

Miracles: Merely Myths?

1. Under the relentless attack of modern naturalists, many religious thinkers have retreated to the view that miracles are not events in the space-time world.
 1. Miracles, they tell us, are myths or events in a spiritual world, above space and time.
 1. As a consequence, the biblical records of miracles must be "demythologized" or divested of the mythological "husk" to get at the existential "kernel" of truth.
 2. Rudolph Bultmann is at the forefront of this view of miracles.
 2. Using the concept of existential analysis and adapting it to Biblical analysis, Bultmann attempts to separate the gospel message from the first-century world view.
 1. His work added fuel to the discussion of relating faith to history that had arisen in the 19th century.
 2. One does not want, on the one hand, to lose all ties to history, and a thoroughly existentialist analysis tend to do.
 3. On the other hand, one does not want to "objectify" the gospel, to limit it to truths that can be appropriated for oneself by a knowledge of what historical study can verify.
 4. Something between sheer facility and fiction is sought.
 5. This is one of the reasons for the appeal of "narrative theology" and the revival of tradition.
 6. Narrative theology sees a "story" -- its function in communities and its structure -- as the way to understand the Bible.
2. Bultmann's Demythological Naturalism.
 1. According to Bultmann, "the cosmology of the New Testament is essentially mythical in character."
 1. By this he means "the world is viewed a a three-storied structure, with the earth in the centre, the heaven above, and the underworld beneath."
 2. The world "is the scene of the supernatural activity of God and his angels on the one hand, and of Satan and his demons on the other. These supernatural forces intervene in the course of nature and in all that we think and will and do."
 2. The New Testament, says Bultmann, presents its redemptive story in a miraculous, mythological form.
 1. "God sent forth his Son, a preexistent divine Being who appears on earth as a man. He dies the death of a sinner on the cross. . . . His resurrection marks the beginning of the cosmic catastrophe. . . . The risen Christ is

- exalted to the right hand of God in heaven and made 'Lord' and 'King.'"
2. Bultmann believes that all this is the language of mythology . . . to this extent the kerygma is incredible to modern man, for he is convinced that the mythical view of the world is obsolete."
 3. In view of this he asks "whether, when we preach the Gospel today, we expect our converts to accept . . . the mythical view of the world in which it is set. If not does the New Testament embody a truth which is quite independent of its mythical setting?"
 4. And "if it does, theology must undertake the task of stripping the Kerygma [proclamation] from its mythical framework."
3. Many in what is called Christendom insist that modern people must accept belief of the miraculous along with the message of the gospel, but for Bultmann this is both senseless and impossible.
 1. "It would be senseless, because there is nothing specifically Christian in the mythical view of the world as such. It is simply the cosmology of a pre-scientific age."
 2. Further, "it would be impossible, because no man can adopt a view of the world by his own volition -- it is already determined for him by his place in history."
 3. The reason for this, says Bultmann, is that "all our thinking today is shaped for good or ill by modern science."
 4. So, "a blind acceptance of the New Testament mythology would be irrational. . . . It would involve a sacrifice of the intellect. . . . It would mean accepting a view of the world in our faith and religion which we should deny in our everyday life."
 4. With unlimited confidence, then, Bultmann pronounces the biblical picture of miracles as impossible.
 1. For "man's knowledge and mastery of the world have advanced to such an extent through science and technology that it is no longer possible for anyone seriously to hold the New Testament view of the world -- in fact, there is hardly anyone who does."
 2. Therefore, the only honest way of reciting the creeds is to strip the mythological framework from the truth they enshrine, for "now that the forces and the laws of nature have been discovered, we can no longer believe in spirits, whether good or evil."
 3. It is simply "impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of demons and spirits."
 4. Therefore, concludes Bultmann, "the only relevant . . . assumption is the

view of the world which has been molded by modern science and the modern conception of human nature as a self-subsistent unity immune from the interference of supernatural powers."

5. This means that "the resurrection of Jesus is just as difficult, it means an event whereby a supernatural power is released. . . . To the biologists such language is meaningless . . . such a notion [the idealist] finds intolerable."
5. If the Biblical picture is mythological, how then are we to understand it?
 1. For Bultmann "the real purpose of myth is not to present an objective picture of the word as it is, but express man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives."
 2. Therefore, "myth should be interpreted not cosmologically, but anthropologically, or better still, existentially."
 3. That is, "myth speaks of the power or the powers which man supposes he experiences as the ground and limit of his world and of his own activity and suffering."
 4. In other words, "the real purpose of myth is to speak of a transcendent power which controls the world and man, but that purpose is impeded and obscured by the terms in which it is expressed."
6. Unlike the old liberal theologians who "used criticism to eliminate the mythology of the New Testament, our task today," notes Bultmann, "is to use criticism to interpret it."
 1. How far does this criticism lead Bultmann?
 2. Was the Christ of the New Testament a mere mythical figure; Bultmann's answer is "no."
 3. "He is also a concrete figure of history -- Jesus of Nazareth. His life is more than a mythical event; it is a human life which ended in the tragedy of crucifixion. We have here a unique combination of history and myth."
 4. The miracles and resurrection of Christ, however, are another matter; they are not historical by suprahistorical events.
7. Bultmann concludes confidently, "Obviously [the resurrection] is not an event of past history. . . . An historical fact which involves a resurrection from the dead is utterly inconceivable."
 1. He offers several reasons for this antisupernatural conclusion.
 1. There is "the incredibility of a mythical event like the resuscitation of a corpse -- for that is what the resurrection means."
 2. Second, "there is the difficulty of establishing the objective historicity of the resurrection no matter how many witnesses are cited, as though

once it was established it might be believed beyond all question and faith might have its unimpeachable guarantee."

3. Third, "the resurrection is an article of faith. . . . So it cannot be a miraculous proof."
4. Finally, "such a miracle is not otherwise unknown to mythology."
2. In view of this, Bultmann says that it is "abundantly clear that the New Testament is interested in the resurrection of Christ simply and solely because it is the eschatological event par excellence."
3. Hence, "if the event of Easter Day is in any sense an historical event additional to the event of the cross, it is nothing else than the rise of faith in the risen Lord. . . . All that historical criticism can establish is the fact that the first disciples came to believe in the resurrection."
8. What, then, is the resurrection, if not an event of objective space-time history?
 1. For Bultmann, it is an event of subjective history, for "the historical problem is scarcely relevant to Christian belief in the Resurrection. For the historical event of the rise of the Easter faith means for us . . . the act of God in which the redemptive event of the cross is completed."
 2. It is an event of subjective history, an event of faith in the hearts of the early disciples.
 3. As such, these "miracles" are not subject to objective historical verification or falsification, for they are not really events in the space-time world.
 4. Christ did not rise from Joseph's tomb, but by faith in the disciples' hearts. [Think of this the next time you sing, "You ask me how I know he lives, he lives within my heart."]
9. It is obvious, then that Bultmann is opposed to the miracles of the Bible, including the resurrection of Christ.
 1. But before evaluating his conclusions, let's restate his central claim.
 2. In view of his rigid naturalistic presuppositions, it is not surprising that Bultmann engages in a demythologizing of the Gospel record.
 3. What is of central importance here is his conclusion that "miracles" are by nature suprahistorical, that they are not events in the space-time world.
 4. It is difficult to formulate precisely what reasoning Bultmann uses to support this thesis, but it seems to go like this:
 1. Myths are by nature more than objective truths; they are transcendent truths of faith.

2. But what is not objective cannot be part of a verifiable space-time world.
3. Therefore, miracles (myths) are not part of the objective space-time world.

3. An Evaluation of Demythological Naturalism.

1. In view of Bultmann's view of the miraculous, several objections can be offered.

1. First, it does not follow that because an event is more than historical that it must be less than historical.

1. Gospel miracles, to be sure, have a "moreness" or transcendent dimension.

1. They cannot be reduced to mere historical events.

2. For example, the virgin birth is more than biological; it points to the divine nature of Christ and to the spiritual purpose of his mission.

3. It is not merely a matter of science; it is also presented as a "sign" (Isa. 7:14).

4. The same is true of Christ's resurrection.

1. Although it is at least that, it is portrayed as more than a mere resuscitation of a corpse.

2. It has a divine dimension that entails spiritual truths as well (Rom. 4:25; 2 Tim. 1:10).

2. But having said all of this, we are by no means bound to conclude that because these miracles are presented as more than the purely objective and factual, they are not at least objective and factual.

1. Even Bultmann admits that the New Testament writers believed these events to be historical: "It cannot be denied that the resurrection of Jesus is often used in the New Testament as a miraculous proof . . . [but] both the legend of the empty tomb and the appearances insist on the physical reality of the risen body of the Lord."

2. Bultmann adds, however, that "these are most certainly later embellishments of the primitive tradition."

3. Apart from simply presupposing the scientific "unacceptability" of these miracles to "modern" people (which is a questionable assumption), there are no solid reasons for concluding that these events could not be events in space-time history.

2. Second, simply because an event is not *of* the world does not mean that it

cannot *occur in* the world.

1. That is, a miracle can originate out of the supernatural world (its source) and yet it can occur in the natural world (its sphere).
 2. In this way the event can be objective and verifiable without being reducible to its purely factual dimensions.
 3. Thus we could verify directly by historical means whether the corpse of Jesus of Nazareth was raised and empirically observed (the objective dimensions of the miracle), without reducing the spiritual aspects of the event to mere scientific data.
 4. In claiming that miracles such as the resurrection cannot occur in space-time history, Bultmann is merely revealing an unjustified, dogmatic, naturalistic bias.
3. Third, it is evident that the basis of Bultmann's antisupernaturalism is not evidential, nor even open to real discussion.
1. It is something that he holds no matter how many witnesses are cited.
 2. The dogmatism of his language is revealing.
 1. Miracles are "incredible," "irrational," "no longer possible," "meaningless," "utterly inconceivable," "simply impossible," "intolerable."
 2. Hence, the "only honest way" for modern people is to hold that miracles are "nothing else than spiritual" and that the physical world is "immune from interference" in a supernatural way.
 3. This is not the language of one open to historical evidence for a miracle.
 4. It looks more like a mind that does not wish to be confused with the facts!
4. Fourth, if miracles are not objective historical events, then they are unverifiable or unfalsifiable.
1. That is, there is no factual way to determine their truth or falsity.
 2. But if this is so, then they have been placed beyond the realm of objective truth and must be treated as purely subjective and unverifiable.
 3. If so, then Flew's criticism that we heard in a prior lesson is to the point: "Now it often seems to people who are not religious as if there was no conceivable event or series of events the occurrence of which would be admitted by sophisticated religious people to be a sufficient reason for conceding 'There wasn't a God after all.' . . . What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of

the love of, or of the existence of, God.?"

4. Let's rephrase the question for Bultmann: "If the corpse of Jesus of Nazareth had been discovered after the first Easter, would this falsify your belief in the resurrection?"
 1. His answer is clearly "no."
 2. By contrast, the answer of the apostle Paul is clearly "yes," for "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are still in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:17).
 3. Therefore, it is obvious that Bultmann's understanding of miracles is contrary to that found in one of the earliest known Christian records of these events, the New Testament.
5. Fifth, if miracles are not historical events, then they have no evidential value.
 1. Nothing can be proved by them since they have value only for those who wish to believe them.
 2. The New Testament writers, however, claim evidential value for miracles.
 3. They consider them "convincing proofs" (Acts 1:3) and not "cleverly devised myths" (2 Pet. 1:16).
 4. Paul declares that "God has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31).
6. Sixth and finally, Bultmann's demythologizing approach to the New Testament documents is unjustified for several reasons.
 1. First and foremost, it is contrary to the overwhelming evidence of the authenticity of the New Testament documents and the reliability of the witnesses.
 2. Second, it is contrary to the New Testament claim for itself not to be "cleverly devised myths" (2 Pet. 1:16) but an eye-witness account (cf. John 21:24; 1 John 1:1-3; 2 Pet. 1:16-18).
 3. Third, the New Testament is not the literary genre of mythology.
 1. One great Oxford scholar, himself a writer of myth (fairy tales), notes that "Dr. Bultmann never wrote a gospel." He asks, therefore, "Has the experience of his learned . . . life really given him any power of seeing into the minds of those long dead [who have written a gospel]?"
 2. Bultmannian biblical critiques are unfalsifiable because, as C.S. Lewis wryly remarks, "Mark is dead. When they meet St. Peter there will be more pressing matters to discuss."