



MY
APOLOGETICS
DINNER
PARTY

A REAL-LIFE
SOCRATIC DIALOGUE

LOUIS
MARKOS



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CONTENTS

Introduction: *Setting the Table* ix

FIRST COURSE: PREDINNER IN THE DEN

- 1 Are Miracles Possible? 3
- 2 Who Did Jesus Claim to Be? 15
- 3 Are the Gospels Historical? 29

SECOND COURSE: DINNER IS SERVED

- 4 Did the Resurrection Really Happen? 45
- 5 What Is the Real Problem with Man? 59
- 6 Why Are Christians So Obsessed with Sex? 74

THIRD COURSE: DESSERT BY CANDLELIGHT

- 7 Why Would a Just God Choose a Single Nation? 89
- 8 How Can There Be Only One Way to God? 102
- 9 What About the People Who Lived Before Christ? 116
- 10 What About New Age Spirituality? 131

FOURTH COURSE: AFTER DINNER BY THE FIRE

- 11 Is God Really Involved in the World? 143
- 12 Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People? 156
- 13 How Has God Worked in *Your* Life? 169

A Note to the Reader 177

Why Everyone Is So Polite in This Book: *A Guide to Engaging with the Conversation* 179

Further Reading 183



ARE MIRACLES POSSIBLE?

“ANTHONY,” I ASKED, taking a deep breath and praying that my smile looked genuine, “why do you say that ‘Virgin Mother’ is an oxymoron?”

“Everybody knows that a woman can’t give birth to a child unless she has sex with a man. That’s simple science. If the people back in Jesus’ day thought his mother was a virgin, that was only because they didn’t understand how procreation works.”

“If you mean they did not know about sperm and eggs, then you are right. But tell me this. When Mary told Joseph that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit, how did Joseph react?”

“He was upset and was prepared to divorce her in secret?”

“Why did he want to divorce her?”

“Because he thought that she had been unfaithful?”

“Why did he think that?”

“Well, she was pregnant, and Joseph knew he had not had sex with her. That meant she must have slept with another man.”

“Ah, so what you are telling me, Anthony, is that Joseph, though he knew nothing about sperm and eggs, was well aware that women don’t get pregnant if they haven’t had sex?”

“Of course he knew that. . . . I mean . . . well . . . oh my.”

“Don’t worry, Anthony, I can’t tell you how many times I have heard highly educated professors say that the people of the past believed in miracles only because they were ignorant of the laws of nature. I hope you see now the flaw in that argument. The only way a person can *recognize* that a



miracle like the virgin birth has occurred is if he is fully aware of the way things normally work in nature.

“When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead after he had been in the tomb for four days, the crowd was shocked and terrified. They reacted that way because they all knew that dead people don’t walk out of graves. And the same goes for blind men being able to see and lame men being able to walk. If they did not know that the dead, the blind, and the lame don’t suddenly wake, see, and walk, they wouldn’t have thought it miraculous, or even out of the ordinary, when they did.

“Stacey,” I said, turning to my daughter, “do you remember the enchanted pig?”

The moment I said those words, she broke into laughter, causing everyone else to wonder what could possibly be so funny about a pig, enchanted or otherwise.

“When my kids were young,” I explained, “I read them fairy stories from the red and blue fairy books of Andrew Lang. One of them concerned an enchanted pig that came to the royal court to ask for the hand of the princess. Stacey, please tell everyone what the king said to the pig after he finished making his suit.”

“Pig,” she said in a deep voice, “I am surprised that you speak so eloquently.” And then she started laughing again.

“You see,” I continued, knowing that once my daughter started laughing, it was difficult to get her to stop, “the king was not surprised that the pig *spoke*, only that it spoke eloquently.”

As Stacey continued to laugh, Anthony, along with most of the guests, stared at her and me with a blank expression.

“In our world,” I said, “we would all be shocked if a pig began to speak. That is because we live in a world in which animals do not possess the gift of speech. But in the realms of fairy, animals are just as likely to talk as people, and that’s why the king doesn’t bat an eye when the pig talks to him. He is surprised only that so lowly an animal should have mastered the high language of the court.

“Or, to bring things back to our world, suppose we all went outside on the front lawn, and I asked Anthony to walk over to the sidewalk and jump as high as he could. If you did that, Anthony, what would happen?”

“I’d jump up and immediately come back down.”

“Exactly, because we live in a world in which gravity draws things downward.

“Would that same rule hold for a person living in the Middle Ages or the time of Christ or the golden age of Greece?”

“Yes.”

“But what if you jumped, Anthony, and, rather than immediately come back down, you floated away into the sky?”

“That’s impossible—unless I were performing a magic trick with hidden wires.”

“Of course it is, but if you did float away without the use of ropes or wires, would you call that a miracle? Wouldn’t you all call that a miracle?”

Anthony, along with all the other guests, nodded his head.

“And what about the medievals or early Christians or ancient Athenians who saw one of their friends float away? Would they not recognize it as a miracle as well, despite the fact that they never heard the word *gravity*?”

“Yes. You don’t need to know the formula for gravity to know that it works.”

“But what if we moved the whole party to the surface of the moon. If you jumped on the moon and floated away, would that be a miracle.”

“No, because there is less gravity on the moon.”

“So, if we can sum up, people recognize that a miracle has occurred only if they know that a natural law has been violated, and they know if it has been violated only if they know that such laws exist. And the people of the past knew just as well as we do that human beings don’t float away, that people don’t come back from the dead, and that women don’t get pregnant if they have not slept with a man.”

I could tell by the looks on the faces of my hungry guests that all of them had understood the argument and that most of them had found it reasonable, but Anthony still looked unconvinced. As I saw the skepticism in his eyes, I said a silent prayer that the turkey would arrive and get me off the hook, but I was to have no such luck.



“All right,” said Anthony, and then paused to let the words coalesce in his head, “I’ll concede that the people of Jesus’ day knew the laws of nature,

even if they didn't have scientific terminology to express it. The real problem is not that they knew about the laws of nature but that they believed, incorrectly, that those laws could be broken at will. Hasn't modern science proved that the laws of nature cannot be broken?"

"Good point, Anthony. I see exactly where you're coming from. Modern skeptics are right when they say that the laws of nature can't be broken."

"Wait a minute, are you agreeing with me that miracles are impossible?"

"If miracles did in fact break the laws of nature, then I would agree with you. But I don't agree that they do. Miracles don't break the laws; they suspend them."

"What's the difference?"

By the looks on the faces of those around me, I could tell that Anthony's point about the laws of nature being unbreakable had engaged them enough to take their minds off dinner. As two dozen eyes fell on me, I looked at my bookshelf in hopes of locating a delicate Chinese vase that one of my students had once given me as a present. Spying it in the top corner by my books of mythology, I went over to the shelf and plucked it down. Then, with the vase in my right hand, I moved to the center of the den.

"Anthony," I asked, lifting up my right hand as high as it would go, "What would happen to this vase if I let it go?"

"It would fall to the ground and shatter."

"Exactly. We are back to the unbreakable law of gravity. But watch this."

As everyone in the room, especially Elaine, gasped with horror, I opened my hand and let the vase fall. Another second and it would have smashed to pieces, but the crash never came. Before the vase could hit the ground, my left hand swooped across and caught it mid-fall.

"OK, Anthony," I said with a smile, "did I just break the law of gravity?"

"No."

"Then what happened?"

"You altered the course of the vase by catching it with your left hand."

"In other words, I suspended the natural course of gravity by adding in a new factor. What will happen if I open my left hand?"

"Gravity will take over again, and the vase will break."

"Do you see now the difference between breaking and suspending the laws of gravity? Increasingly since Isaac Newton, modern scientists and

philosophers have come to view our universe as a giant billiard table run by fixed laws of motion. If you hit a ball with your cue stick with such and such force and at such and such an angle, and if there is no friction on the table, the ball must follow a certain course.”

“But isn’t that true? Isn’t that how the laws of nature work?”

“Yes, they do. But what would happen if, the second after you hit the ball, two hands reached out and shook the table?”

“The course of the ball would follow an unpredictable pattern.”

“Yes, because the intervention of those two hands suspended but didn’t break the physical laws of motion.”

“I agree, but I don’t see what that has to do with miracles like the virgin birth.”

“A miracle takes place when the hand of God reaches into our physical world and suspends, for a moment, the natural course of the laws that run it. But once he pulls his hand back, the normal laws of nature resume.”

“But you can’t bring someone back to life after he’s died.”

“Anthony, the Gospels record three miracles where Jesus raised someone from the dead. All three of those people that he brought back to life eventually died, just as all those he healed from sickness eventually got sick again.”

“But what about the virgin birth?”

“The Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary and that she conceived and became pregnant (Lk 1:30-35). Although Luke’s Gospel provides no details on the mechanics of how this miracle occurred, there is one thing that is clear.”

“What’s that?”

“Mary did not give birth to Jesus two days later. After Mary was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit, she carried the child for nine months and delivered him in the natural manner that all babies have been delivered since Cain and Abel.

“The difference between the early and medieval Christians and us is not that we think the laws of nature are inviolable and they did not, but that they were open, while we are not, to the possibility of the supernatural breaking in to the natural world.”



For a second a hush fell over the group, rather like the hush that fell after Stacey sang “Silent Night.” All of us, myself included, were feeling a quiet sense of awe at the thought that our natural world might not after all be fixed, static, and closed.

But I could tell that something was still bothering Anthony.

“Go ahead, Anthony,” I said. “Tell us what’s on your mind.”

“I’m not sure how to say it, but there’s something else about miracles that just doesn’t sit right with me. I mean, if God created the world and established the laws of nature, then why would he keep meddling with them? Doesn’t that seem to you, well, rather undignified, even a bit sloppy?”

“I see what you mean. Miracles seem to break the set order and rhythm of the cosmos, and as such suggest that God is a poor playwright who has lost control of the story he is telling. Is that what you’re trying to say?”

“Yes.”

“OK, then, let’s explore the analogy a bit further. Tell me, Anthony, who would you say is the greatest playwright who ever lived?”

“That’s easy. Shakespeare.”

“I don’t think anyone would disagree with that answer, but did you know that during the Enlightenment, what in England we call the Age of Reason, Shakespeare was considered to be a rather sloppy craftsman?”

“That sounds crazy.”

“It does to us, but in the eighteenth century, though they recognized the genius of Shakespeare’s soliloquies, critics felt that the overall design of his plays was flawed. Critics such as Samuel Johnson expected plays to follow the strict rules of decorum laid down by Aristotle and Horace, and, because Shakespeare didn’t think twice about breaking those rules, they felt he was an erratic genius at best.”

“What happened to change people’s minds about Shakespeare?”

“The Romantic poet and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge is what happened.”

“Isn’t he the one who wrote *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*?”

“The same. He decided to take a second look at Shakespeare’s plays. When he did, he discovered a deeper, more organic unity. True, Shakespeare broke the surface rules, but that is only because his grasp of the whole was fuller and richer. Just as every acorn contains within it the blueprint for an oak

forest, so, we now know, each of our microscopic cells contains the DNA code that sets the pattern for every part of our body.

“Remember in my class, Anthony, when you had to choose one image or metaphor from *Hamlet* and trace its use across the full length of the play?”

“I remember that well. It turned out to be the best essay I wrote during my four years at Houston Christian.”

“It *was* a good paper, Anthony. That’s because you understood that *Hamlet* is like a complex tapestry made up of a thousand crisscrossing threads. The metaphor you chose to analyze—poison, if memory serves—was one of those threads. It surfaces in act one, then goes dormant, then reemerges, always in a slightly different way. The pattern is there in the play, but you don’t realize it until you study it more closely.”

“Yes, that’s true,” said Anthony, looking enthusiastically at the other guests. “When I read the play again in a more focused manner, the pattern magically emerged. Before I did that, it was invisible. It was there all along, but I didn’t *see* it.”

“That’s because you didn’t yet have eyes to see it.”

“Or ears to hear it,” chimed in Stacey.

“That’s right, Stacey!” I said with fatherly pride. “Many of us learned in Sunday school that Jesus taught in parables so that everyone would understand him. But that’s not what Jesus said. He said that he taught in parables so that only those who had eyes to see and ears to hear would understand (Mk 4:10-12).”

“Can anyone tell me what message John the Baptist sent to Jesus after Herod Antipas put John in prison?”

As Bible questions go, that was a tough one, and it was understandably followed by about twenty seconds of silence. Finally, however, an answer did come, and from just the place I expected it to.



David had been a student of mine almost ten years earlier. In fact, he was the very person who had ushered me in to the international Christian fellowship group that was sponsoring the Thanksgiving potluck. His father,

who had been born in India, and his mother, who had been born in Mexico, had started the group before he was born.

My entry into the group began when David, a senior at the time taking my class on *The Chronicles of Narnia*, invited me to speak for one of their Saturday night meetings. I immediately agreed, only to discover a few days before the scheduled meeting that I couldn't follow through on my commitment because I'm deathly allergic to cats and dogs, and David's family, as it turned out, had a dog.

I was just about to email him my regrets when an idea struck me out of the blue: Why not move the fellowship to my home on Saturday? Well, that's exactly what we did, and the rest, as they say, is history. The group has been meeting at my house once a month ever since—and I wouldn't give up a single meeting!

Even as a senior, David was a powerful evangelist with a strong knowledge of the Bible; the intervening years had only strengthened that knowledge and sharpened his love for Christ, the gospel, and the Word of God.

"John the Baptist," he said, "had two of his disciples go to Jesus and ask him whether he was the Messiah promised by God or whether he should wait for someone else (Lk 7:19)."

"Exactly," I said with a smile, for a teacher is always pleased when his student gets an answer right, even if he hasn't taught him for eight years, "though I must admit I'm shocked that John would ask such a question. After all, John was the one God used to identify Jesus as the Son of God (Jn 1:32-34) and thus initiate his ministry.

"Still, John was confused and worried and wanted to get a straight answer from the lips of Jesus himself. Did Jesus give him the straight yes he was looking for?"

"Yes and no," said David. "He didn't give a direct yes. Rather, he told John's disciples to report back to John and tell him what was happening in Galilee: that the blind were seeing, the lame walking, the deaf hearing, the lepers being cleansed, the dead being raised, and the good news being preached to the poor (Lk 7:22-23)."

"Was Jesus being evasive?"



“No, he was offering up those miracles as a sign that he was the Messiah.”

“Thanks, David,” I said and then turned back to Anthony. “Anthony, do you see the point of this story? Miracles are not random, haphazard events that strike the earth like meteors that have fallen out of their orbit. They are purposeful. In the Old Testament, they were signs of God’s presence in the history of Israel, particularly when he led them out of slavery in Egypt, when he gave them the law of Moses, and when he spoke through the judges and prophets to get them back on track after they had strayed from the law.

“In the New Testament, they point to an amazing fact: that the God who created the world entered in to the world and became a man. They further attest to the good news that God in Christ has defeated sin and death and that he is building his church through the disciples. And miracles continue today, for God’s church is always dying and being reborn, just like its founder. Miracles don’t just *do* something; they *mean* something. They mean that God’s Spirit is working in the world.

“Anthony, the modern scientific mind takes for granted that miracles are aberrations, faulty stitches in the weave of nature, just as Samuel Johnson thought Shakespeare’s deviations from dramatic decorum rendered his plays flawed and imperfect. But if the Bible is right, then our world is fallen and in a state of decay. What if the miracle is not a break or a flaw in the story but a brief, tantalizing moment during which the original order is restored? Maybe miracles offer an all-too-brief glimpse into the way things were meant to be. When the Creator himself enters in to his creation, how else should that creation respond?”

“But water simply doesn’t turn into wine,” said Anthony, “and you can’t feed five thousand men with five loaves of bread and two fish.”

“Stacey,” I said, “could you please go in my study and get my copy of *Miracles* by C. S. Lewis?” As my ever-helpful daughter went in search of the book, I summed up for Anthony and the other guests what Lewis had to say about Jesus’ first miracle, when he turned six stone jars filled with water into six jugs of the finest wine to provide convivial cheer for those attending a wedding at Cana in Galilee (Jn 2:1-11).



“Every day, Lewis explains, water turns into wine, but the process is very slow and happens in secret. But when Jesus shows up and does it in a flash, the veil is lifted, and we get to see the miracle that has been going on for millennia. The same goes for the feeding of the five thousand (Mk 6:30-44). Every day, some wheat becomes much wheat, and a few fish become many fish, but we don’t notice the miracle. Until Jesus does it in a flash, and we suddenly recognize the fecundity the Creator put into his creation.”

“Our eyes are opened,” said Anthony with a slow nod of his head.

“Yes. We recognize not only that what we call nature was fashioned by the hand of a personal Creator but that that Creator is among us.”

At just that moment, Stacey arrived with book in hand. “Here it is, Dad. I’ve opened it to the page I think you have in mind.”

“Well done, daughter! Here is what Lewis writes in chapter fifteen: ‘Every year, as part of the Natural order, God makes wine. He does so by creating a vegetable organism that can turn water, soil, and sunlight into a juice which will, under proper conditions, become wine. Thus, in a certain sense, He constantly turns water into wine, for wine, like all drinks, is but water modified. Once, and in one year only, God, now incarnate, short circuits the process: makes wine in a moment; uses earthenware jars instead of vegetable fibres to hold the water. But uses them to do what He is always doing. The miracle consists in the short cut; but the event to which it leads is the usual one.’

“Anthony, do you remember in class when we read Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*?”

“How could I forget? People turning into bears and birds and trees and stones! Sometimes they even turn into rivers or flowers or stars. I really enjoyed that book.”

“But would you have enjoyed it if you thought that those things might happen?”

“Of course not! I would be terrified if I thought it was even remotely possible that such things might happen to me or someone I know.”

“If the ‘miracles’ in Ovid were true, what would that tell you about the world in which we live?”

“That it’s run by arbitrary gods who help us to become heroes or transform us into animals depending on their mood.”

“Did you know that Ovid wrote his *Metamorphoses* about fifty years before the Gospel of Mark? Ovid’s life overlaps with that of Jesus.”

“Really? But the miracles of Jesus are radically different from those in Ovid.”

“How so? Can you explain the difference?”

“I would say that those in Ovid are performed by random, capricious gods who seem to care nothing for the people whose lives they interfere with, while those in Mark are performed by a good, moral God who wants to help and heal humanity.”

“Well put, Anthony. Would you say, then, that in the miracles recorded in the Gospels, we see the hand of a loving God who works with and through his creation rather than violating and disrupting its laws?”

“Yes, I think that’s a fair statement. The miracles in the Bible really are different from those we read about in Greek and Roman mythology. Ovid’s miracles break the laws of nature, while those in the Bible work through them.”

“Yes, just as Jesus the teacher did not break the Mosaic law but fulfilled it (Mt 5:17), so Jesus the miracle worker did not break the laws of nature but fulfilled them. As Lewis himself reminds us in the same chapter I just read from, when God created the first man, Adam, he did it directly, bypassing what would become the normal route of procreation. Just so, when he created the second Adam, the perfect Man, Jesus, he also bypassed the normal route so that Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit. The virgin birth does not violate the scientific laws of procreation; it reveals that the original seed came from God and that he, not our parents, is the real author of human life.”

When I could see from Anthony’s body language that he was a bit more comfortable now with the idea of a Virgin Mother, I turned my attention to the group as a whole and said: “Yes, the virgin birth is a difficult thing to bend one’s mind around, but it is not the greatest miracle in Christianity. The virgin birth, as amazing as it is, is merely the vehicle that brought about the greatest miracle of all: the incarnation, that Jesus of Nazareth was fully man and fully God.”

“Wait a minute,” said a voice to my left, “those two miracles don’t have to go together. In my religion, we accept and teach the virgin birth, but we

reject what you call the incarnation. Our book teaches us that Jesus was a prophet born of a virgin but that he was not the Son of God.”

This would be a most opportune time for that turkey to arrive, I thought to myself, but the front door remained stubbornly shut. This question too would need to be wrestled with.



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