

BOOK REVIEW

Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011). xxxviii + 1172 pp. Hbk. US\$59.99.

Craig Keener's two-volume study of miracles may initially seem daunting to readers. Is there really that much to say about the topic of miracles? The answer to this question, I think, is largely contingent upon the reader. In the book, Keener explores both ancient and modern sources of miracle claims through critical and exhaustive research. He offers a vast number of eyewitness accounts of miracles from various parts of the world to challenge the prejudice of Western anti-supernaturalists. In addition to the use of exegetical, historical and philosophical arguments, Keener uses statistics and first-hand stories from eyewitnesses who claim to have seen miracles in order to defend the credibility of New Testament miracle accounts. Thus, to date, Keener's work could be considered *the* reference book on the topic of the credibility of miracle accounts in the New Testament, even though he humbly states that the book is 'inevitably only a sample of what could be written on its subject' (p. 12).

The author, who is Professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary and who specializes in the historical study of early Christianity, states in the introduction that 'the main focus of the book is to persuade readers skeptical of NT miracle accounts that such accounts can stem from eyewitnesses and potentially report phenomena that happened' (p. 16). This focus is also evident in the two-fold thesis of the book. The primary thesis is that eyewitnesses can and do make miracle claims. He argues that eyewitness claims do not serve as indisputable proof, but 'they do constitute evidence that may be considered rather than a priori dismissed' (p. 2). Keener's secondary thesis is that both supernatural and other types of explanations should be welcomed to the scholarly discussion of miracles by virtue of both the primary thesis and the fact that the modern situation is far different from that of David Hume, who presupposed a uniformity of human experience and

claimed that miracles are contrary to human experience. According to Keener, modern skepticism of miracles is usually based on Hume's epistemology. Keener asserts that Hume's conclusion that such arguments that are based on this 'uniformity of human experience' must be reconsidered. He contends that 'a number of miracle claims press far enough beyond currently plausible naturalistic explanations to invite at least consideration of the possibility of supernatural causation' (p. 762). In the book's postscript, Keener shares some of his personal experiences, noting his present struggle of yearning to watch God touch the majority of people who need healing and help. The book ends with five appendices, a bibliography of secondary sources, interviews and correspondences cited, as well as various indices.

Keener's book is divided into four major parts. Part 1 (Chs. 1–3), Keener says, 'set[s] the groundwork for later questions in the book' (p. 19), which includes but is not limited to determining whether eyewitness miracle claims are plausible, and whether both supernatural and natural causes should be entertained as possibilities to explain these claims. The focus of this section is on investigating the ancient evidence based on the general scholarly consensus that Jesus was a miracle worker. Keener points out that, from a modern perspective, the substantial evidence pointing to Jesus as a miracle worker raises two important questions. The first is the question of causation, since many analogous, non-Christian miracle claims are also abundant in antiquity. As such, the question becomes how to explain these miracle claims—'Should all be explained psychosomatically, as deception, misinterpretation or in other nonsupernatural terms' (p. 33)? The second concerns the skepticism expressed by moderners toward supernatural claims, which consequently raises the question of whether it is justifiable to rule out a priori the possibility of miracles by virtue of this conflict. From here, Keener surveys miracle accounts from the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds of antiquity and compares them with the Gospel accounts. He highlights miracles of both similar and different phenomena, such as the presence of healing sanctuaries and shrines, miracle workers, magical associations, 'divine men', etc. Keener concludes that Jewish sources, rather than Gentile ones, bear more resemblance to Christian sources, and that Christian sources give more 'dramatic and distinctive emphasis on miracles' (p. 82).

Part 2 (Chs. 4–6) attempts to answer the question of the possibility of miracles. Keener discusses ancient and modern Western skepticism of

miracles, out of which modern critics use anti-supernaturalism as a criterion for authenticating the historicity of the Gospel accounts. Keener devotes the majority of this section to the philosophical epistemology of David Hume, which emphasizes empiricism and skepticism. Keener argues that, although much of modern academia has a priori ruled out the possibility of miracles in the natural world based on the Humean paradigm, many scholars are now beginning to challenge Hume's epistemological framework, since not only is his argument circular, but it also fails to fit our contemporary philosophical and scientific context. Keener says Hume's argument is circular because he defines 'miracle' as a 'violation of natural law, yet defining "natural law" as principles that cannot be violated' (p. 134). Thus, based on this definition, the assumption dictates both the argument and what one claims to prove. Pointing out that this is a standard logical fallacy, Keener contends that Hume's argument is not neutral and that it necessitates a presupposition of atheism or deism for it to succeed logically. Hume also employed 'a deductive approach that a priori excluded the evidence for miracles. He cites experience against experience—typical experience against rare experience, though both are attested by witnesses' (pp. 161-62). Nevertheless, Keener notes that a shift in this Humean worldview in the Western world has been occurring as evidenced in the works of, among many others, William Lane Craig, Marcus Borg, Charles Talbert, Leonhard Goppelt, Wolfhart Pannenberg and Rick Strelan, all of whom recognize the 'prejudice' of excluding God in the Humean equation. Thus, the author concludes that contemporary approaches cannot and should not a priori reject potential supernatural explanations of miracles.

Part 3 (Chs. 7–12), which is the longest section of the book, presents a vast number of miracle claims beyond antiquity, especially from the Majority World. Keener says that 'many cultures exist with worldviews that do not readily accommodate nonsupernaturalism', which is 'not necessarily because they lack appreciation for science or empirical enquiry' (p. 211). He points out that 'hundreds of millions of people in the world claim to have witnessed supernatural healings. Their plausibility structures, and those of the cultures where many of them live, differ from the plausibility structures of those who begin with Humean presuppositions' (p. 212). Keener then provides an extensive list of specific examples of miracle claims—which include accounts of healings and individuals being raised from the dead—from various countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. Keener also provides con-

crete examples of these kinds of miracles from earlier Christian history up until the recent Western world. He concludes that, because of the extraordinary preponderance of evidence of these kinds of post-biblical miracle claims, it is hard to reject or even dispute such phenomena, if we are truly to remain open-minded people (p. 599).

Part 4 (Chs. 13–15) tackles various sorts of explanations of miracle claims. Focusing on his secondary argument, Keener says, ‘If one starts with the assumption that miracles happen, one will construe many of these reports as miracles. If one starts with the assumption that miracles do not happen, one will interpret all these stories differently. If we leave both options open and look for the most plausible explanation in any given case, different cases may require different explanations’ (pp. 606–607). Keener proposes three explanations in this regard. First, he notes that many miracles stem from natural causes and lack clear indication of divine activity. On the one hand, some of the elements associated with non-supernatural causes include fraud and emotional arousal. On the other hand, elements related to the ‘power of faith’ involve psychosomatic and psychological elements of healing, such as the placebo effect. However, secondly, he argues that the assumption that ‘the presence of natural factors must exclude supernatural ones’ (p. 711), especially in instances where healings are medically unexplainable and thus are attributed exclusively to psychological causes when other proposed factors may be at work, is reductionist. Finally, Keener concludes the section by evaluating further plausible miracle reports, especially those to which he has had some personal connection, and says that ‘a supernatural explanation in some cases makes better sense than any explanation that omits the likelihood of supernatural causation’ (p. 759).

While Keener’s book certainly deserves commendation, there are some arguments in the book that need further clarification. First, his argument against Hume’s theory of the uniformity of human experience needs elaboration. The divide between the Western world and the Majority World in terms of their experiences of supernatural phenomena does not necessarily mean that human experiences are ‘not uniform’. I would suggest that the differences between a Westerner’s experience and that of a person within the Majority World can also be explained by cultural, political and economic factors that engender those differences. The majority of people living in the Philippines, for instance, are likely to believe in miraculous healings by faith healers and religious movements, since they have no other means to acquire medical treatment.

But many Christians in the Philippines do not believe such miraculous healings to be genuine, since not only are the ‘source of healing power’ and faith claims of these religious movements questionable, but also those who claim to be healed of their diseases are in fact not. Whether there are real instances of actual healing I cannot say. My point here is that poverty and over-population in the Majority World are perhaps the two major causes that trigger this strong belief in miraculous healings.

Secondly, I am not sure Keener has adequately addressed the objections of atheists to miracle claims, especially when atheists are even more skeptical of miracles than traditional biblical scholars. Whereas Keener posits that belief in miracles is constrained by one’s presuppositions, an atheist may claim that such belief is prejudicially determined by one’s belief in God, particularly his divine character. In short, belief in God evokes belief in miracles. Readers may be left wishing that the author had engaged more thoroughly a range of atheist objections, such as the absence of a supernatural force based on a balancing theory of the law of inertia and gravitational attraction, as well as Bohr’s theory of quantum mechanics, especially considering the massive amount of evidence Keener marshals in this two-volume study. In other words, Keener should have spoken to his mixed audience of Christians and atheists more evenly.

Thirdly, readers may also want to know why there are more miracle claims in the Majority World than in the western world today. This issue is important, especially when the author wishes to use such eyewitness claims to corroborate his secondary thesis, which is to invite skeptics to consider supernatural theories as a legitimate category of explanation.

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