

**R. J. BERRY**

## **A Response to P. Addinall**

I am grateful to Peter Addinall's 'comment' on my article on the Virgin Birth of Christ.<sup>1</sup> This response is intended in the same spirit as Addinall's, as an aid to discussion rather than a defensive apology for my views in the original article.

Addinall raises some important questions about God's relationship to His creation, and, as he says, 'Getting the concept of the miraculous right means getting our conception of God's work in the world right.' This is of vital importance to us all; it is the *raison d'être* of this Journal. I will return to these (Addinall's points 2, 4, 7, 9), but first I comment on some of the more specific points raised by Addinall.

### **Addinall, Point 1**

I cited the crossing of the Re(e)d Sea as one of the few biblical miracles where we are told the mechanism God used ('The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night' Ex. 14:21). I do not dissent from Addinall's assertion that 'the Exodus was a demonstration of Jehovah's absolute power over the gods of Egypt'; the key factor is the place and time of the miracle, not that one group of people crossed dry shod while another group was drowned.

However, I have never thought of the wind as literally blowing the water away from the crossing place in a sort of Cecil B. de Mille type extravaganza. My assumption has always been that the wind acted to delay the normal flow of water, much as gates may alter the timing and height of predicted tidal rhythms. I have no more evidence for my assumption than Addinall has for his; my model is hydrodynamically more plausible than Addinall's but that does not make it intrinsically more probable. A Sovereign God could have used either method, or a completely different one.

### **Addinall, Point 3**

Addinall asks about the plagues in Egypt, 'if they were natural events, how could they be miracles in the sense of being direct consequences of divine interventions in the natural order?' I will come back to the idea that miracles are 'divine interventions', but I want to disagree with the implication that a 'natural event' cannot be a miracle. The whole procession of the plagues in Egypt can have a straightforward explanation in terms of well understood processes. Addinall writes, 'The case of the Nile turning to

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<sup>1</sup> *Science & Christian Belief*, 8: 101–110, 1996.

blood is particularly interesting. By no stretch of the imagination could such an event be regarded as natural.’ But one needs no imagination at all to recognize situations where water does turn blood-red: it is a well known phenomenon produced by phytoplankton blooms of dinoflagellates. It has even been suggested that the Red Sea got its name because of occasional outbreaks of *Trichodesmium erythraeus*. There is a species of *Haematococcus* which can stain freshwaters, but the most notorious organisms are those which produce toxic ‘red tides’ in shallow seas and brackish waters, killing fish and making shell fish highly poisonous. There are a number of dinoflagellate species which cause red tides; they are known from many parts of the world. In the Tyndale Commentary on *Exodus*, Alan Cole notes, ‘Either the red clay washed down from Ethiopia (which caused the annual phenomenon still called the “red Nile” by the Arabs) or the multiplication of red plancton (*sic*) would seem to be the best explanation.’<sup>2</sup> I would incline to the latter suggestion because the ‘turning to blood’ of Ex. 7:17 was obviously an uncommon happening which triggered a sequence of other events.<sup>3</sup> As I wrote in my article, ‘In situations like this it is fairly easy to suggest how God might have worked. The point of the story in Exodus is not simply to state God’s control over the natural world—that is implicit throughout Scripture and is one of the main inferences from the creation accounts in Genesis—but to emphasize His care for His own people and His response to specific prayer.’ I have to disagree with Addinall when he concludes, ‘If we wish to substitute for the total mystery an event which is open to rational explanation and plain description then we are not dealing with a miracle in the obvious sense; we have unquestionably moved to the realm of the mental and emotional.’

### **Addinall, Point 5**

Most commentators point out that the word translated ‘virgin’ in older translations of the Bible, really means nothing more than ‘young woman’. Notwithstanding, Alec Motyer emphasizes that on the nine occasions where the word is used in the OT, ‘wherever the context allows a judgment, *almâ* is not a general term meaning “young woman” but a specific one meaning “virgin”.’<sup>4</sup>

Addinall is correct in urging that Is. 7:14 should be read in its context, and it is true that nowhere else in the passage is there any mention of virginity. But the key to the passage is about a sign which the Lord will give, and Torrance is absolutely right to insist that a ‘young woman’ giving birth to a son is hardly worth recording. Only if there was something unusual about the birth would it become a sign.

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2 Cole, A. (1973) *Exodus*. Leicester: IVP. Page 90.

3 Hyatt, J. P. (1971) *New Century Commentary on Exodus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. Page 336f.

4 Motyer, A. (1993) *The Prophecy of Isaiah*. Leicester: IVP. Page 85.

### **Addinall, Point 6**

Addinall asks why the apostles do not refer to the Virgin Birth in their preaching and doctrinal statements. The short answer is that we do not know. But in the extracts recorded for us in the NT, there is little need to refer to Jesus's parentage. The essential emphasis is that he was God, even though in human likeness (e.g. Phil. 2:6–11); redemption and reconciliation are possible through the cross and resurrection, not by the incarnation as such. In my article, I quoted from the document produced by the Church of England bishops when they were challenged to examine the apparent scepticism of one of their number about (*inter alia*) the truth of Christ's Virgin Birth. I will not repeat the whole quotation but merely point out that they considered the same point as Addinall and concluded, 'The amount of direct testimony (in the Bible) to the Virginal Conception is not significantly smaller than for some other facts in the story of Jesus . . . it needs to be recognized that a critical weighing of New Testament indications is bound to be an inconclusive and even marginal exercise.'<sup>5</sup>

But it would be misleading to assume that the apostolic writers completely ignore the supernatural nature of Christ's birth. It has to be remembered that the general understanding of human fertilization until the last two or three centuries (and the details until the 1880s) was that the male sowed the seed (*semen*) into the field provided by the female. Questions of sex determination were not relevant. Hence it is interesting to note that the normal New Testament word for human birth is never used when Adam is referred to, and Paul never uses it of Christ, only saying that he came into existence like Adam: 'Whereas the first Adam came into existence from the earth, the last Adam came into existence from heaven (1 Cor. 15:47)—sent from God he came into existence of woman, but as a heavenly man. That does not mean that Jesus descended in his humanity from heaven, or that his humanity was preexistent. But what could be more explicit in speech about the Virgin Birth? Christ came down from heaven, the New Man, the New Adam.'<sup>6</sup>

### **Addinall, Point 8**

This is not the place to debate the robustness of David Hume's attack on miracles, although it is important that such a debate takes place. But in response to Addinall's belief that Hume did not argue tautologically, I call Keith Ward into the discussion. He points out that Hume set up his demolition of miracles by defining them in such a way that they could be disposed of without too much difficulty. Ward writes, 'They (miracles) are not well described as 'violations of laws of nature', a description chosen by the philosopher David Hume precisely because it helped to make miracles

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<sup>5</sup> *The Nature of Christian Belief* (1986) London: Church House. Pages 28, 29.

<sup>6</sup> Torrance, T. F. (1994) The doctrine of the Virgin Birth. *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, 12: 8–25.

seem immoral and irrational.<sup>7</sup> I return below to the relationship between laws of nature and miracles; suffice it for the moment to acknowledge that David Hume deserves much more and better than I have given him either here or in my original article (where I did little more than quote C. S. Lewis on the subject).

### **Addinall, Point 10**

Addinall draws attention to the inclusion of four somewhat disreputable women in the genealogy at the beginning of Matthew's gospel (Tamar who tricked her way into her father-in-law's bed; Rahab who was a prostitute; Ruth who seduced Boaz at the instigation of her mother-in-law; and Bathsheba who committed adultery and was a possible accomplice in her husband's murder). I think he is suggesting that Jesus was another man conceived normally but irregularly. If that is the inference, I must point out that Matthew specifically recalls the prophecy about a virgin/young woman conceiving, but more importantly repeat my original assertion that something like a virgin birth was theologically necessary for God taking human form.

### **Miracles: Divine Intervention or Divine Upholding**

However, the key issue raised by Addinall is the relationship of God to creation: are miracles interventions by God into a divinely ordered universe or is there a more intimate link between God and His work? At times Addinall tends towards a 'hands off' deist position. For example, he comments (point 2) on the wind that 'drove the sea back' (Ex. 14:21), that it 'would not have blown if nature had been left to itself'. This implies that there is 'something' that carries on performing unless God intervenes, just as the watch imagined by Paley goes on ticking because it had been designed to do so. Indeed Addinall explicitly accepts this interpretation, since 'nature is characterised by unity and harmony, and once it has been created, God retires (*sic*) from the work of creation to enjoy his eternal Sabbath. A most important relationship with creation continues, and that is the communion of man and God; but it is mankind which is left in charge of the natural order to rule and use it in accordance with God's will' (point 9).

I would not want to downplay in any way the doctrine of our responsibility as divinely appointed stewards,<sup>8</sup> but it is incorrect to interpret it as an alternative to divine action. Such is a false antithesis, and it leads Addinall to the weak (and to me, wholly unacceptable) conclusion that at least some generally accepted miracles are no more than coincidences which need the eye of faith to see them at all. Thus he writes of the crossing of the Red Sea that 'the intervention of God must then be

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<sup>7</sup> Ward, K. (1996) *God, Chance and Necessity*. Oxford: Oneworld. Page 83.

<sup>8</sup> Berry, R. J. (1995) Creation and the environment. *Science & Christian Belief*, 7: 21–43.

transferred from the natural world (as we usually understand the phrase) to the mental realm of Moses and pharaoh . . . May it not be, however, that people in general have tended to read into external circumstances what is in fact the direct work of God in our hearts and minds?' (point 2).

It is sadly true that many modern miracles (especially healing ones) exist only in the minds of their beholders, but it is emphatically untrue that all miracles are of this nature. The whole Bible is a record of God's intimate involvement with men and women through many centuries, culminating in His reconciling work at Calvary, testified by the empty tomb, the resurrection appearances, and the regenerating influence of the Spirit in both individuals and groups. This is central to the Christian faith. It is explicit in answers to prayer. It is unimportant whether an event which we call a miracle can be 'explained' by natural mechanisms or not, since 'all things are held together in him' (i.e. in Jesus Christ, who is 'the image of the invisible God' and who has 'the primacy over all creation'). In the Bible, miracles are signs. Hence Addinall's apparent distinction between 'explainable' and 'uninvestigable' events<sup>9</sup> becomes irrelevant and misleading. Probably all miracles are susceptible to an explanation other than the supernatural.

Notwithstanding, the conventional view of miracles, at least since science replaced magic in common understanding,<sup>10</sup> has been that they depend on supernatural intervention in, or suspension of, the natural order. Apologists have sought gaps in the allegedly prevailing determinism of science to allow God room to work—through indeterminacy and quantum events, or in the crucial initial conditions of 'chaotic' happenings. I believe these attempts are theologically untenable: miracles are a necessary but unpredictable consequence of a God who holds the world in being; this is more plausible and more scriptural than deist interventionism.<sup>11</sup> To me, Donald MacKay's complementarity arguments<sup>12</sup> are logically and intuitively more convincing than all the ingenious attempts to find gaps for God.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, I do not feel the tension attributed to me by

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9 'Would it not be altogether better to acknowledge that if Jesus was born of the Holy Spirit through the direct action of the Holy Spirit that this is a miracle; and a miracle not merely in the sense that the event was remarkable . . . but in the sense that God was working in a way simply not open to human investigation?' (point 7).

10 Thomas, K. (1984) *Man and the Natural World*. London: Allen Lane.

11 Berry, R. J. (1986) What to believe about miracles. *Nature, London, 322*: 321–322.

12 'The God in whom the Bible invites belief is no "cosmic mechanic". Rather is he the Cosmic Artist, the creative Upholder, without whose continual activity there would be not even chaos, but just nothing. What we call physical laws are expressions of the regularity that we find in the pattern of created events that we study as the physical world. Physically they express the stability of the great Artist's creative will. Explanations in terms of scientific laws and in terms of divine activity are thus not rival answers to the same question; yet they are not talking about different things. They are (or at any rate purport to be) complementary accounts of different aspects of the same happening, which in its full nature cannot be adequately described by either alone' [MacKay, D. M. (1960). *Science & Christian Faith Today*. London: Falcon].

13 Russell Stannard (1982) conveniently summarizes different ways of approaching the Bible miracles in his *Science and the Renewal of Belief*. London: SCM. Page 48ff.

Addinall (in his Conclusion) since my aim is *not* to make miracles ‘more readily acceptable’ while at the same time trying ‘to affirm religious circumstances and accident.’ I decline to distinguish between miracles which can be ‘explained naturalistically’ and those in which God ‘alters the course which nature left to itself would follow.’ But I wholeheartedly agree that ‘getting the concept of the miraculous right means getting our conception of God’s work in the world right.’ Although I would use different words, I fully accept Keith Ward’s conclusion that ‘It is God who defines the nature of things and ensures the continuity and regularity of their interactions. But God is not merely an external watch-maker. God is the sustainer of a network of dynamic interrelated energies, and might well be seen as the ultimate environing non-material field which draws from material natures a range of the potentialities which lie implicit within them.’<sup>14</sup> Arthur Peacocke has also argued powerfully against the notion of an interventionist God.<sup>15</sup>

John Polkinghorne has written, ‘The problem of miracles is the problem of finding that wider framework in which they can find a coherent place. This is demanded not by science but by theology itself. ‘Intervention’ is not a word that one can properly use of God in any fitful or *tour de force* sense. His relationship to his creation must be faithful and consistent if it is to be in accord with his eternal nature . . .’<sup>16</sup> It is with that word ‘intervention’ that the troubles begin. . . . God is not a demiurge, struggling to make the best of recalcitrant brute matter. He is the Creator and Sustainer of the whole physical world. Those very laws of nature, said to be violated by a miracle, are themselves the expression of his Creatorly will. One does not doubt, in one sense, his capacity to countermand them. Such action of itself cannot be beyond the power of an omnipotent God. Sir George Stokes robustly made the point in his Gifford Lectures of 1891, when he said: “Admit the existence of a God, of a personal God, and the possibility of miracle follows at once. If the laws of nature are carried on in accordance with his will, he who willed them may will their suspension . . . A theologically acceptable account of miracles will have to incorporate them within a total, and totally consistent, understanding of God’s activity, and not see them as singular exceptions.”<sup>17</sup>

That is also my belief.

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14 Ward, *loc. cit.*, p.57.

15 Peacocke, A. R. (1993) *Theology for a Scientific Age*. London: SCM. Pages 135–151.

16 Polkinghorne, J. (1983) *The Way the World Is*. London: SPCK. Pages 55–56.

17 Polkinghorne, J. (1989) *Science and Providence*. London: SPCK. Page 46.