

Miracles, Signs, and Wonders

Events which unmistakably involve an immediate and powerful action of God designed to reveal His character or purposes. Words used in the Scriptures to describe the miraculous include sign, wonder, work, mighty work, portent, power. These point out the inspired authors' sense of God's pervasive activity in nature, history, and people.

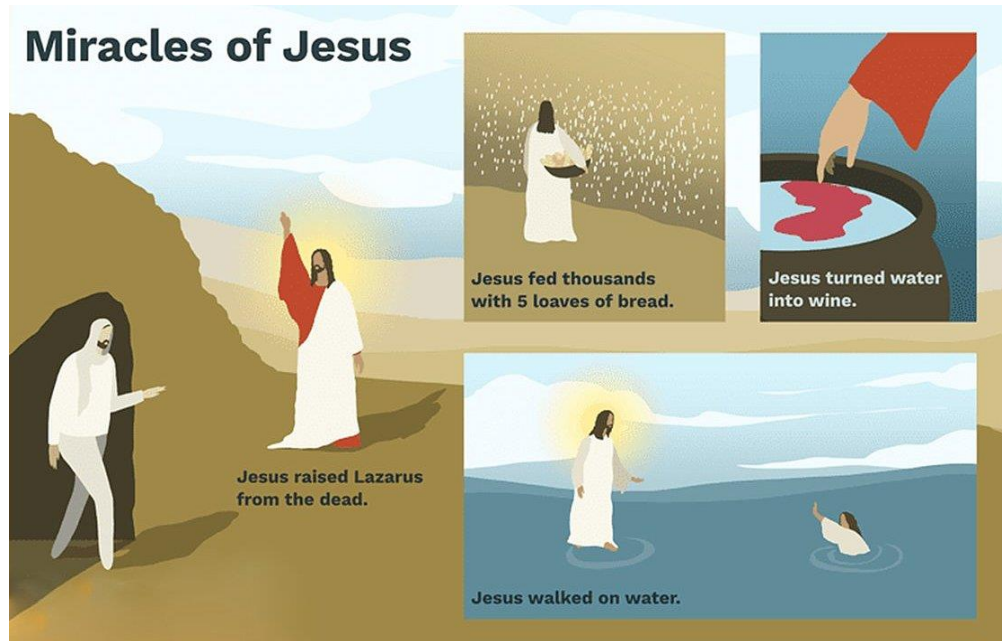
Old Testament

The two Hebrew words most frequently used for “miracle” are translated “sign” (*oth*) and “wonder” (*mopheth*). They are synonyms and often occur together in the same text (Exodus 7:3; Deuteronomy 4:34; Deuteronomy 6:22; Deuteronomy 7:19; Deuteronomy 13:1; Deuteronomy 26:8; Deuteronomy 28:46; Deuteronomy 34:11; Nehemiah 9:10; Psalm 105:27; Isaiah 8:18; Jeremiah 32:20; Daniel 6:27). “Sign” may be an object or daily activity as well as an unexpected divine action (Genesis 1:14; Exodus 12:13, RSV; Joshua 4:6; Ezekiel 24:24). The basic nature of a sign is that it points people to God. “Wonders” describe God's supernatural activity, a special manifestation of His power (Exodus 7:3), but false prophets can perform actions people perceive as signs and wonders. (Deuteronomy 13:1-3). Wonders can serve as a sign of a future event. Signs seek to bring belief (Exodus 4:5; compare Exodus 10:2), but they do not compel a person to believe (Exodus 4:9). At times God invites people to ask for signs (Isaiah 7:11). The signs He has done should make all peoples on earth stand in awe (Psalm 65:8). They should join the Psalmist in confessing that the God of Israel “alone works wonders” (Psalm 72:18 NAS).

New Testament

The phrase “signs and wonders” is often used in the New Testament in the same sense as it is found in the Old Testament and also in Hellenistic literature.

See further Matthew 24:24; Mark 13:22; John 4:48; Acts 2:43; Acts 4:30; Acts 5:12; Acts 6:8; Acts 7:36; Acts 14:3; Acts 15:12; Romans 15:19; 2 Corinthians 12:12; 2 Thessalonians 2:9; Hebrews 2:4.



“Sign” (*semeion*) in the New Testament is used of miracles taken as evidence of divine authority. Sometimes it is translated as “miracle” (Luke 23:8 NIV; Acts 4:16; Acts 4:22 NAS, NIV). John was particularly fond of using “sign” to denote miraculous activity (see John 2:11; John 2:18; John 2:23; John 3:2; John 4:54; John 6:2; John 6:14; John 6:26; John 7:31; John 9:16; John 10:41; John 11:47; John 12:18; John 37:1; John 20:30; Revelation 12:1, Revelation 12:1,3; Revelation 13:13-14; Revelation 15:1; Revelation 16:14; Revelation 19:20).

“Wonders” (*teras*) translates a Greek word from which the word terror comes. It denotes something unusual that causes the beholder to marvel. Although it usually follows “signs,” it sometimes precedes it (Acts 2:22; Acts 2:43; Acts 6:8) or occurs alone (as in Acts 2:19). Whereas a sign appeals to the understanding, a wonder appeals to the imagination. “Wonders” are usually presented as God's activity (Acts 2:19; Acts 4:30; Acts 5:12; Acts 6:8; Acts 7:36; Acts 14:3; Acts 15:12), though sometimes they refer to the work of Satan through human instruments (Matthew 24:24; Mark 13:22; 2 Thessalonians 2:9; Revelation 13:11-13).

New Testament writers also used *dunamis*, power or inherent ability, to refer to activity of supernatural origin or character (Mark 6:2; Acts 8:13; Acts 19:11; Romans 15:19; 1 Corinthians 12:10; 1 Corinthians 12:28-29; Galatians 3:5; 2 Thessalonians 2:9; Hebrews 2:4).

“Work” (*ergon*) is also employed in the New Testament in the sense of “miracle.” John the Baptist heard of the “works” of Jesus while he was in prison (Matthew 11:2). The apostle John used the term frequently (Matthew 5:20; Matthew 5:36; Matthew 7:3; Matthew 10:38; Matthew 14:11-12; Matthew 15:24).

Worldview Considerations

Contemporary philosophical and theological arguments over the possibility and definition of miracle reflect the altered worldview of the last several centuries – from a theistic to a nontheistic concept of the universe. The perceived tension between the natural and the miraculous is a by-product of a naturalism that is intent on squeezing out the supernatural realm of reality.

The people of the bible did not face this problem. The biblical perspective on the universe is that it is created, sustained, and providentially governed by God. The Bible makes no clear-cut distinction between the natural and supernatural. In the “natural” event the Bible views God as working providentially; whereas, in the miraculous, God works in striking ways to call attention to Himself or His purposes.

How do miracles relate to the natural order? Christian thinkers have responded in different ways throughout the centuries. Some hold that miracles are not contrary to nature (Augustine and C. S. Lewis, for instance). This harmony view contends that human knowledge with limited perspective does not fully understand or comprehend the higher laws that God employs in working the miraculous. Others (like Thomas Aquinas) have maintained miracles stand outside the laws of nature. This approach is called the intervention view, based on their belief that God intervenes in the natural order to do the miraculous.

One's view of the miraculous is related to one's view of the universe. A mechanistic perspective believes the world is controlled by unalterable natural laws and cannot allow for the possibility of miracles. Christians in every century have refused to have their universe so limited. They have affirmed the continuing miraculous work of God in the universe He created, continues to care for, uses to reveal Himself, and has promised to redeem.

T. R. McNeal, Holman Bible Dictionary

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