

# Can We Believe in Miracles after Hume?

The Scottish philosopher David Hume claimed to have found conclusive arguments against miracles – and many have agreed with him. For two centuries Hume has stood as a doorman in academia against the central message of the New testament: the incarnation, the virgin birth, the miraculous ministry of Jesus, and his bodily resurrection. What are Hume's arguments – and how strong are they?

**Stefan Gustavsson** is a member of the European Leadership Forum Steering Committee. He is the director for Apologia – Centre for Christian Apologetics and makes his home in Stockholm. He was the founding General Secretary for the Swedish Evangelical Alliance. Stefan travels widely with apologetic teaching and training and is often involved in university evangelism and public debates. He is the author of several books on Christian apologetics and the Christian mind. Stefan is married to Ingrid and they have three grown children.

## Introduction

The historical context of David Hume: The clockwork universe

The claim made by David Hume: "I flatter myself, that I have discovered an argument ...which, if just, will ... be an everlasting check to all kinds of superstitious delusion, and, consequently, will be useful as long as the world endures."

## I. A Christian Understanding of Miracles

Definition of a Miracle: *An event where God makes a temporary exception/addition to the order of nature as a sign for us.*

- *Temporary*: does not interfere with the general regularity of nature
- *Exception / addition*: not grounded in nature but happens **with** nature
- *Order of nature*: it is detectable because of the order and regularity of nature
- *God*: an event that is caused by God's direct action
- *Sign*: the purpose is to point to God

## II. Hume's *Epistemological Critique* of Miracles

Four reasons that there has never been sufficient evidence in favor of a miracle to render it probable:

1. The Falsehood Possibility: No miracle is supported by testimony of a sufficient number of trustworthy people to rule out the possibility of

falsehood.

2. The Wonder Temptation: While we should normally believe that which most closely accords itself with past experience, the sensations of surprise and wonder often lead us to unreasonable beliefs. There are countless instances of tall tales of all sorts that stem not from reasonable inquiry but from a love of wonder.
3. The Ignorance Trap: Most reports of miraculous events occur amongst barbarous or ignorant people, who may not be sophisticated enough to disbelieve fabricated testimony.
4. The Religious Competition: Since every religion claims the veracity of its own miracles as against the miracles of every other religion, the evidence of all other religions opposes the evidence in favor of a miracle in any one particular religion.

Hume's conclusion: "... therefore we may establish it as a maxim, that no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle and make it a just foundation for any system of religion."

### **III. A Response to Hume's Epistemological Critique**

- A. All probability arguments are dependent on the background *context*.
- B. We are justified in believing highly improbable things if there is good *evidence*.
- C. We must distinguish between *adding* evidence and *weighing* evidence. The number of dead is greater than the number raised from the dead, but truth is not determined by the majority.
- D. We need to evaluate the evidence!

### **IV. Hume's *Ontological* Critique**

Hume: "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and because firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the case against a miracle is — just because it is a miracle—as complete as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined to be."

Francis Schaeffer: an open or a closed system of cause and effects. Hume assumes a closed universe: “firm and unalterable experience has established these laws” and “a dead man’s coming to life would be a miracle, because that has never been observed in any age or country.”

## **V. A Response to Hume’s Ontological Critique**

- A. Hume argues in a circle – his naturalistic presupposition shapes his reasoning.
- B. Hume assumes naturalism. But knowledge of nature and the laws of nature does not show that nature is all there is.
- C. We need to evaluate the evidence for the supernatural!

## **Conclusion**

John Earman in his book *Hume’s Abject Failure* writes: “An impressive amount of ink has been spilt over Hume’s “Of Miracles.” It is almost universally assumed . . . that [it] offers a powerful and original argument against miracles. On the contrary, I contend that Hume’s argument is largely derivative, almost wholly without merit where it is original, and worst of all, reveals the impoverishment of his treatment of inductive reasoning. Hume scholars will no doubt be enraged by this charge. Good! There has been much too much genuflecting at Hume’s altar.”