

## STUDY GUIDE to *Miracles*

By C.S. Lewis

### **Introduction**

Lewis' lucid, generous minded and comprehensive apologetic for miracles is, in its own way, no less compelling than *Mere Christianity* in the case it makes for the overall rationality of the Christian faith. Perhaps even more striking than its careful arguments for why the Naturalistic picture of reality is insufficient to describe reality as a whole, is the unusually transparent window it offers us as to what "the glorious resurrection of the new humanity" might be like.

### **Background**

"The traditional Christian view of miracles was stated by St Athanasius (c. 296 – 373) in the eighteenth section of his famous *De Incarnatione*... 'Our Lord took a body like to ours and lived as a man in order that those who had refused to recognize Him in his superintendence and captaincy of the whole universe might come to recognize from the works He did here below in the body that what dwelled in this body was the Word of God.' And this, said Lewis, 'accords exactly with Christ's own account of His miracles: "The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He seeth the Father do."' Following in the same tradition, St Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225 – 74) said 'those happenings are properly called miraculous which are done by divine agency outside the commonly observed order of things.' By the time Lewis turned his mind to miracles most theologians had stopped believing in the same way as Athanasius and Aquinas. The belief in the improbability of miracles was mainly a result of the rise of modern science in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which increasingly saw the world as a closed system subject to the laws of Nature. Lewis himself, in his atheist years, had learned much of his scepticism from David Hume's famous *Essay on Miracles* (1748) and the writings of philosophers such as G.W.F. Hegel who identified God with the Law of Nature. Lewis knew from the beginning that a defence of the miracles recorded in the New Testament would have to begin with a philosophical attack on unbelief."

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### **Suggestions for facilitating discussion**

The two sets of questions in this study section have been designed to facilitate two different kinds of discussion. For those who wish to move through the book slowly with a view to gaining an in-depth knowledge of Lewis' argument, we recommend the intensive study questions as a means of unlocking the book chapter by chapter. This closely text-based study program focuses mainly on understanding and analyzing Lewis' thought. The more generalized questions are offered as a means of using Lewis' ideas as a spring board to developing your own, and might also be more suited to a larger group study of *Miracles* or to a group forced to operate under stricter time constraints. Those keen to tailor this program more particularly may wish to mix and match questions from both sections or, alternatively, to pick out provocative quotes from the text themselves as alternative starting points for discussion. We recommend that you have someone act as a moderator to your group to help direct the conversation, and ensure that everyone who

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wishes to participate has opportunity. In addition to the study questions, we have also provided a short summary of the structure of *Miracles* to help outline each chapter's focus.

### **Outline of Lewis' structure of argument in *Miracles***

Chapter 1 – Looks at how our assumptions will guide and inform our research.

Chapter 2 – Makes the distinction between Naturalism and Supernaturalism: Naturalists believe that nothing exists except, or outside of, Nature. Supernaturalists think that something does exist beyond Nature.

Chapter 3 – Deals with the self-contradiction of the Naturalist.

Chapter 4 – Argues that you cannot believe in God as a supreme consciousness evolving out from within “the whole show,” but as a Creator outside of it.

Chapter 5 – Continues the attack on Naturalism by arguing that the Naturalist position, when we really attempt to live by it, denies the possibility of making valid moral judgements.

Chapter 6 – Deals with faulty concepts of the Supernatural.

Chapter 7 – Disarms some irrationally grounded assumptions that a belief in miracles is out of date.

Chapter 8 - Looks at what we understand by the “Laws” of Nature, and aims to show how miracles may “interfere” with Natural laws without actually breaking them.

Chapter 9 – Discusses different perspectives on Nature herself.

Chapter 10 – Distinguishes between thought and imagination, and the essentials and non-essentials of a belief.

Chapter 11 – Outlines the distinction between Christianity and popular religion; argues that the natural bent of the fallen mind is towards Pantheism rather than Theism, and goes on to discuss why Pantheism, though attractive, cannot explain the true nature of things as they are revealed to us.

Chapter 12 – Challenges the notion that it might be a misuse of power for God to perform miracles, even assuming he has the power to perform them.

Chapter 13 – Looks at the probability of miracles occurring, based on what we already divine as being “fitting” to our pre-conceived sense of the uniformity of reality.

Chapter 14 – Discusses, at some length, the “Grand Miracle” of the Incarnation.

Chapter 15 – Justifies miracles of the Old Creation as acts in accordance with the overall character of the old Nature.

Chapter 16 – Looks at what Miracles of the New Creation intimate about the new Nature.

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Epilogue – Encourages readers to turn to the historical texts and make an independent judgement for themselves.

### **Intensive Study**

#### The Scope of This Book

- (1) “Seeing is not believing” is an odd sentence to begin a book on miracles. Skeptics might well contest that looking at empirical proofs for particular miracles is the only ground *for* belief in the miraculous. What reservations does Lewis have about proving the miraculous from history or sense experience?
- (2) What, for Lewis, is the first question we must consider when we think about miracles?

#### The Naturalist and the Supernaturalist

- (3) “I use the word Miracle to mean an interference with Nature by supernatural power.” Discuss Lewis’ definition of miracles. Could we (or might we) ever describe a miracle in any other way? How might the theologians Lewis draws attention to describe it?
- (4) Lewis pictures the Naturalist as having a “democratic” picture of reality, and the Supernaturalist as having a “monarchical” one. What does he mean by this? Do you think this is a good way of highlighting the differences between the two systems?
- (5) “Naturalism could admit a certain kind of God.” What kind?

#### The Cardinal Difficulty of Naturalism

- (6) According to Lewis, Naturalism like “a strict materialism” refutes itself. How does he explain this?
- (7) Lewis modified the second part of this chapter in response to Elizabeth Anscombe’s criticisms of his argument. Do you find the modified argument a convincing one?

#### Nature and Supernature

- (8) Dualism, says Lewis, is a more sensible philosophy than Naturalism – for what reasons? Why is it still not sensible enough?
- (9) Lewis draws attention to the radical differences between the Jewish account of creation and the creation myths of other cultures. “The idea of creation in the rigorous sense of the word is [in the Hebrew tale] fully grasped.” How?

#### A Further Difficulty in Naturalism

- (10) Naturalism, for Lewis, cannot account for our belief in the validity of our moral judgements. Why?
- (11) “A moment after they [the Naturalists] have admitted that good and evil are

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illusions, you will find them exhorting us to work for posterity, to educate, revolutionize, liquidate, live and die for the sake of the human race.” Do you think most Naturalists live with these types of contradictions?

#### Answers to Misgivings

(12) “The Supernatural is not remote and abstruse: it is a matter of daily and hourly experience.” Do you think there is a temptation to see the Supernatural as “remote”? What is the popular understanding of the Supernatural?

#### A Chapter of Red Herrings

(13) Lewis challenges the idea that belief in miracles was more prevalent in the past because people were more ignorant of Natural laws. Do you think this is still a widespread assumption today? How does Lewis show it to be a groundless objection?

(14) “The real question is why the spatial insignificance of Earth, after being asserted by Christian moralists for some fifteen centuries, without the slightest suspicion that it conflicted with their theology, should suddenly in quite modern times have been set up as a stock argument against Christianity and enjoyed, in that capacity, a brilliant career.” Why?

(15) “It is a profound mistake to imagine that Christianity ever intended to dissipate the bewilderment and even the terror, the sense of our own nothingness, which comes upon us when we think about the nature of things... without such sensations there is no religion.” Do you agree with Lewis that a sense of bewilderment and even terror should be a necessary part of our response to the universe around us?

#### Miracles and the Laws of Nature

(16) How does Lewis distinguish between different conceptions of how the “Laws” of Nature work? Why, in his opinion, do we call them “laws”?

(17) Miracles, says Lewis, do not really “break” the Laws of Nature. Why?

#### A Chapter Not Strictly Necessary

(18) “To treat her [Nature] as God, or as Everything, is to lose the whole pith and pleasure of her.” What is Lewis’ perspective on how we are to appreciate Nature?

#### Horrid Red Things

(19) In this chapter Lewis suggests that Christianity is the only religion that depends, for its overall coherence, on the authenticity of miracles. Why? Do you agree with him?

(20) Do you think Lewis does a good job of explaining how a non-believer with a normal, scientific education finds the traditional images of Christianity hard to deal with? What other things might he or she find difficult?

(21) How does Lewis distinguish between thought and imagination, and leading on from this, between the essentials and non-essentials of a belief? Do you think he is right to say that these things are non-essential?

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### Christianity and "Religion"

- (22) "Speak about beauty, truth and goodness, or about a God who is simply the indwelling principle of these three, speak about a great spiritual force pervading all things, a common mind of which we are all parts, a pool of generalized spirituality to which we can all flow, and you will command friendly interest. But the temperature drops as soon as you mention a God who has purposes and performs particular actions..." Why is the Christian God so offensive to people?
- (23) Do you think Lewis is right to say that Pantheism is "the permanent natural bent of the human mind"?
- (24) What are the main differences between Pantheism and Christianity?
- (25) Lewis describes God, rather poetically, as a "fountain of facthood". What errors is he trying to guard against in declaring this?
- (26) "As long as we remain Erudite Limpets we are forgetting that if no one had ever seen more of God than we, we should have no reason even to believe Him immaterial, immutable, impassible and all the rest of it. Even that negative knowledge which seems to us so enlightened is only a relic left over from the positive knowledge of better men." What, according to Lewis, is the cure for us "Erudite Limpets"?

### The Propriety of Miracles

- (27) "Only an incompetent workman will produce work that needs to be interfered with." How does Lewis answer this charge against God's willingness to perform miracles?

### On Probability

- (28) Lewis says that we have only one rational reason for believing in the uniformity of the law of nature – what is it? What are the irrational ones?

### The Grand Miracle

- (29) Do you agree with Lewis that the central miracle of the Christian faith is the Incarnation?
- (30) How does Lewis explain this miracle as being in accordance with the character of Nature?
- (31) Vicariousness as a principle can be good or bad: "all those very same principles which are evil in the world of selfishness and necessity are good in the world of love and understanding." What do you think Lewis means by positive vicariousness? How might this work in the Christian life?
- (32) "Where a God who is totally purposive and totally foreseeing acts upon a Nature which is totally interlocked, there can be no accidents or loose ends." What kind of case does Lewis make for divine purposefulness?

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- (33) Why is death both a curse and also, for the Christian, a kind of medicine?
- (34) “Almost the whole of Christian theology could perhaps be deduced from the two facts (a) That men make coarse jokes, and (b) That they feel the dead to be uncanny.” How might Lewis argue this, based on his commentary, in Chapter 14?

#### Miracles of the Old Creation

- (35) What, according to Lewis, is the difference between miracles of the old creation and miracles of the new creation?

#### Miracles of the New Creation

- (36) What new light does Lewis shed on our understanding of the “Resurrection”?
- (37) “If the Psychical Researchers succeeded in proving ‘survival’ and showed the Resurrection was an instance of it, they would not be supporting the Christian faith but refuting it.” Why?
- (38) “All references to the risen *body* make us uneasy: they raise awkward questions.” Why might we find this concept awkward?
- (39) What do people normally mean when they talk about heaven “as a state of mind”? What is Lewis’ conception of heaven?
- (40) How does Lewis explain the biblical teaching on the absence of sexual activity in heaven?

#### Epilogue

- (41) Do you agree with Lewis that there is a tendency in modern Christian scholarship to give too much ground to the skeptic?
- (42) “Belief-feelings,” says Lewis, “do not follow reason except by long training.” Outline some of the ways in which our feelings and our beliefs can be at variance.
- (43) Do you agree with Lewis that miracles tend to occur at significant points in history? Might they ever occur at other times?

#### **General Study**

- (1) “What we learn from experience depends upon the kind of philosophy we bring to experience.” Do you agree?
- (1) Lewis finds it impossible to make moral judgements and believe, simultaneously, that the conscience is nothing but a product of Nature (i.e. “It has no tap-root in an eternal, self-existent, rational being, whom we call God.”) Do you think that there could be a future in “cut-flower” morality – moral claims without any reference to the Supernatural?

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- (2) What is the view of Truth that Lewis puts forward in *Miracles*? How does this differ from attitudes toward Truth today?
- (3) Would it be possible, in any sense, for a Naturalist to be a Christian?
- (4) “The ascertained nature of any real thing is always at first a nuisance to our natural fantasies – a wretched, pedantic, logic-chopping intruder upon a conversation which was getting on famously without it.” Why does Lewis place so much importance on the “opacity” of existence? Is he right?
- (5) “If we fully understood what God is we should see then that there is no question whether He is. It would always have been impossible that he should not exist.” Do you agree with Lewis, that our doubt of God’s existence almost always arises from an imperfect understanding of the nature of his being?
- (6) “...the reason why God has no passions is that passions imply passivity and intermission... He [God] cannot be affected with love because he *is* love. To imagine that love as something less torrential or less sharp than our own temporary and derivative ‘passions’ is a most disastrous fantasy.” Lewis comments that it is easy to think of God’s love as being less intense than human love because it is “passionless.” Do you think this “disastrous fantasy” is a common one? How might we combat it?
- (7) What point is Lewis’ humorous fantasy of erudite limpets designed to illustrate?
- (8) “A supreme workman will never break by one note or one syllable or one stroke of the brush the living and inward law of the work he is producing. But he will break without scruple any number of those superficial regularities and orthodoxies which little, unimaginative critics mistake for laws.” Do you think Lewis’ frequent analogy of God as an author, or an artist, makes it easier for us to accept the credibility of miracles?
- (9) In what way does Lewis argue that Christianity (especially with its Judaic roots) is “undemocratic”?
- (10) “A world in which I was really (and not merely by a useful legal fiction) as good as everyone else, in which I never looked up to anyone wiser, or cleverer, or more learned than I, would be insufferable...” Why? How might Lewis’ ideas here go against modern feeling?
- (11) Lewis suggests, from looking at the accounts of Christ’s appearances after the Resurrection, that the old and the new Nature are not as separate as we think. What do you make of his ideas on the resurrected body, and the new Nature?
- (13) What is the picture of heaven that emerges from *Miracles*?
- (14) In *Miracles*, Lewis was in part setting out to defend the authenticity of Biblical miracles. What might he say about claims that miracles still occur today?