

MIRACLE (δύναμις, *dynamis*). An event that defies common expectations of behavior and subsequently is attributed to a superhuman agent; an occurrence that demonstrates God's involvement in the course of human affairs.

Biblical Relevance

Miracles can be characterized by four means:

1. form of the miracle;
2. identity of the direct agent (actor ultimately responsible for the miracle);
3. presence or absence of an intermediate agent;
4. observers' responses.

These means of characterization are interrelated. For example, Jesus of Nazareth's confirmation as the intermediary for the Gospels' miracles affects the theological functions of the miracles.

Miracles in the Hebrew Bible

The Old Testament designates certain extraordinary phenomena as "signs" and "wonders" demonstrating divine power. Forms of miracles in the Old Testament include:

- celestial events (e.g., [Josh 10:9–15](#));
- instantaneous healings (e.g., [2 Kgs 5:14](#));
- control of nature (e.g., [Exod 14:21–22](#));
- objects and animals acting in unexpected ways (e.g., [Num 22:22–35](#); [2 Kgs 6:5–7](#)).

The Hebrew Bible frequently portrays God as the direct agent of miracles in the Hebrew Bible. For example, [Numbers 22:22–35](#) explicitly attributes responsibility for a miracle to God, stating that "the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey" so that it talked to [Balaam](#) ([Num 22:28](#) NRSV). He often employs a human intermediary (e.g., [Moses](#) in [Exod 14:21](#)). Sometimes His power is so essential to a human character that the division between God's power and the power inherent in the human character is hardly recognizable (e.g., [2 Kgs 1:15](#); [2 Kgs 6:5–7](#); Lindars, "Elijah, Elisha and Gospel Miracles," 62–79).

Human responses to miracles depend on the observer's personal situation, sociopolitical situation, and theological suppositions. Thus, the same miraculous event can elicit different responses among various observers. For example, while Belshazzar's initial response to the mysterious hand's writing on the wall is fear, [Daniel](#) shows no fear ([Dan 5:6, 17–28](#)). In addition, a miracle usually affects the reputation of its agent(s). The Philistines of [1 Sam 4:8](#), for instance, are fearful of the Hebrew "gods" who afflicted the Egyptians with [plagues](#) ([Exod 7–12](#); Stirrup, "Why Has Yahweh Defeated Us?" [89–90](#)).

Miracles in the New Testament

New Testament miracles occupy a central place within narrative texts (the Gospels and Acts) and [apocalyptic](#) texts (Revelation and [Mark 13](#)), and they often occur through human intermediaries. The most significant intermediary in the New Testament is Jesus, who performs miracles of healing, provision of food, and control of nature.

New Testament miracles display God's power, confirming or demonstrating the gospel message.

- [Mark's Gospel](#) treats miracles as symbolic demonstrations of the [kingdom of God](#) rather than validations of Jesus and the gospel (Glasswell, "Miracles in Mark," 154–62; Robbins, "*Dynameis* and *Semeia*," 19; compare Saucy, "Miracles and Proclamation," [281–307](#)).
- [Matthew's Gospel](#) uses miracles to portray Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promise to raise up a prophet like Moses ([Deut 18:18](#); Baxter, "Mosaic Imagery," [76](#)).
- [Luke's Gospel](#) and [Acts](#) refer to the miracles of Jesus and the early Christ-followers as validating signs and wonders (e.g., [Acts 2:43](#); Achtemeier, "Lucan Perspective," 553–56; Lampe, "Miracles in Acts," 165). Miracles in Acts work within a mutually interpretative relationship with the Gospel message (Marguerat, "Magic and Miracle in Acts," 124).
- [John's Gospel](#) describes Jesus' miracles as explanatory [signs](#) (σημεῖα, *sēmeia*); the text never calls them "miracles" (δύναμεις, *dynameis*; Kee, *Medicine, Miracle and Magic*, 88).
- Miraculous signs and wonders are confirmations of [Paul's](#) apostleship and valuable evangelistic tools ([Rom 15:19](#); [2 Cor 12:12](#)). Paul considers the ability to perform miracles a spiritual gift ([1 Cor 12:10, 28–29](#)).

Throughout the New Testament, enemies of the Christ-movement are capable of performing miraculous signs and wonders:

- [Mark 13:22](#) and [Matt 24:24](#) attribute signs and wonders to "false Christs" and "[false prophets](#)" (Glasswell, "Miracles in Mark," 155).
- [2 Thessalonians 2:9](#) indicates that the "man of lawlessness" will perform signs and wonders to deceive Christ-followers.
- Revelation refers to signs and wonders as both heavenly visions and as instruments of [Satan's](#) forces ([Rev 12:1, 3](#); [13:13–14](#); [15:1](#); [19:20](#); Aune, *Prophecy*, 281; Aune, "Intertextual Reading," 130, 138).

Functions of Biblical Miracles

The function(s) of a miracle can be identified by several categories, including:

- instrumental—such as the heavenly [manna](#) ([Exod 16:11–21](#)), which serves to provide nourishment for the Israelites;
- communicative—for example, the hand that writes on the wall of [Belshazzar's](#) palace ([Dan 5](#); Collins, *Daniel*, [250](#));
- punitive—like the tumors that afflict the [Philistines](#) while they possess the [ark of the covenant](#) ([1 Sam 5:6–12](#); Culley, "Themes and Variations," [9](#));

- sociopolitical—as when God confirms that [Elijah](#) is the superior prophet by sending fire from the sky to consume his water-soaked offering ([1 Kgs 18](#); compare Theissen, *Miracle Stories*, 231–64);
- theological—which can be divided further into four primary functions:
 - validation of God—for example, the consumption of Elijah’s offering ([1 Kgs 18](#)) validates the superiority of the Hebrew God over [Baal](#) and questions Baal’s existence, and the heavenly voice and descending Spirit at Jesus’ baptism confirm His status as [God’s Son](#) (Kee, *Medicine, Miracle and Magic*, 80, 86);
 - validation of God’s message—such as Moses’ miracles before [Pharaoh](#) ([Exod 7–12](#); Woods, “Evidential Value of Miracles,” 21–22);
 - signal of God’s activity—such as Jesus’ miracles in Matthew and Mark (Glasswell, “Miracles in Mark,” 154–55);
 - divine act of salvation—the miracles in Acts, for example, are themselves saving acts, not just signs of salvation (Lampe, “Miracles in Acts,” 171–78).

Terminology for Miracles

The Hebrew words for “sign” ([אוֹת](#), *wt*) and “wonder” ([מוֹפֶת](#), *mwpt*) frequently refer to miraculous events. While the words typically function as synonyms, a sign explicitly notes the referential quality of a miracle (Simon, “1 Kings 13,” 6; Remus, “Does Terminology Distinguish Miracles?” [537–38](#)). The juxtaposition of “signs” and “wonders” occurs throughout the Hebrew Bible (e.g., [Exod 7:3](#); [Deut 4:34](#); [6:22](#); [7:19](#); [26:8](#); [34:11](#); [Isa 8:18](#); [Jer 32:20–21](#); Kee, *Medicine, Miracles and Magic*, 11).

Three words in the New Testament refer to miracles:

- power ([δύναμις](#), *dynamis*)—in certain contexts, “miracle” and “mighty deed” are alternate translations;
- [sign](#) ([σημεῖον](#), *sēmeion*)—often refers to a miracle that figuratively represents something else, such as the kingdom of God or the gospel;
- wonder ([τέρας](#), *teras*)—indicates something extraordinary.

The juxtaposition of “signs” ([אוֹתות](#), *wtt*) and “wonders” ([מוֹפְתִים](#), *mptym*) occurs in the New Testament with the combination of the Greek words for “signs and wonders” ([σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα](#), *sēmeia kai terata*) (e.g., [Mark 13:22](#); [John 4:48](#); [Acts 2:43](#); [Rom 15:19](#); McCasland, “Signs and Wonders,” 149–52). John refers to Jesus’ miracles as works ([ἔργα](#), *erga*; e.g., [John 10:20](#)). Another Greek word for “wonder” ([θαῦμα](#), *thauma*) appears outside the New Testament as a reference to miracles. In the New Testament, ([θαῦμα](#), *thauma*) refers to “wonder” in the sense of simple amazement ([2 Cor 11:14](#); [Rev 17:6](#)).

The modern term “miracle” derives from the use of *miraculum*, a Latin term for “wonder,” during the late Roman imperial and early medieval periods. Augustine (AD 354–430) first formulated a unified Christian concept of miracle (Harrison, “Miracles, Science, and Religion,” 495–96). The foundations for the Christian concept lie in the New Testament’s presentation of the extraordinary deeds performed by Jesus and His followers.

Miracles in Ancient History

Ancient Near Eastern and Greek societies understood miraculous occurrences as evidence of divine and spiritual beings' participation in earthly affairs (McCasland, "Signs and Wonders," 149–52). Typical ancient Near Eastern and Greek cosmologies reserved an essential role for [deities](#) and spiritual beings within the natural order of the world. Although miraculous events were extraordinary, they were not considered contradictions to the natural order (Ross, "Notes on Miracle," 45–46).

Common miraculous events in ancient society included:

- healings;
- [oracles](#)—such as those of the Delphic Pythia and predictions by Hebrew prophets;
- celestial portents—for example, the [Star of Bethlehem](#);
- extraordinary natural events—for example, earthquakes;
- extraordinary performances by recognized "holy persons," including Empedocles, [Jesus](#), [Apollonius of Tyana](#).

The distinction between "miracle" and "magic" derives from the observer's perspective, which can involve numerous factors, including: group membership; historical context; cultural context; and theological views. In the fifth—fourth centuries BC, many Greeks and Romans came to suspect traditional healers, diviners, prophets, and wonder-workers of being "magicians" (Graf, *Magic*, 26–27, 30–35). The classical and [Hellenistic](#) periods of Greek history saw a steep decline in the popularity of traditional Greek oracles, such as the one at Delphi (Luck, *Arcana Mundi*, 305–08; Aune, *Prophecy*, 24). Hippocratic medicine, which diagnosed illness as the result of natural and physiological causes, grew in popularity. Skepticism toward miracles placed many popular healers and wonder-workers on the defensive against their characterizations as "magicians" (Graf, *Magic*, 232–33). In the Roman imperial period, Christ-followers recognized wonders performed by or through God as "miracles" and commonly characterized all other wonders as "magic" performed by or through the [devil](#). Stratton refers to this as the "Christian magic discourse" (e.g., [Acts 8:9–15](#); [13:6–12](#); Stratton *Naming the Witch*, 107–41; see also Remus, *Pagan-Christian Conflict*, 48–82; Lampe, "Miracles and Apologetic," 205–18).

Modern Scholarly Approaches to Miracles

Approaches that focus on the historical and social aspects of miracles presently dominate modern scholarship. Such approaches include the following:

- form and redaction criticisms (e.g., Fortna, "Source and Redaction of Fourth Gospel"; Theissen, *Miracle Stories*, 43–228);
- socio-historical studies—a way of understanding biblical miracles within their particular ancient social contexts (e.g., Kee, *Miracle in Early Christianity*);
- social-scientific criticism—studies miracles and magic using the insights, theories, and models of modern social sciences (e.g., Craffert, *Life of a Galilean Shaman*);

- rationalization of miracles—defending the historical authenticity of miracles by explaining how a miracle may have occurred in accordance with modern science; this approach has fallen out of favor (Smith, “Present State of Old Testament Studies,” 20; compare Gruenthaner, “Two Sun Miracles,” 271–90).

As an example of the social-scientific approach, Kee and Klauck are among biblical scholars who label extraordinary deeds performed spontaneously as “miracle” and deeds produced through coercive ritual as “magic” (see Kee, *Medicine, Miracle, and Magic in New Testament Times* 3; Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity*, [154–77](#)). This distinction is based upon a characterization of religion as a petitioning ritual and magic as a coercive ritual.

Selected Resources for Further Study

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