

Houston, [Joseph]. *Reported Miracles: A Critique of Hume*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. 282 pp. Hardcover, \$65.00.

In *Reported Miracles* (chaps. 1-5), Houston provides a useful exposition of the definitions of miracles proposed by Augustine, Aquinas, Locke, Hume, Bradley, and Troeltsch. These authors tend to agree that miracles are evident exceptions to nature's regular course, that they lack a natural cause, and that they are not freak events but are actions of God. Houston then evaluates twentieth-century definitions of miracles as disclosing God's presence without being magical, supernatural, or divorced from a natural sequence of events (chap. 6). These definitions assume that the NT reflects a reluctance about miracles, that the miracle stories are inflated, and that miraculous evidence is incompatible with genuine faith. For Houston, these definitions and assumptions are less biblical and desirable than those of Hume.

In chapter 8, Houston addresses some misconceptions about Hume. For example, Paley assumes that Hume regards natural law as describing what actually happens and excluding miracles. However, what Hume argues is that miracle accounts must be judged by our experience of natural law. Arguments inspired by Paley's apologetics are useful for those who accept Hume's objections as if they were compelled in reason to concur. However, they have no force against Hume's questions as to whether an apologist whose audience makes no theistic assumption can make a case for his religious system by appealing to miracles.

Houston points out in chapter 9 that Hume does not doubt miracles because of reports to the contrary, but because of the evidence for natural law. Hume admits that in theory there could be natural laws for which there is little evidence and for whose violation there is a huge weight of powerful evidence. However, he questions how miracles can be based on evidence if inductive reasoning is rendered unreliable by a miracle. From this perspective, there is no reason to believe in miracles without religious assumptions. For Houston, Hume's arguments overlook the fact that while miracles are contrary to natural law, they do not require the rejection of inductive reasoning from experience and analogy. Further, having reasons to believe a miracle need not preclude an evaluation of the whole miraculous explanation. The proposal that God has acted may be regarded as promising if it effectively accounts for what is not otherwise accountable.

In chapter 7, Houston criticizes a view which scholars claim to derive from Hume, namely, the idea of conflict between miracles and the course of nature, or God's purpose. For Houston, miracles may be understood as above rather than against nature. He points out that even for Hume, violation of natural law has no implication for divine purposes. One may conclude that natural law describes what happens and that miracles do not happen. However, natural laws describe the course of events in general terms that do not cover miracles. Also, twentieth-century physics studies unpredictable events contrary to known laws.

Houston points out in chapter 10 that Hume viewed the likelihood of a miracle as related to its probability. However, the probability may be greater than Hume expected if miracle reports are made with more care than usual, since they concern what is surprising, questionable, or unexpected. Houston does not propose that strong reports of miracles can provide a foundation for theism.

Rather, he argues that it may give some support. Neither does Houston regard his view as tied to natural theology. He argues that one does not have to choose between presupposing the truth or falsehood of theism. Thus, only a fideistic atheism refuses to consider the possibility that theism may account better for the range of phenomena (including miracle accounts).

According to Houston, miraculous explanations may be evaluated for compatibility with the data they explain (chap. 11) for self-consistency, and for consistency with antecedently held and supposedly well-founded beliefs. They also may be formed, revised, confirmed, or enlarged in response to experiences which are to be interpreted and accounted for in whatever way forms the best overall account. Uninterpreted raw experiences cannot contribute anything to our beliefs. Interpretation is involved even in the confident, but not indubitable, recognition of common-sense reality. For Houston, this is not question-begging circularity.

Houston ends his book with a discussion of contemporary theologians. Pannenberg affirms the authoritative competence of historical science and yet maintains that some accounts of miracles are credible. Barth is ambivalent about the historical-critical method and claims that miracles are to be believed on the basis of revelation alone. Cupitt and Mackey maintain that to treat miracles like public occurrences is to misunderstand their character. After criticizing these options, Houston concludes that miracles are not incredible, that they may be interpreted as truth-claiming, and that they may make a contribution to the advocacy of religious belief (6-7).

All of the above is marshaled to make a trenchant critique of reductive naturalism. Houston writes:

The late twentieth-century western educated classes . . . are so entrenched in the conviction that there will be a natural explanation for everything, a conviction which has been very useful as the scientists' heuristic assumption, that they balk ungovernably and are not open to the suggestion of a theistic account. However, if there is no good reason to exclude the action of a god as a possible explanation, the entrenchment and the balking are psychological problems, obscurantism to be dealt with by a kind of persistence and persuasion, or by therapy, rather than treated as a rational constraint on our belief (198).

The compact writing style of *Reported Miracles* may provide tough going for the theological novice. However, the book is an indispensable resource for anyone considering the issue of the status of miracle reports. Contemporary theological literature is enhanced by Houston's accounts of older authors which give adequate detail to enable their viewpoints about miracles to be properly grasped. The value of the book is increased further by the fact that it traces and discusses significant relationships between Hume's case and the assumptions and methods of contemporary scientists, historians, and theologians (5).