

The Miracles of Elisha

by Lynn Andrew

The Iron did swim. (II Kings 6:6)

Is there anything wrong with drawing a line here? Can we relegate Elisha's miracles and similar stories to a type of religious mythology? Can we reasonably say that this is something God would not do—break the law of gravity to retrieve an ax head for Elisha?

If we draw such a line, we are saying to God, "You shall not step over this because we cannot believe you if you do; you are entitled to reasonable and necessary miracles like Creation and the resurrection of Christ, but your dignity is at stake here, and we will not be party to attributing swimming ax heads to the God of creation!"

If you can imagine someone saying that, what do you suppose they base their judgment on? How does one determine that floating an ax head would compromise the majesty of the Almighty? Does this person know the mind of God so thoroughly that he knows all the things God would never do? Or is it based on something else?

There is the scientific concept that natural laws are unbreakable (otherwise there could be no confidence in scientific experiments). Philosophy takes it from there and postulates that God is unable to modify the natural course of things without destroying his creation. But how is human intelligence in these matters equal to the Creator's? Did God tell a philosopher that he drew the line for himself and promised not to cross it? If so, it seems he would have told it to at least one of the writers he chose to set down his point of view in the book we call the Bible that has risen to bless the world and defy weighty opposition.

The line is easy to draw. It takes no special knowledge or training. You can draw one yourself and live in a universe where there are no miracles that do not meet with your approval. The great advantage in taking this initiative is that you are never surprised by Scripture, for anything goes on the far side of the line. There is nothing to worry about; you never fear that you might be unable to explain to a skeptic why it's reasonable to believe in incidental and frivolous miracles.

When we judge Biblical narratives and categorize them according to our liking, we inevitably find our alternate universe already well populated. So choose a nice one with nice people in it whom you respect and who have already gotten together a well organized history that excludes whatever offends you. Never mind that, measured by the Biblical universe, you have remodeled the Almighty—so be it if that's what it takes. After all, doesn't sanity demand it? And if not, then at least life is less frightening if the Bible cannot disturb the tranquility of respectable and reasonable things: there is nothing upsetting in the remnant of Scripture that we admit to our side of the line.

To me it seems like quibbling over nothing when the fact that we are here at all stands so tall. It makes the effort to doubt anything in the Scriptures seem foolish, for nothing else explains our being here. So for my part I will take Elisha's story for bedtime reading and dream about the even stranger and more wonderful miracles God will do for me. I don't envy Elisha's knack for calling out exceptions to nature. I just want to be ready when the living saints defy gravity. When I rise from the muddy earth to breathe the holy air of heaven in a new body, I will not be surprised, for I live in the Biblical universe in which God promises to put a rod of iron in my hand.

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