

## **'Stories about miracles are an obstacle to faith for modern people'.**

### **Discuss.**

The whole concept of miracles is rooted in the fantastical, improbable and downright outrageous. So it's not particularly hard to see why modern, enlightened people might consider them an 'obstacle to faith'. However, stories about miracles are part of religious lore; so if they are an obstacle, they're certainly not insurmountable. Indeed, for some they can be said to enhance the idea of a loving, divine God. But exactly how loving can a God that is so indifferent to the suffering of those he doesn't deem worthy of his miracles be? ▲ willingness to believe in God's benevolence must be present in order to ignore the unfair nature of miracles, and in these literate, informed times, it proves incredibly difficult to have such faith.

▲ An important religious perspective on miracles is that of St Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas believed that God can manipulate creation in any way he/she desires. His definition of miracles is 'those things done by divine power apart from the order usually followed in things'. This idea is useful for those inclined towards faith because it encompasses a vast spectrum of events, ranging from a spontaneous apparition of someone dead to an unlikely, but possible occurrence such as a fast recovery from a curable ailment. But this definition of miracles presents some problems. For example, John Macquarie argues that because interpretation of supposedly miraculous events varies, it is nonsensical to ascribe religious meaning to acts that are quite possibly random and lucky. How are we to distinguish between coincidence and an act of God? Surely God can't be responsible for every last one of the unlikely fortuitous events that happen in the world? The Bible appears to fail to provide any answers- it simply asserts that God exists and his miracles occurred, evidence be damned.

In spite of this, the miracles in the Bible can be said to support faith for modern people, as they demonstrate the power and benevolence of God. ▲ prominent example would be Isaiah 38:8, when God stops the Sun for King Hezekiah's benefit. ▲ Another would be when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. Miracles such as these can evoke powerful religious feeling. The implausible nature of these acts, however, makes them a very real roadblock on the path to faith for many discerning, intelligent people. Rudolf Bultmann addressed this by attempting to demythologise Christ. By doing this, he thought he could both enable faith for modern people while allowing them to maintain their suspension of disbelief. He offered rational explanations for the miracles of Christ; for example, when Jesus fed the 5000, there may have been a concealed cave behind him, or he may have simply inspired the others around him to share. This approach is better than the literal interpretation of Biblical miracles because it offers a logical, contemporary solution for Jesus' supposedly 'divine' acts whilst maintaining their essential goodness. But it can also be said that by demythologising Christ you take away the power of his sacrifice- his divinity is integral to Christianity.

David Hume provides a less liberal definition of the miraculous. He limits 'miracles' to 'a transgression of a law of nature...by a particular volition of the deity'. This essentially means that nothing that happens within nature should be labelled 'miraculous'. Hume does not outright reject miracles, but he instead uses the fact that they are impossible to prove to support his criticism. If we are to adhere to Hume's staunchly rationalistic stance, concluding that miracles are an obstacle to faith would be inevitable, as there is no evidence for them. However, Hume's argument is not entirely without its detractors. For example, his parameters can be described as too restrictive. He arrogantly claims that the only credible witness to a miracle is a well-educated, reputable person. But if a miracle genuinely occurs, why are the eyes of an academic more reliable than those of a farmer? John Hick also points out that Hume is assuming that we are privy to all the laws of nature. They certainly appear to have been broken before, only for it to be found that certain things thought impossible. Hick's conclusion is that observing things we do not understand does not constitute 'breaking nature's laws'; we simply need to broaden our understanding of nature'.

▲ Arguably the most compelling argument against miracles was devised by Maurice Wiles. Wiles' premise is that a God willing to perform arbitrary miraculous acts is unworthy of worship, because he/she seems indifferent to the suffering of others. Why does God heal some people, but let others suffer unbearable agonies? The intervening God of Christianity turned water into wine, but remained indifferent to the suffering of six million Jews. Of course, one could argue that greater, celestial rewards await the dead for their pains, but it is my belief that no reward can justify such torture.

For some, the concept of a miraculous God allows for a small degree of security and comfort in the knowledge that, despite the dangers of this harsh, brutal world, someone is taking care of you. It would, for them, seem quite cynical to say that miracles are an 'obstacle to faith'. Despite this, I cannot fathom the idea of an arbitrary, indifferent God, saving people based on whimsy. Faith is obviously a very personal thing, but in these enlightened, intelligent times I am forced to conclude that an intervening deity is both illogical and outdated.