

COLIN BROWN, *MIRACLES AND THE CRITICAL MIND*:  
A REVIEW ARTICLE

William L. Craig\*

*Miracles and the Critical Mind*. By Colin Brown. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984, 383 pp.

Though Colin Brown approaches the problem of miracles as a philosopher, theologian and exegete, his work is best assessed, I think, in terms of its value as a piece of historical scholarship and as a critical handling of the issues.

I. HISTORY OF THE PROBLEM OF MIRACLES: POSITIVE  
MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Nine of the eleven chapters deal with the history of the problem of miracles and are primarily expository in character, tracing the debate from the early apologists to the philosophical and theological discussion of this century. Here Brown is at his strongest: His survey is comprehensive, his exposition clear and objective, his research thorough. I think it necessary, however, to point out what I perceive to be some inadequacies in Brown's treatment of the history of the problem of miracles.

1. *Early Church to the Reformation*. Brown's exposition of Augustine's views on miracle is onesided and hence misleading. According to Brown, miracles are not for Augustine "a foundation of faith. What Augustine offers is a world view in which miracles can be seen to have a part. But the view itself is an explanation offered from the standpoint of faith" (p. 9). Brown thereby minimizes the evidential value of miracles for Augustine. In truth, however, miracles were a central part of Augustine's apologetic for the Christian faith. As Gerhard Strauss in his study of Augustine's doctrine of Scripture explains, Augustine held Scripture to be absolutely authoritative in itself, but this does not mean that it carries credibility in itself.<sup>1</sup> Therefore there must be certain *indicia* or signs that make Scripture's authority evident. The principal signs adduced by Augustine on behalf of the Christian Scriptures are miracle and prophecy.<sup>2</sup> The Scriptures alone have the attestation of miracles and fulfilled prophecies that make it clear that the

\*William Craig is assistant professor of philosophy of religion at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois.

<sup>1</sup>G. Strauss, *Schriftgebrauch, Schriftauslegung und Schriftbeweis bei Augustin* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1959) 7.

<sup>2</sup>Augustine, *De vera religione* 25.46.

Scriptures have divine authority and can therefore be believed. Lacking the historical method, Augustine of course had no way to prove that the gospel miracles actually occurred. He honestly admits that the story of Christ belongs to ancient history, which anyone may refuse to believe.<sup>3</sup> He therefore appeals to the contemporary miracle of the existence of the Church as a sign of Scripture's credibility. But he is not basing Scripture's authority on that of the Church. The appeal is still to miracle. In fact the existence of the Church serves in a sense to establish the historicity of the gospel miracles, for, he argues, if the unbeliever rejects the gospel miracles, we are still left with one stupendous miracle—viz., the whole world believing in Christianity without the benefit of miracles.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly Brown's treatment of Aquinas, which extends just over one page, is inadequate. Brown fails to appreciate the crucial role that the Augustinian signs of credibility, particularly miracle, play in the religious epistemology of Aquinas. According to Thomas, truths about God can be divided into two divisions: truths that can be established by natural reason (e.g. the existence and nature of God), and truths that can neither be demonstratively proved nor are evident from the senses (e.g. the Trinity). This last body of truths must therefore be proved by the authority of Scripture and accepted by faith.<sup>5</sup> But we still need signs that the Scriptures are indeed the true authority. Hence God provides signs in the form of miracles and fulfilled prophecies to confirm these truths, while not demonstrating them directly.<sup>6</sup> "Then they are indeed seen by the one who believes; he would not believe unless he saw that they are worthy of belief on the basis of evident signs or something of this sort."<sup>7</sup> Thomas calls these signs "confirmations," "arguments" and "proofs" of the truths of faith.<sup>8</sup> Christ's miracles "demonstrate" his divinity.<sup>9</sup> Hence "Christ wrought miracles in order to confirm his teaching and in order to demonstrate the divine power that was his."<sup>10</sup>

In his historical survey Brown leaves entirely aside this important scholastic theory of the signs of credibility, which would prove so important for post-Reformation Protestant apologetics. For although the medieval dearth of historiography made impossible a full-blown apologetic for Christianity based on miracle and prophecy, nevertheless, as Dulles points out, the scholastic theory had developed a philosophic framework for such an approach, which became widespread

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 3.4.

<sup>4</sup>Augustine, *De civitate dei* 22.5.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* 1.5; 4.1.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 1.6; 3.154.

<sup>7</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2a2ae. 1.4 ad 2. "Et sic sunt visa ab eis qui credit: non enim crederet nisi videret ea esse credenda, vel propter evidentiam signorum vel propter aliquid hujusmodi."

<sup>8</sup>Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* 3.154; 1.6.

<sup>9</sup>Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 3a.43.4.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid. "Miracula facta sunt a Christo propter confirmationem doctrine ejus, et ad ostendendam virtutem divinam in ipso."

after the rise of historical consciousness.<sup>11</sup> The scholastic signs of credibility of miracle and prophecy were adopted without reservation by the Reformers. Indeed post-Reformation Calvinism, under the leadership of Philippe de Mornay, became characterized by a heavy emphasis on rational apologetics.<sup>12</sup> And despite Brown's attempt to play Luther off against Calvin, the German Reformer also held, as Brown's own citations show, that Jesus' miracles "prove and attest" that God was in Christ.<sup>13</sup>

2. *Rise of skepticism.* Further misunderstandings are also evident in his handling of various Enlightenment figures. John Locke, he tells us, represented a "qualified evidentialism" because miracles were not considered in isolation but within a broader rational and moral context (p. 55). Alongside this emerged a "narrower hard-line evidentialism" represented by Samuel Clarke, which saw Locke's approach as circular (miracles prove doctrine, doctrine tests miracles) and therefore held that miracles alone have a "logically coercive force" in proving Christianity (pp. 55-57). To anyone familiar with Clarke's views, such a characterization can only be seen as a gross distortion. Clarke states explicitly that from a miracle as an isolated event it is impossible to determine whether it was performed immediately by God or by an angel or by a demonic spirit. The means of distinguishing between demonic miracles and miracles wrought either mediately or immediately by God is the moral context in which the miracle occurs.<sup>14</sup> Nor is such reasoning circular, for Clarke as a natural-law theorist held that reason alone could establish the correct system of ethical doctrine. The relationship between doctrine and miracle is that miracle proves that a higher power is involved, and the moral doctrinal context of the miracle enables us to discern whether the source of the miracle is God or Satan. Thus miracles prove the doctrine, but "... at least the *Indifferency* of the Doctrine [is] a necessary Condition or Circumstance, without which the *Doctrine* is not capable of being proved by any Miracles."<sup>15</sup> Not only is this identical with the position of Locke but also, it must be emphasized, with mainstream evidentialism from Augustine through Aquinas through Grotius through Pascal through the English apologists of the eighteenth century.

Furthermore it is evident that Brown does not understand David Hume's philosophical attack on miracles. According to Brown's analysis, the first part of Hume's essay is devoted to "a *priori* considerations culminating in the conclu-

<sup>11</sup>A. Dulles, *A History of Apologetics* (London: Hutchinson, 1971) 111; see also A. Lang, *Die Entfaltung des apologetischen Problems in der Scholastik des Mittelalters* (Freiburg: Herder, 1962) 141, 148-151.

<sup>12</sup>See P. de Mornay, *De la verité de la religion chrétienne* (Anvers: Christofle Plantin, 1581) pref.; W. Rex, *Essays on Pierre Bayle and Religious Controversy* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965) 97 ff.

<sup>13</sup>M. Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of John*, in *Luther's Works* (ed. J. Pelikan and D. E. Poellot; St. Louis: Concordia, 1961), 24. 73.

<sup>14</sup>S. Clarke, *A Discourse concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation* (London: W. Botham, 1706) 362-363.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 368-369.

sion that a miracle is a scientific impossibility"; part two is devoted to "a *posteriori* considerations which undermine the testimony to miracles" (p. 79). Brown thus loses the organic unity of Hume's argument and fails to discern its structure. Hume's reasoning takes the form of an "Even if . . . , but in fact . . ." argument—that is, in the first part of the essay he argues against believing in miracles while granting certain concessions, and then in the second part he continues his argument on the basis of what is in fact the case. Crucial to understanding Hume's reasoning is his differentiation between a "proof" and a "probability." If evidence renders a conclusion virtually certain, then we may speak of a "proof" and the wise man will give wholehearted assent to that conclusion. If the evidence makes a conclusion merely more likely than not, we may speak of a "probability" and the wise man will accept the conclusion with a degree of confidence proportionate to the probability. Now in the first part of the essay Hume is willing to concede that the evidence for a particular miracle amounts to a full proof and yet argues that it is still in principle impossible for a wise man to believe in that miracle. Why? Because opposed to this proof is an equally full proof for the unchangeable laws of nature, so that proof stands against proof and the scales are evenly balanced, resulting in a suspense of judgment. Then in the second part of the essay Hume attempts to show that in fact the evidence for miracles does not amount to a full proof. Indeed it is so negligible that it does not even amount to a probability. Therefore the decisive weight falls on that side of the scales containing the full proof for the inviolability of nature's laws. This is Hume's reasoning—but Brown, as I said, fails to understand it properly. As a result, of course, he also fails to grasp the incisive replies to this reasoning by Campbell and Paley, as well as the German apologist Gottfried Less who, I believe, correctly exposed Hume's fallacy.

3. *Legacy of the nineteenth century.* Brown's handling of late-eighteenth- to early-nineteenth-century German theology is equally flawed. Incredibly, he tells us that Johann Semler's refutation of Reimarus' attack on Jesus' resurrection was "profound and effective" (p. 119). Reimarus had argued against the historicity of the resurrection by claiming that (1) the story of the guard at the tomb is self-contradictory and unconfirmed; (2) the disciples' testimony to the empty tomb and resurrection appearances are inconsistent and self-contradictory; and (3) the OT prophecies of the resurrection are irrelevant, falsely interpreted and question-begging.<sup>16</sup> Semler's profound and effective rebuttal consisted in maintaining that (1) belief in the resurrection is not essential to being a Christian; (2) the truth of Christ's teaching (the self-evident and spiritual Word of God) is the basis for belief in the resurrection, not vice versa; (3) all of Reimarus' objections are true, but irrelevant to belief in the resurrection; and (4) no historical evidence for the resurrection is necessary or forthcoming.<sup>17</sup> Semler's "refutation" helped to spearhead a fundamental hermeneutical change in late-eighteenth-century

<sup>16</sup>H. S. Reimarus, "Concerning the Intention of Jesus and His Teaching," in *Reimarus: Fragments* (ed. C. H. Talbert; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970) 96-104, 153-200.

<sup>17</sup>D. J. S. Semler, *Beantwortung der Fragmente eines Ungenannten insbesondere vom Zweck Jesu und seiner Jünger* (2d ed.; Halle: Verlag des Erziehungsinstituts, 1780) 248-284.

German theology, the results of which we have seen in dialectical and existential theology and from which theology is only now beginning to escape.

Brown concludes this section by asserting that from Paley onward theologians approach miracles within a framework of theism, which Brown perceives to be "an important concession to Hume." Here Brown's earlier historical errors come home to roost. For Augustine, Aquinas and the scholastic tradition, miracles did not go to prove theism but were signs of credibility for special revelation on the part of the God demonstrated via natural theology. Similarly in the deist controversy, miracles were used in defense of revealed religion, not natural religion. The existence of God was not in dispute. Brown himself admits: "No one appears to have based belief in God as such on miracles" (p. 168). Where then is the supposed concession to Hume? The fact is that the debate over miracles had always been conducted within the framework of theism, and the question was this: Which theism is true? Christian thinkers argued that the Biblical miracles and fulfilled prophecies were evidence that showed that Christian theism is the correct form of theism.

4. *Ongoing debate.* Brown's discussion of contemporary thinkers is also not free from misunderstandings. He does not, for example, understand Swinburne's point that although our knowledge of nature's laws is corrigible, still in many cases we have a sufficiently firm grasp of natural law to know that a certain event is naturally impossible. Again, in handling Geisler's discussion of miracles Brown asserts that Geisler takes the miracle stories "on trust" because "a prior commitment to a Christian theistic belief-system" is a prerequisite for identifying miracles (pp. 211-212). One who is familiar with Geisler's approach can only smile at this portrayal of Geisler, himself an ardent Thomist who follows Thomas down the line in his use of miraculous evidences. Here we see once more how Brown's failure to grasp the approach of the classical apologist results in misunderstandings in the contemporary discussion.

## II. HISTORY OF THE PROBLEM OF MIRACLES: THEOLOGICAL *TENDENZ*

The reader needs to be aware that running throughout the expository section of this book is a particular slant determined by Brown's own views on miracles. As a result of doing this book he apparently became convinced that Jesus' miracles are of little or no evidential value in establishing the truth of Christianity. This conviction colors his exposition at vital junctures.

It forces him, for example, to make a wholly arbitrary distinction between Jesus' miracles and resurrection. In classical apologetics as pursued by Aquinas, Grotius, Abbadie, Paley and the like, the resurrection was always taken to be part of the capstone to the argument for Christianity based on miracles. But Brown wants to preserve the evidential value of the resurrection while denying or minimizing such value for Jesus' miracles. Brown justifies their separation on the grounds that (1) Jesus did the miracles himself, but the resurrection was done to him, and (2) the Church could not have sprung into being without the resurrection, but it could have without the miracles. But (1) seems entirely incidental and provides no grounds for thinking that the evidential value of the resurrection differs essentially from miracles Jesus did. As for (2), this simply goes to show

that the evidence for the resurrection is in this respect stronger than the evidence for other miracles. But the state of the evidence is entirely a de facto consideration. It does not serve to establish any difference in principle in the role played by miracles and the resurrection in justifying Christian faith. Philosophically they serve the same role, even if the de facto evidence for the resurrection is greater than for, say, the feeding of the five thousand.

Brown's *Tendenz* shows up most clearly, however, in his repeated attempts to play off miracles as signs against miracles as evidence, a "sacramental" view of miracles against a nonsacramental view, hard evidentialism against qualified evidentialism, "offensive" apologetics against "defensive" apologetics. As far as the history of the debate over miracles is concerned, this dichotomy is largely a product of Brown's own imagination and is not useful in analyzing the issues in that debate. The first thinker on whom Brown imposes these categories is Augustine, whose "sacramental" view of miracles saw them not as "isolated acts, having an independent objective evidential value" but as part of a theistic world view (pp. 10-11). But this is a half-truth, leaving us with a misimpression of Augustine's thought. He never called miracles sacramental, nor did he think miracles have value only within the framework of Christian theism. On the contrary, a seeker after truth, having come to believe that God exists, may be convinced to become a Christian precisely on the basis of the objective evidence of miracle. Brown likewise puts words into Luther's mouth, ascribing to him a sacramental view of miracles according to which the sacraments are "signs" calling for the response of faith (p. 14). But Luther does not call the miracles sacraments. He says that God is present in working miracles, preaching, administering the sacraments, consoling, strengthening, etc. It is therefore unwarranted to employ the Augustinian doctrine of the sacraments as composed of invisible grace and a visible sign as a model for miracles. In a sacrament the heavenly grace had to be accompanied by a visible sign (e.g. water, bread and wine). But this sense of "sign" has nothing to do with miracles. On the contrary, when medieval theology spoke of miracles as signs, the reference was not to doctrine of the sacraments but rather to the signs of credibility, which were proofs of special revelation. Brown, failing to understand the function of miracles and prophecy as signs of credibility, misinterprets the notion of "sign" in terms of sacramental doctrine, which is simply a category mistake. Hence he is mistaken when he suggests that for the pre-Enlightenment thinkers "a sign is not the same as a proof" (p. 19). This is a modern distinction of which they knew nothing. Miracles and prophecy were signs of the divinity of Scripture precisely because they were proofs that God had therein revealed himself and were thus indirect proofs of the doctrines taught by Scripture.

We have already seen the unwarranted distinction that Brown draws between hard and qualified evidentialism during the deist controversy. This bifurcation leads him to maintain that Paley did not hold to a strictly evidentialist position, "which regards evidential data in and of itself as sufficient proof of the conclusions to be drawn" (p. 145). Brown apparently believes that the great champion of Christian evidences was not a strict evidentialist because he discussed miracles only within the context of theism. But, as we have noted, this was the juncture at which miracles were always discussed: Given the existence of God (in Paley's case, proved by the teleological argument), is there any evidence

to warrant the conclusion that he has revealed himself in some way? Paley's answer is a two-volume account of such evidence, which is certainly presented as in itself sufficient proof of the conclusion to be drawn. Clearly this is a far cry from the view of miracles as signs lacking evidential value.

Brown concludes his historical survey by noting that "miracles were interpreted as signs that fitted into and modified an existing framework of belief. They were seen as saying something about what God was doing and about the person who wrought them. Although they modified the framework of belief, they did not establish that framework in the first place" (p. 168). This conclusion is acceptable only so long as (1) "sign" is construed in terms of the signs of credibility, not sacramental theology; (2) the framework of belief is simple theism, not Christian theism; and (3) the "saying something" and "modification" are understood as providing evidence that a Christian form of theism is true.

### III. CRITICAL HANDLING OF THE ISSUES: SIGNS VERSUS OBJECTIVE EVIDENCE

The foregoing historical discussion may have raised in the reader's mind the question of exactly what the difference is, according to Brown, between miracles as signs and miracles as evidence. If so, he has raised a query of crucial importance to which Brown unfortunately gives no clear answer in his critical discussion of the problem of miracles.

Typically those who interpret miracles as signs construe them not as supernaturally caused events but as natural events somehow pregnant with divine significance. But this is not Brown's opinion, for despite his vacillations on this issue he comes down in the end for the understanding of at least some miracles as being events caused supernaturally by God (pp. 194-195, 283). What then does it mean to say that such an event is a sign and not an evidence of God's activity? Here Brown speaks with an uncertain voice. He says that "a sign points to something. It may carry with it some indication of its authenticity and veracity. But its function consists in directing us toward that to which it points. Insofar as it does this, it validates itself" (p. 19). The function of miracles as signs seems to be somehow related to one's prior commitment to a certain world view, in contrast to evidentialism, which seeks to supply irrefutable evidence to establish a world view:

Evidentialism . . . behaves as if the data alone, apart from any other considerations, presented irrefragable evidence. But . . . the decision to accept as historical the events we call miracles and the decision to reject them are decisions that cannot be separated from the world view that we bring to their consideration. They stand or fall, not as isolated events, but in conjunction with the world view in which we locate them . . . If we acknowledge the miracles as historical events, . . . it is not on the basis of overwhelming historical evidence as such, but as events consonant with biblically grounded beliefs about God. Within this scheme of belief, the miracles function as *signs* pointing to further perceptions about Jesus but not as irrefragable objective proofs" (pp. 183, 205).

Because the miracles "function within the scheme of Christian theism, they cannot serve as objective, independent, evidential grounds for that system" (p. 214).

Our "perception of a miracle . . . depends upon the frame of reference or world view we bring to it. A purely deterministic, scientific world view would reject miracles out of hand from the start. But a view that is willing to entertain the possibility of a divine ordering of the world may see in miracles a sign of that personal ordering" (p. 216). Nevertheless Brown holds that it would be wrong to conclude that one must be a theist before one can believe in miracles: "It is both an oversimplification and a questionable move to claim that we cannot recognize miracles without a logically prior commitment to the existence of God" (p. 285). It is a questionable move because it requires a leap of faith to move from the God of natural theology to the miracle-working God of the Bible. It is oversimplified because people do not come to faith in logically successive steps but are drawn to "the miracle-working God of the Bible as the One who answers our deepest human needs in Jesus Christ" (p. 285). The miracles help the sincere inquirer to focus more clearly on who the Biblical God is. Like Jesus' teachings and actions, miracles are manifestations of God, or signs. A sign "is never completely free from ambiguity. It is a pointer, an indication. As such, it falls short of conclusive demonstration. The miracles recorded in the Gospels serve as indicators, summoning a response of insight, faith, and obedience" (p. 286). The miracle stories are reports of a sign, not "some kind of irrefutable, objective demonstration. It invites us to make a response to Jesus and revise our view of God and reality as a precondition to further insight" (*ibid.*). Brown also associates this understanding of NT miracles with the signs given by OT prophets to illustrate their proclamation—e.g. Micah's rolling in the dust, Jeremiah's wearing a yoke, Ezekiel's joining two sticks. Such signs "were not intended to prove the message of the prophet, or provide some kind of independent, objective attestation . . . Like the verbal message of the prophet, the meaning of the prophetic act required discernment and invited a response" (p. 258). Similarly Jesus' signs have "ambivalent value," so that only faith understands them as revelation (p. 323).

From the above nebulous and apparently inconsistent account of the difference between signs and evidence it is very difficult to sort out Brown's view. But let us try.

1. *Evidence as compelling versus signs as pointers.* Sometimes Brown speaks as though the difference between miracles as evidence and as signs lies in their power to compel assent. But then the difference between them seems to become simply a matter of degree. What, after all, is the difference between a sign and weak evidence? Moreover it is plain that Brown is caricaturing classical evidentialism in using words like "irrefragable," "conclusive demonstration," "compel assent," and so forth, for classical evidentialists were sensitive to the nature of historical proof and did not claim for their arguments a scientific or mathematical certainty but sought to press the dilemma: Either accept the historicity of the gospel accounts or else abandon great amounts of history for which the evidence is weaker or equal to the evidence for the gospels. In any case, nothing in evidentialism commits one to a position on how strongly the evidence tips the scales in favor of belief in Jesus' miracles. In fact Brown himself comes out very strongly on this score, declaring that "the alternative to the miracle-working Jesus of the Gospels is not the ethical teacher of liberal theology but sheer historical skepticism" (p. 284). What more could any evidentialist ask for?

2. *Signs as part of a world view versus evidence as independent.* Very often Brown intimates that miracles cannot establish a world view but only can be believed within it. Unfortunately his failure to understand the role of miracles in classical apologetics has prevented his seeing that evidentialists were not trying to establish a world view via miracles. Their world view was already theistic, and the issue devolved around which type of theism was true. Brown provides no reason, so far as I can see, why miracles could not serve as rational grounds for a theist's embracing God's special revelation in Christ. As for his point about oversimplification, I see no reason why the transition between the God of natural theology and the God of the Bible could not be effected precisely on the grounds of Christian evidences that serve to declare to us more clearly the unknown God apprehended in nature. And Brown's argument about how people come to faith is a psychological point only, irrelevant to the rationality of becoming a Christian on the evidence of miracles. It seems to me unobjectionable to say that a person who believes that a personal God exists can come to see this God's special revelation in Christ on the basis of Jesus' miracles. More than that, however, it seems that so long as one entertains a world view that allows the possibility that God exists he must allow the possibility of miracles. Only an atheist can consistently deny the possibility of miracles. Brown himself seems to concede this, for he grants that one need not be a theist in order to recognize miracles. Indeed, Jesus' miracles may lead us to revise our views of God and reality. Brown has here broken decisively with the epistemology of world-view relativity. All one needs to have is a neutral world view in order to allow that miracles may occur, and sufficient evidence for such an occurrence could lead to revisions in our world view. But then what, we may ask, has become of the idea that miracles are merely signs discernible from within the Christian framework? And what grounds remain for not calling miracles evidence for that framework?

Indeed, we may ask, why could not miracles serve as part of a cumulative case for an atheist's changing his world view to Christian theism? Suppose someone came to believe that (1) Jesus' miracles could only have happened if God exists and (2) the evidence makes it plausible to believe that Jesus' miracles happened—more strongly than he believes that (3) God does not exist. Would he not be rational to abandon belief (3)? Of course it might be said that if he believed (3) it is highly unlikely that he should come to accept both (1) and (2). But there seems to be no necessity in this. His atheism could be of the nominal type (e.g. if he were raised in a Marxist country), not very well thought through and wanting in justification, and his acquaintance with Christianity could be very second-hand. Confronted with historical evidence for the credibility of the gospel miracles, would he be irrational to abandon his atheism and become a Christian? I am sure this happens all the time. Did not Brown's hero C. S. Lewis come to Christ in a similar way?

3. *Rational faith versus arational fideism.* If the above considerations do not serve to provide a consistent and plausible analysis of the distinction between sign and evidence, the final consideration urged by Brown would appear to be that evidentialism attempts to provide some rational justification for belief in Christ whereas the defender of signs sees faith in Christ as an arational act of commitment. A miracle provides no rational basis for believing in Jesus or his

mission. The miracle is so ambiguous that it admits of equally plausible alternative interpretations. Some will respond to the miracle with faith, others with disbelief, and the decision to respond one way rather than the other is a criterionless choice. But if this is Brown's understanding of miracle, then what justification is there in calling them "signs"? According to Brown, a sign is an indicator that points to something. But on the above analysis this is precisely what a miracle does not do. If a miracle points to God, then it cannot be said to be wholly ambiguous and admitting of equally plausible alternative interpretations. If a miraculous event points to God it does so precisely because it furnishes some evidence that God is here at work. In other words, the distinction between signs and evidence is illusory. Because it is evidence it is a sign, and were it to furnish no evidence at all of God's activity then it would not be an indicator pointing to God.

Now of course "sign" can be used in ways other than "pointer." It can be used in the sense of "mark" or "token," as circumcision was a sign of God's covenant with Israel. Similarly the prophetic actions noted by Brown were signs in the sense of "tokens" or "illustrations." This sense of sign is nonevidential. But neither are they pointers or indicators that "fall short of conclusive demonstration." The way Brown treats miracles as signs vacillates between understanding them as what amounts to "weak evidence" and as nonevidential "tokens."

If we try to put the best face on what Brown is saying, it seems to me that he is contending for something like this: In order to discern a miracle, one must come to the data with a world view that admits at least the possibility that God exists and has acted in history. If one's heart is open and searching for God, he will see Jesus' miracles as divine tokens that tell us something about who God is. But the discernment of God's hand in these events is an arational response of faith for which the events themselves furnish no evidence.

#### IV. CRITICAL HANDLING OF THE ISSUES: ASSESSMENT

If this is Brown's view, then what reasons are there for accepting it? Unfortunately Brown is no clearer here than in the formulation of his view. His critical handling of the issues in this book often seems to amount to little more than saying he agrees with writer *A* and disagrees with writer *B*. As a result his interaction with the positions he expounds takes on the character of a verdict rather than a grappling with the difficult issues involved. Hence one will look in vain for a clear, hard argument for regarding the gospel miracles as nonevidential tokens. Perhaps we can uncover the reasons for his view by examining his reservations about the two-step approach of classical apologetics in establishing first the historicity of an event and secondly its miraculous character (p. 283). Though he characterizes such an approach as dubious, he does not clearly state why this is so. Many times in the book he seems to suggest that the first step cannot be accomplished because the evidence for the gospel miracles (excluding the resurrection) is so uncertain. Perhaps the clearest statement of this position comes in his remark that for the modern believer, in contrast to first-century witnesses, the gospel miracle stories are unverifiable reports that must be accepted on trust. "To that generation they were a demonstration of divine activ-

ity; to us they are a report of that demonstration which functions as a sign pointing to the identity of Jesus inviting the commitment of faith" (p. 206; cf. p. 176). Now this seems altogether remarkable. Here Brown seems to admit that for the witnesses the miracles were not tokens but demonstrations. Thus they were not for the witnesses ambiguous events in which only faith could discern God's hand. Now this seems to me correct in the case of many gospel miracles—e.g., no one in his right mind could sincerely believe that the cleansing of a body eaten away with leprosy, at Jesus' sheer verbal command, is probably a purely natural event. But how then does historical distance transform the demonstration into a sign? Presumably by weakening the evidence for its occurrence, Brown would say. But this seems to embody a fundamental confusion: The want of evidence does not change a demonstration into a sign; it only creates doubt as to whether the demonstrative event occurred. But if it occurred, it was a demonstration. This is the situation in which the medieval proponents of the signs of credibility found themselves: Miracles and prophecy functioned as evidence for the credibility of Scripture but, lacking the historical method, they had no way of proving that the events took place. Brown has confused the evidence for miracles with the miracles as evidence. The former could be uncertain without affecting the certainty of the latter. Thus our lack of evidence for the gospel miracles does not make them function epistemologically as mere tokens: The miracles of Jesus serve as evidence for supernatural activity, but our evidence that the miracles occurred may be uncertain. In any case Brown never proves that the evidence for the gospel miracles is negligible; he just asserts it.<sup>18</sup>

Brown also seems to doubt the second step of the evidentialist's approach: that one could show that some event is miraculous. His skepticism on this point seems to be connected with his notion that how one interprets the fact will be to a certain extent shaped by one's world view. The "older, hard evidentialism that tried to treat miracles as solid, objective, incontrovertible evidence of divine authenticity was . . . simplistic" because even its proponents made theological presuppositions (p. 284). But we have already seen that classical evidentialism was not trying to establish a world view or prove God's existence. And Brown himself admits that one need not be a theist to become convinced that God is revealed in Jesus' miracles. Despite all his talk of world views and theory-ladenness, Brown's view is in the end so drastically qualified that no reason remains to think that good historical evidence for miracles cannot suffice to cause a person even to change his world view, much less make some modifications within it—i.e., become a Christian theist.

Perhaps Brown's misgivings with the second step, however, are that he sees no way of discerning whether an event is truly miraculous. But here he has failed to appreciate Swinburne's point that we do in some cases have a sufficient grasp of particular natural laws so as to know to a high degree of probability that some event would be naturally impossible—e.g., multiplying bread and fishes. More-

<sup>18</sup>Brown's misgivings on this point are surprisingly simplistic, such as our not being able to personally interrogate the witnesses (pp. 176, 286). This sort of consideration would undermine the whole enterprise of historical study. On the question of whether mere historical distance diminishes the credibility of sound testimony see the piece by P. Merkle in a forthcoming *Evangelical Quarterly*. For an analysis of the historical credibility of the gospel miracles stories see the forthcoming volume on miracles in the Tyndale House Gospel Project's series *Gospel Perspectives* published by JSOT.

over, as Jean le Clerc and Jacob Vernet pointed out against their deist opponents, when the miracles occur at a momentous time (e.g., when Jesus says, "Be clean!") and do not recur in history and when the miracles are numerous and various, then the chances of their being the result of unknown natural laws is minimized.<sup>19</sup> Moreover the supernatural interpretation is given in the religio-historical context in which Jesus' miracles occurred. Hence it would seem plausible to view such events, if they occurred, as genuine miracles.

At this point Brown usually retreats to his first position: We have no evidence that such events have occurred. But, as explained, that fact—even if it were true—is strictly irrelevant to whether miracles are evidence for divine activity or mere tokens of it. Hence I do not see that Brown has refuted the evidentialist's approach, nor has he provided grounds for adopting his own view.

## V. CRITICAL HANDLING OF THE ISSUES: BIBLICAL SIGNS

Brown, however, might offer one last defense for his position: It is Biblical. But only the most tendentious reading of the Biblical evidence could conclude that the Biblical miracles were viewed not as evidence of divine activity but as mere tokens of it. Running throughout the OT is the tradition that God provides miraculous signs as evidence of his action. Think for example of Moses' miracles of the leprous hand and the staff, which were given as proof to Pharaoh of God's presence with his messenger; or again, of Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal to call down fire from heaven as proof of whose form of theism was true; or again, of Isaiah's taunt to the idols to provide descriptions of future contingents as evidence of their deity. It is to this tradition that Brown should have appealed for understanding Jesus' miraculous signs, not the wholly irrelevant natural prophetic signs that were merely dramatic illustrations of their message. Just as Brown misconstrued historical theology by appealing to sacramental signs instead of the signs of credibility, so he misconstrues the Biblical data by appealing to prophetic tokens rather than miraculous OT signs. When Jesus in the synoptics refuses to give a sign to the Pharisees he is refusing to perform miraculous deeds, not refusing to act out a prophetic token. In fact Brown's own provocative thesis that Jesus was crucified, in accordance with the commands of Deuteronomy 13, for performing signs presupposes that these were miraculous evidences, for one is not killed for performing prophetic tokens. Similarly, when the people exclaimed, "When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man?" (John 7:31), they were not declaring that Messiah would do no more prophetic illustrations than had Jesus. And when Nicodemus said, "We know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him" (3:2), he was not commenting on Jesus' ability to dramatize his message in symbolic acts. The blind man healed by Jesus was incredulous that anyone could resist the evidential power of this sign. If Jesus did not think of his miracles as evidence of his person and mission but as mere prophetic tokens, it becomes inexplicable how he could appeal to people to believe in him on the

<sup>19</sup>Jean le Clerc, *Five Letters Concerning the Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures* (London, 1690) 235-236; J. A. Turretin, *Traité de la vérité de la religion chrétienne* (2d ed.; Geneva: Henri-Albert Gosse, 1745-55), 5. 272.

basis of the works themselves (5:36; 10:38). The very purpose of John's gospel is to give eyewitness testimony to these signs so that persons temporally or geographically removed from the events themselves and thus lacking the first-hand acquaintance with the events that Thomas demanded might nevertheless believe on the basis of reliable evidence that Jesus is the Son of God (20:30-31). The prominent witness motif in John and Luke-Acts is itself an historical apologetic based on Jesus' miracles and resurrection.<sup>20</sup> According to Mark, Jesus' miracles were proof of his divine authority (Mark 2:10). Of course not everyone responded positively to the miracles. But, as Matthew notes, the miracles were sufficiently clear so as to condemn those who refused to believe (Matt 11:20-24). The view that Jesus' miracles were not thought to be evidence for God's hand upon him is thus highly implausible.

Of course it might be said that Jesus did not perform miracles to give evidence of his divine person or mission—but that is beside the point. The issue is not whether the miracles were intended as evidence but whether in fact they constitute evidence. The accounts of Jesus' miracles may have a nonevidential purpose. But if they are historically accurate, they have value in showing the supernatural element in Jesus' ministry.

Thus inchoate and inconsistent as it is, I doubt that Brown's critical handling of the issues will serve to advance significantly the contemporary discussion on the problem of miracles. The chief value of this work lies in its worth as a bibliographical reference tool. Interestingly, Brown has promised a sequel to this book, in which he will examine in greater depth the Biblical miracles. It promises to be a massive and in-depth study, and we can look forward to it with eagerness.

<sup>20</sup>See A. A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (Cambridge: University Press, 1977) 78-90, 28-33, 138.