

**MERIC SROKOSZ****Miracles in Medicine – a brief response to Peter May**

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In his article on Miracles In Medicine Peter raises many questions about the verifiability of present-day miracles from the perspective of modern medicine. Before engaging with some of the issues that his article addresses I want to comment on the personal story with which he begins his article. *In nuce*, as a teenager Peter experienced headaches, the doctor diagnosed a possible brain tumour, Peter's father (not a believer) prayed and believed God had given him a sign that his prayers had been answered, when operating the surgeon was surprised not to discover a tumour but a less dangerous subdural haematoma, from which Peter recovered after the operation.

Peter's *interpretation* of the event is that it was not a miraculous answer to prayer but a misdiagnosis by the doctor in the first place. However, an equally valid *interpretation* is that the initial diagnosis was correct and God had indeed answered Peter's father's prayer. The key point to note is that there is no possible way to determine which *interpretation* is correct! Either *interpretation* fits the facts as presented by Peter. I have italicised the word *interpretation* in the preceding discussion in order to emphasise that often in such circumstances it is not the facts so much as how they are viewed *post hoc* that determines how we choose to understand events.

A further preliminary remark that should be made is that medicine, despite many advances in diagnostic techniques, is still far from an exact science. As someone once remarked, diagnosis is 'more of an art than a science' and the practice of medicine requires the use of judgement by the practitioner.<sup>1</sup> This means that a diagnosis might be incorrect, or seen as such in the light of subsequent events (as in the story above). It also means that unexplained occurrences, in medical terms, of people getting better unexpectedly are often labelled as 'spontaneous remissions',<sup>2</sup> which is neither a medical nor a scientific explanation, but simply a label. This implies that even if a miracle should occur it is more likely to be labelled as a spontaneous remission, or explained as a misdiagnosis of the illness in the first place, *post hoc* because a modern medical or scientific world-view does not leave room for the miraculous.<sup>3</sup>

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1 See e.g. Saunders, J. 'The practice of clinical medicine as an art and as a science', *J Med Ethics: Medical Humanities* (2000) 26,18-22; Warsop, A. 'Art, science, and the existential focus of clinical medicine', *J Med Ethics: Medical Humanities* (2002) 28, 74-77.

2 Strictly spontaneous remission is applied to cases of cancer, but similar terminology seems to be used of other unexpected and unexplained occurrences of healing.

3 The most comprehensive recent study of miracles, both in the New Testament and in the

## The dangers of miracle claims

Peter rightly notes that there are dangers associated with making miracle claims and these dangers need to be taken seriously. However, the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, describes many miracles and encourages believers to pray in ways that suggest that miracles, including healing miracles, should be part of their experience of God.<sup>4</sup> There is a tension here between being unduly credulous and having faith that God is capable of performing miracles today.

## What is a healing miracle?

This is a critical but, as noted by Peter, problematic issue. No accepted definition of a miracle exists, which makes investigating them problematic too.<sup>5</sup> The Lambertini criteria, as stated by Peter and against which he wants to test miracle claims, suffer from problems too. For example, with regard to the first of the criteria, paralysis might be due to psychosomatic<sup>6</sup> as well as physical causes and we don't actually know which applied to the people Jesus healed. Presumably Peter would not regard paralysis due to a psychosomatic cause as incurable? Peter himself notes exceptions to Lambertini's second and third criteria, including some of Jesus' miracles, but states that these 'seem to be of little importance'. However, that dismissive statement simply underlines the problematic nature of defining a miracle. There is no reason to think that miracles should meet these particular criteria rather than criteria based on some other definition.

One further point to note is that Peter states that the other types of miracles performed by Jesus (feeding of the 4000 and 5000, stilling the storm) 'have been strangely overlooked by would-be miracle workers'. This may be true of the types of miracle workers / healers that Peter seems to be critiquing, but there are reports of such miracles occurring in the modern era.<sup>7</sup>

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present day, covering biblical, theological and philosophical issues is that of Keener, C.S. *Miracles: the credibility of the New Testament accounts*, vols 1 & 2, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic (2011).

4 e.g. Jesus in Mark 11:22-24, Matt 10:1; Paul in 1 Cor 12:9-10 & 28-31; James 5:14- 18; God describes himself in Ex. 15:26 as 'I am the Lord who heals you', (NIV) or 'I, the Lord, am your healer' (NASB); interestingly, 1 Cor. 12:9, 28 & 30 speak of 'gifts of healings' (both plural in the Greek), which can be taken to mean that there is more than one kind of healing, so encompassing both medical and miraculous (see Thiselton, A.C. *1 Corinthians: A shorter exegetical & pastoral commentary*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans (2006), p.199).

5 See Keener *op. cit.*, (4), vol. 1, chaps. 5 & 6; particularly pp. 109-111 and references therein.

6 Shorter, E. *From Paralysis to Fatigue: a History of Psychosomatic Illnesses in the Modern Era*, New York, NY: The Free Press (1993); Shorter (p.ix) makes the point that 'from the patient's viewpoint psychosomatic problems qualify as genuine diseases. There is nothing imaginary or simulated about the patient's perception of his or her illness.'

7 See Keener *op. cit.*,(4), vol. 1, chap. 12.

## Did Christ perform miracles?

I agree with Peter that we cannot scientifically investigate Jesus' miracles, but neither can we investigate any of the biblical miracles, of which there are many scattered throughout the

Bible – both Old and New Testaments. Miracles are not confined to Jesus' ministry, and there were other miracle workers and healers.<sup>8</sup> The key issue here would seem to be whether God raised Jesus from the dead. If he did, then the Jesus' miracles, and the miraculous more generally, are rather easier to accept. If he didn't, we are wasting our time believing in Jesus in any case.<sup>9</sup> Jesus' miracles per se prove very little and are far from unique in the Bible.<sup>10</sup>

## Investigations

Essentially through careful investigation of a number of miracle claims, Peter concludes that none survive thorough medical scrutiny. While I am not qualified to evaluate the medical evidence for each case in detail, there are some points worth noting about Peter's examples and approach. First, consider the case of spontaneous recovery (healing?) from nerve deafness in a child, which is thought to be explicable based on research in a published paper.<sup>11</sup> The paper suggests a mechanism for spontaneous recovery based experimental work in animals. A key point to be made is that results from animal models do not always transfer to humans and, more importantly, there appears to be no medical evidence that the same mechanism applied in this specific case. The best conclusion that can be drawn in such circumstances is an agnostic one – there is insufficient evidence to decide whether or not a miracle occurred. This same point applies to a number of the examples given. In fact, it is often unclear how one could infer after the event whether a spontaneous recovery or remission was due to a particular physical mechanism or not.

To illustrate the problem of disproving a miracle, suppose it could be shown that in one of the cases where Jesus healed someone from paralysis that paralysis could have had a psychosomatic cause, would that make it any less a miracle? It is important to note that whether or not the paralysis was psychosomatic in origin is not the issue, but people have tried to

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8 See Mark 9:38-39 (interestingly Jesus does not oppose others doing miracles in his name) and for non-biblical examples Vermes, G. *Jesus the Jew: a historian's reading of the gospels*, 2nd edn, London: SCM Press (1983).

9 As noted by Paul in 1 Cor. 15:14 & 17.

10 Which is why Jesus was often regarded as a prophet by people who witnessed his miracles, as they would have been familiar with the miracles of Elijah and Elisha in the Old Testament.

11 Bailey, C. M., Graham, M. D. & Lawrence, M. 'Recovery from prolonged sensorineural hearing loss', *American J Otolology* (1982) 4, 1-8.

dismiss Jesus' healing of paralysis using exactly this type of argument – it could have had a psychosomatic cause, so it must have. This seems to be the approach adopted by Peter: find an alternative explanation and so dismiss the miracle claim even when, as in the case of nerve deafness discussed above, the evidence seems insufficient to make a clear-cut judgment.<sup>12</sup>

Second, another key issue is the coincidence of prayer and healing or miracle. As Archbishop William Temple famously said, 'When I pray, coincidences happen, and when I don't, they don't.' While alternative explanations may be found medically for any particular healing, the coincidence of prayer and healing is not medically explicable.<sup>13</sup> To illustrate this point with a biblical example, consider the Israelites crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus 14:21-31, regarded in the Bible as a miraculous deliverance. Was this any less a miracle because it was a strong east wind that was the mechanism that held back the waters? How God acts in the world is not understood<sup>14</sup> but even if the mechanism can be described scientifically (here a strong east wind) or medically (as in the case of healing) that does not necessarily obviate the fact that God has acted miraculously.

Interestingly, Peter states that in his work with Ernest Lucas he '... eventually ran into a disagreement. Ernest wanted to say that Christlike miracles today are rare. But I countered that if we cannot find a single one, how can we say they are rare? That is surely more than we know.' This problematic for the simple reason that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.<sup>15</sup> More importantly, this is de facto a cessationist<sup>16</sup> standpoint which fails to deal with what the Bible says regarding healing<sup>17</sup> and takes its stance on the apparent lack of evidence from the examination of a lim-

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12 Here no attempt is made to judge the validity or otherwise of the miracles that have been investigated. Rather the question is whether the approach adopted to assessing miracle claims is a valid. My own viewpoint is that many miracle claims are overblown, but I have encountered a small number of cases personally which seem genuine, but proving their validity could well be problematic.

13 Of course, many prayers for healing go (apparently) unanswered, but some are; see Birbeck, M.A. & Lauffenburger, D.A. 'Medicine and miracles: cancer and cures', *Perspect. Sci. & Christian Faith* (2017) 69, 67-75, for a discussion of how prayer, medicine and God might work together in healing.

14 Popular explanations include action at the quantum physics level or through chaos, in both cases exploiting the uncertainty associated with those processes; see e.g. Southgate, C. (ed.) *God, Humanity and the Cosmos*, 3rd edn, London: T&T Clark (2011), chap. 10.

15 Think of the black swan problem.

16 Cessationists see the miraculous as confined to New Testament times, for a variety of reasons that will not be rehearsed here.

17 See e.g. Turner, M. *The Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts: then and now*, Carlisle: Pater-noster Press (1996); or Deere, J. (1993) *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit*, Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications; for miracles in the early centuries of the church see Kydd, R.A.N. *Charismatic gifts in the early church*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers (1984).

ited number of cases (as described in the paper).<sup>18</sup> Surely, what the Bible says should outweigh what limited evidence we may or may not have for modern day miracles?<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusions

In light of the above, some of Peter's conclusions<sup>20</sup> seem questionable, namely:

2. The whole point of 1 Thessalonians 5:21 is to test everything and to hold fast to that which is good. This is not just a warning against false signs and wonders but an encouragement to take seriously the true ones (in this case prophecy). Likewise, while there may be false miracle claims, there will be true ones too.
5. It is not a priori obvious that a miracle would be immediately self-evident. Some might be, but a healing from a cancerous tumour might not be, for example. When Jesus healed the ten lepers he sent them to the priests as required by the law (Luke 17:11-19). However, the implication of story is that they were only cured on the way,<sup>21</sup> so that the miracle was not immediately self-evident.
6. Would you ask God to reverse the law of gravity? Yet that is what God seems to have done on at least four occasions – the sun standing still in Joshua 10:12-14; the floating axe head in 2 Kings 6:1-5; the shadow moving backwards in 2 Kings 20:1-11; and Jesus and Peter walking on the water in Matthew 14:22-33. These can be regarded as God messing with gravity, or with time (in the case of the sun and shadow) or with density in the case of the axe head. Whatever the case, they all illustrate that God's actions can transcend the 'laws of nature' and in three of the cases this was in response to a request. Laws of nature are the regular way that we observe God using to sustain the universe and he is fully at liberty to act otherwise. He is not constrained by the laws of nature and a miracle is just a way of working in the world that transcends the regularities that we observe. God does surprising things, miracles.
7. The mention of alternative therapies (and homeopathy) with regard to Jesus' miracles seems odd as no one would seriously think of reducing the miracles to unverified, anecdotal, and subjective events. Nevertheless, to be provocative, that is exactly what the gospels accounts are

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18 Keener *op. cit.*,(4) details a much larger number of cases and concludes that miracles do occur today.

19 As is the case with regard to the biblical miracles themselves, not least the crucial miracle of the resurrection of Jesus.

20 The numbering follows that of the original article.

21 Luke 17:15 'as they were going, they were cleansed'. Only one turned back to thank Jesus, presumably because by the time they were cured they were some way away.

seen as in terms of modern scientific understanding. They are eyewitness testimonies – unverified, anecdotal, and subjective – but no less true for being that.<sup>22</sup>

What are we to conclude then regarding miracles in medicine? Perhaps the following can be said:

- a) It is debatable whether there will ever be a medical proof, even for a genuine miracle. This is for two reasons: first, there are epistemological problems with proving that a miracle has occurred.<sup>23</sup> Miracles are theological not just medical events, as they depend on the understanding that God was directly involved.<sup>24</sup> Medicine can only determine whether a healing can or cannot be explained by current medical understanding. If medicine cannot explain how a healing has taken place two options present themselves. First, future advances in medical knowledge may explain the healing. Second, God has intervened in response to prayer and a miracle has occurred. Which option is chosen will depend on the presuppositions of the person making the choice.

The second reason, why it is debatable whether there will ever be a medical proof of a miracle, is that there is a tension between faith and proof. Biblically the emphasis seems to be on faith, as demonstrated by Jesus in that when asked to perform a miracle (a sign from heaven) he demurred (Mark 8:11-12). Ironically, Jesus had performed several miracles already, but refused to perform one to prove who he was. It is not clear that God acts in the world in such a way ever as would conclusively prove his existence.<sup>25</sup> In terms of proof of God's action in the world in the realm of healing, scientific studies have been attempted of the efficacy of intercessory prayer in helping those who are ill, but even under 'controlled conditions' it has proved problematic to demonstrate that intercessory prayer is effective medically.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, it seems unlikely that conclusive proof of a medical miracle will ever be forthcoming.

- b) Interpretation, presuppositions and *post hoc* rationalisation play a large part in how any unusual event is understood. Therefore, one person's

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22 Bauckham, R. *Jesus and the eyewitnesses: the Gospels as eyewitness testimony*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans (2008).

23 Stempsey, W.E. 'Miracles and the limits of medical knowledge', *Medicine, Health Care & Philosophy* (2002) 5,1-9. Keener *op. cit.*,(4), vol. 1, p.110 makes the point that 'showing an event to be demonstrably supernatural is ... epistemologically problematic, especially given different observers' varying standards of proof'.

24 If God was not involved then the idea of miracle becomes somewhat meaningless.

25 Even the resurrection of Jesus – the ultimate miracle – as an event in history, the evidence for which depends on eyewitness testimony, does not act as conclusive proof of God's existence.

26 See e.g. Sloan, R.P. & Ramakrishnan, R. 'Science, medicine, and intercessory prayer', *Perspect Biol Med* (2006) 49, 504-514; Turner, D.D. 'Just another drug? A philosophical assessment of randomised controlled studies on intercessory prayer', *J Med Ethics* (2006) 32, 487-490.

miracle may not be seen as such by another person (see discussion at beginning of article regarding Peter's personal experience). It is therefore important that we are clear about our own presuppositions when evaluating the evidence for or against a miracle (biblical or present day). The theologian Rudolph Bultmann is infamous for dismissing biblical miracles based on his presuppositions, expressed in the statement 'It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles.'<sup>27</sup>

- c) Just because there is much confusion and lack of clarity regarding modern miracle claims we should not become inured to the possibility of God's miraculous intervention in people's lives and in the world today, whether medically as in healing, or in other ways. To quote Shakespeare's Hamlet 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.' We cannot prescribe God's action in the world. He will do as he chooses acting in line with his character as revealed in Jesus, who was often moved to heal people by his compassion for them.<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, the issue of miracles in medicine will continue to be problematic as attempts to prove / disprove that a miracle has occurred founder on the varying definitions of a miracle and varying standards of proof that are adopted by different observers. 'Ultimately any testimony can be discredited if one's scepticism about miracles is thoroughgoing.'<sup>29</sup>

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27 Bultmann, R. 'New Testament and Mythology' in Bartsch, H.W.(ed.), Fuller R.H. (trans.) *Kerygma and Myth: a theological debate*, New York: Harper & Row (1961).

28 Matthew 14:14, 20:34; Mark 1:41-42; Luke 7:13-15; Jesus' response is consistent with the Old Testament description of God as a compassionate God (e.g. Exodus 34:6; Psalms 103:8, 111:4, 145:8).

29 Keener *op. cit.*,(4), vol. 1, p.13.