Dr. Robert Newman, Synoptic Gospels, Lecture 1B
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Review

In our last session we were discussing the various liberal lives of Christ. We want to now do a summary on some of the principles we can learn about that and some responses to it. So, a summary on the liberal lives of Christ: I think we can say, first of all, the guiding principle of liberal reconstructions is the rejection of miraculous. This is not a necessary principle to such reconstruction, but it is currently standard. One could use, for instance, spiritism, where you get Jesus studying under a Tibetan guru or something of that sort; but modern scholarship, at least, still considers this trash at present. So, whether that will continue or not, I don’t know.

Liberal Treatment of Fulfilled Prophecy

Well, if the miraculous doesn’t occur or is rejected then, then fulfilled prophecy is dismissed as one of the following sorts of things: a later invention. It’s obviously easy to make very impressive prophecies if you’re writing after the events, and then pretending they occurred earlier. We see some of that in the Book of Mormon, I believe, where we have rather impressive predictions of Columbus, and the Indians, and the Puritans and that sort of thing, but no evidence the book was written before 1830.

Intentional fulfillment, where a person can say, “I’m going to the store tomorrow.” Then they go to the store tomorrow. Yeah, it’s a fulfilled prediction but not terribly impressive. Some would take Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey in that particular category, and there’s some sense in which that is ok, but the problem is: can you explain all that sort of thing that way? The prophecy was vague, ok? That can be resorted to.

The fulfillment is misinterpreted, and that’s kind of a standard phenomenon today. So, probably the two commonest ones you will see in liberal circles today is, “The fulfillment was invented later,” or “The fulfillment is just a misinterpretation of
something that really he didn’t intend that at all.”

**Liberal Treatment of Miracles**

Well, miracle accounts then are going to be handled somewhat similarly. What corresponds to later invention, if you like, in explaining away fulfilled prophecies would be that these events didn’t actually happen. Somebody wrote these miracles into a story of Jesus long after, and nothing of the sort happened. It was “staged.” We’ve already seen in looking through some of the liberal lives of Christ reference to staged miracles, which we’d call “fraud,” of some sort. “Misinterpreted natural event” is, in fact, the way Paulus was handling the things: Jesus walking up the hill into the clouds; or the embarrassed people sharing their 2,500 lunches with the other 2,500 people, or something of that sort. Then the last one under miracle accounts, he says “faith healing.” We saw again in the liberal lives of Christ how that was rather common. So this is kind of the guiding principle: the rejection of the miraculous.

**Resulting Attitude toward the Biblical Material**

What’s the resulting attitude? The resulting attitude towards the biblical material is progressive skepticism. So first you see them rejecting the theological explanations such as we see in Paul and Peter and John’s epistles, and then in the Gospel of John, etc., and then gradually getting into seeing all these miracles and having to explain them away. But even when you’ve gotten down to Mark, you’ve still got miracles. We’ll see when we discuss Bultmann’s “Form Criticism,” which is near the end of our course here, that he finally, after reducing miracles to their simplest form, has to throw them out as not having occurred because he doesn’t believe in the miraculous.

However, as we had mentioned earlier, Renan had pointed out the kind of enigma that you see with the miracles taken to Jesus, so that he then began to sort the various characteristics of Jesus into the ethical teacher of righteousness, revolutionary, and the martyr, etc. The resulting picture of Jesus is a historical enigma if the miracles are removed.
If Jesus never existed, like we would think of, say, Paul Bunyan or somebody like that, and as the communists often claimed of Jesus, then the question is: “Where did all the historical evidence come from? How did it pop up in four or five different sources and that sort of thing? If he existed but he’s only a fraud, where did the ethical teaching come from?” That’s going to be the question. After all, you’ve got some very impressive ethical teaching in the Gospels that has engaged philosophers, ethicists, and theologians for many, many centuries. If Jesus was only a gentle teacher of righteousness, why did he receive all the opposition, particularly from the particular sources, if the Pharisees were really interested in right living, if you like. You can understand maybe more from the Sadducees, or something of that sort. So, why did he receive all the opposition, particularly from those sources? If Jesus was only a revolutionary, where did all the non-revolutionary teaching come from? How can the moral teaching of Jesus be reconciled with his messianic claims apart from the biblical explanation? This is C.S. Lewis’ trilemma: Jesus was either a lunatic, liar, or Lord. How do you handle that sort of thing?

If Jesus is not supernatural, then we must leave out one part of the data to construct a consistent personality model for the human-only Jesus. You’re seeing even the post-Bultmannians are coming across that kind of problem. Why does he seem to be humble and submitted and yet feel he is unique, and that sort of thing?

On Throwing out Data about Jesus

Whenever you claim that some aspect of this data has to be thrown out you really have to explain how it got there and how it got there early. How did that happen? That’s one of the complications regarding the deity of Jesus. As J. Gresham Machen pointed out early in the 20th century, the picture of Jesus as being more than human shows up in the most Jewish parts of the gospels; how did it get there? Well, this usually requires us to insert some kind of a secret plot theory into Jesus’ life; or you have to insert some kind of unknown genius into early Christianity, and it presumes that the gospels are basically unreliable.

But, if Jesus is the God-man-Messiah who has also come to demonstrate what sin
is and point it out to people, then Jesus’ multi-facet personality and actions make sense, and the gospels are reliable. Craig Blomberg, remember the book I mentioned earlier, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, shows that if it’s not assumed in advance that miracles can’t occur, then the gospels look very impressive indeed. I think that’s well worth reading that over.

So that really brings us back to the questions: “Is it really true that miracles cannot occur?” or, “Are the arguments against the miraculous valid?” Well, that’s the primary issue then into some sense to which the New Testament historicity reduces. If miracles can occur, then the New Testament gives every evidence that it is of reliable history. If miracles cannot happen, then the New Testament is unreliable, and the liberals may be justified in leaving out whatever New Testament data do not fit it.

**Arguments against the Miraculous**

**Deductive Argument**

Well, let’s look at some arguments against the miraculous. I’m going to start out with a deductive argument first of all. I have not seen this one in print formally, but it does seem to color liberal arguments. It takes this form: “A miracle is a violation of natural law.” Well, what does it mean to “violate natural law”? Well, it might mean to commit a sin, or commit a logical fallacy, or to commit an aesthetic blunder, and God cannot commit fallacies. He’s not going to sin. He’s not going to blunder aesthetically. Therefore, God cannot do miracles. You kind of have this implied often. Note this argument doesn’t work for satanic miracles. Satan can sin, can blunder aesthetically, etc.

Well, the logical structure of this argument is sound. We have to examine each proposition. Is a miracle necessarily a violation of natural law? Well, that’s a good question. Here I have a pen and it is sitting here on my paper. The natural law is that gravity is holding the pen down, and the electromagnetic forces that make up solids are keeping the thing from going through the paper and the desk and the table. So it stays right there. But low and behold, the pen rises from the table. What has happened? I haven’t violated natural laws. I have intervened and caused something to happen that
wouldn’t have happened otherwise. So lifting a pen like that is not a violation of the law of gravity.

It is true, however, that “the miracle is the violation of natural law” has been used by Christians as common definition of miracle, so I’m not going to fault that too badly. But my read would be some miracles intervene in natural laws and bring another force into play if you like. Some of them, like creating the universe, seem not to violate but at least override or supersede it or something. There is, of course, an ambiguity in the term “law” when the deductive argument claims it to violate natural laws is a sin. Sin, in fact, is a moral law, not natural law; and fallacy applies to logical law, not a natural laws; and a blunder applies aesthetic laws, if you like. But are we justified in mixing moral precepts with physical constraints? Does breaking a physical law necessarily imply moral sin has occurred, or any of these others?

Perhaps physical law does not fall into any of these categories, and to violate physical law is to commit a miracle. Okay? And it’s not clear that’s a real problem. So it’s an ambiguity of natural law, if you like, in the second statement. Even if we grant the first statement “violation of natural law” and even say “to violate natural law is to sin” if you like, or something like that, it’s clear that the Bible contains moral laws which are only intended for man, and God can “violate” them some sense.

So humans are not to take vengeance. God says, “Vengeance is mine.” He can take it, right? God can, in some sense, kill humans in various circumstances that if we were to do, that would be wrong for us to do that. Those really say that there are certain sins that relate to us arrogating what God has restricted to himself. Remember even in the situation when Uzziah goes into the temple to offer incense, which the priests could offer but the king was not supposed to offer. So laws can often take that kind of form if you like.

So God can command us to worship him because of who he is, but we should not command people to worship us. Thus the Bible has precedence for what we may call “person dependent” laws. Some violations for us might not be a violation for God, as that
law does not apply to him. It’s dangerous to limit or judge God by our standards.

So the deductive argument is not conclusive, especially if miracles are connected with God as one of his attributes. Since we cannot safely explore the supernatural on our own, arguing with revelation about it basically leaves us in the dark.

Sometimes people argue that the biblical picture of God is inferior because it pictures of God needing to tinker with the universe. If God was really great, he would’ve made natural laws better so he would not need to interfere with them. Well, as I already hinted earlier in my previous lecture, this assumes that God desired to create a universe which was fully automatic. Perhaps he desired to create the universe which allowed for his self-expression. Contrast a clock with a guitar? Okay, that’s the deductive argument.

Inductive Argument against Miracles

Let’s try inductive argument. A very famous inductive argument was proposed by David Hume. His is the most famous and most influential. Here is how it goes:

1) When someone tells someone of an event, we tend to accept the report, or be skeptical of it, in proportion to the degree of unusual. 2) By definition, a miracle is a very rare and unusual event. Our uniform experience dictates against the miraculous. Thus, we should be very skeptical of any reports about miracles. 3) The means by which we know something is our experience to the world. Since miracles go against this and upset our uniform experience, we tend to explain them by some naturalistic means unless that explanation would itself be more unusual than accepting a miracle. That’s some of Hume’s argument if you like. Then he shifts from his argument to a program. 4) Thus when a miracle is reported, we should reject it unless any naturalistic explanation would be even more unusual.

Well, let’s analyze that. The first one: someone must tell us the event [and] we tend to accept it or reject it proportionally to the degree that it is unusual. That’s certainly true. Our skepticism does increase as one claims to have seen or met X yesterday as X sifts from, say, one of the teachers in your school to the President of United States, or to Queen Elizabeth, or something like that; or Marin Luther, someone who is dead, or Jesus. Okay? It’s more skeptical when you hear these more unusual reports.
2A) By definition, a miracle is a very rare and unusual event. That’s correct. Okay? The Bible says that miracles are very rare events. We should tend to be skeptical of reports of them.  

2B) Our uniform experience dictates against miraculous is incorrect. Hume has shifted the definition of miracle from a rare event to an impossible event. His conclusion is thus the result of a circular argument. After all, whose uniform experience is Hume considering? There are people who have claimed to have seen miracles, Okay? Over what time period? How many individuals is he including? To try to use uniform experience of all humanity would not work; as some people report they have seen miracles. This is true even in modern times. We have non-sympathetic reports of cult miracles in the literature. Take Fatima. Take spontaneous human combustion. Look that one up on Google if you are interested in what that’s all about.

The more general problem is: if we assume that miracles do occur, this methodology tells us to explain them away anyhow. Thus, the argument must be inadequate since it does not include a method to test their possible occurrence.

C.S. Lewis responds to uniform experience argument in his book *Miracles*, in my edition pages 122 to 124. John Warwick Montgomery discusses it in his book *Christianity for the Tough Minded*, page 42. Uniform experience is a poor argument as there may be a whole realm of reality which we cannot sense and which must be revealed to us through revelation, as a deaf or blind person must depend on the revelation [of others] for the sense they lack. So that is Hume’s argument against miraculous.

**Harnack’s Argument**

Let’s move to another one of these arguments, and that’s Adolf Harnack’s argument in *What is Christianity?*, the Harper Torchback edition, pages 24 and 25. He says: “We do not need to accept miracles because they’re based on primitive ignorance.” And here’s how the argument goes: In New Testament times, miracles were thought to be commonplace. Andrew Dickson White and his book *The History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* argues this sort of thing at great length. The problem is the reactions of people in New Testament accounts show they did not expect
miraculous interventions nor that they were ho-hum events. When Jesus begins doing miracles, huge crowds begin to flock, okay? Would they flock to him if those were everyday events and that they had seen one every day of their life?

The disciples do not typically expect Jesus to work a miracle to get them out of a jam: feeding the 5,000, the unexpected storm at sea. They want him to do something—I’m not sure what they want him to do—but they are surely amazed when what he did do happened. New Testament people always marvel when these miracles occur, and they have trouble drawing simple lessons from them. This implies that they did not view them as common, or even as expected.

Harnack argues from reports of secular literature that the miracle accounts were common in the New Testament period. These are not as well attested, nor as clear, as the New Testament accounts. But we should not rule out some of these, as the Bible itself allows for miracles by satanic power. There were remarks about the accounts in Exodus about the magicians trying to match Moses, and they begin to draw some strong conclusions when they can’t match the match if you will. So we must be careful in deciding what can and cannot occur on the basis of our preconceptions. An example of that: late 18th century scientists in France and in America, including Thomas Jefferson, refused to believe that stones fell from the sky because only peasants and priests reported seeing them. But it eventually turned out that stones do fall from the sky; they're called “meteors,” okay? We have lots of them in our museums now.

The second point that Harnack made was New Testament people did not know enough science to recognize a miracle when they saw one (page 25). Well, this appeal to our pride in high technology, much of our advancing technology, does look miraculous to primitives. You have your radio, telephone, computer etc. There are a lot of et ceteras since I’ve made these lectures. However, can we now explain Jesus’s miracles by the means of high technology? Walking on the water, was he really riding on a hovercraft
and they missed noticing the craft and all the racket it made? So we at least don’t have any technology to explain how that sort of thing [walking on water] happened.

New Testament people knew which diseases would not heal suddenly: blindness, death, leprosy, crippled limbs, etc. People today still cannot explain these methods and these miracles with technology. Consider Mark 6, walking on water. Mark 7, the deaf and mute healed. Mark 8, the feeding of the 4,000.

It’s impressive just that Jesus did these types of miracles which still stump us in the 21st century. So there are some real problems with arguments against the miraculous.

**What does the miraculous do to science?**

What does the acceptance of the miraculous do to scientific history, or to science in general? Many historians and scientists are scared of a miracle because they think that then the whole bottom drops out of their work, as their job is to explain reality. This would introduce a whole new realm. Scientific historians feel there should be no miraculous interventions needed to explain history. Well, adding miracles does add a new dimension to reality for many people. I’m not sure I’ve experienced any miracles. I’ve had some fairly wonderful answers to prayer, but I’m not sure that I’ve seen anything that I would explicitly claim as a miracle. History has thus been “explained,” if you might [put] quotes around it, with miracles, but we don’t know whether the explanations are true since we cannot check them; we do not have time machines.

What difference does adding miracles make to explaining history? Well, first it makes an enormous difference on the scale of ultimate explanation. If there’s a God who intervenes, then history is certainly going to be affected on a large scale. God and other supernatural beings introduce the possibility of new purposes and new goals in history which we might not otherwise know about or be able to figure out from down here inside history. What difference miracles make on a small scale will depend on the actual frequency of miracles at that particular time and place.
It may be that there are points in history when miracles were happening but they were not important historically. I would suggest from biblical warrant that regeneration is miraculous and it does affect history. But it’s not the sort of thing like multiplying the loaves and the fishes, or opening the Red Sea, or something of that sort. There may be points in history where miracles are extremely important for understanding the events.

Miracles, of course, do add another variable for use in constructing models, but it doesn’t follow that this variable must be invoked at every gap any more than any other mode of explanation must be invoked at any other gap. There are already plenty of difficult factors to assess—variables in understanding history: individual personalities, backgrounds, motivations, economics, etc. We can’t get inside a person to see their motivations. We know motivations exist because we’re inside ourselves, but we can’t see the others. We don’t have to invoke a miracle whenever an event occurs which we cannot explain. I have a PowerPoint talk on the miraculous; I don’t remember the title of it right at the moment, which [i.e., the talk] does suggest somewhat, you might say, [are] principles [for] recognizing miracles, and that sort of thing.

Well I’ll say a word about it since we’re here, okay; I can’t reproduce the whole talk. I look at the biblical terms used for miracles, and since my Hebrew’s not that great, I’m primarily looking at the Greek terms for miracles. You have dunamis, which means “power.” So a miracle is a work involving unusual power of some sort. While that might not be the physical term for energy per unit of time, but “power” okay.

Then there’s the two terms thalma and teros, which speak of a miracle as something wonderful, amazing, marvelous; that sort of thing. So we think of miracle as something marvelous. And then there’s the third term semeion, which speaks of miracle as significant. And so suggestions should be that probably our default is we don’t invoke miracles under normal circumstances, but if we see evidence an event that is sufficiently powerful, marvelous, and even significant in some way, that may suggest that a miracle is the best explanation of that particular event.
Liberals have often argued that the miraculous is irrational, if you like; but from a biblical perspective, the miraculous is not irrational because it’s the action of a rational being. In God’s case, he’s the most rational being, and it’s [the miracle] usually accompanied by revelation. Some people, as I say, object that miracles add an irrational element to history. By this they mean it adds an element [in] which they can’t predict what it will do. That does destroy the historian’s dream of being able to predict the future. But the Christian realizes that something irrational is not being added—that a mind is involved: God’s mind is not irrational.

Through revelation, God explains what he is doing in his miracles, before and after the event. Satan, of course, may or may not tell us what he is doing, and he is not trustworthy in any case, and sin and sinful minds are irrational. Okay? But God is not. So satanic miracles may be irrational, but in dealing with the motivation of sinful humans, we already have plenty of the irrational in history. Without even imagining miracles, you have got plenty of irrational things happening in history. In fact, the miraculous itself is the revelation of the unseen supernatural person named God when he is the miracle worker, just as human activity is a revelation of the unseen inner person.

Note the parallel activities of God and man: We can look at the outside of other people, and we see what they are doing; but we have to infer their motives, and we may be wrong. We can look at history and see what’s going on, and we can try to infer God’s motives, and we may be wrong. Okay? The Book of Job is a very powerful picture of this, as God and Satan are acting in the unseen world, and Job and his friends are observing what’s happening out there, and all of them botch it up because they don’t see what’s going on.

**Miraculous solves problems**

The miraculous certainly solves a lot of problems in biblical history as well as in natural prehistory. Liberals, as we seen, have not been able to make sense of Jesus
without miracles; but with miracles Jesus and the rest of Scripture make sense. It makes sense in how the disciples came to believe in the Resurrection; it actually happened. If it actually happened, it’s not so hard to see how they believe it, okay? They weren’t making guesses about an empty tomb; they were witnessing Jesus. It explains where the elaborate ritual, moral, and legal code of the Pentateuch came from. Liberals have to spread this over a thousand years and still have some troubles there. It makes sense of fulfilled prophesies, especially the coming of Jesus. Also natural history is—excuse me—natural prehistory is explained: the origin of life, origin of earth, origin of the universe, etc.

**Liberal Reconstructions of the Life of Jesus: Analysis**

This brings us to one last category we want to talk about here just a bit, and that is: What are we to make of liberal reconstructions of the life of Jesus? Well, this may sound very gauche, but there’s Satan’s work. C.S. Lewis captures this very nicely in his *Screwtape Letters*. I have a Macmillan paperback, and that’s page 105 to 109; and then the old hardback edition one is [pages] 116 to 118. [It] is the chapter there in *Screwtape*.

Screwtape, if you have read the book and you remember, there is a senior devil and he is writing to his nephew. Not sure how these relations work out in the demonic realm. Wormwood and Screwtape decide how to keep people distracted from the real Jesus. He says, “Have them search for the historical Jesus, and have them write a new life of Jesus every year.” That’s been going on before Lewis wrote the book, and it’s been going on since Lewis wrote the book. “Such work,” says Screwtape, “is called brilliant in those very circles.” You can see that in some of the hype over the Gospel of Judas and the Da Vinci Code and the tomb of Jesus, and all these things have come up in recent years etc., such work is called brilliant in literary circles but is based on the type of guesswork which would be ruinous in business, betting on horses, and things of that sort. This distraction from the real Jesus is a modern form of idolatry since they make up their own Jesus.
You might ask, “Why does God permit this?” Deuteronomy 13, verses 1 through 5, discusses why the Lord would allow false prophets to arise. Parallel in that culture, if you like, to liberals arising with new Jesuses in this culture. He says, and it’s the Lord speaking through Moses, that this is a test for people to see whether they love the Lord God who exists in comparison of the gods with human invention who often look more attractive or more tolerant of their sin. The world and its history is a testing ground to demonstrate to humans that we are as bad as God says we are and that only his mercy can save us.

There is a nice discussion of the reality of miracles from an Evangelical perspective is given in the book by Doug Geivett and Gary Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case of God’s Action in History*, InterVarsity, 1997.

**Summary / Conclusion**

Well, with that we end our first unit here, which is the historical Jesus. We don’t have time machines to throw away the Gospel, throw away our three, [I mean] four primary sources about the material. We will look at some material inside the Gospels, obviously, and the Synoptic Gospels further on in our course here. There’s lot of apologetic material out there. Naturally, I tend to recommend our stuff in the IBRI website, www.ibri.org, where we try and deal with the evidence in nature for the existence of God and then try and look at historical reliability. But there’s good material out there, but there is bad material out there as well. We’re going to try at least to give you some warnings regarding, at first, the bad, and then some encouragement regarding the good. Thank you very much.