



Does God Intervene in History?: The Question of Miracles

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The Problem of Miracles

1) According to the Bible, the Israelites were rescued from certain death when God parted the Red Sea. There is, however, no independent evidence that this event took place. So believing in it is not like believing in the French Revolution or the American Civil War. The Bible claims, as no standard history book does, that its story is sacred: it is the record of divine involvement in human affairs. To talk about divine involvement, however, is to talk about signs and wonders that form the backbone of the biblical narrative; it is to talk about miracles. The formative events in the history of Judaism are often ones which defy human or mechanical explanation. That is why they are said to offer proof that YHWH is God. Since the Enlightenment, such "proof" [that the Torah is true] may have turned into a stumbling block. It is not merely that the events in the Bible are not corroborated by other sources. According to arguments offered by Spinoza and Hume, it is irrational to believe that any such events occurred. If, as Maimonides insisted, Judaism does not contain anything abhorrent to reason, how can it encompass the miraculous? Prof. Kenneth Seeskin, Jewish Philosophy in a Secular Age, 1990.

Miracles In Exodus

2) God said to Moshe..."And take with you this rod, with which you will perform the signs [מִטְּבֵּל-תַּלְמֵד]. Exodus, 4:17. "For I have appointed you to change the course of nature upon your command." R. Ovadyah Sforno [Italy; 1470-1550], on the verse.

3) Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night God drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea. During the last watch of the night, God looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. He jammed the wheels of their chariots...

Then God said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen." Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and God swept them into the sea. The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen—the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea...But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. Exodus, Ch. 14.

Maimonides' View of Miracles

4) Aristotle asserts - though he does not do so textually, but this is what his opinion comes to - that in his opinion it would be an impossibility that will should change in God or a new volition arise in Him ...it is impossible that a volition should undergo a change in Him or a new will arise in Him." Rambam, Guide of the Perplexed [1190], 2:13.

5) According to Maimonides, the Aristotelian theory is committed to a universe that operates according to a fixed and unyielding pattern, a universe without free will...As we normally use the term, *free will* presupposes the ability to change one's mind. Suppose there are two ways to reach a destination: a scenic way and a fast way. If I am a free agent, then, having chosen one, I am at liberty to change my mind and choose the other.

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With respect to God and creation, the ability to change implies that at one moment there is no universe, then God decides to change this situation and bring the universe into being. This change of mind is said to constitute an instance of Divine volition. Maimonides' position is that by denying creation, the Aristotelians also deny that God can do anything different from what He has always done. In short, the Aristotelians maintain that God is invariant and can never initiate new action.

The crux of the Aristotelian argument is that change, and therefore free will, is incompatible with the concept of a perfect being. If something is already in a perfect state, it is not striving to attain perfection but has already achieved it, change would involve deterioration. If God is perfect, there is no superior condition to which a change could take Him. Thus, the Aristotelians argue that God's activity is constant, and His perfection is completely actualized; He has no decisions to consider, no potential to develop. Prof. Kenneth Seeskin, Maimonides: A Guide for Today's Perplexed. 1991.

6) Does not the supposition that one wishes at one time and does not wish at another time imply in itself change? Maimonides, Guide, 2:18.

7) Know that with a belief in the creation of the world in time, all the miracles become possible and the law becomes possible, and all questions that may be asked on this subject, vanish.....the belief in eternity the way Aristotle sees it - that is, the belief according to which the world exists in virtue of necessity, that no nature changes at all, and that the customary course of events cannot be modified with regard to anything - destroys the Law in its principle, necessarily gives lie to every miracle, and reduces to inanity all the hopes that the Law has held out...Maimonides, Guide, 2:25.

8) It is only by equivocation that our will and that of a being separate from matter are both designated as 'will', for there is no likeness between the two wills. Guide, 2:18

9) I have already made it known to you that the foundation of the whole law is the view that God has brought the world into being out of nothing without there having been a temporal beginning...Everything was created simultaneously; then gradually all things became differentiated...They have compared this to what happens when an agricultural laborer sows various kinds of grain in the soil at the same moment. Some of them sprout within a day, others within two days, and others again within three days, though everything was sowed at the same hour." Guide, 2:30.

10) It would seem that Rambam understands the first days of creation not as describing temporal events but rather as a hierarchical and sequential description of the causes and effects that make up the physical universe...The Divine will is described as sowing... Once the seed is placed, the plant grows on its own. By sowing, man causes plants to grow just as the Divine will is the cause of Creation. The subsequent six days reflect the sequence of cause and effect that bring about the development, in actu, of that original Divine will. As the laws of nature are activated, there is a sequence of events where one event causes another. In other words, the first six days do not describe the actualization of things but describe the process of how things will be actualized. Rambam understands that the six days of creation reflect the sequence of cause and effect that end up in the actualization of our current universe...[Miracles, then] are the natural result of cause and effect put into place at Creation, part of the fabric of the universe. Having established that the phenomena that we perceive as miracles are really natural events that occur infrequently, Rambam now addresses the issue of what are the conditions necessary to trigger those events. Are miracles the result of a new Divine will that is a response to a specific need or are they a consequence of the original will? David Guttmann, "Miracles in Rambam's Thought." *Hakirah*. Volume 3.

Pre-designed Disruptions of the Natural Order

11) Ten things were created at twilight of Shabbat eve. These are: the mouth of the earth [that swallowed Korach]; the mouth of [Miriam's] well; the mouth of [Balaam's] ass; the rainbow; the manna; [Moses'] staff; the *shamir*; the writing, the inscription and the tablets [of the Ten Commandments]. *Pirke Avot*, 5:6.

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tablets [of the Ten Commandments]. *Pirke Avot*, 5:6.

12) The sages do not believe that there is periodic change of the Divine will. Rather at the beginning of the fashioning of the phenomena, He instituted into nature that through them there would be fashioned all that would be fashioned. Whether the phenomena which would be fashioned would be frequent i.e. a natural phenomenon, or would be an infrequent change, namely a sign, they are all equal. Thus they said that (at twilight) on the sixth day He instituted into the nature of the earth that Korach and his company would sink (into it), and concerning the well, that it would bring water forth, and concerning the donkey, that it would speak and similarly for the rest...

Should you ask if all miraculous events are in reality natural phenomena, why were these ten particularized?...The Mishnah is merely teaching us that only these were created at dusk while the other miracles were instilled into nature at the time of their original creation. For example, on the second day, when the waters were separated, they had it in their nature so that the *Yam Suf* should split for Moshe, the *Yarden* for Yehoshua and so for Eliyahu and Elisha, and on the fourth day, when the sun was created, it had in its nature that it should stop at a certain time when Yehoshua spoke to it and the same applies for all the other miracles." Maimonides, Commentary on Avot 5:6.

13) "We believe that God's] will was present during the six days of Creation, and that all things always behave according to their nature as it says "Only that shall happen which has happened only that shall occur which has occurred; there is nothing new under the sun" (*Kohelet* 1:9.)

Therefore the Rabbis found it necessary to say that all the miracles that already happened, that will happen in the future as promised, and that are irregular, all were willed during the first six days of creation. Those things had in their original nature the novel behavior that occurred later, at a set time, and when that happened at a fortuitous time, people perceived them as if they were willed now. That is not so." Rambam, *Shmoneh Perakim*, [Introduction to *Avot* Ch. 8],

14) God made a condition with Nature at the Creation, that the sea should divide to let the Israelites pass through it at the Exodus, and that Nature should alter her course when emergency should arise. *Genesis Rabba* 5:5.

15) [Referring to this Midrash, Maimonides writes]: This notion consists in their holding the view [Chazal] that miracles too are something that is, in a certain respect, in nature.... God put it into these natures that all the miracles that occurred would be produced in them at the time when they occurred. Guide, 2:29.

The Objection of Spinoza

16) Nothing, then, comes to pass in nature in contravention to her universal laws, nay everything agrees with them and follows from them, for whatsoever comes to pass, comes to pass by the will and eternal decree of God; that is...according to laws and rules which involve eternal necessity and truth. Nature, therefore, always observes laws and rules which involve eternal necessity and truth, although they may not all be known to us, and therefore she keeps a fixed and immutable order. Benedict Spinoza [Netherlands, 1632-1677] A Theological-Political Treatise. First published in 1670.

17) According to Spinoza, God is free in the sense that there is no external cause to which he is subject. But it is not true that God is endowed with free *will* as we normally understand the term...It makes no sense to say that God can change His mind or can will something other than what is determined by His nature. This position stands in direct contrast to Maimonides, where *will* is defined by the ability to will and not to will (Guide, 2:18). Seeskin, Jewish Philosophy in a Secular Age.

The Objection of Hume

18) There is not to be found, in all history, any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good sense, education and learning, as to secure us against all delusion in themselves; of such undoubted integrity, as to place them beyond all suspicion of any design to deceive others; of such credit and reputation in the eyes of mankind, as to have a great deal to lose in case of their being detected in any falsehood. David Hume [Scotland, 1711-1776] Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding. 1748

19) According to this passage, the key issue is evidence. Since those who wrote Biblical history were interested parties, since there is a tendency for people to enjoy the telling and hearing of exotic exploits--[what Hume calls] "the usual propensity of mankind

19) According to this passage, the key issue is evidence. Since those who wrote Biblical history were interested parties, since there is a tendency for people to enjoy the telling and hearing of exotic exploits--[what Hume calls] "the usual propensity of mankind towards the marvelous"--and since the Israelites were a primitive people, their testimony cannot be considered authoritative. Testimony that can [be considered authoritative] might contain astonishing facts, but it could not contain anything miraculous. Seeskin, Jewish Philosophy in a Secular Age.

20) It was not the priests or the people who parted the waters of the Jordan or laid fat the walls of Jericho. They did what God ordered and at the appointed time God's word came to pass. This idea shaped the narratives of the real events even as they came into being, at the earliest stage of their oral creation, from the moment when the happenings were formed into a *story* in the mouth of those who had lived them...stamped with the idea of the miraculous sign. Yechezkel Kaufmann [Israeli Bible scholar, 1889-1963] The Biblical Account of the Conquest of Palestine, 1953.

21) It is wrong, then, to suggest [contra Hume] that the key issue is evidence--or evidence conceived in a simple way. The participants did the best job they could of describing the facts. The problem is not so much that they were given to flights of fancy as that the categories at their disposal were different from ours...A modern observer would not describe the conquest of Palestine in the way it is described in the Bible. But it does not follow that the account given in the Bible is "mythical" and that in reading it we should be on guard for a propensity towards the marvelous...In a biblical context, one cannot make sense of things like war, famine or national liberation without seeing the hand of God. Seeskin, Jewish Philosophy in a Secular Age.

The Possibility of Miracles

22) Discovery commences with the awareness of anomaly, i.e., with the recognition that nature has somehow violated the paradigm-induced expectations that govern normal science. Thomas Kuhn, [USA; 1922-1996] The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 1962.

23) When pressed, many educated Christians are too loyal to deny the virgin birth and the resurrection. But it embarrasses them because their rational minds know that it is absurd. Prof. Richard Dawkins, The Blind Watchmaker, 1987.

24) If this week I put a thousand pounds in the drawer of my desk, add two thousand next week and another thousand the week thereafter, the laws of arithmetic allow me to predict that the next time I come to my drawer, I shall find four thousand pounds. But suppose when I next open the drawer, I find only one thousand pounds, what shall I conclude? That the laws of arithmetic have been broken? Certainly not! I might more reasonably conclude that some thief has broken the laws of the State and stolen three thousand pounds out of my drawer. One thing it would be ludicrous to claim is that the laws of arithmetic make it impossible to believe in the existence of such a thief or the possibility of his intervention. On the contrary, it is the normal workings of those laws that have exposed the existence and activity of the thief. C.S. Lewis, Miracles, 1947.

25) Newton's Law of Gravitation tells me that if I drop an apple it will fall towards the centre of the earth. But that law does not prevent someone intervening, and catching the apple as it descends. In other words, the law predicts what will happen, provided there is no change in the conditions under which the experiment is conducted. John Lennox [Professor of Mathematics, Oxford University], "Eliminating the Impossible: Can a Scientist believe the Resurrection?" April 16, 2014.

26) "In Israel, in order to be a realist, you must believe in miracles. David Ben Gurion.