



Biblical Lit Egyptian Period Handout

Miracles in the Desert

POPULAR IDEA OF A "MIRACLE"

If you ask the average person to define a "miracle," they will probably tell you that a miracle has no "natural" explanation. It is something which is, scientifically speaking, unexplainable. This idea of a miracle might be called the "God of the gaps" idea, because it assigns to "God" those events which we currently cannot explain.

There are two problems with this limited idea of God:

First, we lose faith when we find "natural" explanations for things, with the result that God is pushed out of the universe as if he had nothing to do with it. As we get more and more understanding of our world, the gaps close and pretty soon God gets squeezed out.

Secondly, it blinds us to God acting through the laws of nature he created. It reduces God to some kind of little wizard who, like a dumb programmer, must go around and "fix" things he should have known would happen. In this view, God and nature are at odds with each other, and God must frequently answer prayers by fixing the way he made the universe.

THE BIBLICAL IDEA:

In the Bible, God often works through nature. In this case we recognize God as the "Primary" or "First" cause of the event, and the "natural" means he uses (such as a volcano) as the "Secondary" or "Proximate Cause." We see this particularly in Exodus.

The people of the Bible understood that nature came from God and serves God. After all, isn't it more logical to think that God created the world knowing the needs and prayers of his people? The answers to those prayers become part of the natural order of things and unfold with precision at the right moment in time.

The Miracles of Exodus:

For example, from all eternity God knew that his people would pray for water, bread and meat in the wilderness. When did he answer these prayers? From all eternity, knowing what they would need. He creates "nature" in which manna from desert trees blows like snow on the desert floor, quail migrate across long stretches of water and fall exhausted near the Israelite encampment, as they continue to do to this day.

Subterranean water gathers in pools below the protection of shale over many years, to be broken open as "natural" wells. A way is opened up across the Sea of Reeds, perhaps by a combination of tide, winds and shifting sand dunes, or a "natural" event, or related to the tsunamis of a distant volcano.

The biblical writer is able to see his hand in these things, because, for them, he is not a God who must compete with nature, but one who created it to serve him. He is not like some shortsighted computer programmer who must go around and fix what he made. He created that species of quail with that migration pattern for, among other reasons, the purpose of feeding his people in the desert with an abundance of food. It is the timing and the intensity of these which are remarkable. It comes in response to Moses' prayer and its volume is as generous as his mercy.

Perhaps God wrote the laws of nature much like a musician writing the movements of a musical piece. He gives the baton to Moses and helps him to conduct an orchestra of nature, from rivers and tributaries of the Nile, to frogs, hail and desert sandstorms being spun from a volcanic eruption. Like Mickey's famous cartoon, Moses stands perched in a whirlwind of

“natural” events that sends Egypt into a tornado of confusion. These “completely natural” events are powerful miracles, flowing from nature and its Designer.

Finally, there are times when God can and does suspend the laws of nature.

He is far more powerful than the laws of nature. Like a software designer, he can override his own nature software at anytime and suspend a programmed function or insert another one. The Bible reveals a God who can do the “supernatural” with or without nature. (Jesus, for example, cures a man born blind, restores lost flesh to lepers and rises from the dead).

The point is that many of us limit “miracles” to this kind . If “natural” explanations are given, we question it, or tend to see God as some magic wizard. This view tends to distance us from God. He may give us an answer to our problems through the people he has put into our lives. He may speak to us through nature, friends, parents, the Bible or teachers... His timing is startling sometimes.

But if we are too busy looking for the magical side of God, we miss seeing and experiencing all of the signs of his real presence. Let's let God be “God” and appreciate the help he gives us through the means he chooses.



If I only see God as a cosmic wizard, I wont ever know him as the person who has placed me in this world at this time and surrounded me with his own unique set of “signs and wonders” for my life. In short, I run the risk of becoming as hardhearted as pharaoh, whose heart wasn't opened until it was finally broken.