



Vern S.
Poythress

The Miracles of Jesus

*How the Savior's Mighty Acts
Serve as Signs of Redemption*

“Vern Poythress rescues the miracles of Jesus from neglect and confusion by means of his sanctified scholarship. As a pastor, I am indebted to him for helping me make sense of the miracles for myself and in turn for my congregation.”

Alistair Begg, Senior Pastor, Parkside Church, Chagrin Falls, Ohio

“Poythress serves as a sure-footed guide through the towering magnificence of Jesus’s miracles, so that we readers can see them as the pulsing signs of redemption that they are—radiating his power and his lordship and, ultimately, the greatest work ever—the cross. The precision and tender pastoral practicality of *The Miracles of Jesus* will be sure to refresh every reader. Those who preach and teach will find the carefully layered depth of application a welcome help in unfolding the miracles to their people.”

R. Kent Hughes, Visiting Professor of Pastoral Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary

“Because the miracles that marked the ministry of Jesus are the most significant in Scripture, this volume largely confines its attention to them and shows with rich insight how they are essential for revealing the full scope of the salvation he accomplished. Written with a broad audience in view and in the author’s characteristically clear and winsome way, it will be read with great profit by those wanting to grow in understanding how the miracles of Jesus are essential for the gospel.”

Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary

“Blending profound insight with clear explanation, Vern Poythress shows us that Jesus’s miracles are not merely random acts of kindness and power, but—most importantly—are signs pointing to the central events of his redemptive mission: his sacrificial death and mighty resurrection. Poythress leads us from the incarnation, healings, stilled seas, transfiguration, and other supernatural displays of Jesus’s identity as glorious God, last Adam, and promised Messiah to the cross and empty tomb. Then he leads us on to the application in our own lives and struggles with sin and suffering. I highly recommend this reader-friendly and Christ-glorifying study.”

Dennis E. Johnson, Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Seminary California

“We all encounter both believers and unbelievers who firmly deny that miracles of any kind happen today. Then we meet other believers and unbelievers who claim to experience miracles at nearly every turn. Poythress speaks to both extremes in a way that strikes at the heart of the matter. Jesus of Nazareth was the greatest miracle-worker the world has ever seen. But why? His miracles bore witness to him as the Savior and to the good news of God’s miraculous kingdom coming to earth as it is in heaven.”

Richard L. Pratt, Jr., President, Third Millennium Ministries

“Vern Poythress is a master of New Testament interpretation, whose scholarship has shaped a generation of preachers. *The Miracles of Jesus* is a treasure trove that will radically influence the reader’s understanding of Jesus’s miracles. Poythress shows that, beyond proving Jesus’s divine authority, the miracles are actually powerful gospel displays of the wide scope of his saving work. If you wish to understand better how deep and wide is the redeeming love of Jesus, read this book and rejoice!”

Richard D. Phillips, Senior Minister, Second Presbyterian Church,
Greenville, South Carolina; Chairman, Philadelphia Conference on
Reformed Theology

“I am delighted to see available the principles and particulars of interpreting miracle stories that shaped my own understanding as a student of Vern Poythress. In characteristic fashion, he develops profound principles in the most accessible terms and proceeds to demonstrate their application through numerous examples from Matthew’s Gospel. I’m enthused to be able to put this book into the hands of my students.”

Michael J. Glodo, Associate Professor of Biblical Studies, Reformed
Theological Seminary

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Since this book is concerned for pastoral ministry
and for counseling, it is fitting to dedicate it
to my son Justin, gifted in pastoral ministry,
to my son Ransom, gifted in counseling,
and to my new daughter Lisbeth, gifted in counseling

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Part I

**INTRODUCING
MIRACLES**

The Reality of the Miracles of Jesus

In the Bible, the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—record miracles that Jesus worked when he was on the earth. He healed leprosy, blindness, and many other diseases. He multiplied five loaves and two fish. He cast out demons. He walked on water. He raised the dead.

Questions about Miracles

It is an extraordinary record, but it raises many questions. For many modern people, at the top of the list of questions is whether the miracles really took place. And then, if they did take place, what is their meaning? How did they happen? Why did they happen? Why did the Gospels record them? And what are we supposed to make of them? How are they relevant to us?

We want primarily to address the questions about the meaning and relevance of miracles. But it is also important to address the question of whether the miracles really happened. Miracles confront us with the question of what kind of world we live in. Does the nature of the world allow for miracles, or is the world closed to

them? Is the world just a self-sufficient mechanism that allows no deviation from its regularities? Questions about the world quickly lead to questions about God. Does God exist? If he does exist, is he the *kind* of God who would work miracles? And why would he do so? Who is Jesus, the one through whom the miracles took place?

Did Jesus’s Miracles Really Happen?

People have debated the reality of miracles for centuries. Whole books have been written. Since we are focusing on the *meaning* of miracles, we will not cover in detail the long-standing debates about the existence of miracles. For a thorough discussion of the debates, I would recommend two recent books, which include references to many earlier books: C. John Collins, *The God of Miracles*; and Craig Keener, *Miracles*.¹

Rather than have a thorough discussion here, we content ourselves with a brief look at the main issues that arise about the reality of miracles.

The existence of God. The first issue concerns the existence of God. At the foundation of the debate lies the issue of whether God exists, and what kind of God he is. Miracles as the Bible describes them are not merely unusual events or events for which people have not yet found a scientific explanation. They are acts of God, which dramatically indicate his power at work. If God does not exist, clearly miracles also do not exist.

What kind of God. A second issue concerns what *kind* of God exists. Deism pictures God as a God who created everything but afterward is not involved in the day-to-day operation of the world. He is distant. In general, deists believe that God set up the world so that it is a perfect mechanism and needs no “intervention” from him. A miracle would be like admitting that the mechanism has a defect. Accordingly, most deists maintain that miracles do not occur.

¹C. John Collins, *The God of Miracles: An Exegetical Examination of God’s Action in the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000); Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011). See also Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), chapter 29.

A modern materialistic worldview, influenced by science, believes that the world consists most basically in matter and motion, governed by inviolable mechanistic laws. Most materialists do not believe in the existence of God. But even if he exists, he is irrelevant to the day-to-day functioning of the world. His status is similar to that within deism.

So which is true? We may observe briefly that God, as he is described in the Bible, is a God who acts both to create the world initially and afterward to sustain the world that he has created. The Bible indicates not only that God's existence is displayed through the things he has made, but that he has made himself known to all human beings through what he has made. All people *know God*, but they suppress this knowledge and make themselves substitutes for the true God:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. (Rom. 1:18–23)

Arguments about the existence of God may be useful as a kind of tool for reminding people of what they already know. But the value of such arguments is limited because no one is religiously neutral. Human beings are in flight from God.

According to Scripture, God is continually active in the regularities of the world as well as in any unusual events. His governing

word is the real source of what scientists call scientific law.² He is the King and Lord over both the regularities and the exceptions. The regularities in God's rule are what make science possible. Far from being in tension with science, God is the foundation for science.

In addition, God is a personal God, not a mechanical system. So he can also bring about exceptions to the regularities when he wishes. Miracles are not only possible but are understandable and natural, given the fact that at times God may have special purposes that lead to special actions. For example, Christ's resurrection from the dead was exceedingly unusual, but it makes sense when we understand that in this event God the Father vindicated Christ and rewarded him for his obedience. Through Christ he now brings salvation to those who are united with Christ. The resurrection of Christ makes sense within a world governed by God. It does not make sense if the world is governed by impersonal, mechanistic laws.

Credibility of the miracles in the Gospels. Third, we have the question of whether the testimony about miracles found in the Gospels is credible. Once again, whole books have been written on this. The testimony will never be credible to a modern person if he has already decided that God does not exist or that miracles are impossible. But if he believes that God exists and that miracles are possible, the issue still remains as to whether particular miracles actually took place. For example, what about Jesus's casting out demons (Matt. 8:28–34) or his healing the centurion's slave (Matt. 8:5–13)? Did these particular events really take place, and did they take place in the manner described in the Gospels?

There are three subquestions involved here. One is whether the human beings who wrote the Gospels intended to claim that the events really happened. Even a naive reading suggests that they did. And this naive impression is confirmed by an explicit statement in Luke 1:1–4 concerning Luke's historical investigation. He says

²Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), especially chapter 1.

that he wrote his Gospel in order that “you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught” (v. 4). The Gospel of John indicates that it has recorded “things that Jesus did” (21:25). It provides this record “so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (20:31). This purpose presupposes the claim that John is not just providing fiction.³

Second, were the writers of the Gospels actually successful? Are the Gospels historically reliable, at least as reliable as reports from other human historians? It is helpful to look at the book of Acts, which was written by the same human author as the Gospel of Luke (see Acts 1:1). Some of the information in Acts about the Roman Empire can be cross-checked using information about Rome from other sources, and this checking confirms the reliability of Acts. Modern defenses of reliability go into this kind of information.⁴ Again, because of our focus, we will leave this discussion to other books.

Third, do the Gospels have not merely human authority but also divine authority in what they say? If so, then they are completely true and trustworthy in what they say about miracles. They are not just more or less reliable, as a human historical writing might be, but are thoroughly reliable, because of the trustworthiness of God. Once again, whole books are devoted to the question.⁵ I believe that the Gospels are indeed God’s words, not merely human words. In my discussion of the Gospels, I accept the divine authority of what they say.

Who is Jesus? What we think about the miracles in the Gospels also depends on what we think about Jesus. If Jesus is the

³ See further in Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels: A God-Centered Approach to the Challenges of Harmonization* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), chapters 5–6.

⁴ See, for example, F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003). We also have defenses that focus on the Gospels rather than on Acts: Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007); Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel: Issues and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

⁵ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2010); N. B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley, eds., *The Infallible Word: A Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1967).

Messiah, the Son of God, promised by Old Testament prophecies, the miracles make sense as a fitting accompaniment to his work. If, on the other hand, a person does not believe that Jesus is the Messiah, that person may also be skeptical about the reports of miracles. The issue of Jesus's identity may also have an influence on the earlier questions about God and about the nature of Scripture. If the Bible's view is correct, Jesus is the way to God (John 14:6), and beliefs about him may radically influence a person's belief in God. Because Jesus testifies to the divine authority of the Old Testament, a decision about Jesus also affects one's decision about the character of Scripture.

Searching for Truth

All of these questions about God, miracles, and the identity of Jesus are important. As we have observed, we can find whole books that discuss the issues. But in this book we focus instead on the meaning of the miracles. So we provide only very short answers to all the preliminary questions.

If a person is plagued by questions, I could say that he should consult books such as those that I have cited above in footnotes. But he might also begin simply by reading the four Gospels, again and again. As he reads, he asks who Jesus is. And, since there is always sinful human resistance to accepting who Jesus really is, and his claims on our lives, I recommend asking God to reveal what is the truth and to overcome our own resistance. A person uncertain about whether God exists can ask, "God, if you exist, please reveal the truth as I read."

Before they begin reading, some people might want to try to find out whether the Gospels are historically reliable, at least on the level of human writings. So they would read some of the books discussing the question of historical reliability. But it would also be possible to start with the Gospels themselves. A person may find, when reading, that Jesus makes claims on his life that he cannot evade. So the theoretical question of historical reliability, which otherwise

a person might want to debate in a vacuum, turns out not to be as important as it initially appeared to be. Jesus is unique. There is no one like him, among the founders or leaders of other religions or even among the other persons mentioned in the Bible. What he said and did is unique. It is so striking—and so convicting—that a person may realize that no human being could have invented what is found in the Gospels.

If a person comes to see that Jesus is who he claims to be, many things follow. Our own lives have to change, because Jesus calls us to be his disciples. And when we become his disciples, we accept what he says. What he says about the Old Testament confirms its divine authorship and authority.⁶ And then that same authority extends to the New Testament, which is an addition to the Old Testament, commissioned by Jesus himself.

The consequence is that the person who encounters Jesus and who travels down the route to becoming his disciple gets his fundamental questions answered. The Bible contains clear answers to his questions. The answers include the following:

- God exists. There is only one God.
- God created the world and continues to rule over it (in “providence”).
- God can work miracles when he wishes.
- God does work miracles at times when miracles further his purposes.
- We know that the Gospels present trustworthy historical accounts, because the Gospels are writings not only with human authors but with God as their divine author. What they say is God’s word.
- The miracles in the Gospels actually took place in time and space, in the way in which the Gospels describe them.
- Jesus is who the Gospels say he is. He is both God and man, and he became incarnate (took on human nature) in order to bring salvation and to fulfill the promises made in the Old

⁶John Murray, “The Attestation of Scripture,” in Stonehouse and Woolley, *Infallible Word*, 20–28.

Testament concerning the coming of the Messiah in the line of David.

The Meaning of Miracles

Granted that the miracles in the Gospels really happened, what do they show? Why were they done? Why did God bring them about? Those are the questions on which we will focus.

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"Poythress rescues the miracles of Jesus from neglect and confusion by means of his sanctified scholarship. As a pastor, I am indebted to him for helping me make sense of the miracles for myself and in turn for my congregation."

ALISTAIR BEGG, Senior Pastor, Parkside Church, Chagrin Falls, Ohio

"Poythress serves as a sure-footed guide through the towering magnificence of Jesus's miracles, so that we readers can see them as the pulsing signs of redemption that they are. The precision and tender pastoral practicality of *The Miracles of Jesus* will be sure to refresh every reader."

R. KENT HUGHES, Visiting Professor of Pastoral Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary

"In characteristic fashion, Poythress develops profound principles in the most accessible terms and proceeds to demonstrate their application through numerous examples from Matthew's Gospel. I'm enthused to be able to put this book into the hands of my students."

MICHAEL J. GLODO, Associate Professor of Biblical Studies, Reformed Theological Seminary

VERN S. POYTHRESS (PhD, Harvard University; ThD, Stellenbosch University) is professor of New Testament interpretation at Westminster Theological Seminary, where he has taught for over thirty years. In addition to earning six academic degrees, he has written numerous books on biblical interpretation, language, and science, including *Redeeming Science*, *Redeeming Sociology*, *Logic, Chance and the Sovereignty of God*, and *Redeeming Mathematics*.

THEOLOGY

