angels of the great Brahma held out a golden net to receive the babe, who came forth from her right side like the rising sun bright and perfect.

The Brahma-angels took the child and placing him before the mother said: “Rejoice, O queen, a mighty son has been born unto thee.”

At her couch stood an aged woman imploring the heavens to bless the child. All the worlds were flooded with light. The blind received their sight by longing to see the coming glory of the Lord; the deaf and dumb spoke with one another of the good omens indicating the birth of the Buddha to be. The crooked became straight; the lame walked. All prisoners were freed from their chains and the fires of all the hells were extinguished.

No clouds gathered in the skies and the polluted streams became clear, whilst celestial music rang through the air and the angels rejoiced with gladness. With no selfish or partial joy but for the sake of the law they rejoiced, for creation engulfed in the ocean of pain was now to obtain release. The cries of beasts were hushed; all malevo-

lent beings received a loving heart, and peace reigned on earth. Mara, the evil one, alone was grieved and rejoiced not.

The Naga kings, earnestly desiring to show their reverence for most excellent law, as they had paid honor to former Buddhas, now went to greet the Bodhisattva. They scattered before him mandara flowers, rejoicing with heartfelt joy to pay their religious homage.

The royal father, pondering the meaning of these signs, was now full of joy and now sore distressed. The queen mother, beholding her child and the commotion which his birth created, felt in her timorous heart the pangs of doubt.

Now there was at that time in a grove near Lumbini Asita, a rishi, leading the life of a hermit. He was a Brahman of dignified mien, famed not only for wisdom and scholarship, but also for his skill in the interpretation of signs. And the king invited him to see the royal babe.

The seer, beholding the prince, wept and sighed deeply. And when the king saw the tears of Asita he became alarmed and asked: “Why has the sight of my son caused thee grief and pain?”

But Asita’s heart rejoiced, and, knowing the king’s mind to be perplexed, he addressed him, saying: “The king, like the moon when full, should feel great joy, for he has begotten a wondrously noble son. I do not worship Brahma, but I worship this child; and the gods in the temples will descend from their places of honor to adore him. Banish all anxiety and doubt. The spiritual omens manifested indicate that the child now born will bring deliverance to the whole world.

“Recollecting that I myself am old, on that account I could not hold my tears; for now my end is coming on and I shall not see the glory of this babe. For this son of thine will rule the world. The wheel of empire will come to him. He will either be a king of kings to govern all the lands of the earth, or verily will become a Buddha. He is born for the sake of everything that lives. His pure teaching will be like the shore that receives the shipwrecked. His power of meditation will be like a cool lake; and all creatures parched with the drought of lust may freely drink thereof. On the fire of covetousness he will cause the cloud of his mercy to rise, so that the rain of the law may extinguish it. The heavy gates of despondency will be open, and give deliverance to all creatures ensnared in the self-entwined mesh-

es of folly and ignorance. The king of the law has come forth to rescue from bondage all the poor, the miserable, the helpless.”

When the royal parents heard Asita’s words they rejoiced in their hearts and named their new-born infant Siddhattha, that is “he who has accomplished his purpose.”

And the queen said to her sister, Pajapati: “A mother who has borne a future Buddha will never give birth to another child. I shall soon leave this world, my husband, the king, and Siddhattha, my child. When I am gone, be thou a mother to him.” And Pajapati wept and promised.

When the queen had departed from the living, Pajapati took the boy Siddhattha and reared him. And as the light of the moon increases little by little, so the royal child grew from day to day in mind and in body; and truthfulness and love resided in his heart. When a year had passed Suddhodana the king made Pajapati his queen and there was never a better stepmother than she.



According to the 2nd century Roman historian Arrian, eyewitness reports confirm that the diviner Peithagoras correctly predicted the deaths of multiple people based upon the absence of a lobe on the liver of a sacrificed animal.

Divinations of Peithagoras (Arrian, *Anabasis*)

Moreover Aristobulus¹ has recorded the following story. Apollodorus the Amphipolitan, one of Alexander’s Companions, was general of the army which the king left with Mazaeus, the viceroy of Babylon. When he had joined his forces with the king’s on the return of the latter from India, and observed that he was severely punishing the viceroys who had been placed over the several countries, he sent to his brother Peithagoras and asked him to divine about his safety. For Peithagoras was a diviner who derived his knowledge of the future from the inspection of the inward parts of animals. This man sent back to Apollodorus, inquiring of whom he was so especially

¹ Aristobulus, with Ptolemy, were Arrian’s two primary sources for his biography of Alexander. Both men were officers in Alexander’s army, so personally witnessed the events of his life and death.

afraid, as to wish to consult divination. The latter wrote back: “The king himself and Hephaestion.”

Peithagoras therefore in the first place offered sacrifice with reference to Hephaestion. But as there was no lobe visible upon the liver of the sacrificial victim, he stated this fact in a letter, which he sealed and sent to his brother from Babylon to Ecbatana, explaining that there was no reason at all to be afraid of Hephaestion, for in a short time he would be out of their way. And Aristobulus says that Apollodorus received this epistle only one day before Hephaestion died.

Then Peithagoras again offered sacrifice in respect to Alexander, and the liver of the victim consulted in respect to him was also destitute of a lobe. He therefore wrote to Apollodorus to the same purport about Alexander as about Hephaestion. Apollodorus did not conceal the information sent to him, but told Alexander, in order the more to show his good-will to the king, if he urged him to be on his guard lest some danger might befall him at that time. And Aristobulus says that the king commended Apollodorus, and when he entered Babylon, he asked Peithagoras what sign he had met with, to induce him to write thus to his brother. He said that the liver of the victim sacrificed for him was without a lobe. When Alexander asked what the sign meant, he said that it was a very disastrous one. The king was so far from being angry with him, that he even treated him with greater respect, for telling him the truth without any disguise. [Alexander died unexpectedly shortly thereafter due to infection.]

Aristobulus says that he himself heard this story from Peithagoras; and adds that the same man acted as diviner for Perdiccas and afterwards for Antigonos, and that the same sign occurred for both. It was verified by fact; for Perdiccas lost his life leading an army against Ptolemy, and Antigonos was killed in the battle fought by him at Ipsus against Seleucus and Lysimachus.

Also concerning Calanus, the Indian philosopher, the following story has been recorded. When he was going to the funeral pyre to die, he gave the parting salutation to all his other companions; but he refused to approach Alexander to give him the salutation, saying he would meet him at Babylon and there salute him. At the time indeed this remark was treated with neglect; but afterwards, when Alexander had died at Babylon, it came to the recollection of those who had

heard it, and they thought forsooth that it was a divine intimation of Alexander's approaching end.

