

# **Scientific evidence and first-century reports of miracles surrounding Jesus**

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## **How to judge first-century reports that Jesus worked miracles and rose from the dead<sup>1</sup>**

“How to Help Children Understand Social Distancing.” “How to Make a Watermelon Keg.” “How to Forge a Knife.” Those are some of the methods trending at the time of writing this.<sup>2</sup> Obviously, the method for making a watermelon keg will not result in a forged knife. It will not help children learn social distancing. That is not a criticism of the watermelon-keg method. Any method would fail when applied outside its domain. The scientific method of evaluating evidence has proven to be strikingly effective in the study of natural phenomena. Other, less structured methods of inductive reasoning are effective in making ordinary decisions. Are inductive methods also suitable for evaluating the New Testament's accounts of miracles in the sense of supernatural actions of God?

Let's review some of those accounts. Paul of Tarsus reported having seen Jesus alive years after his execution on a cross.<sup>3</sup> In addition to that eyewitness testimony, he appealed to an early tradition that Peter and James saw Jesus alive a few days after his death and to the report that five hundred others did as well.<sup>4</sup> Most of the Gospels describe the resurrection appearances in more detail; for example, the Third Gospel records his eating with his followers after

his death.<sup>5</sup> All four canonical Gospels also bear witness to many miracles that Jesus performed, mostly to heal people of various health problems but also to stop storms, to feed thousands, and even to raise the dead. For example, the Synoptic Gospels report that Jesus healed a paralyzed man by inviting him to get up and walk.<sup>6</sup>

The Gospels did not conceal the purpose of their accounts: that their audiences would believe that Jesus is the Messiah promised to save all people from bondage to their enemies,<sup>7</sup> especially from God's anger against violations of his will as recorded in the Ten Commandments.<sup>8</sup> In the case of the paralyzed man, the healing is offered as proof that God forgave him precisely when Jesus assured him, "Your sins are forgiven."<sup>9</sup>

### **The modern tradition: evaluating miracle reports as merely human testimony**

We have reviewed the testimony of Paul and of the other Christians of the first century. But how believable can reports of supernatural events be? Charles Darwin doubted them in part because he found people of the time to be "ignorant and credulous."<sup>10</sup> Our scientific age's skepticism toward supernatural events has much earlier roots in the Enlightenment's arguments against miracles. As a pioneer of the Enlightenment, Baruch Spinoza proved the impossibility of miracles, defined as violations of scientific laws, from the premise that such laws hold with absolute necessity, not allowing any exception.<sup>11</sup>

Dropping that premise while retaining the definition of a miracle, David Hume offered a more convincing argument, not against miracles themselves but rather against believing testimony about them.<sup>12</sup> In his thinking, testimony that a miracle occurred should only be believed if the probability that the testimony would occur given the absence of a miracle is lower than the probability that scientific law would be violated in the way claimed by the witness. He appealed to scientific induction to explain why he considered the former probability much higher than the latter, especially in the case of a reported resurrection. He reasoned that the "wise and prudent" who first heard the reports of miracles would have dismissed them, which is why we have no contemporary records refuting them.<sup>13</sup>

More recent arguments against accepting accounts of miracles rest on explaining them in terms of psychological phenomena such as false memory.<sup>14</sup> Those arguments, like inductive arguments coming to opposite conclusions,<sup>15</sup> attempt to apply scientific methods of weighing evidence apart from any revelation of a divine being. Such revelation would only be considered if the type of inductive reasoning used in science, perhaps based in part in testimonies of miracles, pointed in that direction. In short, words of a prophet or an ancient writing would only be considered of divine origin if that is the conclusion of an inductive argument that is not itself guided by anything supernatural.

**A first-century alternative:  
receiving miracle reports as divine pledges**

The Enlightenment worldview discussed above, though anticipated in its rejection of religious tradition by ancient Greek philosophy, was not shared by Paul and the other first-century Christian witnesses.<sup>16</sup> They never wanted their testimony of the resurrection and other miracles to be weighed according to human wisdom, not even the most careful reasoning of the best philosophers.<sup>17</sup>

They instead believed that the words of Paul and other witnesses of the resurrection were those of the God who created the universe by commanding, "Let there be light!" From their perspective, people who are completely dead in their opposition to their Creator are resurrected to trust in his promise,<sup>18</sup> "Your sins are forgiven because Jesus, the only begotten Son of the Creator, gave his life as a ransom for you! He proved it by raising him from the dead, and we are witnesses of the resurrection."<sup>19</sup> That pledge and testimony itself creates such trust,<sup>20</sup> raising them from death in rebellion against God to eternal life in the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus is reported to have resurrected a man dead for four days by telling him to leave his tomb.<sup>21</sup> That early Christian belief in the healing power of invitations from Jesus is also seen in the case of the forgiven paralytic:<sup>9</sup>

<b>AFFLICTED</b>	<b>INVITATION</b>
Paralyzed	Get up and walk!
Sinners	Believe the pledge of forgiveness! <sup>22</sup>

Two of the Gospels reporting that also list additional cases of afflictions remedied by divine words:<sup>23</sup>

<b>AFFLICTED</b>	<b>REMEDY</b>
Blind	regain sight
Paralyzed	walk
Lepers	are cleaned
Deaf	hear
Dead	are raised
Poor	are told the good news

The poor in the last row are those who admit that they deserve their Creator's sentence, "Guilty as charged."<sup>24</sup> That poverty is overcome by the good news that he gives them a full pardon, even promising them his eternal kingdom.<sup>25</sup> By contrast, those who are "rich," pleading innocent, remain unforgiven.<sup>26</sup> Those who did believe the words of Jesus were said to have been saved by that trust.

whether he saved them from the affliction of sin or from a physical affliction.<sup>27</sup>

The healing, forgiving power of the words of Jesus was thought to continue after his death and resurrection. In the eyes of the first-century witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus, their testimony of resurrection appearances was inseparable from the Creator's giving a divine pardon to whoever would receive it.<sup>28</sup> Their report of the risen Creator not only was his assurance that he paid the penalty for all people's sins in full but also his command that those who hear arise from their death in sin by trusting that promise.<sup>29</sup>

To highlight the contrast between scientifically evaluating the evidence on one hand to listening to the Creator's voice in the evidence on the other hand, let's also consider the case of the words of Jesus as reported in the Fourth Gospel. It claims that Jesus predicted his crucifixion and resurrection.<sup>30</sup> According to the best human reasoning as found in historical methods informed by science, there are a number of ways the claim could possibly be unreliable due to flaws in human memory.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the unreliability of eyewitness testimony was already a concern when the Gospel was written. That is why it says Jesus promised the eyewitnesses that the Holy Spirit would ensure that they remembered what he taught them.<sup>31</sup> Clearly, the author did not intend his audience to rely on the accuracy of human memory but instead to rely on the Holy Spirit's working through their testimony.

Hard to believe.<sup>32</sup> More bluntly, it is impossible to believe the good news that the forgiving Creator's reign is now here.<sup>33</sup> But the Jesus of the canonical Gospels always commanded the impossible. Just as Jesus told those incapable of walking to walk<sup>34</sup> and a man incapable of moving his hand to stretch out his hand,<sup>35</sup> he tells those incapable of believing the divine pardon to believe the divine pardon.<sup>36</sup> At his invitation, those incapable of walking walked. At his invitation, the man who could not move his hand stretched it out. At his invitation, those incapable of believing believed the good news of the Creator's unconditional forgiveness.

Apart from that life-creating pardon from the almighty Creator, those who are dead in sin would remain dead. They would only be able to evaluate human testimony of the resurrection by scientific methods, philosophy, and other human reasoning. Such evaluations might lead them to conclude that some

claims of Christians are probable. But it would never bring them to trust in the Creator's pardon of all their transgressions, for the sake of his innocent Son's death as their substitute for the eternal death they deserve according to the Ten Commandments. No, inductive, scientific-sounding reasoning like that of Hume simply cannot raise the spiritually dead. As convincing as it is on its own premises, it cannot create the new life of trust in the Creator's pledge to forgive their violations of his law. By human powers, those who cannot believe the Creator's pardon do not believe when invited to believe, just as those who cannot walk do not walk when invited to walk.<sup>37</sup>

### **Does God create belief in what otherwise seems impossible?**

So should the early Christians' reports of Jesus' predictions, the resurrection appearances, and other miracles be evaluated according to inductive methods like those found successful in science? Or should they be received as originally

intended, as the Creator's pardon pronounced on his enemies, a pardon that supernaturally creates trust in itself? Science or a trust-creating pardon from God?

The more scientific approach certainly agrees better with our human thinking. That is to be expected since scientific methods of induction are arguably the most reliable forms of human reasoning about natural causes. But if the divine-pardon position is rejected, then there is no need for Hume's inductive argument against receiving reports of miracles. For rejecting the original intention of the miracle reports means rejecting their announcement that though all people are born as dead to their Creator, he delivered his Son Jesus as the atonement, which can only be received by a trust they are incapable of without his life-creating pardon. Rejecting the divine pardon means rejecting what the miracle reports are supposed to confirm. That not only greatly diminishes the probability that the miracles occurred but also makes their occurrence irrelevant as far as the claims of primitive Christianity are concerned.

Why reject the claim that the miracle reports carry the trust-creating divine pardon? For a lack of evidence? No, that conception of evidence reflects the Enlightenment's insistence on scientific or other inductive reasoning as if there were no trust-creating divine pardon. That is circular reasoning: the scientific

approach to evidence must be used because that is required by the evidence interpreted by the scientific approach. In other words, the best human methods of evaluating evidence must be used because that is required by the best human methods of evaluating evidence. Any almighty word of the Creator is conveniently silenced by human assumptions.

The finding that people remain incapable of believing that word by human methods does not weigh against it. The opposite is true, for that finding corroborates the first-century Christian teaching that such belief is impossible apart from a miracle of divine creation.

What if the claim in the first Christian miracle reports is in fact true? What if the Creator does speak life-giving words of forgiveness through the testimony of the first Christians? More personally, what if he, in their testimony, is announcing to you the good news that he became a man to give his life for your

own violations of his commands? Is that a divine promise bringing you to trust his full pardon for your unbelief and for everything else you have done, said, and thought against what he commanded?

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1. I thank Dorothy Johnson for informative discussions.
  2. <https://www.wikihow.com/Main-Page>, accessed July 6, 2020
  3. 1 Corinthians 15:8-11
  4. 1 Corinthians 15:5-7
  5. Luke 24:42-43
  6. Matthew 9:6-7; Mark 2:10-12; Luke 5:24-25
  7. e.g., Mark 1:1-2; Luke 1:1-4; John 20:30-31
  8. For salvation from bondage to God's wrath as the theological background of the Gospels, see Romans 5. The relevance of the Ten Commandments is explained in "Good news: Incarnation conquered law," David R. Bickel, 2016.
  9. Matthew 9:2-8; Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:18-26
  10. *The autobiography of Charles Darwin 1809-1882. With the original omissions restored. Edited and with appendix and notes by his grand-daughter Nora Barlow.* London: Collins, ed. Nora Barlow, 1958, p. 86. That dismissive attitude was not new; see Hume's characterization of the ancient Jews as "barbarous" (*An Enquiry concerning Human*

- Understanding*, David Hume, Oxford University Press, edited by Peter Millican, 2007).
11. As cited on pp. 9-10 of *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles*, John Earman, Oxford University Press, 2000.
  12. *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, David Hume, Oxford University Press, edited by Peter Millican, 2007. The originality of Hume on that is disputed by *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles*, John Earman, Oxford University Press, 2000.
  13. *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, David Hume, Oxford University Press, edited by Peter Millican, 2007. Contrast the first-century Christian joy that the Father of Jesus hid the things he taught from the "wise and prudent" and revealed them to infants (Luke 10:21). For Christian explanations of why the Creator would hide truth, see "If God exists, why doesn't he prove it?" David R. Bickel, 2008 at [absoluteparadox.com](http://absoluteparadox.com).
  14. See especially *Jesus Before the Gospels: How the Earliest Christians Remembered, Changed, and Invented Their Stories of the Savior*, Bart D. Ehrman, HarperCollins, 2016.
  15. e.g., *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, Richard Swinburne, Oxford University Press, 2003
  16. See *Commentary on Romans*, Anders Nygren, Augsburg Fortress Publishing, 1949.
  17. 1 Corinthians 1:17-2:5, a text with loud echoes in Soren Kierkegaard ("If God exists, why doesn't he prove it?" David R. Bickel, 2008 at [absoluteparadox.com](http://absoluteparadox.com)). While Acts 14:14-18 and 17:22-31 share some common ground with philosophy, they do not adopt its tidy exclusion of divine words from the reasoning process. Rather, they authoritatively announce the Creator (Acts 14:15; 17:23).
  18. Ephesians 2:1
  19. Mark 2:5-11; 10:45; John 3:16; Romans 4:25; Acts 3:15; 10:39
  20. On the supernatural power of the Creator's promise according to first-century Christians, see Matthew 8:5-13 and pp. 315-317 of *Christian Dogmatics*, volume I, Francis Pieper, Concordia Publishing House, 1968.
  21. John 11:43
  22. Like any promise, the promise of the Creator's forgiveness implies an invitation to believe what is promised (*Apology of the Augsburg Confession* on Romans 4:16). For an analysis of that promise as a speech act, see *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, Bayer Oswald, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008.
  23. Matthew 11:4-6; Luke 7:18-23.



24. Just as only the sick need medical treatment, only sinners need Jesus' call to repentance (Matthew 9:12-13; Luke 5:31-32).
25. That Beatitude (Matthew 5:3; Luke 6:20) seemed to fulfill ancient prophecy (Luke 4:17-21; 7:18-23). "Those who are poor are pronounced blessed. They may be destitute, forced to rely on God for everything, but theirs is the kingdom of God, and one day they will rejoice in its limitless riches and spender. The image in the Psalter of the oppressed and righteous poor man who belongs to God (e.g. Ps. 34:6; 72:2) finds fulfillment in them. That is, they are blessed not *because* they are poor and financially needy, but *despite* their property and *because their poverty causes them to rely on God and put their hope in Jesus*" (*The Gospel of Luke: Good News for the Poor*, Lawrence Farley, Ancient Faith Publishing, 2010, p. 137, emphasis original).
26. Luke 6:24; 18:9-14
27. Luke 7:50; 8:48; 17:19; 18:42. All four passages have exactly the same five-word Greek phrase literally translated word-for-word as "The faith your saved you." It means, "Your trust has saved you!" The word for "saved" may also be translated "healed," whether the healing is spiritual (7:50) or physical (8:48; 17:19; 18:42).
28. Notice the blurring of testimony about observable events with testimony about messianic and apocalyptic implications of those events in these texts:
  - Acts 10:39-42; 18:5; 28:23
  - John 1:33-34
  - 1 John 1:2-3; 4:12-14; 5:11.
29. John 5:24-27
30. John 10:18; 12:32-33
31. John 14:26
32. Matthew 19:23
33. Matthew 19:24-26
34. e.g., Mark 2:5-11
35. Mark 3:1-5
36. Mark 1:15. For an exposition of the good news of the presence of God's apocalyptic reign according to the first-century Christians, see "[What does it mean to seek the kingdom of God? Matthew 6:33 and Luke 12:31 in the Contexts of the Sermon on the Mount and the Lucan Parables,](#)" David R. Bickel, 2007. For more on the first-century claims of the supernatural power of God's word to heal and forgive, see "[Ways the Son of Man calls forth life: Seeking the kingdom of God in word and sacrament,](#)" David R. Bickel, 2005.
37. John 3:3; 6:44; Romans 8:8