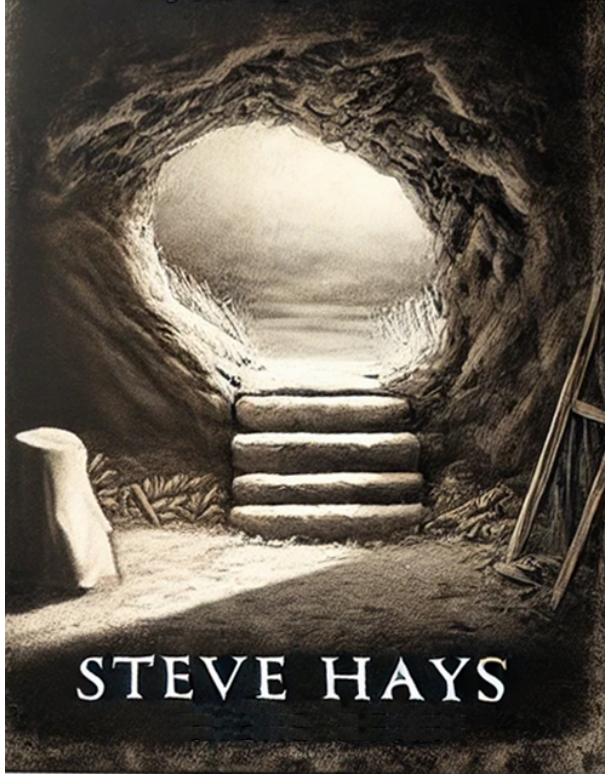


# CHRISTIAN SUPERNATURALISM



STEVE HAYS

**CHRISTIAN  
SUPERNATURALISM**



**STEVE HAYS**

# Christian Supernaturalism

---

## Table of Contents

[Christian Supernaturalism](#)

[Preface](#)

[I. Concept of Miracles](#)

[II. Credibility of miracles](#)

[III. Biblical miracles](#)

[IV. Extrabiblical miracles](#)

[V. Non-Christian miracles](#)

[VI. Supernatural dreams and visions](#)

[VII. Angelic apparitions](#)

[VIII. Dominical apparitions](#)

[IX. Postmortem apparitions](#)

[X. Occult apparitions](#)

[XI. Occult](#)

[XII. Ufology](#)

[XIII. Possession & exorcism](#)

## XIV. Cessationism

For further reading

# Preface

---

My interest in the cessationist debate is indirect. My interest in that debate is secondary to my primary interest in the argument from miracles. But they're intertwined. I discuss the status of Catholic miracles in my book on Catholicism.

The title of the book is necessarily ambiguous. A supernatural phenomenon can be Christian in different ways. For instance, witchcraft is both consistent with and contrary to the Christian faith. On the one hand the power of witchcraft is consistent with Christian theology. It is undergirded by Christian metaphysics. It falls into place within a Christian worldview. On the other hand, the practice of witchcraft is antithetical to Christian piety and ethics. So the title does not constitute an endorsement of all the phenomena documented in the book.

But what all the phenomenon have in common is to falsify the standard naturalist paradigm (physicalism and causal closure). Some of the phenomena eliminate naturalism from further consideration while other phenomena provide positive evidence for Christianity

# I. Concept of Miracles

---

## Classifying miracles

I've been corresponding with some friends on the nature of miracles. I'm going to post my correspondence.

In fact, in my notes at this point I wrote: "This is why Calvinists need not be, and should not be, physical determinists: it would rule out miracle."

Wouldn't that only follow on a Humean definition of miracles? In principle, why couldn't miracles be physically determined?

Depending on how we define "miracle" and "law," I think that miracles would, in principle, be consistent with both physical and nomological determinism. But maybe I'm overlooking some counterexamples.

Mind you, I'm not saying that's the best framework for miracles.

There's another distinction. Natural laws are very general. They're not equivalent to natural processes. Many things naturally occur that aren't covered by natural laws, things more particular than the very general principles denoted by natural laws.

Well, yes, since the notion of 'miracle' is ambiguous. On the traditional view, miracles are *supra natura* (medieval view) rather than *contra natura* (Hume's view). That is, they are not exceptions to the laws of nature. Rather, they are events that don't fall under the scope of the laws of nature. The laws tell us what happens when nature acts under 'its own steam,' relatively speaking. (Nature never *ultimately* acts under its own steam, given divine conservation and concurrence.) The laws don't purport to tell us what happens when God decides to go

beyond conservation and concurrence to bring about something more immediate - that is, something not mediated by the natural powers of substances.

On this traditional view, it is not the case that the laws of nature + a past state of the universe entails any future state. The laws only tell us what would happen *absent divine intervention*. Since it is always open to God to intervene, bringing about effects that go beyond the natural powers of substances, then physical determinism is false. For physical determinism amounts to this entailment claim, but the possibility of divine intervention spoils it.

However, there is another view of 'miracle' to which I think you are alluding. It capitalizes on the spectrum of words that are used to indicate these kinds of things in Scripture: 'wonder,' 'sign,' etc. Here what matters is the religious context of the event, rather than its metaphysical relation to the natural powers of substances. Is God using the event to draw attention to himself in a special way? Here miracles don't have to be things that 'go beyond' nature. Rather, God can have ordained from eternity that the laws of nature + a particular set of circumstances would result in an event that is so remarkably timed or located that it draws attention to God. These would be 'physically determined' miracles, and they would be neither *supra natura* nor *contra natura*.

When I say that "Calvinists shouldn't be physical determinists, for that would rule out miracle," I mean 'miracle' in the first sense, not the second sense. Physical determinism would allow for miracle in the second sense.



**i)** To begin with, many OT miracles (e.g. Noah's flood, judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah, some/all? plagues of Egypt) could be classified as coincidence miracles. They employ natural processes or natural mechanisms. What makes them miraculous is the opportune timing. But these miracles could indeed be the result of natural laws + the past state of the universe. Within that framework, God, in his plan for world history, would prearrange the natural course of events to providentially produce these conjunctions at just the right time and place. Indeed, I think that's the best way to construe a coincidence miracle.

**ii)** The problem with defining a miracles as an event that runs contrary to what happens when nature acts under its own steam is that natural agents can intervene to arrest or redirect the course of natural. Take a beaver dam. Not to mention human technology.

Likewise, if I see an egg rolling across a table, I can intervene to prevent the egg from rolling off the table and smashing on the floor. But that isn't miraculous.

**iii)** Take Daniel's friends in the fiery furnace. Left to its own devices, the heat would incinerate them. However, it's also possible to create natural heat shields. It is possible for God to shield them through a natural medium. In principle, the floating axehead, Jonah's survival, or Joshua's Long Day (depending on how we interpret the description) could involve the same principle.

I'm not saying that's how God did it, but it complicates the analysis of a "miracle," as well as the objection to the miracles as "contrary to nature."

**iv)** Take miracles like turning water into wine or multiplying fish. Those are paradigm-cases of miracles. Something that the natural course of events could never produce.

Yet these are cases of mental causation. Christ wills something to happen, and it happens. But mental causation is not inherently miraculous. I will my hand to grasp of glass of lemonade and put it to my lips. There's a physical effect of a physical cause (the motion of my hand). Behind the physical cause is a mental cause. Yet that's all perfectly natural.

Take Jesus healing the blind. That's a case of mental causation producing a physical effect.

**v)** Perhaps one would say the difference is that, in some of these illustrations, I'm using a physical medium to produce the result, unlike changing water into wine or multiplying fish, where the mind *directly* produces the result. Or perhaps one would say natural laws + plus the past history of the universe could never lead up to that result. It's not a chain reaction, but causally discrete or discontinuous.

However, that's difficult to generalize. For instance, science is open to action-at-a-distance or nonlocality. By the same token, you have philosophers like Stephen Braude who think some human beings naturally have the power of psychokinesis.

Even if we deny psychokinesis in reality, we could still consider it hypothetically. Suppose some agents did have that mind-over-matter ability. Then "miracles" would be consistent with physical determinism or nomological determinism, yes?

Moreover, that wouldn't entail a secular framework.

**vi)** Take Jesus restoring the daughter of Jairus. According to the Lukan version, her "spirit" returned to her body. On one interpretation, that involves Jesus reuniting her soul and body. Jesus having the authority to summon her soul and return her soul to her body. (On another interpretation,

pneuma just means "breath." When you "expire" you stop breathing.)

If dualism is true, then dualism would be "natural." Resuscitating her wouldn't "violate" a law of nature. Personally, I don't care if miracles "break" the laws of nature. I'm just probing the logic of the objection.

**vii)** Take the burning bush. That depends, in part, on how we are meant to understand the phenomenon. Is that physical fire? This is bound up with the presence of the angel. Exodus also has cases of supernatural luminescence (e.g. Shekinah, pillar of fire). So, contextually speaking, this may not be physical fire, in which case it doesn't even *prima facie* "violate" a law of nature for the bush to "burn" without being consumed. Rather, the bush would have a fiery aura.

Yet, on that interpretation, this is still miraculous in another sense.

We could examine other Biblical miracles. I think the traditional discussion of miracles, both pro and con, oversimplifies the issue by trying to reduce everything to a common explanatory principle. But the phenomena are more varied.

**i)** There are basically two different ways of framing the question of miracles. One is a topdown approach. We begin with a preconception of what the world is like. That, in turn, dictates how we define miracles and whether we allow for miracles. Take methodological naturalism. Avoiding the "Divine Foot" in the door.

The other is a bottomup approach. Given the occurrence of miracles, what does that tell us about the kind of world we live in?

Does the world define a miracle, or does a miracle define the world?

**ii)** On the one hand you have the law/lawbreaker model. That casts God in the role of a homeowner who accidentally locked himself out of his house and has to break a window to get back inside. It's patently absurd.

**iii)** On the other hand, as Calvinists, we believe that God predestined every event. In that respect, every event is prearranged and coordinated with every other event.

We believe in meticulous providence, by which God normally implements his plan for the world. On Calvinism, many miracles could be classified or reclassified as coincidence miracles.

**iv)** It's also important to distinguish between *natural* causal explanations and *naturalistic* causal explanations. For instance, there are natural ways of cheating at casino poker. But a cheater is succeeding more often than if he played by the rules.

**v)** Apropos (iv), a miracle doesn't necessarily require a different causal modality. Divine intent can make it miraculous. Even if everything leading up to the outcome seems to be happening "naturally," yet when seen in retrospect, one can perceive how preceding events were *aimed* at that outcome. The end-result was premeditated. We discern the evidence of forethought, as well as the adaptation of means to an intended result.

There is a [David] Lewisian view of laws of nature such that the laws are just exceptionless generalizations, describing 'what always happens,' but they have no necessity. They supervene on actual events. This contradicts the view of the laws that says such laws have *ceteris paribus* clauses, restricting their scope to

closed systems only, where divine intervention is absent. But Plantinga argues that even on a Lewisian view of the laws, miracles could never contradict or break the laws. For if something happens that contradicts the exceptionless generalization, that only means that what we took to be a law wasn't really a law (remember, on this view the laws have no necessity, and supervene on actual events).

What this means is that on either view of the laws - with *ceteris paribus* clauses imposing a restricted scope, or as exceptionless generalizations of universal scope - miracles could never contradict or break the laws. I think this is an interesting point. In fact, to get a laws/miracle conflict, you have to add two theses to the laws themselves: physical determinism, plus the causal closure of the physical universe. But that would be to add a gigantic dose of unsupported metaphysics to the results of natural science. Such gratuitous additions are 'where the conflict really lies,' for Plantinga.

Hasn't Robert Larmer argued that miracles are consistent with nomological necessity? I'm not saying that's the best way to model miracles—just that the objection to miracles based on nomological necessity is metaphysically questionable even if we grant nomological necessity.

Seems to me that most-all Biblical miracles fall into one of two categories: coincidence miracles or psychokinetic miracles.

For a rough definition of a **coincidence miracle**: *a highly unlikely but opportune convergence of causally independent antecedent events.*

For a rough definition of a **psychokinetic miracle**: *an agent causally influencing a physical system without any*

*physical medium to facilitate the effect.*

I think coincidence miracles are clearly compatible with physical or nomological determinism.

Psychokinetic miracles are incompatible in the semantic or superficial sense that they presuppose dualism, which isn't strictly "physical."

However, if dualism is true, then dualism is "natural."

I agree that miracles in both categories would be consistent with nomological determinism (if one allows natural laws to include psychic laws as well as physical laws).

But what about the raising of Lazarus? A coincidence miracle?

No, I'd classify the raising of Lazarus as a psychokinetic miracle: an exercise of Christ's sheer omnipotence.

Another issue is God's relation to time. On the eternalist view, God doesn't miraculously "intervene" at discrete, successive points in history. Rather, God made everything by a single timeless fiat. In that respect, God bears the same causal relation to every event—be it providential or miraculous. God instantiated the world as a given totality, by one indivisible creative fiat.

On the eternalist view, you have all the same events. All the same miracles. But history isn't punctuated by divine interventions, where God jumps in or breaks into the spacetime continuum, then absents himself. You don't have a temporal series of divine incursions, intercalated with lawful operations the rest of the time. A timeless God doesn't shift causal gears to perform a miracle. Rather, God instantiates a miraculous event the same way he

instantiates a providential event—by actualizing his plan for the world, all at once.

Keep in mind that I don't subscribe to nomological determinism. I'm discussing the possible consistency of nomological determinism with miracles for the sake of argument, inasmuch as that's a stock objection to miracles.

So what kind of miracle *couldn't* be classified as a psychokinetic miracle in that case? Seems to me that any miracle could be understood as "an exercise of Christ's sheer omnipotence" -- which suggests that the category doesn't have much utility for classificatory purposes.

**i)** Since every miracle is not a dominical miracle, every miracle wouldn't be an exercise of Christ's sheer omnipotence. In addition to reported postbiblical miracles, you have miracles attributed to prophets, apostles, demons, witches, sorcerers, and the Antichrist, in Scripture.

You also have miracles attributed to Yahweh in the OT. Although there's a robust sense in which Christ is Yahweh, it would be anachronistic to say Yahweh in the OT is Yahweh Incarnate.

**ii)** I don't think it's a question of whether every miracle *could* be psychokinetic, but whether that's the best explanation in any particular cases.

Assuming that we reject occasionalism and idealism, then we believe the physical world normally operates by natural forces, mechanisms, and processes that are genuine agencies. That have real casual or productive power.

Likewise, as Calvinists, we subscribe to exhaustive predestination and meticulous providence.

Given that explanatory frame of reference, it is more economical to classify some miracles as coincidence miracles rather than psychokinetic miracles.

**iii)** Seems to me that in the case of judicial natural disasters (e.g. the flood, destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, plagues of Egypt, drought [in Elijah's time], fall of Jericho, &c.), that a coincidence miracle is the best explanation. God prearranging natural conditions to yield that result.

Other examples might include quail blown off course to feed the Israelites in the wilderness, water from the rock, or the bear-mauling to avenge Elisha.

It's possible that God created a bear ex nihilo to punish Elisha's detractors. But given a doctrine of Biblical providence, I think it makes more sense to say God prearranged two she-bears to be in the vicinity to carry out the divine judgment.

Likewise, it's possible that God created the spring (i.e. water from the rock) by direct fiat, but I think it makes more sense to view this as a coincidence miracle. God guiding the Israelites to that location.

**iv)** I do think most dominical miracles are best classified as psychokinetic miracles. But let's consider some possible or actual exceptions:

**a)** Take the cursing of the fig tree. That could be a psychokinetic miracle. Christ simply wills the fig tree to wither on the spot. On the other hand, God can cause a plant to wither overnight by natural means ([Jonah 4:7](#)). So it could be a coincidence miracle.

If it withered "instantly," then that would favor a psychokinetic miracle. But due to Synoptic variants, that's ambiguous.



**b)** Take [Jn 1:48](#). The fact that Christ is privy to Nathaniel's prayer is telepathic. A reflection of his divine omniscience.

Yet the convenient timing of the event, where it happens just before Nathaniel's encounter with Christ, so that Christ uses that to reveal himself to Nathaniel, also makes it a coincidence miracle. A natural, outwardly ordinary conjunction of events that has no special extrinsic significance, yet is deeply significant to Nathaniel.

**c)** Take the miraculous draught of fish ([Lk 5:4-7](#); [Jn 21:6](#)). It's possible that Christ made these fish ex nihilo, rather like the multiplication of loaves and fish. But I think it makes more sense to assume God/Christ prearranged the natural course of events so that a school of fish would pass by at just the right time and place. A coincidence miracle.

**d)** Finally, take the way Christ paid the temple tax ([Mt 17:24-27](#)). I'd say that's a clear case of a coincidence miracle. God/Christ prearranged the fish to swallow the coin, and prearranged the fish to be at the right time and place when Peter went fishing.

It's possible that Christ made a fish with a coin inside by direct fiat. Even if that were the case, the fact that Peter happened to find exactly the right spot at the right time of day to catch the fish still makes it a coincidence miracle—even if it had a psychokinetic component.

My immediate interest is the compatibility of such miracles with nomological determinism and the notion of natural laws. What kind of natural laws would be consistent with a miracle like the raising of Lazarus? I agree that if dualism is true then the mental can be understood as natural-but-not-physical. But I find it hard to imagine that the state of Lazarus being raised might follow by natural laws alone from the state of Lazarus being dead for several days.

**i)** Seems to me that depends, in part, on how we define natural laws. If we define natural laws as (physical) productive powers, then I certainly don't think natural laws could cause that effect. The past history of the universe + natural laws would be unable to produce that outcome.

**ii)** If, however, we include mental causation, then a mind of sufficient power could will that to happen.

**iii)** It also depends on whether we view natural laws as something over and above natural forces, processes, and mechanisms. If we define natural laws as the most general or fundamental natural forces, then many things naturally occur that weren't *caused* by natural laws. Rather, they were caused by natural mechanisms or processes that are less general or fundamental than natural laws.

**iv)** If, on the other hand, we define a natural law descriptively, as a summary of collective human observations—or if we define a natural law as what happens when nature is left to its own devices, then raising Lazarus would be *consistent* with natural laws even though natural laws don't *account* for the raising of Lazarus.

My immediate interest is the compatibility of such miracles with nomological determinism and the notion of natural laws. What kind of natural laws would be consistent with a miracle like the raising of Lazarus? I agree that if dualism is true then the mental can be understood as natural-but-not-physical. But I find it hard to imagine that the state of Lazarus being raised might follow *by natural laws alone* from the state of Lazarus being dead for several days.

**i)** Once again, that depends on how we define a natural law. On one influential definition, natural laws have prescriptive force: they constrain the scope of what's naturally possible.

So, on that definition, miracles *might* be incompatible with nomological determinism.

**ii)** However, even if we grant that definition for the sake of argument, it has no directional or predictive power. At most, it tells us *that* natural laws constrain what's naturally possible, but not *what* natural laws constrain. The specifics are wide open.

Put another way, natural laws don't tell us what nature is like; rather, nature tells us what natural laws are like. That remains to be discovered.

If miracles happen, then whatever else natural laws constrain, they don't constrain the occurrence of miracles.

**iii)** In addition, a Christian could simply define natural laws as *ceteris paribus* laws. On that definition, miracles would be compatible with nomological determinism.

**a)** One might object that that's a controversial definition of natural law. However, *every* definition of natural law is controversial. And there are leading philosophers of science who so define natural law.

**b)** One might object that that's an ad hoc definition. The Christian self-servingly defines natural law to make room for miracles.

However, I don't think that's ad hoc. If God exists, then God is the supreme agent in (and over) the world. God is not a machine or automaton. God has rational discretion.

Given that fact, we'd expect all natural laws to be *ceteris paribus* laws.

One could try to challenge the presupposition (of divine existence), but that's a different objection.

With respect to your most recent comments (below) I have one objection for now. On some of the conceptions of natural laws you suggest, those laws could be utterly disorderly. For example, if natural laws are merely descriptions of how things actually go in nature (which is how I understand your "nature tells us what natural laws are like") then even an utterly chaotic universe would have natural laws of some sort. But that seems to make the notion of 'law' quite vacuous (likewise for any nomological determinism defined in those terms). In short, if our conception of natural laws doesn't entail that we can make at least reliable (if not infallible) predictions about future events/states based on past events/states, then it's not a very useful conception or one relevant to science.

**i)** If we happen to inhabit a lawlike universe, then the laws will reflect that reality. If we happen to inhabit a chaotic universe, then the notion of law may, indeed, be vacuous.

**ii)** I believe that according to chaos theory, certain kinds of outcomes (involving complex dynamic systems, viz. weather, 3-body problem) can both be determinate and unpredictable.

**iii)** Do natural laws predict that a particular bird will build a nest in a particular tree on a particular date? Do natural laws predict that Caesar will cross the Rubicon?

Seems to me that the role assigned to natural laws operates at a more general or fundamental level. Don't we usually have in mind, say, predicting a solar eclipse 1000 years from now?

**iv)** Apropos (iii), when we talk about lawlike behavior, don't we usually have in mind such things as organic and inorganic chemistry (e.g. crystal formation)? We might include phenomena like the growth of trees, and

photosynthesis. Or the cardiovascular system. Or the instinctual behavior of lower animals.

When, however, we shift to personal agents, then their behavior isn't lawlike or predictable to the same degree.

On the one hand, nature contains a lot of biological machinery. That's a paradigm-case of uniformity.

On the other hand, personal agency isn't mechanistic in that respect.

Of course, humans have a human nature. Generic traits. We have common wants and needs. What's unpredictable (from a scientific standpoint) is how we will go about seeking or achieving the satisfaction of our wants and needs.

So what kind of natural laws would (1) be consistent with a miracle like the resurrection and (2) allow us *in principle* to predict the resurrection in advance?

**i)** I don't know if you're linking these two questions. I think something can be consistent with natural law, but still be unpredictable. Caesar crossing the Rubicon is consistent with natural laws, but could we predict that outcome by knowing natural laws plus past states of the universe?

**ii)** Apropos (i), inasmuch as the Resurrection involves personal agency, I don't think that natural laws or the past states of the universe select for that outcome.

Right, and that's been my point from the outset. It's hard to square immediate divine agency (if that's what *some* biblical miracles involve) with nomological determinism, without building ad-hoc-ish exception clauses into the latter.

Okay, but is your objection confined to the relationship between miracles and nomological determinism, or personal agency (of which miracles would be a subset) and

nomological determinism? Personal agency covers ever so many "ordinary" events.

Moreover, the question of causal "immediacy" has some complications. That depends on how we model miraculous agency. Since the Bible doesn't spell that out, we're left to theorize. To illustrate, let's take Paul blinding the magus ([Acts 13:11](#)).

**i)** On one possible model, God empowers or enables Paul to do that. Paul enjoys an enhanced human ability to perform miracles like that. That would be psychokinetic, but the human agent rather than the divine agent would be the immediate source. Put another way, the effect (blindness) would be mediated through a human agent, although the action itself would bypass a physical intermediary cause.

**ii)** On another possible model, it's like preestablished harmony, where, whenever Paul intends a miraculous effect, his intention and outward action—be it physical or verbal—are coordinated with divine action. On that model, God is the immediate cause of the blindness.

**iii)** Demonic possession supplies a possible analogy. The demoniac has paranormal powers, not because the human host has this ability, but because the incubus has dragooned the body for its own purposes.

At the same time, a demon is a creature, just like the human host. So this is still a creaturely ability—albeit superhuman.

**iv)** There's a further complication in the case of dominical miracles. Unlike prophetic or apostolic miracles, dominical miracles would be grounded in the divine nature of Christ.

**v)** Finally, the Resurrection is generally attributed to the action of the Father rather than the Son. We might ask why that is, inasmuch as the Incarnate Son has the ability to

raise himself from the dead. Presumably the Father reserved that action for himself to reinforce the economic, sender/sent dynamic. Raising Christ demonstrates the fact that the Father sent the Son, as a climactic vindication of his mission.

## Criteria for miracles

There's an important distinction that's often lost sight of in the debate over miracles:

**i)** If the question at issue is whether miracles happen at all, then it makes sense for a Christian philosopher/apologist to use very strict criteria for a miracle. He only cites examples that meet the strictest criteria. Where the evidence is so strong that no reasonable person would deny a miracle.

**ii)** However, having established that miracles do occur, it is artificial to apply such restrictive criteria to every candidate. It's not as if God only performs miracles in situations that meet stringent conditions for verification. In many cases, God will perform a miracle because there's a need, and not to prove anything, although that's a fringe benefit. It's not as if God is going to withhold a miracle unless it checks all the boxes on our philosophical criteria. So many reported miracles may be credible even though the evidence falls short of the screening process we use to determine whether that happens at all.



## Disambiguating miracles

It seems to me that the stock objection to miracles conflates two ideas:

- i) A miracle is an extraordinary event
- ii) It's extraordinary that a miracle would ever happen

It seems to me that these are two distinct ideas. They aren't interchangeable claims. Moreover, I think the move from (i) to (ii) is illicit.

One problem is the notorious ambiguity of the adjective ("extraordinary"). What does that mean?

On one interpretation, "extraordinary" is a synonym for "unnatural." Miracles are unnatural. But if we plug that definition into the objection, it either generates a tautology or an equivocation:

- i) It would be unnatural for an unnatural event to occur.

That's tautologically true, but that says nothing one way or the other about the plausibility of unnatural events happening. The skeptic needs more than a tautology. He needs to show the implausibility of unnatural events occurring.

After all, a theist could accept the definition and say that just means unnatural events occur unnaturally—not that unnatural events don't occur. Rather, they occur, but not by natural means.

Conversely:

**ii)** It would be unlikely for an unnatural event to transpire

But that reformulation introduces an equivocation of terms into the objection, since the adjective (“extraordinary”) no longer means the same thing in both occurrences. It has one sense when it modifies “claims” or “evidence,” but a different definition when it modifies “events.”

An alternative is to use the same definition in both cases, where “extraordinary” always means unlikely:

**i)** A miracle is an unlikely event

**ii)** It’s unlikely that a miracle would ever happen

However, it seems to me that that definition highlights the fact that these are two distinct claims. Moreover, that it is illicit to infer (ii) from (i).

At first blush, it might seem to be obviously or definitionally true that it’s unlikely that an unlikely event will ever happen. But that’s specious, since it’s easy to come up with counterexamples.

The statement is ambiguous. On the one hand, it may be unlikely that an unlikely event will occur at any particular time and place. It may be unlikely that unlikely events will bunch up. Will occur in rapid succession. A series of unlikely events.

On the other hand, it may not only be likely, but inevitable that an unlikely event will occur sooner or later. Given the odds, unlikely events are bound to happen at some time or another, even if they are rare.

Of course, that's not the best definition of a miracle, since miracles would involve personal agency. Purpose. Rational discretion. Teleology. But for now I'm just dealing with the typical objection.

One might take another comparison:

**i)** A coincidence is an unlikely event

**ii)** It's unlikely that a coincidence will happen

But, of course, coincidences do happen, so we can't infer the implausibility of a coincidence from its improbability.

Permit me to illustrate the principle with a personal anecdote. Many years ago my parents went to the Seattle bus station at night. I no longer remember the reason.

When we got there, we bumped into my Aunt Ruth, who was sitting in the bus station. That was coincidental. And it was highly unlikely.

**i)** My aunt lived in Seattle. My parents did not. My parents lived in a bedroom community across the lake.

**ii)** Although my parents often drove into town, they rarely drove to downtown Seattle at night—where the bus station was located.

**iii)** As I recall, this was the only time we ever went to the Seattle bus station. We almost never had occasion to go there, much less go there at night.

**iv)** I doubt my aunt went there very often. You went to the bus station to get a ticket to take a bus out of town, like taking a bus from Seattle to Yakima (in E. Washington). You

used a bus stop to catch a bus from one part of Seattle to another part of Seattle. I doubt my aunt, who was an older woman at the time, took bus trips out of town very often.

v) We didn't make prior arrangements to meet her there. She was there for a different reason. The encounter was fortuitous.

This coincidence involves nested improbabilities. An improbable conjunction of independent variables. Increasing improbabilities, as the specificity of the conditions increases.

Yet it happened. It would be unreasonable to demand extraordinary evidence for this coincidence. It would be unreasonable to doubt it or disbelieve it absent extraordinary corroboration. Coincidences are a commonplace of human experience.

I'm not saying miracles are equivalent to coincidences, although there are coincidence miracles. I'm just examining a stock objection to miracles from different angles

## Mackie on miracles

[W]e should distinguish two different contexts in which an alleged miracle might be discussed. One possible context would be where the parties in debate already both accept some general theistic doctrines, and the point at issue is whether a miracle has occurred which would enhance the authority of a specific sect or teacher. In this context supernatural intervention, though prima facie unlikely on any particular occasion, is, generally speaking, on the cards: ...But it is a very different matter if the context is that of fundamental debate about the truth of theism itself. Here one party to the debate is initially at least agnostic, and does not yet concede that there is a supernatural power at all. From this point of view the intrinsic improbability of a genuine miracle ... is very great, and one or other of the alternative explanations...will always be much more likely – that is, either that the alleged event is not miraculous, or that it did not occur, that the testimony is faulty in some way.

This entails that it is pretty well impossible that reported miracles should provide a worthwhile argument for theism addressed to those who are initially inclined to atheism or even to agnosticism. ... Not only are such reports unable to carry any rational conviction on their own, but also they are unable even to contribute independently to the kind of accumulation or battery of arguments referred to in the Introduction. To this extent Hume is right, despite the inaccuracies we have found in his statement of the case. J. L. Mackie, **THE MIRACLE OF THEISM** (1982), 27.

So the agnostic will assign a very low prior probability to a miracle. Presumably, an atheist would assign a zero probability to a miracle.

Here's the problem I have with that set-up:  
Sure, *given* agnosticism, a miracle has a very high burden of proof to discharge.

The question, though, is how firmly the agnostic should privilege his agnosticism as the benchmark—especially in the face of ostensible counterevidence.

Suppose the agnostic became an agnostic before he ever encountered evidence for the miraculous. But that means he became an agnostic in ignorance of the ostensible counterevidence.

Should his agnosticism count against the probability of miracles? Or should evidence of the miraculous count against his agnostic presumption? Does it not beg the question for him to use his agnosticism to prejudge the likelihood of miracles? Shouldn't the evidence for miracles figure in the case for agnosticism in the first place? Even if he comes to the issue belatedly, shouldn't he mentally go back in time and ask himself whether he'd even be an agnostic had he encountered this evidence at an earlier stage in his intellectual development? Isn't his agnosticism accidental to that degree? Why should it be a standard of comparison? What if he was starting from scratch, with the evidence for miracles at the outset?

Put another way, when both miracles and agnosticism are in dispute, why should his agnosticism have its thumb on the scales?

Suppose an atheist has reasons to be an atheist. He developed his reasons before he became aware of evidence for miracles.

Should he use atheism to assign a low prior probability to miracles? Why isn't the logic reversible? Why can't evidence for miracles assign a low (perhaps very low) prior probability to atheism? Why the asymmetry?

I don't see why his atheism should supply the standard of comparison for assigning prior probability values to miracles. Why is it not simply a case where he has to counterbalance the evidence for atheism against the evidence for miracles? Why would evidence for atheism set the standard?

## Demarcating miracles

I notice that MacArthurite cessationists define miracles in two different ways.

On the one hand, they distinguish between direct miracles and indirect miracles. Direct miracles are miracles which God himself performs apart from human agency, whereas indirect miracles employ divinely-empowered human agents.

MacArthurites sometimes say they are cessationists respecting indirect miracles rather than direct miracles.

On the other hand, they also distinguish between apostolic miracles and modern miracles by claiming that apostolic miracles are top-of-the-line miracles: complete, permanent, undeniable, spectacular, viz. raising the dead, regenerating amputees, restoring sight to the congenitally blind.

But in that case, they aren't drawing the line between direct and indirect miracles, but between low-grade and high-grade indirect miracles.

Even though demarcating miracles is essential to their position, MacArthurites present a moving target on this issue. I assume the reason for this confusion is that MacArthurites are improvising. They have a clearer idea of what they oppose than what they believe in. They begin with what they oppose, then define their position by what they oppose. By process of elimination, they work back to what they believe in: whatever's left over. As a result, their definitions are makeshift and contradictory, because they have a clearer sense of the starting-point than the destination.





## Oppy on supernatural encounters

Among the current crop of atheist philosophers, Graham Oppy is one of the best they've got. So it's useful to see him summarize his case against the credibility of reported supernatural encounters. The argument doesn't get any better than this:

First, there is no question that the history of reports of encounters with supernatural beings and forces is, *at least in very large part*, a history of fraud, gullibility, deception, stupidity, ignorance, and so forth. Second, there is no serious doubt that there is at least good prima facie reason to believe that there is a huge panoply of supernatural beings whose existence would be vindicated by the recorded supernatural experience of humanity if the existence of *any* supernatural beings was vindicated by that recorded supernatural experience. Third, it is quite clear that the joint effect of these first two points is to raise serious questions about the evidential worth of *any* reports of experiences that are claimed to be of, or directly caused by, supernatural agents. Fourth, it may well be that, in the absence of defeating considerations, it is the case that  $p$  (cf. Swinburne 1979). But, as we have just noted, there is no serious doubt that there are very weighty candidate defeating considerations in the case of "seemings" that are tied to the supernatural.

In the absence of any independent support for belief in gods—i.e., support founded in something other than reports of experiences that have been taken to be of, or directly caused by, gods—there is clearly reason to prefer the uniform treatment of reports of supernatural experiences that naturalism affords to the non-uniform

treatment of reports of supernatural experiences that is required by any developed version of theism. Graham Oppy, "Arguments for Atheism," S. Bullivant & M. Ruse, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (OUP, 2013), 67.

By defining "encounters with supernatural beings" as "experiences that are claimed to be of, or directly caused by, supernatural agents," I take it that he's using a definition broad enough to cover diverse phenomena like apparitions, miracles, precognition, and answered prayer. With that in mind, let's run back through his objections:

**1.** Regarding the first claim:

**i)** What does he mean by "in very large part"? Does he mean *most* reported supernatural encounters reflect a history of "fraud, gullibility, deception, stupidity, ignorance, and so forth"? If so, what's his quantitative evidence for that assessment? What's the sample group? How representative is the sample group?

**ii)** What's the intended distinction, if any, between "fraud" and "deception"? Does Oppy use those as synonyms?

**iii)** Wouldn't the primary motivation for fraud be cases where appeal to supernatural encounters is used for personal or institutional gain? To lend credence to a new religion or a new dogma? Maybe a career booster (e.g. faith-healer)?

**iv)** Even when supernatural encounters are invoked to attest the message or the messenger, the ostensible witness may have something to lose rather than something to gain. What if his claim exposes him to predictable persecution? Wouldn't that be a disincentive to make

fraudulent claims about supernatural encounters? So we need to draw that distinction in assessing the credibility of the witness.

**v)** Just to play it safe, suppose, for the sake of argument, that we discount the subset of reported supernatural encounters where there might be an incentive to deceive or commit fraud. That leaves "gullibility, stupidity, and ignorance." However, gullibility, stupidity, and ignorance aren't distinctive to reported *supernatural* encounters. That, therefore, would not be a specific reason to doubt reported supernatural encounters. There are gullible, stupid, and/or ignorant witnesses to everything under the sun. That, however, is not a reason to doubt testimonial evidence in general. Indeed, Oppy's claim about "a *history* of fraud, gullibility, deception, stupidity, ignorance, and so forth" is, in itself, dependent on historical testimony. Therefore, his objection would be self-refuting if he were propounding skepticism about testimonial evidence in general. So, at best, his skepticism is only warranted in reference to cases where we might suspect fraud and deception, even assuming that fraud and deception are more prevalent in reported supernatural encounters.

**vi)** Of course, fraudulent and deceptive reports are hardly unique to reported supernatural encounters, so Oppy needs more discriminating criteria to justify his skepticism about reported supernatural encounters, in contradistinction to other kinds of fraudulent reports.

**vi)** What about reported supernatural encounters where personal or institutional gain is not a plausible motive? Take answered prayer or a miraculous healing. A witness might share that experience with a small circle of friends and family. He (or she) doesn't do that for social advancement. Doesn't do that to start a new religion. He simply wants to

share his marvelous experience with friends and relatives. He's so thankful and overawed by his experience that he wants other people to know how wonderful God is. He can't contain himself. He doesn't do it to become the founder of a new religion, or kickstart a career as a prophet or faith-healer. It may be a once in a lifetime experience.

This isn't just hypothetical. Rather, it's commonplace if you move in religious circles.

**vii)** Perhaps Oppy would object that a primary function of reported supernatural encounters is to authenticate religious claims. But even though that's true, we can, for the sake of argument, take those examples off the table because we don't need to include them to test Oppy's claim. Oppy rejects reported supernatural encounters in toto. So even if we bracket the subset of reported supernatural encounters that serve to validate religious claims, that leaves us with an enormous margin for error, given the remaining reports that don't fall under that rubric.

## **2.** Regarding the second claim:

**i)** It's hard to see how that's supposed to be an argument for atheism. For Oppy fails to explain why that would be an unacceptable consequence. On the face of it, his objection seems to be circular: once you credit reported supernatural experiences, you open the door for the existence of supernatural beings! Okay, but how does that consequence undercut the credibility of reported supernatural experiences?

**ii)** Perhaps, though, he's attempting to cast a dilemma for supernaturalists. Perhaps he means that swings the door wide open for every supernatural claimant. For instance, Christians have no problem with supernatural beings like

God, angels, and demons. Some might also make allowance for the existence of ghosts or poltergeists. But perhaps he means that once you open the door a crack, you can't shut out the whole "panoply" of candidates, viz. Zeus, Thor, jinn, genies, elves, wood nymphs and water nymphs, trolls, leprechauns, fairies. If you credit *any* supernatural being, you must credit them *all*. If that's what he means, I'd say the following:

**a)** We need to distinguish between the ostensible experience and how that's interpreted. For instance, suppose pagans experience supernatural beings. However, they then create a backstory about the supernatural being. A story about the origin, abode, and social life of the supernatural beings in question. That backstory is not a part of the encounter. They didn't experience the backstory. Rather, they created a narrative to explain where the supernatural being fits in their world. Likewise, once a society has developed a mythology for experiences of this type, people in that society automatically classify their experience according to the available cultural categories.

To credit the underlying experience doesn't commit you to the backstory, since that's not given in the experience itself. That's a cultural overlay.

**b)** Apropos (a), this means you can have a multiplication of categories for the same thing. Different cultures will have different names, categories, and narratives. That doesn't imply that there's actually a different supernatural being for each cultural classification. Suppose for the sake of argument that there are really just six different kinds of supernatural beings. Yet there might be a "panoply" of supernatural beings in comparative mythology and comparative folklore, even though these are actually reducible to our half-dozen different kinds of supernatural

beings. Different cultures will develop their own folkloric classifications. That gives the appearance of a "panoply" of supernatural beings, yet that's not because we're combining different entities, but because we're combining different cultural descriptions of the same kinds of entities. A poltergeist in one culture might be a goblin or gremlin in another culture. That doesn't mean there's a corresponding entity for each category. To take a comparison, different cultures have different mythologies for the same animals.

**c)** It's not even possible for some candidates to exist. Thor is a barely disguised personification of thunderstorms. Moreover, pagan deities like Thor are physical beings. It isn't possible for a finite physical being like Thor, even if he did exist, to control the weather. Likewise, there is no palace of the gods on the summit of Mt. Olympus. By the same token, Greek mythology treats wood nymphs and water nymphs as visible, physical beings. If they did exist, there'd be abundant evidence for their existence.

### **3.** Regarding the third claim:

He uses the first two claims to support the third claim. The first two claims, in conjunction, constitute "defeating considerations". But having critiqued the first two claims, the third claim is unwarranted, while his fourth claim piggybacks on his third claim, which piggybacks on the first two claims.

### **4.** Regarding his conclusion:

**i)** He acts as though his first two claims are sufficient to discredit any and every reported supernatural experience, without regard to the specific evidence in any particular case. But even if you grant his first claim, at best that's just a generalization. It hardly preempts exceptions.

And it's illicit for him to insist that you mustn't credit any supernatural being unless you credit every supernatural being. That's like saying you can't give credence to any reported seamonsters unless you give credence to all reports seamonsters. By that logic, you can't believe in giant squid unless you believe in Scylla and Charybdis.

**ii)** To say we should always prefer a uniform treatment begs the question. That's like saying we should automatically dismiss any and all reports of water flowing uphill. But sometimes water *does* flow uphill, because humans build water pumps. To demand a uniform treatment ignores the evidence in any particular case.

**iii)** The basic problem with Oppy's overall argument is that he's laboring to sidestep the duty to examine specific evidence on a case-by-case basis by invoking general considerations. Yet general considerations are, at best, inductive abstractions, based on a sampling of particular cases. You can't rightly use them to prejudge any particular case on pain of vicious circularity. Your generalization is only as good as your sample.

Oppy's entire argument becomes an exercise in intellectual evasion. He doesn't need to consult the evidence because he's concluded in advance that supernatural encounters lack credibility. But that's premature. That forecloses further investigation in spite of counterevidence.



## God and fairy godmothers

This is a sequel to my previous post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/06/atheism-and-agnosticism.html>

While fairies are typically considered to be small, the most often cited reasons why most of us fail to encounter them is that they are both shy and intuitive: they do not like to be seen, and they are very good at noticing that someone might be about to observe them. While they will, on occasion, reveal themselves, almost always they do so only to those who are not likely to be widely regarded as credible witnesses – e.g. ‘pure’ young children.

Most rational, educated adults believe that there are no fairies. It is not merely that most rational, educated adults suspend judgement on the questions whether, say, they have fairies at the bottom of their gardens. And it is not merely that most rational, educated adults suspend judgement on the question whether there are shy, intuitive fairies at the bottom of their gardens, i.e. fairies of a kind that they would not detect even if they looked for them. Just as you can rationally believe that there are no milk cartons in your fridge, so, too, you can rationally believe that there are no fairies at the bottom of your garden. And it is not merely that most rational educated adults rationally believe that there are no fairies at the bottom of their gardens – most rational educated adults also rationally believe that there are no fairies anywhere at all.

Atheists think that what goes for fairies also goes for gods: they think that they have good enough reasons to believe that there are no gods. While the details of atheists' cases against gods are different from the details of cases against fairies, the outcome is the same: atheists take themselves not to have any first-order reasons to believe that there are gods, and they take it that the second-order reasons that they have are not strong enough even to give them reason to suspend judgement on the question.

The comparison between God and fairies is vitiated by disanalogy, inasmuch as Christians think there are multiple lines of evidence for God's existence. And they provide ostensible evidence.

#### 4.7 Anomaly

The case for the claim that considerations about miracles do not favour best theistic big pictures over best naturalistic big pictures was based on consideration of the range of reports of anomalous entities and events within and without religions. However, even if you accept that the range of reports of anomalous entities and events within and without religions casts doubt on the suggestion that miracle reports favour best theistic big pictures over best naturalistic big pictures, you might still wonder whether other considerations about miracles favour best theistic big pictures over best naturalistic big pictures.

Suppose that you have undergone an anomalous experience of a kind that some others are disposed to interpret as evidence for the occurrence of a miracle. Perhaps, for example, while walking alone in a field, you hear a voice telling you to become a Rastafarian,

despite the fact that there is no one around who could be speaking to you. If this kind of thing happens to you only once, you might – eventually – dismiss it as some kind of hallucination. And if this kind of thing happens to you frequently, you will likely end up undergoing extensive medical tests to try to determine the nature of the psychological disorder from which you evidently suffer. But if this kind of thing happens to you more than once, with suitable infrequency – say, no more than once every five or six years – then you might come to have some doubts about whether you'd do best to dismiss the idea that you are receiving a message from the gods. True enough, lots of people who hear voices have psychological disorders; true enough, we have very good reason to think that almost everyone who hears voices would do best not to believe what the voices tell them (unless they already and independently have sufficient reason to believe those things). But, if our case is special in the right kinds of ways, then maybe – maybe – we have some reason to suspend judgement on the question whether we have evidence that there are gods.

**i)** What about an audible voice that tells you something you didn't know and couldn't know prior to the audible voice, but which is confirmable now that you have that lead to follow up on?

This isn't just hypothetical. Consider surveys and interviews by the Society for Psychical Research in which hundreds of respondents report having premonitory, veridical dreams? They dream about a loved one who dies (or a loved one in mortal danger). Next morning they tell friends and family members about their dream. Later, they receive confirmation that they're loved one died the same day as the dream.

**ii)** Also, this isn't confined to individual experience, but repeated kinds of experience which many witnesses report.

It is not uncommon for non-believers to be asked what it would take to convince them to adopt particular religious beliefs. While it is hard to know what to say in response to this question – other than to say that those who already believe are likely better placed to answer it, drawing upon their own experience – it happens not infrequently that non-believers suggest some variant of the example that I have been discussing. One way to strengthen the example is to have multitudes undergo the same experience at the same time; rather than have me walking alone in a field, make it that I am with a large group who are walking together in the field, and let the voice boom down from the sky (so that trickery on the part of some members of the group is plainly ruled out). Perhaps it is plausible to suppose that this kind of case would provide reason to suspend judgement on the question whether there are gods, or even to believe that there are gods, for those who are part of the group. (Of course, it is a separate question – already covered in our previous discussion – whether anyone who has not actually been part of such a group has any reason to believe that there have been episodes like this.)

It needn't be simultaneously collective. It can be distributively collective. Different people at different times and places independently reporting the same kind of experience.

## Special providences

I often write about coincidence miracles. In an earlier age these went by the name of special providences. Here's a nice compact definition:

What used to be called "special providences," in which the extraordinary element lies not in any obvious violation of the causal closure of the physical world but rather in the auspicious timing of apparently independent events. Timothy McGrew, "Arguments from Providence and from Miracles: The State of the Art and the Uses of History," J. Walls & T. Dougherty, eds. **TWO DOZEN (OR SO) ARGUMENTS FOR GOD** (Oxford 2018), 345.

## Are naturalistic explanations the default assumption?

**1.** Some Christian philosophers take the position that naturalistic explanations are the default assumption, so that extra evidence is required to acknowledge a miracle. Hume and his followers take that a step further to say the presumption of a naturalistic explanation is so strong that there will never be enough evidence to overcome that presumption. But let's go back to the weaker claim. Certainly it's easy to come up with examples where Christians regard a naturalistic explanation as the first explanation to reach for. So does that concede that there is, indeed, a standing presumption against recognition of a miracle?

**2.** I'll make the preliminary point that drawing a firm line between naturalistic and supernatural explanations is more important to atheists than Christians. Atheists require that dichotomy to eliminate the supernatural side of the dichotomy while Christians don't require the same distinction since they don't eliminate the natural side. So these are asymmetrical concerns.

**3.** Let's take a comparison. Suppose I'm walking on a trail, and up ahead I see a fallen tree. In principle, there are basically two possible causes for the fallen tree.

**i)** A natural cause made it fall. Perhaps it was blown over in a wind storm because it had a shallow root system; or rain eroded the topsoil—exposing the root system; or it was hollowed out by Ambrosia beetles or heart rot.

**ii)** It was cut down. Felled by logger with a chainsaw.

In the debate over miracles, (i) illustrates a naturalistic explanation while (ii) is a nonnatural explanation—akin to a supernatural explanation. The result of intervention by an agent outside the normal lifecycle of trees using "artificial" means.

Now, viewing the tree at a distance, where all I see is the effect, before I'm in a position to see the tree up close, is there a default explanation? Is it antecedently more likely that it was felled by natural processes rather than a logger? At that stage, we don't have enough information to justify a default explanation. Whether it was felled by natural or artificial means is a contextual question whose answer crucially relies on specific evidence one way or the other. There is no explanatory presumption in a vacuum.

## Is God a science-stopper?

I'd like to revisit Richard Dawkins's "science-stopper" objection. He alleges that if you say "God did it," then there's no point seeking a scientific explanation.

**i)** At best, that only applies to miracles. Take a miraculous healing. There's no *causal* explanation beyond divine agency.

But even in that regard, there may still be a *teleological* explanation. If God miraculously heals somebody, there's still the question of why he healed that person rather than someone else. Does the healing have a larger purpose in terms of future outcomes?

**ii)** In addition, we can generalize the principle. Take the Antikythera mechanism. To ascribe the device to intelligent agency hardly nullifies a scientific investigation into how it works and what it's for. To the contrary, it's only because the product was designed that we presume it has a purpose. If it was like random patterns in sand dunes, we wouldn't ascribe any particular significance to the artifact.



## Are miracles hazardous?

I'm going to comment on this: Yujin Nagasawa, **MIRACLES: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION** (Oxford 2017):

Performing miracles seems to be extremely risky. Nature is uniform and stable because it is regulated by the laws of nature. If the laws of nature did not exist, we should not breathe, sleep, or even exist. Hence, when miracle workers violate the laws of nature they may endanger living things in nature as well as nature as a whole (47).

We saw in the Preface to this book that, according to recent polls, the majority of people in the USA and the UK today believe in miracles. We also saw in Chapter 2 that reports of miracles can always be found, irrespective of time, geographical location, or religious tradition. How could that be possible? The most straightforward answer to this question is that miracles do really take place everywhere, all the time. However, miracles should not be so prevalent. Recall our definition of a miracle: it is a violation of the laws of nature that is caused by an intentional agent and has religious significance. If miracles take place everywhere, all the time, then the laws of nature are being violated everywhere, all the time. If this is indeed so, then nature is so unstable that, it would seem, we should not be able to live normal lives. Suppose, for example, that water was frequently being turned into wine or that dead people were frequently being brought back to life. If these events took place regularly then water supply companies and funeral directors would not be able to run their businesses

smoothly. However, we almost never hear them complaining about miracles taking place. If miracles do take place then they are extremely rare events. So that brings us back to square one: why is belief in miracles so widespread (51).

This objection is unintentionally comical. An example of smart people with dumb ideas. Presumably, Nagasawa is a bright, sophisticated guy, but his objection is blind on several levels:

**i)** He begins with an a priori definition of miracle which he then imposes on reports. That generates a discrepancy between the definition and the reports. But instead of adjusting his definition to accommodate the reports, he adjusts the reports to accommodate his definition.

**ii)** It's doubtful that most respondents to the surveys define a miracle the way he does.

**iii)** I myself prefer to define a miracle as a type of event that won't happen when nature is allowed to run its course.

**iv)** Then there's the equivocal language about "everywhere, all the time". For instance, suppose a miracle happens everyday in every town, city, and suburb across the globe. Yet the relative distribution of miracles would still be an infinitesimal fraction of all the ordinary events that transpired across the globe on any particular day. Miracles could happen every day or every hour without happening constantly in the sense of representing a sizable proportion of what happens.

To take a comparison, suppose that every day, in every town, city, and suburb across the globe, there are people with green eyes. Yet in relation to seven billion human

inhabitants, that might constitute a tiny fraction of the overall population. Widely scattered specks. By the same token, miracles might be widely distributed in time and place without being densely pervasive.

**v)** Perhaps the deepest weakness of Nagasawa's analysis is the apparent, unstated assumption that by breaking a law of nature, each miracle temporarily suspends the laws of nature at a cosmic level. Every time a miracle occurs, assuming a miracle ever occurs, the laws of nature momentarily wink out all across the universe. In that case, the disruption would be cataclysmic.

But even if we define a miracle as an event that defies the laws of nature (a dubious definition), it doesn't seem to even occur to Nagasawa that the violation can be local rather than global. The transgressive effects can be contained.

**vi)** One of the problems may be that Nagasawa adopts a religiously pluralistic viewpoint (although he himself is clearly a skeptic). Within a framework of animism, polytheism, or witchcraft, a wonder-worker might not be able to control the effects of his actions.

But from the standpoint of biblical monotheism or classical theism, miracles are coordinated with general providence. Even if a miracle requires the suspension of natural laws (a dubious definition), that doesn't mean natural laws must be inoperative everywhere to be inoperative at a particular point in time and space. Rather, the effects would be insulated. A closed system within a larger system.

To take a comparison, passengers inside an airplane are immobile (seated) or walking up and down the aisles within

the passenger compartment, even though the plane may be traveling at supersonic speeds.

## Naturalized miracles

I was asked how to respond to the counter that purported events like the Resurrection might happen, yet not be miraculous, but be due to some as of yet undiscovered natural cause or process.

One problem with that explanation is that there are so many different kinds of well-documented miracles. So an atheist must postulate so many undiscovered natural causes.

In addition, I ran the question by three philosophers who specialize in the philosophy of miracles. They indicated that it's okay to share their responses:

Naturalism of the gaps. That's not applying all evidence and inferring the best explanation. Actually, the more science progresses, the lower the probability of such a thing becomes. We now know *\*why\** the dead do not spontaneously rise by natural causes, in ever-greater detail. Cellular death, denaturing of proteins, bacterial activity, etc.

If we discovered robots on another planet, we could hold out indefinitely for "some natural cause," but that wouldn't be rational. People are always able to be irrational (and often are irrational). That doesn't make it epistemically legitimate.

– Lydia McGrew

In our Blackwell paper, Lydia and I consider a number of such attempts to give a non-miraculous account of the evidence. The short answer is that they do not

account for that evidence nearly as well as the resurrection itself does.

A slightly longer answer is that there is no better way to evaluate such hypotheses than to look at the evidence in detail and consider the hypotheses on a case-by-case basis. For some miracle claims -- the Hindu milk miracle comes to mind -- there is a superior naturalistic explanation. (Lydia recreated the Hindu milk miracle in our kitchen with a spoonful of water and a piece of unglazed tile. No statue of Ganesh was required.) For others, this option turns out not to be true.

As far as an undiscovered natural cause, anybody can postulate that possibility for anything whatsoever. Perhaps there's an undiscovered natural cause that makes it look like the Earth orbits the sun even though in fact Ptolemaic astronomy is true. Perhaps there's an undiscovered natural cause that makes it look like the Earth isn't flat even though -- surprise! -- it is. Perhaps there's an undiscovered natural cause that generates all of the evidence we have that the universe is billions of years old even though it isn't. Perhaps there's an undiscovered natural cause that makes it look like Jesus miraculously rose from the dead even though his coming back to life was just a very, very rare natural event, and it was just lucky that this purely natural event happened to look like the culmination of many centuries of increasingly specific prophecy.

– Timothy McGrew

I think you will find that in chapter four of **THE LEGITIMACY OF MIRACLE** I discuss that suggestion at

length. The basic point is that the progress of science has made such a suggestion less convincing rather than more. The more we know about human physiology the harder it becomes to suggest such a counter. Similarly with other miracles. We know, for example, a lot more about the chemistry of wine than we did two thousand years ago but that makes it harder, rather than easier to give a natural explanation of how water could turn into wine at the spoken word of Jesus. If one is positing some natural process for such an event or the resurrection then one needs to explain why that process only worked in that unique instance. Note also that positing such a process is simply a promissory note. Presumably, the only reason to trust such a promissory note is the inductive argument that science has been successful in the past. This fails, however, in that it makes no distinction between nomological and historical science. The fact that pigeons are easy to catch does not provide a good inductive argument that foxes are easy to catch. Analogously, the fact that regular law-like events are susceptible of natural explanations provides no reason to think that events such as the resurrection, Jesus walking on water, the virgin birth, or the origin of life are susceptible of natural explanations. So the progress of science argument really cuts the other way. Everything we know makes natural explanations of such events less plausible than more.

The alternative for the naturalist is to suggest not that there is some repeatable identifiable natural process that will explain why dead people generally stay dead, but Jesus did not, but rather to claim Jesus's return to life was a chance event. Given the reluctance of

scientifically literate naturalists to accept the chance origin of life - because the probabilities are so minuscule they are desperately attempting to find some natural process that will not have to invoke chance - such an alternative smacks of hopelessness.

- Robert Larmer



## Rebooting the argument from miracles

**1.** On the face of it, the biblical argument from miracles is circular. By that I mean, if you're using biblical miracles to prove the bible, that appears to be circular inasmuch as that presumes the veracity of the biblical accounts. But there are some mitigating factors:

**2.** The argument from miracles isn't confined to biblical miracles. There are many well-documented Christian miracles in modern times. And that in turn lends credence to biblical miracles. It demonstrates that miracles don't only happen in old "stories". Once you establish, independent of ancient records, that certain phenomena happen, that makes the ancient records more credible.

**3.** In addition, these are linked. For Christian miracles fulfill biblical promises.

**4.** Moreover, the unbeliever must provide an alternative explanation for the biblical reports.

**5.** Unlike the Koran, the Bible isn't a one-man testimony. It consists of many independent books. Some miracles are multiply-attested. The showcase example is the Resurrection. But that has led to the neglect of some other dominical miracles that also enjoy multiple-attestation. There are miracles reported in two or more Gospels. The same miracle or the same kind of miracle. That's like overlapping accounts of WWII by Churchill and Eisenhower. It provides mutual corroboration. Moreover, there's other internal and external evidence for the historicity of the Gospels.

**6.** A stock objection is that the Synoptic Gospels are not independent. Rather, Matthew and Luke copy Mark. That's true to some degree, but simplistic and misleading:

**i)** Assuming traditional authorship (which is highly defensible), Matthew, Mark, and Luke moved in the same circles, so there were many opportunities for information-sharing before they took pen to paper. For instance, Mark could get some of his material orally from Matthew, then Matthew is, in effect, quoting himself when he "copies" Mark.

**ii)** The argument from undesigned coincidences (revived and refined by the McGrews) demonstrates that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John have independent sources of information even when discussing the same event. And it's demonstrable that John has independent knowledge when discussing the same event.

My aim is not to provide a full-blown argument, but to draw attention to a neglected argument from miracles, and suggest a strategy for making that case.

### **Miraculous draught of fish**

*4 And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." 5 And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." 6 And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. 7 They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink (Lk 5:4-7).*

*They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. 4 Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. 5 Jesus said to them, "Children, do you have any fish?" They answered him, "No." 6 He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish...8 The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish (Jn 21:4-6,8).*

### **Healing Centurion's servant**

*5 When he had entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him, 6 "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly." 7 And he said to him, "I will come and heal him." 8 But the centurion replied, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. 9 For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." 10 When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. 11 I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, 12 while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." 13 And to the centurion Jesus said, "Go; let it be done for you as you have believed." And the servant was healed at that very moment (Mt 8:5-13).*

*7 After he had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. 2 Now a centurion had a servant who was sick and at the point of death, who was highly valued by him. 3 When the centurion heard about*

Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant. 4 And when they came to Jesus, they pleaded with him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy to have you do this for him, 5 for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue." 6 And Jesus went with them. When he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends, saying to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. 7 Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed. 8 For I too am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me: and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." 9 When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." 10 And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well ([Lk 7:1-10](#)).

46 So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill. 47 When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. 48 So Jesus said to him, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." 49 The official said to him, "Sir, come down before my child dies." 50 Jesus said to him, "Go; your son will live." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. 51 As he was going down, his servants[b] met him and told him that his son was recovering. 52 So he asked them the hour when he began to get better, and they said to him, "Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him." 53 The father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." And he himself believed, and all his

household. 54 This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee ([Jn 4:46-54](#)).

## **Multiplication of food**

15 Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves." 16 But Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." 17 They said to him, "We have only five loaves here and two fish." 18 And he said, "Bring them here to me." 19 Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. 20 And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. 21 And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children ([Mt 14:15-21](#)).

36 Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." 37 But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." And they said to him, "Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?" 38 And he said to them, "How many loaves do you have? Go and see." And when they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." 39 Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass. 40 So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. 41 And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all. 42 And they all ate and were satisfied. 43 And they took up twelve

*baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. 44 And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men (Mk 6:36-44).*

*12 Now the day began to wear away, and the twelve came and said to him, "Send the crowd away to go into the surrounding villages and countryside to find lodging and get provisions, for we are here in a desolate place." 13 But he said to them, "You give them something to eat." They said, "We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people." 14 For there were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, "Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each." 15 And they did so, and had them all sit down. 16 And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing over them. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. 17 And they all ate and were satisfied. And what was left over was picked up, twelve baskets of broken pieces (Lk 9:12-17).*

*5 Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" 6 He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. 7 Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little." 8 One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 9 "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?" 10 Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. 11 Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. 12 And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost." 13 So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with*

fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten (*Jn 6:5-13*).

## **Walking on water**

22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24 but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. 25 And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. 26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" and they cried out in fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid" (*Mt 14:22-27*).

45 Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. 46 And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray. 47 And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. 48 And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night[a] he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them, 49 but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, 50 for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid" (*Mk 6:45-50*).

16 When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, 17 got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. 18 The sea became rough because a strong wind

was blowing. 19 When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened. 20 But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid" (*Jn 6:16-21*).

### **Healing the sick at Gennesaret**

34 And when they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret. 35 And when the men of that place recognized him, they sent around to all that region and brought to him all who were sick 36 and implored him that they might only touch the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well (*Mt 14:34-36*).

53 When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored to the shore. 54 And when they got out of the boat, the people immediately recognized him 55 and ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds to wherever they heard he was. 56 And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment. And as many as touched it were made well (*Mk 6:53-56*).



## Quantifying miracles

i) The issue miracles is often framed in terms of mathematical odds. Like there's a presumption against having a license plate with that particular number, given tens of millions of license plates, but that presumption can be overcome by specific evidence to the contrary. By the same token, miracles are said to be very rare. Therefore, the mathematical odds against the occurrence of a miracle are high, though not insurmountable.

I've never been impressed by that way of framing the issue. To take a comparison, consider a corridor with closed doors on both sides. Let's say there are 100 doors total. What are the odds that any particular door is locked?

I don't think the mathematical odds are relevant. That's the wrong way to broach the issue. There's no presumption that the closed doors are either locked or unlocked. That depends on other variables.

If it's during business hours, many doors may be closed but unlocked. If it's after business hours, they are more likely to be locked. Yet even then you have workaholic employees who are still slaving away in their office. Or doors may be unlocked because the cleaning crew is servicing offices.

Some doors lead to conference rooms. These remain unlocked day or night. There might be a door to a utility room that's normally locked.

The abstract odds have no bearing on the probability that any particular door is locked or unlocked. There's no presumption one way or the other.

**ii)** Even if miracles are very rare, that's not a mathematical assumption. Rather, that's an empirical observation. In our experience, miracles are (allegedly) very rare. That's not a question of a priori mathematical odds, but a posteriori evidence.

Moreover, it's ambiguous to say miracles are rare. Rare overall? We'd expect miracles to be underreported since most Christians aren't famous. Miracles might be frequent, but most of them will never be a matter of public record.

Something can be rare but still be common if the absolute number is large even if the relative number is small. It might be a fraction of total events, yet the percentages are considerable. Green eyes are rare, but if millions of people have green eyes, that's a lot of green eyes.

## Fireproof

20 And he ordered some of the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. 21 Then these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics,[e] their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the burning fiery furnace. 22 Because the king's order was urgent and the furnace overheated, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. 23 And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace.

24 Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, "Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?" They answered and said to the king, "True, O king." 25 He answered and said, "But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods."

*26 Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning fiery furnace; he declared, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here!" Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. 27 And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king's counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men. The hair of their heads was not singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them (Dan 3:20-27).*

There are readers who find this unbelievable or hard to believe. In that regard, the description of Polycarp as fireproof presents a striking parallel to Daniel's friends in the furnace:

Polycarp 15:2

The fire, making the appearance of a vault, like the sail of a vessel filled by the wind, made a wall round about the body of the martyr; and it was there in the midst, not like flesh burning, but like [a loaf in the oven or like] gold and silver refined in a furnace. For we perceived such a fragrant smell, as if it were the wafted odor of frankincense or some other precious spice.

Polycarp 16:1

So at length the lawless men, seeing that his body could not be consumed by the fire, ordered an

executioner to go up to him and stab him with a dagger. And when he had done this, there came forth [a dove and] a quantity of blood, so that it extinguished the fire; and all the multitude marvelled that there should be so great a difference between the unbelievers and the elect.

<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/martyrdom-polycarp-lightfoot.html>

The martyrdom of Polycarp is presented as an eyewitness account. To my knowledge, it's generally considered to be authentic.

The account includes a premonition (5:2), and audible divine voice (9:1). Although an unbeliever will dismiss that as legendary embellishment, it helps to explain Polycarp's indomitable courage in the face to death by torture.

## What makes a miracle?

I'm going to comment on this: Yujin Nagasawa, **MIRACLES: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION** (Oxford 2017):

For an event to qualify as a miracle, an intentional agent must bring it about (13).

That seems like a useful criterion.

Any probabilistically impossible event with more than 0 per cent probability can take place purely by chance. An event that can happen purely by chance cannot be considered a miracle because a miracle has to be an event that is beyond coincidence.

Jesus's turning water into wine and resurrecting the dead are miracles precisely because they are nomologically impossible events. Given the laws of chemistry there is no way that water alone can turn into wine. Given the laws of biology there is no way that a person who has been dead for days can be resurrected. Yet they are neither probabilistically nor logically impossible. On the one hand it is not merely a matter of probability that water cannot turn into wine and the dead cannot be resurrected. These events cannot occur by chance. On the other hand, it is not a matter of logic that water cannot turn into wine and the dead cannot be resurrected. There is nothing logically contradictory about water turning into wine and the dead being resurrected. They are impossible only given the laws of the nature of this world...What he [Jesus] performed can be deemed miracles because the impossibilities they involve are perfectly fine-

tuned: they are stronger than probabilistic impossibilities but weaker than logical impossibilities (17).

...the outcome of the transformation (e.g. wine) cannot be obtained merely by processing the original substance (e.g. water)...When Jesus transformed water into wine perhaps he first produced wine out of nowhere and used it to instantly replace the water (23).

**i)** It's true that turning water into wine (or bread into fish) is naturally impossible in a way that a coincidence miracle is not. That's a valid distinction. And replacement is one way to model it.

**ii)** A "miracle" is a term of art, so Nagasawa is at liberty to offer his own definition. But that's subject to scrutiny.

**iii)** Could the laws of nature be different? The laws of nature are contingent. If the nature world disappeared, natural laws would disappear.

However, some people are too quick to claim that there could be a universe with different natural laws. Maybe so. But natural laws are interrelated. If you change one, you may have to change them all, or many or most of them. Each natural law must be consistent with every other natural law. But that raises the question of whether a universe with different natural laws is coherent. How many laws would have to be different for any law to be different? Is there a functional combination of alternative natural laws?

An omnipotent God is very resourceful. And omnipotent God can often bypass the natural order. But what's natural isn't

indefinitely elastic.

**iv)** What about his claim that a miracle must be an event that's beyond coincidence? Is that a metaphysical definition of a miracle or an epistemological definition?

Let's take a comparison. Suppose a man dies in a car crash due to brake failure. That *could* happen purely by chance.

But suppose, on further investigation, it turns out that his wife was having an affair with the automechanic who serviced the car the day before. And suppose the husband was a rich man. According to the will, his widow becomes a wealthy heiress in the event of his accidental death.

That *could* be a coincidence. But is it reasonable to classify the event as accidental death rather than murder? Even if all we have is circumstantial evidence which can't absolutely rule out the statistically possibility that it happened purely by chance, yet from an epistemic standpoint, that's not the most plausible explanation. Shouldn't we classify this event, not according to what's possible or impossible but probable or improbable?

Suppose, finally, the homicide detective recovers text-messages which explicitly reveal a murder plot between the wife and the boyfriend/automechanic. Metaphysically speaking, it wasn't actually a coincidence even if that kind of thing *can* (and does) happen by chance.



## Horse-racing

I've discussed this before, but I'd like to provide a couple of examples to illustrate the principle. Unbelievers allege that Christians succumb to sample-selection bias. When we appeal to miracles or answered prayer or fulfilled prophecy or archeological corroboration, we only count the hits and discount the misses. We conveniently forget the latter.

Now, in fairness, some Christians can be guilty of this. Take Christians who are straining to find God's will. Straining to detect divine signs. Likewise, many answered prayers are ambiguous in the sense that they *could be* naturally explicable.

However, hits and misses are evidentially asymmetrical. For instance, consistently losing at the race track requires no special explanation, whereas consistently winning at the race track does require a special explanation. Consistently losing at the casino requires no special explanation whereas consistently winning does.

So hits can be evidentially significant in a way that misses are not. It's to be expected that gamblers normally lose. There's an element of uncontrollable chance, and the odds are against you. If you consistently beat the odds, if you consistently outperform, that's suspicious. That implies cheating.

By the same token, lack of evidence isn't equivalent to counterevidence unless there's a reasonable expectation that if something's the case, there should be corroborative evidence. Consider how many things you and I do in the course of an ordinary day for which there were never any records.



## Infinite monkey theorem

I was asked to comment on a post by Matthew Ferguson:

<https://celsus.blog/2015/12/27/review-of-craig-keener-miracles-part-1-what-evidence-of-miracles-are-skeptics-searching-for/amp/>

**1.** Ferguson says he's interested quality rather than quantity. However, we're often warranted in believing something happened or something exists due to the sheer number of independent reports. So why should we have a different standard for miracles?

**2.** I generally agree with Ferguson's definition of a miracle. Among other things, he says:

Miracles involve agencies, wills, or intentions, causally working from outside of the physical order, intervening in the physical order to cause events that cannot be explained by physical causes alone...Hence why the molecules of Jesus' corpse cannot cause him to immortally rise from death. Hence why the water molecules in a jar cannot explain sudden transformation into wine. Instead, an agency, will, or intention working from outside of the physical order is intervening to cause an occurrence that would otherwise not be possible within the physical order...Miracles are not generally understood as unconscious accidents, but happen for intentional reasons. Answers to prayers, healing bodies in very specific ways, and producing very specific effects, such as parting the Red Sea specifically in front of the Judeans, all imply intelligent design.

In other words, the same causes produce the same effects. Christians don't deny that. But this creates no presumption against a different cause producing a different effect. A miracle happens when a new cause (e.g. divine action), outside the causal continuum, produces a new effect.

**3.** I agree with his definition of agency-centered teleology, although I disagree with his naturalistic definition of biological teleology.

**4.** He cites two putative coincidence miracles:

Don brought up (part 2, 40:40) a girl that lost her pet parakeet, prayed for a new parakeet, and then had another parakeet fly into her yard the next day. Don also brought up a couple that had prayed for a very specific amount of money, and then received that exact sum of money.

But dismisses them:

these events can still be plausibly explained as coincidences. We live in a world of more than 7 billion people, where extraordinarily rare events are happening everyday.

Yet there are problems with that response:

**i)** He fails to define a coincidence. Here's one definition:

A coincidence is a surprising concurrence of events, perceived as meaningfully related, with no apparent causal connection. D. Bartholomew, **UNCERTAIN BELIEF** (Oxford 2000), 101.

But in that event, can he justifiably dismiss these examples as merely coincidental unless he can establish that the relation is in fact random? How does he discharge his burden of proof in that regard?

**ii)** What's his practical criterion to distinguish a coincidence from an orchestrated event? For instance, consider circumstantial evidence that implicates a suspect in a crime. But given his standard, why can't we say that in a world with more than 7 billion humans, the evidence of criminal activity can always be chalked up to coincidence?

**iii)** How often must a certain kind of event occur before we recognize a pattern rather than a coincidence? What's his threshold?

**5.** Apropos (4), he quotes Richard Carrier:

the Law of Large Numbers is also used to refer to what causes the Infinite Monkey Theorem to be true ... The point is the same: the more occasions for a coincidence to occur, the more such coincidences will occur. And without a mathematical check, we cannot know from our isolated POV whether we are one of those coincidences or not.

Yet how is that a mathematical check in practice? According to the infinite monkey theorem, one monkey with infinite time, or infinite monkeys with finite time, typing keys at random, will eventually produce a particular finite text like Hamlet.

**i)** But what's the real-world analogue? An atheist can't appeal to infinite time or infinite random factors to provide a naturalistic explanation for coincidence miracles.

**ii)** In addition, consider how the gibberish texts would astronomically outnumber the intelligible texts. But is that ratio comparable to reported miracles?

**6.** Two problems with his comment on the argument from prophecy:

**i)** A prophecy might be ambiguous in advance respecting the process by which it will be fulfilled, yet unambiguous after the fact.

**ii)** The argument from prophecy doesn't turn on the probability of prophetic fulfillment considered in isolation, but the combined probability of many convergent prophecies.

**7.** He says:

If a miracle worker could perform miracles on demand in modern times, then he could do it when doctors and scientists are present. This would provide perhaps the strongest evidence there is of a miracle.

But that's an artificial bar because it assumes a miracle worker has the ability to perform miracles at will. While that was true of Jesus, given his divinity, that's not a given with respect to miracle workers in general.

**8.** He says:

Nevertheless, a genuine miracle worker, who could repeat miracles, could provide empirical evidence of miracles to scientists and doctors in a controlled setting.

That piggybacks on the same dubious assumption noted under (7). In addition, unless there's a presumption that God wants to prove his existence to everyone, there's no reason to think miracles will routinely occur in a controlled setting. On some occasions, God's intention to heal someone in particular might take place in a controlled setting (e.g. a hospital).

**9.** He says:

Miracles such as raising the dead, walking on water, or turning water into wine likewise would involve demonstrable, empirical change. If such miracles existed, science could find them.

“[W. L. Craig] Natural laws have implicit *ceteris paribus* conditions ... In other words, natural laws assume that no other natural or supernatural factors are interfering with the operation that the law describes.”

*Ceteris paribus* is a Latin term meaning “all other things being equal.” Science can tell us, for example, that a human being’s weight placed on the surface of liquid water will be too great for the surface friction on top of the water to support, causing the person to sink. This pattern can be demonstrated again and again through empirical testing. We know from science, therefore, that a human being walking on water would defy ordinary physical causality. If such an action were performed, therefore, especially by someone reputed to be a miracle worker, this would provide *prima facie* evidence of a miraculous event.

Science can also distinguish intelligently-driven behavior from natural occurrences, due to the goal

orientation, design, and intentionality reflected in intelligent behavior. Empirical science, therefore, provides us with all of the tools that we need to study the existence of miracles.

That's a useful corrective to methodological naturalism.

**10.** He says:

What naturalists maintain, however, is that, no miracle events will be able to be supported by verifiable empirical evidence. Only a single example of such verifiable evidence, even if no others occurred for all of history, would be enough to disprove this view.

That's very significant to the burden of proof. Naturalism is a universal negative in reference to miracles. In principle, it only takes one counterexample to falsify naturalism.

Therefore, the Christian has a trivially low burden of proof while the atheist has an insurmountably high burden of proof. An atheist must be able to discount every reported miracle.

**11.** He says:

“extraordinary” does not mean that the type of evidence itself has to be remarkable. Video tapes, x-rays, medical records, and so on are all part of ordinary life experience. What is meant by “extraordinary” in this case is that the evidence in question cannot be equally explained by a wide range of causes, but is only rendered probable under a very specific hypothesis. The problem with miracle reports is that they can be explained by a wide range of non-miraculous causes—such as misinterpretations of one’s



senses, misdiagnosed medical conditions, remarkable coincidences, constructed memories, hearsay, and plain old lies.

While I appreciate the definition, his escape clauses amount to special pleading.

**12.** He says:

We can assess the likelihood of such events based on empirical evidence and simple statistics. As Cavin explains, a low prior probability for miracles can be shown by a simple statistical syllogism (slide 110):

99%+ of Xs are Ys  
A is an X  
Therefore, A is probably a Y

In the case of a miracle such as Jesus rising from the dead, the question is not whether God wants to raise Jesus from the dead, but simply the question of how often these kinds of events empirically take place in the world.

But that's simplistic:

**i)** Suppose I drive my friend to the airport. My car is just one of a thousand other cars in the parking garage. Does this mean there's only a one in a thousand chance that I will drive my own car home?

The other 999 cars are irrelevant to the odds that I will drive my own car home, because my selection isn't random. In fact, it's not a question of mathematical odds at all.

**ii)** What are the odds that I will be dealt a royal flush? Depends. Is the deck fair or stacked? If the deck is stacked, then it may be inevitable that I will be dealt a royal flush.

**iii)** What are the odds that the deck will be stacked? I don't think that's quantifiable. Rather, it's a question of whether the dealer and I are in cahoots. The probability that he and I conspired isn't a question of mathematical odds.

**13.** He says:

First, miracles are events that people look and hope for. People pray everyday for miracles to occur, and they look for their prayers to be answered. This will not only cause people to see miracles in places where they may very well have not occurred, but it will also cause people to believe in miracles when they are told about them by others.

Although that's sometimes true, it's an overgeneralization. Reported miracles also happen to people who weren't looking for them. Some Christian miracles that happen to atheists, Jews, and Muslims, despite their predisposition to reject Christian miracles due to the social cost of conversion.

**14.** He says:

Human psychology is likewise wired to often see agencies in places where there are none. Early humans lived on a planet teeming with life, much of which was hostile and dangerous. Accordingly, early humans had to compete with other animals (and sometimes other humans) to survive, which selected our minds to detect agency and to seek out intelligence that threatened us.

An accidental side effect of this, however, was that our minds became programmed for agency over-detection.

**i)** That combines a tendentious Just-So story with a tendentious psychological mechanism.

**ii)** Moreover, we could just as well or better say that atheists suffer from an agency under-detection strategy.

**15.** He says:

Simply documenting a multitude of such reports, therefore, does not mean that one has provided a compelling case for their actual occurrence.

That fails to distinguish between a multiple derivative reports of the same event, multiple independent reports of the same event, and multiple independent reports of different events.

**16.** He says:

Merely documenting anecdotal evidence and miraculous reports is not enough.

Finally, any researcher who seeks to make a persuasive case for the existence of miracles will need to research miracles in every possible context that they can. This means looking for evidence of miracles occurring in a Hindu context, a Muslim context, a Catholic context, a Native American context, a Pagan context, and others, besides a solely a Protestant and Pentecostal context, for example.

**i)** Yet that's in tension with his prior admission that:

Only a single example of such verifiable evidence, even if no others occurred for all of history, would be enough to disprove this view.

Anecdotal evidence can be quite sufficient to overturn a universal negative.

The weakness of anecdotal evidence is when one attempts to generalize from a few examples, since that may not be a representative sample. But disproving a universal negative doesn't require extrapolation.

**ii)** In addition, he seems to think the occurrence of non-Christian miracles poses a problem for Christianity, although he fails to explain why. Perhaps his unstated objection is that if the argument from miracles is used to prove Christianity, then non-Christian miracles cancel out that line of evidence. If that's what he has in mind, I'd say the following:

**iii)** Even if the argument from miracles is insufficient to prove Christianity, it can be sufficient to disprove naturalism. And that can figure in a cumulative case argument for Christianity, by eliminating a major contender.

**iv)** Likewise, even if the argument from miracles is insufficient to single out Christianity, it can figure in a cumulative case argument for Christianity. The case for Christianity doesn't hinge on a crucial piece of evidence, but multiple lines of evidence.

**v)** If miracles cluster around Christianity, then they point to Christianity.

## Goldilocks atheism

All Keener's work can ultimately do is to get us to the level of *belief* in miracles being present. A leap of faith is still required to confirm that there is a supernatural agent behind such purported miracles and this cannot be proven by a historian. "It could have been something else" is just as valid or invalid, just as speculative, and has obvious limitations for the historian. The only firm evidence the historian has is that people *claim* miracles happen" Graham Twelftree, ed., **THE NATURE MIRACLES OF JESUS** (Cascade Book 2017), 89.

Beyond a certain point the mere piling up of examples starts to look more problematic than convincing: if miracles are really so commonplace, perhaps they're not so miraculous after all. Or perhaps Keener's examples tell us more about social anthropology, social psychology, and the sociology of knowledge than about what can actually happen. What is needed is not the piling up of further examples, but a closer analysis of a selection of the better-documented ones to see what they do in fact establish... (202).

No matter how many independent attestations of feeding miracles there may be, the use of multiple attestation of sources only shows the popularity of miracle stories (including "nature" miracles) in certain contexts... (206).

Here's a brief sequel to my previous post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2017/11/an-embarrassment-of-riches.html>

In that post I offered detailed responses to their specific objections, but now I'd like to comment on something they share in common. Ironically, the complaint is the abundance of testimonial evidence for miracles.

Suppose we only had a few reported miracles. Wouldn't atheists exclaim that the paucity of independent corroboration is reason to discount the reports? It's easier to dismiss a few random cases as luck. Odds are, coincidental events are bound to happen.

But now they turn around and say, in the face of a veritable avalanche of well-documented, contemporaneous reports, that the very abundance of the testimony is a problem. That just means miracle stories are *popular*.

From their viewpoint, there's either too little evidence or too much evidence. There can never be just enough. These are clearly people who don't want to believe in God, miracles, or Christianity. If you point to lots of evidence, they say that's too much. If you pointed to less, they'd say that's not enough. They've arranged things so that you can never strike the right balance.

## Mill on miracles

J. S. Mill was a brilliant atheist who wrote a sustained attack on Christianity (Three Essays on Religion). I'd like to comment on his attempted attack on miracles.

Taking the question from the very beginning; it is evidently impossible to maintain that if a supernatural fact really occurs, proof of its occurrence cannot be accessible to the human faculties. The evidence of our senses could prove this as it can prove other things. To put the most extreme case: suppose that I actually saw and heard a Being, either of the human form, or of some form previously unknown to me, commanding a world to exist, and a new world actually starting into existence and commencing a movement through space, at his command. There can be no doubt that this evidence would convert the creation of worlds from a speculation into a fact of experience. It may be said, I could not know that so singular an appearance was anything more than a hallucination of my senses. True; but the same doubt exists at first respecting every unsuspected and surprising fact which comes to light in our physical researches. That our senses have been deceived, is a possibility which has to be met and dealt with, and we do deal with it by several means. If we repeat the experiment, and again with the same result; if at the time of the observation the impressions of our senses are in all other respects the same as usual, rendering the supposition of their being morbidly affected in this one particular, extremely improbable; above all, if other people's senses confirm the testimony of our own; we conclude, with reason, that we may trust our senses. Indeed our senses are all

that we have to trust to. We depend on them for the ultimate premises even of our reasonings. There is no other appeal against their decision than an appeal from the senses without precautions to the senses with all due precautions. When the evidence, on which an opinion rests, is equal to that upon which the whole conduct and safety of our lives is founded, we need ask no further. Objections which apply equally to all evidence are valid against none. They only prove abstract fallibility.

That's well taken.

But the evidence of miracles, at least to Protestant Christians, is not, in our own day, of this cogent description. It is not the evidence of our senses, but of witnesses, and even this not at firsthand, but resting on the attestation of books and traditions.

**i)** Although differentiating between the evidence of our senses and the evidence of witnesses is a valid distinction, his dichotomy between witnesses and attestation of books and traditions is a false antithesis. That's the nature of most *recorded* testimonial evidence, which has its origin in oral history.

**ii)** Moreover, he assumes that 19C Protestants had no firsthand experience of miracles. How would he be in any position to know that? He was raised in an irreligious household. As an adult, he didn't move in evangelical circles. He avoided the settings in which miracles, if they occur, are more likely to occur. There's a circular, self-reinforcing quality to infidelity, where unbelievers associate with other unbelievers, so that their social circle deliberately excludes the company where answered prayer, if it happens, would fall under their purview.



**iii)** Nowadays, we also have lab tests and medical scans that show a patient's before and after condition. That's different from either firsthand observation of a miracle or testimony to a miracle. You could pull someone's records and see the results for yourself.

And even in the case of the original eyewitnesses, the supernatural facts asserted on their alleged testimony, are not of the transcendent character supposed in our example, about the nature of which, or the impossibility of their having had a natural origin, there could be little room for doubt. On the contrary, the recorded miracles are, in the first place, generally such as it would have been extremely difficult to verify as matters of fact, and in the next place, are hardly ever beyond the possibility of having been brought about by human means or by the spontaneous agencies of nature. It is to cases of this kind that Hume's argument against the credibility of miracles was meant to apply.

That denial is conspicuous for the utter lack of specific examples. He doesn't say what recorded miracles he's alluding to, how they'd have been extremely difficult to verify as matters of fact, or hardly ever beyond the possibility of having been brought about by human means or by the spontaneous agencies of nature. So his denial is a vacuous abstraction.

His argument is: The evidence of miracles consists of testimony. The ground of our reliance on testimony is our experience that certain conditions being supposed, testimony is generally veracious. But the same experience tells us that even under the best conditions testimony is frequently either intentionally or unintentionally, false. When, therefore, the fact to

which testimony is produced is one the happening of which would be more at variance with experience than the falsehood of testimony, we ought not to believe it. And this rule all prudent persons observe in the conduct of life. Those who do not, are sure to suffer for their credulity.

At variance with experience? As in no one's experience?

Now a miracle (the argument goes on to say) is, in the highest possible degree, contradictory to experience: for if it were not contradictory to experience it would not be a miracle. The very reason for its being regarded as a miracle is that it is a breach of a law of nature, that is, of an otherwise invariable and inviolable uniformity in the succession of natural events. There is, therefore, the very strongest reason for disbelieving it, that experience can give for disbelieving anything. But the mendacity or error of witnesses, even though numerous and of fair character, is quite within the bounds of even common experience. That supposition, therefore, ought to be preferred.

There are two apparently weak points in this argument. One is, that the evidence of experience to which its appeal is made is only negative evidence, which is not so conclusive as positive; since facts of which there had been no previous experience are often discovered, and proved by positive experience to be true.

That's well-taken.

The other seemingly vulnerable point is this. The argument has the appearance of assuming that the testimony of experience against miracles is undeviating and indubitable, as it would be if the whole question

was about the probability of future miracles, none having taken place in the past; whereas the very thing asserted on the other side is that there have been miracles, and that the testimony of experience is not wholly on the negative side. All the evidence alleged in favour of any miracle ought to be reckoned as counterevidence in refutation of the ground on which it is asserted that miracles ought to be disbelieved. The question can only be stated fairly as depending on a balance of evidence: a certain amount of positive evidence in favour of miracles, and a negative presumption from the general course of human experience against them.

That's well-taken.

In order to support the argument under this double correction, it has to be shown that the negative presumption against a miracle is very much stronger than that against a merely new and surprising fact. This, however, is evidently the case. A new physical discovery even if it consists in the defeating of a well established law of nature, is but the discovery of another law previously unknown. There is nothing in this but what is familiar to our experience: we were aware that we did not know all the laws of nature, and we were aware that one such law is liable to be counteracted by others. The new phenomenon, when brought to light, is found still to depend on law; it is always exactly reproduced when the same circumstances are repeated. Its occurrence, therefore, is within the limits of variation in experience, which experience itself discloses. But a miracle, in the very fact of being a miracle, declares itself to be a supersession not of one natural law by another, but of

the law which includes all others, which experience shows to be universal for all phenomena, viz., that they depend on some law; that they are always the same when there are the same phenomenal antecedents, and neither take place in the absence of their phenomenal causes, nor ever fail to take place when the phenomenal conditions are all present.

**i)** I don't know what Mill means by natural law. On one definition, a natural law is merely descriptive. It doesn't do anything. Laws aren't causes.

Is he using "natural law" as a synonym for a universal natural force or process? If so, it's not self-evident that miracles per se are inconsistent with universal forces or processes, although some may be.

**ii)** In any event, natural laws simply mean the same causes produce the same effects. If, however, a miracle involves the temporary introduction of a new cause, then that wasn't covered by a natural law. It's not inconsistent with natural laws, since they only deal with events covered by the same kind of causation.

It is evident that this argument against belief in miracles had very little to rest upon until a comparatively modern stage in the progress of science. A few generations ago the universal dependence of phenomena on invariable laws was not only not recognized by mankind in general but could not be regarded by the instructed as a scientifically established truth. There were many phenomena which seemed quite irregular in their course, without dependence on any known antecedents: and though, no doubt, a certain regularity in the occurrence of the most familiar phenomena must always have been

recognized, yet, even in these, the exceptions which were constantly occurring had not yet, by an investigation and generalization of the circumstances of their occurrence, been reconciled with the general rule. The heavenly bodies were from of old the most conspicuous types of regular and unvarying order: yet even among them comets were a phenomenon apparently originating without any law, and eclipses, one which seemed to take place in violation of law. Accordingly both comets and eclipses long continued to be regarded as of a miraculous nature, intended as signs and omens of human fortunes. It would have been impossible in those days to prove to any one that this supposition was antecedently improbable. It seemed more conformable to appearances than the hypothesis of an unknown law.

To the contrary, many biblical miracles were regarded as astounding to the original audience because they run counter to ordinary providence.

Now, however, when, in the progress of science, all phenomena have been shown, by indisputable evidence, to be amenable to law, and even in the cases in which those laws have not yet been exactly ascertained, delay in ascertaining them is fully accounted for by the special difficulties of the subject; the defenders of miracles have adapted their argument to this altered state of things, by maintaining that a miracle need not necessarily be a violation of law. It may, they say, take place in fulfilment of a more recondite law, to us unknown.

Critics of the Bible don't really believe that. They reject biblical miracles because they think those are naturally impossible. Indeed, that's why they reject Bible history.

If by this it be only meant that the Divine Being, in the exercise of his power of interfering with and suspending his own laws, guides himself by some general principle or rule of action, this, of course, cannot be disproved, and is in itself the most probable supposition. But if the argument means that a miracle may be the fulfilment of a law in the same sense in which the ordinary events of Nature are fulfilments of laws, it seems to indicate an imperfect conception of what is meant by a law, and of what constitutes a miracle.

When we say that an ordinary physical fact always takes place according to some invariable law, we mean that it is connected by uniform sequence or coexistence with some definite set of physical antecedents; that whenever that set is exactly reproduced the same phenomenon will take place, unless counteracted by the similar laws of some other physical antecedents;

For some reason, Mill's entire discussion is framed in terms of natural law. However, it's unnecessary for a counteracting natural *law* to produce the exception. A counteracting cause or agent will suffice.

and that whenever it does take place, it would always be found that its special set of antecedents (or one of its sets if it has more than one) has preexisted. Now, an event which takes place in this manner, is not a miracle. To make it a miracle it must be produced by a direct volition, without the use of means; or at least, of any means which if simply repeated would produce it. To constitute a miracle a phenomenon must take place without having been preceded by any antecedent phenomenal conditions sufficient again to reproduce it;

or a phenomenon for the production of which the antecedent conditions existed, must be arrested or prevented without the intervention of any phenomenal antecedents which would arrest or prevent it in a future case. The test of a miracle is: Were there present in the case such external conditions, such second causes we may call them, that whenever these conditions or causes reappear the event will be reproduced? If there were, it is not a miracle; if there were not, it is a miracle, but it is not according to law: it is an event produced, without, or in spite of law.

That's true for one class of miracles, but not for coincidence miracles, which piggyback on continuous antecedent conditions, but are more discriminating than physical causes alone would select for.

It will perhaps be said that a miracle does not necessarily exclude the intervention of second causes. If it were the will of God to raise a thunderstorm by miracle, he might do it by means of winds and clouds. Undoubtedly; but the winds and clouds were either sufficient when produced to excite the thunderstorm without other divine assistance, or they were not. If they were not, the storm is not a fulfilment of law, but a violation of it. If they were sufficient, there is a miracle, but it is not the storm; it is the production of the winds and clouds, or whatever link in the chain of causation it was at which the influence of physical antecedents was dispensed with. If that influence was never dispensed with, but the event called miraculous was produced by natural means, and those again by others, and so on from the beginning of things; if the event is no otherwise the act of God than in having been foreseen and ordained by him as the consequence of the forces put in action at the Creation;

then there is no miracle at all, nor anything different from the ordinary working of God's providence.

To take an counterexample, God's judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah was a natural disaster. That was consistent with natural laws. Indeed, that employed natural mechanisms. It was, however, targeted in time and space in a way that was more specific than merely natural forces, which are aimless. Of course, Mill denies the historicity of that account, but I use it to illustrate the *idea* of a miracle.

For another example: a person professing to be divinely commissioned, cures a sick person, by some apparently insignificant external application. Would this application, administered by a person not specially commissioned from above, have effected the cure? If so, there is no miracle; if not, there is a miracle, but there is a violation of law.

I'm curious about Mill's fixation with natural law. Natural laws are the most general classifications. Many physical forces, much less organic processes, operate at lower levels of generality and contingency. Is it a law of nature that a human heart has an average number of beats per minute?

It will be said, however, that if these be violations of law, then law is violated every time that any outward effect is produced by a voluntary act of a human being. Human volition is constantly modifying natural phenomena, not by violating their laws, but by using their laws. Why may not divine volition do the same? The power of volitions over phenomena is itself a law, and one of the earliest known and acknowledged laws of nature. It is true, the human will exercises power over objects in general indirectly, through the direct power which it possesses only over the human



muscles. God, however, has direct power not merely over one thing, but over all the objects which he has made. There is, therefore, no more a supposition of violation of law in supposing that events are produced, prevented, or modified by God's action, than in the supposition of their being produced, prevented, or modified by man's action. Both are equally in the course of nature, both equally consistent with what we know of the government of all things by law.

**i)** It's true that if God subsists outside of time and space, then divine agency differs from human agency.

**ii)** However, Mill equivocates over "nature" and "law". If he's using "natural" as a synonym for "physical," then it begs the question to say that human volition is natural in the sense of physical.

**iii)** Moreover, human volitions aren't law-like in the way that gravity is law-like, or even natural processes. Natural processes are mechanical. They don't think, deliberate, or make choices. They do whatever they were programmed to do. That's what makes them predicable in a way that human agents are not. For that matter, even animal behavior is unpredictable and "unlawful" compared to, say, crystal formation.

Mill seems to be imprisoned in a 19C mechanical paradigm, where he overextends the operations of some invariant natural forces, as if everything in the natural world has the law-like character of some natural forces or natural processes.

Those who thus argue are mostly believers in Free Will, and maintain that every human volition originates a new chain of causation, of which it is itself the

commencing link, not connected by invariable sequence with any anterior fact. Even, therefore, if a divine interposition did constitute a breaking-in upon the connected chain of events, by the introduction of a new originating cause without root in the past, this would be no reason for discrediting it, since every human act of volition does precisely the same. If the one is a breach of law, so are the others. In fact, the reign of law does not extend to the origination of volition.

Those who dispute the Free Will theory, and regard volition as no exception to the Universal law of Cause and Effect, may answer, that volitions do not interrupt the chain of causation, but carry it on, the connection of cause and effect being of just the same nature between motive and act as between a combination of physical antecedents and a physical consequent. But this, whether true or not, does not really affect the argument: for the interference of human will with the course of nature is only not an exception to law when we include among laws the relation of motive to volition; and by the same rule interference by the Divine will would not be an exception either; since we cannot but suppose the Deity, in every one of his acts, to be determined by motives.

But even if human volitions are produced by chains of cause and effect, if that's mental rather than physical, then when human agents manipulate nature, that's still a "breach" or "breaking-in" in relation to the physical continuum of cause and effect.

The alleged analogy therefore holds good: but what it proves is only what I have from the first maintained—that divine interference with nature could be proved if

we had the same sort of evidence for it which we have for human interferences. The question of antecedent improbability only arises because divine interposition is not certified by the direct evidence of perception, but is always matter of inference, and more or less of speculative inference. And a little consideration will show that in these circumstances the antecedent presumption against the truth of the inference is extremely strong.

Our evidence for human "interference" is hardly confined to direct perception in contrast to inference. We constantly infer human agency in reference to past events which fall outside direct perception.

When the human will interferes to produce any physical phenomenon, except the movements of the human body, it does so by the employment of means: and is obliged to employ such means as are by their own physical properties sufficient to bring about the effect. Divine interference, by hypothesis, proceeds in a different manner from this: it produces its effect without means, or with such as are in themselves insufficient. In the first case, all the physical phenomena except the first bodily movement are produced in strict conformity to physical causation; while that first movement is traced by positive observation, to the cause (the volition) which produced it. In the other case, the event is supposed not to have been produced at all through physical causation, while there is no direct evidence to connect it with any volition. The ground on which it is ascribed to a volition is only negative, because there is no other apparent way of accounting for its existence.

Actually, there are well-documented cases of psychokinesis. Moreover, Mill is obfuscating the issue. Lifting a glass with my hand employs means, and bodily movements are physical. But is *willing* to lift my hand a physical act or a mental act? Is mental causation prior to physical causation in that respect?

But in this merely speculative explanation there is always another hypothesis possible, viz., that the event may have been produced by physical causes, in a manner not apparent. It may either be due to a law of physical nature not yet known, or to the unknown presence of the conditions necessary for producing it according to some known law.

A basic problem with appealing to unknown laws is that natural laws are entirely general and unintelligent. Natural laws lack the rational discretion to single out particular outcomes in the way that miracles reflect.

Supposing even that the event, supposed to be miraculous, does not reach us through the uncertain medium of human testimony but rests on the direct evidence of our own senses; even then so long as there is no direct evidence of its production by a divine volition, like that we have for the production of bodily movements by human volitions—so long, therefore, as the miraculous character of the event is but an inference from the supposed inadequacy of the laws of physical nature to account for it,—so long will the hypothesis of a natural origin for the phenomenon be entitled to preference over that of a supernatural one. The commonest principles of sound judgment forbid us to suppose for any effect a cause of which we have absolutely no experience, unless all those of which we have experience are ascertained to be absent. Now

there are few things of which we have more frequent experience than of physical facts which our knowledge does not enable us to account for, because they depend either on laws which observation, aided by science, has not yet brought to light, or on facts the presence of which in the particular case is unsuspected by us. Accordingly when we hear of a prodigy we always, in these modern times, believe that if it really occurred it was neither the work of God nor of a demon, but the consequence of some unknown natural law or of some hidden fact.

Although experience can show us what happens, or at least what *has* happened, and therefore what *can* happen, it fails to show us what *can't* happen or *won't* happen. Experience refers to the past, not the future, and to what *is* the case, not what *must* be the case. Although experience contributes to our belief that some kinds of events are naturally inexplicable if they happened, it's not raw experience which yields that conclusion, but interpreted experience. When we understand how things physically work together, we understand when and why they don't work. The causal pathway is blocked. It's not possible for certain things to happen by that means if the connection is broken. Which doesn't rule out the event, but it can't happen through that medium if a link is missing. If it happens, it must be by some other cause, which doesn't require that intervening element.

Nor is either of these suppositions precluded when, as in the case of a miracle properly so called, the wonderful event seemed to depend upon the will of a human being. It is always possible that there may be at work some undetected law of nature which the wonder-worker may have acquired, consciously or unconsciously, the power of calling into action;

What kind of "law" is Mill talking about? Is he alluding to something like psychokinesis? If so, that precludes naturalism (i.e. physicalism-cum-causal closure). For that involves action at a distance, which is impossible if human volitions are generated by the brain. In that case, all mental activity is confined to the brain, and can have no direct effect on anything outside the body. Once he allows for minds that can operate apart from corporeal constraints, how can he exclude God, angels, and demons?

or that the wonder may have been wrought (as in the truly extraordinary feats of jugglers) by the employment, unperceived by us, of ordinary laws: which also need not necessarily be a case of voluntary deception;

Mill is contriving an unfalsifiable position, where no kind of evidence could ever countenance a miracle, even if it occurred. He's sealed himself off from reality by a web of intellectual evasions. How is that different, in principle, from a brilliant psychotic who deems the sensible world to be a cunning illusion, who deems the mental ward, the patients and psychiatrists, to be a cunning illusion? He has ingenious explanations that defect any possible disconfirmatory evidence.

or, lastly, the event may have had no connection with the volition at all, but the coincidence between them may be the effect of craft or accident, the miracle-worker having seemed or affected to produce by his will that which was already about to take place, as if one were to command an eclipse of the sun at the moment when one knew by astronomy that an eclipse was on the point of taking place.

That only works in like cases. It fails in cases that are not analogous to that. Mill's tactic is to operate at a level of high abstraction, so that he doesn't have to engage specific evidence for specific miracles. He avoids the details.

In a case of this description, the miracle might be tested by a challenge to repeat it; but it is worthy of remark, that recorded miracles were seldom or never put to this test. No miracle-worker seems ever to have made a practice of raising the dead: that and the other most signal of the miraculous operations are reported to have been performed only in one or a few isolated cases, which may have been either cunningly selected cases, or accidental coincidences. There is, in short, nothing to exclude the supposition that every alleged miracle was due to natural causes: and as long as that supposition remains possible, no scientific observer, and no man of ordinary practical judgment, would assume by conjecture a cause which no reason existed for supposing to be real, save the necessity of accounting for something which is sufficiently accounted for without it.

**i)** Even if miracles were confined to a few isolated cases, that's sufficient to overturn a universal negative. If you say all crows are black, it only takes one albino crow to prove otherwise.

**ii)** Moreover, magical tricks involve elaborate preparations. Special equipment. Controlled conditions. That doesn't account for the unstructured setting of many reported miracles.

Were we to stop here, the case against miracles might seem to be complete. But on further inspection it will be seen that we cannot, from the above considerations,

conclude absolutely that the miraculous theory of the production of a phenomenon ought to be at once rejected. We can conclude only that no extraordinary powers which have ever been alleged to be exercised by any human being over nature, can be evidence of miraculous gifts to any one to whom the existence of a supernatural Being, and his interference in human affairs, is not already a *vera causa*. The existence of God cannot possibly be proved by miracles, for unless a God is already recognized, the apparent miracle can always be accounted for on a more probable hypothesis than that of the interference of a Being of whose very existence it is supposed to be the sole evidence. Thus far Hume's argument is conclusive.

**i)** What makes divine agency less probable than a naturalistic explanation? In relation to what frame of reference is that less probable? Not in a world where an interventionist God exists. So Mill's strictures are prejudicial.

**ii)** Take the discovery of a new pathogen. Must the existence of the pathogen already be recognized before we can point to evidence? The fact that the existence of a hitherto unsuspected pathogen is required to explain the medical condition doesn't mean an investigation must begin with prior belief in the pathogen.

But it is far from being equally so when the existence of a Being who created the present order of Nature, and, therefore, may well be thought to have power to modify it, is accepted as a fact, or even as a probability resting on independent evidence. Once admit a God, and the production by his direct volition of an effect which in any case owed its origin to his creative will, is no longer a purely arbitrary hypothesis to account for



the fact, but must be reckoned with as a serious possibility. The question then changes its character, and the decision of it must now rest upon what is known or reasonably surmised as to the manner of God's government of the universe: whether this knowledge or surmise makes it the more probable supposition that the event was brought about by the agencies by which his government is ordinarily carried on, or that it is the result of a special and extraordinary interposition of his will in supersession of those ordinary agencies.

That's true. However, it's unnecessary to first prove God's existence before you can appreciate how miracles provide evidence for God's existence, for reasons stated (see above).

In the first place, then, assuming as a fact the existence and providence of God, the whole of our observation of Nature proves to us by incontrovertible evidence that the rule of his government is by means of second causes; that all facts, or at least all physical facts, follow uniformly upon given physical conditions, and never occur but when the appropriate collection of physical conditions is realized. I limit the assertion to physical facts, in order to leave the case of human volition an open question: though indeed I need not do so, for if the human will is free, it has been left free by the Creator, and is not controlled by him either through second causes or directly, so that, not being governed, it is not a specimen of his mode of government. Whatever he does govern, he governs by second causes. This was not obvious in the infancy of science; it was more and more recognized as the processes of nature were more carefully and accurately examined, until there now remains no class of phenomena of

which it is not positively known, save some cases which from their obscurity and complication our scientific processes have not yet been able completely to clear up and disentangle, and in which, therefore, the proof that they also are governed by natural laws could not, in the present state of science, be more complete. The evidence, though merely negative, which these circumstances afford that government by second causes is universal, is admitted for all except directly religious purposes to be conclusive. When either a man of science for scientific or a man of the world for practical purposes inquires into an event, he asks himself what is its cause? and not, has it any natural cause? A man would be laughed at who set down as one of the alternative suppositions that there is no other cause for it than the will of God.

**i)** The "whole of our observation of nature" includes many reported miracles, so Mill's appeal is self-refuting.

**ii)** If, moreover, miracles occur, but science disallows miraculous explanations, then science is out of touch with what actually happens in the world. If men of science can't bring themselves to admit reality into their explanatory repertoire, then science becomes a self-enclosed fiction. It's no longer about the world, but what scientists wish to believe, even when their beliefs don't match reality.

Against this weight of negative evidence we have to set such positive evidence as is produced in attestation of exceptions; in other words, the positive evidences of miracles. And I have already admitted that this evidence might conceivably have been such as to make the exception equally certain with the rule. If we had the direct testimony of our senses to a supernatural fact, it might be as completely authenticated and made

certain as any natural one. But we never have. The supernatural character of the fact is always, as I have said, matter of inference and speculation: and the mystery always admits the possibility of a solution not supernatural.

**i)** That's a good example of self-reinforcing ignorance. Mill isn't merely confessing that he himself never saw a miracle; rather, he presumes to speak on *behalf* of everyone else! But, of course, many observers say they do have the direct testimony of their senses to a supernatural fact. That's not firsthand evidence *for Mill*, but he's in no position to say they can't have the experience they report. He can't speak on their behalf, because he wasn't there.

**ii)** Moreover, there's nothing wrong with inference. Take a medical diagnosis, in which a physician infers a particular disease based on distinctive symptoms.

To those who already believe in supernatural power, the supernatural hypothesis may appear more probable than the natural one; but only if it accords with what we know or reasonably surmise respecting the ways of the supernatural agent. Now all that we know, from the evidence of nature, concerning his ways, is in harmony with the natural theory and repugnant to the supernatural. There is, therefore, a vast preponderance of probability against a miracle, to counterbalance which would require a very extraordinary and indisputable congruity in the supposed miracle and its circumstances with something which we conceive ourselves to know, or to have grounds for believing, with regard to the divine attributes.

Mill keeps repeating the same tendentious claims. Moreover, is he simply speaking in quantitative terms? Is he saying

natural explanations are more probable than supernatural explanations because natural events are more frequent than supernatural events? Even if that were so, the inference is fallacious. We explain natural events naturally, not because they are more frequent, but because they have the character of natural events. We ought to explain supernatural events supernaturally because they have the character of supernatural events. Relative frequency is irrelevant.

Suppose we discovered an ancient alien space craft that crashed on Mars. The frequency or rarity of such phenomenon in our experience has no bearing on the proper interpretation.

This extraordinary congruity is supposed to exist when the purpose of the miracle is extremely beneficial to mankind, as when it serves to accredit some highly important belief. The goodness of God, it is supposed, affords a high degree of antecedent probability that he would make an exception to his general rule of government, for so excellent a purpose. For reasons, however, which have already been entered into, any inference drawn by us from the goodness of God to what he has or has not actually done, is to the last degree precarious. If we reason directly from God's goodness to positive facts, no misery, nor vice nor crime ought to exist in the world. We can see no reason in God's goodness why if he deviated once from the ordinary system of his government in order to do good to man, he should not have done so on a hundred other occasions; nor why, if the benefit aimed at by some given deviation, such as the revelation of Christianity, was transcendent and unique, that precious gift should only have been vouchsafed after the lapse of many ages; or why, when it was at last

given, the evidence of it should have been left open to so much doubt and difficulty.

**i)** It's unclear how Mill's conclusion follows from his assumption. Let's grant that there's no intrinsic cutoff between one exception and a hundred exceptions. If, then, any exception will be arbitrary in the sense that there could always be one more exception more or one less exception, then there's no antecedent objection to the rarity of miracles (assuming miracles are rare). For Mill's objection is reversible. If miracles were more frequent, the logic of Mill's objection would then be the opposite: they could be less frequent!

**ii)** In addition, his principle is fallacious. Something that's beneficial in fewer cases may not be equally beneficial in more cases. Some things have special value to us because they are unusual, unexpected, or even unique. If you had a happy childhood, you're nostalgic about your childhood because it's unrepeatable. Something that's routine may be taken for granted. It's enjoyable to listen to my favorite musical numbers every so often. It would be unbearable to listen to them every day and every hour.

Suppose I'm at the end of my tether. Then an old friend shows up out of the blue. I haven't seen in for years. It's so opportune that he turned up at a low point of my life. Like a providential windfall. If, however, I saw him every week, it wouldn't have the same effect. That would still be good, but a different kind of good. What makes a pleasant surprise pleasant is the element of surprise. Because Mill suffers from an irrational animus towards Christianity, he overlooks many objections to his position.

Let it be remembered also that the goodness of God affords no presumption in favour of a deviation from

his general system of government unless the good purpose could not have been attained without deviation. If God intended that mankind should receive Christianity or any other gift, it would have agreed better with all that we know of his government to have made provision in the scheme of creation for its arising at the appointed time by natural development; which, let it be added, all the knowledge we now possess concerning the history of the human mind, tends to the conclusion that it actually did.

**i)** What is Mill even talking about? How could mankind receive Christianity through a process of natural development if Christianity is defined by such events as Adam's fall, the call of Abraham, the Exodus, the Incarnation, Resurrection, and return of Christ (to name a few)? These involve personal agency and supernatural intervention. It's not analogous to organic growth.

**ii)** What makes miracles a deviation rather than ordinary providence? What makes ordinary providence the standard of comparison? Each has independent value. Each serves a distinctive purpose.

To all these considerations ought to be added the extremely imperfect nature of the testimony itself which we possess for the miracles, real or supposed, which accompanied the foundation of Christianity and of every other revealed religion.

**i)** Miracles aren't confined to the founding of Christianity. Reported miracles occur throughout church history right up until the present. Although not all reports are credible, some are well-attested.

**ii)** How many candidates for revealed religions are there?

This is one of Mill's persistent weaknesses. He takes refuge in fact-free generalities.

Take it at the best, it is the uncross-examined testimony...

What do we know about ancient history and medieval history that's *not* based on uncross-examined testimony? Most of what we believe about anything is based on secondhand information. We haven't cross-examined our sources of information.

Mill's objection is self-refuting. He himself relies on the uncross-examined testimony of ancient historians and medieval historians to tell us what conditions were like back then. He unwittingly depends on testimonial evidence to impugn testimonial evidence.

...of extremely ignorant people, credulous as such usually are, honourably credulous when the excellence of the doctrine or just reverence for the teacher makes them eager to believe; unaccustomed to draw the line between the perceptions of sense, and what is superinduced upon them by the suggestions of a lively imagination; unversed in the difficult art of deciding between appearance and reality, and between the natural and the supernatural;

That's silly on the face of it. For Bible writers and their audience, miracles stand out precisely because they run counter to the ordinary course of nature. That's what makes them signs and wonders.

Is it a difficult art to distinguish between appearance and reality? What is Mill's referring to? Walking on water?

Turning water into wine? Healing the blind? Replicating food?

...in times, moreover, when no one thought it worth while to contradict any alleged miracle, because it was the belief of the age that miracles in themselves proved nothing, since they could be worked by a lying spirit as well as by the spirit of God.

They prove the existence of God and evil spirits. That establishes a worldview which is entirely at odds with Mill's naturalism.

Such were the witnesses; and even of them we do not possess the direct testimony; the documents, of date long subsequent, even on the orthodox theory

Within living memory.

which contain the only history of these events, very often do not even name the supposed eyewitnesses.

What difference would that make? These are ordinary people. What's the relevance of having someone's name from the past? How does that add to the credibility of the report? What's the difference between a named witness and an anonymous witness at our distance from events?

If one historical account says a medieval farmer discovered a meteorite on his property while a parallel account says farmer John discovered a meteorite on his property, what does that detail contribute to the credibility of the report? In one case we know the name of the medieval peasant. A name he shared in common with many other medieval peasants.



They put down (it is but just to admit), the best and least absurd of the wonderful stories such multitudes of which were current among the early Christians.

Is he saying there were many more stories in circulation regarding the miracles of Christ when the Gospels were written?

but when they do, exceptionally, name any of the persons who were the subjects or spectators of the miracle, they doubtless draw from tradition, and mention those names with which the story was in the popular mind, (perhaps accidentally) connected: for whoever has observed the way in which even now a story grows up from some small foundation, taking on additional details at every step, knows well how from being at first anonymous it gets names attached to it; the name of some one by whom perhaps the story has been told, being brought into the story itself first as a witness, and still later as a party concerned.

**i)** So his initial appeal to the evidential value of named witnesses was duplicitous. He doesn't care if they were anonymous or not.

**ii)** My parents and grandmother used to tell me stories about their lives. There was no growth in their stories. To the contrary, their anecdotes were fixed in memory with a stereotypical form. The wording would vary, but not the content.

It is also noticeable and is a very important consideration, that stories of miracles only grow up among the ignorant and are adopted, if ever, by the educated when they have already become the belief of multitudes. Those which are believed by Protestants all

originate in ages and nations in which there was hardly any canon of probability, and miracles were thought to be among the commonest of all phenomena.

That statement was demonstrably false even when Mill wrote it, and it hasn't aged well. There are many reported miracles by modern educated witnesses, some of which enjoy independent corroboration. There are collections of vetted miracles by scholars like Robert Larmer and Craig Keener. And that's just what's in the public domain. Most Christians aren't famous. The miracles they experience or witness go unreported. But they know what *they* saw.

The Catholic Church, indeed, holds as an article of faith that miracles have never ceased, and new ones continue to be now and then brought forth and believed, even in the present incredulous age—yet if in an incredulous generation certainly not among the incredulous portion of it, but always among people who, in addition to the most childish ignorance, have grown up (as all do who are educated by the Catholic clergy) trained in the persuasion that it is a duty to believe and a sin to doubt; that it is dangerous to be sceptical about anything which is tendered for belief in the name of the true religion; and that nothing is so contrary to piety as incredulity. But these miracles which no one but a Roman Catholic, and by no means every Roman Catholic believes, rest frequently upon an amount of testimony greatly surpassing that which we possess for any of the early miracles; and superior especially in one of the most essential points, that in many cases the alleged eyewitnesses are known, and we have their story at firsthand.

There's a lot of truth to that, and I'm no friend of Catholicism. That said, I've read a couple of articles by

Stanley Jaki on two miracles attributed to Lourdes. I find his analysis credible.

Thus, then, stands the balance of evidence in respect to the reality of miracles, assuming the existence and government of God to be proved by other evidence. On the one side, the great negative presumption arising from the whole of what the course of nature discloses to us of the divine government, as carried on through second causes and by invariable sequences of physical effects upon constant antecedents.

I've responded to that fallacious claim. In addition, Mill erects a false dichotomy between miracles and second causes. But coincidence miracles employ second causes. There are three explanatory categories: natural, preternatural, supernatural. Many amazing answers to prayer are preternatural.

On the other side, a few exceptional instances, attested by evidence not of a character to warrant belief in any facts in the smallest degree unusual or improbable

There are many well-documented miracles. Not just a "few exceptional instances". Notice, too, that Mill doesn't examine any specific examples.

the eyewitnesses in most cases unknown, in none competent by character or education to scrutinize the real nature of the appearances which they may have seen

That's demonstrably false.

and moved moreover by a union of the strongest motives which can inspire human beings to persuade,

first themselves, and then others, that what they had seen was a miracle.

Miracles can be deeply unwelcome when they induce an observer to convert on pain of persecution or martyrdom. There's a powerful disincentive to credit miracles in that case. Take Muslims who attribute their Christian conversion to dreams and visions of Jesus. That's a huge personal risk.

The facts, too, even if faithfully reported, are never incompatible with the supposition that they were either mere coincidences, or were produced by natural means; even when no specific conjecture can be made as to those means, which in general it can. The conclusion I draw is that miracles have no claim whatever to the character of historical facts and are wholly invalid as evidences of any revelation.

What is Mill's criterion to distinguish coincidence from design?

What can be said with truth on the side of miracles amounts only to this: Considering that the order of nature affords some evidence of the reality of a Creator, and of his bearing good will to his creatures though not of its being the sole prompter of his conduct towards them: considering, again, that all the evidence of his existence is evidence also that he is not all-powerful, and considering that in our ignorance of the limits of his power we cannot positively decide that he was able to provide for us by the original plan of Creation all the good which it entered into his intentions to bestow upon us, or even to bestow any part of it at any earlier period than that at which we actually received it—considering these things, when we consider further that a gift, extremely precious, came

to us which though facilitated was not apparently necessitated by what had gone before, but was due, as far as appearances go, to the peculiar mental and moral endowments of one man, and that man openly proclaimed that it did not come from himself but from God through him, then we are entitled to say that there is nothing so inherently impossible or absolutely incredible in this supposition as to preclude any one from hoping that it may perhaps be true. I say from hoping; I go no further; for I cannot attach any evidentiary value to the testimony even of Christ on such a subject, since he is never said to have declared any evidence of his mission (unless his own interpretations of the Prophecies be so considered) except internal conviction; and everybody knows that in prescientific times men always supposed that any unusual faculties which came to them they knew not how, were an inspiration from God; the best men always being the readiest to ascribe any honourable peculiarity in themselves to that higher source, rather than to their own merits.

The case for Christianity is hardly confined to the sole testimony of Jesus.

## McTaggart on miracles

John McTaggart was a brilliant atheist who wrote a sustained attack on Christianity (**SOME DOGMAS OF RELIGION**). I'm going to comment on his attempted attack on miracles:

There remains the argument that certain dogmas should be accepted because they have been held by men, or beings incarnate in human bodies, who have worked miracles, including the miracle of predicting the future.

A miracle is an event which we cannot explain by any natural law known to us, and which is therefore attributed, by the believers in its miraculous character, either to a special divine interference with the course of nature, or to the action of some law, differing in its nature from those which explain non-miraculous events. It is then argued that the occurrence of such events at the will of, or in connexion with, a particular being, is evidence, either that that being is himself divine, or that he enjoys special divine favor, and, in either case, that his teaching on matters of religious dogma is trustworthy.

Generally, a miracle is not attributed to divine agency simply by default. In addition, it may be in answer to a prayer to the God in question. Or a prophet may predict a miracle in God's name. There are indicators of the source over and above the fact that no natural process can explain it.

The evidence for the existence of miracles is an inquiry beyond our purpose. But we may remark in passing that, as Hume has pointed out \ if miracles are to be accepted as evidence of the truth of a religion, then whatever evidence there is for the miracles of one religion is evidence against the truth of all incompatible religions. There is perhaps no reason, if there are miracles at all, why they should not occur in connexion with several incompatible systems. There might be reasons why a God should work miracles in connexion with a false religion. Or again the miracles of all the systems except one's own might be ascribed, as they used to be ascribed, to devils. But then miracles would prove nothing about the truth of a religion. If, on the other hand, they can prove anything about it, then none but a true religion can have miracles connected with it. Of two religions with incompatible dogmas, one, at least, must be false, and therefore only one, at most, can have miracles connected with it. Thus neither religion can be proved true, without disproving the existence of the miracles of the other religion. And in so far as these latter are at all probable, they render the truth of the first religion improbable.

**i)** Even if that objection were true, miracles would still contribute to a cumulative case for Christianity by eliminating naturalism from consideration.

**ii)** In addition, the objection is overstated. For instance:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2017/11/pagan-miracles.html>

Supposing that miracles were proved to exist, and to exist in connexion with one religion only, should we be

entitled to believe that religion to be true? It seems to me, to begin with, that the existence of the miracle would not prove that it was due to the action of God — meaning by God a supreme being. The amount of power required for any miracle, however startling, can never be proved to be more than finite. And in that case it is always possible that it should have been performed by some being whose power, while much greater than human power, might be far below the power of a supreme being.

**i)** Even assuming that's so, if miracles take naturalism off the table, then that makes a very significant contribution to the overall case for Christianity.

**ii)** It's not as if any single argument or line of evidence must prove Christianity at one stroke. It can be a process of elimination. If miracles eliminate naturalism, there are other arguments that eliminate religious alternatives to Christianity.

**iii)** McTaggart acts as though it's necessary to conclusively rule out any alternate explanation, yet that sets the bar far too high. Take a crime scene. Homicide detectives conclude the victim was killed by the jealous boyfriend of a woman he slept with. They have incriminating evidence on the boyfriend.

But suppose the victim was actually killed by the CIA because he discovered a sensitive military secret or because he had embarrassing information on a high-ranking government official. The CIA framed the boyfriend for the crime, planting false evidence. Or maybe the victim was killed by a race of sadistic extraterrestrials who like to toy with humans.



Suppose we can't disprove these alternate explanations? So what? There are many things we can't absolutely prove or disprove. The question is who is the best candidate to explain the phenomenon. It isn't necessary or reasonable to demand that we rule out every conceivable explanation. McTaggart has a double standard when it comes to Christianity. He has a highly artificial and inhuman standard for proving Christianity which no one reasonably applies to host of other issues. Admitted, McTaggart's own position (metaphysical idealism) was pretty esoteric. But that's a weakness.

If then a miracle were due to the action of such a superhuman but non-divine being, would it give any reason to suppose the religion to be true ? I see no reason to believe that a being who can raise the dead, or prophesy the future, or assist a man to do these things, would be a specially trustworthy guide on matters of religious dogma. The power of influencing the course of events, and the power of apprehending religious truth, are not always closely connected. Napoleon greatly excelled the average English clergyman in the first, but it would be a rash inference that he excelled him in the second.

Once again, it narrows the range of options to supernatural explanations.

Waiving this difficulty, and assuming that the miracle could prove the special interference of the supreme being, so that the religion connected with it could be accepted as his revelation, should we then be safe in accepting it as true ? We should not be justified, I submit, unless we had previously proved that the supreme being was good. For we have no reason to suppose that he will tell us the truth except that it

would not be a good act to deceive us. If he is indifferent to the good, or if he is positively malignant, he may well tell us lies, either from caprice or in order to gratify his malignancy.

It is obviously impossible to trust to the revelation to tell us that he is good, since we have no reason to trust the revelation at all unless we know that he is good. This goodness must be proved independently. And thus one of the most important of dogmas cannot be proved by a miracle-based revelation.

If, however, this dogma has been independently proved, are we then entitled to accept the divine revelation as true? Even then I do not think that we can do this. A God — that is, a good supreme being — will doubtless regard deceit as an evil. But there is, beyond doubt, much evil in the universe, and, if we are satisfied that there is a God, we must regard that evil as in some way compatible with his goodness. And then why not that further evil of a misleading divine revelation? If, for example, we attribute the existence of evil to God's limited power, and say that cancer and plague exist because they are the best that God can do for us under the circumstances, how can we be sure that the best thing he can do for us under the circumstances is not to deceive us about religious dogma? How can we be sure, for example, if God tells us we are immortal, that it is not a deceit — bad in itself, but good as the means of avoiding some greater evil?

**i)** These are variations on the Cartesian demon. If, however, a malevolent or universally deceptive deity exists, that's no less a problem for atheists than it is for Christians. That would be a defeater for both. Why does McTaggart imagine

the onus lies on Christians to disprove this thought-experiment? His own position falls prey to the same hypothetical.

**ii)** How seriously should we take thought-experiments designed to establish global skepticism? The fact that human imagination can dream up hypothetical traps from which we can't escape may be an entertaining intellectual diversion, but no reasonable person bases his belief or behavior on such fanciful scenarios. These are mental tricks. Their main value is to demonstrate the limits of what can be proven or disproven. But proof and knowledge are not equivalent.

**iii)** What's the point of asking whether we might be hopelessly deluded? If we are hopelessly deluded, then posing such questions won't lead to enlightenment. Indeed, on that view, skeptical thought-experiments are one of the ways in which the Cartesian demon toys with us. It's just another blind alley in the nautilus shell of the global illusion.

## Miracles, induction, and retrodiction

According to the principle of induction, we can retroengineer the past from the present. There's a chain of events leading up to the present. Antecedent states produce subsequent states. The same causes produce the same effects. Since that's repeatable, if we're familiar with the process, we can retrace an effect back through intervening stages to the originating cause.

For instance, when I see an adult human, I know how he got to that point. I can run it backwards from adulthood through adolescence, childhood, gestation, and conception.

All things being equal, that's a generally reliable inference. However, miracles pose an exception to induction. A classic miracle (in contrast to a coincidence miracle) is causally discontinuous with the past. A miracle isn't uncaused, but it's not the result of a causal chain. Rather, a miracle results from the introduction of an anomalous cause outside the ordinary chain of events. It represents a break in the causal continuum. The continuum resumes after the break, taking the miracle as a new starting-point.

For instance, suppose a person suffers from a naturally irreversible degenerative condition. Suppose he undergoes miraculous healing. That outcome can't be retrodicted from his prior condition.

In the case of miracles, induction hits a wall. When the subsequent course of events is the result of a miracle, inductive inference can't go further back than the miracle. It can't reconstruct the past before the miracle occurred, because the post-miraculous state is not a product of the pre-miraculous state. Induction can only take you from the

present to as far back in time as the precipitating miracle. It can't jump over that to the other side, because the chain of events prior to the miracle is a dead-end. The prior chain of events terminated with the miracle, which represents a new beginning.

This raises a potential problem regarding past-oriented sciences (e.g. cosmology, historical geology, paleontology, evolution). If miracles occur in the past, are they even detectable? What's the scope of any particular miracle to reset the status quo? That limits our ability to reconstruct the past.

## Sagan's slogan

Recently I debated an atheist on Facebook. Here's part of the exchange:

Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.

Simply parroting Sagan's slogan doesn't make it true or even meaningful. Once again, you don't get to take intellectual shortcuts.

It's funny how atheists imagine that just repeating Sagan's slogan automatically shifts the onus onto the Christian. What they fail to appreciate is that Sagan's slogan is, in itself, a claim, and therefore, when they quote the slogan, they themselves are assuming a burden of proof to defend his claim. You need to define what you mean by "extraordinary claims" and "extraordinary evidence."

You then need to defend the assertion that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. The onus is on you to justify your slogan.

What does it even mean? By what standard of comparison is the supernatural extraordinary? If we're living in a world where the supernatural exists, then in what respect is it extraordinary that the supernatural exists in a world where the supernatural exists?

Likewise, if God exists, is it extraordinary that God would make his existence manifest through miracles, or answered prayer? Is that unexpected, or is that to be expected?

The more extraordinary the claim, the more evidence is needed to back it up.

If supernature exists, then nature is contingent on supernature. Supernature is more fundamental, more ultimate than nature. So it's counterintuitive to demand that we need more evidence or extraordinary evidence for something fundamental, on which other things depend.

# The Legitimacy of Miracles

## I. Exposition

I'm going to review Robert Larmer's **THE LEGITIMACY OF MIRACLE** (Lexington Books, 2014). Larmer is a Canadian Christian philosopher whose area of specialization includes the philosophy of miracles. He's published books and articles on the subject since 1983. **THE LEGITIMACY OF MIRACLE** is the culmination of 40+ years of research and reflection. This may be his magnum opus on the topic. Incidentally, Larmer has forthcoming book entitled **HUME'S MUDDLED MESS**. Larmer is also developed a website. Stay tuned!

In **chapter 1**, Larmer outlines occasionalist, deistic, and supernatural models of divine agency. Larmer compares these models to the pretheoretical concept of miracles in Scripture, concluding that Scripture supports the supernatural model, involving ordinary providence: second causes with natural teleology. That's the context which makes divine intervention meaningful, and miracles detectable.

The raw data of Scripture furnish paradigm examples which in turn provide the basis for a philosophical definition **in chapter 2**: namely: "a miracle is an unusual and religiously significant event which reveals and furthers God's purposes, is beyond the power of physical nature to produce, and is caused by an agent who transcends nature".



He defines "unusual" in the sense that they are events which unaided physical nature would not otherwise produce. They are "extraordinary" in the sense that they constitute exceptions to what would occur when nature is allowed to run its course.

Quoting Newman, he says miracles are not "unconnected and unmeaning occurrences", but hold a place in the "extensive plan of divine government".

Larmer doesn't consider God to be the only miraculous agent. Creatures like angels can be miraculous agents.

Larmer criticizes the "violation of natural laws" definition in part because there's no agreed upon definition of natural laws. If natural laws are defined as universal generalizations, then miracles don't violate natural laws inasmuch as the definition covers anything that happens, which, if miracles occur, would be included in whatever actually happens. So even if we define a miracle in reference to natural laws, a miracle is consistent with natural laws on nomic necessity and regularity theories.

Causal dispositional theories are ambiguous in reference to miracles. If no event can violate a law of nature, does that mean miracles can't happen, or that miracles don't violate natural laws?

Larmer approvingly quotes J. S. Mill's statement that

in order that any alleged fact should be contradictory to the law of causation, the allegation must be, not simply that the cause existed without being followed by the effect, for that would be no uncommon occurrence; but that this happened in the absence of any adequate counteracting cause. Now in the case of an alleged

miracle, the assertion is exactly the opposite of this. It is, that the effect was defeated, not in the absence, but in consequence of a counteracting cause, namely, a direct imposition of act of the will of some being who has power over nature. A miracle is no contradiction to the law of cause and effect; it is a new effect, supposed to be produced by the introduction of a new cause.

Larmer says natural laws are silent on the question of events caused by divine intervention. They don't speak to that issue one way or the other. Natural laws have implicit *ceteris paribus* clauses—what will transpire all other things being equal.

In the same chapter, Larmer analyses coincidence miracles. Could some miraculous events be the end-result of front-loaded determinism? Larmer rejects that as deistic.

On a related note, Larmer differentiates miracles from special providence.

Larmer draws an analogy between divine intervention and substance dualism—in contrast to physicalism and physical determinism.

Larmer draws an analogy between divine intervention and human agency to alter the course of nature. In that connection, he denies that miracles are intrinsically rare.

Reloading a gun doesn't violate a law of nature, even though it may change the outcome. In vitro fertilization doesn't violate a law of nature, even though it may change the course of nature (my examples).

Larmer addresses the objection that miracles violate the conservation of energy. He says that's only true if we view nature as a closed system. But that begs the question in relation to miracles. Moreover, a Christian will reject the stipulation that God cannot create or destroy energy. Indeed, assuming that miracles "violate" the conservation of energy, this would be evidence that it's not an absolute principle.

It would be viciously circular to adopt the conservation of energy on the grounds that there's no evidence to the contrary, then appeal to the conservation of energy to rule out ostensible evidence to the contrary.

Natural laws, considered in isolation, predict nothing—but only in conjunction with supplementary information regarding initial conditions.

In **chapter three**, Larmer engages Hume's classic essay on miracles, which is the standard frame of reference in modern philosophy and theology. According to the traditional interpretation, Hume proposed an a priori epistemological argument according to which testimonial evidence is incapable, even in principle of justifying rational belief in miracles. Revisionist interpretations have challenged the traditional interpretation. Larmer defends the traditional interpretation.

Since Larmer rejects the Humean concept of miracles, he considers the a priori argument to be a failure, because Hume misframed the issue.

Larmer says Hume's appeal to the uniformity of nature is at variance with his theory of induction and causation. On his own grounds, Hume can't presume that the future will resemble the past, or even probably resemble the past.

In addition, Hume has no principled basis to accept testimonial evidence for merely unusual events while rejecting testimonial evidence for miraculous events.

Over and above the lack of consistency with Hume's theory of induction and causation, Larmer raises direct objections to Hume's a priori argument:

If natural laws are defined as exceptionless generalizations, can they be revised when exceptions are discovered? By Hume's strictures, natural laws can never be revised, because prior invariable experience automatically discounts subsequent observations to the contrary. And that has the same logical status as a reported miracle.

Larmer says the question of whether an event occurred is logically distinct from the question of what caused it, if it did in fact occur. Criteria for accepting that an event did in fact occur are quite different from criteria for determining whether its cause was natural or supernatural. Testimony must be believed before there's any point in analysing what happened.

Hume attempts to distinguish between warranted belief in unusual events and unwarranted belief in miracles by saying the former are analogous to our general experience whereas the latter are disanalogous to our general experience. Yet that's at variance with his hypothetical case of the Indian prince whom Hume says is justified in disbelieving reports about walking on (frozen) water.

Moreover, Larmer says miraculous events are analogous inasmuch as personal agents, whether divine or human, produce outcomes contrary to the ordinary course of nature.

In addition, Hume's objections are confined to secondhand information about miracles. He never makes allowance for firsthand experience of miracles.

Larmer says Hume's appeal to the uniformity of nature is viciously circular. We only know that uniform experience rules out reported miracles if we know that every such report is false. And we can only know that every such report is false if we already know that miracles never happen. So there's no independent evidence for Hume's appeal.

In **chapter 4**, Larmer examines the God of the gaps objection, which he construes as the (allegedly) fallacious argument from ignorance. He counters that arguments from silence are often used in historical research lack of knowledge inferences can be reasonable in psychology, natural sciences employ the concept of negative evidence, and philosophers acknowledge the legitimacy of non-see-um inferences.

Lack of evidence is not an argument from ignorance in case there's a reasonable expectation that if a claim were true, we should be able to find supporting evidence.

Larmer quotes Del Ratzch:

Identification of the agency as supernatural depends upon the implicit claim that neither nature alone nor finite agent activity is causally or explanatorily adequate for the phenomena in question...if neither nature nor finite agency can produce some phenomenon inarguably before us, then supernatural agency is about the only option left.

Take the evidence that the sabertooth tiger is extinct. Although lack of evidence may not be conclusive, it justifies a provisional assessment regarding the extinct status of that species (my example).

Critics appeal to the stately march of science. Larmer responds by distinguishing between artifacts and natural products.

He notes that even prescientific theologians distinguished between primary and secondary causality, or mediate and immediate agency. They didn't attribute every event to God's direct action. That's an urban legend.

Success in filling one kind of gap by discovering a natural mechanism doesn't imply or predict for success in filling all kinds of gaps by discovering a natural mechanism.

The argument for scientific progress cuts both ways. Superior scientific knowledge can make some reported miracles more naturally inexplicable than ever. Indeed, the difficulty of providing a naturalistic alternative explanation is why skeptics simply deny the occurrence of some reported miracles.

Larmer says appeal to some presently undiscovered natural causes commits the critic to unwarranted skepticism regarding our understanding of how nature works. Ironically, that stands in contrast to a Christian doctrine of ordinary providence. Quoting Lennox, we need to distinguish between how things work and how things came to exist in the first place.

Larmer uses the illustration of a man who puts diamonds in a safe, only to find the diamonds missing. He can either infer that someone else knew the combination (perhaps a

safe-cracker) or else there's some unknown natural process by which diamonds dematerialize. Which is more reasonable?

He says biblical miracles are not anomalous surds, but figure in a larger teleological pattern.

To the objection that miracles are "science-stoppers," Larner provides two criteria:

**i)** the event has religious significance

**ii)** the event is an exception to established pattern

Likewise, we need to distinguish between events caused by unaided nature and personal agency. Indeed, there are sciences devoted to the role of personal agency (e.g. forensics, archeology, anthropology, cryptography). The fact that some events are caused by agents manipulating nature doesn't automatically foster skepticism about the ordinary course of nature.

Larner's basic objection to methodological naturalism is that, ironically, it's unscientific. The aim of science is to discover the cause of natural events. Methodological naturalism precludes a scientist from identifying a supernatural cause even if that's the correct explanation. So it stultifies science by prohibiting a scientist from following the evidence wherever it leads. Method mustn't trump evidence.

By the same token, methodological naturalism isn't neutral, but prejudicial. Methodological naturalism is only warranted if metaphysical naturalism is warranted.

Larmer says methodological naturalism cultivates intellectual indolence.

In addition, Larmer says some reported miracles are amendable to scientific confirmation or disconfirmation, such as medically verifiable miracles. Although supernatural causes are not empirical, their effects may be empirical. Larmer draws a parallel with particle physics.

In **chapter 5**, Larmer examines the claim that miracles are incoherent. The first section overlaps with chapter 2, although it has some distinctive material.

Later on Larmer fields other objections, such as the claim that an incorporeal agent can't exert causal influence on physical objects. As Larmer notes, that parallels objections are raised to interactionist substance dualism. But here and elsewhere, he counterattacks by raising objections to physicalism.

Although he doesn't use this terminology, Larmer counters the objection by saying there comes a point beyond which or below which we must allow for direct causation—otherwise we're stuck in an infinite regress. Every cause-effect relation can't be facilitated by an intervening physical medium without appeal to the infinite divisibility of matter.

Borrowing a page of Hume, Larmer says our understanding of causation is fundamentally descriptive. We simply know from experience that some things cause other things. But why that's the case is ultimately mysterious.

In addition, Larmer says we have immediate knowledge of mental causation. That's more fundamental and unquestionable than how physical objects causally interact. And that's analogous to divine action in the world.



Moreover, Larmer alludes to the hard problem of consciousness. A problem for physicalism, not dualism.

Larmer turns tables on Troeltsch by agreeing with his principle of analogy, but appealing to well-attested modern miracles to demonstrate that the past and the present are comparable in that regard.

Larmer says Nowell-Smith has a flawed definition by making predictability a necessary condition of what constitutes an explanation. Larmer says that fails to distinguish between impersonal agencies and personal agents.

Larmer addresses the question of whether repeatability is necessary to rule out coincidence.

Larmer addresses the objection that miracles depict God as an incompetent engineer who must keep adjusting the machinery. Variations on this objection have been around since Leibniz, Spinoza, and Maimonides. The stock metaphor is the clockwork universe.

Larmer objects to the mechanical metaphor. He says that instead of comparing the world to a machine, what if God designed the world to function like a musical instrument. You don't just make a violin and leave it alone. Rather, you make it to play it. To do something with what you make.

Dropping the metaphor, he appeals to a dynamic rather than static relationship between the Creator and his rational creatures.

In addition, Larmer appeals to the self-imposed limitations of God, according to freewill theism. Such a God may need

to adapt to obstacles which recalcitrant free agents pose to his objectives.

Larmer then addresses the objection that the inequitable distribution of miracles is incompatible with divine benevolence. Larmer notes that this isn't unique to miracles, but to the inequitable distribution of certain goods generally, so it goes to larger questions of theodicy. Why not more good and less evil? By the same token, defending this specific objection to miracles can make use of general responses to the problem of evil.

He appeals to the soul-making theodicy. In addition, he seems to indicate that the fact that God only selectively answers some petitionary prayers fosters humility. If God routinely answered prayer, that would foster pride. If that's what he means, the argument is underdeveloped. It may related to a further point he later makes that we never control God.

He says God generally performs miracles through other individuals, which means God will sometimes be frustrated due to lack of human cooperation (e.g. [Mk 6:5](#)).

Finally, he addressed the objection that miracles are at odds with divine transcendence, by making God just another agent.

Larmer takes the position that laws of nature are necessary, not in the absolute sense that God couldn't create different laws, but that he couldn't create the same world with different laws.

In **chapter six**, Larmer begins by reviewing Swinburne's four types of evidence. He takes issue with Swinburne's Humean definition of a miracle.

More generally, Larmer says that to be rational, worldviews must be based on evidence, not dictate what the evidence must be. Worldviews are not an independent source of evidence, but must be responsive to a comprehensive body of evidence.

Larmer discusses the relationship between firsthand observation and testimonial evidence.

In addition, there's a degree of circularity to evidential appeals inasmuch as we must privilege some evidence as the standard of comparison when assessing other evidential appeals.

Larmer says that unless there's conflicting evidence which casts doubt on a reported miracle, the evidence in favor of that reported event should be accepted. In the absence of conflicting evidence, the onus lies on those who wish to dismiss the reported miracle.

Larmer says multiple, independent attestation is strong evidence, but by the same token, that means we must make allowance for minor discrepancies.

Larmer says that while it's possible to personally witness a miracle, most miracles will take place outside the firsthand experience of any particular individual, so testimonial evidence remains pertinent.

Larmer comments on Sagan's famous slogan that extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence. Moreover, even some Christian philosophers think warranted belief in miracles must meet a higher evidential threshold.

In that connection, Larmer indicates that facile appeal to Ockham's Razor is viciously circular. You can't rationally justify disbelief in God on the grounds that there's no evidence for his existence and then discount evidence for miracles on the grounds that God's nonexistence has already been established.

Larmer says the demand cuts both ways. He quotes Licona's observation that appeal to group hallucinations (to discredit the post-Resurrection appearances) is an extraordinary claim requiring extraordinary evidence.

Larmer addresses the objection that ostensible evidence for miracles must be balanced against the evidence for God's nonexistence (e.g. problem of evil). Larmer endeavors to turn tables on the critic by saying the existence of evil actually furnishes evidence for God's existence rather than nonexistence inasmuch as moral realism and moral responsibility have no foundation in naturalism. Larmer appeals to moral intuition and libertarian freewill. He says naturalists typically either outright deny the existence of freewill or define it according to compatibilism, but both options negate moral ascriptions. Larmer revisits the same issue in chapter 7.

Larmer says the popular view that miracles require "extraordinary evidence" rests on the mistaken assumption that there are competing bodies of evidence. But since he denies that such a conflict exists in general, he denies the higher evidential threshold that reported miracles must surmount. Larmer agrees with Newman that miracles don't require a type of evidence distinct from what's required for other events. It's impossible to draw a qualitative or quantitative evidential line to prove an earthquake or meteor shower. Testimony can't be more than that of

competent and honest men. We must content ourselves with obtaining this kind of evidence rather than some inhumane ideal.

Larmer says even modest evidence for a reported miracle gives good grounds for believing it in the absence of counterevidence.

Larmer concedes that while it's unavoidable to assess claims within a framework of prior beliefs regarding what is possible or probable, that mustn't be allowed to override facts. He cites an amusing vignette about Laplace, who imperiously dismissed reported meteors. He approvingly quotes Newman's statement that experts are at risk of "correcting the evidence for their senses" when confronted with "strange phenomena"; conversely, "the same persons are competent to attest miraculous facts who are suitable witnesses of corresponding ones"; "everyone is apt to interpret facts in his own way; if the superstitious see too many prodigies, men of science may see too few".

Moreover, Larmer says that in some cases, we do have extraordinary evidence for miracles. So even by that artificially high standard, the argument from miracles goes through.

Larmer relates a personal anecdote about respondents who were willing to dismiss reported miracles, not on the basis of evidential considerations relevant to establishing their occurrence, but on the basis that if such events were to occur, they'd be difficult if not impossible to explain naturalistically.

Larmer says Hume's first three a posteriori objections are tendentious assertions rather than arguments. Moreover, they are hasty generalizations. And they cut both ways. For

instance, cessationists are predisposed to be unduly skeptical of reported miracles.

The fourth a posteriori argument concerns non-Christian miracles. Larmer indicates verification is not the sole function of miracles, so even if miracles exist in rival religions, that doesn't ipso facto cancel respective claimants.

He says that apart from Christianity, most religions don't even emphasize miraculous attestation. In addition, not all reports are equally well-attested. It's necessary to examine them on a case-by-case basis. Larmer says this is analogous to sifting divergent testimony in the court room. Larmer says Hume misrepresents the actual procedure (e.g. process of elimination).

In **chapter 7**, Larmer says miracles can furnish direct evidence for God's existence. One needn't prove God first. It is the event itself, and not the subsequence classification of the event as miraculous, which functions as evidence for God. The skeptic should consider God's existence as a hypothetical assumption, then ask if that's the best explanation for the event—compared to rival hypotheses.

Although he doesn't say so, this means Larmer is siding with evidential apologetics rather than classical apologetics in that particular regard.

Responding to the objection of J. S. Mill that we can never definitively rule out a naturalistic explanation, Larmer says we need to distinguish between abstract possibilities and realistic probabilities. Just because a naturalistic explanation might be an outside possibility doesn't mean all possible explanations are equally plausible.

Larmer points out that in practice, skeptics typically deny the occurrence of reported miracles rather than attempting to explain them naturalistically.

Larmer classifies the argument from miracles as variation on the teleological argument. He says, however, it has an advantage over the usual examples. What's at issue is not the supernatural pedigree of the event, if it occurred, but whether it occurred. Larmer says the evidence for miracles is often underestimated or simply ignored. In reality, there's a "massive amount of evidence".

Larmer adds that if there's so much evidence of supernatural intervention in human history, then why not natural history (e.g. the origin and development of life, fine-tuning argument)?

Larmer fields the claim that the argument from miracles might be used in support of polytheism, pantheism, or panentheism.

To the objection that our experience of agency is confined to embodied agents, Larmer's quotes Alston's contention that the concept of agency is more abstract.

On a related note, Larmer finds total apophatic theology to be incoherent since every negation implies some kind of prior affirmation. If we have no positive knowledge of God prior to what we negate, there's no meaningful way to know what to negate. Larmer says abstract concepts can be univocal, but analogical when predicated of different things.

In **chapter 8**, he argues that miracles can furnish evidence for a particular religion (i.e. Christianity), but are too coarse-grained to adjudicate intramural Christian disputes.

He says post-Christian Judaism doesn't typically appeal to modern miracles. He says Islam doesn't claim to be established by miracles. The best candidate is the ambiguous "splitting of the moon" in surah 54:1-2.

Larmer notes the emphasis on power evangelism, both in the NT and the modern mission field. This includes revelatory dreams, visions, prophecies, and exorcism—as well as miracles. Sometimes this involves the relationship between a supernatural event and a supernatural interpretation of said event. These aren't free-floating miracles, but tied to a particular religion's claims.

He says you can't separate the miraculous incidents in the Gospels from the mundane incidents. Either the Gospels are historically reliable in reporting both kinds of events or neither. Larmer appeals to Lewis's Lord/liar/lunatic trilemma.

Larmer doesn't deny the possible occurrence of non-Christian miracles, but says Christianity supplies the best frame of reference for explaining non-Christian miracles as well as Christian miracles.

Larmer evaluates miracles attributed to Apollonius of Tyana, Hanina ben Dosa, Honi the Circle-Drawer, and Vespasian. While his position allows for non-Christian miracles, these are poorly-attested examples.

He says if miracles are deemed to be maximally improbable compared to other events and explanations, then all reported miracles are equally incredible. But he denies that. Reverting to his critique of methodological naturalism, he says the job of a historian is not to prejudge what can or cannot happen, but to be guided by the evidence.



In the appendix, Larmer records four dramatic, medically verified miraculous healings. In his popular level *Dialogues on Miracle*, Larmer has an appendix with an additional six cases of miraculous healings.

## II. Evaluation

**1.** Larmer's monograph is an outstanding contribution to the philosophical defense of Christian miracles. The analysis is sophisticated and detailed. A thoroughgoing, often multiple-point response to stock objections to miracles. In general, this is presently the best work of its kind. The current standard-bearer.

**2.** Larmer has an impressive bibliography, which includes most of the major modern titles and historical titles. His bibliography could be updated in one or two places. He lists the 1987 edition of Craig Blomberg's **THE HISTORICAL RELIABILITY OF THE GOSPELS**, but Blomberg published a revised and expanded edition in 2007. In addition, Blomberg issued a more recent edition (2011) of **JESUS AND THE GOSPELS**, although that's only a few pages longer than the original.

There are a few striking omissions in Larmer's bibliography. No mention of Peter van Inwagen's essay, "Of "Of Miracles," in **THE POSSIBILITY OF RESURRECTION AND OTHER ESSAYS IN CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS** (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), chapter 6.

Or Timothy McGrew's SEP entry:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/miracles/>

Or McGrew's review of Fogelin's *A Defense of Hume on Miracles* in **MIND**, Vol. 114, No. 453 (Jan., 2005), 145-149.

Or Elizabeth Anscombe's essay, "Hume on Miracles," in G.E.M. Anscombe, **FAITH IN A HARD GROUND: ESSAYS ON RELIGION, PHILOSOPHY AND ETHICS** (Imprint Academic, 2008), chapter 4.

Perhaps, though, it was not his intention to offer a bibliography for reference, but only to include the titles he cites in the body of the text.

**3.** He quotes Michael Licona favorably on several occasions. In recent debates, Licona has been putting more emphasis on extrabiblical evidence for the supernatural to debunk the presumption against Biblical supernaturalism.

**4.** We might adapt Chisholm's distinction between methodists and particularists to the question of miracles. Larmer is a particularist. He begins with paradigm-examples. By contrast, "skeptics" are methodists who begin with a priori criteria which they invoke to preempt reported miracles.

**5.** On the traditional interpretation, Hume presents an a priori argument designed to render belief in miracles rationally inadmissible in principle. Revisionist interpreters claim that Hume's argument was less ambitious and tendentious. I'm not a Hume scholar, so I don't have an independent judgment to offer. What I will say is that the revisionist interpretation poses a dilemma. On the one hand, the revisionist interpretation makes Hume's argument less vulnerable to easy refutation.

But there's a tradeoff. On the traditional interpretation, the value of Hume's argument for "skeptics", if successful, is that it disables the argument from miracles at one stroke. On the traditional interpretation, Hume's argument is a shortcut, by relieving the "skeptic" of any burden to disprove specific evidence for specific miracles. So making Hume's argument more defensible comes at the cost of making his argument less useful to "skeptics," for if his objection was never intended to block the argument from miracles in principle, then the "skeptic" is forced to fall back on a case-by-case evaluation of reported miracles. But wasn't the primary advantage of Hume's contribution to sidestep that daunting task?

**6.** Larmer cites Berkouwer, whom he who identifies as a theologian in the Calvinist tradition, as a proponent of occasionalism. In the same context, he cites a secondhand quote from Kuyper, via Berkouwer. I'd point out that although Berkouwer began his career as a Reformed theologian, he liberalized his theology over the years so that there came a point where he was no longer a representative of Reformed theology. For instance, his 1955 monograph on election marked a turning point.

Occasionalism is an outlier in Reformed theology. For more representative sample, there is Warfield's essay on "The Question of Miracles," in **SELECTED SHORTER WRITINGS OF BENJAMIN B. WARFIELD**, vol. 2, chap 12, John Frame's **THE DOCTRINE OF GOD**, chap. 13, as well as Paul Helm's discussion of deism and occasionalism in **THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD**, chap. 3.

In fairness, Larmer isn't attempting to give a historical overview of Reformed theology on this topic, but just citing notable individuals as foils for his own position. Moreover, he later mentions Hodge as an opponent of deism and occasionalism in his definition of miracles.

**7.** Regarding the burden of proof, a crucial point that I think Larmer neglected to make explicit is that because naturalism disallows supernaturalism in toto, the bar is extremely high for the naturalist and extremely low for the Christian. Naturalism has no give. It can't tolerate a single miracle. Therefore, it only takes a few well-documented miracles to falsify naturalism. An atheist must discredit every single reported miracle whereas a Christian apologist need only establish a few.

**8.** "Skeptics" accuse Christians of fallacious reliance on the argument from ignorance. Yet "skeptics" deploy the "argument from ignorance" when they justify disbelief in miracles on the grounds that, to their knowledge, there are no well-documented cases of miracles.

**9.** A stock objection to miracles is that it makes God an incompetent engineer whose rollout is plagued by failure to debug the prototype before he launched. Larmer addresses that objection.

I'd point out, however, that if open theism is true, then God might have to resort to midcourse corrections, due to unforeseen developments. I'm not sure what Larmer's position is on open theism. He's a freewill theist who approvingly quotes Hasker and Pinnock in the course of his monograph.

**10.** Apropos (9), critics of miracles who treat the clockwork universe as their ideal fail to distinguish between creation

and the fall. It's not a design flaw if a watch needs to be repaired because it was damaged after it left the factory or the jewelry store.

**11.** Larmer is a freewill theist, and he frequently appeals to freewill theism in his defense of miracles. As a rule, if a philosopher can defeat or undercut a position by offering either a more ambitious argument or a less ambitious argument, it's preferable to use the less ambitious argument inasmuch as defending a less ambiguous argument is less intellectually demanding. That would expose less of his flank.

With that in mind, rather than attempting to attack determinism in general, it would be more prudent for Larmer to narrow his objection to the kind of determinism espoused by naturalism. That's typically blind physical determinism.

Although Larmer disagrees with predestinarian theological traditions (e.g. Thomism, Calvinism), objections to blind physical determinism don't equally cut against just any kind of determinism, viz. substance dualistic Calvinism. It isn't necessary for Larmer to engage determinism in general to engage naturalism in particular. Take the observation by freewill theist Richard Swinburne:

It has been argued that any argument for determinism would be self-defeating. For suppose a scientist discovers an apparently cogent argument for determinism. He will conclude that he has been caused to believe that his argument is cogent. But when we discover of people that they are caused to hold beliefs—e.g. as a result of the way they were educated, or of subjection to drugs—we do not regard

them as having a rationally justified belief. To be rational in adopting a belief we have to do so freely, i.e. uncaused, the argument goes. So no one can ever be justified in believing determinism to be true. For one who believes determinism to be true must believe his belief to be caused and so unjustified. (There is a statement of this argument, subsequently retracted, by J. B. S. Haldane in his **POSSIBLE WORLDS**, Chatto and Windus, London, 1930, p. 209. For references to other statements of it, including one by Epicurus, and discussion thereof, see K. R. Popper and J. C. Eccles, **THE SELF AND ITS BRAIN**, Springer, New York, 1977, pp. 75 ff.) This argument has, I believe, no force at all. The mere fact that our beliefs are caused is no grounds for holding them unjustified. Exactly the reverse. I argued in Chapter 7 ["Beliefs"] that to the extent that we regarded them as uncaused or self-chosen, we could not regard our beliefs as moulded by the facts and so likely to be true. The point is rather that if we see some belief to be caused by a totally irrelevant factor (e.g. a belief that I now am being persecuted being caused by something irrelevant in my upbringing) then we rightly regard it as unjustified. But a belief that determinism is true could be both caused and justified, if caused by relevant factors, e.g. hearing relevant arguments. **THE EVOLUTION OF THE SOUL** (OUP, rev. ed., 1997), 233n2.

**12.** Regarding the quality of witnesses, here's an interesting test-case. Take the news report of pious Catholics who venerated a bank window because the bank window

sometimes had a pattern that resembled the Madonna, which they took to be a Marian apparition.

On the one hand, the witnesses are stereotypically credulous, superstitious religious believers. Wishful thinking combined with the conditioning effect of Catholic iconography induce them to bear witness to a miracle. Yet this is clearly a coincidence. An optical illusion caused by the angle of the light and the angle of the window at a particular season or time of day. There's nothing naturally inexplicable about the phenomenon.

But consider what the witnesses got right as well as what they got wrong. They aren't liars. They aren't hallucinating, whether individually or collectively. On occasion, the bank window does have a reflection that bears an adventitious resemblance to the Madonna.

So here we have an important distinction between what they see and what they think they see. What they see exists outside their minds, but what they perceive only exists in their minds. Anyone in the same physical position could observe the same pattern. That has nothing to do with religious predispositions. They're not mistaken about the evidence, but their interpretation of the evidence.

**13.** Larmer says the argument from ignorance is sometimes justified. Let's consider a few examples. Classifying some species as extinct is an argument from ignorance. If there's no evidence that the Irish Elk still exists, it's classified as an extinct species. But that's hardly fallacious.

Or take the Loch Ness monster. Lack of adequate evidence is sufficient to doubt its existence. Same thing with Bigfoot.

Ironically, atheists sometimes compare reported miracles to reported sightings of Bigfoot, the Loch Ness monster, &c., but aren't they guilty of resorting to the argument from ignorance? It's either a fallacy for believers and unbelievers alike, or it's not a fallacy, per se.

**14.** Larmer says inferring incorporeal agency (God, angels, demons) is analogous to inferring elementary particles. Another example would be abstract objects. If they exist, they lie outside of space and time. Incapable of direct empirical confirmation. Yet it's rational to posit abstract objects based on the indispensable explanatory role they fill.

**15.** Larmer is critical of Cardinal Kasper's claim that miracles are incongruous with divine transcendence. While I agree with Larmer's response, we could make another point. Kasper is a Catholic theologian and prelate. Unlike an outright atheist, Kasper must muster some pious-sounding excuse to rationalize his disbelief in miracles.

**16.** Larmer conjectures that the inequitable distribution of miracles may be due in part to the fact that God's will is sometimes thwarted by unwilling humans. But even if we grant freewill theism for the sake of argument (which some readers will dispute), that's not a very convincing explanation. For even if God would rather work a miracle through human instrumentality, God may have more than one human vehicle to choose from—and failing that, God retains the fallback option of direct divine agency. I offer a different explanation further down.

**17.** Larmer is critical of how Swinburne counterbalances the posterior probability of miracles against their prior improbability. That may suggest that Larmer doesn't think



Bayesian probability theory is a good framework for the argument from miracles.

To take an example, consider the 9/11 attacks. In theory, we could begin by assessing the mathematical odds of two passenger planes, within minutes of each other, colliding with two adjacent skyscrapers. We could try to calculate the total number of airplanes and total number of skyscrapers over a period of decades, and lay odds. We could then ask why quality and/or quantity of evidence would be needed to overcome the astronomical improbability of that event.

But of course, no one puts these two sets of facts on either side of the scale, then wait to see which one tips the scale. No, we simply go with the evidence that airplanes struck the Twin Towers.

In addition, the abstract odds are irrelevant, because this wasn't an accident.

**18.** Larmer admits that we must use some evidence to assess other evidence. On the face of it, that appears to be viciously circular. What justifies taking some evidence as the standard of comparison?

Perhaps one justification would be that this isn't absolute. We can try this with different samples. We can treat one sample as the frame of reference and see how that works. We can then treat a different sample as the frame of reference and see how that works. We can compare and contrast different samples.

One might also appeal to certain "truths of reason" for guidance.

**19.** On the question of non-Christian miracles, I'd like to take one hypothetical example. Abraham's ancestors were heathen. Abraham himself was heathen before Yahweh disclosed himself to Abraham.

It stands to reason that some of Abraham's lineal ancestors faced life-threatening conditions. Mortality was high in the ancient world. It stands to reason that they prayed to their pagan gods for healing. And it stands to reason that Yahweh might perform a life-saving miracle for one of Abraham's linear ancestors, since Abraham wouldn't ever exist if one of his forebears died too soon. That miracle would not be for the benefit of the immediate recipient, but for Abraham, maybe generations down the line.

**20.** Larmer discusses coincidence miracles, but I don't think he succeeds in getting to the nub of the issue. Here's one definition:

It is important to emphasize that in spite of the widespread belief to the contrary, an event may be the source of marvel and elicit genuine religious response, not only without violating any natural law, but even if all its details may be explained by known laws. As long as an event is genuinely startling and its timing constitutes a mind-boggling coincidence, in that it occurs precisely when there is a distinct call for it to promote some obvious divine objective, then that event amounts to a miracle. The promotion of a divine objective may take many forms: it could be a spectacular act of deliverance of the faithful from the evil forces ranged against them, it might come as a highly unusual meteorological event through which the priests of Baal are discredited, or it might appear as a swift, clear, and loud answer to the prayers of the truly

pious. However, whatever form the wondrous event takes, it should have a religious impact on its witnesses. George Schlesinger, "Miracles," Quinn & Taliaferro (eds.), **A COMPANION TO PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION** (Blackwell, 1999), 398-99.

What makes this miraculous is not that it circumvents natural processes, but that the outcome is too discriminating, too opportune, to be the result of natural processes alone. Natural processes are uniform. They aren't directed to benefit anyone in particular.

**21.** Larmer defines a miracle in terms of supernatural "intervention". I'm not sure what he means by that. He uses that framework in opposition to deism and occasionalism, but it raises other question. Does he think God intervenes in the sense that God is a temporal agent in history?

To state my own position, I use divine "intervention" to express the counterfactual truth that some things won't happen absent prayer, some things won't happen if nature ran its course. Miracles and prayers make a difference in that sense. It doesn't mean God is rewriting the plot.

Take a film in which, at one level, the director causes everything. He doesn't "step in" to change the plot in midstream, because he wrote the plot in advance. He's scripted every scene.

However, a film involves an interplay between personal agents and their physical environment. Things happen as a result of human interaction that would not occur in crystal formation.

Likewise, the director can write a "coincidence" into the plot. Timely, opportune meetings between one person and another, or a character and something he needs at that very moment. This doesn't require the director to introduce "breaks" into the continuity of the plot. Rather, they reflect the coordination of otherwise independent chains of events to achieve an intended goal. Something beyond the ability or ken of characters inside the story.

**22.** A stock objection to miracles is that a miracle is just a coincidence which believers misidentify due to sample selection bias. Larmer attempts to field this objection. I think his response is rather weak.

**i)** The first thing that needs to be said is that this is by no means unique to Christianity. To the contrary, the need to distinguish a coincidence from what is not coincidental is crucial in many different fields and walks of life. Most people don't have sophisticated criteria.

**ii)** One attempt to provide a rigorous criterion is Dembski's specified complexity. Given Larmer's sympathy for intelligent design theory, or at least criticisms of methodological naturalism by intelligent design theorists, it's odd that Larmer doesn't appeal this principle to help differentiate a miracle from a coincidence.

**iii)** Finally, here's an older work making the point that repetition is not a necessary criterion to distinguish a coincidence from what is not coincidental:

The order of the phenomena is not a phenomenon. That order is only grasped by the mind; it is an intelligible relation between the phenomena, of which, however, we seek the explanation quite as much as the phenomena themselves. Take the fall of a stone, it is

explained by the law of gravitation; le there be a second fall, it is explained by these same law. But let ether be a hundred falls...yet these hundred falls will not longer admit of being explained by the repetition a hundred times over of one and the same cause; and a mind which should not be capable of remarking this agreement of phenomena, and which should continue to explain them indefinitely by the same cause, would on that very account appear to us struck with imbecility. [It would be like] that that man of whom Gassendi speaks, who, half-asleep, and hearing four o'clock strike, say, This clock is mad; lo, four times in succession it has struck one o'clock. Paul Janet, **FINAL CAUSES** (T & T Clark, 1878), 27.

But yet one more: what is there here more than in a hundred separable falls? Nothing but their convergence or simultaneity.

Repetition...would be insignificant if it merely had reference to the number of facts (since we are always equally remote from the infinite)...A single experiment [may] suffice for proof, because it is such a coincidence as could scarcely occur even once, had it not its own reason in the laws of nature. this is what causes great scientists rarely to mistake the worth of a significant fact, though occurring only once. The Abbé Haüy lets fall a piece of quartz, and merely by observing the fracture, he at once concludes that he has discovered a law of nature; for what is the likelihood that a mineral should break by chance according to the laws of geometry? So in a thousand cases. The knot [of the inductive problem], then, is not in the repetition itself, but in the fact of the coincidence. Ibid. 460-61.

**23.** Another objection to miracles is that the inequitable distribution of miracles is incompatible with divine benevolence. Larmer responds to this objection, but I'd like to make a few additional observations:

**i)** A world in which miracles are evenly distributed will have a different world history. Moreover, the world histories increasingly diverge the earlier you change a variable. Different people will be born into a world in which everyone is saved. Mating and procreation depends on timing. Who you meet. That depends on when and where you were. Same thing with procreation. It takes very little to throw that off.

At that point some critics say people who never exist in the first place have nothing to lose. That, however, embroils them in an Epicurean dilemma. I think most philosophers wish to reject the Epicurean symmetry between prenatal nonexistence and posthumous nonexistence.

Ironically, a Christian could accept the symmetry, but reverse the assessment. Rather than taking that to mean if nonexistence is no misfortune at one end (prenatal nonexistence), then it's no misfortunate at the other end (posthumous nonexistence), we can logically take it to mean nonexistence is misfortune at both ends.

For instance: "There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse (William Rowe)."

But that's ambiguous. Does Rowe mean God could preserve the same goods without the attendant evils, or equivalent goods? What if preventing some evils prevents attendant goods?

Let's take a comparison. Many atheists think death is bad. Murder is bad. And they think premature death is worse than dying at a ripe old age.

By contrast, Epicurus and Lucretius posited a symmetry between prenatal nonexistence and posthumous nonexistence. As Mark Twain put it, "I do not fear death. I had been dead for billions and billions of years before I was born, and had not suffered the slightest inconvenience from it."

Consider how secular philosophers struggle with this issue. Cf. J. Fischer, ed. **THE METAPHYSICS OF DEATH** (Stanford University Press, 1993); J. Fischer, **OUR STORIES: ESSAYS ON LIFE, DEATH, AND FREE WILL** (Oxford University Press, 2008). One way to cash out the intuition, according to secular philosopher Thomas Nagel, is appeal to the principle of deprivation as well as counterfactual goods. The argument goes like this: death is bad because death is an experiential blank. And that's bad because it robs the decedent of the goods of life. Had he died later rather than earlier, he'd enjoy more of life's goods.

By that logic, both prenatal and posthumous nonexistence are experiential blanks that deprive one of life's goods, including missed opportunities. And if it's worse to die young, worse to cease existing at an earlier age, then it's even worse not to exist in the first place.

By the same token, we don't simply regret actual goods we lose, but lost opportunities for desirable goods.

The problem that poses for Rowe's argument is that preventing certain evils prevents certain lives. And that's a loss for them. Indeed, total loss. They never had a chance to enjoy life's goods.

Even if that's offset by countervailing goods, the people who don't exist in that alternate history aren't compensated for their loss. Rather, other people who take their place are the beneficiaries.

**ii)** Take a different example: suppose you have two neighborhood boys of the same age. One is disabled. The other boy is a high school athlete. He's hoping for a football scholarship to pay for college. Suppose, if God heals the disabled boy, he becomes a competitive athlete who gets the scholarship instead. The miracle is beneficial to the recipient, but harmful to the other boy.

**iii)** On a related note, one miracle can impact more than one person. So the apparently inequitable distribution of miracles may be superficial in many cases, because we're looking at the situation as if these are discrete, self-contained events, in a one-to-one relationship between the miracle and the recipient, whereas they may often have a one-to-many relationship down the line.



## The Titanic

A recent exchange I had on Facebook:

### Smith

What "evidence" is there that the Holy Spirit actually exists? I mean this as a serious question because when I was "saved" at 10, I did not feel any supernatural force guiding me, nor have I ever that I am aware of. It was a decision in my brain that caused me to walk the aisle and tell the preacher I wanted to be saved. How can anyone discern any difference between a conscience and the Holy Spirit? There doesn't seem to be a *clear* distinction. And shouldn't we KNOW with a significant degree of certainty that we are being led by this supernatural guide?

### Hays

Ray, decisional evangelism and the alter call are 19C theological innovations that have nothing to do with the Biblical theology of conversion. So you're using the wrong standard of comparison. That's pop folk fundamentalist theology.

In terms of supernatural guidance, a better example would be unambiguous cases like premonitory dreams.

### Smith

Steve, how do you know a dream is from the Holy Spirit?

### Hays

If a dream were to come true, then it's revelatory. That would be a veridical, supernatural dream.

### Smith

Steve, if a dream comes true, it may be a random coincidence, which I contend is much more probable than someone having a dream that predicts the future.

Also, you can't just count the hits and ignore the misses. How many dreams has the person had that did not come true? Most likely more dreams do not come true than do come true.

### **Hays**

Whether it's a random coincidence depends on the specificity of the details and/or the antecedent improbability of the event.

As a matter of fact we *can* just count hits and ignore misses. Misses simply mean something didn't happen. The fact that something didn't happen hardly subtracts from something that did happen. A nonevent isn't counterevidence, but nothing at all. It does nothing to obviate evidence for something. The fact that most cruise ships don't hit an iceberg and sink hardly makes the sinking of the Titanic less credible.

### **Smith**

But it makes the sinking of the Titanic less probable because you know that on say 99 trips, the ships did not hit an iceberg. So you could estimate that 1% of cruise ship trips result in hitting an iceberg.

Misses are events. I'm sure you know how batting averages are calculated.

If a person has 99 dreams that do not come true, those are misses and they do count.

### **Hays**

**i)** Why is the abstract probability of the Titanic accident relevant when we have evidence that it sunk? Do you really think we need to counterbalance the evidence that it hit an iceberg and sank against mathematical improbabilities? No one says, let's begin with the mathematical odds of a cruise ship hitting an iceberg and sinking. Let's put that on one side of the scales. Then let's put news reports of the Titanic accident on the other side of the scales, and see which tips the scales. No, we just go with the evidence that the Titanic sunk.

**ii)** Swinging a bat and missing the ball is an event. That's quite different from something that didn't happen.

Most dreams don't come true because most dreams aren't premonitory in the first place. That's a red herring. Most dreams are not about the future. You can only miss what you're aiming for. There's no presumption or expectation that dreams in general are supposed to be revelatory or premonitory, but 99 times out of a 100, they fail to envision the future. The presumption, rather, is that most dreams are ordinary, imaginary mental events. What distinguishes a premonitory dream is precisely that it's not normal in that regard.

**iii)** Problem is we need some criterion to distinguish a coincidence from what's not a coincidence. Atheists are intellectually lazy about that. They play the coincidence card, but of course, but they also need some criterion to rule out events that are not coincidental. Otherwise, their appeal is ad hoc.

## **Rebecca**

I had a series of dreams recently about hot air balloons (never been in one, and no reason to dream about them). In a short space of time, two separate people (who didn't

know each other) mentioned hot air balloons to me specifically relating it to the meaning of my dream. They didn't know I had been dreaming about hot air balloons. Coincidence?

## Is God extraordinary?

I recently had a brief exchange with atheist philosopher Stephen Law on Facebook:

### **Law**

Interesting point. Magical or extraordinary beings with extraordinary powers can explain anything you need explaining, which is one reason why they are so popular. Can't explain x? Posit extraordinary being y with desire for x and ability to bring x about and bingo you can explain it. Then you can run argument to the best explanation to conclude that your y-involving worldview explains what your rival's cannot and thus is to be preferred!

### **Hays**

Maybe you're uninformed about the extensive literature on the subject, but it's not just a question of "positing" agents with supernatural or paranormal abilities. Rather, that's often based on direct experience.

### **Law**

What we are looking at re this post is a very specific suggestion: that a major reason for favouring the Xian world view over the atheist is that it explains more, or provides the better overall explanation of what we observe. But it only achieves that (if indeed it does) by appealing to an extraordinary being with extraordinary powers.

### **Hays**

If God exists, what would make him an "extraordinary" being? And is it "extraordinary" that God has powers which lowly creatures do not? Or is that ordinary *for God*?

For instance, there are various animals that have "extraordinary" abilities *in relation to humans*, or extraordinary sensory acuities, but these are not extraordinary *for the animals*. So that's a comparative ascription rather than an absolute ascription.

## **Law**

...which always gives you an automatic explanatory advantage - but rarely a more rational worldview. E.g. you can't explain why your keys ended up on the mantelpiece; I can! - it was gremlins (who like hiding keys and have the power to do it) - my world view wins!

## **Hays**

**i)** Comparing God to explicitly fictional critters like gremlins skews the issue. A more apt comparison might be ghosts or demons, for which there's actual evidence. Or examples of paranormal powers, for which there's actual evidence.

**ii)** Suppose ghosts, angels, and demons exist. In a world where they exist, are they extraordinary or ordinary?

**iii)** An angel might have powers that are *extraordinary in relation to humans*, but *ordinary in relation to angels*. So what's the standard of comparison that you're using?

**iv)** On a standard definition, if God exists, then he exists in every possible world. Assuming (ex hypothesi) that God exists, his existence would not be out of the ordinary, but commonplace.

## Miracles and risk assessment

Larry Shapiro is a secular philosopher who's been attacking miracles in different venues. He published a book on the subject. And he recently debated Mike Licona. In that debate he recycled an illustration he uses in this article:

<http://www.slate.com/bigideas/are-miracles-possible/essays-and-opinions/larry-shapiro-opinion>

It's a good illustration of risk assessment. There can be multiple factors to balance. How likely is this to happen? How harmful if it did happen? How likely is misdiagnosis? How successful is the treatment? How harmful is the treatment? Problem is, his example is a poor analogy for what he's attempting to illustrate.

Even granting the tremendous reliability of the witnesses to Jesus' resurrection, the case for accepting their account is very weak. How many people return from the dead? It must be very low, far less than the number of people who have the serious disease in our analogy. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that God resurrects one in a billion people. This means that even if the witnesses to the resurrection were incredibly reliable (perhaps they misidentify non-miraculous events as miraculous only one in a million times), the chance that they were correct about Jesus' resurrection would be only one in a thousand. To summarize, the extreme rarity of divine interventions works against the rationality of believing in them...However, my argument does not show that belief in miracles is *never* rational. Just as receiving numerous positive test results for a disease would raise the probability that you really are

sick, numerous independent witnesses testifying to the same miracle would increase the probability that it really occurred. Alas, we lack numerous independent accounts in the case of biblical miracles. Therefore, though miracles might be possible, belief in them is irrational.

Several problems:

**i)** He's staking out the position that even if an event really happened, and even if we have evidence that it really happened, we should refuse to believe it. But when skepticism prohibits us from believing what's true, even when we have evidence, then isn't skepticism irrational?

**ii)** Dead people naturally stay dead. By his own admission, the Resurrection takes that for granted. The Resurrection is predicated on the introduction of a factor that's contrary to the ordinary course of nature:

Events like these require divine intervention because, presumably, without such intervention the natural laws according to which the universe marches would have prevented them from happening...That's why, if Jesus really did return to life, something must have intervened to block the otherwise inevitable march of natural laws.

But in that event, Shapiro's standard of comparison is disanalogous and irrelevant. By his own admission, Shapiro's comparison is a category mistake by resorting to a frame of reference that isn't parallel to the case of miracles. It's odd that having framed the issue correctly, he proceeds to draw a conclusion that disregards his framework. His entire analysis is vitiated by that systematic equivocation. His lack of consistency is puzzling.



**iii)** We do have multiple attestations for some dominical miracles. In addition, there's extensive evidence for modern miracles.

**iv)** In addition, a miracle isn't like a randomly occurring, randomly distributed event. Rather, a miracle is an intentional action by a personal agent.

## Salamanders and miracles

Let's suppose that I'm lecturing somewhere and some terrorists interrupt the event, come up on stage, and behead me for saying Muhammad was a false prophet. While the commotion was occurring, some audience members dial 911. When sirens announce the approaching police, the terrorists flee. An hour later, while audience members are being interviewed by police and members of the media outside of the auditorium in which my headless corpse still lies, a strange thing occurs. A moment later, I walk out of the auditorium with head attached and in perfect health! Everyone is stunned and ask what has happened, to which I answer that God has sent me back to tell everyone the Christian message is true. I then begin calling out the names of a few audience members, one by one, and tell each that, while I was in heaven, I spoke with one of their family members who had died and who has sent a message to them. I then provide the names of those family members and messages, messages that contain accurate information I could not have known otherwise. A physician then approaches me and checks my vitals.

There is no question that such an event would be a miracle and would probably require an act of God. But the physician has no access to God using the methods of her discipline. So, if we were to follow Bart's principle, the physician could not affirm that I was alive, since only theologians have access to God! You can see how this approach fails, since the physician could certainly affirm that I was alive, but could not affirm that God was the cause of my miraculous return to life. In a similar manner, historians can look at the data, formulate hypotheses which they then weigh

using criteria of inference to the best explanation to see which best explains the data. If the Resurrection Hypothesis does a better job of fulfilling those criteria than competing hypotheses, the historian can affirm that Jesus rose from the dead, while being unable to affirm that God was the cause of Jesus's miraculous return to life (although he could suggest God is the best candidate for the cause). So, one is free to suggest there is not enough evidence to confirm that Jesus rose from the dead or that there is a better hypothesis than one stating that he rose. But, in principle, there is no good reason for why historians cannot investigate a miracle claim.

<http://www.thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/licona-major-statement/>

I discussed Licona's example once before, so I don't wish to belabor the point:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2017/03/trompe-lil.html>

However, I would like to comment on how Larry Shapiro responded in his debate with Licona. One of Shapiro's naturalistic explanations is that if this really happened, it might mean Licona is a freak mutant or extraterrestrial with the natural ability to regenerate, like salamanders that can regrow a lost tail. But that's an example of special pleading:

**i)** The fact that lizards and salamanders can regenerate some organs or body parts is hardly analogous to *instantaneous* regeneration.

**ii)** Likewise, the fact that an organism can temporarily or even permanently survive without some organs or body parts is hardly analogous to decapitation. The brain is a vital organ. Not only a vital organ in its own right, but it directs the functions of other vital organs.

So Shapiro's response illustrates the irrational lengths to which an atheist will go to rule out miracles.

## The law of large numbers

Unbelievers often raise contradictory objections to Christianity. I've noted some of these in the past. Here's another example:

On the one hand, you have debunkers (e.g. James Frazer, Joseph Campbell, Robert Price, Richard Carrier) who draw attention to alleged parallels between Bible narratives and heathen mythology. They cite these to show that Bible writers borrowed their material, in which case their own accounts are fictitious.

On the other hand, you have debunkers (e.g. David Hand, John Littlewood) who dismiss reported miracles, answers to prayer, and cases of special providence on the grounds that coincidences are bound to happen, and happen with some frequency.

But these two objections cancel each other out. If, according to the law of large numbers, coincidences are inevitable and commonplace, then even assuming there are genuine parallels between Biblical narratives and heathen mythology, that's consistent with the historicity of the Biblical narratives. That's to be expected. That happens in real life. So that, by itself, creates no presumption that Biblical narratives are fictitious.

If, on the other hand, alleged parallels between Biblical narratives and heathen mythology are deemed to be too unlikely to be coincidental, then the same can be said for some reported miracles, answered prayers, and cases of special pleading.

So this poses a dilemma for secular debunkers. Either they must make a damaging concession to the historicity of Scripture or make a damaging concession to the credibility of miracles.

And this assumes, for the sake of argument, that these are genuine parallels. Of course, that's very dubious. If so, then Christians don't suffer from a comparable dilemma.

## The big casino

I often use poker to field objections to miracles. That single metaphor can illustrate multiple points. In this post I'd like to collect my previous thoughts on the matter into one place, as well as making a couple of newer points.

**i)** Let's begin with Sagan's oft-quoted trope that extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence. There are several problems with that assertion. He fails to explain what makes a claim extraordinary. He fails to explain why an extraordinary claim demands extraordinary evidence. And he fails to define extraordinary evidence. Yet atheists routinely quote his statement as if that's a knockdown objection to miracles.

What does he mean by an "extraordinary claim"? Since he's attacking miracles (or supernaturalism), he's apparently using "extraordinary claims" as a synonym for miracles. But that would amount to saying a claim is extraordinary if miraculous, and miraculous if extraordinary. If so, that does nothing to explicate what makes something extraordinary.

**ii)** What are the odds that a player will be dealt three royal flushes in three consecutive games? That's a deceptively simple question. Seems like a simple question of math. But the question is ambiguous. It contains a hidden premise. The odds depend on whether the deck is fair or stacked. If the deck is fair, then the odds are astronomically improbable. If, however, the deck is stacked, then it's a dead certainty that a player will be dealt three royal flushes in three consecutive games. Therefore, it's a question that can't be answered in the abstract, because it depends on how we answer a preliminary question.

**iii)** Apropos (i-ii), a fair deck is analogous to a closed system. The odds in case the deck is randomly shuffled. That's what happens in the natural course of events.

A stacked deck is analogous to an open system in which an outside agent manipulates the variables to produce a more discriminating outcome.

**iv)** Assuming that it's extraordinary to be dealt three royal flushes in three consecutive games, what kind of evidence would suffice to establish that fact? Does it require extraordinary evidence that a player was dealt three royal flushes in three consecutive games? I don't see any logical connection. Wouldn't eyewitness testimony or security footage from casino cameras suffice?

**v)** Apropos (ii-iv), verifying the "extraordinary" feat that a player received three royal flushes in three consecutive games needn't meet a higher evidential threshold than verifying an ordinary hand. For one thing, whether or not that's extraordinary depends on the cause. If the deck was stacked, that's an ordinary explanation. It needn't meet a higher evidential threshold to account for that outcome given that utterly mundane cause.

"Mundane" in the sense that personal agency can take shortcuts. Events that are naturally improbable or even impossible may be possible or probable given personal agency.

**v)** Some Christians, as well as many atheists, think you first need to establish the existence of God before you can justifiably entertain the possibility that a given event is miraculous. But let's revert to our illustration. Must I establish in advance that the dealer is a cardsharp before I'm entitled to infer that the deck is stacked? Surely not. If



a player is dealt three royal flushes in three consecutive games, that, in itself, is reason suspect cheating.

**vi)** Some critics object to intelligent design theory on the grounds that we can't infer design unless we know the intentions of the designer. An analogous objection could be raised to the recognition of miracles.

Using the poker analogy, must we know the motives of the dealer to infer that he stacked the deck? Surely not. The fact that the same player was dealt three royal flushes by the same dealer is sufficient evidence of cheating, regardless of his motives. Indeed, we'd expect his motives to be hidden.

Perhaps the player and the dealer are colluding. They will split the profits. A voluntary partnership. Maybe the player took the initiative. He made the dealer an offer.

Or maybe the dealer is in debt, so he took the initiative. He made the player an offer.

Perhaps the player put a squeeze on the dealer. The player kidnapped his family. Threatened to harm the hostages unless the dealer helps him win.

Or maybe the dealer hates the player, and deals him winning cards to get him in trouble with the mob boss who runs the casino.

**vii)** Atheists often say appeal to divine agency is a God-of-the-gaps argument. By that logic, we should never infer that the deck is stacked. To be dealt three royal flushes in three consecutive games is sheer coincidence. To conclude that the dealer was a cardsharp is cheating-of-the-gaps.

Or they might say that's sample selection bias. Sure, it looks suspicious, considered in isolation, but when you compare it to all other the hands in which players don't receive three royal flushes in three consecutive games, that's just a random anomaly. Flukes happen.

## Flying ships

Atheists typically attack Christian appeal to "anecdotal evidence". They brand it to summarily discount miracles, answered prayer, special providence, and the like. These are chalked up to coincidence and bias. I've discussed this in the past, but I'd like to make some additional observations.

One of the ironies of their objection is that atheists are only too happy to resort to anecdotal evidence when they think it serves their purpose. Take Hume's notorious claim that "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined...But it is a miracle, that a dead man should come to life; because that has never been observed in any age or country."

What is that if not an appeal to anecdotal evidence? Hume never witnessed a resurrection. No one in his social circle did.

Nor can it be said that his objection isn't confined to person experience because he is basing that conclusion on his reading of history, for reported miracles crop up in ancient history and church history.

Or take his illustration: "The raising of a house or ship into the air is a visible miracle."

That may have been impressive to Hume and his 18C readers, but it's unwittingly quaint to a modern reader, raised on aerospace technology. We have a different sample than Hume.

Which brings me to the next point: it seems to me that the distinction between experimental evidence and anecdotal evidence is generally a difference of degree rather than kind. What makes the appeal to anecdotal evidence unreliable in some instances is when the sample is unrepresentative. In that event, it's fallacious to extrapolate from anecdotal evidence.

But the same challenge confronts experimental evidence. I daresay experimental evidence is invariably incomplete . So it becomes a question of whether the experimental sample is representative. In that respect, experimental evidence is anecdotal as well. Both experimental and anecdotal evidence rely on samples. But it's hard to avoid circular justification. How can you know in advance that your sample is representative? After all, isn't the point of testing a sample group to discover something about the sample group that you didn't already know?

Take a horse doctor. Suppose he's been in the business for forty years. He's treated many horses. Yet isn't that anecdotal?

It really depends on whether horses have stable traits. If one horse is much like another, then anecdotal evidence is representative.

But the same thing would be said for miracles, answered prayer, special providence.

The experimental method works best for inanimate processes with invariant reactions. Even in that case, you can have systems that are too complex, with too many unknown variables, as well as known, but uncontrollable

variables, to extrapolate from the sample at hand. Take meteorology.

And it's even more uncertain when you introduce personal agents into the mix. That's what makes the stock market so unpredictable. Real life is volatile and unforeseeable in a way that ideal experimentation is not. Anecdotal evidence for religion is not a class apart from the same kind of evidence we rely on for almost everything we believe in.

There is, of course, the danger of bias and coincidence when we interpret reported miracles, answered prayer, and special providence. But, once again, that's scarcely unique to religion.

## Miracles, motion pictures, and body-swapping

One way to define and classify miracles is by causality.

**i) Providence** is like an automated machine that does whatever it's programmed to do, nothing more and nothing less. Physical causes are unintelligent. Providence operates on the principle of internal causality. When nature operates as a closed system.

Providence is like a game of pool. The cue stick strikes the cue ball, which strikes the 8-ball, which rebounds against the cushion, in a series of unbroken cause and effect.

**ii) Classical miracles** bypass natural processes. At that point nature becomes an open system, subject to external agency. The miracle is causally discontinuous with antecedent states.

A classical miracle is like motion pictures. Motion pictures generate the illusion of causal continuity, but in reality, preceding and succeeding images are causally discontinuous with each other. In a classic miracle, there's a causal gap between the preceding chain of events and the miracle. The chain of events will resume after the miracle, because the miracle establishes a new antecedent state, and which point second causes kick in.

We might also compare classical miracles to body-swapping in science fiction. Transferring consciousness to a different body. Under that scenario, mind and body are discontinuous with each other inasmuch as that mind has no prior history with that body.

That has a real-world analogue with the resurrection of the body. On one model, God will create a duplicate body for the soul. It may be very similar to his former body, although this body will be immortal rather than mortal. But even if the new duplicate body was indistinguishable from his former body, his mind has no prior history with the new duplicate body. In that respect, it's like motion pictures.

**iii) Coincidence miracles** are in-between. They are like ordinary providence insofar as they utilize physical causes. They are causally continuous with the chain of events. Continuous with antecedent states.

But they are unlike ordinary providence inasmuch as they are more discriminating and specific. They reflect rational discretion. Both classical miracles and coincidence miracles involve an external agent who overrides the automatic setting.

A coincidence miracle is like loaded dice or stacked decks. It doesn't circumvent natural processes. But it requires the intelligent manipulation of natural processes by an agent outside the system.

BTW, "coincidence miracle" doesn't mean it's a *coincidence*. Rather, it means that independent chains of events *coincide* at that juncture, in a way that's too naturally improbable and opportune to be fortuitous.

## Little green men of the gaps

**1.** I recently linked to the debate between Michael Shermer and David Wood. Now I will comment on the debate.

**i)** A mistake many people make in evaluating a debate is to award winners and losers based on which position they agree with. For them, it's not about the actual performance. It's not about who made the best case in the course of the debate. Rather, it's about prior agreement or disagreement. What side the viewer is on coming into the debate frequently dictates who they perceive to be the winner or loser. Their own position affects what they hear. Often, they are poor listeners. They don't analyze arguments. They perceive the winner or loser, not based on the quality of the intellectual performance, but prior agreement or disagreement with the position under debate. Of course, that's the wrong way to assess a debate. Your side could be right, but still do a bad job of arguing for its position.

**ii)** There are roughly two kinds of spokesmen for a position: popularizers and high-level thinkers. Ideally, when assessing a position, we should judge it by the high-level thinkers and scholars. Indeed, good philosophers go the extra mile by improving on the arguments of the opposing position. That way, when they attack the opposing position, they attack the strongest case that can be made for the opposing position.

**iii)** However, there's value in attacking popularizers. In general, they have a much wider audience than the high-level thinkers and scholars. They are more directly influential. Their followers find their bad arguments convincing. Their followers fail to recognize what bad arguments these are.



**iv)** Wood won the debate hands down. He won on points. He's very focussed. Very analytical. Although he has a wicked sense of humor which he deploys in his satirical videos about Islam, in this debate he was pretty matter-of-fact.

Shermer is a practiced debater. He has his spiel. In this debate he seems to have mellowed since he debated John Lennox 6 years ago. Maybe he was just in a different mood that night. In this debate he often adopts a folksy, avuncular tone. However, that's a facade, because that's punctured by snide or bitter comments. Although his demeanor is initially somewhat winsome, it gets to be tiresome. In addition, he meanders. Jumps back and forth.

BTW, in comparing his debate with Wood to his debate with Lennox, I notice that Shermer recycles the same bad arguments, even after he's been corrected.

Italic text will be me quoting Shermer or summarizing Shermer.

**2.** In addition to the debate proper, he tweeted some of his debate talking points. Some of these he incorporated into the debate, but some didn't make the cut. I'm going to comment on the debate talking points that didn't get quoted before I comment on the debate itself:

*If God can create a stone so big that he cannot lift it, then he's not omnipotent.*

*If God cannot create a stone so big that he cannot lift it, then he's not omnipotent.*

*Therefore, God is not omnipotent,*

*Therefore, God is either just another flawed being or God does not exist.*

**i)** This attempts to pose a dilemma for Christian theism. But one basic problem with the stone paradox is the concept of lifting an object. That presumes a frame of reference. Relocating a physical object from one position to another. If, however, God made a stone so big that it filled the entire universe, then it's not physically possible to move it from one location to another because there's no available space. That's not a limitation on divine omnipotence; rather, that limitation is built into the set-up. So the question is incoherent. A contradiction in terms. A pseudotask.

**ii)** How does inability to do something ipso facto constitute a flaw? If I can't run 1000 mph, does that make me flawed?

3. Paradox of perfection:

*If God exists, then he is perfect,*

*If God exists, he is the creator of the universe*

*Perfect beings must create perfect things*

*The universe is not perfect.*

*Therefore, the universe was not created by a perfect being.*

That's not really an argument. Shermer fails to explain how perfect beings must create perfect things. In addition, he fails to define perfection.

The syllogism suffers from an implicit equivocation: a creature cannot be perfect in the same sense that God is perfect.

3. *The universe is everything there is. Thus, God must be within the universes or is the universe. In either case, God*

*would himself need to be caused, and thus the regress to a first cause just begs the question, "What caused God"? If God does not need to be caused, then clearly not everything in the universe needs to be caused.*

But in Christian theism, the physical universe is *not* everything there is. Christian theism is dualistic: there are mental entities as well as material entities. God exists apart from time and space. Hence, the inference that God needs to be caused piggybacks on the initial false premise.

*4. Not every event has a cause; quantum events like the radioactive decay of a beta particle do not have causes.*

To my knowledge, beta particles are produced by quantum fields. They don't pop out of nothing. Rather, there's a physical process in place.

*5. After God created the universe, he could cease to exist.*

Making the world is an incidental property or relation. In order to create the world, God must have a nature apart from the world. His existence is not contingent on making the world: just the opposite.

6. Finite v. infinite universe

Shermer claims an infinite past is possible. But that's ambiguous. The question at issue is whether a *cumulative* temporal infinite is possible. Shermer fails to engage that issue.

Now let's shift to what Shermer said in the actual debate:

*7. You can't prove a negative*

The motivation for that maxim is to lower Shermer's burden of proof. According to him, he doesn't have to disprove Yahweh's existence.

But a problem with that maxim is that it stands in tension with his subsequent appeal to Sagan's garage dragon. Isn't the point of that hypothetical that you can prove a negative? You can disprove the presence of a dragon in the garage by searching the garage. There's no evidence for a dragon.

Proving a negative in that context doesn't mean having to explore every square inch of the universe. For the hypothetical narrows the scope of the search parameters to manageable levels. It's a search of finite space that can be done in finite time.

Perhaps, though, the counter is that you can't disprove the presence of the dragon if it's an undetectable dragon. The dragon is unfalsifiable in that sense. However, the point that Sagan labors to make is that an undetectable dragon is indistinguishable from a nonexistent dragon. Even if you haven't absolutely disproven the dragon's presence, there's no actual or possible evidence that it's there. And so you have no reason to believe there's a dragon in the garage. As a practical matter, we consider that equivalent to disproving a negative.

## 8. Dragon in the garage

Apropos (7), let's examine this some more. Sagan's dragon is a rip-off of Flew's invisible gardener. Here's how Flew frames the issue:

For if the utterance is indeed an assertion, it will necessarily be equivalent to a denial of the negation of the assertion. And anything which would count against the assertion, or which would induce the speaker to withdraw it and to admit that it had been mistaken, must be part of (or the whole of) the meaning of the negation of that assertion. And to know the meaning of the negation of an assertion, is as near as makes no matter, to know the meaning of that assertion. And if there is nothing which a putative assertion denies then there is nothing which it asserts either: and so it is not really an assertion. When the Sceptic in the parable asked the Believer, "Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?" he was suggesting that the Believer's earlier statement had been so eroded by qualification that it was no longer an assertion at all.

The process of qualification may be checked at any point before the original assertion is completely withdrawn and something of that first assertion will remain (Tautology). Mr. Wells' invisible man could not, admittedly, be seen, but in all other respects he was a man like the rest of us. But though the process of qualification may be and of course usually is, checked in time, it is not always judicially so halted. Someone may dissipate his assertion completely without noticing that he has done so. A fine brash hypothesis may thus be killed by inches, the death by a thousand qualifications.

Now it often seems to people who are not religious as if there was no conceivable event or series of events the occurrence of which would be admitted by sophisticated religious people to be a sufficient reason for conceding "there wasn't a God after all"...I therefore put to the succeeding symposiasts the simple

central questions, "What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or the existence of, God?"

There are several problems with that objection:

**i)** Suppose a heathen Greek says Zeus lives in a palace on the summit of Mt. Olympus. Problem is, you can't see a palace on Mt. Olympus on a clear day. And if you scale the mountain, there is no visible, tangible palace. There is no visible, tangible Greek god.

Now, our heathen Greek might save appearances by redefining Zeus to elude direct empirical detection. Problem is, that's not analogous to Christian theism. Christian theism didn't begin with the notion of a humanoid deity, like Zeus. Christian theism didn't begin with a directly empirical deity, then when challenged, proceed to introduce ad hoc caveats to make God undetectable to the five senses. In Christian theism, God was never that kind of entity in the first place. So the Christian concept of God hasn't died the death of a thousand qualifications.

**ii)** In Christian theism, the evidence for God's existence isn't based on direct observation, but on the observable *effects* of divine agency, as well as the explanatory power of God. It's analogous to the explanatory value of abstract objects, or postulating theoretical entities (e.g. elementary particles) to account for what we can directly detect.

**iii)** Flew's objection confuses a semantic question of what makes something meaningful with the psychological or evidential question of what, if anything, would lead us to doubt Christianity. But those are distinct issues. It's true that for God-talk to be meaningful, it must be inconsistent

with negations thereof, viz. propositions that affirm what God-talk denies or deny what God-talk affirms. Its assertions must logically exclude assertions to the contrary. But God-talk can easily satisfy that condition.

*9. Over the past 10,000 years, humans have created about 10,000 different religions, and about 1,000 gods. what's the probability that Yahweh is the one true god, and Amon Ra, Aphrodite, Apollo, Baal, Brahma, Genesha, Isis, Mithras, Osiris, Shiva, Thor, Vishnu, Wotan, Zeus, and the other 986 gods are false gods?*

**i)** Just listing a number of items, then asking what are the odds that you will pick one rather than another, as if that's a random, quantitative choice, like reaching into a bag and pulling out a raffle ticket, is ill-conceived. It's like saying, since there are thousands of inbound passengers at the airport, what are the odds that I will pick up one passenger in particular? But when I go to the airport to pick up a relative, the sheer number of passengers is wholly irrelevant to my selection criterion. There's no chance that I will drive home any other passenger. The probability is 100% that I will pick up my relative (assuming we don't miss connections).

**ii)** This involves comparing different concepts of God. Pagan concepts of the divine are quite different from the Christian concept. Pagan gods are impossible beings. If they existed, they'd be subject to the natural constraints of physical beings. They can't do what they are said to do given their nature. They can't exist where they are said to exist.

**iii)** There's no evidence they exist. By contrast, there are multiple lines of evidence for Christian theism.

*10. As skeptics like to say, everyone is an atheist about these gods; some of us just go one god further.*

Wood had a clever retort to that. He said the difference between one and none can be the difference between common sense and nonsense. I'd like to expand on his response. Suppose a patient has alarming, or even life-threatening symptoms. He goes to a diagnostician. Some of the patient's symptoms are visible.

Problem is, his symptoms are consistent with several different illnesses. But it would be dangerous if not fatal to simultaneously treat him for several different illnesses. The diagnostician must run a battery of tests to narrow down the candidates. By process of elimination, only one illness remains.

Enter the adiagnostician. He doesn't believe in disease. That's an illusion. The patient has no underlying illness. The symptoms have no cause. "I contend that we are both adiagnosticians. I just believe in one fewer illness than you do. When you understand why you dismiss all the other candidates, you will understand why I dismiss yours."

But, of course, diagnosing the right illness has explanatory power, while denying any illness has no explanatory value.

*11. Even if theists could prove the existence of a God, it doesn't prove that Yahweh is the God, or that he had a Son named Jesus, or any of the other characteristics of the God Christians worship.*

**i)** Proving the existence of a God would suffice to disprove atheism. That's intellectual progress. The elimination of some preliminary false alternatives is an important stage in arriving at the true explanation.



ii) Suppose I prove the existence of a man born on August 22, 1920 in Waukegan, Illinois—who died in Los Angeles on June 5, 2012. He lived in Tucson from 1926–27 and 1932–33. He graduated from Los Angeles High School in 1938. He had four daughters: Susan, Ramona, Bettina and Alexandra.

None of that tells you that he was famous. None of that tells you what he was famous for. If that's all you had to go by, you couldn't tell that he was an immensely popular science fiction writer. Indeed, I haven't even given his name. Yet all those incidental details refer to the one and only Ray Bradbury.

If Yahweh exists, many things are true of Yahweh, even if, considered in isolation, they don't single out Yahweh. But multiple lines of evidence converge on Yahweh, just as multiple lines of evidence converge on Ray Bradbury. By process of elimination, it comes down to one candidate.

*12. Atheism: what we don't believe. Onus on theist to prove God's existence, not on atheist to disprove God's existence. No atheist hypothesis; either you think there's evidence for God or not. No alternative that has to be defended.*

That's a popular meme among village atheists, but it's demonstrably false. Negative claims are truth-claims. Denials assert something not to be the case.

An atheist either says there's no evidence for God, or insufficient evidence for God, or positive evidence that there is no God. In each case, that's an affirmation regarding the state of the evidence.

Suppose I call myself an atobacco-carcinogenist. I lack belief that chain-smoking raises the risk of lung cancer. Suppose I say there's no evidence that tobacco consumption is carcinogenic? Don't I assume a burden of proof?

*13. X looks created, I can't think how X was created naturally, therefore X was created supernaturally. God-of-gaps. But science is filling the gaps.*

**i)** How did we get to the presumption that if something looks designed, it wasn't designed? Why is the onus on the Christian to prove that something which appears to be designed is what it appears to be, rather than on the atheist to disprove evident design?

**ii)** Shermer acts as though there's no positive evidence for God. It's always just an argument from ignorance. But supposed we applied that to apparent design in general. Is the design inference an argument from inference in general? When we first discovered cuneiform tablets, should our operating assumption be that this happened naturally unless we can prove otherwise?

**iii)** How does Shermer distinguish evidence for personal agency from natural patterns or coincidence? Does he have any distinguishing criteria?

**iv)** Shermer substitutes naturalism-of-the-gaps for God-of-the-gaps. He abodes faith in promissory naturalism. His justification is the success of science in filling gaps. But science can only fill gaps of the right kind. Personal agency is categorically different from mechanical cause and effect. To paraphrase Shermer: "Naturalism is just a word, a linguistic placeholder, to fill in gaps. We don't know what

that means. Atheists invoke "naturalism" when they hit an epistemological wall."

*14. Any being that made the world can't be simple. Has to be more complex than creation. Infinite regress. Who designed the designer?*

That's equivocal. Yes, there's a sense in which God is more complex than creation. Infinitely complex. However, we need to distinguish between abstract and concrete complexity. The concept of God is not the concept of a being who's the sum of his parts. God isn't composed of physical parts. Larger parts made of smaller parts.

Likewise, design suggests something made to perform a function. But God isn't complex in a functional sense. (Wood made some similar point. But he was limited by the clock.)

Rather, God is analogous to complex abstract objects like possible worlds or the Mandelbrot set. It's a different kind of complexity.

*15. If God exists, why doesn't he prevent harm to innocent children?*

I'm not going to rehash everything I've said on problem of evil. A few quick points:

**i)** It isn't just a matter of preventing harm to children. In a world of cause-and-effect, preventing one thing generally has the side-effect of preventing many other things. Preventing a particular evil will prevent some attendant goods. Preventing a particular evil will result in another evil further down the line. There's a domino effect—both for better and worse. You're not replacing one discrete incident

with another discrete incident. Rather, you're replacing one domino effect with a different domino effect.

Because humans don't know the future, it's appropriate for us to prevent evils that would be inappropriate for an agent who sees the long-term consequences of alternate timelines.

**ii)** There are theodicies like soul-building and second-order goods that, in combination, cover a lot of ground. Shermer simply ignores that.

**iii)** From a secular standpoint, children are replaceable replacements. From the viewpoint of naturalism, there's nothing tragic about the death of children.

**iv)** What's ultimate is what ultimately matters. Not death and suffering in this life, which is temporary, but what, if anything, happens after you die.

16. The irrefutable God-problem: God gets credit for good, no blame for bad. Whatever happens, God hypothesis confirmed. What would disconfirm God hypothesis? Good things happen, so God is; bad things happen, so God is. What would have to happen to refute God's existence? What can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence.

**i)** I'd put it differently. God is responsible for good and bad alike. (I distinguish responsibility from culpability.)

**ii)** I don't think Christians generally argue that evil confirms God's existence. They don't generally argue for evidential parity: good events confirm God's existence and bad events confirm God's existence. Rather, they appeal to various lines

of evidence for God's existence, then argue that evil is *consistent* with God's existence.

**iii)** There is, though, a sense in which evil confirms God's existence. Evil is evidence for God's existence inasmuch as moral realism requires God's existence.

*17. If your theory of evil is that your neighbor cavorts with the devil at night, flies around on a broomstick inflicting people, crops, and cattle with disease, and that the proper way to cure the problem of evil is to burn her at the stake, then you are either insane or you lived in Christian Europe 400 years ago. This was the Christian theory of evil: Exod 22:18. Today, no one in their right mind believes this. Why? Because science debunked the witch theory of evil.*

Maybe that's an applause like at atheist conferences. But it's grossly anachronistic and a blatant non sequitur. Is he even trying to be honest?

**i)** Exod 22:18 doesn't attribute natural disasters to witchcraft.

**ii)** Shermer is reading European folklore and Hollywood movies back into Exod 20:18. But there's nothing in that text about cavorting with the devil at night or flying on a broomstick.

**iii)** The penalty for witchcraft in Exod 22:18 isn't death by burning. Moreover, the prohibition isn't confined to women. Cf. Deut 18:10.

**iv)** Witchcraft isn't confined to Christian Europe 400 years ago. It's quite widespread in time and place.

**v)** There's evidence for the power of witchcraft. That's entirely separate from a folkloric or Hollywood narrative about cavorting with the devil at night or flying on a broomstick, causing crops to fail and cattle to die.

**vi)** Under the new covenant, the way to combat witchcraft is through prayer, evangelism, and exorcism.

**vii)** But as far as that goes, consider ufology. That's a secular movement in which E.T's are said to do things that used to be ascribed to witches.

*18. God could just forgive the sin we never committed*

Shermer is alluding to original sin. There's some confusion in what he says.

**i)** Scripture routinely speaks of eschatological judgment for actual sin.

**ii)** Gen 2-3 implies that if Adam and Eve hadn't disobeyed God, they and their posterity would live forever via the tree of life. But because Adam and Eve violated the prohibition, they were banished from the Garden, which rendered the tree of life inaccessible to themselves as well as their posterity. Biological immortality was something to be acquired, not innate.

It's like a rich man who squanders the family fortune on gambling debts. As a result, his children inherit nothing. But that's not punitive. They weren't punished because their father was a compulsive gambler. And they weren't entitled

to the estate in the sense that a worker is entitled to fruits of his labor. They didn't earn it.

It's not as if human beings are entitled to immortality. If, due to the Fall, they lost the opportunity to become immortal, that isn't the same as being punished for a sin they didn't commit. Rather, it's like losing out on the inheritance.

iii) And, of course, glorification awaits Christian believers. What was lost in Adam is still attainable for believers.

*19. So God sacrificed himself to himself to save us from himself. That's barking mad!*

That's such a crude, incompetent misrepresentation of the atonement. Does Shermer put it that way because it's catchy?

**i)** To begin with, Shermer's formulation is unitarian rather than Trinitarian.

**ii)** In addition, it's not about saving us from God, but saving us from divine judgment. Saving us from the just deserts of sin. It doesn't create the schizophrenic spectacle that Shermer's reductionistic caricature depicts.

**iii)** Suppose a judge's son commits theft. The son can't afford to make restitution. So his father makes financial restitution on behalf of his son and in lieu of his son. That's not barking mad.

*20. What is God like? God is just a word, a linguistic placeholder, to fill in gaps. We don't know what that means. Christians invoke "God" when they hit an epistemological wall.*

It's unclear if Shermer is saying the concept of God is just a linguistic placeholder with no definable meaning, or if he's saying the invocation of divine agency to explain things is just a linguistic placeholder with no definable meaning. Maybe he doesn't distinguish the two. Given his fondness for Sagan's garage dragon, which had its antecedents in logical positivism, he may think "God" or "God-talk" is literally meaningless. Has no real constative content.

If so, that's in conflict with his appeal to the problem of evil, for that depends on having a clear concept of God. Something with specific definable properties.

### *21. Unlike physics, religion is geographically variable*

Although he used to be a professing Christian, Shermer has either forgotten or never understood the nature of Christianity. Although some Christian truths dovetail with intuition, Christian faith is primarily based on historical knowledge. Testimonial evidence. A record of divine deeds in creation, redemption, and judgment. Like historical knowledge in general, that's acquired rather than instinctive or intuitive. History is something you must learn about, not something you are born knowing. Not something you can figure out, like a mathematician. So naturally the geographic distribution of the Christian faith will be uneven in time and space. If Christianity is true, that's to be expected.

### *22. How does God do it?*

If by that question, Shermer is asking by what *means* did God work miracles, that generally misses the point; except for coincidence miracles, miracles circumvent natural means. The effect is produced directly, apart from a



physical medium. Even at a creaturely level, that's not unexampled. Take cases of psychokinesis—some of which are well-documented.

If God is timeless, then God doesn't make things happen by acting in the world, but by enacting the world—akin to how a novelist makes things happen, not as a participant in the novel, but by composing the plot, setting, and characters.

### *23. What kind of God is a jealous God?*

Although he used to be a professing Christian, Shermer never understood that the "jealous" God is part of the marital metaphor, including "spiritual adultery". The analogy is that just as spouses should be faithful to each other, Jews have a duty to faithfully keep the covenant, just as Yahweh faithfully keeps his end of the bargain.

### *24. Sometimes cancers do go away whether or not someone prayed for them*

**i)** How does Shermer know that no one prayed for them? Ironically, his fellow atheist, Hector Avalos thinks prayer studies are useless for precisely that reason:

The problem with this and any so-called controlled experiment regarding prayer is that there can be no such thing as a controlled experiment concerning prayer. You can never divide people into groups that received prayer and those that did not. The main reason is that there is no way to know that someone did not receive prayer. How would anyone know that some distant relative was not praying for a member of the group that Byrd had identified as having received

no prayer? "Can Science Prove that Prayer Works?"  
**FREE INQUIRY** 17 (1997).

ii) I'm somewhat dubious about how people refer to "spontaneous remission," as if that's a scientific explanation. But what does "spontaneous remission" mean? Is there an actual known mechanism by which cancer sometimes goes into remission, or is that just a label, a verbal placeholder, in lieu of a biological explanation? Is the phenomenon naturally inexplicable according to the present state of medical science? I've read "spontaneous" means "without any apparent cause".

On a related note, I suppose it might depend on the kind of cancer and the extent of damage. Take C. S. Lewis's description of his wife's remission from bone cancer:

I have stood by the bedside of a woman whose thighbone was eaten through with cancer and who had thriving colonies of the disease in many other bones, as well. It took three people to move her in bed. The doctors predicted a few months of life; the nurses (who often know better), a few weeks. A good man laid his hands on her and prayed. A year later the patient was walking (uphill, too, through rough woodland) and the man who took the last X-ray photos was saying, "These bones are as solid as rock. It's miraculous."

<http://www.fellowshipconway.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/C.S.-Lewis-Efficacy-of-Prayer.pdf>

That isn't just tumors disappearing, but the condition reversing itself.

There's also the question of remission that's synchronized with prayer.

*25. Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic*

Shermer cites that quote from Arthur Clarke (which he misattributes to Asimov) to contend that you can never establish a miracle since it might be caused by E.T.'s. But that makes Shermer's atheism unfalsifiable. So his position amounts to secular fideism. This is his alien-of-the-gaps argument.

Ironically, it's the mirror-image of Flew's objection to God-talk. To paraphrase Flew:

Now it often seems to Christians as if there was no conceivable event or series of events the occurrence of which would be admitted by sophisticated atheists to be a sufficient reason for conceding "there was a God after all"...I therefore put to you, "What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of atheism?"

*26. Why does God only heal things that might have happened anyway, rather than amputees?*

**i)** But the question is disingenuous, for Shermer has an escape clause (#25).

**ii)** Shermer shows no awareness of the scholarly literature on miracles, including well-documented case studies (e.g. Craig Keener, Robert Larmer).

**iii)** It doesn't take one artificially narrow class of miracles to disprove naturalism. Any bona fide miracle will overturn a universal negative against their occurrence.

### *27. Good without God*

Finally, Wood said an atheist only has two possible sources of morality: either we are hardwired to have moral instincts or we are culturally conditioned to have social mores. Yet these aren't sufficient, either individually or in combination, to underwrite moral realism. Evolutionary ethics commits the naturalistic fallacy. And cultural relativism implies moral relativism.

Shermer never even attempted to directly rebut Wood's argument. Shermer tries to establish secular ethics by stipulation.

It isn't just Christians who find fault with Shermer's position. So do secular philosophers. For instance:

<http://rationallyspeaking.blogspot.com/2013/01/michael-shermer-on-morality.html>

<http://rationallyspeaking.blogspot.com/2013/02/toward-science-of-morality-annotated.html>

## Avalos on prayer

Last year, apostate Hector Avalos gave a talk on prayer:

[http://www.iowastatedaily.com/news/student\\_life/article\\_277d43c6-dcc5-11e4-b244-e3f0fe813ae9.html](http://www.iowastatedaily.com/news/student_life/article_277d43c6-dcc5-11e4-b244-e3f0fe813ae9.html)

This appears to be a rehash of objections he raised in more detail in his article: "Can Science Prove that Prayer Works?" **FREE INQUIRY** 17 (1997). I'll comment on that article.

The problem with this and any so-called controlled experiment regarding prayer is that there can be no such thing as a controlled experiment concerning prayer. You can never divide people into groups that received prayer and those that did not. The main reason is that there is no way to know that someone did not receive prayer. How would anyone know that some distant relative was not praying for a member of the group that Byrd had identified as having received no prayer?

I basically agree with that.

For example, many people with high blood pressure would call me to pray for them when their blood pressure rose. I would come and pray, and afterwards the blood pressure would fall. This would be regarded by me and the patient as an answered prayer. Yet most blood pressure frequently does rise and fall on its own because our bodies have systems that function like the thermostat in our homes. Many other "sick conditions"

also get better on their own because the body has mechanisms to relieve itself (for example, fevers, colds, many types of aches and pains).

Another reason for the widespread belief in divine healing among Christians, especially Pentecostals, is the dynamic of the services in which healings are said to occur. In many instances a great quantity of healings are reported by traveling evangelists. Usually the evangelist asks the patient what the problem is.

Many may say, for instance, that they had a "kidney problem" when they have a backache. The evangelist usually does not verify if the patient is indeed suffering from kidney problems and is not usually familiar with the patient's medical history. Yet he might announce that the patient was healed of "kidney problems" to the entire audience. The evangelist also might assume that the persons who approached the altar were healed, and so he may report that multitudes of persons were healed in his previous stop. Indeed, the evangelist rarely performs follow-up examinations. Thus exaggerated numbers of reported healings can multiply rapidly in these environments.

The psychology of the petitioner is also a contributing factor. If the evangelist, for example, asks patients if God has healed them, they are very likely to say "Yes," even if their symptoms say the opposite. [14] The reason is that many patients are embarrassed to say that God has not healed them because this appears to insult God.

**i)** I agree. However, citing unimpressive examples does nothing to counter more impressive examples. What about medically verifiable miracles?

**ii)** Avalos fails to draw an elementary distinction. If you wish to prove the occurrence of answered prayer, then it's logical to begin with unambiguous examples. But once you establish the occurrence of answered prayer, that makes another examples more likely to be cases of answered prayer, even if they are ambiguous.

For most of my young and adolescent life, I was a faith healer in a Pentecostal tradition. I witnessed what I then thought were resurrections, spontaneous growth of short limbs, cures from cancer, and many other types of diseases. In retrospect, I have learned much about why people believe in answered prayers even when there is evidence to the contrary or even when it is logically absurd. Every single case of a supposedly answered prayer that I witnessed can be explained by one or more of the following factors: (1) false assumptions, (2) erroneous information, and (3) wishful thinking.

Yet he admits that he "witnessed what he then thought were resurrections, spontaneous growth of short limbs..." He fails to explain how he could misperceive the instantaneous growth of short limbs. That would be a visible phenomenon, right? Does he think his eyes played tricks on him?

For Christian believers, answered prayers qualify as a type of miracle. According to Charles Hodge, the famous American fundamentalist theologian: "A miracle, therefore, may be defined to be an event, in the external world, brought about by the immediate efficiency, or simple volition, of God." [11] The problem with verifying scientifically that miracles as defined above ever occur is that the Christian god is supposed to have infinite characteristics, and we can never know

whether a prayer has been answered by a being that is said to be infinite.

Let me explain. One of the infinite characteristics of the Christian god is omnipresence - that is, this being is said to be everywhere in the universe at the same time. The Christian god is also said to be eternal, all-powerful, and all-knowing. Yet, we, as finite human beings, could never know that such an infinite being exists. For example, in order to know that there is a being who is everywhere at the universe at the same time we would have to be everywhere in the universe at the same time.

**i)** I don't think God is literally omnipresent. God isn't a physical being. So God isn't everywhere. Strictly speaking, God isn't anywhere.

**ii)** It's not uncommon to postulate the existence of spaceless entities (e.g. numbers, logical laws, possible worlds). Their explanatory power accounts for concrete states.

In order to know that there is a being who is eternal, we would have to be eternal.

**i)** That's a one-sentence assertion. He fails to explain why we'd have to be eternal to know there's an eternal being. What's the principle? That you must be like what you know? The subject of knowledge must be the same kind of being as the object of knowledge? Must I be a bumble bee to know that bumblebees exist?

**ii)** I don't need to be timeless to know that timeless objects exist (e.g. numbers, logical laws, possible worlds). I infer their existence because they do necessary explanatory



work. They are indispensable to account for certain concrete states.

In order to know that any event we witnessed in the world was caused by a particular being, we first have to know that such a being exists. For example, it would be absurd to say: "I know my prayer was answered by an invisible Martian, but I do not know if invisible Martians exist." The reason this statement is logically absurd is that it attributes an action to a being not known to exist.

Really? Take white explorers who saw bison on the Great Plains for the very first time. Must they know in advance that bison exist to take sightings of bison as evidence for their existence? Must they have evidence that bison exist independent of bison sightings before they can acknowledge that bison exist based on direct observation? How would Avalos ever establish the initial existence of something? If he automatically discounts the first case on the grounds that we can't accept that evidence unless we already know it exists, then that rules out novel discoveries.

Likewise, in order to know that any event (e.g., an answered prayer or any other supposed extraordinary event) was caused by an infinite being, we first have to know that an infinite being exists. Since we can never know that an infinite being such as the Christian god exists, we can never know that any event we witness was caused by this being. In sum, knowing scientifically that an infinite God answered a prayer is logically impossible.

That piggybacks on a couple of bad arguments (see above).

Prayer would be unnecessary if there were an all-knowing, all-good, and all-powerful God. Let's suppose that the most gifted doctor in the world happens to be your friend. This doctor has the ability to cure any sickness known to modern medicine. Let's also suppose that this doctor is living with your family, which includes a six-month-old baby.

Now if this infant were to become violently ill in the presence of this super-doctor, what would you expect from him? If the baby is choking, for example, you would expect him to use techniques that will relieve the baby's problem. You would not expect him to ask you first if you believed that he could cure your child before he was willing to help the child. You would not expect him to require you to show how much faith you had in him before he would help your child. What you would expect is for this super-doctor to act as soon as he sees the child choking.

Among other things, prayer is designed to cultivate a sense of dependence on God. If all our needs were automatically provided for, there'd be no appreciation or realization of our dependence on God.

Moreover, we shouldn't just expect people to do us favors. Asking for a favor is an acknowledgement that if your request is granted, the grantor is doing you a favor. Even if a parent knows that his teenager wants something from them, he may wait for the teenager to ask. A teenager shouldn't just take his parents for granted. Receiving what he asked for is a basis for gratitude. Otherwise, the child grows up to be a selfish, thankless person, since he expects everything to be provided without ever having to ask. The same dynamic applies to friendship.

Let's also suppose that this doctor has the ability to prevent cancer in all children anywhere in the world even before it occurs. Undoubtedly, you would expect that if he had this ability then he would use it, if he really fits our definition of "good." But if the doctor has this ability, and does use it, then you would not expect there to be any cases of infantile cancer in the world. If this super-doctor has this ability, then he should not wait for anyone to ask him to prevent the suffering of children with cancer. We would expect him to act immediately out of pure goodness.

That depends on the long-term consequences. Individual lives are not self-contained events. Rather, they have short-term and long-term impacts on other people's lives, for better or worse. Suppose God heals a child with cancer. Suppose his future grandson is a security guard at an oil refinery. He works the nightshift. One of his duties is to periodically check the gauges to make sure a system isn't going critical. But instead, he's watching a skin-flick. As a result, the refinery explodes, incinerating the inhabitants of the company town. Saving one life resulted in a thousand deaths.

Similarly, an all-good God would not want anyone to suffer.

Some people deserve to suffer. Take people who commit atrocities.

An all-knowing God would know who would suffer ahead of time, and an all-powerful God could prevent suffering before it happens. Thus, if there were an all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful God, then there would be no need for prayer in the first place,

especially if the prayer is used to alleviate illnesses or any other type of suffering.

Of course, that's the problem of evil, for which there are different, sometimes complementary, theodicies. For instance, suffering can be a theater for soul-building virtues. Likewise, a world without suffering will have a different set of people than a world with suffering. Each scenario has tradeoffs. Each scenario has winners and losers.

Even if someone prayed to the Christian god for healing and that person was healed, it would not prove that the healing was done by the Christian god. All religions claim to have answered prayers. For example, according to the Bhagavad-Gita, part of the sacred scriptures of Hinduism, the god Krishna claims that it does not matter which god human beings worship; it is Krishna who answers their prayer. [13] Thus, it would not be scientifically possible to show that it is the Christian god who answered a prayer even if such a prayer was answered.

**i)** Avalos is equivocating. He's an atheist. So even if you can't prove that a prayer was answered by the Christian God, it still falsifies atheism.

**ii)** What kind of god is Krishna? He didn't always exist. He had parents (Devaki, Vasudeva). Is it even possible for an anthropomorphic deity like Krishna to exist? Is it even possible for a finite god like Krishna to answer prayer?

**iii)** Hector's comparison is reversible. If the Christian God intended for Ravi Zecharias to exist, he might answer a prayer to Krishna by one of Ravi's ancestors, in case Ravi's future existence is contingent on that answer. Likewise, if

God intended Tom Schreiner to exist, he might answer a prayer to Mary by one of Schreiner's Catholic forebears, in case Schreiner's existence is contingent on that answer.

**iv)** There's a conspiratorial quality to Hector's objection. For instance, he teaches at Iowa State U. Now it's hypothetically possible that Iowa State U is really a front organization for a drug cartel. This deflects attention away from the cartel's nefarious activities. They bought off the local reporters and politicians to avoid detection.

Hector's habit of floating hypothetical alternatives is a diversionary tactic. Even though it's hypothetically possible that things are not as they seem, unless we have actual evidence to the contrary, it's irrational to be suspicious.

Even if we saw an extraordinary healing occur (e.g., a severed leg grow back instantaneously), we would not be able to prove scientifically that it was a supernatural occurrence. To say that something is supernatural is to say that something is not natural. But to say that something is not natural, one would have to be practically omniscient because that would be tantamount to saying that we know all the natural factors that could possibly be responsible for an event, and are claiming to know that none of the factors was responsible. No one has the kind of knowledge, and so consequently no one could ever call anything non-natural.

The most we could say about an event whose cause is unknown is that the cause is unknown. As already noted, we would be less justified in attributing an extraordinary event to an infinite being.

But even if you recovered from a potentially deadly illness in some unexpected manner, you still cannot know if it was an act of God. The most we could say is that the recovery was accomplished through an unknown process. Many recuperations that may appear supernaturally miraculous may be due to very natural processes which have not been recognized or studied previously. Indeed, one can draw up a long list of phenomena that were unknown 100 years ago but are deemed perfectly natural today. In fact, most believers in prayer have received conventional medical treatment, and so one cannot eliminate the possibility that it was the medical treatment, not the prayer, that actually had a beneficial effect, even when such an effect might be unexpected.

**i)** That argument either proves too much or too little. We can turn it around. You'd have to be omniscient to disprove God's existence. You'd have to be omniscient to rule out supernatural factors. As he himself says, "there is no way to know that someone did not receive prayer". So naturalism is unverifiable.

**ii)** By that logic, every biblical miracle might have happened, just as people saw it occur, yet it has a naturalistic explanation. Surely Avalos doesn't take that seriously.

**iii)** If he really takes that position, then he's a secular fideist. If nothing in principle could ever count against atheism, then atheism isn't based on evidence. Atheism is indifferent to evidence. Faith-based atheism rather than fact-based atheism.

**iv)** If a Christian receives conventional medical treatment, that explains the instantaneous regeneration of an

amputated limb?

## Methodological atheism is viciously circular

Imagine the following conversation between a theist (T) and a metaphysical naturalist (MN) who justifies metaphysical naturalism on the basis of the evidential form of the problem of evil and who then attempts to justify methodological naturalism on the basis of metaphysical naturalism.

**MN:** If one is a metaphysical naturalist then one should be a methodological naturalist, i.e., refuse ever to postulate nonphysical entities as the cause of physical events. One should not believe in nonnatural entities without good evidence. There is no good evidence for nonnatural entities. Indeed, in the case of God, the chief candidate for a nonnatural entity, the existence of evil constitutes positive evidence against His existence. Therefore one should accept metaphysical naturalism and, by logical extension, methodological naturalism.

**T:** I disagree that there is no good evidence for nonnatural entities. I propose to show you that there is evidence that God causes some physical events and that this positive evidence for God outweighs any presumed negative evidence based on the existence of evil.

**MN:** Such positive evidence cannot exist.

**T:** Why not?

**MN:** Because any investigation of the causes of physical events must employ methodological naturalism, i.e., must assume that it is never, even in principle, legitimate to posit a nonnatural cause for a physical event.



**T:** Why should one accept methodological naturalism?

**MN:** Because there is good reason to think metaphysical naturalism is true, and methodological naturalism follows logically from the truth of metaphysical naturalism.

**T:** Remind me once more of your good reason for thinking metaphysical naturalism is true.

**MN:** The good reason for thinking that metaphysical naturalism is true is that there is no good evidence that nonnatural entities exist. Further, given that evil constitutes evidence against the existence of God, the primary candidate for a nonnatural entity, it seems clear that metaphysical naturalism is justified.

**T:** Would methodological naturalism ever permit one to posit a nonnatural entity as the cause of a physical event.

**MN:** No. I have already made that clear.

**T:** Let me get this right. Your acceptance of metaphysical naturalism is based on the fact that there exists no evidence that nonnatural entities ever cause physical events?

**MN:** Yes. That along with the evidence provided by the existence of evil.

**T:** And your endorsement of methodological naturalism follows from your acceptance of metaphysical naturalism?

**MN:** Yes.

**T:** This seems question-begging. You endorse metaphysical naturalism on the basis that there exists no evidence that

nonnatural entities ever cause physical events, yet adopt a methodology which rules out the possibility of ever recognizing evidence of nonnatural causes. You are using your metaphysic to justify your acceptance of methodological naturalism, but your acceptance of methodological naturalism serves to guarantee that even if evidence for the existence of nonphysical causes exists it can never be recognized as such.

**MN:** Are you not forgetting that evil constitutes positive evidence against God's existence?

**T:** Assuming that evil does in fact constitute evidence against God's existence, it only makes God's existence improbable if there is not a body of positive evidence that outweighs the body of negative evidence. By adopting methodological naturalism you guarantee that such a body of positive evidence will not be recognized, even if it exists. You use your metaphysical naturalism to justify methodological naturalism and you use methodological naturalism to justify your metaphysical naturalism. Your metaphysical naturalism supposedly justifies your methodological naturalism, but your methodological naturalism serves to insulate your metaphysical naturalism from any possible challenge. This is viciously circular. It begs the important question of whether there exists sufficient evidence to justify belief in nonnatural entities and thus disbelief in metaphysical naturalism.

[http://epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Larmer%20\(MethodologicalNaturalismQuestion-Begging\).pdf](http://epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Larmer%20(MethodologicalNaturalismQuestion-Begging).pdf)

## Unjustifiable naturalism

Bradley Bowen is a regular, longtime contributor to the Secular Outpost. I'll interact with a recent remark of his:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2016/05/23/critical-historians-vs-the-dogmatists-believers-or-deniers/#comment-2692948536>

I am in favor of using a "naturalistic heuristic" in doing historical investigations. But this approach needs to be rationally justified.

Agreed.

Part of justifying this approach is clarifying the difference between a firm belief in naturalism on the one hand and a more provisional skepticism that is open to the possibility of miracles and supernatural events.

Although that's a valid distinction, it's necessary to justify provisional skepticism as well.

But more is needed than that, since the same sort of qualification could be made in the opposite direction, and one could argue for a provisional theistic approach or provisional supernaturalism in historical investigations.

A striking concession.

One argument for a naturalistic heuristic is based on the track record of natural vs. supernatural historical claims/hypotheses.

That's a classic uncomprehending objection which atheists repeatedly recite. The assumption is that in the past, people used to attribute more events to direct divine action, but science has replaced that through the ever-expanding discovery of natural mechanisms. Now, it's doubtless true that in the past, more events were mysterious. But Christian theology has always had a category for ordinary providence. The principle of secondary causes was in place all along, even if the examples were less readily identifiable.

A second argument is the general need for uniformity and stability of natural laws in order for historical reasoning to be possible and successful (if most events were produced by divine or supernatural intervention, then not only would the future be highly unpredictable, but reasoning about the past would be just as dicey).

**i)** That argument either proves too much or too little. Humans are agents who regularly interfere with nature, resulting in outcomes that wouldn't happen if nature was allowed to take its own course. So how is that different in principle from divine intervention?

**ii)** His objection is reminiscent of Einstein's objection to quantum physics. There are, of course, competing interpretations of quantum physics. But you can't rule out uncertainty or indeterminism just because you think that has destabilizing consequences. We must deal with reality as it comes to us.

**iii)** His second argument suffers from the same oversight as the first argument: failure to appreciate the role of ordinary providence in Christian theology.

**iv)** As a matter of fact, naturalism is unable to justify the problem of induction. The appeal is circular. You can only justify the uniformity and stability of natural laws if, in fact, the future resembles the past. But the past can hardly count as evidence for the future unless natural laws are uniform and stable. Conversely, evidence that natural laws are uniform and stable depends on whether you can project the past into the future. Not to mention that our knowledge of the past is quite piecemeal. Indeed, we reconstruct the past based on interpolations that take for granted the uniformity of nature! That's how we plug the gaps. So there seems to be no way to justify his extrapolation from inside the circle of empirical observation itself.

You have indicated a third reason, which is logical consistency with our approach to scientific investigations. If we employ a naturalistic heuristic in scientific investigations, then we ought to do the same in historical investigations UNLESS someone can point to a significant difference between history and science that justifies taking a radically different approach to historical investigations.

**i)** One elementary difference is that science tends to deal with impersonal causes or instinctive behavior whereas history tends to deal with personal agents. Natural causes are mechanical, unintelligent processes—or instinctive behavior. By contrast, rational agents are far more flexible.

**ii)** There's no reason to presume a naturalistic heuristic in scientific investigations. In medical science, for instance, there's what normally occurs. But suppose a patient

undergoes a naturally inexplicable healing in answer to prayer? The best explanation in any particular case depends on the specific evidence at hand.

A fourth reason for using a naturalistic heuristic is that we don't observe miracles and supernatural events in this century, so that is a good reason for presuming that miracles and supernatural events either did not occur in past centuries or were rather rare in past centuries. If we did observe miracles or supernatural events in this century, then that would provide grounds for making the opposite presumption that miracles or supernatural events have occurred in past centuries.

It's funny how he takes that for granted, as if it's indisputable. Has he even bothered to study the literature on modern miracles?

## Are miracles antecedently improbable?

Bayesian probability theory distinguishes between prior and posterior probability. From what I've read, prior probability is based on our background knowledge regarding what's possible or likely in general, while posterior probability takes into account specific information about the event under consideration. The way it's divvied up, an event may have low prior probability, but that initial presumption can sometimes be overcome by countervailing evidence.

As a rule, I just don't find this a helpful framework. Let's take two illustrations:

Consider a parking lot at a shopping mall or parking garage at an airport. Say there are a thousand cars. One of them is mine. I'm walking back to the parking lot or parking garage.

You could say the prior probability of me picking out any car in particular is one in a thousand. As a matter of pure math, that's true.

But it's a rather ridiculous way to cast the issue. Unless I see an irresistibly appealing sports car that I decide to hot-wire on the spur of the moment, it's 100% certain that I will drive my car home, and 100% certain that I won't drive any of the other 999 cars home.

So why would we even set up the calculations as if there's a heavy presumption against my driving my own car home, a presumption which—fortunately—can be overcome by additional information? Why frame the issue in such an abstract way that that's a low prior probability of me driving

a car with that particular license plate? The mathematical odds just aren't relevant. I'm not picking a car at random.

Why divvy it up as if we have to begin in a state of relative ignorance, when in fact we have all the information? Why set it up as a balancing act?

Let's take another example: what are the odds that lightning will strike any particular tree? Well, we could start by comparing the number of lightning strikes during a given timespan to the number of trees in a given radius. And from that standpoint, the odds are remote that it will strike any particular tree.

Suppose, though, I go for a daily walk along a trail. I always pass by the same stately tree. Today I walk past that tree. Then I'm overtaken by a thunderstorm. I see a lightning strike behind me on the trail, and I hear something explode. But I don't see what was hit.

As I walk back, I see the familiar tree split in two, with scorch marks. I conclude that it was struck by lightning. Although it's antecedently improbable that lightning would single out this tree, the abstract chances of that happening have no bearing on my well-founded belief that this tree was struck by lightning. Why would I even take prior probability into account?

I'm not saying this is never germane. It may be antecedently improbable that the brakes will fail on a recently serviced, high-end sports car, causing the driver to die. The very implausibility of mechanical failure may make the homicide detective suspicious, so he sniffs around until he finds out the wife of the decedent was having an affair with dashing automechanic to service the car a day before.



The circumstantial evidence is very incriminating. Means, motive, and opportunity.

My problem, though, is when the case for miracles is always shoehorned into a framework where miracles are assigned a very low prior probability. A standing presumption against miracles. It's then up to the Christian apologist to surmount the daunting odds. It's like winning when the deck is stacked against you. Impressive if you can, but why should we frame the issue that way in the first place? It's gratuitously prejudicial.

## Falsifying naturalism

The threshold for disproving naturalism is exceedingly low. That's because naturalism is a universal negative. It only takes one good counterexample to blow it to smithereens.

Consider physicalism. If cognition is reducible to brain events, and all mental activity is located inside the head, then the mind can't possibly act at a distance or know things at a distance (in time or space). Hence, it only takes a few well-attested counterexamples to falsify physicalism.

Technically, naturalism isn't synonymous with physicalism. It's possible for a naturalist to be a Platonic realist, Cartesian dualist, idealist, or panpsychic. But physicalism is the default position of most naturalists. Most naturalists fight tooth and nail for physicalism. And there's a reason for that. They appreciate what a threat to naturalism it would be to make allowance for knowledge or action at a distance. If the mind can know things or effect things apart from a chain of physical causes, then there's no presumption against God, angels, demons, discarnate souls, miracles, heaven, or hell. They can't afford to make that concession.

There's an abstract atheism that infidel apologists like to project. That atheism is merely nonbelief in God or gods. By the same token, Jeff Lowder likes to compartmentalize things as much as possible, carefully partitioning atheism, naturalism, and physicalism.

That's prudent from a tactical standpoint. Exposing as little of your flank as possible. Making yourself a small target.

But that kind of abstract atheism is like an experimental lifeform that can't exist outside laboratory conditions. It's

very artificial.

## Is Goddidit unfalsifiable?

i) We're living at a time when Christians are under increasing pressure to accommodate the Bible to the scientific establishment. The scientific arguments are complex and often highly technical. And the ground keeps shifting in light of new developments. Here's one way to simplify the debate.

Unbelievers frequently raise two contradictory objections to creationism. I'm using "creationism" loosely, because unbelievers use "creationism" loosely to designate YEC, OEC, intelligent design, and/or the historicity of Gen 1-9.

### **A. Science falsifies creationism**

Take human evolution. Many books and websites say there's overwhelming evidence for human evolution. Creationism has been falsified by multiple lines of evidence from comparative anatomy, comparative genomics, and the fossil record.

Obviously, this triumphalist claim hasn't gone unchallenged by creationists. Indeed, sometimes you have skeptics of the standard evolutionary paradigm within secular scientific establishment itself.

However, that's well-trodden ground. What is more striking is to compare this objection with the next objection:

### **B. Creationism is unfalsifiable**

Let's quote a few representative examples:

Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door. The eminent Kant scholar Lewis Beck used to say that anyone who could believe in God could believe in anything. To appeal to an omnipotent deity is to allow that at any moment the regularities of nature may be ruptured, that miracles may happen.

[http://www.drjbloom.com/Public%20files/Lewontin\\_Review.htm](http://www.drjbloom.com/Public%20files/Lewontin_Review.htm)

The appeal to supernatural forces, whether divine or occult, is always available because we can cite no necessary constraints upon the powers of supernatural agents. This is just the picture of God that Johnson presents. He says that God could create out of nothing or use evolution if He wanted (JDT p. 14, 113); God is "omnipotent" (JDT p. 113). He says God creates in the "furtherance of a purpose" (JDT p. 4), but that God's purposes are "inscrutable" (JDT p. 71) and "mysterious" (JDT p. 67). A god that is all-powerful and whose will is inscrutable may be called upon to explain any event in any situation, and this is one reason for the methodological prohibition against such appeals in science. Because of this feature, supernatural hypotheses remain immune from disconfirmation.

It is not that supernatural agents and powers could not explain in principle, it is rather that they can explain all too easily. As such we may think of them as the explanation of last resort, since, like the Greek god in the machine, they can always be hauled down to "save the day" if every other explanation fails.

[https://www.msu.edu/~pennock5/research/papers/Pennock\\_SupNatExpl.html](https://www.msu.edu/~pennock5/research/papers/Pennock_SupNatExpl.html)

Nye's position relies upon the scientific method, summarized by the phrase "evidential evaluation of falsifiable hypotheses." In other words, science aims to disconfirm its hypotheses and uses evidence to do so. This

falsification process is a powerful way to eliminate bad ideas, and nothing proves an idea false better than its disagreement with reality...By contrast, faith—and theology more broadly—does not possess or employ a mechanism for falsification and appears only incidentally interested in observation.

<https://richarddawkins.net/2014/01/creationism-faith-and-legitimizing-bad-ideas/>

The basic contention here is that science requires an unbroken chain of physical cause and effect. But once you make allowance for an omnipotent, interventionist God, a God who can instantly bypass natural processes to produce a physical effect apart from antecedent condition, then creationism is unfalsifiable—for anything in nature, anything pattern of evidence is explicable by appeal to this Deus ex machina. It severs the links in the chain of cause and effect, past and present.

**ii)** Now, what's interesting about B is that it cancels A. These two objections can't both be true.

Moreover, these are asymmetrical objections. B can rule out A in a way that A is impotent to rule out B. For if B is true, then nothing counts as evidence for A.

Ironically, this is a secular objection to creationism. But if we take the secular objection seriously, it destroys secular science. In their effort to shoot down creationism, the bullet ricochets on their own position.

Of course, they regard this as an unacceptable consequence of theism. But to claim that theism has this consequence in no way invalidates or undercuts the unwelcome consequence.

In this respect, Christians don't need to produce any evidence to refute A. We don't need to mount our own

independent argument to refute A. We can simply redeploy an argument that secular scientists keep repeating. If, according to secular scientists, methodological naturalism is a necessary presupposition of science, then by their own admission, the existence of an omnipotent interventionist God nullifies all their evidentiary objections to creationism.

That's not some ad hoc argument that Christians concoct to deflect the scientific evidence. Rather, that's a tacit concession which the secular scientists are making. All we need to do is agree with them, thank them for pointing that out, and kindly showing them that their objection backfires.

**iii)** From a theological standpoint, B is fairly overstated. According to Biblical theism, God hasn't made an *Alice in Wonderland* world where effects routinely materialize out of the blue. Every possibility is not a plausibility. To the contrary, Biblical theism has a doctrine of ordinary providence.

However, that observation does nothing to support A or undermine creationism, for that's a theological restriction. It presumes a theological framework.

**iv)** Finally, if creationism is unfalsifiable, that doesn't make it unverifiable. And that doesn't mean naturalistic evolution is unfalsifiable. Once again, these are asymmetrical positions. Naturalistic evolution can still be falsifiable on its own terms.

By contrast, creationism isn't falsifiable on its own terms—given the limitless explanatory power of an omnipotently resourceful God. Conversely, if some biological events are inexplicable apart from superhuman intelligence, then the evidence selects for theism rather than naturalism.

## Naturalism and the burden of proof

Miracles, in order to leave no reasonable doubt their scientific inexplicability, must therefore be very extraordinary events. They must be events which we have every reason to believe are physically impossible; i.e., our best-confirmed natural laws must tell us that events of this sort cannot occur. This means that prior to their actual occurrence they must be events that we would judge very unlikely to take place. Indeed, it is fair to say that they must have an a priori likelihood about as low as any contingent fact could have. Thus, even if we can imagine events so remarkable that they would be scientifically inexplicable, we can ask whether any evidence would be strong enough to establish that such improbable events had taken place.

[http://infidels.org/library/modern/keith\\_parsons/theistic/4.html](http://infidels.org/library/modern/keith_parsons/theistic/4.html)

- i)** This is a classic way of making the case against miracles. You shift the burden of proof onto the proponent of miracles, then assign an insurmountably low prior probability to miracles.
- ii)** Notice that Parsons doesn't base his definition of miracles on examples of miracles in Scripture or church history. He doesn't begin with the kinds of miracles that figure in the dispute, then formulate a definition that covers these cases. Instead, he picks an aprioristic definition out of the air.
- iii)** To say a miracle must be the kind of event which cannot happen consistent with natural laws is ambiguous. Does that mean it cannot occur if nature is left to its own devices? If so, that doesn't mean miracles are physically



impossible if an agent intervenes? Mill defined a miracle as "a new effect produced by the introduction of a new cause."

It's physically impossible for nature to produce a bicycle, but an agent can produce a bicycle by manipulating natural resources.

**iv)** There's also the question of what natural laws allow or permit. Suppose psychokinesis is real. In that case, some kinds of events are physical possible which would be physically impossible if no one has psychokinetic ability. One can't rule out psychokinesis in advance by claiming that conflicts with natural laws, for that's circular.

**v)** Parsons seems to be assuming that a miracle must bypass natural processes. But although that's true for some kinds of miracles, that's not true for coincidence miracles.

For instance, in 1 Kgs 22, Ahab's death in the battle of Ramoth-gilead is predicted (vv22). And this is what happens:

*29 So the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat the king of Judah went up to Ramoth-gilead. 30 And the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "I will disguise myself and go into battle, but you wear your robes." And the king of Israel disguised himself and went into battle. 31 Now the king of Syria had commanded the thirty-two captains of his chariots, "Fight with neither small nor great, but only with the king of Israel." 32 And when the captains of the chariots saw Jehoshaphat, they said, "It is surely the king of Israel." So they turned to fight against him. And Jehoshaphat cried out. 33 And when the captains of the chariots saw that it was not the king of Israel, they turned back from pursuing him. 34 But a certain man drew his bow at random and struck the king of Israel between the scale armor and the breastplate. Therefore he said to the*

*driver of his chariot, "Turn around and carry me out of the battle, for I am wounded." 35 And the battle continued that day, and the king was propped up in his chariot facing the Syrians, until at evening he died.*

On the face of it, this doesn't violate any natural laws. Yet it's too discriminating to be the result of blind causes—especially in conjunction with the fateful prediction, and Ahab's futile precautionary measures.

**vi)** Finally, it's actually the naturalist who suffers from an insurmountable burden of proof. Naturalism is a universal negative. Naturalism can't afford a single miracle. Naturalism can't afford a single answered prayer. Naturalism must discount every answered prayer as mere coincidence. Naturalism must discount every miracle as misperceived, misremembered, misinterpreted, or misreported. Naturalism can't afford a single miracle to slip through its sieve. All it takes is one miracle, one answered prayer, to falsify naturalism.

Keep in mind, too, that answered prayers are vastly underreported. That's because most Christians live and die in obscurity. Only a handful of people knew them. They are quickly forgotten. They never make it into the history books. No one writes their biography. The answered prayers we happen to hear about are an infinitesimal fraction of the totality.

## What's a scientific explanation?

i) Let's begin with some stereotypes. There's the familiar narrative of the boy who's raised in a "fundamentalist church," but loses his faith in Scripture when he goes to college and studies science.

Likewise, secular science regards creationism and intelligent design theory as ad hoc. These aren't driven by the evidence. Rather, they try to find flaws in conventional science, and propose possible alternative explanations which are merely consistent with the evidence.

Moreover, when the evidence runs out or goes against them, they resort to the deus ex machina. Miracles are consistent with anything. Given a miracle, anything can happen.

Although that's a hostile, outsider characterization of creationism and intelligent design theory, there are creationists who, to some extent, have the same misgivings. Take the so-called problem of distant starlight. A popular creationist explanation appeals to mature creation. However, some creation scientists dislike that explanation because it's a miraculous explanation rather than a scientific explanation. They are trained scientists, and they want to defend creationism on *scientific* grounds.

ii) There's a grain of truth to these objections, but they are one-sided. If, in fact, God-did-it, then to exclude God from the explanation is special pleading. If, in fact, God-did-it, then a naturalistic alternative is ad hoc.

iii) This also goes to the thorny question of what constitutes a scientific explanation. Atheists think divine agency renders an explanation unscientific. And we'd expect atheists to

take that position. But I also find similar confusion among some creationists. Both sides are unclear on how to demarcate a scientific explanation from a miraculous explanation.

Atheists like Lewontin take the position that once you allow a divine foot in the door, anything goes. That, however, is a caricature of the miraculous.

The definition of a scientific explanation is bound up with the definition of a miracle. These are correlative questions. Let's consider two potential criteria:

### A) CAUSAL CONTINUITY.

A presupposition of science is that the same causes yield the same effects. That also supplies a principle of predictability. Given the same cause, the same effect will result.

And that also supplies a basis for interpolations and extrapolations. We infer missing links. We trace the effect back to the cause through a series of intervening processes or events. The principle is symmetrical and reversible. If the same causes entail the same effects, then the same effects entail the same causes.

But that's consistent with miracles. When a given outcome is the result of a miracle, you have a different result because you have a different cause. A cause that bypasses the ordinary chain of cause and effect (on a classic definition of a miracle).

Take a terminal cancer patient who goes into spontaneous remission in answer to prayer. That doesn't subvert medical science. Absent divine intercession, the same causes have the same effects. It simply interjects a new factor, outside the chain of cause and effect, into the transaction. It breaks

into the chain of cause and effect, but the chain resumes after divine intercession.

In addition, some miracles result from a continuous chain of physical cause and effect. Take Ahab's "accidental" death by a random arrow (1 Kgs 22). At one level, that was perfectly natural. The end-result of natural means. Yet it was a prearranged event.

### B) PHYSICAL CAUSATION

A presupposition of *secular* science is that causes are physical. A natural explanation involves physical causes.

This stands in contrast to mental causation. Physical causes are unintelligent forces or processes. Often inanimate.

Because physical causes are unintelligent, they are invariant. They operate automatically, with mechanical regularity—like a programmed result.

From a Christian standpoint, that's often the case, although that's not a matter of principle. In ordinary providence, things normally happen that way. And that also supplies the basis for linear extrapolations and postulated interpolations.

But in the biblical worldview, causation isn't confined to physical causation. In addition, there is mental causation. Personal agents who have the ability to simply will things to happen.

That does introduce an unpredictable element into the equation. This means that in some cases we can't say with confidence how something happened—especially events where there were no human observers. We can't be sure if it happened naturally or supernaturally.

I'd add that there's abundant evidence for miracles, as well as the paranormal. Indeed, this is underreported.

So a Christian isn't guilty of special pleading when he takes this additional factor into consideration. It isn't just a face-saving explanation. Rather, it's making allowance for genuine imponderables. In many cases, that's not something you or he can rationally rule out.

# The tortoise and the hare

## I. The scientific method

David Berlinski once said:

Where science has a method, it is trivial – look carefully, cut the cards, weigh the evidence, don't let yourself be fooled, do an experiment if you can. These are principles of kennel management as well as quantum theory. Where science isn't trivial, it has no method. What method did Einstein follow, or Pauli, or Kekulé? Kekulé saw the ring structure of benzene in what he called a waking dream. Some method.

My real view is that there is only one science, and that is mathematics, and that the physical sciences are really forms of experimental mathematics. The idea that there is out there a physical world which just happens to lend itself to mathematical description has always seemed to me to be incoherent. There is only one world – the universe, in fact, and it has the essential properties of a mathematical model. For reasons that we cannot even begin to understand, that model interacts with our senses, and so without measuring devices, allowing us to pretty much confirm conclusions antecedently reached by pure thought.

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1GWum5O7pSIFVu8V5P5HciOnVxbSI5Jg67ZRwf1IZAGo/edit?pli=1>

This claim is worth exploring. For one thing, questions of scientific method crop up in debates over the relation between theology and science. Do theological claims violate the scientific method? *Is there a scientific method?*

It's easy to find statements of the scientific method on the Internet. According to one source:

The scientific method has four steps

1. Observation and description of a phenomenon or group of phenomena.
2. Formulation of an hypothesis to explain the phenomena. In physics, the hypothesis often takes the form of a causal mechanism or a mathematical relation.
3. Use of the hypothesis to predict the existence of other phenomena, or to predict quantitatively the results of new observations.
4. Performance of experimental tests of the predictions by several independent experimenters and properly performed experiments.

[http://teacher.nsrj.rochester.edu/phy\\_labs/appendix/appendix.html](http://teacher.nsrj.rochester.edu/phy_labs/appendix/appendix.html)

Sounds very straightforward and uncontroversial. But if you study works on the philosophy of science, that summary proves to be deceptively simple and overly confident. If you consult Gary Gutting's entry on "Scientific Methodology" in the Blackwell **COMPANION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE**, the scientific method is very much up for grabs.

## **II. The Divine foot in the door**

One reason debates over scientific methodology are significant is that atheists like to invoke "the scientific method" to preemptively disqualify theological claims. In a refreshing moment of candor, one exponent famously or infamously admitted that:

Our willingness to accept scientific claims that are against common sense is the key to an understanding of the real struggle between science and the



supernatural. We take the side of science *in spite* of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, *in spite* of its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, *in spite* of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our *a priori* adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door. The eminent Kant scholar Lewis Beck used to say that anyone who could believe in God could believe in anything. To appeal to an omnipotent deity is to allow that at any moment the regularities of nature may be ruptured, that miracles may happen.

[http://www.drjbloom.com/Public%20files/Lewontin\\_Review.htm](http://www.drjbloom.com/Public%20files/Lewontin_Review.htm)

Lewontin is half right. Admitting the possibility of miracles, admitting the existence of an interventionist God, introduces an element of unpredictability into science. That's because personal agents exercise rational discretion, unlike inanimate natural process which are uniform—absent interference from an outside agent.

If, however, science is a quest for a true description or true explanation of natural events, and if an interventionist God does, indeed, exist, then like it or not, scientists have no

choice but to bend to reality, however unwelcome that may be.

In addition, Lewontin overstates his case. Granting God's existence doesn't have the destabilizing consequences he imagines. God is not a gremlin who tampers with laboratory experiments to throw off the results. Christian theology typically has a strong doctrine of providence.

### **III. The tortoise and the hare**

Is there a scientific method? One difficulty is the diversity of science. Given all the different branches of science, is there one method that captures what every scientific discipline does?

But another difficulty is the difference between two different kinds of scientists. On the one hand you have the plodders. They are patient observers and chroniclers of nature. They conduct tedious experiments. They proceed in steps.

This is not to be disdained. It produces a lot of useful science. It's how most scientific practitioners must proceed—given their intellectual limitations.

On the other hand, the greatest scientific minds tend to proceed in skips. They have flashes of insight. Physical intuition. They resort to analogies and thought-experiments. They have no method. They can't be emulated. Darwin was a tortoise to von Neumann's hare. Edison was a tortoise to Feynman's hare. To take some examples:

During my stay in London I resided in Clapham Road....I frequently, however, spent my evenings with my friend Hugo Mueller....We talked of many things but most often of our beloved chemistry. One fine summer evening I was returning by the last bus, riding outside as usual, through the deserted streets of the city....I fell into a reverie, and lo, the atoms were gamboling

before my eyes. Whenever, hitherto, these diminutive beings had appeared to me, they had always been in motion. Now, however, I saw how, frequently, two smaller atoms united to form a pair: how a larger one embraced the two smaller ones; how still larger ones kept hold of three or even four of the smaller: whilst the whole kept whirling in a giddy dance. I saw how the larger ones formed a chain, dragging the smaller ones after them but only at the ends of the chains....The cry of the conductor: "Clapham Road," awakened me from my dreaming; but I spent a part of the night in putting on paper at least sketches of these dream forms. This was the origin of the "Structural Theory.(6)

During my stay in Ghent, I lived in elegant bachelor quarters in the main thoroughfare. My study, however, faced a narrow side-alley and no daylight penetrated it....I was sitting writing on my textbook, but the work did not progress; my thoughts were elsewhere. I turned my chair to the fire and dozed. Again the atoms were gamboling before my eyes. This time the smaller groups kept modestly in the background. My mental eye, rendered more acute by the repeated visions of the kind, could now distinguish larger structures of manifold conformation; long rows sometimes more closely fitted together all twining and twisting in snake-like motion. But look! What was that? One of the snakes had seized hold of its own tail, and the form whirled mockingly before my eyes. As if by a flash of lightning I awoke; and this time also I spent the rest of the night in working out the consequences of the hypothesis. (6)

<http://dwb4.unl.edu/Chem/CHEM869E/CHEM869ELinks/www.woodrow.org/teachers/ci/1992/Kekule.html>

Over the next year Pauli recorded a series of his dreams which culminated in a vision of the world clock, a dream of the most subtle harmony.

Pauli's world clock had revolved upon an axis which was both part of the movement and yet stationary. This axis was a speculum, a mirror that stood between two worlds reflecting one into the other. This speculum also entered into the essence of Pauli's approach to physics. For the speculum can also be taken as the mathematical mirror which generates symmetry, whereby its abstract operations reflect quantum states or elementary particles, one into the other.

<http://www.f davidpeat.com/bibliography/essays/divine.htm>

Linus Pauling was lying in bed with a cold when he managed to build accurate models of protein structure, largely based on his unmatched feel for such numbers. And every chemist can learn from the incomparable intuition of Enrico Fermi who tossed pieces of paper in the air when the first atomic bomb went off, and used the distance at which they fell to calculate a crude estimate of the yield.

<http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/the-curious-wavefunction/2013/05/24/what-is-chemical-intuition/?print=true>

Within a week I was in the cafeteria and some guy, fooling around, throws a plate in the air. As the plate went up in the air I saw it wobble, and I noticed the red medallion of Cornell on the plate going around. It

was pretty obvious to me that the medallion went around faster than the wobbling.

I had nothing to do, so I start to figure out the motion of the rotating plate. I discover that when the angle is very slight, the medallion rotates twice as fast as the wobble rate - two to one [Note: Feynman misremembers here---the factor of 2 is the other way]. It came out of a complicated equation! Then I thought, ``Is there some way I can see in a more fundamental way, by looking at the forces or the dynamics, why it's two to one?"

I don't remember how I did it, but I ultimately worked out what the motion of the mass particles is, and how all the accelerations balance to make it come out two to one.

I went on to work out equations of wobbles. Then I thought about how electron orbits start to move in relativity. Then there's the Dirac Equation in electrodynamics. And then quantum electrodynamics. And before I knew it (it was a very short time) I was ``playing" - working, really - with the same old problem that I loved so much, that I had stopped working on when I went to Los Alamos: my thesis-type problems; all those old-fashioned, wonderful things. It was effortless. It was easy to play with these things. It was like uncorking a bottle: Everything flowed out effortlessly. I almost tried to resist it! There was no importance to what I was doing, but ultimately there was. The diagrams and the whole business that I got the Nobel Prize for came from that piddling around with the wobbling plate.

<http://www.physics.ohio-state.edu/~kilcup/262/feynman.html>

- Salviati: If we take two bodies whose natural speeds are different, it is clear that on uniting

the two, the more rapid one will be partly retarded by the slower, and the slower will be somewhat hastened by the swifter. Do you not agree with me in this opinion?

- Simplicio: You are unquestionably right.
- Salviati: But if this is true, and if a large stone moves with a speed of, say, eight, while a smaller stone moves with a speed of four, then when they are united, the system will move with a speed of less than eight. Yet the two stones tied together make a stone larger than that which before moved with a speed of eight: hence the heavier body now moves with less speed than the lighter, an effect which is contrary to your supposition. Thus you see how, from the assumption that the heavier body moves faster than the lighter one, I can infer that the heavier body moves more slowly...
- And so, Simplicio, we must conclude therefore that large and small bodies move with the same speed, provided only that they are of the same specific gravity.
- [http://www.philosophical-investigations.org/Galileo's Thought Experiments](http://www.philosophical-investigations.org/Galileo's_Thought_Experiments)

Another possible action of the demon is that he can observe the molecules and only open the door if a molecule is approaching the trap door from the right. This would result in all the molecules ending up on the left side. Again this setup can be used to run an

engine. This time one could place a piston in the partition and allow the gas to flow into the piston chamber thereby pushing a rod and producing useful mechanical work. This imaginary situation seemed to contradict the second law of thermodynamics.

<http://www.auburn.edu/~smith01/notes/maxdem.htm>

Newton looked at these two formulas for the distance a cannonball would travel horizontally and vertically, and he noticed that the distance the cannonball would fall in a given time interval  $t$  was constant, since  $a$  is constant. However, the distance the cannonball travels horizontally is dependent on its speed --- something he could control. So, if he changed the speed of the cannonball, he could change its trajectory, as illustrated below

Then Newton realized that if he chose just the right velocity, the trajectory of the cannonball would curve at exactly the same rate the Earth (being spherical) curves, and therefore the cannonball would always stay the same height above the ground. In doing so, he balances the inertia of the cannonball (which makes it want to continue traveling in a straight line, and therefore away from the Earth) against the acceleration due to the Earth's gravity (which pulls the cannonball toward the center of the Earth).

The result is that the cannonball *orbits* the Earth, always accelerating toward the Earth, but never getting any closer. That may sound like a strange statement, but remember acceleration is the change in *velocity*, which is both the speed *and direction* of an object. In this case, the cannonball's direction is changing, and therefore it experiences an acceleration even though its speed doesn't change. (You experience this kind of acceleration when you go around a corner at constant speed in a car.)

Newton figured out that the speed of the cannonball was related to the acceleration due to the Earth's gravity ( $\mathbf{a}$ ) and the radius of the orbit ( $\mathbf{r}$ ; measured from the center of the orbit; i.e., the center of the Earth) as follows:

One cool thing about this relation is that even though Newton figured it out for a cannonball orbiting the Earth, it applies to *any object in circular motion*.

Because of inertia, objects always want to travel in straight lines; in order to make them curve into circular motion, they have to be accelerated somehow. For Newton's cannonball, the Earth provided the acceleration. For a ball on a string, the tension in the string provides the acceleration. For your car going around a corner, the engine, through the tires and the friction between the tires and the road, provide the acceleration. In all cases, the amount of acceleration you'll need is described by the above equation, and is dependent on how fast the object is moving, and how tight a circular path it needs to travel on.

<http://www.eg.bucknell.edu/physics/astronomy/astr101/specials/newtscannon.html>

Now imagine that a (very fast) train is travelling along the track in the direction from A toward B and it so happens that the lightning flashes at A and B hit the ends of the train. The question is: "Do the flashes hit the train simultaneously?" As far as our observer Mike is concerned, as he saw the flashes together the answer must be "yes". If the flashes hit the ends of the train, the ends must have been at A and B at the moments of the flashes. But what of an observer N, Nina, inside the train, let us say at the mid point of the train?

The same definition of simultaneity applies in the train's frame of reference. If the observer sees two



flashes which have travelled equal distances at the same time they must have been simultaneous in that frame of reference.

So, do observers in the train also see the two lightning strokes A and B as simultaneous? Imagine that Nina happens to be opposite Mike, that is, also half way between A and B at the moment the flashes occurred (as determined in the embankment frame). See diagram M1. This is NOT the time at which Mike and Nina see the flashes. They see them a little after this moment when the light reaches them – we need to take into account the 'look-back time', that is, the time taken for light to travel from the flashes to the observer.

For Mike to see the events as simultaneous, the light must have come from A and B and met at his position. Remember that Mike is at rest relative to the embankment. Nina in the train, however, is racing away from A and towards B and so will see the flash from B first (diagram M2) because it will have less distance to travel. Note that we could not take a photo and see what is represented in the diagrams! (The camera only 'sees' the light when it enters the lens.) They must be seen as 'reconstructions' of what must have been. Diagram M3 shows the moment that Mike sees both flashes and diagram M4 shows the moment a little later again when Nina sees the flash from A.

<http://www.vicphysics.org/documents/teachers/unit3/EinsteinsTrainGedanken.pdf>

Isaac Newton conducted an experiment with a bucket containing water which he described in 1689. The experiment is quite simple and any reader of this article can try the experiment for themselves. All one needs to do is to

half fill a bucket with water and suspend it from a fixed point with a rope. Rotate the bucket, twisting the rope more and more. When the rope has taken all the twisting that it can take, hold the bucket steady and let the water settle, then let go. What happens? The bucket starts to rotate because of the twisted rope. At first the water in the bucket does not rotate with the bucket but remains fairly stationary. Its surface remains flat. Slowly, however, the water begins to rotate with the bucket and as it does so the surface of the water becomes concave. Here is Newton's own description:-

*... the surface of the water will at first be flat, as before the bucket began to move; but after that, the bucket by gradually communicating its motion to the water, will make it begin to revolve, and recede little by little from the centre, and ascend up the sides of the bucket, forming itself into a concave figure (as I have experienced), and the swifter the motion becomes, the higher will the water rise, till at last, performing its revolutions in the same time with the vessel, it becomes relatively at rest in it.* Soon the spin of the bucket slows as the rope begins to twist in the opposite direction. The water is now spinning faster than the bucket and its surface remains concave.

What is the problem? Is this not precisely what we would expect to happen? Newton asked the simple question: why does the surface of the water become concave? One is inclined to reply to Newton: that is an easy question - the surface becomes concave since the water is spinning. But after a moment's thought one has to ask what spinning means. It certainly doesn't mean spinning relative to the bucket as is easily seen. After the bucket is released and starts spinning then the water is spinning relative to the bucket yet its surface is flat. When friction between the water and the sides of the bucket has the two spinning together with no relative motion between them then the water is concave. After the bucket stops and the water goes

on spinning relative to the bucket then the surface of the water is concave. Certainly the shape of the surface of the water is not determined by the spin of the water relative to the bucket.

Newton then went a step further with a thought experiment. Try the bucket experiment in empty space. He suggested a slightly different version for this thought experiment. Tie two rocks together with a rope, he suggested, and go into deep space far from the gravitation of the Earth or the sun. One certainly can't physically try this today any more than one could in 1689. Rotate the rope about its centre and it will become taut as the rocks pull outwards. The rocks will create an outward force pulling the rope tight. If one does this in an empty universe then what can it mean for the system to be rotating. There is nothing to measure rotation with respect to. Newton deduced from this thought experiment that there had to be something to measure rotation with respect to, and that something had to be space itself. It was his strongest argument for the idea of absolute space.

Now Newton returned to his bucket experiment. What one means by spin, he claimed, was spin with respect to absolute space. When the water is not rotating with respect to absolute space then its surface is flat but when it spins with respect to absolute space its surface is concave.

However he wrote in the *Principia*:-

*I do not define time, space, place, and motion, as they are well known to all. Absolute space by its own nature, without reference to anything external, always remains similar and unmovable.* He was not too happy with this as perhaps one can see from other things he wrote:-

It is indeed a matter of great difficulty to discover and effectually to distinguish the true motions of particular bodies from the apparent, because the parts of that immovable space in which these motions are performed do by no means come under the observations of our senses.

Leibniz, on the other hand, did not believe in absolute space. He argued that space only provided a means of encoding the relation of one object to another. It made no sense to claim that the universe was rotating or moving through space. He supported his argument with philosophical reasoning, but faced with Newton's bucket, he had no answer. He was forced to admit:-

*I grant there is a difference between absolute true motion of a body and a mere relative change of its situation with respect to another body.* For around 200 years Newton's arguments in favour of absolute space were hardly challenged. One person to question Newton was George Berkeley. He claimed that the water became concave not because it was rotating with respect to absolute space but rather because it was rotating with respect to the fixed stars. This did not convince many people that Newton might have been wrong. In 1870 Carl Neumann suggested a similar situation to the bucket when he imagined that the whole universe consisted only of a single planet. He suggested: wouldn't it be shaped like an ellipsoid if it rotated and a sphere if at rest? The first serious challenge to Newton, however, came from Ernst Mach, who rejected Neumann's test as inconclusive. However, he wrote in 1872 in *History and Root of the Principle of the Conservation of Energy*:-

*If we think of the Earth at rest and the other celestial bodies revolving around it, there is no flattening of the Earth ... at least according to our usual conception of the law of inertia. Now one can solve the difficulty in two ways; either all motion is absolute, or our law of inertia is wrongly expressed ... I [prefer] the second. The law of inertia must be so conceived that exactly the same thing results from the second supposition as from the first.* We quote from an 1883 work by Mach on Newton's bucket:-

*Newton's experiment with the rotating water bucket teaches us only that the rotation of water relative to the bucket*

*walls does not stir any noticeable centrifugal forces; these are prompted, however, by its rotation relative to the mass of the Earth and the other celestial bodies. Nobody can say how the experiment would turn out, both quantitatively and qualitatively, if the bucket walls became increasingly thicker and more massive -- eventually several miles thick.* Mach's argument is that Newton dismissed relative motion too readily. Certainly it was not rotation of the water relative to the bucket that should be considered but rotation of the water relative to all the matter in the universe. If that matter wasn't there and all that there was in the universe was the bucket and water, then the surface of the water would never become concave. He disagreed with Newton's thought experiment based on two rocks tied together in completely empty space. If the experiment were carried out in a universe with no matter other than the rocks and the rope, then the conclusion one can deduce from Mach's idea is that one could not tell if the system was rotating. The rope would never become taut since rotation was meaningless. Clearly since this experiment cannot be performed it is impossible to test whether Mach or Newton is right.

[http://www-history.mcs.st-and.ac.uk/PrintHT/Newton\\_bucket.html](http://www-history.mcs.st-and.ac.uk/PrintHT/Newton_bucket.html)

## Naturalism as a working principle

Sometimes we can test a hypothesis by direct observation, but more often we do not see processes or causes directly (for example, electrons, atoms, hydrogen bonds, molecules, and genes are not directly visible, and we cannot watch the occurrence of mutation during DNA replication). Rather we infer such processes by comparing the outcome of observations or experiments with predictions made from competing hypotheses. In order to make such inferences, we must assume that the processes obey natural laws. D. Futuyma, **EVOLUTION** (Sinaur 2005), 526.

One problem with his stipulation is that his characterization is anthropomorphic: "processes obey natural laws." That conjures up the image of one agent giving orders to another agent, and enforcing his order at gunpoint. "I command you! Obey—or else!"

Is he consciously using a metaphor? If so, what's his literal substitution?

On the face of it, aren't natural laws just inductive generalizations? They don't make things happen.

In order to make such inferences, we must assume that the processes obey natural laws: statements that certain patterns of events will always occur in certain conditions hold...Because supernatural events or agents are supposed to suspend or violate natural laws, science cannot infer anything about them, and indeed, cannot judge the validity of any hypotheses that involve them.

Science must therefore adopt the position that natural causes are responsible for whatever we wish to explain about the natural world...it is a commitment to methodological naturalism (the *working principle* that we can entertain only natural causes when we seek scientific explanations), *ibid.* 526-27.

The way he defines methodological naturalism leaves things open to supernatural causation. He says "certain patterns of events will always occur in certain conditions hold." But on that definition, fiat creationism, progressive creationism, and intelligent design theory are all compatible with methodological naturalism. None of them denies that the same types of causes yield the same types of effects. If, instead of automatic processes, God directly causes something to happen, or "loads the dice," you have a different outcome because the initial condition is different. Divine agency introduces a different initial condition. It's not same cause, different effect—or different cause, same effect. Rather, it's different cause, different effect.

Likewise, God can work through natural causes. He can prearrange events to yield a particular outcome at a particular time and place. In principle, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah could employ purely natural mechanisms.

## The onus of miracles

I've discussed this issue on more than one occasion, but I want to revisit it. There is a Humean standard of evidence, popularized by Carl Sagan, according to which extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence.

That's a catchy slogan. Many unbelievers find it compelling. Even self-evident.

But what does the slogan amount to, and is it sound?

**1.** The superficial appeal of the slogan lies in its compact symmetry. The principle seems to be that like requires like. Yet, at a general level, it's hard to take that principle seriously. Suppose we said it takes a cow to eat a cow? Would that be compelling?

**2.** What does it mean to say that extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence?

**i)** Does it mean the evidence for an extraordinary claim must be the same *kind* of thing as the event it attests? Supernatural claims demand supernatural evidence? Paranormal claims demand paranormal evidence? Where both evidence and event belong to the same class or category of thing? Is that what this rule of evidence amounts to? The nature of the evidence must correspond to the nature of the event?

Yet that seems to be viciously regressive. After all, the objection to miracles (to take a specific example) is that miracles are inherently implausible. And that is why we need a special kind of evidence to overcome the



presumption of their nonoccurrence.

But if the sceptic is demanding the same *kind* of evidence, if a miraculous report demands miraculous evidence, then the evidence would suffer from the same (alleged) implausibility as the event it attests.

If you say a miraculous event is implausible because it's miraculous, then miraculous evidence for a miraculous event would be equally implausible.

Yet the slogan seems to concede that a miracle is credible as long as you can furnish the right kind of evidence. On the fact of it, the slogan doesn't say that no quality or quantity of evidence would ever count as probative evidence for an extraordinary claim.

**ii)** And if, in fact, this is what the slogan really amounts to, then is that a sound standard of evidence? How is the sceptic in any position to rule out the possibility of a miracle? Isn't his own worldview based on a preponderance of the evidence? If so, then his worldview must make allowance for counterevidence. The evidentiary standard cuts both ways. If he can't make allowance for any possible evidence to the contrary, then his worldview isn't based on the state of the evidence.

**iii)** But what is the alternative? If it doesn't mean that an extraordinary claim requires the *same* kind of evidence to attest the event, then it would require a *different* kind of evidence. But, by definition, a different kind of evidence would be *ordinary* evidence.

**3.** It's also ambiguous to say an extraordinary claim demands extraordinary evidence. This can mean either of two things:

**a)** It requires extraordinary evidence to attest the *occurrence* of an extraordinary event.

**b)** It requires extraordinary evidence to attest the extraordinary *nature* of the event in question.

**i)** But (a) seems circular. Unless you can already recognize the extraordinary (e.g. miraculous, supernatural, paranormal) nature of a reported event, why would you demand special evidence to attest that claim? You would only demand extraordinary evidence if you already classified the event in question as an extraordinary event.

For unless the event already fell within your preconception of an extraordinary event, then ordinary evidence would suffice to attest its occurrence.

**ii)** So that leaves us with (b). But the problem with that interpretation is that sceptics don't think you need extraordinary evidence to identify a miracle (to take one example) as an extraordinary event.

To the contrary, sceptics routinely reject extraordinary claims of this sort (e.g. miraculous, supernatural, paranormal) because they have a preconception of what kinds of events are ordinary, and what kinds of events are extraordinary. They accept or reject the credibility of a reported event based on their preexisting classification scheme of what is actual, possible, impossible, probable, and improbable.

For them, it goes like this:

i-b) Miracles are inherently implausible.

ii-b) The reported event falls within the stereotypical domain of a miraculous event.

iii-b) Hence, the reported event is inherently implausible.

iv-b) Hence, it requires extraordinary evidence to overcome the presumption of its nonoccurrence.

But, of course, the major premise (i-b) simply begs the question.

## "Extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence!"

This is a Humean rule of evidence which was popularized by Carl Sagan. A variant on this slogan is that "extraordinary events demand extraordinary evidence."

It's since been picked up by atheists generally to quash any and all reported miracles. But what does this slogan mean, and is it a sound rule of evidence?

**1.** What makes a claim an "extraordinary" claim? Does that simply mean the event in question is exceptional, out of the ordinary, or unusual?

But unbelievers think that many natural events are extraordinary in that weak sense. Likewise, they think that many human events or historical events are extraordinary in that weak sense. And they don't demand extraordinary evidence (whatever that means) for such events. So they must have something stronger in mind.

**2.** They often appeal to the uniformity of nature. So do they define "extraordinary" in the sense that miracles don't happen, inasmuch as that would run counter to the uniformity of nature?

But, of course, that definition begs the question. Whether miracles do or don't happen is the very point at issue. You can't very well presume that miracles never happen without begging the question.

Hence, reported miracles don't have to overcome the presumption that miracles never happen. For that would

assume the very thing the unbeliever must prove.

**3.** Perhaps, though, the unbeliever thinks the onus is on the believer. Since the believer is asserting that miracles happen, the believer assumes the burden of proof.

However, the unbeliever is asserting that miracles don't happen, so he—in turn—shoulders a commensurate burden of proof.

**4.** Frequently, the uniformity of nature is underwritten by appeal to the laws of nature. Here we have a strong claim: miracles don't happen because miracles can't happen.

And why can't they happen? Because that would violate the laws of nature.

Extraordinary events don't demand extraordinary evidence as long as they're the right kind of event—natural events, consistent with natural law. A miracle is the wrong kind of extraordinary event for ordinary evidence to suffice.

But there are several problems with this claim:

**5.** An unbeliever can't very well presume that the laws of nature preclude miracles. For he's making a very ambitious claim. A claim about the state of the world.

That's something he needs to defend. He can't merely stipulate that his view of the world is right. He must argue for his view of natural law. Therefore, it's not as if reported miracles must overcome the presumption that natural law precludes their occurrence.

Even if natural law did preclude the miraculous, that, of itself, is a claim which demands a supporting argument.

**6.** Keep in mind that a natural “law” is just an anthropomorphic metaphor. Literally speaking, there are no “laws” of nature. That’s a figure of speech which is borrowed from human affairs and then projected onto nature.

**7.** Assuming, for the sake of argument, that we formulate the possibility of miracles within a natural law framework, what would be extraordinary about an event that “violated” the laws of nature?

That would only be extraordinary under the assumption that natural laws are the ultimate factors governing reality. An absolute limiting condition. They demarcate what is possible and impossible.

But, of course, the unbeliever cannot very well presume such a grandiose position. He needs to argue for it.

**8.** To see the problem with (7), ask yourself the following question: “Is there something extraordinary about the idea that God would do something contrary to the laws of nature?”

On the face of it, there’s nothing extraordinary about such an idea. If God is more ultimate than nature, then God is more ultimate than natural law. So God isn’t bound by nature law. Rather, the laws of nature depend on God.

On the face of it, there’s no presumption that God would never do something contrary to the laws of nature. That would only follow if the laws of nature are ultimate and autonomous.

**9.** Of course, at this point, the unbeliever will object to the

introduction of God into the equation. After all, the unbeliever doesn't believe in God.

But why doesn't he believe in God? Does he take the position that God's existence is an extraordinary claim demanding extraordinary evidence?

But why is God's existence extraordinary? After all, many theologians argue that God is a necessary being. And if God is a necessary being, then it would be extraordinary if he didn't exist. Indeed, his nonexistence would be impossible. So his existence is not extraordinary: rather, it's inevitable.

**10.** Of course, an unbeliever will deny that God is a necessary being. But if a theologian must argue that God is a necessary being, then an atheologist must argue that God is not a necessary being. An atheist or agnostic can't merely presume that God is not a necessary being. His own denial is a belief. A belief with its own burden of proof.

On the basis of 1-10, there's no prima facie assumption that a reported miracle amounts to an extraordinary claim. If an unbeliever is going to classify a reported miracle as an extraordinary claim, then he must mount an argument for his category. It's not something he's entitled to take for granted.

He is making a claim about the state of the world. That's not something he can merely stipulate to be the case—especially when his claim is controversial.

**11.** What about extraordinary evidence? What an unbeliever really means is that, practically speaking, no evidence will ever overcome the presumption against the occurrence of miracles.

But that, of itself, is a very ambitious claim. It's an extraordinary claim to claim that, practically speaking, no evidence can ever overcome the presumption against the occurrence of miracles.

Indeed, it begs the question. It really boils down to supposition that since miracles either don't occur or can't occur, then there is no possible evidence for miracles. But that's tendentious.



## Are naturalistic explanations the default assumption?

**1.** Some Christian philosophers take the position that naturalistic explanations are the default assumption, so that extra evidence is required to acknowledge a miracle. Hume and his followers take that a step further to say the presumption of a naturalistic explanation is so strong that there will never be enough evidence to overcome that presumption. But let's go back to the weaker claim. Certainly it's easy to come up with examples where Christians regard a naturalistic explanation as the first explanation to reach for. So does that concede that there is, indeed, a standing presumption against recognition of a miracle?

**2.** I'll make the preliminary point that drawing a firm line between naturalistic and supernatural explanations is more important to atheists than Christians. Atheists require that dichotomy to eliminate the supernatural side of the dichotomy while Christians don't require the same distinction since they don't eliminate the natural side. So these are asymmetrical concerns.

**3.** Let's take a comparison. Suppose I'm walking on a trail, and up ahead I see a fallen tree. In principle, there are basically two possible causes for the fallen tree.

**i)** A natural cause made it fall. Perhaps it was blown over in a wind storm because it had a shallow root system; or rain eroded the topsoil—exposing the root system; or it was hollowed out by Ambrosia beetles or heart rot.

**ii)** It was cut down. Felled by logger with a chainsaw.

In the debate over miracles, (i) illustrates a naturalistic explanation while (ii) is a nonnatural explanation—akin to a supernatural explanation. The result of intervention by an agent outside the normal lifecycle of trees using "artificial" means.

Now, viewing the tree at a distance, where all I see is the effect, before I'm in a position to see the tree up close, is there a default explanation? Is it antecedently more likely that it was felled by natural processes rather than a logger? At that stage, we don't have enough information to justify a default explanation. Whether it was felled by natural or artificial means is a contextual question whose answer crucially relies on specific evidence one way or the other. There is no explanatory presumption in a vacuum.

## Are specific claims improbable?

One atheist objection I've run across goes like this: the more specific a claim, the more antecedently improbable the claim. There's an inverse relation between specificity and probability. So, for instance, Christian theism is more antecedently improbable than mere theism.

To which I'd respond:

**i)** For anything to exist, there must be a minimum threshold of complexity. So it's artificial to speak in the abstract about the prior probability of specific claims, as if something simpler is more likely to exist or occur than something more complex. Reality isn't incrementally reducible to zero.

By that logic, it's more antecedently probable that nothing whatsoever exists. But if nonexistence is the default assumption, why does anything exist? For that matter, probability theory is quite complex. Does that make it antecedently improbable that probability theory exists? But it takes probability theory to probabilify anything. So it can't be self-referential.

**ii)** Even assuming for argument's sake that the principle is true, it's misleading inasmuch as a more specific claim may have more specific evidence than a less specific claim. Christian theism may have a lot more evidence than mere theism.

## What is the God-of-the-gaps?

Atheists frequently accuse Christians of committing the God-of-the-gaps fallacy (hereafter GOG). But what is the God-of-the-gaps fallacy, and what makes it fallacious? From what I can tell, there are at least two different GOG allegations.

**1.** GOG short-circuits the search for natural mechanisms. For instance, prescientific people don't know about viruses and bacteria, so they explain epidemics in terms of divine displeasure.

**i)** There may well be examples of that. However, Christian theism doesn't regard direct divine agency as a general substitute for natural mechanisms. Rather, the role of God is one step removed. God created the natural mechanisms.

**ii)** This is not to deny that divine agency is often invoked to explain certain events within the ongoing history of the world. Miracles are a classic example.

But that's not GOG reasoning, for atheists are the first to admit that certain kinds of events are naturally impossible. If they happened, they'd require supernatural agency. Atheists generally respond to reported miracles, not by crediting the report while attributing the cause to an undiscovered natural mechanism, but by denying the accuracy of the report.

**2.** Another version goes something like this: GOG is fallacious because naturalism is the standard of comparison. To say "God did it" is unscientific because physical causes are the only admissible explanation. On that view, any appeal to supernatural agency is by definition a fallacy. It's

sufficient to identify the explanation as theistic or supernatural, then slap the "fallacy" label on the explanation. Nothing more is required to refute it.

But that's a transparent rhetorical ploy. Concoct a tendentious fallacy, then apply it to the position you oppose.

Yet that begs the question of whether it really is a fallacy and why. That's a shortcut that endeavors to win the argument without having to even present an argument.

To make naturalism the standard of comparison begs the question. The very issue in dispute is whether there is supernatural agency. That can't be settled at the outset by prejudicial stipulation.

## Is God a postulate?

Oppy is arguably the smartest philosophical atheist of his generation, so he's a useful foil:

Theoretical virtues:

Simplicity: If everything else is equal, we should prefer the theory that postulates fewer (and less complex) primitive entities.

It is clear that Naturalism is simpler than Theism: it postulates fewer kinds of entities...According to Theism, there are two kinds of entities—natural and supernatural—whereas according to Naturalism there is only one kind. Graham Oppy, **THE BEST ARGUMENT AGAINST GOD** (Palgrave 2013), 7,19.

Several problems with that argument:

i) I'm not sure what he means by "primitive entities," but I assume he means something other things derive from, that's not derived from other things. If so, then Christian theism has just one primitive entity: God. But in that event, Christian theism meets the condition of simplicity. You can't get much simpler than only one primitive entity.

ii) What makes less complex primitive entities a theoretical virtue? A violin is simpler than a violinmaker. A toy is simpler than a toymaker.

Perhaps Oppy is operating with the notion that complicated things are composed of parts. That complexity is reducible to simpler and ultimately simple constituents. A planetary

biosphere is more complex than the early stages of the universe. A body is composed of parts, composed of molecules, composed of atoms, composed of elementary particles. That's a bottom-up model of reality. Reality constructed from the smallest or simplest building blocks.

But what about topdown models of creativity? Da Vinci's mind is more complex than his paintings. Bach's mind is more complex than his music. Dante's mind is more complex than his fiction. On that view, artifacts are simpler exemplifications of mentality. Instances of something more complex.

Or take an abstract object like the Mandelbrot set. Infinitely complex, although it can be represented in finite instances.

**iii)** I don't know what in particular he has in mind by supernatural entities. Plausible candidates include God, angels, demons, and ghosts. If so, his methodology is eccentric. The way we usually establish if something exists is not by whether that satisfies a theoretical virtue like simplicity, but whether there's any direct evidence, indirect evidence, or counterevidence.

**iv)** Apropos (iii), supernatural entities aren't necessarily or even generally postulates. Although they can sometimes be invoked for their explanatory value, in many cases, people say that supernatural entities exist because they claim to experience supernatural entities. Not a postulate but a direct encounter. Not a posit but an observation. Now, Oppy can dispute the credibility of such reports, but it's a different category than a theoretical postulate. Reality is something we generally discover rather than intuit.

## Breaking the laws of nature

“A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.”

This is Hume’s primary objection to miracles. But it suffers from a number of fatal flaws:

**i)** Hume invokes the uniformity of nature to exclude miracles. But that’s an appeal to experience—as he himself admits. Yet he wouldn’t be writing this essay in the first place were it not for reported miracles. Therefore, reported miracles are a part of human experience as well.

**ii)** Hume might try to salvage his original objection by drawing a distinction between prima facie experience and veridical experience. While there’s prima facie evidence for the miraculous, the uniformity of nature tells against the veridicality of these reports.

But the problem with that move is that a Christian could make the same move in reverse: while there’s prima facie evidence for the uniformity of nature, reported miracles tell against the veridicality of this experience.

So Hume’s appeal to experience is a double-edged sword. And if he tries to qualify his appeal, it still cuts both ways.

**iii)** It’s also rather anthropomorphic to speak of natural “laws” in the first place. Given that Hume is trying to



depersonalize nature, it's ironic that he's take recourse in such an anthropomorphic metaphor.

**iv)** But even if we accept his definition for the sake of argument, is it true that all miracles violate the laws of nature?

Let's consider a couple of examples. Take the flood. That's a paradigmatic miracle in Scripture. In **Gen 7:11**, Scripture posits two flood mechanisms, which I take to be rainwater and seawater respectively.

Rainwater is natural. Torrential rain naturally causes flooding.

Likewise, the "deep" seems to be a poetic word for the sea. If so, then that would allude to coastal flooding—which is also a natural phenomenon.

Now, you might say the timing of the flood is miraculous. It happened right on cue. But the flood itself seems to exploit natural mechanisms.

Let's take an extrabiblical miracle:

"It does not seem necessary to insist that every miracle must entail a strict violation of a natural law. This is illustrated by R F. Holland's story of the mother who cries to God for a miracle when she sees her child stuck on the level crossing and hears the train approaching round the corner. The train shudders to a halt within inches of the child, not because the driver has seen him on the line, but because he was taken ill a quarter of a mile back and the train's automatic emergency braking system came into play. The mother rightly thanks God for a miracle, even though there

is a perfectly 'natural' explanation for the train stopping,"  
"Miracles, extra-biblical," **NEW DICTIONARY OF CHRISTIAN  
APOLOGETICS**, 432.

Mind you, I myself have no particular problem with the idea that God is free to "break" the laws of nature. I'm just responding to Hume on his own terms.

## The presumption of atheism?

Carl Sagan famously said that extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence. In this he was popularizing a Humean rule of evidence.

I've criticized this maxim on various occasions. Now I want to make a different point.

Unbelievers invoke this maxim because they think it undercuts the Christian faith. For example, unbelievers apply this maxim to miracles. They classify miracles as extraordinary events, then treat miracles as inherently improbable and therefore implausible for that very reason.

But let's grant, for the sake of argument, that this is a sound maxim. The problem with this maxim is that it cuts both ways.

On the one hand, Christians don't regard the existence of God as extraordinary. Rather, they regard the existence of God as necessary. There's nothing extraordinary about the existence of a necessary being. To the contrary, it would be extraordinary if a necessary being did not exist. Indeed, it would be impossible.

Conversely, Christians regard nature as extraordinary. And that's because nature is contingent. Its existence is unnecessary. Therefore, the existence of nature demands a special explanation.

*Given* the existence of nature, then nature is ordinary, but the given is extraordinary. As Leibniz famously said, why does something exist rather than nothing?

Beyond the general “specialness” of nature, you also have fine-tuning arguments which contend for the extraordinary character of the big bang, or life on earth, &c.

At the moment, my purpose is not to expound or defend any of these arguments. Rather, I’m making the point that Sagan’s maxim is a double-edged sword. It doesn’t carry any presumption in favor of naturalism. It doesn’t create any presumption against supernaturalism.

Both sides of the debate can begin with this maxim and draw opposing conclusions. Both sides of the debate can try to use this maxim against the other side. So this maxim doesn’t assign a distinctive or disproportionate burden of proof on the Christian. As far as the maxim is concerned, the onus falls equally on believer and unbeliever alike.

## How to ignore history

*Both Ben Witherington and James McGrath are good scholars: I found Witherington's [The Jesus Quest](#), [Jesus the Sage](#) and several of his commentaries very useful and McGrath's book [John's Apologetic Christology](#) and article on ["Two Powers"](#) are must reads for those interested in Christology. They have two different stances on how to do history; see Witherington's massive response to Bart Ehrmann ([here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)) and some of McGrath's own views ([here](#), [here](#), [here](#)), largely in response to the recent Triablogue incident (for the record, I feel James was treated unfairly). Witherington argues that we need to be open to divine intervention and, "it is narrow-minded rather than open-minded to start with a skepticism about the role of the divine in human history, and write one's history guided by that skepticism." On the other hand, McGrath writes, "On methodological naturalism, I don't see how historical study can adopt any other approach, any more than criminology can."*

*Theologically I believe in miracles, the incarnation, bodily resurrection and virgin birth (though this last point is by far the least important, being absent in Paul, Mark and John). But I cannot just appeal to my own private experience to judge history because other people in the discipline don't share that experience, just as I'm not sure Christian scholars would accept Muslim or Hindu scholars claims to demonstrate miracles in their own tradition. I don't know of any other history, classics or social sciences department that appeal to divine intervention as an explanation because these departments seek human explanations*

*for human actions and historical-criticism is based on probability and publically available evidence that can be studied by religious and non-religious alike. I may post on this in the future, but take the resurrection as an example. Historical study may be able to demonstrate an empty tomb and even that the disciples had experiences that defy explanation (they couldn't all have shared a hallucination, could they?). But then historians must conclude, "Using our methods I don't know what happened", but it is that extra leap of faith that says, "God raised Jesus from the dead." So what do you think: can we invoke God to explain historical events?*

<http://thegoldenrule1.blogspot.com/2009/04/how-to-do-history-two-different.html>

"But I cannot just appeal to my own private experience to judge history because other people in the discipline don't share that experience."

Why not? Does a historian have to share the experience of an eyewitness to a past event? Can a historian not appeal to the private experience of an observer at the Battle of Waterloo because the historian didn't personally share that experience?

By definition, historians ordinarily appeal to the experience of others—an experience which the historian doesn't himself share because the experience took place at some time in the past before he was born.

"Just as I'm not sure Christian scholars would accept Muslim or Hindu scholars claims to demonstrate miracles in their own tradition."

Why not? The Bible talks about the occult.

"I don't know of any other history, classics or social sciences department that appeal to divine intervention as an explanation because these departments seek human explanations for human actions and historical-criticism is based on probability and publically available evidence that can be studied by religious and non-religious alike."

**i)** Of course, that's viciously circular. He's appealing to methodological naturalism to justify methodological naturalism when methodological naturalism is the very issue in dispute.

**ii)** Needless to say, not all eyewitnessed events are private experiences. Some eyewitnessed events are public events with multiple-witnesses to the same event.

**iii)** As I've already explained, methodological naturalism can't treat miracles as inherently unlikely, for that would involve a metaphysical judgment on the possibility or probability of their occurrence.

**iv)** Why should the rules of evidence be dictated by what someone is prepared to believe ("religious and non-religious alike")?

For example, the category of "publicly available evidence" is, itself, a theory-laden category. What if you accept Ayer's argument from illusion:

"For any perceptual state of ours, we could be in a state indiscriminable from it but which did not involve perception of any material object or scene, it being an illusion that there was any such object or scene to be

perceived. That is, non-veridical perceptions could share their intrinsic properties with veridical perceptions, this possibility leading Ayer to claim that it was plausible that the object of perception in both cases was (non-material) experience, and not, as naïve realism would have it, the physical objects themselves. As a consequence, ordinary perceptual judgments, those making claims about such objects, go beyond what is 'strictly available' in our perceptual experience, and so they form a theory about that which is available to perception."

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ayer/#3>

"I may post on this in the future, but take the resurrection as an example. Historical study may be able to demonstrate an empty tomb and even that the disciples had experiences that defy explanation (they couldn't all have shared a hallucination, could they?). But then historians must conclude, "Using our methods I don't know what happened", but it is that extra leap of faith that says, "God raised Jesus from the dead." So what do you think: can we invoke God to explain historical events?"

Why not? Not only do historians study past events, but they're also concerned with historical causation. And historical causation often involves personal agency. Napoleon is a factor in historical causation. Churchill is a factor in historical causation. Newton is a factor in historical causation.

Some events can be accounted for by natural forces. Even that is a proximate rather than ultimate explanation.



But other events can only be accounted for by personal agency. The question then turns on the various ways in which we identify personal agency. And what an agent-caused event may reveal about the agent.

How does a casino detect cheating? Some patterns are random, but other patterns suggest rational intervention to tilt the odds.

## Miracles and methodological naturalism

If a "historian" or "scholar" chooses to apply methodological naturalism to the Bible, he will have to pay for that move in two respects:

**1.** Remember that methodological naturalism allows for the possibility of miracles. What it disallows is making allowance for miracles in the interpretation of a natural or historical event.

It cannot rule out the occurrence of the miraculous because it's a purely methodological principle. To declare miracles impossible would amount to a metaphysical claim.

But this, in turn, generates the following dilemma. Since methodological naturalism must make room for the possibility of miracles while, at the same time, ruling out a miraculous interpretation of a natural or historical event, then methodological naturalism must take the position that a naturalistic explanation is always preferable even if a naturalistic explanation is false.

That is to say, by making allowance for the possibility of miracles, it must also allow for the possibility that a miraculous explanation might sometimes be the true explanation. And yet it cannot permit a miraculous explanation for any event. Hence, it cannot permit a miraculous explanation even if the miraculous explanation happens to be the best explanation of the event. Happens, indeed, to be the correct explanation.

Why would any responsible historian or scholar commit himself to a methodology that automatically precludes or excludes the true interpretation of a natural or historical

event? What's the value of a methodology that forbids you from ever considering an interpretation which may, in fact, be the correct interpretation?

Isn't the value of a historical or scientific method to arrive at a true explanation?

**2.** But methodological naturalism generates yet another conundrum. If a "historian" or "scholar" adopts methodological naturalism, then he thereby forfeits the right to classify miracles as improbable. For probability is a metaphysical concept. It involves a claim about the nature of the world. Yet what supposedly distinguishes methodological naturalism from metaphysical naturalism is the ontological neutrality of methodological naturalism.

In that event, methodological naturalism is debarred from treating supernatural events as any less probable than natural events. There can be no antecedent presumption one way or the other.

But in that case, a "historian" or "scholar" who applies methodological naturalism to the Bible can't very well claim that any other explanation, however unlikely, is still more likely than a supernatural explanation. To do so would smuggle in metaphysical naturalism under the guise of methodological naturalism.

Yet if methodological naturalism can't properly treat a supernaturalistic interpretation of events as any less likely than a naturalistic interpretation of events, then what conceivable warrant does it have to invariably favor a naturalistic interpretation over a supernaturalistic interpretation? Logically speaking, it should be equally open to both possibilities.



## On the brink

As I've often mentioned in the past, false expectations are hazardous to your faith. And false expectations are fostered by theological mistakes.

Some outwardly earnest Christians are just a thin door away from apostasy. Take the question of extrabiblical miracles. Ironically, some Christians oppose extrabiblical miracles for essentially Humean reasons. As Hume put it, "Let us consider, that, in matters of religion, whatever is different is contrary; and that it is impossible the religions of ancient Rome, of Turkey, of Siam, and of China should, all of them, be established on any solid foundation, Every miracle, therefore, pretended to have been wrought in any of these religions (and all of them abound in miracles), as its direct scope is to establish the particular system to which it is attributed; so has it the same force, though more indirectly, to overthrow every other system. In destroying a rival system, it likewise destroys the credit of those miracles, on which that system was established; so that all the prodigies of different religions are to be regarded as contrary facts, and the evidences of these prodigies, whether weak or strong, as opposite to each other."

This is based on two assumptions:

- i)** The only function of miracles is evidentiary
- ii)** Miracles validate whatever religion they're attributed to

From these two assumptions, Hume derives the conclusion that the ostensible miracles of one religion cancel out the

ostensible miracles of another religion.

This, in turn, commits some Christians to ruling out all postbiblical miracles, for fear that once they admit the possibility of a postbiblical miracle, they thereby undermine Biblical miracles.

To take another example: because of their flawed eschatology, some Christians automatically discount the existence of ghosts.

But this approach to the occult or the paranormal is spiritually perilous. Because there's no flexibility in their outlook, it would only take one personal experience to the contrary for their belief-system to come tumbling down in a heap of dust.

Let's go back to the question of miracles. Let's take an example from Scripture: "And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time" (Lk 4:5).

This clearly qualifies as a miracle in the usual sense. It's a supernatural event. But it's a Satanic miracle.

According to Hume's argument, a Satanic miracle would cancel out a divine miracle. But how does that follow?

**i)** To begin with, does Satan perform this miracle to attest a system of doctrine? No. That's not his intention. Rather, his intention is to divert the Messiah from his mission.

**ii)** Suppose, though, we say that, regardless of his motives, a side-effect of this miracle is evidentiary. If so, then what

does this Satanic miracle attest?

- a)** The existence of the devil.
- b)** The power of the devil.
- c)** The character of the devil.

So does this Satanic miracle cancel out a divine miracle? I don't see how. All these things are consistent with Biblical demonology.

Let's take another example from Scripture: the demoniac in **Acts 16:16**. This clearly qualifies as a miracle in the usual sense. A supernatural aptitude. But it's a demonic miracle.

According to Hume's argument, a demonic miracle would cancel out a divine miracle. But how does that follow?

The slave-girl is probably heathen. But does this miracle attest the truth of heathen religion? Ironically, this pagan demoniac is bearing witnessing to the Apostles!

But assuming that it does, indirectly, attest something about paganism, what would that be?

- i)** Demons are real
- ii)** Possession is real
- iii)** Demons have superhuman powers
- iv)** Paganism is demonic.

So does this demonic miracle cancel out a divine miracle? I don't see how. All these things are consistent with Biblical demonology.

What about ghosts? I don't have a personal stake in the issue. I've never seen a ghost.

But you have some Christians who think Ron Rhodes is the last word on ghosts. Because there's no give in their belief-system, their faith is extremely fragile. It's not the proverbial web of belief, which can stretch and spring back, to readjust the internal balance. Instead, it's as brittle as an ice castle. One tiny crack or hairline fracture and it breaks into a thousand pieces.

And it's not limited to Christians. Bishop Pike was a textbook example. Ironically, it's because he was a liberal rationalist who didn't take the occult seriously that he had no resistance to the occult when he was confronted with that tantalizing reality. His secular worldview shattered on contact, and he instantly capitulated to necromancy.

Sometimes the very people who are the most dogmatic are also the most vulnerable. Because their belief-system is so unsophisticated and ill-prepared, they're right on the brink of apostasy without knowing it. It only takes one little nudge to push them over the edge. They're absolutely sure of themselves until a last minute crisis, at which point they suddenly jettison their former convictions and embrace the very thing they used to denounce.



## Miracles and modern science

JD Walters has a new post on miracles over at the CADRE. He outlines "two approaches seem to be the most promising for an understanding of special divine action that respects the integrity of science but also allows for genuine miracles..."

<http://christiancadre.blogspot.com/2010/06/two-approaches-to-divine-action-in-age.html>

Keeping in mind the disclaimer at the outset of his post, I'd venture the following comments:

I don't have much to say about the second approach because I can't tell, from his terse summary, what it really amounts to. We have a little snatch of Pannenberg, a little snatch of Peirce, and a colorful illustration by Chesterton. What that all adds up to is hard to say. I will say that his remarks about Peirce sound similar to Rupert Sheldrake's view of nature.

Instead I'll focus on the first approach, which comes through more clearly. And I'll begin with JD's introductory remarks:

"As a person who takes the current scientific consensus very seriously in the way I understand the world, one of the most challenging issues I face in theological reflection is how to understand God's action in the world, not primarily his creating and conserving the world in existence but those 'special' acts we ordinarily call miracles. The problem is that the narrative of

modern science-certain controversies over the implications of quantum mechanics notwithstanding-is one of finding ever more precise regularities in the goings-on of the natural world, which many scientists are tempted to summarize as laws which govern the behavior of all objects in the natural world. On one account of physical laws, called necessitarian, physical laws tell us what must happen in any given situation. Many scientists are probably intuitive necessitarians. If we accept this account, and if the necessary laws we discover do not leave room for events we would call miracles to occur, God would either have to suspend the order of nature to perform a miracle, or limit himself to working only through these laws once he has created and set the world in motion. Both conclusions are theologically unpalatable, the former because it would seem imprudent of God to create a world which he has to override in order to accomplish his purposes, the latter because the current inventory of natural laws does not allow for most events usually understood as miracles."

**i)** One issue is what is meant by "necessary" laws. Is this equivalent to causes or sufficient conditions where, given the cause or sufficient condition, there will be a corresponding effect?

If so, I don't think that presents a prima facie problem for Christian theism. That's just a doctrine of secondary causes or ordinary providence, where some physical things make other physical things happen. These are genuine agencies, with genuine potencies. "Natural forces." They are necessary, *all things being equal*.

**ii)** Within this framework, I don't see the problem with God "overriding" that mechanism as the occasion demands.

Perhaps JD's objection is that this seems ad hoc. Similar to Spinoza's objection that miracles are midcourse corrections, which reflect a design flaw. (And, of course, Spinoza rejected miracles on that account.)

**a)** However, there's no reason to cast the issue in such invidious terms. In general, nature operates much like a machine. And this mechanical quality is useful. It introduces a crucial element of stability and predictability into human existence. Seedtime and harvest.

**b)** But for God to miraculously override this regime is not ad hoc or corrective, per se. It would simply mean that while second causes serve an important purpose, they have their limitations—like any creaturely medium. They are well-adapted to their intended purpose, but there are other purposes which they cannot serve.

It's like a tool. A tool which is useful for one job may be useless for another. While a certain amount of order is needful in human experience, there are also occasions when personal discretion is called for. It's fine to run the system on autopilot most of the time, but there are other times when manual override is called for. That's not a defect, just a limitation. Impersonal agencies can only do so much. Although intelligence designed them, they are not in themselves intelligent. There are situations in which there's no substitute for rational discrimination.

**c)** In addition, this is not merely a created order, but a fallen order. For instance, you wouldn't have the dominical healings and exorcisms in a sinless world.

Moving along:

“The first takes its cue from the history of science.

Time and time again we have seen laws which were originally assumed to be universally valid subsumed as special cases of more general laws, which apply under special conditions (usually called 'limit' conditions), or as approximations to more general laws which are 'valid' enough in those conditions. For example, Newton's laws of motion, once thought to be universally valid, are now seen merely as a 'good enough' approximation of the more general relativistic laws of motion, valid only when the objects being studied are moving slowly enough and are not too massive. Once the limit conditions are transcended, however, general relativity predicts (and experiments confirm) strange behavior never anticipated by Newton's laws, and in fact quite unintelligible within that framework. By analogy, we can think of divine action, not in terms of God violating the laws of nature, but of his taking advantage of a limit condition, in which events occur that are not covered by our current understanding of the laws of nature, but which are still lawful according to the most general laws of nature, which by definition we have not discovered yet."

**i)** I think this fails to draw a fundamental distinction between personal agents and impersonal agencies. Miracles are not analogous to law-like regularities precisely because miracles involve personal discretion. They aren't cyclical, like the phases of a comet. Miracles involve the principle of "counterflow" (to borrow a term from Del Ratzsch). It's akin to human interventions in nature, such as irrigation.

**ii)** On a related note, this theory falters by failing to begin with the concrete phenomena it presumes to systematize. Just consider some of the miracles of Scripture, like Jesus' healings, exorcisms, and nature-miracles (e.g. turning water into wine, or the multiplication of fish), and ask

yourself if that can be properly subsumed under a general "law."

The answer is "no." These events are too pointed, too particular, too discrete, and too discriminate. That's the antithesis of uniformity. The antithesis of a machine, with its standardized "products."

Put another way, this approach suffers from a methodological error. It tries to take a top-down approach when it needs to take a bottom-up approach. You can't start with an abstract model, and then superimpose that on the angular data, to make the data fit the theory.

Rather, you have to begin with a representative sampling of miracles, look for commonalities, then come up with a theory that generalizes on the basis of the particulars which feed into the theory. Instead of trying to squeeze miracles into some preconceived scientific paradigm, we should consider miracles on their own terms, and proceed from there.

## Hume and the burden of proof

Hume famously made this influential, programmatic claim:

*A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.*

Many critics have pointed out the blatantly circular character of his argument. However, I'd like to make a different point.

Hume's objection is based on experience. Especially his claim that we don't experience miracles. That miracles are absent from human experience, or at least the overwhelming preponderance of human experience.

For him, this creates a presumption against reported miracles. Indeed, it creates a daunting presumption against reported miracles.

But that raises the question: if miracles occur, to what extent will we experience their occurrence?

Let's take a paradigm-case:

*1Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years. And the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things. 2And Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his household, who had charge of all that he had, "Put your hand under my thigh, 3that I may make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and God of the earth, that you will not take a wife*

for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell, 4 but will go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac." 5The servant said to him, "Perhaps the woman may not be willing to follow me to this land. Must I then take your son back to the land from which you came?" 6Abraham said to him, "See to it that you do not take my son back there. 7The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my kindred, and who spoke to me and swore to me, 'To your offspring I will give this land,' he will send his angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there. 8But if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this oath of mine; only you must not take my son back there." 9So the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master and swore to him concerning this matter.

10Then the servant took ten of his master's camels and departed, taking all sorts of choice gifts from his master; and he arose and went to Mesopotamia to the city of Nahor. 11And he made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water at the time of evening, the time when women go out to draw water. 12And he said, "O LORD, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. 13Behold, I am standing by the spring of water, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water. 14Let the young woman to whom I shall say, 'Please let down your jar that I may drink,' and who shall say, 'Drink, and I will water your camels'—let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master."

15Before he had finished speaking, behold, Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, came out with her water jar on her shoulder. 16The young woman was very attractive in

*appearance, a maiden whom no man had known. She went down to the spring and filled her jar and came up. 17Then the servant ran to meet her and said, "Please give me a little water to drink from your jar." 18She said, "Drink, my lord." And she quickly let down her jar upon her hand and gave him a drink. 19When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, "I will draw water for your camels also, until they have finished drinking." 20So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough and ran again to the well to draw water, and she drew for all his camels. 21The man gazed at her in silence to learn whether the LORD had prospered his journey or not ([Gen 24:1-21](#)).*

Let's examine some features of this miracle:

**i)** This miracle is an answer to prayer. It's what we call a coincidence miracle. Outwardly speaking, it seems to be a perfectly natural event. Yet it's actually a miracle of timing.

**ii)** Abraham's servant is the only direct witness to this miracle. Others could witness the event, but only he could perceive the special providential character of the event.

That's because it involves a private understanding between just two parties: God and Abraham's servant.

Abraham's servant asked for a sign. And, outwardly speaking, there's nothing "extraordinary" about the sign. What makes it miraculous is the conjunction between the petition and the answer.

**iii)** Abraham's servant shared his prayer with others, but that's after the fact. That's dependent on his testimony.

Likewise, you and I only know about it because it was recorded for posterity in Scripture. It's not the type of



miracle that leaves any trace evidence of its miraculous character.

**iv)** In a way, the resultant births of Jacob and Esau are just as miraculous as the birth of Isaac. Yet Isaac's birth was overtly miraculous whereas their birth was covertly miraculous.

There was nothing miraculous about the immediate circumstances of their conception. Yet their conception was contingent on a miraculous answer to prayer—further back. If God hadn't guided Abraham's servant to find Rebekah, Jacob and Esau wouldn't be born.

**v)** In addition, there's a chain of events leading up to Rebekah's arrival the well that day. For instance, unless her parents were born, unless they married each other, unless they happened to be living there or move to that area, where she was born and bred, she wouldn't be there to come to the well that day. So there's a series of seemingly ordinary events leading up to that particular event. The miracle of timing wasn't confined to coordinating her arrival with the arrival of Abraham's servant on that particular day, at that particular time of day.

Behind that lay a carefully coordinated series of events stretching back for centuries, so that all the salient variables would line up to yield the desired result. Many prior events had to occur, and occur just so, for that one event to occur. So many other things had to happen at a particular time and place for this event to happen at a particular time and place. God's hand is behind the entire process. Not just one "coincidence," but an interconnected sequence of opportune "coincidences." Yet to a human observer, there was nothing special about any of this.

**vi)** Not only does this miraculous answer to prayer presuppose an orchestrated past, but it also has long-range future repercussions. For one thing, it contributes to a genealogy. Because Isaac and Rebekah married, they had Jacob and Esau. And, of course, as a delayed effect of that event, Jacob and Esau also found wives, by whom they had kids one, and grandkids, and great-grandkids, &c. So you have a family tree that branches out in a very different direction than if that prayer went unanswered.

**vii)** And, of course, this isn't just anyone's family. This event has worldwide consequences. It's a link in the lineage of the Messiah. Moreover, it's a conduit of the Abrahamic promise.

Billions of human beings experience the effect of that answered prayer. And yet the miraculous character of the precipitating event is indiscernible. Unless we had a record of the event, including an interpretation of the event, we'd have no idea that this was a miracle.

Mere experience is blind to the ulterior significance of this event. It looks like any other "natural" event. Yet that's just one answer to prayer.

In terms of antecedent probabilities, the evidence doesn't point in one direction or another.

## Are miracles implausible?

Is there a heavy presumption against the miraculous which an abundance of evidence must overcome to justify belief in a miracle? That's what the atheist assures us.

But what does that claim involve? According to one objection, "anyone who could believe in God could believe in anything. To appeal to an omnipotent deity is to allow that at any moment the regularities of nature may be ruptured, that miracles may happen."

This objection defines a miracle as a breach in the uniformity of nature. By the same token, it defines a miracle as an unpredictable event. If the uniformity of nature can break down at any point, then anything can happen at any time. So goes the argument.

To flesh this out a bit, what distinguishes a miracle from a natural event is that you can't extrapolate from past conditions to the occurrence of a miracle. For it lacks causal continuity. It doesn't belong to the chain of events.

One potential objection to this definition is that it doesn't cover coincidental miracles. Miracles of timing. These may involve natural factors, but the timing is opportune in a way that suggests personal prevision and provision. Natural events were coordinated to yield this unexpected, but fortuitous outcome.

Yet there's a sense in which a miraculous coincidence is both predictable and unpredictable. In principle, it would be possible to anticipate that outcome if you knew the prior conditions.

On the other hand, what makes it a miracle is not merely the event itself, but the conjunction of that event with a human need. We couldn't anticipate being in the situation where we need that particular event, and we couldn't anticipate that event occurring just when we need it.

Be that as it may, is there a presumption against believing that some events are unpredictable? That you can't extrapolate some events from past conditions?

That would only be implausible if you subscribe to a closed system. So the presumption is only as good as the metaphysical claim which underwrites it. And the past doesn't create any such presumption, for the very question at issue is whether all future events are inferable from past events. Put another way, whether any particular event is antecedently inferable from past conditions.

Undoubtedly many events are the end-result of past conditions. But that's not something you can know in advance. That's only something you can know after the fact. Which is also true of miracles. Subsequent validation or falsification.

Of course, there's a sense in which miracles are predictable. But not because we can infer a miracle from past conditions. Rather, a miracle is predicable in case God predicts a miracle, or promises a miracle. Predicable because the agent who ultimately performs the miracle has advance knowledge of his future actions. ("Future" in relation to us, if not to himself.) He knows what he will do.

## Extraordinary disclaimers demand extraordinary evidence

Hume famously said, "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined."

This was summarized in Carl Sagan's slogan that "extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence."

I've often criticized this argument. Now I'll approach it from a different angle.

It doesn't occur to Humeans that the principle cuts both ways. It only takes a single instance to establish a miracle. One will do.

By contrast, the Humean has to disclaim every single reported miracle. The Humean must take the antecedent, unfalsifiable position that each and every witness to a miracle was either a deceiver or deceived. Just one isolated exception will dash the entire argument.

So there's no parity between these two propositions. And it's the Humean position which comes up short.

Surely the claim that there's a 100% failure rate in the whole of human history to reported miracles is nothing if not an utterly extraordinary claim. And that, in turn, demands extraordinary evidence.

By what possible evidence could a Humean overcome the standing presumption against his extraordinary claim? He wasn't there. He's in no position to examine every report. Or interview the witnesses.

Also, it's safe to say that for every reported miracle, many similar incidents go unreported. Not every witness had occasion to write it down. Not every witness was literate.

Even if he wrote it down in a private diary, many diaries are never published. Many diaries are forever lost to the ravages of time.

If extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence, then extraordinary disclaimers demand extraordinary evidence.

## Are miracles improbable?

Here's my take on the meaning of the slogan: Extraordinary Claims Require Extraordinary Evidence. (I don't know if other nonbelievers would agree with this.) An extraordinary claim is a claim that an improbable event occurred. An example is a miracle. Since a miracle is a violation of a law of nature it does not happen very often, possibly never. We can estimate a highest possible value for the probability of some miracle occurring e.g one in a billion for a person rising from the dead. (Say if approximately out of every billion people that have died there is one alleged claim of resurrection.) Extraordinary evidence for an extraordinary claim would be evidence which if the claim were not true, then the probability of the evidence itself would be a lot lower than that of the extraordinary claim being true. For example if testimony to a miracle was given and the likelihood of such testimony occurring was say one in a trillion if the miracle did not actually occur. (Thus a believer might argue that approximately out of every trillion false claims

made there is at most one which is endorsed by a person willing to die for the claim.) If the probabilities involved cannot be compared then no case can be made.

By Peter Hawkins on The onus of miracles on  
12/31/10

Is it improbable that a poker player had five royal flushes in a row? Well, that's highly improbable if the deck is randomly shuffled. If, on the other hand, the dealer is a card sharp, then it may be highly probable (even inevitable) that the player had five royal flushes in a row.

So you really can't say, in the abstract, what is probable or improbable. That depends on other variables, known or unknown.



## Parsons on Reppert

What is a supernatural hypothesis? I will limit attention to hypotheses that postulate the existence of supernatural persons or powers. Instances of supernatural persons would include gods, ghosts, demons, angels, spirits (like Ariel), and souls. Instances of supernatural powers would include mana, qi, astrological influences, telekinesis, ESP, and the creative power attributed to God in Genesis where God says "Let there be..." and there is. But what is it for a person or power to be supernatural? By "supernatural" I mean "capable of existing or operating independently of, unrestrained by, or even in violation of, the laws of nature."

So, are supernatural hypotheses as characterized above testable? What do we mean by a "testable?" I mean "testable" in the rather strict sense of "confirmable or disconfirmable by rigorous experiment, experiment of the sort typically employed to evaluate hypotheses in the physical and biological sciences."

<http://secularoutpost.infidels.org/2011/09/testing-supernatural-hypotheses.html>

I find this deeply confused. Although there are times when a theory or hypothesis coincides with an existential proposition, in many situations that's not the case. For instance, there's an elementary difference between confirming the existence of ball lightning, and testing a hypothesis regarding the nature of ball lightning, i.e. how it's generated.

Likewise, while it may (at some point) be feasible to reproduce ball lightning under rigorous, laboratory

conditions, you don't need experimental evidence to confirm the existence of ball lightning. Anecdotal or testimonial evidence should suffice.

After all, if ball lightning exists, it normally exists in nature, not in the lab. Therefore, observing ball lightning in nature would be a perfectly legitimate method of confirming its existence. That's where we'd expect to find it—assuming it exists.

Of course, we'd still need to apply the usual criteria for testimonial evidence.

Now maybe Parsons would say supernatural entities are disanalogous. But that's a different argument.

## NOMA

There are, in general, two hypotheses about how the Shroud came to be. The first is that the shroud represents the work of human ingenuity. The second is that the shroud represents an artifact of supernatural activity.

We'll explore the supernatural hypothesis first. In very general terms, if something is the artifact of a supernatural process, we have no particular expectations about what sort of physical evidence we should expect to accompany it. In other words, there is no scientific way to test a supernatural hypothesis. The shroud could be the artifact of a supernatural process, and there is no way that this hypothesis could be completely ruled out, because it is not as though supernatural activity would leave any tell-tale marks.

<http://turretinfan.blogspot.com/2012/04/shroud-supernatural-hypothesis-and.html>

I'm not clear on what TFan means by this. On the face of it, it bears a startling similarity to methodological naturalism or Gould's nonoverlapping magisteria. Unbelievers frequently tell us that "by definition," supernatural events can't be historically or scientifically confirmed. To take a few examples:

No such conflict should exist because each subject has a legitimate magisterium, or domain of teaching authority—and these magisteria do not overlap (the principle that I would like to designate as NOMA, or "nonoverlapping magisteria").

The net of science covers the empirical universe: what is it made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). The net of religion extends over questions of moral meaning and value. These two magisteria do not overlap, nor do they encompass all inquiry (consider, for starters, the magisterium of art and the meaning of beauty). To cite the arch clichés, we get the age of rocks, and religion retains the rock of ages; we study how the heavens go, and they determine how to go to heaven.

I believe, with all my heart, in a respectful, even loving concordat between our magisteria—the NOMA solution. NOMA represents a principled position on moral and intellectual grounds, not a mere diplomatic stance. NOMA also cuts both ways. If religion can no longer dictate the nature of factual conclusions properly under the magisterium of science, then scientists cannot claim higher insight into moral truth from any superior knowledge of the world's empirical constitution. This mutual humility has important practical consequences in a world of such diverse passions.

[http://www.stephenjagould.org/library/gould\\_noma.html](http://www.stephenjagould.org/library/gould_noma.html)

What about the resurrection of Jesus? I'm not saying it didn't happen; but if it did happen, it would be a miracle. The resurrection claims are claims that not only that Jesus' body came back alive; it came back alive never to die again. That's a violation of what naturally happens, every day, time after time, millions of times a year. What are the chances of that happening? Well, it'd be a miracle. In other words, it'd be so highly improbable that we can't account for it by natural means. A theologian may claim that it's true,

and to argue with the theologian we'd have to argue on theological grounds because there are no historical grounds to argue on. Historians can only establish what probably happened in the past, and by definition a miracle is the least probable occurrence. And so, by the very nature of the canons of historical research, we can't claim historically that a miracle probably happened. By definition, it probably didn't. And history can only establish what probably did.

I wish we could establish miracles, but we can't. It's no one's fault. It's simply that the canons of historical research do not allow for the possibility of establishing as probable the least probable of all occurrences. For that reason, Bill's four pieces of evidence are completely irrelevant. There cannot be historical probability for an event that defies probability, even if the event did happen. The resurrection has to be taken on faith, not on the basis of proof.

The evidence that Bill himself doesn't see his explanation as historical is that he claims that his conclusion is that Jesus was raised from the dead. Well, that's a passive – "was raised" – who raised him? Well, presumably God! This is a theological claim about something that happened to Jesus. It's about something that God did to Jesus. But historians cannot presuppose belief or disbelief in God, when making their conclusions. Discussions about what God has done are theological in nature, they're not historical. Historians, I'm sorry to say, have no access to God. The canons of historical research are by their very nature restricted to what happens here on this earthly plane. They do not and cannot presuppose any set beliefs about the natural realm. I'm not saying this is

good or bad. It's simply the way historical research works.

<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/is-there-historical-evidence-for-the-resurrection-of-jesus-the-craig-ehrman#ixzz1sEV77EaW>

But a basic problem with NOMA or methodological naturalism is the failure to distinguish between cause and effect. If something is supernaturally caused, that doesn't mean the effect is supernatural. The effect is natural. Mundane. Creaturely.

Moreover, it's common for Christian philosophers to infer supernatural causes from natural effects. Consider the many versions of the cosmological and teleological arguments. Or the argument from religious experience. Or intelligent design theory. Or the argument from miracles. Or the argument from prophecy.

Is it TFan's position that we can never infer supernatural agency from experience? What about answers to prayer? Can we never infer that God answered our prayer?

Finally, I'll close with Craig's response to Ehrman, which seems germane to TFan's objection:

But that's not all. Dr. Ehrman just assumes that the probability of the resurrection on our background knowledge  $[\text{Pr}(R/B)]$  is very low. But here, I think, he's confused. What, after all, is the resurrection hypothesis? It's the hypothesis that Jesus rose supernaturally from the dead. It is not the hypothesis that Jesus rose naturally from the dead. That Jesus rose naturally from the dead is fantastically improbable. But I see no reason whatsoever to think

that it is improbable that God raised Jesus from the dead.

In order to show that that hypothesis is improbable, you'd have to show that God's existence is improbable. But Dr. Ehrman says that the historian cannot say anything about God. Therefore, he cannot say that God's existence is improbable. But if he can't say that, neither can he say that the resurrection of Jesus is improbable. So Dr. Ehrman's position is literally self-refuting.

Now he seems to suggest that the historian can't make these sorts of inferences because somehow God is inaccessible. Well, I have a couple of points I'd like to make here.

Secondly, notice that the historian doesn't have direct access to any of the objects of his study. As Dr. Ehrman says, the past is gone. It's no longer there. All we have is the residue of the past, and the historian infers the existence of entities and events in the past on the basis of the evidence. And that's exactly the move that I am making with respect to the resurrection of Jesus.

<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/is-there-historical-evidence-for-the-resurrection-of-jesus-the-craig-ehrman#ixzz1sEVaIIDp>

## Are miracles too improbable to believe?

Unbelievers typically say miracles are too “improbable” or “extraordinary” to be credible. But other issues aside, is that an accurate definition of a miracle?

For instance, Christian theology teaches the general resurrection of the dead. According to this doctrine, on the day of judgment the dead will be raised to life. Reembodied. Everyone who ever lived and died will be reembodied.

The only exception will be those who are alive when Christ returns. And even they will undergo a change. They will be immortalized. One way or another, everyone (both the living and the dead) will be physically immortalized—some to be rewarded and others to be punished.

Now unbelievers would presumably classify this as a miracle. They certainly don't view it as a naturally occurring event. Of course, they don't believe it will happen, but that's not the point. Right now we're discussing the *concept* of miracle.

Here we're dealing with an event that's universal or well-nigh universal. It would affect every single human being.

But if so, then in what sense is it “extraordinary” or “improbable”? Something that happens to everyone is not unusual. Not something out of the ordinary. Rather, something that happens to everyone is normal. Can't get more ordinary than that.

For instance, Richard Carrier says “probability measures frequency.” On that definition, the general resurrection is maximally probable.



Moreover, even if the general resurrection isn't actually universal, we could recast the issue in hypothetical terms. Philosophy routinely deals with thought-experiments.

Likewise, how can something that happens to everyone be improbable? If it rained 360 days a year, would we say rain is improbable? Wouldn't the absence of rain be improbable?

One could say the general resurrection isn't strictly universal if it only applies to the dead, not the living. But on that view, it's not the resurrected who are exceptional, but those who aren't resurrected—assuming the sum total of everyone who lived and died outnumbers the generation that's alive at the time of the Parousia. The living are in the minority compared to the dead.

In that event, those *not* raised from the dead would be the anomalous cases—assuming those alive at the Parousia represent a fraction of humanity. In that case, it would be "extraordinary," and thus "improbable," *not* to be raised from the dead.

## Infidels on the run

Misotheist Chris Hallquist has “reviewed” Keener’s monograph on miracles. I’ll review his review:

<http://www.uncrediblehallq.net/2012/01/05/review-of-craig-keeners-miracles/>

*The book’s primary thesis is simply that eyewitnesses do offer miracle claims, a thesis simple enough but one sometimes neglected when some scholars approach accounts in the Gospels. The secondary thesis is that supernatural explanations, while not suitable in every case, should be welcome on the scholarly table along with other explanations often discussed (p. 1)*

This is what I call a weaselly thesis statement because it clearly says much less than what Keener wants to say. It lets him that hint at some very controversial claims, but because he’s officially only defending these seemingly banal claims, it gets him off the hook from really having to defend his views.

Hallquist’s conspiratorial interpretation notwithstanding, there’s nothing sneaky about Keener’s thesis. Keener is a NT scholar. Liberal NT scholars typically relegate miracles to legendary embellishment by redactors who didn’t observe the events they report. So that’s what Keener is responding to.

Now based on what I know about the history of paranormal investigation and some of the adventures of the Society for Psychical Research, I'd quite confidently predict that if Christians ever did that kind of investigation, they'd eventually realize that they're not going to find good evidence for supernatural phenomenon with those kinds of stories.

One wonders who he's actually studied on the subject. Has he read Stephen Braude or Rupert Sheldrake, for instance?

So for example, let's look at the issue of claims of regrown limbs. There's a website called [WhyWon'tGodHealAmputees.com](http://WhyWon'tGodHealAmputees.com), (formerly known as [WhyDoesGodHateAmputees.com](http://WhyDoesGodHateAmputees.com)) that makes an argument:

For this experiment, we need to find a deserving person who has had both of his legs amputated. For example, find a sincere, devout veteran of the Iraqi war, or a person who was involved in a tragic automobile accident...

If possible, get millions of people all over the planet to join the prayer circle and pray their most fervent prayers. Get millions of people praying in unison for a single miracle for this one deserving amputee. Then stand back and watch. What is going to happen? Jesus clearly says that if you believe, you will receive whatever you ask

for in prayer. He does not say it once — he says it many times in many ways in the Bible.

And yet, even with millions of people praying, nothing will happen...

What are we seeing here? It is not that God sometimes answers the prayers of amputees, and sometimes does not. Instead, in this situation there is a very clear line. God never answers the prayers of amputees. It would appear, to an unbiased observer, that God is singling out amputees and purposefully ignoring them.(LINK)

What's the point of this thought experiment? How do we know, for sure, that God does not answer prayers?... we simply pray and watch what happens. What we find is that nothing happens. No matter how many people pray, no matter how often they pray, no matter how sincerely they pray, no matter how worthy the prayer, nothing ever happens. If we pray for anything that is impossible — for example, regenerating an amputated limb or moving Mt. Everest to Newark, NJ — it never happens. We all know that. If we pray for anything that is possible, the results of the prayer will unfold in

exact accord with the normal laws of probability. In every situation where we statistically analyze the effects of prayers, looking at both the success AND the failure of prayer, we find that prayer has zero effect. Prayers for amputees never work. Medical prayers never work. Prayers for “good people” never work. Battlefield prayers never work. That happens, always, because God is imaginary. Every time a Christian says, “The Lord answered my prayer,” what we are seeing instead is a simple coincidence or the natural effects of self-talk.(LINK)

There’s a slew of problems here. To name a few:

- i)** Even if the amputee is “deserving,” answered prayers have a ripple effect. Changing one variable in the present changes many variables in the future. A human being is not an isolated system. Men interact with their environment. So that has to be taken into account.
- ii)** The very fact that he was injured in the first place has a purpose in the plan of God.
- iii)** To multiply the same prayer by millions of petitioners misconceives the nature of prayer. It’s not like upping the odds that you will win the lottery if you buy up thousands of tickets.

God will answer a prayer if it’s wise to do so, and not because millions of people asked him to. One wise prayer is

better than a million foolish prayers.

**iv)** Of course God doesn't answer a prayer to relocate Mt. Everest. That's a stunt.

**v)** Marshall Brain fails to appreciate the use of hyperbole in Scripture. The promise to receive "whatever" you ask is obviously hyperbolic. It's understood that that's not a blank check. For instance, it doesn't mean God will annihilate himself upon request.

**vi)** Marshall Brain issues a series of question-begging denials about the alleged inefficacy of prayer. But that's not an argument. That assumes what he needs to prove. And it disregards countless testimonies to the contrary.

**vii)** Indeed, he tries to preempt the counterevidence by asserting that apparent answers to prayer are sheer coincidence. Statistically equivalent to nonanswers. But that's special pleading.

On the one hand he says there's no evidence. On the other hand he tries to discredit evidence in advance of the fact.

The fact that the only prayers God "answers" are prayers for things that have a chance of happening anyway is powerful evidence that God never actually answers prayers...Deep down, most of them have to know that prayer doesn't really ever work, which is why they only pray for things that have a chance of happening anyway.

This is armchair psychoanalysis. Attribute a defensive motive to Christians.

**i)** By definition, it would be futile to ask for something if you think there's no chance of getting what you receive.

**ii)** At the same time, the word "chance" is misleading. Hallquist is using the word in a naturalistic sense, but the point of prayer is to ask for things you don't expect to happen by chance. Yes, it's possible that it would happen even if you didn't pray, but that's true of many things.

It's possible that I will get a job offer out of the blue. Does this mean I should never apply for a job? Just wait by the phone?

**iii)** Christians frequently pray about mundane, bread-and-butter issues, not because they believe these things have a chance of happening anyway, but because these are things they need. They pray about things that affect their daily lives—and the lives of those they love. Urgent concerns. A medical crisis.

They don't begin with a mental list of naturally occurring events, see if what they want is on the list, then check the matching box. Prayer isn't that premeditated.

I pray for certain things because they are important to me. Important to those I care about. They reflect my needs or the needs of others close to me. They reflect my priorities. My ultimate concerns.

For instance, I pray for the salvation of the lost. I don't do that because I think there's a chance of that happening anyway.

Now Keener is completely missing the point here. The significance of the regrown limb issue is that if regrown limbs happened, they'd avoid a lot of problems you get

with other kinds of healing claims. You eliminate the possibility that it could be a coincidence you, eliminate the possibility that maybe the doctors made a mistake. If someone's leg really regrew it'd be pretty easy to document conclusively, if it happened under the right circumstances. If the limb regrows almost instantaneously, it's going to be hard to be mistaken about witnessing that.

**i)** Notice Hallquist's bias. Why is it necessary to eliminate the "possibility" of coincidence? Why must prayer meet such an artificially high threshold?

Hallquist takes for granted a massive presumption against miracles or efficacious prayer. Therefore, you can't justifiably believe that God answered a prayer unless you can eliminate the "possibility" of coincidence or the "possibility" of misdiagnosis.

Yet it's reasonable to accept many things for which we never set a very high standard of proof. Hallquist relies on medical science, even though many things can go awry at any stage of the process. He can be misdiagnosed. His medical records can be inaccurate. The pharmacist can make a mistake.

**ii)** Notice how "weaselly" his own procedure is. He's looking for loopholes to evade evidence for miracles or efficacious prayers.

**iii)** Suppose I misidentify an answered prayer? So what? Why should that be in a class by itself? We make mistakes in other walks of life. Misperceive or misremember what happened. Rely on faulty sources. But Hallquist doesn't think we have to eliminate all possibility of error in other walks of life to be warranted in what we believed.



**iv)** If there is a prayer-answering God, why assume the world would look any different than it does? Why assume God would go out of his way, every time he answers our prayers, to eliminate the appearance of a happy coincidence? How is that germane to the purpose of prayer?

There's a difference between asking God for a job, and asking God for a sign. Notice how Hallquist has tacitly shifted the issue from the efficacy to evidence. He's stipulating that if God answers prayers, he must not only give the petitioner what he asked for, but make it unmistakably clear that God did it. It's not enough to answer the prayer. God must sign his name to the answer. But these are separate issues.

**v)** Only if Hallquist already knows what the world is like, knows ahead of time that there is no God, is he entitled to treat as ipso facto suspect an answer to prayer that might seem to be coincidental. For if a prayer-answering God exists, there is no reason he'd go out of his way to sidestep second causes. God created the system of second causes. That's how he normally governs the world. It's not like oil and water, where an answer to prayer must never be confused with ordinary providence.

**vi)** Of course, the evidentiary value of miracles does depend on our ability to detect superhuman personal agency. There is, however, no expectation that if a prayer-answering God exists, his agency will be detectable. If divine agency happens to be undetectable in any given case, that doesn't create a negative presumption.

So we shouldn't expect false reports of regrowing limbs to happen very often. It's going to be hard to get away with making up a story like that, and we should expect

that to deter people from making up stories about regrowing limbs. However, people do sometimes tell outrageous lies. So the fact that there is a story of a regrowing limb in a book by Pat Robertson doesn't prove anything. It doesn't change the fact that the lack of evidence of regrowing limbs is suspicious, and the fact that skeptics aren't impressed by such stories isn't evidence of closed-mindedness.

Notice the tension in his statement. He begins by saying it's hard to fake a regenerated limb. But then he mentions the fact that people tell outrageous lies. Once again, he's leaving himself an out.

By definition, for every 100 times someone is faced with 100 to 1 odds, one person will beat the odds. In more religious parts of the world, including the United States, I'm sure that most people, maybe an overwhelming majority of people, pray when they or their children are faced with a serious illness. In that case, most odds-beating recoveries will happen after prayer.

In the nature of the case, most odds-beating recoveries will also happen after medical treatment. Is it just coincidental that the cure follows the treatment?

This is why science is neat. At the most basic level, when we're talking about the scientific study of prayer, we're talking about checking to see if prayer leads to beating the odds more often than not praying. We're also checking for things like bias among people recording the data and the placebo effect.

**i)** Suppose a prayer-answering God exists. Is beating the odds the objective of prayer?

Suppose your best friend is diagnosed with cancer. Suppose there's a 70% success rate with this type of cancer. He doesn't need to beat the odds to be cured. More often than not, patients with his type of cancer are cured.

Does that mean you won't pray for him? No. What if he's in the 30% risk group?

**ii)** The function of petitionary prayer is not to beat the odds, but to meet a need. God answers the prayer by meeting the need. Whether or not that beats the odds is beside the point. That's not what prayer is for.

**iii)** In addition, statistics are pretty irrelevant to personal experience. As Richard Feynman once said:

*“You know, the most amazing thing happened to me tonight. I was coming here, on the way to the lecture, and I came in through the parking lot. And you won't believe what happened. I saw a car with the license plate ARW 357. Can you imagine? Of all the millions of license plates in the state, what was the chance that I would see that particular one tonight? Amazing!”*

If God answers your prayer, if you witness a miracle, statistics don't matter.

This is something that's actually not all that surprising, once you think about what randomness means. Random doesn't mean being distributed evenly. There's

nothing about randomness that prevents events of a certain kind from clumping together just by chance, so it's going to happen some of the time. Yes in some cases it's going to be tempting to say "this clump is just too improbable to have happened by chance," but except in the very most extreme of cases it's just not something you can say without careful statistical analysis.

**i)** That's a truism, but in real life we don't insist on "careful statistical analysis" to legitimate most of our beliefs or decisions. Suppose I find out that a married couple attended the same junior high and high school at the same time.

That could be a coincidence, but it's more likely than not that they paired off because they knew each other in junior high and high school. Is that a rigorous inference from the data? No. Just a commonsense inference.

Do you have to eliminate the possibility that it's coincidental to be reasonably believe it's not coincidental? No.

**ii)** In addition, Hallquist's appeal to the odds is simplistic. Real life isn't like throwing dice, where each throw is causally unrelated to the other.

**iii)** Notice, once again, that Hallquist is always on the look out for an excuse to disbelieve in miracles. He demands evidence, but always comes up with some escape clause to discount the evidence.

Furthermore, even in cases that seem extreme, what might be happening is that inaccurate reporting is taking events that were only somewhat improbable and

blowing them up into something extremely improbable. There are a number of reasons that could happen.

Of course, that cuts both ways. Inaccurate reporting can also *underreport* miracles.

Well maybe not. But you could also ask similar questions about prayer in general—why an omnipotent, omniscient God would need our input on how to run the universe.

**i)** That's a caricature of the rationale for prayer. Is Hallquist just demagoguing the issue, or is he really that ignorant?

**ii)** Moreover, there's nothing implausible about a theistic universe in which inanimate processes are the default setting, but allowance is made for "manual override"; a universe open to dynamic interaction between God and man. On the one hand it's generally convenient to have cyclical processes in place. That makes life stable and predictable. Enables us to make plans.

On the other hand, that leaves room for us to bypass the machinery by going directly to God. That strikes a reasonable balance.

We ourselves do that. We invent machines that do things automatically. But we also reserve the right to intervene, to break the cycle, to exercise rational discretion.

**iii)** Furthermore, I'd also expect God, especially in a fallen world, to foster a piety of patience. Learning how to wait. Learning how to trust. Learning to cope with disappointment and deal with frustration. Not instant gratification.

Even in the life of someone like Abraham, miracles weren't a regular occurrence. Decades passed without anything extraordinary happening to him. And he's exceptional.

Keener does at one point give a very brief argument for why we can't study the supernatural scientifically:

*Since science depends on observation and experimentation, and since a "miracle is by definition an irreproducible" experience, even documented miracle cures by definition cannot fit precisely the expectations of science as it has been most narrowly defined. While affirming miracles, one scholar warns that "miracles cannot be investigated by the usual scientific methods since we cannot control the variables and perform experiments" (p. 608).*

This is pretty clearly wrong. If God gave one man the power to work a certain limited kind of miracles at will, that would be reproducible, and subject to scientific experimentation. In particular, he could submit to a test under conditions designed to rule out fraud and delusion, and then we could see if he could still produce the apparent effects under those conditions. There are many people who would be happy to arrange such a test, including the James Randi Educational Foundation, which offers a \$1,000,000 prize to anyone who can demonstrate paranormal abilities under controlled test conditions.

**i)** Actually, secular scientists typically incorporate methodological naturalism into their definition of science. So Keener is merely answering them on their own terms.

**ii)** If Hallquist rejects methodological naturalism, then he has no right to tilt the board against miracles. In that event there's no antecedent presumption to the contrary which the evidence must overcome.

**iii)** Moreover, OT prophets and NT apostles aren't sorcerers. They have no inherent paranormal abilities. They can't make extraordinary things happen at will. They can only act as God empowers them, when God empowers them, at God's bidding.

**iv)** It's striking how much faith "sceptics" place in a washed-up stage magician like James Randi.

For example, you can say that the reason people who claim to be psychic are never able to demonstrate under controlled test conditions that are designed to rule out cheating is that the presence of skeptics somehow disrupts psychic powers, but I think the more plausible explanation is that nobody really has psychic powers and precautions against cheating are doing exactly what they're supposed.

**i)** That begs the question of whether telepathy is fraudulent.

**ii)** Moreover, it gratuitously assumes that experimental evidence is superior to anecdotal evidence. But experimental evidence is suited to inanimate processes rather than personal agency.

**iii)** Furthermore, Hallquist ignores statistical and experimental evidence that runs counter to his naturalism. Cf. R. Sheldrake, **THE SCIENCE DELUSION**, chap. 9.

So it can't be disputed that the evidence for miracles is less than perfect. That's enough to disprove Keener's insinuation that skeptics of miracles wouldn't be persuaded by any evidence. The vast majority of skeptics would have no trouble believing in the power of prayer if there were as much evidence for it as there is for the power of penicillin. But there isn't.

**i)** That's not true. There are unbelievers who say, as a matter of principle, that a miraculous explanation is, by definition, the least likely explanation. Therefore, any naturalistic explanation, however, improbable, is preferable to a miraculous explanation.

**ii)** Moreover, we wouldn't expect personal agency to operate with the mechanical uniformity of chemical reactions.

The issue is not whether skeptics are closed-minded, the issue is that if the case is going to be touted as powerful evidence of miraculous healing, it needs to be possible to show with some degree of certainty that the doctors didn't make a mistake. Keener claims that misdiagnosis can sometimes be ruled out, but he supports this claim with just a footnote.

**i)** Misdiagnosis cuts both ways. A doctor might automatically attribute a cure to medical treatment rather than prayer. Or he might automatically attribute an illness to natural causes rather than supernatural causes (e.g. possession, hexing).



**ii)** Likewise, why must a miraculous explanation achieve some degree of certainty, but a naturalistic explanation must not?

I don't know if you're getting sick of this post by now, but I am, so one last point: Keener tries to explain the lack of medical documentation for alleged miraculous healings by proposing that God has seen fit to mainly work healing miracles in the context of missionary efforts in the Third World, and that makes them difficult to document (see i.e. p. 662-704-705). Again, while this is a possible explanation, I don't think it's the best explanation. Alleged miracles not happening under circumstances where they can be well documented is just what we would expect if no miracles were happening all.

**i)** It's not implausible that God performs miracles of healing (to take one example) more often among those who lack our medical resources.

**ii)** Likewise, It's not implausible that God performs miracles more often in areas dominated by the occult.

## What if everything is ordinary?

The multiverse is a popular theory in physics—especially quantum cosmology (or so I've read). Of course, it's a controversial theory, but it's a scientifically respectable and respected theory within the guild. Suppose we grant that theory for the sake of argument.

Let's compare that with a stock objection to miracles: extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence. This goes back to Hume, although it was popularized by Sagan. Suppose we grant that objection for the sake of argument.

But doesn't the multiverse moot Sagan's objection? If the multiverse exists, then nothing is extraordinary. For if the multiverse exists, then every possibility is realized in some parallel reality or another. Every alternate possibility pops up in some corner of the far-flung multiverse. But in that case, every event is ordinary in the great scheme of things. Indeed, every event is equally ordinary. Nothing is too improbable to occur. Indeed, it's inevitable.

So which gives—Sagan, or the multiverse?

## Michael Shermer dons a clerical collar

One of my concerns about some hardline cessationists is the way their scepticism towards modern miracles implicitly casts doubt on Biblical miracles. If a cessationist automatically and invariably greets every reported miracle in modern times with the same debunking mentality as James Randi or Michael Shermer, then why assume biblical witnesses are somehow more believable? It seems arbitrary to draw a bright red line between the total credibility of biblical witnesses and the total incredibility of modern witnesses.

Now, some cessationists like Jack Cottrell and Francis Nigel Lee do make allowance for modern miracles, but with a significant caveat: they classify all modern miracles as demonic.

This creates an odd asymmetry. During the church age, the Devil is free to perform miracles while the Holy Spirit is disarmed.

## Unfalsifiable atheism

*If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead (Lk 16:31).*

The point is not these [naturalistic] explanations are indeed the correct ones; it is that someone who has naturalistic preconceptions will always in fact find some naturalistic explanation more plausible than a supernatural one. The words "in fact" in the previous sentence are important. I am talking about the world as I believe it is. Suppose that I woke up in the night and saw the stars arranged in shapes that spelt out the Apostles' Creed. I would know that astronomically it is impossible that the stars should have so changed their positions. I don't know what I would think. Perhaps I would think that I was dreaming or that I had gone mad. What if everyone else seemed to me to be telling me that the same thing had happened? Then I might not only think that I had gone mad—I would probably *go* mad.

J. J. C. Smart & J. J. Haldane, **ATHEISM AND THEISM** (Blackwell 2003), 45-46.

## The limits of science

**i)** I think scientific realism is paradoxical. Here's one reason. Scientific realism aims at providing an objective, third-person description of the world. Not only is that the aim, but that's a presupposition.

However, science ultimately depends on observation. On the human observer. So underlying the third-person perspective is a first-person perspective. And it's hard to see how science can bootstrap a third-person perspective from a first-person perspective.

**ii)** But the paradox runs even deeper. According to a scientific analysis of sensory perception, we don't perceive the world directly. Rather, our perception of the world is mediated by various intervening processes. Physical objects generate sound waves, light waves, &c. That's a form of coded energy or coded information. When that reaches our eyes, ears, and other sensory relays, that's translated into different coded energy. Say, from electromagnetic signals to electrochemical signals.

The upshot is that my internal representation of the external world is coded information. I have a mental image of a tree. But if the scientific analysis of sensory perception is correct, then my mental representation isn't a miniature image of the tree, but a coded analogue.

Yet if that's the case, then there's no reason to assume the mental representation resembles the external object, any more than musical notation resembles sound.

We tend to think of the eyes as cameras which take photographs of the outside world. The difference between

the tree “out there” and my mental image is basically a difference in scale and dimensionality (i.e. a 2D image of a 3D object).

But it’s hard to see (pardon the pun) how a process of coding energy is likely to yield a readout that resembles the distal stimulus.

**iii)** And that’s not the end of the paradox. For we’re having to use sensory perception to analyze sensory perception. A circular procedure. So we can’t get behind the process to study the process apart from the process, for we are part of the very process we study! The percipient perceiving himself.

In a scientific analysis of sensory perception, we’re tacitly assuming a viewpoint independent of the observer. A viewpoint over and above the process. We imagine the tree “out there.” We imagine the tree generating light waves. We track the light waves as they impinge on the retina. We continue to trace the process from the outside into the brain.

But that’s an illusion. For the scientific analysis is ultimately on the receiving end of the process. Hence, we’re never in a position to retrace the process.

But in that event, the deceptively objective scientific description is even further removed from reality than appears to be the case.

So the conclusion circles back and falsifies the premise. That leaves us totally in the dark.

**iv)** And it’s truly insoluble given naturalism. Contrast that to Christian theism. If God made us, if God made the world,

then I can understand how God could coordinate what the tree is really like, outside the observer, with the observer's mental picture of the tree. God could design a process in which the output resembles the input.

But how would an unguided evolutionary process be able to compare what the tree is really like with our mental representation of the tree? There's no overarching intelligence to compare the two in advance and create a chain-of-custody in which appearance and reality eventually match up.

**v)** Unbelievers argue for methodological naturalism on the grounds that leaving divine intervention out of the picture contributed to the tremendous progress and success of modern science and technology. Science continues to explain things that ignorant, superstitious folk used to explain by recourse to gods and demons.

From a historical standpoint, there may be a grain of truth to that portrayal, but I think it's largely true of pagan polytheism. In polytheism, there is no unifying principle, no centralized command-and-control. Rather, you have a turf war between competing gods, who vary in their knowledge and power. Indeed, the gods themselves are the product of a cosmic process.

But in OT monotheism, there's a single sovereign Creator God behind everything that happens. So everything is coordinated. God creates an order of second causes.

**vi)** Scientific realism also assumes or stipulates the uniformity of nature. And there's a measure of truth to that. That's somewhat analogous to divine providence. But according to providence, natural events are guided by a

higher intelligence, unlike the uniformity of nature—which is driven by mindless forces.

**vii)** In addition, from a Christian standpoint, historical causation includes factors like answered prayer and coincidence miracles.

These involve divine “intervention.” This type of “intervention” doesn’t necessarily “interrupt” the “natural” course of events. Not like jumping into the middle of things to change course. Rather, it’s more like a stacked deck where the cards were shuffled ahead of time to yield a specific, predetermined sequence of events. Viewed from the outside, it all looks perfectly “natural.” But there’s a higher intelligence directing the process behind-the-scenes to yield a particular conjunction of seemingly fortuitous events.

This is generally imperceptible, because the significance of the outcome is only meaningful to a particular individual in need. He recognizes how this outwardly ordinary event is extraordinarily opportune for him.

There’s no telling how often answered prayer or coincidence miracles are a driving force in history, for you have to be an insider to appreciate the answer or the “coincidence.” But these are “causes” no less than “natural” causes.



## Naturalizing the paranormal

I'm going to comment on a recent post by JD Walters:

<http://christiancadre.blogspot.com/2012/09/christianity-and-paranormal.html>

First of all, I agree with JD that Christians should take the academic study of the paranormal seriously. For one thing, this has apologetic value. It supplies counterevidence to the common atheistic contention that there's no point of contact between the enchanted world of the Bible and the disenchanting world we actually inhabit.

Likewise, the paranormal is part of a Christian worldview. Of course, that acknowledgement doesn't set aside ethical questions regarding participation in certain paranormal activities, viz. the occult.

Aside from the benefit of allowing Christians to study parapsychology and comparative religion without fear of the implications for their faith, it can also help us regain a sense of God's presence in everything that happens, not just 'special' events. There is a danger that, if we only view supernatural events as religious, we lose sight of the sacramental reality of the whole world as God's creation. Ultimately, Christianity is not an otherworldly religion. We are not to focus our attention on some spiritual realm, to the neglect of the earthly one. On the contrary, this is the world God cares about and this is the world in which he became flesh. While special visions and other signs and

wonders can be uniquely powerful manifestations of God's presence and can be incredibly encouraging, ultimately they will serve their purpose if they turn us back to our everyday lives and activities with a renewed love of God and increased ability to discern His presence everywhere.

There's a lot of truth to this statement. However, as stated, this represents an overreaction to an equally reactionary alternative. The biblical outlook is both worldly and otherworldly. JD's position risks deeschatologizing the Christian outlook.

Divine prophecy "involves communication, not merely representation; interpretation, not narration; integration, not fragmentation; moral direction in the present, not manipulation of the future. It preserves freedom; it does not bind people to a predetermined fate. It builds confidence and hope, not insecurity and despair." (pp. 99-100) Prophecy aims fundamentally at moral transformation and is a call to action, not just an announcement of future news stories.

But that oversimplifies the data. Prophecies are not all of a kind. For instance, oracles of judgment tend to be conditional, where one objective is to motivate repentance. (Of course, oracles of judgment can also inculcate the impenitent.)

On the other hand, we wouldn't want oracles of salvation to be conditional, if that means the prophecy might let us down just when we need it most.

The paranormal needs to be 'naturalized', and understood to be just as much a part of the 'ordinary' world we live in as rocks falling and plants photosynthesizing. In other words, in addition to distinguishing between 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' or 'special' divine providence, we also need to distinguish between paranormal happenings and divine miracles, the latter being a subset of the former.

If many phenomena formerly thought to be evidence of God's direct intervention instead turn out to be manifestations of 'natural' abilities...

However, I think she is right to call for the naturalization of the paranormal.

**i)** I'm game for whatever happens to be the best explanation for any given phenomenon. And there's a temptation to reduce everything to a common explanation. Ever since Aristotle, we like to systematize. Reduce outward variety to an underlying unifying principle. Present a unified explanation.

But that runs the risk of a prescriptive analysis which prejudices and oversimplifies the world.

**ii)** If, moreover, we classify "divine miracles" as a "subset" of the paranormal, and if we "naturalize" the paranormal as the expression of natural human abilities, then does a miraculous answer to prayer mean that I answered my own prayer? In that case, God didn't answer my prayer.

**iii)** The basic problem with Schwebel's framework, to judge by JD's exposition, is a false dichotomy, where every paranormal event must either be the result of God's direct action or else the result of our natural paranormal abilities.

But in the Christian worldview, God and man are not the only agents.

**iv)** This also goes to the definition of the paranormal. In principle, we could say a paranormal event is either the result of the agent's own ability or else the ability of a secondary agent who empowers the first agent or simply does something to or for another agent.

**v)** For that matter, even on a "naturalized" paradigm, it doesn't follow that all humans either have paranormal abilities or the same paranormal abilities. So if a man has a paranormal experience, that could be the result of another man (or agent) exercising his paranormal ability. In fact, even Schwebel seems to draw that basic distinction:

...telepathically induced visions in which the 'signal' comes from the mind of the departed person while the seer supplies the sensory environment and remembered images of the departed, who often appear as the seer remembered them from a previous time.

**vi)** In addition, this book appears to be an apologia for Catholic miracles, so we need to take that bias into account. That doesn't mean we can dismiss it out of hand. But the book is apparently designed to legitimate Catholic miracles, as well as explaining their occurrence consistent with rival miracles, by subsuming both under a kind of covering law.

Again, I haven't read the book. I'm just bouncing off of JD's summary.

## Wooden probabilities

Thus, the alleged resurrection of Jesus is an "extraordinary claim" in the sense that it has an extremely low prior probability, i.e.,  $\Pr(R | B) \leq 10^{-11}$ . In other words, even if God exists, R has an extremely low prior probability for the simple reason that God has an extremely weak tendency to resurrect people from the dead.[3] To be precise, He resurrects from the dead less than one human in every 100 billion.

<http://secularoutpost.infidels.org/2012/08/ECREE5.html>

**i)** That's a false premise. According to the Biblical doctrine of the general resurrection, God will resurrect everyone who ever lived. The only folks he won't raise from the dead are those who happen to be alive at the time of the Parousia. And even they will be immortalized.

**ii)** In addition, this reflects Jeff's wooden grasp of probability. Even if God hasn't raised anyone else from the dead, this doesn't tell you anything about the likelihood that he raised Jesus from the dead. It all depends on what reason he has for raising Jesus, but not raising others.

To take a comparison, suppose I ask if it's extraordinary to find fallen leaves stacked in neat piles. That depends. It would be extraordinary if fallen leaves arranged themselves into neat piles on the lawn. If, however, a gardener raked the yard, that's pretty ordinary.

The answer depends on the presence or absence of personal agency, as well as the particular intent of the

agent. That's not something you can calculate in the abstract, from raw frequency.

## But what if it really did happen that way?

Hume notoriously argued that a naturalistic explanation is always preferable to a supernaturalistic explanation. Carl Sagan popularized Hume's position in the slogan that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence." Bart Ehrman says that "by definition," a miracle is the least likely explanation for a historical event. You also have atheists who attempt to deploy Bayesian probability theory to show that the prior probability of a miracle is so low that, practically speaking, no evidence can overcome the crushing presumption of its nonoccurrence.

The problem with all these related postures is the starting point. Suppose God really did call Abraham out of Ur? Suppose Christ really did change water into wine? Suppose the Father really did raise Jesus from the dead?

In sum, what if a reported miracle *did* happen? Then what?

The atheist can't admit that something which happened... happened. Even if a miracle did, in fact, occur, I will never accept it! No matter what happened, I'm going to say in advance that I refuse to believe it!

But how is that reasonable? How is it reasonable to stake out a position that won't allow you to acknowledge reality? Isn't that the definition of a delusion? No matter what's actually the case, you're not prepared to believe it?

Shouldn't we be open to the occurrence of something that occurred? It's not something you're in a position to rule out in advance of the fact. If you already knew that, you wouldn't have to play the odds in the first place. That's just a guess.

Is it not more reasonable to take as our starting point that if something occurs, we should acknowledge its occurrence? Shouldn't probability theory defer to reality? Shouldn't our starting point make room to let the real world inside?

In its approach to miracles, atheism seals itself off from acknowledging miracles even if they truly happen. But a position that's so internalized, so closed in on itself, that it refuses to admit that something which happened... happened—is irrational and evasive. Atheists stick their fingers in their ears to avoid hearing an unwelcome truth.

Moreover, we only know what's likely to happen by observing the kinds of things that happen. That's not something we can know ahead of time. If a miracle happens, then that's the kind of thing that happens. It would be viciously circular to assert that a reported miracle didn't happen because events like that don't happen.

Furthermore, personal agency affects predictability. It's naturally improbable that orange trees grow in evenly spaced rows. But it's not improbable if a gardener planted the orchard.



## Jeff's sneaky definition

According to the Bayesian interpretation of ECREE, the relevant probabilities are to be understood as epistemic probabilities (as opposed to the classical, logical, or other interpretations of probability). So the objector is correct that the Bayesian interpretation is inherently subjective in the sense that it depends entirely upon what a person knows and believes. So what? It doesn't follow that we can't figure out what are extraordinary claims.

As we shall see below, we use the same formula for both ordinary and extraordinary claims to determine the evidence required to establish a high final probability for a claim...Notice that the inequalities are the same for both ordinary and extraordinary evidence. This might lead one to wonder, "Then why bother with the ECREE slogan at all?" The answer is this. ECREE emphasizes the common sense notion that the more implausible we initially regard a claim prior to considering the evidence, the greater the evidence we will require to believe the claim.

[http://secularoutpost.infidels.org/2012/06/is-extraordinary-claims-require\\_26.html](http://secularoutpost.infidels.org/2012/06/is-extraordinary-claims-require_26.html)

So Jeff ultimately defines an "extraordinary" claim as an "implausible" claim. He classifies supernatural claims (e.g. God's existence, miracles) as "extraordinary" because he views them as implausible.

But, of course, that's a rigged definition. It begs the question of whether miracles or God's existence are, in fact,

implausible. Yet that's the very issue in dispute. That's not something Jeff is entitled to stipulate at the outset.

Only if he already knew that atheism was true or probably true would he be entitled to begin with that presumption. He's trying to take an illicit intellectual shortcut. Jeff should be fined for trespassing.

I'd also add that there's nothing philosophically rigorous about calling something "implausible." That's hardly a precise definition.

## Sagan's wet candle

Now, what's the difference between an invisible, incorporeal, floating dragon who spits heatless fire and no dragon at all? If there's no way to disprove my contention, no conceivable experiment that would count against it, what does it mean to say that my dragon exists? Your inability to invalidate my hypothesis is not at all the same thing as proving it true. Claims that cannot be tested, assertions immune to disproof are veridically worthless, whatever value they may have in inspiring us or in exciting our sense of wonder. Carl Sagan, **THE DEMON-HAUNTED WORLD: SCIENCE AS A CANDLE IN THE DARK** (Ballantine 1997), 171.

That's Sagan's uncredited knockoff on parables by John Wisdom and Antony Flew. I've commented on this before, but since it cropped up again, I'll revisit the issue.

This is Sagan's attempt to debunk the supernatural and paranormal. But there are several problems with his comparison:

**i)** In medieval lore, dragons are part of the natural world. Yet dragons are naturally impossible. It's naturally impossible for an animal that size to fly. It's naturally impossible for an organism composed of protoplasm to generate and exhale fire. That, in itself, is a reason to discount their existence.

**ii)** If they did exist, dragons are supposed to be physical, empirical objects. So they're supposed to be detectable in principle. Therefore, Sagan's thought-experiment artificially redefines the concept.

**iii)** The problem with Sagan's comparison is that he acts as though there's no evidence for supernatural or paranormal reports, so it's a matter of concocting face-saving explanations to account for the lack of evidence. But that's a straw man. There is prima facie evidence for certain kinds of paranormal or supernatural phenomenon. So the real question at issue is not the absence of evidence but whether the prima facie evidence is defective.

**iv)** The fact that there's no Aston Martin DB5 in *my* garage doesn't imply or presume that there's no Aston Martin DB5 in *your* garage. If, moreover, when I peer into your garage, I sometimes see an Aston Martin DB5 but at other times the garage is empty doesn't mean the misses cancel out the hits. Likewise, the absence of miraculous healings or answered prayer in some cases doesn't cancel out the evidence for miraculous healings or answered prayer in other cases.

## Coincidence miracles

There have always been, though, a significant number of theists who do not believe an observable event need be of a type that cannot be explained naturally to be considered miraculous. Take, for instance, the classic story by R. F. Holland. A child riding his toy motorcar strays onto an unguarded railway crossing near his house whereupon a wheel of his car gets stuck down the side of one of the rails. At that exact moment, an express train is approaching with the signals in its favour. Also a curve in the track will make it impossible for the driver to stop his train in time to avoid any obstruction he might encounter on the crossing. Moreover, the child is so engrossed in freeing his wheel that he hears neither the train whistle nor his mother, who has just come out of the house and is trying to get his attention. The child appears to be doomed. But just before the train rounds the curve, the brakes are applied and it comes to rest a few feet from the child. The mother thanks God for the miracle although she learns in due course that there was not necessarily anything supernatural about the manner in which the brakes came to be applied. The driver had fainted, for a reason that had nothing to do with the presence of the child on the line, and the brakes were applied automatically as his hand ceased to exert pressure on the control lever.<sup>21</sup>

The event sequence described in this situation includes no component for which a natural explanation is not available. Boys sometimes play on train tracks, drivers sometimes faint, and the brakes of trains have been constructed to become operative when a driver's hand releases the control lever. But another explanation presents itself in this case: that God directly intervened

to cause the driver to faint at the precise moment. And as the theists in question see it, if God did directly intervene in this instance, the event can be considered a miracle, even though a totally natural explanation would also be available.

In short, to generalize, there are a number of theists who do not want to limit the range of the term 'miracle' to only those direct acts of God for which no natural explanation can presently be offered. They want to expand the definition to cover events in relation to which God can be viewed as having directly manipulated the natural order, regardless of anyone's ability to construct plausible alternate natural causal scenarios. To do so, as David Corner points out, allows us to continue to conceive of the miraculous as something 'contrary to our expectations...an event that elicits wonder, though the object of our wonder seems not so much to be *how* [an event comes to be] as the simple fact *that* [it occurs] when it did'.<sup>22</sup>

It is important to emphasize here that those who allow for, or favour, this 'coincidence' definition of miracle are not thereby saying that any miraculous event can, itself, be considered fully explainable naturally and thus a mere coincidence. That is, while these theists are granting that nature itself could have brought about an event of this type, they are not thereby saying that nature itself did in fact produce fully the event in question. They agree with Corner that a miracle can never be 'a mere coincidence no matter how extraordinary or significant. (If you miss a plane and the plane crashes, that is not a miracle unless God intervened in the natural course of events causing you to miss the flight.)' As an event token, 'an observed occurrence cannot be considered a miracle, no matter

how remarkable, unless the "coincidence" itself is caused by divine intervention (i.e. [is] not really a coincidence at all)'.<sup>23</sup>

However, it is in relation to this conception of the miraculous that some have wanted to introduce a different understanding of the nature of the intentional divine activity involved. As just noted, all who affirm the concept of a 'coincidence' miracle agree that while nature left to itself can produce events of the type in question, the specific miraculous event in question would not, itself, have occurred if God had not interrupted the way things would have happened naturally by purposely manipulating the natural order. Furthermore, most in this camp assume God's interventive activity occurs *at the time* of the miraculous occurrence. For instance, most who considered the preservation of the boy's life in Holland's train scenario the result of intentional divine intervention would be assuming that God brought it about that the driver fainted *at the time* the train rounds the bend. And most who believed God brought it about that someone misses a fatal flight would be assuming that God did so *at the time* the person was attempting to reach the airport or board the plane.

However, as philosophers such as Robert Adams have pointed out, there is another way to think of God's activity in this context. We can, Adams tells us, conceive of God creating 'the world in such a way that it was physically predetermined from the beginning' that nature would act in the appropriate way 'at precisely the time at which God foresaw' it would be needed.<sup>24</sup> For example, we can conceive of God creating the world in such a way that a specific individual driving a train would faint at a specific time

in order to save the life of a young boy. And we can conceive of God creating the world in such a way that a specific tyre on a specific car would go flat at the exact time required to ensure that the person driving the car would miss a fatal flight.

This perspective is also evident in the thinking of those rabbis mentioned in the Talmud who argued that to maintain that the walls of Jericho came down at the precise time needed to ensure an Israelite victory was the result of divine intervention does not necessitate believing that God intervened in the natural order at the time this event occurred. It can be assumed instead that God determined when setting up the natural order that an earthquake would bring down the walls 'naturally' at the exact time this needed to occur.<sup>25</sup>

In all these cases, to restate the general point, God is still viewed as directly intervening in the sense that God purposely manipulates the natural order to bring about some event that would not have occurred without this intentional divine activity. However, God is not viewed as directly intervening in the sense that God directly manipulates a natural order already in place. It is held, rather, that the intentional divine activity takes place when God was planning how the natural order would operate and not at the time this predetermined natural activity occurred.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> R. F. Holland, 'The Miraculous', **AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL QUARTERLY** **2** (1965), 43–51 (43).

<sup>22</sup> David Corner, '[Coincidence Miracles](#)' in 'Miracles', **INTERNET ENCYCLOPEDIA OF**



**PHILOSOPHY**, his emphasis.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Levine, 'Introduction', in 'Miracles', **STANFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY**, n.p. [cited 10 June 2008].  
Online: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/miracles/>.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Merrihew Adams, 'Miracles, Laws and Natural Causation (II)', **PROCEEDINGS OF THE ARISTOTELIAN SOCIETY SUPPLEMENTARY** volume (1992), 207–24 (209).

<sup>25</sup> *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 5.45; *Midrash Exodus Rabbah* 21.6; and *Pirque Avoth (Sayings of the Fathers)* 5.6. See also Stephen Howard, 'Miracles', in *Liberal Judaism*, n.p. [cited 15 June 2008].  
Online: [www.liberaljudaism.org/lj\\_wherewestand\\_miracles.htm](http://www.liberaljudaism.org/lj_wherewestand_miracles.htm). This type of divine 'preplanning' will, of course, be acceptable only to those who believe that God decreed all before creation or that God possesses middle knowledge (knows beforehand what will actually happen in each conceivable situation).

<sup>26</sup> For theological determinists such as Calvin and Luther, this distinction in a very real sense collapses since, given this model of divine sovereignty, God has in every case decreed both the event and the means necessary to ensure that it comes about. Thus, Thomas Aquinas can say, for instance, that 'we pray not in order to change the divine disposition but for the sake of acquiring by petitionary prayer what God has disposed to be achieved by prayer'. See *Summa Contra Gentiles* 2a–2ae, q. 83, a.2.4.

Twelftree, G. (ed.). (2011). **THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO MIRACLES**, pp 28-30.

## Analogy and intervention

Since "Reformed Thomism" is popular among some young Calvinists, I'd going to consider two such positions. Once again, I'll be using Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (3rd ed.), as a reference point.

### 1. ANALOGY

As Davies explains, Thomism rejects univocal predication in favor of analogical predication (ibid. 147-52).

Although this discussion can get into the weeds, it raises a fundamental question, both in principle and practice, about whether God is knowable. Can we pray to God?

i) One issue is whether analogical predication is parasitic on univocal predication. If we can't pinpoint what two things have in common, then do they really have *anything* in common?

ii) I don't deny that our knowledge of God includes analogical knowledge. But I deny that we can't have univocal knowledge of God. Sometimes it's one or the other or both. Let's illustrate:

A sundial and a Rolex are analogous objects. In terms of function, they are univocal. They have an identical function, as timepieces. Yet the way they tell time is very different, so in that respect they are analogical.

In this case, the relationship can be both univocal and analogies, in differing respects.

Another comparison might be wooden and aluminum baseball bats. Different composition, but identical function.

iii) If I make something, and God makes something, is that attribution analogical or univocal? Let's begin with definitions. What do we mean by causation? David Lewis proposed that this represents our intuitive concept of causation:

We think of a cause as something that makes a difference, and the difference it makes must be a difference from what would have happened without it. Had it been absent, its effects — some of them, at least, and usually all — would have been absent as well.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/causation-counterfactual/#CouCauDep>

Offhand, I think that nicely captures our pretheoretical intuition. And this, in turn, leads him to define causation thusly:

*e causally depends on c* if and only if, if *c* were to occur *e* would occur; and if *c* were not to occur *e* would not occur.

Again, seems reasonable to me.

If I make a batch of cookies and God makes the world, is that analogical or univocal predication? No doubt there are categorical differences, but is the meaning of the terms and the core concept the same? Well, let's plug these examples into the formula:

**a)** Absent divine agency, the world would not exist.

**b)** Absent human agency, the cookies would not exist.

The world causally depends on God if the world would not exist unless God did something.

The cookies causally depend on me if the cookies would not exist unless I did something.

(There are other ways of phrasing it, to the same effect.)

Of course, in both cases, the prior action has to be suitably related to the outcome. Nevertheless, I think it's unavoidable that based on this definition, "making" means the same thing in reference to God and human agents alike.

The fact that God and human agents are so different, the fact that how they bring about the result is so different, the fact that what they make is so different, is irrelevant to the fact that the same idea covers both actions.

What makes it work is comparing two things at a high enough level of abstraction that you eliminate differences which are incidental to the core idea.

## **2. INTERVENTION**

Davies has problems with an interventionist model of miracles (chap. 11). So does Ed Feser.

**i)** In one sense I agree. I think the word can be misleading. But that's because God's relationship to the world is too complex to be summed up in a word. Single words can't do

the work of concepts. But we need a word to denote the concept. The real issue is fleshing out the concept.

**ii)** It depends in large part on what analogies or metaphors we use to model miracles. Suppose we view the physical universe as a machine. Indeed, much of the natural world has a mechanical quality to it. Machines within machines. The human body is like a superbly engineered machine. Indeed, that's not really a metaphor. There's a sense in which the human body *is* a machine. An organic machine.

That's only a problem if you think "machine" or "mechanical" has pejorative connotations. But why think that? In fact, Davies even quotes Aquinas defining a miracle as "an event that happens outside the ordinary processes of the whole of created nature" (258).

Well, that conjures up the image of what is normally a closed system. A miracle would involve outside agency.

Now, automated machines are programmed to do the same thing. Likewise, natural processes are unintelligent. They simply do what they were designed to do.

But personal agency can reprogram the machine. Personal agency can redirect a natural process, or bypass the process altogether.

The knock against a "mechanical" model of miracles is that it makes God look like an inefficient watchmaker. But that's an uncharitable interpretation.

To begin with, in a fallen world, some miracles *do* involving repairing the damage. Take healing miracles.

In addition, "intervention" doesn't imply a design flaw or lack of foresight. Automation is useful, but what makes it useful makes it limited. Automation is indiscriminate. But sometimes it's better to circumvent the process, to achieve a more discriminating result. Human agents do this all the time.

"Intervention" doesn't mean "the world is able to carry on independently" (239) of God. That misses the point. It doesn't mean the cosmos is actually a closed system.

Rather, it means God made a world in which natural processes generally yield uniform results. All things being equal, physical causes produce the same effects.

And surely that's undeniable. That's how the natural world operates. What's the alternative? Idealism? Occasionalism?

Sure, God is still the "ground of being," without which the universe would cease to exist. "Intervention" doesn't mean God is normally uninvolved in *that* sense.

Now, as with illustrations generally, the mechanical illustration has its limitations. A different illustration would be a film in which, at one level, the director causes everything. He doesn't "step in" to change the plot in midstream, because he wrote the plot in advance. He's scripted every scene.

However, a film involves an interplay between personal agents and their physical environment. Things happen as a result of human interaction that would not occur in crystal formation.

Likewise, the director can write a "coincidence" into the plot. Timely, opportune meetings between one person and

another, or a character and something he needs at that very moment. This doesn't require the director to introduce "breaks" into the continuity of the plot. Rather, they reflect the coordination of otherwise independent chains of events to achieve an intended goal. Something beyond the ability or ken of characters inside the story.



## Luck of the draw

This is a sequel to my previous post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2016/03/break-bank.html>

I often use poker as a theological analogy. That's in part because poker is an iconic game in American culture. In addition, it's a flexible analogy that can illustrate different doctrines, viz. prayer, predestination, miracles. Here's another example:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2013/03/poker-and-prayer.html>

I'm going to continue with my original analogy, but develop it in another direction. The question is whether something that's not random can seem to be random.

Suppose, as a teenager, I discover that I have telepathic abilities. BTW, this isn't purely hypothetical. There is evidence for telepathy. For instance, philosopher Stephen Braude has documented this phenomenon. Likewise, Classicist Gilbert Murray had quite the reputation as a mindreader. My illustration doesn't depend on the reality of telepathy. I'm just using it to make a point of principle. But it could actually be realistic.

Back to the story. As an enterprising, but not overly scrupulous teenager, I realize that I could use my ability to make an easy and lucrative living for myself, if I play my cards right (pardon the pun). It dovetails perfectly with

certain kinds of gambling. I'd be unbeatable at chess or poker.

However, I have to be very discreet about my ability. A casino would not be amused by the presence of a psychic poker player. Not to mention the players I cheat.

Although I could be equally invincible at chess or poker, I dare not play both, as that would draw too much attention to myself. The trick is not to acquire a reputation as a great poker player (or chess player), since that would attract unwanted attention. I must figure out how to succeed without becoming too successful for my own good. Maintain a low profile.

I'm not a regular customer at the casino. I only go there when I'm low on money. And since the amount I win varies from one game to the next, I don't go back at regular intervals. From the casino's perspective, there's no pattern to when I show up. It seems to be random.

Of course, that's not the case. I go there at irregular times because the amount of the jackpot varies from one game to another. Sometimes I win more, sometimes I win less. When I win more, I can live on that for longer. When I win less, I need to replenish my bank account sooner.

Moreover, people don't spend money at the same rate every month or every year. Maybe I buy a new car one year, or buy a boat one year. Or maybe the boat engine needs to be repaired, so I'm out a lot of money that month.

So, from the casino's perspective, it's completely unpredictable when I will turn up, even though that's not really random, but determined by my finances, which are determined by my winnings and expenses. There's actually

a connection, but the casino doesn't have enough information to piece it together.

In addition, if I always went to the same casino, that would arouse suspicion. Even if my visits were infrequent, my success would still raise red flags. So, to cover my tracks, I spread it out by visiting different casinos in Reno, Vegas, and Atlantic City, as well as Indian casinos. That creates a randomized appearance. Yet it's calculated randomness. There's actually a pattern to it. But each casino is unaware of my activities at other casinos.

Finally, although I can win every game, that would be a dead giveaway. I'm an unbeatable player who must pretend to be beatable to throw them off the scent. I must lose more often than I win. A tactical loss. Once again, that's to feign the appearance of happenstance.

The point is not whether it's ethical for a mindreader to be a professional poker player or chess player. It's just a handy way of demonstrating how, in principle, one agent's actions can be purposeful and methodical even though they seem to be aimless or coincidental to observers.

## Break the bank

**1.** One line of evidence for God's existence involves examples of special providence. This might include modern miracles and answered prayers. Likewise, there are things we will need in the future, but we don't know that in advance. We'd pray for it if we knew we were going to need it. So in some cases God might provide for us *as if* that were an answer to prayer, because we don't know ahead of time that we need it to happen, and by then it would be too late to pray.

Now in some cases the windfall might be consistent with special providence or luck. Chances are, you will get lucky every so often. Coincidences happen. But I have in mind examples that are highly resistant to naturalistic explanations. Where it's too specific, unlikely, and opportune to be sheer luck.

**2.** However, "skeptics" discount this evidence as sample selection bias. The distribution is random. It averages out, when you take everything that happens to you into account. For instance, sometimes you get what you pray for, and sometimes you don't. Some people are healed, and some are not. If you only compare healings, it looks impressive. If you add dissimilar outcomes, it all blends into the undifferentiated background. Or so goes the argument.

**3.** There are, however, at least two major problems with the "skeptical" objection. To begin with, it backfires.

Suppose there really is a pattern. If, however, our sample is too small, then there's no reason to expect a discernible the pattern. If all we have to go by are anecdotes and isolated incidents, then it would hardly be surprising if the pattern

entirely escapes our notice, for it only emerges if we have a much larger sample. In that case, apparent randomness is perfectly consistent with a deeper, broader pattern. So the very thing the "skeptic" mentions to show it's really random is the same thing that's consonant with its nonrandomness.

In terms of reported miracles, answered prayers, and other special providences, our provincial knowledge is only skimming the surface. We know next to nothing about what most other Christians experience at different times and different places. So even if there were a pattern, how would we be in any position to perceive it?

To take a comparison: suppose I'm a Martian who's assigned to study human behavior. I see a family of four load the trunk of their car with luggage and drive away. If their objective is to reach their destination, then they will take the shortest route. Depending on the length of the journey, they will drive as far as they can each day. Their route will be determined by the location of motels, gas stations, and the distance between the starting-point and the end-point.

Yet my Martian logic is confounded by their actual behavior. They don't travel in anything like a straight line. They constantly veer off. They may stay in a town or campsite for several days before they resume the trip. To all appearances, their behavior is random.

But from a human perspective we know that's probably not the explanation. Rather, this is typical tourist behavior. Their objective was never to simply reach their destination. Rather, it was always more about the journey than the destination. They are sightseers. They drive on scenic routes. They visit historic towns. Far from being random,

their trip is meticulously planned. Where they will go. How long they will stay. Each day is accounted for.

In addition, our Martian can't tell from where they begin what their destination will be. He doesn't know if they plan to drive 50 miles, 500 miles, or from coast to coast. They might head east to west for most of the trip, then turn south during the final leg of the trip. Our Martian observer might have no inkling three-quarters of the way through the trip where their intended destination is. To register the pattern, you need to begin at the end and work backwards.

And it could be the same way with providence. The pattern defies recognition if all you have are isolated data-points.

**4.** However, the "skeptic" might object that this only shows, at best, how the phenomenon is consistent with either randomness or nonrandomness. Mind you, even if that were the case, it greatly attenuates the original objection. According to the original objection, what we really have is evidence of randomness, once you take all the evidence into consideration. But now the "skeptic" must concede that the distribution pattern isn't evidence for randomness—appearances to the contrary notwithstanding.

**5.** But it's not just parity. As I noted at the outset, what if you have examples of special providence which are not plausibly susceptible to naturalistic explanations? Then that's positive evidence for special providence.

To take a comparison, suppose a group of ten Caltech students or MIT students decide to break the bank. They figure out how to cheat casinos. They do it as a test of ingenuity. Perhaps they hack into the security cameras so that they can actually see the poker hands, and they devise some undetectable signaling system.

They divide up into teams of two and hit five casinos in Las Vegas. The same team never goes to more than one casino, so there's nothing to directly connect the group of ten cheaters.

It doesn't take long for each casino to catch on to the fact that something is afoot. A player is beating the odds way too often for that to be coincidence. Yet these are isolated incidents.

Suppose each casino is ignorant of the fact that four other casinos are encountering the same thing. Or even if they knew it, they have no background information on the players to connect them. Even if they were aware of a larger pattern, they can't account for the pattern. It seems to be random, although there must be some hidden connection.

But their inability to identify the collusion in no way obviates the evidence of cheating in the individual cases. By the same token, even if the distribution of special providences appears to be random, that doesn't affect or cancel out the evidence in specific cases.

## Is there a base rate for the Resurrection?

Village atheists suffer from groupthink. They constantly repeat each other, which means repeating the same blunders. Here's a classic example:

"...if Jesus's resurrection is the 'disease' and the witness report is the 'test', we can now do the algebra to decide whether to believe in the resurrection. The base rate for the resurrection is (let's say) one in 1 billion. The witnesses go wrong only one time in 100,000. One billion divided by 100,000 is 10,000. So, even granting the existence of extraordinary witnesses, the chance that they were right about the resurrection is only one in 10,000; hardly the basis for a justified belief."

Lydia McGrew said...

The author goes wrong because the resurrection was not, if it occurred, some sort of spontaneous but random event the probability of which is set by a "base rate," like a disease. If it occurred, it was a personal act of God. This argument would be like talking about the number of times you propose to some woman or other in the population, setting a "base rate" by that means, and then disbelieving your fiancée because you were so unlikely to propose to a randomly selected woman, so (allegedly) you were unlikely to propose to her! She must have just made a mistake. (People do make mistakes sometimes, yada, yada.) The prior probability for the resurrection should thus be decided on the basis of completely different considerations, such as what other evidence we have about Jesus, whether Old Testament Judaism has independent support, whether Jesus



seems to have been the Messiah (based on other evidence aside from the reports of the resurrection), and so forth.

The author also goes wrong because the question of whether the witnesses made an error should also not be estimated in some off-the-cuff fashion concerning "how often witnesses go wrong." Rather, the specific circumstances of these testimonies have to be taken into account to see if these testimonies are well-explained by their "going wrong." That gets us into discussing alternative hypotheses such as hallucination, error, lying etc., which do a terrible job of explaining these testimonies in this historical context.

[https://www.blogger.com/comment.g?  
blogID=20704380&postID=7722219527272185444](https://www.blogger.com/comment.g?blogID=20704380&postID=7722219527272185444)

## One in a billion?

“Of the six billion people in the world, not one of them can walk on top of lukewarm water filling a swimming pool. What would be the chances of any one person being able to do that? Less than one in six billion. Much less,” B. Ehrman, *Jesus Interrupted*, 176.

I’ve already commented on one aspect of this statement. Now I’m going to zero in on another aspect.

Who is Ehrman alluding to? To Jesus, of course.

And who is Jesus? Is Jesus just one more person? Interchangeable with six billion others? Or is Jesus unique?

We not talking about an ordinary person doing something extraordinary. Rather, we’re talking about an extraordinary person doing something extraordinary.

Jesus is the most extraordinary person who ever lived. Indeed, Jesus is the most extraordinary person who ever lives.

We’d expect an extraordinary person to do something extraordinary. To the extraordinary, the extraordinary is ordinary. What would be truly extraordinary is if an extraordinary person never did anything out of the ordinary.

Of course, Ehrman doesn’t believe that Jesus is the Son of God Incarnate. My point, though, is that Ehrman isn’t even addressing the text on its own terms.

Although this is not properly a question of mere probabilities, yet if that’s how you choose to cast it, then

the real question is not, what are the odds of someone ordinary doing something extraordinary, but what are the odds of someone extraordinary doing something extraordinary? An extraordinary person on an extraordinary mission.

Ehrman is too stupefied by infidelity to even know how to correctly frame the question. Was he that uncomprehending back when he was a nominal Christian? If so, then would explain how he fell so far so fast.

## Skywriting

Some atheists say they'd believe in God if he arranged the stars to spell out **John 3:16**—or something like that.

Indeed, this has become an atheist trope. Theodore Drange, Jerry Coyne, Evan Fales, Matt McCormick, and Keith Parsons, among others, have used that basic illustration.

Of course, it's a facetious illustration. Because so many atheists have intellectual contempt for Christianity, they easily succumb to thinking there's a quick and easy way to dismiss it. As a result, they resort to glib, shortsighted examples.

The problem with the skywriting example is that it conflicts with how many atheists define a miracle. Taking their cue from Hume, many atheists define a miracle as a violation of natural law.

But on the face of it, a conjunction of starry objects (e.g. stars, comets) to spell out **John 3:16** doesn't violate the laws of physics. Rather, it fits the definition of a coincidence miracle.

In principle, God could plan the history of the universe so that in the year 2000 AD (or whenever), there's an alignment of starry objects spelling out **John 3:16**. That might be in the works from the time of the Big Bang. God could work through natural processes to arrive at that result.

It doesn't require the stars to suddenly rearrange themselves. It only requires a combination of starry objects

of absolute or apparent magnitude to spell out that message. It doesn't require any star to change course. This physical conjunction could be physically predetermined from the time of the Big Bang. A delayed reaction.

(I'm not saying I subscribe to the Big Bang—just using that frame of reference for convenience.)

## Could natural law be miraculous?

Hume famously defined a miracle as a broken law of nature. Although that definition has many critics, many supporters and opponents of the miraculous continue to define a miracle in those broad terms. They may tweak it a bit, but the definition still involves the concept of natural laws or laws of physics.

I think that's most consistent with physical determinism. The universe as a closed system of cause and effect. Within that framework, a miraculous event must temporarily violate intramundane causality or temporally violate physical determinism. It could either be indeterminate, or be the determinate effect of an external cause.

On this model, what makes an event miraculous is the contrast between physical determinism and the miracle.

Now suppose, for the sake of argument, that we turn this around. Let's posit indeterminism. Seven times out of ten (in no particular order) the same subsequent (physical) state follows the same antecedent (physical) state, but three times out of ten, a different subsequent state follows the same antecedent state. Say, seven times out of ten, water runs downhill, but three times out of ten, water runs uphill. And the alternation is random. Suppose the universe is a billion years old, and that's how it has always operated.

Let us now suppose that for a span of a million years, God makes physical determinism reign. The same subsequent state always follows the same antecedent state. During this time, water invariably runs down hill.

Given Hume's principle, that would be a miracle. If indeterminism is the norm, if that's the backdrop, and determinism is the exception, then cause and effect would be miraculous.

So Hume's definition has paradoxical consequences. If a miracle is defined as the opposite of the status quo, then, in principle, a (temporary) regime of natural law could itself be miraculous so long as that stands in contrast to what's normally the case (i.e. randomness). If we maintain his principle of contrast—as a necessary backdrop—then we can simply reverse the norm. Physical determinism and indeterminism changes places.

## Measuring prior probability

Robin LePoidevin has written sympathetically about atheism and agnosticism. But a few years ago he made an interesting observation. He begins by stating a stock objection to theism:

The default position in any debate is whichever view is less likely to be true. The more improbable the hypothesis, the greater the need for justification. Theism is intrinsically less likely than atheism, so it stands in greater need of justification.

To which he responds (in part):

We need some means of establishing the likelihood of a hypothesis...perhaps we can measure the prior probability of a hypothesis by *how much it rules out*. The more it rules out, the lower the prior probability. The less it rules out, the greater the prior probability.

Robin LePoidevin, **AGNOSTICISM: A VERY SHORT**

**INTRODUCTION** (OUP, 2010), 49-50.

But assuming that's a sound principle, doesn't physicalism rule out much more than Christian theism? It precludes abstract objects (i.e. numbers). It precludes immaterial minds. Indeed, some physicalists deny consciousness altogether. Likewise, the denial of miracles is a universal negative.

But by LePoidevin's logic, that means Christian theism has a higher prior probability than physicalism and/or atheism. And that's even before we add all the specific evidence for Christian theism.





## Frequency, probability, and miracles

A stock objection to miracles is that, "by definition," miracles are improbable. That depends, in part, on how you define improbability.

Many people who object to miracles treat improbability as a synonym for infrequency. Suppose we grant that definition for the sake of argument.

Can something be both frequent and improbable? That would seem to be a contradiction in terms, but is it?

Take chess. It's unlikely that a chess player will win all the time or even most of the time. In fact, it becomes more unlikely as he moves up the ladder because he is pitting himself against ever more talented opponents. The competition becomes increasingly tougher.

Yet some chess players dominate the game. In their prime they are nearly invincible.

Although a chess genius is improbable or infrequent, once you have a chess genius, he may win games with great frequency. The same holds true in other sports, viz. golf, tennis.

Or we might take music. It's improbable that music of Mozartean quality would be a frequent occurrence. Yet Mozart was a very prolific composer, despite dying at a young age.

A musical genius is improbable or infrequent, but once you have a musical genius, he may compose top quality music with great frequency.

So we should perhaps distinguish between the frequency of the source and the frequency of the product given the source. Even if the existence of the producer is highly improbable, assuming the producer exists, the product may then be highly probable.

## Can God make time travel possible?

Time travel scenarios are both wildly popular and physically or metaphysically impossible. Usually, though, this is in a secular context of what's *naturally* possible. But could divine agency make time travel feasible?

I don't think so. I think that's a pseudotask.

However, let's vary the question: Could God make something *like* time travel possible? A scenario that might be indistinguishable to the participants?

On that scenario, it's not about traveling back in time or changing the past, but making the present resemble the past. Take the present rather than the past as the starting-point. Miraculously antique the setting to make the present physically indistinguishable from the past. Give present-day participants anterograde amnesia, so that their memories regress to, say, a day in high school. Age them down. Miraculously restore their youth.

Reset the chess board to an early state of play in the same game. Then take it from there. That's the stage at which the new outcome diverges from the first time around.

It's really not a different future. But for all intents and purposes, it's functionally equivalent to a different future. It's *as if* they traveled back in time to high school, then took a different fork in the road. The psychological and phenomenological effects are indiscernibly akin to time travel.

## Freedom and stability

All these Christian thinkers argue that free will requires an environment of natural laws, predictability, risk and ability to do evil. In other words, even God cannot create a world that includes genuine moral free will and responsibility and constantly interfere to stop gratuitous evils from occurring.

Read

more: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2015/01/is-there-a-difference-between-permitting-evil-and-doing-evil/#ixzz3OuduGbsA>

Although I commented on this statement yesterday, in connection with his general post, this is worth discussing in its own right. It merits an expanded analysis.

This is sometimes called a natural-law theodicy or stable environment theodicy. C. S. Lewis (in **THE PROBLEM OF PAIN**) helped to popularize it. Here's one formulation:

A final important theodicy involves the following ideas: first, it is important that events in the world take place in a regular way, since otherwise effective action would be impossible; secondly, events will exhibit regular patterns only if they are governed by natural laws; thirdly, if events are governed by natural laws, the operation of those laws will give rise to events that harm individuals; so, fourthly, God's allowing natural evils is justified because the existence of natural evils is entailed by natural laws, and a world without natural laws would be a much worse world.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evil/#NeeForNatLaw>

And this, in part, is how Lewis put it:

But if matter is to serve as a neutral field it must have a fixed nature of its own. If a "world" or material system had only a single inhabitant it might conform at every moment to his wishes "trees for his sake would crowd into a shade". But if you were introduced into a world which thus varied at my every whim, you would be quite unable to act in it and would thus lose the exercise of your free will.

If fire comforts that body at a certain distance, it will destroy it when the distance is reduced. Hence, even in a perfect world, the necessity for those danger signals which the pain-fibres in our nerves are apparently designed to transmit.

If a man travelling in one direction is having a journey down hill, a man going in the opposite direction must be going up hill. If even a pebble lies where I want it to lie, it cannot, except by a coincidence, be where you want it to lie. And this is very far from being an evil: on the contrary, it furnishes occasion for all those acts of courtesy, respect, and unselfishness by which love and good humour and modesty express themselves. But it certainly leaves the way open to a great evil, that of competition and hostility. And if souls are free, they cannot be prevented from dealing with the problem by competition instead of by courtesy...The permanent nature of wood which enables us to use it as a beam also enables us to use it for hitting our neighbour on the head.

We can, perhaps, conceive of a world in which God corrected the results of this abuse of free-will by His creatures at every moment: so that a wooden beam became soft as grass when it was used as a weapon, and the air refused to obey me if I attempted to set up in it the sound waves that carry lies or insults. But such a world would be one in which wrong actions were impossible, and in which, therefore, freedom of the will would be void.

Up to a point, this theodicy has some merit, but it's quite inadequate as a stand-alone theodicy:

**i)** It doesn't select for freewill theism. For instance, Calvinism refers to this as ordinary providence. It includes second causes. So Calvinism can also invoke the value of "natural laws" as part of a Reformed theodicy. For instance, Calvinists are fond of quoting:

*While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease (Gen 8:22; cf. Jer 31:35).*

**ii)** Moreover, the argument either proves too much or too little. Carried to a logical extreme, this is an argument for deism. It precludes the destabilizing principle of miracles or petitionary prayer. For once you leave the door ajar for miracles or answered prayer, that interjects a degree of unpredictability into the outcome.

For instance, when a natural disaster is predicted (e.g. hurricanes, tornadoes), Christians pray that God will avert the disaster. But by Olson's logic, it's misguided for Christians to pray in that situation. Natural evils are an

essential part of a stable environment, which is—in turn—a precondition of freedom and responsibility.

**iii)** That's aggravated by the fact that petitionary prayer is, itself, highly unpredictable. Sometimes God grants your request, and sometimes he doesn't. You never know ahead of time if he will answer your prayer. And if you did know in advance that your prayer would go unanswered, you wouldn't bother asking in the first place.

In that respect, it's hard to plan for the future based on prayer. Yet prayer is a fixture of the Christian life.

**iv)** There's an ironic, fundamental tension between the appeal to libertarian freedom and the appeal to the stability of our environment. On the one hand, the freewill theist needs a stable environment to form the backdrop for his choices. To make meaningful decisions, his decisions must have predictable consequences.

On the other hand, the fact that his decisions are indeterminate destabilizes the very environment which forms the backdrop for his choices. Unpredictable choices have unpredictable consequences. There's a circular or dialectical relationship between our choices and our environment. The environment acts on the agent and the agent acts on the environment. By acting on his environment, he changes his environment—which, in turn—affects how the environment acts on him. A mutual alteration.

To the extent that the choices of libertarian agents create the future, indeterminate choices make the future unpredictable. We step into the future we made, by our collective decisions.



That's aggravated by the fact that our environment includes our social environment—and not merely our natural or physical environment. We make choices in large part based on our ability to predict how other people will react to our choices. Our free choices interact with the sometimes countervailing free choices of other free agents, in a vast nexus where the consequences of one agent's choice can neutralize the consequences of another agent's choice. Of course, that raises the question of how people can be so predictable if the outcome is truly open-ended.

Risk assessment is a common feature of decision-making. A cost/benefit analysis. But libertarian freedom introduces unforeseeable consequences, due to the destructive wave interference of competing free agents.

So the freewill theist is caught in a dilemma. If you demand a stable environment, that undercuts the ability to manipulate the environment. If you demand freedom to manipulate the environment, that undercuts a stable environment. The more freedom, the more fluid the environment. These principles tug in opposing directions.

**v)** Consider attempted suicide. Some people deliberately overdose on drugs, then regret their rash act. They seek last-minute medical intervention. That makes the consequences of attempted suicide less predictable. By Olson's logic, a world which includes genuine freedom and responsibilities disallows second thoughts about attempted suicide. Once you overdose, no attempt should be made to save your life, for that trivializes the finality of our choices, without which we cannot make meaningful choices in the first place. Examples could be multiplied.

## Interventionist theism

Jeff D:

I have trouble seeing much of a difference between Calvinism and deism, functionally. The Calvinist God created the world he created. End of story. How can the Calvinist God be meaningfully described as an "interventionist."

It seems hard for God to intervene in a universe where God knows how the future will unfold is because he predetermined that is the way the future would unfold. What is [he] intervening with, himself?

To some extent I think this is a semantic quibble, although it goes to deep questions concerning the nature of God and causality. Let's begin with some exposition:

**i)** In mainstream Calvinism, God subsists outside of time and space.

God has made a physical universe. The physical universe includes physical causes. Natural processes.

The physical universe is like an automated machine. It does whatever it was programmed to do, no more and no less. The same kind of cause will produce the same kind of effect.

That's, in part, what we mean by ordinary providence.

However, the created order is not confined to the physical dimension. There's mental causation. The created order includes finite minds. Some finite minds are discarnate agents (angels) while other finite minds are embodied

agents (humans). In addition, reality includes the divine mind, which exists outside the created order.

Unlike physical processes, which are thoughtless, intelligent agents can exercise rational discretion. Moreover, intelligent agents can manipulate a natural process to produce a desired effect that's different than what the natural process would produce absent the intervention of an intelligent agent.

That can involve mundane things like technology, or supernatural events like miracles. There are basically two kinds of miracles:

**a)** Classic miracles which circumvent natural processes. In the case of a classic miracle, the effect is not the result of the antecedent state. Rather, it's discontinuous with prior conditions leading up to that event. It has a mental rather than physical cause. It's not the end-result of a preceding chain of events.

**b)** Coincidence miracles which utilize natural processes. A coincidence miracle is the coordinated result of independent chains of events converging for the benefit of a particular individual or group. It reflects the discriminating intention of a powerful agent.

**ii)** Deism asserts the uniformity of nature. The universe operates according to natural laws. Natural events are law-like in the sense of mechanical regularity. The same kinds of things always happen. A closed system. A seamless causal continuum.

According to the classic metaphor, we inhabit a clockwork universe. God made the watch, wound it, and set it.

Thereafter it runs of its own accord. It requires no maintenance.

Deism regards a miracle as analogous to a mechanic on the night watch who must superintend the machinery in case of malfunction. The mechanic must repair it in case it breaks down.

Or to continue with the watchmaker metaphor, God must periodically rewind or reset the watch if it runs down, runs fast, or runs slow. But that makes God a poor designer. So goes the argument.

Deism makes no allowance for supernatural mental causation as an integral element in natural history.

**iii)** In theological discourse, "intervention" is a term of art. As I use the term, an interventionist God is a God who works miracles and answers prayer—to take two paradigm examples. A Deist God or noninterventionist deity is a God who does not work miracles or answer prayer.

Put another way, divine "intervention" is synonymous with God's ongoing involvement in natural history and especially human history. By contrast, a Deist God is uninvolved in the subsequent course of world history. His participation begins and ends with the initial act of creation. (In some versions of Deism, God will judge the wicked when they die).

There are critics of "interventionist" terminology. They think the terminology has misleading connotations. For instance:

Some biblical fundamentalists think of God as an engineer who designed and created species of animals and plants like a watchmaker designing a watch. Ironically, this God of the world machine has more to

do with science than with the bible or traditional Christian doctrines. When the machine model of nature took hold in seventeenth-century science, a new image of God came into being as a supernatural engineer, a machine-maker separate from nature.

You don't believe in this kind of God, and neither do I. In traditional Christian theology, God is not a kind of craftsman, or demiurge, who makes the world in the first place and then retires, leaving it to work automatically, except for occasional interventions when he arbitrarily suspends the laws of nature. God is not a demiurge, and not a meddler with machinery. According to the traditional understanding in Christian and other theologies, God is the ground of all being, the reason why there is something rather than nothing. He sustains the world in its existence from moment to moment, and is doing so now.[1]

<http://www.thebestschools.org/sheldrake-shermer-god-and-science-opening-statements/>

Problem: "miracle," as used in these controversies, is not a biblical category. The God of the Bible is not a normally absent God who sometimes "intervenes." This God is always present and active, often surprisingly so...The "closed continuum" of cause and effect is a modernist myth. The God who does not "intervene" from outside but is always present and active within the world, sometimes shockingly, may well have been thus active on this occasion.

<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=17>

In English theology, the easy-going pre-Enlightenment assumption that the world of creation gave reliably straightforward witness to a good creator (I cited Bishop Butler above; we might include writers like Joseph Addison, too) had been shaken to the core by the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which as Susan Neiman has argued must be seen as one of the proximate causes at least of the Enlightenment revolution.[12] That revolution attempted to solve the problem, as well as several others, by cutting God loose from the world, drawing on the old upstairs/downstairs world of English deism. Religion became the thing that people did with their solitude, a private, inner activity, a secret way of gaining access to the divine rather than either an invocation of the God within nature or a celebration of the kingdom coming on earth as in heaven. God became an absentee landlord who allowed the tenants pretty much free rein to explore and run the house the way they wanted, provided they checked in with him from time to time to pay the rent (in much middle Anglican worship until the last generation, taking up the collection has been the most overtly sacramental act) and reinforce some basic ground rules (the Ten Commandments, prominently displayed on church walls, and the expectation that bishops and clergy will 'give a moral lead' to society). As we know, the absentee landlord quite quickly became an absentee, as in Feuerbach, whom Robinson quotes to this effect (p. 50) without any sense that Feuerbach himself has been subjected to damaging critique.

My sympathy for his plight has grown over the years as I have lived within the continuing split-level world of much English piety. The word 'miracle' is a case in point. Most people, not least in the media, still think of it as meaning an action performed by a distant, remote deity reaching in to the world from outside—just as to

many people, still, the word 'God' itself conjures up a basically deist image of that kind of a being. I know that in fact that word 'supernatural' has a longer history than this and that, for instance, mediaeval theologians were able to use it in such a way that it did not carry the baggage of an implied deism or semi-deism [192] (by which I mean the view which, while sharing deism's gap between God and the world, holds that from time to time this 'God' can and does 'intervene'). But I continue to find that this model dominates UK theological discourse, particularly among those of, or near, Robinson's generation. Thus, for instance, when I have written about Jesus' mighty acts, or about the resurrection, I have often been heard to be affirming one kind of post-Enlightenment supernaturalism (with an 'interventionist' God) over against one kind of post-Enlightenment naturalism (with a 'non-interventionist' God), even though I have frequently and explicitly renounced precisely this distinction and the framework which facilitates it (to the consternation of my 'supernaturalist' friends).

[http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright\\_Doubts\\_About\\_Doubt.htm](http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Doubts_About_Doubt.htm)

**iv)** There's some truth to these criticisms, but they are confused.

**a)** In classical theism, God *is* an "outside agent." God exists apart from the creation. God exists apart from the space-time continuum.

**b)** There are different ways of making something. I can plant an orchard, then abandon the orchard. What the orchard will be like 50 years later has nothing to do with

me, beyond my initial contribution. It will be very different than if I tended the orchard on a regular basis.

**c)** Compare that to a novelist. The novelist exists outside the story. Yet he's involved in every detail of the story. In one respect, he causes everything to happen, from start to finish. The novelist is responsible for everything that's said and done in the course of the story.

But in another respect, characters drive the course of events. Conversely, characters react to events. Characters within the story drive the plot. They influence other characters. And they themselves are influenced by their circumstances.

You have both primary and secondary causation.

**d)** Does the God of Calvinism "intervene"? Depends on what you mean. As I said at the outset, I define an interventionist God as a God who does things like working miracles and answering prayer. That's clearly consistent with Calvinism.

I don't define an interventionist God as a God who alternates between participation and detachment. Indeed, the usual rap against Calvinism is not that God is too remote, but that God is too involved. Critics of Calvinism think God ought to be more detached.

Freewill theists limit divine intervention. Too much intrusion would either infringe on human freedom or trivialize the consequences of free choices.

Clearly the Calvinist God doesn't intervene in the sense of acting at cross-purposes with his plan. But why should we define divine intervention in *that* way?



**iv)** There are, of course, freewill theists who think God intervenes in the sense that he has to jump in every so often to make midcourse corrections lest things get totally out of hand. But that's not how Calvinism uses the term.

The part I don't really get is that Calvinists insist it is vitally important to point out that God knows all the possible games of chess the two players could have theoretically played. I guess I agree that that is knowledge that God has, but why is that relevant? God knows that it is theoretically possible two people could sit down for chess and just move their knights back and forth over the same spaces until they die of old age. So what? Why does that matter? Like I said, I think the important thing is that God knows ahead of time what game of chess the two players will actually play and the game of chess they would have played if he had not intervened on white's 10th move.

It's relevant for God to have counterfactual knowledge since God must be in a position to know what the possibilities are in order to instantiate a particular set of possibilities in space and time. God made the world by selecting and combining some possibilities to the exclusion of other possibilities. It isn't a blind draw.

It amounts to God predetermining every move and pretty much playing chess with himself. When he is intervening, he is intervening with himself because he created a person to act one way, but finds it necessary to nevertheless intervene in time to bring about his predetermined outcomes.

**i)** One limitation of the chess analogy is that ordinarily, chess pieces are unintelligent. If, however, the chess pieces

were rational agents, then you'd have some pieces playing against other pieces. Indeed, the pieces on one side strategize with each other on how to defeat the other side, and vice versa. And as the game progresses, from their perspective (unlike God's), they adapt their strategy to the changing situation.

**ii)** The other problem is that Jeff is hung-up on a particular connotation of "intervention."

**iii)** In addition, a lot depends on the metaphor we use to illustrate the point. If, instead of chess, we use a novel, you could say the novelist is telling himself a story. If, however, the characters were real people, like sentient virtual characters, then they experience the story. They are an audience for the story, like stage actors.

## What if science can duplicate a miracle?

Elliott Sober is a leading secular philosopher of science:

These comments have not addressed the question of how we would ever know that an event is a miracle. It isn't hard to know that an event is awe-inspiring and that it presently cannot be explained by science. But how can we know that science will never be able to explain it? And how are we to know that an event is the result of God's intervening in nature? Many religions endorse the idea that the dead coming back to life is a miracle in this last sense. Atheists often claim that it is impossible for the dead to come back to life, but maybe the science of the future will show that they are mistaken. Perhaps mere human beings, armed with a technology that is more powerful than the one we possess, can do the trick. If future scientists discover how to bring the dead back to life, they will be following in the footsteps of Newton and Darwin.

<http://www.slate.com/bigideas/are-miracles-possible/essays-and-opinions/elliott-sober-opinion>

That's deeply confused. In principle, it might be possible for advanced technology to replicate some biblical miracles. But that misses the point: since this hypothetically advanced knowledge didn't exist in Bible times, it would take a miracle to produce the same effect absent scientific intervention.

Even if, in principle, scientific intervention could sometimes produce the same effect as divine intervention, that explanation is hardly a substitute for divine intervention in

cases where no such scientific intervention did or could exist.

## Is the argument from miracles circular?

Attempting to use the evidence of miracles in this way presents two serious problems. One problem is the need to avoid circularity in argument. By the "Christian Revelation" Clarke presumably means the Bible or at least central parts of the Bible. But the evidence for the authenticity of the Christian Revelation cannot be drawn from the pages of that revelation itself without circularity. For one would be appealing to the authenticity of the revelation, the accurate account it proves of miracles, to authenticate it as a revelation, actually and immediately sent to us from God.

But perhaps a distinction could be made between the revelation as immediately sent from God, and the revelation as historically trustworthy. If the Bible could be established as historically trustworthy, and if its historical trustworthiness could be initially granted then, it might be argued, its account of miracles can be taken as giving additional authentication of itself as a divine revelation. Paul Helm, "The Miraculous," **SCIENCE & CHRISTIAN BELIEF**, 3/1 (1991), 82.

There are various problems with the charge of circularity:

**1.** As a rule, narrated miracles aren't cited to attest the narrator. If the narrator cited his own miracles to validate his claims, that would be circular. Mind you, even in that case, there's a distinction between vicious and virtuous circularity.

Typically, narrated miracles attest a character within the narrative, not the narrator himself. At that level there's not

even prima facie circularity.

**2.** It isn't viciously circular to judge a witness by his own testimony. Take a witness whose testimony is so dubious that we conclude that he can't be trusted. Before he opened his mouth, we had no opinion regarding his character. If self-testimony can undermine a witness's credibility, it can enhance his credibility.

**3.** Moreover, the evidence for miracles isn't confined to testimonial evidence. There are men, women, and children who claim to have personal experience with the miraculous. Even if their claim is secondhand for *us*, it is firsthand for *them*—assuming it really happened to them. They don't believe it because they heard someone else say it.

**4.** Apropos (3), this isn't something all of us just encounter in *literature*. Some of us have friends or family members who recount miraculous incidents in their lives.

**5.** By the same token, if there's credible evidence for miracles throughout church history, then there's nothing presumptively fictitious or suspect about Gospel miracles, NT miracles, or OT miracles.

**6.** The canonical Gospels are quite restrained in the miracles they relate. Mark's Gospel, which is usually thought to be the first one written, has the highest proportion of miracles. By contrast, Matthew and Luke deemphasize miracles in relation to Mark by the amount of additional teaching material they include. And John has fewer miracles than the Synoptic Gospels. Moreover, it's not as if John's miracles are more spectacular. So there's no pattern of legendary embellishment.

**7.** In addition, some Biblical miracles have inherent credibility. For instance, some Biblical miracles pass the criterion of embarrassment:

**i)** Take the scene of Jesus walking on water, which turns into a scene of Peter walking on water (Mt 14:28-31). Only Peter humiliates himself. Why would Matthew invent that story?

**ii)** Likewise, a story recounting the failure of the disciples to exorcise a hard case (Mt 17:14-20; Mk 9:14-29; Lk 9:37-43). Why would the Synoptic narrators invent a story or preserve a fabulous tradition which makes the disciples look impotent? Why would Christian writers fabricate stories which portray leaders of the Christian movement in such an unflattering light?

**iii)** Or take the unintentionally comical scene of Christians praying for Peter's deliverance. When, however, their prayers are answered, they are incredulous (Acts 12:12-16).

**iv)** Even more dramatic is the episode where Jesus is rejected by those who know him best. As a result, he "cannot" (or "will not") perform many miracles there, due to their unbelief (Mt 13:58; Mk 6:5). Why would the narrators fabricate a story which, at least superficially, makes Jesus seem limited in his power to work miracles?

**v)** In addition, you have reported miracles which bring Jesus into physical contact with ritually impure patients—like lepers (Mt 8:1-4; Mk 1:40-45; Lk 5:12-16), or the women who suffered from menorrhagia (Mt 9:20-22; Mk 5:25-34; Lk 8:43-48). That would grate against Jewish sensibilities. Why invent stories in which Jesus is defiled by contact with those he heals?

**vi)** On a related note is the use of spittle in some healings (Mk 7:33; 8:23; Jn 9:6). Why does Jesus use spittle in a few healings, but heal directly in most other cases? Why concoct that anomalous detail?

Although there's evidence that spittle was sometimes used in Hellenistic folk medicine, that's the sort of invidious comparison we'd expect Jewish writers to studiously avoid—unless it really happened. They tell it that way because they are constrained by the facts on the ground.

Moreover, spittle has ambivalent connotations in Jewish usage, a la ritual defilement (Lev 15:8). Although Jesus wasn't in that condition, why write something that invites unwanted associations?—unless the narrator had no choice because that's how it happened.

**vii)** You also have stories that just don't seem to be the kind of thing a narrator would make up, like healing the Canaanite's daughter (Mt 15:21-28; Mk 7:24-30). A desperate mother who seeks him out. Realistic dialogue.

Likewise, transferring evil spirits from a demoniac to pigs, who proceed to drown themselves after they were maddened by possession (Mt 8:28-34; Mk 5:1-20; Lk 8:26-39). Why would anyone start from scratch with a fictional story like that? It's one of those angular encounters that happens in real life. Not something you make up if you're inventing inspirational literature. Real life is quirky. Unexpected. Incongruous.

To be sure, I'm only discussing some Gospel miracles. But they lend independent credibility to the Gospels in which they occur, and to other miracles by association.



**viii)** Then there are Biblical miracles which unbelievers love to mock, like the fate of Lot's wife (Gen 19:26), or Balaam's donkey (Num 22:28-30). But if these are so ridiculous, why would the narrator concoct anything that ridiculous?

**ix)** Or take the exploits of Samson. A critic might dismiss this as something out of a comic book about superheroes. Yet it occurs in a book that's notorious for its grim, horrific realism. And Samson himself is a tragic figure. An abject moral failure. In an honor/shame culture, we wouldn't expect the narrator to invent a national hero who's an embarrassment to his own people.

## The clockwork universe

*While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease (Gen 8:22).*

The scientific method treats the world as a closed system. A continuum of physical cause and effect. Nothing from the "outside" bypasses the chain of cause and effect.

And that's the basis for induction. The present resembles the past, and vice versa. And that, in turn, forms the basis for sciences of origins (e.g. cosmology, geology, paleontology, paleoanthropology).

And there's some truth to that. In the Biblical worldview, nature *generally* operates *as if* it's a closed system. *Ceteris paribus*, there's nothing wrong with presuming continuity.

And yet, according to the Biblical worldview, nature is actually an open system. Open to agents (e.g. God, angels, demons, ghosts, sorcerers, miracle-workers) who can, and sometimes do, bypass the causal continuum. Open to the introduction of causes outside the ordinary chain of physical cause and effect.

As Christians, we must make allowance for the possibility, and actuality, that induction breaks down at unpredictable points along the line. A miracle both interrupts and restarts the process. The natural order resumes after the miracle. But it resumes at a different point than if the miracle had not occurred. A miracle may not merely restart, but

jumpstart or reset the process. Advance the outcome or change the outcome. Take miraculous healing.

That's not some ad hoc consideration. It's fundamental to the Christian worldview. To Christian supernaturalism and dualism.

And that's something which theistic or deistic evolutionists refuse to take into account. They don't take that seriously. They operate as though nature really is a closed system. Indeed, some of them think that's the case. They are really back to the clockwork universe.

There are scientists with a very literal-minded view of reality. Victor Stenger is a case in point. They have a rule-bound mindset. They think nature always follows the rules. Indeed, they think nature ought to follow the rules. As though nature made them a promise. If a miracle happens, then nature broke its promise. A miracle is "cheating." They indulge in that childish personification of nature.

## Are miracles extraordinary?

One often encounters the claim that "by definition," miracles are "extraordinary." Both atheists and some theologians/Christian apologists take that position. Atheists say miracles are extraordinary by definition to create an insuperable presumption against their occurrence—or belief in their occurrence. Some Christians apologists say miracles are extraordinary by definition because their evidentiary value supposedly lies in their extraordinary nature. One problem is how to define "extraordinary" in this context.

### 1. QUANTITATIVELY EXTRAORDINARY

**i)** One possibility is to define miracles as quantitatively extraordinary events. Very rare, exceptional events. That, however, seems to be inadequate. Surely there are very rare *naturally occurring* events which atheists and Christian apologists don't classify as miraculous. A freak mutation might be a unique, one-off event. But that, by itself, wouldn't make it miraculous.

**ii)** In addition, the quantitative definition is vague. What's the frame of reference? For instance, in the OT, some men (e.g. Moses, Elijah, Elisha) reportedly perform miracles. They are exceptional in the sense that most Jews did not (even reportedly) perform miracles. Miracles are statically rare in the sense that only a tiny minority of the (OT Jewish) population performs them.

Yet, if you're one of the rare individuals who performs miracles, you may frequently perform miracles. It is not out-of-the-ordinary for *you* to perform miracles. So it's not extraordinary in reference to the miracle-worker. Yet

atheists and Christian apologists alike would say the feats attributed to these singular individuals are still miraculous—if true.

**iii)** Take Acts 2:17-18. The scope of that promise is disputed. However, my argument doesn't turn on the correct interpretation. For the sake of argument, let's stipulate that according to this promise, most Christians will experience revelatory dreams and visions. Let's treat that as a hypothetical case. By a revelatory dream, I mean, for instance, premonitions that come true. These are too specific, and come true too often, to be coincidental. An atheist would typically say that's incompatible with naturalism. If that really happens, then it must be supernatural. Miraculous.

But is it extraordinary? If this happened to most Christians, then it would be the *norm*. It would be an *ordinary* part of Christian experience. It wouldn't be extraordinary in the quantitative sense. Yet, presumably, a typical atheist would classify revelatory dreams and visions as miraculous—as would a Christian apologist.

**iv)** According to Biblical eschatology, there will be a general resurrection on the day of judgment. Everyone who died will be raised from the dead. Their souls will be reunited with their bodies. The only exception will be the humans who are still alive at the time of the Parousia.

That ranges along a continuum. At one end of the continuum you might have the corpse of somebody who died an hour before. His corpse lies in the morgue. It's undergone some necrosis. It can't be naturally resuscitated. A resurrection requires God to repair the corpse. But the body is still intact. Further along the continuum are skeletal remains. At the other hand of the spectrum you have

decedents whose bodies have disintegrated. A resurrection requires God to recreate the body from scratch. Recreate that unique arrangement of particles.

Quantitatively speaking, the general resurrection is not extraordinary. It will happen to every man, women, and while who died. The cumulative mortality of the whole human race. Most people who ever lived will experience the general resurrection. So that isn't a rare event. Or even unusual. The majority of the human race will experience the general resurrection.

Of course, an atheist doesn't believe that will happen. But that's not my point. I'm discussing this from a hypothetical standpoint to probe the definition of a miracle. If that were to happen, would it not be miraculous because it is so commonplace?

## 2. QUALITATIVELY EXTRAORDINARY

Assuming that the quantitative definition is a failure, what about a qualitative definition? What makes a miracle miraculous?

i) One might try to define a miracle as extraordinary in the sense that it's naturally or scientifically inexplicable. Of course, that only pushes the question back a step. What makes an event naturally or scientifically inexplicable? Perhaps we might try to unpack that definition by invoking the principle of causal closure. We might define causal closure to mean "every physical change has a purely physical cause." Put another way, "everything that happens in the physical universe is caused by something else in the physical universe."

On that definition, an event is miraculous or extraordinary if it violates causal closure (thus defined).

Certainly, this definition may better capture the intuitive definition of miracles that many atheists work with. However, a glaring problem with this definition is that it begs the question by assuming that physicalism is true. Or that physicalism is the default assumption.

To say that miracles face an insuperable presumption against their occurrence (or belief in their occurrence) because they violate causal closure is viciously circular. For if miracles do, in fact, occur, then causal closure is either false or not a universal principle. At a minimum, an objector to miracles must first establish causal closure.

**ii)** In addition, some kinds of miracles don't seem to violate causal closure. Take coincidence miracles. For instance:

R.F. Holland (1965) has suggested that a religiously significant coincidence may qualify as a miracle. Suppose a child who is riding a toy motor-car gets stuck on the track at a train crossing. A train is approaching from around a curve, and the engineer who is driving it will not be able to see the child until it is too late to stop. By coincidence, the engineer faints at just the right moment, releasing his hand on the control lever, which causes the train to stop automatically. The child, against all expectations, is saved, and his mother thanks God for his providence; she continues to insist that a miracle has occurred even after hearing the explanation of how the train came to stop when it did. Interestingly, when the mother attributes the stopping of the train to God she is not identifying God as its cause; the cause of the train's stopping is the engineer's fainting. Nor is she, in any

obvious way, offering an explanation for the event—at least none that is intended to compete with the naturalistic explanation made possible by reference to the engineer's medical condition. What makes this event a miracle, if it is, is its significance, which is given at least in part by its being an apparent response to a human need. Like a violation miracle, such a coincidence occurs contrary to our expectations, yet it does this without standing in opposition to our understanding of natural law.

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/miracles/#H9>

Admittedly, this is a hypothetical case. But for now I'm just testing the definition of a miracle. Moreover, there are real examples of reported coincidence miracles.

In the aforesaid example, nowhere is the chain of physical cause and effect interrupted. At that level, it's all explicable by reference to physical factors. What makes it naturally inexplicable is not the means, but the opportune timing.

Likewise, take some examples of retroactive prayer:

<http://www.proginosko.com/2014/10/open-theism-and-past-directed-prayers/>

[http://www.proginosko.com/docs/Open\\_Theism\\_and\\_Past-Directed\\_Prayers.pdf](http://www.proginosko.com/docs/Open_Theism_and_Past-Directed_Prayers.pdf) (§5)

Once again, this doesn't violate causal closure. An atheist may object that it breaks causal closure in the ulterior sense that God prearranged that outcome, and God is not a physical agent.



True, and, of course, many miracles presuppose the existence of God. However, in these cases the miraculous outcome is effected through physical means. Although the outcome reflects divine premeditation, the plan is implemented through ordinary providential factors or second-causes. God not only planned the event, but planned the event to eventuate through intramundane causation.

So coincidence miracles and retroactive prayers aren't qualitatively extraordinary, in terms of *how* they come about. They are mediated by the causal continuum, rather than operating outside the causal continuum.

BTW, I'm not suggesting there's anything sacrosanct about causal closure. I'm framing the issue in those terms for the sake of argument. Certainly there are kinds of miracles which involve direct mental agency rather than physical agency. Types of miracles which are discontinuous with a physical chain of cause and effect. I have no problem with that.

I'm simply discussing, whether, as a matter of principle, miracles are "extraordinary." What does that mean? If it's meaningful, does it cover all miracles, or only some? And how does that affect the burden of proof?

## Breaking Littlewood's Law

Some atheists invoke "Littlewood's Law" to dismiss miracles as statistically inevitable cases of sheer coincidence. There are books on the subject which popularize that outlook.

Problem is, facile appeal to "Littlewood's Law" proves too much. They render cheating undetectable. Sometimes the dice are loaded. Sometimes the deck *is* stacked:

<http://www.askamathematician.com/2014/08/q-how-many-times-do-you-need-to-roll-dice-before-you-know-theyre-loaded/>

<http://rjlipton.wordpress.com/2013/09/17/littlewoods-law/>

# God plays with loaded dice

## I. INTRODUCTION

Last Spring, Vern Poythress published **CHANCE AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD**. It's an outstanding treatment. I've been planning to do a post on it, but I was waiting for the ebook edition to come out, because it's easier to quote from the ebook:

<http://www.frame-poythress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/ChancePoythress.pdf>

Although he doesn't use the terminology, his Scriptural illustrations are textbook examples of coincidence miracles. Likewise, his analysis of chance and probability is useful for unpacking the nature of a coincidence miracle, as well as supplying criteria for the identification of coincidence miracles. Before I quote from his book, let's review some preliminaries.

Traditionally, systematic theology distinguishes between miracles and ordinary providence. A miracle is classically defined as an event that bypasses natural processes. By contrast, ordinary providence employs natural mechanisms. To take a comparison:

i) The development of an acorn into an oak is providential. The acorn has the innate information necessary to turn into an oak. That development follows a continuous process of gestation.

**ii)** Take a miracle like turning a stick into a snake (Exod 4). That's naturally impossible. There is no natural mechanism to account for that.

**iii)** However, there's a third class of events that overlaps providence and miracle. Suppose a guy dies in an elevator mishap. The elevator suddenly plunges 50 stories, crashing in the basement.

Normally, we'd consider that a tragic accident, due to a mechanical malfunction. But suppose the victim was an investigative reporter who was about to publish a story that would bring down the president. In that event, we suspect the elevator mishap was a "planned accident" rather than a freak accident.

Ordinary providence is like a machine that's programmed to do something. It always does and only does what it was programmed to do. Like invariable chemical reactions.

Compare an assembly line using human workers with robotics. Robots can be programmed to perform some of the same tasks which humans used to do. Although robots are unintelligent, they can perform tasks which require intelligence because they were designed by intelligent engineers who programmed them to perform that task.

In Scripture, some events are "natural" events in the sense that the outcome is the result of natural means. Yet the outcome is too selective to be the result of blind physical causes. The outcome reflects special guidance.

Many answered prayers are coincidence miracles. God often answers prayers through natural means. Yet it's not something that would happen if nature was left to operate on its own accord. The result is too discriminating. God

coordinated causally independent chains of events to converge at just the right time and place to benefit the Christian.

The next two sections are verbatim excerpts from the book.

## II. COINCIDENCE MIRACLES

What about seemingly random events? Does God control them?

### THE FLIGHT OF AN ARROW

First Kings 22 contains a striking case. Micaiah, speaking as a prophet of the Lord, predicts that Ahab, the king of Israel, will fall in battle at Ramoth-gilead (1 Kings 22:20–22). Ahab disguises himself in battle to avoid being a special target for enemy attack (v. 30). But God’s plan cannot be thwarted. The narrative describes the crucial event:

*But a certain man drew his bow **at random** and struck the king of Israel between the scale armor and the breastplate. Therefore he [the king] said to the driver of his chariot, “Turn around and carry me out of the battle, for I am wounded.” (v. 34)*

“A certain man drew his bow at random.” That is, he was not aiming at any particular target. An alternative translation would be that he drew his bow “in his innocence” (ESV marginal reading). The alternative translation might

mean that the man shot at Ahab, but he did not know who it was (he was “innocent” of knowing it was the king). Whichever interpretation we take of this detail, we should notice that the arrow struck in just the right place. Ahab was dressed in armor. If the arrow had struck Ahab’s breastplate, it might have simply bounced off. If it had struck his scale armor, it would not have wounded him. But there *happened* to be a small space between the scale armor and the breastplate. Perhaps for just a moment Ahab turned or bent in such a way that a thin opening appeared. The arrow went right in, exactly in the right spot. It wounded him fatally. He died the same day (1 Kings 22:35), just as God had said.

God showed that day that he was in charge of seemingly random events. He controlled when the man drew his bow. He controlled the direction of his aim. He controlled the moment the arrow was released. He controlled the flight of the arrow. He controlled the way Ahab’s armor was put on earlier in the day, and the position that Ahab took as the arrow came nearer. He controlled the arrow as it struck in just the right spot and went in deep enough to produce fatal damage to organs. He brought Ahab to his death.

Lest we feel too sorry for Ahab, we should remind ourselves that he was a wicked king (1 Kings 21:25–26). Moreover, by going into battle he directly disobeyed the warning that Micaiah the prophet gave in God’s name. It was an act of arrogance and disobedience to God. God, who is a God of justice, executed righteous judgment on Ahab. From this judgment we should learn to revere God and honor him.

Ahab’s death was an event of special significance. It had been prophesied beforehand, and Ahab himself was a special person. He was the king of Israel, a prominent leader, a key person in connection with the history of God’s

people in the northern kingdom of Israel. But the event illustrates a general principle: God controls seemingly random events. A single out-standing event, like the arrow flying toward Ahab, has not been narrated as an exception but rather as a particularly weighty instance of the general principle, which the Bible articulates in passages where it teaches God's universal control.

## COINCIDENCES

We can find other events in the Bible where the outcome depends on an apparent coincidence or happenstance.

In Genesis 24, Rebekah, who belonged to the clan of Abraham's relatives, *happened* to come out to the well just after Abraham's servant arrived. The servant was praying and waiting, looking for a wife for Abraham's son Isaac (Gen. 24:15). The fact that Rebekah came out at just the right time was clearly God's answer to the servant's prayer. Rebekah later married Isaac and bore Jacob, an ancestor of Jesus Christ.

Years later Rachel, who belonged to the same clan, *happened* to come out to a well just after Jacob arrived (Gen. 29:6). Jacob met her, fell in love with her, and married her. She became the mother of Joseph, whom God later raised up to preserve the whole family of Jacob during a seven-year famine (Genesis 41–46). When God provided Rachel for Jacob, he was fulfilling his promise that he would take care of Jacob and bring him back to Canaan (28:15). Moreover, he was fulfilling his long-range promise that he would bless the descendants of Abraham (vv. 13–14).

In the life of Joseph, after Joseph's brothers had thrown him into a pit, a caravan of Ishmaelites *happened to go by*, traveling on their way to Egypt (Gen. 37:25). The brothers

sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites. They in turn happened to sell Joseph to Potiphar, “an officer of Pharaoh” (v. 36). Joseph’s experiences were grim, but they were moving him toward the new position that he would eventually assume in Egypt.

False accusation by the wife of Potiphar led to Joseph being thrown into prison (Gen. 39:20). Pharaoh *happened* to get angry with his chief cupbearer and his chief baker, and they *happened* to get thrown into the prison where Joseph now had a position of responsibility (40:1–4). While they were lying in prison, both the cupbearer and the baker *happened* to have special dreams. Joseph’s interpretation of their dreams led to his later opportunity to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams (Genesis 41). These events led to the fulfillment of the earlier prophetic dreams that God had given to Joseph in his youth (37:5–10; 42:9).

After Moses was born, his mother put him in a basket made of bulrushes and placed it among the reeds by the Nile. The daughter of Pharaoh *happened* to come down to the river and *happened* to notice it. When she opened it, the baby *happened* to cry. The daughter of Pharaoh took pity and adopted Moses as her own son (Ex. 2:3–10). As a result, Moses was protected from the death sentence on Hebrew male children (1:16, 22), and he “was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7:22). So God worked out his plan, according to which Moses would eventually deliver the Israelites from Egypt.

Joshua sent two spies to Jericho. Out of all the possibilities, they *happened* to go to the house of Rahab the prostitute (Josh. 2:1). Rahab hid the spies and made an agreement with them (vv. 4, 12–14). Consequently, she and her relatives were preserved when the city of Jericho was



destroyed (6:17, 25). Rahab then became an ancestor of Jesus (Matt. 1:5).

Ruth "*happened* to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz" (Ruth 2:3). Boaz noticed Ruth, and then a series of events led to Boaz marrying Ruth, who became an ancestor of Jesus (Ruth 4:21–22; Matt. 1:5).

During the life of David, we read the following account of what happened in the wilderness of Maon:

*As Saul and his men were closing in on David and his men to capture them, a messenger came to Saul, saying, "Hurry and come, for the Philistines have made a raid against the land." So Saul returned from pursuing after David and went against the Philistines (1 Sam. 23:26–28).*

David narrowly escaped being killed, because the Philistines *happened* to conduct a raid at a particular time, and the messenger *happened* to reach Saul when he did. If nothing had happened to interfere with Saul's pursuit, he might have succeeded in killing David. The death of David would have cut off the line of descendants leading to Jesus (Matt. 1:1, 6).

When Absalom engineered his revolt against David's rule, a messenger *happened* to come to David, saying, "The hearts of the men of Israel have gone after Absalom" (2 Sam. 15:13). David immediately fled Jerusalem, where otherwise he would have been killed. During David's flight, Hushai the Archite *happened* to come to meet him, "with his coat torn and dirt on his head" (v. 32). David told Hushai to go back

to Jerusalem, pretend to support Absalom, and defeat the counsel of Ahithophel (v. 34). As a result, Hushai was able to persuade Absalom not to follow Ahithophel's counsel for battle, and Absalom died in the battle that eventually took place (18:14–15). Thus, happenstances contributed to David's survival.

When Benhadad the king of Syria was besieging Samaria, the city was starving. Elisha predicted that the next day the city of Samaria would have flour and barley (2 Kings 7:1). The captain standing by expressed disbelief, and then Elisha predicted that he would "see it . . . but . . . not eat of it" (v. 2). The next day the captain *happened* to be trampled by the people who were rushing out the gate toward the food (v. 17). "He died, as the man of God had said" (v. 17), seeing the food but not living to partake of it. His death was a fulfillment of God's prophecy.

When Athaliah was about to usurp the throne of Judah, she undertook to destroy all the descendants in the Davidic family. Jehosheba happened to be there, and she took Joash the son of Ahaziah and hid him away (2 Kings 11:2). So the line of the Davidic family was preserved, which had to be the case if the Messiah was to come from the line of David, as God had promised. Joash was an ancestor of Jesus Christ.

During the reign of king Josiah, the priests happened to find the Book of the Law as they were repairing the temple precincts (2 Kings 22:8). Josiah had it read to him, and so he was energized to inaugurate a spiritual reform.

The story of Esther contains further happenstances. Esther *happened* to be among the young women taken into the king's palace (Est. 2:8). She *happened* to be chosen to be the new queen (v. 17). Mordecai *happened* to find out

about Bigthan and Teresh's plot against the king (v. 22), and Mordecai's name then *happened* to be included in the king's chronicles (v. 23). The night before Haman planned to hang Mordecai, the king *happened* not to be able to sleep (6:1). He asked for an assistant to read from the chronicles, and he *happened* to read the part where Mordecai had uncovered the plot against the king (vv. 1–2). Haman *happened* to be entering the king's court at just that moment (v. 4). A whole series of happenstances worked together to lead to Haman's being hanged, the Jews being rescued, and Mordecai being honored.

The book of Jonah also contains events that worked together. The Lord sent the storm at sea (Jonah 1:4). When the sailors cast lots in order to identify the guilty person, "the lot fell on Jonah" (v. 7). The Lord appointed the fish that swallowed Jonah (v. 17). The Lord also appointed the plant that grew up (4:6), the worm that attacked the plant (v. 7), and then the blazing of the sun and the "scorching east wind" (v. 8).

Zechariah the priest, the husband of Elizabeth, *happened* to be chosen by lot to burn incense in the temple (Luke 1:9). The time was just right, shortly before the conception of John the Baptist and the coming of Jesus (vv. 24–38).

When Dorcas died in Joppa, Peter *happened* to be nearby in Lydda (Acts 9:32, 38). The disciples in Joppa happened to hear that he was there. So they sent for Peter, and as a result Dorcas was raised back to life.

While Paul the apostle was in prison, the son of Paul's sister *happened* to hear about the Jewish plot to kill Paul (Acts 23:16). He passed the news on to the Roman leader, the tribune, who had his soldiers take Paul to Caesarea.

Paul was saved from being killed because of a happenstance.

We could multiply instances of this kind. The storm and the fish that the Lord sent to Jonah might be considered miraculous, but for the most part we have focused on incidents where a bystander may not have noticed anything extraordinary. In each case, the narrative as a whole shows that God was accomplishing his purposes (chap. 3).

We can confirm the point about God's control over apparently random events with another case, namely the disasters that befell Job.

#### DISASTERS IN THE BOOK OF JOB

Job 1 describes several disasters. The key passage is worth quoting in full:

*Now there was a day when his [Job's] sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, and there came a messenger to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys feeding beside them, and the Sabeans fell upon them and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them, and I alone have escaped to tell*

*you.” While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, “The Chaldeans formed three groups and made a raid on the camels and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you.” While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, “Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother’s house, and behold, a great wind came across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young people, and they are dead, and I alone have escaped to tell you.” Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”*

*In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong. (Job 1:13–22)*

Some of these disasters seem to be random. For one thing, how come they all happened on the same day? That in itself seems unlikely, because they are not causally connected to one another. One of the disasters was that “the fire of God fell from heaven” (Job 1:16). When and where it would fall was totally unpredictable. Why did it fall when it did on

Job's sheep and servants, and not elsewhere? How was it that "a great wind" came (v. 19), and why did it hit the house and not elsewhere, and why did it hit at the moment when Job's sons and daughters were inside the house? Job was faced with a series of seemingly random events. He was emotionally devastated by the losses. But how did he deal with the question of why? Did he think, "Well, things just happen by chance because the world has chance in it"? No, he saw the hand of God: "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away" (1:21).

A consistent deist would have to say, "It was all part of the clockwork." Deism might lead to the conclusion that God created the world with both order and randomness. According to deistic thinking, the randomness just has to be accepted. God is not responsible for disasters, because he has walked away from the clock that he made. Other people might still want God to be responsible for the good things and the blessings that come to us. But they cannot stomach the idea that he was responsible for a disaster like Job's. They would say that they want to protect the goodness of God.

Yes, the Bible does teach that God is good and does good (Ps. 86:5; 100:5; 107:1; 119:68). But it flatly contradicts those who want to "protect" him by removing his control over disasters. Job made it clear that he thought God was in control: "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away" (Job 1:21). Was Job wrong? From the surrounding narrative in Job 1 we learn that Satan engineered the disasters:

*And the Lord said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand" (Job 1:12).*

But Satan did not act without God's permission (see Job 1:10–11). We see three distinct causes: God, Satan, and human raiders (vv. 15, 17), all acting within the same events. The plans of Satan do not negate the sovereignty of God (ibid. 41-43).

### III. CONTROLLED "CHANCE"

The Bible makes it clear by any number of cases that God involves himself in details:

*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. (Matt. 10:29)*

*But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. (Matt. 10:30)*

*. . . to bring rain on a land where no man is, on the desert in which there is no man, to satisfy the waste and desolate land, and to make the ground sprout with grass? (Job 38:26–27)*

*Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these?*

*He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name,*

*by the greatness of his might, and because he is strong in power not one is missing. (Isa. 40:26)*

Consider now a classic case of a random event: the roll of dice. When we roll dice, no one can predict what numbers will come up. The result is a matter of pure "chance." Here is what the Bible says:

*The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord. (Prov. 16:33)*

The expression "the lot" designates some kind of random event. It covers a range of possible means. People can roll dice, or flip a coin, or spin a top, or spin a dial with markings on it. Or they may throw down sticks and observe whether they form a pattern of some kind. The fact that the lot "is cast into the lap" suggests in this case something more like dice. Whatever the means used, "its every decision is from the Lord." "Every decision," it says, not just some. Every time the dice come up, they come up as the Lord directs. The Lord controls the outcome of this random event.

A skeptic might still claim that Proverbs 16:33 covers only a few "special" events. The proverb envisions primarily a situation where people cast a lot in order to make a decision based on the outcome of the lot. They might have an important religious or political decision to make.

In Joshua 7:14 we see a significant incident where lots are used. Someone in Israel has taken things out of Jericho that were "devoted" to God, which God had claimed for himself and told the people not to take. Joshua then uses lots to find out which tribe and which member of the tribe has



done the deed. The outcome of the lots does take place under the Lord's control, because they find out that Achan is the culprit (Josh. 7:18).

In more pleasant circumstances, in 1 Samuel 10:20–21, the casting of lots singles out Saul the son of Kish as the new king of Israel. A lot also singles out Jonah as the person responsible for the storm at sea (Jonah 1:7). A lot is used by the apostles in Acts 1 to determine whether Joseph called Barsabbas or Matthias should be appointed as an additional apostle, to fill the place left empty by the death of Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:23–26). The successor to Judas must be the one whom the Lord has appointed, and the will of the Lord comes to expression when the apostles cast lots. "The lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles" (v. 26). The apostles clearly understand that the outcome for this casting of lots is controlled by the Lord.

We can see a similar kind of thing in modern times when a group of people draw straws or flip a coin to see who goes first. Sometimes the result may be humanly important, if they are risking their lives in a dangerous mission. Sometimes the result may be of small importance, if they are just determining which person plays first in a game.

So, the skeptic wonders, does God's control over dice or lots take place only when some weighty decision is needed? Or, even more narrowly, does his control apply only to intense religious situations in Israel, such as selecting Achan or Saul or Matthias? Or does God's control extend to other instances?

The verse in Proverbs 16:33 does not have any qualification. It does not say, "When an important decision has to be made, the decision is from the Lord." The

formulation is a general one: “the lot is cast into the lap.” The natural meaning is, “any lot whatsoever.” It includes the lot cast by the pagan sailors on Jonah’s ship. “Every decision,” not merely a decision once in a while, is “from the Lord.” It is true that the proverb focuses on lots that have some significance, because such lots are the ones in which people are most interested, and where it is most important that they understand the Lord’s control. But the principle is a general one: every lot. Every lot has its outcome determined by the Lord in his sovereignty, and in accord with his eternal plan. We can generalize further: the Lord controls every random event, whether it is deliberately brought about by a human action of rolling dice or flipping coins, or is just a happenstance, like a hair coming out of someone’s head and falling to the ground.

How do we know this? We know this because Proverbs 16:33 is a general principle. It has no qualifications that would limit the power of God over details. The absence of limitation agrees with the verses that we have already seen that teach the complete universality of God’s control:

*. . . having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will. (Eph. 1:11)*

*Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it?*

*Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come? (Lam. 3:37–38) [ibid. 63–67]*

We can rely on another regularity, called independence of events or independence of probabilities. Independence is a key idea in the theory of probability, but it takes some explaining. Suppose we have two dice, one white and one red. The probability that the white die will come up 5 is  $1/6$ . The probability that the red die will come up 5 is also  $1/6$ . These truths follow from symmetry and also from the regularities in space and time.

Now picture a situation in which we roll the white die, and it comes up 5. Then we proceed to roll the red die. What is now the probability that it will come up 5, given the extra information that we have, namely, the information that the white die has already come up 5?

The actual answer is that the red die still has a  $1/6$  probability of coming up 5. Knowing the outcome from the white die does not affect the red die. Its probabilities are still the same as they were before. The technical term for this situation is probabilistic independence. We say that the outcome for the red die is independent of the outcome for the white die. This kind of independence does not occur in our examples about the 75-year-old woman who smokes or exercises regularly. The probability that she will die in the next year is influenced by such extra information. It is not independent of the information. Some kinds of knowledge influence probability estimates, but other kinds of knowledge do not. When one kind of knowledge does not have an influence, we describe the situation as a situation of probabilistic independence.

The roll of one white die does not affect the outcome of the roll of a red die. The two are independent. Similarly, a previous roll of a white die does not affect the outcome of the next roll of the same die. This independence is an independence in time.

Some people's intuitions fail them when they think about situations like these. For example, they may imagine that since the white die has already come up 5, a second roll of the same die is less likely to come up 5. They may try to bolster their reasoning by pointing out that the average for a large number of die rolls must work out so that the outcome of 5 is no more frequent than any other outcome. So surely the next roll is a little less likely to come up a 5, in order to "balance" the long-run frequencies of all six outcomes. By similar reasoning, if a single die has come up 5 six times in a row, it is quite a bit less likely to come up 5 again, because it has to balance out the total number of 5s with the totals for the other possible outcomes.

Some people's intuitions may actually go in the opposite direction. They may think that, after several occurrences of an outcome of 5, the die is more likely to come up 5 because maybe there is a tendency to stick to a pattern that is already in place.

There are indeed situations in ordinary life that show patterns like these. Suppose you go to a Little League game knowing nothing about either team. You watch the pitcher, and the first eight pitches you see are all strikes. Is the next pitch likely to be a strike? Yes. There is a good chance that you are watching a very accurate pitcher, and that he has decided to try to throw a strike every time. You learn from watching that there is a pattern to his pitches. The probability of his throwing a strike is very high, especially when compared to another pitcher with poor accuracy.

Now let us go back to the situation with dice. We have to see that the two dice are more like two pitchers than one. Just because one pitcher is accurate, it does not make another pitcher more accurate. The same is true for the

situation where we repeatedly roll a single die. We throw the white die a second time, a third time, and so on. Is it more likely to come up 5? What if it comes up 5 three times in a row? Is it likely to come up 5 on the fourth throw? The answer is no. The fourth throw still has a probability of  $1/6$  of coming up 5. If it comes up 5 ten times in a row, or a hundred times in a row, the probability of coming up 5 on the next roll is still  $1/6$ . That is what we mean by probabilistic independence.

But we must insert a qualification. The probabilities we are talking about for dice are a priori probabilities. We knew what these probabilities were before we ever starting rolling the dice. But suppose we start for the first time with rolling a die, and it does come up 5 a full 10 times in a row, right after we start. What then? That is a very unusual result, so unusual that we begin to suspect that there is something fishy. Someone has tampered with the die. It looks symmetrical, but maybe it is not. Ah, it feels funny. The face opposite to the 5 seems to be very heavy. What is happening here is that in our assessment of the die we are being influenced by a posteriori probabilities. The actual results of conducting trials, that is, conducting rolls, are so unusual that we look around for some explanation for why the results, that is, the a posteriori samples, differ strongly from the a priori predictions.

Gamblers sometimes get trapped by their feelings or hunches about probabilities. They feel that a particular die or a roulette wheel or other object has mysteriously gotten "stuck" on some pattern, and therefore it is very likely that the pattern will continue. Or, conversely, they notice that 5 has not come up for a long time on the die, so, they feel, it is "time" for it to come up, and the probability of it coming up on the very next roll is higher than it would otherwise be. Are they right? The answer is no. The patterns that the

gamblers think that they see are all temporary, ephemeral. Despite the gamblers' feelings, the outcome of the next roll of the die is just as unpredictable as the very first roll. The probability of coming up 5 is  $1/6$ . This probability is independent of all the previous rolls, as far back as we go.

How do we know that is the case? We are finite; we do not know absolutely. But those who have studied events like repeated coin flips and repeated dice rolls and repeated drawing of cards from well shuffled decks discern a pattern of independence in all these types of events. The pattern is ordained by God in his faithfulness and creativity and love.

We can, in part, understand something of the rationale and the wisdom in this pattern. Each roll of a die is distinct. And each is going to involve minute differences in the initial orientation of the die, and how it first strikes the ground, and so on. Such differences cannot be controlled by human beings. So the spatial symmetry of the die's faces do suggest, by means of a priori reasoning, that the six distinct outcomes should be equally likely. And since each roll of each die is different in the details of how it starts, there will be no intrinsic correlation between two distinct rolls or two distinct dice. The lack of intrinsic correlation means independence.

This independence contrasts with the intrinsic correlations that we sense do exist in cases where we consider, for example, the relation of smoking or family history to the likelihood of death. Things that happen in the woman's body earlier in time influence the state of her health. By contrast, the history of a die does not influence the next roll, because the roll starts fresh with slightly different orientation, slightly different rate of spin, and so on (ibid. 191-94).

The casino will soon notice his success. Winning in this way is so unusual that the casino manager might suspect that the gambler has formed a secret partnership with the employee managing the roulette table, and that together they have found some secret way of manipulating the outcome of the wheel. If the manager can find no explanation of this kind, he will nevertheless ban the gambler from the roulette table beginning on the next day. He cannot afford to do otherwise. If he were to let the gambler continue, he would continue losing money to the one gambler. But in addition, other gamblers would soon notice the "good luck" and begin to imitate his bets, thereby "piling on" and winning money themselves (ibid. 205).

## Naturalism and the burden of proof

Miracles, in order to leave no reasonable doubt their scientific inexplicability, must therefore be very extraordinary events. They must be events which we have every reason to believe are physically impossible; i.e., our best-confirmed natural laws must tell us that events of this sort cannot occur. This means that prior to their actual occurrence they must be events that we would judge very unlikely to take place. Indeed, it is fair to say that they must have an a priori likelihood about as low as any contingent fact could have. Thus, even if we can imagine events so remarkable that they would be scientifically inexplicable, we can ask whether any evidence would be strong enough to establish that such improbable events had taken place.

[http://infidels.org/library/modern/keith\\_parsons/theistic/4.html](http://infidels.org/library/modern/keith_parsons/theistic/4.html)

- i)** This is a classic way of making the case against miracles. You shift the burden of proof onto the proponent of miracles, then assign an insurmountably low prior probability to miracles.
- ii)** Notice that Parsons doesn't base his definition of miracles on examples of miracles in Scripture or church history. He doesn't begin with the kinds of miracles that figure in the dispute, then formulate a definition that covers these cases. Instead, he picks an aprioristic definition out of the air.
- iii)** To say a miracle must be the kind of event which cannot happen consistent with natural laws is ambiguous. Does that mean it cannot occur if nature is left to its own devices? If so, that doesn't mean miracles are physically



impossible if an agent intervenes. Mill defined a miracle as "a new effect produced by the introduction of a new cause."

It's physically impossible for nature to produce a bicycle, but an agent can produce a bicycle by manipulating natural resources.

**iv)** There's also the question of natural laws allow permit. Suppose psychokinesis is real. In that case, some kinds of events are physical possible which would be physically impossible if no one has psychokinetic ability. One can't rule out psychokinesis in advance by claiming that conflicts with natural laws, for that's circular.

**v)** Parsons seems to be assuming that a miracle must bypass natural processes. But although that's true for some kinds of miracles, that's not true for coincidence miracles.

For instance, in 1 Kgs 22, Ahab's death in the battle of Ramoth-gilead is predicted (vv22). And this is what happens:

*29 So the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat the king of Judah went up to Ramoth-gilead. 30 And the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "I will disguise myself and go into battle, but you wear your robes." And the king of Israel disguised himself and went into battle. 31 Now the king of Syria had commanded the thirty-two captains of his chariots, "Fight with neither small nor great, but only with the king of Israel." 32 And when the captains of the chariots saw Jehoshaphat, they said, "It is surely the king of Israel." So they*

*turned to fight against him. And Jehoshaphat cried out. 33 And when the captains of the chariots saw that it was not the king of Israel, they turned back from pursuing him. 34 But a certain man drew his bow at random and struck the king of Israel between the scale armor and the breastplate. Therefore he said to the driver of his chariot, "Turn around and carry me out of the battle, for I am wounded." 35 And the battle continued that day, and the king was propped up in his chariot facing the Syrians, until at evening he died.*

On the face of it, this doesn't violate any natural laws. Yet it's too discriminating to be the result of blind causes—especially in conjunction with the fateful prediction, and Ahab's futile precautionary measures.

**vi)** Finally, it's actually the naturalist who suffers from an insurmountable burden of proof. Naturalism is a universal negative. Naturalism can't afford a single miracle. Naturalism can't afford a single answered prayer. Naturalism must discount every answered prayer as mere coincidence. Naturalism must discount every miracle as misperceived, misremembered, misinterpreted, or misreported. Naturalism can't afford a single miracle to slip through its sieve. All it takes is one miracle, one answered prayer, to falsify naturalism.

Keep in mind, too, that answered prayers are vastly underreported. That's because most Christians live and die in obscurity. Only a handful of people knew them. They are

quickly forgotten. They never make it into the history books. No one writes their biography. The answered prayers we happen to hear about are an infinitesimal fraction of the totality.

## Are miracles less likely than not?

I'm posting something I said in recent correspondence with some friends:

I just find the whole business of probabilifying miracles nonsensical. It's said that miracles are inherently or antecedently unlikely.

Take the miracle at Cana. By that logic, it was less likely than not (indeed, far less likely) that God would perform the miracle at Cana. But how is anyone in a position to say in advance (and after the fact it's moot) whether or not God intended to perform the miracle at Cana? How do you lay odds for that hypothetical?

If, moreover, God did in fact perform the miracle at Cana, how is it less likely than not (indeed, far less likely) that he wouldn't do what he was going to do? If he did it, then isn't it at least more likely than not that he was going to do what he did?

Perhaps an atheist will say the evidence for atheism renders a miracle improbable. But in that event, it's not the probability of a miracle, but the probability of a miracle-working God, that's at issue.

Since, moreover, any evidence for miracles would subtract from any (alleged) evidence for atheism, is it not viciously circular to make atheism the gauge for assigning a probability value to miracles—even if you're an atheist?

Not to mention that it would only take one bona fide miracle to falsify atheism. The threshold for falsifying atheism is exceedingly low.

To take a comparison, what's the probability of a royal flush? Assuming the deck is randomly shuffled, that's a straightforward mathematical calculation.

But what's the probability of a royal flush if the deck is stacked? Well, assuming the card sharp is good at his job, it's inevitable.

So that becomes a question of how probable it is that the deck is stacked, which in turn, becomes a question of how probable it is that the dealer is a card sharp.

I don't see how treating probability statistically enables us to lay odds on whether or not the deck is stacked. That's a question of what would motivate a dealer to stack the deck.

In my illustration, the uniformity of nature is analogous to randomly shuffled decks, while a miracle is analogous to a stacked deck.

I don't mind defining a miracle as an action that inhibits the world from continuing in the way it would if left to itself.

But since a miracle involves personal agency or personal intention, overriding how the world would continue if left to itself, the question is how to assign a probability value to God's will to perform (or not perform) a miracle. I don't see how statistics or background knowledge regarding the general uniformity of nature is germane to how we anticipate or estimate God's intention to perform a miracle.

## In what sense are miracles improbable?

Atheists typically classify miracles as inherently improbable. And even some Christian philosophers assign a very low (but surmountable) prior probability to miracles. Low in what sense?

Consider two examples to illustrate my question.

Richard Feynman once said:

You know, the most amazing thing happened to me tonight. I was coming here, on the way to the lecture, and I came in through the parking lot. And you won't believe what happened. I saw a car with the license plate ARW 357. Can you imagine? Of all the millions of license plates in the state, what was the chance that I would see that particular one tonight? Amazing!

In what sense is that improbable?

i) Perhaps he meant, what are the odds that a license plate would have that combination of letters and numbers. Those exact letters and numbers in that exact sequence.

Let's pick a figure out of the air. Suppose the odds are one in 20 million that a license plate would have that number.

If, however, there were 20 million license plates, then it's a dead certainty that one plate will have that number.

So even though it's astronomically unlikely that any given plate will have that number, it's certain that some plate will have that number.

**ii)** But maybe what he meant was not the improbability of the license plate, but the conjunction of two independent events. What are the odds that a car with that particular license in that particular lot would be there at the same time he happened to be there?

However, as a good physicist, wouldn't he say it that conjunction was bound to happen given the antecedent conditions? That there was a causal chain of events leading up to that conjunction? It seems (to me at least) counterintuitive to say something inevitable is astronomically improbable.

But perhaps we need to distinguish between what's metaphysically improbable and what's epistemically improbable.

**iii)** To take another comparison, what are the odds of having B- blood type? I think the answer depends on the reference group. It's 2% for Caucasians, but 0.4% for Asians.

## N. T. Wright on miracles

Let's give up the world miracle because the word miracle comes to us now in our culture from that Epicurean or deist worldview which envisages a God who is outside the process and occasionally reaches in and does something funny and then pushes off again. Now, that is not what the New Testament is talking about. So when people say can we believe in miracles I say no, because the word miracle gives us this sense of a normally absent God sometimes reaching in, that's not the God of the Bible.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2014/01/28/wait-no-miracles-wright-on-rjs/>

Wright's way of framing the issue is confused:

- i)** Metaphysically speaking, God *is* outside the process. God subsists apart from the world. Indeed, on a classical theistic view, God is timeless and spaceless.
- ii)** God created a system of second causes. Mundane events generally occur according to natural mechanisms. Physical causes producing physical effects.

Physical processes are unintelligent. They do whatever they were programmed to do. They operate automatically and uniformly, if nature is allowed to take its course.

To a great extent, the natural world is like a machine. Of course, it takes wisdom to design the machine and power to build or maintain the machine. So that doesn't exclude God by any means.



**iii)** A miracle stands in contrast to this default process. There are basically two kinds of miracles:

**a)** Miracles which bypass natural processes. The effect is not the result of antecedent conditions. God causes the effect apart from the usual chain of cause and effect.

**b)** Miracles which utilize natural processes, but are more discriminating than blind natural processes. Where God has prearranged causally independent events to converge on a very specific and highly unlikely outcome.

## Preternatural miracles

Hallquist has posted a partial response to my critique:

<http://www.uncrediblehallq.net/2012/01/10/yay-a-reply-to-my-review-except-sigh/>

(1) Hayes quotes me as calling Keener's thesis "weasly," and then calls this a "conspiratorial interpretation" while ignoring my more detailed explanation of what's wrong with Keener's thesis. To recap: the "primary thesis" is poorly-chosen because it's too trivial to be worth devoting a two-volume set to...

He's a NT scholar whose book is addressed to members of the guild. He's challenging the unquestioned assumption that reported miracles in the Gospels and Acts should be automatically consigned to legend. And he's filling a lacuna in the scholarly literature.

...and his "secondary thesis" is problematic because it's vague, and seems to provide Keener with an excuse for spending a lot of time accusing people of being closed-minded, instead of doing what he should be doing, which is arguing that miracles actually occur.

**i)** Keener devotes a great deal of time documenting the occurrence of miracles.

**ii)** However, many unbelievers *are* closed-minded. As a result, they are impervious to the evidence. So Keener also needs to challenge their arbitrary rules of evidence.

I suppose I could have spent a little more time on this last problem, for the sake of making things clear. In particular, I neglected to quote some of the more blatant ad hominem, such as, "skeptics 'have laid out the rules of the game in such a way that they cannot possibly lose'" (p. 703). This quote, along with much of Keener's discussion of such important issues medical documentation, misdiagnosis, and scientific study of prayer (quoted in my original review), is located in a chapter titled "Biased Standards?" which implies that the key issue with respect to these things is not the quality (or weakness) of the evidence, but whether skeptics are closed-minded.

Hallquist acts as if this is Keener's hostile caricature of how unbelievers respond to reported miracles. Yet it's easy to quote unbelievers who've "laid out the rules of the game in such a way that they cannot possibly lose."

The locus classicus is Hume, from his famous essay:

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.

No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish: And even in that case, there is a mutual destruction of arguments, and the superior only gives us an assurance suitable to that degree of force, which remains, after deducting the inferior.

And there are variants on this argument among other unbelievers. For instance:

That is, he must in effect concede to Hume that the antecedent improbability of this event is as high as it could be, hence that, apart from the testimony, we have the strongest possible grounds for believing that the alleged event did not occur. This event must, by the miracle advocate's own admission, be contrary to a genuine, not merely a supposed, law of nature, and therefore be maximally improbable. It is this maximal improbability that the weight of the testimony would have to overcome.

Those who accept this as a miracle have the double burden of showing both that the event took place and that it violated the laws of nature. But it will be very hard to sustain this double burden. For whatever tends to show that it would have been a violation of natural law tends for that very reason to make it most unlikely that it actually happened.

J. I. Mackie, **THE MIRACLE OF THEISM** (Oxford 1982), 25-26.

Historians more or less rank past events on the basis of the relative probability that they occurred. All that historians can do is show what probably happened in the past. That is the problem inherent in miracles. Miracles, by our very definition of the term, are virtually impossible events.

Historians can establish only what probably happened in the past, but miracles, by their very nature, are always the least probable explanation for what happened...If historians can only establish what

probably happened, and miracles by their definition are the least probable occurrences, then more or less by definition, historians cannot establish that miracles have ever probably occurred.

B. Ehrman, **JESUS INTERRUPTED** (HarperOne 2009), 175-76.

Even in the best possible case, in order for an extraordinary explanation to be believable, the evidence (as a whole) must be extraordinarily improbable on any other explanation but the extraordinary one and in direct proportion, the more extraordinary the claim, the more extraordinarily improbable the evidence must otherwise be.

R. Carrier, "Why the Resurrection is Unbelievable," J. Loftus, ed., **THE CHRISTIAN DELUSION** (Prometheus Books 2010), 311n4.

So Keener's characterization is not a "blatant ad hominem."

(2) Hayes complains a lot about it, but never answers two key questions: why do believers rarely pray for limbs to regenerate, and why are the prayers for limb regeneration that people do make so rarely answered?

**i)** One of Hallquist's rhetorical ploys is to characterize my response as a "complaint," then dismiss the "complaint" without engaging my argument.

**ii)** I'm in no position to know the relative infrequency of such prayers. I'm also in no position to know the relative infrequency of answers to such prayers.

**iii)** If it happened to a friend or relative of mine, I'd pray for healing. However, like all my prayers, that prayer would be qualified.

The question is deceptively simple:

**i)** For one thing, it's often easier to explain why something *does* happen than why it *doesn't*. Explaining a nonevent, explaining a negative, can be more elusive or inscrutable.

Ask me why God *didn't* make it rain in Peoria on a certain date, and I may be stumped for an answer. But if God didn't make it rain in Peoria on a certain date, there's no reason a Christian should be privy to the reason.

**ii)** If God did heal an amputee, the atheist could always say the medical records were inaccurate, say that's a case of mistaken identity, etc.

**iii)** If an amputee's limb regenerated, the atheist could always deny that God did it in answer to prayer. He could say that's dumb luck. Chalk it up to the post hoc ergo post hoc fallacy.

**iv)** If an amputee's limb regenerated, the atheist could always say all this proves is that in some anomalous cases, amputated limbs spontaneously regenerate—like other freak medical conditions.

**v)** Amputation is a special case of the problem of evil. Underlying the question of why God (allegedly) won't heal amputees is the ulterior question of why God permits injuries that require amputation in the first place.

Put another way, if God has good reason for allowing (or planning) injuries that require amputation, then God may have the very same reason for refusing to heal the amputee. If God allows (or plans) the injury, then it's not surprising if God refuses to heal the amputee—assuming that would thwart his initial purpose in allowing the injury to occur.

**vi)** The question is a diversionary tactic. It deflects attention away from evidence for other types miracles. An ad hoc stipulation for a particular kind of evidence.

**vii)** Even in Bible history, preternatural miracles aren't a regular occurrence. To the contrary, preternatural miracles are epochal phenomena. Bible history alternates between phases punctuated by preternatural miracles and phases characterized by ordinary providence. Noah experienced cataclysmic judgment, but after that, ordinary providence resumed (Gen 8:22). (And, strictly speaking, even Noah's flood may not be preternatural.)

In the wilderness, Israelites experienced preternatural sources of food and water, but after that, ordinary providence resumed (Josh 5:12).

So there's no antecedent reason to assume that during the church age, God will perform preternatural miracles (e.g. regenerating limbs). If that doesn't happen, it's not surprising.

Christians can pray for whatever God permits, but we don't know in advance whether the church age will include preternatural miracles. That's something we can only discover, moving forward.

(By “preternatural” I mean miracles that override natural processes. But miracles or answers to prayer can harness natural processes. What makes it miraculous is that (i) it’s highly unlikely to happen by chance, and (ii) the timing indicates the personal discretion of a superhuman agent.)

viii) The atheist might try to accuse the Christian of special pleading. His position is unfalsifiable because the Christian can always postulate some unknown reason God had not to heal amputees.

However, that objection cuts both ways. The atheist can always postulate some unknown cause (i.e. undiscovered naturalistic cause) for why severed limbs might spontaneously regenerate. He can always postulate inaccurate medical records or mistaken identity. He can always stipulate that any naturalistic explanation, however improbable, is more probable than a supernatural explanation.

And while I’m on the subject: Hayes complains that I’m “leaving myself an out” by pointing out that a leg regrowth story might be a lie. But does he seriously think it’s unreasonable to be skeptical of the story from Pat Robertson’s book?

Assuming that the “Pat Robertson” remark isn’t just a throwaway line.

(3) My answer: In some cases, yes. In other cases, no. But the reason we know that some medical treatments really work is not because of Keener-style collections of stories of people who received medical treatment and then recovered. We know this because we’ve done scientific studies of the effectiveness of many medical



treatments, and in many cases the results came back positive.

**i)** Hallquist originally insinuated that ostensible answers to prayer commit the post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy. I simply drew a parallel with medical treatment.

**ii)** His new argument doesn't get around the problem. For inductive scientific studies only document a correlation, not causation. That, therefore, doesn't eliminate the "possibility" of coincidence.

**iii)** Moreover, one can be equally skeptical of scientific studies:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/print/2010/11/lies-damned-lies-and-medical-science/8269/>

Do I deny the efficacy in medical science? Generally no. But the efficacy of medical science is subject to the same caveats as the efficacy of prayer, or reported miracles.

(4) Similarly, if a friend tells me they got sick, took some penicillin, and got better, I'll figure the penicillin probably contributed to their getting better, because I know there's good evidence that penicillin helps fight infections. However, if a friend tells me they got sick, prayed, and got better, I'll think it's extraordinarily unlikely that the prayer helped except maybe in a psychosomatic way, because there's no good evidence for the efficacy of prayer. In other words, it's totally normal to use what you know about the world in general to evaluate reports about specific occasions. This should not be hard to understand.

**i)** Of course, that's circular. For the very question at issue is what we know about the world.

And, yes, we often use the general to assess the specific, but the general is, itself, an abstraction from sampling particular instances. A bottom-up process, from the specific to the general. At best that's descriptive, not prescriptive. Inherently provisional.

**ii)** There is also a tension in Hallquist's example. Doesn't he think a miracle is supposed to be "extraordinarily unlikely" to eliminate sheer coincidence?

## What makes a miracle miraculous?

*5 After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. 2 Then they carried the ark into Dagon's temple and set it beside Dagon. 3 When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord! They took Dagon and put him back in his place. 4 But the following morning when they rose, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord! His head and hands had been broken off and were lying on the threshold; only his body remained. 5 That is why to this day neither the priests of Dagon nor any others who enter Dagon's temple at Ashdod step on the threshold. 6 The Lord's hand was heavy on the people of Ashdod and its vicinity; he brought devastation on them and afflicted them with tumors (1 Sam 5:1-6).*

Since the Bible nowhere define a miracle, philosophers and theologians come up with their own definitions. Two popular definitions are a "violation of natural law" and an effect which bypasses natural processes.

Up to a point, these can both be useful definitions. There are some biblical events which fit those definitions. But there are many "miraculous" events in Scripture which slip through the sieve.

The issue is important in debates over cessationism. Cessationism requires a very narrow definition of what constitutes a miracle. Problem is, the definition is so tightly drawn that it excludes many Biblical events which are impressive candidates for the miraculous. Shouldn't that inform our concept of the miraculous?

Consider the example from 1 Samuel:

**i)** An idol tipping over doesn't violate any law of nature, does it? Likewise, it doesn't necessarily bypass second causes. By the same token, an idol breaking on contact with a hard surface isn't clearly a violation of natural law. And that doesn't necessarily (or even probably) bypass natural processes. It's not unusual for things to fall over or break.

By the same token, the punitive pestilence doesn't violate a law of nature or bypass natural processes. To the contrary, it seems to exploit preexisting pathogens. Redirects them.

**ii)** So should we demote these events to something less than miraculous? We could say it's providential. And there's nothing necessarily wrong with that classification.

But that fails to distinguish between events that happen automatically, and events that swim against the current (as it were). Left to its own devices, natural cause and effect wouldn't be that discriminating.

**iii)** What makes this miraculous is twofold:

**a)** The specificity in time and place. It's not idols falling down generally, or idols breaking generally. Rather, this

happened when a rival religious object was brought into the heathen temple.

And this happened back-to-back. Even if the first occurrence was merely coincidental, what about two nights in a row? Notice, too, that the second occurrence doesn't merely repeat the first occurrence, but intensifies the result.

Not only the timing, but the placement. The idol falls down right in front of the ark.

**b)** This, in turn, brings us to the symbolism of the event. Minimally, the posture of the fallen idol signifies a pagan "god" worshipping the one true God. That's quite ironic.

In addition, it probably represents the true God subduing a false god—like a conqueror who subjugates the defeated king. Public humiliation. This is further reinforced by mutilating the idol.

Finally, the fact that the idol is decapitated and amputated symbolizes the ignorance and impotence of pagan divinities. Know-nothing, do-nothing deities.

This could all happen through natural mechanisms, yet it can still be miraculous.

## Tails up

A cliché objection to miracles, popularized by Carl Sagan, is that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence". This slogan is parroted by atheists, as if it's self-evidently true.

Ironically, the slogan is a claim in its own right. Indeed, two claims bundled into one: (i) miracles are "extraordinary"; (ii) as such, it takes "extraordinary evidence" to credit them.

The slogan itself needs to be unpacked. The key terms need to be defined and defended. So an atheist who uses Sagan's slogan has his own burden of proof.

That said, let's approach things from another angle: Suppose a reporter tells me that he saw a table with 100 coins, and every coin was tails up. Is that extraordinary? What are the odds? Does it demand extraordinary evidence to lend credence to the report?

That's not a question we can answer in a vacuum. Is the assumption that someone flipped every coin once, and on the first flip, each quarter came up tails?

If so, would that be extraordinary? What are the odds?

Well, that depends. Do the 100 coins represent the entire sample? Suppose the original sample was 1000 coins, some of which flipped heads and some of which flipped tails. The coins on the table represent a select subset of that larger total. In that event, there's nothing extraordinary about 100 out of 1000 coins coming up tails on the first flip.

Suppose, though, it is the original sample. But just by looking at the coins on the table, an observer can't tell how many times each coin was flipped. Maybe someone flipped each coin until he got tails. In that event, there's nothing extraordinary about 100 coins tails up. You can't tell from just looking at the end-result what caused that particular outcome.

Or maybe the coins were never flipped to achieve that result. Maybe someone simply laid each coin on the table, tails up. In that event, there's nothing extraordinary about 100 coins tails up.

You can't tell, from viewing the event in isolation, whether the event is "extraordinary". What might be extraordinary in the case of random coin tossing might be ordinary in the case of selected results or direct action.

And you don't need to know in advance that an agent produced the result to take agency into consideration. Indeed, if the reported outcome is astronomically improbable, absent some additional variable to orient the outcome, that's not a reason to deny the resort unless there's no good reason to suppose an agent may have been involved. And if the outcome is not in serious doubt, then agency is the only rational explanation.

## Critical thinking on modern miracles

Name one that is biblical. To claim that false healings and miracles and gibberish are the works of the Holy Spirit is a dangerous practice. That is MacArthur's point. Produce one person that has been healed of congenial blindness, one amputee who's limb has grown back, one legitimate resurrection...just one. Show me someone who speaks in the tongues Luke describes in Acts 2...just one.

[http://thegospelcoalition.org/book-reviews/review/strange\\_fire#comment-1100570585](http://thegospelcoalition.org/book-reviews/review/strange_fire#comment-1100570585)

All of that to say, if continuationists are correct that signs and wonders are a part of the normal Christian experience and they are happening with regularity among God's people, then there should be gifted individuals who should do extraordinary signs and wonders with their laying on of hands. Their ministry should be public — I would suggest a children's cancer hospital or special ministries department at a local church. And their ministry should be witnessed by believers and unbelievers alike and those signs and wonders should be both undeniable and verifiable.

<http://hipandthigh.wordpress.com/2013/07/08/the-continuationists-signs-and-wonders-problem/>

**i)** It's striking that MacArthurites like Ed and Fred are utterly oblivious to the fact that their objection to modern charismata parrots the atheist objection to God's existence. If there is a God, why doesn't he heal amputees? If God exists, why doesn't he cure every patient in a cancer ward?



Same thing with atheists and prayer studies. If God answers prayer, then that ought to show up on double-blind experiments.

Charismatics can respond to the cessationist objection in the same way cessationists respond to the atheist objection. If a cessationist defends himself by saying God doesn't heal amputees because it's not God's will to heal amputees, and God has a good reason for not doing so, then a charismatic can defend himself by saying God doesn't empower a modern-day Christian to heal amputees because it's not God's will to heal amputees, and God has a good reason for not doing so—either directly or indirectly.

**ii)** Likewise, Jesus and the apostles didn't try to prove themselves by searching for sick people to heal. Rather, sick people came to them.

**iii)** Now, bad arguments can be persuasive because they contain a grain of truth. The element of truth lends a specious plausibility to a bad argument. And that's the case here.

I think Fred is calling the bluff of charismatics. And up to a point, there's nothing wrong with that. It's like calling a psychic's bluff by taking the psychic out of her controlled environment, where she can manipulate the variables, and putting her in a situation where she has to do cold readings.

Notice how Fred prefaces the challenge:

if continuationists are correct that signs and wonders are a part of the normal Christian experience and they are happening with regularity among God's people, then there should be gifted individuals who should do

extraordinary signs and wonders with their laying on of hands.

And there are undoubtedly continuationists who claim that. So that's a fair challenge.

iv) However, there's no reason to think the alternative to cessationism must be believing that "signs and wonders are a part of the normal Christian experience and they are happening with regularity among God's people."

v) For instance, how do cessationists define faith-healers? Let's take a comparison:

a) A Christian prays for a cancer patient. The next day, the cancer is gone.

b) A Christian lays hands on a cancer patient and prays over the patient. The next day, the cancer is gone.

Is (b) a faith-healer, but (a) is not? Is that the distinction? If not, is there some other differential factor?

vi) What if a Christian has the "gift of healing," but doesn't claim to be a faith-healer? Suppose he or she simply acquires a reputation for having the ability to heal, without doing anything to cultivate that image or advertise that fact? Is that Christian a faith-healer?

vii) If a Christian is a healer, does that mean he or she must be able to heal anyone and everyone? If a serial killer with terminal cancer comes to her, and she lays hands on him or prays for him, and he still dies of cancer, does that mean she's a fraud?

What if it wasn't God's will to heal the terminal serial killer? Unlike the faith-healer, God knows who this individual is. God knows what this individual will do if miraculously cured. Therefore, God blocks or withholds healing.

viii) If someone claims to be a faith-healer or miracle-worker, then we have every right to demand evidence. That, however, is different from proposing an artificial litmus test.

If Jesus heals a woman who suffers from internal bleeding (Mt 9:18-26), but he doesn't heal someone dying of radiation sickness, the latter doesn't cancel out the former. We should judge each case by the evidence for (or against) each case. The fact that nothing happened in one case isn't evidence that nothing happened in another case.

ix) It's also illogical to prejudge the question of modern charismata by charismatic claims. Whether or not modern charismata occur is irrespective of what charismatics claim, one way or the other. It's undoubtedly the case that many charismatics make exaggerated claims or entertain exaggerated expectations. However, disproving exaggerating claims—which is a worthwhile exercise in itself—does nothing to disprove modern charismata.

If a weather forecaster predicts that it will rain 5 days in a row, and it only rains 3 out of 5 days, his prediction was false. But his mistake doesn't falsify the reality that it rained 3 days out of 5. He was partially wrong, but he was partially right. The event is independent of his claims. Disproving his specific claims does nothing to disprove a weather event.

Cessationists and charismatics can't prescribe or proscribe reality. It will be whatever it will be, regardless of their prognostications.

Ultimately, you need to judge the question of modern miracles, not by what cessationists or charismatics claim, but by what really happens—or doesn't. If the incidence of miracles is lower than the rate which Pentecostals optimistically predict, the mismatch disproves Pentecostalism, but it does nothing to disprove the miracles which do occur—assuming they occur. It's unfortunate that so many cessationists fail to draw that fundamental distinction.

## Now Thank We All Our God

I'm going to discuss two related issues which were cropping up in my impromptu debate with JD Walters.

**1.** One traditional argument in Christian apologetics is the argument from miracles. In this argument, miracles are viewed as having special evidentiary value.

As a preliminary step, it is often thought necessary to provide a precise definition of a miracle, a definition which includes all and only miraculous events.

It is necessary to clearly demarcate miracles from ordinary providence because, so the argument goes, ordinary providence lacks the same evidentiary value as miracles. Ordinary providence is more susceptible to a naturalistic interpretation.

**2.** Now, I have no problem with the argument from miracles, per se. However, I don't distinguish miracles from providence on evidentiary terms. God reveals himself in ordinary providence no less than he does in signs and wonders.

**3.** Answered prayer can also be cited for its evidentiary value. But when prayer is viewed apologetically, the same traditional distinction comes into play. It's important, from an apologetic standpoint, to be fairly certain that an apparent answered prayer is an actual answered prayer. For if you mistake a mere coincidence for an answered prayer, then there's nothing "special" about what happened. The outcome no longer implicates a supernatural agent.

**4.** Once again, I don't have any problem with the role of

answered prayer in Christian apologetics. However, the apologetic dimension is not the only or primary way to view prayer.

For if a Christian already knows that God is real, then he can never go wrong by attributing an event to God. For one way or another, God lies behind every event.

Maybe he's mistaken in thinking that the outcome represents an answer to prayer. But be that as it may, God is still responsible for the outcome.

Is a Christian wrong to thank God for answering his prayer if, in fact, God did not answer his prayer? Well, he's wrong in the sense that he misinterpreted the outcome. But it's never wrong to thank God for the outcome, even if you misinterpret the outcome in some respect.

**5.** Of course, one can also have false expectations about prayer, as well as overconfidence in discerning God's providence. But we should never be hesitant to express our gratitude to God. We can go wrong in other respects, but not in that respect.

## More on methodological naturalism

JAMES F. MCGRATH SAID:

*Thanks for taking the time to interact with my post on Beale's book. I will let you read about my own conversion experience on my blog if you are interested; the authors that have come to be among my favorites did not achieve that status without a fight against them on my part. And I think this too tells against the "conspiracy theory" and "peer pressure" hypotheses.*

**i)** The "conspiracy theory" is not Beale's theory. Rather, that's a polemical caricature of Beale's position—which you impute to him.

**ii)** Peer pressure was not the only explanation I gave. But it's undoubtedly a factor in some situations.

**iii)** There are liberal seminaries, liberal colleges, liberal divinity schools where the veracity of Scripture comes under direct attack. For the ill-prepared student, that can take a toll.

*I attended Evangelical Bible colleges, and it was already in those contexts that I found the Bible itself raising the questions, and at times leading to the answers, that I resisted from "liberals". And you are surely aware that both Robinson and Bultmann can only be generalized as "liberal" if one defines that term to mean "anyone who doesn't adhere consistently to conservative Evangelical conclusions".*

To the contrary, it ranges along a continuum. For example,

Bruce Metzger was to the left of Gregory Beale, but to the right of Rudolf Bultmann. I'm quite capable of distinguishing between conservatives, moderates, and liberals—with many intervening shades.

*Bultmann challenged classic Liberalism's assumption that one can merely remove the cultural shell of the first century and take a timeless core of Christianity out from within it.*

Which simply means that Bultmann was to the left of classic Liberalism. He was a more thoroughgoing liberal.

*And his existentialist emphasis on personal decision became a key element of modern Evangelicalism.*

The existentialist emphasis antedates Bultmann. For example, the Puritans place an enormous emphasis on spiritual introspection and experimental religion.

*Robinson's conclusions on the date of New Testament writings are more conservative than those of many conservatives.*

You didn't reference his book on redating the NT. Rather, you cited his book on **HONEST TO GOD**. That title was riding the crest of 1960s countercultural. A radical chic expression of secular theology. There were a slew of books in that vein, attempting to cash in on the theological fad du jour, viz. Cox, Altizer, van Buren.

*This is one reason why terms like "liberal" and "conservative" are unhelpful: they suggest that there are two opposing views rather than a wide range of partially-overlapping possible positions, as well as the*



*possibility of being more or less conservative on some issues and different on others.*

If you dislike the “liberal” label to characterize Bultmann or Robinson, I’d be happy to substitute a more exacting designation: how about *atheist* or *secularist*?

I don’t know what sort of God, if any, they still believed in. Certainly not the God of the Bible. They didn’t believe in a God who actively involves himself in mundane affairs—be it creation, providence, or miracle.

But if God never does anything, then there’s precious little evidence that God even exists. Such a God is virtually indistinguishable from a nonexistent God. At best, the “theology” of Bultmann and Robinson is functionally equivalent to atheism.

If that’s their position, then why try to keep up appearances? Why continue to intone Biblical or liturgical language when there’s no extratextual referent?

*On methodological naturalism, I don't see how historical study can adopt any other approach, any more than criminology can. It will always be theoretically possible that a crime victim died simply because God wanted him dead, but the appropriate response of detectives is to leave the case open. In the same way, it will always be possible that a virgin conceived, but it will never be more likely than that the stories claiming this developed, like comparable stories about other ancient figures, as a way of highlighting the individual's significance. And since historical study deals with probabilities and evidence, to claim that a miracle is "historically likely" misunderstands the method in question.*

*I am a New Testament scholar rather than purely a historian, but it is my understanding (which historians I know have confirmed) that historical study works on the basis of probability, evaluating available evidence and drawing conclusions much as a jury might in a court of law. And I don't see how anyone could conclude "beyond reasonable doubt" that it is more probable that a miracle occurred than that a story about a miracle came into existence for some other reason. That doesn't mean that miracles did not occur. It just means that historical study can't "prove" that they did.*

*I think a distinction must be made. I cannot affirm a miracle as having happened in the distant past based on accounts in texts that have come down to us, because that's the way historical study works. When it comes to modern miracles, that's a question that relates to not only philosophical worldviews but also theology, experience and perhaps much else.*

Several problems with your historiography:

**i)** History is supposed to be a *descriptive* discipline. A description of past events. It involves an element of *discovery*. The historian doesn't know, in advance of his investigations, what has happened. He must *learn* about the past. Learn about the past on the basis of testimonial evidence or archeological evidence. (An exception would be a historian who is recording autobiographical anecdotes.)

**ii)** By contrast, methodological naturalism is a *prescriptive* principle. Applied to history, it *prejudges* what the historian is allowed to regard as possible or actual. It superimposes a filter on the historical evidence, screening out any evidence which is at variance with methodological naturalism.

Methodological naturalism dictates a foregone conclusion. Before the historian ever looks out the window, methodological naturalism tells the historian what he's permitted to see. Methodological naturalism prescribes, in advance of the evidence, what can or cannot count as evidence.

That isn't a way of doing history. That isn't a way of learning about the past. Rather, that's a way of insulating yourself from any sort of evidence which would challenge your precommitment to naturalism. It systematically begs all the factual questions.

**iii)** Moreover, methodological naturalism doesn't distinguish between past miracles and present miracles, first-hand evidence and second-hand evidence. If you stake out the a priori position that any explanation is more likely than a miraculous explanation, then you could be an eyewitness to a modern miracle, or a series of modern miracles, yet you would be forced, in every single case, to seek an alternative explanation.

**iv)** You have adopted a principle which immunizes our position from all possible falsification. If you insist that every historical interpretation must be naturalistic, then your historical interpretations are unfalsifiable. How did you ever maneuver yourself into the position that historical study commits you to unfalsifiable interpretations of the past?

**v)** When you insist that every historical interpretation must be naturalistic, then the historical evidence ceases to control the historical interpretation. Instead, your naturalistic filter is controlling the historical interpretation.

**vi)** You talk about historical probabilities, but the assessment of what is probable depends on a background knowledge of what is actual or possible. However, methodological naturalism isn't based on historical probabilities. How could you know, apart from observation, what is actual or possible?

You can't automatically discount testimony evidence to the occurrence of miracles based on what is likely, for your knowledge of what is likely is, itself, contingent on testimonial evidence.

**vii)** Methodological naturalism would only be the default position in historiography (or science) if a naturalistic methodology were underwritten by the stronger thesis of metaphysical naturalism. Absent metaphysical naturalism, there is no antecedent presumption in favor of methodological naturalism.

**viii)** You fail to explain what would make a miracle unlikely. Let's take the paradigm-case of the Resurrection. Considered on its own terms, what makes the Resurrection likely or unlikely is whether it's likely or unlikely that God willed to resurrect Jesus. Did God have a reason to resurrect Jesus? Did it serve his purpose?

At a metaphysical level, it comes down to a teleological question, involving personal agency. In this case, divine agency, divine intent.

**ix)** I'd add that, at an epistemic level, the answer to this question doesn't depend on prior belief in God. Unless metaphysical naturalism is true, it is not antecedently improbable that God willed the resurrection of Jesus. And, in that event, evidence for the Resurrection would also be evidence for the existence of God as well as the will of God.

*My time as a Pentecostal has not persuaded me that regrowing limbs or anything utterly inexplicable of that sort happens today, and so I'm not sure why I should believe it did in the past.*

But if you subscribe to methodological naturalism, then even if you did witness the regeneration of limbs in answer to prayer, you would have to discount the miraculous explanation as the least likely explanation.

So are you now admitting that methodological naturalism is an unsound principle? Are you admitting that first-hand evidence for a miracle would be sufficient to attest the occurrence of a miracle? If so, can you drive a wedge between first-hand evidence and second-hand evidence?

*That's nothing to do with Hume, it's just a belief in divine consistency, i.e. that God did not do miracles in the past and then stop at some point.*

**i)** I don't know what that's supposed to mean. Consistent in relation to what? Consistent in relation to a divine promise? Did God promise to heal amputees? If not, then what is the basis of your expectation?

**ii)** Why do you think divine consistency entails that if God performed miracles in the past, he'd perform miracles in the present? Do you think miracles should be a regular phenomenon—like Old Faithful? Something we set our clocks to?

Do you think God should perform the random miracle now and then? What is your theology of miracles?

**iii)** How can you demand evidence for modern miracles

given your axiomatic commitment to methodological naturalism? Your naturalistic methodology would preempt any evidence for modern miracles.

**iv)** There is, in fact, an extensive literature on miracles throughout church history, up to and including the present day.

*Let me not make this comment any longer, but I will say that when inerrancy is nuanced and qualified as in the Chicago Statement, it is not clear what is in fact being affirmed.*

I don't know why that's unclear to you. The Chicago Statement spells out in some detail what its view of inerrancy affirms and disaffirms.

*The Bible can be approximate and imprecise, and contains different genres - that is certainly true. But why then prejudice which texts represent which genres, and why continue to use "inerrancy" when that gives an impression to laypeople that is different from what adherents to the Chicago Statement mean by it?*

**i)** Where does the Chicago Statement prejudice the literary classification of various texts?

**ii)** What makes you think the impression of a layman should be identical with the impression of scholars? Theology has a number of technical terms. Technical terms have specialized meanings.

**iii)** Having said that, I don't know why you think the Chicago Statement defines inerrancy in a way a layman would not. Take round numbers. The average layman doesn't talk like Lt. Commander Data. The average layman

doesn't give measurements down to the very last decimal point. The use of round numbers is a convention of ordinary language. Why would a layman think that Scripture cannot or ought to employ the conventions of ordinary language?

*I think it is to create a sibboleth (sorry, I have trouble pronouncing that word) that will allow seminaries and theological schools to continue to be funded by conservative congregations and individuals, rather than educating them, since education inevitably involves having our assumptions challenged.*

Now you yourself are peddling a conspiracy theory. You act as if all pastors or professors are closet liberals, but keep it to themselves for reasons of job security. Now, some pastors are leading a double life. But many conservative seminaries expose their students to the liberal view of Scripture. They discuss liberal objections to the Bible. Faculty members write whole books on the subject. Many seminarians have read both sides of the argument, and come down on the conservative side of the argument. They have nothing to hide from their congregations. This isn't a trade secret.

## The divine storyteller

The position we have laid down might suggest that the history of mankind, or perhaps of God's people, could we but read it rightly, would show the working of a continuous and tranquil providence, leading God's creatures to their perfection; much as we might hope to see the superficially disconnected passages composing a certain sort of novel or play fall into a continuous march of meaning. But the God of revelation, unlike the storyteller or playwright, continually interrupts his own composition and talks to his characters, not that his interventions are really interruptions, but it is through them that he steers the characters and makes the plot. Sacred history is primarily concerned with the actions and fortunes of people in dialogue with God; natural events serving providential ends, and ungodly men forwarding purposes which are nothing to them, play a part, but an altogether subsidiary part. A. Farrer, **FAITH AND SPECULATION** (T&T Clark 1967/1988), 97.



## Death & resurrection

The relationship between the crucifixion and resurrection nicely illustrates the difference between providence and miracle. On the one hand, the crucifixion was a natural event. On the other hand, the resurrection was a supernatural event.

Even if humans were naturally immortal, if they didn't die from aging or disease, they could still be killed. The body isn't indestructible.

And the naturalness of his death supplies a necessary point of contrast to frame the supernaturalness of his resurrection. What's naturally possible or impossible furnishes the background for miracles.

If a thunderbolt from a clear blue sky struck Christ dead, that would send the wrong message. He had to die at human hands—just as he had to rise from the dead by divine power.

There's a similar relationship between the Incarnation and many other incidents in the life of Christ. An interplay of providence and miracle.

## Public and private miracles

I think it's useful to distinguish between public and private miracles. That's a rough-cut distinction. There's some overlap.

**i)** By public miracles, I mean a miracle that's sufficiently impressive, as well as witnessed by enough people, that it has value in validating a religion. To serve that function, enough people must see it so that it takes on a legendary status. It becomes famous through word-of-mouth. Likewise, it helps to be a spectacular miracle.

The primary value of a public miracle is to authorize religion. But it could have beneficial side-effects. For instance, the ten plagues bore witness to Yahweh through the public humiliation of the Pharaoh cult and the gods of Egypt, but they were also instrumental in delivering the Israelites from bondage.

**ii)** By contrast, a private miracle is a miracle that God does for the benefit of an individual. It may only be known to that individual or a handful of people in his inner circle. Although it may bolster his personal faith, it's not on a scale sufficient to validate religion for second parties. The miracle is unknown to most outsiders.

The function of a private miracle may be an exercise of divine mercy. The design isn't to confirm or prove God's existence, although it might have that side effect for the beneficiary, but to help someone in need. Take a dramatic answer to prayer. Not prayer for a divine sign, but prayer to relieve an urgent or desperate extremity which only God can meet.

Or a private miracle might be for the benefit, not of the immediate recipient, but someone further down the line, in a chain reaction. Say the miracle is to benefit the great-grandson of the recipient—who won't exist apart from a miracle upstream to himself.

**iii)** We should distinguish between the ontology and epistemology of miracles. To function as a divine sign, attesting religion, a miracle must be recognizably miraculous. But in principle, an event could be miraculous even though people fail to recognize the miraculous nature of the event. What makes it miraculous is the *kind* of event, and not how it's perceived.

To take a comparison, suppose a used-car salesman turns back the odometer on every car he retails so that no car displays more than 50,000 miles. Even though that's his uniform policy, there's something funny going on, since it's highly unlikely that every used car will naturally have such low total mileage. Someone had to monkey with each odometer to produce that result. In this case, uniformity is suspicious.

**iv)** Apropos (iii), in principle, private miracles could be frequent. But because private miracles are isolated events which happen to ordinary individuals, they are consistent with the *apparent* rarity of miracles. Since, in the nature of the case, private miracles aren't well-known, even if they were common, their frequency wouldn't diminish the value of public miracles, since most folks would remain ignorant of all, or nearly all, private miracles. Public miracles would still stand out against the *apparent* regularity of nature. Miracles in the public domain could be infrequent while miracles in the private domain could be frequent. I'm not saying that's the case in reality, but it's a useful clarification.

Likewise, private miracles might be more prevalent at a particular time and place, but less prevalent at other times and places. Or one individual might experience several miracles in the course of a lifetime while another individual might experience none. That would depend on factors like persecution, inaccess to mundane solutions, and the strategic placement of miracles to further God's agenda in history.

## Godless prayer

A friend shared this link with me:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SICB7oI2iwg>

It's nice to hear a sympathetic analysis of prayer from a leading philosopher. Very erudite. Very intelligent. Very discriminating. Scruton's parents were atheists, yet he himself took an interest in Anglicanism as a teenager, although he drifted. But he's been backing into Christianity.

The problem with his view of prayer is that it has no place for petitionary or intercessory prayer. He operates with a closed-system view. So there's a fatalistic quality to his position. Prayer is about resigning ourselves to the inevitable. Scruton seems to take a therapeutic view of prayer.

I'm not sure why he takes a Deistic position. Maybe he thinks there's no evidence that prayer makes an appreciable difference to the course of events. From what I've read, he subscribes to a Kantian epistemology. He seems to be someone who's strongly attracted to Christianity, but can't bring himself to believe that God-talk is meaningful.

Perhaps he misconstrues the language of divine "intervention". That doesn't mean God is rewriting the plot. Prayer doesn't change what *will* be. Rather, prayer changes what *would* be, absent prayer. The efficacy of prayer is counterfactual. Some things happen as a result of prayer that wouldn't happen apart from prayer. Prayer makes a difference in *that* sense.

In fairness to Scruton, there's a sense in which petitionary/intercessory prayer is hazardous. It's possible to hedge a prayer with so many caveats that any outcome is consistent with the terms of prayer. That way you can never say your prayer went unanswered. The petition was cast in open-ended terms, so that whatever happens or doesn't happen is consistent with the petition.

But I don't think that's a real prayer. If you pray for something specific, you risk disappointment. You can avoid disappointment by avoiding specificity, but then, you're not praying for what you really wish to happen. It's understandable, therefore, that some people stop praying altogether when, in their experience, it makes no discernible difference.

There's an element of truth to what Scruton is saying, an important truth, perhaps a neglected truth, but a half-truth. There are certainly times when the purpose of prayer isn't to change our situation, but to change us. Times when we should rise to the challenge. Cultivate a different attitude. Trying circumstances are a theater for soul-building virtues. That's a perspective on prayer that some people lose sight of.

But his position is very one-sided. That can't be the whole of prayer. The Bible is chockfull of prayers petitioning God to deliver the supplicant, or his people, from their ordeal. Petitionary/intercessory prayer is fundamental to the Biblical theology of prayer. Indeed, that distinguishes the true God from know-nothing, do-nothing idol-gods.

Scruton's position is more Buddhist than Christian. In Buddhism, we suffer because we have an emotional investment in people and things, and due to the transient

nature of human experience, we are bound to lose all that we love.

In Buddhist metaphysics, flux is bedrock reality. That's unredeemable. There is no God. No eschatological compensations.

Given our intractable circumstances, the best we can do is to develop a coping mechanism. Emotionally divest ourselves of everything we care about. That way, we won't suffer when we lose something or someone. We must make a psychological adjustment to our intractable situation. If the situation is unalterable, then we need to alter our disposition towards the situation. That's logical given the premise, but it reflects a very despairing outlook on life and death.

## The "real" problem with miracles

I'm going to comment on this post, by militant atheist Keith Parsons:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2015/05/19/the-real-problem-with-miracles/>

So, the credibility of a miracle claim given certain evidence and background comes down to three factors: (1)  $p(e/m \ \& \ k)$ , the likelihood that we would have the evidence  $e$  given that the miracle did take place and given our relevant background knowledge. (2)  $p(m/k)$ , the prior probability of the occurrence of the miracle, that is its probability given only background knowledge and independently of the particular evidence  $e$  that we are now considering. (3)  $p(e/k)$ , the likelihood of having the evidence  $e$  given only background knowledge. This is equivalent to the total probability of  $e$ :  $p(e/m \ \& \ k) \times p(m/k) + p(e/\sim m \ \& \ k) \times p(\sim m/k)$ , that is, the probability that we would have evidence  $e$  whether or not  $m$  took place.

I've always had misgivings about that kind of analysis. I think it artificially partitions the evidence.

It's as if Bayesians first hands a runner a backpack full of rocks (prior probability). Considered in isolation, he can't win or even cross the finish line with all that dead weight on his back. Yet they then proceed to lighten the load (posterior probability), which enables him to huff and puff his way past the finish line.

But why load him down with rocks in the first place if they know all along that they are going to remove most of the



rocks, by taking the totality of the evidence into account? Why divide it up that way? Why not work back from their conclusion?

If we have the total evidence at our disposal, isn't it very artificial to divvy it up between prior and posterior probability? It's like we're pretending, in the prior, that we don't know as much. That we're in the dark, except for generalities. We suppress our full knowledge for the sake of distributing the odds between prior and posterior probability.

Now, that makes sense if, indeed, we don't know all the facts at the time we begin our assessment. But if, in fact, we enjoy the benefit of hindsight, then shouldn't the body of total evidence supply the frame of reference *all along*?

A skeptic such as Hume, who does not presuppose the existence of God, will, of course, put  $p(m/k)$  very low, not far from zero. On the other hand, a Christian, one who believes in a God who can and on occasion will perform miracles, will often have a very different prior probability for  $p(m/k)$  for a given  $m$ . In other words, if  $k_s$  is the presumed background knowledge of the skeptic, and  $k_c$  is the presumed background knowledge of the Christian, then, for many purported miracles,  $p(m/k_c) \gg p(m/k_s)$ .

**i)** That's misleading. Although a miracle presumes the existence of God, it doesn't presume prior belief in God. So that objection confounds the order of knowledge with the order of being.

Suppose I don't believe in God. But if I witness a miracle, or a trusted acquaintance shares with me his experience of a

miracle, then that's a reason for me to ditch my skepticism. I was skeptical because I was ignorant of the evidence. I had no exposure to firsthand or reliable secondhand information. I should say to myself, "Well, I used to be an atheist, but that's because I didn't know any better. Now that I've encountered this evidence, I see that my atheism was premature."

**ii)** Since a miracle involves personal agency or personal intention, overriding the ordinary course of nature, the question is how to assign a probability value to God's will to perform (or not perform) a miracle. I don't see how statistics or background knowledge regarding the general uniformity of nature is germane to how we anticipate or estimate God's intention to perform a miracle.

This is hardly surprising since evidence quite sufficient to overcome a moderate burden of proof will be woefully insufficient to overcome a very heavy burden.

Of course, that begs the question. Any given miracle has a very low antecedent probability. Therefore, it takes really impressive evidence to overcome the presumption that any given miracle never happened. So goes the argument.

In fairness, one might say that's true of any particular event. But reported miracles are typically represented as demanding a higher—indeed, *much* higher—burden of proof than ordinary events. Indeed, that's what Parsons is insinuating.

Yet his way of framing the issue fosters a prejudicial impression, as if the rational default position is disbelief in miracles, but if a Christian apologist can muster overwhelming evidence to the contrary, a miracle can heave itself over the finish line in one last gasp.

But why should we grant that tendentious way of framing the issue? It puts the Christian apologist at an unfair disadvantage. Let's consider a few examples:

1. A high school football player drops dead of cardiac arrest during practice. The odds of this happening are low. Statistically speaking, few teenage boys die of heart attacks.

And there's more to it than actuaries. There's the underlying reason: usually, that's the age at which the vital organs are in peak condition.

But an autopsy reveals the fact that the ill-fated player had an undiagnosed congenital heart defect. Given his specific condition, it was quite likely that he would die of heart failure from overexertion.

Perhaps that illustrates the distinction between prior and posterior probability. If so:

**i)** The ordinary unlikelihood of a teenage boy dying of heart failure demands a special explanation if it happens. The very fact that it's normally so improbable means that we need to investigate how it happened to discover the cause. You wouldn't autopsy a 90-year-old who died of cardiac arrest.

**ii)** At the same time, the distinction between prior and posterior probability theory seems artificial after the fact. The odds may be germane before the autopsy, but after the autopsy, isn't the only relevant evidence his heart condition, and not the general odds of that happening?

It's not so much that posterior probability overcomes prior probability in this case, but that the real explanation replaces prior probability. Prior probability is just a placeholder unless and until we become more informed about the particulars of this specific case.

2) Edwin Prescott III loses control when he tries to make the hairpin turn of the Grand Corniche. His Bugatti Veyron plunges over the cliff, and he dies in a conflagration.

An investigation turns of mechanical failure. Specifically, the brakes gave out.

However, the prior probability of brake failure on a Bugatti Veyron is very low. In addition, the car was serviced just a week before the fatal "accident."

Now, there are different ways of assessing prior probability in this case. You could begin with statistics on the failure rate of its brake system. How frequently (or infrequently) does that happen?

There's the factory specs on the average lifespan of the brakes, and factory recommendation on when they should be replaced.

You could have an engineering analysis of the conditions under which the constituents deteriorate (e.g. metal stress).

However, a homicide detective makes a couple of observations. Prescott's wife stood to inherit the husband's fortune in case of accidental death. And she was having an affair with the dashing automechanic who serviced the car a week before.

The assumption, therefore, is that the brakes were tampered with, even if the car was too damaged in the conflagration to make a conclusive determination.

Assuming that illustrates the distinction between prior and posterior probability:

**i)** It's not as if the posterior probability subtracts from the prior probability. It's not like we sum the probability of each (prior and posterior) individually, then combine them to arrive at the sum total—do we?

The prior probability is an admission of ignorance regarding the specifics of the case in hand. But once we know about the affair and the terms of the will, then that's what we go with.

**ii)** At best, the high antecedent unlikelihood of that happening makes the "accident" inherently suspect. That prompts the homicide detective to consider factors other than mechanical failure.

3. At a high-stakes poker game, a player is dealt a final card to complete a royal flush at the very time the opposing player calls his bluff. The opposing player has bet everything on this hand. He's all in.

**i)** Assuming a random deck, the antecedent probability of a royal flush is low.

But you also have the opportune timing of the hand. The lucky player is dealt a winning hand at the climax of the game, when both players have everything to gain or everything to lose.

ii) Theoretically, one response would be to say, "That's so unlikely that I can't believe what I'm seeing! My eyes are playing tricks on me!"

Likewise, there must be some technical glitch in the casino camera footage.

Another response might be: "Well, I guess the odds of a royal flush aren't so improbable after all!"

iii) The antecedent odds against a royal flush in tandem with the opportune timing is very suspicious. The fix is in!

The player got to the dealer. Bribe him or put the squeeze on the dealer by threatening his family.

Let's say an investigation confirms that suspicion. If so, then isn't prior probability moot at that juncture? If you can prove that the player cheated in collusion with the dealer, then the abstract odds no longer figure *at all* in the final explanation.

Once we know that the dealer is a cardsharp, isn't prior probability a moot point? It's not so much that the real explanation overcomes the prior, but that it cancels out the relevance of that consideration tout court.

We now have many reasons, many more than Hume could have known, for regarding it as very likely that we will have miracle reports when no miracle has occurred.

He disregards extensive documentation for modern miracles and the paranormal.

Much psychological research has shown the extent to which perception is constructive.

Like perception, memory is largely a construction. We remember things as they should have been or as how we want them to have been rather than how they were.

**i)** That argument is self-defeating, for it undercuts Hume's appeal to uniform experience. Hume's argument against miracles is based on testimonial evidence. If, however, testimonial evidence is unreliable, that sabotages Hume's standard of comparison.

**ii)** The fact, moreover, that we tend to recollect things we personally find interesting is what makes them memorable in the first place.

Strong desires or expectations seriously bias our judgments as well as our perceptions.

One again, that cuts both ways. It applies perforce to atheist observers. Parsons keeps raising counterproductive objections.

Hallucinations and other sensory delusions are now known to be much more common, even among psychologically healthy people than was previously believed. Oliver Sacks' recent book *Hallucinations* shows that this is so. All sorts of factors can lead psychologically normal people to hallucinate—grief, emotional duress, sensory deprivation or monotony, and exhaustion, for instance.

He simply begs the question by discounting crisis apparitions as hallucinatory. It doesn't even occur to him that his preemptory dismissal is circular.

Hypnagogic and hypnopompic hallucinations are well-known phenomena that sometimes occur just as people are going to sleep or waking. They have been known for centuries and probably account for many reported experiences of demons, witches, or ghosts. In the 1980s many people, including author Whitley Strieber, reported that they had been abducted by aliens, taken on board spacecraft, and subjected to what were apparently medical probes. These experiences seemed very real to the people that endured them, yet they were in all probability due to hypnagogic or hypnopompic hallucinations.

He fails to draw an elementary distinction between sleep paralysis and sleep paralysis *with awareness* (ASP). Sleep paralysis is universal. A natural mechanism to protect the body when we dream.

But ASP or old-hag syndrome is not universal. For that reason alone, merely appealing to sleep paralysis fails to explain old-hag syndrome. Appealing to sleep paralysis fails explain why some people experience old-hag syndrome but others don't. Likewise, it fails to explain why some people experience it at one point in life, but not another.

David Hufford is probably the world authority on old-hag syndrome. He's an academic folklorist at Penn State. Here's some of his material:

[https://www.academia.edu/4041334/\\_From\\_Sleep\\_Paralysis\\_to\\_Spiritual\\_Experience\\_An\\_Interview\\_with\\_David\\_Hufford\\_Paranthropology\\_vol.\\_4\\_no.\\_3\\_2013\\_](https://www.academia.edu/4041334/_From_Sleep_Paralysis_to_Spiritual_Experience_An_Interview_with_David_Hufford_Paranthropology_vol._4_no._3_2013_)

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL893F2DA8DCBDCFA5>



Folklorists now know how stories can grow and spread through a community and how rapidly they can take on fantastic or miraculous content. Even in an era of electronic communications, and even when eyewitnesses are alive and vigorous, false stories can and do spread widely. Consider the famous case of Flight Nineteen: In December 1945 a flight of TBF Avenger dive bombers took off for a training mission from Ft. Lauderdale, Florida and subsequently disappeared. Within thirty years, written accounts told weird stories of how the flight had met its allegedly mysterious end in the "Bermuda Triangle."

I don't know why he thinks urban legends like the Bermuda Triangle prove his thesis. We get most of our information about the world second hand, from history books, science textbooks, or the "news media."

For instance, some stories turn out to be hoaxes, but that's not something the average person could know in advance. The medium is the same for hoaxes and true stories. If that's a problem for religious knowledge, that's no less a problem for secular knowledge. Parsons keeps shooting himself in the foot.

When recounting events we tend to recall gist rather than specifics and imagination and wishful thinking are always ready to impact the story.

To my knowledge, that's a gross overgeneralization. He fails to distinguish between events and conversations. We tend to remember the gist of a conversation, rather than verbatim recall. But we can have specific and stable memories of events we see. Memory is selective. It can and

often does select for specifics. That's because the specifics are sometimes memorable.

## God's bookie

Atheists, as well as many Christian philosophers, attempt to calculate the probability of miracles. Atheists lay odds to make miracles incredible while Christian philosophers lay odds to make miracles credible.

I must say, I've always found this approach ill-conceived—on both sides. It reminds me of a gambler who's discovered a system to beat the casino. This may involve collusion with one or more fellow gamblers. They pretend to be perfect strangers, but they've devised subtle ways of signaling each other. As a result, they win at a higher than statistical average.

Of course, there's a catch. The casino notices their improbable success. And the casino has hidden cameras trained on the table. The casino replays footage until it recognizes the coded signals. The gamblers may wake up inside the trunk of an unmarked car, headed for a watery destination.

Assuming someone works out a system for predicting God's choices, I can't help supposing, with all due reverence, that God would take special pleasure in *not* doing what the odds said he was *supposed* to do, or vice versa.

## Do you believe in snow?

I'm going to comment on a post by apostate atheist Hector Avalos:

<http://debunkingchristianity.blogspot.com/2014/03/w-l-craig-as-pick-and-choose.html>

Craig and other selective supernaturalists (as there are really no individuals that explain everything supernaturally)...

**i)** By this I take him to be insinuating that Christians are guilty of ad hoc reasoning when it comes to explaining some events by natural causes, but other events by supernatural causes.

And I think some Christians are guilty of this. In my experience, many cessationists are guilty of this. Their default explanation is naturalistic. Because Christianity commits them to belief in Biblical miracles, they make an exception to the rule when it comes to Biblical miracles, but when it comes to extrabiblical miracles, they switch to the same arguments as Hume, James Randi, Martin Gardner, Paul Kurtz, Susan Blackmore, &c.

**ii)** There's an interesting parallel between some cessationists and some apostates. Many apostates are ex-charismatics. Many hardline cessationists are ex-charismatics. In both cases, their experience in the charismatic movement led them to become very skeptical about miracles.

Hector Avaos is, himself, an ex-charismatic. A former boy-preacher and faith-healer. He's simply taken his reactionary skepticism one step further than cessationists who came out of the charismatic movement.

Of course, not all apostates are ex-charismatics, just as not all cessationists are ex-charismatics. But its frequency is striking.

**iii)** There is, however, nothing inherently ad hoc about a Christian explaining some events by natural causes, and other events by supernatural causes.

a) Avalos acts as if supernaturalism entails occasionalism, where God is the only agent. If that's his position, then he needs to argue for that inference.

b) The Bible itself narrates a distinction between ordinary providence and miracles which bypass ordinary providence. God has created a world in which many things happen as a result of natural forces or natural processes. Manna from heaven doesn't obviate seedtime and harvest.

c) Apropos (b), there's an obvious sense in which all events are ultimately the result of supernatural causation. For God created the natural agencies that make most events happen. In that respect, Christians attribute every natural event to divine agency, directly or indirectly.

The main problem with supernaturalism is its very definition. No one has any sound idea about what it means or how one would detect it. At least with "natural," I can define it as whatever can be detected by the use of my five

senses and/or logic. So, detection is relatively easy because I can simply ask if I can detect it with:

A. My natural senses and/or

B. Logic

If the answer is YES, then it is natural.

Supernatural, on the other hand, cannot be detected at all. Apparently, all one is saying is “supernatural = not natural or beyond the natural.”

But how would one even detect something that cannot be detected by the natural senses and/or logic?

If I could detect with my natural senses and/or logic, then it would be natural.

If I cannot detect it with my natural senses and/or logic, then it is simply undetectable or irrelevant for any explanation of an event I witness, much like undetectable Martians are irrelevant in explaining any event I witness, whether that be a murder or a resurrection.

**i)** To begin with, he's ruling ESP out of consideration. But that begs the question. There's abundant evidence that some people discern things apart from sensory perception.

**ii)** He fails to draw an elementary distinction between causes and effects. Even if the cause is imperceptible, it may be detectable or inferable from the effect. This is commonplace.

Let's play along with his Martian hypothetical. Suppose a Martian space probe fails to detect Martians. If, however, it photographed alien technology on the surface of Mars, we'd be justified in concluding that these artifacts were invented by Martians and left there by Martians.

**iii)** He assumes that logic is natural. But physicalists have difficulty grounding logic. Some resort to platonic realism, but that's a last-ditch resort.

And to say that something is not natural, one would have to be practically omniscient because that would be tantamount to saying that we know all the natural factors that could possibly be responsible for an event, and are claiming to know that none of the factors was responsible. No one has the kind of knowledge, and so consequently no one could ever call anything non-natural.

**i)** Of course, the reasoning is reversible: to say that something is not *supernatural*, one would have to be

practically omniscient because that would be tantamount to saying that we know all the *supernatural* factors that could possibly be responsible for an event, and are claiming to know that none of the factors was responsible. No one has the kind of knowledge, and so consequently no one could ever call anything *natural*.

ii) Moreover, it's not a question of eliminating every conceivable possibility, but what's the best explanation given the specific evidence, which is a case-by-case assessment.

So, even if there were a resurrection, it would not mean that it was not natural rather than due to some unknown natural cause. Unless one can demonstrate the supernatural to exist, then it is not reasonable to attribute anything to a supernatural cause.

That's quite disingenuous. Avalos doesn't believe biblical miracles happened, but explains them naturalistically. Rather, like other atheists, he doesn't believe they happened because he doesn't think events like that can or do happen. He doesn't think they're amendable to a naturalistic explanation.

Since, the only causes we know are natural...

Begs the question.

**UNKNOWN/UNVERIFIABLE CAUSES**



Supernatural causes

God's activity

A real resurrection

Begs the question.

But I have never seen any god or supernatural cause produce a story of a resurrection.

That's confused. The question at issue is not what produced the account of the resurrection, but what produced the resurrection, which—in turn—gave rise to the account.

So, why should I use a cause I've never seen do anything...

Why should a boy in the tropics believe a story about snow? After all, he's never seen it snow.

## Doing what comes naturally

Jeffery Jay Lowder

It's not that we have any strong antecedent reason on theism to expect God to create conscious beings embodied in silicon bodies rather than carbon bodies. But suppose it turns out that carbon-based based life is the only naturalistically possible form of life with our universe's laws of physics. Then we would have at least some evidence favoring naturalism over theism, since God obviously isn't constrained by the laws of physics. He can do anything that is logically possible.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2014/04/03/arguments-from-reason/#comment-1319101506>

Seems to me several things go awry here:

**i)** There's an equivocation between what's naturally possible and what's naturalistically possible. "Naturalism" is roughly synonymous with atheism or secularism, whereas the "laws of physics" concern what's naturally possible, given a physical universe governed by certain laws.

**ii)** Not everything that's logically possible for God to do is naturally possible for God to do. Take certain miracles like surviving in a furnace or turning sticks into snakes, and vice versa. Although it's possible for God to do that, this doesn't mean it's naturally possible for God to do that. Rather, that's in spite of what comes naturally. God is bypassing natural cause and effect. God is bypassing natural processes.

**iii)** The fact that God is omnipotent doesn't mean that nature is able to do whatever God is able to do. For if God is working by natural means, then that limits his field of action. God isn't limited to natural means. But if he chooses to effect an outcome through natural means, then that's a self-imposed restriction on what he can accomplish by that medium.

**iv)** True, God isn't constrained by the laws of physics. But is Jeff suggesting that if our universe only contains carbon-based lifeforms, that's evidence favoring naturalism? But if a universe containing silicon-based lifeforms has different physical laws than a universe containing carbon-based lifeforms, then it's not naturally possible for both kinds of lifeforms to occupy the same universe. Not all possibilities are compossibilities.

In that event, Jeff has no basis of comparison. He can't say the exclusive existence of carbon-based lifeforms in our universe favors naturalism, for the absence of silicon-based lifeforms requires a different universe. Either God had to choose one or the other, or there's a parallel universe in which that alternative plays out. But it's undetectable from our universe.

## The mystery of providence

Our forebears used to talk about the mystery of providence. This was mysterious to them in part because our forebears in the faith often suffered grievously.

One of the enigmatic features of divine providence is the apparent randomness of divine providence. There are two popular explanations for this phenomenon. One is atheism. The argument from divine hiddenness. According to the atheist, this is precisely what we'd expect in a godless world. There is no God to rescue us. We're on our own. Better get used to it.

There are, however, some fundamental problems with that explanation. To begin with, that's not the actual pattern of providence. Providence isn't apparently random in the sense that God never intercedes. Rather, providence is apparently random in the sense that God intercedes sometimes, but not other times. There's ample evidence for Biblical and extrabiblical miracles. There's ample evidence for answered prayer. What's puzzling is their often inscrutable distribution in time and place.

Another problem with the atheist explanation is that it reacts to the horrors of life by taking the horror out of the horrific. In a godless universe, there is no good and evil. In a godless universe, nothing happens contrary to the way things ought to be. For nothing is supposed to be one way rather than another. Atheism predicates the existence of evil in the premise, then denies the existence of evil in the conclusion.

Another explanation is the spiritual warfare model of open theism (a la Gregory Boyd). God is struggling.

However, Boyd has it backwards. What makes providence enigmatic is not that God is willing, but unable to prevent evil—but that God is able, but unwilling to prevent evil. God prevents some evils, but not other evils. The same kinds of evils. As John Piper once said, in response to Rabbi Kushner:

God does not need to be all-powerful to keep people from being hurt in the collapse of a bridge. He doesn't even need to be as powerful as a man. He only needs to show up and use a little bit of his power (say, on the level of Spiderman, or Jason Bourne) "he did create the universe, the Rabbi concedes" and (for example) cause some tremor a half-hour early to cause the workers to leave the bridge, and the traffic to be halted. This intervention would be something less spectacular than a world-wide flood, or a burning bush, or plague of frogs, or a divided Red Sea, or manna in the wilderness, or the walls of a city falling down "just a little tremor to get everybody off the bridge before it fell."

There are critics like Roger Olson who resent Piper's statement, but he's just stating the obvious.

We see this in Scripture. In the Book of Acts, Peter is miraculously delivered in answer to prayer while James is executed. Why did God protect Peter, but not James?

Job 1-2 and Dan 11 furnish a partial explanation. God delegates certain prerogatives to secondary agents. He puts Job at the mercy of Satan. Satan isn't given a completely free hand, but there's a lot he's free to do to Job.

In Dan 11, God delegates the success or failure of Daniel's prayer to angels. There's a fallen angel who's an impediment to Daniel's prayer. The fallen angel must be overpowered by a mightier, heavenly angel.

On the face of it, you might expect Daniel to have immediate access to God in prayer. That answering prayer would be directly in God's hands. But, for whatever reason, God makes that contingent on secondary agents.

That doesn't mean God has abdicated the outcome to secondary agents. They still do his bidding. Nevertheless, there are certain things that won't happen unless we do it.

Prayer is both a first resort and a last resort. In prayer we invite God to make the first move. But prayer isn't necessarily or normally a substitute for our own action. Rather, it's deferring to God in case God chooses to act on our behalf. But in many cases he won't, so it's up to us.

Many tragedies occur because a human failed to do something. Parents leave their older son in charge of their younger son. But the kid brother drowns in the swimming pool because the big brother was preoccupied. Or a child is disfigured by scalding water in the kitchen because her mother was momentarily distracted.

Sometimes these tragedies are due to human negligence, but in other cases, these were conscientious adults. It was simply an accident. No one was a fault.

It's a hard truth that we can't count on God to do certain things for us, not because God is unreliable, but because, for whatever reason, he won't intercede in that situation.

Currently, many scholars are laboring to domesticate the OT. Deny that God really said or did the harsh things attributed to him. But even if that was plausible, it does nothing to account for equally harsh things that happen outside the Bible.

The best explanation I can think of for the mystery of providence is that God's intermittent absence is teaching us the hard way what it would be like if God were consistently

absent. It's a terrible reminder of what life would be like if God never intervened. What a truly godless world would be like. The horrors of life without God. How utterly lost we'd be if he didn't exist. If he was never there.

A middle ground between forgetting God and taking God for granted. Between presumption and infidelity.

It deters us from becoming too attached to a fallen world. Makes us hate our continued existence in a fallen world, and long for the world to come.

## What's a scientific explanation?

**i)** Let's begin with some stereotypes. There's the familiar narrative of the boy who's raised in a "fundamentalist church," but loses his faith in Scripture when he goes to college and studies science.

Likewise, secular science regards creationism and intelligent design theory as ad hoc. These aren't driven by the evidence. Rather, they try to find flaws in conventional science, and propose possible alternative explanations which are merely consistent with the evidence.

Moreover, when the evidence runs out or goes against them, they resort to the deus ex machina. Miracles are consistent with anything. Given a miracle, anything can happen.

Although that's a hostile, outsider characterization of creationism and intelligent design theory, there are creationists who, to some extent, have the same misgivings. Take the so-called problem of distant starlight. A popular creationist explanation appeals to mature creation. However, some creation scientists dislike that explanation because it's a miraculous explanation rather than a scientific explanation. They are trained scientists, and they want to defend creationism on *scientific* grounds.

**ii)** There's a grain of truth to these objections, but they are one-sided. If, in fact, God-did-it, then to exclude God from the explanation is special pleading. If, in fact, God-did-it, then a naturalistic alternative is ad hoc.

**iii)** This also goes to the thorny question of what constitutes a scientific explanation. Atheists think divine agency renders an explanation unscientific. And we'd expect



atheists to take that position. But I also find similar confusion among some creationists. Both sides are unclear on how to demarcate a scientific explanation from a miraculous explanation.

Atheists like Lewontin take the position that once you allow a divine foot in the door, anything goes. That, however, is a caricature of the miraculous.

The definition of a scientific explanation is bound up with the definition of a miracle. These are correlative questions. Let's consider two potential criteria:

### A) CAUSAL CONTINUITY

A presupposition of science is that the same causes yield the same effects. That also supplies a principle of predictability. Given the same cause, the same effect will result.

And that also supplies a basis for interpolations and extrapolations. We infer missing links. We trace the effect back to the cause through a series of intervening processes or events. The principle is symmetrical and reversible. If the same causes entail the same effects, then the same effects entail the same causes.

But that's consistent with miracles. When a given outcome is the result of a miracle, you have a different result because you have a different cause. A cause that bypasses the ordinary chain of cause and effect (on a classic definition of a miracle).

Take a terminal cancer patient who goes into spontaneous remission in answer to prayer. That doesn't subvert medical science. Absent divine intercession, the same causes have the same effects. It simply interjects a new factor, outside the chain of cause and effect, into the transaction. It breaks

into the chain of cause and effect, but the chain resumes after divine intercession.

In addition, some miracles result from a continuous chain of physical cause and effect. Take Ahab's "accidental" death by a random arrow (1 Kgs 22). At one level, that was perfectly natural. The end-result of natural means. Yet it was a prearranged event.

## **B) PHYSICAL CAUSATION**

A presupposition of *secular* science is that causes are physical. A natural explanation involves physical causes.

This stands in contrast to mental causation. Physical causes are unintelligent forces or processes. Often inanimate.

Because physical causes are unintelligent, they are invariant. They operate automatically, with mechanical regularity—like a programmed result.

From a Christian standpoint, that's often the case, although that's not a matter of principle. In ordinary providence, things normally happen that way. And that also supplies the basis for linear extrapolations and postulated interpolations.

But in the biblical worldview, causation isn't confined to physical causation. In addition, there is mental causation. Personal agents who have the ability to simply will things to happen.

That does introduce an unpredictable element into the equation. This means that in some cases we can't say with confidence how something happened—especially events where there were no human observers. We can't be sure if it happened naturally or supernaturally.

I'd add that there's abundant evidence for miracles, as well as the paranormal. Indeed, this is underreported.

So a Christian isn't guilty of special pleading when he takes this additional factor into consideration. It isn't just a face-saving explanation. Rather, it's making allowance for genuine imponderables. In many cases, that's not something you or he can rationally rule out.

## A history of miracles

Over the next few days or weeks I plan to review Bart Ehrman's new book, **JESUS, INTERRUPTED** (HarperOne 2009). I haven't decided yet if I'm going to review the whole thing. The basic problem with his book is that Ehrman is recycling a lot of hackneyed objections to the Bible that have been repeatedly addressed by conservative scholars. And he's either too ignorant or too dishonest to engage the opposing argument.

Today I'll confine myself to an analysis of his historiography:

"There is something historically problematic with his [Jesus] being raised from the dead, however. This is a miracle, and by the very nature of their craft, historians are unable to discuss miracles...But that is not why historians cannot show that miracles, including the resurrection, happened. The reason instead has to do with the limits of historical knowledge. There cannot be historical evidence for a miracle" (172-73).

"Historians more or less rank past events on the basis of the relative probability that they occurred. All that historians can do is to show what *probably* happened in the past" (175).

"That is the problem inherent in miracles. Miracles, by our very definition of the term, are virtually impossible events. Some people would say they are literally impossible, as violations of natural laws: a person can't walk on water any more than an iron bar can float on it. Other people would be a bit more accurate and say that there aren't actually any laws in nature, written

down somewhere, that can never be broken; but nature does work in highly predictable ways. That is what makes science possible. We would call a miracle an event that violates the way nature always, or almost always, works so as to make the event virtually, if not actually, impossible. The chances of a miracle occurring are infinitesimal. If that were not the case it would not be a miracle, just something weird that happened. And weird things happen all the time" (175).

"By now I hope you can see the unavoidable problem historians have with miracles. Historians can establish only what probably happened in the past, but miracles, by their very nature, are always the least probable explanation for what happened. This is true whether you are a believer or not. Of the six billion people in the world, not one of them can walk on top of lukewarm water filling a swimming pool. What would be the chances of any *one* person being able to do that? Less than one in six billion. Much less" (176).

"If historians can only establish what probably happened, and miracles by their definition are the least probable occurrences, then more or less by definition, historians cannot establish that miracles have ever happened...Historians can only establish what probably happened in the past. They cannot show that a miracle, the least likely occurrence, is the most likely occurrence" (176).

To see what's wrong with this argument, let's begin with an illustration. Human beings are rational agents. One thing we do with our rationality is to make tools. Design machines. Invent appliances.

We do this for various reasons. We may do it because the machine can do something we can't. We may do it because, even though we're able to perform certain tasks, we find

them tedious to perform, and so we delegate them to a machine. Or we may do it because a machine is more reliable. It yields a uniform result.

What makes the machine reliable is that it's impersonal. It can't think for itself. It can't exercise personal discretion. It can't change its mind or vary its routine.

Machines are designed to work within certain parameters. A device, left to its own devices, can't operate outside specified parameters—unless it malfunctions.

Take an automatic card shuffler. Why would we invent an automatic card shuffler? One motivation is that we don't trust the dealer. The dealer might be a cardsharp. He might be on the take.

The dealer can do things with a deck of cards that an automatic card shuffler cannot. And that's the problem. In a high-stakes poker game, we don't want a dealer who can stack the deck. So we may use an automatic card shuffler instead, since that gizmo is designed to randomize the order of the deck.

By the same token, we might prefer a machine count of the vote to a hand count. The machine is nonpartisan. It doesn't discriminate between one party and another, one candidate and another, one voter and another.

Nature has a mechanical quality to it. A number of inanimate, impersonal agencies that effect various events without a thought, forethought, or afterthought.

God designed nature that way to ensure a level of stability to human existence. An ability to plan for the future. Seedtime and harvest. That sort of thing.

Now let's draw some distinctions:

**i)** It would be quite illogical to infer that if an automatic card shuffler can't do certain things, then a dealer is subject to the same restrictions. The fact that certain outcomes are impossible or improbable for an impersonal process doesn't mean the same outcomes are equally impossible or improbable for a personal agent.

History is simply the record of what happened. While it may be impossible for natural forces to do certain things, that doesn't mean a rational agent is just as limited in his sphere of influence.

**ii)** Certain patterns indicate intelligent direction or personal intervention. If one player receives a string of winning cards while his opponent receives a string of losing cards, we conclude that the deck is stacked.

Either the dealer is a cardsharp, or the automatic shuffler has been reprogrammed to stack the deck.

While that falls outside the standard operating parameters of an automatic card shuffler, this doesn't mean it's impossible for an automatic card shuffler to stack the deck. What it means, rather, is that, if left to its own devices, an automated card shuffler is unable to stack the deck. But it's possible for the device to be reprogrammed.

**iii)** To verify a miraculous event is a step-process.

**a)** First, you verify the occurrence of the event. You don't need to verify the miraculous character of the event to verify the occurrence of the event. That's a separate issue.

**b)** Given the occurrence of the event, you then interpret the event. Are the internal resources of an impersonal process sufficient to account for the event? Or does the event exceed the standard operating parameters of natural causation?

It's like a game of cards. You can verify that each player was dealt a particular hand. You can verify which cards he was dealt.

But depending on the outcome, there are cases in which cheating is far and away the most likely explanation for the outcome. The odds against that pattern occurring at random are astronomical.

The chances of that happening are only infinitesimal if the automated card shuffler is working within standard parameters. But that's quite distinct from the chances of reprogramming its parameters. And that, in turn, is also distinct from the chances of what it can do once the machine is reprogrammed.

To infer that just because it's improbable that an automatic card shuffler will deal a royal flush in every game—given its standard operating parameters, then it's equally improbable that someone would reprogram its operating parameters to yield a desired result, is quite illogical. Those are separate issues. The probability of the one is irrelevant to the probability of the other.

Probability is a relative concept. Probable relative to what? In relation to what background conditions?

In this instance we attribute the outcome to the dealer's sleight-of-hand, or—in the case of an automated card shuffler—to the hidden hand of an engineer who



reprogrammed the machine.

Just as there can be probative evidence for cheating, there can be historical evidence for miracles.

## Ehrman Corrupted

Continuing my review of Bart Ehrman's latest book:

"What I want to show is that because of the very nature of the historical disciplines, historians cannot show whether or not miracles every happened. Anyone who disagrees with me—who thinks historians can demonstrate that miracles happen—needs to be even-handed about it, across the board. In Jesus' day there were lots of people who allegedly performed miracles. There were Jewish holy men such as Hanina ben Dosa and Honi the circle drawer. There were pagan holy men such as Apollonius of Tyana, a philosopher who could allegedly heal the sick, cast out demons, and raise the dead. He was allegedly supernaturally born and at the end of his life he allegedly ascended to heaven. Sound familiar? There were pagan demigods, such as Hercules, who could also bring back the dead. Anyone willing to believe in the miracles of Jesus needs to concede the possibility of other people performing miracles, in Jesus' day and in all eras down to the present day and in other religions such as Islam and indigenous religions of Africa and Asia," **JESUS**

**INTERRUPTED** (HarperOne 2009), 172.

The most impressive feature about this argument is the fact that Ehrman seems to be impressed by this argument. Why he thinks this is supposed to be a compelling argument is a complete mystery to me.

i) What's problematic about the notion that 1C Jews might be able to perform miracles? Other Jews could perform

miracles. Moses, Elijah, Elisha, as well as Peter and Paul—to name a few.

**ii)** What's problematic about the notion that pagans could perform miracles? Jannes and Jambres could apparently perform miracles (Exod 7-8). A medium could conjure up the shade of Samuel (1 Sam 28). A demonic could predict the future ([Acts 16:16](#)). Witches could strike people dead ([Ezk 13:17-23](#)).

**iii)** What's problematic about the idea that miracles might occur at present as well as the past? Don't foreign missionaries report this sort of thing?

**iv)** Must I be prepared to believe that Hercules can do a miracle? Not unless I believe that Hercules actually exists.

**v)** Yes, the feats attributed to Apollonius sound familiar. Why is that? Let's see. Maybe, just maybe, because his biography was written long after the time of Jesus? If you think the parallels are genuine, that's because a 3C AD biography is aping the life of Christ.

Ehrman knows that. But he's banking on the ignorance of his gullible readers.

**vi)** Why does Ehrman think his argument has any teeth? Perhaps this is the unspoken assumption: miracles attest the messenger. Therefore, the miracles of one religion cancel out the miracles of another.

What about that assumption?

**vii)** Even in Scripture, attestation is not the only function of a miracle. A miracle may be performed as an act of mercy.

**viii)** Suppose, moreover, that a miracle does attest the messenger. So what? We need to draw an elementary distinction between what is what is *right* and what is *true*.

What does witchcraft attest? The reality of the dark side. The fact that demonic or diabolical spirits have paranormal powers. The fact that if you're in league with the devil, you may acquire black magical powers.

But the fact that something is true doesn't make it right. Suppose demonic possession confers paranormal powers on the human host? That doesn't mean we should become devil-worshipers, does it? If Satanism works, that may mean it's true, but that doesn't mean it's good. It's still pure evil.

**ix)** The existence of sorcery does nothing to falsify Christian doctrine. To the contrary, this is corroborative evidence.

## Reason at the margins

For someone like Hess, any interpretation that runs counter to his doctrinal position is impossible.

It's an interesting problem: how do you hold a discussion with someone who cannot ever accept that you might have a point? No matter how persuasive or logical your arguments, they can never allow themselves to agree.

<http://unreasonablefaith.com/2011/06/22/doctrinal-conformity/>

Of course, that "problem" cuts both ways.

Critical historiography, as it developed in the nineteenth century, had its own principles...Troeltsch set out three principles...(2) the principle of analogy: historical knowledge is possible because all events are similar in principle. We must assume that the laws of nature in biblical times were the same as now. Troeltsch referred to this as "the almighty power of analogy," (3) the principle of correlation: the phenomena of history are interrelated and interdependent and no event can be isolated from the sequence of historical cause and effect.

John J. Collins, **ENCOUNTERS WITH BIBLICAL THEOLOGY** (Augsburg Fortress 2005), 12.

On methodological naturalism, I don't see how historical study can adopt any other approach, any more than criminology can. It will always be

theoretically possible that a crime victim died simply because God wanted him dead, but the appropriate response of detectives is to leave the case open. In the same way, it will always be possible that a virgin conceived, but it will never be more likely than that the stories claiming this developed, like comparable stories about other ancient figures, as a way of highlighting the individual's significance. And since historical study deals with probabilities and evidence, to claim that a miracle is "historically likely" misunderstands the method in question.

<http://exploringourmatrix.blogspot.com/2009/04/triabl-ogue-osphere.html>

For someone like John Collins, James McGrath, or Ernst Troeltsch, any interpretation that runs counter to his doctrinaire naturalism is impossible.

It's an interesting problem: how do you hold a discussion with a methodological naturalist who cannot ever accept that you might have a point? No matter how persuasive or logical your arguments, they can never allow themselves to agree.

## The view from the snowglobe

*(Posted on Steve's behalf.)*



A supersnowglobal event is a violation of the laws of Snowglobe; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a supersnowglobal event, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from snowglobal experience can possibly be imagined. Why is it more than probable, that it must daily snow; unless it be, that these events are found agreeable to the laws of Snowglobe, and there is required a violation of these laws, or in other words, an extrasnowglobal incursion to prevent them? Nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happen in the common course of nature. It is no miracle that water freezes. But it is a miracle, that ice should melt; because that has never been observed in any age or corner of Snowglobe.

There is not to be found, in all snowglobal history, any supersnowglobal event attested by a sufficient number of snowmen, of such unquestioned good sense, education, and

learning, as to secure us against all delusion in themselves; of such undoubted integrity, as to place them beyond all suspicion of any design to deceive others; of such credit and reputation in the eyes of snowmankind, as to have a great deal to lose in case of their being detected in any falsehood; and at the same time, attesting facts performed in such a public manner and in so celebrated a part of Snowglobe, as to render the detection unavoidable: all which circumstances are requisite to give us a full assurance in the testimony of snowmen.

A supersnowglobalist may be an enthusiast, and imagine he sees what has no extrasnowglobal reality. It forms a strong presumption against all supersnowglobal reports, that they are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous snowmen.



## Hiding in plain sight

A stock objection which unbelievers routinely raise to Biblical miracles is the allegation that the world you and I live in doesn't resemble the world of the Bible. Biblical narratives are studded with miracles, but we don't experience that in the modern world. Rather, we experience the uniformity of nature.

The contrast between the world of the Bible and the world you and I actually experience strongly suggests the world of the Bible isn't the real world, but a mythical, fictitious representation.

There are different ways of responding to this argument. One way is to challenge the operating premise. For instance, Jason Engwer and I have cited a lot of material documenting widely-attested and well-attested cases of the miraculous or the paranormal. In that event, the alleged disconnect between the Biblical world and the modern world or the "real" world is bogus. These are, in fact, continuous.

There is, however, another way to challenge the operating premise. On the one hand, the atheistic objection exaggerates the presence of miracles in Bible history in contrast to the (alleged) absence of miracles in modern history.

On the other hand, we can also reverse the equation. It's not as if miracles are standard operating procedure in the Bible, with a wholesale shift to ordinary providence thereafter. For miracles and providence coexist in Scripture. Both modes of operation are already in place in Bible history.

Before proceeding further, let's consider some common definitions of a miracle:

A common approach is to define a miracle as an interruption of the order or course of nature. (Sherlock 1843: 57) Some stable background is, in fact, presupposed by the use of the term, as William Adams (1767: 15) notes:

An experienced uniformity in the course of nature hath been always thought necessary to the belief and use of miracles. These are indeed relative ideas. There must be an ordinary regular course of nature, before there can be any thing extraordinary. A river must flow, before its stream can be interrupted.

David Hume (Hume 1748/2000; cf. Voltaire 1764/1901: 272) famously defined a miracle as "a violation of the laws of nature."

Thus, Samuel Clarke (1719: 311–12) writes that

the true Definition of a Miracle, in the Theological Sense of the Word, is this; that it is a work effected in a manner unusual, or different from the common and regular Method of Providence, by the interposition either of God himself, or of some Intelligent Agent superiour to Man...

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/miracles/#ConDef>

I cite the first two definitions, not because I think they are good definitions, but because these are popular atheistic definitions, and I'm responding to an atheistic objection.

Therefore, there's some value in casting the issue of miracles in atheistic terms, for the sake of argument.

The third definition is more religious. However, I think that definition is somewhat defective as well. More on that later.

Let's now turn to a paradigm-case of Biblical providence:

However, the overtly secular atmosphere in which the story of Esther seems to unfold need not be held against it. On the contrary, we may find Esther's contemporary relevance for ourselves considerably enhanced by this feature, if we interpret it correctly. It may help us with the very difficult question of discerning the purpose and activity of God in political affairs.

A comparison of the story of Esther with the story of the Exodus will help to make the point. Both are stories of the deliverance of Israel from Gentile power...But there is also a significant difference between these two stories. In the story of the Exodus the purpose and activity of God are evident...But in the story of Esther there are no such declarations of the divine purpose... There is no one to point authoritatively to the hand of God and no supernatural signs of it. In other words, the writer of Esther depicts the ordinary world of political action, which was the world as he experienced it and the world as we too experience it most of the time, a world without explicit indications of divine purpose.

The point is not that God is not at work in the story of Esther. The writer takes God's providential care for his people Israel entirely for granted, but he refrains from referring explicitly to it because he wishes the reader

to discern it, as the characters in such a story are obliged to discern it, without any interpretation provided from outside the story. The question is how God is at work and how his activity becomes evident. There is one feature of the story which, for the believer, points clearly to the activity of divine providence: the series of remarkable coincidences. The story hinges on a combination of quite unpredictable occurrences, which the human actors in the story could never have deliberately produced, but without which Israel would have perished. Mordecai's discovery of the plot against Xerxes' life (2:22), the vacancy for a queen and Esther's ability to fill it (2:1-18), the king's insomnia on that particular night (6:1), Haman's early arrival at the palace that particular morning (6:4): the combination of these chance events determines the plot...The author has deliberately told a story in which coincidence takes the place of miracle as a signal of divine activity.

In this sense, as David Clines puts it, "God, as a character in the story, becomes more conspicuous the more he is absent." However, we need to note that this is true only retrospectively. In advance, we know of God's promise to keep his people safe. But how he fulfils it, his providential activity in actual events, emerges only in the course of the story.

R. Bauckham, **THE BIBLE IN POLITICS** (WJK, 2nd ed., 2011), 123-24.

**i)** Now this providential mode of divine operation exists side-by-side the miraculous mode of operation in Bible history. It's not as if miracles are the default setting in

Scripture, while providence abruptly replaces the miraculous in modern history.

**ii)** There's a term for what Bauckham describes in Esther: a coincidence miracle. This type of miracle doesn't fit the conventional atheistic definition. The providential prearrangement of events in Esther doesn't "interrupt the ordinary regular course," much less "violate the laws of nature." There's no disruption in the "uniformity" of nature.

Moreover, this is not "effected in a manner unusual, or different from the common and regular method of providence." Rather, God is working through normal second causes. So it's outwardly "natural."

Yet the series of events is teleological. The events are linked to achieve a goal. The historical process is internal to the world, but it's guided by a powerful, superior intelligence that's external to the process. Events are coordinated beyond the ken or competence of the human participants. The human players are agents who unwittingly implement a plan not of their own making. The plan reflects divine foresight, but they themselves don't foresee the outcome.

**iii)** Although this is not how atheists typically define a miracle, it's no less a case of divine agency and purpose than a "miracle."

**iv)** Now, an atheist might concede all that, but counter by saying we don't observe that kind of providence in the modern world. Yet that raises a question. How often, or widely, would coincidence miracles be discernable?

In the case of Esther, the reader is able to perceive a series of coincidence miracles because the omniscient narrator is cognizant of compartmentalized information to which no

one individual would be privy–information he shares with the reader. In addition, the narrator selects a few apparently random, isolated incidents, out of the vast totality of events, and draws our attention to how those specific incidents line up to produce a particular effect. An outcome which reflects premeditated intent on the part of a powerful, superior intelligence.

But suppose we didn't have that privileged perspective. That God's-eye view of the proceedings. Suppose we didn't have that continuous red thread connecting some incidents to other incidents?

Suppose we just had the vast plethora of indiscriminate daily, weekly, monthly, yearly events. Chains of events, some parallel, others interlocking. Suppose, moreover, our individual knowledge would be extremely fragmented. I saw something you didn't. You heard something I didn't. Usually, you'd be in no position to piece it together or perceive a subtle pattern. Any pattern would be lost in the sheer volume of events.

It's like looking at a subway map. The map shows tunnels fanning out in all different directions. Some directly connected. Others indirectly connected. Tunnels connecting to other tunnels through other tunnels. The map itself doesn't pick out any particular route or destination. The map itself is omnidirectional. A huge number of alternative combinations. The map doesn't point anywhere in particular because it points everywhere in general. It has no starting-point or end-point. That's up to the rider.

**v)** This doesn't mean coincidence miracles are inherently undetectable. Rather, it means God must put you in a position to recognize a coincidence miracle. You may need access to compartmentalized information. Know what

someone else knows. And you have to be able to see how the outcome is a wholly unexpected, yet tailor-made solution to the problem. Things like that.

By the same token, a coincidence miracle wouldn't be widely perceived. That's not necessarily because God is concealing himself from outsiders. Just that the miracle is not for their benefit. Hence, their inability to discern the miracle is simply a side effect of the target audience. Outsiders aren't party to that transaction. It's not to them, for them, or about them.

There is, of course, the Biblical theme of a God who hides himself from the lost. Not all the lost, but some of the lost, as a preliminary judgment for their sin.

There are stories in which a friend or brother sneaks into a place where his friend or brother works. Or perhaps he's captured.

They instantly recognize each other. But the friend or brother who works there feigns ignorance. Protects his friend or brother rather than ratting him out. By contrast, the coworkers have no idea who he is. They don't know how he's related to their colleague. Everyone sees the same thing, but everyone doesn't perceive the same thing. The friend or brother has inside information.

## Hacking nature

**i)** Normally, it's not terribly important for Christians to be able to define a miracle. Where Scripture is concerned, it's sufficient to affirm the occurrence of whatever events the Bible says have occurred or will occur, as the Bible describes them. It isn't generally necessary to assign each event to a miraculous or providential column.

**ii)** There are, however, times when this becomes more important. If a Christian apologist deploys the argument from miracles, he needs to define his terms. If an atheist attacks Biblical miracles, we reserve the right to challenge his definition. If cessationists insist that certain kinds of miracles don't occur in Medieval or modern times, then it's incumbent on them to define their terms.

**iii)** Let's consider some standard definitions in the Christian apologetic and philosophical literature:

Either the event appears to defy known physical laws (a superseding miracle), or a set of events seems too improbable to come together on the basis of coincidence alone (a configuration miracle).

Coincidences and unusual things do happen; so, in order to be called a miracle, the event should be the kind of occurrence in which we might look for God's direct intervention. By "direct intervention" we mean that God is directly responsible for bringing about this unusual event. Christians recognize God's hand in providence (His everyday care for us) as well as in answered prayer, but we may consider God to have answered a prayer even if the answer consists of an



otherwise normal event. Only when we are confronted with the "unusual" and see that God's action is the easiest explanation for it that we are inclined to call it a miracle. W. Corduin, **REASONABLE FAITH** (B&H 1993), 157-58.

In order to differentiate between the customary way in which God acts and his special, miraculous action, theologians have traditionally distinguished within divine providence between God's ordinary providence and his extraordinary providence, the latter being identified with miracles. For example, just as the Israelites approach the Jordan River, a rockslide upstream blocks temporarily the water's flow, enabling them to cross into the Promised Land (Josh 3:14-17); or again, as Paul and Silas lie bound in prison for preaching the gospel, an earthquake occurs, springing the prison doors and unfastening their fetters (Acts 16:25-26). Events wrought by special providence are no more outside the course and capacity of nature than are events produced by God's ordinary providence, but the context of such events—such as their timing, their coincidental nature and so forth—points to a special divine intention to bring them about. J. P. Moreland & W. L. Craig, **PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR A CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW** (IVP 2003), 566.

**iv)** Apropos (iii), in theological parlance, extraordinary providence is a synonym for the miraculous, in contrast to ordinary providence. Let's begin with a rough and ready distinction between providence and miracle. An automated traffic system illustrates providence. The system regulates traffic flow by programming the duration and timing of

traffic lights. When the red light goes on. How long it stays on. This has to be coordinated with traffic lights up and down the street to prevent gridlock. Once the system is programmed, things always happen the same way. Lights go on and off in a predetermined sequence, relative to other intersections.

In *The Italian Job*, a character hacks into the system to override the system. He makes the driver of an armored car go to a particular destination by selectively operating the traffic lights to reroute the armored car.

Now this is still "natural." But it's analogous to a miracle because it's not something the system would do on its own. The system is indifferent to individuals. It doesn't target a particular vehicle for special treatment. Unless the system is artificially intelligent, it can only do what it's programmed to do. It takes a rational agent to be more discriminating.

Here we might invoke Del Ratzsch's criterion of counterflow:

Counterflow refers to things running contrary to what, in the relevant sense, would (or might) have resulted or occurred had nature operated freely. **NATURE, DESIGN AND SCIENCE** (SUNY 2001), 5

Providence is what nature will do on its own unless an agent intervenes to impede, deflect, or redirect nature. Change must come from outside the system. For instance, orange trees don't naturally grow in evenly-spaced straight rows. It takes a farmer to arrange them that way.

At the same time, that doesn't break any law of nature. Indeed, the farmer takes advantage of lawful nature. Once in place, the seeds, thusly planted, will grow accordingly.

v) In addition to the examples cited by Moreland and Craig, we might consider examples of divine judgment where God sends a deadly plague (e.g. Num 11:33; 14:37; 16:46-50; 25:8-9; 1 Sam 5:6ff.; 24:15).

In a sense, that's death by "natural causes." But the specificity of the event in time and place is miraculous.

Likewise, the fate of Korah and his cohorts (Num 16:31-33). You could say that's death by natural causes, but the specificity of the event is miraculous. It was predicted. It happened at a particular time and place. And nature, left to its own devices, wouldn't single out Korah and the other culprits.

Or take the death of Ananias and Sapphira. Is that miraculous?

If they were autopsied, the coroner might discover that they died of natural causes. A heart attack. He might also discover that they both had coronary artery disease, which put them at high risk of heart attack.

What makes it miraculous is not the physical cause, but the opportune timing of the event. Judicial punishment. Predicted punishment.

Same thing with the draught of fish (Lk 5; Jn 21). Is that miraculous?

Phil Johnson says "here's a proper definition: A miracle is an extraordinary work of God that transcends or contravenes the ordinary laws of nature."

By that definition, none of these events was really miraculous. But why should we accept his narrow, a priori definition?

**vi)** MacArthurites sometimes favor ostensible definitions of the miraculous, like raising the dead, restoring lost limbs, restoring sight to the congenitally blind. But there are problems with that maneuver:

**a)** Does that mean other examples cited in this post are sub-miraculous?

**b)** In what sense do MacArthurites think curing the congenitally blind is distinctively miraculous? In principle, medical science might well reach the point where it can cure the congenitally blind. On the face of it, that prospect doesn't violate a law of nature. If medical science can someday pull that off, would it cease to be miraculous, as MacArthurites define it?

**c)** What makes healing the blind miraculous? In the sense that, when nature is allowed to run its course unimpeded, the sightless don't become sighted. For that to happen requires intervention, be it medical intervention or divine intervention.

**d)** It's natural for some animals to regrow lost appendages. But that doesn't come naturally for humans. In principle, medical science might figure out how to transfer that ability to humans, or clone replacement limbs.

That wouldn't be miraculous. But it would be miraculous if that happened apart from changing the status quo by introducing a new dynamic from outside the system.



## One thing leads to another

3 Now the donkeys of Kish, Saul's father, were lost. So Kish said to Saul his son, "Take one of the young men with you, and arise, go and look for the donkeys." 4 And he passed through the hill country of Ephraim and passed through the land of Shalishah, but they did not find them. And they passed through the land of Shaalim, but they were not there. Then they passed through the land of Benjamin, but did not find them.

5 When they came to the land of Zuph, Saul said to his servant who was with him, "Come, let us go back, lest my father cease to care about the donkeys and become anxious about us." 6 But he said to him, "Behold, there is a man of God in this city, and he is a man who is held in honor; all that he says comes true. So now let us go there. Perhaps he can tell us the way we should go." 7 Then Saul said to his servant, "But if we go, what can we bring the man? For the bread in our sacks is gone, and there is no present to bring to the man of God. What do we have?" 8 The servant answered Saul again, "Here, I have with

me a quarter of a shekel of silver, and I will give it to the man of God to tell us our way.” 9 (Formerly in Israel, when a man went to inquire of God, he said, “Come, let us go to the seer,” for today's “prophet” was formerly called a seer.) 10 And Saul said to his servant, “Well said; come, let us go.” So they went to the city where the man of God was.

11 As they went up the hill to the city, they met young women coming out to draw water and said to them, “Is the seer here?” 12 They answered, “He is; behold, he is just ahead of you. Hurry. He has come just now to the city, because the people have a sacrifice today on the high place. 13 As soon as you enter the city you will find him, before he goes up to the high place to eat. For the people will not eat till he comes, since he must bless the sacrifice; afterward those who are invited will eat. Now go up, for you will meet him immediately.” 14 So they went up to the city. As they were entering the city, they saw Samuel coming out toward them on his way up to the high place.

*15 Now the day before Saul came, the Lord had revealed to Samuel: 16 “Tomorrow about this time I will send to you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him to be prince over my people Israel. He shall save my people from the hand of the Philistines. For I have seen my people, because their cry has come to me.” 17 When Samuel saw Saul, the Lord told him, “Here is the man of whom I spoke to you! He it is who shall restrain my people” (1 Sam 9:3-17).*

Systematic theology traditionally distinguishes between providence and miracle. However, there’s a type of miracle that overlaps the two categories: a coincidence miracle.

We have a good example in 1 Sam 9:3-10:5. That recounts a series of seemingly random, causally disconnected events. Although there’s nothing overtly miraculous about these events, there’s a subtle means-ends pattern which the reader can detect after the fact.

Saul’s father loses some donkeys. Saul goes in search of the lost donkeys. He can’t find them, but his search happens takes him in the vicinity of Samuel, so he consults Samuel.

However, Samuel was expecting his arrival. This was prearranged by God. Samuel then gives Saul three signs:

*And this shall be the sign to you that the Lord has anointed you to be prince over his heritage.*



2 When you depart from me today, you will meet two men by Rachel's tomb in the territory of Benjamin at Zelzah, and they will say to you, 'The donkeys that you went to seek are found, and now your father has ceased to care about the donkeys and is anxious about you, saying, "What shall I do about my son?"' 3 Then you shall go on from there farther and come to the oak of Tabor. Three men going up to God at Bethel will meet you there, one carrying three young goats, another carrying three loaves of bread, and another carrying a skin of wine. 4 And they will greet you and give you two loaves of bread, which you shall accept from their hand. 5 After that you shall come to Gibeath-elohim, where there is a garrison of the Philistines. And there, as soon as you come to the city, you will meet a group of prophets coming down from the high place with harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre before them, prophesying (10:1-5).

Again, these are ordinary events. What is extraordinary is their conjunction. What are the odds that Saul would be in just the right place at just the right time for these encounters to happen? Moreover, what are the odds that Samuel could anticipate these meetings?

To an outside observer, each individual incident in this story would seem utterly mundane, requiring no special explanation. It's only as you look back over the series of events, with the benefit of some inside information, that you can discern the goal-oriented nature of the process—an outcome imperceptibly guided by a hidden hand. Most of the participants would be oblivious to their ulterior role in the process.

Unbelievers often complain about the absence of miracles in the modern world. There are, of course, books which document well-attested miracles in the modern world.

However, unbelievers don't know what to look for. They have a preconception of what constitutes a miracle which blinds them to miracles that may be occurring right under their nose. Coincidence miracles can be happening all around us, but a coincidence miracle is only recognizable to the concerned party. It has a private significance. It meets a need which only the concerned party is in a position to appreciate.

## Sabotaging the Resurrection

I'm pulling this out of the combox to illustrate an unintentional reductio ad absurdum:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2013/02/resurrecting-jesus.html?showComment=1361470548418#c3711799003611280559>

You are operating from an unproven assumption that Jesus' resurrected body could not do things that His physical body could not do without it compromising the fact of the resurrection. I would argue that is sheer nonsense.

No, I'm objecting specifically to an ethereal body. A docetic or Gnostic resurrection.

I'm also objecting to the glib assumption that we must ascribe certain dominical miracles to properties of Christ's body, rather than Christ's omnipotence.

Christ's resurrected body could not perish, it could not decay...

That wouldn't be a case of what his body can or can't do, but what can't be done to his body. Different principle.

...it did not require food.

Why assume a glorified body doesn't require food? Does the Bible say that? No.

I suppose he doesn't think a glorified body needs oxygen.

This is how a physical resurrection dies the death of a thousand negations. Is his body still a biological organism? If so, why assume it doesn't need food?

In fact, there are a number of radical differences between Christ's physical body and His resurrected body.

There are certainly important differences.

Christ's physical body walked on water. That defies the laws of gravity.

But is that a property of his body? Could he walk on water because his body was naturally buoyant? Was his body made of cork or Styrofoam?

This confuses what a body can do with what can be done with a body. Jesus could do things with his body that we can't, not because he had a custom-made Superhero body, but because he was (and is) omnipotent.

Keep in mind, too, that he could walk on water before the Resurrection. So did he have one kind of custom-made, Superhero body before the Resurrection, and a different custom-made Superhero body after the Resurrection? Or is it a mistake to attribute these abilities to his body?

His resurrected body ascended up into the sky.

Is that because his body is lighter than air? Was his body a helium balloon, covered by skin?

For that matter, was Jesus unable to levitate before the Resurrection? If he wanted to levitate before the Resurrection, would he be unable to do so?

What about Jesus glowing in the dark at the Transfiguration? Is this because his body was made of zinc sulfide or strontium aluminate?

This whole approach fails to distinguish what his body could do with what he could do with his body. As God Incarnate, Jesus didn't need a special kind of body to do special things with his body. What that requires is not a special kind of body, but a special kind of power.

How did Phillip find himself in the desert?...Was not Phillip's experience just as mysterious? I would be willing to say that Phillip could equally be said to have vanished.

And is that a special property of Phillip's body? If you did a body scan, would you discover something about the composition of his body, or a special internal organ, which enabled him to do that? Or is this something God did to Phillip?

This is an example of how some Christians unwittingly sabotage the integrity of the Resurrection. They end up giving us a "body" that's indistinguishable from a nonbody.

Here I'll add something I said to another commenter:

Let's approach it in reverse. What makes a body vulnerable to harm? What makes a body destructible? The fact that a body can be affected by external agents. Conversely, if a body is invulnerable or indestructible, that means it can't be affected by external agents.

But that comes at a cost. An invulnerable body is an insensate body. The senses must be sensitive to function. The senses can't sense unless they can be affected by outside factors. Unless they can register or absorb stimuli.

Light that's too bright hurts our eyes. Noise that's too loud hurts our ears. Food can be too hot or spicy.

A quick way to temporarily disable a man is to kick him in the groin. In theory, that part of the male anatomy could be made impervious to pain or harm. However, that would totally desensitize the area in question, and most men would rather remain vulnerable—for having a sensitive anatomy in that department has widely reported fringe benefits.

An embodied soul, a soul united to an invulnerable body, would be a mind imprisoned in a block of steel-reinforced concrete. A mind sealed away from sensory perception. By making it impregnable to harm, one makes it impregnable to being on the receiving end of the physical world.

## Theistic time travel

Since it is not obvious that one can rid oneself of all constraints in realistic models, let us examine the argument that time travel is implausible, and we should think it unlikely to exist in our world, in so far as it implies such constraints. The argument goes something like the following. In order to satisfy such constraints one needs some pre-established divine harmony between the global (time travel) structure of space-time and the distribution of particles and fields on space-like surfaces in it. But it is not plausible that the actual world, or any world even remotely like ours, is constructed with divine harmony as part of the plan. In fact, one might argue, we have empirical evidence that conditions in any spatial region can vary quite arbitrarily. So we have evidence that such constraints, whatever they are, do not in fact exist in our world. So we have evidence that there are no closed time-like lines in our world or one remotely like it.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/time-travel-phys/#8>

What's striking about this objection is the admission that the possibility or impossibility of time-travel isn't theologically value-free. All other things being equal, time-travel might be possible in a theistic universe, but impossible in an atheistic universe.

Of course, that, of itself, doesn't resolve other issues concerning the logical, physical, or metaphysical possibility of time-travel. But it does illustrate the fact that bringing God into the picture or leaving God out of the picture is a game-changer. What is unrealistic in an atheistic universe may be realistic in a theistic universe.





## II. Credibility of miracles

---

## An embarrassment of riches

All Keener's work can ultimately do is to get us to the level of *belief* in miracles being present. A leap of faith is still required to confirm that there is a supernatural agent behind such purported miracles and this cannot be proven by a historian. "It could have been something else" is just as valid or invalid, just as speculative, and has obvious limitations for the historian. The only firm evidence the historian has is that people *claim* miracles happen" Graham Twelftree, ed., **THE NATURE MIRACLES OF JESUS** (Cascade Book 2017), 89.

Beyond a certain point the mere piling up of examples starts to look more problematic than convincing: if miracles are really so commonplace, perhaps they're not so miraculous after all. Or perhaps Keener's examples tell us more about social anthropology, social psychology, and the sociology of knowledge than about what can actually happen. What is needed is not the piling up of further examples, but a closer analysis of a selection of the better-documented ones to see what they do in fact establish... (202).

No matter how many independent attestations of feeding miracles there may be, the use of multiple attestation of sources only shows the popularity of miracle stories (including "nature" miracles) in certain contexts... (206).

This is from a collection of essays by contributors with different viewpoints, including Craig Keener and Timothy

McGrew, as well as unbelievers like Eric Eve and James Crossley, whom I just quoted.

To some degree, Keener's case-studies are a game-changer. A traditional objection to miracles is that reported miracles come to us from the distant past, filtered through the accounts (allegedly) written by anonymous authors who may have no firsthand knowledge of the incident or witnesses. This also plays into the famous analogy argument, popularized by Troeltsch (although it has antecedents in other thinkers like Bradley), that miracles reported in the past lack credibility because there's no counterpart in the present. In a sense, Keener can grant that standard of comparison, but call the bluff by appealing to well-documented modern miracles.

That requires unbelievers to adjust the traditional strategy, because it backfired. Now they find themselves confronted by an abundance of reported miracles from eyewitnesses. And this is an ongoing event, at present. Indeed, Keener himself is continually updating his file of case studies. And he's not alone.

So let's run back through the retooled objections:

No matter how many independent attestations of feeding miracles there may be, the use of multiple attestation of sources only shows the popularity of miracle stories (including "nature" miracles) in certain contexts...

That's *all* that multiple-attestation shows? Suppose there was a reported sighting of a rabbit at a local park. Then additional reports of rabbits at the park began to pour in. Would that only show the popularity of rabbit stories? Or

would independent reports of rabbit-sightings indicate the presence of rabbits at the park?

Or perhaps Keener's examples tell us more about social anthropology, social psychology, and the sociology of knowledge than about what can actually happen.

Would multiple examples of rabbit-sightings tell us more about social anthropology, social psychology, and the sociology of knowledge than about the actual existence of rabbits?

What is needed is not the piling up of further examples, but a closer analysis of a selection of the better-documented ones to see what they do in fact establish...

i) Although there's a sense in which the quality of the reportage is more important than the quantity of the reportage, isn't there a tipping-point where the sheer volume of independent reports creates a strong presumption that the reported phenomenon is real? If we had lots of reports of rabbit-sightings at the park, we'd be justified in believing that rabbits frequent the park. We wouldn't be duty-bound to interview witnesses, conduct background checks to establish their credibility.

Hiding behind the demand for intensified scrutiny is the prejudicial viewpoint that there's a strong standing presumption against miracles, which only rigorously vetted witnesses can overcome. This assumes that we already know what kind of world we inhabit, a world in which miracles are highly implausible. Yet that benchmark is circular. Our belief about what the world is like is largely dependent on testimonial evidence. If miracles are widely

reported, then that should figure in our background understanding of the kind of world we inhabit.

**ii)** The skeptical bias involves the view that our world is regulated by natural laws, which miracles, if they ever occur, must "violate". But even if we accept a natural law framework, which is contentious in itself, it only means that a natural law can't be contravened by a natural event. It creates no presumption against, much less impossibility of, a supernatural event overriding a natural law. And whether there are such exceptions falls within the purview of human observation.

**iii)** I'm also struck by the studied passivity of the critic. If he thinks what is needed is a closer analysis of the better-documented examples, why doesn't he take that upon himself? Investigators like Keener have already done the preliminary spadework. Why does the critic act like it's someone else's job to follow up on those reports?

Few things could be more significant. If supernatural agents exist, is it not important that we nail that down? For their existence will impact our lives. Indeed, their existence may impact the afterlife—for better or worse. So why does he shrug his shoulders in the face of the prima facie evidence, as if settling that question has no relevance or urgency?

if miracles are really so commonplace, perhaps they're not so miraculous after all.

The defining element of a miracle is not rarity but a supernatural source. An event that defies the ordinary course of nature, pointing to supernatural agency.

All Keener's work can ultimately do is to get us to the level of *belief* in miracles being present.

If we received numerous reports of rabbit-sightings in a park, would that only get us to the level of *belief* in rabbits being present? Wouldn't that count as evidence for the presence of rabbits? Yes, they believe what they saw, but the point is what forms the basis of their belief. It's not sheer belief, but belief grounded in observation. What underlies their belief in rabbits is the spectacle of rabbits in their field of vision.

There are two elements to these reports: the reported experience and the reported interpretation. It's not, in the first instance, belief in a miracle, but the observation of an event. It's then a question of how to properly characterize the nature of the event.

A leap of faith is still required to confirm that there is a supernatural agent behind such purported miracles and this cannot be proven by a historian. "It could have been something else" is just as valid or invalid, just as speculative, and has obvious limitations for the historian. The only firm evidence the historian has is that people *claim* miracles happen"

i) It's true that there's a distinction between the event and the construal. However, inferring a supernatural agent isn't a leap of faith. Rather, that involves an understanding with regard to the limitations of what a natural process can yield. And that's not a uniquely Christian understanding. Indeed, atheists discount reported miracles because they typically subscribe to physicalism and causal closure. Miracles imply a larger reality. If, therefore, a well-attested event is inconsistent with natural law (in that sense), then, in principle, an atheist must infer outside agency that transcends what is naturally possible.

"It could have been something else" is *not* just as valid or invalid on secular grounds no less than Christian grounds. For an atheist, the only viable explanations consistent with naturalism are naturalistic explanations. If an event is naturally inexplicable, then the logic of naturalism requires a supernatural explanation.

**ii)** The critic tries to insulate his position by artificially compartmentalizing the task of the "historian". But reality isn't compartmentalized. Historians seek causes. Historians appeal to personal agency all the time. Historians draw inferences like everyone else. If the ultimate explanation points to a source behind the empirical phenomenology of the event that can't be explained by physical causes alone, then an intellectually honest historian must follow the logical trail back to the point of origin. And he isn't switching explanatory principles. It still comes down to personal agency.

## Hume on miracles

Here is one of Hume's stock objections to reported miracles:

*[T]here is not to be found, in all history, any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good sense, education, and learning, as to secure us against all delusion in themselves; of such undoubted integrity, as to place them beyond all suspicion of any design to deceive others; of such credit and reputation in the eyes of mankind, as to have a great deal to lose in case of their being detected in any falsehood; and at the same time attesting facts, performed in such a public manner, and in so celebrated a part of the world, as to render the detection unavoidable: All which circumstances are requisite to give us a full assurance in the testimony of men.*

However, Hume's objection easily reversible. Suppose the "educated and learned" move in social circles where belief in miracles is disdained as backward superstition—or worse? If they value their reputation, they have a powerful incentive to remain mum about a miracle even if they were to witness a miracle, or hear a credible report of a miracle from someone they trusted.

Indeed, this is more than hypothetical. We live in a time and place where peer pressure among the "educated and learned" deters the elites from admitting to belief in miracles.



## Centaurs

@RandalRauser

You are walking through the woods when you suddenly come upon a centaur staring back at you about 10 feet away. His eyes are fierce, his expression dark and stentorian. You pinch yourself and rub your eyes, but he's still there. Then he turns and gallops into the brush.

You're definitely not dreaming. You're not taking any medication or illicit drugs or are under undue stress that might suggest a hallucination. What do you conclude?

- 1.** It's unclear where Rauser is going with this. His M.O. is to play both sides of the atheist fence. So the drift of the comparison may be the last-ditch position of atheists like Richard Dawkins and Peter Atkins who say it's more reasonable to believe that you lost your mind than to believe in a miracle, even if you see it happen right before your eyes.
- 2.** Suppose in response to Rauser's hypothetical, a Christian says it's more reasonable to believe he was hallucinating than to believe centaurs exist. Will Rauser then exclaim that this justifies an atheist taking the same position with respect to firsthand miracle reports?
- 3.** It's easy to set hypothetical traps, but they're just hypotheticals. The fact that you can contrive a hypothetical dilemma for Christians doesn't make that a reason to be skeptical. Having doubts about the centaur doesn't warrant doubts about miracles unless that's a realistic comparison.

The analogy only works if we experience something analogous. Otherwise, it's just an imaginary wedge issue.

**4.** It's naturally impossible for centaurs to exist. They could only exist under supernatural conditions. But even at that level, what kind of being would cause centaurs to exist? What purpose does that serve? Even supernaturalism has a plausibility structure. Supernaturalism doesn't open the door to just any kind of arbitrary postulate.

Centaurs are fictional characters in Greek mythology. God isn't going to create a centaur. That would foster a pagan worldview.

**5.** But a hallucination is not the only explanation. There's a middle ground. Something can be illusory without being subjective. Suppose by the power of witchcraft an observer is caused to perceive a centaur. It isn't really there, yet the illusion doesn't originate in the mind or imagination of the observer. An external agent is causing the illusion. An external agent is causing the observer to perceive a centaur. Even if the illusion is psychological, it could be telepathic.

**6.** Here's another variation. Suppose by the power of witchcraft an optical illusion takes the form of a centaur. What appears in the observer's field of vision is something real, something outside the observer. A configuration of lightwaves that has the appearance of a centaur.

**7.** Here's yet another variation. Suppose by the power of witchcraft, matter is organized into the shape of a centaur. A physical entity with empirical secondary properties.

## Carrier bungles the argument from miracles

<https://www.richardcarrier.info/archives/16120>

Living gods don't need ancient poorly attested miracles as evidence of their creeds. Living gods can work living miracles. The reliance, therefore, on long dead tales to support the existence of living gods, is a fallacy of the first order. It would only be necessary in a world without gods. Which is why we can know such is the world we live in.

**i)** There's a grain of truth to his statement. However, a chronic weakness of Carrier is that he's addicted to hyperbole, so his statement is, at best, a half-truth.

**ii)** I myself have said that when it comes to the argument from miracles, many Christian apologists are stuck in a rut. There's an overemphasis on the Resurrection, and overemphasis on ancient documentary evidence for miracles in the distant past. There's nothing wrong with including that in your case for miracles. But it should be augmented by evidence for modern miracles.

**iii)** I don't agree that biblical miracles are poorly attested.

**iv)** A living God is a God who acts in the past as well as the present and the future. If he performs miracles, then he performs them in the past as well as the present. So there's nothing sneaky or untoward about appealing to past miracles, anymore than we appeal to past evidence for past events generally.

**v)** Ancient history is Carrier's specialty, so it's duplicitous for him to automatically discount "long dead tales".

If he performed miracles anciently, he should be doing so presently, indeed all the more, as the population in need of them is now a thousand times in size—so miracles should be thousands of times more frequent.

**i)** It may well be the case that the number of miracles has increased over time. But according to Scripture, God never performed miracles just to meet the need for a miracle. There was never a miracle for every problem that only a miracle could solve. Jesus healed people who came to him. He healed people who were brought to him, or brought to his attention. But the Gospels don't record him healing people in general. In the OT, God doesn't perform miracles for pagans generally. Indeed, God doesn't perform miracles for individual Jews generally. In Scripture, God never performs a miracle for everyone in need. Not remotely.

**ii)** For that matter, not all biblical miracles are beneficial. Some are quite destructive. They may help some humans by harming others.

You can explain your way out of that with a bunch of made-up “assumptions” about how God would behave differently than any other person in the same circumstances; but such “gerrymandering” your theory would only reduce the probability of that God existing, not rescue it from disproof as you might irrationally have thought.

Actually, there's a good reason why God would behave differently than any other person in the same circumstances. Unlike shortsighted human agents, God has foreknowledge and counterfactual knowledge. Just about every miracle has a snowball effect. Every miracle alters the future. So the miracles that God performs must be

consistent with his plan for world history. Performing additional miracles results in a different world history.

What remains is scenario one: God performed tons of miracles in antiquity—parted seas, rained fire from heaven, turned people into salt, transformed sticks into snakes, raised the dead, turned water into wine, became incarnate, flew into space, mystically murdered thousands of pigs, erased the sun. On and on. But now he doesn't.

**i)** Yet another example of Carrier's penchant for hyperbole. Despite the fact that the Bible is a very long book, the number of recorded miracles is about 150+. So the ratio of miracles to the span of Bible history and the number of individuals is quite scant, percentage-wise.

**ii)** The sun was never erased.

**iii)** Jesus never flew into outer space. At the Ascension he levitated, and was then enveloped by the Shekinah.

**iv)** It isn't possible to murder pigs. And Jesus didn't consign thousands of pigs to drowning. It was just a herd of domesticated pigs. 20? 50?

**v)** The Red Sea crossing happened once. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah happened once. The fate of Lot's wife was a one-time event. Jesus raised three people from the dead.

And that's why miracles are never believable. If the world were the sort of place miracles really occurred, we'd have tons of solid evidence of that fact by now. Yet we have accumulated no solid evidence of it. None.

That raises a nest of epistemological issues:

**i)** Miracles aren't like tree rings, where you have permanent cumulative evidence. Rather, miracles are more like fruit trees producing cumulative perishable fruit. Every year the tree bears fruit. Over the course of a productive lifetime, it may bear a lot of fruit. But while there's a cumulative total, that's not the same thing as cumulative evidence, because most of the fruit perishes. It rots or is eaten. There's no permanent record of the total produce. Like so many other things, miracles are cumulative, but the direct evidence is usually ephemeral rather than enduring.

**ii)** Take someone who undergoes miraculous healing. In a sense, that individual is evidence for a miracle. Yet the evidence may be indirect. It may not be apparent that the individual ever had a medical condition requiring a miraculous cure. Just looking at them, you can't tell. So you'd need some before and after evidence to provide a basis of comparison.

**iii)** In addition, the individual will eventually die, so in that sense the evidence will die with them.

**iv)** Most miracles, if they happen, are basically private underreported affairs. They happen to nobodies. They are known to handful of confidants.

**v)** Some people are reluctant to talk about uncanny experiences they had for fear people will say they are crazy. Indeed, the sneering attitude of atheists like Carrier is a disincentive. People don't like to be ridiculed, so they're selective about who they share things with.

**vi)** Because miracles are discontinuous with the past, they don't leave a long chain of evidence. The trail goes cold. There's the situation before the miracle. Then the miracle marks a new start. A reset. So we're limited in our ability to trace a miracle, unlike linear cause and event which extend back indefinitely to antecedent conditions leading up to a particular event as well conditions leading away from the event.

## Miracles and missionaries

**1.** This post is occasioned by the controversy surrounding Francis Chan's recent healing claims. But that's just a launchpad to address a broader issue. I'm discussing general principles that may not apply to that particular situation.

**2.** I'm reading high-profile cessationists who have a new criterion for reported miracles: unless it's caught on camera, it isn't credible. With the profusion of cellphone cameras, we should demand photographic evidence for reported miracles before we lend them credence. Eyewitness testimony is inadequate.

**3.** I'm all for empirical verification of miracles where that's available and feasible. But to demote testimonial evidence degrades biblical miracles.

**4.** From what I've read, miracles are more likely to happen in a virgin mission field, to help the Christian faith get a foothold. I also think it likely that God does more for those who have less and less for those who have more. Take folk who don't have access to advanced medical care.

**5.** There are different kinds of missionaries and different kinds of missionary settings. In some countries, Christianity is technically legal, but in reality Christian expression is persecuted.

In some countries, Christianity is legal but conversion is illegal. By the same token, Christianity is legal in some countries but evangelization is illegal.



This creates an underground church where native Christians and Christian missionaries practice a degree of anonymity to evade detection from hostile authorities. At the risk of stating the obvious, in a closed country the authorities can use cellphone camera images to identify and apprehend Christians and missionaries. Consider the use of facial recognition technology in China.

**6.** There are different kinds of missionaries. For instance, there are white-American missionaries who do temporary junkets to Third-World countries. They stick out compared to the native population. In addition, there are white-American missionaries who live in the host country.

Then you have minority-American missionaries of the same race/ethnicity as the host country. For some, these are temporary junkets. Others take up full-time residence.

They can pass for natives. It's easier for them to avoid detection from hostile authorities. Finally, you have native missionaries.

**7.** But in many cases it's necessary for the missionary, Christians on the ground, and unreached people, to maintain their anonymity. In some situations, cellphone cameras will be a deterrent to missionary activity, because it exposes the identity of the participants.

This includes prospective converts who might be open to conversion, but they're not prepared to take the risk of arrest, if their face shows up in a gov't database at a Christian gathering, and flags them to be "disappeared". So there's a disincentive to missionaries, Christians, and prospective converts blowing their cover.

I'm just stating the obvious, and I'm struck by the naïveté of some cessationist critics. There are situations where it's reasonable to request medical verification. But we must make allowance for impediments and deterrents on the ground. We need to take the setting into account, and judge reported miracles on a contextual, case-by-case basis.

## Caught on camera

In reaction to Francis Chan's recently claim that he healed some people, it's striking to see cessationists like Justin Peters and Fred Butler invent a new standard for accepting a reported miracle: it must be caught on camera! If we take that seriously, as if plain old eyewitness testimony is untrustworthy, that instantly impugns the credibility of all biblical miracles.

I'd add, at the risk of stating the obvious, that not all medical conditions are visible to a cellphone camera. Deafness is invisible. Many diseases are invisible, or only detectable via scanning internal anatomy, or lab work.

Furthermore, unless they were expecting a miracle, there's no reason they'd have cameras running in advance to capture the event as it happened.

Finally, if you're going to be that skeptical, it's also possible to fabricate photographic evidence.

## Credulous Christians and knee-jerk skeptics

Recently I posted a report about Francis Chan healing the sick:

<https://www.christianpost.com/news/francis-chan-says-he-healed-deaf-boy-girl-in-rural-myanmar-village-my-faith-was-at-another-level.html>

I didn't vouch for his claims, but I think they merit respectful consideration. On Twitter, JMac's righthand man, Phil Johnson, chimed in on the same report:

The miracles of Jesus and the apostles were routinely public, undeniable, & well-attested by multiple eyewitnesses. Even Jesus' most determined adversaries couldn't argue that the miracles were faked. They therefore raised doubts about the *source of his power* (Mt. 12:24).

Miracles such as those done by Jesus and the apostles are NOT occurring in charismatic circles today. Simple honesty SHOULD compel even the most doctrinaire continuationists to admit that no one today is doing what the apostles did in Acts 5:12; 9:33-42; 19:11-12; etc.

Yet unverified and unverifiable claims are routinely made by charismatics. Tales are regularly told that, when investigated, turn out to be false.

That's why spiritually sane people don't automatically swallow stories like the one Francis Chan told last week at Moody.

When someone tells a fantastic tale like “Everyone I touched was healed!”—asking for evidence is NOT sinful unbelief. (Especially when the person telling the tale is a theological drifter.)

Jesus *commanded* us to have that flavor of skepticism. Mt 24:24; Lk 21:8.

Yes, I saw it: Francis Chan going full faith healer at Moody Bible Institute’s Founder’s Week—on the platform of Moody Church.

I used to live in that part of Chicago. There’s a hospital close by with a full ward of terminally ill children. Do you think he’ll pay them a visit?

Several issues:

- 1.** There's some history between Francis Chan and JMac's outfit. Francis is their most famous and popular graduate. But he's become a disappointment and embarrassment to them, so they disassociate themselves from his ministry
- 2.** I agree with Phil that there's lots of chicanery in the charismatic movement.
- 3.** I agree with him that we should ask for evidence and not "automatically swallow" every report.
- 4.** Speaking for myself, I find Francis's recent testimony credible. That doesn't necessarily mean I believe it. There's a difference between saying something is believable and saying you believe it. I think it's more than possibly true. Plausible or probable without its being compelling or altogether convincing. I'm very open to what he said.

I'd like to have more background information about the folks he allegedly healed. Where these persistent, clearly-identified conditions? What about follow-up studies?

**5.** That said, Francis's testimony is evidence. Prima facie evidence in its own right. And there were multiple reported witnesses. To be sure, that's different than have separate accounts by different witnesses. It would be useful to hear from other members of his team. It would be useful to interview the folks who were said to be healed. Or their friends and relatives.

**6.** Francis is somewhat lacking in theological judgment. That doesn't disqualify him as an eyewitness. There is the danger of gullibility. Maybe he's too eager to see divine signs. But that doesn't mean we should dismiss his firsthand report out of hand.

**7.** As William James classically stated, there are two opposite errors to avoid:

“Believe truth!” “Shun error!”—these, we see, are two materially different laws; and by choosing between them we may color differently our whole intellectual life. We may regard the chase for truth as paramount, and the avoidance of error as secondary; or we may, on the other hand, treat the avoidance of error as more imperative, and let truth take its chance. Clifford, in the instructive passage which I have quoted, exhorts us to the latter course. Believe nothing, he tells us, keep your mind in suspense for ever, rather than by closing it on insufficient evidence incur the awful risk of believing lies. You, on the other hand, may think that the risk of being in error is a very small matter when compared with the blessings of real knowledge, and be

ready to be duped many times in your investigation rather than postpone indefinitely the chance of guessing true...For my own part, I have also a horror of being duped. But I can believe that worse things than being duped may happen to a man in this world...

**8.** Although Francis may be credulous to a fault, Phil and Jmac are incredulous to a fault. Phil isn't consistently skeptical. He's oblivious to his own double standard. Debunkers like Michael Shermer, Martin Gardner, Carl Sagan, James Randi, and Paul Kurtz (to name a few) don't think NT miracles are undeniable. It's not as if we can use modern scanning technology to diagnose the preexisting medical conditions of individuals in the Gospels and Acts. We don't have case-histories, or before and after scans. We don't have identifiable skeletal remains to examine.

Many dominical healings involve possession and exorcisms, but certainly possession and exorcism can sometimes be faked or misdiagnosed. And that's even assuming the Gospels and Acts are trustworthy accounts, which skeptics deny. Phil is playing with a double-bladed sword.

**9.** Did Jesus visit leper colonies and cure all the lepers? For that matter, isn't Jesus still alive? But he doesn't pop into cancer wards to heal everyone in sight. It's reckless when cessationists like Phil raise objections which, if taken seriously, discredit biblical miracles.

Indeed, well-documented modern miracles lend credibility to biblical miracles. They don't only happen in old stories.

**10.** Phil's objection is circular: "Miracles such as those done by Jesus and the apostles are NOT occurring in charismatic

circles today...When someone tells a fantastic tale like "Everyone I touched was healed!"

On the one hand, Phil seems to be saying that when Jesus and the apostles healed people, everyone they touched was healed—yet that's a "fantastic tale" if someone today makes the same claim. What makes that a fantastic tale now but not back then?

And how does he know that "Miracles such as those done by Jesus and the apostles are NOT occurring in charismatic circles today"? His denial seems to amount to the claim that they can't be happening today because miracles like that don't happen today. I don't believe it because I know that sort of thing doesn't happen anymore, and I know that sort of thing doesn't happen anymore because it only happened in the past.

But that's circular. It begs the question. What would count as evidence that it still happens? If it still happens, we'd expect to hear reports of it happening. Which is, in fact, what's going on.

Phil's attitude is like saying we know a species went extinct because there are no contemporary sightings of the species. As such, we should discount all contemporary sightings because we know the species went extinct. All contemporary reports must be false.

I'm by no means suggesting that we accept every reported miracle. But I do object to Phil's blanket preemptive dismissal. To reject every report is just as mindless as accepting every report.

**11.** I believe Phil's paradigm of a healer is that God delegates the ability to heal. That's an autonomous ability



which a healer can perform on anyone at any time at any place. Hence the taunt about failing to clear out a cancer ward.

But that's a very mechanical view of healing. What if God occasionally empowers a Christian to lay on hands and heal. It's not a permanent or even regular endowment, but temporary endowment. It might only be once or twice in the lifetime of the Christian. BTW, we have examples of that in the OT, where the Spirit of God temporarily enables someone to do something extraordinary or supernatural.

Proof of miraculous healing doesn't require a 100% success rate. The only proof necessary is a patient with a naturally incurable condition who is cured by the intervention of a Christian who, let us say, prays over them.

## Faith journeys

Here's the testimony of a Christian med student:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7D\\_LPCVzdU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7D_LPCVzdU)

Around the 6 min. mark he recounts a miracle. He says he overheard a phone conversation that was too far away to naturally hear, not to mention all the noise from passengers mulling around. In addition to hearing God's voice. If it happened, it must be telepathic.

This is veridical in the sense that his impression was corroborated, both by what happened when he spoke to the man and the message on the video, by the guy recounting his side of the exchange.

There are only four logical explanations:

### I) HE'S MISTAKEN

How could he misperceive what he thought he heard? How could that accidentally correspond to what was actually said?

### II) IT'S A COINCIDENCE

What are the odds?

At this point an atheist might say, sure (i-ii) are astronomically improbable, but they're more probable than the alternative of something that crazy actually happening.

Yes and no. (i-ii), however wildly improbable, might still be more plausible than the alternative *naturally* happening. But that's not the comparison. The comparison is whether *God* made it happen.

### III) HE'S LYING

That's something we should make allowance for. If, however, there are many stories like this from prima facie credible witnesses, then what's the tipping point to overturn naturalism (i.e. physicalism, causal closure)? It's circular for an atheist to discount all these reports as unbelievable because we don't live in a world where things like that happen. But how do we know what kind of world we live in? What's the benchmark? If enough witnesses report incidents like that, then we *do* live in that kind of world!

The atheist is appealing to experience, yet he's using one set of reported experiences as the benchmark to evaluate other reported experiences. But what's his justification of appealing to naturalistic experiences to set the standard of comparison? Why not the other way around?

Moreover, there's not even a prima facie conflict. Not experiencing the supernatural isn't positive evidence to the contrary, that counters evidence for the supernatural. If I've never seen something, that doesn't count as evidence against your reported sighting.

### IV) HE'S TELLING THE TRUTH

## The Devil's Chaplain

At the John Radcliffe Hospital, a physician tells Richard Dawkins that his son was stillborn. A hospital chaplain talks Richard into secretly adopting an orphaned newborn whose mother died in childbirth. Out of concern for his wife's mental health, Richard agrees. He and his wife Marian name the child Damien.

Shortly thereafter, Richard's mentor, Nikolaas Tinbergen, is killed in a freak accident when a gas main explodes under his car. As a result, Richard is appointed to replace Tinbergen as the Simonyi Professor for the Public Understanding of Science

Five years later, Damien's original nanny is bitten to death by a black mamba. This is puzzling because there are no black mambas in Oxfordshire. Richard assumes the snake must have escaped from a private collector.

A few days later, a new nanny, Mrs. Baylock, arrives out of nowhere to replace her—claiming the agency sent her after reading the obituary. Richard hires her on condition that she never read fairy tales to Damien: *“I have sometimes worried about the educational effects of fairy tales. Could they be pernicious, leading children down pathways of gullibility towards anti-scientific superstition and religion? I think looking back to my own childhood, the fact that so many of the stories I read allowed the possibility of frogs turning into princes, whether that has a sort of insidious effect on*

*rationality. Faith can be very very dangerous, and deliberately to implant it into the vulnerable mind of an innocent child is a grievous wrong. I've always been scrupulously careful to avoid the smallest suggestion of infant indoctrination, which I think is ultimately responsible for much of the evil in the world. I want Damien to make up his own mind freely when he becomes old enough to do so. I would encourage him to think for himself—as long as he thinks like me.”*

One night, when Marian goes into Damien's bedroom, she's confronted by a menacing Rottweiler with glowing red eyes. She runs from the room and tells Richard. "It's like some hellhound with eyes that glow in the dark!"

Richard assures her that the dog's eyeshine is simply the natural effect of *tapetum lucidum* reflecting the nightlight in Damien's bedroom. The next day, Richard asks the nanny about the strange dog. Mrs. Baylock tells him it's a guard dog that the agency sent to protect the boy. Damien has become very attached to the new dog.

One day, when Damien is playing with another boy, his playmate accidentally breaks Damien's toy train. Damien glares at the boy, mutters a Sumerian curse, and the boy bursts into flames. The burning boy runs screaming from the room, and dies moments later.

The police are mystified, but Richard assures them that there must be a perfectly natural explanation for what

happened. *“Just because science so far has failed to explain something, such as spontaneous combustion, to say it follows that the facile, pathetic explanations which religion has produced somehow by default must win the argument is really quite ridiculous.”*

Another time, Marian walks into Damien’s bedroom when Damien playing with toy soldiers. The toy soldiers are floating in midair.

Marian tells Richard. *“It’s as if he was moving them with his mind.”*

He assures her that there must be a scientific explanation for levitation—if that’s what it was. Probably an optical illusion, or anomalous atmospheric conditions. Must have something to do with electromagnetic fields. *“If ever there was a slamming of the door in the face of constructive investigation, it is the word miracle. To a medieval peasant, a radio would have seemed like a miracle. Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence.”*

On Damien’s sixth birthday party, Marian hires a magician to perform tricks for the children who came to celebrate Damien’s birthday. The magician pulls a rabbit out of the hat. Marian sees Damien touch the rabbit. It turns into a cobra. The magician is horrified. The children scream and run away. All except for Damien.

When Marian tells Richard what she saw, he brushes off the incident as slight-of-hand. *"It really comes down to parsimony, economy of explanation,"* He says. *"It is possible that your car engine is driven by psychokinetic energy, but if it looks like a petrol engine, smells like a petrol engine and performs exactly as well as a petrol engine, the sensible working hypothesis is that it is a petrol engine. Telepathy and possession by the spirits of the dead are not ruled out as a matter of principle. There is certainly nothing impossible about abduction by aliens in UFOs. One day it may be happen. But on grounds of probability it should be kept as an explanation of last resort. It is unparsimonious, demanding more than routinely weak evidence before we should believe it. If you hear hooves clip-clopping down a London street, it could be a zebra or even a unicorn, but, before we assume that it's anything other than a horse, we should demand a certain minimal standard of evidence."*

One day Marian takes Damien to the zoo. When they go to the herpetarium, all the snakes press themselves against the glass, as if they were doing obeisance to Damien.

Fr. Brennan, an Anglican priest, visits Richard's office at Oxford to warn him that his adopted son is possessed. Damien is the long-predicted Antichrist, he says. He urges

Richard to have Damien baptized and exorcised. Read him the Bible every day.

Richard is scornful: *“Don’t ever be lazy enough, defeatist enough, cowardly enough to say ‘I don’t understand it so it must be a miracle—it must be supernatural—it must be the occult—God did it—the Devil did it.’ Say instead, that it’s a puzzle, it’s strange, it’s a challenge that we should rise to. Whether we rise to the challenge by questioning the truth of the observation, or by expanding our science in new and exciting directions—the proper and brave response to any such challenge is to tackle it head-on. And until we’ve found a proper answer to the mystery, it’s perfectly ok simply to say ‘this is something we don’t yet understand—but we’re working on it’. It’s the only honest thing to do. Miracles, magic and myths, they can be fun. Everybody likes a good story. Myths are fun, as long as you don’t confuse them with the truth.”*

*“But that’s precisely why the dark side entrusted the child to your care,”* Fr. Brennan interjects. *“They knew you’d provide the perfect cover. The Devil’s dupe. You’d be the very last person to suspect Damien’s true identity—until it’s too late!”*



Richard orders the priest to leave. After he goes outside, Fr. Brennan is struck dead by a lightning bolt, even though there's not a cloud in the sky.

Marian starts having nightmares about Damien. She begins to question whether Damien could really be her own child. As she's driving to his office to share her concerns, she's swallowed alive by a sinkhole, which suddenly appears right under her car.

## Were the Wright brothers a hoax?

It is no miracle that a man, seemingly in good health, should die on a sudden: because such a kind of death, though more unusual than any other, has yet been frequently observed to happen. But it is a miracle, that a dead man should come to life; because that has never been observed in any age or country. There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation. **And as a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full *proof*, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle; nor can such a proof be destroyed**

When anyone tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened.

– Hume

There are several problems with this claim. For one thing, it begs the question. Hume knows full well that his audience will instantly think of Jesus. There's testimonial evidence that this very thing has indeed been observed. If so, that would belie the "uniformity" of experience against every miraculous event.

But I'd like to focus on another issue. There's a sense in which Hume's statement could certainly be true, even

though Jesus rose from the dead. It depends on the timeframe. Suppose Jesus rose from the dead. Yet anyone who died before c. 30 AD could honestly say that a dead man returning to life has never been observed in any age or country. That never once occurred—right up to the moment it occurred!

Anyone living before the time of Christ could say what Hume said without begging the question. For anyone living before the time of Christ, it would be the uniform experience that no one came back to life.

By the same token, anyone who died before the 20C could truly say that human flight has never been observed in any age or country. There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against human flight. That was true right until December 17, 1903, at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.

So, to paraphrase Hume, **As a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full *proof*, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of human flight; nor can such a proof be destroyed.** When anyone tells me, that he saw the Wright brothers fly, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened.

That's a basic problem with Hume's argument. You could truly say it never happened...until it happened! Before it happened, it never happened. It never happened in the past. It never happened all the way up to the moment that changed. So Hume's objection turns out to be a tautology

with no predictive value. It is, at best, a statement about the past, not the future. It's only true, if at all, for the observer's provincial sample of time.

## Swelling reverberations

On his blog, Vincent Torley has posted a massive attack on the Resurrection accounts. This summarizes an even larger, self-published book by autodidact Michael Alter.

I don't know much about Torley. He is (or was) a contributor to Uncommon Descent. He's a convert to Catholicism (from what, I don't know).

The main problem with Torley's attack is that it's just a basket full of musty chestnuts. Most of these are very stale objections.

I'm not saying old arguments are necessarily bad arguments. Old arguments can be good arguments.

But these objections have all been discussed in evangelical commentaries, monographs, and periodical articles. I myself have been over this ground, sometimes quoting other scholars and sometimes offering my own explanations.

Torley's attack is rather one-sided. He seems to be better read in infidelity than in conservative scholarship. And his rosy assessment of liberal critics lacks discrimination.

What one person finds convincing another person may find unconvincing. There's such a déjà vu quality to Torley's attack. Right now I don't feel like posting a repetitious rebuttal to repetitious objections. There are so many layers to peel away, and it's all been done before. How many times must we peel the same onion?

However, I will reiterate one point: the evidence for Christianity isn't confined to ancient documentary evidence. Christianity is a living faith. Christians pray to Jesus, or pray to the Father in Jesus' name. Countless Christian prayers have been answered. How is a dead Savior answering their prayers? If Jesus was just a man who ceased to exist when he expired, who is answering prayers addressed to and through Jesus?

Likewise, contemporary dreams and visions of Jesus are instrumental in the conversation of many Muslims. How is a dead Savior, a mortal who passed into oblivion 2000 years ago, appearing to them? Same thing with Christian visions of Jesus. For instance:

<https://epistleofdude.wordpress.com/2017/11/07/visions-of-jesus/>

I'm not saying we should believe every testimony. That needs to be sifted on a case-by-case basis.

Yet this isn't simply about something that, if it happened, happened in the past, and that's all behind us—but about something that continues to happen as a result of that past event. Supernatural reverberations. And they aren't fading reverberations, but swelling reverberations. The bell rung 2000 years ago gets louder, not softer—filling the earth.

## Why doesn't God prevent evil?

I believe Rauser was raised in a conservative charismatic church, but he's been a "progressive Christian" for many years, so his testimony can't be dismissed as the confirmation bias by a "fundamentalist".

This example is interesting from a theodical standpoint. Why doesn't God prevent evil? Why didn't God simply prevent the accident in the first place?

But if he did, the accident would be a nonevent. There'd be nothing out of the ordinary, nothing to remember. God's intervention would be undetectable.

By allowing the accident to happen but miraculously mitigating the natural effects, this becomes a witness to God's existence and special providence. It became known to Rauser's family and church. And now he's talking about it in the public domain. That's edifying in a way that prevention is not.

The same holds true for many cases where, rather than preventing evil, God defeats evil. Overrules it for good, as a witness to his providential presence.

When I was about ten years old, I was riding my bike home from school when I crossed the street just up the hill from our house ... except this time I didn't do my usual shoulder check for oncoming traffic. A second later I suddenly heard a car horn blast followed by the sickening squeal of tires. Then, just as I turned to my left I saw the grill of a large Buick as if it were hovering but a few terrifying feet away from me. You know how people talk about time slowing down when their life is in danger? That describes my experience. Though it

was a mere split second, even now I can still visualize the grill of that Buick, frozen in time, looming in space mere feet away from me.

The next moment I was sent sailing through the air and rolling on the asphalt as the car came to a lurching halt on the graveled shoulder of the road. Here's where the miracle bit takes center stage. Incredibly, *I never felt the impact of the car*. At the moment when I should have been making contact with a chrome grill, all I felt was a cushion of air. Even more incredibly, though I had been sent flying off my bike and skidding on the asphalt with no helmet or pads, I got up with no injuries at all, save a single scrape on my elbow.

Shortly thereafter, as I was wheeling my bike up the driveway, our Christian babysitter, Mrs. White, burst out the front door. She said that she had been sitting on the couch watching TV when God told her that I was in trouble and she needed to pray for my safety. So pray she did until she sensed God telling her that the danger had passed.

<https://randalrauser.com/2018/08/why-doesnt-god-give-everyone-a-miracle/>



## Armchair debunkers

This is a sequel to my prior post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2016/09/opy-on-supernatural-encounters.html>

I'm been interacting with some of Graham Oppy's material. It's useful for Christians to be able to take on the most sophisticated atheists. I'll be quoting from his monograph on **THE BEST ARGUMENT AGAINST GOD** (Palgrave Pivot, 2013). Here Oppy expands on his objection to miracles:

Some might be inclined to think that the content of the accumulated body of 'social science' is bound to favour Naturalism over Theism. In particular, some might think to draw attention to the fact that there is not one single well-established result in the 'social sciences' that depends upon the postulation of the existence of God. There is no established knowledge in archaeology, or anthropology, or ethnography, or human geography, or sociology, or psychology, or cognitive science, or economics, or political science, or criminology, or linguistics, or education, or international relations, or legal studies, or human history, or communication studies, or any other of the 'social sciences' that relies upon the assumption that God exists (35).

**i)** To begin with, that's an exercise in misdirection. The question isn't whether particular disciplines depend on the postulate of God's existence, but whether, say, there's archaeological confirmation for Bible history or medical verification for some reported miracles.

**ii)** But in addition, the "God postulate" is germane to some disciplines. Take the role of proper function in medical science. Physicians approach the human body the way engineers approach a machine. They act as though the heart is a pump. They act as though lungs were designed to oxygenate blood. An eye is for seeing, an ear is for hearing. They can only fix malfunctioning organs, &c., by assuming a teleological viewpoint. If, however, the human body is the byproduct of a mindless, aimless process, then that's misplaced.

...there are many Theists who suppose that there are phenomena that lie within the domain of human history that are much better explained on the hypothesis that God exists than on the hypothesis that causal reality is natural reality. In particular, there are many Theists who suppose that there are events from recorded human history – miracles – that are best understood to be results of direct intervention by God in the natural causal order. While Naturalists suppose that the best explanations of reports of miracles – or reports of experiences of the miraculous – can always be framed within the confines of 'naturalistic social sciences' or naturalistic discourse more broadly construed, some Theists suppose that the best explanations for at least some reports of miracles – or reports of experiences of the miraculous – advert to the direct intervention by God in the natural causal order.

There are countless reports of miracles across the world's religions. Consider, for example, the well-known reports concerning: Buddha's painless birth (and conception without sexual intercourse); Arunagirinathar's survival after he threw himself from a temple tower; Jesus' turning of water into wine; Mohammed's splitting of the moon; the shaking of the

earth, the darkening of the sun, and the raining of beautiful flowers from the sky consequent upon the execution of Ichadon by King Beopheung of Silla; Sarkar Waris Pak's wading across the flooded Ghanghra river; the regrowth of Miguel Juan Pellicer's amputated leg; the sun's dimming, changing colours, spinning, dancing about in the sky and plummeting to the earth at Fátima; the healing powers of Audrey Marie Santo; and so on.

There are also countless reports of other kinds of *anomalous* interventions, episodes, activities and phenomena in the course of human history. Consider, for example, reports concerning: astrological influences, alien (extraterrestrial) visitations, channelling, clairvoyance, cryptids (e.g. bunyips, hoop snakes, Loch Ness monsters, man-eating trees, mermaids, werewolves, will-o'-the-wisps and yeti), demons, dowsing, ESP (extra-sensory perception), fairies, fortune-telling, ghosts, goblins, out-of-body experiences, prophecy, reincarnation, telekinesis, telepathy and witchcraft; and consider, too, the vast range of reports emanating from practices that can be collected together under the heading of 'alternative medicine' or 'spiritual healing' (e.g. Bach flower remedies, chiropractic, chromotherapy, crystal healing, cupping, ear candling, homeopathy, iridology, magnotherapy, naturopathy, reflexology, reiki, rolfing and so forth).

Of course, while the truth of some of the further reports just mentioned would (arguably) be inconsistent with Naturalism, the truth of others would not. However, when we come to assess the evidential import of reports of miracles for the dispute between Theist and Naturalist, we need to consider the full range of reports of interventions, episodes, activities and phenomena that are anomalous from the

standpoint of currently well-established science. It is uncontroversial that the truth of pretty much everything referred to in the preceding two paragraphs has not been confirmed by natural and social scientific investigation. It is also uncontroversial that the domain of investigation of these kinds of interventions, episodes, activities and phenomena is ripe with 'knavery and folly' (as David Hume says in his famous discussion of miracles). The upshot for those who would claim that some particular reports of miracles are evidence for Theism over Naturalism is clear: we need to be given some very good reason to suppose that these particular reports have truth-relevant features that clearly distinguish them from the vast body of reports concerning the miraculous and the anomalous. In the absence of very good reason to suppose that the particular reports in question have truth-relevant features that clearly distinguish them from the vast body of reports concerning the miraculous and the anomalous, the evidently proper conclusion to draw is that the particular reports in question offer no serious support for Theism over Naturalism (35-37).

Oppy's tactic is to jumble together a lot of miscellaneous examples; act as though it's all of a kind; act as though, because some of this is incredible, the rest is incredible by association. That's an intellectually frivolous way of approaching the issue. And notice how he systemically begs the question. He presumes, without benefit of argument, that everything he mentions is unbelievable. He gives the reader no reason to share his assessment.

It is uncontroversial that the truth of pretty much everything referred to in the preceding two paragraphs

has not been confirmed by natural and social scientific investigation.

There's no indication that he's even acquainted with the relevant body of literature. What's the basis for his sweeping generalization? This is a very broad field.

If he was intellectually serious, he'd sift and sort these examples. Let's comment on some of his examples:

Buddha's painless birth (and conception without sexual intercourse)

i) It's equivocal or deceptive to call that a "report". A report has the connotation of something that, at least in principle, is based on observation. But the legends of Buddha cannot be "reports" in the sense of testimonial evidence. As Edwin Yamauchi notes:

Buddha's teachings, after many centuries of being passed on orally, were written down for the first time in the first century B.C. in Ceylon. The earliest written texts which have been preserved are in Pali, an Indo-Aryan dialect which may be the dialect Buddha himself used. The Pali canon of the Hinayana school (the southern branch of Buddhism, also called the Theravada school) is known as the Tipitaka (Sanskrit Tripitaka), meaning "Three Baskets." Portions of this collection, such as the *Samyutta Nikaya*, the *Majjhima Nikaya* and the *Anguttara Nikaya*, may have come into existence two centuries after Buddha's death, but not much later.

The Sanskrit canon of the Mahayana school, which spread northeastward to Tibet, China, Korea and Japan, dates, at the earliest, to the first and second

centuries A.D. According to Christmas Humphreys, "the later Sutras of the Mahayana School, though put into Buddha's mouth, are clearly the work of minds which lived from five to fifteen hundred years after his passing."<sup>3</sup>

In the later sources one notes a conspicuous exaggeration of the supernatural elements in Buddha's life. But even the earliest traditions, separated as they are by a century or two from Buddha's time, are not free from amplification. As M. Winternitz observes, "Even what are generally considered to be our oldest documents, the texts of the Pali Tipitaka, speak of Buddha often enough as a superhuman being, and tell us more of the legendary man than of the historical Buddha."<sup>4</sup>

<http://irr.org/jesus-zoroaster-buddha-socrates-muhammad>

**ii)** That's not comparable to NT miracles, where you have 1C reports of 1C events. That's not even comparable to OT miracles, where we do have some archaeological confirmation for OT history.

**iii)** On a related note, when evaluating "reports," it helps to know the date of the report in relation to the date of the ostensible event. Whether there's any evidence that the report is based on firsthand information. Whether the reporter had an incentive or disincentive to lie. Whether there's corroboration in the form of independent, multiple attestation or acknowledgement from hostile witnesses. Arguably, some NT miracles meet these criteria.

the sun's dimming, changing colours, spinning, dancing about in the sky and plummeting to the earth at Fátima.

We need to distinguish between an observation and the interpretation of what was seen. I think there's credible evidence that there was, indeed, some atmospheric phenomenon that generated that optical illusion. I don't dismiss the report. Rather, it's a question of how to classify the phenomenon.

the regrowth of Miguel Juan Pellicer's amputated leg

We'd need to examine the documentary evidence for that claim.

the healing powers of Audrey Marie Santo

Once again, we'd need to investigate the quality of the evidence. What's the potential for fraud and wishful thinking?

There's a difference between dogmatic skepticism, a priori skepticism, that rejects any reported miracle out of hand before even considering the evidence—and a posteriori skepticism, where we approach a report with an open mind, and draw a skeptical conclusion after considering the evidence.

Mohammed's splitting of the moon

**i)** That's alluded to in the Koran, with more detailed accounts in the Hadith. Ironically, that "report" backfires. If, in the 7C AD, the moon was seen to split in two or break into pieces, then resemble, even if that was an optical illusion, it would be visible to many literate cultures in Europe, the Near East, and the Far East. We'd expect documentary records to survive of such a spectacular event. So this is a good example of a legendary Muslim miracle.

**ii)** But Oppy might say that proves his point. Why believe some reports but disbelieve others? There is, however, nothing inherently arbitrary about selective credence. It is rational to evaluate reports on a case-by-case basis. And that isn't unique to reported miracles. That's true for historical reportage in general. You scrutinize the specifics. Do some fact checking.

Oppy's attitude is strikingly anti-intellectual. He just rattles off miscellaneous examples, then renders an armchair verdict. But that's hardly an intelligent or rationally responsible way to evaluate historical testimony.

**iii)** It is, of course, true that we approach claims with a plausibility structure. We make snap judgments. We don't have time to investigate every report. But our plausibility structure needs to have an evidential foundation.

Jesus' turning of water into wine

What we're getting from Oppy is an autobiographical window into what he personally finds to be unbelievable. But he doesn't give the reader any reason to doubt that account.

Consider, for example, reports concerning: clairvoyance... ESP (extra-sensory perception)...ghosts...out-of-body experiences...telekinesis, telepathy

But there's probative evidence for those phenomena. Medical evidence of veridical OBEs. By the same token, you have paranormal researches like Stephen Braude, Mario Beauregard, and Rupert Sheldrake. Has Oppy even studied the best literature on the topic? Or is he just giving the reader his knee-jerk reaction?



demons...witchcraft

Once again, there's probative evidence for those phenomena. That's been documented by academic anthropologists like Clyde Kluckhohn, Felicitas Goodman, Sidney M. Greenfield, and Edith Turner, as well as David J. Hufford (academic folklorist), and M. Scott Peck (Harvard-educated psychiatrist)—not to mention Christian exorcists like John Richards.

prophecy

**i)** Excuse me, but there's probative evidence for prophecy. There's an extensive literature on the argument from prophecy.

**ii)** In addition, we need to keep our eye on the burden of proof. Oppy takes the position that every single report of a supernatural or paranormal event is bogus. That's a universal negative. It only takes a few well-attested counterexamples to falsify a universal negative. If you say all crows are black, it only takes one albino crow to prove you wrong.

For Oppy to preemptively dismiss every reported miracle, answered prayer, special providence, or paranormal event, requires him to view testimonial evidence as overwhelmingly unreliable. But he doesn't really believe that. He depends on secondhand information for most of what he believes. His selective distrust is arbitrary special pleading.

iii) Has he ever read Rex Gardner's **HEALING MIRACLES: A DOCTOR INVESTIGATES**, Craig Keener's **MIRACLES: THE CREDIBILITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT ACCOUNTS** – or the appendices in Robert Larmer's **THE LEGITIMACY OF MIRACLE & DIALOGUES ON MIRACLE?**

## Aliens among us

One popular storyline in SF involves an advanced alien civilization that makes first contact with primitive humanoids. By definition, it has to be technologically advanced to be capable of deep space travel.

In one variation on this theme, first contact is the origin of humanoid religion. To primitive humanoids, the alien technology is magical. Godlike.

Continuing with our storyline, suppose humanoids passed down a traditional record of first contact in folklore. They recorded the appearance of the spacecraft. The appearance of the aliens. What they aliens did.

The folklore might reflect a degree of legendary embellishment. Because the primitive humanoids lacked the scientific categories to describe first contact, they'd resort to mythopoetic categories. But it would still bear witness to a real event.

Suppose ufologists appeal to this ancient folklore as evidence of first contact. Along come the debunkers. The counterparts to Carl Sagan, Martin Gardner, Richard Dawkins, Jerry Coyne, Michael Shermer, and PZ Myers in our SF scenario.

Now even though, in our scenario, aliens really did make first contact, the debunkers would dismiss that out-of-hand.

Another variant on this theme involves alien/humanoid hybrids. Say they use molecular cloning to create hybrids. Then the aliens leave the hybrids behind.

Some humanoids never interbreed with hybrids. Other humanoids interbreed with hybrids, but because the humanoids outnumber the hybrids, the alien DNA is steadily diluted until only trace elements remain.

Suppose geneticists discover some humanoid specimens with residual alien DNA. The ufologists cite that as scientific confirmation that the folklore about first contact was authentic.

But the debunkers dismiss that as genetic anomalies, the same way they explain away evidence inconsistent with Darwinism—even though, in our scenario, this really is evidence of first contact.

The same mindset which causes atheists to discount miracles, irrespective of the evidence, would cause them to discount first contact, irrespective of the evidence.

## Does God know Greek?

*Der Spiegel*

**Micky Maus:** Herr Doktor Ehrman, you used to believe in the verbal inspiration of Scripture. How did you lose your faith?

**Ehrman:** I was a student at Princeton, taking a course in Classical Hebrew. And it suddenly hit me like a ton of bricks: "Unless Yahweh knew Hebrew, how could he inspire the Hebrew Bible?"

**Micky Maus:** Could you flesh that out a bit?

**Ehrman:** Literacy was very rare in the ancient Near East. So how did Yahweh learn literary Hebrew? I couldn't locate any school records of Yahweh attending yeshiva. And Hebrew Union College didn't exist in the Second Millennium BC. So Yahweh might have been high school dropout, for all I know.

**Micky Maus:** Isn't it possible, if not probable, that the records were lost?

**Ehrman:** Yes, but history is about what you can *show*. So unless you can show that Yahweh attended yeshiva, that's not a historical datum. And how else could he learn Hebrew? He didn't have parents. So it poses an insoluble conundrum for Christians.

**Micky Maus:** What about the NT?

**Ehrman:** Same problem. How did Yahweh learn literary Greek? There's no documentary evidence that he attended

Plato's Academy. And I couldn't find a library card with Yahweh's name on it for the Royal Library of Alexandria.

**Micky Maus:** Suppose it's a miracle?

**Ehrman:** If it's a miracle, then it can't be a historical datum. Historians can only establish what probably happened in the past, and by definition a miracle is the least probable occurrence. And so, by the very nature of the canons of historical research, we can't claim historically that a miracle probably happened. By definition, it probably didn't. And history can only establish what probably did.

If I saw Jesus multiply fish with my own eyes, I wouldn't believe it. I mean, what am I gonna believe—Hume or my lying eyes?

**Micky Maus:** But if you saw Jesus multiply fish with your very own eyes, how could you *not* believe it? In that event, what do you think really happened?

**Ehrman:** If I saw Jesus multiply the fish right before my eyes, I'd assume he was hiding them under his cloak.

**Micky Maus:** Isn't 5000 fish a whole lot of fish to hide under his cloak?

**Ehrman:** I didn't say it was going to be easy, but anything is more likely than a miracle. So it must be Jesus pulling 5000 fish out of his loincloth.

**Micky Maus:** You think *that's* more probable than a miracle?

**Ehrman:** Absolutely! Didn't you hear my definition?

**Micky Maus:** What if someone rejects your definition?

**Ehrman:** They can't. By definition, my definition is true!

## Seeing is disbelieving

In 33 AD, Richardus Carrier, a natural philosopher of world renown, was on the island of Capri, where Tiberius Caesar was vacationing.

*April 23, 33*

**Centurion:** We just received report of a mass resurrection in a Jewish cemetery in Jerusalem. A moment after the Messiah died, the earth shook, splitting rocks. Some tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the Jerusalem and appeared to many.

**Carrier:** Nonsense! I won't believe it until I know who the reporter was.

*April 25, 33*

**Centurion:** My contacts tell me the reporter was one Matthew or Levi—he goes by two different names—an apostle and one-time tax collector.

**Carrier:** I won't believe it until I interview Matthew personally:

*April 30, 33*

**Centurion:** How did the interview go?

**Carrier:** I won't believe it until I know who the witnesses were.



*May 2, 33*

**Centurion:** My contacts have given me a list of names and addresses of observers who witnessed the mass resurrection in the Jewish cemetery.

**Carrier:** Nonsense! I won't believe it until I interview the witnesses personally.

*May 7, 33*

**Centurion:** How did the interviews go?

**Carrier:** Eyewitness testimony is notoriously unreliable. I won't believe it until I personally interview some of the "raised saints."

*May 11, 33*

**Centurion:** How did the interviews go?

**Carrier:** I won't believe it until I know the saints were really dead and buried.

*May 13, 33*

**Centurion:** I just received word from the Chief Coroner of Jerusalem that the saints were truly dead and buried.

**Carrier:** Nonsense! I won't believe it until I see the results of DNA testing to confirm that the saints who were said to be raised are the very same individuals who were buried there.

*May 15, 33*

**Centurion:** Based on DNA samples taken both before and after the event, the Chief Coroner of Jerusalem informs me that they are one and the same individuals.

**Carrier:** Nonsense. DNA samples can be tampered with. I won't believe it unless I can see it for myself.

*May 17, 33*

**Centurion:** Here's footage from security cameras at the cemetery which show the mass resurrection.

**Carrier:** Nonsense! Photographic evidence can be tampered with. And even if your photographic evidence is accurate, how can I be sure the whole event wasn't staged by mischievous aliens? For all I know, the Mother Ship may be hiding behind the moon, conveniently out of sight. I won't believe it unless I can go back in time to be there when it happens, so that I can see it with my own eyes:

*May 19, 33*

**Centurion:** Your butler tells me that the Archangel Michael appeared to you yesterday and transported you back in time and space to the Jewish cemetery, at the moment it happened.

**Carrier:** Nonsense! I was obviously hallucinating.

## Carrie acquitted!



(Reuters) - Today, in a packed courtroom, Carrie White and Liz Sherman were acquitted on charges of murder by arson.

Carrie was charged with incinerating her classmates on prom night, while her codefendant, Liz Sherman, was charged with incinerating staff and patients at the asylum where she was staying.

Lead defense attorney Robert Shapiro used the celebrated "Carrier" defense to get his clients acquitted. In a famous debate with David Marshall, Carrier denied that Jesus ever miraculously healed anyone. Carrier insisted that all his cures were "psychosomatic."

Taking his cue from Carrier, Mr. Shapiro argued that his clients didn't *really* incinerate anyone since pyrokinesis is, by definition, psychosomatic: mind over matter.

Apparently, that was sufficient to convince the jury, although some veteran courtroom reporters privately speculated that jurors were afraid of what Hellboy might do to them if they convicted his girlfriend.



## Carrier fumbles the argument from evil

David Marshall recently debated Richard Carrier. Among other things, Carrier deployed his own version of the argument from evil, which Marshall has posted:

<http://christthetao.blogspot.com/2013/03/marshall-vs-carrier-richards-opening.html>

i) A basic problem with Carrier's argument is that he fails to distinguish between the internal argument from evil and the external argument from evil.

The existence of infant mortality isn't even *prima facie* inconsistent with the existence of the Biblical God. It's not as if the Bible depicts a world in which no child ever dies of illness, in glaring contrast to the real world where children die every day.

Death is a fixture of Bible history. In Scripture, everyone dies—sooner or later. Likewise, the Bible acknowledges the existence of disease. Indeed, Carrier appeals to the healings of Jesus to document that fact.

The Bible doesn't depict a disease-free world. The Bible doesn't depict a world in which everyone is immortal.

Therefore, there is no *prima facie* discrepancy between Biblical theism and human mortality. So why does Carrier think human mortality is an undercutter or defeater for Biblical theism? From a Biblical perspective, the coexistence of the Biblical God with human mortality is clearly compatible, for the obvious reason that Scripture acknowledges both.

It's as if Carrier deployed the argument from water to disprove Biblical theism. Carrier cited statistics regarding the volume of freshwater in lakes, rivers, glaciers, icecaps, and aquifers. He cited statistics about snowfall and rainfall. He cited statistics about the volume of saltwater in the oceans.

He then triumphantly explained how the existence of water disproved the existence of Yahweh! But since the Bible doesn't deny the existence of water, how would the existence of water be inconsistent with the existence of Yahweh?

**ii)** The Bible has a theology of death. There is a theological rationale for death. Carrier doesn't even engage that argument.

Human mortality is a divine curse. We live in a fallen world. Exposure to natural evils like disease and death are hallmarks of our fallen condition.

**iii)** Although death is a curse, death has fringe benefits. Many of us exist because others have died. Take replacement children. Or widows and widowers who remarry. Take war, which results in dislocation. That, in turn, results in men and women mating with different men and women than if they hadn't migrated from the war zone. Same thing with famine. A fallen world has compensatory goods.

**iv)** Although death is a curse, immortality in a fallen world would be a curse. To live in sin century after century, millennium after millennium, to be trapped in a fallen world, to be unable to die, is no less punitive than death. Indeed, that's what the Bible means by everlasting punishment.

Many unbelievers begin killing themselves long before their natural lifespan has run its course. Many unbelievers begin killing themselves in their prime. They drink themselves to death. Or escape into recreational drugs. Or commit suicide.

They can't stand to be sober. They hate getting up in the morning. They dread the prospect of getting through another day. They are miserable, depressed. The emptiness of their godless existence is unendurable.

**v)** Death is the great reminder of how life without God robs us of everything we hold dear. In a fallen world, time is often our worst enemy. The thief of time. The passage of time devours our past. Steadily consumes everything that makes life worthwhile.

Coming face to face with the death of friends and relatives forces us to confront our desperate need for divine healing. Physical healing. Spiritual healing. Emotional healing.

**vi)** The Bible has a doctrine of immortality. That's an eschatological promise. Although death is the Last Enemy, death won't have the last word.

Having to wait for something makes it more precious than instant gratification. Dying makes eternal life more precious. Frequently we don't know how good we had it until we lose it.

As an internal argument from evil, Carrier's argument fails—badly.

**vii)** What about an external argument from evil? But from that perspective, why is infant mortality evil?

To begin with, Carrier supports abortion. So he's shedding crocodile tears when he feigns indignation over the death of babies.

**viii)** In addition, from his Darwinian perspective, high rates of mortality for young offspring figure in the balance of nature. That's a common phenomenon in the animal kingdom. Out of large litters, only a few survive to adulthood. Most offspring die to feed predators, scavengers, and detritivores. Carrier complains about germs and parasites, but that's an integral part of the ecosystem. Has Carrier bothered to consider what would happen to life on earth if we eradicated all germs and parasites? Has it occurred to him that that would be detrimental to life on earth?

From a Darwinian perspective, the death of simian primate offspring is no different than the death of prosimian primate offspring (e.g. gibbons, lemurs, orangutan, marmosets). Of course, because it's our own species, natural selection has programmed our brain to form emotional attachments for certain members of our own species, like offspring. But that has no objective significance.

**ix)** Carrier makes hay about Christ's opposition to ceremonial handwashing. Is Carrier really that illiterate, or is he just playing to the galleries?

In context, this has reference to ritual cleansing, not hygienic cleansing. Ritual ablutions don't use antiseptic soap and water. There's nothing inherently sanitary about ritual ablutions.

**x)** Carrier said:



No. Jesus argued that we don't have to wash our hands before we eat, that washing is a human tradition, with no endorsement from God. And that nothing we put into us can harm us. And as he is claimed to have said in the Gospel of Mark, not even poison. Clearly, Jesus knew nothing about germs. Nor did he know that faith doesn't make you immune to poison, either.

**a)** Carrier is partly alluding to the Long Ending of Mark. But that's probably a scribal interpolation.

**b)** In addition, Carrier is alluding to Mk 7:14-23 (par. Mt 15:10-20). Once again, is Carrier really that illiterate, or is he just playing to the galleries?

Jesus is discussing "defilement," not hygiene. "Defilement" is a cultic category. It refers to ritual impurity, not unsanitary conditions.

Moreover, Jesus is contrasting manmade purity codes (concocted by the Pharisees) with actual sin. Moral evil. Moral pollution, not physical pollution.

**xi)** Carrier makes tendentious claims about the healing miracles of Jesus, as well as post-biblical healing miracles. He says it's all psychosomatic.

Really? Raising Lazarus from the dead after three days in hot tomb is psychosomatic? Why doesn't Carrier visit the county morgue and test his theory on the cadavers.

Of course, Carrier would deny the historicity of that event, but that's different than classifying it as "psychosomatic."

He also disregards evidence to the contrary. For instance:

R. Gardner, **HEALING MIRACLES** (DLT 1987)

C. Keener, **MIRACLES** (Baker 2011)

B. Palmer, ed. **MEDICINE AND THE BIBLE** (Paternoster 1986)

M. Scott Peck, **GLIMPSES OF THE DEVIL** (Simon & Schuster 2005)

G. Twelftree, **JESUS THE MIRACLE WORKER** (IVP 1999)

## 9/11 was a hoax!

Now that I've got your attention with the provocative title...

**i)** Unbelievers typically assert that extraordinary events demand extraordinary evidence. That's a catchy phrase, but is it true?

I've discussed this in many occasions, but I'd like to take another whack at it.

**ii)** There's a sense in which the 9/11 attack was an extraordinary event. What's the evidence for the 9/11 attack? Mainly, eyewitness testimony and photography. Yet there's nothing extraordinary about cameras or eyewitnesses. That's extremely commonplace.

Moreover, if you determined to be skeptical, you could question both. The witnesses could be bribed. Or they could be CIA agents posing as civilians. The news footage could be CGI.

Although the 9/11 attack was the most widely viewed event in human history, that's deceptive. Except for observers on site, most of us only saw what a few cameras saw. The actual source of information is quite narrow. Millions of viewers using the same conduit.

**iii)** Now, an unbeliever might object that 9/11 isn't extraordinary in the relevant sense. That's not how unbelievers define "extraordinary" in reference to miracles. Perhaps not. But that raises the issue of ad hoc definitions, where their definition of an extraordinary event is custom-made to pick out miracles, and their definition of extraordinary evidence is custom-made to pick on miracles.

They begin with what they disbelieve, then they invent stimulative definitions and tendentious criteria to exclude it or disprove it.

**iv)** But here's another issue. What's more likely: that 9/11 would go unreported if it did happen, or that reporters would concoct 9/11 if it didn't happen?

Put another way, what kinds of events are most likely to be reported? Extraordinary events. The vast majority of events go unreported because they are so mundane. They happen every day. No one gives them a second thought. It's the extraordinary events that make people stand up and take notice. The more out of the ordinary, the more newsworthy.

If 9/11 happened, what are the odds that no one would report it? Aren't the odds of that practically nil?

Conversely, if 9/11 never happened, what are the odds that this nonevent would be reported? Now, that's not quite nil. Sometimes people make up stories. Mind you, that depends in part on how public it would be. The scale of the event. The number of observers in a position to deny the yarn.

Nevertheless, if 9/11 happened, there's an overwhelming presumption that it would be reported—whereas, if it didn't, there's an overwhelming presumption that there'd be no public record—since there'd be nothing to report in the first place.

Yet unbelievers routinely claim that there's a standing presumption against reported miracles. And it takes massive evidence to overcome that presumption.

But the more unlikely the event, the more likely it will be reported.

If, say, the Resurrection happened, we'd expect it to be reported. If, however, it never happened, there's no expectation that it would be reported.

Nonevents are rarely reported. How many people who visit cemeteries report seeing people rise from the grave? And this is despite the pop cultural zombie fad.

**v)** In addition, even when a nonevent is reported, that often has a basis in fact. Maybe it didn't happen the way it was reported. The event was misidentified or misinterpreted.

Take Marian apparitions. Suppose a pious Catholic says she saw the Virgin Mary appear in a window on a sunny day. She's not lying. And it's not purely a figment of her imagination.

It's an optical illusion. Lighting conditions generate an image that corresponds to traditional Marian iconography.

Is it really the Virgin Mary? No. But it's not a nonevent. There's an objective phenomenon that gave rise to this impression. Although she's projecting something that isn't there, there is something there that forms the basis of her projection.

Whether or not a reported miracle can be explained away depends on the concrete details. There's a naturalistic explanation for this particular example. That doesn't mean other cases invite the same reductive explanation.

## Atheist Clichés to Avoid

“Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence”. The problem with invoking this phrase to dismiss religious claims is that it implies that the claim in question has “ordinary” evidence going for it, but simply lacks “extraordinary” evidence. But that’s FAR too generous when it comes to most religious claims, which typically fail to meet even “ordinary” standards of evidence (and in many cases lack any evidence whatsoever beyond an unsupportable claim of divine revelation).

<https://deusxed.wordpress.com/2014/01/20/atheist-cliches-to-avoid-part-7/>

I disagree with where he takes this. He's an *atheist*, after all, so he will naturally take it in the wrong direction. But Vic Wang does draw attention to an amusing irony, for that statement, which goes back to Sagan, popularizing Hume, is a tacit admission that there's evidence for miracles. In the face of that evidence, the best an atheist can do is to up the ante. The statement is actually an unwitting concession to Christianity. A move to preemptively discount the evidence for miracles. But why would an atheist do that unless he was insecure? Afraid of having his bluff called? To dismiss the evidence in advance is a sign of weakness.

## Agency detection

Atheists dismiss reports of answered prayer and miracles as, at best, coincidence. Sometimes they invoke the law of large numbers.

But do atheists have any principled way to distinguish a coincidence from a noncoincidence? If they don't, then it's arbitrary for an atheist to automatically discount reports of answered prayer or miracles as sheer coincidence. Before proceeding, I'll quote two concrete examples:

Around the 15-17 min. mark, Licona gives an example:

It's from an atheist. Someone who is today an atheist. Someone who's an atheist today, but when this happened was a Christian:

One time my church desperately needed \$7641 in order to keep going. After an all-night prayer meeting my dad [a deacon] went to get the mail, and in it was a check for exactly \$7641.00—from somebody who didn't even know the church needed the money, but had heard one of the pastors speak a few years ago. My dad contacted the giver and she said that after she heard the pastor speak she felt God wanted her to put some cash in an annuity and give it to our church. The process took years and just days before she decided to close the account and send the accrued money to the church, and it happened to be the exact amount that was needed—right after an all-night prayer meeting.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IW9w6c2RWmA>

J. P. Moreland:

Now the same thing takes place in specific answers to prayer. To illustrate, early in my ministry, while attending a seminar in Southern California, I heard a presentation on how to pray in a more specific way.

Knowing that in a few weeks, I would be returning to Colorado to start my ministry at the Colorado School of Mines in Golden with Ray Womack, a fellow Campus Crusade worker, I wrote a prayer request in my prayer notebook — a prayer which was known only to me. I began to pray specifically that God would provide for the two of us a white house that had a white picket fence, a grassy front yard, a close proximity to the campus (specifically, within two or three miles), and a monthly payment that was no more than \$130.

I told the Lord that this request was a reasonable one on the grounds that (a) we wanted a place that provided a homey atmosphere for students, was accessible from campus and that we could afford, and (b) I was experimenting with specific prayer and wanted my faith to be strengthened.

I returned to the Golden area and looked for three days at several places to live. I found nothing in Golden and, in fact, I only found one apartment for \$135/month about 12 miles from campus. I told the manager that I would take it and she



informed me that a couple had looked at the place that morning and had until that afternoon to make a decision. If they didn't want it, then I could move in the next day.

I called late that afternoon and was informed that the couple took the apartment which was the last available one in the complex. I was back to square one. Now remember, not a single person knew that I had been praying for a white house.

That evening, Kaylon Carr (a Crusade friend) called me to ask if I still needed a place to stay. When I said yes, she informed me that earlier that day, she had been to Denver Seminary. While there, she saw a bulletin board on which a pastor in Golden was advertising a place to rent, hopefully to seminary students or Christian workers. Kaylon gave me his phone number, so I called and set up an appointment to meet the pastor at his place at nine the next morning. Well, as I drove up, I came to a white house with a white picket fence, a nice grassy front yard, right around two miles from campus, and he asked for \$110 per month rent. Needless to say, I took it, and Ray and I had a home that year in which to minister.

<http://www.trueu.org/Academics/LectureHall/A000000425.cfm>

**1.** An atheist might say it's more likely that these are tall tales. But he might resort to the last-ditch position that even if they happened, it's just a coincidence. But if *that's* a coincidence, what is *not* a coincidence? What's their

criterion to distinguish random from nonrandom events? If they can't say, then their skepticism is ad hoc.

**2.** Many atheists take the position that any naturalistic explanation, however implausible, is more plausible than any supernatural explanation. But a problem with that posture is that it begs the question. If you already know for a fact that we inhabit a world where supernatural events never happen (because there are no supernatural agents), then that makes sense. But what's your evidence that we inhabit a world where supernatural events never happen? You can only use that benchmark to discount reported miracles if all the available evidence counts against reported miracles. Yet reported miracles are *prima facie* evidence that we don't inhabit a world where supernatural events never happen. So the posture of the atheist is viciously circular. He's artificially privileging some kinds of evidence to preemptively disregard counterevidence. But his starting-point is arbitrary. Why not start with evidence to the contrary?

Moreover, evidence that we don't inhabit a world where supernatural events occur is, at most, negative evidence. But that's easily overcome by positive evidence to the contrary.

Talking to a lot of atheists is like talking to a potted plant. At best they're foils. Usually it's a waste of time. They're not listening.

But that raises the question, Is there a rigorous definition of coincidence? Are there established criteria in the philosophical/mathematical/statistical literature to distinguish a coincidence from a noncoincidence?

**3.** Christians attribute certain phenomena to supernatural agency. That's a type of personal agency. How do we detect personal agency? When is that inference warranted?

To take a comparison, suppose I leave a message with my portfolio manager to transfer a sum of money from one account to another. I didn't speak to him directly, and I didn't hear back from him directly. A day later, when I check my accounts, a financial transfer was made for the exact amount. Is that random? Just a coincidence? Does the law of large numbers explain that?

That's similar to certain kinds of answered prayer. Suppose we made a specific request. Maybe there's a deadline. Something happens to meet the request. It was beyond human ken to coordinate that outcome.

**4.** Christians routinely thank God for answering their prayers. There are situations in which what we take to be answered prayer could be something that was going to happen any way. If a Christian apologist is using answered prayer for its evidential value, then he should pick the strongest examples.

**5.** We have the intuitive sense that rolling sixes ten times in a row is a suspicious coincidence. Although it's possible, the more likely explanation is that the dice are loaded. If, however, the dice roll sixes a thousand times in a row, then we're convinced the dice are loaded.

Is this similar to the sorites paradox? There are situations in which we can't specify an exact threshold where something becomes too coincidental to be sheer coincidence, but we can all intuitively identify examples where that's the case. Put another way, while edge cases or borderline cases are

tricky, many situations fall well outside those narrow parameters.

**6.** It's striking how underdeveloped the concept of coincidence is, given how important it is in so many fields that we be able to detect the difference between coincidence and noncoincidence, and how this routinely crops up in debates over miracles, prayers, &c. If I understand him, Bill Dembski takes the position that coincidence is rigorously definable. And there are mathematically stringent criteria to rule in or rule out coincidence. You identify personal agency by eliminating chance.

By contrast, Timothy and Lydia McGrew reject that paradigm. They still think you can identify personal agency, but they operate with a different paradigm. For different sides of the argument:

William A. Dembski, "Design by Elimination vs. Design by Comparison," (Chapter 33 from **THE DESIGN REVOLUTION**)

\_\_\_\_\_, "Detecting Design by Eliminating Chance: A Response to Robin Collins."

Timothy McGrew, "Toward a Rational Reconstruction of Design Inferences," *Philosophia Christi*, 7/2 (2005), 253-98.

**7.** Here's how Lydia McGrew summarizes their position:

The short version of the answer is no, there is not one rigorous definition of notable or striking coincidence. Indeed, to a very large extent what appears to be a coincidence will depend upon one's background information. Take card games. If you don't know the

rules of a card game, you won't know what a royal flush is, so the fact that a person gets a royal flush three times in a row won't appear to be a coincidence. And indeed in a game where that arrangement of cards has no special meaning, it would be correct not to think of it as a weird or noteworthy coincidence.

This issue came up quite a lot when Tim and I were working with the Intelligent Design movement and trying to convince the ID folks to abandon William Dembski's error statistical model of design inferences and go with a comparative model instead. The point we made repeatedly is that a pattern is salient in relation to an hypothesis. An hypothesis that competes with chance, one might say. Hence, the repeated royal flush is salient and striking as a suspicious coincidence in relation to the hypothesis of cheating, because we know that the royal flush is advantageous according to the rules of the game.

Or take a lottery. If we learn that the person who won the lottery was an auto mechanic, this isn't something we deem to be a striking coincidence. The winner had to have some profession. But if we learn that the winner was the first cousin of the lottery official, that's a suspicious coincidence.

We should also note that there is an ambiguity here: The word "coincidence" can mean precisely the opposite of "striking or suspicious." It can mean what one would call *just* a coincidence--something that is *not* striking, that is trivial or unimportant. We might even say that it can mean two things that are precisely the opposite of one another. But I think the two meanings can be brought closer together if we imagine a case where something initially *appears* strange or

suspicious but we eventually decide that causally it really did happen by chance: The lottery official's cousin won the lottery fairly, so it was "just a coincidence."

**8.** So who's right? On the one hand, if someone rolls sixes a thousand times in a row, we're warranted in concluding that the dice are loaded without considering alternative explanations.

On the other hand, background information does figure in our assessment. We have expectations about how fair dice should behave based on our experience of the kind of world we inhabit. Dice are very limited objects. And they're designed to perform randomly.

In addition, a gambler has a financial motivation to cheat if he can get away with it. (Admittedly, rolling sixes a thousand times in a row is not an overly subtle way to beat the casino.) So there is an implicit frame of reference for assessing that outcome.

**9.** But whichever paradigm you prefer (Dembski or the McGrews), it provides a principled basis for agency detection. Contrast that with the village atheist who simply shrugs off any example—however specific, antecedently unlikely, and well-attested—of answered prayer, as a sheer luck.

## Skewed priorities

I will comment on this statement:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2015/10/29/william-craigs-response-to-my-objections-on-the-resurrection/#comment-2334901461>

Keith Parsons

Angra,

Like you, I have never really delved into the "evidence" for the resurrection very deeply and I am not terribly inclined to do so.

That's a remarkable admission. Parsons is a militant atheist with a very long paper trail attacking Christianity. He has debated W. L. Craig twice. He's a philosophy prof. with two earned doctorates. Yet he's never taken the time to really delve very deeply into the evidence for the Resurrection. But shouldn't that be one of the very first things he examines when assessing the case for Christianity?

Does this make us derelict in our epistemic duties?

More to the point, it makes him a monumental fool.

Are we, as Craig might suggest, refusing to look out of fear of what we might find, like those who refused to look through Galileo's telescope?

Having read lots of stuff by Parsons, I'd say his pride gets in the way. He's so pleased with himself. It's crucial to his self-esteem to feel intellectually superior to Christians. He tries very hard to impress others.

I can't speak for you, of course, but my rationale/excuse is this: You just don't have time to investigate everything in the depth that you would like, so you have no choice but to make judgments about the prima facie reasonableness of a claim and decide whether it is really worth a massive investment of time, effort, and energy. Jeez. really to do it right, I would have to dig out my old textbook of Koine Greek and learn it all over again.

That's true so far as it goes, but absurdly simplistic. In a risk assessment, you need to take two risk factors into account:

**Hazard:** the magnitude of potential loss

**Risk:** the likelihood that the loss will occur

A risk with high probability but low potential loss can be less risky than a risk with low probability but high potential loss.

Cf. "Risk Assessment," W. Kirch, ed., **ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PUBLIC HEALTH** (Springer 2008), 1:1261ff.

Suppose I'm stranded on a remote desert island. I could just do nothing and hope that I will be rescued. The chance of that happening is nearly nonexistent.

Or I could collect rocks and arrange them on the beach to spell out S.O.S. Likewise, I could gather and arrange kindling and branches for a beacon fire. That way, if a boat or plane comes into view, I have a way to signal them. The chances of that happening are very low, but it's better than being stuck on this island for the rest of my life.



Both require maintenance. Because the beach is unstable, I have to keep the rocks properly arranged. Keep sand off the rocks. Likewise, I have to keep the materials for the beacon fire dry. Or replace them if they get wet. Daily effort with dim prospects of success.

Consider the stakes. If atheism is true, Parsons has nothing to gain. He is doomed. So he has nothing to lose by making a "massive investment of time, effort, and energy" into the case for the Resurrection, even if (ex hypothesi) that turns out to be false. Conversely, if the Resurrection is true, then he has everything to lose by neglecting that.

I am empathetic with Christians who take a similar view of the "mythicist" arguments. I can understand that such a claim might reasonably strike them as too implausible to merit a close and careful look or a detailed rebuttal.

Those aren't symmetrical options (see above). Moreover, even liberal scholars like Bart Ehrman and James McGrath don't take mythicism seriously.

Further, there are just so many obvious points that strongly favor skepticism. Here are just a few of them:

- 1) The only witnesses of the resurrection event itself mentioned in the NT (only Matthew) were the Roman soldiers set to guard the tomb by Pilate, and we have no testimony from them.

Strictly speaking, no one saw the resurrection event itself. But if Jesus was dead for about 36 hours (from blood loss and asphyxiation), and people subsequently encountered him in the flesh, then, of necessity, he came back to life.

2) The only firsthand report of an encounter with the resurrected Jesus is Paul's, an event that appears to have been of a visionary nature (all Paul is reported in Acts to have experienced was a bright light and a voice) and which occurred some years after the supposed resurrection.

That's equivocal. A record can include firsthand reports even if the historian or biographer was not himself an eyewitness.

3) The list of other supposed eyewitnesses given by Paul in I Corinthians 15 is a bare list. We are given no information about what these people saw, the circumstances of their experiences (when and where did they occur?), their frame of mind, or their reliability as witnesses, corroborating evidence, etc. Consider the famous "500." Did Jesus appear to them on a stage or a hilltop so that they could clearly see him? Did each know Jesus well enough by sight that they could be sure that it was him? Did they get close enough for a good look? Were they in a state of emotional excitement, expecting to see something extraordinary? Paul says nothing about such crucial details.

But even if Parsons had an ancient record with that information, he'd dismiss it out of hand as a biased source (see below).

4) The Gospels, by contrast, have rich and detailed stories of encounters with the risen Christ. However, if we are going to appeal to scholarly consensus...

The appeal to scholarly consensus can be useful for the sake of argument. Even if we confine ourselves to scholars

consensus, then certain core facts are not in serious dispute.

That, however, doesn't mean scholarly consensus should be the standard of comparison. It comes down to the quality of the arguments.

...then the overwhelming consensus has long been that the Gospels (a) were written decades after the events, (b) were written by persons unknown, except for Luke, who admits that he was not an eyewitness, (c) were based on oral traditions (i.e. telling and re-telling), (d) contain unmistakable fictional elements, (e) have an apologetic ax to grind (i.e. the Gospel writers were clearly not disinterested reporters), and (f) have no independent corroborating accounts.

**i)** He simply ignores, through studied ignorance, moderate to conservative scholarship to the contrary.

**ii)** Consider (f). What qualifies as an "independent corroborating account"? In the nature of the case, any writer who corroborates the Resurrection will believe in the Resurrection. So Parsons' criterion is circular. If you corroborate the Resurrection, then you can't be "independent." You can only be independent if you deny it. Parsons has an unfalsifiable position.

Fact is, if someone was going to collect all the reports of the Resurrection by individuals closest to the event, that collection would coincide with the NT. And any "independent corroborating account" would be part of that collection.

5) If the apologetic argument is aimed at skeptics, and surely it is, then it must begin with the skeptic's priors

and not the apologists'. This is an obvious point that often seems ignored.

Actually, that's obviously false. What if the skeptic's priors are arbitrary? That's subject to challenge.

In other words, apologists don't get to choose their own burden of proof.

Both sides have a burden of proof. In philosophical analysis, moreover, a standard method of assessing the opposing position is to assume it's true for the sake of argument, then consider it on its own terms.

Skeptics have much latitude in how low they want to set their priors for the resurrection. If I want to put it at, say, .0000000001, why can I not?

Because you pulled that figure out of thin air. It has no philosophical merit.

What epistemic duty have I violated in doing so?

Conjuring up a bogus statistic is a good place to start (see above).

6) We now have copious knowledge about how extraordinary stories can get started and spread, despite the opposition of eyewitnesses. Soon after Darwin's death, evangelicals began to preach that Darwin had repented on his deathbed, repudiated his theory, and accepted Christ as his savior. This legend flourished for decades, finally being put into print by one "Lady Hope" who claimed to have interviewed Darwin shortly before his death. The Darwin children, who were present for their father's final illness and

death, roundly repudiated those claims, declaring them utterly false. Yet, the claims continued to proliferate.

**i)** Parsons is so gullible. The deathbed conversion of the notorious infidel is such a familiar trope that I, for one, always greet such claims with antecedent skepticism. It's a traditional genre unto itself. Parsons has to be very credulous to imagine that's a good example to illustrate his contention.

**ii)** That said, imminent death is an incentive to conversion. It's more likely to happen in that circumstance than when the individual is healthy and has years ahead of him.

**iii)** Moreover, he fails to show how that furnishes a detailed analogy to the Resurrection accounts.

7) In sum, these purported events happened a long, long time ago, under obscure circumstances...

Like the extinction of the dinosaurs?

...with NO contemporary accounts and no independent later accounts by unbiased persons.

**i)** Like the extinction of the dinosaurs?

**ii)** In addition, there's equivocation over the definition of "contemporary accounts." An account can be written years later by someone who was contemporaneous with the events. Likewise, an account may incorporate firsthand reports, even if the writer was not himself an observer. Consider history books and presidential biographies. Parsons is overlooking really obvious counterexamples.

The claimed events were of a miraculous nature and skeptics are fully within their epistemic rights to demand a very heavy burden of proof. It is just dead obvious that skepticism is reasonable.

Why do events of a miraculous nature demand a lopsided burden of proof? That involves a prejudgment about the kind of world we live in. If there's well-attested evidence for the occurrence of miracles, then shouldn't his a priori denial demand a very heavy burden of proof?

## God moves in mysterious ways

Here is a commonly cited example:

I was healed from cancer by God!  
Really? Does that mean that God will heal all others with cancer?  
Well... God works in mysterious ways.

A key characteristic of ad hoc rationalizations is that the "explanation" offered is only expected to apply to the one instance in question. For whatever reason, it is not applied any other time or place and is not offered as a general principle. Note in the above that God's "miraculous powers of healing" are not applied to all cancer sufferers, but only this one at this time and for reasons which are completely unknown.

In the above, the idea that not everyone will be healed by God contradicts the common belief that God loves everyone equally.

How could we tell when it is happening and when it is not? How could we differentiate between a system where God has acted in a "mysterious way" and one where the results are due to chance or some other cause?

[http://atheism.about.com/library/FAQs/skepticism/blfaq\\_fall\\_adhoc.htm](http://atheism.about.com/library/FAQs/skepticism/blfaq_fall_adhoc.htm)

**i)** I disagree with the setup. Many atheists, as well as some Christians, routinely recast all truth-claims in terms of evidence and counterevidence. No doubt that's appropriate

in cases where there *is* both prima facie evidence and prima facie counterevidence, but everything shouldn't be hoisted onto that that seesaw.

**ii)** For instance, we often believe something happened based on direct evidence that it happened. I believe certain things happened to me because that's a matter of personal experience. I don't put that on one side of the scales, put possible counterevidence on the other side of the scales, then see which way the scales tip. That's very artificial. I simply believe it happened because it happened to me, and, in the nature of the case, I have firsthand knowledge of things that happen to me.

Likewise, we believe lots of things based on what trusted people tell us. We don't ordinarily feel the need to counterbalance that belief by considering possible evidence to the contrary, then decide if one outweighs the other. The teeter-totter paradigm doesn't fit our general belief-forming system, or even the justification of beliefs.

**iii)** Why does God not healing somebody else equally deserving furnish *any* kind of evidence that God didn't heal me? What's the connection? If there's evidence of divine healing, why isn't the evidence in *itself* the only salient consideration?

Suppose, unbeknownst to me, cyberterrorists hack into the traffic light system to facilitate a bank heist. On the one hand it gives the getaway car an escape route. On the other hand, it blocks traffic on the same side of the street where the police station is located.

However, that has the fringe benefit drivers in my lane have solid green lights all the way home, while drivers in the opposing lane, and side streets, have solid red lights. In my



ignorance, I have no idea how to account for the disparity. Moreover, this is something *extraordinary*.

Yet that doesn't count against the indisputable fact that, for some inexplicable reason, the traffic lights favor everyone in my lane. They just do! It may cause me to investigate why that's the case. But it's not the phenomenon itself that's in question. That's not a reason to doubt that on this particular day, the traffic lights in my lane stayed green all the way home. And that's not a reason to doubt that it requires a special explanation.

**iv)** In addition, the objection presumes, without benefit of argument, if God heals people at all, we'd expect him to heal all equally deserving people. But is that a reasonable expectation? What's that based on? Just that it seems arbitrary for God to heal some, but not all, equally deserving people?

But it's not hard to come up with reasons why that might be so. Consider the alternative: suppose God healed everyone who prayed for healing, or everyone who was prayed for. Well, that would change the future, in the sense that the future would turn out very differently in that event than if God didn't heal everyone. Who lives and who dies, where they live and die, when they live and die, affects the future. If more people live longer, that has multiple ramifications.

So one reason God might not answer every prayer for healing is because that's inconsistent with the future he intends. For instance, some people die because other people didn't die. Take a terminal cancer patient who's miraculously healed. A year later, he kills a cyclist or pedestrian while driving under the influence.

It sounds swell to say God should heal everyone, but what is good for one person may be bad for another. Your healing may come at someone else's expense, down the line. Something you do today may unintentionally harm someone tomorrow.

On the other hand, one reason God might heal some people is to furnish evidence for his existence. He performs miracles often enough to maintain a periodic witness to his existence, but he refrains from performing miracles routinely because that would result in a very different future.

**v)** Incidentally, I, as a Calvinist, reject the premise that God loves everyone.

## Trauma memories

One way atheists routinely attack evidence for miracles is to claim that eyewitness testimony and memory are notoriously unreliable. In light that of that stock allegation, it's striking to read evidentiary appeals like this:

Witnesses report Roof sat with attendees of the prayer meeting for an hour before he turned his gun on them. Three men and six women were killed. Three people survived.

One woman, who said she was as cousin of the church's pastor, Sen. Rev. Clementa Pinckney, told NBC News late Wednesday night that the shooter reloaded five different times and told a survivor...

- See more

at: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/progressives-ecularhumanist/2015/06/charleston-church-shooting-was-about-race-not-religion/#sthash.iUutcQwC.dpuf>

Keep in mind that this was an extremely traumatic event. But haven't we been told that makes testimony less reliable? For instance:

People's memories for traumatic events are – like their memories for more mundane events – easily distorted. Importantly, memory distortion for traumatic events appears to follow a particular pattern: people tend to remember more trauma than they experienced, a phenomenon referred to as “memory amplification.”

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4337233/>

That presents a dilemma for atheists: they can't discount eyewitness testimony and memory in general without discounting the testimony of observers who witnessed the shooting.

Conversely, they can't vouch for the testimony of observers who witnessed the shooting without conceding that eyewitness testimony and memory can be trustworthy.

I think there are two reasons that atheists are so credulous in reference to this incident:

**i)** They want to be seen as champions of civil rights. Siding with blacks. Opposing racism.

**ii)** They want to establish that the crime was racially motivated rather than religiously motivated. The testimony of observers who survived the attack helps to establish that claim—especially initial reports, before we had additional incriminating information (e.g. Roof's "manifesto").

## God heals amputees!

Don't take my word for it. According to apostate atheist Hector Avalos, in "Can Science Prove that Prayer Works?" *Free Inquiry* 17 (1997):

Even if we saw an extraordinary healing occur (e.g., a severed leg grow back instantaneously), we would not be able to prove scientifically that it was a supernatural occurrence.

For most of my young and adolescent life, I was a faith healer in a Pentecostal tradition. I witnessed what I then thought were resurrections, spontaneous growth of short limbs, cures from cancer, and many other types of diseases.

So he's conceding that he saw the instantaneous regeneration of amputated limbs. (Notice that he uses "spontaneous" as a synonym for "instantaneously".) By his own admission, that's from firsthand observation.

He doesn't deny what he saw. "Who should I believe—me or my dying eyes!" Instead, he says that's still not scientific proof that it was a supernatural occurrence.

Now, Avalos is such a fanatical atheist that he might backpedal on his original, damaging admission. Again, though, how could he be mistaken? How could he see an amputated limb merely *appear* to instantaneously grow right before his eyes?

Notice that he's not talking about tricks by *other* faith-healers, but his own direct observation.



## Miraculous organ regeneration

Although Nabeel has yet to receive his hoped-for miracle, beginning around the 3 min. mark, he relates two other anecdotes involving other people which, if true, would be miraculous:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXWuRPVifw>

When atheists tauntingly ask, "Why doesn't God heal amputees," these would be examples of miraculous organ regeneration.

## Does God only heal certain types of disorders?

Atheists object that only certain kinds of healing miracles are reported.

**i)** In my experience, atheists are rarely conversant with the best literature documenting miracles, so most of them are too uninformed to generalize about the types of healing miracles.

**ii)** In addition, case-studies barely scratch the surface. Miracles are vastly underreported. The sample is infinitesimal.

**iii)** However, for discussion purposes, let's stipulate that God rarely if ever performs certain kinds of miracles. Is there an explanation for that? Let's consider two related hypothetical examples.

From what I've read, language acquisition is crucial to cognitive development and social formation. And there's a narrow window of opportunity for that to occur. If a child fails to acquire a language by a certain age, he will suffer severe cognitive impairment.

And I've read that prior to the development of sign language, people born deaf were liable to cognitive impairment for that very reason. They had a normal brain. But without a linguistic stimulus, their cognitive development was stunted. That's an irreversible and unrepeatable phase in developmental psychology. If you miss out, it can't be fixed.

Suppose God healed a teenager born deaf. A teenager from the 17C. Assuming that his lack of language acquisition left



him mentally impaired, restoring his hearing wouldn't restore his mind.

To take another example, from what I've read, the brain of autistic kids fails to develop certain neural pathways. Suppose God heals the brain of a 17-year-old-autistic. Even though he now has the brain of a normal 17-year-old boy, does that mean he now has the personality of a normal 17-year-old boy? Or did his defective brain fail to process information correctly, so that he's psychologically stunted? Did he miss key steps in his cognitive development?

If so, do we know what kind of person would pop out at the end of the miraculous healing? If he didn't develop the proper socialization, might he have a personality disorder? Might he turn out to be a psychopath or sociopath? Just restoring his brain doesn't automatically compensate for other deficits. And at that stage, the defective brain might suppress sociopathic behavior. Did the deficient brain structures that filtered out crucial information processing now filter out socially dangerous impulses? If you suddenly remove the screen, what emerges?

I'm not stating this for a fact. I don't claim to be an expert. My immediate point is that these are considerations which critics of miraculous healing overlook. Physical restoration doesn't entail psychological restoration. Psychological restoration may await heaven.

## Does God heal?

I'm going to respond to philosophical theologian concerning prayer and miraculous healing:

<https://stephenjgraham.wordpress.com/2014/01/27/does-god-heal/>

<https://stephenjgraham.wordpress.com/2014/03/18/divine-healing-my-charismatic-deconversion/>

**i)** I agree with him that there's lots of charlatanry and wishful thinking in the charismatic movement.

**ii)** I agree with him that his mother-in-law's experience doesn't rise to the level of apodictic proof.

That said:

**iii)** He seems to think that in order to credit a miracle, you must first rule out every alternative explanation. But surely that's not our general practice in assessing claims.

Take a missing person report. It's possible that they got lost in the woods and died. It's possible that they were murdered, and the killer concealed the remains. And it's possible that they were abducted by aliens.

But reasonable people wouldn't say that unless you can rule out an alien abduction, you can't say it's more likely that they went missing because they were murdered or got lost.

Why does he hold a miracle report to a standard where you must eliminate all other explanations before you are justified in crediting a miracle? He seems to think that

unless the evidence for a miracle is unquestionable, it would be unwarranted to credit the miracle.

But that's not an evidentiary standard we apply to other claims. In general, our explanations for a given event are *provisional* explanations. We allow for the possibility that that could be mistaken. But we don't make the possibility of error a condition for precluding that explanation, if that's what the evidence seems to indicate.

Why not say, "In this case the evidence points to a miracle. That's the best explanation, given the available evidence—although it's *possible* that there's a natural explanation."

Why does he give preference for a natural explanation unless you are able to absolutely exclude a natural explanation? Isn't he begging the question by presuming that supernatural events are less likely to be true than natural events?

**iv)** He says:

If healings were far more frequent...then we might have more reason to accept such healing instances as divine in origin.

I don't see how that follows. If healings were far more frequent, then it's easy to anticipate skeptics saying that just proves the placebo effect or spontaneous remission is more common than we suspected. Or that we live in the kind of universe where natural laws make that more frequent.

**v)** He doesn't furnish any evidence that people who suffer from chronic migraines randomly experience total

spontaneous remission. He doesn't furnish any evidence that chronic migraines are responsive to the placebo effect.

For all I know, that may be the case. But he just talks in abstract generalities. He doesn't furnish any specific evidence to that effect vis-a-vis migraines.

**vi)** Since his mother-in-law was routinely "in the emotionally charged atmosphere of a healing crusade or [charismatic] worship service," if the placebo effect is germane, why would that be a one-time experience for her? If, moreover, it was the placebo effect, then that would quickly wear off, but in her case, the cessation of migraines was permanent.

**vii)** I don't see that the lottery is a good analogy. Although any individual is statistically unlikely to win the lottery, it is set up so that someone is bound to win the lottery. The lottery is *designed* to produce occasional winners. So that's not just coincidental. Although you have to get luckily to win the lottery, it isn't *pure* luck.

By the same token, the lottery is designed so that most individuals will lose. That isn't just bad luck.

**viii)** Is "spontaneous remission" a naturalistic alternative to a miracle? Is that an identifiable mechanism? Or is that just what doctors say when they *don't* have a scientific explanation? Does "spontaneous remission" have any explanatory value. Does that actually explain anything? Or is that a euphemistic way of saying the phenomenon defies natural explanation?

**ix)** The fact that it happens every so often doesn't ipso facto make that natural rather than supernatural. After all, if miracle occur, they happen every so often. They don't

happen all the time. So infrequency is consistent with a miraculous explanation.

**x)** Likewise, he classifies improved eyesight as one of those ailments that's subject to spontaneous remission. But he supplies no evidence to corroborate his claim. What does he mean by "improved eyesight"? Does he simply mean someone's testimony that their eyesight got better?

I had an older relative who was diagnosed with macular degeneration. She prayed about it, and her eyesight improved. Her ophthalmologist was stumped.

Is macular degeneration is subject to spontaneous remission?

**xi)** He raises a stock objection which is typically raised by atheists:

Which brings me to a second powerful point against believing in regular divine healing: confirmation bias. I've discovered that many people who believe in divine healings can recite a few examples of a person recovering from some disease or disorder. However, what they tend to forget are the many – vastly superior number – of occasions where the person prayed for does NOT get healed. Believers naturally remember the times when prayer has been "successful" and, forgetting all the "unsuccessful" prayers, they seem to have a tendency to think that they therefore have some powerful evidence for the efficacy of healing prayers, when in fact it's a combination of coincidence and forgetfulness.

**a)** I might well agree with him that we lack evidence for *regular* divine healing.

**b)** He makes the textbook mistake of supposing that "unsuccessful" prayers cancel out the evidence for "successful" prayer. But that's very careless.

The identification of answered prayer isn't just statistical. It concerns specificity of need, timing, opportune convergence of causally independent events, &c. As Lydia McGrew recently put it:

There is almost never some crucial, falsifying test that an hypothesis fails and is then no longer rationally believable, particularly if there is a tough web made up of a variety of reasons for believing that proposition. For example, even if you inexplicably stopped hearing from a family member at some point and never heard from him again for the rest of your life and could never figure out what in the world happened, you could well have sufficient other evidence to believe that this family member did exist or had existed. (Old photographs, previous letters or e-mails from him, the memories of other people, etc.)

Some event can be evidence for an hypothesis, but the non-occurrence of the event may have virtually no value as evidence against it. For example, my receiving a phone call seemingly from my brother is good evidence for his existence, but my not receiving a phone call of that kind is virtually no evidence at all against his existence. This is why arguments from silence are often so weak.

In sum, he's overreacting to his charismatic background. He got his fingers burned, so now he's afraid of matches.

## BDD and amputees

A recent popular atheist trope is the taunt, "Why won't God heal amputees?" Two assumptions or motivations lie behind the taunt:

- i) Candidates for miracles are ambiguous. The test is an unambiguous example which rules out naturalistic explanations.
- ii) If God healed amputees, a spectacular miracle like that would be widely reported.

Since there's no evidence that amputees are healed, there's no evidence that a miracle-performing God exists. So goes the argument.

I've discussed this before, but now I'd like to approach it from a different angle. There's a mental health disorder known as body dysmorphic disorder (BDD). The patient feels alienated from a body part. They imagine their body part to be defective, despite the fact that it's perfectly healthy and normal.

Nowadays, some patients take the next step by undergoing surgical mutilation to fix the perceived problem. They have normal functional body parts amputated for cosmetic reasons.

Suppose God routinely healed amputees with BDD. That would encourage some people to test God by becoming amputees. That would be their fallback. If I change my mind, God will restore the body part!

Would that be a better kind of world or worse kind of world?  
Should we expect God to encourage that behavior?

Now a village atheist will complain that my explanation is special pleading. And I agree that if there was no good evidence for bona fide miracles, then attempts to explain away the nonoccurrence of miracles consistent with the existence of a miracle-performing God are special pleading. But to the contrary, it's atheists who obsess over one arbitrarily chosen example to be the test case who are guilty of special pleading. There's plenty of evidence for unambiguous miracles.



## "Why won't God heal amputees?"

An unbeliever has thrown out the following challenge to Christians. Ten argumentative questions.

Before dealing with the specifics, let's make a general observation. It's impossible to make the world better in some way without making the world worse in other ways. That principle is illustrated by science fiction scenarios in which a time-traveler tries to make the world a better place by changing the past. But every time he makes one thing better, he makes another thing worse. Every improvement carries a collateral downside. He can never strike a perfect balance, in which everything is better and nothing is worse.

Every life touches other lives. Every life has consequences. Humanly speaking, every life has unintended consequences.

Suppose medical science discovers the cure for cancer. In some respects, a world without cancer is a better world. However, some cured cancer patients will end up committing crimes. A world in which no one dies of cancer is a world with more rapes, murders, domestic violence, and so on. Certain evils will occur as a result of a cancer-free world that wouldn't occur if some patients died of cancer.

To take another example, suppose I have kids, and they have kids, and their kids have kids, continuing for several generations. Odds are, one of my decedents will accidentally kill someone in a traffic accident. Eliminating tragedies upstream can result in tragedies downstream. You're trading one set of tragedies for another set of tragedies.

Suppose ER physicians could see ahead. Suppose they could anticipate the long-term consequences of every life they save. Should they still save every life, even if—by saving the life of the patient, they effectively take the life of someone else who dies as a result of saving the patient's life?

Now you might say, What about a world with no evil? But that has tradeoffs, too. An unfallen world has no evils at the expense of eliminating the second-order goods you have in a redeemed world. So there's both loss and gain.

### 1. Why won't God heal amputees?

**i)** The question is ambiguous. Is the question Why won't God heal any amputee or every amputee?

**ii)** Craig Keener has cited documented cases of body-part regeneration. Cf. **MIRACLES: THE CREDIBILITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT ACCOUNTS**. So there's prima facie evidence that God heals *some* amputees (or the equivalent).

**iii)** God will heal every Christian amputee at the resurrection of the just.

**iv)** If God healed every amputee, would that be a better world? It would be better in some respects. However, a world in which God healed every amputee would also contain some evils not present in a world with amputees.

Some healed amputees will use their regenerated limbs to commit crime. Or some amputees will have kids or grandkids who commit crimes. Or accidentally kill someone. As long as they were amputees, their prospects for

marriage were dim. As healed amputees, they are now far more eligible. That can be a good thing or a bad thing depending on the long-term repercussions. Indeed, it can be a little of both.

2. Why are there so many starving people in our world?

That's a variant of the first question. So the answer is the same. A world in which no one starves is better in some respects, but worse in others. Suppose no Muslim ever starves to death. As a result, you have more suicide-bombers, honor-killings, female genital mutilation, &c.

In a world where no one starves to death, more people survive to outlive their loved ones, die in a nursing home, succumb to Alzheimer's. Every improvement is offset by something worse.

There is no best possible world. There are different combinations of good and evil. Likewise, there are goods that exclude other goods.

3. Why does God demand the death of so many innocent people in the Bible?

According to the Bible, everyone is a sinner.

4. Why does the Bible contain so much anti-scientific nonsense?

That question assumes what it needs to prove.

5. Why is God such a huge proponent of slavery in the Bible?

Once again, that question assumes what it needs to prove.

6. Why do bad things happen to good people?

**i)** In a fallen world with common grace, people are a combination of good and evil.

**ii)** Many people are “good” only so long as it doesn’t cost them anything. Likewise, many people would do evil if they could get away with it.

**iii)** In a godless universe, there’s no such thing as right and wrong, good and evil.

7. Why didn't any of Jesus' miracles in the Bible leave behind any evidence?

A number of his miracles *did* leave behind evidence-testimonial evidence.

8. How do we explain the fact that Jesus has never appeared to you?

**i)** If I said Jesus appeared to me, an unbeliever would dismiss that as a hallucination.

**ii)** I can learn far more about Jesus from the Bible than I can from a one-time apparition.

**iii)** My maternal grandfather never appeared to me. He died before I was born. I only know about him from relatives. So what? Should I doubt the existence of my maternal grandfather because I never met him? Should I discount what relatives told me about him?

**iv)** Jesus *will* appear to me (1 Jn 3:2).

9. Why would Jesus want you to eat his body and drink his blood?

As a Zwinglian, I deny the premise of the question.

10. Why do Christians get divorced at the same rate as non-Christians?

**i)** They don't. That's an urban legend.

**ii)** Anyway, that's a diversionary question. The divorce rate among Christians is irrelevant to Messianic prophecy, the Incarnation, Resurrection, &c.

## **Believe truth! Shun error!**

From a recent Facebook debate I had with an atheist:

Your objection is deeply confused. You act as if his credibility is relevant. It's not. Credibility is important in a witness. But he isn't asking anyone to simply take his word for what he says. His personal motives are beside the point. All that's germane is the quality of argumentation and evidence he presents in support of his position, and not whether you trust the purity of his motives.

You are still fixated on motives rather than evidence, which is a red herring. In addition, that objection cuts both ways. What about atheists who say that even if they directly witnessed an apparent miracle, they'd believe that was a hallucination before they accepted that as evidence for God?

What about atheists who say the God of the Bible is evil? Haven't they burned their bridges for believing in God regardless of the evidence?

And I've explained why your obsession with motivations is a decoy. For instance, the general purpose of formal public debates is not for one debater to convince the other, or vice versa. Rather, it's for the benefit of the audience. Both speakers are representatives of certain viewpoints. The point is to engage their arguments, not because the speakers are sincere, but because they are capable exponents of a position you wish to evaluate. I've seen and read many debates between Christians and atheists. I don't evaluate the performance by speculating on the sincerity of the atheist. I just consider the quality of his arguments.

BTW, from a secular standpoint, why does it even matter what motivates someone's beliefs? From your viewpoint, Christians and atheists share a common oblivion when they die. Nothing they believe makes any ultimate difference to them or the world at large. What difference does it make, from a secular standpoint, if a Christian's motives were pure or impure? The morgue doesn't differentiate between the corpses of Christians and atheists.

You said "I don't think there's anything that I could read in a book that could convince me that a God exists." That's unqualified skepticism.

Is that your position about history books in general? Sometimes we must sift between conflicting historical sources. Does that mean we should be skeptical about history in general? So you're skeptical about the existence of Lincoln, the Crusades, the Battle of Waterloo, &c.?

Most of what you believe is based on secondhand information. Why do you demand firsthand experience in the case of God's existence? Why do you have a different standard of comparison for the historical Charlemagne than the historical Jesus?

The Gospels are arguably 1C historical accounts of a 1C historical figure, based on eyewitness testimony. Are you suggesting the sources are comparable for the existence of Vishnu?

Is Vishnu empirical in the sense that Jesus is empirical? In addition, not all concepts of the divine have the same explanatory power.

So your claim is that reported miracles are inconsistent with observed reality. But that's circular inasmuch as observers

report miracles.

To disbelieve all reported miracles assumes extreme skepticism about testimonial evidence. Yet you admit that you rely on testimonial evidence.

You have yet to address the vicious circularity of your objection. What we know about reality is based mostly on observational claims. Well, that includes reported miracles.

Moreover, this isn't even a case of conflicting observational claims. The fact that some people don't observe miracles doesn't logically contradict other people observing miracles.

if your comment was alluding to the ascension of Elijah, he didn't ascend to heaven on a winged horse. Perhaps, though, you were alluding to Muhammad's night journey. If so, that depends on the credibility (or lack) thereof, of Islam—and Muslim sources generally.

It's funny how often atheists act as if non-Christian miracles are inconsistent with the Christian worldview. Atheists have a bad habit of parroting stock objections by other atheists.

Your question is confused. Verifying a miracle is a separate issue from the patient's conviction that Vishnu performed it. This goes back to your irrational fixation with motives.

You keep conflating two distinct issues. A verified miracle disproves naturalism.

Moreover, you retreat into hypotheticals about the Hindu woman. That becomes another diversion. Instead of addressing actual, well-attested case studies, you retreat into imaginary what-if scenarios. Why don't we begin with reality rather than counterfactuals?



For starters, you need to produce a Hindu with a verifiable miracle before we even address the question of divine attribution. You keep putting the horse before the cart. There's extensive documentation for Christian miracles. This is a problem with atheists who think that can just wing it by resorting to fact-free hypotheticals. There's a place for hypotheticals, but that's not a substitute for evidence.

"Let me ask you this: If you heard a Christian say she experienced something that would fit the definition of a miracle"

You have a bad habit of recasting the issue as a string of vague claims. But I'm not discussing highly ambiguous examples. You need to acquaint yourself with specific evidence for specific examples.

You play the typical game of stipulating an artificial test for miracles. But that reveals a complete misunderstanding of where the onus lies. Naturalism denies miracle in toto. That's a universal negative. All that's required to falsify a universal negative are a few verifiable counterexamples.

The logical and honest approach is to establish that a miracle has occurred. That rules out atheism at one stroke. That's the first step. Anthony evades that by shifting the discussion to hypothetical rival divine candidates. And he keeps harping on that as if it rules out verification of a miracle. A bait-n-switch.

Regarding the Vishnu hypothetical:

**i)** On the one hand, the Christian God might have occasion to answer the prayer of a Hindu. Suppose a linear ancestor of Ravi Zacharias is deathly ill. If he dies, Ravi will never

exist. The Christian God might answer a Hindu prayer so that further down the line, Ravi will be born.

**ii)** On the other hand, suppose, for discussion purposes only, that Vishnu is real. Suppose he sometimes answers Christian prayers. Christians are praying to the wrong god, but have no way of knowing that. Not only are they mistaken, but they're in no position to detect and correct their mistake.

Is that thought-experiment supposed to be a defeater for Christianity?

Let's consider another thought-experiment: suppose the devil plants fossils to make people go to hell by losing their faith in Scripture. Atheists mistakenly believe in naturalistic evolution because the devil planted false evidence. Is that hypothetical a defeater for atheism? Can Magnabosco disprove the thought-experiment?

Another basic problem with your tactic is that it cuts both ways. If he's going to cast the issue in terms of case-by-case elimination of rival gods, how does he, as an atheist, propose to dispatch the "330 million" gods of Hinduism, as well as other theisms, polytheisms, pantheisms, and panentheisms?

In my experience, many atheists act as if the worst consequence is to mistakenly believe Christianity. But why is that worse than mistakenly refusing to believe in Christianity or mistakenly believing in atheism?

Suppose, for argument's sake, people mistakenly believe in Christianity. What do they have to lose? If atheism is true, when they die they never find out they were wrong because they instantly pass into oblivion. And when atheists die,

they never find out that they were right, because they instantly pass into oblivion.

By contrast, suppose people mistakenly refuse to believe in Christianity. What do they have to lose? Everything!

As William James put it, in his classic essay ("The Will to Believe"):

ONE more point, small but important, and our preliminaries are done. There are two ways of looking at our duty in the matter of opinion,--ways entirely different, and yet ways about whose difference the theory of knowledge seems hitherto to have shown very little concern. We must know the truth; and we must avoid error,- -these are our first and great commandments as would-be knowers; but they are not two ways of stating an identical commandment, they are two separable laws. Although it may indeed happen that when we believe the truth A, we escape as an incidental consequence from believing the falsehood B, it hardly ever happens that by merely disbelieving B we necessarily believe A. We may in escaping B fall into believing other falsehoods, C or D, just as bad as B; or we may escape B by not believing anything at all, not even A. Believe truth! Shun error!-these, we see, are two materially different laws; and by choosing between them we may end by coloring differently our whole intellectual life. We may regard the chase for truth as paramount, and the avoidance of error as secondary; or we may, on the other hand, treat the avoidance of error as more imperative, and let truth take its chance. Clifford, in the instructive passage which I have quoted, exhorts us to the latter course. Believe nothing, he tells us, keep your mind in suspense

forever, rather than by closing it on insufficient evidence incur the awful risk of believing lies. You, on the other hand, may think that the risk of being in error is a very small matter when compared with the blessings of real knowledge, and be ready to be duped many times in your investigation rather than postpone indefinitely the chance of guessing true. I myself find it impossible to go with Clifford.

## Starting-points in apologetics

**1.** What's the best starting-point in Christian apologetics? Is there one best starting-point?

For sometime now, a popular paradigm has been to take the resurrection of Jesus as the starting-point. Increasingly, this is paired with the claim that inerrancy is expendable.

**2.** The choice of starting points depends in part on the forum and who makes the first move. If, say, you're writing a book-length treatment on "The case for Christianity," then you control the presentation, and you can structure the argument according to what you deem to be the most logical sequence. Here's my basic approach:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2017/12/making-case-for-christianity.html>

**3.** But in the context of personal evangelism, with its spontaneous give-and-take, you don't have that degree of control. I agree that inerrancy is not the best opening gambit in arguing for Christianity. But what if the seeker or unbeliever initiates the discussion? What if they raise questions regarding the veracity of Scripture?

There's nothing necessarily wrong with attempting to redirect the discussion away from inerrancy. One reason an unbeliever may be an unbeliever is because he doesn't know the right questions to ask. So it can be valid countermove for a Christian apologist to reframe the discussion.

**4.** There are different kinds of unbelievers. Some unbelievers have a few intellectual impediments, and if you clear those up, they will be satisfied. That will create an opening for the Gospel.

If you duck their questions, they will view that as an intellectual evasion. They will take that to be a tacit admission that you lack confidence in the Bible. If you duck tough questions, that makes a bad impression. That Christianity can't stand up to rigorous scrutiny. It has no answers for tough questions.

**5.** There are other unbelievers who aren't listening. For every objection you answer, they will move the goal post.

So one preliminary question you might ask is: "What are your *real* reasons? If no matter how many objections I field, that doesn't make a dent, then this is a waste of time".

You could follow up by asking what are their best objections? That's one way to narrow it down.

**6.** I wouldn't make the Resurrection the starting-point. For one thing, that's a rather complicated argument.

I think it's more efficient to begin at the other end of the spectrum by debunking naturalism. Theoretically, there are intermediate options between naturalism and Christianity, but once you dispose of naturalism, the intermediate options are easy to dispose of, and many unbelievers don't take the intermediate options seriously.

I'd also focus on the argument from miracles. There's a wealth of well-documented cases. I think that's more accessible than argument for the Resurrection.



## The God of the gaps narrative

An extremely popular argument in atheism is the God of the gaps narrative. According to the narrative, prescientific people used to attribute every event, or at least every mysterious event, to supernatural agency. Indeed, that's a primary source for religious belief in the first place. Ancient people were superstitious because they were ignorant of how nature works. So they postulated supernatural agency as a stopgap.

But due to the stately march of science, we are steadily filling in the gaps. Indeed, the very success of modern science and methodological atheism go to show that invoking supernatural agency never had any genuine explanatory power. Thanks to modern science, we can propose naturalistic alternative explanations. Indeed, religious sophisticates concede scientific explanations for most events. And even when we can't currently offer a naturalistic alternative explanation, the success of secular science creates a tremendous presumption in favor of naturalistic explanations. As Richard Feynman put it,

God was invented to explain mystery. God is always invented to explain those things that you do not understand. Now, when you finally discover how something works, you get some laws which you're taking away from God; you don't need him anymore. But you need him for the other mysteries. So therefore you leave him to create the universe because we haven't figured that out yet; you need him for understanding those things which you don't believe the laws will explain, such as consciousness, or why you only live to a certain length of time -- life and death --



stuff like that. God is always associated with those things that you do not understand. Therefore I don't think that the laws can be considered to be like God because they have been figured out. P. C. W. Davies & J. Brown, eds. **SUPERSTRINGS: A THEORY OF EVERYTHING** (Cambridge, 1993), 208-209.

**i)** The claim is a half-truth. For instance, paganism often personifies natural forces. Likewise, paganism may treat mental illness as the result of one person hexing another.

**ii)** It's also true that some Biblical miracles might employ natural mechanisms. For instance, Ananias and Sapphira might have died from a brain aneurism or stroke or heart attack or pulmonary embolism. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah might have been a natural disaster. The Crucifixion darkness might have had a natural cause. In cases like that, we'd be dealing with a coincidence miracle: a miracle of timing rather than a miracle of nature.

**iii)** There are, however, many Biblical miracles that resist scientific explanation, viz. regenerating the severed ear of Malchus, replicating fish, raising Lazarus from the dead, fireproofing humans (Dan 3), contact with a skeleton reviving the dead (2 Kgs 13:21), the metamorphosis of a stick into a snake and vice versa, walking on water, virgin birth.

For instance, even if it's scientifically possible to walk on water, that wasn't scientifically feasible back in the 1C. The technology didn't exist.

**iv)** In many cases, the God of the gaps narrative has the situation exactly backwards. The progress of science has

made these miracles even less, or ever less naturally explicable rather than more naturally explicable. Take the virgin birth. About the only thing ancient people were in a position to observe was the normal correlation between sexual intercourse and pregnancy. They had no deeper understanding of the cause and effect. By contrast, we have a detailed scientific understanding of sexual reproduction. In principle, an ancient skeptic might appeal to an unknown law to explain away the virgin birth, but we now know that's naturally impossible.

**v)** Apropos (iv), if the God of the gaps narrative were generally true, then we'd find secular scientists offering naturalistic explanations for Biblical miracles. There is the occasional attempt to explain a Biblical miracle scientifically, viz. the ten plagues, Star of Bethlehem, Crucifixion darkness.

However, many Biblical miracles defy naturalistic explanations. When is the last time you read a secular scientist like Carl Sagan, Isaac Asimov, Richard Dawkins, Jerry Coyne, Sean Carroll, Lawrence Krauss, Victor Stenger, Stephen Hawking, PZ Myers, Steven Weinberg, or Neil deGrasse Tyson present alternative naturalistic explanations for all the miracles of Scripture? If the God of the gaps narrative is true, then they should be able to posit natural mechanisms to account for them. But what they do instead is to deny that these event ever took place.

For instance, they don't say, "Yes, Jesus was dead for about 48 hours, but here's a natural process to explain the reversal of his condition". They don't say, "Yes, Jesus was restored to life after 48 hours, but not because God raised him from the dead. Here's how it really happened!"

What they do is not to explain the event naturalistically, but deny the reported event and propose a different event to account for the "legend", viz. the body was stolen; Jesus fainted on the cross, then revived in the tomb; the disciples went to the wrong tomb, &c.

In general, they dismiss Biblical miracles as pious fiction. Yet that's the polar opposite of their God of the gaps narrative. To be consistent with the narrative, they should grant the historicity of the Biblical events, but then explain them naturalistically. It should be a question, not regarding the occurrence of the event, but the interpretation of the event.

The upshot is that "skeptics" don't really believe the God of the gaps narrative. In practice, their response to Biblical miracles is diametrically at odds with that narrative. They don't think science has any explanatory power to account for most of these events.

## Where is God?

I recently did two posts explaining how special providence is consistent with the apparent randomness of the distribution pattern. Here's one that links to the other post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2016/03/luck-of-draw.html>

**i)** However, an unbeliever might raise the following objection: even if special providence is consistent with apparent randomness, that's no reason to believe in special providence. Their abstract mutual consistency isn't evidence for special providence. Indeed, that's is just a face-saving distinction, for even if God did not exist, that would be consistent with apparent randomness. That's equally consonant with God's existence or nonexistence alike.

Put another way, to say it's consistent fails to give a reason for apparent randomness. Why would God make the pattern so elusive? What would motivate God to be so inevident? For every apparent answer to prayer, there are so many unanswered prayers. For every divine judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, there's countless cases of divine inaction. For every Ananias and Sapphira dropping dead, you have every so many wrongdoers who prosper.

To use my own example, given the gambler, he has a reason to conceal his telepathy, but what makes that a given? How is that analogous to God?

**ii)** To that I'd say two things: suppose God routinely answered prayer. Suppose immediate retribution was the norm.

Crooks don't ordinarily commit a crime in full view of the police. They wait until the coast is clear. Likewise, smart crooks evade security cameras. They may wear a mask to disguise their identity.

By the same token, you have people who'd commit atrocities if they thought they could get away with it. They have no conscience. The only thing that deters them is fear of reprisal.

Suppose you have a scrawny high school student who's bullied by a larger boy. A football player sees that, and takes the scrawny kid under his wing. He warns the bully to leave the kid alone. The kid is now under his protection. The football player is bigger, tougher, stronger than the bully, so the bully fears the football player. Not somebody he wants to tangle with.

Problem is, that only deters him from picking on the scrawny student when he's in the company of the football player. But when he's by himself, he once again becomes an easy target. And the bully threatens him (or his relatives) with dire bodily harm if he reports him to the football player.

If special providence was more consistent, many people would be more God-fearing, but for the wrong reason. They'd *behave* better, but they wouldn't *be* better. Outer conformity absent inner conviction. The moment they thought they could do wrong with impunity, they'd instantly revert.

**iii)** In addition, the question of why God doesn't make himself more evident views the issue through the wrong end of the telescope. For the real issue is qualitative, not quantitative. Atheism is a universal negative. If atheism is

true, then there can be no clear instances of evidence for God's existence whatsoever.

We can wonder why God doesn't intervene with greater frequency, but that's irrelevant to the case for God's existence so long as there is some unambiguous evidence for his existence. Even if there was scant evidence for his existence, so long as that was unmistakable, a modicum of evidence is sufficient to disprove a universal negative.

My argument takes for granted that there's at least some clear evidence for his existence. And that's a very low threshold to meet. Indeed, that's a very easy threshold to meet.

## Scoring the Moore/McGrew debate on miracles

**\*\*UPDATE\*\***

With permission, I'm posting Dr. Timothy McGrew's response to my evaluation:

Yes, I meant the "net" evidence -- allowing that there may be some evidence against a proposition P, but if there is a greater weight of evidence in favor of it, then that positive evidence overbalances the negative.

I would count moral experience as very strong, possibly decisive, evidence against atheistic naturalism. The only reservation I would have about your stronger statement is that it is not completely clear to me that atheistic moral Platonism could be ruled out. But again, as J. L. Mackie observes, moral facts in a godless universe would be very queer facts indeed.

Regarding 3, I took that stance since (a) a large proportion of the people present would not have claimed to experience a miracle and (b) I never have (to my knowledge).

I think your criticism 4 shows a misunderstanding of how I'm using the filter. It doesn't "preemptively exclude" things that don't pass through it, that don't, as I elsewhere phrased it, "make the first cut." Rather, it suggests that those are not promising places to make a first inquiry. Later, they may come back into focus because of their connection with other kinds of evidence, probably because they are connected to the resurrection. I did make that point in passing later in the discussion.

On 5, there are religious environments where the religion is not established but rather newly fledged. Christianity and Mormonism are the only two examples

I am aware of (with the latter clearly derivative) of large world religions founded on miracle claims from the outset.

On point 6, without denying that such things might happen simply to meet an individual need, I'm very cautious, partly because I believe (rightly or wrongly) that I've seen some people fool themselves about private miracles, partly because I am mindful of **Luke 4:25-26**.

Timothy McGrew and Zachary Moore recently debated the question: "Could it ever be rational to believe in miracles?":

<http://livestream.com/accounts/12497542/events/4663424/videos/109068111>

In this post I'm going to summarize and score their performance. As a rule I don't watch philosophical/theological debates. It's an inefficient way to present and process information on complex issues. And it's more cumbersome when I have to take notes.

I've seen the one debate once through, and I've repeatedly listened to particular statements. It's possible that I missed a key point.

This was a three hour debate with opening statements, rebuttals, cross-examinations, Q&A (from the audience), and closing statements. There are two ways I could summarize the debate. I could offer a running summary of what was said in sequential order. That, however, would result in a very disjointed summary. In the course of the debate, Moore and McGrew stated their positions, revisited



the same issues, introducing explanations, clarifications, and qualifications to their initial statements.

It would be very choppy and repetitious to offer a chronological summary. The order would be disordered.

In the interests of coherence, I will reorganize the material to group together statements of the same kind. My summary will combine different statements on the same subject to give a compact, qualified statement of their respective positions. I will sometimes paraphrase what they said, but I will frequently use their own words. Anyone can watch the original debate to compare my summary with the verbatim proceedings.

The formal question to be debated determines the burden of proof. Winning or losing depends on how well the respective debaters discharge their burden of proof in reference to the question under review. There may be many interesting or important ancillary questions to be pursued, but a responsible debate performance will stick to the precise question at issue and resist the temptation to stray from that path.

## I. SUMMARY OF MCGREW'S POSITION

### **1. Defining terms:**

**i)** "Miracle": an event that would not have happened if the natural world was left to itself, as opposed to outside agency (i.e. divine intervention).

**ii)** Natural order: the interaction of physical agencies, as well as the actions and interactions of agents (humans,

animals) with abilities much like ours.

**iii) "Rational":**

a) Follow the evidence wherever it leads

b) Seek available evidence

c) Have reasonable rules of evidence

d) A high cost of getting it wrong

**iv) "Could":** irrational to disbelieve in miracles no matter how much evidence there is in their support.

**2.** Hume did not regard this as irrational because he held there was always at least as much or more evidence for the unbroken laws of nature. Our confidence in natural laws is as certain as any empirical belief can be, based on extensive, invariable experience. That's the strongest possible evidence

Unlike testimonial evidence, the laws of nature are unfailingly true. At best, testimonial evidence for miracles can only equal, and never exceed, the evidence for natural laws. In practice, evidence for miracles is always weaker than evidence for natural laws.

However, skepticism regarding testimonial evidence for miracles boomerangs on Hume, since the evidence for natural laws is, itself, dependent on testimonial evidence. To object to miracles on scientific grounds is self-defeating, for that undercuts science no less than miracles.

**3.** Scientific probability is based on what nature does when left to itself. When nature functions as a closed system or

isolated system, when there is no outside intervention. That's an implicit rider on scientific probabilities.

For example, a rock will normally roll downhill. If you see a rock rolling uphill, that's evidence of intervention from an external agent.

Outside intervention changes the way nature behaves. So the probability of miracles depends on whether we have good reasons to believe the system was not left to itself in that instance.

**4.** The scientific method is like a metal detector: very good at what it was designed to uncover, but the fact that a metal detector can't find a lost contact lens does nothing to prejudge the existence of the contact lens.

**5.** The regular course of nature is a necessary backdrop for the recognition of miracles.

Although McGrew didn't explicitly say so, the implication is that natural laws, far from being incompatible with miracles, are a prerequisite for miracles. Miracles require that point of contrast to stand out as divine signs.

**6.** Due to the multiplicity of reported miracles, we need a filter (rules of evidence) to isolate and identify the best candidates:

**i)** Distant in time. If the first report of the alleged event isn't at or near the time of the event, its credibility is diminished.

Belated reports are hard to check up on if the reporter can't contact a witness on the ground.

**ii)** Distant in space. If the reporter of the alleged event wasn't at or near the place where it reputedly occurred, its credibility is diminished.

Was the reporter close up to the event in time and space, either directly or via access to eyewitness testimony?

**iii)** Statistical noise. Events that are consistent with either a natural or supernatural explanation.

**iv)** Trivial events. Allegedly weird events that serve no rational purpose.

**v)** Self-serving events. Does the reporter have something to gain (e.g. Joseph Smith)?

**vi)** Events that confirm a preexisting belief system. Adherents are predisposed to believe it. They aren't motivated to verify it even if it never happened.

By contrast, testimony to the Resurrection took place in the teeth of the Judeo-Roman establishment.

If a reported miracle makes the first cut, it graduates to the next criterion. If it fails at any stage along the way, it merits no further consideration. That's where your preliminary investigation ends.

**7.** Assuming a reported miracle survives (6), it must meet additional criteria:

**i)** A public event. Multiple witnesses.

**ii)** An observable event.

To function as a divine sign, it must be observable.

**iii)** An early record (e.g. memorial) of the event.

**iv)** Distinguish optimal eyewitness testimony from unreliable eyewitness testimony.

**8.** These are not sectarian criteria, but generic, common sense criteria.

**9.** McGrew's filter screens out most reported miracles. Screens out all ecclesiastical miracles, and many or most Biblical miracles. Indeed, McGrew said only about 5-6 candidates survive.

That's not a problem since, at this stage of the argument, the objective is not to determine the prevalence of miracles, but to determine whether *any* miracles occur. To achieve that modest aim, a fine-mesh filter is adequate.

**10.** Although he didn't flesh it out, at one point in the debate he suggested that once you establish certain anchor miracles (my term), you can use that frame of reference to go back and render other reported miracles more credible, even if they were caught in the filter.

**11.** Given the multiplicity of reported miracles, the question is where to start. The purpose of the filter is to narrow down the search parameters to manageable proportions. What reported miracles are good candidates to establish whether that *kind* of event ever takes place? What reported miracles furnish a *good starting-point* in your investigation? That's the purpose of the filter.

The filter intentionally eliminates many candidates that may indeed be bona fide miracles. The purpose of the filter is to

establish a lower threshold, not an upper threshold. (That's my interpretation of McGrew's position.)

**12.** To function as divine signs, miracles must be rare.

By the same token, it is reasonable to demand greater evidence for reported miracles than ordinary events.

**13.** According to Scripture, God hasn't salted miracles across history, waiting to be discovered. Rather, they cluster around three different periods in time and place: the Mosaic era, the ministry of Elijah and Elisha, the ministry of Christ and the Apostles.

**14.** In assigning background probabilities, we must use the same reference class rather than mixing reference classes. To say the Resurrection has low prior probability due to the base rate for dead men coming back to life is confused. In that case, the base rate has reference to what happens when nature is left to operate on its own. But the Resurrection is predicated on outside intervention.

You can calculate the trajectory of a cannon ball based on natural laws. You can't project the trajectory of a human agent based on natural laws. As a personal agent, where he goes isn't dictated by natural laws.

**15.** It's a methodological error (my phrase) to stipulate a rule of evidence that walls you off from reality. If you were wrong, you will never discover it because you refuse to accept a certain kind of truth even if it really is true. That puts you out of reach of evidence. You block it out by definition. In the words of William James, a rule of thinking that guarantees we won't wind up in certain places.

16. In his opening statement, Moore ran through several kinds of reported miracles. However, none of these constitutes a counterexample to McGrew's position because his filter screens out Moore's examples. They just aren't germane to McGrew's position.

Likewise, McGrew allows for the possibility of demonic miracles.

**17.** In answer to a question from the audience, McGrew said it's not incumbent on Christians to explain how supernatural agents can interact with the natural order. That's not an issue unique to miracles. As a general philosophical issue, causation at a direct level is puzzling. Eventually, any causal explanation will bottom out where one thing *just does* cause another with no further level in-between them. But because some things apparently *do* cause other things, and because that has explanatory value, we grant that assumption. It allows us to account for why some things happen.

## II. SUMMARY OF MOORE'S POSITION

**1.** Different religions report the same kinds of miracles. Moore attempted to draw parallels between Jacob's ladder and Muhammad's midnight journey (on a winged horse) to Jerusalem, a eucharistic miracle involving a skeptical 8C Brazilian monk compared to a Hindu miracle about Ganeshi, Balaam's donkey compared to a Hindu miracle about a water buffalo reciting the Gita, a Jewish miracle (Honi the circle-drawer), Hanukkah, resurrection miracles attributed to St. Nicholas, Lourdes, and Fatima (the "miracle of the sun")—witnessed by thousands, and transubstantiation.

**2.** Every new religion makes miracle claims.

- 3.** McGrew's filter is an ad hoc filter.
- 4.** Roman Catholicism has its own filter. Which one is right?
- 5.** There is no objective standard of comparison to distinguish credible miracle reports from incredible miracle reports. No positive control. Nothing like the one kilogram platinum ingot that's the base unit of mass for the international metric system.
- 6.** Reported miracles suffer from a type 1 error: too many false positives. The error rate is overwhelming.
- 7.** Reported miracles suffer from a type 2 error: too many (undetectable) false negatives.
- 8.** The background probability for miracles, even assuming God exists, is vanishingly low.
- 9.** How, in principle, could we even detect supernatural agency? That's inaccessible to sensory perception.
- 10.** A cumulative case strategy hits a wall. Multiple lines of evidence require you to evaluate each piece of evidence separately. That successively lowers the overall probability because you have more things to independently prove.
- 11.** He accused McGrew of committing the post hoc fallacy and/or sharpshooter fallacy. Here's a definition:

An analysis of outcomes out of context that can give the illusion of causation rather than attributing the outcomes to chance. The Texas sharpshooter fallacy fails to take randomness into account when determining cause and effect, instead emphasizing how outcomes are similar rather than how they are different.



<http://www.investopedia.com/terms/t/texas-sharpshooter-fallacy.asp>

### III. ASSESSMENT OF MCGREW'S POSITION

Needless to say, I'm far more sympathetic to McGrew's position than Moore's. It was that way going in, and that way coming out. To be won over by Moore's position was never a live option. For one reason, I have my own considered position on miracles.

It's very praiseworthy that McGrew is bringing his expertise to the general public on this all-important topic. That's beneficial to believers and unbelievers alike.

That said, I have some reservations about a few things McGrew said. Of course, given the constraints of the debate format, he had to keep many things in reserve.

**1.** "Following the evidence wherever it leads" is a good rule of thumb, but I don't think that's absolute. There are times when it's rational to believe something despite evidence to the contrary. For instance, there may be conflicting evidence. Perhaps McGrew's statement is shorthand for the "preponderance of evidence" or something like that.

**2.** In addition, I rule out atheism in advance. If a position subverts moral realism, subverts human value, and/or subverts human reason, then I don't take that seriously. My investigation would be confined to finding out if the position in question has those catastrophic consequences. If so, I look no further in that direction.

It's like que sera sera fatalism. Suppose someone hexes me. Tells me I will die a horrible death before the age of 30.

Well, that will either happen or not. If I'm doomed, there's nothing I can do about it, so there'd be no point proving I'm doomed. There'd no point writing a philosophical defense of fatalism. Believe it or not, if fatalism is true, it makes no difference what I think or do or refrain from doing about it. So that's a waste of intellectual energy. There might be some value in disproving fatalism, because that would make a difference—if, indeed, fatalism is false.

Same thing with comparing atheism to Christian theism. These aren't symmetrical alternatives. Not even close.

**3.** The debate was conducted as if everyone's source of information about miracles is secondhand information. The only evidence for miracles is testimonial evidence.

Certainly that covers a major subset. But in discussing the rationality of belief in miracles, you have many people who say a miracle happened to them, or happened in their presence. We need to distinguish between what's rational to believe in the case of firsthand experience and secondhand information.

For instance, suppose I have a dream. At the time it seems like an ordinary dream. But then it comes true. The dream was very specific. It's highly unlikely that it was just a coincidence. In that case, the dreamer is warranted in believing his dream was a premonition.

What if he tells his best friend about the dream? Well, that depends. If he tells his best friend about a funny dream he had last night, then a day later, both of them witness it

come true, then I'd say the dream has the same evidential value for the second party (if the dreamer gave his friend a detailed description).

What if he tells his friend after the fact, or his friend isn't there to witness the dream come true. In that case, the friend might be justified in believing the dream, but on a weaker basis. By the same token, he might be justified in withholding judgment. It didn't happen to him, and it wasn't a veridical dream for him.

**4.** There's potential tension between McGrew's filter and his objection to methodological atheism. He faults atheists for discounting certain kinds of evidence or certain kinds of truths in advance, yet his own filter preemptively excludes reported miracles which don't meet the criteria, even though—by his own admission—that may screen out many bona fide miracles.

Likewise, for reasons I've stated on other occasions, I don't think reported miracles have a higher burden of proof. But I won't repeat myself here.

Perhaps, though, he'd just say the point of the filter is to establish a foothold for miracles. It's intended to eliminate reasonable doubt by its focus on some index miracles (my term).

**5.** One of his criteria seems to be in tension with his statement that if there were any real miracles, we'd expect them to occur, or occur with greater frequency, in a religious environment. That's where we'd expect them to happen if they happen at all. Yet his filter screens out reported miracles that confirm established opinions.

I'd add that this particular criterion of his filter is quite similar to the notorious dissimilarity criterion in Gospel criticism.

**6.** I agree with McGrew that when a miracle functions as a general sign, it must be evident. But in principle, miracles can function as signs for individuals. We might distinguish between a public miracle to attest the Christian faith, and a private miracle to give an individual guidance or encouragement.

Likewise, verification is not the only function of miracles: they can simply meet a personal need. Verification might be a fringe benefit.

**7.** We might compare veridical/inveridical miracles to veridical/inveridical NDEs. The existence of veridical NDEs will establish that this *kind* of event occurs.

If that can be established, then it raises the probability that some inveridical NDEs are true. After all, veridicality isn't what makes it true. Rather, veridicality furnishes independent evidence. But veridicality depends on a particular setting, particular circumstances, which are incidental features of NDEs. It's rare that NDEs would take place in that setting. So the mere fact that most NDEs are inveridical isn't prejudicial to the reality of the experience.

And it's subject to the same degrees of certainty or uncertain as my example regarding premonitory dreams.

#### **IV. ASSESSMENT OF MOORE'S POSITION.**

**1.** His position reminds me of the celebrated debate between Clifford and James. Is the priority to believe fewer

errors at the risk of believing fewer truths, or to believe more truths at the risk of believing more errors?

**2.** A besetting problem with Moore's performance was his systematic failure to adapt his argument in light of McGrew's filter. Moore did nothing much to advance his original argument. He kept reciting the same talking points despite the fact that McGrew's filter, if valid, moots nearly all of Moore's talking points. Moore was caught off guard by McGrew's position, and he had nothing to fall back on. It reminded me of Bart Ehrman's ill-fated debate with W. L. Craig, where Ehrman walked right into an ambush, and was bleeding to death for the rest of the debate. Likewise, Moore had nothing in reserve when McGrew preempted his prepared argument. After McGrew's opening statement, much of what Moore said in response seemed to be stalling for time.

**3.** Apropos (2), Moore treats McGrew's criteria, or any criteria for miracles, as arbitrary. But McGrew's criteria for miraculous events aren't essentially different from criteria for historical events generally. The main difference is that his criteria are more stringent in some respects, but an opponent of miracles should hardly find that objectionable.

Most of McGrew's criteria are stock criteria for assessing the credibility of eyewitnesses and sifting testimonial evidence. Much of this is what a historian would apply to accounts of Caesar crossing the Rubicon. It isn't something McGrew cooked up just for miracles.

Moore acts as though, unless criteria for scientific or historical knowledge fell from the sky, they are arbitrary. But the criteria for scientific and historical knowledge are necessarily philosophical criteria which humans devise. There's nothing inherently suspect about that enterprise.

And it's unavoidable. The alternative is radical skepticism regarding the possibility of scientific and historical knowledge. And that's counterproductive for Moore's own position.

**4.** He thinks to be any good, a criterion must be objective in the sense that the platinum ingot is an objective standard. But that's a poor example, for that's an arbitrary social convention. It isn't even a criterion for truth. It's simply convenient.

But you can't extrapolate from an artificial standard for weights and measures to historiography. Reality is independent in a way that the metric system is not. Our criteria must be suited to the nature of reality, and not imposed on reality.

Take the difference between experimental and anecdotal evidence. It's often useful to study things in a controlled setting where you can eliminate irrelevant factors and reproduce results. But some people mistakenly make that the ideal of scientific knowledge or knowledge in general.

Yet most of what we know about the nature world is based on field work rather than lab work. A geologist studies volcanic action as it happens in nature.

Likewise, a biologist may study animal behavior in the wild. Indeed, to study animal behavior in a controlled environment may be misleading precisely because animals often behave abnormally in unnatural settings. To understand animal behavior, you generally need to study them in their natural surroundings.

The same holds true for historical events in general or miraculous events in particular. We must take them as they

come to us. When, where, and how they occur isn't something we can ordinarily dictate.

**5.** An undetectable agent can produce detectable effects.

**6.** Moore never absorbed the crucial distinction between natural processes and personal agency. Take an automated car. Presumably, this will be common in the future.

Some automated cars will be involved in fatal accidents. In most cases, that will be due to mechanical error.

However, some of them may involve murder. The killer hacked into the computer system and caused the fatal accident. Statistically, that might be improbable, but a homicide detective can't just go by statistics. Indeed, the rarity of fatal mechanical error will itself raise suspicion of foul play.

Suppose the wife was having an affair with the automechanic who serviced the car a week before? Suppose she recently took out a life insurance policy on her husband?

**7.** Moore's objection to a cumulative case argument is wildly counterintuitive. He acts as though, the more evidence you have, the less credible the claim. Multiple lines of independent evidence make the claim less probable because each piece of evidence must be individually evaluated. To some extent that's true, but so what? Surely he doesn't really think having more witnesses, more circumstantial evidence, actually weakens rather than strengthens the case for a given event. It's hard to believe he thought that through.

**8.** Consider the burden of proof. Atheism demands a universal negative in reference to miracles. Which means in principle that an atheist must disprove every single reported miracle while a theist must only prove one single miracle.

Keep in mind, too, that if miracles occur, most go unreported because most people aren't famous. Their experience never makes it into the history books.

**9.** Every new religion doesn't make miracle claims to launch itself. Islam didn't, Buddhism didn't, Hinduism didn't.

**10.** In drawing examples from comparative religion, Moore makes no attempt to date sources.

**11.** Moore's case is overly reliant on controlling metaphors like "false positives," "false negatives," "playing with the same money." At best, these are impressionistic analogies. They are not substitute for definitions and arguments.

**12.** To my knowledge, Hindu and Buddhist "miracles" don't typically attest beliefs. They are just fantastic stories.

**13.** Let's run through some of his examples:

**i)** The Bible doesn't rule out the possibility of pagan miracles. Indeed, the Bible arguably grants the existence of some pagan miracles.

**ii)** Jacob's ladder is a dream. That's not physical teleportation. It's not comparable to Muhammad's alleged midnight journey.

**iii)** Regarding Balaam's donkey, before you attempt to compare that to other stories of talking animals, you have to consider how that functions in the narrative.



**iv)** Were there Brazilian monks in the year 700? Doesn't the presence of Roman Catholic monks and priests and in Latin American depend on the introduction of Catholicism by the Conquistadors and their missionaries? Unless I misheard or misunderstood what Moore said, his grasp of church history and relative chronology leaves much to be desired.

**v)** In the nature of the case, transubstantiation, even if true, is undetectable.

**vi)** I've discussed Lourdes and Fatima:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/05/does-lourdes-undercut-resurrection.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2007/01/miracle-of-sun.html>

## How often does God intervene?

Back to the stable nature theodicy:

**i)** To take a comparison, it's like healing and prayer. If God always healed in answer to prayer, then medical science would be pointless—and if God never healed in answer to prayer, then prayer (for healing) would be superfluous.

Occasional miraculous healing in answer to prayer doesn't make medical science useless. You don't know in advance which will do the trick, or whether either one will do the trick. Sometimes we pray for healing because medical science failed.

The dilemma for the stable environment theodicy is that it can't explain why God intervenes in some cases rather than others. So that must be supplemented by skeptical theism.

**ii)** I doubt it's possible to even guess at how often God prevents some natural evils. Physical events leave physical evidence in their wake, but nonevents leave no trace evidence of their nonoccurrence. So what's the evidence that something didn't happen because God preempted it?

To take a comparison, consider those time-travel scenarios in which a Jewish scientist goes back in time to kill Hitler's granddad, thereby erasing Adolf from the space-time continuum. If successful, there will be no evidence that Adolf ever existed, because changing that one variable changes a host of affected variables. To be consistent, there must be corresponding adjustments.

Of course we know that's unrealistic: hence time-travel antinomies. But I'm just using that as an analogy to

illustrate a point.

In the case of divine intervention to preempt a natural evil, that doesn't change the past, but prevent that past from happening in the first place—in which case, there's no empirical evidence that God intervened. We have no basis of comparison. We just have what actually happened.

It's not as if there's a gap or hole in the historical record or natural record when God prevents a natural evil. So in that sense, there's no direct evidence for divine preemption. Not like a missing folder in the filing cabinet between the As and the Cs where the Bs ought to be. All the "space" is filled.

So, from what I can see, there's no estimating the frequency of divine interventions in that respect. For all we know, divine intervention to prevent natural evils might be commonplace. It's imponderable.

I'm not saying it's never possible to identify divine preemption. In some cases you have plausible answers to prayer. But in other cases, no testimonial evidence will be available.

## Is belief in miracles irrational?

I will comment on this:

<http://www.slate.com/bigideas/are-miracles-possible/essays-and-opinions/larry-shapiro-opinion>

Take Jesus' resurrection. Given how nature works, dead people stay that way.

Absent the intervention of a rational, omnipotent agent.

It didn't have to be that way. Just as the freezing temperature of water might have been 34° F rather than 32° F, maybe one in ten dead could have "naturally" come back to life.

**i)** That's a bit too facile. In principle, the freezing point for water could be different. However, that's not a discrete variable. To change that would impact other things. To make everything balance out, there'd have to be corresponding changes. You can't just alter the freezing point of water and leave everything else unaffected. Other adjustments must be made to accommodate that particular change. And maybe there's not that much give in the system.

**ii)** Under what scenario does he think one in ten dead could "naturally" come back to life? How much necrosis has the body undergone?

But, water does freeze at 32° F, and dead people stay dead (barring unforeseen medical advances that certainly were not available 2000 years ago). That's why, if Jesus really did return to life, something must

have intervened to block the otherwise inevitable march of natural laws.

That's roughly true.

Back to miracles. Even granting the tremendous reliability of the witnesses to Jesus' resurrection, the case for accepting their account is very weak. How many people return from the dead? It must be very low, far less than the number of people who have the serious disease in our analogy. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that God resurrects one in a billion people. This means that even if the witnesses to the resurrection were incredibly reliable (perhaps they misidentify non-miraculous events as miraculous only one in a million times), the chance that they were correct about Jesus' resurrection would be only one in a thousand.

That frames the issue as if it's a roll of the dice. The natural odds. But if it happened, the Resurrection was the result of divine intervention. Not letting nature taking its course, but reversing nature. Circumventing nature.

It's like asking what are the odds of throwing sixes ten times in a row? Well, that depends. Are they fair dice or loaded dice?

Natural processes involve unintelligent causes—like a computer that's programmed to perform a task. It always does the same thing. Only does what it was programmed to do.

But the odds for what a computer will do—given the status quo—are very different from what a computer programmer

will do. He can change the program. He can make the computer perform a different task.

## Miracles and memories

Unbelievers think an account that includes a miracle greatly lowers the credibility of the account. Is that true?

What makes an event memorable? Off the top of my head, I'd say several things can make an event memorable: is it unusual, interesting, significant, or emotionally resonant? How much attention did you pay to it?

Any one factor can make an event memorable, and combining two or more factors can make it all the more memorable. In addition, the factors can interact in constructive ways.

For instance, the death of parents is extremely common. However, that's statistical. It's hardly a common experience for *you* when *your* mother or father dies. For you, that's a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Moreover, that's a very emotional experience. You only have one mother and father.

Likewise, the death of parents in *general* is not significant to strangers. If *your* parent dies, that's not normally significant to *me*. But if my parent dies, that's highly significant to me. Some events are intrinsically significant, or personally significant, or both.

By the same token, people typically pay great attention to the death of their parents. That's not something they only notice in passing.

On a related note, whether or not we find something interesting is often subjective. What one person finds fascinating may be boring to another person.

Now, consider the miracles of Christ. Take the raising of Lazarus. That would be an *extremely* memorable event. Memorable on multiple grounds, and each factor would magnify it's unforgettable character.

To say it's unusual or out-of-the-ordinary would be an understatement. And by definition, it's an attention-grabbing event.

Mortality is emotionally resonant. The fear of death. Separation from loved ones. A reversal of death would be at least as emotional—if not more so, because it's unexpected.

The possibility of restoration to life is universally interesting. We all have a stake in that.

It is both intrinsically and personally significant. Directly significant to his sisters. But significant to onlookers. After all, if Jesus can do that for their brother, he can do that for me and my loved ones.

A miracle like that is unforgettable. A life-changing experience.

Not all of Christ's miracles have that direct, intrinsic importance. But they all point to the power of Christ. How he can provide for his people.

Take the multiplication of food. If he can do *that*, is there anything he *cannot* do? More to the point, what he is able to do for me or my loved ones.

The upshot is that the most memorable events in the life of Christ would not be what he said, or even what he generally



did, but his miracles in particular. The supernatural aspect of his ministry.

## Why didn't Jesus appear to everyone?

One of the stock objections to the Resurrection is that Jesus didn't appear to more people. But the problem with this objection is that infidels will always move the goalpost.

**1.** Suppose Jesus appeared to Pilate. Suppose we had an ostensible firsthand account of his appearance to Pilate.

How would infidels respond? Their first resort would be to deny the authenticity of the account. It must be a 2C forgery, or something like that.

And they know it couldn't be authentic since dead men don't return from the grave. So you have a circular denial.

**2.** But suppose the account was authenticated. How would infidels respond?

**i)** Their next resort would be to ask rhetorically, What's more likely: that Jesus really did appear to Pilate, or that Pilate lied, or hallucinated, or we have a case of mistaken identity, &c.?

**ii)** They'd add that ancient witnesses can't be trusted. They're so superstitious, you know. So that feeds into their confirmation bias. They see what they expect to see. Things that go bump in the night.

**3.** Suppose Jesus appeared on national TV. How would the infidel respond?

He might say: What's more likely: that dead men return from the grave, or that his television appearance was a computer-animated illusion?

**4.** Suppose Jesus made a personal appearance to the infidel? How would he respond?

**i)** He might say, How do I know it's Jesus? What does Jesus look like, anyway? And it's not like I can do a DNA match.

**ii)** Or he might say, What's more likely: that dead men return from the grave, or that I had a hypnagogic hallucination?

**iii)** Or he might say, Even a space alien impersonating Jesus is more likely than Jesus appearing to me. At least space aliens, if they exist, are naturally possible. And any naturalistic explanation, however unlikely, is more likely than any supernaturalistic explanation like a miracle (i.e. the Resurrection).

## Evidence of nonevents

Adam Omelianchuk

I share your point about the culpability of "lying," because to lie is to know the truth and intentionally mislead an inquirer. But, as I've said elsewhere, the young-earth view is committed to a whimsical ontology replete with baffling supernatural acts that yield curious results. For example, gamma ray bursts that would normally travel billions of light years to reach us are thought to be created in transit, yet still providing evidence of events that never occurred. The same is true of supernovas the collisions of galaxies, and stars being sucked into black holes. When you have evidence of events that never occurred, you have something awfully strange on your hands.

<http://randalrauser.com/2013/02/would-god-be-lying-if-he-created-the-world-with-apparent-age/#comment-787003000>

Let's consider some potential counterexamples:

**i)** The general principle underlying Omelianchuk's objection seems to be the disconnect between effects and secondary causes. You have an effect which would normally be the result of a secondary cause, but in this case there is no secondary cause corresponding to the effect.

An obvious problem with his objection is that it rules out creation ex nihilo, as well as miracles that bypass second causes.

**ii)** For instance, since humans normally have two biological parents, the existence of Adam and Eve would be evidence of a nonevent, for they didn't have parents.

Likewise, the existence of Jesus is evidence of a nonevent: a father impregnating a mother.

**iii)** Or take the multiplication of the loaves and fish. The instant bread is evidence of a nonevent: sowing grains of wheat, germination, sun and rain, ears of wheat, harvesting, threshing, baking bread with water, flour, and fire,

Likewise, the instant fish are evidence of a nonevent: insemination, laying eggs, maturation.

I don't know if Omelianchuk subscribes to theistic evolution. If so, then instant fish are evidence of a nonevent: an age-long evolutionary process resulting in fish.

**iv)** Omelianchuk's principle rules out progressive creation as well as fiat creation, for, according to progressive creationism, God introduces new natural kinds by direct intervention. Effects without secondary causes.

**v)** To consider this from a different angle:

10 Then David said, "O Lord, the God of Israel, your servant has surely heard that Saul seeks to come to Keilah, to destroy the city on my account. 11 Will the men of Keilah surrender me into his hand? Will Saul come down, as your servant has heard? O Lord, the God of Israel, please tell your servant." And the Lord said, "He will come down." 12 Then David said, "Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?" And the Lord said, "They

will surrender you.” 13 Then David and his men, who were about six hundred, arose and departed from Keilah, and they went wherever they could go. When Saul was told that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the expedition (1 Sam 23:10-13).

Here David is choosing what to do in light of a nonevent: if David remains in Keilah, the citizens will turn him over to Saul. So he leaves before that eventuality plays out. God gives David evidence of a nonevent: what would happen to him if he took that fork in the road, as a result of which he turns that hypothetical into a nonevent by pursuing an alternate course of action.

**vi)** What about praying for a past event? Suppose you apply to college. Suppose you receive a letter in the mail. Before you open the envelope, you pray about it.

Of course, at the time the letter was mailed, the admissions office had already decided to accept or deny your application. If God answers your prayer, your prayer may affect the past, rendering the alternative a nonevent.

## Near miss

Yes, there is hype and over-reporting. But as I've asked ordinary people whether they have ever seen a miracle, I've heard many credible stories. None of them has been widely reported. In fact, sometimes the persons's own family has never heard the story.

Dale Flowers, my pastor, told me of a mission trip he took to China with a group of pastors in 1993. They were being chauffeured in a minibus down a remote, narrow road clogged with trucks. Vehicles, including their own, were passing each other at every opportunity. It was dusk, raining, and tense driving conditions, when an oncoming truck loaded with logs attempted pass. As the truck swerved into their lane, the load of logs shifted and lifted the truck off two of its wheels. To Dale and his fellow passengers, it appeared that only one of two things could happen: either the truck would tip over in their lane and they would crash into it, or the truck with its load of logs would fall on their minibus. They had nowhere to escape and no time to slow down. In an instant it became clear that they would all die. Dale didn't even have time to pray.

Then, defying the laws of gravity, the leaning truck was righted back on all four wheels and completed its pass without crashing into their vehicle. It was as if God had caught the falling truck, lifted it, and moved it out of the way of their minibus. Absolutely stunned by their escape, the pastors—ordinarily a talkative bunch—didn't say a word. Afterward, no one mentioned what had happened. And certainly, though I have heard Dale talk about the incident privately, I have never heard him preach of it in all his years of preaching.

You can understand why. The miracle made a difference to those pastors, but what difference would it make for others? If they weren't there to see it for themselves, they would probably be skeptical. Why press it?

My friend Tim Hostetler became a Christian in the California Jesus movement:

At the age of twenty-one, I was a new Christian and I badly needed \$20 to pay a bill. I remember getting down on my knees and asking God to somehow provide me with that money. I went to my mailbox, and there was a letter from someone I didn't know, with a check off \$20.

I later found out that two weeks earlier, my sister had been talking to a lady who said she liked to send out checks to people in need. My sister told her that I probably needed some money, and she wrote me a check. When I learned about it I was amazed that God was not constrained by time. He put the answer to my prayer in motion two weeks before I prayed. There was no limit to what he could do in answering our prayers.

Lots of people have miraculous experiences like that when they are new Christians. Like little children when they pray, they see God's answers in direct and beautiful ways.

Forty years later, Tim still knows that God has no limits, but he also knows that God does not always answer our prayers as we want. Tim has prayed for many people who were healed, yet he himself has suffered from chronic illness—disabling back pain, terrible digestive pain, regular migraine headaches. He's been on disability for decades. He's visited



every doctor possible, and Christians all over the state have prayed for him. He's still very sick.

"I've had thousands of migraine headaches, and I've had people pray for me hundreds of times. Only once have I been healed, when a man put his hand on my head and the pain went away immediately. I started praying for the research people in the labs. Since God wasn't healing my migraines through prayer, I thought medicine might be the way. And I thank God for Imitrex, because it really helps".  
Tim Stafford, **MIRACLES** (Bethany 2012), 120-21; 193-94.

## Alien abduction stories

An atheist trope is to cite alien abduction stories to cast doubt on the reliability of testimonial evidence. There are, however, several problems with his comparison:

- 1.** An atheist depends on testimonial evidence to even be aware of alien abduction stories.
- 2.** Unless a Christian happens to be an expert on ufology, he has no informed opinion to offer on alien abduction stories. Ufology is a study unto itself. A huge swamp.
- 3.** In addition, the comparison suffers from a basic equivocation. In assessing alien abduction stories, we need to differentiate actual eyewitnesses to *something* from people who fraudulently claim to be eyewitnesses. Not everyone who claims to be an eyewitness is in fact an eyewitness. Sifting testimonial evidence requires us to distinguish between people who simply make stuff up from actual observers.

When the reliability of testimonial evidence is challenged, what is being challenged? The credibility of a witness to be an actual witness? Or the accuracy of his perception, recollection, and/or interpretation of the experience?

- 4.** To take a comparison, suppose someone claims to be an eyewitness to the sinking of the Titanic, assassination of Bobby Kennedy, or demise of Jack Ruby. In that case, we have independent evidence that there was something to be observed. Evidence that the Titanic, Jack Ruby, and Bobby Kennedy existed.

But the evidence for alien abductions is circular inasmuch as reports *just are* the putative evidence that extraterrestrials are kidnapping humans. Yet there can only be alien abductions if extraterrestrials exist. They can only be observed in case they exist. So what's our basis to classify these reports as eyewitness testimony? There can only be observers if there's something to observe.

## Ufology and miracles

Fred Butler Pls explain how the hysterical claims of UFO activity in this video <http://bit.ly/1g2LvoY> differ from those regarding modern miracles.

Here we go again. MacArthurites resent being compared to Hume and secular debunkers, yet they keep doing it. Do they live in a bubble?

**i)** Fred's ufological parallel is a standard tactic which atheists deploy against Biblical miracles like the Resurrection. Imagine an atheist saying "Please explain how hysterical claims of UFO activity differ from those regarding the Resurrection?" In fact, you don't have to imagine it. Atheists do it.

**ii)** BTW, notice that Fred refers to modern miracles in general. MacArthurites often say they don't deny modern miracles, just charismatic miracles.

This is a dilemma for MacArthurites. How do they deal with reported charismatic miracles? One way is to mount a preemptive strike by discrediting testimonial evidence. Comparing it to stories of alleged alien abductees.

Problem is: testimonial evidence for charismatic miracles isn't essentially different from testimonial evidence for modern miracles generally. So, in order to launch a first strike against modern charismatic miracles, consistent MacArthurites must preemptively discredit testimonial evidence for all modern miracles to thereby discredit the subset of charismatic miracles. But in that case, their claim to believe in modern miracles is disingenuous.

**iii)** Fred imagines that he can discredit modern miracles without discrediting Biblical miracles by appealing to the presuppositional authority of Scripture. But there are two problems with that move:

**a)** As I've argued on more than one occasion, the cessationist argument is essentially evidentialist rather than presuppositional.

**b)** In addition, take a passage like 1 Cor 15:6: *Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.*

Paul isn't appealing to apostles or prophets in that verse. That's part of his overall argument, but not here. Here, Paul is appealing to the evidentiary value of ordinary, uninspired, fallible observers. But in that event, Fred can't erect a wall between 1 Cor 15:6 type witnesses and ostensible witnesses to modern miracles.

## Miracles and urban legends

I'd like to focus on two or three related objections that Graham Oppy raises to Christianity (or theism) in **FOUR VIEWS ON CHRISTIANITY AND PHILOSOPHY** (Zondervan, 2016).

**1.** Both here and in his monograph on **THE BEST ARGUMENT AGAINST GOD** (Palgrave-Macmillan), Oppy makes simplicity a criterion for judging atheism to be preferable to Christianity. But there are basic problems with that appeal:

**i)** There's no doubt that simplicity can sometimes be a useful criterion to adjudicate between competing explanations. However, it's hard to justify simplicity as a *general* criterion. For instance, occasionalism is infinitely simpler than secondary causation. Just consider the gazillions of individual causes in the universe. Not just the sheer number, but different *kinds* of causes for different kinds of events, as well as elaborate causal chains, or intersecting causal chains. Secondary causality in the universe is fiendishly complex. By contrast, occasionalism posits a single agent for everything that happens. But obviously, Oppy rejects occasionalism, despite the fact that it's an immensely more parsimonious explanation.

Occam's razor isn't plausible purely in the abstract. Rather, that's something we can only judge on a case-by-case basis. Sometimes simplicity is a methodological virtue, but that's context-dependent.

**ii)** Simplicity isn't just one principle. There's the distinction between a simpler ontology and a simpler explanation. These can be in tension. Postulating more entities can

simplify an explanation. For instance, physicists postulate subatomic particles to account for higher-level interactions.

**iii)** There's a metaphysical tradition that rejects the presumption of parsimony: the principle of plenitude. Leibniz is the best-known champion of that alternative. But it has a modern counterpart in theories of a multiverse. The principle is that anything that can happen will happen. It's a controversial claim, but hard to rule out a priori—or even a posteriori.

**iv)** Another basic problem with invoking Occam's razor is this: suppose we agree with Oppy that a world without God is simpler than a world with God. How does that contrast create any presumption that God doesn't exist?

At best, all it does is to note a consequence of a world with or without God. But how does noting that consequence make it more likely that one consequence is true while the other is false? It's just a logical relation between two things.

Suppose it's true that if God exists, the world will be more complex than if he doesn't exist. Assuming that's the case, how does that indicate that in fact we're living in a world where God does *not* exist? For if we *were* living in a world where God exists, then our world would be more complex. If God is real, then that consequences follows from his existence. Assuming that's the case, how does that observation provide any evidence that God *isn't* real?

**2.** Oppy says that alongside the miraculous birth of Jesus:

we can set reports of the miraculous births of Buddha, Krishna, Karna, Kabir, Zoroaster, Marduk, Horus,

Romulus, Asclepius, Oedipus, Augustus Caesar, Qi, Lao-tse, and others.

...the many similarities between Christian miraculous births and miraculous births in other religions and traditions. **FOUR VIEWS ON CHRISTIANITY AND PHILOSOPHY**, 37-38.

There are several problems with his comparison:

**i)** It fails to distinguish between fictional characters, mythological gods, and historical figures. It *stipulates* parallels to the virgin birth rather than *documenting* parallels. But we'd need to see the details. And it fails to consider the genre of the accounts, or the date of the source in relation to the date of the individual. It's deceptive to call these "reports". That connotes an account which, at least in principle, had its basis in observation.

**ii)** More to the point, a basic way of assessing a claim is to ask yourself what would follow if the claim were true. If Jesus was virginally conceived, would that prevent other religions and traditions from having tales of gods, heroes, and founders whose conception was extraordinary? Since there'd be tales like this whether or not Jesus was virginally conceived, the existence of such tales doesn't tell against his virginal conception. The existence of such tales makes no difference one way or the other on whether Jesus was virginally conceived. In that respect, the situation would be just the same if he were virginally conceived. The virginal conception of Christ would be a fact regardless of what other stories might exist.

**3.** In the same book, Oppy automatically discounts testimonial evidence for miracles by appealing to the rapid



development of urban legends (pp36-37,68-69). But that suffers from the same problem. Once again, ask yourself what would follow if the claim were true. If miracles do occur, then some miracles will be witnessed. And if miracles do occur, there will still have the phenomenon of urban legends. A world in which miracles occur won't eradicate urban legends. Urban legends would develop whether or not miracles actually happen. So how does the existence of urban legends discredit any and all reported miracles?

Testimonial evidence for miracles is just a subset of testimonial evidence in general. If urban legends create a presumption against reported miracles, do urban legends create a presumption against reported events generally? If not, why single out miracles as if the existence of urban legends only casts doubt on *them*?

**4.** Finally, his appeal to urban legends cuts both ways. You can have urban legends that attempt to explain away miracles. Take the cover story of the stolen body (Mt 28:11-15).

## The Fakers

1. I recently read **THE FAKERS: EXPLODING THE MYTHS OF THE SUPERNATURAL** (Fleming Revell 1980), by Dan Korem and Paul Meier.

It's similar to secular debunking books except that it was written by two Christians. At the time, Korem was a magician while Meier is a big name in Christian counseling. It has a foreword by Josh McDowell.

I used to own one or more books by Meier. (I may still have them in a box somewhere.) I was bothered by his cookie-cutter approach. As I recall, he has a classification system adapted from depth psychology, and he pigeonholes people according to that formulaic taxonomy. He also has a rather mechanical view of abnormal psychology, like there's a recipe book.

In this book, Meier frequently appeals to his extensive professional experience with patients ("thousands of patients"). However, the book was published in 1980. I assume the manuscript was submitted for publication no later than 1979. Meier graduated from Duke University in 1975. So wasn't his professional experience pretty limited at the time of writing?

I'm also somewhat dubious about his coauthor. More recently, Korem produced this profiling system:

[https://medium.com/@dvsdv\\_55178/new-releases-the-art-of-profiling-reading-people-right-the-first-time-by-dan-korem-237828f06949](https://medium.com/@dvsdv_55178/new-releases-the-art-of-profiling-reading-people-right-the-first-time-by-dan-korem-237828f06949)

That looks really flaky to me. It raises the specter of one charlatan denouncing other charlatans.

**2.** One aim of the book is to debunk popular candidates for the paranormal like dowsing, the pendulum, Ouija board, automatic writing, table tilting/rapping, firewalking, psychic surgery, necromancy, and fortune-telling (e.g. psychics, cartomancy).

**i)** I'm happy to stipulate that some of this is flimflam. If I were making a case for the paranormal, I wouldn't cite some of those as evidence.

**ii)** However, the authors fail to distinguish between necromancy and apparitions of the dead. There's a difference between initiating contact with the dead and the dead initiating contact. I think there's credible evidence for grief apparitions and crisis apparitions. That doesn't involve a medium.

**iii)** I think the authors miss the point about the Ouija board. The question at issue isn't so much if that's a way to discover the future but whether people who play with Ouija boards sometimes open a door to the dark side which they can't close.

**iv)** Although fortune-telling in the pop culture is bunk, that doesn't mean there's no evidence for precognition.

**v)** Psychic surgery might well be a good candidate for sleight of hand. However, I find the studies of Sidney Greenfield on occult healing intriguing, so I don't rule it out tout court:

<https://www.concordia.ca/content/dam/artsci/research/polanyi/docs/conference-2014-papers/Greenfield%20Sydney%20Montreal%202014.pdf>

**3.** One of their targets is the Lutheran exorcist Kurt Koch. The allegation is that Koch was hoodwinked because he's unfamiliar with how magicians fool viewers. I think there's some validity to that criticism. If someone like Koch had training as a magician, he'd be better equipped to spot the tricks of the trade. Some candidates for the paranormal may well be legerdemain.

However, the authors only interact with a handful of Koch's voluminous case studies. That's hardly representative. Moreover, Koch is by no means the only source of information on the paranormal and the occult, although he was a very prominent figure at the time of writing.

**4.** The authors lean on the work of debunkers like Milbourne Christopher. However, he was a member of CSICOP, founded by Paul Kurtz. That's an organization of militant atheists committed to naturalism. They rule out the paranormal and supernatural a priori because they think the physical universe is all there is, and that's a closed system. Another example is D. H. Rawcliffe.

This doesn't mean secular debunkers can't expose charlatans. It's a target rich environment.

**5.** The authors are skittish on demonic possession. They affirm it in principle, but are dismissive in practice. However, I've read psychiatrists who refer some of their

patients to exorcists, after ruling out natural causes. Meier's experience isn't representative.

**6.** A basic problem with the book is a double standard, where they accept biblical reports without question, but default to naturalistic explanations for extrabiblical reports about similar phenomena. When it comes to extrabiblical reports, they explain that away by appeal to coincidence, chicanery, the law of large numbers, psychosomatic illness. But that's an artificial dichotomy which smacks of special pleading. It's the same way secular debunkers automatically discount all healing miracles, answered prayers, premonitory dreams, &c.

In the case of Meier, no one is disputing that some people experience hallucinations. Those are easy to call. The real test are hard cases which resist or defy naturalistic explanations.

## 900 foot Jesus

Fred Butler has pried away some spare time to respond to us on the issue of modern miracles:

<http://hipandthigh.wordpress.com/2013/10/09/the-theology-of-miracles/>

I appreciate the fact that unlike some MacArthurites, Fred argues for his position. His post is mainly directed at some comments by Jason Engwer, but I will weigh in.

Where I think Keener derails, however, is his suggestion that skepticism toward miracles in our modern day has its roots with David Hume's skeptical philosophy. Thus, if you are a cessationist, such as myself and the rest living in "MacArthurville" as Steve has so defined us, we have been unwittingly influenced by Hume's skepticism.

I never used that argument. Rather, I've pointed out that MacArthurites often resort to skeptical tactics to dismiss modern miracles which are indistinguishable from the tactics of Hume and secular debunkers. That doesn't suggest or imply that MacArthurites have to be influenced by Hume.

That is particularly true regarding alleged testimonies of miracles in third-world settings. The idea being that if the evidence of such miracles is merely the testimony of superstitious, mud-hut dwelling tribesmen, then such miracles cannot even be genuinely considered.

And I've quoted MacArthurites doing that very thing.

Keener, on the other hand, attempts to argue that just as the authenticity of the NT record of miracles is established by eye-witness testimony, so also must eye-witness testimony to modern miracles be at least considered. Why would Christians accept the testimony of ancient eye-witnesses who establish the credibility of the NT, yet not consider the testimony of modern witnesses, even if they are located in third-world venues? [The fact that it is called "God's Word" has something to do with that, but I digress...]

What about Fred's digression? His response is circular. Remember that MacArthurites classify Biblical miracles as sign-gifts whose function is to certify the messenger. So although Fred believes in Biblical miracles because he believes in the Bible, his position also commits him to believing in the Bible because the Bible was attested by sign-gifts. Therefore, he can't simply exempt Scripture from testimonial evidence in general. On the one hand he believes in Biblical miracles because the Bible attests them. On the the hand, he believes in the Bible due to miraculous attestation. So his cessationism ironically creates some parity between the case for Biblical miracles and the case for modern miracles, given the function which cessationism assigns to miracles (i.e. to accredit the messenger). Given that paradigm, you can't discount the one without discounting the other.

The main point of contention I have with any miracle that people say happened is the supernatural SOURCE of that miracle. In other words, I don't believe every instance is necessarily from God...Other passages of Scripture imply that miraculous activity can be produced by our demonic enemy designed specifically to lead people into theological error.

I don't deny that. I doubt Jason does, either. On the other hand, I believe Jason does object to defaulting to a demonic explanation. I think he regards that as an easy out in too many cases.

Throughout the portion of his book where he documents alleged testimony of modern-day miracles, Keener seems to be comfortable confirming miracles happening among groups I would consider not only heretical, but also cultic. For instance, he reports miracles happening among Catholics like Father Ralph DiOrio, the classic television style Pentecostal evangelists like Aimee Simple McPherson and Oral "900 foot tall Jesus" Roberts, and the real crazy charismatics like John Wimber and the Bethel Church in Redding which is a shaman healing lodge, rather than a Christian church.

Let's briefly comment on a few of these examples:

**i)** I've never bothered to investigate Aimee Semple McPherson. I'm quite open to the possibility (or probability) that she was a charlatan.

Over against that, Robert Godfrey, in one of his church history classes, did a sympathetic presentation of "Sister Aimee." He didn't treat her as a fraud. Godfrey's a church historian, and president of a Reformed seminary. I also assume that he's a Reformed cessationist. So it's not as if he's predisposed to vouch for her sincerity. As a church historian, I assume his assessment of her is based on scholarly sources regarding her life and work.

**ii)** Likewise, I never did an in-depth study of Wimber. As I recall, he was asked (by Peter Wagner) to speak at Fuller Seminary. When he was there, sensational things began to



happen. That's ironic because by that time, Fuller had gone liberal. This was a throwback to a primitive supernaturalism that liberal seminary profs. would disdain.

My off-the-cuff impression of Wimber is that he was a sincere, but theologically unsophisticated Christian. As such, he probably said a number of questionable things, and exercised poor judgment in some of his associations. But that's distinct from whether genuine miracles occurred under his ministry. I have no firm opinion, not having researched the issue. I don't think he's a reliable theological guide. For a sympathetic analysis of Wimber's theology:

<http://www.waynegrudem.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/PowerandTruthVineyardPositionPaper.pdf>

**iii)** Kurt Koch thinks that Oral Roberts did have genuine healing ability. Koch attributes that to Roberts having been healed by an Indian witchdoctor when he was a young man. As a result, Koch thinks that occult ability was transmitted to Roberts. I have no firm opinion. Certainly his "seed-faith" doctrine was a fundraising gimmick.

The "vision" of the 900 foot Jesus was a fiasco. It was a fundraiser for a medical center, which became a boondoggle—bankrupting ORU. The 900 foot Jesus turned out to be a white elephant in disguise.

Whatever his paranormal abilities, if any, Roberts was a conman.

Jason appears to have a similar charitable perspective to alleged miracles among non-Christian faiths, particularly Roman Catholics. I find that to be odd, knowing what I have read of him in the past

outlining the false gospel Catholicism promotes. His conclusion is that within Catholicism, there are Catholics who are genuine believers and the alleged miracle claims from Catholic circles is God working out of compassion on behalf of those Christians.

**i)** I have my own take on Catholic miracles:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2007/01/miracle-of-sun.html>

**ii)** I don't know the source of Jason's interest in Lourdes. However, I can think of one possible source. A few years ago, Jason and I reviewed a book edited by John Loftus. One of the contributors used Lourdes as a test-case for Biblical miracles. It was an argument from analogy. He took the position that reported miracles at Lourdes are better attested than Biblical miracles. But if reported miracles at Lourdes are bogus, then so much the worse for Biblical miracles. That may have peaked Jason's interest in Lourdes, as a way of challenging the secular debunker on his own grounds.

Jason has also taken in interest in the Shroud of Turin. Of course, that's not unusual among evangelical apologists (e.g. Gary Habermas). Although the Shroud is currently a Catholic relic, if the Shroud is authentic, then that association is adventitious (like the bronze serpent). I have no opinion about the authenticity of the Shroud.

He [Keener] explains those claims of miracles among those of "incompatible religions" as the possibility of a supreme powers' good will toward people of different faiths that doesn't necessarily endorse any particular belief. He also suggests the work of alternative supernatural powers, such as evil spirits. Whatever the

case, what matters is that we recognize and affirm a clear manifestation of the supernatural...I personally see no precedent from Scripture in which God worked in such a fashion among the purveyors of a false Gospel...Well, what about it? As I noted above, Keener would probably respond by saying there are many non-Christian examples of miraculous healings, but then speculates that it could be a loving God who is doing such powers of mercy through false religions because it is in His nature to be merciful. I am of a contrary opinion. I believe that God would never heal through a person who is then proclaiming a false religion that only assigns men's souls to judgment, or a false teacher who may claim to speak for Christ, but proclaims an unbiblical and errant Gospel. Hence, such "healings" and "miracles" are the deception of demons. I am of that opinion not because I carry with me Hume's skepticism, but because my theology of miracles is grounded in the Word of God.

**i)** Consider a counterexample. The Bible records a number of revelatory dreams. In several cases, pagans are the recipients of these revelatory dreams: Abimelech (Gen 20:3-7), the Egyptian baker and cupbearer (Gen 40), Pharaoh (Gen 41), Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 2, 4), and Pilate's wife (Mt 27:19). We might include the Magi (Mt 2:12).

God is the direct source of these miraculous disclosures. And these are true revelations rather than delusive revelations.

So there is Biblical precedent for God miraculously revealing himself to and through adherents of false religions.

**ii)** That's only a problem if you artificially restrict the function of miracles to accrediting doctrine. And, ironically, that's how Hume frames them, then deploys that framework to conclude that reported miracles from competing religions cancel out one another.

## Expect a miracle!

A village atheist who goes by the moniker of porphyryredux tried to leave some belated comments on some old posts of mine. After a post has been up for five days, comments are automatically routed to moderation, where they usually die of benign neglect. I'll respond to some of his comments (including some related statements he made on his blog).

The critic's basic argument is that, assuming god is the omni-everything that the bible says he is, the lack of medically verified regrowing of limbs among those who claim documentation of miracle-healing, is suspicious, given that the regrowing of a missing limb, clearly beyond the abilities of current science, would be the acid test of the miracle-healing claim.

Since God never promised to heal amputees, there's nothing suspicious about God not doing what God never said he was going to do.

I think my fellow skeptics are unwise to pursue this particular argument, since, as proven from the article at Triablogue, this particular criticism emboldens apologists to lure us into areas of pure speculation.

So even though he admits that it's unwise for atheists to pursue this particular argument, he persists in doing so anyway. Go figure.

I argue in another **post** that the minimum expenses and and time lost from work/family necessary for skeptics to track down important evidence and otherwise do a seriously thorough investigation on

miracle claims, make it absurd for apologists to saddle skeptics with the obligation to “go check out the claims”. If the apologists at Triablogue [sic] are serious, they would obligate a skeptic living in America to expend whatever resources necessary to get to southern Africa (‘Gahna), properly interview all witnesses and get back home. Absolute nonsense.

**i)** A classic strawman. I never suggested that evaluating a miracle claim requires you to reinterview the witnesses. If, however, an atheist is so irrational that he refuses to believe testimonial evidence unless he personally conducts the interview, then that's his self-imposed burden of proof.

**ii)** I'd add that his complaint is very quaint, as if he were living in the 18C, and had to interview witnesses face-to-face. Has he never heard of email or telephones? In fact, even before the advent of airplanes, people wrote letters to solicit information.

No Christian is going to travel half way around the world to investigate a claim that the ultimate miracle debunking has happened, so they have no business expecting skeptics to go halfway around the world in effort to properly conduct an independent investigation of a miracle-claim.

There's no parity between these two positions. Atheism posits a universal negative with respect to miracles. An atheist must reject every single reported miracle. By contrast, it only takes one miracle to falsify atheism. Therefore, the atheist and the Christian apologist do not share the same burden of proof. Not even close.

Would it be too much to ask apologists to do something more with their claim of miracle healing, than simply provide references?

**i)** Actually, that *would* be asking too much. Just as we accept documentation for other historical events, we ought to accept documentation for miracles. Miracles are just a subset of historical events in general.

**ii)** His complaint only makes sense if there's a standing presumption against the occurrence of miracles, so that miracles must meet a higher standard of evidence. But as I've often argued, that begs the question.

**iii)** I'd also note in passing that if God exists, then it would be extraordinary if miracles *didn't* happen. If God exists, then miracles are to be *expected*.

**iv)** I'd add that belief in miracles doesn't require prior belief in God. Evidence for miracles is, itself, evidence for God.

If you seriously believe you have evidence of a modern day healing that cannot be explained by current medical science, set forth your case.

Testimonial evidence *is* setting forth a case.

All this stuff about what Keener said, what he didn't say, how critics misquoted him...

Where did I say critics misquote him?

...God having the sovereign right to avoid doing monster miracles, accomplishes nothing more than helping distract the less educated Christian readers

from the simple fact that you have ZERO medically documented medically inexplicable healings.

That's just an empty denial in the face of explicit documentation to the contrary.

Steve says Craig Keener has cited documented cases of body-part regeneration. Cf. **MIRACLES THE CREDIBILITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT ACCOUNTS**. So there's prima facie evidence that God heals some amputees (or the equivalent). Does Steve know of anybody who has attempted to obtain the medical documentation and/or witness statements that Keener has cited?

Do atheists make the same demand for cures in general? If a patient recovers from stage-1 cancer, do they refuse to believe it unless they can read the medical records for themselves and interview the patient? Notice the unexamined bias.

It would be helpful for apologists to provide the one case of body part regeneration they feel is the most compelling, and lets get the ball rolling on the subject of just how good the medical documentation, diagnosis and witness statements really are.

Demanding evidence of body-part regeneration is an artificial litmus test for miracles. I never took that demand seriously in the first place. I'm just calling their bluff.

Atheists who refuse to consider evidence for miracles in general, and instead resort to this decoy, betray their insincerity. Logically, the case for miracles is hardly confined to one artificial class of miracles.



Apologists think they score big on the objectivity scale by insisting that skeptics and atheists do their own research into the claims for miracles that appear in Christian books. A large list of miracle-claim references may be found in Craig Keener's two volume set "Miracles (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2011)".

But if we are realistic about the time and money required to be expended in the effort to properly investigate a single modern-day miracle claim, it becomes immediately clear that the apologist advice that skeptics should check out those claims, is irrational for all except super-wealthy super-single super-unemployed super-bored skeptics.

That's ironic, considering the obvious fact that Keener isn't "super-wealthy, super-single, or super-unemployed." Indeed, as Keener said in the introduction, "I have no research team, no research assistants, and no research funds; nor have I had sabbaticals to pursue this research" (1:12). What hinders an atheist from doing what Keener did?

Apologists, desperate to cut the skeptic's costs as much as possible so as to leave them "without excuse", will suggest ways to cut the costs as described above...

Another strawman. Atheists are *already* without excuse.

What bright ideas do you have for the married miracle skeptic whose wife homeschools their children, who has only one job?

Since when did atheists join the Christian homeschooling movement?

If skeptics need to stay open to the possibility of miracles merely because they cannot rationally go around investigating each and every miracle claim, then must you, the Christian apologist, stay open to the possibility that miracles don't happen, on the grounds that you don't have the time or money to investigate every single naturalistic argument skeptics have ever come up with?

Once again, these are asymmetrical positions. It only takes on miracle to exclude atheism, whereas atheism must exclude every miracle.

And the bad news is that it doesn't matter if we investigate a single claim and come up with good reasons to remain skeptical of it....there are thousands of other miracle claims complete with identifiable eyewitnesses and alleged medical documentation that we haven't investigated.

**i)** That's the dilemma for atheism. A position with an insurmountable burden of proof. Good luck with that. Not my problem.

**ii)** Atheists are like paranoid cancer patients who refuse treatment until they can verify the treatment for themselves. They make irrational, time-consuming demands on the oncologist to prove the efficacy of cancer therapy.

But the oncologist is under no obligation to accede to their unreasonable demands. He's not the one with the life-threatening disease. He has nothing to prove to the

paranoid patient. It's the patient whose life is on the line. It's the patient who has everything to lose.

If the patient is diagnosed with stage-1 cancer, but refuses treatment for 8 months while he conducts his own "independent" investigation—by interviewing other patients—then even if he succeeds in satisfying his personal curiosity, and is now amenable to therapy, by that time he will have stage-4 cancer—at which point therapy is futile.

If the apologists here saw video footage of a dog flying around a room using biological wings sprouting out of its back, would they insist on making sure all other alternative explanations were definitively refuted before they would be open to considering that this was a real dog with real natural flying ability? Then skeptics, likewise, when confronted with evidence for a miracle healing, would insist on making sure all other alternative possible explanations were definitively refuted before they would start considering that the claimed miracle was genuinely supernatural in origin.

**i)** That's an argument from analogy minus the argument. Where's the supporting argument to show that miracles are analogous to flying dogs?

**ii)** Instead of dealing with the actual evidence for actual miracles, atheists deflect attention away from the evidence by floating hypothetical examples. But that's a diversionary tactic.

**iii)** Moreover, it's self-defeating. If an atheist concocts the most ridiculous hypothetical he can think of, then, yes, the example strains credulity. But that's because he went out of his way to concoct an artificially ridiculous example. That's a

circular exercise. Unbelievable because he *made* it unbelievable.

## Michael Brown on healing

What was my conclusion after these years of intensive study and prayer? I concluded that healing was God's ideal will for His obedient children, and that rather than praying, "Lord, if it be Your will to heal," we should pray with the expectation that it was His will, sometimes even rebuking the sickness at its root.

Since then, have I seen other precious believers die of cancer? Yes, tragically, including some people very close to me, after years of prayer and fasting for their healing.

Have I prayed for blind eyes that were not opened and deaf ears that were not unstopped? Quite a few times, I'm sorry to say.

Yet I still believe the testimony of Scripture, since my theology is based on the Word rather than on personal experience. And when I have experienced miraculous healing in my own life – including from Hepatitis C, apparently contracted when I was a drug user from 1969-1971 but not manifest until the mid-1990's, after which I was healed – I have been thankful for divine confirmation of the Word.

<https://askdrbrown.org/library/why-wasn%E2%80%99t-nabeel-qureshi-healed>

It sounds pious and faithful to say that when push comes to shove, his theology is based on Scripture rather than experience, but the obvious problem with his dichotomy is that, as he interprets Scripture, Scripture predicts for a particular kind of experience. He thinks Scripture obligates

us to expect miraculous answers to prayer. So he can't neatly dichotomize Scripture from experience if, by his own lights, Scripture itself fosters the expectation that we should experience a particular kind of answer when we pray.

Brown has created a situation in which his interpretation of Scripture is unfalsifiable. If you exercise expectant faith, and the prayer is answered, that confirms your charismatic interpretation—but if you exercise expectant faith and the prayer goes unanswered, somehow that's still consistent with your charismatic interpretation.

Fact is, even mundane prayer is risky in the sense that when you pray you leave yourself wide open for disappointment. Prayer puts you in a vulnerable position. And if you exercise expectant faith, that aggravates the opportunities for disappointment. How many times can you exercise expectant faith before you lose faith in prayer, because your expectations are so often disappointed? How many times can you get burned before you need a skin graft? To be frank, miraculous intervention is unpredictable and unreliable. That's something you can pray for and hope for, and it's something you ought to pray for, but it's not something you can bank on. More often than not, God does not intercede in tangible, miraculous ways. You queue yourself up for disillusionment and make apostasy more likely if you constantly psyche yourself up for something that rarely if ever happens to you. There's nothing impious about striking a balance. Some professing Christians need to lower their expectations before they crash and burn. In reality, it often seems like you're on your own in life. Ordinary providence is the norm. Better get used to it.

## Bigfoot

The core issue, as I indicate above, is how to account for the claims of Jesus's postmortem appearances. I think that they are accounted for in much the same way that we account for UFOs and alien abductions, sightings of Bigfoot, homeopathic "cures," and the innumerable visions, epiphanies, theophanies, visitations, possessions, hauntings, and so forth reported in all cultures throughout history.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2015/11/16/jesus-end-the-formal-possibilities/>

When Parsons lumps together these disparate phenomena, an implication of his statement, although it may be an unintended implication, is that it's arbitrary for Christians to privilege Biblical miracles but reject Bigfoot, alien abductions, &c. Although Parsons might not have had that in mind when he wrote it, I'm sure that's what he believes—given his general outlook. But that's confused.

**1.** To begin with, we need to distinguish between natural kinds of phenomena and supernatural (or paranormal) kinds of phenomena. If Bigfoot or extraterrestrials exist, these would be physical beings that are subject to natural constraints. When we consider claims about these types of entities, we rightly evaluate such claims in light of what's naturally or physically possible or probable—given their ostensible identity.

By contrast, ghosts, theophanies, demonic possession, angelic apparitions, and miracles like the Resurrection are supernatural phenomena. Some of them aren't natural or

physical phenomena at all, while others are natural or physical effects of supernatural agency.

If these kinds of things exist or occur, they aren't subject to the same natural constraints. Hence, when we consider claims about them, we can't evaluate them in light of what's naturally or physically possible or probable unless we know that the only sorts of actual phenomena are physical or natural in character. But that's circular, since that's the very issue in dispute.

Therefore, a Christian can properly distinguish between different types of claims. To pick up on some of his examples:

**2.** A stock objection to intergalactic space travel is that, according to contemporary physics, superluminal travel is either impossible or results in backward time-travel. Of course, if we had direct evidence of extraterrestrials visiting the earth, that would be reason to revise our understanding of physics.

**3.** Another problem is that even if superluminal travel is possible, how would spacecraft traveling at that speed avoid a disastrous collision with interstellar debris? Surely it's moving too fast to detect the debris and change course. And at that speed, wouldn't a collision with even small debris be catastrophic?

If you dive into a water from ten feet above, no harm done. If you dive into water from a mile above, you might as well be falling onto pavement.

**4.** Take Bigfoot. One stock objection is that for there to be a minimum viable population, there ought to be enough individuals in the woods that if Bigfoot existed, hunters



would have killed or captured a specimen by now. That's not a knock-down argument, but it's one reason to be skeptical.

**5.** In addition, what evidence we'd expect to find (or not) depends on what kind of creature Bigfoot would be, if it exists. For instance, if it's an giant ape that crossed the Bering land bridge during the last Ice Age, then that creates one set of expectations. If, on the other hand, it's supposed to be a hominid, then we might expect it to live in villages with huts, tools, weapons, and campfires.

**6.** A potential line of evidence is American Indian lore about Bigfoot. However, that's complicated:

**i)** The stories I've read aren't confined to Bigfoot but include tales about skinwalkers, Stone Giants, the Windigo, &c. That doesn't refer to natural creatures, but legendary, mythological, or paranormal beings.

Some stories could be campfire tales to deter kids from wandering into the woods unaccompanied, where they might get lost or be attacked by predators.

Likewise, the Indian stories I've read treat Bigfoot as a being with supernatural abilities. So that testimony won't mesh with theories about Old World primates, or hominids.

By the same token, some stories depict Bigfoot as having humanoid intelligence. Even superior to human intelligence. But if that were the case, shouldn't we expect corresponding evidence of cultural artifacts?

**ii)** Another complication is dating the source material. To my knowledge, most Indian tribes were originally preliterate, oral cultures. So that makes it hard to assess

the antiquity of some of these stories, or how much legendary embellishment they may have undergone as they were handed down by word-of-mouth.

Related to that is the cross-pollination of Indian traditions with Caucasian culture. Modern-day Indians are acquainted with the science fiction and horror genre popularized by Hollywood. Likewise, some tales have a suspiciously apocalyptic or environmentalist motif. So there's the question of how much contact with the white man and modern western culture might "contaminate" Indian lore about Bigfoot.

**iii)** In addition, American Indians traditionally practiced pagan witchcraft. If you believe that can tap into genuine occult power, then some of these stories may have a basis in fact. But that involves a different paradigm than primates and hominids.

**7.** Finally, the Resurrection is infinitely more consequential than Bigfoot. If we discovered that Bigfoot exists, that would be very interesting, but it doesn't affect human destiny. By contrast, the Resurrection is all-important. Therefore, there's incomparably more reason to have an informed opinion on the Resurrection than Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, or even alien abductions. In terms of what to study, that takes absolute precedence.

## Trompe-l'œil

I've read or seen three debates in which Mike Licona uses the same illustration: if the audience witnessed him beheaded on stage, then ten minutes later he emerges outside restored to life, and says that while he was in heaven God revealed to him a private conversation with an audience member, to which only the audience member would be privy, would an atheist admit that this was a miracle?

He's using this hypothetical as a wedge tactic to test how fantastically devoted an atheist is to rejecting miraculous explanations. Is there absolutely nothing they'd accept as evidence for a miracle? However, I don't think this is a good illustration to prove his point:

- 1.** Atheists often try to lampoon miracles by concocting preposterous hypotheticals, then ask how you'd respond if your best friend told you he saw that. But biblical miracles aren't equivalent to weird events: biblical miracles are purposeful. They often have a symbolic function.
- 2.** Given what we know about professional magicians (e.g. sawing a lady in half), it would be more reasonable to conclude that the apparent beheading was illusory rather than miraculous.
- 3.** In addition, that's not analogous to biblical miracles like the Resurrection. Appearing to saw a lady in half are elaborately staged, with trick boxes and trap doors, &c. But biblical miracles like the Resurrection did not and could not be staged like that. It wasn't a controlled setting with elaborate preparations and special equipment.

**4.** In addition, Jesus reportedly appeared to many people at different times, locations, angles, and lighting conditions.

**5.** In fairness, Licona added a veridical element regarding supernatural or paranormal knowledge about a private conversation. However, that's logically independent of the beheading hypothetical.

**6.** That said, in both debates, Licona's atheist opponent took the position that it's more plausible, or at least as plausible, to conclude that recovering from decapitation is naturally possible than to concede a miracle. Yet atheists routinely deny the possibility of miracles because they define a miracle as a violation of natural law, and they treat any alternative explanation as more plausible than breaking a nature law. Problem is that atheists try to have it both ways:

**i)** A reported miracle didn't happen because that would break a natural law

Or

**ii)** If it did happen, that means it was naturally possible after all.

But that's a heads I win, tails you lose gimmick.

## Faith and providence

The standard objection to Calvinism is that predestination implicates God in evil. I've fielded that objection on multiple occasions, so I won't rehash my arguments. I will say that it comes down to two stark alternatives:

- i) Every evil happens for a good reason
- ii) Evils happen for no good reason

Whichever box you check, it will be a hard truth.

But now I'd like to draw attention to one of the practical values of predestination. Nabeel Qureshi is a Muslim convert to Christianity. He's become perhaps the most high-profile Christian apologist who specializes in Islam. Lately, he's been struggling with what, if nature takes its course, is terminal cancer. He's done a running series of videos updating his diagnosis and treatment. Here's the latest:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQ2EwVprLHo>

It's painful to watch these videos in chronological order, because he starts out very upbeat and optimistic, but is forced to move the goal post as his prayer for miraculous healing goes unanswered (thus far). In earlier installments, he talked about how Scripture encourages "presumptuous" faith. (What Sam Storms calls "expectant faith"). He said in light of this that he must believe God has in fact healed him. But sadly, that hasn't happened.

In his latest update he says Jesus healed everyone who came to him, or everyone who was brought to him. He

infers from this that it is God's will to heal everyone.

The problem with Nabeel's position is that, despite the best of intentions, his setup means faith in Scripture is bound to lose. Even though he knows in advance that God doesn't miraculously heal everyone, or every Christian, he's pitting Scripture against undeniable experience to the contrary. But that guarantees confusion and disappointment at best, and bitter disillusionment at worst.

What he needs is a more robust theology of providence. It's a false dichotomy to pit Scripture against providence. To some degree, we can infer God's will from providence. For providence mirrors God's decretive will. The past is the record of God's plan for the world, up to that point.

So there's nothing faithless about inferring that it's not God's will to miraculously heal everyone, or every Christian in particular, from the fact that God doesn't heal everyone. History in itself, is a reflection of God's will.

I'd also point out that Nabeel's appeal to the Gospels is misleading, even though that's not his intention. Assuming that Jesus healed everyone who came to him, or everyone who was brought to him, that's an infinitesimal fraction of all the ailing people whom he didn't heal. Most people didn't come to Jesus for healing for the simple reason that most people didn't know he existed. Outside the ambit of Judea and Samaria, he was unknown. So consider all the ailing people who never had an opportunity to seek him out for healing. Not to mention people living on other continents.

And that's just in reference to his public 2-3 year ministry. Consider the multiplied millions of people throughout human history whom God hasn't healed, both before and

after the Incarnation. So Nabeel's sample is quite unrepresentative.

Which is not to deny that some people are miraculously healed. But he's framed the issue in such a way that faith in Scripture will inevitably be dashed by rude experience. That's a recipe for professing Christians to become alienated from the faith. They had a false expectation, based on their misunderstanding of Scripture. When that collides with unyielding reality, they lose their faith. Or, at the very least, suffer a crisis of faith.

## Deflecting miracles

I've run across the following strategies which MacArthurites use to deny modern miracles:

**i)** They say we have is no objective evidence for modern miracles. For instance, we have no medical verification. All we have are reports from dark-skinned, beetle-browed Third-World primitives.

You then ask what literature the MacArthurite has studied in modern miracles. Oftentimes, they act as if that's an outlandish demand.

**ii)** When confronted with evidence countering their denial (e.g. medical verification), one fallback strategy is to distinguish between mediate and immediate miracles. They deny the occurrence of modern miracles involving human agency.

Now, there are certainly cases in which that's a valid distinction. However, there are other cases where that distinction breaks down. Take Jas 5:15-16. To say that doesn't involve human agency is special pleading.

Of course, a MacArthurite could add further caveats to exempt a Jas 5:15-16 case, but that would be evasive. In that event they are devising ad hoc criteria to preemptively screen out any evidence which would falsify their claims. It parallels methodological atheism. Whenever your demand is met, move the goal post.

**iii)** Another fallback strategy is to admit the miracle, but say it's the wrong kind of miracle. It doesn't rise to the level



of a Biblical miracle. So the admission becomes a throwaway concession.

There are problems with that maneuver. Biblical miracles are not all of a kind. Is the floating ax-head or the coin in the fish's mouth on the same plane as raising Lazarus or surviving in a furnace?

Anyway, isn't the issue whether an event rises to the level of a miracle, not whether it rises to the level of an extra special miracle? The contrast is supposed to be between modern miracles and their nonoccurrence, not between different kinds of occurrent modern miracles.

**iv)** A related fallback is to admit the miracle, but discount it because it's not an "undeniable" miracle.

One problem with that strategy is the ambiguity of the key term. Does "undeniable" mean:

**a)** A miracle which no one *should* deny?

or

**b)** A miracle which no one *would* deny?

A MacArthurite can't mean (b), because that would discredit every Biblical miracle at one stroke. After all, there are millions of unbelievers who deny Biblical miracles.

So that leaves (a): A miracle which no reasonable person will deny. A miracle which nobody ought to deny.

If so, a MacArthurite needs to explain why it's reasonable for him to deny the miracle in question.

**v)** A final fallback strategy is to admit the miracle, but classify it as a demonic miracle. There is some biblical precedent for that category.

However, there also happens to be biblical precedent for misattributing the work of the Spirit to the work of the devil (Mt 12:22-32). If a MacArthurite is so bent on denying modern miracles that he'd always opt for a demonic attribution over a divine attribution, then he'd attribute a miracle to the devil even if God is its source.

In addition, God is behind some demonic miracles (e.g. 1 Sam 16:14). So those aren't always mutually exclusive attributions.

## Reviewing reviews of the Licona/Dillahunty debate

I'd like to make a few more observations about James White's review of the Licona/Dillahunty debate. That's because his review goes to the question of how to interpret presuppositionalism and differentiate presuppositionalism from evidentialism. White was actually siding with the atheist by saying that in some of his exchanges with Licona, Dillahunty was "knocking the ball out of the park".

**1.** It isn't clear what White's position is on the occult and the paranormal. Does he deny the occurrence of non-Christian miracles (and other suchlike)? Licona wasn't appealing to that evidence to adjudicate rival religious claims, but to adjudicate the contrast between naturalism and supernaturalism. White doesn't appear to grasp the actual state of the argument.

Likewise, we need to be clear on what certain phenomena attest. If, say, some modern-day exorcisms prove the existence of demons, that doesn't mean you should become a devil-worshipper. If, say, some modern-day cases of witchcraft prove the power of sorcery, that doesn't mean you could become a Satanist. Where do I sign up? Corroborative evidence for the dark side doesn't attest it in the sense that you ought join the dark side. A validation is not necessarily a recommendation.

**2.** White faulted Licona for failing to challenge Dillahunty's creatureliness. He said Licona granted that Dillahunty has the right to judge God. Granted the grounds. White said Licona failed to point out that atheists like Dillahunty don't have the right to make such determinations. They have no

basis for their reasons. White appealed to Rom 1. This raises a number of distinct issues:

**i)** In a debate over the existence of God, or some related issue, a Christian apologist can't directly appeal to divine authority for the obvious reason that God's existence is the very question at issue. In a debate with an atheist over God's existence (or some related issue), a Christian apologist is assuming a burden of proof for the sake of argument. And at that stage of the argument, God's existence has yet to be established, so it would be premature and question-begging to cite divine authority at that preliminary stage of the argument. God's existence is the conclusion of the argument.

This doesn't mean the onus is on the Christian. Both sides have a burden of proof in that format.

**ii)** That said, a Christian can certainly challenge the atheist's moral authority. Indeed, many secular thinkers concede that naturalism cannot justify moral realism.

**iii)** In addition, this was in reference to Dillahunty's allusion to the argument from divine hiddenness. That, however, is not a case of the atheist standing in judgment over God. Rather, divine hiddenness argument proposes to be an internal critique of Christianity. It alleges that Christian theology is inconsistent, for if God wants everyone to believe in him, he could make himself more evident to everyone.

**iv)** There are, of course, ways to counter the divine hiddenness argument. Dillahunty was begging the question by asserting that the evidence for the Resurrection is insufficient.

**v)** Moreover, as White correctly observed, the divine hiddenness argument is premised on assumptions specific to freewill theism rather than Calvinism. Therefore, it has no purchase on Calvinism.

**vi)** Finally, this was just a diversionary tactic on Dillahunty's part. Instead of directly engaging the evidence adduced by Licona, Dillahunty deflects attention away from that issue by changing the subject. But the divine hiddenness argument is not a refutation of Licona's specific evidence for the Resurrection, or for the supernatural. So that's just a decoy.

**3.** White acts as though Licona's appeal to paranormal phenomena was meant to be direct evidence for the Resurrection. Does White fail to grasp the fact that Licona is mounting a two-stage argument? The purpose of his appeal to evidence for supernaturalism is not to directly prove the Resurrection, but to establish the possibility of the Resurrection, by ruling out naturalism.

**4.** White objected to Licona's appeal to probabilities. White said that when the Apostles preach the Resurrection, they treat that event, not as merely probable, but absolutely established. But this, again, raises a number of distinct issues:

**i)** In general, there's often a difference between what can be known and what can be proved. There are many situations in which what we can demonstrate falls short of what we know to be the case. Put another way, there's an elementary distinction between being justified in what you believe and being able to justify what you believe.

For instance, I have many memories of now-deceased relatives. I know I had those conversations. I know we did

those things. But I have no corroborative evidence. Memories are all that's left.

**ii)** In addition, this runs deeper than apologetic methodology. It concerns epistemology. There are competing theories about knowledge and justified belief. For instance, there's a Puritan paradigm, exemplified by John Owen and the Westminster Divines, according to which it's possible for Christians to attain "infallible" assurance regarding the veracity of the Christian faith. On the other hand, there's a moderate Anglican paradigm, exemplified by John Locke and Bishop Butler, which stresses probability rather than certainty. Having "reasonable" grounds for what we believe. You have Augustine's divine illumination model, Pascal's "the heart has reasons which reason knows nothing of," the Thomistic dichotomy between demonstrable truths and articles of faith, Newman's illative sense. And so on and so forth. There are many divergent models regarding the relationship between faith and reason.

Licona himself is on record admitting that he periodically struggles with doubts about the truth of Christianity. So for him, it's not so much about apologetic method or philosophy, but his personal frame of reference. In his case, that's unfortunate.

**5.** White noted that the way Dillahunty frames the divine hiddenness argument seems to be influenced by Molinism, with its gallery of possible worlds. White countered that God is not a cosmic card dealer.

I agree. I'd note, however, that modal metaphysics is hardly the exclusive provenance of Molinism. Calvinists can and should believe in possible worlds. But we ground these differently than Molinists.

**6.** White took issue with Licona's statement that we need to let the data challenge our presuppositions, challenge our current worldview. Now, it's unclear how far Licona would take that.

**i)** It isn't possible to suspend all your presuppositions. As an intellectual exercise, you can bracket or scrutinize some of your presuppositions. But you can't simultaneously bracket or scrutinize all your presuppositions, since you must use some beliefs as a standard of comparison to assess other beliefs. By the same token, you can't assess evidence apart from presuppositions, since evaluation requires norms. You must have rules of evidence. You must have an idea of what constitutes evidence.

**ii)** That said, I think the intended context of Licona's remarks concerns Dillahunty's methodological atheism. He resorts to methodological atheism as a filter to screen out any and all lines of evidence that disconfirm atheism. As a result, Dillahunty is a secular fideist.

**iii)** That brings us to the point that while presuppositions are unavoidable, not all presuppositions are justified. Some presuppositions are ad hoc or intellectually evasive.

**7.** White accused Licona of adopting a "naturalistic, materialistic" historiography by appealing to the paranormal. But that's a complete misrepresentation of Licona's argument. Licona's appeal is the polar opposite: he is citing that kind of evidence to debunk naturalism and physicalism.

Likewise, White completely missed the point of Licona's example about bridge hands. This goes to the question of prior probabilities. What are the odds that you will be dealt a winning bridge hand like that? Licona's point is that even

though there's the outside chance, an abstract mathematically possibility, that something that astronomically unlikely will happen at random, that's not the first explanation we reach for. Rather, we suspect cheating. The deck was stacked. And Licona is using that as an analogy for the Resurrection.

**8.** White condemned Licona for saying his argument wasn't predicated on God's existence. But that objection is confused.

**i)** To begin with, there's a logical difference between a premise and a presupposition. A presupposition is not a premise of an argument.

**ii)** In addition, many things may be necessary for anything particular thing to be the case, but they needn't all figure in your argument. For instance, how would you prove that Lincoln was assassinated? Consider how many other facts must be true for that particular fact to be true. It happened at Ford's Theatre. Does that mean you must prove the existence of Ford's Theatre? Ford's Theater is located in Washington, DC. Does that mean you must prove the existence of Washington, DC (in the mid 19C)? Booth was the assassin. Does that mean you must prove the identity of the assassin? It happened on April 14, 1865. Does that mean you must prove the reality of time? To be shot to dead, Lincoln had to be a physical organism. Must we prove that first?

At what point do we break into the argument? We necessarily come to the claim, or come into the argument, with many presuppositions that we take for granted. But as a rule, all you need to prove Lincoln's assassination is period documentation. Testimonial evidence.





## The hand is quicker than the eye

Unbelievers often say there's no evidence for God's existence. Among other things, that turns on what counts as evidence. Let's take a few examples:

*The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord (Prov 16:33).*

*12 "Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death. 13 But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place to which he may flee (Exod 21:12-13).*

*19 And Micaiah said, "Therefore hear the word of the Lord: I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left; 20 and the Lord said, 'Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?' And one said one thing, and another said another. 21 Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, 'I will entice him.' 22 And the Lord said to him, 'By what means?' And he said, 'I will go out, and*

*will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ And he said, ‘You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.’ 23 Now therefore behold, the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the Lord has declared disaster for you.”*

*29 So the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat the king of Judah went up to Ramoth-gilead. 30 And the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, “I will disguise myself and go into battle, but you wear your robes.” And the king of Israel disguised himself and went into battle. 31 Now the king of Syria had commanded the thirty-two captains of his chariots, “Fight with neither small nor great, but only with the king of Israel.” 32 And when the captains of the chariots saw Jehoshaphat, they said, “It is surely the king of Israel.” So they turned to fight against him. And Jehoshaphat cried out. 33 And when the captains of the chariots saw that it was not the king of Israel, they turned back from pursuing him. 34 But a certain man drew his bow at random and struck the king of Israel between the scale armor and*

the breastplate. Therefore he said to the driver of his chariot, "Turn around and carry me out of the battle, for I am wounded." 35 And the battle continued that day, and the king was propped up in his chariot facing the Syrians, until at evening he died. And the blood of the wound flowed into the bottom of the chariot (1 Kings 22:19-23,29-35).

8 Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, 9 according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. 11 And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. 12 And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. 13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. 14 And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15

for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. 16 And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, 17 and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

18 And Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” 19 And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 20 And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time.” 21 And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple. 22 And when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the temple. And he kept

*making signs to them and remained mute. 23  
And when his time of service was ended, he went  
to his home (Lk 1:8-23).*

These are what are called coincidence miracles. Outwardly, they may seem indistinguishable from chance events. But they're too "lucky" to be random.

These examples remind me of some lines from *The Cincinnati Kid*:

BILL

"Could" isn't good enough for a man who hates to lose money as much as I do. He's going to need help -- from the best man with a pack of cards between Omaha and New Orleans.

SHOOTER

Not a chance, Bill. You ought to know I never ever use what I got with the cards for nothing but tricks and dressing up a game.

SHOOTER

I made up my mind to this. I ain't going to give him any help till he needs it.

THE KID

Now, just what the hell are you trying to pull?

SHOOTER

Nothing -- what are you talking about?

THE KID

You, Shooter Man -- you been feeding me cards for an hour.

SHOOTER

Even if I was you couldn't spot it -- I'm too good a mechanic for anybody to spot it.

THE KID

But I was looking for it, Shooter -- four times you give me the cards I need.

SHOOTER

You seen it before often enough. One player draws four good ones.

THE KID

Never in a game when I been told ahead the dealer has a stake in my coming out on top.

SHOOTER

Kid, you got to understand. It wasn't my idea --

THE KID

Well who the hell's was it then -- Schlaegel? --

### SHOOTER

He's got the squeeze on me Kid and he's meaner than hell. He'll cut me up if I don't come through.

You think I wanted to deal a phony game? You think it don't mean something to me? I never done a crooked thing before in my life.

### THE KID

Now you get straight on this. No fix. You come along straight or I blow it wide open.

Shooter is a cardsharp. Because he's such a deft "mechanic," you can't spot him stacking the deck. The hand is quicker than the eye.

But even if you can't detect the process by which he stacks the deck, you can detect the effect of his shuffling. And you can reason back from the effect to the mind behind the nonrandom process that's invisibly guiding the outcome.

Likewise, even if there were no direct evidence for God's existence, it would still be possible to infer his existence from events that are too coincidental to be random. Events which may appear to be natural events, chance events, which carry private significance to the parties concerned.

Cf. Arthur Koestler, "Anecdotal Cases," Alister Hardy, Robert Harvie, & Arthur Koestler, **THE CHALLENGE OF CHANCE** (Random House 1974), 167-224.



## III. Biblical miracles

---

## Feeding the multitude

*And God said, "Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens." So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day (Gen 1:20-23).*

*Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves." But Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They said to him, "We have only five loaves here and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and*

*the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children (Mt 14:15-21).*

Many professing Christians subscribe to theistic evolution. From what I can tell, that's the default position in modern Catholicism. There are also some "evangelicals" like John J. Davis and Alister McGrath who represent that position.

Some Darwinian theists are more conservative than others. For example, you have Darwinian theists who deny the historicity of the creation account, but affirm the historicity of Jesus' miracles. For example, although they'd deny the historicity of Gen 1, they'd never presume to deny the feeding of the multitude.

But this raises some interesting questions. Take the creation account of fish in **Gen 1:20-23**. A Darwinian theist will deny that this is how fish actually originated.

Rather, he believes that fish originated through a long evolutionary process. And he believes that because he thinks the scientific evidence points in that direction. However, he also believes that Jesus miraculously multiplied two fish.

Now we don't know exactly what the additional fish were like that Jesus made by instantaneous fiat. But they were probably duplicates of the two fish. Just like you could catch in the Sea of Galilee.

Suppose you were an evolutionary ichthyologist who traveled back in time to this event. Suppose you examined one of the miraculous fish—only you didn't know it was a miraculous fish.

Could you tell the difference between the miraculous fish and a normal fish from the Sea of Galilee? No. All the evidence would point to a fish from the Sea of Galilee.

What is more, the miraculous fish would look just like fish that had gone through all of the preliminary stages in the lifecycle to reach that point. Its parents had mated. It started out as a fish egg. And so on.

But, of course, none of that would actually apply to the miraculous fish.

What is more, not only would the miraculous fish resemble a fish with a personal history, but, of course, that history would be continuous with the history of all its ancestors. The generations of fish which came before it.

But, of course, none of that would actually apply to the miraculous fish.

What is more, our evolutionary ichthyologist would explain to us that this fish was a "living fossil"—insofar as a modern fish bears the telltale traces of its evolutionary past. A living record of the past. Of prior adaptations leading up to a modern fish. Not only does this fish have a personal history, from its conception forward, but it evidences the evolutionary history of its species. To get to this fish, you have to go back millions of years through all of the

intervening stages in evolutionary development.

But, of course, none of that would actually apply to the miraculous fish.

What is more, our evolutionary ichthyologist would explain to us that this fish evidences the common ancestry of man and fish, for human blood shares the same basic salt content as fish blood.

But, of course, none of that would actually apply to the miraculous fish.

The presumptive history lying behind the miraculous fish turns out to be nonexistent. All of the "scientific evidence" amounts to evidence of something that never happened.

So the position of a conservative Darwinian theist seems to generate a dilemma. Why treat the multiplication of fish as factual while treating the initial creation of fish as fictitious?

## Entertaining angels unawares

JD WALTERS SAID:

*"There's plenty of Christian silliness to go around. Think of televangelists who sell blessed 'healing handkerchiefs' or 'miracle wafers'. Think of Christian groups that refuse to use modern medicine and have their children die as a result. It's not as if there's a few Christians tainted by bad experience with supernatural claims and the rest are lily-white innocents who happen to have chanced on exactly the right combination of beliefs, so they don't have to worry about being critical of such claims. Every Christian should be equipped to critically test other people's claims. Even if Scripture is (rightly) part of that critical apparatus, the Christian must exercise reason to properly interpret Scripture and apply it to claims she encounters."*

How is that supposed to create a general presumption against the occurrence of miracles (or, conversely, a presumption favoring naturalistic explanations)? Your illustrations undercut the principle, for the presumption is only as good as the examples you cite to illustrate your objection. But, in that event, it doesn't turn on taking a presumptive stand, but judging individual claims on the merits of the case.

In cases involving manifest charlatans or deluded cult-members, then of course we're justified in dismissing their testimony. That goes to the type of witness, which also goes to the credibility of the witness. The credibility of a claim has always been tied to the credibility of the claimant. That applies with equal force to claims about ordinary events.

To “critically test” miracle claims doesn’t mean we treat every miracle claim as suspect unless and until it is proven otherwise—any more than we treat every mundane claim as suspect unless and until it is proven otherwise. A liar is just as prone to lie about something mundane as he is to lie about something miraculous.

Had Abraham slammed the door on the divine foot ([Gen 18:1-10](#); [Heb 13:2](#)), he would have missed out on God’s gracious promise. Don’t flee into the arms of David Hume to escape the clutches of Elmer Gantry. In the end, one is just as diabolical as the other.

## Balaam the seer

In the past I've explored the possibility that the talking donkey episode (Num12) is a vision:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/07/balaams-vision.html>

That interpretation goes back to Maimonides. As I think about it, there's an additional argument for that interpretation. The reason Balak hires Balaam to hex Israel is due to Balaam's reputation as a seer. It would therefore make ironic sense for Yahweh to give Balaam a humiliating satirical vision. Here's a renown heathen diviner, but in the vision he's outwitted by a talking mule! Reputed to be a seer and visionary, but the only vision he's granted is a scene that casts him in the role of a blind blithering fool. That's poetic justice. Turning Balaam's "gift" against him.



## From doubt to doubt

In a recent book by John Suk, **NOT SURE: A PASTOR'S JOURNEY FROM FAITH TO DOUBT**, we are treated to a memoir-ish sketch of one pastor's formerly firm foundation in the faith into suppressed doubts into doubts in the open, and now from his blog I have learned that he has chosen to resign his ministerial credentials in the Christian Reformed Church.

Irony: many pastors know the condition of serving people when the pastor can seemingly jump out of the scene, examine it all, and wonder if it make sense. Suk's problems, discussed piercingly in his chp on "Postmodern Faith," was not only the cosmopolitan relativism but learning creation stories in the Ancient Near East, and the sense of imminency in the New Testament, the politics of the Nicene Creed...

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2012/07/20/when-pastors-doubt/>

- i) The CRC is pretty liberal to begin with. So is Calvin College and Seminary. Hence, Suk's odyssey is less a journey from faith to doubt than a journey from lesser doubt to greater doubt.
- ii) McKnight is alluding to pp62-63 of Suk's book. It's as if Suk never read the Bible before he attended seminary.
- iii) There are good treatments on comparative mythology, such as John Oswalt's **THE BIBLE AMONG THE MYTHS**.

**iv)** But what about Gen 1-2 in relation to ANE creation stories? Was Suk surprised to discover the existence of ANE creation stories? If so, why would that surprise him? Don't most cultures have creation stories?

**v)** Moreover, even if Gen 1-2 share some generic motifs in common with other ANE creation stories, how does that cast doubt on the factuality of Gen 1-2?

To begin with, this is a description of the natural world. The type of world which the audience inhabited. To the extent that the story has primitive features, that's because it's describing a primitive world. That's what the world was really like back then.

It's also not surprising if Gen 1-2 shared some literary characteristics in common with the genre of ANE creation stories.

For modern readers, who inhabit a fairly artificial world, with fast food and HVAC microclimates—from the home to the car to the business, &c., Gen 1-2 may seem a bit alien to us.

Yet you'd expect a realistic creation account, addressed to people living in the ANE, to talk about day and night, morning and evening, summer and winter, seedtime and harvest, rain, floodplains, river valleys, wild animals, game animals, livestock, sun, moon, stars, fish, fruit-trees, dirt, breath, and so on. Both fictitious and factual creation stories set in the ANE would include many of the same basic ingredients.

If most of us were still ranchers or farmers, we'd find nothing fictitious or mythical about these elements. Of course, the Biblical accounts have some supernatural

elements as well, but that's only mythological on the prior assumption that God, angels, and evil spirits don't exist. That miracles don't happen.

Keep in mind, too, that once the garden of Eden was planted and furnished, everything would seem quite natural. There's no evidence that God or angels paid visits on a regular basis. God appears in judgment. The cherubim appear in judgment.

## Is the Resurrection special?

Christian apologists often treat the Resurrection as if that's a uniquely important miracle. In one sense that's true, in another sense that's not the case.

Many apologists focus on the Resurrection for two reasons;

**i)** They think that's the best-attested miracle. That's the easiest to defend. They can make a case for the Resurrection.

**ii)** That's a lynchpin miracle. If you can prove the Resurrection, then you can prove more than the Resurrection because the Resurrection has larger implications. The Resurrection becomes a proof for other things.

There's an element of truth to that, although it's overstated. For instance, the multiplication of food is recorded in all four Gospels.

In addition, the Exodus is multiple-attested in the OT. Not just in the Pentateuch, but the Psalter. And given how many people participated in the Exodus, we'd expect there to be independent chains of testimony. Family lore that passed down from descendants of that event, including the Psalmists.

In another respect, all miracles share a common principle. Events beyond the scope of nature to produce. In that regard, the Resurrection is not in a class apart from other nature miracles.

There's another sense in which the Incarnation and Resurrection are fairly unique types of miracles. Most biblical miracles are about life in this world. Things that happen within our world. Things that happen in the course of life.

By contrast, the Incarnation and Resurrection are like two sides of the same door. A door between two worlds. The Incarnation bears witness to an entry point from a larger reality outside our world into our world. A point of contact.

Conversely, the Resurrection bears witness to an exit from our world to the next world, and back again. Passing out of this life, this world, into the next world, then returning—but with a difference. From mortal life through death to immortality.

So these are mirrored miracles. Entry and exit—pointing to a world beyond our world. To a hope beyond our world. A world outside our world which is the source of life and goodness in our world.

## Did God Zap Ananias and Sapphira?

This is one of the stranger interpretations I've run across:

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/bibleandculture/2019/01/28/did-god-zap-ananias-and-sapphira/>

According to BW3, It doesn't involve God at all. God is not an actor in this story.

To begin with, how was Peter privy to their deception? Isn't there the unstated implication that he has supernatural knowledge of their deception? Doesn't the fact that Peter knew this was coming imply supernatural prescience?

Statistically speaking, how many people in honor/shame cultures drop dead when they are shamed?

And what a coincidence that both the husband and wife drop dead of a heart attack when they were exposed. A synchronized heart attack!

BW3 would make an interesting homicide detective.

## Holy hexing

We ordinarily associate hexing people with witchcraft. Ezk 13:17-23 is a classic example. However, here's a Christian example:

*6 They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, 7 who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. 8 But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. 9 Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, 10 "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? 11 Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun."*

*Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead*

*him by the hand (Acts 13:6-11).*

**i)** Paul curses Elymas with blindness. There may be some caustic irony in that. Since Elymas is a sorcerer, Paul repays him in kind by hexing the hexer! Like Balaam, Elymas may have made his living in part by cursing people his clients paid him to neutralize. But now he finds himself on the receiving end of poetic justice.

**ii)** It's hard to find a direct parallel to this elsewhere in Scripture. Elijah summoning lightning to incinerate the soldiers (2 Kgs 1:10-12) is somewhat analogous. A closer parallel is the angels blinding the Sodomites (Gen 19:11).

**iii)** This raises the question of whether God endowed Paul with the direct power to hex someone. Or is it a case where Paul expects God to back up the pronouncement of judgment? Is this a question of ability or authority?

**iv)** This also raises the question of how Paul's action jives with the "love your enemy" ethic. Perhaps, though, that's a question of *whose* enemy? Elymas wasn't Paul's enemy in the sense that he was in no position to harm Paul. Rather, by opposing Paul, he was an enemy of the lost. He hindered the Proconsul and his retinue from hearing the Gospel. By hexing Elymas, Paul created an opening for the Gospel.

This incident may also shed light on the interpretation of the judgment miracle that befell Ananias and Sapphira:

*5 Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. 2 With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part*



of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

3 Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? 4 Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."

5 When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. 6 Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

7 About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"

"Yes," she said, "that is the price."

9 Peter said to her, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the

*men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.”*

*10 At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband (Acts 5:1-10).*

**i)** Did Peter, like Paul, hex them? That's less clear. There's nothing in the scene with Ananias to indicate that. But the scene with Sapphira has a twist. Why did Peter predict that she'd suffer the same fate as her husband? Was he naturally assuming that since she was guilty of the same offense, God would strike her dead as well? Or did he have a revelation of God's punitive intentions? Or did Peter cause them to drop dead?

**ii)** Suppose, for argument's sake, that a Christian has the ability to hex someone. Are there any circumstances in which he should exercise that ability? If it's wrong to do so, would God override the curse? Put another way, if it succeeds, does that imply divine endorsement—like Elijah and St. Paul?

**iii)** Assuming that's ever justifiable, I think it ought to be reserved for cases of extreme provocation—like officious employees at the DMV!

## Did the Nile turn to blood?

Commentators are divided on whether the plague of blood has reference to literal blood. Stuart points out that the same Hebrew word is a synonym for the color red.

Duane Garrett has a 5-point argument that it isn't actually hemoglobin. For instance, he points out that the Egyptians used sand as a filtration device to make the river water drinkable. But that would be futile if it was hemoglobin. I agree with most of his arguments. But here's one I find more dubious:

Had the whole river turned to literal blood, it would have been a catastrophe of unimaginable proportions. The Nile in Egypt is almost 600 miles long. If it had all become literal blood under the Egyptian sun, the whole river would have become a thick, decaying sludge of biological waste. No potable water would have been available for the entire population for months or even years. It is difficult to calculate how long it would have taken waters from the sources of the Nile far to the south in Ethiopia to wash away the tens of millions of gallons of blood as well as the coagulated and decomposing remains of that blood. D. Garrett, **A**

**COMMENTARY ON EXODUS** (Kregel 2014), 284-5.

Although I agree with Stuart and Garrett that the miracle probably didn't mean God changed the water into hemoglobin, I don't think that's a good objection:

i) Does the account require the Nile, throughout the length of Egypt, to be affected? Contextually, the description is

centered on a stretch of the Nile near the palace and thereabouts. Pharaoh and his entourage are the primary audience for this plague. To be sure, 7:20-21 describes the plague in comprehensive terms, but that's hyperbolic since most of Egypt is desert.

**ii)** Even if it was more extensive, why assume that the plague is supernaturally produced but naturally resolved? If God supernaturally changes the water to hemoglobin (or whatever), the cessation of the plague might just as well or better involve God supernaturally changing it back to water. Miraculous contamination followed by miraculous restoration.

**iii)** Even if we grant for argument's sake that it wasn't supernaturally restored, the Nile is a dynamic system, not a self-enclosed lake. Not only is it flushed into the ocean from upstream, but I assume that in the Delta region the Nile is to some degree a tidal river, subject to coastal intrusion. So the "blood" would be diluted or replaced from both ends—provided that the affected area was fairly confined (i).

## Fire from heaven

*38 Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench (1 Kgs 18:38).*

**i)** What kind of "fire" fell from heaven? An obvious candidate is lightning. If so, this might well be a case of polemical theology. Baal was a storm god, so when Yahweh backs up his own prophet (Elijah) by raining thunderbolts on the burnt offering, in a showdown with the priest of Baal, that publicly humiliates the reputation of Baal.

**ii)** Perhaps, then, we should visualize a storm cloud suddenly, spontaneously forming over the burnt offering. That's all the more striking given the drought.

## Flaming ministers

*“He makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire” (Heb 1:7).*

**1.** Angels are common agents in Scripture, but is there any empirical evidence for angels? To my knowledge, this is a neglected topic. Is there anything more reliable than New Age or RadTrad Catholic sites?

One potential source of information is a book by Emma Heathcote-James, **SEEING ANGELS: TRUE CONTEMPORARY ACCOUNTS OF HUNDREDS OF ANGELIC EXPERIENCES** (London: John Blake, 2001). That's based on her doctoral dissertation at the University of Birmingham, which drew on 800 firsthand accounts. Given the academic background, it's a more reputable source than a lot of stuff on the subject. She's not obviously flakey.

**2.** The book quotes and summarizes scores of reported angelic apparitions and related phenomena. I assess it the same way I assess reported miracles generally. I make allowance for flimflam, coincidence, wishful thinking. There is, though, a degree of cumulative credibility based on multiple independent reports of similar phenomena. One has to be a knee-jerk skeptic to dismiss all of it out of hand. What may be implausible in isolation becomes plausible if repeated by different observers at different times and place.

If it's a question of establishing whether something exists or ever happens, the bar is quite low. How much does it take

to disprove a universal negative? Not much.

**i)** Atheists trap themselves in circular reasoning. They discount reported angelic apparitions (and other supernatural phenomena) because there's no evidence that angels exist. And what's the evidence that angels don't exist? It can't very well be absence of reported angelic apparitions.

Only if we know in advance that angels don't exist are we entitled to automatically disregard eyewitness accounts of their existence. We have to know what the world is like, a world where angels don't exist. But how do we know what the world is like? That's something we discover, and reported phenomena contribute to our knowledge of the world. It's viciously circular to discount reported angelic apparitions on the grounds that such reports can never count as evidence for the claim in question.

It's not as if there's evidence against the existence of angels which must be overcome by sufficient counterevidence. At best one might attempt to claim that there's insufficient evidence. But one can't justifiably claim there's no evidence, then use that to dismiss ostensible evidence to the contrary. The claim that there's no evidence for something is highly vulnerable to disconfirmation. The threshold for disproof is extremely low. All you need is some positive evidence.

One doesn't have to believe every anecdote in her book. If even a handful are true, that's enough.

There's a funny story about Laplace, the famous mathematician and scientist of the French Enlightenment. He didn't believe in meteorites. Farmers told him they saw

rocks fall from the sky, but he waved that aside as backward superstition. He closed his mind to the evidence.

**ii)** You also have cessationists who are impervious to testimonial evidence. But that's a dangerous place to be in. If extraordinary and miraculous things only happen in Scripture, while nothing like that happens outside the pages of Scripture, that creates a troublesome hiatus between what Scripture says is real and reality as you and others experience it. I'm not suggesting that every Christian, or even most Christians, need to experience something extraordinary or miraculous. But it's a problem to drive a wedge between the world of Scripture and the world outside of Scripture.

**3.** One superficial problem with the book is the classification system. She puts all reports in one angelic basket. That's in part because her informants have limited categories, so they describe an experience in angelic terms even if it's not specifically angelic. The book records a number of phenomena which are not necessarily or even probably angelic, although they are (if true) supernatural:

**i)** Audible voice

That could be God speaking directly to someone.

**ii)** Christophany

A few cases appear to be Christophanies rather than angelophanies.

**iii)** Shekinah

Many of her informants describe supernatural light. Although angels can be luminous, many of these reports



don't envision or depict an angelic figure, but just supernatural light. So that could be a luminous theophany, like the Shekinah.

**iv)** Many cases aren't angelic apparitions, but apparitions of the dead. Grief apparitions and crisis apparitions. At least one case suggests bilocation.

**v)** Some cases involve near-death or out-of-body experiences.

**vi)** Generic miraculous intervention. Could be direct divine action.

**4.** Some of the reputed angels look human. Their angelic identity is implied, not by their appearance, but by their supernatural abilities.

Other reputed apparitions correspond to traditional Christian iconography. That could mean the apparition is imaginary—unless angels accommodate expectations, based on Western religious art, to be recognizable.

**5.** She doesn't always identify the religious affiliation, if any, of the informant, but in many cases her informants profess to be Christian. In a few cases they were unbelievers for whom the encounter is a spiritual catalyst.

**6.** The nature of the angelic apparitions and other phenomena vary, although they revolve around common situations.

**i)** Miraculous intervention to protect people in danger

**ii)** Guidance for people who are (physically) lost

**iii)** Encouragement during a time of crisis. A deathbed experience. Angelic visitations to the sick or dying. Or luminous theophanies rather than angelophanies.

**iv)** Supernatural warnings and premonitory dreams.

**7.** One intriguing case involved a visual apparition to someone congenitally blind.

It's an interesting book. I wouldn't stake my life on it, but I find much of it credible.

## Healing touch

31 Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. 32 And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. 33 And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. 34 And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." 35 And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly (Mk 7:31-35).

22 And they came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him. 23 And he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Do you see anything?" 24 And he looked up and said, "I see people, but they look like trees, walking." 25 Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he opened his

*eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly (Mk 8:22-25).*

*As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3 Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. 4 We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. 5 As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." 6 Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud 7 and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing (Jn 9:1-7).*

This is striking for several reasons:

- i)** Jesus could simply will people to be healed, without resort to any means whatsoever. So why are there occasions when he heals by touch?
- ii)** Likewise, why the use of saliva on three different occasions?

**iii)** Commentators find this a bit puzzling. The fact that we have to guess at why Jesus did it this way indicates that Gospel writers aren't inventing stories to illustrate theological claims, for had that been the case, we'd expect the symbolism to be more overt. Rather, they record these details because that's how it happened, and not due to the theological significance, if any, of the details.

**iv)** I don't claim to know the reason, but these incidents are recorded for our benefit, so we should explore the possible reasons. One factor may be that sick and disabled people often suffer from physical isolation. People are more likely to avoid them. Humans are social creatures, and touch is extremely important in human relationships. By physically engaging them, at such a personal level, Jesus is affirming their worth.

**v)** In the first two examples, the narrator mentions that Jesus tried to heal the individuals as privately as possible. One reason might be that he's not treating them like circus animals. He's not trying to prove anything to others by healing them. Rather, he has the sensitivity to heal them in private because he cares about them. They likely already felt stigmatized, and by healing them away from public view, Jesus shields them from the shame of prying eyes and gossipy tongues. Their suffering is nobody's business. In that regard, notice how Jesus restored the daughter of Jairus. Where possible, he sometimes prefers to do these things in a more secluded setting.

**vi)** Because these individuals suffer from sensory deprivation (deaf, blind), Jesus takes a tactile approach. Two can't see him act while a third can't hear him speak, so he comes down to their level, entering their blinkered experience. Expressing solidarity. Leading them out of their predicament by going with them into their predicament.

**vii)** These gestures reinforce the fact that the healing comes from Jesus. A chain of physical continuity. From his mouth to their mouth, his hands to their ears and eyes.

## The Deadliest Catch

*For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth ([Mt 12:40](#)).*

As we approach Easter, it's appropriate to revisit the miracle of Jonah.

i) Some critics classify Jonah as a fictional book because of the miraculous elements, especially his survival inside the fish. From a Christian standpoint that's an illicit reason to reject the historicity of Jonah.

ii) Another approach is to classify Jonah as a fictional satire. That's the tack taken by David Marcus in **FROM BALAAM TO JONAH: ANTI-PROPHETIC SATIRE IN THE HEBREW BIBLE** (Scholars Press 1995).

In Scripture, although sinners are often targets of prophetic satire, sometimes prophets are on the receiving end of satirical barbs. Balaam is a case in point.

In his analysis, a text is a satire if (a) it has an object that it attacks, either directly or indirectly, and (b) it contains an overwhelming abundance of satirical features, including "a mixture of unbelievable elements (absurdities, fantastic situations, grotesqueries, distortions), ironies, ridicule, parody, and rhetorical feature. On that view, Jonah is analogous to **GULLIVER'S TRAVELS** or **DON QUIXOTE**.

And up to a point, Jonah certainly fills the bill. If there was some overriding reason to conclude that Jonah can't be historical, then this would be a respectable alternative. There's nothing inherently wrong with a canonical book that's satirical fiction.

**iii)** That said, this is not a strong argument for classifying Jonah as fictitious. Even if it is satirical, satire is not a fictional genre. Satire is neutral in that respect. A satire can be fiction or nonfiction. Satirists routinely lampoon real people, real events, real institutions, real customs.

**iv)** In addition, scholars don't agree on the satirical character of Jonah. According to one Jewish commentator (Uriel Simon, in the JPS series), Jonah reflects "compassionate irony" rather than "satirical irony. This is a pathos-amplifying sort of humor, "one which looks down on the hero and painfully exposes his failures, but it is forgiving: It sets the hero in his proper place without humiliating him and restores him to his dignity without abasing him" (xxii). The fundamental seriousness of the fugitive prophet and his utter fidelity to himself are meant to arouse the reader's sympathy rather than derision: Jonah is a genuinely pathetic figure in his hopeless struggle with his God (xxi); a desperate fugitive, who is at once bold and stubborn, upright and ludicrous, (xxi).

That's clearly a more sympathetic portrayal. However, these differing approaches aren't necessarily antithetical. Jonah could be a tragic figure in his own mind. Someone who takes himself too seriously. There can be a contrast between his heroic self-image and God making a fool out of Jonah. How he sees himself, and how the reader sees him, from the narrator's viewpoint, can be two very different perspectives.

**v)** Moreover, although Jonah has satirical elements, it isn't pervasively satirical.

**vi)** Also, a modern reader needs to keep in check what he deems to be unbelievable elements (absurdities, fantastic situations), in contrast to what an ancient Jewish reader would deem to be unbelievable. Jonah wasn't written to or for a secular-minded audience.

**vii)** Another problem with classifying the book as fictional is that Scripture views Jonah as a real person, a real prophet ([2 Kgs 14:25](#)).



Moreover, his ministry in 2 Kings dovetails with the setting of the book of Jonah. There is, of course, such a thing as historical fiction. But we have to be careful not to anachronistically project modern examples of that genre back into the OT.

**viii)** Some moderate to conservative scholars defend the miracle on naturalistic grounds, by citing alleged parallels in modern times. I myself find that dubious. I'm no expert, but I doubt a human could naturally survive for more than a few minutes inside the stomach of a marine creature. That's not an oxygen-rich environment. I assume he'd quickly asphyxiate. Moreover, soaking in a vat of gastric acid is not conducive to survival.

This is a case where a natural explanation is less credible than a supernatural explanation.

That said, there are marine creatures large enough to swallow a man whole. That much is naturally possible.

**ix)** I also think a stronger case can be made for the historical interpretation than conservative interpreters generally do. Both proponents and opponents of the miracle typically make the mistake of isolating the miracle from its larger context. But taken in context, this miracle is embedded in a number of realistic features. By "realistic," I mean theologically and psychologically realistic features.

Of course, if you suffer from an a priori antipathy to miracles, this argument won't have any traction, but I'm not addressing people who suffer from that attitude.

*1 Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 2 "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." 3 But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away*

*from the presence of the Lord.*

*4 But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. 5 Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep.*

*6 So the captain came and said to him, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish."*

*7 And they said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.*

**i)** It's realistic that pagan sailors would blame the squall on the displeasure of a god. Pagans ascribe natural forces to the gods. Pagans view natural disasters as punitive events. Indeed, that's not confined to paganism.

**ii)** Moreover, this isn't just a primitive outlook. I sometimes catch episodes of *The Deadliest Catch*, when it airs on TV. Modern captains and their crew can be superstitious. When they have a run of bad luck, they resort to superstitious rituals.

**iii)** Moreover, the idea that God really sent the squall is consistent with Biblical theism.

**iv)** It's realistic that pagan sailors resort to sortilege to finger the culprit. The pagan world was rife with divination. Casting lots was a popular form of pagan divination.

**v)** Furthermore, the idea that God providentially loaded the dice is consistent with Biblical theism.

*8 Then they said to him, "Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation?"*

*And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" 9 And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." 10 Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them.*

*11 Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. 12 He said to them, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you." 13 Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. 14 Therefore they called out to the Lord, "O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you." 15 So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. 16 Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.*

The sailors are in a bind. On the one hand, they'd normally have no compunction about giving a passenger who endangered them the heave-ho. He's to blame for their woe. By getting Jonah off their backs, they get God off their backs.

On the other hand, the situation is complicated by the fact that the culprit is a prophet. They already angered his God by giving the fugitive prophet safe passage. Sure, they didn't know all the details, but in their experience, the gods aren't very discriminating.

Can they kill a prophet with impunity? Or is he sacrosanct? What if killing the prophet would further enrage his God, thereby sealing

their doom? That's their inhibition.

It's a dilemma. Either way, they are mortally imperiled.

*17 And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.*

Having thrown him overboard, what's the expected outcome? If nature was allowed to take its course, in all likelihood he'd drown.

But in that event, Jonah would successfully evade God's command. Indeed, although volunteering to be thrown overboard might seem altruistic, by sacrificing himself to save the sailors, a more cynical interpretation is that this is Jonah's final way of evading God's command. Suicide is his opt-out clause. On that view, this isn't Jonah's confession of guilt and submission to punishment, but another ruse evade God's command. He's provoking the sailors to kill him, because a dead prophet can't preach to the Ninevites.

Pious commentators impute pious motives to Jonah, but that overlooks the fact that Jonah is on the run from God. He gives new meaning to a reluctant prophet.

We don't expect God to let Jonah to defeat his plan for Jonah. The next logical step in the course of events is for God to miraculously preserve the life of his wayward prophet, so that Jonah will be forced to continue and complete his appointed mission.

The miracle of the fish is not an isolated event, but part of a logical sequences of events. The narrative is realistic, both within the Jewish worldview of the narrator as well as the pagan worldview of the sailors.

## Jesus could do no mighty work there

*And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them (Mk 6:5).*

In his commentary, Darrell Bock makes a couple of trenchant observations about this provocative statement. Cf. D. Bock, **MARK** (Cambridge 2015), 202. I'd like to briefly expand on Bock's comments:

**i)** Bock's first point is that in the Gospels, people are usually healed by coming to Jesus or being brought to Jesus. If, however, Jesus faces a wall of animosity in Nazareth, then far fewer people than normal will present themselves to be healed. So it's not about his absolute inability to heal them, but about their refusal to seek him out for healing. Jesus typically leaves it to the ailing individual (or friends and family) to take the initiative.

**ii)** In addition, there's a link between faith, the message, messenger, and healing. Jesus won't make a policy of healing people who aren't open to the Gospel. Physical healing is secondary. That's for this life, whereas salvation is primary—that's for all time. Jesus won't reward hostile unbelief. Accepting the gift but rejecting the giver.

## Miracle battery

*And a great crowd followed him and thronged about him. 25 And there was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, 26 and who had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse. 27 She had heard the reports about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his garment. 28 For she said, "If I touch even his garments, I will be made well." 29 And immediately the flow of blood dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. 30 And Jesus, perceiving in himself that power had gone out from him, immediately turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my garments?" 31 And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing around you, and yet you say, 'Who touched me?'" 32 And he looked around to see who had done it. 33 But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling and fell down before him and told him the whole truth. 34 And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well;*

*go in peace, and be healed of your disease” (Mk 5:24-34).*

**i)** This is an enigmatic passage. On the face of it, this might suggest that Jesus is a supercharged miracle battery. You only have to touch him, and there's an involuntary transfer of miraculous energy, like an electrical current.

**ii)** One thing to keep in mind is that Mark uses "power" (dynamis) as a synonym for "miracle". So we could translate v30, "a miracle went out from him". It's not that he contains miraculous energy, but rather, he's a source of miracles.

**iii)** In the OT, some objects are "sacred" objects. They've been consecrated for sacred use, and there's an automatic cause/effect relation if they are misused. An example is the ark of the covenant. If that's mishandled, the result is fatal (2 Sam 6:6-10). It's not because there's anything naturally special about the ark of the covenant. It's just a gilded wooden box. But God arranged a cause/effect relation.

An analogy would be the tree of life and the tree of knowledge. God has assigned a particular result if someone ate the fruit. Another example is 2 Chron 26:16-21, where King Uzziah contracts a visible, conspicuous skin disease because he makes unauthorized use of sacred objects.

It's based on the principle of ritual purity and ritual impurity, where a person becomes defiled by profaning a sacred object. The result is automatic.

**iv)** Apropos (iii), I think there's an element of that in the Markan account, which views Jesus as a sacred object (so to speak). Merely touching Jesus can produce an effect without his consciously willing that effect, like contact with sacred objects in the OT.

**v)** But in the Markan, that's qualified in a couple of respects. Because Jesus is thronged by the crowd, many people are touching him, yet only she is healed. The differential factor is her faith.

**vi)** In addition, she is ritually impure due to chronic bleeding. Normally, ritual impurity is contagious. Someone who's ritually impure transmits that on contact.

But in the case of Jesus, the process is reversed. She doesn't contaminate Jesus by touching him; rather, he heals her by being touched by her. So that's in studied contrast to the OT. Rather than sinners desecrating Jesus by physical contact, it has the opposite effect: they are restored.



## The land of the sun

*21 Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. 22 And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left (Exod 14:21-22).*

It's common for theologians to cite this text as a paradigm example of extraordinary providence. How God can use natural means do something miraculous.

Now there's no doubt that God sometimes employs natural mechanisms in miraculous ways, but I'm dubious about that interpretation of Exod 14:21-22.

i) That passage is prefaced by something clearly supernatural or preternatural:

*19 Then the angel of God who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, 20 coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness. And it lit up the*

*night without one coming near the other all night (Exod 14:19-20).*

So it would be artificial if a "strong east wind" is the one natural element.

**ii)** Moreover, does that make any sense as a natural explanation? Can wind action have that effect?

**iii)** I think it more likely that *ruach* is a double entendre in this passage. It trades on wind as a metaphor, but the actual agent is the Spirit of God. It's the same studied ambiguity we have in Gen 1:2 and 8:1. And, indeed, the parting of the Red Sea account is crisscrossed with allusions to the creation and flood accounts.

**iv)** I think theologians and commentators are thrown off by the adjectives. If the text just said *ruach* was the cause, they might be more likely to identify the Spirit as the referent, but the adjectives ("strong east") dispose them to think it's a natural phenomenon: wind.

**v)** Yet I think that's dubious. For one thing, it overlooks the emblematic significance of the "east" in Scripture. Sunlight originates in the east. And light is an elemental theological metaphor.

That's why the tabernacle faces east. Why the Garden of Eden is located in the East (Gen 2:8). Why it has an eastern entrance/exist (Gen 3:24).

**vi)** The *ruach* is strong because the Spirit is powerful. A mighty agent.

**vii)** Some people might consider it incongruous to suggest that the Spirit comes from the east. Isn't the eastern orientation more suited to a natural phenomenon?

But consider the Shekinah, which departs from the east gate, heading eastward (Ezk 10:18-19; 11:22-23). Conversely, the Shekinah will return from the east (Ezk 43:1-5).

The direction plays on the emblematic significance of the east, as the symbolic source of divine light. And that can have a literal exemplification.

**vii)** So the Spirit comes from the east in Exod 14:21 due to the emblematic connotations of that compass point.

This is not to deny that it plays on associations with wind action. And there may have been wind action on that occasion. But that's not the ultimate cause. Rather, that's a token of the Spirit's agency.

## We see no signs!

Remarking on Ps 74:9, one commentator has noted that:

The lament now says, "We do not see signs for us" Kraus suggests that this is a reference to omens or oracles in view of the parallelism. The absence of the signs is clearly related to the dilemma of no longer having a prophet. They were looking for some sign of fulfillment for the prophetic word that had promised them a future and given them hope for deliverance. But there was none; and there was no longer a prophet among them (especially true at the time Jeremiah and Ezekiel had been taken from them) They had no idea how long this silence will continue. A. Ross, **A**

**COMMENTARY ON THE PSALMS** (Kregel, 2013), 2:590.

What's bitterly ironic about this complaint is that when the (preexilic) Jews had prophets, they scorned their warnings. Now that the predicted calamity has overtaken them, they no longer have prophets to consult in their distress. Having hated God's prophets when they had them, they now lament the absence of God's prophetic word.

## The Visitation

Da Vinci has an idyllic painting of "The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne." But in reality, Mary was probably shunned by most of her relatives. How many would believe her story?

It's striking that the first—and only reported—relatives she visits after the Annunciation are not her parents, but her Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Zechariah. This, despite the fact that it was a long and arduous trek from Nazareth to Jerusalem or thereabouts. About 70 rocky and hilly miles on foot. What prompted her excursion?

I suppose she just couldn't contain herself. She had to share the news with *someone!* But with whom? Most of her relatives would naturally assume that she became pregnant through premarital sex. Who's going to believe a story about an angelic apparition, announcing a miraculous conception—when a more mundane explanation was so easily available?

Elizabeth and Zechariah were the only two relatives she could count on to believe her. After all, they had an uncannily similar uncanny experience. The angel appearing to Zechariah, to announce another miraculous conception. And that promise was manifestly in process of fulfillment. At this stage of gestation, Elizabeth was unmistakably pregnant, despite the fact that she was barren even during her child-bearing years, much less in her postmenopausal condition.

Mary's out-of-wedlock pregnancy would leave her terribly socially isolated and ostracized. Even Joseph didn't find her explanation credible. These are the only two people who'd lend her a sympathetic ear and treat the news as cause for

celebration rather than denunciation. A striking example of how, providentially, one thing leads to another.

## Celestial portents

Remarking on Joshua's Long Day in his recent commentary, Kenneth Mathews says:

The traditional view is that the sun stopped (i.e., the earth's rotation ceased), thus prolonging the sunlight of the day. The overthrow of the fleeing Amorites can be thoroughly complete if they cannot escape into the night...[But] the text itself does not support this view. Depiction of the sun "over Gibeon" and the moon "over the Valley of Aijalon" shows that the time of day must have been in the morning (10:12), not at midday, as this view assumes ("middle of the sky," 10:13). Gibeon and the Valley of Aijalon are on an east-west plane, meaning that with the naked eye the sun is seen in the eastern sky and the moon in the western sky. In astronomy this relationship is called "opposition." That two celestial bodies appear in the sky at the same time indicates that the time of day is morning.

The background to understanding the Joshua passage is the Assyro-Babylonian celestial omen texts...by studying the positions and movements of celestial bodies, diviners discerned messages from the gods regarding human events...For example, the celestial signs portended either good or ill for the king and the nation in battle. A propitious sign was when the first day of the full moon fell on the fourteenth of the monthly, at which time "opposition" of the moon and sun briefly occurred in the morning...On the other hand, if the opposition...appeared on another day (e.g. fifteenth day), the omen indicated disaster.

Although the practice of celestial divination was widespread in the Late Bronze Age (a notable exception is Egypt), there is uncertainty about the extent to which Joshua and the Canaanites knew the technical art of celestial divination as conducted by trained scholars. Assyriologists are divided as to when and to what degree celestial omen calculation was current in Canaan during the Late Bronze Age. K. Mathews, **JOSHUA** (Baker Books 2016), 92-94.

That's a very intriguing interpretation. Mathews is not the first scholar to propose it.

**i)** In its favor, it explains the significance of the implied celestial opposition. That's something a modern reader is apt to miss, which an ancient reader might pick up on. Although that identification depends on knowing the local geography.

**ii)** However, I have reservations about that interpretation as stated. One difficulty, which commentators remark on, is whether the same sign would be viewed as a propitious omen for the Israelites but an unpropitious omen for the Canaanites. Perhaps, though, the idea is that this is polemical theology, which exploits the superstition of the pagan army—a view not shared by Joshua.

**iii)** There's nothing extraordinary about that phenomenon. Doesn't opposition of sun and moon occur twice a month (once after dawn and once before dusk)? So how would that be an unparalleled day (v14)?

**iv)** Likewise, the shifting position between sun and moon is periodic and predictable. Since the Canaanite army could presumably anticipate that phenomenon, why would they



even engage the Israelite army if they regarded that, ahead of time, as a portent of disaster?

v) Perhaps, though, what they saw was surprising and shocking. Maybe God produced an optical illusion, like a sundog, which defied their expectations. The perceived celestial opposition was not supposed to happen on that calendar day. And that happened in answer to prayer by the enemy. Their God caused it. If so, one can see how that would have a demoralizing effect on the Canaanite troops, leaving them in disarray. It would be like the "counterclockwise" effect of Ahab's sundial. They weren't just arrayed against the Israelite army, but against the God of the Israelite army, who displays his terrifying power, in contrast to the impotent gods of Canaan. And that's in addition to the targeted hailstorm (v11). A God who can manipulate the forces of nature to shield his people and rout their adversaries.

## Plague of darkness

i) Some scholars attempt to explain the ten plagues of Egypt naturalistically. That has the merit of taking the historicity of the events seriously, but the danger is to secularize the account.

Some miracles may employ natural mechanisms. Those are coincidence miracles.

However, the plagues can't be sheerly natural events. One reason is how selective they are. They single out the Egyptians but exempt the Israelites. Natural events aren't that discriminating. Although some natural disasters have disparate impact, the distribution is random.

The plague of darkness is a striking example. Unlike the other plagues, which are physically destructive, this is more a case of psychological warfare. It happens without warning. The Egyptians go to bed at night, expecting sunrise. Nothing is more elemental and perennial in human experience than the diurnal cycle. Yet imagine waking up in the dark, wondering what time it is. At first they assume they must have awakened in the middle of the night, and go back to sleep. But as the hours wear on, sunrise never happens!

In theory, they could resort to firelight (lamps, torches, bonfires) to create a bit of illumination, but paradoxically, it takes light to make light. You can't make a fire when it's pitch black. You need to be able to see what you're doing to make a fire. And the plague of darkness struck without warning, so they didn't have a chance to make preparations. They couldn't keep a fire burning.

Moreover, even if they did have a lamp or torch, that's not a flashlight. It doesn't project light any distance. So you'd become hopelessly lost in the dark if you ventured a few yards from home.

In the meantime, the Israelites in Goshen continued to have natural light. Sunlight, starlight, moonlight.

It's as if thick clouds blanketed the land of Egypt, but there was a hole in the cloud cover just above Goshen.

Sometimes, if you're outside during a daytime storm, the sky is blackened by menacing clouds, yet there's a break in the clouds. The ground is dark as night, except for a bright patch, like a spotlight from the sky. Perhaps, in the enveloping darkness, the Egyptians could see Goshen encircled in light.

**ii)** There's an interesting relationship between the plague of darkness and the creation account. The plague lasts for three days. The land is plunged in darkness apart from Goshen.

In comparison, you have the paradox of Genesis, where the diurnal cycle seems to preexist sunlight for the first three days. Day and night alternate, yet the sun is not created until the fourth day. Or is it?

By the same token, Egypt is enshrouded in darkness for three days, except for Goshen, which remains illuminated by shafts of sunlight through an opening in the clouds. (Or something like that.) Then, on the fourth day, sunlight is restored to the land of Egypt.

## Consuming fire

*And the people complained in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes, and when the Lord heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. 2 Then the people cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire died down. 3 So the name of that place was called Taberah, because the fire of the Lord burned among them (Num 11:1-3).*

The account doesn't say what kind of fire this was. The pillar of fire is an obvious candidate. I've often remarked that descriptions of the pillar of fire are reminiscent of a fire devil. A mobile column of fire. A flaming tornado.

Of course, a fire devil is a natural phenomenon. I'd classify the pillar of fire as a preternatural phenomenon. Although it resembles a fire devil, it has a degree of stability and directionality unlike a fire devil.

Imagine how terrifying this would be to the grumbling Israelites. Normally, the pillar of fire guides them and protects them. But if they're faithless, it can turn on them.

Picturing God's judgment on apostates, Heb 12:29 calls God a "consuming fire". Although that may be metaphorical, it's an allusion to God's literally fiery judgments on the

faithless Israelites in the wilderness, who are counterparts to new covenant apostates.

## Give us meat that we may eat!

*31 Then a wind from the Lord sprang up, and it brought quail from the sea and let them fall beside the camp, about a day's journey on this side and a day's journey on the other side, around the camp, and about two cubits above the ground. 32 And the people rose all that day and all night and all the next day, and gathered the quail. Those who gathered least gathered ten homers. And they spread them out for themselves all around the camp. 33 While the meat was yet between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the Lord was kindled against the people, and the Lord struck down the people with a very great plague. 34 Therefore the name of that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had the craving (Num 11:31-34).*

Here's a striking example of a coincidence miracle. That's a type of event which is more than natural, but less than supernatural. Quail naturally migrate. God uses wind (a natural force) to drive the quail off-course and redirect them to the Israelite camp.

What makes it more than natural is how discriminating the outcome is in time and place. It happens at just the right time at just the right place.

If the "plague" is food poisoning, that would be another coincidence miracle, fulfilling the threatened judgment in vv19-20. That, too, is very timely. So we seem to have two coordinated events. A combination of two coincidence miracles.

## Chariots of fire

*And as they still went on and talked, behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven (2 Kgs 2:11).*

This reminds me of chariot theophanies (e.g. Ezk 1:13-14), as well as the wall of fire that shielded the Israelites from Pharaoh's army (Exod 13:21-22).

I'd say these are examples of the Shekinah. The Shekinah is metamorphic.

This makes me think of Jacob's ladder (Gen 28:10-19). Cyclones and tornadoes have the ability to elevate objects. A preternatural tornado might function like a spiral staircase or elevator, raising objects from ground-level to the sky, or vice versa (e.g. Job 30:22). And if you add luminosity (e.g. fire devils), the effect is even more dramatic.

In nature, these are dreadful, destructive forces. When God manipulates natural media to simulate his presence and power, the result is awesome, but it can be beneficent.



## Plague of blood

15 Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out to the water. Stand on the bank of the Nile to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that turned into a serpent. 16 And you shall say to him, ‘The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you, saying, “Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness.” But so far, you have not obeyed. 17 Thus says the Lord, “By this you shall know that I am the Lord: behold, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall turn into blood. 18 The fish in the Nile shall die, and the Nile will stink, and the Egyptians will grow weary of drinking water from the Nile.”’” 19 And the Lord said to Moses, “Say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their rivers, their canals, and their ponds, and all their pools of water, so that they may become blood, and there shall be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.’” 20 Moses and Aaron did as the Lord commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants he

*lifted up the staff and struck the water in the Nile, and all the water in the Nile turned into blood. 21 And the fish in the Nile died, and the Nile stank, so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile. There was blood throughout all the land of Egypt. 22 But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts. So Pharaoh's heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said. 23 Pharaoh turned and went into his house, and he did not take even this to heart. 24 And all the Egyptians dug along the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the water of the Nile 25 Seven full days passed after the Lord had struck the Nile (Exod 7:15-25).*

A couple of preliminary points before I get to the main point:

- i)** Hebrew has the same word for blood and the color red. Therefore, it's prejudicial to say the Nile transmogrified into hemoglobin.
- ii)** Some well-meaning people attempt to defend the historicity of the plagues by construing them naturalistically. But although some miracles employ natural mechanisms, some of the plagues are designedly discriminating in a way that defies a naturalistic explanation. The plague of blood is case in point. Consider v19. The implication is that the

plague extended to water that was collected prior to the plague. There's no natural process by which water in separate containers could become contaminated after the fact. That's independent of what happened to the Nile.

**iii)** V24 is intriguing. Unbelievers think Exodus is pious fiction. Even if they think it contains a kernel of historical truth, they believe it's mostly legendary embellishment. And the miracles are, from their perspective, paradigm examples of legendary embellishment.

But why would a narrator writing pious fiction invent v24? Doesn't that circumvent the miracle? Even if it was understandable for Egyptians, in their desperation, to dig down to groundwater to find potable water, we wouldn't expect the narrator to let them succeed. Rather, if even water in containers was contaminated, we'd expect the groundwater to be contaminated. Why would the narrator invent that loophole?

This is the kind of niggling detail that only makes sense if the account is factual. God allowed Egyptians to find drinkable water because it wasn't his intention to make all the Egyptians die of thirst. Rather, the point of the plague was to send a message: to show that Yahweh was the true God, a God with awesome control over natural forces and natural elements. A God who could best the Egyptian pantheon on their own turf.

Perhaps the groundwater was naturally filtered. so that it escaped the effects of the plague. God didn't make the plague extend to groundwater. The miracle didn't impede the normal filtration process that purifies polluted surface water from potable groundwater. But that's a realistic detail you wouldn't expect if the account is pious fiction.



## Snakes in Malta

28 After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta.  
2 The native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold.  
3 When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. 4 When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, Justice[b] has not allowed him to live." 5 He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. 6 They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god (Acts 28:1-6).

Critics say Luke is mistaken, since there are no venomous snakes on Malta. But that raises a raft of issues:

**i)** If it wasn't recorded in the Bible, and if critics didn't think this was an account of a miracle, I doubt you'd have their knee-jerk skepticism. Rather, they'd regard this as historical evidence that possibly venomous snakes used to inhabit Malta.

**ii)** It isn't all that clear that the snake is venomous. Ancient writers didn't have our detailed taxonomic designations.

**iii)** Some scholars think it's a viper, but it doesn't behave like a viper. I'm not a herpetologist, but to my knowledge, vipers typically have a rapid strike and release technique. They inject their prey with retractable hypodermic fangs.

By contrast, venomous snakes with fixed fangs are more likely to fasten onto their prey, to aid the process of envenomation. So I wouldn't expect a viper to cling to Paul's hand.

A critic might say Luke's description is inaccurate, but that poses a dilemma for the critic, since he depends on Luke's account to impugn the accuracy of Luke's account, so he can't have it both ways.

**iv)** It isn't necessarily the case that the snake is indigenous to Malta. Snakes can be introduced into foreign habitats. For instance, ancient ships attract rats, which attract snakes. Some snakes are stowaways.

**v)** To my knowledge, Malta has been deforested over the centuries. That leads to loss of habitat for snakes.

**vi)** Many people kill venomous snakes on sight. If you live in an area that's infested with venomous snakes (e.g. jungle), it isn't possible to begin to kill them all, because there are too many, and they are too well camouflaged.

However, not only would deforestation automatically reduce the snake population, but with fewer snakes and hiding places, it would be easier to exterminate the remaining venomous snakes. All the more so considering that Malta is a small island.

**vii)** Humans sometimes introduce animals into foreign habitat that threaten snakes.

**viii)** The account is basically told from the viewpoint of the natives. It relates their reaction. They thought the snake was venomous.

I've seen nature shows in which a white guy had to explain to natives the difference between the venomous and nonvenomous species in their area. It seems a bit paradoxical that an outsider would know the difference, while the natives wouldn't. Perhaps, though, the natives are so afraid of snakes in general that they just assume the worst. They don't wish to find out the hard way which species are venomous and nonvenomous. So even though you might suppose they'd know by experience which is which, and even though it would be in their self-interest to know the difference, they don't seem to be that attentive or discriminating where snakes are concerned.

In that event, the natives of Malta might assume the snake that bit Paul was venomous—whether or not that's actually the case.

## What did the Wise Men see?

I'm going to quote an anecdote from Nabeel Qureshi to draw a comparison. Before doing so, I'd like to make a preliminary observation: I allow for the possibility that Nabeel is regaling readers with tall tales. It's possible that he's cashing in on his conversion.

However, I don't find that the most plausible explanation. He's a psychiatrist by training. He could make a comfortable living that way. It would make for a less stressful, eventful life.

Certainly I don't think he converted with the intention of cashing in. He had no advance knowledge that his conversion would be marketable. And he had so much to lose. Why detonate his relationship with his family, which means so much to him?

It was my first time back in Britain since we had moved to Connecticut eight years prior...Tens of thousands of Ahmadis attended the United Kingdom jalsa...The people I most longed for were my friends from Scotland, the Maliks. Apart from one letter that I received from the youngest brother while I was in seventh grade, I had not heard from any of them. Public email was still in its nascent phase, and international phone calls were too expensive to justify. But when I arrived at the jalsa, I realized I did not know if my friends would even be there...It would be nearly impossible to look for them by walking through the jalsa too. Apart from the sheer number of people to search through, we had all grown up over the previous seven years, and I was not sure I would recognize



them even if I saw them. I sorely wanted to reunite with them, but I did not know where to start. So I turned to God. I just prayed from my heart, bowing my head and closing my eyes. "God, can you please help me find my friends?"

When I opened my eyes, what I saw stunned me stock-still. In the air before me were two streaks of color, one gold and one silver, as if whimsically painted onto the sky by an ethereal brush. They trailed in the distance, obviously leading me somewhere.

I still remember the words I spoke in shock: "You're kidding. I'm supposed to follow those, right?"

What I intrinsically knew was that no one could see the stripes but me. They were not so much in the sky as they were in my perception of the sky. They were neither a mile away, nor a foot away, nor anywhere in-between. They just were. And they were waiting for me.

The jalsa was crowded, and everyone was outside the tents because there was no speech currently in session. I followed the streaks into swarms of people, sifting my way through the crowd as if in a Pakistani bazaar.

And in fact, the streaks swirled over the jalsa marketplace...the streaks funneled downward, dissipating over a space next to a clothing tent. When I weeded my way to the clearing, I saw two men standing there, chatting and wearing skullcaps. It took a moment, but I recognized them: they were the older Malik brothers. Nabeel Qureshi, **SEEKING ALLAH, FINDING**

**JESUS: A DEVOUT MUSLIM ENCOUNTERS**

**CHRISTIANITY** (Zondervan, 2014), 103-105.

Here's the comparison: what if the Star of Bethlehem is like *that*? Not that exact phenomenon, but a supernatural phenomenon that's only discernible to those it was meant to guide. Something the intended observer perceives in his field of vision, even though it remains invisible to other observers, because wasn't for their benefit.

How we construe the Star of Bethlehem is based on our conceptual resources. As a result, we may overlook alternative explanations. Because the identity of the star so often comes down to a debate between stereotypical options, that can foster tunnel vision.

## Where is the promised coming?

*3 This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, 2 that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, 3 knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. 4 They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation" (2 Pet 3:4).*

**i)** The Bible doesn't have much to say about atheists. That's in large part because the ancient world was very religious. And while there were undoubtedly some closet atheists or agnostics, it was politically hazardous to dis the state religion or undermine a lucrative industry (cf. Acts 19:23ff.).

You had some pockets of religious skepticism in Greco-Roman philosophy. But NT writers had little occasion to comment on that.

**ii)** Ancient religious skepticism wasn't necessary a bad thing. It was directed against pagan superstition. Heathen

divination. Moreover, most pagans had little precious little evidence that the gods actually intervened in human affairs. Did prayer to Baal or Juno really make any tangible difference?

**iii)** It's not possible to reconstruct Peter's opponents with certainty. From what he says about the false teachers, their position has some affinities with Epicureanism. However, heretics don't necessarily have a coherent position. The position of the false teachers may have been a ragtag affair, with no philosophical consistency.

**iv)** Apparently, the false teachers call themselves Christian. They have infiltrated some Christian communities. Their background is gentile.

Although there's a danger of drawing excessive inferences from Peter's scanty descriptions, their position seems to be deistic at best. It's not even clear if they believe in divine creation. "Creation" may simply refer to the chance origin of the world. In any event, they apparently reject divine providence and miracles. Their position borders on atheism. A noninterventionist God is scarcely distinguishable from a nonexistent God. At most the "ground of being".

**v)** One might ask how they could view themselves as Christian at all. Yet we have other examples of this. For instance, Leibniz and Maimonides have little room for miracles in their system. Bultmann viewed the universe as a closed system. Or take someone like Peter Enns, who denies many Biblical miracles. Indeed, he probably denies more miracles than he lets on to.

There are different ways to finesse that in relation to Scripture. Some people allegorize the miraculous accounts in Scripture. Others outright deny all or most Biblical

miracles, but claim that's inessential to what Christian faith is ultimately about, viz. Schleiermacher, Tillich, Don Cupitt, D. Z. Phillips, Bishop Robinson.

**vi)** This is where evidence for modern miracles can be useful. Even for true believers, it can sometimes feel that we are waiting for something that never happens. Is it just wishful thinking? So it's helpful to have some well-attested examples of divine intervention above and beyond what Scripture reports. And it doesn't take much to disprove a universal negative. Even a little encouragement is logically sufficient.

## Biblical superheroes

5 Then Samson went down with his father and mother to Timnah, and they came to the vineyards of Timnah. And behold, a young lion came toward him roaring. 6 Then the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him, and although he had nothing in his hand, he tore the lion in pieces as one tears a young goat. But he did not tell his father or his mother what he had done (Judges 14:5-6).

4 So Samson went and caught 300 foxes and took torches. And he turned them tail to tail and put a torch between each pair of tails. 5 And when he had set fire to the torches, he let the foxes go into the standing grain of the Philistines and set fire to the stacked grain and the standing grain, as well as the olive orchards (15:4-5).

14 When he came to Lehi, the Philistines came shouting to meet him. Then the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon him, and the ropes that were on his arms became as flax that has caught fire, and his bonds melted off his hands. 15 And he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, and put out his hand

*and took it, and with it he struck 1,000 men (15:14-15).*

*18 And he was very thirsty, and he called upon the Lord and said, "You have granted this great salvation by the hand of your servant, and shall I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?" 19 And God split open the hollow place that is at Lehi, and water came out from it. And when he drank, his spirit returned, and he revived. Therefore the name of it was called En-hakkore; it is at Lehi to this day (15:18-19).*

*3 But Samson lay till midnight, and at midnight he arose and took hold of the doors of the gate of the city and the two posts, and pulled them up, bar and all, and put them on his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that is in front of Hebron (16:3).*

*17 And he told her all his heart, and said to her, "A razor has never come upon my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If my head is shaved, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak and be like any other man."*

*20 ...But he did not know that the Lord had left him. 21 And the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes and brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles. And he ground at the mill in the prison. 22 But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved (16:17,20-22).*

**i)** I'm going to comment on the credibility of Samson's exploits. There must be people, including Christians, who read the accounts of Samson and can't help thinking that they move in the same mythological world as Gilgamesh, Hercules, Perseus, Theseus, Homeric heroes (Iliad), Jason & the Argonauts (Argonautica)–or Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox. Likewise, we have lots of comic book superheroes. Some of these make their way into blockbuster films. So is that a legitimate comparison? Is Samson a legendary superhero, on a par with these other figures?

**ii)** As a basis of comparison, let's begin by raising some naturalistic objections to his exploits:

**a)** Even if a man had the physical strength to tear a lion apart with his bare hands, how would he be able to get past the teeth and claws in order to get a good grip on the lion? Couldn't a lion disembowel him with its claws?

**b)** Wouldn't catching 300 foxes (or jackals) be extremely time-consuming?

**c)** You can only strike your foes down one at a time. If you're surrounded by hundreds of soldiers, they can attack



you from all sides. And they don't have to get within striking distance. They can spear you with a javelin.

**d)** Isn't water from the rock a rather frivolous miracle in this situation? For that matter, why does God protect Samson when he indulges in so much sinful, egotistical behavior?

**e)** The human body can't be muscular beyond an upper limit. There must be a balance between muscle mass and bone density, as well as the bond between bones, ligaments, and tendons.

**iii)** Having set the stage, let's respond. Paul Bunyan and his blue ox are consciously fictional.

**iv)** Demigods have innately superhuman abilities, because they are, indeed, superhuman. A hybrid. But Samson is merely human. His superhuman exploits aren't an innate ability. Rather, this represents divine empowerment or enablement. His hair is just a token of divine enablement.

It might be objected that in the Iliad, the gods sometimes come to the aid of combatants. But the combatants aren't doing anything humanly impossible. Rather, this is a case of the gods taking sides, tipping the scales.

**v)** Samson isn't just a muscleman like Hercules. Samson is very clever. Take his riddles. Or the way he sets fire to the grain fields.

**vi)** There's an intentionally comical element to some of Samson's exploits. The reader is meant to find some of this humorous. It's a mistake to read the accounts too straight. God is using Samson to mock the Philistines.

**vii)** Although Samson is very cocky, he pays dearly for his impiety and impudence.

**viii)** The problem with naturalistic objections is the assumption that all the natural objects retain their natural properties. That all the interactions between natural objects operate according to normal physics. That all the standard dynamics were kept in place.

But there's no reason to impose that rigid framework on the accounts. God needn't empower Samson directly. God can locally suspend certain physical constants to bring about these feats. It doesn't even require direct contact. For instance:

**a)** The weight of the city gates depends on the gravity. What if God levitates the gates? Reduces their weight by reducing the gravitational force at that particular point? Like an astronaut in space.

Or what if God grants Samson temporary psychokinetic abilities? The narratives don't attribute his phenomenal feats to phenomenal musculature. That interpretation is based on supplementing the accounts with a mental picture of Steve Reeves in *Hercules*, or beefcake actor Victor Mature.

But the narratives say nothing about his physique. He could be the proverbial 90-pound weakling.

Rather, it comes and goes, based on the Spirit "coming upon him" or "leaving" him. Not a permanent endowment, but temporary enduements to do what's required at the time.

**b)** Did God strengthen Samson or weaken the lion?

**c)** God can prompt the foxes (or jackals) to congregate, making them easier to catch.

**d)** There's the thorny issue of how to construe large numbers in the OT.

**e)** How Samson struck down so many soldiers depends in part on how we visualize the scene. Suppose he leads them or lures them into a narrow passageway (e.g. crevice) where they must approach him single file. This isn't groundless speculation. The account mentions a rocky location in reference to the miraculous spring.

It forces them to form a line. Those behind can't spear him with a javelin because it's blocked by a soldier ahead of them. They must climb over a mounting heap of bodies to get to him, which makes them even more exposed. Fighting at close quarters in a bottleneck, they can never put sufficient distance between Samson and themselves to take advantage of their superior numbers.

Or God may disorient them. The OT gives examples.

When we read a passage like this, we tend to fill in the details by forming our own mental picture. Nothing necessarily wrong with that. But there are many different ways it could happen. Our imagination has to supply what's missing, which may be wide of the mark.

## Pray in the Spirit

*26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. 27 And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God (Rom 8:26-27).*

*15 What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also (1 Cor 14:15).*

*18 praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints (Eph 6:18).*

*19 It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit. 20 But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit (Jude 19-20).*

One way that cessationists insulate their position from evidential falsification is to partition prayer from the spiritual gifts. They make allowance for miraculous answers

to prayer, but drive a wedge between answered prayer and the spiritual gifts.

But a basic problem with that disjunction is that Paul (as well as Jude) regards Christian prayer as prayer that's informed or empowered by the Spirit. When Christians pray, the Spirit is at work in our minds and hearts. So it's a false dichotomy to compartmentalize prayer in isolation to the charismata. In the pneumatology of Paul and Jude, the ability to offer genuine Christian prayer is as much a spiritual gift as the other charismata. The agency of the Spirit is necessary in each instance.

## Eaten by worms

*20 Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food. 21 On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. 22 And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" 23 Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last (Acts 12:20-23).*

Unbelievers automatically discount stories about miracles. And they find the account of Agrippa I's demise even more incredible because it dovetails with the trope of villains who get their comeuppance.

Yet Josephus has a parallel account. Moreover, his account reflects a degree of literary license, including legendary embellishment (the omen of the owl), compared to Luke's much more restrained account.

Now when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea he came to the city Caesarea, which was formerly called Strato's Tower; and there he exhibited

spectacles in honor of Caesar, for whose well-being he'd been informed that a certain festival was being celebrated. At this festival a great number were gathered together of the principal persons of dignity of his province. On the second day of the spectacles he put on a garment made wholly of silver, of a truly wonderful texture, and came into the theater early in the morning. There the silver of his garment, being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays, shone out in a wonderful manner, and was so resplendent as to spread awe over those that looked intently upon him. Presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another, (though not for his good) that he was a god; and they added, "Be thou merciful to us; for although we have hitherto revered thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature." Upon this the king neither rebuked them nor rejected their impious flattery. But he shortly afterward looked up and saw an owl sitting on a certain rope over his head, and immediately understood that this bird was the messenger of ill tidings, just as it had once been the messenger of good tidings to him; and fell into the deepest sorrow. A severe pain arose in his belly, striking with a most violent intensity. He therefore looked upon his friends, and said, "I, whom you call a god, am commanded presently to depart this life; while Providence thus reproves the lying words you just now said to me; and I, who was by you called immortal, am immediately to be hurried away by death. But I am bound to accept what Providence allots, as it pleases God; for we have by no means lived ill, but in a splendid and happy manner." When he had said this, his pain became violent. Accordingly he was carried into the palace, and the rumor went abroad everywhere that he would certainly die soon. The

multitude sat in sackcloth, men, women and children, after the law of their country, and besought God for the king's recovery. All places were also full of mourning and lamentation. Now the king rested in a high chamber, and as he saw them below lying prostrate on the ground he could not keep himself from weeping. And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life, being in the fifty-fourth year of his age and in the seventh year of his reign. He ruled four years under Caius Caesar, three of them were over Philip's tetrarchy only, and on the fourth that of Herod was added to it; and he reigned, besides those, three years under Claudius Caesar, during which time he had Judea added to his lands, as well as Samaria and Cesarea. The revenues that he received out of them were very great, no less than twelve millions of drachmae. But he borrowed great sums from others, for he was so very liberal that his expenses exceeded his incomes, and his generosity was boundless (Antiquities 19.8.2).

So here we have multiple attestation of the same event, from two independent sources.

"Eaten by worms" may well be an idiom or stock phrase rather than a technical diagnosis. Scholars differ on the diagnosis (e.g. peritonitis and/or appendicitis, fecal impaction).



## The world to come

There are different ways to view the world to come. Will there still be natural disasters and dangerous animals? That's necessary to the balance of nature as we understand it. If so, how will the saints be safe? If not, that will be an unrecognizably different kind of world.

One possibility, which I've discussed before, is God's providential protection. But here's another possibility: in Scripture, some prophets and apostles have the ability to perform miracles. In principle, the saints in the world to come could have the same abilities. That would enable them to ward off dangerous animals or ward off natural disasters. Or in some cases they might have the prophetic foreknowledge or counterfactual knowledge to dodge impending threats.

## Snake charmers

*8 Then the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 9 "When Pharaoh says to you, 'Prove yourselves by working a miracle,' then you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent.'" 10 So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the Lord commanded. Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent. 11 Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did the same by their secret arts. 12 For each man cast down his staff, and they became serpents. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. 13 Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said.*

Some conservative commentators interpret the action of the Egyptian magicians naturalistically. They say it's a parlor trick. If you pinch a nerve at the back of its neck, that will immobilize the snake. It will become rigid, like a rod.

Although that's a possible explanation, that's easier said than done. To begin with, the magicians didn't have

advance knowledge that Aaron was going to do this. It's not as if they had supply of cataleptic snakes on hand to perform this stunt—if that's what it was.

Assuming these are venomous snakes (e.g. cobras), how to you induce paralysis without getting bitten in the process?

I've seen nature shows in which a herpetologist (or just a brazen daredevil) will pick up a venomous snake by the tail. For that to work, you have to keep the snake at arm's length from your body. The snake must be short enough that it isn't scraping the ground. It must be vertical to keep it at a safe distance. If the snake is long enough, it can bite you in the foot, leg, or between the legs—something men are eager to avoid. You don't want that head level with limbs and other appendages.

But a snake that's the length of a walking staff would be too long to hold by the tail, and keep the entire body of the snake in the air. Herpetologists use snake hooks to keep the head away from their body.

Another problem is that when you grab a snake by the tail and lift it up, the head and neck can assume a horizontal angle, which puts the handler in striking distance of the snake. I've seen handlers shake a snake by the tail to keep the head down. Keep the body straight.

This is very dangerous, but even if you can avoid getting bitten by grabbing and holding a snake by the tail, I don't see how, from that position, you immobilize the snake, since you are holding the wrong end to do that.

I've also seen nature shows in which a herpetologist milks a snake. But he doesn't grab the snake with his bare hands. Instead, he uses snake tongs to catch it by the neck, pin it

to the floor, then gingerly grasp it just below the jaws. Even so, that's a very risky procedure. There's no margin for error. This is usually done in a setting where there's antivenom nearby. I've read about herpetologists who died when they tried to do this out in the bush. One slip, and they were goners. Did ancient magicians have aluminum snake tongs? Don't think so.

Finally, I've seen herpetologists hypnotize a king cobra in the wild to tap it on the the head. Perhaps that's a possible way to grab a snake by the head without getting bitten, then induce paralysis. But there's a high risk of snakebite.

In addition, I've only seen that done with king cobras. Would the same trick work with smaller cobras? Are smaller cobras more easily agitated?

Of course, I've seen snake charmers (on TV) with cobras. But that can be deceptive. When they handle cobras, I've read they stitch the mouth shut. And the snake will die in a few days from infection.

Nowadays, the snake may be defanged. But that requires surgical tools. Moreover, snakes rapidly replace lost fangs.

The Egyptian magicians didn't have the lead time for these precautions or preparations. Within the implied time frame of the story, how would they capture snakes and immobilize them in time to counter Aaron?

Moreover, surely no one would mistake a rigid snake for a staff. If the magicians come out holding cataleptic cobras, which they cast on the ground, can't anyone see these were snakes all along?

An unbeliever might say these are plot holes in fiction, but if it were fiction, there's no reason to offer a naturalistic explanation.

## Honi the circle-drawer

In his recent debate with Dr. Timothy McGrew, Zachary Moore cited a counter-miracle. He referred to a story about Honi the Circle-Drawer (c. 60 BC). He attributed the story to Josephus.

As Moore relates the story, there was a drought in Judea. Honi drew a circle in the dust, stood in circle, and refused to move unless and until God brought rain. At first, God responded with drizzle. Honi said that was too little, so God responded with a downpour. Honi said that was too much, so God moderated the precipitation. Some people were upset by his ordering God around, but he got away with it due to his piety.

I'm summarizing. You can listen to his verbatim remarks (at the 56-57 min. mark).

<http://livestream.com/accounts/12497542/events/4663424/videos/109068111>

**i)** Why does Moore imagine that's a problem for belief in miracles? From a Christian standpoint, what's problematic about God answering the prayer of a pre-Christian Jew? Wouldn't we expect God to answer the prayers of some OT Jews and Intertestamental Jews? How is that inconsistent with a Christian theology of miracles?

**ii)** This further illustrates a problem with Moore's effort to discredit miracles by attempting to draw parallels between reported miracles in religiously diverse cultures. Given that humans have stereotypical needs, we'd expect humans to have similar "stories". Jewish farmers, Christian farmers, and pagan farmers all pray for rain during drought. It's

hardly surprising that you might find cross-cultural "stories" like that, because it happens in real life. Even if some of the stories are fictional, people tell stories like that because they wish their God or gods would answer prayers like that.

To take a comparison, there are lots of fictional love stories. But that's because some men and woman fall in love in real life, and most men and women hope to do so. The fact that some of these stories are fictional doesn't cast doubt on any story in particular. There's no presumption that a love story is fictional. Some are and some aren't.

**iii)** Finally, Josephus doesn't contain the version of the story that Moore attributes to him. This is all Josephus says about Honi:

Now there was one named Onias, a righteous man and beloved of God, who, in a certain drought, had once prayed to God to put an end to the intense heat, and God had heard his prayer and sent rain. **ANTIQUITIES** 14.2.1 21.

That's it! And that comes from the **ANTIQUITIES** (c. 93)– which is about 150 years after the alleged event.

So where do the details of the story come from that Moore is citing? From the Mishnah:

They said to Honi, the circle drawer, "Pray for rain."  
He said to them, "Go and take in the clay ovens used for Passover, so that they not soften [in the rain which is coming]."  
He prayed, but it did not rain.  
What did he do?

He drew a circle and stood in the middle of it and said before Him, "Lord of the world! Your children have turned to me, for before you I am like a member of the family. I swear by your great name—I'm simply not moving from here until you take pity on your children!" It began to rain drop by drop.

He said, This is not what I wanted, but rain for filling up cisterns, pits, and caverns."

It began to rain violently.

He said, "This is not what I wanted, but rain of good will, blessing, and graciousness."

Now it rained the right way, until Israelites had to flee from Jerusalem up to the Temple Mount because of the rain.

Now they came and said to him, "Just as you prayed for it to rain, now pray for it to go away."

He said to them, "Go, see whether the stone of the strayers is disappeared."

Simon b. Shatah said to him, "If you were not Honi, I should decree a ban of excommunication against you. But what am I going to do to you? For you importune before the Omnipresent, so he does what you want, like a son who importunes his father, so he does what he wants. J. Neusner, ed. **THE MISHNAH: A NEW**

**TRANSLATION** (Yale 1991), 312-13.

According to Jacob Neusner, the *Mishnah* dates to c. 200 AD (ibid. xvi). So the Mishnaic story of Honi is about 250 years after the fact! Perhaps it reflects a legendary embellishment of Josephus, or maybe it's an independent, but very late tradition—which could still be legendary. So the story cited by Moore is of very dubious historicity on chronological grounds alone.



**iv)** Assuming my information is correct, how did Moore misattribute to Josephus a story from the Mishnah? The obvious explanation is that he relied on some thirdhand source, and didn't bother to check his sources. You have to wonder where he got it. Is this from some village atheist collection of comparative mythology?

**v)** Keep in mind that this was in Moore's opening statement. He even has a display. It's not like the rebuttal or cross-examination, where debaters are talking off the cuff. One can make allowances for inaccuracies that creep in when speakers have to give unrehearsed responses. But this wasn't some offhand comment. These were prepared remarks. It tells you something about Moore's standards that he's that slipshod. And it's ironic that he himself is guilty of legionary embellishment. Intentionally or not, he embellished Josephus.

## The sky vanished

*The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place (Rev 6:14).*

i) What kind of astronomical phenomenon would ancient readers associate this with description? Modern commentators aren't very helpful here, because they don't ask that kind of question. They're more into literary allusions or literary parallels. They treat the text as a mural rather than a window.

ii) I asked a Christian astronomer, who suggested that I consult ancient commentators on that passage. But the ancient commentators aren't very helpful in that regard, for they interpret the passage allegorically. The earliest extant commentary is by Victorinus, who construes the passage allegorically:

6:14. "And the heaven withdrew as a scroll that is rolled up." For the heaven to be rolled away, that is, that the **Church** shall be taken away.

<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0712.htm>

Tychonius takes a similar view, according to which it symbolizes the underground church, which withdraws from public view during times of persecution. Oecumenius thinks it refers to angels.

Andrew of Caesarea construes it allegorically:

"That heaven is rolled out like a scroll symbolizes either that the second coming of Christ is unknown...or that even the heavenly powers grieve for those who have fallen from the faith as though they experience a certain rolling out through sympathy with grief. However, this image symbolizes also that the substance of heaven does not disappear. but as though by a kind of unrolling changes into something better."

William C. Weinrich, ed. **REVELATION** (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture), 98-99.

So none of them construe the astronomical image realistically.

**iii)** One might try to cut the knot by saying the passage is figurative. But even if that's the case, we still need to ask what figurative image the passage is meant to conjure up in the minds of the reader.

**iv)** Moreover, I doubt it's accurate to say the passage is figurative overall. The bit about the scroll is figurative, but that's expegetical. The simile is used to illustrate the prosaic statement that "the sky vanished." If, therefore, the vanishing sky is compared to a metaphor, the vanishing sky is not, itself, a metaphor.

**v)** Admittedly, this is something John saw in a vision. So it may not be realistic. It may be dream-like. But there's still the question of what John saw.

**vi)** Moreover, the vision has a referential dimension. It signifies real-world events of some sort or another. That may or may not be astronomical in reality, but the question is worth exploring.

**vii)** Since, in Bible history, God does sometimes use real prodigies, we shouldn't rule that out.

**viii)** The Greek verb is ambiguous. It could mean the sky was "split" apart or split in two. Is one rendering preferable to another in context?

**ix)** To say the sky "vanished" (or "disappeared") could either mean the sky ceased to exist or else the sky ceased to be visible. On the latter interpretation, the sky still existed, but could no longer be seen.

**x)** Liberal scholars suppose ancient Jews and gentiles thought the sky was a solid dome. Let's play along with that identification for the sake of argument. On that view, to say the sky "vanished" might mean God removed the dome separating what's under the dome (the earth) from what's behind the dome.

What would be the consequences of that action? Well, on that view, wouldn't removing the dome cause everything above it to come crashing down? The cosmic sea would empty onto the earth. The celestial palace or temple would fall to earth. Likewise, earthbound observers could see God, the saints, the angels, and so forth.

But Rev 6 doesn't say that's the effect of v14. And, indeed, if all that happened, there wouldn't be much left to recount after the dust settles.

**xi)** On that view, the sky splitting has similar consequences. If the dome split apart or split in two, everything behind the dome would become visible. The cosmic sea would inundate the earth. But that's not the

aftermath of what happens in Rev 6. So much for the solid dome.

**xii)** Perhaps it means the sky disappeared from view. It was still there, but invisible to the naked eye. Is so, what does that mean?

There's a bit of a paradox here. If they can't see the sky, what do they see in its place?

We might start by asking what makes the sky visible in the first place. Illumination and contrast. Seeing the sky in relation to the horizon.

You can't see the sky in a blizzard. You can't see the sky on a foggy day.

Likewise, if you look in a mirror, you don't see the mirror itself, but whatever it reflects. If the sky became reflective, you'd see the earth when you gaze overhead. But the text doesn't say that.

By the same token, you don't see clear glass; rather, you see through clear glass. If the sky became transparent, it would become a window. You could see everything beyond the sky. But the text doesn't say that.

Another possibility is if the sky goes dark because the sun, moon, and stars go dark. If God were to miraculously shield the earth from their light (or at least the visible spectrum), then the sky would disappear from view. Indeed, the entire earth would be plunged into darkness—apart from firelight (or electrical lighting, if we construe this futuristically).

And that could be a realistic scenario. Perhaps God will block out the light.

**xiii)** What about the sky splitting in two? That could be the opposite effect. If something brighter than the sky appeared in the middle of the sky, like a brilliant band, it would visually bisect the sky. Because the sky would be darker on either side of the luminous boundary, it would appear as though the sky was splitting apart (or splitting in two), to reveal something behind the sky. An optical effect. Something emerging from the sky, like a bright line or crease in the sky. The edge of something incoming. Long and luminous.

Nowadays, we're used to seeing contrails. That's another, albeit modern, atmospheric phenomenon that bisects the sky.

The upshot is that we don't know for sure what the text depicts. But we can consider a range of options.

## BioLogos and bad science

Science is based on observed regularities and logical induction to unobserved regularity. The secular scientist assumes that everything works in a regular, reproducible kind of way because that is what science has always found to be the case so far. The scientist who is a Christian agrees, but in addition believes in a rational basis for that order, the creator God who faithfully endows the universe with its regularities and intelligibility. Denis Alexander, **CREATION OR EVOLUTION: DO WE HAVE TO CHOOSE?** (Monarch Books; revised and expanded ed., 2014), 48.

There's some truth to this claim. However, it suffers from a strange overstatement. Mind you, that's not surprising considering the fact that he's one of the bigwigs at BioLogos. In particular, consider his claim that:

The secular scientist assumes that everything works in a regular, reproducible kind of way because that is what science has *always found to be the case so far*.

Really? To take a stock counterexample, what about miraculous healing in answer to prayer? I'm not saying that's commonplace. But how many medically verifiable examples would you need to disprove his universal claim to the contrary?

Compare his outlook to M. Scott Peck. Peck was a psychiatrist who received his B.A. degree magna cum laude from Harvard College in 1958, and his M.D. degree from the Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine in 1963. From 1963 until 1972, he served in the United States as Assistant Chief Psychiatry and Neurology Consultant to the Surgeon General of the Army:

I had come to believe in the reality of benign spirit or God, as well as the reality of human goodness. I'd come to believe distinctly in the reality of human evil, and that left me an obvious hole in my thinking. Namely was there such a thing as evil spirit, or the devil specifically? In common with 99.99 percent of psychiatrists and with 80 percent of Catholic priests--as confidentially polled back in 1960, the figure would be much higher now--I did not believe in the devil.

But I was a scientist, and it didn't seem to me I should conclude there was no devil until I examined the evidence. It occurred to me if I could see one good old-fashioned case of possession, that might change my mind. I did not think that I would see one, but if you believe that something doesn't exist, you can walk right over it without seeing it.

These cases, in a whole number of ways--the more I studied them, the more they did not fit in a typical psychiatric picture. The second case [Becca], for instance. As she should have been getting better, she got worse.

And this is what's called diagnoses by exclusion. I'd go through the whole range of psychiatric conditions, whether they could explain the patient's condition. In both of my two cases, they were unexplainable by any kind of traditional psychiatric terms.

Because I was a scientist I was perhaps more stringent than most people would be in diagnosing these two cases. I wasn't going to try to deal with something I wasn't sure was possession. Particularly as a psychiatrist, I was really sticking my neck out.

<http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/2005/01/The-Patient-Is-The-Exorcist-Interview-With-M-Scott-Peck.aspx>



Peck doesn't begin with the postulate that "everything works in a regular, reproducible kind of way because that is what science has *always found to be the case so far*." Peck is more scientific than Alexander. Peck doesn't assume he knows the answer in advance. He examines the evidence.

If, moreover, some forms of mental illness are the result of possession, then everything doesn't work in a regular, reproducible way. Machines work in a regular, reproducible way. That's in contrast to personal agency.

## The argument from Biblical miracles

This is a brief sequel to my previous post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/11/is-argument-from-miracles-circular.html>

The question at issue is whether it's viciously circular to cite Biblical miracles to evidence Christianity. Insofar as Biblical miracles presume the veracity of the source, aren't we begging the question?

There are different ways of responding to that objection. But let's consider this example:

*The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works (2 Cor 12:12).*

Should we believe Paul wrought miracles because he says so? Put that baldly, the appeal would be circular. But that's not the actual form of Paul's claim.

Paul is reminding the Corinthians of the miracles he performed in their presence. So that's not reducible to circular attestation.

Would Paul make a claim like that unless it was true? It's a highly exposed claim. For if it's false, the Corinthians would simply retort: "Au contraire!"

Notice that the credibility of Paul's claim doesn't even presume that he's honest. It only credits him with the

mother-wit not to make imprudent claims that will be shot down, and instantly expose him as a fraud.

Put another way, the credibility of the claim depends less on addresser than the addressee. A claim like that puts Paul at the mercy of the Corinthians. For if the claim is false, they'd say: "No, Paul—you did no such thing!"

Now, even though the modern reader wasn't there to see for himself whether or not Paul performed miracles, that doesn't alter the logic of the claim. So long as this is an authentic letter, Paul's claim is compelling. If Paul wouldn't make a claim like that unless it was true—given the audience—then the fact that a modern reader is not in the position of the Corinthians is irrelevant.

## The rock that followed them

One of Peter Enns's prooftexts for denying the inerrancy/historicity of Scripture is his take on 1 Cor 10:4. Beale has a skillful rebuttal:

<http://michaeljkruger.com/does-the-bible-ever-get-it-wrong-facing-scriptures-difficult-passages-1-greg-beale/>

However, I'd like to approach the issue from a different angle.

**i)** There's a circular quality to Enns's position. He regards Paul's interpretation as a fictional gloss on a fictional event. Therefore, he doesn't bother to ask what this would mean if, in fact, the Exodus really happened, as well as miracles by which God sustained the Israelites in the wilderness.

**ii)** The number of Israelites is disputed. But whatever the figure, the Sinai desert had insufficient food and water to naturally support the Israelites. They needed drinking water on a regular basis. What else did they have to drink? Wine production wasn't an option of a nomadic party in the desert. Maybe they could drink goat milk, but that wouldn't be enough. And, in any case, that only pushes the same problem back a step, for livestock required sources of water no less than the Israelites. Admittedly, livestock can drink water that's undrinkable for humans.

There might be the occasional flashflood, but that's rare. Not a steady source of water. Same thing with seasonal wadis. Perhaps there were a few scattered oases in the Sinai. I don't know that for a fact. If there were, that would be prime real estate, jealously guarded by the locals. Not just there for the taking. That's my operating assumption.

On the face of it, it would take a miracle—indeed, *repeated* miracles—to supply the Israelites with enough drinking water throughout their 40-year slog.

**iii)** In that respect, there's a parallel between a miraculous food supply and a miraculous water supply. Exod 16 records the onset of the manna while Josh 5:12 records the cessation of the manna. In-between, it's understood that God provided them with this miraculous foodstuff on a regular basis, without the Pentateuch having to chronicle that fact.

**iv)** There are, moreover, tight textual parallels between the miraculous provision of manna (Exod 16; Num 11; Deut 8:3,16) and the miraculous provision of water (Exod 17:6; Num 20:8-11; Deut 8:15). Food and water go together. If the manna was a repeated miracle, so was the water.

**v)** Finally, the two episodes narrating miraculous water from the rock (Exod 17; Num 20) bookend the wilderness wandering. The first episode occurs during the first year of the wilderness wandering while the second episode occurs during the last year of the wilderness wandering. The first episode concerns the first generation or Exodus-generation, while the second episode concerns the second generation or exit-generation. A distinction between entering the wilderness and leaving the wilderness.

I think this framing device is a synecdoche. Like reading a book from "cover-to-cover," that's a way of saying the Israelites received a miraculous supply of water, not just on those two stated occasions, but on many occasions in-between, as needed. From start-to-finish, God provided water.

**vi)** So, wherever they went, a freshwater supply was waiting for them. *As if* the water "accompanied" them or "followed" them wherever they went. No doubt they camped out at certain locations for extended periods of time. But whenever they were on the move, God would supply them with water.

If you affirm the historicity of the wilderness account, as well as miraculous provisions, then I think that's a fairly necessary implication. That's something the implied reader would take for granted.

Assuming there was a Jewish legend about a movable well, it has its basis in that underlying fact. And it's easy to see how that would be a poetic way of depicting a prosaic fact. If everywhere they go, they find a miraculous spring, then it's like the water goes wherever they go. Not literally, but phenomenologically. Not that there was actually a movable well, but that's a poetic way of putting it.

## "Doublets"

*5 Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. 6 He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: 7 Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf."...9 Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, "Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." (Gen 37:5-7,9).*

*5 And one night they both dreamed—the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison—each his own dream, and each dream with its own interpretation (Gen 40:5).*

*After two whole years, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile, 2 and behold, there came up out of the Nile seven cows, attractive and plump, and they fed in the reed grass. 3 And behold, seven other cows, ugly and thin, came up out of the Nile after them, and stood by the other cows on the bank of the Nile. 4 And the ugly, thin cows ate up the seven attractive, plump cows. And Pharaoh awoke. 5 And he fell asleep and dreamed a second time. And behold, seven ears of grain, plump and good, were growing on one stalk. 6 And behold, after them sprouted seven ears, thin and blighted by the east wind. 7 And the thin ears swallowed up the seven plump, full ears. And Pharaoh awoke, and behold, it was a dream (Gen 41:1-7).*

**i)** Traditionally, liberal scholars regard "doublets" as evidence for independent traditions which redactors edited

into a single narrative. However, many of the "doublets" are clearly integral to the narrative. So that's a bad explanation.

**ii)** More recently, scholars like Robert Alter regard "doublets" as literary devices. That suggests fictional conventions.

**iii)** There is, however, a realistic explanation. The reason Joseph and Pharaoh both receive two related dreams is to confirm the message. Two different ways to say the same thing. It's similar to Peter's threefold vision, which is reiterated to lend certainty to the disclosure:

*9 The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. 10 And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance 11 and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. 12 In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. 13 And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." 14 But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." 15 And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common." 16 This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven ([Acts 10:9-16](#)).*

Emphatic repetition underscores the revelatory, authoritative nature of the dream or vision. It's not a fluke or coincidence. Rather, there's a pattern.



**iii)** The dreams of the baker and cupbearer aren't doubled. They have one dream apiece. Two dreamers. That's a "doublet" of sorts, but it has a different function. To begin with, their coordinated dreams indicate special providence. God sent and synchronized their dreams. In addition, the two dreams forecast divergent fates for the two dreamers. And the survivor belatedly brings Joseph to Pharaoh's attention.

## Up from the grave they arose

In his recent commentary on Matthew, Craig A. Evans argues that Mt 27:52-53 is a scribal gloss. If you're going to question the historicity of this incident, I think his approach is better than Michael Licona's.

I'm not going to quote his argument. If you're curious, you can read it for yourself. Use the "search this book" feature, type **Akhmim** in the search box, and it will pull up his discussion (pp466-67):

<http://www.amazon.com/Matthew-New-Cambridge-Bible-Commentary/dp/052101106X>

That said, I'm puzzled by why so many otherwise conservative scholars balk at this account. I understand why liberals deny this account. At least they're consistent. They deny all the Gospel miracles.

For some reason, many conservative scholars find this scene bizarre. But isn't this scene the resurrection of the just in miniature?

Both OT and NT have a doctrine of the general resurrection, as well as the resurrection of the just—in particular. That lies in the future.

What do they think *that* will look like when that happens? Won't it be similar to Mt 27:52-53, only on a vaster scale?

So I don't see how we can question Mt 27:52-53 in *principle* without questioning the general resurrection. It's a difference in degree, not in kind.



## Guiding light

Some of the depositions spoke of miraculous sightings, of lights appearing in the sky to guide the Camisards through the dark of night past Catholic troops, and other supernatural phenomena. Claude Arnassan from Montel recounted that he had spent three years in Marseille as a galley slave, the penalty for having fought in Rolland Cavalier's troop. While soldiering, he had witnessed lights like torches in the sky, which appeared fortuitously on occasion: "He was no sooner on his knees, than there appeared in the air a light, like a large star, which advanced, pointing to the place where the assembly was met." As he was leaving, a young *inspiré* told Arnassan of a vision he had experienced, in which he saw that Arnassan would be imprisoned unless he immediately put himself back under Cavalier's leadership. Shortly after, he was jailed in Nîmes until 1704, Jacques Du Bois, who made his way from Montpellier to Geneva and then to London, witnessed "balls of fire fall from heaven to dazzle the eyes of their enemies" on several occasions. Similarly, Guillaume Bruguier, who had been captured at Usez, incarcerated for three months, then impressed into the king's service in Spain before deserting near Portugal, was guided in his flight by "Le Ciel": "I saw, as it were, stars directing toward the place, where it was, which I always looked upon as a guide, and never failed to find it true." C. Randall, **FROM A FAR COUNTRY: CAMISARDS AND HUGUENOTS IN THE ATLANTIC WORLD** (University of Georgia Press 2011), 53.

French Protestants suffering intense persecution and martyrdom for their faith from the Catholic authorities.

Although I certainly allow for the possibility that some of these accounts are fanciful or legendary, I think they're plausible. I find it believable that God would perform miracles *like* this to encourage Christians suffering severe persecution for the faith.

These reported miracles are interesting in part because they evoke Biblical parallels. For instance, God using astronomical portents and prodigies to confound enemy troops. Likewise, functional similarities with the Star of Bethlehem.

Liberal Bible scholars dismiss astronomical miracles as mythical or rhetorical, so it's striking to read about prima facie corroborative evidence in the annals of church history.

## The divine ironist

Infidels are especially fond of citing the incident of Balaam's talking donkey to mock the Bible. I've discussed this before, but I'll say a bit more on the subject:

**i)** This is inherently incredible only if miracles are inherently incredible. Just citing the incident does nothing to disprove it. You'd either have to make a solid case against miracles in general, or allow for the possibility of miracles in general, but show why this particular case is out of bounds.

**ii)** Among exorcists and paranormal investigators, there are reported incidents which are just as bizarre. So, once again, you can't dismiss this out of hand unless you make a general case against miracles or paranormal events.

Keep in mind that infidels pride themselves on their intellectual superiority. Yet they aren't actually demonstrating their intellectual superiority. They make fun of something, but where's the argument?

**iii)** Finally, their objection to the Balaam incident is quite obtuse. They ridicule the account because they find it patently absurd. But that misses the point entirely. For the incident is meant to be ridiculous. God is ridiculing the pagan prophet. God is assuming the role of satirist or ironist.

To take a comparison, suppose somebody thought it was clever to lampoon *Gulliver's Travels*. He'd cite preposterous scenes in *Gulliver's Travels*, then exclaim, "How could Jonathan Swift be so stupid!"

But would his mockery reflect badly on the intelligence of Jonathan Swift, or the intelligence of the mocker?

Since *Gulliver's Travels* was ridiculous by design, if you ridicule something that's intentionally ridiculous, you just make yourself look stupid.

Incidentally, wacky things happen all the time in real life. The fact that something is absurd doesn't mean it can't happen. Life in a fallen world is brimming with absurdities.

As one commentator explains:

Yahweh provides the donkey with the means of verbal communication. He "opened the mouth" of the donkey; ironically, this is an expression used when God opens the mouths of prophets to speak (Ezk 3:27; 33:22). Who is the true prophet in this episode? It is the donkey that sees a vision or theophany and speaks the words of God given to her!

The contrast between the two figures is sharp:

[Quoting Milgrom] In truth, Balaam is depicted on a lower level than his ass: more unseeing in his ability to defeat the angel, ore stupid in being defeated verbally by his ass, and more beastly in subduing it with his stick whereas it responds with tempered speech.

A further irony, or satiric comment, is Balaam's statement, in the optative mood, that if he had a sword, then he would kill his donkey. There is a sword nearby; it is in the hand of the angel of Yahweh whom Balaam, the seer, cannot see! J. Currid, *Numbers* (EP 2009), 322-23.

The account is riddled with deliberate biting irony. The predicament of Balaam was meant to be ludicrous. Balaam is the butt of God's humor. Comic effect is the very point.

When an unbeliever cites this passage as a paradigm-case of just how ridiculous the Bible is, the unbeliever makes himself ridiculous in the process. His ridicule amounts to self-ridicule because he is too dense to even recognize the satirical nature of the account. Indeed, his reaction is doubly ironic, for the infidel is just as blind, just as clueless as Balaam. He falls into the very same trap. Makes himself a fool by affecting wisdom.



## Before Methuselah

Some places seem interchangeable with other places. Unless you already knew, you couldn't tell where you were—or even when. But other settings have a sense of time and place. Christopher Hitchens once wrote about driving through the New England countryside. The landscape reminded him of parts of England. Yet, he said, its English counterparts felt far older.

I think one reason some people find it difficult to believe Bible history isn't just the distance in time, but the distance in space. The world that most of us inhabit looks very different from the world of the Bible. Our world feels modern. It doesn't look like the kind of world where these things would happen. A different ambience. We read about one world, but live in another. We don't easily relate to the physical world of the Bible.

Even though there's a sense in which every part of the world is just as old as every other part, some parts of the world seem older than others. Years ago I was in Cappadocia. That felt far more ancient than any other place I've been in. Weighted with a sense of the yawning, forsaken, forgotten past. Like stepping into a different millennium. If you bumped into Abraham, just around the corner, it wouldn't be out of character. If you happened upon a voice from a burning bush, it wouldn't seem out of place.

I remember hiking along a bluff, overlooking a dry riverbed below, in a shadowy gorge. There were deserted, rock-hewn churches clinging to the treacherous edge of the bluff. Due to erosion, they were turning back into the rock formations from which they were originally hewn. Weatherworn, they

blended into the austere landscape. A palpable sense of silence, stillness, emptiness, antiquity, and aloneness. Abandoned by time—like a misshelven book.

## Healing a few

*6 He went away from there and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. 2 And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands? 3 Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. 4 And Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household." 5 And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. 6 And he marveled because of their unbelief ([Mk 6:1-5](#)).*

*53 And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there, 54 and coming to his hometown he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? 55 Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? 56 And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?" 57 And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household." 58 And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief ([Mt 13:53-58](#)).*

What's the relation between unbelief and Jesus not performing miracles (Matthew) or not being *able* to perform miracles (Mark) in Nazareth? Is Jesus impotent to perform miracles against their will? Is lack of faith a check on his power? Must people cooperate?

I don't think that's the point of the passage. The problem is not that they were lacking in faith, or that they didn't have enough faith. Rather, they greeted his ministry with belligerent disbelief. That's not the same as doubt, weak faith, or wavering faith. Rather, that's the opposite of faith. A implacable attitude to the contrary.

Jesus not performing miracles in that setting is punitive. He refuses to reward their animosity. They get what they deserve, which is nothing. Those who refuse him, lose him.

However, the opposition wasn't total, so he did heal a few. A remnant.

## Angels among us

One stock objection to Bible history is the alleged mismatch between the modern world and the world of the Bible. Miraculous things happen in Scripture that don't happen in real life. Our everyday experience doesn't correspond to the world depicted in the Bible. For instance, there are many angelic encounters recorded in Scripture. But when is the last time an angel appeared to *you*? So Bible "history" is unreal.

However, that objection raises a question: how do you *know* that you never met an angel? The objection tacitly assumes that angelic encounters are manifestly angelic. But in Scripture, that's generally not the case. The objection confuses the perspective of the omniscient narrator with the perspective of the characters within the narrative. The reader knows that some character encountered an angel because the narrator cues the reader to the true identity of the angelic visitor. But the character isn't automatically privy to the narrator's viewpoint.

And the true identity of an angel isn't evident unless the angel makes that evident. Although angels can take on a supernatural aspect (e.g. luminosity), when angels interact with humans, they typically assume a human appearance. They are outwardly indistinguishable from humans. They can exhibit supernatural powers (like the angels who blinded the Sodomites), but if all you had to go by were appearances, you couldn't tell an angel from a fellow human being.

Put another way, angels often function as undercover operatives. They disguise themselves as human. So for all you know, you have encountered angels.

Now an unbeliever might object that this is special pleading. There's no evidence that you met an angel.

But that misses the point. I'm not discussing the evidence for angels. I'm discussing the claim that what we experience in "real life" is inconsistent with how the Bible depicts the world. I'm discussing the assumption that if angels still do the things attributed to them in Scripture, we should see the evidence all around us. Because we don't, that's evidence for the nonexistence of angels.

And I'm pointing out that this objection is illogical. There's no presumption that if you met an angel, you'd know it.

BTW, that doesn't mean there's no positive evidence for angels in the modern world. Angelic apparitions are reported in the modern world, as well as church history.

Of course, we have to judge the credibility of these reports on a case-by-case basis. And in many cases, we lack sufficient information to assess them one way or the other.

But, then, they weren't for our benefit in the first place. We are third parties to that transaction, assuming it happened.

## The pillar of fire

Exodus speaks of the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire. What is the reader supposed to visualize? Since the Bible records real events, it's useful for readers to enter into the accounts and imagine what the observers saw.

At one level, this is a theophany. A visible symbol of God's presence and power. At another level, theophanies can be natural phenomena—like coincidence miracles.

One question is whether the pillar(s) of cloud and fire represent two distinct phenomena or one. A fiery manifestation would be less luminous in sunlight.

One the face of it, their descriptive names and functions suggest whirlwinds; specifically: a dust devil for the pillar of cloud and fire devil for the pillar of fire. Dust devils would be familiar sights to desert inhabitants. Fire devils would be rarer. These whirlwinds have a columnar appearance. They are mobile. A dust devil is darker while a fire devil is brighter—due to their respective composition.

Normally, dust devils and fire devils are small, weak, momentary, aimless vortices. However, they can vary in size and intensity, sometimes rivaling tornadoes.

In the case of the pillar(s) of cloud and fire, these are guided, durable phenomena. Unlike mindless, inanimate whirlwinds, they lead the Israelites in the trackless desert:

*And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that*

*they might travel by day and by night* (Exod 13:21).

They can also assume a protective role:

*19 Then the angel of God who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, 20 coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness. And it lit up the night without one coming near the other all night* (Exod 14:19-20).

This is a complex phenomenon. Since it's not a purely natural phenomenon, that's understandable. On the one hand, the "dark side" of the cloud might serve to conceal the Israelites from the Egyptian army. If, on the other hand, this is a tornadic fire devil, it would pose an impenetrable barrier—a wall of fire—shielding the Israelites from the Egyptian army.

The fire devil identification may seem less suitable for the "cloud" that fills the tabernacle and the temple. For one thing, it would incinerate worshippers. In context, this is probably not a "pillar of cloud." A columnar shape seems less apt for filling rectilinear space. Also, it seems to emit light rather than heat.

Since this is not a purely natural phenomena, we'd expect that flexibility. God is manipulating natural forces. Bending nature to his will.



At the same time, there may be something physically dangerous about the "cloud." Notice that the presence of the "cloud" is incompatible with human presence in temple dedication:

*10 And when the priests came out of the Holy Place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, 11 so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord (1 Kgs 8:10-11).*

The "cloud" is inhospitable to human life. That, of course, reflects the holiness of God—where direct contact with sinners may be fatal.

## Epilepsy or possession?

Many Bible commentators, including otherwise conservative commentators, classify the young demoniac in the Synoptic accounts (Mt 17:14-20; Mk 9:14-29; Lk 9:37-43) as epileptic. A prima facie problem with their diagnosis is that the Gospels attribute his condition to demonic possession.

One reservation I have is that being a NT scholar doesn't make one an expert on epilepsy. All we're getting from the commentators is their amateur understanding of epilepsy.

In addition, the boy has other symptoms which don't seem to be attributable to epilepsy. He's a deaf-mute. And his father says the evil spirit tried to make the boy drown himself or burn himself to death.

To be sure, we should make allowance for the fact that this is the father's impression. Jesus doesn't say that, or the narrator. Still, the fact that Jesus exorcizes the boy to some degree endorses the father's interpretation.

## Samson's Trojan Horse

23 Now the lords of the Philistines gathered to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to rejoice, and they said, "Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hand." 24 And when the people saw him, they praised their god. For they said, "Our god has given our enemy into our hand, the ravager of our country, who has killed many of us." 25 And when their hearts were merry, they said, "Call Samson, that he may entertain us." So they called Samson out of the prison, and he entertained them. They made him stand between the pillars. 26 And Samson said to the young man who held him by the hand, "Let me feel the pillars on which the house rests, that I may lean against them." 27 Now the house was full of men and women. All the lords of the Philistines were there, and on the roof there were about 3,000 men and women, who looked on while Samson entertained. 28 Then Samson called to the Lord and said, "O Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes." 29 And Samson

*grasped the two middle pillars on which the house rested, and he leaned his weight against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other. 30 And Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines." Then he bowed with all his strength, and the house fell upon the lords and upon all the people who were in it. So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he had killed during his life.*

*31 (Judges 16:23-31).*

This is a complex miracle. It's tempting to focus on the obvious miracle: Samson's superhuman strength. But myopic attention to that aspect of the account can blind us to the larger miraculous framework. For the obvious miracle is embedded in a coincidence miracle. A divinely staged convergence of opportune circumstances. The Trojan Horse quality of the incident. The Philistines imagine that they scored a coup by capturing Samson, but that will backfire. Their failure to notice that his hair had time to grow back during his captivity. The presence of the entire Philistine leadership in one place. The significance of the location: the temple of their national god. The fact that the temple was supported by two close-spaced pillars.

## Foundation for a new covenant

Eph 2:20 is a cessationist proof-text. That, however, raises questions regarding the function of the metaphor in Paul's argument. Metaphors aren't like propositions with logical implications. Metaphors are open-textured, and it's because they can be taken in so many different directions that we need to be sensitive to the intended scope of the metaphor. Failure to confine ourselves to the role which the metaphor was meant to play in an author's argument is a recipe for mischief, nonsense, and heresy (as the case may be).

What is the author using that to illustrate? In his recent commentary, this is how Baugh construes the imagery:

The point is that the Ephesian congregation has already been laid down as a first layer of stone upon the temple's foundation. From here the building will continue to be erected ("grow," v21), but the foundation and the initial level had already been laid down when Paul wrote this epistle (cf. Rom 15:20; 1 Cor 3:10-14). In the background is the notion that there is no going back to the Mosaic theocracy that excluded Gentiles from full membership in "the covenants of promise" (cf. Gal 2:18). The Mosaic "old covenant" has been displaced by its fulfillment in the "new covenant" definitively and permanently instituted by the once-for-all, high-priestly sacrifice of Christ (e.g., 2 Cor 3:7-11; Heb 7:12; 8:13; 9:15-18; 10:8-12).

No Ephesian could hear vv21-22 without thinking immediately of the great Temple of Artemis Ephesia (the Artemisium), one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and the largest building in the Greek world. The Artemisium was about four times larger than the Athenian Parthenon. It made Ephesus an important tourist attraction and formed a large part of its economy (Acts 19:24-27,35), S. M.

Baugh, **EPHESIANS** (Lexham Press, 2016), 201, 204.

So according to Baugh's analysis, the purpose of the imagery is, in the first place, to show that the Mosaic theocracy is defunct. You might say that foundation was torn up. Replaced. A new foundation was laid. Ephesian Christians are the first story.

It isn't possible to lay the old covenant onto of the foundation of the new covenant. It can't be relaid. That's out of place. Out of sequence. Anachronistic. Passe.

In addition, although Baugh doesn't make this explicit, Paul may be taking a polemical swipe at the cult of Artemis in Ephesus, by appropriating temple imagery for Christian usage. The spiritual Christian temple displaces the pagan temple.

In context, I don't think Eph 2:20 can be used as a proof-text for cessationism. That doesn't disprove cessationism. But it must look elsewhere for its exegetical justification.

## IV. Extrabiblical miracles

---

## Let God Arise

Claude Arnassan recalled accompanying some men from Cavalier's troop to a place where they expected to find an assembly, but getting lost along the way. One of their number urged them: "My bothers, pray God and he will guide us." No sooner had they fallen to their knees "when there appeared a light in the air, like a large star, which moved toward the place where the Assembly was, a half league from there. As soon as this celestial flame disappeared, we heard the signing of psalms and joined our brothers."

This was nowhere more clearly demonstrated than by the most famous miracle of the entire period, in August 1703, when Pierre Claris repeated the miracle described in the OT book of Daniel (3:23-8) by placing himself in a fire and emerging unscathed. Several historians have discussed this particular event... [e.g. Georgia Cosmos, "Trial by fire at Sérignan: an apocalyptic event in the Cévennes war and its echoes abroad," **PROCEEDINGS OF THE HUGUENOT SOCIETY**, 27/5 (2002), 642-58].

Pine cones and other combustibles were gathered and lit, and Claris stepped into the fire, continuing to prophesy until the fire had burned itself out...All of the prophets who were present and who later testified for Misson's Théâtre sacre left behind vivid accounts of his miracle, and Antoine Court remarked that "this event had a large impact in the providence and was attested by a large number of witnesses."

Court, the Protestant historian whom Joutard credited with writing the first "modern" history of the conflict, had



considerable doubts. "But," he wrote, "by the information I have gathered, the truth is here altered: first, Claris did not stay in the fire; second, he entered it twice; third, he burned his arm and was obliged to stop in Pierredon and put on a dressing." Court, the rationalist pastor who fought much of his life against the prophetism that had fired the rebellion, was concerned to show its fallacies as the witnesses in the *Théâtre sacré* were to show its accuracy.

W. Gregory Monahan. **LET GOD ARISE: THE WAR AND REBELLION OF THE CAMISARDS** (Oxford 2014), 98-99.

The English translation of *Le Théâtre sacré des Cévennes*, accomplished by John Lacy, was entitled *A Cry from the Desert*. The most serious omission of the work, in terms of its English readership, is the collector of testimony's preface, "Au Lecteur." This piece is an integral part of the original which describes the aims of the work, its historical significance and the immediate context in which the depositions were collected in London. Contemporary reactions to *désert* prophecy (traced in chapter seven),<sup>[1]</sup> are central for an understanding of the circumstances which compelled Misson to undertake the collection of sworn evidence from former inhabitants from the region who claimed to have witnessed miraculous phenomena in the Cévennes. Witnesses who came forward between November 1706 and March 1707 to give testimony were cautioned against making false or inaccurate statements; they were to report "la vérité pure et simple" speaking only of events they could distinctly remember (pp. 24-7).

The texts of the *Théâtre sacré* confirm earlier contemporary reports documenting the occurrence of prophesying in adjacent provinces: the phenomenon had first appeared after the Revocation in 1688 in the Dauphiné, after which it

spread to the Vivarais and Velay. The outbreak of prophesying in the Cévennes after 1700 was perceived by believers to be of a similar nature to the "miracles" which had occurred earlier in these provinces. Witnesses' accounts of these events in their depositions reflect understandings of unified dimensions of time (pp. 34-6).

The depositions of the Théâtre sacré are distinct from records of interrogation held in archival repositories in France (p. 2). They are voluntary testimonies given by French exiles in London. It should be emphasized that most were collected after the act proclaimed against the Camisard inspirés in the Savoy church in January 1707. In all probability, witnesses were not unaware of the action taken against the three men by the ministry of this church. At the time of the collection of the depositions, it is unlikely that any of the witnesses could have imagined that they would later be summoned to verify their statements many of which were given under oath before Masters in Chancery (p. 166).

Only five out of the total number of witnesses who gave depositions for the Théâtre sacré gave declarations in support of assertions in the Examen du Théâtre sacré, a pamphlet published anonymously in London in 1708 (p. 170). Denial of former testimony was prompted by the very real fear of reprisal by the consistory. Evidence in consistorial records, for example, reveals that action was taken against persons who continued to attend the inspirés' meetings after their denunciation by the ministry of the refugee churches (p. 168). It is also not inconceivable that witnesses could have denied their former statements so as to avoid further involvement in this controversial affair.

In my account of this event in Huguenot Prophecy, I locate this story within the context of the apocalyptic piety of the

désert and also show how its reception in London provoked requests for verification of the miracle.

<http://www.h-france.net/vol6reviews/Vol6no52cosmos.pdf>

This is a good example of how to sift testimonial evidence for modern miracles:

**i)** Both Gregory Monahan and Georgia Cosmos are historians who specialize in this period. Their monographs have been published by prestigious academic publishing houses, which certainly have no bias in favor of miracles. Their studies are based on primary source material and eyewitness accounts.

**ii)** I don't think it's coincidental that we have reported miracles among the Huguenots and the Covenanters. I think it's antecedently more likely that God will perform encouraging miracles for Christians facing dire persecution.

**iii)** Cosmos discusses both the disincentive to lie under oath as well as the incentive to recant former testimony if the witness feels threatened by the escalating controversy.

**iv)** Monahan records the reservations of a skeptic. But he doesn't state Antoine Court's source of information. We should take those objections into account in assessing the credibility of the reported miracle. By the same token, we should take his hostile agenda into account.

## Huguenot miracles

Following Louis XIV's revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, French protestants faced the stark choice of abandoning their religion, or defying the law. Many fled abroad, whilst others continued to meet clandestinely for worship and to organise resistance to government policy, culminating in the bloody Camisard rebellion of 1702-10. During this period of conflict and repression, a distinct culture of prophecy and divine inspiration grew up, which was to become a defining characteristic of the dispersed protestant communities in southern France.

Drawing on a wide range of printed and manuscript material, this study, examines the nature of Huguenot prophesying in the Cévennes during the early years of the eighteenth century. As well as looking at events in France, the book also explores the reactions of the Huguenot community of London, which became caught up in the prophesying controversy with the publication in 1707 of *Le Théâtre sacré des Cévennes*. This book, which recounted the stories of exiles who had witnessed prophesying and miraculous events in the Cévennes, not only provided a first hand account of an outlawed religion, but became the centre of a heated debate in London concerning 'false-prophets'.

<http://www.ashgate.com/isbn/9780754651826>

Georgia Cosmos, *Huguenot Prophecy and Clandestine Worship in the Eighteenth Century*.

Chapter six is drawn almost entirely from the author's article on a particular miracle near the village of Sérignan in August 1703, when the prophet Pierre

Claris appeared to be consumed by fire, then walked miraculously out of it without any effect at all.[8] There were, in fact, a number of apparent miracles performed by prophets before and during the Camisard war, though this one was certainly among the more dramatic.

<http://www.h-france.net/vol6reviews/Vol6no51monahan.pdf>

## Blomberg on modern miracles

Keener has also compiled a catalog of some of the most verified miracles throughout Christian history, indicating the strict criteria that they must meet, so that he has probably eliminated many genuine miracles from consideration in so doing.

My own experience is more limited than some, but my family and I have had firsthand, personal exposure to or involvement with several experiences for which science has no explanation but that fit Christian faith hand in glove. My aunt who passed away at the age of 88 in 1993 had a multiply-fractured ankle poorly reset in her thirties and experienced so much pain that by her late sixties she was on constant, heavy medication. One evening just before midnight, following the instructions of a preacher on a television show she as watching, she prayed for healing for her ankle and went to bed. The next morning the pain was gone, and she lived another twenty years without its recurrence and without ever taking another pain pill for that particular problem.

As an elder in a local church, I regularly participated in prayers for healing in which we anointed people with oil according to the instructions in **Jas 5:13-18**. On two occasions, patients with previously diagnosed cancerous tumors went to their doctors shortly afterward, and the medical experts could find no trace of any tumors ever having existed.

My wife, during her nurse's training at a teaching hospital one evening, watched a team of emergency

personnel rush into a room in which she was trying unsuccessfully to make an elderly heart patient comfortable. The head nurse commended by wife for having come to get her, even though she had left her patient unattended in so doing, and confirmed that the patient was indeed having a heart attack. My wife replied that she had never left the room. Later the two women searched the floor, asking everyone they could if anyone resembling my wife had been on the wing, and the answer was uniformly negative. Given that she had fiery red, curly hair, there could not have been many such individuals, and even if such a look-alike had been on the floor, she would have had no reason to tell the head nurse that the patient my wife was attending in that room had suffered a heart attack.

A few years ago before my mother moved out of the house she had lived in for over fifty years and into a retirement community, she was starting to go out her back door and walk to the alley behind her garage one cold winter's day, to put out garbage for the trash collector. Unlike any experience she had ever had in her life, and although she was entirely alone in her house, she heard an audible voice telling her, "Take your cane." Startled, but assuming it was God, she grabbed her cane. Just before closing the backdoor behind her, she heard the voice again say, "Now take your cell phone." Again, nothing like this had ever happened to her before, nor has it happened since. As she was walking on the sidewalk through the backyard, she realized that there was a thin layer of ice she hadn't seen from the house, and the cane became quite important to keep her from falling. After emptying the trash, she realized that she was poised precariously between larger sections of snow and ice, so that she didn't want to try to navigate the walk even

with the cane. So she used her phone to call for help and was able to get back to the house with assistance. My mother acknowledged that she would have been quite frightened otherwise, having recently had knee surgery, if she had tried to get back on her own, and she felt sure there was a good chance she would have fallen.

Once a friend and former student contacted me, told me she had dreamed that I had a particular affliction, and accurately described a recently injury I had experienced.

I could add even more astonishing examples, but I have not sought their permission to tell their stories. Several, I know, would not want attention drawn to themselves.

Craig Blomberg, **CAN WE STILL BELIEVE THE BIBLE?** (Brazos Press 2014), chap. 6.



## Miracles and medicine

I think many atheists, especially scientists, are conditioned to secularism because, in their observation, the natural world operates like a machine.

And up to a point, that's consistent with Christian theology. Christian theology has a doctrine of ordinary providence. As a rule, natural events are governed by secondary causes. A chain of physical cause and effect.

As a rule, a botanist wouldn't attribute a sickly plant getting better to divine intervention. As a rule, a veterinarian wouldn't attribute a sick horse getting better to divine intervention.

However, let's consider miraculous answers to prayer. These are usually prayers for humans. If God intervenes more often in medical practice than botany, that's a reflection of the fact that more prayers are directed at sick humans.

But let's take a comparison. John Wesley once prayed for his horse:

Wesley was familiar with all the discomforts of the road. His horses fell lame or were maimed by incompetent smiths. Sometimes there were more serious accidents. In July 1743, he and John Downes rode from Newcastle to Darlington. They had young horses, which were quite vigorous the day before, but now both seemed unwell. The ostler went in haste for a farrier, but both animals died before they could discover what was the matter with them. In June, 1752, a young strong mare which Wesley borrowed at Manchester fell lame before he reached Grimsby.

Another was procured, but he was "dismounted" again between Newcastle and Berwick. When he returned to Manchester, he found that his own mare had lamed herself whilst at grass. He intended to ride her four or five miles, but some one took her out of the ground. Another which he had lately bought ought to have been forthcoming, but she had been taken to Chester. In one journey his horse became so exceeding lame that it could scarcely set its foot to the ground. Wesley could not discover what was amiss. He rode thus seven miles till he was thoroughly tired, and his head ached more than it had done for months. He says, "What I here aver is the naked fact. Let every man account for it as he sees good. I then thought, 'Cannot God heal either man or beast by any means, or without any' Immediately my weariness and headache ceased, and my horse's lameness in the same instant. Nor did he halt any more that day or the next. A very odd accident this also!"

<http://wesley.nnu.edu/?id=95>

Although it could be coincidental, this seems to be a case of answered prayer. For the sake of argument, let's say that's the case.

Back in the days when many Christians relied on horses for farming and transportation, more prayers would be directed at ailing horses. To the extent that God answered their prayers, God intervened more often on behalf of horses. In that event, veterinary science ought to make greater allowance for miracles. But there is less occasion for that today.

Likewise, if a Christian farmer prays for infested crops, and God answers his prayer, then God intervened on behalf of

corn or wheat. In that event, a botanist ought to make allowance for a miracle.

To some degree, what scientists observe concerning the presence or absence of miracles in their field may mirror what Christians generally pray for. Nature is more automatic when we have less occasion to pray about natural events. We pray for what we need.

## An everyday miracle

We read in [2 Kgs 20:7](#):

*Then Isaiah said, "Prepare a poultice of figs."  
They did so and applied it to the boil, and he  
[Hezekiah] recovered.*

According to John J. Bimson in the **NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY**:

The use of a poultice of figs for the king's skin disorder (7) is typical of the practices of ancient 'folk medicine'. It would therefore be surprising if such treatment had not been tried on Hezekiah earlier. Perhaps we should assume that it had, but that it was ineffective until Isaiah delivered God's promise of recovery.

According to **THE IVP BIBLE BACKGROUND**

**COMMENTARY: OLD TESTAMENT** by Victor H. Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton:

20:7 **poultice of figs**. Fig cakes may have been used as condiments and for medicinal purposes at Ugarit. Both later rabbinical Jewish and classical sources (e.g., Pliny the Elder) shared the belief that dried figs had medicinal value. Poultices were sometimes used for diagnosis rather than for medication. A day or two after the poultice was applied, it would be checked for either the skin's reaction to the poultice or the poultice's reaction to the skin. One medical text from Emar prescribes the use of figs and raisins for such a process. They helped determine how the patient should be treated and whether or not he would recover.

As far as I'm aware, we don't know what specific disease Hezekiah had. But, of course, the opening verses of the chapter tell us the disease would eventually prove fatal for Hezekiah.

Hezekiah did not take his impending demise well, and "wept bitterly" (v3). The Lord responded and told Isaiah to deliver the following message to Hezekiah:

"Go back and tell Hezekiah, the ruler of my people, 'This is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you. On the third day from now you will go up to the temple of the Lord. I will add fifteen years to your life....([2 Kgs 20:5-6a](#))"

And Hezekiah was healed after the poultice of figs was applied to his boil(s).

If we hadn't been able to peek behind the curtains to know Hezekiah would die from his illness, as well as that it was the Lord who would spare Hezekiah's life, then we could very well have concluded ordinary medicinal remedies, i.e., the "poultice of figs," worked to effect healing for Hezekiah. However, we know the truth is God stood behind this otherwise ordinary looking medicinal remedy. Had God not granted Hezekiah's prayer, then Hezekiah would not have had an extra fifteen years of life. Had God not granted Hezekiah's prayer, then no medicine would've worked to cure Hezekiah.

Now, as far as I can tell, only Hezekiah and Isaiah knew Hezekiah should've died from his illness. And Hezekiah only knew because Isaiah told him what God told Isaiah. In addition, again as far as I can tell, only Hezekiah and Isaiah knew God had heard Hezekiah's prayer and spared Hezekiah's life. And Hezekiah again only knew because Isaiah told him what God told Isaiah. Hezekiah had to trust

Isaiah's word. (Perhaps that's why Hezekiah wished for an additional sign, in spite of the prophet's word, which was God's word which Hezekiah should've trusted.)

Others like those who prepared and applied the poultice of figs may have known. But they just as well may not have known. After all, it doesn't sound like Isaiah had a compelling reason to tell anyone else God's plans for Hezekiah. So it seems plausible only Hezekiah and Isaiah would've known Hezekiah's recovery was at all a miraculous answer to prayer. It seems plausible this miracle would've been a private miracle. It seems plausible it wouldn't have been verifiable by outsiders. No one outside Hezekiah and Isaiah would've been able to rigorously examine and demonstrate it was a bona fide miracle. And, arguably, perhaps not even Hezekiah or Isaiah would've been able to do so. "All" they had was God's word.

In short, it most likely would've appeared to outsiders that Hezekiah fell sick, "a poultice of figs" was applied to him, and he was healed. On the face of it, there wouldn't have seemed to have been anything miraculous about any of it at all. There would've been at least some expectation the poultice of figs could work.

## Medieval miracles

Jason appears to have a similar charitable perspective to alleged miracles among non-Christian faiths, particularly Roman Catholics. I find that to be odd, knowing what I have read of him in the past outlining the false gospel Catholicism promotes. His conclusion is that within Catholicism, there are Catholics who are genuine believers and the alleged miracle claims from Catholic circles is God working out of compassion on behalf of those Christians. I personally see no precedent from Scripture in which God worked in such a fashion among the purveyors of a false Gospel.

<http://hipandthigh.wordpress.com/2013/10/09/the-theology-of-miracles/>

I've discussed this before, but I'd like to elaborate on this claim.

**i)** Fred didn't take time to explain why he doesn't think God would do that, so I can only speculate. However, I assume the unstated reason for Fred's position is that if purpose of miracles is to attest doctrine, then God wouldn't empower a false teacher to preform miracles. For, by so doing, God would attest false doctrine, which would defeat the evidential function of miracles.

**ii)** Of course, that argument is premised on the assumption that the exclusive purpose of miracles is to attest doctrine. If, however, that's simplistic and reductionistic, then the argument fails.

**iii)** Fred goes on to attribute some miracles to demonic agency. There is scriptural precedent for that. However, that move undercuts the evidential value of miracles. For if some miracles are demonic, then miracles don't reliably attest doctrine. So that's a potential point of tension in Fred's argument.

**iv)** But let's consider the assumption from another angle. Unless you believe there were no real Christians between the death of the apostles (or their immediate converts) and the Protestant Reformation, then for many centuries Christians suffered from an obscured gospel.

Put another way, if God elected a Christian to be born in Medieval Europe, then due to social conditioning and the available theological models and resources, that Christian would have a very flawed theology by Protestant standards. Yet Calvinists do believe that God preserves a remnant throughout church history, including the pre-Reformation era. Indeed, the fact that you could be a genuine Christian despite the poor theological paradigms at your disposal is a tribute to God's sustaining grace. God is able to overcome those daunting impediments.

And even if you're not a Calvinist, I daresay evangelical Christians generally believe there were real Christians before the Protestant Reformation. By contrast, it's cults like Mormonism which think the Gospel went into eclipse for centuries on end, until God restored the "lost" gospel.

So unless you think there were no true Christians during the "Dark Ages" or the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, unless you think the gospel dropped out of sight between the death of St. John and a monk nailing 95 theses to the door of All Saints Church, then, in fact, you must make allowance for the coexistence of true believers and false doctrine.



There are, of course, degrees of error. But it's going to reflect the religious culture of that time and place.

**v)** I'd add that within this historical context, we could even grant the evidential value of miracles. By the standards of the day, a medieval missionary could *symbolize* Christianity—in contrast to, say, unchurched Vikings. In that historical setting, he can be a *representative* of the Christian faith even if his theology quite deficient. To take a comparison, under the Mosaic Covenant the high priest *officially* represented the true faith, even if he was personally corrupt. He held that emblematic role, in contrast to the pagan nations which surrounded ancient Israel.

If, say, God empowered a medieval missionary to practice "power evangelism" in the face of unchurched Vikings, that wouldn't attest the specifics of medieval theology. Rather, that would operate at a higher, more *symbolic* level. It would stand in contrast to the heathen faith of the Vikings.

**vi)** Finally, MacArthurites typically insist that continuationists should be able to furnish evidence for miracles throughout church history. If, however, continuationists meet their demand, it would be duplicitous of MacArthurites to dismiss the evidence because it comes from the wrong period of church history. To discount evidence of medieval miracles because they are too...medieval.

**vii)** Having spoken in abstractions, I'd like to close with a concrete illustration. Indeed, I've set the stage. This concerns Bernard of Clairvaux's reputation as a miracle-worker. Keep in mind that this was written by contemporaries and eyewitnesses. Also keep in mind that

this was prior to his canonization. He wasn't technically a "saint" at that time. So this isn't your conventional hagiography. Rather, it's a historical chronical.

...Especially in Geoffrey of Auxerre's account of Bernard's preaching of the Second Crusade in Germany...It is predominately about a group which accompanied Bernard, recording miracles as they happened...they provide an excellent example of miracles performed as a living saint, recorded in meticulous detail by well-informed, astute and reputable observers:

EBERHARD: On that day I saw him cure three others who were lame.

FRANCO: You all saw the blind woman who came into church and received her sight before the people.

GUADRIC: And we saw that a girl whose hand was withered had it healed, while the chant at the offertory was being sung.

GERHARD: On the same day I saw a boy receive his sight.

BISHOP HERMAN: The priest of the town of Hereheim, for so it was called, showed me a man who had been blind for ten years who came from his home on the First Sunday of Advent, and it was blessed by Bernard as he passed and he returned to his home seeing. I had heard of this before and everyone in that area confirmed it.

EBERHARD: I heard from two honest men, one a priest the other a monk, about two people in the town of Lapenheim who on that same day were blessed and receive their sight.

PHILIP: On Monday in my presence a blind man was led into the church and after the saint had laid his hand on him, just as you have heard from everyone, the people proclaimed that he could see.

ABBOT FROWIN: I myself with brother Godfrey saw that man coming in.

FRANCO: On Tuesday, in Frieburg the mother of a blind boy brought him in the morning to our lodging; and when the Father was told that after he had touched him he could see, he ordered inquires to be made about him; and I myself did this. I interrogated the boy and he replied that he could see clearly and proved it with many actions.

The details given of the journey and of those present were not in question; it was clear where they went and who they were. What, then, did they see? They affirm that they saw and heard Bernard being asked to cure the sick and him doing so. Can these firsthand records of such miraculous cures be considered as events, taking place visibly during the three months of the tour of Germany? It seems that they could: they were events which were seen and recorded by well-known monks and clerics. Bernard...would make the sign of the cross and pray for a cure in the name of Christ, or the Trinity or just himself. On several occasion he was interested in the outcome of events and sent his companions to see if the person concerned was really cured.

The number of cures performed must have been considerably more than those recorded, but the records note the healing of 235 cripples, 172 blind as well as cures of the deaf and dumb, demoniacs and those afflicted with other diseases.

B. Ward, "Miracles in the Middle Ages," G. Twelftree,

ed. **THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO MIRACLES**

(Cambridge University Press 2011), 158-160.

## The charismatic covenanters

I'm going to quote from an article which was originally published in the Westminster Theological Journal: Smith, Dean R. "The Scottish Presbyterians and Covenanters: A Continuationist Experience in a Cessationist Theology." WTJ 63 (2001): 39-63. Dean Smith currently teaches at Geneva College.

The article is illustrative in two respects. First of all, there's the question of whether continuationism is "truly Reformed." I myself don't find that a terribly interesting question, but other people do. The other reason is to present documented cases of predictive prophecy and the "gift of prophecy" in modern church history.

Whether or not we believe it is a different question. That depends on your worldview, as well as how you evaluate testimonial evidence.

### **The Scottish Presbyterians and Covenanters: A Continuationist Experience in a Cessationist Theology**

Many Reformed people have assumed that Warfield adequately summarized the history of the church in regard to the continuation of charismata. Generally both cessationists and continuationists have until recently either ignored or overlooked the history and the testimony of the Scottish Presbyterians and Covenanters in regard to the continuation of both prophecy and healing.

Scottish Presbyterians were those early Protestants of Scotland who struggled for religious reformation in Scotland.. The first Scottish Confession of Faith was signed

in 1557, subscribed again in 1581, 1590, 1596, and 1638. The Covenanters were those who signed the Solemn League and Covenant in 1638 and lived from 1638-1688, a period during which some 18,000 people suffered death or other penalties of hardship for their faith. This same period, however, experienced a remarkable outpouring of the Spirit of God on his suffering church. Some of the experiences were recorded in a series of books: John Knox's History of the Reformation in Scotland; Robert Fleming's The Fulfilling of the Scriptures, first published in Rotterdam in 1671; Patrick Walker's Six Saints of the Covenant, originally published 1724; and John Howie's The Scots Worthies, first published in 1775. Howie's work, based on the earlier accounts, is primarily inspirational biographical sketches of the Scottish martyrs, arranged chronologically according to the date they died for their faith. Howie's work is also more popular, written to encourage later generations of believers. The 1870 edition was reprinted in 1995 by the Banner of Truth Trust, thus making it readily available today.

One question that needs to be addressed is reliability. Many of the things recorded in these books are so remarkable that they naturally produce a response of skepticism, if not outright disbelief. Are the records reliable or are the events merely reflective of myth and Scottish folklore?

Knox was present at George Wishart's martyrdom and heard Wishart's prophecy of Cardinal Beaton's death. Knox himself gives indication of his own experience of prophecy in writing "A Godly Letter to the Faithful in London, etc." in which he clearly identifies the judgments of God coming through a variety of plagues. How does Knox know this?

But ye wald knaw the groundis of my certitude; God grant that hearing thame ye may understand and stedfastlie believe the same. My assurances are not the

Mervallis of Merline, nor yit the dark sentences of prophane Prophesies; But (1.) the plane treuth of Godis Word; (2) the invincibill justice of the everlasting God; and (3.) the ordinarie course of his punishmentis and plagues from the begynning, ar my asurance and groundis. Godis Word threateneth distructioun to all inobedient; his immuntabill justice require the same. The ordinary punishmentis and plagues schawis exempillis. What man then can ceis to prophesie?

It might be argued by some that Knox is here referring to prophecy only in the sense of the proper exposition and application of the Scriptures. However, in the same letter Knox cites several ministers who prophesied specific coming judgments:

Almost thair wes none that occupyit the place, but he did prophesie and panelie speake the plagues that ar begun and assuredlie sall end. MAISTER GRINDALL panelie spak the death of the Kingis Majestie; complaynyng on his houshald servandis and officeris, who neither exchameit nor feirit to rail aganis Godis trew Word, and aganis the Preacheris of the same. The godlie and fervent man, MAISTER LEVER, panelie spak the desolatioun of the commoun weill, and the plagues whik suld follow schortlie. MAISTER BRADFURDE (whome God for Chrystis his Sonis sake comfort to the end!) spared not the proudest, but boldlie declareit that Godis vengeance suld schortlie stryke thame that then wer in autoritie, becaus thay abhorrit and loathed the trew Word of the everlasting God. And, amangis many uthir, willit thame to tak exempill be the lait Duck of Somerset, who became so cold in hearing Godis Word, that the year befor his last apprehensioun, he wald ga visit his masonis, and wald not dainyie himself to ga

frome his gallerie to his hall for ehring of a sermone.  
"God punissit him (said the godlie Preacher) and that  
suddanelie, and sall He spair yow that be dowbill mair  
wicket? No, He sall not!

This letter was written in 1554. Can there be certainty that Knox really believed that God was giving special insights into the future to these men? Writing on September 19, 1565 a prefix to a sermon preached on August 19, 1565 in Edinburgh, Knox says:

For considering my selfe rather cald of my God to instruct the ignorant, comfort the sorowfull, confirme the weake, and rebuke the proud, by tong and livelye voyce in these most corrupt dayes, than to compose bokes for the age to come, seeing that so much is written (and that by men of most singular condition), and yet so little well observed; I decreed to containe my selfe within the bondes of that vocation, wherunto I founde my selfe especially called. I dare not denie (lest that in so doing I should be inhurious to the giver), but that God hath revealed unto me secretes unknowne to the worlde; and also that he made my tong a trumpet, to forwarne realmes and nations, yea, certaine great personages, of translations and chaunges, when no such thinges were feared, nor yet was appearing, a portion wherof cannot the world denie (be it ever so blind) to be fulfilled; and the rest, alas! I feare, shall follow with greater expedition, and in more full perfection, than my sorrowfull heart desireth. These revelations and assurances notwithstanding, I did ever absteyne to commit anye thing to writ, contented onely to have obeyed the charge of Him who commanded me to cry. (Emphasis added).



This is perhaps the clearest of Knox's statements about God revealing events to him in advance so that he could warn kingdoms and rulers of things about to come. Some of these he had seen come to pass, and some would yet come. Knox is recording things out of his own experience and awareness.

What about Robert Fleming? Deere notes:

Fleming and his contemporaries should be considered credible because they saw many of these things with their own eyes. Fleming's spiritual fathers and other witnesses had passed on accounts of miracles before his time or the events were a matter of public record.

The events recorded in *The Fulfilling of the Scripture* are carefully documented. Dates are frequently indicated and often the names of people present are given, with frequent notes that the observers are still alive. Steven notes the high regard in which Fleming is held:

Annexed to the folio edition is an extremely favourable attestation by Dr. Isaac Watts, Mr Jabez Earle, Mr. Daniel Neal, the historian of the Dissenters, and other eighteen distinguished ministers in London. The writer, they observe, "is universally known to have been a person of singular worth and piety, and his works declare him a diligent and careful observer of the provides (sic) of God towards his church and people. Many such instances, which no other author has taken notice of, and which, were they not well attested, would appear almost incredible, are to be met in his book called *The Fulfilling of the Scripture*; a performance which has so far entitled itself to the esteem of all serious Christians, as not to need our recommendation." The work was originally published in

Holland, where, as throughout the British Empire, Mr. Fleming acquired a lasting reputation. It is designed to shew the workings of particular providence, and, in our opinion, is a production which does much honour to the piety and sound professional learning of its author. Few Christians more habitually recognised the overruling hand of the Almighty than did Mr. Fleming; and indeed in every object and event, he devoutly traced the divine operations. From the history of all nations, and especially from that of his native, as well as of Holland, his adopted country, he has gratefully recorded several ever memorable instances of a public and private kind, which afforded evident proofs of the merciful interference of heaven in the hour of extremity.

Similar statements are made about Patrick Walker. Even though Walker traveled over 1000 miles in Scotland and Ireland, while collecting reports and historical facts, his accuracy was attacked from the beginning and he was accused of inadequate documentation. However, D. C. Lachman notes: "In so far as his work can now be verified, his quotations are substantially accurate and his facts and dates correct."

D. H. Fleming, editor of the 1901 edition of Walker's Six Saints of the Covenant states:

Many of Patrick's (sic) statements can now be neither verified nor disproved; but, in going carefully over his printed works, I have been agreeably surprised to find that a number of his marvellous stories can be corroborated from other works, some of which he never saw. His quotations are fairly accurate, and his dates are on the whole amazingly correct. When he records what he had personally seen or heard,

his statements, may, I think, be taken as absolutely truthful, subject of course to some allowance in details for lapse of memory, seeing that some of his stories seem to have floated in his mind for forty years before they were committed to paper. Although he appealed at the close of each pamphlet for additional information, it must not be supposed that he was credulous enough to believe everything and to insert anything. Credulous in some ways he undoubtedly was, he was not destitute of the critical faculty, as some learned to their cost who tried to trip him up.

The conclusion to be drawn is that the unique and amazing accounts from this history are reliable accounts of actual events. This is how they were understood at the time and by later historians and scholars who have evaluated the records.

George Gillespie was one of the four ministers who were sent as commissioners from the Church of Scotland to the Westminster Assembly and was considered unequalled in clarity of thinking and strength of argument. Gillespie makes some significant observations about prophecy as it was experienced by the Scottish Presbyterians and Covenanters of previous generations as well as by those he would have known as contemporaries.

And now, having the occasion, I must say it, to the glory of God, there were in the church of Scotland, both in the time of our first reformation, and after the reformation, such extraordinary men as were more than ordinary pastors and teachers, even holy prophets receiving extraordinary revelations from God, and foretelling divers strange and remarkable things, which did accordingly come to pass punctually, to the great admiration of all who knew the particulars. Such

were Mr. Wishart the martyr, Mr. Knox the reformer, also Mr. John Welsh, Mr. John Davidson, Mr. Robert Bruce, Mr. Alexander Simpson, Mr. Furgusson, and others. It were too long to make a narrative here of all such particulars, and there are so many of them stupendous, that to give instance in some few, might seem to derogate from the rest, but if God give me opportunity, I shall think it worth the while to make a collection of these things; meanwhile, although such prophets be extraordinary, and but seldom raised up in the church, yet such there have been, I dare say, not only in the primitive times but amongst our first reformers and others; and upon what scripture can we pitch for such extraordinary prophets, if not upon those scriptures which are applied by some to the prophesying brethren, or gifted church members?

Gillespie's use of the words "holy prophets receiving extraordinary revelations from God" is most important. As a signer of the Confession, he was committed to the uniqueness and completeness of the Scriptures, yet he sees in these men extraordinary revelations from God.

Samuel Rutherford was another Scottish commissioner to the Westminster Assembly. In writing about the nature of subjective (internal) revelation Rutherford says:

(3) There is a revelation of some particular men, who have foretold things to come even since the ceasing of the Canon of the word as John Husse, Wickeliefe, Luther, have foretold things to come, and they certainly fell out, and in our nation of Scotland, M. George Wishart foretold that Cardinall Beaton should not come out alive at the Gates of the Castle of St. Andrewes, but that he should dye a shamefull death, and he was hanged over the window that he did look

out at, when he saw the man of God burnt, M. Knox prophesied of the hanging of the Lord of Grange, M. Ioh. Davidson uttered prophecies knowne to many of the kingdome, divers Holy and mortified preachers in England have done the like....

Rutherford notes that these men did not require others to believe their prophecies as Scripture and did not denounce those who did not believe their predictions of particular events and facts. It is significant to note that Rutherford, along with Gillespie, recognized the unique extraordinary revelation that was given to those who had preceded them, and uses the term prophecy to describe such revelation.

Robert Blair, a contemporary of Gillespie and Rutherford, also makes reference to Wishart, Knox, Davidson, and Welch as men who had received extraordinary revelations concerning the times in which they lived.

The force of the Gillespie, Rutherford, and Blair references is that these men who either were commissioners to the Westminster Assembly, or lived during its time, recognized the extraordinary revelation that God had given to their predecessors and did not see it as inconsistent with their understanding of the Scriptures as the only infallible rule of faith and life. In other words, their understanding of the uniqueness of the Scriptures did not lead them to conclude that God could not continue to reveal himself through extraordinary revelation.

What was the nature of the extraordinary revelation experienced by these Scottish Presbyterians and Covenanters? Illustrations will be given from the lives of the Scots from George Wishart to Alexander Peden. The information included comes mainly from Howie's biographies which were based on the earlier works of Knox,

Fleming and Walker. The examples chosen are but a few selections from many examples in the lives of these men.  
George Wishart (1513-1546)

George Wishart was one of the early Scottish Reformers and martyrs. Cardinal David Beaton was Wishart's nemesis. Beaton made several unsuccessful attempts on Wishart's life. Eventually Beaton had Wishart arrested, tried and condemned to be burned at the stake for heresy on March 1, 1546. Howie notes:

...Two executioners came to him, and arraying him in a black linen coat, they fastened some bags of gunpowder about him, put a rope about his neck, a chain about his waist, and bound his hands behind his back, and in this dress they led him to the stake, near the Cardinal's palace...

the fore-tower, which was immediately opposite to the fire was hung with tapestry, and rich cushions were laid in the windows, for the ease of the Cardinal and prelates, while they beheld the sad spectacle.

When they kindled the fire, the gunpowder blew up, but did not kill Wishart. Right before the executioner drew the cord about his neck to end his life, Wishart uttered these words:

This flame hath scorched my body, yet it hath not daunted my spirit; but he who, from yonder place, beholdeth us with such pride, shall within a few days lie in the same, as ignominiously as he is now seen proudly to rest himself.

Deere notes that:

On May 28, 1546, less than three months after Wishart's death, at about fifty-two years of age, Cardinal Beaton was

murdered in the very palace from which he watched the prophetic martyr's execution, fulfilling Wishart's last prophecy.

Howie notes that Wishart "possessed the spirit of prophecy to an extraordinary degree."

John Knox (1514-1572)

John Knox is perhaps the most famous of the Scottish Reformers and played a leading role in the Reformation in Scotland.

John Knox was an eminent wrestler with God in prayer, and like a prince prevailed. The Queen Regent herself had given him this testimony, when upon a particular occasion she said that she was more afraid of his prayers than of an army of ten thousand men. He was likewise warm and pathetic in his preaching, in which such prophetic expressions as dropped from him had the most remarkable accomplishment.

(1) As an instance of this, when he was confined in the castle of St. Andrews, he foretold both the manner of their surrender, and their deliverance from the French galleys; and when the Lords of the Congregation were twice discomfited by the French army, he assured them that the Lord would ultimately prosper the work of Reformation.

(2) Again, when Queen Mary refused to come and hear sermon, he bade them tell her that she would yet be obliged to hear the Word of God whether she would or not; which came to pass at her arraignment in England.

(3) At another time, he thus addressed himself to her husband, Henry, Lord Darnley, while in the king's seat in the

High Church of Edinburgh: "Have you, for the pleasure of that dainty dame, cast the psalm-book into the fire? The Lord shall strike both head and tail." Both King and Queen died violent deaths.

(4) He likewise said, when the Castle of Edinburgh held out for the Queen against the Regent, that "the castle should spue out the captain (meaning Sir William Kircaldy of Grange) with shame, that he should not come out at the gate, but over the wall, and that the tower called Davis Tower, should run like a sand-glass; which was fulfilled a few years after—Kircaldy being obliged to come over the wall on a ladder, with a staff in his hand, and the said fore-work of the Castle running down like a sand-brae.

(5) On the 24th of January 1570, John Knox being in the pulpit, a paper was put into his hands, among others containing the names of sick people to be prayed for; the paper contained these words, "Take up the man whom you accounted another God," alluding to the Earl of Moray, who was slain the day before. Having read it, he put it into his pocket, without showing the least discomposure. After sermon, he lamented the loss which both the Church and the State had met with in the death of that worthy nobleman, showing that God takes away good and wise rulers from a people in His wrath; and at last said, "There is one in the company who maketh that horrible murder, at which all good men have occasion to be sorrowful, the subject of his mirth. I tell him, he shall die in a strange land, where he shall not have a friend near him to hold up his head." Thomas Maitland, the author of that insulting paper, hearing what Knox said, confessed the whole to his sister, the Lady Trabrown, but said, that John Knox was raving, to speak of he knew not whom; she replied with tears, that none of John Knox's threatenings fell to the ground. This gentleman afterwards went abroad and died



in Italy, on his way to Rome, having no man to comfort him.

(6) At his execution in June 1581, (the Earl of Morton) called to mind John Knox's words and acknowledged, that in what he had said to him he had been a true prophet. [Parentheses added]

John Knox not only made such prophecies consciously, his hearers regarded them as prophecy.

John Davidson (d. 1595)

John Davidson was a minister who suffered for over 20 years beginning in 1584 with the Raid of Ruthven. Like a number of others, he received extraordinary revelations.

He likewise, in some instances, showed that he was possessed, in a considerable measure, of the spirit of prophecy. While in Preston, he was very anxious about the building of a church in that parish, and had from his own private means contributed liberally to it. Lord Newbattle, having considerable interest in that parish, likewise promised his assistance, but afterwards receded from his engagements upon which Davidson told him, that these walls there begun should stand as a witness against him, and that ere long God should root him out of that parish, so that he should not have one bit of land in the same; which was afterwards accomplished.

Robert Fleming, in his Fulfilling of the Scriptures, relates another remarkable instance of this kind. A gentleman nearly related to a great family in the parish of Preston, but a most violent hater of true piety, did on that account, beat a poor man who had lived there,

although he had no manner of provocation. Among other strokes which he gave him, he gave him one on the back, saying, "Take that for Mr. Davidson's sake." This maltreatment obliged the poor man to take to his bed, complaining most of the blow which he had received on his back. In the close of the sermon on the Sabbath following, Davidson, speaking of the oppression of the godly, and the enmity which the wicked had to such, in a particular manner mentioned this last instance, saying, "It was a sad time, when a profane man would thus openly adventure to vent his rage against such as were seekers of God in the place, whilst he could have no cause but the appearance of His image;" and then said with great boldness, "He who hath done this, were he the laird or the laird's brother, ere a few days pass, God shall give him a stroke, that all the monarchs on earth dare not challenge." Which accordingly came to pass in the close of that very same week; for this gentleman, while standing before his own door, was struck dead with lightning, and had all his bones crushed to pieces.

### John Welch (1570-1622)

John Welch was born about 1570. He was very much the prodigal son in his early years, leaving home and living as a thief. He then decided to return home where he was reconciled to his father, entered college and then went into the ministry. He was diligent not only in preaching and studying, but also in prayer. Welch had many extraordinary experiences in his ministry according to Howie:

(1) While Welch was at Ayr, the Lord's day was greatly profaned at a gentleman's house about eight miles distant, by reason of a great confluence of people

playing at the football, and other pastimes. After writing several times to him, to suppress the profanation of the Lord's day at his house, which he slighted, not loving to be called a puritan, Welch came one day to his gate, and, calling him out, told him that he had a message from God to show him; because he had slighted the advice given him from the Lord, and would not restrain the profanation of the Lord's day committed in his bounds, therefore the Lord would cast him out of his house, and none of his posterity should enjoy it. This accordingly came to pass; for although he was in a good external situation at the time, yet henceforth all things went against him, until he was obliged to sell his estate; and when giving the purchaser possession thereof, he told his wife and children that he had found Welch a true prophet. [Emphasis added]

(2) But though John Welch, on account of his holiness, abilities, and success, had acquired among his subdued people a very great respect, yet was he never in such admiration as after the great plague which raged in Scotland in his time. And one cause was this: The magistrates of Ayr, for as much as this town alone was free, and the country around infected, thought fit to guard the ports with sentinels and watchmen. One day two travelling merchants, each with a pack of cloth upon a horse, came to the town desiring entrance, that they might sell their goods, producing a pass from the magistrates of the town from whence they came, which was at that time sound and free. Notwithstanding all this, the sentinels stopped them till the magistrates were called, and when they came they would do nothing without their minister's advice; so John Welch was called, and his opinion asked. He demurred, and putting off his hat, with his eyes towards heaven for

a pretty space, though he uttered no audible words, yet he continued in a praying posture, and after a little space told the magistrates that they would do well to discharge these travellers their town, affirming with great asservation, that the plague was in these packs. So the magistrates commanded them to be gone, and they went to Cumnock, a town about twenty miles distant, and there sold their goods, which kindled such an infection in that place, that the living were hardly able to bury their dead. This made the people begin to think of Mr. Welch as an oracle. [Emphasis added]

(3) John Welch was some time prisoner in Edinburgh Castle before he went into exile. One night sitting at supper with Lord Ochiltree, he entertained the company with godly and edifying discourse, as his manner was, which was well received by them all, except a debauched Popish young gentleman, who sometimes laughed, and sometimes mocked and made wry faces. Thereupon Mr. Welch brake out into a sad abrupt charge upon all the company to be silent, and observe the work of the Lord upon that mocker, which they should presently behold; upon which the profane wretch sunk down and died beneath the table, to the great astonishment of all the company.

John Semple (d. 1677)

John Semple was among the faithful "Protesters" who was arrested in August 1660. Howie notes:

Mr. Semple was a man who knew much of his Master's mind, as evidently appears by his discovering of several future events.

(1) When news came that Cromwell and those with him were engaged in the trial of Charles I, some persons asked him, what he thought would become of the king. He went to his closet a little, and coming back, he said to them, "the king is gone, he will neither do us good nor ill any more;" which of a truth came to pass.

(2) At another time, passing by the house of Kenmuir, as the masons were making some additions thereunto, he said, "Lads, ye are busy, enlarging and repairing the house, but it will be burnt like a crow's nest in a misty morning," which accordingly came to pass, for it was burnt in a dark misty morning by the English.

(3) Upon a certain time, when a neighboring minister was distributing tokens before the Sacrament, and was reaching a token to a certain woman, Mr. Semple (standing by) said, "Hold your hand, she hath gotten too many tokens already; she is a witch;" which though none suspected her then, she confessed to be true, and was deservedly put to death for the same.

(4) At another time, a minister in the shire of Galloway sent one of his elders to Mr. Semple with a letter, earnestly desiring his help at the Sacrament, which was to be in three weeks after. He read the letter, went to his closet, and coming back, he said to the elder, "I am sorry you have come so far on a needless errand; go home, and tell your minister, he hath had all the communions that ever he will have, for he is guilty of fornication, and God will bring it to light ere that time." This likewise came to pass.

James Wood (163?-167?)

James Wood ministered in the 1650s. He was made the principal of the Old College of St. Andrews sometime after 1651. He also experienced extraordinary revelation.

On one occasion, in company with Mr. Veitch, he went into one James Glen's shop, in Edinburgh, to see Sharp, whom he had not seen since he became archbishop, and who was expected to pass in the Commissioner's coach. Sharp coming first out of the coach, and uncovering his head to receive the Commissioner, they had a full view of his face, at which Mr. Wood looked very seriously, and then, being much affected, uttered these words: "O, thou Judas and apostatised traitor, thou hast betrayed the famous Presbyterian Church of Scotland to its total ruin, as far as thou canst; if I know anything of the mind of God, thou shalt not die the ordinary and common death of men." This, though spoken eighteen years before, was exactly accomplished in 1679.

Richard Cameron (1655?-1680)

Richard Cameron preached in the 1670s. We find in his life several references to extraordinary revelation.

When Richard Cameron came to preach in and about Cumnock, he was much opposed by the lairds of Logan and Horsecleugh, who represented him as a Jesuit, and a vile, naughty person. But yet some of the Lord's people, who had retained their former faithfulness, gave him a call to preach in that parish. When he began, he exhorted the people to mind that they were in the sight and presence of a holy God, and that all of them were hastening to an endless state of either weal or woe. Andrew Dalziel, a debauchee (a cocker or fowler), who was in the house, it being a stormy day,

cried out, "Sir we neither know you nor your God." Mr. Cameron, musing a little, said, "You, and all who do not know my God in mercy, shall know Him in His judgments, which shall be sudden and surprising in a few days upon you; and I, as a sent servant of Jesus Christ, whose commission I bear, and whose badge I wear upon my breast, give you warning, and leave you to the justice of God.." Accordingly, in a few days after, the said Andrew, being in perfect health, took his breakfast plentifully, but before he rose he fell a-vomiting, and died in a most frightful manner. This admonishing passage, together with the power and presence of the Lord going along with the Gospel, as dispensed by him during the little time he was there, made the foresaid two lairds desire a conference with him, to which he readily assented; after which they were obliged to acknowledge that they had been in the wrong, and desired his forgiveness. He said, from his heart he forgave them what wrongs they had done to him; but for what wrongs they had done to the interest of Christ, it was not his part to forgive them; but he was persuaded that they would be remarkably punished for it. To the laird of Logan he said, that he should be written childless; and the Horsecleugh, that he should suffer by burning—both of which afterwards came to pass."

Alexander Peden (1626-1686)

Perhaps the most famous of the recipients of extraordinary revelation was Alexander Peden. Howie does not note his date of birth, but we can determine the approximate time of his ministry by the fact that a proclamation against him was issued in 1666. Howie lists some eleven different prophecies by Peden that were fulfilled. Some of these were:

(1)...(I)n the year 1680, being near Mauchline, in the shire of Ayr, Robert Brown, at Corsehouse, in Loudon parish, and Hugh Pinaneve, factor to the Earl of Loudon, stabling their horses where he (Peden) was, went to a fair at Mauchline. In the afternoon, when they came to take their horses, they got some drink; in the taking of which, the said Hugh broke out into railing against our sufferers, particularly against Richard Cameron, who was lately before that slain at Airmoss. Peden, being in another room, overhearing all, was so grieved, that he came to the chamber door, and said to him, "Sir, hold your peace; ere twelve o'clock you shall know what a man Richard Cameron was; God shall punish that blasphemous mouth of yours in such a manner, that you shall be set up for a beacon to all such railing Rabshakehs." Robert Brown, knowing Mr. Peden, hastened to his horse, being persuaded that his word would not fall to the ground; and fearing also that some mischief might befall him in Hugh's company, he hastened home to his own house, and the said Hugh to the Earl's; where, casting off his boots, he was struck with a sudden sickness and pain through his body, with his mouth wide open, and his tongue hanging out in a fearful manner. They sent for Brown to take some blood from him, but all in vain, for he died before midnight.

(2) After this, in the year 1682, Mr. Peden married that singular Christian, John Brown, at his house in Priesthill, in the parish of Muirkirk, in Kyle, to Isabel Weir. After marriage, he said to the bride, Isabel, "You have got a good man to be your husband, but you will not enjoy him long; prize his company, and keep linen by you to be his winding sheet, for you will need it when ye are not looking for it, and it will be a bloody



one." This sadly came to pass in the beginning of May 1685.

A final prophecy by Peden is found in Smellie's Men of the Covenant. It is a prophecy uttered in regard to the death of John Brown.

Again, on one of the last days of April in 1685, Alexander Peden came to the carrier's house at Priesthill. He was always an honored friend, and he remained overnight- this gaunt and gracious seer of the Covenant, who for the most part, had nowhere to lay his head. Early on May-day morning (i.e. May 1, the morning of Brown's death) he said his farewells; but passing out from the door, he was heard repeating to himself, 'Poor woman, a fearful morning!' These words twice over, and then—'A dark misty morning!' The murder was committed between six and seven in the morning. Alexander Peden was then ten or eleven miles distant. Before eight o'clock he found himself at the gate of a friend's house, and lifted the latch, and entered the kitchen, craving permission to pray with the family. 'Lord,' he said, 'when wilt Thou avenge Brown's blood? O, let Brown's blood be precious in Thy sight!' When the voice of yearning and entreaty had ceased, John Muirhead, the father in the home, asked Peden what he meant by Brown's blood. 'What do I mean?' he answered. 'Claverhouse has been at the Priesthill this morning, and has murdered John Brown. His corpse is lying at the end of his house, and his poor wife sitting weeping by his corpse, and not a soul to speak comfortably to her.' And then, lifted into a kind of ecstasy, he continued, 'This morning, after the sun-rising, I saw a strange apparition in the firmament, the appearance of a very bright, clear, shining star fall from heaven to the earth. And indeed there is a clear,

shining light fallen this day, the greatest Christian that ever I conversed with.' Into Peden's eyes 'from the well of life three drops' were instilled; his heart, as the Quaker apostle said, was baptised into a sense of all conditions; and he saw, by a spiritual intuition, the sorrows which were happening in other parts of the vineyard of Christ.

Smellie indicates that Brown had been killed in the presence of his wife outside their home that morning, just as Alexander Peden had said.

John Howie makes a significant summary about Alexander Peden:

Thus died Alexander Peden, so much famed for his singular piety, zeal, and faithfulness, and indefatigableness in the duty of prayer, but especially exceeding all we have heard of in latter times for that gift of foreseeing and foretelling future events, both with respect to the Church and nation of Scotland and Ireland, and particular persons and families, several of which are already accomplished.

### **Summary on Prophecy among the Scottish Presbyterians and Covenanters**

For a period of almost one hundred and forty years, extraordinary revelation was reported in Scotland concerning these ministers. What was experienced was viewed as more than merely an extraordinary providence. It was noted above that Knox viewed a number of his contemporaries as prophets to whom God had revealed specific coming judgments as He had to Knox himself.

A second gift usually considered among the charismata is the gift of healing. Like prophecy, healing was also experienced among the Scottish Presbyterians and Covenanters and is recorded by Fleming, Walker, and Howie.

Robert Bruce (1554-1631)

Bruce's prophetic ministry was also accompanied by a healing ministry. Howie notes:

Robert Bruce was also a man who had somewhat of the spirit of discerning future events, and did prophetically speak of several things that afterward came to pass; yea, and divers persons distracted says Fleming, in his "Fulfilling of the Scripture," and those who were past all recovery with epileptic disease, or falling sickness, were brought to him, and were, after prayer by him on their behalf, fully restored from that malady. This may seem strange, but it is true, for he was such a wrestler with God, and had more than ordinary familiarity with him.

It is important to note that there appears to be more than just one extraordinary providence recorded about Robert Bruce in regard to healing. A variety of people were brought to him and healed through his prayers.

John Scrimgeour (16th Cent.)

John Scrimgeour lived at the end of the 16th century and served for a time as chaplain to James VI. Howie notes that he had a particular talent for comforting the dejected. He also notes:

He was also an eminent wrestler with God, and had more than ordinary power and familiarity with Him as appears from the following instances:

(1) When he was minister at Kinghorn, there was a certain godly woman under his charge, who fell sick of a very lingering disease, and was all the while assaulted with strong temptations, leading her to think that she was a castaway, notwithstanding that her whole conversation had put the reality of grace in her beyond a doubt. He often visited her while in this deep exercise, but her trouble and terrors still remained. As her dissolution drew on, her spiritual trouble increased. He went with two of his elders to her, and began first, in their presence, to comfort and pray with her; but she still grew worse. He ordered his elders to pray, and afterwards prayed himself, but no relief came. Then sitting pensive for a little space, he thus broke silence: "What is this! Our laying grounds of comfort before her will not do; prayer will not do; we must try another remedy. Sure I am, this is a daughter of Abraham; sure I am, she hath sent for me; and therefore, in the name of God, the Father of our Lord Jesus, who sent Him to redeem sinners; in the name of Jesus Christ, who obeyed the Father, and came to save us; and in the name of the Holy and blessed Spirit, our Quickener and Sanctifier, I, the elder, command thee, a daughter of Abraham, to be loosed from these bonds." And immediately peace and joy ensued.

(2) Mr. Scrimgeour had several friends and children taken away by death. The only daughter who at that time survived, and whom he dearly loved, was seized with the king's evil, by which she was reduced to the very point of death, so that he was called up to see her die. Finding her in this condition, he went out to the

fields, as he himself told, in the night-time, in great grief and anxiety, and began to expostulate with the Lord, with such expressions as for all the world he durst not again utter. In a fit of displeasure, he said, "Thou, O Lord, knowest that I have been serving Thee in the uprightness of my heart, according to my power and measure; nor have I stood in awe to declare Thy mind even unto the greatest in the time, and Thou seest that I take pleasure in this child. O that I could obtain such a thing at Thy hand, as to spare her! And being in great agony of spirit, at last it was said to him from the Lord, "I have heard thee at this time, but use not the like boldness in time coming, for such particulars." When he came home the child was recovered, and sitting up in the bed, took some meat; and when he looked at her arm, it was perfectly whole.

John Welch (1570-1622)

We have earlier seen John Welch's experience with extraordinary revelation. Howie also attributes one of the most remarkable instances of healing in history to John Welch.

There was in his house, amongst many others who boarded with him for good education, a young gentleman of great quality and suitable expectations, the heir of Lord Ochiltree, Governor of the Castle of Edinburgh. This young gentleman, after he had gained very much upon Mr. Welch's affections, fell ill of a grievous sickness, and after he had been long wasted by it, closed his eyes and expired, to the apprehension of all the spectators; and was therefore taken out of his bed, and laid on a pallet on the floor, that his body might be more conveniently dressed. This was to Mr.

Welch a very great grief, and therefore he stayed with the body fully three hours, lamenting over him with great tenderness. After twelve hours, the friends brought in a coffin, whereinto they desired the corpse to be put, as the custom was; but Mr. Welch desired that, for the satisfaction of his affections, they would forbear for a time; which they granted, and returned not till twenty-four hours after his death. Then they desired with great importunity, that the corpse might be coffined and speedily buried, the weather being extremely hot; yet he persisted in his request, earnestly begging them to excuse him once more, so they left the corpse upon the pallet for full thirty-six hours; but even after all that, though he was urged not only with great earnestness, but displeasure, they were constrained to forbear for twelve hours more. After forty-eight hours were past, Mr. Welch still held out against them, and then his friends, perceiving that he believed the young man was not really dead, but under some apoplectic fit, proposed to him for his satisfaction, that trial should be made upon his body by doctors and chirurgeons (sic), if possibly any spark of life might be found in him, and with this he was content. So the physicians were set to work, who pinched him with pinchers in the fleshy parts of his body, and twisted a bow-string about his head with great force; but no sign of life appearing in him, the physicians pronounced him stark dead, and then there was no more delay to be made. Yet Mr. Welch begged of them once more that they would but step into the next room for an hour or two, and leave him with the dead youth; and this they granted.

Then Mr. Welch fell down before the pallet, and cried to the Lord with all his might, and sometimes looked upon the dead body, continuing to wrestle with the Lord, till

at length the dead youth opened his eyes and cried out to Mr. Welch, whom he distinctly knew, "O sir, I am all whole, but my head and legs:" and these were the places they had sorely hurt with their pinching. When Mr. Welch perceived this, he called upon his friends; and showed them the dead young man restored to life again, to their great astonishment...This story the nobleman himself communicated to his friends in Ireland.

This recorded instance of John Welch's healing raises a number of questions. Often the skeptics of the continuation of the charismata will ask if there are any recorded instances of people being restored from death. While there have not been many in the history of the Reformation, there is at least this one.

Thomas Hog (1628-16??)

Thomas Hog was born in 1628 and was ordained to the ministry in 1654 or 1655. Hog is noted for the intense labors of his pastoral ministry in the homes in his parish. He is also noted for what we would call a significant ministry of healing. As Howie records:

So soon as it pleased the Lord thus to bless his parochial labours with a gracious change wrought upon a considerable number of the people, he took care to unite the more judicious in societies for prayer and conference. These he kept under his own inspection, and did heartily concur with them; for he himself was much in the exercise of that duty, and had several notable returns to prayer, of which we have several instances.

1. A good woman having come with this sore lamentation, that her daughter was distracted, Mr. Hog charged one or two devout persons (for he frequently employed such on extraordinary occasions) to set apart a day and a night for fasting and prayer, and join with him in prayer for the maid the next day. Accordingly, when this appointment was performed, she recovered her senses as well as before.

2. A daughter of the laird of Park, his brother-in-law, who lodged with him, was seized with a high fever, which left little hope of life. Mr. Hog loved the child dearly, and while he and his wife were jointly supplicating the Lord in prayer, acknowledging their own and the child's iniquity, the fever instantly left her. This passage was found in his own diary, which he concludes with admiration upon the goodness of God, to whom he ascribes the praise of all.

3. In like manner, a child of the Rev. Mr. Urquhart having been at the point of death, those present pressed Mr. Hog to pray, for he now was become so esteemed that none other would in such case do it, while he was present; upon which he solemnly charged them to join with him, and having fervently wrestled in prayer and supplication for some time, the child was restored to health. A like instance is found of a child of Kinmundy's in his own diary.

4. David Dunbar, who lived at a distance, being in a frenzy, came to Mr. Hog's house in one of his fits. Mr. Hog caused him to sit down and advised with Mr. Fraser of Brea, and some others present, what could be done for the lad. Some were for letting blood, but Mr. Hog said, "The prelates have deprived us of money, wherewith to pay physicians, therefore let us employ



Him who cures freely," and then laid it on Mr. Fraser to pray, who put it back on himself. So after commanding the distracted person to be still, he prayed fervently for the poor man; who was immediately restored to his right mind. This is faithfully attested to by those who were eye and ear witnesses.

5. Mr. Hog having once gone to see a gracious woman in great extremity of distress, both of body and mind, he prayed with her and for her, using this remarkable expression among others, "O Lord, rebuke this temptation, and we in Thy name rebuke the same;" and immediately the woman was restored both in body and mind.

And yet, notwithstanding the Lord had honoured him in such a manner, it is doubtful if any in his day more carefully guarded against delusions than he did, it being his custom, whenever he bowed a knee, to request to be saved from delusions.

Again there are several observations to be made. Hog recognized that some of what he was called to do was extraordinary. It is interesting to note his use of other devout people along with the use of fasting. It is also interesting to note that Hog was recognized (or esteemed) as having a unique ministry in this area. It is also important to note that Hog was very much concerned about delusions in anything he was doing and prayed constantly against being deluded.

The kind of healing ministry experienced is different from what is observed today in that there was no advertising or promoting of this ministry. Nevertheless, there was a gift of healing that was recognized as being possessed by these men.



## The Force was with him



In his autobiography (*Blessings in Disguise*, 34-35), Alex Guinness claims he had a premonition of James Dean's demise. There used to be a snippet of an interview on YouTube in which he recounted the same story.

And here's another anecdote:

The next story is also one of a disaster averted—in less dramatic and more tortuous ways. It was told by Sir Alec Guinness during a luncheon with mutual friends; he then kindly put it down in writing at my request:

Saturday July 3<sup>rd</sup> 1971 was, for me, a quiet day of rehearsals ending with dinner with a friend and going to bed at 11:30 PM. Before going to bed I set my two alarm clocks to wake me at 7:20 AM. When working in London at a weekend it has been my habit to get up at 7:20 on the Sunday morning and leave my flat at 7:45 for the short walk to Westminster Cathedral for Mass at 8:00. (I have been a Catholic, of a sort, for about sixteen

years.) On returning from Mass I would have a quick light breakfast and catch the 9:50 Portsmouth train, from Waterloo, to my home near Petersfield. On this particular night I remember I didn't sleep a great deal as I constantly woke up—perhaps each hour—with a tremendous sense of well-being and happiness, for no reason that I can put my finger on.

By habit and instinct I am a very punctual riser in the morning, and usually wake up two or three minutes before the alarm clock rings. On this particular morning I woke, glanced in the half light at the clock and thought "My God, I've overslept!" It appeared to me the clock said 7:40 (I didn't refer to the second clock). I rushed through washing and so on and hurried to the Cathedral. Very unexpectedly—in fact it had never happened before—I found a taxi at that early hour, so I thought I was at the Cathedral at 7:55. With time to spare I went to confession. When Mass started I thought the attendance was considerably larger than usual for eight o'clock. It was only when what was obviously going to be a rather tedious sermon was underway that I glanced at my watch and realized I was at the 9:00 Mass instead of the 8:00. I went home as usual, saw that both my alarm clocks were correct and decided to catch the 10:50 train instead of the 9:50. (My wife was away in Ireland so it made no difference what train I caught.) When I arrived at Waterloo at 10:30 there was an announcement that all trains on the Portsmouth line were delayed for an unspecified amount of time. An enquiry gave me the information that the 9:50 train had been derailed a few miles outside London. Subsequently

I found out that it was the front coach of the train which had toppled on its side and that, although no one was killed, or even grievously injured, the occupants of the coach had been badly bruised and taken to hospital. My habit, when catching the 9:50 on a Sunday morning, had been to sit in the front compartment of the front coach because, when in Waterloo station, that coach was in the open air, away from the roofing of Waterloo and consequently with more light for reading and less likelihood of being crowded.

In my reply to his letter I pointed out that he had not only overslept (by an hour and twenty minutes!) but had also misread the clock by an hour; had he not done so, he might have decided to skip mass and catch the ill-fated 9:50 train after all.

He wrote back that he also thought that his misreading the clock was the oddest thing about the story—"particularly as there were two clocks, almost side-by-side."

Arthur Koestler, "Anecdotal Cases," Alister Hardy, Robert Harvie, & Arthur Koestler, **THE CHALLENGE OF CHANCE** (Random House 1974), 184-86.

## A few modern miracles

Cards on the table: I have personally witnessed a large number of miracles like this. Blindness, deafness, paralysis, unlearned earthly languages being spoken (in one recent case, a Rwandan language that was being spoken by a white British girl in our prayer meeting, and understood by a native speaker of that language standing a few feet away), life-long conditions, the whole kit and caboodle—not third hand stories from Majority World countries, but in front of me in the UK—and many of the healings have subsequently been verified by medical staff, which is something we always encourage. (In my favourite story, which was featured in the national press in the UK, the government continued paying disability benefits to a wheelchair bound lady even after she had been completely healed, and when she rang to say she no longer needed the money because she could walk again, the bureaucrat at the government department said, “We haven’t got a button to push that says ‘miracle.’”)

[https://thinktheology.co.uk/blog/article/ets\\_ii\\_my\\_response\\_to\\_tom\\_schreiner](https://thinktheology.co.uk/blog/article/ets_ii_my_response_to_tom_schreiner)

## Prayer, providence, and importunity

[Peter Bide was a student of C. S. Lewis who later became an Anglican priest.]

I had come up to Oxford in 1936, at the age of 24, to read English. After I took my degree in 1939, I kept up with Lewis during the war when I was a Royal Marine. When I came through Oxford I used to go and see him, and later on, when I was ordained, I continued the habit.

My first parish was Hangleton on the edge of Hove. As well as having this tiny medieval church in the middle of a down, with great fields around it, I had care of the local "fever hospital", as we used to call it in those days. In 1954 I think it was, we had a terrible epidemic of polio, and people were streaming into the hospital.

There came an afternoon when the Bishop of Lewes came to baptize my latest child, and after the baptism I came out of my tiny church and somebody said, "Do you know that the Gallagher's boy is seriously ill"? Now the Gallaghers were Roman Catholic Irish who had just come to live in my parish. I said, "No I didn't know that he was ill, but I'll go and see him as soon as I've got rid of the Bishop.

I went down to the Gallagher's, and it was clear from the beginning that something very serious was going on because there they all were, with Mrs Gallagher at the center, handkerchief in her hands, and all the local Irish community around her in a tiny room. I said to her, "What's the matter, Mrs Gallagher?" and she said, "Michael's up in the hospital and they say he's doing to die." "Well," I said, to her, "there's one thing I can say about that; the doctors haven't got the gift of life and death. Only God has the gift

of life and death, and what you've got to do is to relax your fear and your distress insofar as you can, and rest on the mercy of God. Meanwhile I'll go and see him."

I got on my scooter and I went up the half-made road to the hospital. And as I went, it was as if a little green man was sitting on the handles, babbling away in my ear: "What the hell do you think you're going to do? Have you got your bones with you? Why don't you take those out and throw them round? You're going to see this boy? What can you do about it?"

Well, I didn't turn around and go back; I don't know why, but I didn't. I got to the hospital and put on my gown and my mask and went into the room where the boy was. It was absolutely clear that something very serious was happening to this child, because the sister was sitting in the room with him, an unusual thing for a sister to do. There was nobody else there, but she was sitting there with him, and I went up to the bedside and there he lay. His face was the color which I had come to associate with death, a sort of leaden, blue-y white. His eyes were wide open and turned up so only the whites were visible. He was flailing the pillow with his hands. If there was ever a child dying, it was this boy; and at the same time, as I saw this, I had this sort of feeling that this was a crux. Something about my whole vocation hung on it.

I didn't touch the boy. I went down on my knees beside him and I said some simple, naive, corny prayer like, "Lord, look at this Thy child, if it be Thy gracious will, let him recover in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen." Then I got up and I turned to the sister and said, "Well, now I hope he'll be all right". And she looked at me as if I was mad not unnaturally, not unnaturally: I thought I



was mad myself And I went back and I got ready for that evening.

This was Lent, and I was giving a whole series of Lenten evening lectures on the nature of faith, such as most of you have suffered under at some stage or another. The preceding week, I had been discussing the healing of Jairus's daughter, which makes a very good story for discussing the nature of faith and what is involved in faith. And I said to this group, "I'm sure that since last week, in your prayers and thoughts, you have been concerning yourself with the nature of faith. Now here is Michael Gallagher. I you will set everything that you have learnt in this church, all the many blessings that have come to you through sacrament and worship, and put Michael's welfare at the heart of this, then he will get better." I heard myself say this, and of course it was a terrible thing to say. I was putting all these people's faith at risk, and equally well I'd drawn a blank check on the Holy Spirit, which is not in my judgment a very good thing to do. But I went on with what I had to say to them that particular evening, and when I got onto my scooter again, I went straight up to the hospital.

When I got into the ward, the night sitter was on duty. I can remember her face very well. I said to her, "How is he?" and she said, "I don't know why, but he's getting better." Two days later, the chief physician at the Children's Hospital in Brighton rang up the "fever hospital" and asked what the result of the autopsy was, and was told he was sitting up in bed having his breakfast.

Now, I found this theologically extremely puzzling. I had visited all sorts of other patients in this hospital: I'd prayed for them, I'd laid hands on some of them, and they'd died. Why was Michael (who incidentally turned out to a right tearaway) selected from all this? It really worried me. It

may not worry you, but it worried me like nothing else, and the next time I went up to see Jack Lewis, I discussed it with him. So we went over the top of Shotover, as we nearly always did, and I told him how I found this incomprehensible.

I don't think he'd got any special answers to this—I don't remember what he said about it, to tell you the truth. But this is the basis on which he sent me later on. When Joy was diagnosed as having a sarcoma, he wrote to me and said would I be kind enough to come up and lay hands on her. Well, how could I say "no"? He was a friend of mine and this was a terrible situation, and of course I had to say "yes". So I went.

When I got there, up to the quarry where he lived, Jack said, "Peter, what I'm going to ask you isn't fair. Do you think you could marry us? I've asked the Bishop. I've asked all my friends at the faculty here, and none of them will." He said, "It doesn't seem to me to be fair. They won't marry us because Joy was divorced, but the man she married in the first place was a divorced man, so in the eyes of the church, surely there isn't any marriage anyway. What are they making all this fuss about?"

Well, I must admit that I had always thought that the Church of England's attitude to marriage was untenable... And so I married them in the hospital, with Warnie and the ward sister as witnesses. I laid hands on Joy, and she lived for another three years.

I don't understand this, I never have done; but that is the story, and what you see in *Shadowlands* had little or nothing to do with it. It made me very cross that there have been about six different treatments of this episode in the

course of the last ten years and nobody has every come and asked me what happened. It strikes me as absolutely extraordinary. A. N. Wilson went all the way to America to talk to somebody who had spoken to me: an expensive journey, when he could have walked down the road and found me himself. It's a very odd thing, but now you know what the truth is. My own wife died of cancer about a year before Joy Lewis, and I wrote him and told him about it, of course, and he said "There's nothing I can say Peter." Peter Bide, "Marrying C. S. Lewis." Roger White, Judith Wolfe, & Brendan Wolfe, **C. S. LEWIS AND HIS CIRCLE: ESSAYS AND MEMOIRS FROM THE OXFORD C.S. LEWIS SOCIETY** (Oxford University Press 2015), 187-90.

## Prayer, providence, and Dunkirk

Then another thing that has focused attention on the doctrine of providence is what we call 'special providences'. Now special providences are special interventions of God on behalf of individuals or groups of people. For instance, at Dunkirk during the War a kind of mist came down to protect the soldiers while at the same time the sea was unusually calm and smooth, and many people in this country were ready to say that that was a providential act of God. They said that God had intervened in order to save our troops by making it possible for them to be brought back into this country. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, **GREAT DOCTRINES OF THE BIBLE** (Crossway, 2012), 141.

## This is My Story

Recently I was rereading the early autobiography of Jerome Hines: *This is My Story, This is My Song* (Fleming-Revel, 1968). Hines was trained in the hard sciences (chemistry, physics). As a young man he was a Deist. Didn't subscribe to an interventionist God. The universe was a closed system.

But that all changed when he had a dramatic conversion experience. He reports many examples of special guidance. God speaking to him in an audible voice. God making promises that were providentially fulfilled.

**1.** I admit that I balk at some of the things he quotes God telling him. If that really happened, then I'd say this is a case of divine accommodation.

I don't have to have a firm opinion on the accuracy of the claims. I can take it or leave it.

There are, however, some factors that lend credibility to the claims:

**2.** His account is peppered with self-deprecating anecdotes. If he's regaling the reader with tall tales, I'd expect him to paint a more flattering self-portrait rather than divulging his foibles and insecurities. The candor suggests honesty. It certainly passes the criterion of embarrassment.

**3.** Given, moreover, his background in the hard sciences, it might well take something miraculous or at least preternatural to break through that naturalistic prejudice.

**4.** Hines often sang at soup kitchens in the slums. I wouldn't expect that from someone who's motivated by self-aggrandizement.

**5.** Seems to me that from a professional standpoint, he had more to lose than to gain by making this up. The operatic subculture is very worldly. Conventional Catholic piety might be tolerated, but I think his robust, outspoken evangelical piety would hurt his career as an opera singer. The more so when James Levine, reputedly an avid homosexual, became musical director of the Met.

**6.** Finally, there's his preternatural vocal preservation. Amazing how much voice he had left right up to his death from cancer at age 80.

**7.** An alternative naturalistic explanation is that he was sincere, but delusional. Yet I don't find that plausible:

**i)** If he was psychotic, how was he able to have a long successful musical career? That takes lots of discipline and presence of mind. Would a psychotic be that reliable?

Moreover, he wasn't a superstar with an entourage. He had to do most of it on his own. No one to cover for him.

**ii)** It's not just a case of hearing voices. He says the predictions came true, in highly unlikely ways. Hallucinations lack veridical confirmation.

## Why the choir was late

Here's a striking example of a coincidence miracle:

It happened on the evening of March 1 in the town of Beatrice, Nebraska. In the afternoon the Reverend Walter Klempel had gone to the West Side Baptist Church to get things ready for choir practice. He lit the furnace — most of the singers were in the habit of arriving around 7:15, and it was chilly in the church - and went home to dinner. But at 7:10, when it was time for him to go back to the church with his wife and daughter Marilyn Ruth, it turned out that Marilyn Ruth's dress was soiled. They waited while Mrs. Klempel ironed another and thus were still at home when it happened.

Ladona Vandergrift, a high school sophomore, was having trouble with a geometry problem. She knew practice began promptly and always came early. But she stayed to finish the problem.

Royena Estes was ready, but the car would not start. So she and her sister called Ladona Vandergrift, and asked her to pick them up. But Ladona was the girl with the geometry problem, and the Estes sisters had to wait.

Sadie Estes' story was the same as Royena's. All day they had been having trouble with the car; it just refused to start.

Mrs. Leonard Schuster would ordinarily have arrived at 7:20 with her small daughter Susan. But on this particular evening Mrs. Schuster had to go to her mother's house to help her get ready for a missionary meeting.

Herbert Kipf, lathe operator, would have been ahead of time but had put off an important letter. "I can't think why," he said. He lingered over it and was late.

It was a cold evening. Stenographer Joyce Black, feeling "just plain lazy," stayed in her warm house until the last possible moment. She was almost ready to leave when it happened.

Because his wife was away, Machinist Harvey Ahl was taking care of his two boys. He was going to take them to practice with him but somehow he got wound up talking. When he looked at his watch, he saw he was already late.

Marilyn Paul, the pianist, had planned to arrive half an hour early. However she fell asleep after dinner, and when her mother awakened her at 7:15 she had time only to tidy up and start out.

Mrs. F.E. Paul, choir director and mother of the pianist, was late simply because her daughter was. She had tried unsuccessfully to awaken the girl earlier.

High school girls Lucille Jones and Dorothy Wood are neighbors and customarily go to practice together. Lucille was listening to a 7-to-7:30 radio program and broke her habit of promptness because she wanted to hear the end. Dorothy waited for her.

At 7:25, with a roar heard in almost every corner of Beatrice, the West Side Baptist Church blew up. The walls fell outward, the heavy wooden roof crashed straight down like a weight in a deadfall. But because of such matters as a soiled dress, a catnap, an unfinished letter, a geometry problem and a stalled car, all of the members of the choir were late - something which had never occurred before.

Firemen thought the explosion had been caused by natural gas, which may have leaked into the church



from a broken pipe outside and been ignited by the fire in the furnace. The Beatrice choir members had no particular theory about the fire's cause, but each of them began to reflect on the heretofore inconsequential details of his life, wondering at exactly what point it is that one can say, "This is an act of God." Edeal, George. "Why the Choir Was Late." *Life* (March 27, 1950), 19-23.

What are the odds that 15 people would all be late for choir practice due to 15 different, independent reasons? Seems like a strong candidate for special providence.

**i)** However, skeptics will raise a familiar objection. And even some Christians may have nagging doubts. We might be more likely to credit that as divine intervention if it fit into a larger pattern of divine intervention. But why would God save *those* people when so many *other* Christians die in terrible accidents and natural disasters? Considered in isolation, it appears to be too lucky to be sheer luck, but compared to what happens generally, it appears to be random. After all, anomalous events happen. Like someone who survives a plane crash when all his fellow passengers die.

**ii)** But there are problems with that objection. Suppose a gambler is dealt three royal flushes in three successive games. Would it be reasonable to discount the outcome by pointing out that most gamblers aren't dealt three royal flushes in three successive games? Is it just a coincidence that he was dealt three royal flushes in three successive games?

**iii)** Suppose we lived in a world where events like this happened routinely. It's easy to imagine atheists adapting

to that challenge by saying it just goes to show some people have precognition and telepathy. They have a premonition, which they telepathically communicate to their acquaintances. The synchronized delay was due to natural factors. Turns out some humans naturally have telepathy and precognition!

**iv)** What makes examples like this so arresting is precisely because they're so rare and naturally inexplicable. To be recognizably miraculous or providential, it can't be too routine.

**v)** In addition, a world in which God constantly intervenes is a world in which people become careless and irresponsible, since they don't fear the dire consequence of their actions. They do reckless things because they expect a deus ex machina to spare them. Unless our actions have reasonably predictable results (at least in the short-term), we become morally frivolous and callous, since we don't think our actions, or negligence, will be harmful to ourselves or others.

## Joy Davidman's miraculous remission

In this post I'm going to quote some firsthand accounts concerning the miraculous remission of Joy Davidman's bone cancer. She became Lewis's wife. I'll be quoting from **THE COLLECTED LETTERS OF C. S. LEWIS, VOLUME III: NARNIA, CAMBRIDGE, AND JOY 1950-1963** (HarperOne, 2007). I will begin by quoting from the editor's (Walter Hooper) biographical sketch of Peter Bide. Bide was a former student of Lewis's, who became an Anglican priest. I will then quote from some of Lewis's letters.

-----  
-----

During the years of the war Bide had kept up with Lewis, visiting him whenever he passed through Oxford. In the spring of 1954 there was a terrible polio epidemic in the area [of Sussex], and numerous sufferers were moved by ambulances to the "fever hospital" where Bide was chaplain. One young boy named Michael Gallagher was seriously ill of cerebral meningitis and believed to be dying. Bide went on his knees beside the boy's bed, laid his hands on him, and prayed for his recovery. Michael did recover, and after being told about it Lewis was one of those who believed a miracle had been worked.

Lewis remembered this when, in 1957, Joy was in the Wingfield-Morris Hospital (now the Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre), dying of cancer. He asked Bide to come up and lay hands on her. Although it was not expected that she would recover, Lewis would not consider moving Joy to The Kilns unless they were married in a Christian ceremony in addition to the civil marriage they had already contracted,

but when Lewis asked the Bishop of Oxford for permission to marry he was refused on the grounds that her previous marriage was still valid. Bide arrived in Oxford on 20 March. As he later explained:

When Joy was diagnosed as having a sarcoma, Jack wrote to me and asked for me to come up and lay hands on her. I hesitated. The Michael case had mercifully made little or no noise but I had been aware of how easy it would have been for me to assume the role of "a priest with a gift of healing", so I made no attempt to exploit the gift, if gift it was...But Jack was a special case. Not only did I owe a considerable intellectual debt but the ordinary demands of friendship would have made it churlish to say no. So I went, and that was the beginning.

In the end there seemed only one Court of Appeal. I asked myself what He would have done and that somehow finished the argument. The following morning I married them in the hospital ward with the Ward Sister and Warnie Lewis as witnesses. I laid hands on Joy and she lived for another three years (ibid. 1650-51).

---

---

Magdalene College,  
Cambridge,  
November 27, 1957

My dear Arthur,

Our news is all very good. Joy's improvement has gone beyond anything we dared to hope and she can now

(limping, of course, and with a stick) get about the house and into the garden.

Yours  
Jack  
(ibid. 900)

Magdalen College,  
Cambridge,  
November 27, 1957

My dear Van Auken,

My own news continues better than we ever dared to hope. The cancerous bones have rebuilt themselves in a way quite unusual and Joy can now walk: on a stick and with a limp, it is true, but it is a walk—and far less than a year ago it took three people to move her in bed and we often hurt her. Her general health, and spirits, seem excellent. Of course the sword of Damocles hangs over us. Or should I say that circumstances have opened our eyes to see the sword which really hangs always over everyone.

Yours  
C. S. Lewis  
(ibid. 901)

The Kilns, Kiln Lane,  
Headington Quarry,  
Oxford,  
December 13 1957

My dear Allens,

How every kind of you both to remember us at this season, and how very grateful my wife and I are for your prayers—

prayers which have indeed been answered, for my wife is almost miraculously better. She will, alas, always been an invalid, but X-Ray photos show beyond any shadow of doubt that the diseased bone is healing; and now she can walk about the house, and even in the garden, with the aid of a stick. When I remember that this time last year she was under sentence of death, I have indeed much to be thankful for.

Yours ever,  
C. S. Lewis  
(ibid. 905-06)

Magdalene College,  
Cambridge  
27th, April, 1959

Dear Sister Madelva,

Thank you for your kind words about my wife. She was given a few weeks to live. A good man laid his hands on her and prayed. Now, two years later, she is walking about our wood pigeon shooting. At her last X-Ray check the doctor used the word "miraculous" -tho' I don't suppose he meant it quite as you or I would.

Yours sincerely  
C. S. Lewis  
(ibid. 1041)

## Fatal overdose

<https://anchorednorth.org/the-overdose-that-didnt-kill-me/>

Assuming this is true, seems like a case of instantaneous miraculous restoration (from a fatal overdose).

## Miracles: now and then

'There is, in my experience, no such demonstration of present miracle-working, *of any kind*, sufficient to suggest that a particular miracle, like the resurrection of Jesus, is likely to be a miracle from a god. This is actually the way everyone thinks, all the time: we do not believe stories that come to us second-hand which contradict our direct experience, because each fact presents us with two possible realities, the only evidence of one is a story, the only evidence of the other is direct observation.'

[http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard\\_carrier/resurrection/1.html#ii](http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/resurrection/1.html#ii)

Since the claim that "no miracles today implies none then" is a stock objection to Biblical miracles, it merits some comment.

**i)** I'd begin my noting that event if we grant Carrier's premise (no miracles today), the conclusion is fallacious:

<http://www.answeringinfidels.com/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=32>

**ii)** What's striking, though, is that Carrier takes his premise for granted. And this is quite common among unbelievers.

This is a case of self-reinforcing ignorance. The unbeliever assumes that miracles never happen. Therefore, he deems it a waste of time to do any serious reading in the sort of literature (on the miraculous, occultic, or paranormal) that would attest the occurrence of supernatural or preternatural



events. So we end up with a circular argument: if you don't go looking for evidence, you may well succeed in failing to find the evidence you didn't look for!

Let's cite some ostensible evidence of supernatural or paranormal events in the post-Biblical history. This is a very tiny sampling of what's available.

## **Augustine**

Why, they say, are those miracles, which you affirm were wrought formerly, wrought no longer? I might, indeed, reply that miracles were necessary before the world believed, in order that it might believe. And whoever now-a-days demands to see prodigies that he may believe, is himself a great prodigy, because he does not believe, though the whole world does. But they make these objections for the sole purpose of insinuating that even those former miracles were never wrought. How, then, is it that everywhere Christ is celebrated with such firm belief in His resurrection and ascension? How is it that in enlightened times, in which every impossibility is rejected, the world has, without any miracles, believed things marvellously incredible? Or will they say that these things were credible, and therefore were credited? Why then do they themselves not believe? Our argument, therefore, is a summary one— either incredible things which were not witnessed have caused the world to believe other incredible things which both occurred and were witnessed, or this matter was so credible that it needed no miracles in proof of it, and therefore convicts these unbelievers of unpardonable scepticism. This I might say for the sake of refuting these most frivolous objectors. But we cannot deny that many miracles were wrought to confirm that one grand and health-giving miracle of Christ's ascension to heaven with the flesh in which He rose. For these most trustworthy books of ours contain in one

narrative both the miracles that were wrought and the creed which they were wrought to confirm. The miracles were published that they might produce faith, and the faith which they produced brought them into greater prominence. For they are read in congregations that they may be believed, and yet they would not be so read unless they were believed. For even now miracles are wrought in the name of Christ, whether by His sacraments or by the prayers or relics of His saints; but they are not so brilliant and conspicuous as to cause them to be published with such glory as accompanied the former miracles. For the canon of the sacred writings, which behoved to be closed, causes those to be everywhere recited, and to sink into the memory of all the congregations; but these modern miracles are scarcely known even to the whole population in the midst of which they are wrought, and at the best are confined to one spot. For frequently they are known only to a very few persons, while all the rest are ignorant of them, especially if the state is a large one; and when they are reported to other persons in other localities, there is no sufficient authority to give them prompt and unwavering credence, although they are reported to the faithful by the faithful.

The miracle which was wrought at Milan when I was there, and by which a blind man was restored to sight, could come to the knowledge of many; for not only is the city a large one, but also the emperor was there at the time, and the occurrence was witnessed by an immense concourse of people that had gathered to the bodies of the martyrs Protasius and Gervasius, which had long lain concealed and unknown, but were now made known to the bishop Ambrose in a dream, and discovered by him. By virtue of these remains the darkness of that blind man was scattered, and he saw the light of day.

But who but a very small number are aware of the cure which was wrought upon Innocentius, ex-advocate of the deputy prefecture, a cure wrought at Carthage, in my presence, and under my own eyes? For when I and my brother Alypius, who were not yet clergymen, though already servants of God, came from abroad, this man received us, and made us live with him, for he and all his household were devotedly pious. He was being treated by medical men for fistulæ, of which he had a large number intricately seated in the rectum. He had already undergone an operation, and the surgeons were using every means at their command for his relief. In that operation he had suffered long-continued and acute pain; yet, among the many folds of the gut, one had escaped the operators so entirely, that, though they ought to have laid it open with the knife, they never touched it. And thus, though all those that had been opened were cured, this one remained as it was, and frustrated all their labor. The patient, having his suspicions awakened by the delay thus occasioned, and fearing greatly a second operation, which another medical man— one of his own domestics— had told him he must undergo, though this man had not even been allowed to witness the first operation, and had been banished from the house, and with difficulty allowed to come back to his enraged master's presence—the patient, I say, broke out to the surgeons, saying, Are you going to cut me again? Are you, after all, to fulfill the prediction of that man whom you would not allow even to be present? The surgeons laughed at the unskillful doctor, and soothed their patient's fears with fair words and promises. So several days passed, and yet nothing they tried did him good. Still they persisted in promising that they would cure that fistula by drugs, without the knife. They called in also another old practitioner of great repute in that department, Ammonius (for he was still alive at that time); and he, after examining the part, promised the same result as themselves from their

care and skill. On this great authority, the patient became confident, and, as if already well, vented his good spirits in facetious remarks at the expense of his domestic physician, who had predicted a second operation. To make a long story short, after a number of days had thus uselessly elapsed, the surgeons, wearied and confused, had at last to confess that he could only be cured by the knife. Agitated with excessive fear, he was terrified, and grew pale with dread; and when he collected himself and was able to speak, he ordered them to go away and never to return. Worn out with weeping, and driven by necessity, it occurred to him to call in an Alexandrian, who was at that time esteemed a wonderfully skillful operator, that he might perform the operation his rage would not suffer them to do. But when he had come, and examined with a professional eye the traces of their careful work, he acted the part of a good man, and persuaded his patient to allow those same hands the satisfaction of finishing his cure which had begun it with a skill that excited his admiration, adding that there was no doubt his only hope of a cure was by an operation, but that it was thoroughly inconsistent with his nature to win the credit of the cure by doing the little that remained to be done, and rob of their reward men whose consummate skill, care, and diligence he could not but admire when he saw the traces of their work. They were therefore again received to favor; and it was agreed that, in the presence of the Alexandrian, they should operate on the fistula, which, by the consent of all, could now only be cured by the knife. The operation was deferred till the following day. But when they had left, there arose in the house such a wailing, in sympathy with the excessive despondency of the master, that it seemed to us like the mourning at a funeral, and we could scarcely repress it. Holy men were in the habit of visiting him daily; Saturninus of blessed memory, at that time bishop of Uzali, and the presbyter Gelosus, and the deacons of the church of Carthage; and among these was

the bishop Aurelius, who alone of them all survives—a man to be named by us with due reverence—and with him I have often spoken of this affair, as we conversed together about the wonderful works of God, and I have found that he distinctly remembers what I am now relating. When these persons visited him that evening according to their custom, he besought them, with pitiable tears, that they would do him the honor of being present next day at what he judged his funeral rather than his suffering. For such was the terror his former pains had produced, that he made no doubt he would die in the hands of the surgeons. They comforted him, and exhorted him to put his trust in God, and nerve his will like a man. Then we went to prayer; but while we, in the usual way, were kneeling and bending to the ground, he cast himself down, as if some one were hurling him violently to the earth, and began to pray; but in what a manner, with what earnestness and emotion, with what a flood of tears, with what groans and sobs, that shook his whole body, and almost prevented him speaking, who can describe! Whether the others prayed, and had not their attention wholly diverted by this conduct, I do not know. For myself, I could not pray at all. This only I briefly said in my heart: O Lord, what prayers of Your people do You hear if You hear not these? For it seemed to me that nothing could be added to this prayer, unless he expired in praying. We rose from our knees, and, receiving the blessing of the bishop, departed, the patient beseeching his visitors to be present next morning, they exhorting him to keep up his heart. The dreaded day dawned. The servants of God were present, as they had promised to be; the surgeons arrived; all that the circumstances required was ready; the frightful instruments are produced; all look on in wonder and suspense. While those who have most influence with the patient are cheering his fainting spirit, his limbs are arranged on the couch so as to suit the hand of the operator; the knots of the bandages are untied; the part is

bared; the surgeon examines it, and, with knife in hand, eagerly looks for the sinus that is to be cut. He searches for it with his eyes; he feels for it with his finger; he applies every kind of scrutiny: he finds a perfectly firm cicatrix! No words of mine can describe the joy, and praise, and thanksgiving to the merciful and almighty God which was poured from the lips of all, with tears of gladness. Let the scene be imagined rather than described!

In the same city of Carthage lived Innocentia, a very devout woman of the highest rank in the state. She had cancer in one of her breasts, a disease which, as physicians say, is incurable. Ordinarily, therefore, they either amputate, and so separate from the body the member on which the disease has seized, or, that the patient's life may be prolonged a little, though death is inevitable even if somewhat delayed, they abandon all remedies, following, as they say, the advice of Hippocrates. This the lady we speak of had been advised to by a skillful physician, who was intimate with her family; and she betook herself to God alone by prayer. On the approach of Easter, she was instructed in a dream to wait for the first woman that came out from the baptistery after being baptized, and to ask her to make the sign of Christ upon her sore. She did so, and was immediately cured. The physician who had advised her to apply no remedy if she wished to live a little longer, when he had examined her after this, and found that she who, on his former examination, was afflicted with that disease was now perfectly cured, eagerly asked her what remedy she had used, anxious, as we may well believe, to discover the drug which should defeat the decision of Hippocrates. But when she told him what had happened, he is said to have replied, with religious politeness, though with a contemptuous tone, and an expression which made her fear he would utter some blasphemy against Christ, I thought you would make some great discovery to me. She,

shuddering at his indifference, quickly replied, What great thing was it for Christ to heal a cancer, who raised one who had been four days dead? When, therefore, I had heard this, I was extremely indignant that so great a miracle wrought in that well-known city, and on a person who was certainly not obscure, should not be divulged, and I considered that she should be spoken to, if not reprimanded on this score. And when she replied to me that she had not kept silence on the subject, I asked the women with whom she was best acquainted whether they had ever heard of this before. They told me they knew nothing of it. See, I said, what your not keeping silence amounts to, since not even those who are so familiar with you know of it. And as I had only briefly heard the story, I made her tell how the whole thing happened, from beginning to end, while the other women listened in great astonishment, and glorified God.

A gouty doctor of the same city, when he had given in his name for baptism, and had been prohibited the day before his baptism from being baptized that year, by black woolly-haired boys who appeared to him in his dreams, and whom he understood to be devils, and when, though they trod on his feet, and inflicted the acutest pain he had ever yet experienced, he refused to obey them, but overcame them, and would not defer being washed in the laver of regeneration, was relieved in the very act of baptism, not only of the extraordinary pain he was tortured with, but also of the disease itself, so that, though he lived a long time afterwards, he never suffered from gout; and yet who knows of this miracle? We, however, do know it, and so, too, do the small number of brethren who were in the neighborhood, and to whose ears it might come.

An old comedian of Curubis was cured at baptism not only of paralysis, but also of hernia, and, being delivered from

both afflictions, came up out of the font of regeneration as if he had had nothing wrong with his body. Who outside of Curubis knows of this, or who but a very few who might hear it elsewhere? But we, when we heard of it, made the man come to Carthage, by order of the holy bishop Aurelius, although we had already ascertained the fact on the information of persons whose word we could not doubt.

Hesperius, of a tribunitian family, and a neighbor of our own, has a farm called Zubedi in the Fussalian district; and, finding that his family, his cattle, and his servants were suffering from the malice of evil spirits, he asked our presbyters, during my absence, that one of them would go with him and banish the spirits by his prayers. One went, offered there the sacrifice of the body of Christ, praying with all his might that that vexation might cease. It did cease forthwith, through God's mercy. Now he had received from a friend of his own some holy earth brought from Jerusalem, where Christ, having been buried, rose again the third day. This earth he had hung up in his bedroom to preserve himself from harm. But when his house was purged of that demoniacal invasion, he began to consider what should be done with the earth; for his reverence for it made him unwilling to have it any longer in his bedroom. It so happened that I and Maximinus bishop of Synita, and then my colleague, were in the neighborhood. Hesperius asked us to visit him, and we did so. When he had related all the circumstances, he begged that the earth might be buried somewhere, and that the spot should be made a place of prayer where Christians might assemble for the worship of God. We made no objection: it was done as he desired. There was in that neighborhood a young countryman who was paralytic, who, when he heard of this, begged his parents to take him without delay to that holy place. When he had been brought there, he prayed, and forthwith went away on his own feet perfectly cured.



There is a country-seat called Victoriana, less than thirty miles from Hippo-regius. At it there is a monument to the Milanese martyrs, Protasius and Gervasius. Thither a young man was carried, who, when he was watering his horse one summer day at noon in a pool of a river, had been taken possession of by a devil. As he lay at the monument, near death, or even quite like a dead person, the lady of the manor, with her maids and religious attendants, entered the place for evening prayer and praise, as her custom was, and they began to sing hymns. At this sound the young man, as if electrified, was thoroughly aroused, and with frightful screaming seized the altar, and held it as if he did not dare or were not able to let it go, and as if he were fixed or tied to it; and the devil in him, with loud lamentation, besought that he might be spared, and confessed where and when and how he took possession of the youth. At last, declaring that he would go out of him, he named one by one the parts of his body which he threatened to mutilate as he went out and with these words he departed from the man. But his eye, falling out on his cheek, hung by a slender vein as by a root, and the whole of the pupil which had been black became white. When this was witnessed by those present (others too had now gathered to his cries, and had all joined in prayer for him), although they were delighted that he had recovered his sanity of mind, yet, on the other hand, they were grieved about his eye, and said he should seek medical advice. But his sister's husband, who had brought him there, said, God, who has banished the devil, is able to restore his eye at the prayers of His saints. Therewith he replaced the eye that was fallen out and hanging, and bound it in its place with his handkerchief as well as he could, and advised him not to loose the bandage for seven days. When he did so, he found it quite healthy. Others also were cured there, but of them it were tedious to speak.

I know that a young woman of Hippo was immediately dispossessed of a devil, on anointing herself with oil, mixed with the tears of the prebysyter who had been praying for her. I know also that a bishop once prayed for a demoniac young man whom he never saw, and that he was cured on the spot.

There was a fellow-townsmen of ours at Hippo, Florentius, an old man, religious and poor, who supported himself as a tailor. Having lost his coat, and not having means to buy another, he prayed to the Twenty Martyrs, who have a very celebrated memorial shrine in our town, begging in a distinct voice that he might be clothed. Some scoffing young men, who happened to be present, heard him, and followed him with their sarcasm as he went away, as if he had asked the martyrs for fifty pence to buy a coat. But he, walking on in silence, saw on the shore a great fish, gasping as if just cast up, and having secured it with the good-natured assistance of the youths, he sold it for curing to a cook of the name of Catosus, a good Christian man, telling him how he had come by it, and receiving for it three hundred pence, which he laid out in wool, that his wife might exercise her skill upon, and make into a coat for him. But, on cutting up the fish, the cook found a gold ring in its belly; and forthwith, moved with compassion, and influenced, too, by religious fear, gave it up to the man, saying, See how the Twenty Martyrs have clothed you.

When the bishop Projectus was bringing the relics of the most glorious martyr Stephen to the waters of Tibilis, a great concourse of people came to meet him at the shrine. There a blind woman entreated that she might be led to the bishop who was carrying the relics. He gave her the flowers he was carrying. She took them, applied them to her eyes, and forthwith saw. Those who were present were

astounded, while she, with every expression of joy, preceded them, pursuing her way without further need of a guide.

Lucillus bishop of Sinita, in the neighborhood of the colonial town of Hippo, was carrying in procession some relics of the same martyr, which had been deposited in the castle of Sinita. A fistula under which he had long labored, and which his private physician was watching an opportunity to cut, was suddenly cured by the mere carrying of that sacred fardel, — at least, afterwards there was no trace of it in his body.

Eucharius, a Spanish priest, residing at Calama, was for a long time a sufferer from stone. By the relics of the same martyr, which the bishop Possidius brought him, he was cured. Afterwards the same priest, sinking under another disease, was lying dead, and already they were binding his hands. By the succor of the same martyr he was raised to life, the priest's cloak having been brought from the oratory and laid upon the corpse.

There was there an old nobleman named Martial, who had a great aversion to the Christian religion, but whose daughter was a Christian, while her husband had been baptized that same year. When he was ill, they besought him with tears and prayers to become a Christian, but he positively refused, and dismissed them from his presence in a storm of indignation. It occurred to the son-in-law to go to the oratory of St. Stephen, and there pray for him with all earnestness that God might give him a right mind, so that he should not delay believing in Christ. This he did with great groaning and tears, and the burning fervor of sincere piety; then, as he left the place, he took some of the flowers that were lying there, and, as it was already night, laid them by his father's head, who so slept. And lo! before

dawn, he cries out for some one to run for the bishop; but he happened at that time to be with me at Hippo. So when he had heard that he was from home, he asked the presbyters to come. They came. To the joy and amazement of all, he declared that he believed, and he was baptized. As long as he remained in life, these words were ever on his lips: Christ, receive my spirit, though he was not aware that these were the last words of the most blessed Stephen when he was stoned by the Jews. They were his last words also, for not long after he himself also gave up the ghost.

There, too, by the same martyr, two men, one a citizen, the other a stranger, were cured of gout; but while the citizen was absolutely cured, the stranger was only informed what he should apply when the pain returned; and when he followed this advice, the pain was at once relieved.

Audurus is the name of an estate, where there is a church that contains a memorial shrine of the martyr Stephen. It happened that, as a little boy was playing in the court, the oxen drawing a wagon went out of the track and crushed him with the wheel, so that immediately he seemed at his last gasp. His mother snatched him up, and laid him at the shrine, and not only did he revive, but also appeared uninjured.

A religious female, who lived at Caspalium, a neighboring estate, when she was so ill as to be despaired of, had her dress brought to this shrine, but before it was brought back she was gone. However, her parents wrapped her corpse in the dress, and, her breath returning, she became quite well.

At Hippo a Syrian called Bassus was praying at the relics of the same martyr for his daughter, who was dangerously ill. He too had brought her dress with him to the shrine. But as he prayed, behold, his servants ran from the house to tell

him she was dead. His friends, however, intercepted them, and forbade them to tell him, lest he should bewail her in public. And when he had returned to his house, which was already ringing with the lamentations of his family, and had thrown on his daughter's body the dress he was carrying, she was restored to life.

There, too, the son of a man, Irenæus, one of our tax-gatherers, took ill and died. And while his body was lying lifeless, and the last rites were being prepared, amidst the weeping and mourning of all, one of the friends who were consoling the father suggested that the body should be anointed with the oil of the same martyr. It was done, and he revived.

Likewise Eleusinus, a man of tribunitian rank among us, laid his infant son, who had died, on the shrine of the martyr, which is in the suburb where he lived, and, after prayer, which he poured out there with many tears, he took up his child alive.

What am I to do? I am so pressed by the promise of finishing this work, that I cannot record all the miracles I know; and doubtless several of our adherents, when they read what I have narrated, will regret that I have omitted so many which they, as well as I, certainly know. Even now I beg these persons to excuse me, and to consider how long it would take me to relate all those miracles, which the necessity of finishing the work I have undertaken forces me to omit. For were I to be silent of all others, and to record exclusively the miracles of healing which were wrought in the district of Calama and of Hippo by means of this martyr — I mean the most glorious Stephen— they would fill many volumes; and yet all even of these could not be collected, but only those of which narratives have been written for public recital. For when I saw, in our own times, frequent

signs of the presence of divine powers similar to those which had been given of old, I desired that narratives might be written, judging that the multitude should not remain ignorant of these things. It is not yet two years since these relics were first brought to Hippo-regius, and though many of the miracles which have been wrought by it have not, as I have the most certain means of knowing, been recorded, those which have been published amount to almost seventy at the hour at which I write. But at Calama, where these relics have been for a longer time, and where more of the miracles were narrated for public information, there are incomparably more.

At Uzali, too, a colony near Utica, many signal miracles were, to my knowledge, wrought by the same martyr, whose relics had found a place there by direction of the bishop Evodius, long before we had them at Hippo. But there the custom of publishing narratives does not obtain, or, I should say, did not obtain, for possibly it may now have been begun. For, when I was there recently, a woman of rank, Petronia, had been miraculously cured of a serious illness of long standing, in which all medical appliances had failed, and, with the consent of the above-named bishop of the place, I exhorted her to publish an account of it that might be read to the people. She most promptly obeyed, and inserted in her narrative a circumstance which I cannot omit to mention, though I am compelled to hasten on to the subjects which this work requires me to treat. She said that she had been persuaded by a Jew to wear next her skin, under all her clothes, a hair girdle, and on this girdle a ring, which, instead of a gem, had a stone which had been found in the kidneys of an ox. Girt with this charm, she was making her way to the threshold of the holy martyr. But, after leaving Carthage, and when she had been lodging in her own demesne on the river Bagrada, and was now rising to continue her journey, she saw her ring lying before her

feet. In great surprise she examined the hair girdle, and when she found it bound, as it had been, quite firmly with knots, she conjectured that the ring had been worn through and dropped off; but when she found that the ring was itself also perfectly whole, she presumed that by this great miracle she had received somehow a pledge of her cure, whereupon she untied the girdle, and cast it into the river, and the ring along with it. This is not credited by those who do not believe either that the Lord Jesus Christ came forth from His mother's womb without destroying her virginity, and entered among His disciples when the doors were shut; but let them make strict inquiry into this miracle, and if they find it true, let them believe those others. The lady is of distinction, nobly born, married to a nobleman. She resides at Carthage. The city is distinguished, the person is distinguished, so that they who make inquiries cannot fail to find satisfaction. Certainly the martyr himself, by whose prayers she was healed, believed on the Son of her who remained a virgin; on Him who came in among the disciples when the doors were shut; in fine—and to this tends all that we have been retailing—on Him who ascended into heaven with the flesh in which He had risen; and it is because he laid down his life for this faith that such miracles were done by his means.

Even now, therefore, many miracles are wrought, the same God who wrought those we read of still performing them, by whom He will and as He will; but they are not as well known, nor are they beaten into the memory, like gravel, by frequent reading, so that they cannot fall out of mind. For even where, as is now done among ourselves, care is taken that the pamphlets of those who receive benefit be read publicly, yet those who are present hear the narrative but once, and many are absent; and so it comes to pass that even those who are present forget in a few days what they heard, and scarcely one of them can be found who will tell

what he heard to one who he knows was not present.

One miracle was wrought among ourselves, which, though no greater than those I have mentioned, was yet so signal and conspicuous, that I suppose there is no inhabitant of Hippo who did not either see or hear of it, none who could possibly forget it. There were seven brothers and three sisters of a noble family of the Cappadocian Cæsarea, who were cursed by their mother, a new-made widow, on account of some wrong they had done her, and which she bitterly resented, and who were visited with so severe a punishment from Heaven, that all of them were seized with a hideous shaking in all their limbs. Unable, while presenting this loathsome appearance, to endure the eyes of their fellow-citizens, they wandered over almost the whole Roman world, each following his own direction. Two of them came to Hippo, a brother and a sister, Paulus and Palladia, already known in many other places by the fame of their wretched lot. Now it was about fifteen days before Easter when they came, and they came daily to church, and specially to the relics of the most glorious Stephen, praying that God might now be appeased, and restore their former health. There, and wherever they went, they attracted the attention of every one. Some who had seen them elsewhere, and knew the cause of their trembling, told others as occasion offered. Easter arrived, and on the Lord's day, in the morning, when there was now a large crowd present, and the young man was holding the bars of the holy place where the relics were, and praying, suddenly he fell down, and lay precisely as if asleep, but not trembling as he was wont to do even in sleep. All present were astonished. Some were alarmed, some were moved with pity; and while some were for lifting him up, others prevented them, and said they should rather wait and see what would result. And behold! he rose up, and trembled no more, for he was healed, and stood quite well, scanning



those who were scanning him. Who then refrained himself from praising God? The whole church was filled with the voices of those who were shouting and congratulating him. Then they came running to me, where I was sitting ready to come into the church. One after another they throng in, the last comer telling me as news what the first had told me already; and while I rejoiced and inwardly gave God thanks, the young man himself also enters, with a number of others, falls at my knees, is raised up to receive my kiss. We go in to the congregation: the church was full, and ringing with the shouts of joy, Thanks to God! Praised be God! every one joining and shouting on all sides, I have healed the people, and then with still louder voice shouting again. Silence being at last obtained, the customary lessons of the divine Scriptures were read. And when I came to my sermon, I made a few remarks suitable to the occasion and the happy and joyful feeling, not desiring them to listen to me, but rather to consider the eloquence of God in this divine work. The man dined with us, and gave us a careful account of his own, his mother's, and his family's calamity. Accordingly, on the following day, after delivering my sermon, I promised that next day I would read his narrative to the people. And when I did so, the third day after Easter Sunday, I made the brother and sister both stand on the steps of the raised place from which I used to speak; and while they stood there their pamphlet was read. The whole congregation, men and women alike, saw the one standing without any unnatural movement, the other trembling in all her limbs; so that those who had not before seen the man himself saw in his sister what the divine compassion had removed from him. In him they saw matter of congratulation, in her subject for prayer. Meanwhile, their pamphlet being finished, I instructed them to withdraw from the gaze of the people; and I had begun to discuss the whole matter somewhat more carefully, when lo! as I was proceeding, other voices are heard from the tomb of the

martyr, shouting new congratulations. My audience turned round, and began to run to the tomb. The young woman, when she had come down from the steps where she had been standing, went to pray at the holy relics, and no sooner had she touched the bars than she, in the same way as her brother, collapsed, as if falling asleep, and rose up cured. While, then, we were asking what had happened, and what occasioned this noise of joy, they came into the basilica where we were, leading her from the martyr's tomb in perfect health. Then, indeed, such a shout of wonder rose from men and women together, that the exclamations and the tears seemed like never to come to an end. She was led to the place where she had a little before stood trembling. They now rejoiced that she was like her brother, as before they had mourned that she remained unlike him; and as they had not yet uttered their prayers in her behalf, they perceived that their intention of doing so had been speedily heard. They shouted God's praises without words, but with such a noise that our ears could scarcely bear it. What was there in the hearts of these exultant people but the faith of Christ, for which Stephen had shed his blood?

*<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120122.htm>*

### **Cotton Mather**

In the year 1679 the house of William Morse at Newberry was infested with daemons after a most horrid manner, not altogether unlike the daemons of Tedworth. It would fill many pages to relate all the infestations, but the chief of them were such as these:

Bricks and sticks and stones were often, by some invisible hand, thrown at the house, and so were many pieces of wood; a cat was thrown at the woman of the house and a long staff danced up and down in the chimney. Afterwards,

the same long staff was hanged by a line and swung to and fro, and when two persons laid it on the fire to burn it, it was as much as they were able to do with their joint strength to hold it there.

An iron crook was violently, by an invisible hand, hurled about, and a chair flew about the room until at last it lit upon the table where the meat stood ready to be eaten and had spoiled it all, if the people had not with much ado saved a little.

A chest was, by an invisible hand, carried from one place to another, and the doors barricaded, and the keys of the family taken -- some of them from the bunch where they were tied and the rest flying about with a loud noise of their knocking against one another.

For one while the the folks of the house could not sup quietly, but ashes would be thrown into their suppers and on their heads and their clothes; the shoes of one man being left below, one of them was filled with ashes and coals and thrown up after him.

When they were abed, a stone weighing about three pounds was divers times thrown upon them. A box and a board was likewise thrown upon them, and a bag of hops, being taken out a chest, they were, by the invisible hand, beaten therewith 'til some of the hops were scattered on the floor, where the bag was then laid and left.

The man was often struck by that hand with several instruments, and the same hand cast their good things into the fire. Yea, while the man was at prayer with his household a beesom gave him a blow on his head behind and fell down before his face. When they were winnowing their barley, dirt was thrown at them, and assaying to fill

their half bushel with corn, the foul corn would be thrown in with the clean so irresistibly that they were forced thereby to give over what they were about.

While the man was writing his inkhorn was, by an invisible hand, snatched from him, and being able nowhere to find it, he saw it at length drop out of the air down by the fire. A shoe was laid upon his shoulder, but when he would have caught it, it was rapt from him. It was then clapped upon his head, and there he held it so fast that the unseen fury pulled him with it backward on the floor. He had his cap torn off his head, and in the night he was pulled by the hair and pinched and scratched and the invisible hand pricked him with some of his awls and with needles and bodkins, and blows that fetched blood were sometimes given him. Frozen clods of cow dung were often thrown at the man, and his wife, going to milk the cows, they could by no means preserve the vessels of milk from the like annoyances, which made it fit only for the hogs.

She going down into the cellar, the trapdoor was immediately, by an invisible hand, shut upon her and a tbale brought and laid upon the door, which kept her there until the man removed it.

When he was writing another time, a dish went and leapt into a pail and cast water on the man and on all the concerns before him so as to defeat what he was then upon. His cap jumped off his head and on again, and the pot lid went off the pot into the kettle, then over the fire together.

A little boy belonging to the family was a principle sufferer in these molestations, for he was flung about at such a rate that they feared his brains would have been beaten out; nor did they find it possible to hold him. His bedclothes were pulled from him, his bed shaken, and his bedstaff leap

forward and backward. The man took him to keep him in a chair, but the chair fell a-dancing and both of them were very near being thrown into the fire.

These, and a thousand such vexations, befalling the boy at home, they carried him to live abroad at a doctor's. There he was quiet, but returning home he suddenly cried out he was pricked on the back, where they found strangely sticking a three-tined fork which belonged unto the doctor and had been seen at his house after the boy's departure. Afterwards, his troublers found him out at the doctor's also where, crying out again he was pricked on the back, they found an iron spindle stuck into him, and on the like cry out again they found pins in a paper stuck into him, and once more a long iron, a bowl of a spoon, and a piece of panshred in like stuck upon him. He was taken out of his bed and thrown under it, and all the knives belonging to the house were, one after another, stuck into his back, which the spectators pulled out, only one of them seemed unto the spectators to come out of his mouth. The poor boy was divers times thrown into the fire and preserved from scorching there with much ado. For a long while he barked like a dog, and then he clucked like a hen and could not speak rationally. His tongue would be pulled out of his mouth, but when he could recover it so far as to speak he complained that a man called P----I appeared unto him as the cause of all.

Once, in the daytime, he was transported where none could find him, 'til at last they found him creeping on one side and sadly dumb and lame. When he was able to express himself he said that P----I had carried him over the top of the house and hurled him against a cartwheel in the barn, and accordingly they found some remainders of the threshed barley, which was on the barn floor, hanging about his garments.

The spectre would make all his meat, when he was going to eat, fly out of his mouth and instead thereof make him fall to eating of ashes and sticks and yarn. The man and his wife, taking the boy to bed with them, a chamber pot and its contents was thrown upon them; they were severely pinched and pulled out of the bed, and many other fruits of devilish spite were they dogged withal until it please God mercifully to shorten the chain of the devil. But before the devil was chained up, the invisible hand, which did all these things, began to put on an astonishing visibility.

They often thought they felt the hand that scratched them, while yet they saw it not; but when they thought they had hold of it, it would give them the slip. Once, the fist beating the man was discernible, but they could not catch hold of it. At length an apparition of a Blackamoor child showed itself plainly to them, and another time a drumming on the boards was heard, which was followed with a voice that sang, "Revenge! Revenge! Sweet is revenge!" At this, the people, being terrified, called upon God, whereupon there followed a mournful note several times uttering these expressions:

"Alas! Alas! We knock no more, we knock no more!" and there was an end of all.

<http://www.graveworm.com/occult/texts/thaumat03.html>

On June 11, 1682, showers of stone were thrown by an invisible hand upon the house of George Walton at Portsmouth. Whereupon the people going out found the gate wrung off the hinges and stones flying and falling thick about them and striking of them seemingly with a great force, but really effected 'em no more than if a soft touch were given them.

The glass windows were broken to pieces by stones that came not from without but from from within, and other instruments were in like manner hurled about. Nine of the stones they took up, whereof some were as hot as if they came out of the fire, and, marking them, they laid them on the table, but in a little while they found some of them again flying about.

The spit was carried up the chimney and, coming down with the point forward, stuck in the back-log from whence one of the company, removing it, it was, by an invisible hand, thrown out at the window.

This disturbance continued from day to day and sometimes a dismal, hollow whistling would be heard, and sometimes the trotting and snorting of a horse, but nothing to be seen.

The man went up the great bay in a boat unto a farm he had there, but there the stones found him out, and carrying from the house to the boat a stirrup-iron, the iron came jingling after him through the woods as far as his house and at last went away and was heard of no more. The anchor leaped overboard several times and stopped the boat.

A cheese was taken out of the press and crumbled all over the floor; a piece of iron stuck in the wall and a kettle hung thereupon. Several cocks of hay, mowed near the house, were taken up and hung upon the trees, and others made into small whisps and scattered about the house.

The man was much hurt by some of the stones. He was a Quaker and suspected that a woman, who charged him with injustice in detaining some land from her, did by withcraft occasion these preternatural occurrences.

However, at last, they came unto an end.

<http://www.graveworm.com/occult/texts/thaumat05.html>

Four children of John Goodwin, in Boston, which had enjoyed a religious education, and answered it with a towardly ingenuity--children, indeed, of an exemplary temper and carriage, and an example to all about then for piety, honesty, and industry--were, in the year 1868, arrested by a very stupendous witchcraft.

The eldest of the children--a daughter of about thirteen years old--saw cause to examine the laundress, the daughter of a scandalous Irish woman in the neighborhood, about some linen that was missing, and the woman bestowed very bad language on the child, in her daughter's defense, [after which] the child was immediately taken with odd fits that carried in them something diabolical.

It was not long before one of her sisters, with two of her brothers, were horribly taken with the like fits, which the most experienced physicians pronounced extraordinary and preternatural: One thing that the more confirmed them in this opinion was that all the children were tormented [in] the same part of their bodies, at the same time, tho' their pains flew like swift lightning from one part unto another, and they were kept so far asunder that they neither saw nor heard one another's complaints. At 9 or 10 a-clock at night they had a release from their miseries and slept all night pretty comfortably. But when the day came, they were most miserably handled.

Sometimes they were deaf, sometimes dumb, sometimes blind, and often all this at once. Their tongues would be drawn down their throats and then pulled out upon their chins to a prodigious length. Their mouths were forc'd open



to such a wideness that their jaws went out of joint, and anon clap together again with a force like that of a spring lock, and the like would happen to their shoulder blades and their elbows and hand wrists and several of their joints. They would lie in a benumbed condition and be drawn together like those that are ty'd neck and heels, and presently be stretched out--yea, drawn back enormously. They made piteous outcries that they were cut with knives and struck with blows, and the plain prints of the wounds were seen upon them. Their necks would be broken so that their neckbone would seem dissolved unto them that felt after it, and yet, on the sudden, it would become again so stiff that there was no stirring of their heads. Yea, their heads would be twisted almost round, and if the main force of their friends at any time obstructed a dangerous motion which them seemed upon, they would roar exceedingly. And when devotions were performed with them, their hearing was utterly taken from them.

[When] the ministers of Boston and Charlestown, [kept] a day of prayer with fasting, on this occasion, at the troubled house, the youngest of the four children was immediately, happily, finally delivered from all its trouble. But the magistrates, being awakened by the noise of these grievous and horrid occurrences, examined the person who was under the suspicion of having employed these troublesome daemons, and she gave such a wretched account of herself that she was committed unto the [jailer's] custody.

It was not long before this woman (whose name was Glover) was brought upon her trial, but then the court could have no answers from her but in the Irish, which was her native language, although she understood English very well and had accustomed her whole family to none but English in her former conversation. When she pleaded to her indictment, it was with owning and bragging rather than

denial of her guilt. And the interpreters, by whom the communication between the bench and the barr was managed, were made sensible that a spell had been laid by another witch on this to prevent her telling tales by confining her to a language which 'twas hoped nobody would understand.

The woman's house being searched, several images (or poppets) or babies made of rags and stuffed with goats' hair were thence produced, and the vile woman confessed that her way to torment the objects of her malice was by wetting her finger with spittle and stroaking [the] little images.

The abused children were then present in the court [and] the woman kept stooping and shrinking as one that was almost prest unto death with a mighty weight upon her. But, one of the images being brought unto her, she oddly and swiftly started up and snatched it into her hand, but she had no sooner snatched it than one of the children fell into sad fits before the whole assembly. The judges had their just apprehension at this, and carefully causing a repetition of the experiment, they still found the same event of it, tho' the children saw not when the hand of the witch was laid upon the images.

They asked her "whether she had any to stand by her?" She replied she had and, looking very pertly into the air, she added, "No, he's gone!" and then she acknowledged that she had one, who was her prince, with whom she mentioned I know not what communion. For which cause, the night after, she was heard expostulating with a devil for his thus deserting her, telling him that because he had served her so basely and falsely, she had confessed all.

However, to make all clear, the court appointed five or six physicians to examine her very strictly, whether she was no

way crazed in her intellectuals. Divers hours did they spend with her, and in all that while, no discourse came from her but what was agreeable, particularly when they asked her what she thought of her soul she replied, "You ask me a very solemn question and I cannot tell what to say to it." She profest herself a Roman Catholic and could recite her Pater-noster in Latin very readily, but there was one clause or two very hard for her, whereof she said she could not repeat if she "might have all the world."

In the upshot, the doctors returned her compos mentis and sentence of death was passed upon her. Divers days past between her being arraigned and condemned and in this time one Hughes testified that her neighbor (called Howen), who was cruelly bewitched unto death about six years before, laid her death to the charge of this woman and bid her (the said Hughes) to remember this, for within six years their would be occasion to mention it.

One of Hughes' children was presently taken ill in the same woeful manner that Goodwin's was, and particularly the boy, in the night, cried out that a black person with a blue cap in the room tortured him and that they tried with their hand in the bed for to pull out his bowels.

The mother of the boy went unto Glover the day following and asked her why she tortured the poor lad at such a rate. Glover answered, "Because of the wrong [I] had received from [you]" and boasted that she had come at him as a black person with a blue cap and, with her hand in the bed, would have pulled his bowels out, but could not. Hughes denied that she had wronged her, and Glover, then desiring to see the boy, wished him well, upon which he had no more of his indispositions.

<http://www.graveworm.com/occult/texts/thaumat09.html>

## George Muller

On one occasion a poor woman gave two pence, adding, "It is but a trifle, but I must give it to you." Yet so opportune was the gift of these "two mites" that *one of these two pence* was just what was at that time needed to make up the sum required to buy bread for immediate use. At another time eight pence more being necessary to provide for the next meal, but *seven pence* were in hand; but on opening one of the boxes, *one penny* only was found deposited, and thus a single penny was traced to the Father's care.

During this four months, on March 9, 1842, the need was so extreme that, had no help come, the work could not have gone on. But, *on that day*, from a brother living near Dublin, ten pounds came: and the hand of the Lord clearly appeared in this gift, for when the post had already come and no letter had come with it, there was a strong confidence suggested to Mr. Müller's mind that deliverance was at hand; and so it proved, for presently the letter was brought to him, having been delivered at one of the other houses. During this same month, it was necessary once to delay dinner for about a half-hour, because of a lack of supplies. Such a postponement had scarcely ever been known before, and very rarely was it repeated in the entire after-history of the work, though thousands of mouths had to be daily fed.

[http://www.biblebelievers.com/george\\_muller/g-m\\_ch12.html](http://www.biblebelievers.com/george_muller/g-m_ch12.html)

During this period of patient waiting, Mr. Müller remarked to a believing sister:

"Well, my soul is at peace. The Lord's time is not yet come; but, when it is come, He will blow away all these obstacles, as chaff is blown away before the wind."

*A quarter of an hour later*, a gift of seven hundred pounds became available for the ends in view, so that three of the five hindrances to this Continental tour were at once removed. All travelling expenses for himself and wife, all necessary funds for the home work for two months in advance, and all costs of publishing the Narrative in German, were now provided. This was on July 12th; and so soon afterward were the remaining impediments out of the way that, by August 9th, Mr. and Mrs. Müller were off for Germany.

[http://www.biblebelievers.com/george\\_muller/g-m\\_ch13.html](http://www.biblebelievers.com/george_muller/g-m_ch13.html)

After October, 1845, it became clear to Mr. Müller that the Lord was leading in this direction. Residents on Wilson Street had raised objections to the noise made by the children, especially in play hours; the playgrounds were no longer large enough for so many orphans; the drainage was not adequate, nor was the situation of the rented houses favourable, for proper sanitary conditions; it was also desirable to secure ground for cultivation, and thus supply outdoor work for the boys, etc. Such were some of the reasons which seemed to demand the building of a new orphan house; and the conviction steadily gained ground that the highest well-being of all concerned would be largely promoted if a suitable site could be found on which to erect a building adapted to the purpose.

There were objections to building which were carefully weighed: money in large sums would be needed; planning and constructing would severely tax time and strength;

wisdom and oversight would be in demand at every stage of the work; and the question arose whether such permanent structures befit God's pilgrim people, who have here no continuing city and believe that the end of all things is at hand.

On the thirty-sixth day after specific prayer had first been offered about this new house, on December 10, 1845, Mr. Müller received *one thousand pounds* for this purpose, the largest sum yet received *in one donation* since the work had begun, March 5, 1834. Yet he was as calm and composed as though the gift had been only a shilling; having full faith in God, as both guiding and providing, he records that he would not have been surprised had the amount been five or ten times greater.

Three days later, a Christian architect in London voluntarily offered not only to draught the plans, but gratuitously to superintend the building! This offer had been brought about in a manner so strange as to be naturally regarded as a new sign and proof of God's approval and a fresh pledge of His sure help. Mr. Müller's sister-in-law, visiting the metropolis, had met this architect; and, finding him much interested to know more of the work of which he had read in the narrative, she had told him of the purpose to build; whereupon, without either solicitation or expectation on her part, this cheerful offer was made. Not only was this architect not urged by her, but he pressed his proposal, himself, urged on by his deep interest in the orphan work. Thus, within forty days, the first thousand pounds had been given in answer to prayer, and a pious man, as yet unseen and unknown by Mr. Müller, had been led to offer his services in providing plans for the new building and superintending its erection.

[http://www.biblebelievers.com/george\\_muller/g-](http://www.biblebelievers.com/george_muller/g-)

[m\\_ch14.html](#)

When, for three years, scarlet and typhus fevers and smallpox, being prevalent in Bristol and the vicinity, threatened the orphans, prayer was again made to Him who is the God of health as well as of rain. There was no case of scarlet or typhus fever during the whole time, though smallpox was permitted to find an entrance into the smallest of the orphan houses. Prayer was still the one resort. The disease spread to the other houses, until at one time fifteen were ill with it. The cases, however, were mercifully light, and the Lord was besought to allow the epidemic to *spread no further*. Not another child was taken; and when, after nine months, the disease altogether disappeared, not one child had died of it, and only one teacher or adult had had an attack, and that was very mild. What ravages the disease might have made among the twelve hundred inmates of these orphan houses, had it then prevailed as later, in 1872!

During the next year, 1865-6, scarlet fever broke out in the orphanage. In all thirty-nine children were ill, but Whooping-cough also made its appearance; but though, during that season, it was not only very prevalent but very malignant in Bristol, in all the three houses there were but seventeen cases, and the only fatal one was that of a little girl with constitutionally weak lungs.

Again, when, in 1866, cholera developed in England, in answer to special prayer *not one* case of this disease was known in the orphan houses; and when, in the autumn, whooping-cough and measles broke out, though eight children had the former and two hundred and sixty-two, the latter, not one child died, or was afterward debilitated by the attack. From May, 1866, to May, 1867, out of over thirteen hundred children under care, only eleven died,

considerably less than one per cent.

[http://www.biblebelievers.com/george\\_muller/g-m\\_ch15.html](http://www.biblebelievers.com/george_muller/g-m_ch15.html)

At one meeting at Huntly, by special request Mr. Müller gave illustrations of God's faithfulness in answer to prayer, connected with the orphan work, of which the following are examples:

a. He stated that at various times, not only at the beginning of the work, but also in later years, God had seen fit to try his faith to the utmost, but only to prove to him the more definitely that He would never be other than his faithful covenant-keeping God. In illustration he referred to a time when, the children having had their last meal for the day, there was nothing left in money or kind for their breakfast the following morning. Mr. Müller went home, but nothing came in, and he retired for the night, committing the need to God to provide. Early the next morning he went for a walk, and while praying for the needed help he took a turn into a road which he was quite unconscious of, and after walking a short distance a friend met him, and said how glad he was to meet him, and asked him to accept £5 for the orphans. He thanked him, and without saying a word to the donor about the time of need, he went at once to the orphan houses, praising God for this direct answer to prayer.

b. On another occasion, when there were no funds in hand to provide breakfast for the orphans, a gentleman called before the time for breakfast and left a donation that supplied all their present needs. When that year's report was issued, this proof of God's faithfulness in sending help just when needed was recorded, and a short time after the donor called and made himself known, saying that as his



donation had been given at such a special time of need he felt he must state the circumstances under which he had given the money, which were as follows:

He had occasion to go to his office in Bristol early that morning before breakfast, and on the way the thought occurred to him:

"I will go to Mr. Müller's orphan house and give them a donation,"

and accordingly turned and walked about a quarter of a mile toward the orphanage, when he stopped, saying to himself,

"How foolish of me to be neglecting the business I came out to attend to! I can give money to the orphans another time,"

and he turned round and walked back towards his office, but soon felt that he *must* return. He said to himself:

"The orphans may be needing the money *now*. I'm leaving them in want when God had sent me to help them;"

and so strong was this impression that he again turned round and walked back till he reached the orphanages, and thus handed in the money which provided them with breakfast. Mr. Müller's comment on this was:

"Just like my gracious heavenly Father!"

and then urged his hearers to trust and prove what a faithful covenant-keeping God He is to those who put their trust in Him.

[http://www.biblebelievers.com/george\\_muller/g-m\\_appendix-h.html](http://www.biblebelievers.com/george_muller/g-m_appendix-h.html)

## **Montague Summers**

In the records of witchcraft, or magic, or sorcery, as I have studied them throughout the continent of Europe, in Spain and Russian, in England and Italy, one finds oneself confronted, not once or twice, but literally as whole, systematically and homogeneously, with the same beliefs, the same facts, the same extraordinary happenings, unexplained and (so far as we know today) inexplicable... When I read Mr. Kaigh's *Witchcraft and Magic of Africa* I find myself continually paralleling what he relates with the pages of such writers as Heinrich Kramer (d. 1508) and James Sprenger (1436-1495); Jerome Cardan (1501-76); Johann Weyer (1515-88); Jean Bodin (1530-96); Pierre de Loyer (1550-1634); Martin Delrio S. J. (1551-1608); Joseph Glanvil (1636-80); Ludovico Maria Sinistrari (1622-1701); Johann Joseph von Gorres (1776-1848): and a score beside. All these tell of the same phenomena as Mr. Kaigh has known and witnessed today.

M. Summers, "Forward," F. Kaigh, *Witchcraft and Magic of Africa* (Richard Lesley 1947), viii.

## **Frederick Kaigh**

One night I saw the Jackal Dance... Suddenly a powerful young man and a splendid young girl, completely naked, leapt over the heads of the onlookers and fell sprawling the clearing.

They sprang up again instantly and started to dance... If the dance of the nyanga was horrible, this was revolting. They danced the dance of the rutting jackals. As the dance

progressed, their imitations became more and more animal...Then, in a twinkling, with loathing unbounded, and incredulous amazement, I saw these two *turn into jackals before my very eyes*.

F. Kaigh, *Witchcraft and Magic of Africa* (Richard Lesley 1947), 32.

## **Michael Sudduth**

I met my friend Gregg F. in 1976, while we were both still in elementary school. Having a mutual interest in music, we formed a rock band in 1979, our last year in junior high school. It was around this time that we met Devin D. Devin played guitar and shared our interest in the same kind of music. The three of us became close friends and remained so even after graduating from junior high school and attending separate high schools.

### Apparitional Experiences and Other Unusual Phenomena

In the summer of 1981, now in our sophomore year in high school, Gregg, Devin, and I began holding séance sessions. While most teenagers dabble in this sort of thing out of boredom, our approach was more seriously motivated. We had a growing curiosity about psychical phenomena (what we called "the supernatural") and the survival of death. While Greg had a mild curiosity about these issues, Devin had a more intense interest, speaking frequently of reincarnation, telepathy, and discarnate personalities. My interest was personally motivated. My grandmother, who died two years prior, had told me often that she would attempt to make contact with me after she died, to tell me about the afterlife. Nearly two years had passed since her death and I had not heard from her. I formulated a tentative hypothesis that if she had indeed survived death

perhaps communicating with the living wasn't as easy as she had assumed it would be and that I should try to lend her some assistance by trying to make contact with her.

My fascination with the survival question was deepened by my mother's account of an apparitional experience of my deceased grandfather in our house, a few days before my grandmother died in the summer of 1979. While sitting under a hairdryer in the kitchen, with my dad but a few feet away from her in the living room, my mother suddenly noticed someone standing to her right, in the doorway to the kitchen, about eight feet away from where she was seated. After she quickly turned her head, she saw what we later described to me as my grandfather, dressed and looking as he did while alive. He initially appeared as solid as a physical body. He said nothing, though she sensed he was trying to communicate with her telepathically, telling her that everything would be all right. The entire experience lasted only about 15 seconds, at which time he dematerialized in front of her, in a way resembling the partial dematerialization of persons in the transporter machine in the original Star Trek series.

It is worth noting that my grandmother has an apparitional experience of the same grandfather shortly after he died in 1972. My grandmother's experience was similar to my mother's. My grandfather was dressed the same way in each of their experiences. The apparition manifested itself in the nearest doorway during a time when the perceivers were in a highly relaxed state. In each case, after appearing for about 15 seconds, they witnessed the apparition dematerialize before their eyes. While the perceivers in each case reported being initially startled by the apparition (and frightened after the experience), they each reported a sense of calm emanating from the apparition, as if it were communicating telepathically with them. My mother never

knew about my grandmother's experience until after my mother's apparitional experience.

In addition to my curiosity about survival, my diary from the two months prior to summer mentioned some "unusual" occurrences in my household, which seemed to have prompted my excursion into psychical phenomena at this particular time. First, a cross on a necklace I had been wearing disappeared in a way I considered mysterious. I went to bed with it on, but when I awoke in the morning the cross was gone, though the chain remained around my neck. (The cross would be found several months later under a chair in a different location in the house). Secondly, I believed that I had been having precognitive experiences during my dream states. One recurring experience was dreams of earthquakes that would actually occur locally within a day of the dreams. This happened three or four times. These incidents, together with my mother's apparitional experience, generated a sustained interest in the paranormal.

### The Seance Sessions

Devin, Gregg, and I started holding séance sessions in June 1981. My parents were often away on weekends and Devin and Gregg would spend the weekend or portion thereof at my house. We kept ourselves occupied with guitar playing and movie watching, as well as typical teenage high jinx. When these had run their course, we would pull out the ouija board and begin trying to contact the spirit world. Our séance sessions were almost always conducted using the ouija board, with lights out and candles lit. In some instances, the sessions were held during the day, and then we had natural sunlight, dimmed with blankets or sheets over the windows.

Our efforts early on had no results. This wasn't terribly surprising since we lacked sufficient seriousness and focus at the time. We were often flying by the seat of our pants. We tried to set the mood with the appropriate films or discussions. We even tried to generate genuine phenomena by artificially creating effects. Sometimes these were as minor as bumping or shaking the table during a sitting. In some cases we perpetuated a larger scale hoax. Devin and I pulled off such a hoax on Gregg in early July, with artifactual physical phenomena ranging from moving objects to mysterious writing appearing on objects. The hoax was so effective that we had to disclose our trickery to keep Gregg from fleeing the house. Later that night we attempted some serious sittings, some of which were recorded on audiotape. We experienced some unusual sparks from the candle at points, which seemed responsive to our line of questioning, though the planchette did not move very much. There was also a strange voice that appeared on a portion of the audio recording when I played it back later. But these phenomena were ambiguous at best.

Although our séance sessions became more serious in late July and early August 1981, the sittings still failed to achieve any unambiguous results. We would get periodic flashes or sparks from the flame on candles. While these seemed responsive to our questions, we concluded that they were probably more a matter of coincidence. We drew the same conclusion about creaking and popping sounds in the walls of the house. We were looking for something obviously paranormal. Nothing like that occurred during what probably amounted to a couple dozen sessions.

In mid-August we changed things up a bit. Instead of the three of us, I conducted the sessions with just Devin. Devin seemed to have a more serious interest in psychical phenomena than Gregg, and Devin had suggested that

perhaps Gregg's presence was presenting an obstacle to genuine results, especially since his interest was inconsistent. So we began conducting sittings without Gregg. It was then that we had results.

Devin and I held multiple sittings in the garage at my house, not the kitchen as we had done earlier. We used a fairly robust heavy table, about six feet long and two feet wide, with a red felt top. The legs were foldout double legs made of metal, securely bolted to the tabletop, which was out of two sheets of thick plywood. The table's height made it possible for us to see each other's legs under the table and equally difficult for our knees to make contact with the under portion of the table top. The table was inspected before we started. As before, we utilized the ouija board. The sittings were held during the day. The lights were turned off and we used two candles, though we also had some natural sunlight we managed to dim by placing a thin blanket over the garage window.

After about 20 minutes into our sitting we made contact with a man who referred to himself as Paul Langster. He lived in the 18th century in England and was killed by someone named Asmostis. Paul answered most of our questions through the movement of the ouija planchette. The answers were sometimes intelligible and responsive to our questions. At other times, the responses were not so intelligible, a lot of nonsensical ramblings. However, Paul said that we could speak with Asmostis if we liked. And so we did. Spelling out the appropriate responses, Asmostis rather quickly indicated that he was present. But the responses were highly negative in character. For example, upon asking Asmostis to prove himself to us, he replied, "Come to hell and I will show you my powers." His other answers indicated that Asmostis was in fact a demon and Paul Langster was enslaved to Asmostis, the result of

having sold his soul to the devil. Asmostis explained that like Paul we had opened a door to the other side, a door we could not close. Asmostis also took the credit for taking my cross.

We ended our session and tried to find some information about Asmostis in my father's large collection of encyclopedia of the supernatural. The nearest match we could find was Asmodeus, the demon of lust and power (associated with Assyria, coincidentally or not, the land of my ancestors), also regarded as an agent responsible for the breakup of relationships. When we returned we asked whether Asmostis was Asmodeus. The answer was yes.

I was not entirely convinced that Devin was not intentionally moving the planchette, so I continued to dare Asmostis to show himself or demonstrate his reality. After several minutes of taunting, the left end of the table lifted in the air a couple of inches and then fell to the ground. It was clear to me that Devin could not have moved the table. Since Devin was seated directly across from me, with his legs visible and both hands on the top of the table, lifting the end of the table would have been impossible without this being visible to me. Having perpetuated a hoax on our friend Gregg a couple of months earlier, we could tell that this was an altogether different phenomenon.

It is significant that the sitting took place at my own house without advance planning. The table was my parents' table and we both inspected it, before and after the events. No one else was in my house at the time of the sitting. It is implausible to suppose that the table was rigged in any way.

Although the anomalous table movement was startling, we continued with the session. We asked Asmostis various questions the answers to which only one us (Devin or I)



knew, questions about our family, family trips, details about our hobbies, and so on. Most of the answers were correct, which convinced me that I could exclude the possibility that Devin was engaging in trickery of some sort. He was likewise convinced that I was not pulling his leg. We then proceeded to ask questions that neither one of us knew the answer to but which we could verify. Here the results were not as accurate, but still impressive. The planchette correctly spelled out the names of some unusual contents of my refrigerator, despite my belief that these items were not in the refrigerator, but subsequent investigation showed that they were. For example, the planchette spelled out TEA. I thought this was odd, but we later found a jug of tea located in the back of the refrigerator, hidden behind other items. This was not an item normally in my refrigerator.

When we had returned to the table, after verifying several of Asmostis' claims, we noticed that one of the candles on the table, which had gone out after burning to the bottom, was relit. We thought this odd since both of us took note of the candle going out ten minutes or so earlier. (Neither one of us were out of each other's sight at any point between leaving the garage and returning). After physically examining the candle, we concluded that it burned out naturally after reaching the base of the candle. There was nothing paranormal about this. However, upon returning, the candle was relit and continued to burn for several minutes with a stub of a wick. Devin said that perhaps this was a sign that we should continue with the séance.

After resuming, I began immediately to ask for a demonstration of Asmostis' presence and power. The table lifted again. This time higher and more forcefully than the first time, perhaps about four to five inches. It jerked around in the air for a few seconds and then fell to the ground. Again it was, from my position, the left side of the

table that levitated. This incident was quite disconcerting and we ran out of the garage. We returned about ten minutes later to clean up. I placed the ouija board in a bag on the side of my house, where it stayed for several days until Devin retrieved it.

### Unleashing Poltergeists

In the days that followed, Devin and I both experienced a range of anomalous phenomena.

A few days after the sessions, Devin called me in the morning and said that some strange things were happening in his house and that he needed to leave immediately. He asked to come over to my house. After he arrived, Devin explained that he woke up to the sound of scratching under his bed, but believing it was his dog he ignored it. He then heard his dog bark in the garage and knew immediately that it couldn't be his dog. After jumping up out of bed, he headed for the kitchen where he "heard" his parents' voices. When he entered the kitchen, no one was there. He then heard the sound of the shower in the master bedroom. Thinking his parents were there, he headed toward their room, only to find that they were not there. The shower sound stopped just before he reached their room. He inspected the shower and found it wet and the showerhead dripping, as if it had just been turned off.

I had a string of similar experiences, from scratching, knocks, and raps in the walls to the sound of doors and cabinets shutting, glasses rattling, and plates moving about in the kitchen, though no one else was home. I never saw any anomalous movement of these objects, though I had inferred in several instances that doors had indeed shut and objects had been displaced. During this time, my parents were becoming increasingly agitated about personal items

suddenly missing and later turning up in strange places. Electrical equipment was also malfunctioning. There were also times when I woke up in the middle of the night and believed I saw a dark apparitional figure in my room, either in the corner or hovering near the ceiling. Devin and Gregg were both witnesses to some of these anomalous events at my house. At one point, Gregg refused to visit me at my house since he found the events quite disconcerting.

The events died out after a few months and only returned sporadically during the next year and a half. In February Gregg and I, along with a new friend Robert, attempted a few séances, but these were wholly unsuccessful in producing any physical phenomena. In the summer of 1982 Devin and I tried to resurrect physical phenomena by producing artifactual effects by means of another large-scale hoax, this time on a group of five. In part we wanted others to experience what we had experienced and we knew that genuine phenomena occurred the year prior after we had engaged in fakery. The hoax was again successful but more dramatic than the first hoax. It involved flying glasses, moving plates, faucets mysteriously turning on in plain view of the sitters, and disembodied voices speaking to individual sitters.

It is worth noting that during these sittings there were some phenomena that were not part of the plan and which would not have been produced by Devin's covert operations. The table seemed to vibrate occasionally and there was a cold breeze across the table at times. These unintended effects created a more dramatic séance environment. Nothing was experienced of the magnitude of the séances in the summer of 1981.

I would not experience any systematic and frequent anomalous phenomena again until 2002, when as an adult I

purchased an historic home in Windsor, Connecticut and experienced – along with my wife – events that exceeded in intensity the incidents during the summer of 1981. But sufficient for the day are the recollections thereof.

<http://postmortem survival.blogspot.com/2009/02/ouija-board-recollections.html>

## **J. P. Moreland**

Now the same thing takes place in specific answers to prayer. To illustrate, early in my ministry, while attending a seminar in Southern California, I heard a presentation on how to pray in a more specific way.

Knowing that in a few weeks, I would be returning to Colorado to start my ministry at the Colorado School of Mines in Golden with Ray Womack, a fellow Campus Crusade worker, I wrote a prayer request in my prayer notebook — a prayer which was known only to me. I began to pray specifically that God would provide for the two of us a white house that had a white picket fence, a grassy front yard, a close proximity to the campus (specifically, within two or three miles), and a monthly payment that was no more than \$130.

I told the Lord that this request was a reasonable one on the grounds that (a) we wanted a place that provided a homey atmosphere for students, was accessible from campus and that we could afford, and (b) I was experimenting with specific prayer and wanted my faith to be strengthened.

I returned to the Golden area and looked for three days at several places to live. I found nothing in Golden and, in fact, I only found one apartment for \$135/month about 12 miles

from campus. I told the manager that I would take it and she informed me that a couple had looked at the place that morning and had until that afternoon to make a decision. If they didn't want it, then I could move in the next day.

I called late that afternoon and was informed that the couple took the apartment which was the last available one in the complex. I was back to square one. Now remember, not a single person knew that I had been praying for a white house.

That evening, Kaylon Carr (a Crusade friend) called me to ask if I still needed a place to stay. When I said yes, she informed me that earlier that day, she had been to Denver Seminary. While there, she saw a bulletin board on which a pastor in Golden was advertising a place to rent, hopefully to seminary students or Christian workers. Kaylon gave me his phone number, so I called and set up an appointment to meet the pastor at his place at nine the next morning. Well, as I drove up, I came to a white house with a white picket fence, a nice grassy front yard, right around two miles from campus, and he asked for \$110 per month rent. Needless to say, I took it, and Ray and I had a home that year in which to minister.

This answer to prayer — along with hundreds of others that my Christian friends and I have seen — was an event that was (1) contingent and did not have to happen according to natural law; (2) very improbable; and (3) independently specifiable (a number of features of the event were specified in my prayer prior to and independent of the event itself taking place).

<http://www.trueu.org/Academics/LectureHall/A000000425.cfm>

## **Gabriele Amorth**

I have seen individuals expel strange and very long pins made of a substance resembling plastic or very flexible wood from the part that was targeted and immediately be released from pain...I have seen chunks of wood or iron, twisted wire, and dolls full of piercing and marks and have witnessed the sudden appearance of very thick braids of children or women's hair.

G. Amorth, *An Exorcist Tells His Story* (Ignatius 1999), 134-35.

## **M. Scott Peck**

I still did not know precisely when and why Beccah had become possessed. I knew that around age six she had developed an abnormal attraction to a book of woodcuts that told one version of the pact with the devil story.

The extraordinary amount of restraint required was one of the less remarkable features of the exorcism. The most remarkable was the change in the appearance of Beccah's face and body. Except during break times and a few other occasions when Satan would seemingly be replaced by Beccah, she did not appear to be a human being at all. To everyone present, her entire face became like that of a snake. I would have expected it to be the usual kind of poisonous snake with a triangular head, but that was not the case. The head and face of this snake were remarkably round. The only exception to this roundness was its nostrils, which had a distinct snub-nosed look. Most remarkable of all were the eyes. They had become hooded.

During another appointment, again for but a minute, Beccah's face appeared to be that of a very dry, thick-

skinned, lizardlike creature—possibly an iguana. Definitely a reptile but nothing like a snake.

M. Scott Peck, *Glimpses of the Devil: A Psychiatrist's Personal Accounts of Possession, Exorcism, and Redemption* (Free Press 2005), 173, 214-15, 225.

### **Doreen Irvine**

My powers as a black witch were great, and I added to my knowledge of evil every day. My ability to levitate four or five feet was very real. It was not a hoax. Demons aided me.

Killing birds in flight after they had been let loose from a cage was another act I performed as a witch. I could make objects appear and disappear. I also mastered apport, which is often used when witches demonstrate their powers before others.

D. Irvine, *From Witchcraft to Christ* (Life Journey 2007), 120.

### **Stephen Braude**

I was seated across the table from a woman, no more than three feet away. And while we were talking, a small piece of gold-colored foil appeared suddenly on her face. I knew that her hands were nowhere near her face when this happened. In fact, I was certain they were in full view on the table the entire time. I knew also that if her husband, seated next to her, had placed the material on her face, I would have seen it clearly. But nobody's hands had been anywhere near her face. So I knew that the material hadn't been placed there; it *appeared* there, evidently without normal assistance.

This was one of several similar incidents that occurred during my most fascinating paranormal investigation: the case of a woman much of whose body—not must parts of her face—would break out in what looked like gold leaf.

The case of D. D. Home is very rich and merits much more attention than I can give it here...Other, and even more dramatic effects, include: The movement and complete levitation of large objects, including tables (sometimes with several people on top) and pianos. Earthquake effects. The entire room and its contents would rock or tremble. Supple, solid, warm, and mobile materialized hands, of different sizes, shapes, and colors, ending at the wrist, would carry objects, shake hands with the sitters, and then dissolve or melt in their grasp. The handling of hot coals.

S. Braude, *The Gold Leaf Lady and Other Parapsychological Investigations* (University of Chicago 2007), 1, 38-39.

### **Richard Carrier**

There was a night when I fought with a demon trying to crush my chest—the experience felt absolutely real, and I was certainly awake, probably in a hypnagogic state. I could see and feel the demon sitting on me, preventing me from breathing, but when I “punched” it, it vanished. It is all the more remarkable that I have never believed in demons, and the creature I saw did not resemble anything I had ever seen or imagined before.

*The Empty Tomb*, J. Lowder & R. Price, eds. (Prometheus Books 2005), 185.

My aim is not to personally vouch for all of these examples. It's the sort of thing you'd have to sift through, on a case-by-case basis, and apply the usual criteria in assessing



testimonial evidence.

Likewise, this material raises a number of interpretive issues, some of which I've touched on before, and some of which I have opinions about, but haven't had occasion to discuss.

My immediate point is that we have a tremendous amount of prima facie evidence, in time and place, which runs directly counter to the unquestioned premise of Carrier. What I've cited barely scratches the surface.

## V. Non-Christian miracles

---

## Hindu miracles

The argument from miracles is a traditional line of evidence for Christianity. One way atheists try to deflect the argument from miracles is to cancel out reported Christian miracles by raising the specter of reported non-Christian miracles. In my experience, atheists rarely give any concrete examples. It's just hypothetical.

But occasionally they do gesture at reported Hindu or Muslim miracles. In my experience, controversial Hindu guru Sathya Sai Baba is the usual culprit. Keep in mind that non-Christian miracles are consistent with the truth of Christianity. Miracles are not a sufficient evidence to validate a religion. But they do eliminate naturalistic claimants. That said, how credible are the miracles attributed to Sathya Sai Baba? Commenting on **MODERN MIRACLES: SATHYA SAI BABA, A MODERN-DAY PROPHET** by Erlendur Haraldsson, reviewer Brian Steel makes the following observation:

One aspect of the parapsychological phenomena that might have rewarded investigation is the increasing tendency in the past three decades, under the intense scrutiny of larger and larger darshan audiences and of camera zooms and videocameras, for SSB's public materialisations to be largely confined to vibhuti, small items of jewellery, and necklaces, as well as the occasional dubious Shiva lingam (and the aborted lingam session caught on camera by the BBC in their 2004 documentary, *Secret Swami*). Also, is it not worth consideration that there have been no reports of spectacular phenomena like trances, bilocations, or

'Lazarus-like resurrections' in SSB's final decades of life? *JSPR* Volume 79.2 Number 919 April 2015.

Looks like parlor tricks to me. He seems to be a classic charlatan. If that's the best candidate for documented Hindu miracles, it's hardly impressive or persuasive. Nothing comparable to the well-documented Christian miracles.

## Comparative religious miracles

**i)** An atheist trope is to neutralize the Christian argument from miracles by appealing to many purported miracles in other religions. In my experience, I've never seen an atheist actually document anything comparable in non-Christian religions. This is just a hypothetical counterexample they toss out.

**ii)** Many atheists labor under the illusion that the occurrence of non-Christian miracles is incompatible with the truth of Christianity. They never explain why they think that.

**iii)** Hume appealed to purported non-Christian miracles. His argument is that such a phenomenon creates a stalemate between revival religious claimants. Up to a point that's true if the argument from miracles was the sole argument for Christianity, but it's not.

**iv)** In **MIRACLES: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION** (Oxford Univ. Press, 2018), Yujin Nagasawa has block quotes of reported Christian/biblical, Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim miracles without any footnotes to the source material he's quoting from. It would be nearly impossible for the reader to track down the source in order to consider elementary questions about genre, the date of the source, &c. in relation to the putative event. He does have a chapter bibliography which hints at where he's quoting this material from, but that's it.

**v)** I'm going to quote from **THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO MIRACLES** (Cambridge 2011), G. Twelftree, ed. This has contributors representing different religious viewpoints. It

bends over backwards to be evenhanded. Each contributor gives a sympathetic account of purported miracles in non-Christian religions. So this is about as good as it gets. As scholarly, nonpartisan reference work.

Despite that, notice the poverty of the examples. Notice the distance in time and space between the purported miracles and the source material. There's nothing comparable to the Christian argument from miracles. I'll be quoting from the following chapters: 4. Miracles in the Greek and Roman world by Robert Garland; 10. Miracles in Hinduism by Gavin Flood; 11. Miracles in Islam by David Thomas; 12. Tales of miraculous teachings: miracles in early Indian Buddhism by Rupert Gethin:

The fact that the Greeks used the word *iama* from *iaomai*, meaning "to heal", rather than *thauma*, suggests, however, the cures are to be regarded as routine rather than miraculous, even though they came about in surprising ways (81).

[Aelius Aristides] is the only firsthand literary account from the beneficiary of a miraculous cure that has come down to us from Graeco-Roman antiquity (82)... Regarding the "truth" of the claims, Charles A. Behr, *Aelius Aristides and the Sacred Tales* (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1968), 39, writes, "Many of Aristides' cures seem transient..." (92n20).

Salmoxis was denounced as a charlatan by Herodotus' Greek informant (4.94-6). They claimed that he faked his resurrection by building a hall with an underground chamber and then went into hiding for three years, after which he popped up again—literally so, perhaps—to the amazement of all (83).

Even more ridicule attached to the philosopher Empedocles of Acragas (c. 492-32 BCE), who is said to have stayed the winds, cured the sick, resuscitated the dead and become a god. His chief claim to fame, however, was the bathetic manner of his death. The most colorful account has him leaping into the volcanic crater of Mt. Etna with the intuition of faking his apotheosis, only to be revealed as a fraud when the volcano belched up one of his bronze sandals (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 8.69). It may be that the reports of his miraculous powers, largely extrapolated from his poetry, aroused such derision that posterity exacted its revenge by assigning him a particularly ignominious death (83).

In the absence of any contemporary account of Pythagoras' life, there is no knowing when reports of his wondrous deeds first began to circulate (83).

We hear of no Roman miracle workers, and it may be that here, as in so many other areas of professional expertise, the Greeks claimed a monopoly, particularly in light of the fact that miracle workers were, as we have seen, to some degree perceived as entertainers (84).

The Jewish philosopher Philo (*Embassy* 144-5) credited the deified Augustus with the ability not only to "calm the torrential storm on every side" but also to "heal plagues that afflicted both the Greeks and the barbarians". However, extravagant flattery of this sort was routinely offered by those seeking favors or rewards and is part of the language of soteriology (84).

Tacitus' account is nicely nuanced. Though he does not dismiss the story outright as fabrication, he falls short

of endorsing the claim that Vespasian had miraculous powers...There are no reports of Vespasian performing miracles after his accession. Quite possibly claims to this effect would have been greeted with incredulity in the capital itself (85).

Julian the Theurge is said to to have caused a miraculous downpour in 172 CE, when the Roman army was dying from thirst during Marcus Aurelius' campaign in Germany (88)...The earliest surviving reference to the rain miracles is in Tertullian, Apology 5.6 (c. 197-8) [93n27].

Perhaps the most famous contemporary guru associated with the miraculous is Sathya Sai Baba... There is much controversy surrounding Sai Baba...He has borne the brunt of negative criticism that his "miracles" are in fact sleight-of-hand [cf. Erlendur Haraldsson, *Modern Miracles: An investigative Report on the Psychic Phenomena Associated with Sathya Sai Baba* (New York: Fawcett, 1997) and accusations of sexual abuse and even complicity in murder [cf. David Bailey, *A Journey to Love* (Prasanthi Nilayam: Sri Sathya Sai Towers Hotels Pvt. Ltd, 1997) (195; 197n33; 197n34).

In this context we must lastly mention the "miracles" associated with icons of the gods. In September 1995, a "miracle" occurred in a Delhi temple when the elephant-headed god, Ganesha, drank milk offered during worship. Due to mass communication this phenomenon spread and icons of Ganesha were drinking milk throughout the world within a few days. This was attested from Malaysia to London and 60 percent of the Delhi's population visited a Ganesha temple at the time. The phenomenon died down in due



course and was explained by "rationalists" in India as the porous stone of the image absorbing the liquid (196).

According to traditional accounts, the Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad between 610 and 632 CE by the angel Gabriel from God himself..The reference in 54:1-2—"the hour [of judgment] is nigh, and the moon is cleft asunder. But if they see a sign, they turn away, and say, "this is [but] transient magic"—was interpreted as a physical occurrence in the heavens witnessed by Muhammad and people around the world. And the reference in 17:1 formed the basis of a tradition that became a whole genre of literature in itself: "Glory to [Allah] who did take his servant for a journey by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque, whose precincts we did bless—in order that we might show some of our signs"....The story of this event was greatly elaborated as time went on... These later amplifications of references in the Qur'an that at best hint at miracles associated with Muhammad boost his status to that of at least the equal of the greatest of his predecessors (204-5).

One of the best-known early examples of this genre is the *Kitab al-din wa-al-dawla*, *The Book of Religion and Empire*, by 'Ali ibn Rabban al-Tabari (d. c. 860 CD), who worked at the caliphal court in Baghdad for many years as a Christian but then converted to Islam at the age of seventy..'Ali also adduces examples of miraculous events that are immediately recognizable as works of wonder. They include the Night Journey, which here Muhammad proves when he returns home by giving the skeptical Meccans details about a caravan approaching the town that he could not have known about without seeing it, the sudden and painful deaths

of five of his most vehement critics in Mecca, his diverting a storm that threatened to damage some dwellings, turning a plant stem into a sword and understanding what a bird was communicating, a calf that was about to be slaughtered proclaiming his advent, a wolf doing the same, his withholding rain, increasing food and providing water for his companions on a journey (207-8).

From its beginnings in the fourth or third century BCE, Buddhist literature abounds in tales of miracles...In the earliest texts, the Buddha himself is routinely portrayed as exercising his ability to perform miracles: he makes someone sitting near him invisible to another (Vin 1 16); he overpowers fiery dragons (naga) by himself bursting into flames (Vin 1 25), he disappears from one shore of the Ganges and reappears together with the community of monks on the far shore (D II 89), when the great god Brahma fails in his own attempt to make himself invisible, the Buddha makes himself invisible (M 1 330) [216,21).

## Splitting the moon

The Koran never explicitly attributes a miracle to Muhammad. One possible candidate is surah 54. The Koranic reference is elliptical, but when supplemented by the Hadith, it attributes a miracle to Muhammad, to verify his prophetic credentials. Here's one discussion from a standard reference work:

The first two verses of al-Qamar ["The Moon"] are understood by the vast majority of commentators as a reference to a miracle performed by the Prophet. One evening, he was addressing a group of disbelievers and Muslims on the plain of Mina, just outside of Makkah. The disbelievers had been disputing with the Prophet for several days, demanding a miracle as proof of his prophethood, and they began to do so again. The Prophet then raised his hand and pointed to the moon, whereupon it appeared to separate into two halves, one on either side of the nearby Mt. Hira. He then said, "Bear witness!" (IK, T) and the line of separation disappeared. All were left speechless, but his opponents soon discredited it as an illusion produced by sorcery. According to one account, one of the disbelievers said, "Muhammad has merely bewitched us, but he cannot bewitch the entire world. Let us wait for travelers to come from faraway places and hear what reports they bring". Then, when some travelers arrived in Makkah a few days later, they confirmed that they too had witnessed the splitting of the moon (IK). "The Moon," Seyyed Hossein Nasir, ed., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (HarperOne, 2015), 1299.

**1.** One obvious problem with this report is that it relies entirely on Muslim sources.

**2.** But a deeper problem is the scale of the reported miracle. For the phenomenon would be visible to everyone on earth who happened to be facing the moon (assuming clear skies in their neck of the woods). And many of these involve literate civilizations. Add to that the fact that ancient people took a keen interest in celestial portents and prodigies, and you'd expect to have multiple surviving records of this event from geographically diverse localities. So a reported miracle that's cited to verify Muhammad's prophethood actually undercuts his prophethood, given how unlikely it is that a natural wonder of this magnitude would leave no trace in historical records outside the Muslim world.

**3.** Perhaps a Muslim apologist would counter that if this is a problem for Islam, then there's a parallel problem regarding Joshua's Long Day (Josh 10:12-14), the sundial of Ahaz (Isa 38:8; 2 Kgs 20:9-11; 2 Chron 32:31), and darkness during the crucifixion (Mt 27:45; Mk 15:33).

**i)** But even if (ex hypothesi) these were problematic for the historicity of Scripture, that doesn't let a Muslim off the hook. That doesn't resolve his own problem.

**ii)** The miracle attributed to Muhammad (7C AD) is far more recent than the NT example (1C), much less the two OT examples (8C BC & 2nd millennium BC). It's unsurprising that records wouldn't survive for much earlier events.

**iii)** The crucifixion darkness may simply be darkness over "the land" (i.e. Eretz Israel). Indeed, that's practically an idiomatic synonym for Palestine. In that event, it's not on the same scale as the miracle attributed to Muhammad.

It might be caused by swarms of locusts covering the sun. That would be a suitable omen of divine judgment.

**iv)** Commentators often compare the crucifixion darkness to the Ninth Plague (**Exod 10:21-23**). That, however, was a local rather than global spectacle. Moreover, Goshen was exempted—which, again, stresses the local nature of the miracle. So it's not on the same scale as the miracle attributed to Muhammad. And if that's truly analogous to the crucifixion darkness, then that's another argument for the local nature of the phenomenon.

**v)** The sundial of Azaz was evidently a local miracle, confined to the land of Judah (**2 Chron 32:31**). Had it been a global phenomenon, Babylonian emissaries wouldn't travel to Judah to enquire about the sign. Rather, they were following up on a report—given Babylonian interest in astronomical portents and prodigies.

The accounts don't describe anything happening directly to the sun. Rather, they describe the counterclockwise effect of the shadow. Perhaps a preternatural or supernatural optical illusion.

**vi)** Regarding Joshua's Long Day, it's hard to pinpoint the nature of the phenomenon because we lack a direct description of the event. The passage is poetic, and filtered through a secondary source, which makes it hard to identify the "mechanics" behind the miracle. But in context, the miracle involves prolonging daylight to give the Israelites extra time to defeat the enemy, so, at a minimum, a preternatural or supernatural optical effect is in view.



## A naturalistic heuristic

What standards guide this questioning process? Will not those very standards be brought into question when the historical investigation abuts the grounds for religious belief? For instance, we doubt Herodotus' stories about divine interventions at the Battle of Salamis precisely because historical inquiry is guided by a naturalistic heuristic just as much as natural science is. But won't religious apologists complain that such reliance on "post-Enlightenment" historiographic standards bias the case against them?

This complaint conflates a default assumption with an invincible conviction. Initial skepticism, even very deep skepticism, about miraculous events, is not a problem unless the skepticism becomes dogmatism that refuses to consider the evidence. Apologists have no grounds for complaining that the job of convincing the rational skeptic is hard and that they have a lot of work to do. They willingly took on a tough job and they cannot reasonably complain that it is tough. It is not reasonable to ask historians to suspend the rules that they apply to all other inquiries as soon as the investigation turns to Christian claims. To do so would be a gross case of special pleading on the part of the apologists.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2016/05/23/critical-historians-vs-the-dogmatists-believers-or-deniers/>

**i)** Parsons is less than clear about what he means. Apparently he's alleging that Christian apologists operate with a "naturalistic heuristic" for everything except Christian miracles. If so, on what basis does he say that? Does he think all Christian apologists automatically discount reported miracles in non-Christian settings? What about Christian apologists who believe in occult powers? Pagan witchcraft?

**ii)** The reason to doubt Herodotus' stories about divine interventions at the Battle of Salamis needn't be based on a general, default naturalistic heuristic. Rather, we can doubt (or deny it) for the specific rationale that we have no reason to believe the gods of the Greek pantheon ever existed. Indeed, we have reason to believe they don't exist. Never did. It's not about "divine intervention" in general, but intervention attributed to the gods and goddesses of Greek mythology. If we have good reason to believe they do not exist—indeed, that entities like that *cannot* exist—then that's a specific rationale for doubting (or denying) Herodotus' stories about divine interventions at the Battle of Salamis, which has nothing to do with methodological atheism.

**iii)** And, yes, "initial, or even very deep skepticism" about miraculous events is a problem because it's prejudicial. That can't be justified on a "naturalistic heuristic". That can only be justified if there's a solid argument for metaphysical naturalism. For unless you already know, or have good reason to believe we live in a kind of world where divine interventions don't happen, initial skepticism, much less very keep skepticism, is question-begging.



## Going native

There's a tension in traditional anthropology, especially concerning the study of religion. Western anthropologists are secular. So they remain detached observers rather than participants. Diffident or disapproving outsiders. Yet this judgmental attitude is at odds with their cultural relativism.

Edith Turner is a noted anthropologist. Unlike the typical anthropologist, she crossed over. Frankly, it's terrifying to see a woman give herself over to the dark side, by embracing witchcraft. At the same time, this does afford an independent witness to the reality of occult forces.

One thing that's unclear to me when she refers to supernatural experiences among the Eskimo is whether she's describing Christian Eskimos, folk medicine, or a syncretistic amalgam of Christian theology and indigenous paganism. Modern Eskimos aren't like Eskimos from 500 years ago. Missionaries brought the Gospel to Alaska. There are churches in Alaska. You can watch televangelists. So it would be useful to see a more discriminating analysis.

In the past in anthropology, if a researcher "went native," it doomed him academically. My husband, Victor Turner, and I had this dictum at the back of our minds when we spent two and a half years among the Ndembu of Zambia in the fifties.

All right, "our" people believed in spirits, but that was a matter of their different world, not ours. Their ideas were strange and a little disturbing. Yet somehow we were on the safe side of the White divide and were free merely to study the beliefs. This is how we thought. Little knowing it, we denied the people's equality with ours, their "coevalness," their common humanity as that humanity extended itself into the spirit world.

Try out that spirit world ourselves? No way!

But at intervals, that world insisted it was really there. For instance, in the Chihamba ritual at the end of a period of ordeal, a strong wave of curative energy hit us. We had been participating as fully as we knew how, thus opening ourselves to whatever entities that were about. In another ritual, for fertility, the delight of dancing in the moonlight hit me vividly, and I began to learn something about the hypnotic effect of singing and hearing the drums.

Much later, Vic and I witnessed a curious event in New York City in 1980, while running a workshop at the New York University Department of Performance Studies, which was attended by performance and anthropology students. With the help of the participants, we were trying out rituals as actual performances with the intention of creating a new educational technique.

We enacted the Umbanda trance session, which we had observed and studied in one of the slums of Rio de Janeiro. The students duly followed our directions and also accompanied the rites with bongo drumming and songs addressed to the Yoruba gods. During the ritual, a female student actually went into a trance, right there in New York University. We brought her 'round with our African rattle, rather impressed with the way this ritual worked even out of context. The next day, the student told us that she had gone home that night and correctly predicted the score of a crucial football game, impressing us even further.

Since then, I have taken note of the effects of trance and discovered for myself the three now obvious regularities: frequent, nonempirical cures; clairvoyance, which includes finding lost people or

objects, divination, prediction, or forms of wisdom speaking; and satisfaction or joy—these three effects repeating, almost like a covenant.

What spirit events took place in my own experience?

One of them happened like this. In 1985, I was due for a visit to Zambia. Before going, I decided to come closer than on previous occasions to the Africans' own experience, whatever that was—I did not know what they experienced. So it eventuated, I did come closer.

My research was developing into the study of a twice-repeated healing ritual. To my surprise, the healing of the second patient culminated in my sighting a spirit form. In a book entitled *Experiencing Ritual*<sup>1</sup>, I describe exactly how this curative ritual reached its climax, including how I myself was involved in it; how the traditional doctor bent down amid the singing and drumming to extract the harmful spirit; and how I saw with my own eyes a large, gray blob of something like plasma emerge from the sick woman's back.

Then I knew the Africans were right. There is spirit stuff. There is spirit affliction; it is not a matter of metaphor and symbol, or even psychology. And I began to see how anthropologists have perpetuated an endless series of put-downs about the many spirit events in which they participated - "participated" in a kindly pretense. They might have obtained valuable material, but they have been operating with the wrong paradigm, that of the positivists' denial.

[...]

Later, in 1987, when I went to northern Alaska to conduct research on the healing methods of Inupiat Eskimos, I similarly found myself swamped with stories

of strange events, miracles, rescues, healings by telephone hundreds of miles away, visions of God, and many other manifestations. It was by these things that the people lived. Their ears were pricked up for them, as it were. I spent a year in the village acting as a kind of pseudo auntie, listening to, and believing, the stories. And naturally, those things happened to me about as frequently as they did to them.

[...]

Ernie often accused me of not believing in these manifestations, but I protested that I did. How could I help it? Ernie usually had a bad time from Whites, who labeled his experiences "magical beliefs." But by then, I myself was within the circle of regular Eskimo society and experienced such events from time to time. I am now learning that studying such a mentality from inside is a legitimate and valuable kind of anthropology that is accessible if the anthropologist takes that "fatal" step toward "going native."

[...]

But we eventually have to face the issue head on and ask, "What are spirits?" And I continue with the thorny question, "What of the great diversity of ideas about them throughout the world? How is a student of the anthropology of consciousness, who participates during fieldwork, expected to regard all the conflicting spirit systems in different cultures? Is there not a fatal lack of logic inherent in this diversity?"

The reply: "Is this kind of subject matter logical anyway?" We also need to ask, "Have we the right to force it into logical frameworks?"

Moreover, there is disagreement about terms. "Spirits" are recognized in most cultures. Native Americans refer to something in addition called "power." "Energy," Ki or C'hi, is known in Japan and China, and has been adopted by Western healers.

"Energy" was not the right word for the blob that I saw coming out the back of a Ndembu woman; it was a miserable object, purely bad, without any energy at all, and much more akin to a restless ghost. One thinks of energy as formless, but when I "saw" in the shamanic mode those internal organs, the organs were not "energy." They had form and definition. When I saw the face of my Eskimo friend Tigluk on a mask, as I saw it in a waking dream, and then saw Tigluk himself by luck a few minutes afterward, the mask face was not "energy," laughing there. It was not in the least abstract.

The old-fashioned term, "spirit manifestation," is much closer. These manifestations are the deliberate visitations of discernable forms that have the conscious intent to communicate, to claim importance in our lives. As for "energy" itself, I have indeed sensed something very much like electrical energy when submitting to the healing passes of women adepts in a mass meeting of Spiritists in Brazil.

([Source](#))

# VI. Supernatural dreams and visions

---

## Dreams and visions

But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them:

"Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:

"And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy."

([Acts 2:14-17](#))

### I. Exegesis

1. What should contemporary Christians expect from this passage? Before attempting to answer that question, we have to do some exegesis.

**i)** For general background on dreams in the ancient world, and some modern counterparts, cf. F. Bovon, "These Christians Who Dream: The Authority of Dreams in the First Centuries of Christianity," **STUDIES IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY** (Baker 2005), chap. 11; C. Keener, **MIRACLES: THE CREDIBILITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT ACCOUNTS**, VOL.

**2** (Baker 2011), Appendix E; "Excursus: Dreams and Visions (2:17)," **ACTS: AN EXEGETICAL COMMENTARY** (Baker 2012), 1:911-19; S. Noegel, "Dreams and Dream Interpreters in Mesopotamia and in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament)," K. Bulkeley, ed. **DREAMS: A READER ON THE RELIGIOUS, CULTURAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF DREAMING** (Palgrave 2001), chap. 3; S. Noegel, **NOCTURNAL CIPHERS: THE ALLUSIVE LANGUAGE OF DREAMS IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST** (AOS 2007).

**ii)** In this passage, dreams and visions are minimally a subset of prophecy. So it's referring to prophetic dreams and visions. Revelatory dreams and visions.

This raises the question of whether dreams and visions are exegetical of prophecy. Are dreams and visions a special case of prophecy? Is prophecy a general category that includes dreams and visions, but covers additional phenomena? Or is "prophecy" employed here as a synonym for dreams and visions? Is prophecy identical with dreams and visions? We probably can't answer that question from this passage alone.

**iii)** The distinction between dreams and visions is somewhat rhetorical—a feature of Hebrew parallelism. So these aren't necessarily distinct phenomena.

At the same time, parallelism doesn't mean the



parallel terms are strictly synonymous. They may be analogous rather than synonymous. They have enough in common to plug into the rhetorical framework.

**iv)** There's a potential distinction between dreams and visions—where dreams take place at night, when the seer is asleep, while visions take place during the day, when the recipient is awake or in a trance. That's a conceptual rather than a semantic distinction.

**v)** Whether or not visionary revelation involves an altered state of consciousness depends on whether we're dealing with objective or subjective visions.

**vi)** The distribution of "visions" to young men and "dreams" to old men is a rhetorical device (iii).

**vii)** The passage contrasts the old covenant with the new covenant. Under the old covenant, visionary revelation was generally confined to a special class of seers or prophets, in distinction to ordinary Jews. But according to this passage, the scope of prophecy or visionary revelation will be extended to God's people generally.

**viii)** "All flesh" isn't necessarily universal. It may be idiomatic or hyperbolic. Indeed, in context, it's obviously confined to God's people, and not to pagans or unbelievers (Cf. [Num 11:29](#)). Rather, the universal quantifier is a way of saying this applies without respect to race, ethnicity, gender, or social class.

At the same time, oracular dreams can come to pagans as well as believers (e.g. Abimelech, Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Pilate's wife).

**ix)** Pentecost is not an isolated incident. Examples of prophecy, dreams, and visions cycle through the rest of Acts (7:55-56; 9:3-12; 10:3,9-19; 11:5-10; 16:9-10; 18:9-10; 27:23-24).

**x)** Not every Christian in Acts is a seer or prophet. So that implicitly delimits the scope of the prophecy.

**xi)** This raises other theoretical distinctions. According to one theoretical distinction there'd be a subset of Christians who are seers or prophets. According to another theoretical distinction, all Christians are potential recipients of prophecy, and/or oracular dreams and visions, but that potential is only realized for some Christians some of the time—on a need to know basis.

In other words, some or many Christians might go their whole life without experiencing anything out of the ordinary in this regard. Other Christians might experience something like this rarely, occasionally, or once in lifetime.

On this view, no Christian would be a seer or prophet in the sense of receiving prophecies, and/or oracular dreams and visions on a regular basis. Rather, it would range along a continuum. Be person-variable. Depending on exigent circumstances.

Right now I'm not saying which model is correct (although I incline to the latter). I'm just blocking out different theoretical possibilities. The rest of Acts might clarify the necessary distinctions.

**xii)** I also think it's unnecessary to nail it down. This is not a command. This is not something we do. Rather, this is something done to us. It depends entirely on God's initiative.

We don't have to predict the frequency. That's out of our hands.

2. Richard Gaffin defends a cessationist interpretation:

Peter's apostolic gloss on Joel's universal apocalyptic vision, "and they will prophecy" ([Acts 2:18](#)), cannot find its fulfillment in the restrictively distributed gift of 1 Corinthians 12-14. Rather...It is best understood in terms of the anointing of [1 Jn 2:20,27](#). This anointing with the Spirit, John says, is true of all believers, and such that "you do not need anyone to teach you" (cf. [Heb 5:12](#)). These words, in turn, echo the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy... ([Jer 31:34](#)).

W. Grudem, ed. **ARE MIRACULOUS GIFTS FOR TODAY?** (Zondervan 1996), 291.

**i)** I agree with Gaffin that the wording of [Acts 2:17-18](#) doesn't map directly onto 1 Cor 12-14. But then, why should it? The phraseology is suited Joel's situation and genre, then recontextualized by Peter. We must make allowances for different modes of

communication, audience adaptation, literary genre, &c.

**ii)** In addition, 1 Cor 12-14 isn't my immediate concern. How that meshes with 1 Cor 12-14 isn't my immediate concern. I'm just considering the passage on its own terms.

**iii)** It's a hermeneutical misstep to use 1 John to interpret Acts. Why assume they're talking about the same thing? You have to exegete [Acts 2:17-18](#) in light of Acts. In light of Luke's narrative strategy, literary allusions, &c.

**iv)** Apropos (iii), Luke illustrates what is meant by subsequent examples (7:55-56; 9:3-12; 10:3,9-19; 11:5-10; 16:9-10; 18:9-10; 27:23-24). These are not equivalent to the Johannine anointing. Gaffin is conflating different categories.

**v)** Gaffin stresses the definitive character of Pentecost. And that's no doubt a turning point in redemptive history. However, a turning point is not the end-point, but a new direction towards our destination. It brings us closer to the destination.

The uniqueness of Pentecost doesn't foreclose the occurrence of other signs and wonders, dreams and visions in the remainder of the narrative.

In fairness to Gaffin, he's responding to a second-blessing theology, and there I agree with him.

## **II. Experience**

**i)** Responsible Christians normally frown on using

experience to interpret Scripture. Rather, we should use Scripture to interpret experience.

And that's generally sound. However, depending on the passage of Scripture, certain interpretations predict for certain experiences. If a particular passage is taken to be prophetic or promissory, then one way of testing the interpretation is to see if the predicted experience transpires.

If, say, you interpret [Acts 2:17-18](#) to mean many, most, or all Christians will be seers or prophets, and if that doesn't pan out, then experience counters your interpretation. There's nothing wrong with appealing to experience in that case, for the nature of your interpretation carries observable consequences.

Of course, that cuts both ways. If experience can disconfirm your interpretation, it can also confirm your interpretation. At least tentatively.

To take a comparison, a classic test of prophecy is whether or not the prophecy comes true ([Deut 18:22](#)). To some extent, fulfillment or nonfulfillment is interpretive. (At the same time, interpreting ancient oracles is not without uncertainties.)

**ii)** Many passages of Scripture aren't prophetic or promissory, so experience is hermeneutically irrelevant in those instances.

### **III. Types of dreams**

There are different types of dreams:

**i)** Ordinary dreams

Ordinary dreams are the immediate product of the dreamer's imagination. They incorporate elements from his experience, along with fictitious elements.

There's a sense in which even ordinary dreams are revelatory. Revelatory in the way that natural or general revelation is revelatory. Ordinary dreams are a subdivision of general revelation. All dreams have their ultimate origin in divine agency. In that respect, all dreams, like nature and history, reflect the nature of God. But ordinary dreams have no directional value. They provide no guidance.

## **ii) Lucid dreams**

Lucid dreams occupy a borderland between consciousness and unconsciousness. The lucid dreamer is consciously dreaming while he's still asleep.

## **iii) Oracular dreams**

We find many paradigmatic examples in Scripture. These are revelatory in the higher sense of special revelation. They are not the product of the dreamer's imagination. Rather, they are divinely inspired.

They provide guidance. That may be precautionary ([Mt 2:13,19-20](#); [27:19](#)) or—more often—predictive.

Precautionary dreams are counterfactual. By forewarning the dreamer, the dreamer can avoid the danger.

## **IV. Interpreting dreams**

**i)** Scripture cautions us against delusive dreams (e.g. [Deut 13:1-5](#); [Jer 23:25-28](#)). This parallels the stock distinction

between true and false prophecy.

**ii)** If you had a premonition, like a prescient dream, would you be in a position to know if it was prescient? You could know in retrospect if the dream was prescient. If it "came true," then it was prescient. But could you know ahead of time?

If you had a vision of the future, you wouldn't necessarily know it was about the future. It would just be a scene of some place.

**iii)** In principle, a character within the dream could tell the dreamer if his dream was a presentiment of things to come (or something to avoid). But that raises another question.

How do you know whether or not the character is just a figment of your imagination? You might know after the fact, if the dream comes true, but that's the same conundrum.

**iv)** This, in turn, raises the question of whether we should ever act on our dreams. And that's a risk assessment. What's the cost/benefit analysis?

For instance, it would be very imprudent to sell your house or quit your job. If, on the other hand, it meant waiting for a different bus, taking a different route to work, catching a different plane, the inconvenience might be fairly trivial.

**v)** Dreams don't have to be oracular to be edifying. Suppose you have a comforting dream about a loved one who died. After you awaken you can thank God for the dream and pray to God that the dream is a harbinger of the world to come. You're not assuming that the dream is significant. Rather, you're praying about the dream.

Indeed, it's possible to turn this into a devotional cycle, where you dream about what you pray about, then pray about what you dream about. A supplementary source of hope and encouragement, resting on prayerful dreams.

Prayer is a source of hope. We can pray for what we hope for, and hope for what we pray for. Prayer bolsters hope.

vi) Some Christians construe [Acts 2:17-18](#) in cessationist terms to forestall abuses or excesses. But that defensive strategy is like a pebble holding back a boulder. If the pebble gives way, the boulder will come tumbling down the hillside and crush the cottage at the foot of the hill. That's a very precarious defensive strategy. Only a pebble stands between you and the boulder. Remove the pebble and the boulder is unstoppable.

That, of itself, is not a reason to question a cessationist interpretation of [Acts 2:17-18](#)—which is primarily a question of sound exegesis.

My point is that *if* the chief recommendation for that interpretation is apologetic, is a first strike to preempt abuse, then one good counterexample leaves you defenseless against the very thing you fear.

If we vacate the field, then by process of self-elimination, we leave the field to some of the least responsible spokesmen, viz. pop Pentecostals, psychics, New Agers. Fraud and abuse becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (pardon the pun).

It's better to have criteria in place to anticipate contingencies. Criteria to evaluate dreams, rather than hoping the boulder won't be dislodged and come rolling down the hill. Have a backup plan.



## V. Examples

(1) Only once do I remember hearing him [William Nobes] speak and that was truly an occasion to be remembered. It was at the Fellowship Meeting...[when] he told us the story of his conversion.

He said little about his early days...And then, with his youth behind him, when he was well on to middle age, he had a dream. The horror of that dream was real to him yet, and he managed, in the hush of that meeting, to involve us, too, in the horror of it. In his dream he was hanging over a flaming inferno, helpless and frantic. Above him and almost obstructing the opening of the pit was an enormous ball, like a great globe, and he found himself trying to climb up the roundness of this ball to get away from the heat of the flames below, and out into the clean, cool air above. Sometimes he would make two or three feet, sometimes more, at times only two or three inches.

Once he thought he had really got over the widest part of the ball, but in spite of all his efforts and his mounting fear and agony, the result was always the same—he would fail to keep his hold, fail to make another inch, fail to keep what ground he had gained, and in helpless weakness slide and slither back along that fearsome slope, to find himself back where he had started.

This seemed to go on for an eternity, and then at last, all hope gone, and hanging over the open jaws of hell, he looked up once more at the light above him and uttered one great despairing cry and there was a face in that light looking down at him, full of love and pity, and a hand reached down and grasped his, and drew

him up out of all the horror below him and stood him on the firm sweet earth and in the pure clear air...From then on he walked before the Lord in love and thankfulness.

Bethan Lloyd-Jones, **MEMORIES OF SANDFIELDS** (Banner of Trust 1983), 61-63.

(2) A gentlewoman [i.e. Cotton Mather's late wife] whom I may do very well to keep alive in my memory, fell into grievous languishments wherein a pain of her breast and an excessive salivation were two circumstances that were become as insupportable unto her as they were incurable. She apprehended (in her sleep, no doubt) that a grave person appearing to her directed her, for the former symptom, to cut the warm wool from a living sheep and apply it warm unto the grieved part; for the latter symptom, to take a tankard of spring water, and therein over the fire dissolve an agreeable quantity of mastic and of gum-isinglass and now and then drink a little of this liquor to strengthen the glands. The experiment was made, and she found much advantage in it.

**SELECTED LETTERS OF COTTON MATHER** (Louisiana State University 1971), 116.

(3) Even within a fortnight of my writing this, there was a physician who sojourned within a furlong of my own house. This physician, for three nights together, was miserably distressed with dreams of his being drowned. On the third of these nights his dreams were so troublesome, that he was cast into extreme sweats, by struggling under the imaginary water. With the sweats yet upon him, he came down from his chamber, telling the people of the family what it was that so

discomposed him. Immediately there came in two friends that asked him to go a little way with them in a boat upon the water. He was at first afraid of gratifying the desire of his friends, because of his late presages. But it being a very calm time, he recollected himself. "Why should I mind my dreams or distrust the Divine Providence?" He went with them, and before night, by a thunderstorm suddenly coming up, they were all three of them drowned. I have just now inquired into the truth of what I have thus related; and I can assert it.

**MAGNALIA CHRISTI AMERICANA** (Banner of Truth 1979),  
2:468.

(4) John Sanford wrote of a dream his father experienced a week before his death. Sanford's father was dying of kidney failure:  
In the dream he awakened in his living room. But then the room changed and he was back in his room in the old house in Vermont as a child. Again the room changed: to Connecticut (where he had his first job), to China (where he worked as a missionary), to Pennsylvania (where he often visited), to New Jersey, and then back to the living room. In each scene after China, his wife was present, in each instance being a different age in accordance with the time represented. Finally he sees himself lying on the couch back in the living room. His wife is descending the stairs and the doctor is in the room. The doctor says, "Oh, he's gone." Then, as the others fade in the dream, he sees the clock on the mantelpiece; the hands have been moving, but now they stop; as they stop, a window opens behind the mantelpiece clock and a bright light shines through. The opening widens into a door and

the light becomes a brilliant path. He walks on the path of light and disappears.

K. Bulkeley & P. Bulkley, **DREAMING BEYOND DEATH: A GUIDE TO PRE-DEATH DREAMS AND VISIONS** (Beacon Press 2005), 64.

(5) The present writer has a personal interest in the subject of religious visions, since he became a Christian as a result of a vision of Jesus. This occurred one winter afternoon when he was sixteen years old, during term time in a residential school. Sitting alone in my study, I saw a figure in white approach me, and I heard in my mind's ear the words, "Follow me." I knew that this was Jesus. How did I know? I have not the slightest idea. I had no knowledge of Christianity whatsoever—it had intentionally been kept from me. My parents were both Jewish—my father was president of his synagogue. I had never been to a church service. I had never read the New Testament. I had never discussed Christianity with my friends. The only manifestation of Christianity that I had witnessed was that a few boys knelt beside their bed to say their prayers at night in the dormitory. (Jews do not kneel to pray.)

Apart from at school, all my friends and acquaintances were Jewish. I had been barmitzvahed at my synagogue, and at school I did not attend chapel or religious education lessons. Far from attending them, someone from outside the school came to give me lessons in Judaism. I had not been searching for a faith: indeed, I had even thought of becoming a rabbi. Yet I immediately recognized the figure I saw as Jesus. How I knew this, I have no idea. He was not a person

who had crossed my conscious mind. (Naturally I do not know what happens in my unconscious, or it would not be unconscious.) In my vision, Jesus was clothed in white, although I cannot remember the nature of his clothes, nor yet his face, and I doubt if I ever knew them. I feel sure that if anyone had been present with a tape recorder or a camcorder, nothing would have registered.

It was certainly not caused by stress: I was in good health, a happy schoolboy with good friends, leading an enthusiastic life and keen on sport as well as work...Again, I am sure it was not wish fulfillment. I was (and still am) proud to be Jewish.

I cannot account for my vision of Jesus by any of the psychological or neurological explanations on offer. That does not prove that it was of divine origin, but my experience over the last sixty plus years of Christian life confirms my belief that it was.

H. Montefiore, **THE PARANORMAL: A BISHOP**

**INVESTIGATES** (Upfront Publishing 2002), 234-35.

(6) Close friends recently told me about Hilda (not her real name), a woman of their acquaintance who recently died of cancer at forty years of age. Hilda's parents have been involved in Christian ministry all of their lives, and her maternal grandparents were, too, while they were alive. Hilda's parents received three unusual telephone calls on the day after her death. One was from a city close to my own, where someone reported a dream in which Hilda's grandparents were seen in heaven with their arms outstretched welcoming someone whose identity they were not given. A second

telephone call came from a family friend from Wales, where someone had a dream that was identical to that reported in the first call. Finally, a chaplain who occasionally visited Hilda phoned her parents, saying that he had dreamed that he met her in heaven and began to converse with her about her sufferings. He did not know that Hilda had just died. In the conversation, she dismissed her pain as insignificant in comparison with the joy she was experiencing. Hilda's parents do not think these three individuals had any contact with each other.

P. Wiebe, **GOD AND OTHER SPIRITS: INTIMATIONS OF TRANSCENDENCE IN CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE** (Oxford 2004), 66-67.

(7) Preachers and Christians in general had often come to me and I used to resist them and persecute them. When I was out in any town I got people to throw stones at Christian preachers. I would tear up the Bible and burn it when I got a chance.

I was faithful to my own religion, but I could not get any satisfaction or peace, though I performed all the ceremonies and rites of that religion. So I thought of leaving it all and committing suicide. Three days after I had burnt the Bible, I woke up about three o'clock in the morning, had my usual bath, and prayed, "O God, if there is a God, wilt thou show me the right way or I will kill myself." My intention was that, if I got no satisfaction, I would place my head upon the railway line when the 5 o'clock train passed by and kill myself.

I was praying and praying but got to answer; and I prayed for half an hour longer hoping to get peace. At

4:30 AM, I saw something of which I had no idea at all previously. In the room where I was praying I saw a great light. I thought the place was on fire. I looked round, but could find nothing. Then the thought came to me that this might be an answer that God had sent me. Then as I prayed and looked into the light, I saw the form of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I felt that a vision like this could not come out of my own imagination. I heard a voice saying in Hindustani, "How long will you persecute me? I have come to save you; you were praying to know the right way. Why do you not take it?" The thought then came to me, "Jesus Christ is not dead but living and it must be He Himself." So I fell at His feet and got this wonderful peace which I could not get anywhere else.

B. H. Streeter & A. J. **APPASAMY**, **THE MESSAGE OF SADHU SUNDAR SINGH** (MacMillan 1921), 6-7.

(8) I have had firsthand, incontrovertible experience of extrasensory perception, and a little precognition. But the experience I want to mention here is relevant to the matter of the resurrection.

Many of us who believe in what is technically known as the Communion of Saints, must have experienced the sense of nearness, for a fairly short time, of those whom we love soon after they have died. This has certainly, happened to me several times. But the late C. S. Lewis, whom I did not know very well, and had only seen in the flesh once, but with whom I had corresponded a fair amount, gave me an unusual experience. A few days after his death, while I was watching television, he "appeared" sitting in a chair a

within a few feet of me, and spoke a few words which were particularly relevant to the difficult circumstances through which I was passing. He was ruddier in complexion than ever, grinning all over his face and, as the old-fashioned saying has it, positively glowing with health. The interesting thing to me was that I had not been thinking about him at all. I was neither alarmed nor surprised nor to satisfy the Bishop of Woolwich, did I look up to see the hole in the ceiling that he might have made on arrival. He was just there—"large as life and twice as natural"! A week later, this time when I was in bed reading before going to sleep, he appeared again, even more rosily radiant than before, and repeated to me the same message, which was very important to me at the time. I was a little puzzled by this, and I mentioned it to a certain saintly Bishop who was then living in retirement here in Dorset. His reply was, "My dear J..., this sort of thing is happening all the time."

J. B. Phillips, **RING OF TRUTH** (Harold Shaw Publishers 1989), 116-17.

(9) Some years ago I got up one morning intending to have my hair cut in preparation for a visit to London, and the first letter I opened made it clear I need not go to London. So I decided to put the haircut off too. But then there began the most unaccountable little nagging in my mind, almost like a voice saying, "Get it cut all the same. Go and get it cut." In the end I could stand it no longer. I went. Now my barber at that time was a fellow Christian and a man of many troubles whom my brother and I had sometimes been able to help. The moment I opened his shop door he said, "Oh, I was praying you might come today." And in fact if I had



come a day or so later I should have been of no use to him.

It awed me; it awes me still. But of course one cannot rigorously prove a causal connection between the barber's prayers and my visit. It might be telepathy. It might be accident.

I have stood by the bedside of a woman whose thighbone was eaten through with cancer and who had thriving colonies of the disease in many other bones, as well. It took three people to move her in bed. The doctors predicted a few months of life; the nurses (who often know better), a few weeks. A good man: laid his hands on her and prayed. A year later the patient was walking (uphill, too, through rough woodland) and the man who took the last X-ray photos was saying, "These bones are as solid as rock. It's miraculous."

C. S. Lewis, **THE WORLD'S LAST NIGHT** (Mariner Books 2002), 3-4.

(10) He [Spurgeon] also mentioned the sermon at Exeter Hall, in which he suddenly broke off from his subject, and pointing in a certain direction, said, "Young man, those gloves you are wearing have not been paid for: you have stolen them from your employer." At the close of the service, a young man, looking very pale and greatly agitated, came to the room, which was used as a vestry, and begged for a private interview with Spurgeon. On being admitted, he placed a pair of gloves upon the table, and tearfully said, "It's the first time I have robbed my master, and I will never do it again. You won't expose me, sir, will you? It would kill my mother if she heard that I had become a thief'."

H. J. Harrald, ed. **AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF CHARLES H.**

**SPURGEON** (American Baptist Publication Society 1878),  
3:88-89.

(11) While preaching in the hall, on one occasion, I [Spurgeon] deliberately pointed to a man in the midst of the crowd, and said, "There is a man sitting there, who is a shoemaker; he keeps his shop open on Sundays, it was open last Sabbath morning, he took nine pence, and there was four pence profit out of it; his soul is sold to Satan for four pence!" A city missionary, when going his rounds, met with this man, and seeing that he was reading one of my sermons, he asked the question, "Do you know Mr Spurgeon?" "Yes," replied the man "I have every reason to know him, I have been to hear him; and under his preaching, by God's grace I have become a new creature in Christ Jesus. Shall I tell you how it happened? I went to the Music Hall, and took my seat in the middle of the place: Mr Spurgeon looked at me as if he knew me, and in his sermon he pointed to me, and told the congregation that I was a shoemaker, and that I kept my shop open on Sundays; and I did, sir. I should not have minded that; but he also said that I took nine pence the Sunday before, and that there was four pence profit; but how he should know that, I could not tell. Then it struck me that it was God who had spoken to my soul through him, so I shut up my shop the next Sunday. At first, I was afraid to go again to hear him, lest he should tell the people more about me; but afterwards I went, and the Lord met with me, and saved my soul."

I [Spurgeon] could tell as many as a dozen similar

cases in which I pointed at somebody in the hall without having the slightest knowledge of the person, or any idea that what I said was right, except that I believed I was moved by the Spirit to say it; and so striking has been my description that the persons have gone away, and said to their friends, 'Come, see a man that told me all things that ever I did; beyond a doubt, he must have been sent of God to my soul, or else he could not have described me so exactly.' And not only so, but I have known many instances in which the thoughts of men have been revealed from the pulpit. I have sometimes seen persons nudge their neighbours with their elbow, because they had got a smart hit, and they have been heard to say, when they were going out, 'The preacher told us just what we said to one another when we went in at the door.'

H. J. Harrald, ed. **AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF CHARLES H.**

**SPURGEON** (Flemming H. Revell Co., 1899), 2:226-27.

(12) Cessationists are correspondingly susceptible to the sins of the debunker. I am much less likely to get a cessationist to believe in a remarkable response to prayer than I would be able to get a charismatic to believe it.

For instance. A number of years ago a good friend of ours was dying. When she finally passed away, Nancy and I were on the road (in Philadelphia). It was the middle of the night and we both woke up. *Are you awake? Yeah, are you awake? How come? Beats me.* A few minutes later the phone rang, and it was the news that our friend had gone to be with the Lord. Back home, our grandson Knox had been praying regularly for her, and he was two or thereabouts. But that night

while praying for her, he stopped, and said, "She died. She is in Heaven." They found out later that she had in fact died that night.

<http://dougwils.com/the-church/excesses-of-the-wahoo-brethren.html>

(13) When I first came to America, thirty-one years ago. I crossed the Atlantic with the captain of a steamer who was one of the most devoted men I ever knew, and when we were off the banks of Newfoundland he said to me:

"Mr. Inglis, the last time I crossed here, five weeks ago, one of the most extraordinary things happened which, has completely revolutionized the whole of my Christian life. Up to that time I was one of your ordinary Christians. We had a man of God on board, George Muller, of Bristol. I had been on that bridge for twenty-two hours and never left it. I was startled by some one tapping me on the shoulder. It was George Muller:

"Captain, he said, 'I have come to tell you that I must be In Quebec on Saturday afternoon.' This was Wednesday.

"It is impossible,' I said.

"Very well, if your ship can't take me, God will find some other means of locomotion to take me. I have never broken an engagement in fifty seven years.'

"I would willingly help you. How can I? I am helpless.'

"Let us go down to the chart-room and pray.'

"I looked at that man of God, and I thought to myself, what lunatic asylum could that man have come from? I never heard of such a thing.

"Mr. Muller,' I said, 'do you know how dense the fog is?'

"No,' he replied, 'my eye is not on the density of the fog, but on the living God who controls every circumstance of my life.'

"He got down on his knees and prayed one of the most simple prayers. I muttered to myself: 'That would suit a children's class where the children were not more than eight or nine years old.' The burden of his prayer was something like this: 'O Lord, if it is consistent with Thy will, please remove this fog in five minutes. You know the engagement you made for me in Quebec Saturday. I believe it is your will.'

"When he finished. I was going to pray, but he put his hand on my shoulder and told me not to pray. "First, you do not believe He will; and second. I believe He has. And there is no need whatever for you to pray about it.' I looked at him, and George Muller said.

"Captain. I have known my Lord for forty-seven years, and there has never been a single day that I have failed to gain an audience with the King. Get up, captain, and open the door, and you will find the fog is gone.' I got up, and the fog was gone!

"You tell that to some people of a scientific turn of mind, and they will say, 'That is not according to natural laws.' No, it is according to spiritual laws. The God with whom we have to do is omnipotent. Hold on to God's omnipotence. Ask believingly. On Saturday afternoon, I may add, George Muller was there on time."

**THE HERALD OF GOSPEL LIBERTY** (August 25, 1910),  
1060.

(14) Even more important is what happened when, a few years after my own accident, another drunk driver plowed into the car of one of my dearest friends. Unlike me, she didn't survive. After a few weeks in a coma, she, along with her unborn child, went away. Less than a week after the funeral, however, she came back. I was awakened in the night to behold Barbara standing at the foot of my bed. She said nothing. She just stood there—beautiful, brightly luminous, intensely real. Her transfigured, triumphant presence, which lasted only a few moments, cheered me greatly.

Then, one afternoon, several weeks after that, I was typing in my study, wholly focused on my work. Suddenly I sensed someone else in the room. The presence seemed to be located up, behind, and to my left. I understood immediately, I know not how, that it was Barbara. Unlike the first time, when I saw her and heard nothing, this time I heard her and saw nothing. She insisted that I visit her distraught husband as soon as possible. Overwhelmed by this urgent communication, I immediately picked up the phone.

D. Allison, **NIGHT COMES** (Erdmans, 2016), 14.

## Deadbed visions

Our forebears in the faith used to write about deathbed visions. Seems as though that's fallen out of fashion. That may be because nowadays most people die in hospitals rather than homes. Sometimes they die alone--except for hospital staff. And the surroundings are distracting.

This post isn't specifically about deathbed visions, but more generally about reported phenomena that happen to some dying patients and/or their loved ones. I'm going to post some anecdotes. In evaluating this material, we need to draw some distinctions and take some precautions:

**i)** Obviously, this depends on the credibility of the witness. In many cases this is not the kind of experience that a second party would be in a position to observe or corroborate.

Since the witness is dying, I don't think they have anything to gain or lose by lying. Still, in most cases we only have their word for it.

**ii)** Even if they saw or heard what they say they saw or heard, that's still subject to interpretation. It's their *impression* of what they experienced. Whether what they experienced is what they *think* it was is a separate question.

So we need to distinguish between the reported experience and the interpretation of the reported experience. We can have a credible report of a particular experience. How best to interpret that experience is a different question.

**iii)** Apropos (ii), the same distinction holds true for witnesses who relay what the dying patient told them. For instance, I have no prior reason to think Trudy Harris is a



liar. However, her evidential value lies in reporting what patients told her, and not in her theological interpretation of what they said. She can be a reliable reporter, but an unreliable interpreter. In addition, Trudy has a sugary style that I find off-putting.

**iv)** Thus far I've mentioned some skeptical caveats. But now for something more positive. Given the fact of the afterlife, it would not be surprising if some people in the twilight hours of life, with this life nearly behind them and the afterlife just ahead of them, might experience glimpses of the great beyond. And this could be true for the heavenbound and the hellbound alike. In the borderland between life and death, a patient might become more aware of both realms—as they slip away. As their grip on this life loosens.

**v)** I think it would be a mistake to ignore what dying patients say. To dismiss their experience out of hand.

For instance, this may be a time when the Lord prepares a Christian for death. For the journey through the shadow of death. Or to comfort the bereaved.

Conversely, this might be a time when the sins of the wicked begin to catch up with them.

**vi)** If some of the dying experience uncanny events, hospice nurses are in a better position than most folks to witness what dying patients experience.

**vii)** Likewise, if a pattern emerges of characteristic things that some dying patients say they experience, I think that lends more credibility to their deadbed testimonies.

Dear Trudy,

My mother suffered from Alzheimer's and was in an assisted-living home for a few years before she had to be moved into the nursing home section for full-time care. Her sister was there every day to ensure that she was OK as well as to provide her with some company.

Her condition worsened and she died on Christmas night in 2000. She would have chosen this day for her "going home," and perhaps she did because it was the birthday of her Savior. She was 88. Prior to Mama's death, I had to place her sister in the assisted-living home and then quickly into the nursing home section, because she could no longer care for herself.

Her sister slept most of the time and was probably in a coma because she was not responsive to anyone. When my mother died, I went to her sister's room to tell her. I leaned over and whispered in her ear that Mama, her little sister, had died, and that it was all right for her to go home and join her.

There was no response. I didn't think much about it at the time. On her birthday, only two weeks after Mama died, she passed away. She was 91. At her funeral, I was talking with one of her friends from the assisted living/nursing home and mentioned how unusual it seemed to me that she died on her birthday. Her friend said it is very common to see patients pass away on their birthdays. She had witnessed many occasions in her 30 years at the home. It seemed to her that their birthday was a goal, and once it was achieved, it was OK to go.

Permalink: [/blogs/glimpses-heaven/woman-joins-her-sister-in-heaven](#)

A new friend recently told me about her elderly mother, who had been diagnosed with dementia years before. It was so painful for my friend not to be recognized by the one who had raised her so lovingly and whom she loved very much.

I have a long-held belief that people with dementia have frequent moments of lucidity and understanding that we do not know about. They experience momentary enlightenments during which they remember and understand just as we do, although we do not know about it at the time.

Necessity required that my friend's mother enter an Episcopalian nursing residence, which she called home for the rest of her life. She was a very happy soul who smiled a great deal and seemed contented in the world she now occupied. The nurses and aides who cared for her loved her. They often said how wonderful it would be to have all the patients as contented and peaceful she was.

When her mother died, my friend was approached at the funeral by one of the nurses who had cared for her all those years.

"I have wanted to tell you something for a long time now but never got around to it," she said. "Over the years we often found your mother sitting at the bedside of patients in the last days and hours of their lives. She would stop by, hold their hands and just stay with them while they were dying." Somehow, on some level, she knew that God was calling them home to Himself and she did not want them to be alone on the journey.

Permalink: [/blogs/glimpses-of-heaven/she-knew-they-were-leaving-for-heaven](#)

The other evening I watched a Johnson & Johnson commercial celebrating nurses and all they do for their patients. The nurse introduced herself as a hospice nurse and was seated on the side of the bed with her patient, Berta Olsen.

Berta had told her of a tradition in Denmark that reminded people to leave a window open in the room of a dying person so that the soul could move on after death. The nurse replied, "Not tonight Berta, not tonight," letting the patient know it was not yet her time to die. The piece was very, very accurate and so reminiscent of the many times I sat just like that with a patient close to death.

Many years ago I sat on the floor next to my father-in-law's chair as he was dying and I had a similar experience. It was before hospice work had become part of my life and I had not yet experienced all the wonderful things God allows you to see and understand as he draws one of his children home.

My father-in-law's breathing was slowing down, his color changing, and he was becoming very peaceful. Suddenly but very gently, I clearly saw something white move away from his body and glide out of the window in front of him. I remember saying, "You have his spirit now, Lord, please let his body shut down." I had no idea why I said it except that what I had seen was real.

Years later, while I was actively caring for dying patients, a friend told me of a similar experience she'd had. She was sitting with her husband as he took his last breath when suddenly the window in the hospital room blew open with no wind or breeze in sight. My friend was startled because it was midsummer and a very quiet evening.

Permalink: [/blogs/glimpses-of-heaven/an-open-window-for-the-soul-after-death](#)

Several years ago, we had in our care three children from the same family, all of whom had the same neuromuscular degenerative disease. For parents to discover, after giving birth to three children, that all had the same disease was more than the heart could comprehend.

Yet the parents of these children cared for them in a way that was deeply moving. All of the medical professionals caring for their children were touched by the dedication and love their parents exhibited, selflessly being on call for each and every need, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The oldest child died first, and the parents, siblings and all those involved in their care were devastated. But the way he died and the things he said held so much meaning later on.

He was admitted into the hospital for care and although he did not appear to be close to death, he suddenly began to rapidly decline. It became evident that his time was near and that he was dying. His dad was holding the oxygen mask close to his face in order to help him breathe. Pushing his hand away, his son said to him, "Don't hold me, Dad; you don't understand, I'm already walking. If you could only see what I see ..." With that, he died.

Two other children were to die, much too soon after the older one...

Permalink: [/blogs/glimpses-of-heaven/a-sons-last-words-before-entering-heaven](#)

Several years ago a dear friend was very ill and not expected to live. She, her daughter and I had traveled together to see a healing priest and she told me later that she knew God had healed her soul and her spirit while she was there, but was not going to heal her body.

She and her loving husband had exhausted every avenue known to them, all to no avail, and although she was only 42 years old, she knew she was going to die. She had left the Islands, where she had undergone experimental therapies, and had gone home to prepare to meet her God. Her daughter called to tell us that she was very peaceful.

While I was standing in the kitchen a day later preparing supper, the back door flew open and a soft breeze passed behind me and moved down the hall. I remember turning toward the movement and saying, "Oh, Diane." I did not understand anything at the time since it was before my hospice days, but I knew it meant something important. I turned to my children and told them that dad and I needed to leave right away to go to see Diane and since they were old enough to be left alone, we were on the road within the hour.

Whatever told me that Diane was about to die I was not sure, but I knew it was imminent. As evening approached and the skies darkened, I suddenly saw a shooting star flash across the sky with all the beauty and power imaginable. I asked my husband to pull over at a phone at the side of the highway. He did so without asking me why.

Within minutes I was speaking to a nurse who had been caring for my friend in her hospital room. He hesitated when I admitted we were not family members but I am sure he heard the urgency in my voice when I said, "Did Diane just die?" "Yes," he said, "just a few minutes ago."

Permalink: [/blogs/glimpses-of-heaven/a-death-is-near-experience](#)

Dear Trudy,

The youngest of my three daughters, Lisa, died of cancer in 2009. A year later, my oldest daughter, Linda, also died of cancer. Of course there is no way to describe the grief that

followed. Soon after my youngest daughter died, a very close friend gave me a beautiful picture of butterflies. Attached to the picture was a lovely poem describing the wonderful change that takes place when a caterpillar becomes a butterfly.

The next day, my husband and I were sitting on a bench looking out over the ocean when a white butterfly came to rest on my leg for two or three minutes. I had never seen a butterfly at the beach before, probably because there is usually too much breeze for them. It was a very tender moment.

A few weeks ago, my surviving daughter, Lana, was at our house. We were sitting on the patio when two beautiful white butterflies began to flutter together around us.

Permalink: </blogs/glimpses-of-heaven/comfort-after-the-death-of-her-daughters>

Many years ago there was a very elegant store in Charlotte, North Carolina, called Montaldo's. It carried exquisite women's apparel.

Mary Anne, the friend I wrote about in my first book, [\*Glimpses of Heaven\*](#), shopped there often and was always impeccably dressed. I have to admit I window-shopped there on many occasions and once was hired as their "house model," which allowed me to play dress-up three times a week.

Mary Anne died after an illness the doctors said would take her life in six months. But God was ever so patient with her; he gave her two and a half years to find him, and find him she did. She was baptized on Christmas Eve and died in the wee hours of Christmas morning, with the peace and grace God gives to those who know and love him. She and I became very close friends through this experience, and

during this time, God enabled me to learn some hard and valuable lessons he wanted me to understand.

About two weeks after Mary Anne's death, I went with a neighbor to Montaldo's to visit friends working there.

I thought I would shop for a new pair of shoes. Waiting to be helped, my eye was drawn to the center aisle of the store, leading into the very beautiful shoe department. A very elegant woman, dressed to the nines, entered the salon and sat across from me. As she did, she raised her eyes to look directly into my face. It was Mary Anne. She smiled a beautiful, loving smile while tipping her head in my direction. It was as if she was simply stopping by to let me know she had made the hard-fought journey she wanted for so long. In an instant she was gone, and the friend who was with me looked at my wide-eyed expression and said, "You look like you have seen a ghost."

Permalink: </blogs/glimpses-of-heaven/a-friend-visits-after-her-death>

One morning, very early, the father of a child in our hospice program came to our office. He was frightened, agitated and confused and wanted to talk to someone right away. He had something important to share.

We had in our care at the time his six-year-old boy, Jack, who was the apple of his daddy's eye. As much as everyone prayed and wished, this little one was very sick and would soon die. His mother and father, as well as his eight-year-old sister, dealt with this reality as well as they possibly could, but it was hardest for the dad.

They all talked and laughed and played board games in the bed together, and they comforted Jack and each other for as long as they could. And then one night he went on to [heaven](#), without a whimper. His dad was more than



heartbroken. His mom and sister were, too, but they dealt with it differently.

This dad had big plans for his boy. They would go to games together, play ball; he would teach Jack how to do everything and watch him grow into the man he dreamed he would become. There was no consolation for the dad. He simply could not believe his son was gone.

Jack's sister slept on the floor in her parents' bedroom at first, not wanting to be away from them all night long. She felt safe there. She awakened suddenly one night, the week after he died, to see Jack standing at the foot of the bed, smiling. She jumped up to awaken her father. He clearly saw Jack standing there and smiling. In some way, he understood that he had come to say goodbye and let his dad know that he was all right.

When his dad arrived at the office that morning, he wanted to tell us all about his son's visit—and to make sure he wasn't crazy. We assured him that he was not. He said he saw him so well and that he looked very happy. He left feeling relieved and at peace.

Permalink: [/blogs/glimpses-heaven/he-came-night-offering-proof-life-after-death](#)

Lynda writes about her mother's death and the guilt she and her sister felt because they were not with her. The middle sister, who was the primary caregiver, had taken a much-needed break. The other sister had taken her daughter out for breakfast, and Lynda herself lived a good distance away and could not get there in time.

A few weeks after her mother died, she had a dream that brought her peace. She was standing behind a railing on one side of a deep but narrow canyon. Her parents (her dad had died years earlier) were seated together on the patio of

a restaurant in Mexico, where they had vacationed years before. It was a very happy scene and when her mother caught her eye, she smiled and waved. She knew she could not join them but was happy to see them together and to know her mother had made the transition peacefully. A week later, Lynda discovered that one of her sisters had had the same dream—with one difference.

Permalink: </blogs/glimpses-heaven/dreams-bring-peace-after-loved-one>

Dear Trudy,

I have a question for you that is not as positive as those normally associated with your column. My dad died of lung cancer and during his life he was far from a nice person. We had a very rocky relationship but, in the end, I tried to help him the best I could.

During the week I cared for him at home, he attempted to break everything in his room. I had to take out everything but the bed. He tried to break out the windows and escape, he yelled incessantly, he had delusions and visions. He was so destructive that I had to lock him in his room. I feared going in to feed him, give him water or his morphine. When I did, I'd open the door slowly to peek in and make sure he hadn't made it over to the door to wait for me, though by this time, he'd lost the use of his legs.

One day I cracked open the door and peeked in. The room was dimly lit and he lay staring at me from the bed with a sinister smile on his face, glowing eyes, saying something to the effect of, "I see you trying to come get me." Then suddenly I saw what looked like one of those stone garden gargoyle statues leap up from his body, in ghost or spirit form, and fly through the door I had open.

I've never heard of anything like this. I have relived this moment a few times since his death; it is always scary. The glow was not like the kind people speak of when someone dies gently and well. It was dark and scary and very real.

Permalink: [/blogs/glimpses-heaven/death-and-face-of-evil](#)

## Second Sight in the Hebrides

We should have had little claim to the praise of curiosity, if we had not endeavoured with particular attention to examine the question of the Second Sight. Of an opinion received for centuries by a whole nation, and supposed to be confirmed through its whole descent, by a series of successive facts, it is desirable that the truth should be established, or the fallacy detected.

The Second Sight is an impression made either by the mind upon the eye, or by the eye upon the mind, by which things distant or future are perceived, and seen as if they were present. A man on a journey far from home falls from his horse, another, who is perhaps at work about the house, sees him bleeding on the ground, commonly with a landscape of the place where the accident befalls him. Another seer, driving home his cattle, or wandering in idleness, or musing in the sunshine, is suddenly surprised by the appearance of a bridal ceremony, or funeral procession, and counts the mourners or attendants, of whom, if he knows them, he relates the names, if he knows them not, he can describe the dresses. Things distant are seen at the instant when they happen. Of things future I know not that there is any rule for determining the time between the Sight and the event.

This receptive faculty, for power it cannot be called, is neither voluntary nor constant. The appearances have no dependence upon choice: they cannot be summoned, detained, or recalled. The impression is sudden, and the effect often painful.

By the term Second Sight, seems to be meant a mode of seeing, superadded to that which Nature generally bestows.

In the Earse it is called Taisch; which signifies likewise a spectre, or a vision. I know not, nor is it likely that the Highlanders ever examined, whether by Taisch, used for Second Sight, they mean the power of seeing, or the thing seen.

I do not find it to be true, as it is reported, that to the Second Sight nothing is presented but phantoms of evil. Good seems to have the same proportions in those visionary scenes, as it obtains in real life: almost all remarkable events have evil for their basis; and are either miseries incurred, or miseries escaped. Our sense is so much stronger of what we suffer, than of what we enjoy, that the ideas of pain predominate in almost every mind. What is recollection but a revival of vexations, or history but a record of wars, treasons, and calamities? Death, which is considered as the greatest evil, happens to all. The greatest good, be it what it will, is the lot but of a part.

That they should often see death is to be expected; because death is an event frequent and important. But they see likewise more pleasing incidents. A gentleman told me, that when he had once gone far from his own Island, one of his labouring servants predicted his return, and described the livery of his attendant, which he had never worn at home; and which had been, without any previous design, occasionally given him.

Our desire of information was keen, and our inquiry frequent. Mr. Boswell's frankness and gaiety made every body communicative; and we heard many tales of these airy shows, with more or less evidence and distinctness.

It is the common talk of the Lowland Scots, that the notion of the Second Sight is wearing away with other superstitions; and that its reality is no longer supposed, but

by the grossest people. How far its prevalence ever extended, or what ground it has lost, I know not. The Islanders of all degrees, whether of rank or understanding, universally admit it, except the Ministers, who universally deny it, and are suspected to deny it, in consequence of a system, against conviction. One of them honestly told me, that he came to Sky with a resolution not to believe it.

Strong reasons for incredulity will readily occur. This faculty of seeing things out of sight is local, and commonly useless. It is a breach of the common order of things, without any visible reason or perceptible benefit. It is ascribed only to a people very little enlightened; and among them, for the most part, to the mean and the ignorant.

To the confidence of these objections it may be replied, that by presuming to determine what is fit, and what is beneficial, they presuppose more knowledge of the universal system than man has attained; and therefore depend upon principles too complicated and extensive for our comprehension; and that there can be no security in the consequence, when the premises are not understood; that the Second Sight is only wonderful because it is rare, for, considered in itself, it involves no more difficulty than dreams, or perhaps than the regular exercise of the cogitative faculty; that a general opinion of communicative impulses, or visionary representations, has prevailed in all ages and all nations; that particular instances have been given, with such evidence, as neither Bacon nor Bayle has been able to resist; that sudden impressions, which the event has verified, have been felt by more than own or publish them; that the Second Sight of the Hebrides implies only the local frequency of a power, which is nowhere totally unknown; and that where we are unable to decide by antecedent reason, we must be content to yield to the force of testimony.

By pretension to Second Sight, no profit was ever sought or gained. It is an involuntary affection, in which neither hope nor fear are known to have any part. Those who profess to feel it, do not boast of it as a privilege, nor are considered by others as advantageously distinguished. They have no temptation to feign; and their hearers have no motive to encourage the imposture.

To talk with any of these seers is not easy. There is one living in Sky, with whom we would have gladly conversed; but he was very gross and ignorant, and knew no English. The proportion in these countries of the poor to the rich is such, that if we suppose the quality to be accidental, it can very rarely happen to a man of education; and yet on such men it has sometimes fallen. There is now a Second Sighted gentleman in the Highlands, who complains of the terrors to which he is exposed.

The foresight of the Seers is not always prescience; they are impressed with images, of which the event only shews them the meaning. They tell what they have seen to others, who are at that time not more knowing than themselves, but may become at last very adequate witnesses, by comparing the narrative with its verification.

To collect sufficient testimonies for the satisfaction of the publick, or of ourselves, would have required more time than we could bestow. There is, against it, the seeming analogy of things confusedly seen, and little understood, and for it, the indistinct cry of national persuasion, which may be perhaps resolved at last into prejudice and tradition. I never could advance my curiosity to conviction; but came away at last only willing to believe. **A JOURNEY TO THE WESTERN ISLES OF SCOTLAND** by Samuel Johnson.





## Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners

**I.** I'm going to make a few observations about John Bunyan's **GRACE ABOUNDING TO THE CHIEF OF SINNERS**. It reflects a classic contrast between Puritanism and Anglicanism. Both Puritanism and Anglicanism have virtues and vices. On the one hand, I think Bunyan's autobiography is somewhat overwrought. Moreover, he makes salvation seem like a trial by ordeal—where the goal is constantly threatened. That makes for gripping drama when he allegorized his autobiography (**THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS**), but it stands in tension with sola gratia. If salvation is truly by grace alone, then the outcome shouldn't be constantly in suspense, where you dare not relax.

On the other hand, there's an urgency to his outlook that's unthinkable in Anglicanism. It's inconceivable that an Anglican could write **THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS**. That's because Anglicanism, with its pacific ritualism, is prone to index salvation to baptism, the eucharist, liturgical prayer, and public acts of worship. So long as you use the right mechanism, you're probably safe. Salvation by ritual.

**II.** Critics sometimes note the contrast between Bunyan's trifling vices and his terrified guilt. It seems disproportionate. In the same vein, I'm reminded of Ruskin's statement (in **PRAETERITA**) that:

Though I felt myself somehow called to imitate Christian in the Pilgrim's Progress, I couldn't see that either Billiter Street and the Tower Wharf, where my father had his cellars, or the cherry-blossomed garden

at Herne Hill [his boyhood home] where my mother potted her flowers, could be places I was bound to fly from as in the City of Destruction. Without much reasoning on the matter, I had virtually concluded from my general Bible reading that, never having meant or done any harm that I knew of, I could not be in danger of hell: while I saw also that even the crème de la crème of religious people seemed to be in no hurry to go to heaven. On the whole, it seemed to me, all that was required of me was to say my prayers, go to church, learn my lessons, obey my parents, and enjoy my dinner.

That's an obstacle to evangelizing adults as well. While the sentiment is understandable and even acceptable in a child, what it fails to grasp or appreciate is that in Christian theology, we are born lost, absent divine intervention. It's not as if the default condition is that we're moving in a heavenward direction, and must commit some heinous sin to lose our way. Rather, we are lost at the outset, and must find our way out of the forest before we're overtaken by the snowy night. Bunyan was fundamentally right about that.

**III.** I'd also like to consider some of Bunyan's personal anecdotes:

5. Yea, so settled and rooted was I in these things, that they became as a second nature to me; the which, as I also have with soberness considered since, did so offend the Lord, that even in my childhood He did scare and affright me with fearful dreams, and did terrify me with dreadful visions; for often, after I had spent this and the other day in sin, I have in my bed been greatly afflicted, while asleep, with the apprehensions of devils and wicked spirits, who still, as I then thought,

laboured to draw me away with them, of which I could never be rid.

6. Also I should, at these years, be greatly afflicted and troubled with the thoughts of the day of judgment, and that both night and day, and should tremble at the thoughts of the fearful torments of hell fire; still fearing that it would be my lot to be found at last amongst those devils and hellish fiends, who are there bound down with the chains and bonds of eternal darkness, 'unto the judgment of the great day.'

7. These things, I say, when I was but a child but nine or ten years old, did so distress my soul, that when in the midst of my many sports and childish vanities, amidst my vain companions...

**i)** Since he was a young boy when he had these nightmares, I take them with a grain of salt. Perhaps his conscious, childish fears fed into nightmares. That invites a naturalistic explanation. Speaking for myself, I only remember one nightmare from my childhood.

**ii)** However, he refers to visions as well as nightmares. If that means hellish visions of evil spirits (demons, the damned) when he was awake, then I'm not sure if that's so easy to discount. I'm not a child psychologist. Is it natural for children to hallucinate?

13. This also have I taken notice of with thanksgiving; when I was a soldier, I, with others, were drawn out to go to such a place to besiege it; but when I was just ready to go, one of the company desired to go in my room; to which, when I had consented, he took my place; and coming to the siege, as he stood sentinel,

he was shot into the head with a musket bullet, and died.

That might well be a special providence.

53. About this time, the state and happiness of these poor people at Bedford was thus, in a dream or vision, represented to me. I saw, as if they were set on the sunny side of some high mountain, there refreshing themselves with the pleasant beams of the sun, while I was shivering and shrinking in the cold, afflicted with frost, snow, and dark clouds. Methought, also, betwixt me and them, I saw a wall that did compass about this mountain; now, through this wall my soul did greatly desire to pass; concluding, that if I could, I would go even into the very midst of them, and there also comfort myself with the heat of their sun.

54. About this wall I thought myself, to go again and again, still prying as I went, to see if I could find some way or passage, by which I might enter therein; but none could I find for some time. At the last, I saw, as it were, a narrow gap, like a little doorway in the wall, through which I attempted to pass; but the passage being very strait and narrow, I made many efforts to get in, but all in vain, even until I was well-nigh quite beat out, by striving to get in; at last, with great striving, methought I at first did get in my head, and after that, by a sidling striving, my shoulders, and my whole body; then I was exceeding glad, and went and sat down in the midst of them, and so was comforted with the light and heat of their sun.

55. Now, this mountain and wall, etc., was thus made out to me—the mountain signified the church of the living God; the sun that shone thereon, the

comfortable shining of His merciful face on them that were therein; the wall, I thought, was the Word, that did make separation between the Christians and the world; and the gap which was in this wall, I thought, was Jesus Christ, who is the way to God the Father (John 14.6; Matt. 7.14). But forasmuch as the passage was wonderful narrow, even so narrow, that I could not, but with great difficulty, enter in thereat, it showed me that none could enter into life, but those that were in downright earnest, and unless they left this wicked world behind them; for here was only room for body and soul, but not for body and soul, and sin.

i) This appears to be the seminal idea for **THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS**. Unlike his childish dreams and visions, this occurred when he was an adult. But it's hard to evaluate since he says "dream or vision". If it was a dream, it could have a naturalistic explanation, although it might be a revelatory dream.

ii) If, on the other hand, it happened when he was awake, then it was either a revelatory vision or a hallucination. To be a hallucination, he'd must have been in a psychotic state at the time. That's not as easy to explain naturalistically as a dream. Was he suffering from extreme sleep deprivation?

107. In prayer, also, I have been greatly troubled at this time; sometimes I have thought I should see the devil; nay, thought I have felt him, behind me, pull my clothes; he would be, also, continually at me in the time of prayer to have done; break off, make haste, you have prayed enough, and stay no longer, still drawing my mind away. Sometimes, also, he would

cast in such wicked thoughts as these: that I must pray to him, or for him. I have thought sometimes of that— Fall down, or, 'if thou wilt fall down and worship me' (Matt. 4.9).

**i)** This happened when he was awake. If hallucinatory, it's both a visual and tactile hallucination. Again, that's harder to explain naturalistically, although a depth psychologist might try. Of course, there's the question of whether depth psychology is junk science. Using pseudo-scientific analysis to naturally explain away his experience would be ironic.

**ii)** I'd add that when I was in my mid-twenties, I had a tactile experience which I took to be occultic in origin. And unlike Bunyan, I wasn't in an agitated state of mind at the time, so it can't be chalked up to an overheated imagination.

240. Another cause of this temptation was, that I had tempted God; and on this manner did I do it. Upon a time my wife was great with child, and before her full time was come, her pangs, as of a woman in travail, were fierce and strong upon her, even as if she would have immediately fallen in labour, and been delivered of an untimely birth. Now, at this very time it was that I had been so strongly tempted to question the being of God, wherefore, as my wife lay crying by me, I said, but with all secrecy imaginable, even thinking in my heart, Lord, if thou wilt now remove this sad affliction from my wife, and cause that she be troubled no more therewith this night, and now were her pangs just upon her, then I shall know that thou canst discern the most secret thoughts of the heart.

241. I had no sooner said it in my heart, but her pangs were taken from her, and she was cast into a deep sleep, and so she continued till morning; at this I greatly marvelled, not knowing what to think; but after I had been awake a good while, and heard her cry no more, I fell to sleeping also. So when I waked in the morning, it came upon me again, even what I had said in my heart the last night, and how the Lord had showed me that He knew my secret thoughts, which was a great astonishment unto me for several weeks after.

That seems like a dramatic, straightforward answer to prayer. A divine sign. Challenge met. And it operates on two different levels: the instant cession of her pain as well as the disclosure of his inner thoughts.

In sum, there's prima facie evidence that Bunyan had some supernatural experiences. Given the immense influence of **THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS** (and, to a lesser extent, **THE HOLY WAR**), although its popularity has faded in modern times, it makes providential sense that he had some supernatural experiences, as a stimulus to his literary ministry.

## Divine signage

Not to belabor the issue, but one more post on Nabeel. Some Muslims say Allah cursed him with cancer as punishment for his apostasy from Islam. You also have Christians asking why he wasn't healed.

**i)** If he died of cancer because Allah cursed him, does that mean that when Muslims die of cancer and other diseases, Allah cursed them?

**ii)** There's a statistical presumption against miracles in the sense that miracles happen less often than not in response to prayer. Indeed, that's probably a dramatic understatement. That doesn't mean there's a general presumption against miracles. Given the Christian worldview, miracles are inevitable. But there's a statistical presumption against any particular miraculous answer to prayer. Miracles are unpredictable, and I daresay most prayers for miracles go unanswered. So there's nothing surprising about the fact that he wasn't healed. That really doesn't require a special explanation. Countless Christians die of cancer and other diseases, prayer notwithstanding.

**iii)** However, one can overemphasize the fact that prayers for his healing went unanswered. Although he didn't get the miracle he was asking for (and others on his behalf) in this case, to my knowledge, Nabeel is on record claiming that he had at least 5 miraculous signs in his life. In his book **SEEKING ALLAH, FINDING JESUS**, he recounts a vision and three revelatory dreams that were instrumental in his conversion.



And after his cancer diagnosis, he said he had a dream of Jesus, which included a sign:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eHEDzitxJB0>

At the time I took that to be an omen or premonition of his impending death.

Assuming his testimony is truthful, these all had veridical elements. Also, David Wood has vouched for some of the dreams.

My point, then, is this: if we take his word for it, he had five miraculous signs in his life. By contrast, many lifelong Christians have nothing out of the ordinary ever happen to them.

## Dreams and divination

The Bible narrates some revelatory dreams. The Bible even has a famous prophecy about Christian dreams (Acts 2:17-18). That raises the question of whether we ought to interpret our dreams. How seriously should we take our dreams?

There are "primitive" cultures in which oneiromancy is a fixture of the culture. In addition, depth psychologists think dreaming is significant. Freud and Jung are two noted examples.

Recently, I was listening to a psychologist discuss dream analysis. I didn't listen to him for that reason. He was initially discussing Dostoyevsky and secular ethics, but then he got onto the subject of dreams, which is natural for a psychologist to discuss, since dreams are an important and historically neglected feature of human cognition.

He discussed what dreams represent. In dream analysis, a psychologist will ask the client what the dream reminds them of, then attempt to connect that to a network of ideas.

A presupposition of dream interpretation is that dreams are symbolic. Therefore, the objective is to decipher the symbolism.

However, I'm skeptical about the operating assumption. I think ordinary dreams are figments of the imagination that don't really symbolize anything. To be sure, that's an oversimplification. Sometimes we dream about familiar people and places. Many dreams draw on memories.

Dreams aren't imaginary in *that* sense, although we also dream about strange people and places that only exist in our dreams. I mean the plot in a dream is imaginary. And even when we dream about a real place, there's often a degree of surreal distortion.

Ordinary dreams can be significant in the sense that we sometimes dream about things that are significant to us. In that respect, dreams can sometimes be a reflection of what's important to us. But in that case, the interpretation is obvious to the dreamer.

Then there's the question of revelatory dreams. If these are coded language by which God communicates to some people, does that require interpretation?

Even if it did require interpretation, that doesn't mean the interpretation is available. In the case of premonitory dreams, those don't require interpretation ahead of time, because the future will supply the interpretation. If the dream comes true, the interpretation lies in the fulfillment. In that respect, premonitory dreams are self-interpreting, but not in advance. And, of course, that's a direct way to distinguish ordinary dreams from revelatory dreams.

I think it would normally be a mistake to make decisions based on dreams, since most dreams are imaginary rather than prophetic. That's a highly unreliable source of divination and decision-making. A snare.

Moreover, the paradox of premonition is that it's usually too late to act on premonitory dreams, because it's only after the fact that you are in a position to know that the dream was premonitory.

This raises the question of whether dreams ever can or should function as a warning. That depends in part on whether you can confirm certain presently true details—as well as whether treating the dream as a possible omen entails nothing more than a minor inconvenience. It would be foolhardy to act on a dream if that carries the potential for major irreversible loss in case it's just a figment of your imagination.

The question of premonitory dreams also goes to the perennial issue of fatalism. And that, in turn, goes to the distinction between foreknowledge and counterfactual knowledge. If a dream comes true, then in retrospect you can see that it was bound to happen that way. But that's in part because, if you don't know ahead of time whether whether a dream is premonitory—and most dreams are just ordinary dreams—so there's no reason to take actions that would change the outcome. Moreover, most dreams aren't threatening. And threatening dreams (nightmares) are apt to be unrealistic, so there's nothing you could do to avert the dire consequence since the dream doesn't correspond to reality, in any discernible sense. Rather, it's one of those surreal things that only happens in a dream. It *can't* happen in real life.

And there's another paradox. If the future doesn't turn out the way you dreamt because you did something to thwart the dream, then you will never know if the dream was premonitory. Did it not come true because it was never about the future in the first place? Or did it not come true due to your evasive maneuvers?

One can think of hypothetical examples in which that's a false dichotomy. Suppose you dream about a terrorist attack in Times Square tomorrow, so you avoid Times Square tomorrow, and the attack occurs. The dream was

true, but it wasn't true for you, because you took preventive measures to opt out of that scenario.

This also goes to fictional dilemmas about seers who futilely warn the populace about some impending catastrophe. The authorities assume they are loons, and lock them up. The predicted disaster occurs right on schedule. The seer is belatedly vindicated.

## Nabeel's recent dream

I'm going to comment on this:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eHEDzitxJB0>

When I provide evidence for Christian supernaturalism, I typically select the strongest examples. However, it's useful to examine more ambiguous cases. That's because Christians may experience ambiguous cases, so I think it's useful to consider how we should approach those cases. So I'm going to discuss how I personally assess an example like this. In principle, Nabeel's example raises three issues: (i) Did he really have that dream? (ii) Assuming so, did Jesus really appear to him in a dream? (iii) Assuming so, what does it mean? Let's run through these:

**1.** One question, and this is an issue concerning testimonial evidence generally, is whether a witness is *prima facie* credible. Obviously, there are lots of charlatans who profess to have supernatural encounters. And some of them make a lucrative living that way.

So one question we might ask is whether Nabeel has a pecuniary motive. There's a market for Christian bestsellers that makes sensational claims about supernatural encounters. However, in Nabeel's case, I doubt he's a conman—although we must always allow for that possibility. (I don't mean Nabeel specifically.)

**i)** For one thing, I don't find him patently phony like so many charlatans in the charismatic movement. That doesn't mean he couldn't be a charlatan. Some charlatans are better actors than others. My point, though, is that when

someone strikes me as oozing with flimflammy, I discount them in the first elimination round. The subset who survive the first elimination round might be discounted on other grounds. But it narrows the contenders.

**ii)** Someone might object that in making snap judgments about people, I might unfairly prejudge and misjudge a candidate. That's possible, but so what? I don't owe any of these people my credence. Life is short. We have to make preliminary and provisional judgments about many things. That's necessary to prioritize our time and attention.

**iii)** Over and above (i), Nabeel comes across as sincere in this vlog series because he's desperate, and desperation puts you in touch with the real person. In the course of his 20 vlogs and counting, he's spooked by the cancer. He's grasping at straws. He wears his game face, both to encourage others and encourage himself, but the anxiety comes through. That's not playacting.

**iv)** If he's a conman, he doesn't believe in miracles. He knows that a miraculous healing was never in the cards. But in that event he won't live long enough to profit from his illness. So I don't think he has an obvious motive to lie about his dream. It's a kind of paradox: a charlatan has a motive to lie, but only if it's beneficial. Yet if there's nothing to gain, then there's no incentive to lie—in which case there's no reason to suspect that he's a charlatan.

**v)** If he was concocting a story about Jesus appearing to him in a dream, I'd expect the symbolism to be less obscure. Likewise, someone concocting such a story wouldn't promptly forget most of what Jesus supposedly told him in the dream.

I'm not saying that's a knockdown argument. But it's reasonable.

**2.** Assuming the dream is real, which I grant (see above), did Jesus really appear to him in a dream? Of course, I'm in no position to have a definitive opinion on that one way or the other.

**i)** Certainly Nebeel could use the encouragement. He's at the end of his tether. So it seems like the sort of thing Jesus might do.

**ii)** There's the question of autosuggestion. Can we dream about something because we wish to dream about something? I'm not a dream psychologist, so I have no expertise on that question. At least in my own experience, I have no ability that I'm aware of to program my dreams. There are things I'd like to dream about more often, but don't. I lack control over what I dream about from one night to the next.

**iii)** I don't think the realistic appearance of Jesus in his dream is probative. Thoughtful Christians have a general idea of what a 1C Palestinian Jew would look like. So our imagination might be informed by what we know in that regard.

Also, if Jesus does appear to people in church history—in dreams and visions—I'd expect him to adapt his appearance to the time and place.

So, if we consider the dream in isolation, I have no particular opinion about whether Jesus really appeared to him. I allow for that possibility.



**iv)** However, in combination with his daughter's reaction, I think it more likely that this was a revelatory dream: a sign or omen.

**3.** That, in turn, goes to the question of what it means.

**i)** Nabeel offered his own interpretation. It might seem reasonable to suppose that a revelatory dream means whatever it means to the dreamer. After all, if it's for his own benefit, then it would seem to be tailor-made to what's significant to the dreamer. What the symbolism connotes for him.

Perhaps, though, that's too facile. After all, we have some revelatory dreams in Scripture (to Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar) that were opaque to the dreamer. They required a second party to interpret their dream.

Of course, that might be exceptional because God was making the heathen dreamer depend on the services of a Jewish oneiromantis, in order to give Jews favor with their pagan overlords. So it's hard to say.

**ii)** As is his wont, Nabeel offered a more edifying, optimistic interpretation. But that could be because he wants it to have a more edifying and optimistic significance. There's been a strain of wishful thinking throughout his vlog series. I don't say that as a personal criticism. By his own admission, he's terrified by the cancer. But desperately hoping for the best can skew the interpretation.

**iii)** A more pessimistic interpretation is that this is an omen or premonition of impending death. A harbinger that his daughter will lose her father. If so, that could be merciful in the sense that it prepares his family for the inevitable. If worst comes to worst, they will still know that God didn't

abandon them in their extremity. However mysterious his providence, God was present and active in this situation. Only time will tell which interpretation is correct.

## Perceiving God

I'm going to comment on some objections to the argument from religious experience by atheist philosopher Richard Gale. His foil is Alston's **PERCEIVING GOD**. I won't be using Alston's monograph as my own frame of reference. I'm just exploiting Gale's criticisms as a launchpad:

Necessarily, any cognitive perception is a veridical perception of an objective reality. It now will be argued that it is conceptually impossible for there to be a veridical perception of God...from which it follows by modus tollens that it is impossible that there be a cognitive religious experience. My argument for this is an analogical one that, like those for the cognitively of religious experiences, takes sense experience to be the paradigmatic member of the analogy. A veridical sense perception must have an object that is able to exist when not actually perceived and be the common object of different sense perceptions. For this to be possible, the object must be housed in a space and time that includes both the object and the perceiver. It is then shown that there is no religious experience analogue to this concept of objective existence, there being no analogous dimensions to space and time in which God, along with the perceiver, is housed and which can be invoked to make sense of God existing when not actually perceived and being the common object of different religious experiences. Because of this big disanalogy, God is categorically unsuited to serve as the object of veridical perception, whether sensory or nonsensory.

In arguing that it is impossible for there to be a veridical religious experience of an objective reality, I

am not engaging in an objectionable form of chauvinism by requiring that the sort of objective existence enjoyed by the objects of veridical sense experiences, physical objects, hold for all objective existents. I am happy to grant that there are objective realities that do not occupy space and/or time nor any analogous dimensions, such as the denizens of Plato's nonspatiotemporal heaven; and God might very well be among these objectively existent abstract entities. What is impossible is that there be any veridical *perception* of one of them, even of the intellectual sort describe by Plato in the Phaedrus, according to which we "see" them with our mind's eye... R. Gale, **ON THE NATURE AND EXISTENCE OF GOD** (Cambridge, 1996), 326-27.

i) God is essentially imperceptible. By that I mean, God exists outside space and time. In that respect, it isn't possible to perceive God in himself using the five senses. The question is whether we can perceive an effect of God. By the same token, whether we can perceive a self-representation of God. The *effect* or *representation* can occupy our visual field, or be heard, even if God in himself remains imperceptible. That isn't just *analogous* to sensory perception—that *is* sensory perception (of the divine).

Paradigm-cases include theophanies (e.g. Ezekiel 1) and God's audible voice. Let's say a theophany is an audiovisual (and perhaps tactile) representation of God. There's a genuine external stimulus which the observer perceives. It could be photographed. It's physical in the sense that lightwaves and sound waves are physical.

God doesn't have a natural voice. But God can simulate vocalization. The auditor would hear sentences, although no speaker was visible. The sound would originate outside his mind. Stimulate his eardrums.

**ii)** The divine object (e.g. source of theophanies) can exist when not actually be perceived. The effect or representation can be the common object of different sense perceptions.

**iii)** Since, however, the mode of perception needn't be sensory, but only be *analogous* to sensory perception, it needn't satisfy all the conditions of sensory perception. In that regard, take revelatory dreams. Dreams simulate physical space. Dreams simulate sensory perception.

Normally, dreams are the product of the dreamer's imagination, but in principle a dream can originate outside the dreamer's mind. Suppose telepathy exists. Suppose another agent causes someone to have a particular dream.

**iv)** We need to distinguish between perception and perceptual inferences. Suppose I'm driving toward the ocean. There comes a point when I notice that trees on the hillside are permanently bent. They face away from the coast. They grew bent due to the chronic onshore breeze. I therefore conclude that I must be approaching the ocean. This is two steps removed from the percept. I infer that an onshore breeze caused the trees to grow bent, and I infer that the ocean generated the onshore breeze. How different is that from an unmistakable answer to prayer?

Because these objects are nondimensional, they will be disanalogous to empirical particulars in several important respects. First, they will have radically different grounds of individuation. Whereas empirical

particulars are individuated by their position in nonempirical dimensions, they are not.

Another invidious consequence of their nondimensionality is that no analogous explanation can be given for how they can exist unperceived and be common objects of different perceptions to that which was previously given for empirical particulars. Whereas we could explain our failure to perceive an empirical particular, as well as our perceiving numerically one and the same empirical particular, in terms of our relationship to it in some nonempirical dimension, no such analogous explanation can be offered for our failure to perceive God and the like, or our perceiving numerically one and the same God. This means that it is impossible in principle to distinguish between, for example, mystical experiences that are numerically one and the same undifferentiated unity and the like and those that are merely qualitatively similar ones. Ibid. 341.

**i)** I don't know what he means when he says "empirical particulars are individuated by their position in nonempirical dimensions." Wouldn't physical objects be individuated in physical space?

**ii)** Consider how objects are individuated in dreams. Even though the grounds of individuation are different, the result is the same. We see distinct objects against a contrastive background when we dream. We can hear dream characters speak to us.

**iii)** We perceive God when God produces a symbolic self-representation—or an effect which we infer to signify God. We don't perceive God when he doesn't produce that emblematic external stimulus.

**iv)** In the case of revelatory dreams, we perceive God when God inspires a revelatory dream, and we don't perceive him when we have ordinary dreams. A revelatory dream needn't be a common object of perception, although God is able to inspire two or more people to have the same dream.

**v)** As to whether it's impossible in principle to distinguish between perceptions of one and the same God and merely similar impressions, which may not be numerically the same, that depends, in part, on how stringently Gale defines veridicality. It's easy to concoct Matrix-like undercutters in which no perception is veridical. Where you can never distinguish reliable perception from illusion. Presumably, Gale doesn't wish to set the bar that high.

**vi)** Perhaps the question is how do we verify that these prima facie perceptions of God are in fact about God? The answer depends on the nature of the perception. For instance, a revelatory dream might disclose verifiable information that the dream didn't initially have at his disposal. It had to come from an outside source. Same thing with an audible voice.

A theophany might utilize religious symbolism. And unless you're open to ufology, there'd be no naturalistic alternative explanation.

**vii)** Take the case of recurring dreams. These are nonempirical, yet we remember seeing that dreamscape before.

**viii)** Perhaps Gale would ask how we distinguish a theophany from a psychotic hallucination. But is that a question for the observer? If the observer is in fact psychotic, then he's in no condition to diagnose himself, no

matter how good the criteria. And that's true for mental illness in general. It's not confined to visions. Crazy people can't test their perception of reality since their distorted perceptions would extend to the test. If that's grounds of skepticism, then skepticism infects perception in general. So that objection either proves too much or too little.

**ix)** I'm not suggesting these paradigm-examples (theophany, audible voice, revelatory dream) are ways in which people typically perceive or experience God. I simply use them to establish a principle.



## Dreams of Jesus

I'd like to comment on this post by atheist philosophy prof. Eric Sotnak:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularoutpost/2016/10/18/dream-a-little-dream-of-me/>

To put this in context, Sotnak mentions this claim:

Leventhal, professor of church missions and ministries and director of the graduate school of ministry program at Southern Evangelical Seminary, told those gathered at SES' 23rd annual National Conference on Christian apologetics in Charlotte, North Carolina, on Friday that Jesus even appeared to people during the Holocaust. As an example, Leventhal shared the testimony of a Jewish man named Joseph who during the Holocaust was forced to work in a Nazi labor camp.

Joseph had sworn vengeance against his Lutheran neighbors who refused to help him and his family. "He made a vow, a vow of only one thing: He would never stop hating his so-called Christian neighbors. He would always hate their Christian God; their Jesus would be his enemy as long as he lived," said Leventhal.

"His hatred for Christians and their Jesus grew with each passing day until one dark evening in his bunk, a night that would change Joseph's life forever, Jesus appeared to Joseph."

Quoting from Joseph's testimony, Leventhal recounted that on that night: "Jesus appeared to me. In the darkness of my hatred for Christians and their Jesus, Jesus appeared to me. I recognized Him in a split

second, I knew who He was and His first words to me were 'Joseph, I love you. I died for you. You will survive.'"

<http://www.christianpost.com/news/jesus-still-appears-to-people-in-dreams-even-god-haters-christian-apologist-says-170855/>

That's Sotnak's immediate frame of reference. Now for Sotnak's comments.

His claim isn't that people have dreams in which Jesus figures as part of the dream, but rather that Jesus, himself, appears in the dream. I suspect that Leventhal does not think that every dream involving Jesus counts as an appearance of him, though...Leventhal claims that there have been cases where people have converted to Christianity as a result of dreaming of Jesus. This may be true (though one story he tells of such a conversion has the ring of legend, I think), but it is not clear why Leventhal thinks these are cases of genuine appearance.

Speaking for myself, I find the testimony credible. But I have a different plausibility structure than an atheist like Sotnak. He doesn't bother to explain why he thinks that story has a legendary ring. The Holocaust is a central research interest of Leventhal's, so it's reasonable to think he relies on good sources. Admittedly, it would be helpful to know the source of this particular anecdote. Perhaps he cited his source at the apologetics conference, referenced in the article.

There is also something very strange about the whole idea of someone appearing in a dream. The whole notion treats dreams as having a real space within which actual existing things and people come and go.

I have no idea why Sotnak conceptualizes the relationship in those terms. Here's a different model: the character in the dream isn't Jesus directly; rather, the character represents or simulates Jesus. If Jesus wishes to communicate with someone in a dream, he produces a character who represents him.

To take a comparison, when I see someone on TV, is that a real person? Strictly speaking, the electronic image isn't a real person. Rather, the image represents or simulates a real person. As a philosophy prof., Sotnak ought to be able to come up with models like that.

There is also the question of how I would know that the person appearing was, in fact, Jesus. It won't do to say, "well, it obviously was Jesus – after all, it looked like him."

That's a very good question. It's a question that charismatic Christians need to ponder, since many of them lack critical discernment.

**i)** One possible explanation is subliminal telepathic communication. If Jesus is who he says he is, surely he has the ability to plant in the dreamer's subconscious the idea that this is Jesus.

**ii)** Or in some cases a dream might be veridical because it contains information that the dreamer didn't know, which he can corroborate after he awakens.

**iii)** However, it also depends on the purpose of the dream. Suppose the value of the dream isn't evidentiary. Rather, suppose the dream functions as a stimulus to prompt someone who's indifferent or antipathetic to Christianity to seriously consider it for the first time, and to do so in a receptive frame of mind. Suppose the dreamer undergoes Christian conversion as a result of that process. His warrant for Christian faith isn't the dream itself, but the whole process that precipitating incident set in motion. In that case, it isn't necessary to verify that Jesus appeared to the dreamer.

**iv)** There's also the question about why someone would dream about Jesus in the first place. How often does Sotnak dream about Jesus? If that happens out of the blue, with no preparation, then that may require a special explanation. To take Leventhal's example, why would a Jew in a Nazi concentration camp, who hates Christians, have a dream like that?

Am I to think that Jesus didn't appear to me as he likely would have looked in life, but rather as he is depicted in popular iconography (with strongly Caucasian features – perhaps with blue eyes?)

**i)** To begin with, Sotnak seems to be pretty ignorant regarding artistic representations of Jesus. Sure, you have Aryan depictions. However, the Jesus in El Greco paintings is not a blue-eyed Jesus. Rather, he's a Spanish Jesus. Does the Jesus in Byzantine icons have blue eyes? What about Italian Renaissance paintings of Jesus? Unsurprisingly, they look...Italian! The iconography of Jesus varies from country to country. Artistic depictions of Jesus often take on the ethnic features of the country in question. Doesn't Sotnak know that? If not, shouldn't he bother to inform himself? For instance:

<https://churchpop.com/2016/02/02/japanese-christian-art/>

<https://churchpop.com/2015/07/02/jesus-black-man-depictions/>

<https://churchpop.com/2015/06/15/if-jesus-had-been-korean-20-rare-paintings-of-the-life-of-christ/>

**ii)** More to the point, what would be the point of Jesus appearing to someone in a dream if he was unrecognizable to the dreamer? If Jesus *does* appear to people in dreams and visions, we'd expect him to do so in culturally identifiable forms. Sotnak's disdain for Christianity blinds him from considering the implications of the claim on its own terms. Sure, he doesn't believe that Jesus really appears to anyone, but considered as a hypothetical proposition, if Jesus *were* to appear to someone, it would be counterproductive to look like he did in the 1C—in the event that would be unrecognizable to the dreamer. A philosophy prof. should be able to consider the internal logic of the position, even if he rejects the position.

Then there is the question of why, if someone wanted to communicate with me, they would choose to attempt doing so in a dream, especially if we have reason to think they could do so in other, much less ambiguous ways. It is too easy to chalk a dream up to imagination.

It's odd that a philosophy prof. is unable to consider obvious counterexamples. For instance, if a culture puts great stock

in oneiromancy, it might make sense of Jesus to exploit that entrée. If dreams are significant to some people, God might use that medium.

By analogy, if I were to find a note taped to my door that read: "You shall carve exactly six pumpkins this Halloween. Sincerely, Jesus" I would surmise that it had been written by a prankster.

But the problem with that analogy is that a prankster doesn't have access to our minds. That's quite different from the ability to insert yourself into somebody's dream.

# Bell, book, & candle

## I. Introduction

In this post I'll be discussing the relationship between the paranormal and the occult. Whether these are two different things, one and the same thing, or overlapping domains, is one of the issues I'll address.

This topic is of interest to Christians on several potential grounds:

1. Evaluating paranormal claims raise much the same issues as evaluating miraculous claims.
2. Unbelievers often claim that the Bible is incredible because it describes a world which is a world apart from the world we actually experience. But if paranormal phenomena happen, then the world of the Bible is not fundamentally different from the world we experience today. Of course, at that point the unbeliever might shift grounds. He might accept the paranormal, but try to explain it on secular grounds—then do the same with Scripture.

However, that still advances the argument. Instead of debating whether these events ever happen, we're now debating the proper interpretation of the event.

3. Science and medicine are wonderful disciplines. But they have their limitations. For example, some medical conditions may have a spiritual or occultic source of origin. As such, they need a different remedy.
4. There's an extensive literature on psi. Writers range from charlatans to philosophers and scholars. In addition, every ideological viewpoint is represented—orthodoxy, heterodoxy, secularism, occultism, &c. It's useful to begin sifting through

this vast array of material and set down some basic guidelines.

## **II. Terminology**

1. *Psi*. For the time being I'll use "psi" or "paranormal" as a neutral term to avoid prejudging its origin.
2. *Exorcist*. This designation is associated with people who claim to cast out demons. I'll use it a bit more broadly for people who confront general occultic/paranormal phenomena, viz. possession, black magic, hauntings, &c.
3. *Energumen*. I use this term to denote someone who exhibits paranormal powers.
4. *Paranormal*. By this term I'm referring to things like telepathy, telekinesis, precognition, retrocognition, NDEs, OBEs, materialization, apports, &c.
5. *Occult*. By this term I'm referring to things like possession, black magic, astrology, necromancy, divination, infestation, &c.
6. *Possession*. In principle, spirit-possession can take three different forms:

**i)** Possession by the Holy Spirit

**ii)** Possession by evil spirits (i.e. demons)

**iii)** Possession by departed spirits (i.e. the damned)

(i) & (ii) are clearly attested in Scripture. Putatively speaking, necromancy is a paradigm-case of (iii), which is also attested in Scripture.

However, we have no direct access to the dead, so it's ambiguous what, exactly, the medium is contacting. It could be either (ii) or (iii).



iv) According to another theory of mediumship, the medium is contacting the living rather than the dead. Specially, reading the mind of the sitter.

Whether or not (iv) is correct would depend, in part, on whether the medium knows something the sitter does not.

Also, to judge by the anecdotal literature, possession comes in degrees. It's not all of the Linda Blair variety.

7. *Sitter*. Anyone other than the medium, taking part in a séance.
8. *Communicator*. The (alleged) entity whom the medium is channeling.

### **III. General Criteria**

1. It's important to distinguish between the evidence for psi, and the interpretation of psi. For example, a writer may be a reliable source of information on case studies. He is accurately reporting the experimental or anecdotal evidence. The same writer may be unreliable when he attempts to interpret the case studies. His worldview will affect his interpretation of the data. It will promote one approach while demoting another.

A writer might be a Christian, secularist, heretic, or occultist. His worldview will favor or allow certain interpretations while disallowing other interpretations.

There are various, competing theories to account for psi. They posit different "mechanisms." But whether an event is well-attested is independent of the way we explain that event.

A witness might be a reliable reporter, even if his interpretation is unreliable. These are distinct issues.

2. In evaluating a paranormal report, we should draw a rough distinction between public, observable events, and subjective impressions. This, in turn, correlates with the potential distinction between deception and self-deception. Where subjective impressions are concerned, it's possible for a witness to be honest, but self-deluded. He may sincerely believe what he says.

But in the case of public events, there's less room for the witness to be sincerely mistaken. That doesn't mean what he says is true. Rather, if it's false, the falsehood is more likely to be intentional.

This distinction is useful when we evaluate a witness. Which is more likely—that he is a liar, or the event really happened?

3. It's customary for unbelievers to dismiss Biblical accounts of possession as "prescientific." We are told, for instance, that the demoniac in [Mk 9:14-29](#) was clearly an epileptic. But aside from the question of whether possession can present standard clinical symptoms, there's a simple way of determining whether a malady like that is demonic or "natural": if conventional therapy is ineffective while exorcism is effective, then it's demonic; if exorcism is ineffective while conventional therapy is effective, then it's "natural." There's no need to speculate on the correct diagnosis. The treatment will select for the correct diagnosis.

#### **IV. Theological Criteria**

Is it appropriate to use theological criteria to rule out certain interpretations, or is that an exercise in special pleading?

1. If the Bible is true, then there's no reason we shouldn't use the Bible as a criterion to exclude certain interpretations.
2. Exorcism itself operates with a theological viewpoint. As such, it's not special pleading to evaluate a value-laden activity by its own value-system.
3. To judge by the anecdotal literature, a successful exorcism can be performed by a Catholic (Amorth), Lutheran (Koch), Anglican (Richards), Congregationalist (McCall), nondenominational believer (Peck), &c. As such, a successful exorcism doesn't validate any particular Christian tradition. That being the case, it's not as if the raw evidence singles out a sectarian interpretation of the event. The evidence is not that specific. So it's not as if we disregard the evidence by an ac hoc appeal to Scripture.
4. This raises the question of how different rites and ceremonies, representing somewhat differing theological presuppositions, can yield the same effect. Probably because the efficacy of the performance doesn't lie in the precise words which an exorcist uses, or the precise beliefs which the exorcist brings to the situation, but in the general faith of the exorcist and the indulgent grace of God.

God blesses imperfect prayers. He improves on our defective methods. The success or failure of an exorcism depends, not on the magical efficacy of the formula, but on the sovereign disposition of God, who honors or dishonors the exercise according to the spirit in which it was offered (cf. [Lk 9:49-50](#); [Acts 19:13-20](#); Aune 2006:407-11; Twelftree 1993: 40-43; 2007:148-53).

As one writer puts it:

"One must remember that it is not the superior magic of the exorcist but the power of Christ that overcomes the spirit. Ministers have told me of how God has used them in exorcism without any special gifts; they have simply acted according to Scripture" (Wright 1972:153).

"Some exorcists use adaptations of traditional Roman Catholic methods, including the sprinkling of holy water and salt that has been blessed; and some even use old Latin prayers, though one cannot see why a spirit should know Latin rather than English if it has chosen to manifest itself in England. I personally am not convinced that these things are the effective agents, and certainly they could not be a substitute for the name of Jesus Christ, which of course these exorcists use" (Wright 1972:153-154).

## **V. Biblical Data**

What does Scripture have to say about psi?

1. At a general level, Scripture ascribes to apostles and prophets of God the ability to perform miracles and predict the future. This is analogous to telekinesis and precognition.
2. Visionary revelation is often analogous to an OBE. Ezekiel gives a number of examples.
3. Xenoglossy occurs at Pentecost.
4. Elisha apparently had the gift of clairaudience (2 Kg 6:12).
5. [Acts 8:39](#) seems to be a case of teleportation.
6. The Ascension is, in part, a case of levitation. (However, Jesus didn't literally "ascend" to heaven.)

The "cloud" which receives him is probably the Shekinah.)

7. Samson exhibits superhuman strength.
8. The Third Commandment ([Exod 20:7](#)). In popular piety, this is treated as a prohibition against profanity, but in the original context, it probably had reference to things like perjury—as well as hexes (cf. [Ezk 13:17-23](#)).

On another front:

1. The Egyptian magicians exhibit metamorphic powers (Exod 7-8), which is analogous to telekinesis and materialization. For some reason, a number of conservative scholars, who ordinarily go out of their way to defend the supernatural character of the events in Exodus, balk at attributing magic to the Egyptian sorcerers. But while these naturalistic explanations (e.g. catalepsy) may be possible or plausible considered in isolation, this is at odds with the narrative framework. The ability to Moses and Aaron to outwit the legerdemain of some Egyptian charlatans wouldn't prove very much. It seems to me the point of this encounter is to demonstrate the superior power of God by defeating a genuine opponent on his own turf.

(Incidentally, cobras eat other snakes, including other cobras, so that's a realistic detail.)

2. A demoniac exhibits superhuman strength ([Mk 5:3-4](#)).
3. Another demoniac exhibits ESP ([Acts 16:16](#)).
4. It's possible for a false prophet to accurately predict the future ([Deut 13:1-3](#); [Acts 16:16-18](#)). Deuteronomy doesn't explain how this is possible,

but Acts attributes this type of prognostication to demonic possession.

5. A medium can summon the dead (1 Sam 28). Commentators frequently puzzle over this passage because they don't understand how the witch can see the shade of Samuel, but Saul cannot.

But that's pretty standard in the anecdotal literature, where the sitter is dependent on the medium for his information. The point of being a medium is to mediate this contact. In contrast to the sitter, the medium has access to a normally invisible realm (e.g. a psychic projection by the dead). So this is quite realistic.

6. The malefice of Black magic was a fixture of the ANE. Does the Bible endorse that?

**i)** The most celebrated case is the example of Balaam. Since, however, he is unsuccessful in cursing Israel, the narrative doesn't say for sure if he had that power.

There may be a suggestion in [Num 23:23](#) that black magic was a potent force, but ineffective against Israel because Israel enjoyed a special immunity.

**ii)** By contrast, [Ezk 13:17-23](#) presents a fairly unambiguous case:

"They performed magical spells as a means of prognostication. Ezekiel is directed to engage in a symbolic gesture, as in 6:2. Here it announces a virtual counterspell that puts the evil eye on these sorcerers...This inauspicious introduction allows a further characterization of the female prophets, with respect to their magical devices that evidently accompanied the spells...The prevalence of magical practices in Mesopotamia doubtless encouraged their use among the exiles, although such a tradition was also known in their homeland (cf. [Exod](#)

[22:18](#)[17]; [Deut 18:10](#)). The female sorcerers' magical powers were evidently widely credited among the exiles. The accusation itself has no doubt about their effectiveness. These women evidently operated under the umbrella of Yahwism and doubtless incorporated his name into their spells, like later Jewish magicians" (Allen 1994:204).

"Whatever the nature of the kesatot and the mispahot, they appear to have been instruments of black magic, and their wielders may justifiably be designed sorceresses, evil magicians, witches. Where they learned the tricks of their trade we may only speculate, but given the prevalence of magic in ancient Babylonian and the presence of technical expressions borrowed from Akkadian in this text, some Mesopotamian influence appears likely...With their sorcerous invocation of the divine name, the women have degraded Yahweh in the public's eyes to the level of Babylonian deities and demons, who let themselves be manipulated by divination and witchcraft...By means of incantations, curses, spells, and mutilation of the images of their victims and alliances with evil spirits, they stalk the exilic community for prey and coerce the gods into serving their agenda. These are not prophets as Ezekiel understand the office; they are witches, black magicians, charlatans" (Block 1997:414,416-17).

#### 7. Divine healing ([Jas 5:14-15](#))

"Given the overall teaching of the NT, in which healing is not consistently paired with anointing, we should not take this one verse [[Jas 5:14](#)] as mandating that oil must accompany all prayers for the sick. At the same time, there is no reason not to implement a practice like this one for some of the most chronic or life-threatening illnesses that church members face.

Neither does this verse refer to a specific 'gift' of healing, but rather assigns the task of anointing the sick to the elders, the duly commissioned church leaders responsible for the leadership and nurture of the body as a whole. The descriptive phrase 'in the name of the Lord' reminds us that the healings done solely by the will and power of God. Given the use of the formula 'in the name of Jesus' throughout the early church, especially in Acts, the Lord here may specifically be Christ (Blomberg & Kamell 2008:243).

"This verse [5:15] makes the bold claim that if we pray in faith, God will heal the person for whom we pray...The promise of healing for the sick offers a much needed corrective for those of us who have trouble praying boldly, for we fear or even assume that God will not do what we ask of him. Instead, we ought to pray boldly, believing that he is a God of power and love and that he listens to the prayers of his people. A necessary caveat, however, requires us to remember that he choose how and when he heals, as Paul lays out clearly in [2 Cor 12:8-10](#), and that complete healing never occurs in this life" (Blomberg & Kamell 2008:244).

"Trying to identify an exact definition of the 'prayer of faith' is perplexing, but perhaps the best explanation appears already in 1:5-8, where we are instructed to pray 'with the confident expectation that God will hear and answer the prayer.' Still, these commands also assume the proviso of 4:15 in which everything for which we hope remains contingent on God's will" (Blomberg & Kamell 2008:244).

"The second half of the sentence forms a third-class condition, which counters the assumption that there must be some sin, or lack of faith, that needs God's



forgiveness (recall the recurring, errant counsel of Job's friends). James does not, however, exclude the option that past sins may well have caused current illness" (Blomberg & Kamell 2008:244).

"I remember a Non-conformist minister giving me a lift, and my noticing inside the car a small phial of oil. Although I thought I knew the answer, I nevertheless asked him what it was. 'For anointing people,' he said. 'I didn't think your Church did that,' I said, to which he replied 'No, I don't think they do, but they did New Testament times, and I can't wait for my church to catch up!'" (Richards 1974:17).

8. These examples have certain things in common:

**i)** The source of psi is either explicitly or implicitly supernatural.

**ii)** In most-all of the examples, the source of psi is or could be spirit-possession.

The distinguishing feature is the identity of the spiritual agent that empowers the subject.

In the case of God's servants, it's the Spirit of God. In the case of God's enemies, it's demonic.

So the Biblical evidence favors a supernatural explanation for psi. That doesn't necessarily preclude the possibility that some types of psi might be natural abilities.

While certain forms of psi might be distinctively supernatural, other forms might be supernaturally enhanced. But it's clear that the supernatural factor is present in at least some cases of psi. And in some cases, dabbling in the occult is clearly a factor.

## **VI. Theories**

Apropos (V), there are different theories of the paranormal. Such theories can be local or global, naturalistic or supernaturalistic.

1. *Local*. Local theories try to explain a particular type of paranormal phenomena.

Let's take the example of the shlemazel. This refers to someone who is accident-prone. It goes beyond the fact that some folks are clumsy or oblivious to danger. Rather, the shlemazel suffers from a chronic run of "bad luck." Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong.

Although this is the stuff of comedy, it's a genuine phenomenon. And it's no fun for the shlemazel.

Here are two different theories to account for the shlemazel:

**i)** Braude (Braude 2007:148-149) offers a naturalistic explanation. He thinks the shlemazel is an emotional disturbed individual with telekinetic powers. He is subconsciously projecting his frustrations onto his environment.

Of course, this is also a paranormal explanation. I call it "naturalistic" because Braude doesn't attribute to schlemazel's telekinetic ability to an occultic source of origin.

**ii)** By contrast, Amorth (Amorth 1999:130-31; cf. McCall 1994:77-78; 1996:144-46) regards the shlemazel as a victim of black magic. He is under a curse.

At the same time, Braude (149-150) allows for the same possibility. On the other hand, he doesn't frame this in theological terms (pace Amorth).

**iii)** For his part, McCall (McCall 1996:124-26) regards the shlemazel as the victim of a family curse. He is living under the pall of departed ancestors who died in tragic circumstances. These restless spirits are reaching out from the grave. The dead take possession of a living descendent.

**iv)** Not only do these theories differ in principle, but they also differ in practice. If Braude is correct, then I suppose the only solution, if there is a solution, is for the shlemazel is to undergo counseling in hopes of resolving his self-destructive anger.

But Amorth is correct, then the only solution, if there is a solution, is to break the spell—through the appropriate ceremony.

And if McCall is correct, then the only solution, if there is a solution, is to truly put these restless spirits to rest—through the appropriate ceremony.

2. *Global*. A local theory may presuppose a global theory, or it may be neutral on a global theory. A global theory tries to present a unified explanation. A mechanism that underlies these events. What are some global theories of the paranormal?

**i)** Radin (Radin 2006) offers a naturalistic explanation, based on quantum mechanics.

**ii)** As we've seen, McCall (McCall 1994:5-21; cf. Amorth 2002:133) offers a supernaturalistic explanation based on the malefic influence of wandering spirits. This is tied to an elaborate theory of racial memory, fetal memory, hypnagogic contact, proxy confession, and postmortem conversion (McCall 1996:149-52; 166-71; 195-210).

According to him, this works both ways. The dead can affect the living while the living can affect the dead. The living can prevent their departed loved ones from "progressing" by refusing to let them go (McCall 1996:195,205). Conversely, the dead can take subliminal possession of the living (McCall 1996:206-208).

In McCall's opinion, this isn't limited to extraordinary events. He applies it to many apparently ordinary medical or psychiatric conditions. The symptoms seem normal enough. But they resist conventional therapy. Although the outward effect is apparently natural, the source of original is supernatural.

**iii)** For his part, Koch (Koch 1973:53-74) generally classifies psi as form of mediumistic magic. And he also regards mediumistic magic as hereditary (Koch 1972: 186-187; 1973:61-62; cf. Amorth 1999:162; McCall 1994:75-77). The ergumen may not be personally guilty of dabbling in the occult. This is something he inherited from a relative or close ancestor.

Of course, he also thinks you can acquire paranormal powers through direct occultic practice, as well as transference—which, according to him, is weaker than heredity.

At one point he does allow for "traces of natural telepathy" as well as a "natural form" of astral travel (Koch 1973:58).

There is some overlap between McCall's theory and Koch's theory. Both attribute psi to the effect of the dead on the living. But they have a different narrative to account for that effect.

For McCall, the influence of the dead is more direct—a form of possession. McCall also believes in postmortem salvation. By contrast, I'm sure Koch thought our fate was sealed at death. For him, the influence is more intermediate—the way a sorcerer transfers his Shakti to his apprentice, who transfers it to his apprentice, and so on, down the line.

**iv)** Amorth (Amorth 1999: 157-58; 2002:160-61; cf. Wright 1972) draws a distinction between people with natural psychic abilities ("seers," "sensitives") and people with supernatural psychic abilities ("charismatics").

According to him, sensitives have a paranormal ability to perceive natural things (like disease), but charismatics have a paranormal ability to perceive supernatural things (like possession).

He also refers to healers and prana-therapists who possess a paranormal ability of "natural origin" (Amorth 2002:135).

On the other hand, he issues a warning about "voices" and "visions" (Amorth 2002:112-13). So even though he seems to classify this as a natural paranormal ability, he thinks it's spiritually treacherous.

On the face of it, his position appears to be a bit inconsistent. If it's a natural ability, you'd expect it to be innocuous or innocent. How do we account for this apparent inconsistency:

- a) Perhaps the translation is ambiguous or misleading.
- b) Perhaps the evidence is ambiguous.
- c) Perhaps he means that a natural, albeit paranormal ability, while innocent in itself, can be a channel for evil

forces.

d) Perhaps he is genuinely inconsistent.

**v)** Rahner (Rahner 1963) uses the term "parapsychological" for individuals with natural psychic ability (e.g. clairvoyance, prophetic dreams, premonitions of death), but he says, in the same connection, that "they seem often to be hereditary and endemic, associated with a particular region" (Rahner 1963:93).

**vi)** We may have competing theories because each theory is underdetermined by the available evidence. Different causes could produce the same effect. So it's hard to infer the cause from the effect.

What should we do in practice? Writers like Amorth think that some paranormal abilities are natural abilities. But Koch usually regards a paranormal ability as having an occultic origin. It comes at a terrible cost. As such, the energumen needs to renounce this ability for the sake of his own wellbeing and the wellbeing of those around him.

I think Stafford Wright (Wright 1972) strikes a reasonable balance: "Obviously the proper thing is to pray that, if the 'gift' is not according to the will of God, He will take it away. If then it persists, we take it that He will use it if it is put into His hands" (Wright 1972:149).

**vii)** In this connection, we should keep in mind that the disjunction between nature and supernature is an essentially secular disjunction. The unbeliever draws this line to demarcate the possible (natural) from the impossible (supernatural), and, hence, the credible from the incredible—to his own way of thinking.

But from a Christian standpoint, there's no a priori reason why certain paranormal powers couldn't be God-given abilities. God endows certain individuals with these abilities to further his purposes. For example, I don't see any antecedent reason why God couldn't endow some Christian with the faculty of second sight.

I'm not stating this for a fact. If a paranormal power is traceable to a relative who was trafficking with the dark side, or if a paranormal power seems to be a magnet for "bad luck" or mental illness, then the energumen should clearly renounce this faculty.

## VII. Evaluation

How do these theories stack up?

1. *Amorth*. The malefice is clearly attested in Scripture ([Ezk 13:17-23](#)). That, of course, doesn't mean that every shlemazel is necessarily the victim of a curse. But that's a live option.
2. *Koch*. Does Scripture support the view that psi is hereditary? I don't see any specific teaching to that effect. However, it's possible that this dovetails with some other biblical teachings:

**i)** Scripture prohibits necromancy, which is a paradigmatic form of mediumship.

**ii)** Scripture also teaches that various sins like idolatry can defile the land (e.g. [Jer 3:2,9](#)). That indicates that one's ancestor's can do something which has a lasting, spiritual effect on the environment.

If it can have that effect on the land, which is inanimate, then something comparable, or worse, might well be possible in the case of people.

**iii)** There is also some suggestion in Scripture that demonic influence is more concentrated in some areas than others (Poythress 1995). In a sense, that's about space rather than time, but the two are related. People often reside in the same place from one generation to the next.

**iv)** On a (possibly) related note, we have the converts who burned their magic books in [Acts 19:19](#). Did they do this because they thought the books were "infested"?

### 3. McCall.

**i)** It's possible that the theory of racial memory has some basis in fact. However, Jung was hardly a reliable source of information. He himself was an occultist, with a number of relatives who were enmeshed in the occult. To some extent the same is true of William James.

**ii)** We can discount the heretical elements of McCall's eschatology on Scriptural grounds.

**iii)** Perhaps possible that the deceased can sometimes possess the living. We can treat that as a working hypothesis.

**iv)** A basic problem with McCall's methodology is that he operates with a pragmatic, outcome-based epistemology. And the problem with that methodology is that different techniques, representing different theories, can be equally "successful." Therefore, the cause is underdetermined by the effect. If more than one thing works, you can't infer a singular explanation.

v) McCall is terribly naïve about the dark side. He's so credulous and unsuspecting.



4. *Braude*. His theory could be correct up to a point. But it doesn't run deep enough. It fails to furnish an ultimate explanation. What's the source of telekinesis? Black magic also involves telekinesis. But it has more explanatory power.

5. *Radin*. Since there's no unanimity on the proper interpretation of quantum mechanics, it lacks the explanatory power to explain anything else. Like using one enigma to explain another. His explanation also suffers from a secular bias.

6. *Natural or Supernatural?*

i) I don't know that we need to distinguish them. In principle, all paranormal abilities might have a supernatural source, whether divine or demonic (as the case may be). In Christian metaphysics, the fundamental distinction is not between nature and supernature, but between the creature and the Creator.

ii) In addition, nature is not reducible to a machine. It is ultimately directed by divine intelligence. God could have good reason for giving some people some abilities some of the time without giving everyone the same abilities all of the time. Endowing some human beings with paranormal abilities might further his plan, whereas endowing every human being with such abilities might hinder his plan—as they would work at cross-purposes.

### **VIII. Necromancy**

How are we to evaluate descriptions of the afterlife furnished by mediums? According to Meynell, after summarizing the studies of Robert Crookall:

"Another point to be made in favor of Crookall's conclusions is that they do not fit very neatly with any conventional religious view. The popular Christian

notion that we are to expect to see Jesus immediately after we die, and the common Protestant view that we are bound directly either for an eternal heaven or an eternal hell, find no support in Crookall's data...Catholics may perhaps take some comfort from the apparent corroboration of their doctrine of purgatory—which is to the effect that most people at least, even if they are ultimately bound for the vision of God in heaven, have to go through a great many trials after death before they attain it; and from the strong vindication of the practice of prayer for the dead" (Stoeber & Meynell 1966:37).

There are several problems with this conclusion:

1. In a séance, you lack direct access to the dead. The medium is the conduit. Where is the medium getting her information? There are different possibilities:

**i)** She could be channeling the damned.

**ii)** She could be channeling a demon.

**iii)** She could be reading the mind of the sitter. Then telling him what he wants to hear.

These are not reliable sources of information. Indeed, we would expect all three to be deceptive.

2. The composite picture of the afterlife assembled by another writer, drawing on the same sources (necromancy), doesn't bear any real resemblance to the Catholic dogma of Purgatory (cf. Fontana 2007:443-67). If, therefore, the necromantic data is thought to undermine the Protestant doctrine of the afterlife, it equally undermines the Catholic doctrine of the afterlife.

3. Meynell is conflating popular conceptions with Protestant doctrine. But the Protestant doctrine of the afterlife posits a distinction between the intermediate state and the final state. The damned don't go straight to hell when they die. While they are hellbound, and their infernal fate is irreversible, hell represents the final state of the damned, not the intermediate state of the damned. So Protestant eschatology doesn't preclude the existence of wandering spirits.
4. In addition to the necromantic data, we also have more recent data furnished by NDEs. In contrast to the necromantic data, at least some NDEs corroborate the Protestant doctrine of the afterlife (cf. Sabom 1998). Moreover, there are plausible explanations for apparent cases to the contrary (cf. Habermas & Moreland 1998:178-83; Braude 2002:113).
5. To an outsider, the claim that necromantic data has a demonic origin may seem like special pleading: an attempt to save face by imposing a Christian interpretation onto the data. However, that this is not a reinterpretation of the evidence is borne out by a striking correlation between traditional shamanism and modern necromancy. As one scholar explains:

"There are very few studies from an anthropological perspective of spirit mediumship in Western society. This might seem surprising, since the phenomenon is relatively common. Most accounts of mediumship come either from dedicated believers, or else from parapsychologists chiefly interested in assessing the ostensible evidence for ESP. It may be that anthropologists are afraid of being tarred with

these brushes. I think, however, that most people who have any substantial acquaintance with Western Spiritualism will recognize that many of the above observations about shamans and shamanism apply equally to Spiritualist mediums in our own society. It is true, of course, that the discarnate entities which are alleged to 'possess' or otherwise communicate through Spiritualist mediums usually (though not always) claim to be just the spirits of deceased humans rather than of gods, demons, animal spirits and other beings which additionally manifest to shamans. But the outward forms of this phenomena present many analogies which it would be superfluous to pursue in detail. In fact there are few mediumistic phenomena for which the literature on shamanism cannot provide parallels, and few shamanistic performances to which Spiritualism provides no counterpart" (Gauld 1983:20).

In other words, the "communicator" adapts itself to the audience. For a modern séance, it impersonates a lost loved one, but for pagan culture, it impersonates a mythological god or demon or animal spirit, &c. To take a specific example:

"A choirboy once contacted his departed grandmother in this way. When the boy related the incident to his Vicar, the Vicar said, 'I remember your grandmother as a very devout Christian—ask her what she thinks of Jesus Christ.' When, after the next session, the Vicar asked the lad what had happened, the astonished boy said 'She swore!' 'Do you think it was grandma?' the Vicar asked. 'No I don't' said the choirboy.'

'Neither do I,' replied the Vicar, 'and I suggest you leave it alone'" (Richards 1974:63-63).

6. In addition, necromancy is generally a two-stage process. The medium must contact a "control" who, in turn, facilitates communication with the dead (cf. Gauld 1983:30; Yap 1960:15). So even if we accept the necromantic literature at face value, there's no direct contact with the dead. Hence, no presumption that you are in actual contact with the dead—rather than a demonic entity.
7. But let's assume it is possible to contact the dead. If the only departed spirits you can reach turn out to be damned spirits, then they will not be reliable guides to the true nature of the afterlife. Rather, they will be more like vampires, who try to "turn you" to the dark side.
8. We should also note the fundamental asymmetry between Christian explanations and occultic explanations, for the occult is parasitic on the Christian worldview. For example:

"The exorcism practiced by British and European witches is more often directed against spells and curses which they believe have been uttered against them by other magic groups...Crosses are made with chalk on the doors...Sometimes holy water is sprinkled in each room—it having been stolen from a church—and white magicians say, 'I exorcise thee, O unclean spirit, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost,' and in extreme cases it has been known for them to ask a clergyman not a member of the group, to perform the exorcism for them. Naturally he will not have been told of the curse which is to be lifted. He will have been informed that the house

is haunted, or that a poltergeist is troubling the occupants...Where magic groups conduct their rituals by stealth in churches at night, it is not uncommon for the clergymen to have the church reconsecrated before holding another service there" (Johns 1971:101).

## **IX. "The Psychic Christ"?**

Maurice Elliott once wrote a book entitled *The Psychic Life of Christ*, in which he tried to reinterpret the person and work of Christ as a great psychic.

If we credit the reality of psi, is that a legitimate interpretation? No.

1. If, as I've argued, psi has an ultimately supernatural source of origin, whether divine or demonic, then offering a "psychic" interpretation doesn't furnish a genuine alternative, for we can already integrate psi into a Biblical worldview.
2. Even if, considered in isolation, one could try to explain the miracles of Christ in terms of psi, that artificially compartmentalizes his miracles from his teaching as well as his redemptive mission. His miracles are not freestanding phenomena. They are thoroughly integrated into a purposeful and meaningful, religious outlook.
3. Likewise, the "psychic" interpretation also isolates his miracles from Messianic prophecy.
4. There's no historical record of a virgin-born psychic who returned bodily from the dead.

## **X. Annotated Bibliography**

Ahmed, R. *The Black Art* (Senate 1994). A standard monograph on witchcraft.

Allen, L. *Ezekiel 1–19* (Word 1994). A standard commentary on Ezekiel. To the left of Block.

Amorth, G. *An Exorcist Tells His Story* (Ignatius 1999). A Catholic exorcist. In general, I find Amorth credible. Despite the rather sensational nature of his work, he writes in a business-like style. Just another day at the office. Pragmatic, practical, and down-to-earth.

\_\_\_\_\_. *An Exorcist: More Stories* (Ignatius 2002).

Arnold, C. *3 Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare* (Baker, 1997).

\_\_\_\_\_. *Powers of Darkness: Principalities and Powers in Paul's Letters* (IVP, 1992). By an evangelical NT scholar.

Aune, D. *Apocalypticism, Prophecy, and Magic in Early Christianity* (Baker 2006). By a classicist and NT scholar. Learned, but liberal.

Ayer, A. J. "[What I saw when I was dead](#)".

Baring-Gould, S. *The Book of Werewolves* (2002 Blackmask Online).

Barker, M. G. "[Possession and the Occult - a psychiatrist's view](#)". *The Churchman*.

Bauckham, R. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (2nd ed.) (Eerdmans, 2017). Excellent discussion of criteria for sifting testimonial evidence.

Baxter, R. *The Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits* (1691). Classic collection of reported cases of witchcraft, ghosts, &c. by Puritan Divine. Some examples more credible than others.

Beauregard, M. *Brain Wars* (HarperOne 2012). A noted neuroscientist documents the paranormal. Better for case

studies than interpretation.

Beekman, S. *Enticed by the Light: The Terrifying Story of One Woman's Encounter with the New Age* (Zondervan, 1997). Excellent source for case studies on psi, NDEs, and OBEs. However, his panpsychic theory isn't even consistent with the evidence he cites, where the subject retains personal identity/first-person viewpoint.

Bennett, R. *Afraid: Demon Possession and Spiritual Warfare in America* (Concordia 2016).

\_\_\_\_\_. *I Am Not Afraid* (Concordia 2013). By a Lutheran exorcist.

Berlinski, D. *The Secrets of the Vaulted Sky* (Harcourt Books 2003). An erudite monograph on astrology.

Blomberg, C. & M. Kamell. *James* (Zondervan 2008). A fine new commentary on James. Excellent discussion of 5:14-15 (pp 242-45).

\_\_\_\_\_. "[James 5 Commentary and Discussion with Craig L. Blomberg](#)".

Bock, D. *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1-24* (Eerdmans 1997). The standard evangelical commentary on Ezekiel. Exhaustive.

Braude, S. *ESP & Psychokinesis* (Brown Walker Press 2002). Braude is a leading philosopher on the paranormal. Affirms the paranormal, but betrays a secular bias.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Immortal Remains* (Rowman & Littlefield 2003).

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Gold Leaf Lady* (Chicago 2007). Good case studies. Good discussion of criteria for testimonial evidence.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Limits of Influence* (RKP 1986). Good discussion of criteria for testimonial evidence.



Brown, C. "[How should prayer be studied?](#)".

Burns, R. *Miracles: The Great Debate on Miracles from Joseph Glanvill to David Hume* (Bucknell University Press 1981). Documents the fact that Hume's famous essay broke new ground, but was a latecomer to the debate.

Chan, P. "[God's orchard](#)".

\_\_\_\_\_. "[Three women in a vision](#)".

\_\_\_\_\_. "[William Nobes](#)".

Coady, C. *Testimony* (Oxford 1994). The standard philosophical monograph on testimonial evidence.

Collins, C. John. *The God of Miracles: An Exegetical Examination of God's Action in the World* (Crossway 2000). An evangelical study.

Coons, P. "[The Differential Diagnosis of Possession States](#)".

Cruz, N. *Run, Baby, Run* (Bridge-Logos 1988). Among other things, describes his deliverance from occult bondage.

Decker R. & Dummett, M. *A History of the Occult Tarot* (Duckworth 2002). An erudite overview of the esoteric tradition. Exposé of the lurid lives of some of its leading exponents.

Douthat, R. "[Varieties of Religions Experience](#)".

Doyle, T. [Dreams and Visions: Is Jesus Awakening the Muslim World?](#) (Thomas Nelson 2012).

Dreher, R. "[Are Ghosts Real?](#)".

Dude, Epistle of. "[Bedside visitations](#)".

\_\_\_\_\_. "[Bones solid as rock](#)".

\_\_\_\_\_. "[A crazed woman](#)".

- \_\_\_\_\_ . ["Demonic bullying"](#) .
- \_\_\_\_\_ . ["A dream of my father"](#) .
- \_\_\_\_\_ . ["From strength to strength"](#) .
- \_\_\_\_\_ . ["Healed of ALS"](#) .
- \_\_\_\_\_ . ["Healing miracles"](#) .
- \_\_\_\_\_ . ["Idols"](#) .
- \_\_\_\_\_ . ["Jesus and the psychiatrists"](#) .
- \_\_\_\_\_ . ["LAMPs"](#) .
- \_\_\_\_\_ . ["A 'miracle' in Burleson"](#) .
- \_\_\_\_\_ . ["Mrs. Kwo"](#) .
- \_\_\_\_\_ . ["Mystery lady"](#) .
- \_\_\_\_\_ . ["Visions of Jesus"](#) .
- \_\_\_\_\_ . ["Witchcraft"](#) .

Duffin, J. *Medical Miracles: Doctors, Saints, and Healing in the Modern World* (Oxford 2008).

Durbin, J. ["The overdose that didn't kill me"](#) .

Earman, J. *Hume's Abject Failure* (Oxford University Press 2000). A secular critique.

Edwards, P. *Reincarnation* (Prometheus Books 1996).  
Standard philosophical critique. Secular.

Engwer, J. Multiple posts on [the Enfield poltergeist](#) .

Fontana, D. *Is There An Afterlife?* (O Books 2007). Useful compendium of case studies. Less reliable on analysis.

Gallagher, R. ["I help spot demonic possession"](#) .

\_\_\_\_\_. ["When exorcists need help, they call him"](#)

Gardner, R. *Healing Miracles: A Doctor Investigates* (DLT 1987). Contains extensive case studies by a noted physician.

Garrett, D. *Angels and the New Spirituality* (B&H 1995). An evangelical critique of new age angelology, with sections on some Catholic and Protestant aberrations as well.

Garrison, D. *A Wind in the House of Islam* (Wingtake 2014).

Gauld, A. *Mediumship & Survival* (Paladin Books 1982). Standard monograph by an English psych. prof.

Geivett, D. & Habermas, G. (eds.). *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History* (IVP 1997). A standard reference work.

Goodman, F. *How About Demons?* (Indiana Press 1988). Academic study by a cultural anthropologist.

Habermas, G. & Moreland, J. P. *Beyond Death* (CB 1998). The standard evangelical work of its kind.

Hays, S. ["Beat the devil"](#).

\_\_\_\_\_. ["Brazilian witchcraft"](#).

\_\_\_\_\_. ["Bruce Waltke on prayer and providence"](#).

\_\_\_\_\_. ["Communion of the saints"](#).

\_\_\_\_\_. ["Deathbed visions"](#).

\_\_\_\_\_. ["Devil may care"](#).

\_\_\_\_\_. ["Dreams and visions"](#).

\_\_\_\_\_. ["Jesus and the psychiatrists"](#).

\_\_\_\_\_. ["Mark Twain's premonition"](#).

\_\_\_\_\_. "[Miraculous organ regeneration](#)".

\_\_\_\_\_. "[The Night Hag](#)".

\_\_\_\_\_. "[Pandemonium](#)".

\_\_\_\_\_. "[Premonitions](#)".

\_\_\_\_\_. "[Second Sight in the Hebrides](#)".

\_\_\_\_\_. "[Spooky hospitals](#)".

\_\_\_\_\_. "[Supernatural dreams](#)".

\_\_\_\_\_. "[Why was the choir late?](#)".

Heathcote-Jones. *Emma, Seeing Angels* (John Blake 2001). Popularization of doctoral dissertation. Some cases more impressive than others.

Heiser, M. "[Spell Casting](#)."

\_\_\_\_\_. "[Sleep paralysis](#)".

\_\_\_\_\_ & Burton, J. "[Werewolves: An Anthropological Exploration: A Discussion with Dr. Judd Burton](#)".

Higton, M. & Holmes, S. "Meeting Scotus: On Scholasticism and Its Ghosts". *International Journal of Systematic Theology* (2002).

Hird, Ed. "[Carl Jung and the Gnostic Reconciliation of Gender Opposites](#)". Exposé of Jung's occultic background.

Houston, J. *Reported Miracles: A Critique of Hume* (Cambridge University Press 2007). An academic critique of Hume.

Hufford, D. *The Terror That Comes in the Night: An Experience-Centered Study of Supernatural Assault Traditions* (University of Pennsylvania Press; 2nd ed. 1989).

An academic study of Old-Hag syndrome by a noted folklorist.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Sleep Paralysis as Spiritual Experience". *Transcultural Psychiatry* 42/1 (March 2005), 11-45.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Visionary Spiritual Experiences in an Enchanted World". *Anthropology & Humanism* 35/2 (November, 2010), 142-158.

Inglis, B, *The paranormal: An encyclopedia of psychic phenomena* (Granada 1985). Standard reference work.

Irvine, D. *From Witchcraft to Christ* (Life Journey 2007). Inspirational story of bondage and deliverance. I'm sure she's sincere, and I think she's credible up to a point. I don't think she would invent her hardscrabble childhood or experience as a junkie and prostitute. On her career as a witch, I'd distinguish between her subjective impressions—which sometimes strike me as fanciful—from her eyewitness descriptions—which are more likely to be accurate.

Jones, J. *Black Magic Today* (Nel 1971). By a British journalist. Based on historical investigation and personal observation. Often graphic and gruesome, but a useful window into the true character of the occult.

Kaigh, F. *Witchcraft in Africa* (Richard Lesley 1947). An eyewitness account, with a forward by leading scholar on witchcraft (Summers), which corroborates Kaigh's account.

Kay, W. & Parry, R. (eds.). *Exorcism and Deliverance* (Paternoster 2011). Uneven but useful collection of studies.

Kee, H. *Medicine, Miracle, and Magic in New Testament Times* (Cambridge 2005). Standard monograph. Liberal, but learned.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Miracle in the Early Christian World* (Yale 1983)

Keener, C. "[Crooked Spirits and Spiritual Identity Theft: A Keener Response to Crooks?](#)".

\_\_\_\_\_. "[Exorcism stories](#)".

\_\_\_\_\_. "[Demon possession](#)".

Kluckhohn, C. *Navaho Witchcraft* (1944). By the Harvard anthropologist.

Koch, K. *Christian Counseling & Occultism* (Kregel 1972). Koch was a Lutheran exorcist. In his generation, the leading evangelical writer on this topic. Useful for case studies and pastoral advice.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Demonology: Past & Present* (Kregel 1973)

\_\_\_\_\_. *Occult ABC* (Kregel 1986)

Koestler, A., Hardy, A., & Harvie, R. "Anecdotal Cases". *The Challenge of Chance* (Random House 1974), 167-224. Events that are too coincidental to be pure coincidence.

Korem D. & Meier, P. *The Fakers* (Fleming Revell 1980). Christian debunkers. Some of their targets are more deserving than others.

Lane, A. (ed.). *The Unseen World: Christian Reflections on Angels, Demons, and the Heavenly Realm* (Baker), 1996. Scholarly symposium.

Larmer, R. *The Legitimacy of Miracle* (Lexington 2013).

\_\_\_\_\_. *Dialogues on Miracles* (Wipf & Stock 2015). Both Larmer's books contain case-studies in appendices.

Lee, S. "[The scourge of evil spirits](#)".

Lloyd-Jones, M. *Healing & the Scriptures* (Nelson 1988). By a physician and pastor. Chapter 10 lays down some criteria

to distinguish possession from natural mental illness. (Chapter 10 is from Lloyd-Jones' talk "Body, Mind, and Spirit" at the Christian Medical Fellowship Conference in 1974. This talk is available for free via the MLJ Trust [here](#) and [here](#).)

\_\_\_\_\_. *Not Against Flesh and Blood* (Christian Focus Publications 2013). Addresses on the occult, paranormal, and spiritual warfare.

\_\_\_\_\_. "[The Supernatural in Medicine](#)".

Martin, G. "[Dreams and World Evangelization](#)".

Martin, M. *Hostage to the Devil* (HarperSanFrancisco 1992). A standard Catholic treatment. However, Malachi was a controversial figure. M. Scott Peck, who knew him, evaluates his credibility (see below).

McCall, K. *A Guide to Healing the Family Tree* (Queenship 1996). McCall was a distinguished medical missionary, the son of another distinguished missionary. Useful case studies, but less reliable on analysis.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Healing the Haunted* (Queenship 1996).

\_\_\_\_\_. *Healing the Family Tree* (Sheldon Press 1994).

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Moon Looks Down* (Darley Anderson (1987)).

Montefiore, H. *The Paranormal* (Upfront 2002). Useful compendium of cases studies, but Montefiore is quite pluralistic.

Montgomery, J. W. (ed.). *Demon Possession: A Medical, Historical, Anthropological, and Theological Symposium* (Bethany 1976).

Montgomery, J. *Principalities and Powers* (Bethany 1973). By the polymathic Lutheran apologist.

Mozley, J. B. *Eight Lectures on Miracles* (BiblioBazaar 2009). A classic Victorian defense of miracles.

Muller, Bill. "[Everyday miracle](#)".

Mullin, R. B. *Miracles and the Modern Religious Imagination* (Yale University Press 1996). Documents a division in modern Christendom, centered on the status of miracles.

Nahm, M. "[Terminal lucidity](#)".

Nevius, J. "[Demon possession and allied themes: being an inductive study of phenomena of our own times](#)".

Noll, R. *The Aryan Christ: The Secret Life of Carl Jung* (Random House 1997). Exposé of Jung's occultic background.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Jung Cult: Origins of a Charismatic Movement* (Princeton University Press 1994).

Noll, S. *Angels of Light, Powers of Darkness* (IVP 1998). Standard monograph by a British NT scholar.

Olson, R. "[Stranger Things](#)". Records an apparition of the dead, by a postevangelical theologian.

Page, S. *Powers of Evil: A Biblical Study of Satan and Demons* (Baker, 1995). By an evangelical scholar.

Peck, M. *Glimpses of the Devil* (Free Press 2005). Peck was a distinguished psychiatrist. Describes two of his patients, whom he diagnosed as having been possessed, as well as their exorcism.

Poythress, V. "[Territorial Spirits](#)". Useful review of the biblical data.

Prince, D. *Blessing or Curse* (Chosen Books 2007). Prince had a very distinguished résumé. So you'd expect him to be



a reliable and insightful writer on the occult. Unfortunately, he's a terribly gullible and impressionable man.

\_\_\_\_\_. *They Shall Expel Demons* (Chosen Books 2007).

Radin, D. *Entangled Minds* (Pocket Books 2006). Useful for case studies. Less reliable on analysis.

Rahner, K. *Visions & Prophecies* (Herder & Herder 1963). Lays down Catholic criteria for private revelation.

Rasmussen, J. "[Prayer studies](#)".

Rauser, R., "[Kanashibari](#)". By a progressive theologian.

Richards, J. *But Deliver Us From Evil* (DLT 1974). By an Anglican exorcist. Thorough. Evangelical. One of the best all-around treatments.

Ring, K. & Cooper, S. "[Near-Death and Out-of-Body Experiences in the Blind: A Study of Apparent Eyeless Vision](#)".

Rivas, T. et al. (eds.). *The Self Does Not Die* (IANDS 2016). Fairly well-documented evidence for post-mortem survival. Uneven. Some cases more impressive than others. Editors have a New Age bias.

Sabom, M. *Light & Death* (Zondervan 1998). By a Christian cardiologist on NDEs. Good case studies. Good analysis of competing theories.

\_\_\_\_\_. "[The Shadow of Death \(part one\)](#)".

\_\_\_\_\_. "[The Shadow of Death \(part two\)](#)".

Sheldrake, R. "[Papers on Telepathy](#)".

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Science Delusion: Freeing the Spirit of Scientific Enquiry* (Coronet 2012). Sheldrake is a scientific iconoclast

who investigates phenomena which the scientific establishment ignores.

Sims, A. "Demon Possession: Medical Perspective in a Western Culture" in Palmer, B (ed.). *Medicine and the Bible* (Paternoster 1986), 165-89.

Stafford, T. *Miracles* (Bethany 2012). A few impressive cases, but primary value lies in the pastoral theology.

Stoeber, M. & Meynell, H. (eds.). *Critical Reflections on the Paranormal* (SUNY 1996). Useful anthology of essays.

Strobel, L. *The Case for Miracles* (Zondervan 2018). Uneven.

Summers, M. *The Werewolf in Lore and Legend* (Dover 2003 reprint).

Taylor, G. *Pastor Hsi* (Overseas Missionary Fellowship 1997). Biography of a famous Chinese pastor and exorcist.

Temple, Ken. "[More than dreams](#)".

Twelftree, G. *In the Name of Jesus* (Baker 2007). Twelftree is a specialist on NT and early church miracles. Useful, but heavy on redaction criticism.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Jesus the Exorcist* (Hendrickson 1993).

\_\_\_\_\_. *Jesus the Miracle Worker* (IVP 1999).

\_\_\_\_\_. *Paul and the Miraculous: A Historical Reconstruction* (Baker 2013). Explores a neglected aspect of Pauline theology.

Twelftree, G. (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Miracles* (Cambridge University Press 2011). Standard reference work.

Twelftree, G. (ed.) *The Nature Miracles of Jesus* (Wipf & Stock 2017). Of value for the contributions by Craig Keener and Timothy McGrew.

Turner, Edith. *The Hands Feel It* (Northern Illinois U. Press 1996). Field study by academic anthropologist of miracles and witchcraft among an Eskimo community.

\_\_\_\_\_. "[The Reality of Spirits](#)". Turner has a New Age perspective. I reject that. But her prism is separable from the case studies.

Unger, M. *Beyond the Crystal Ball* (Moody 1974). Unger was a fine OT scholar. Unfortunately, this particular title is very dated.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Demons in the World Today* (Tyndale 1976). After he changed his mind.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Haunting of Bishop Pike* (Tyndale 1971). Exposé. A cautionary tale.

Valiant for Truth. "[A Pastor's Reflections: Demon Possession and Mental Illness](#)".

Van der Toorn, K., Becking, B., & van der Horst, P. (eds.). *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, rev. 1999). Standard reference work.

Wenham, D. & Blomberg, C. *Gospel Perspectives VI: The Miracles of Jesus* (WS 2003). Useful anthology.

Wiebe, P. *God and Other Spirits* (Oxford 2004). Philosophical defense of discarnate spirits.

Wiebe, P. *Visions of Jesus: Direct Encounters from the New Testament to Today* (Oxford 1998). Well-documented collection of reported visions of Jesus by Christian philosopher. An excerpt from the book has been posted [here](#).

Wilson, A. "[Modern miracles](#)".

Wright, J. S. *Christianity & the Occult* (Moody 1972). By an English evangelical Bible scholar. One of the best all-around treatments.

Yamauchi, E. "[Magic in the Ancient World](#)". By an erudite evangelical scholar of ancient history.

Yap, P. "[The Possession Syndrome in Hong Kong and in Catholic Cultures](#)". Online version of an article originally published in a peer-reviewed journal.

Young, F. *A History of Anglican Exorcism* (I.B. Tauris 2018). Academic study of the checkered history of exorcism in the Anglican tradition.

## Supernatural dreams

**1.** One of my objectives is to expand the evidential base for Christian apologetics. Christian apologists imitate each other. As a result, Christian apologetics can get mired in a rut, recycling the same types of arguments and evidence. These may be fine as far as they go, but it neglects other lines of evidence.

**2.** Evidence for Christianity can be direct or indirect. Naturalism is a primary foil to Christianity. Contemporary mainstream naturalism is defined by commitment to physicalism and causal closure. Minds are produced by brains. There's no mental activity outside the brain. The physical universe is all there is. We inhabit a closed system. There are no agents outside the universe.

Although debunking naturalism doesn't prove Christianity, it eliminates a major competitor. And that can be part of a multi-step argument for Christianity.

**3.** Some Victorian intellectuals took an interest in paranormal activity. This led to organizations like The [Cambridge] Ghost Club and the Society for Psychical Research. In the late 19C, three members of SPR published **PHANTASMS OF THE LIVING** (1886), by Edmund Gurney, Frederic W. H. Myers, & Frank Podmore—based on more than 700 case-studies. Two volumes, totalling over 1400 pages. Second volume of supplementary material.

One of the topics is supernatural dreams. Vol. 1, chap. 8; Vol 2, chap. 3.

There's a vetting process by which the authors select the most credible examples, to differentiate veridical dreams from merely coincidental dreams. If there's empirical evidence for supernatural dreams, that debunks naturalism. If all mental activity is confined to the brain, it isn't possible for a dreamer to have extrasensory knowledge. On that view, all dreams are imaginary, although they may make use of the dreamer's experience.

**4.** Scripture records many revelatory dreams. Sometimes the dreamer is pagan, sometimes the dreamer is Christian or Jewish. Secular readers think these are fictional dreams. Part of ancient superstitious folklore.

There is, however, abundant extrabiblical evidence for supernatural dreams. Some Christians shy away from this material, but it's no different in kind from archeological corroboration.

**5.** The aforementioned book interprets the veridical dreams as telepathic. In a sense that may be true, but that just pushes the question back a step. Most of the dreams cluster around death and danger. But if the explanation is that some humans are naturally telepathic, why would their dreams be bunched around family and friends who are dying or endangered? If they can read other people's minds, wouldn't they dream about lots of other things their loved ones were doing?

In most reported cases, the dreamer doesn't normally have veridical dreams. This is usually a one-time event, concerning the death of a loved one (or loved one in mortal peril). Telepathy fails to explain the selectivity of the dreams.

So that might suggest the dreams are revelatory. The ultimate source isn't the ability of the dreamer to access someone else's thoughts.

**6.** Perhaps it might be countered that in a crisis, the dying or imperiled individual has especially intense feelings which generate a stronger signal. But that doesn't strike me as a plausible explanation:

**i)** Telepathy doesn't operate like the inverse-square law, where waves of energy are diminished by relative distance. These dreams are often about people hundreds or thousands of miles away. Conversely, there are cases of simultaneous or synchronized dreams where two dreamers in the same house have the same dream. Telepathy is action at a distance. Proximity is irrelevant.

**ii)** Dying people don't necessarily panic. Some people have a peaceful death. Some moribund people are too enfeebled to generate much emotional energy. Some people are unconscious at the moment of death. So you can't chalk it up to an agitated state of mind.

**7.** A number of the informants were Christian. Perhaps it's more likely that God sends revelatory dreams to Christians. But even in Scripture, revelatory dreams aren't confined to believers.

We can speculate as to why that is. In some cases it may make them more open to the Gospel. Or make them more culpable if they steel themselves against the evidence.

## VII. Angelic apparitions

---



## Flaming ministers

*“He makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire” (Heb 1:7).*

**1.** Angels are common agents in Scripture, but is there any empirical evidence for angels? To my knowledge, this is a neglected topic. Is there anything more reliable than New Age or RadTrad Catholic sites?

One potential source of information is a book by Emma Heathcote-James, **SEEING ANGELS: TRUE CONTEMPORARY ACCOUNTS OF HUNDREDS OF ANGELIC EXPERIENCES** (London: John Blake, 2001). That's based on her doctoral dissertation at the University of Birmingham, which drew on 800 firsthand accounts. Given the academic background, it's a more reputable source than a lot of stuff on the subject. She's not obviously flakey.

**2.** The book quotes and summarizes scores of reported angelic apparitions and related phenomena. I assess it the same way I assess reported miracles generally. I make allowance for flimflam, coincidence, wishful thinking. There is, though, a degree of cumulative credibility based on multiple independent reports of similar phenomena. One has to be a knee-jerk skeptic to dismiss all of it out of hand. What may be implausible in isolation becomes plausible if repeated by different observers at different times and place.

If it's a question of establishing whether something exists or ever happens, the bar is quite low. How much does it take

to disprove a universal negative? Not much.

**i)** Atheists trap themselves in circular reasoning. They discount reported angelic apparitions (and other supernatural phenomena) because there's no evidence that angels exist. And what's the evidence that angels don't exist? It can't very well be absence of reported angelic apparitions.

Only if we know in advance that angels don't exist are we entitled to automatically disregard eyewitness accounts of their existence. We have to know what the world is like, a world where angels don't exist. But how do we know what the world is like? That's something we discover, and reported phenomena contribute to our knowledge of the world. It's viciously circular to discount reported angelic apparitions on the grounds that such reports can never count as evidence for the claim in question.

It's not as if there's evidence against the existence of angels which must be overcome by sufficient counterevidence. At best one might attempt to claim that there's insufficient evidence. But one can't justifiably claim there's no evidence, then use that to dismiss ostensible evidence to the contrary. The claim that there's no evidence for something is highly vulnerable to disconfirmation. The threshold for disproof is extremely low. All you need is some positive evidence.

One doesn't have to believe every anecdote in her book. If even a handful are true, that's enough.

There's a funny story about Laplace, the famous mathematician and scientist of the French Enlightenment. He didn't believe in meteorites. Farmers told him they saw

rocks fall from the sky, but he waved that aside as backward superstition. He closed his mind to the evidence.

**ii)** You also have cessationists who are impervious to testimonial evidence. But that's a dangerous place to be in. If extraordinary and miraculous things only happen in Scripture, while nothing like that happens outside the pages of Scripture, that creates a troublesome hiatus between what Scripture says is real and reality as you and others experience it. I'm not suggesting that every Christian, or even most Christians, need to experience something extraordinary or miraculous. But it's a problem to drive a wedge between the world of Scripture and the world outside of Scripture.

**3.** One superficial problem with the book is the classification system. She puts all reports in one angelic basket. That's in part because her informants have limited categories, so they describe an experience in angelic terms even if it's not specifically angelic. The book records a number of phenomena which are not necessarily or even probably angelic, although they are (if true) supernatural:

**i)** Audible voice

That could be God speaking directly to someone.

**ii)** Christophany

A few cases appear to be Christophanies rather than angelophanies.

**iii)** Shekinah

Many of her informants describe supernatural light. Although angels can be luminous, many of these reports

don't envision or depict an angelic figure, but just supernatural light. So that could be a luminous theophany, like the Shekinah.

**iv)** Many cases aren't angelic apparitions, but apparitions of the dead. Grief apparitions and crisis apparitions. At least one case suggests bilocation.

**v)** Some cases involve near-death or out-of-body experiences.

**vi)** Generic miraculous intervention. Could be direct divine action.

**4.** Some of the reputed angels look human. Their angelic identity is implied, not by their appearance, but by their supernatural abilities.

Other reputed apparitions correspond to traditional Christian iconography. That could mean the apparition is imaginary—unless angels accommodate expectations, based on Western religious art, to be recognizable.

**5.** She doesn't always identify the religious affiliation, if any, of the informant, but in many cases her informants profess to be Christian. In a few cases they were unbelievers for whom the encounter is a spiritual catalyst.

**6.** The nature of the angelic apparitions and other phenomena vary, although they revolve around common situations.

**i)** Miraculous intervention to protect people in danger

**ii)** Guidance for people who are (physically) lost

**iii)** Encouragement during a time of crisis. A deathbed experience. Angelic visitations to the sick or dying. Or luminous theophanies rather than angelophanies.

**iv)** Supernatural warnings and premonitory dreams.

**7.** One intriguing case involved a visual apparition to someone congenitally blind.

It's an interesting book. I wouldn't stake my life on it, but I find much of it credible.

## VIII. Dominical apparitions

---

## Ten questions Christians must answer!

I ran across a village atheist website with "Ten Questions a Christian Must Answer". At last count it had about 1250 comments.

I'm going to ignore most of the questions because I've answered them or questions like them before. These are cliché questions. But there's one question I'll single out. Indeed, I've seen two variations on the same question:

How do we explain the fact that Jesus has never appeared to you? Jesus is all-powerful and timeless, but if you pray for Jesus to appear, nothing happens. You have to create a weird rationalization to deal with this discrepancy.

How do we explain the fact that Jesus has never appeared to you? Jesus could appear to you, but he doesn't. He appeared to Paul after he died, so it's not like he hasn't done it before. He could appear to give you advice for a tough decision, give you comfort in person like a friend would, or just assure you that he really exists.

**i)** I explain the fact that Jesus never appeared to me because I never asked him to appear to me.

**ii)** In addition, Jesus never promised to appear to every Christian, so there's no expectation that he will appear to every Christian.

**iii)** Moreover, I don't view Jesus as a genie whom I can summon to do my bidding.

**iv)** As far as decision-making, that doesn't require private revelation. Throughout Scripture, you have people making decisions because God providentially orchestrated events in a certain way or implanted subliminal suggestions. So I can do God's will without even thinking about it.

And even at the level of private revelation, that doesn't require a dominical vision. What about an audible voice or revelatory dream? To demand a personal audience with Jesus is an arbitrary stipulation, even if we grant the general principle.

**v)** There are many well-documented reports of Jesus appearing to people, viz.,

<https://epistleofdude.wordpress.com/2017/11/07/visions-of-jesus/>

<http://denverseminary.edu/resources/news-and-articles/a-wind-in-the-house-of-islam/>

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/bibleandculture/2015/06/03/dreams-and-visions-the-muslim-encounter-with-isa/>

Another example is Bishop Hugh Montefiore, who converted from Judaism to Christianity due to a dominical vision.

To say Jesus doesn't appear to people because he doesn't exist backfires, considering the many reported examples to the contrary. There's no dearth of evidence.

And if an atheist discounts these reports as tall tales or hallucinations, then his challenge was duplicitous. If, when you call his bluff, he says it doesn't matter, then he was arguing in bad faith all along.



**vi)** From what I've read, reports of Jesus appearing to people typically involve situations where they didn't ask or expect Jesus to appear to them. It wasn't in response to prayer, but an unsolicited visitation.

**vii)** Furthermore, when Jesus appears to people, it may be to summon them to a life of costly discipleship. So there's a tradeoff. A grueling vocation in exchange for the vision. I don't envy St. Paul's life.

**ix)** I'm not vouching for any particular report. I'm just responding to the atheist on his own grounds. I don't presume that every reported dominical apparition is legit. I can't assign percentages. But I do think that if you have enough reports by prima facie credible witnesses, that makes it likely that some reports are true.

**x)** Likewise, I don't need to personally experience something to know it's true. Secondhand information suffices for most of what we know. Why carve out an ad hoc exception in this instance?

## Apparitions of Jesus

Recently I read Tom Doyle's book, **DREAMS AND VISIONS: IS JESUS AWAKENING THE MUSLIM WORLD?** (Thomas Nelson 2012). I also read Strobel's interview with Doyle in L. Strobel, **THE CASE FOR MIRACLES** (Zondervan 2018), chap. 8. In addition, I read or listened to some material by David Garrison, which covers much the same ground, but is independent of Doyle, and has different anecdotes.

Doyle and Garrison document reported apparitions of Jesus to Muslims. However, the phenomenon isn't confined to Muslim converts to Christianity. For instance:

<https://epistleofdude.wordpress.com/2017/11/07/visions-of-jesus/>

A few observations:

- 1.** I don't automatically believe or disbelieve any particular report. I think there's cumulative plausibility, when you have multiple independent reports of the same kind of phenomenon. One doesn't have to credit all of them to think that, odds are, given that many reports, at least a fraction are probably authentic.
- 2.** In many cases this involves individuals who have a incentive not to believe in Jesus. This happens in spite of their predisposition.
- 3.** Of course, some people indulge in tall tales about supernatural encounters. We must always make allowance

for that. Just as, odds are, a fraction are probably authentic, a fraction are inevitably fraudulent.

**4.** By the same token, some people experience hallucinations. They are sincere, but mistaken.

**5.** However, some of the anecdotes, if reliably reported, have veridical elements. Information is imparted that they wouldn't be in a position to naturally know, but it's later confirmed. Strobel also mentions two people having the same dream the same night, although I didn't read any examples of that (unless I missed it). But if they happen, synchronized dreams would be veridical. Likewise, dreams that come true—if they're sufficiently specific and naturally improbable.

**6.** How do we classify a Christophany? There seem to be two basic categories:

**i)** Jesus physically appearing to someone

**ii)** Jesus telepathically appearing to someone

Most of the cases I've read comport with (ii), although some cases have physical traces which might indicate (i).

**7.** Given the number of reported encounters, if a subset of those involve Jesus physically appearing to people, then that implies bilocation, because Jesus would have to be in two or more places at once to appear to that many people. (I'm referring to modern-day reports.)

If so, that might have implications for Gospel harmonization. If Jesus sometimes physically appears in two (or more) places at once, then "contradictory" reports of when, where, and to whom Jesus appeared after the

Resurrection may have a neglected principle of harmonization.

**8.** In modern-day Christian apologetics, there's an overemphasis on ancient documentary evidence. Although it's necessary to defend the inerrancy and historicity of Scripture, and while it's useful to make the Resurrection a component of Christian apologetics, the evidence for Christianity isn't confined to literary reports of biblical miracles. Christianity is a living faith. Throughout church history, some Christians encounter God in extraordinary ways. These reports need to be carefully sifted, but that's true for testimonial evidence generally. Modern-day Christian apologetics frequently suffers from tunnel vision in the sample of evidence it showcases. But the evidential database is much broader.

# IX. Postmortem apparitions

---

## Apparitions and deathbed visions

In this post I'm going to discuss the question of apparitions and deathbed visions. One response to these claims is to bury your head in the sand. The problem with the ostrich posture is that it doesn't protect Christians. If a Christian, or someone he knows and trusts, has the kind of experience you told him can't happen, then you shot your only bullet, and it missed. It's better to provide an explanatory framework, consistent with Christian orthodoxy.

There are roughly two kinds of (alleged) apparitions:

### 1) INDUCED APPARITIONS

In this situation (i.e. seance), a medium tries to conjure the dead.

**i)** I expect most mediums (and psychics) are outright frauds, although a handful are deeply invested in the occult, and may be the real deal.

**ii)** Since necromancy is, at best, forbidden knowledge, I think such "communications" are inherently suspect. I say "at best" because, in many cases, I doubt it even counts as knowledge.

**iii)** Assuming for the sake of argument that necromancy is sometimes successful, who among the dead would we expect to be accessible via a seance? Since this is a forbidden, occultic activity, I figure that would normally be the damned.

A counterexample is 1 Sam 28. But that's arguably exceptional. The scene is deliberately ironic. Saul regards Samuel as his last best hope, but it backfires. Samuel denounces Saul.

I'd also like to comment on an exchange between Michael Sudduth and Michael Prescott. I think Sudduth and Prescott are both wrong in different ways. This is unintentionally comical. On the one hand, Prescott regards necromancy as a reliable source of information about the afterlife. On the other hand, Sudduth assumes the role of skeptic in this exchange. But considering the fact that Sudduth is a Jungian Zen Hare Krishna, hasn't he disqualified himself from playing the skeptic? Sudduth's outlook is more septic than skeptic.

Here are some specific examples. At least as far back as Richard Hodgson's investigations of Leonora Piper, it has been noted that newly deceased communicators speaking through mediums often exhibit feebleness and confusion; their messages are brief and muddled. But with the passage of time (usually just a few days) the communicators improve noticeably; the confusion is largely dispelled, and the messages become clearer and more lengthy. Moreover, with continued practice, some communicators seem to hone their skills, and some just seem better at it than others; certain individuals come through a variety of mediums with consistently good results, while others never seem to get the hang of it.

Hodgson and other survivalists **argue** that these developments are just what we would expect if the communications are genuinely coming from discarnate individuals. The trauma of the dying process leaves

these persons fatigued and befuddled for a short time, but with the opportunity to rest and orient themselves to their new environment, they grow stronger and shake off their lethargy. Furthermore, practice improves their abilities in some cases; and just as some incarnate individuals have a gift for mediumship and others don't, some discarnates are better able to communicate through mediums than others.

[http://michaelprescott.typepad.com/michael\\_prescotts\\_blog/2014/05/more-on-super-psi.html](http://michaelprescott.typepad.com/michael_prescotts_blog/2014/05/more-on-super-psi.html)

I can think of an alternative explanation. Prescott is clearly referring to repeated visits to a medium. Clients who keep returning to the medium to contact their departed loved ones.

An obvious reason why the "communicators" improve is not because the decedent has recovered from the trauma of death and adjusted to his/her new condition. Rather, the more often a medium meets with a client, the better acquainted the medium becomes with the client. That familiarity enables the medium to better impersonate the client's departed loved ones.

For his part, Stephen Braude explains these "communications" by appeal to "living agent psi." He thinks the medium has telepathic access to the client's memories of the decedent.

I suspect Braude favors this explanation because he's an atheist who's hostile to theological explanations. Hence, he prefers a naturalistic, this-worldly explanation to one about souls passing into the next world. So there may be a secular bias.



## 2) SPONTANEOUS APPARITIONS

In this situation, the dead (allegedly) appear to the living of their own accord. No one summoned them into the presence of the living.

This is a widely reported, well-attested phenomenon. (On a related note are deathbed visions.) For instance:

D. Allison, **RESURRECTING JESUS** (T&T Clark 2005, 273-77.

<http://randalrauser.com/2014/06/j-b-phillips-and-the-ghost-of-c-s-lewis/>

<http://randalrauser.com/2014/06/apologetics-and-the-crisis-apparition/>

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tom-morris/interview-with-a-philosop\\_4\\_b\\_5522218.html?page\\_version=legacy&view=print&comm\\_ref=false](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tom-morris/interview-with-a-philosop_4_b_5522218.html?page_version=legacy&view=print&comm_ref=false)

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2630927/At-gates-heaven-A-new-book-drawing-stories-dying-patients-doctors-transform-way-think-final-days.html>

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2632303/Messages-dead-The-drowned-son-returns-bedside-chats-The-astronaut-spoke-fathers-ghost-Impossible-This-spine-tingling-series-make-think-again.html>

Reported spontaneous apparitions are theologically problematic if they suggest that unbelievers go to heaven. So what are we to make of this evidence?

**i)** One needs to distinguish between evidence that there is an afterlife, and evidence for what the afterlife is like.

**ii)** Apparitions of the dead aren't direct evidence for their *eternal* fate, inasmuch as the final judgment lies in the future. Christian eschatology distinguished between the intermediate state and the final state.

**iii)** Accounts about spontaneous apparitions may lack information regarding the religious beliefs of the decedent.

William Lane Craig was critical of Allison:

Allison's familiarity with the literature is daunting. Pages 279-82 of his essay contain only 16 lines of text and nearly 200 fine lines of references! But his very strength as a bibliographer becomes a weakness, since he tends to accept all reports uncritically, lumping together serious studies in journals of psychology with New Age popular books and publications in parapsychology. Most of the so-called veridical visions of deceased persons are gathered from parapsychological literature of the late nineteenth century. What is wanting is a careful sifting of the evidence and a differentiated discussion of the same.

<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/dale-allison-on-the-resurrection-of-jesus>

**i)** I agree with Craig's specific contention that apparitions are not a plausible alternative explanation for the post-Resurrection appearances of Christ.

**ii)** It's true that Allison needs to be more discriminating in his sources.

**iii)** I don't see anything inherently unreliable about 19C sources.

**iv)** Allison also cites more up-to-date evidence, viz. widows/widowers.

**v)** Craig draws an invidious comparison between serious studies in journals of psychology and publications in parapsychology. But that begs the question.

**vi)** Because evangelical scholars don't generally bother to investigate certain paranormal phenomena (e.g. apparitions of the dead), they vacate the field, thereby leaving that to often less reliable investigators. So it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Finally, I think this is one reason why secularism will never succeed. Atheists assume that belief in the supernatural is the result of ignorant superstition and religious indoctrination. Humans don't actually experience the supernatural. That's an extrinsic narrative.

But because uncanny experiences are so widespread, secularism en masse is doomed to fail. The secular elites may win political battles by muscling their way into public policy. Atheists may succeed in imposing a degree of outward conformity on the general public. But it won't be convincing. There will be many closet supernaturalists.

Like the way people used to pay lip-service to communism long after most of them no longer believed in it (and some of them never espoused it in the first place). They didn't dare publicly dissent, but just under the surface was massive disaffection, which is why communism fell so hard and so fast.

If you have an experience like this, then secularism just isn't very persuasive. Of course, a fanatical atheist will explain away his own experience. But most folks aren't that dogmatic.

## Moreland—is there life after death?

In this post I'll use "dualism" as shorthand for substance dualism. I subscribe to Cartesian interactionist dualism. I don't subscribe to Thomistic dualism (hylomorphism).

**A.** This is a fairly useful exchange as far as it goes:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmfsZ\\_-Z\\_OY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmfsZ_-Z_OY)

But it tries to cover far too much ground in far too little time. Also, Moreland and the interviewer are talking at cross-purposes for a while, which squanders precious time.

**B.** Moreland probably has far more to say about religious pluralism, but due to time constraints, deflected that issue.

**C.** Up to a point, dualism and physicalism are empirically equivalent explanations. Both are consistent with the data that the interviewer cited, viz. memory loss, inability to form new memories, and loss of cognitive function.

According to dualism, the brain is an interface between the mind and the physical world. It mediates action or information in both directions. If damaged, the brain blocks input or output at both ends.

If the brain is damaged, that may block new sensory input. That prevents the mind from receiving new information from and about the sensible world.

If, conversely, the brain is damaged, that may block the ability of the mind to communicate with the outside world. Memories are stored in the mind, not the brain. If the brain is damaged, that impedes retrieval. The memories can't get through a washed out bridge. So long as the mind is embodied, that imposes limits on mental activity.

All things being equal, the scales tip slightly in favor of physicalism as the simpler explanation. All things considered, additional evidence weighs heavily on the dualist side of the scales.

**D.** Moreland greatly understates the evidence for the afterlife. I'll begin by proposing a more complex taxonomy:

**1. Indirect philosophical evidence for the afterlife**

**2. Indirect empirical evidence for the afterlife**

**3. Direct theological evidence for the afterlife**

**4. Direct empirical evidence for the afterlife**

Let's run back through these:

(1)-(2) constitute evidence for dualism. If there's evidence that the mind is ontologically independent of the brain, then that's indirect evidence for the afterlife. That's what makes disembodied consciousness possible.

**1. Indirect philosophical evidence for the afterlife**

**i)** The hard problem of consciousness.

Philosophical arguments that the characteristics of consciousness are categorically different from physical structures and events.

**ii)** Roderick Chisholm's argument:

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2019/09/body-and-soul.html>

**2. Indirect empirical evidence for the afterlife**

**i)** Veridical near-death experiences and veridical out-of-body experiences.

**ii)** ESP, psychokinesis. If all mental activity takes place inside the brain, then the mind can't know about the physical world or act on the physical world apart from sensory input or the body interacting with its environment. If, conversely, there's empirical evidence that mental activity is not confined to the brain, then that's evidence for the metaphysical possibility of disembodied postmortem survival.

### **3. Direct theological evidence for the afterlife**

**i)** The biblical witness to the intermediate state. If there's good evidence that the Bible is a trustworthy source of information, then that's indirect evidence for whatever it teaches.

**ii)** The resurrection of Christ

That's evidence, not for the immortality of the soul, but a reembodied state.

That's what "Christian physicalists" pin their hopes on. However, the immortality of the soul is a bridge to the resurrection of the body. A philosophical objection to "Christian physicalism" is that if consciousness ceases at death, then what God resurrects isn't the same person who died but a *copy* of the person who died. And that raises questions of personal identity. If your existence is discontinuous, if there's a break or gap in your existence, then what does God restore? Is a *copy* of you *you*?

### **4. Direct empirical evidence for the afterlife**

**i)** A subset of near-death experiences report meeting a decedent who wasn't known to be dead at the time. In a variation, the decedent imparts information that could not naturally be known. If the report is true, that's direct empirical evidence for postmortem survival.

**ii)** Veridical postmortem apparitions, viz. poltergeists, grief apparitions, crisis apparitions, Christophanies.



## Communion of the saints

**i)** Is there any empirical evidence for life after death? Much has been written about near-death experiences. By comparison, postmortem apparitions are neglected in contemporary Christian apologetics—although that was of great interest in Victorian England. For instance, Cambridge Ghost Society (founded in 1851) included the Cambridge Triumvirate (Westcott, Hort, and Lightfoot), as well as future Archbishop of Canterbury Edward Benson.

**ii)** Unlike near-death experiences, postmortem apparitions can't be explained away by a dying brain hypothesis (not that that's a good explanation for near-death experiences). It's not about the alleged experience of the patient when he was clinically dead, but living observers who say they witnessed a ghost. Some of these reports include corroborative evidence. Some of these reports are premonitions rather than postmortem apparitions.

**iii)** A fringe benefit is that this provides empirical disconfirmation of annihilationism.

**iv)** There are different kinds of purported apparitions, viz. angelic apparitions, Marian apparitions, and dominical apparitions. As an evangelical, I rule out Marian apparitions. I've discussed that elsewhere.

In reference to postmortem apparitions, the primary categories are grief apparitions and crisis apparitions. Reports may be further subdivided into visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory apparitions. Even if you don't believe in ghosts, it's useful to have the terminology for purposes of assessment and analytical clarity.

The professional literature uses the word "hallucination," but that's prejudicial.

**v)** One theological concern might be whether apparitions of the dead imply universalism or postmortem salvation. If there's a reported apparition to someone who's not a Christian, or an apparition of someone who wasn't a Christian at the time of death, does that undermine the spiritual finality of death?

When we review case-studies of apparitions, there may be no information on the Christian status of the decedent or the observer. I don't think Christian theology rules out apparitions of the damned. What it precludes is a change in one's postmortem destiny. If damned angels can appear to the living, why can't the souls of damned humans?

**vi)** In Scripture, God sometimes sends revelatory dreams to pagans. And that's just a sample. What happens to be recorded in Scripture. If dreams, why not apparitions? Indeed, some apparitions take the form of dreams.

**vii)** Assuming Christianity is true, I don't think it's surprising that dead Christian friends or relatives might appear to some Christians. If the saints are aware of what's happening to their living loved ones, or sometimes aware that a living loved one is undergoing an ordeal, I don't think there's any antecedent objection to the possibility that they might appear to them to give them some encouragement or warn them of danger—unless God prevents contact between the living and the dead.

I'm not saying for a fact that the saints keep tabs on what's happening to their living loved ones. Maybe they're out of the loop. I don't think that can be settled a priori. That's an evidential question.

Scripture forbids the living from initiating contact with the dead, but that's not the same thing as the dead initiating

contact with the living. Whether or not that ever happens is an evidential question.

**viii)** Sola Scriptura doesn't mean Scripture has all the answers. The Bible is not an encyclopedia. We depend on extrabiblical sources of information for much of what we know or believe. Scripture rules out certain possibilities, but where Scripture is silent, it's permissible and often necessary to have recourse to extrabiblical sources of information.

**ix)** There are hazards in both directions. On the one hand, some people are led astray by the New Age. On the other hand, if Christians have never seriously considered the status of ghosts, if they're theologically unprepared for that eventuality, then that can leave them vulnerable to the New Age in case they have an experience which they can't interpret in terms of their Christian paradigm. If they've been told that's inconsistent with the Christian theology, that leaves them ill-equipped if it does happen.

**x)** An alternative explanation for postmortem apparitions is that these are telepathic projections by living agents rather than the dead. But if ostensible apparitions of the dead are really projections by living agents, why do they take the form of the dead or dying rather than the living agents who (allegedly) project them? Moreover, many of the details select for postmortem apparitions rather than telepathy by living agents.

**xi)** Here are some criteria for veridical postmortem apparitions:

Either (1) two or more observers might independently witness the apparition; or (2) the apparition might convey information, afterwards confirmed to be true, of something

which the observer had never known ; or (3) the apparition might be someone whom the observer himself had never seen, and of whose appearance he was ignorant, and yet his description of it might be sufficiently definite for identification. But though one or more of these conditions would have to be fully satisfied before we could be convinced that any particular apparition of the dead had some cause external to the observer's own mind, there is one more general characteristic of the class which is sufficiently suggestive of such a cause to be worth considering. I mean the disproportionate number of cases which occur shortly after the death of the person represented. Such a time-relation, if frequently enough encountered, might enable us to argue for the objective origin of the apparition. For, according to the law of probabilities, an apparition representing a known person would not by chance present a definite timeframe to a special cognate event—viz., the death of that person—in more than a certain percentage of cases. Cf. Gurney, Edmund & Myers, Frederic. ON APPARITIONS OCCURRING SOON AFTER DEATH, **PROCEEDINGS** 5, 1888-9, 404.

The hallucinations which have prima facie claim to be regarded as veridical may be divided into three classes. The first is the class in which the hallucination coincides in time with an external event in such a way as to suggest a causal connection between them—as when the apparition of a dying person is seen at the time of his death. The second is the class in which some information previously unknown to the percipient is conveyed to him through the hallucination. These two classes often overlap, as when a hallucination coinciding in time with a death distinctly conveys the information that the death has occurred or when an

apparition represents some actual characteristics of the dress or appearance of the dying person which was unknown to the percipient. The third class consists of "collective" hallucinations; that is, hallucinations occurring simultaneously to two or more persons, which cannot be traced to sensory suggestion from the same external cause, and cannot be explained as transferred from one percipient to the other through suggestion by word or gesture. Cf. Sidgwick, Henry et al. REPORT ON THE CENSUS OF HALLUCINATIONS, **PROCEEDINGS** 10, 1894, 207-9.

**xii)** In assessing reported apparitions, it's useful to have a large sample. That provides a margin for error. It only takes a few veridical cases to falsify naturalism. Likewise, if we have multiple, independent, firsthand accounts of the same kind of phenomena, that's provides cumulative evidence that the phenomena are real.

**xiii)** Here's some general statistics:

Kalish and Reynolds (1981) found that 44% of a random sample said they had experienced or felt the presence of someone who had died. The dead appeared and spoke in 73.6% of the experiences, the dead were psychologically felt in 20.3%, and in 6%, there was a sense of touch. Rees (1975) found that 46.7% of the Welsh widows he interviewed had occasional hallucinations for several years. Most common was the sense of the presence (39.2%), followed by visual (14%), auditory (13.3%), and tactile senses (2.7%). Glick, Weiss, and Parkes (1974) found among widows a persistent continuing relationship with the inner representation of the dead husband. They report In contrast to most other aspects of the reaction

to bereavement, the sense of the persisting presence of the husband did not diminish with time. It seemed to take a few weeks to become established, but thereafter seemed as likely to be reported late in the bereavement as early (p147). "Hallucinations of Widowhood," J Am Geriatr Soc. 1985 Aug;33(8):543-7. Cf. Kalish. R. A. & Reynolds, D. K. (1981). **DEATH AND ETHNICITY: A PSYCHOCULTURAL STUDY**. Farmingdale, NY: Baywood Publishing Company. Rees, W. D. (1975). The bereaved and their hallucinations. In Bernard Schoenberg et al. (Eds.), **BEREAVEMENT: ITS PSYCHOSOCIAL ASPECTS**. New York: Columbia University Press, 66-71.

**xiv)** A question is where we can find reputable collections of case-studies. In this post I'll quote from several different sources. #1 is from a medical journal. #2 is from a neurosurgeon in a medical journal. #3 is from a philosophy prof. at San Francisco State U. It's a firsthand account. In addition, he researched the background of the phenomenon. #'s 4-14 are from **ALAS, POOR GHOST!** (*USU Press* 1999), based on Gillian Bennett's doctoral dissertation for the University of Sheffield. Most of the respondents were English Methodist churchgoers. #'s 15-28 are from the Society of Psychical Research. Although SPR investigators accept the paranormal, they have an aversion to orthodox Christian explanations, so that's actually hostile testimony. They record these incidents despite their secular bias.

I've excluded reports based on seances, mediums, automatic writing, and other occult elements. I've included reports that have veridical elements or reports that strike

me as theologically fitting. This is just a sample. I left out many additional reports because it becomes repetitious.

**1.** I called my uncle in Argentina to let him know my father's death. He said he already knew as my father appeared while he slept and said good-bye.  
"Parapsychological phenomena near the time of death."  
Barbato, Michael; Blunden, Cathy; Reid, Kerry; Irwin, Harvey; Rodriquez, Paul *Journal of Palliative Care* 15/2 (Summer 1999), 32.

**2.** Sir,—What are those waves of communication, that extra sense not yet understood? Something remarkable happened to me about ten years ago. Two elderly sisters had a house built near part of our garden. I had objected to the planning permission and then had required the plans to be modified, causing the sisters to see me as a hostile incompatible, and no neighbourliness existed. When our doctor told me that one of them had been admitted to hospital, we thought I should show some support by visiting her. I found her soon to return home. We talked and the pleasantly recovering, clouds of strangers and antagonism drifted away.

The following Sunday morning, when crossing the hall to the kitchen to make tea, a presentiment of doom beset me and I feared we had been burgled. When I opened the kitchen door all appeared normal but then there seemed to be a curious descending dark shimmer in the far part of the kitchen, immediately gone—but I knew it was death and female. I thought some catastrophe to one of our daughters-in-law. Disturbed by these suppositions and

deciding not to tell my wife, I made the tea and took the tray to the bedroom. As I reached the bedroom, the doorbell rang and I was not surprised to see the village policeman who said he would be grateful for my help. He had to tell the lady along the road that her sister had died suddenly and could I assist him with the awful task? This we did together, and he came in for a cup of tea; as we sat I told him of my astonishing experience. He said that he had been on his way to tell our neighbour that her sister was very ill but that when almost here a message had come through on his car telephone that she had just died-and it had been then that he thought he should seek my help. My monition must have been as she was actually dying. Was she trying to recruit my help for her sister-was that the cry? My wife and I did have to support the sister, a woman we did not know who had a considerable disability. She is now dead and I can record this without causing her distress.

As a neurosurgeon my mind has been pragmatically directed and I had had no interest in telepathy or extrasensory perception. Here was the reception of information from a source I did not know or comprehend when it declared its nature, female death. Finding out what you do not know from what you do is a logical concept but I did not know the people involved, except the fragmentary meeting at the hospital, nor had any thoughts persisted in my mind. For me to have received such a message remains astonishing. It would be valuable if declared telepathic communicators could be investigated by scanning and electroencephalography to find which areas of the brain are involved with inception, reception, and onward conscious recognition. There was a message in my mind. How it reached there is not defined; although at first confused with



fear, it was so very clear. "Sixth sense" (J.M. Small) in the *Lancet*, volume 337, issue 8756, 22 June 1991, p1550.

**3.** My two years in Windsor, Connecticut deepened my long-standing and recently re-wakened interest in survival. Within a couple of days of moving into the early Federal-style home built by Eliakim Mather Olcott in 1817, my wife and I (and dog) began to experience a combination of prototypical haunting and poltergeist phenomena. Although we critically investigated the various phenomena as they occurred, we were unable to trace the phenomena to natural causes. Given the fairly astonishing nature of some of the phenomena, my curiosity about our experiences peaked and I began research into the history of the home and the experiences of its former residents. This led to what has been a ten-year long investigation, including interviews with former residents, visitors to the home, and acquaintances of residents as far back as the 1930s. My inquiry turned up testimony from several prior occupants to experiencing phenomena identical, even in detail, to the phenomena my wife and I experienced. What I found equally fascinating, though, was the fact that occupants of the home prior to 1969, including long-term residents, claimed not to have experienced anything unusual. 1969 was the year resident Walter Callahan Sr. committed suicide in the home. In this way, the pattern of experiences surrounding the home fit a more widespread pattern in which ostensibly place-centered paranormal phenomena are associated with a suicide or other tragic event at the location.

<http://michaelsudduth.com/personal-reflections-on-life-after-death/>

**4.** Again, I remember Wolfgang, a German boy who used to stay with us, telling us the story about his uncle, the pastor. He had an uncle who was a Lutheran pastor, and the uncle told him or it was strong family knowledge. They moved into this equivalent to the Manse, whatever they call it, and it was quite empty and not a very nice sort of place altogether. It was a bit grim, and his uncle wasn't a bit happy about it. But, anyway, they settled down, the family did, and he was in his study writing his sermons, and suddenly all his books came off the shelf and flew all over the place, and his papers, his sermons, were all fluttering about like leaves, and the uncle wasn't really very concerned, he thought there was a sudden wind though there wasn't a window open or anything, and he went out into the other room, passage, or what-have-you, and asked his wife and she said, "No. Nothing. Why? What do you mean?" and it happened again. Every time he went to sit down to do any study, all his papers flew up all over the place.

Now, I know to make the story REAL, I should say what it was that had CAUSED this, and Wolfgang did connect it up to something, but that I've forgotten. (Agnes) *Alas, Poor Ghost!* (USU Press 1999), 43.

**5.** "We lived in a house that was spirited," Molly\* told me:

It was a lady committed suicide in the house, and then no one would live in it. We lived in it. We were desperate for another house. We went to live in it.

We had all kinds of things happened. Otherwise I wouldn't have believed in it, because I do believe in spirits. I don't

say ghosts. I don't know whether they're the same. I imagine they are really.

[G. B.: What happened there?]

Oh, well, the toilet used to flush when nobody was in, and we'd hear somebody walking in the passage and we'd go to the door and there'd be nobody there, and my mother was hanging washing up one day in the attic (you know, we'd two big attics) and she was hanging washing up one day and somebody came up behind her and gripped her by the shoulders, and she thought it was one of us, but it wasn't. We didn't live long in that house. It got a bit unnerving. Ibid. 48.

**6.** But I saw my father. My father was the first to die, and he died at three o'clock in the morning, and then twelve months after, Mother died at three o'clock in the afternoon. Well, she died from cancer of the jaw, so I mean, there was nothing to SMILE about.

But just before she died, I felt that whatever there was, EVER there was, Father had come to meet her. Because she just sat up and she gave that SMILE.

Of course, I think they do sit up before they die.

But— and she sort of held her arms out, and it was just that SPECIAL SMILE she always kept for him— [G. B.: You think she actually saw him?] I do! Oh, yes! (Lettie) Ibid. 52.

**7.** But I do think you can see people that's died. I do think there's summat at the other side and I've experienced it, as I say, and my daughter (she lives in Corbridge now, her

youngest daughter's nearly sixteen now) and when she was only about three it was the kidneys that were wrong with her, and they sent a district

nurse to her. My daughter had a very bad time with that last child.

She's four of them, two married now, one [other?] still at home. And she was very close to her father, my daughter was, she was the oldest, and I didn't know for quite a long while after (and I knew it must have been the crisis, my granddaughter must have been passing through the crisis, because she seemed to turn after that, on the mend), and I didn't know for quite a long while after, and my daughter said, "Mum," she said, "I've SEEN MY DAD as plain as I can see you! and he STOOD at the bottom of the bed as though she was going to die."

She says, "He was ready to take her!" But she turned for the better, you see.

But she said, "He STOOD at the bottom of that bed with his arms up!"

Some people think you imagine these things, but no! I'VE HEARD MY HUSBAND'S VOICE, and there's not been a soul in that flat! (Kathleen) Ibid. 53.

**8.** My sister died some years ago and she was desperately ill, and we'd been to see her in hospital the Sunday, and on the Sunday evening, the specialist phoned and said that the crisis was over and she would be on the mend, and I could HEAR her TALKING to me ALL evening, and suddenly, at five to six she just said, "I'm sorry, Sylvia, I can't hold on any longer," and the phone went, and it was the hospital. She'd died at five to six.

But it was as if she was actually in the room with me and said, "I'm sorry, Sylvia, I can't hold on any more." (Sylvia\*) Ibid. 54-55.

**9.** When my grandfather was dying, and my grandmother's name was Kate, and I was with him when he died, and he said— he called me Kate for about a day before he died and he said, "I'd like this, Kate"— and as he was dying he suddenly grasped my hand and he said, "Oh, smell the flowers! Smell the lilacs!" and he said, "Open the gate, Kate! I can't get in!" and it was February, there were no flowers out and none in his room, and he said it so strongly, "Smell the lilacs! Smell the lilacs!" and "Open the gate, Kate. I can't get in!" (Margot) Ibid. 55.

**10.** My husband during the war well, it was during the First World War really. Well, at the end. He was young. He was at home. But he was away with his sister and they—

The young man his sister was engaged to, because she was a bit older than he was, he appeared before them in the bedroom as plain as anything in his uniform. He said it was just as if he was almost there, and he'd been killed just at that time in the war.

Sixteen or seventeen he [the husband] was. But he said he [the brother-in-law] was standing near the dressing table and you just— he could have sworn he was there, and he apparently had been killed about that time in France or something, and that was something— He'd experienced it. There's no doubt. Ibid. 56.

**11.** They had burglars in the house about two years ago, and, just before this happened, one of my aunts APPEARED to her (my aunt died four years ago), and she actually SAW her but she didn't SAY anything. She said to me afterwards, "I'm sure she was trying to WARN me". Ibid. 57.

**12.** Dad had been dead now for about three years probably. Ned was working at the time of the story for a local farmer, Sam Black at the Manor Farm at Dell, and he used to have to go to market with these cart horses, bigger horses than ours but still cart horses, and he was going to Bradbury market one terrible frosty day. It was a dark morning, early morning, and the leading horse slipped and fell.

Ned would be at this time only fifteen or sixteen at the most and no experience. He was stuck in a country lane with a horse and the load all UP like this. The one horse had dragged the other horse down, and he didn't know what to do a little bit! and he said (this is the story), you know how you do? "Oh, help me! help me! What shall I do? What shall I do?" and saying it out loud, and he said Dad's voice CAME TO HIM QUITE CLEARLY, said, "Cut the girth cord, Ned! Cut the girth cord!" and he cut the girth cord and the leading horse got up and he was able to go, and he got to Bradbury very shaken, very frightened, but the load intact. (Agnes) Ibid. 61-62.

**13.** I collected very few stories in which women make physical preparations in response to a warning or omen...a mother waits at home because she is confident that she will hear that her daughter has been involved in an accident—that's all. Most often, it is merely psychological preparation

that the foreknowledge provides: before he steps on a mine a sister “sees” her brother with “his leg all shrivelled up”; a wife “sees” the accident her husband has been involved in; an aunt has a dream that her nephew has been blinded in the war, and so on Ibid. 67.

**14.** My little boy was drowned in the brook, did you not know? Well, I can tell you about that. I can tell you about what happened after with that. I prayed— I had— I was very, very ill, and I lay in bed one night and I said, “Please, God, just let me see him!” and he walked round the door, and I was fully awake. This is perfectly true. I was fully awake, and he came round the door, and he smiled at me, and I said, “Were you pushed, Bob, or were you— did you fall in?” and he didn’t say a word, and then I wasn’t satisfied with that. I said, “Please, God,” praying to God, “please let me touch him!” and I’d friends in the village, the butcher’s shop opposite the cinema, and I was in bed again and he came. I said, “Please let me touch him!” and I don’t know whether I was dreaming or not, but he came in front of me at their house above the butcher’s shop, and he stood in front of me as he often did, and I used to stroke him under the chin. He was a gorgeous-looking little boy. He’d blond curls.

[G. B.: How old was he?]

Eight and a half, and I just touched his cheeks. Like I always did, put my hand under his cheeks, you know, and held him close to me and he was there and I did it, and I said too—What else did I ask for? My wishes were granted. It was three wishes, and I can’t think what the other one was, can’t think what the other— But it— I thought it was absolutely wonderful.

[G. B.: Sort of like a miracle.]

It WAS a miracle. It was a miracle TO ME. IT WAS A REAL MIRACLE, because it helped a lot to me to have my wishes granted. (Laura) Ibid. 77-78.

**15.** When at Loweswater, I one day called upon a friend, who said, "You do not see many newspapers ; take one of those lying there." I accordingly took up a newspaper, bound with a wrapper, put it into my pocket and walked home.

In the evening I was writing, and, wanting to refer to a book, went into another room where my books were. I placed the candle on a ledge of the bookcase, took down a book and found the passage I wanted, when, happening to look towards the window, which was opposite to the bookcase, I saw through the window the face of an old friend whom I had known well at Cambridge, but had not seen for 10 years or more, Canon Robinson (of the Charity and School Commission). I was so sure I saw him that I went out to look for him, but could find no trace of him. I went back into the house and thought I would take a look at my newspaper. I tore off the wrapper, unfolded the paper, and the first piece of news that I saw was the death of Canon Robinson!

In reply to your note October 6th, I may state, with regard to the narrative I detailed to the Bishop of Carlisle, that I saw the face looking through the window, by the light of a single Ozokerit candle, placed on a ledge of the bookcase, which stood opposite the window ; that I was standing, with the candle by my side, reading from a book to which I had occasion to refer, and raising my eyes as I read, I saw the



face clearly and distinctly, ghastly pale, but with the features so marked and so distinct that I recognised it at once as the face of my most dear and intimate friend, the late Canon Robinson, who was with me at school and college, and whom I had not seen for many years past (10 or 11 at the very least). Almost immediately after, fully persuaded that my old friend had come to pay me a surprise visit, I rushed to the door, but seeing nothing I called aloud, searched the premises most carefully, and made inquiry as to whether any stranger had been seen near my house, but no one had been heard of or seen. When last I saw Canon Robinson he was apparently in perfect health, much more likely to out-live me than I him, and before I opened the newspaper announcing his death (which I did about an hour or so after seeing the face) I had not heard or read of his illness, or death, and there was nothing in the passage of the book I was reading to lead me to think of him.

The time at which I saw the face was between 10 and 11 o'clock p.m., the night dark, and while I was reading in a room where no shutter was closed or blind drawn.

I may answer in reply to your question " whether I have ever had any other vision or hallucination of any kind ? " that though I never saw any apparition, I have heard mysterious noises which neither my friends nor I were able satisfactorily to account for. Gurney, Edmund & Myers, Frederic. ON APPARITIONS OCCURRING SOON AFTER DEATH, *Proceedings* 5, 1888-9, 408-9.

**16.** About two months before the death of my dear father, which occurred on December 10th, 1887, one night about from 12 to 1 a.m., when I was in bed in a perfectly waking condition, he came to my bedside, and led me right through the cemetery at Kensal Green, stopping at the spot where his grave was afterwards made. He was very ill at that time and in a helpless condition—so far as his ability to walk up three flights of stairs to my room was concerned. I had at that time never been in that cemetery, but when I went there after his interment the scene was perfectly familiar to me. He led me beyond his grave to a large iron gate, but my recollection of this part is confused. I there lost sight of him. It was just like a panorama. I cannot say if my eyes were closed or open.

Again, a day or two before his death, somewhere between, the 4th and the 10th of December (the day of his decease), when he was lying in an unconscious state in a room on the ground floor, and I sleeping on the second floor, I was awoken suddenly by seeing a bright light in my bedroom—the whole room was flooded with a radiance quite indescribable—and my father was standing by my bedside, an etherealised semi-transparent figure, but yet his voice and his aspect were normal. His voice seemed a far-off sound, and yet it was his same voice as in life. All he said was, "Take care of mother." He then disappeared, floating in the air as it were, and the light also vanished.

About a week afterwards, that is to say, between the 12th and the 17th of December, the same apparition came to me again, and repeated the same words. An aunt, to whom I related these three experiences, suggested to me that possibly something was troubling his spirit, and I then

promised her that should my dear father visit me again I would answer him. This occurred a short time afterwards. On this, the fourth, occasion he repeated the same words, and I replied, "Yes, father." He then added, "I am in perfect peace. "

Apparently he was satisfied with this my assurance. Since that time I have neither seen nor heard any more. I have never before or since had any such experience. Myers, Frederic. ON RECOGNISED APPARITIONS OCCURRING MORE THAN A YEAR AFTER DEATH, *Proceedings* 6, 1889-90,450-51.

**17.** Towards the middle of the month of October, 1887 [since fixed by letters of that year as Sunday, October 23rd, 1887], in fact, as nearly as I can recall, about the time when C.'s father first appeared to her in a spiritualised form, I had a singular and most vivid impression that the post would bring me bad news. We were then in Switzerland. I could daily from my window, at 11.20 a.m. to a moment, see the train arrive which brought our English letters. These were taken to the post-office close by and sorted ; and about 20 minutes after the train came in my letters (if any) were placed upon my table. On Sunday mornings the English Church service began at 10.30, so that by 11.40 the chaplain was well advanced in his sermon. On that one particular Sunday it was, as nearly as I can tell, exactly at that moment of time I suddenly felt much distressed and mentally disturbed, feeling convinced that bad news was awaiting me on my return to the hotel. I had to put considerable force upon myself to refrain from rising from my seat and leaving the church.

My presentiment was only too true ; on my writing-table I found a most agonising letter from T. (O.'s elder sister) telling me that their father had had a most alarming attack of illness (this was the first of the three seizures which resulted in his decease on December 10th). One point I would especially notice—apparently this letter conveyed no impression to my mind so long as it was in the train or at the post-office, but took effect upon me so soon as it was put upon my writing-table—came within my surroundings, as it were.

We returned to England on December 1st. After C.'s father's death— during the night of December 12th-13th—I was sleeping in a small back room on the ground floor of a lodging in London, a room which had only one window, closed by shutters and a thick curtain. The gas in the passage was put out when I went to bed, so that, after I had extinguished my candle, the room was shrouded in impenetrable darkness—darkness that could be felt. About 3 a. m. on the morning of the 13th I awoke en sursaut, as the French expression has it (that is to say, I was wide awake, not in a half dreamy condition), to see the room up to the ceiling, for about the width of my bed, and extending to the fireplace opposite, flooded with a pale golden radiance, an unearthly light—quite unlike any we are acquainted with ; it seemed to come from behind the bed ; so bright was it that I could distinctly see the design on the wall-paper opposite me, and over the fireplace. This paper was a very pale French grey, of two tints, outlined here and there with a thin line of colour. This effect lasted, as nearly as I can tell, about five minutes, during which I opened and shut my eyes several times, clasped and unclasped my hands, and hit myself to be certain that I was not dreaming. When the light went I was in total darkness as before.

That same day I confided the circumstance to T. (Clara's sister), begging her not to tell her about it, since C. was feeling her father's death most acutely ; but when a day or two later O. told me of his three appearances to her, and of this same remarkable golden light which accompanied them, I related to her what I had myself seen, expressing my regret that awe or astonishment had prevented me from speaking or making some sign ; though, unlike herself, I had seen no shadowy form approach me. The thought then occurred to me that there might be something regarding which the deceased wished to be satisfied—something which prevented his spirit from obtaining perfect rest, and I suggested to her that should this experience be repeated to either of us we should answer him. The result is stated in C. 's account. My own impression is that his spirit tried to communicate with me, but in my great amazement at the vision I was unable to receive his message. C. was prepared.<sup>1</sup>

Later on—viz., in a letter, dated February 27th, 1888, C., when writing to me, says : "When I told you in my last letter, dear auntie, that I had spoken, it was from your advice, for you told me to do so. Now, I must try and explain to you just what happened. It was about 4 o'clock in the morning, or even earlier. A bright light suddenly came into my room—not a light like from a fire or a candle, but a glow of golden light. Then I sa/v a form, quite white, bend over me, and in my darling father's voice I heard these words : \* Take care of mother—I am in perfect peace. ' I said : ' Yes, father. ' And then the light by degrees disappeared. Since this, I have not seen or heard anything more, and I have a feeling that I shall never again, as I feel sure that all he wanted to say he has said, and is at rest

since I answered him. What you tell me as having happened to you on the night of December 12th is, indeed, passing strange. I should so like to know what was meant to tell you. Have you any idea 1 It is strange that both you and I should see the same light. You see I told you first, so it could not have been a dream, as I might possibly have fancied if you had told of your strange light (for I do sometimes dream of things which I hear and read of). If anything should happen again I will write it down, and let you know at once ; but, somehow, I feel I shall not." Gurney, Edmund & Myers, Frederic. ON APPARITIONS OCCURRING SOON AFTER DEATH, *Proceedings* 5, 1888-9, 450-53.

**18.** Our mother died while we were all very young...At length, when I was about 18 years old, a terrible grief befell us, viz., the death of my two elder brothers within a few weeks of each other, while, they were still abroad.

My father's sorrow was great ; and at the same time he became seriously-troubled with many doubts regarding various points of Christian faith, and so gradually lost nearly all his buoyancy of spirit, and became sadly depressed and worn-looking, though only 48 years old.

I was lying in deepest anguish, beset not only with the grief of the sudden loss sustained, but with the wretched fear that my beloved father had died too suddenly to find peace with God, regarding those miserable doubts that had so troubled him. As the night wore on, the pain of heart and thought grew worse and worse, and at length I knelt in prayer, earnestly pleading that my distressful thoughts

might be taken away, and an assurance of my father's peace be given me by God's Most Holy Spirit. No immediate relief came, however, and it was early dawn when I rose from my knees, and felt that I must be patient and wait for the answer of my prayer.

I was just about to slip quietly down into the bed, when on the opposite side of it (that on which the nurse was sleeping) the room became suddenly full of beautiful light, in the midst of which stood my father absolutely transfigured, clothed with brightness. He slowly moved towards the bed, raising his hands, as I thought, to clasp me in his arms ; and I ejaculated : "Father ! " He replied, " Blessed for ever, my child ! For ever blessed ! " I moved to climb over nurse and kiss him, reaching out my arms to him ; but with a look of mingled sadness and love he appeared to float back with the light towards the wall and was gone ! The vision occupied so short a time that, glancing involuntarily at the window again, I saw the morning dawn and the little bird just as they had looked a few minutes before. I felt sure that God had vouchsafed to me a wonderful vision, and was not in the least afraid, but, on the contrary, full of a joy that brought floods of grateful tears, and completely removed all anguish except that of having lost my father from earth. I offer no explanation, and can only say most simply and truthfully that it all happened just as I have related. Myers, Frederic. ON RECOGNISED APPARITIONS OCCURRING MORE THAN A YEAR AFTER DEATH, *Proceedings* 6, 1889-90, 25-6.

**19.** Sixteen years ago, I had just got into bed, but had not lowered the gas, which was brightly burning. My wife and I both saw her aunt walk across the room and disappear. The

figure was as plain as in life. She lived one and a-half miles away, and was ill at the time. Next day we heard she had died about that hour. Sidgwick, Henry et al. REPORT ON THE CENSUS OF HALLUCINATIONS, *Proceedings* 10, 1894, 230.

**20.** My first impression was at a concert at Richmond, Surrey, on December 12th, 1881, when my father appeared to me on the platform at frequent intervals the whole time the concert was going on. My father was lying ill in Devonshire at the time. He was dressed in his ordinary clothes. I was told afterwards that my father had been asking for me at this time.

I was in much anxiety about my father, who was very ill at the time, but I did not know he was any worse in December than he had been for some weeks previously. My age was 27. I again saw my father in the early hours of the morning of the 13th December, and was so disturbed that I got up and told a footman of it in an adjoining room. On returning to my own room I again saw the figure of my father, leaning over me as I lay in bed, and he remained on and off through the night. I had seen my father the previous July. He died at 7.30 on the morning of the 13th December, within a short time of his appearing to me. I did not know of his death till mid-day on December 13th. Sidgwick, Henry et al. REPORT ON THE CENSUS OF HALLUCINATIONS, *Proceedings* 10, 1894, 233.

**21.** When I was about 19 years old, an old friend of my mother's, Mr. Wilson,<sup>1</sup> came to live near us. He had just lost his wife and was himself in consumption, with no chance of



permanent recovery. He was in the habit of coming to our house in a bath-chair every morning, when he was well enough, and having a rest and a little luncheon. One day he came as usual, but looking much better and in particularly good spirits. On the evening of that day, about 9 o'clock (it was quite dusk), I was sitting at supper with my mother and aunt in the dining-room, with my back to the window, and facing an old-fashioned sideboard. I distinctly saw Mr. Wilson standing, resting his elbow on the sideboard and his face on his hand ; he had no coat on, and I was particularly struck by noticing that the back of his waistcoat was made of a very shiny material. I felt as though I could not take my eyes off him, and my aunt, noticing that I looked terrified, asked me what was the matter. He then disappeared. Within an hour a messenger came to fetch my mother, telling her that Mr. W. had broken a blood vessel and was dying. We went round just in time to see him alive, and he was lying on the bed, on his side, without a coat, and wearing a waistcoat with a particularly shiny back. Sidgwick, Henry et al. REPORT ON THE CENSUS OF HALLUCINATIONS, *Proceedings* 10, 1894, 237.

**22.** On October 5th, 1863, I awoke at 5 a.m. I was in Minto House Normal School, Edinburgh. I heard distinctly the well-known and characteristic voice of a dear friend, repeating the words of a well-known hymn. Nothing [was] visible. [I was] lying quite awake in bed — in good health, and free from any special anxiety. There would be two others in the room, but sound asleep. I have always thought it remarkable that at the very same time, almost to a minute, my friend was seized suddenly with mortal illness. He died same day, and a telegram reached me that evening announcing that fact. He had previously been in his usual

good health. Sidgwick, Henry et al. REPORT ON THE CENSUS OF HALLUCINATIONS, *Proceedings* 10, 1894, 256.

**23.** On 30th October, 1857, while Curate of Gain's Colliie, Essex, I was sitting in my room, in lodgings, in a lonely half-occupied farmhouse, about 7 p.m., when I heard the voice of a parishioner, whom I well knew, calling me from the outside, under my window, 'Mr. Maskell, I want you ; come/ I went out, but saw no one, and thought no more of it, till about 9 p.m. I was sent for by the man's wife, distant nearly a mile, and then learned that the man J. B. had been found dead in the roadway from Chappie Station to the village—a long distance from my abode, perhaps a mile or more. " J. B. was a cattle dealer, and I saw him frequently, both in his place in church, and out of it. I had no knowledge of his occupation at 7 p.m. on Saturday, October 30th, 1857. The man J. B. was supposed to have been murdered, and at the inquest the verdict was ' Wilful murder against some person or persons unknown.' The motive for the murder was robbery, as he had sold much cattle, and was returning with money from Colchester Market. Sidgwick, Henry et al. REPORT ON THE CENSUS OF HALLUCINATIONS, *Proceedings* 10, 1894, 258.

**24.** On September 3rd, 1858, I was in a wild part of the West Highlands, where our home was, close to the sea. A party of cousins were with us, on a visit. I and a sister and one of our guests, a girl of 16, went out on the hills, to a point where we could look over the Sound of Mull. We sat on the turf looking at the view. I and my cousin made an outline sketch. [Then] she rose and walked a little further to join my sister. I was left alone, and an impulse came over me io pray for a brother, a sailor—he was in the West Indies

at the time. I heard no sound, but I felt a sensation as if something touched me. I obeyed and prayed for his safe keeping (his ship was on its way home). I said nothing to the others, but I did look at my watch : it was 3.30 p.m.

On September 7th a letter from this brother came. He hoped to be with us in a few weeks, but they had been coaling at St. Thomas, and yellow fever was raging there ; several cases on board his own ship, though none were very severe. His letter was dated on a late day in August (25th, I think). On September 21st, our guests having all left us, a letter came from the authorities at Portsmouth, stating that on September 3rd he had died of yellow fever on his voyage home, and his body had been committed to the deep on the same day. He had been taken ill just after writing his last letter, and as he was a young fellow of 19, the surgeon thought his best chance was to be sent off at once, so he was carried on board and died on the second day at sea, September 3rd. The exact hour was not known, for the boy was left asleep in his berth, and found dead by one of his fellow-officers.

The shock was great to my mother—we could not talk much to her. Just after Christmas my mother and I went to stay with old friends and connections at a beautiful place close to Dunbar. Of course the sad event was talked over by my mother and our hostess. I was sitting by the first time they spoke, and heard my mother say, that about 3 o'clock on September 3rd she was sitting talking to her friend (the mother of the girl who walked out with me). Each had a sailor-boy, and they were talking of those two absent ones. Then they agreed to go out and walk, and my mother had got on her things, and was leaving her room to join her

friend, when (I quote her words) 'a hand seemed to force me to turn back, and I went and knelt down and prayed for my boy. I did not know why, but I just prayed he might be safe.' When I got her alone, I told her about our walk and my own experience. I had never done so till then, she had been so ill and upset. Neither of us had a doubt but that this ' message ' was sent to us just as the young spirit passed alone into the Unseen World. We heard no voice and saw nothing, but we were aware of an unusual sensation, which could not be resisted. I can only call it ' an uncontrollable impulse.' Sidgwick, Henry et al. REPORT ON THE CENSUS OF HALLUCINATIONS, *Proceedings* 10, 1894, 258-9.

**25.** It was one Sunday morning at church, during morning service. I looked up from my Prayer-book and saw the figure of a man standing in what had been an empty seat opposite me. He turned half round and looked at me with a fixed, agonised gaze. I felt perturbed and very annoyed at his behaviour, when he bowed his head as though something were passing over him, and, to my utter astonishment, vanished. This was on Sunday...I was singing the Psalms, with my brother sharing the same book. I was in good health, and quite free from grief or anxiety. My age was 22. The appearance was that of an acquaintance of mine, who from his seat in church was much given to staring at me during service. I heard afterwards that at that exact time he was at the deathbed of his mother. Sidgwick, Henry et al. REPORT ON THE CENSUS OF HALLUCINATIONS, *Proceedings* 10, 1894, 260.

**26.** At Redhill, on Thanksgiving Day, between 8 and 9 in the evening, when I was taking charge of the little daughter of

a friend, during [my] friend's absence for that evening, I left the child sleeping in the bedroom, and went to drop the blinds in two neighbouring rooms, being absent about three minutes. On returning to the child's room, in the full light of the gas-burner from above I distinctly saw, coming from the child's cot, a white figure, which figure turned, looked me full in the face, and passed down the staircase. I instantly followed, leaned over the banisters in astonishment, and saw the glistening of the white drapery as the figure passed down the staircase, through the lighted hall, and silently through the hall door itself, •which was barred, chained, and locked. I felt for the moment perfectly staggered, went back to the bedroom, and found the child peacefully sleeping. I related the circumstance to the mother immediately on her return late that night. She was incredulous, but said that my description of the figure answered to that of an invalid aunt of the child's. The next morning came a telegram to say that this relative, who had greatly wished to see her niece, had died between 8 and 9 the previous evening. Sidgwick, Henry et al. REPORT ON THE CENSUS OF HALLUCINATIONS, *Proceedings* 10, 1894, 263.

**27.** I was in Staffordshire, and on the night of August 7th, 1877, retired to rest between eleven and twelve, but I could not sleep. About two, as near as I can remember, while still awake, a strange feeling came over me, as if I was not alone, and sitting up to look, two scenes came vividly before me ; in the first, I saw my dear brother (who, as I believed, was far away in Bangkok) lying at the foot of my bed, dying. I remember I cried out, ' No one there who loves him, and no last message. ' Then I saw a coffin in the same place, and felt he was dead. [I was] in good health. [Age] over 20.

In December we heard that my brother had died in hospital at Singapore on his way home, unconscious, and with no one there who knew him. At the time I had this vision we were not aware of my brother's illness.

Miss H. remembers distinctly that this was the date of her visions; it was a Sunday morning ;1 she was asked by the vicar's wife after church why she looked strange and whether she was unwell. Sidgwick, Henry et al. REPORT ON THE CENSUS OF HALLUCINATIONS, *Proceedings* 10, 1894, 288.

**28.** On June 5th, 1887, a Sunday evening,1 between 11 and 12 at night, being awake, my name was called three times. I answered twice, thinking it was my uncle, 'Come in, Uncle George, I am awake,' but the third time I recognised the voice as that of my mother, who had been dead 16 years. I said, 'Mamma !' She then came round a screen near my bedside with two children in her arms, and placed them in my arms and put the bed-clothes over them and said, 'Lucy, promise me to take care of them, for their mother is just dead.' I said, 'Yes, mamma.' She repeated, 'Promise me to take care of them.' I replied, 'Yes, I promise you ;' and I -added 'Oh, mamma, stay and speak to me, I am so wretched.' She replied, 'Not yet, my child,' then she seemed to go round the screen again, and I remained, feeling the children to be still in my arms, and fell asleep. When I awoke there was nothing. Tuesday morning, June 7th, I received the news of my sister-in-law's death. She had given birth to a child three weeks before, which I did

not know till after her death. Sidgwick, Henry et al. REPORT  
ON THE CENSUS OF HALLUCINATIONS, *Proceedings* 10,  
1894, 380.

## Abraham, Lazarus, and Dives

*27 And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house— 28 for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' 29 But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' 30 And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' 31 He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead'" (Lk 15:29-31).*

In my experience, this is sometimes quoted to rule out the possibility of ghosts and apparitions of the dead.

**i)** Since I'm not Roman Catholic, I don't believe that men and women canonized by the church of Rome appear to the living. That's not how I define a "saint".

**ii)** Jesus is telling a fictional story to make a point (or several points). Although Abraham is a real person who continues to exist in the afterlife, he functions as a fictional character in the story—just like the rich man. So this is a fictional dialogue rather than a heavenly oracle.



**iii)** I doubt readers are meant to think Abraham has the authority to send people from heaven to earth, but simply refuses to exercise that authority. Abraham is just one of many saints.

**iv)** In the first instance, this is referring to the epistemic situation of Jews. People who have the OT. It doesn't address the epistemic situation of pagans.

**v)** V31 is an ironic jibe that foreshadows the Jewish rejection of Jesus. If they disregard the argument from (messianic) prophecy, then they'll disregard the Resurrection. And in fact, that's what often happened.

But even then it's not an absolute or universal claim, but just a generalization. After all, the disciples had to witness the resurrection of Christ to be convinced. Even for the disciples, Moses and the Prophets were not enough to convince them.

**vi)** In the parable, the barrier isn't between heaven and earth but heaven and hell (v26).

## Are there ghosts?

Question: "What does the Bible say about ghosts / hauntings?"

Answer: Is there such a thing as ghosts? The answer to this question depends on what precisely is meant by the term "ghosts." If the term means "spirit beings," the answer is a qualified "yes." If the term means "spirits of people who have died," the answer is "no." The Bible makes it abundantly clear that there are spirit beings, both good and evil. But the Bible negates the idea that the spirits of deceased human beings can remain on earth and "haunt" the living.

Hebrews 9:27 declares, "Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment." That is what happens to a person's soul-spirit after death—judgment. The result of this judgment is heaven for the believer (2 Corinthians 5:6-8; Philippians 1:23) and hell for the unbeliever (Matthew 25:46; Luke 16:22-24). There is no in-between. There is no possibility of remaining on earth in spirit form as a "ghost." If there are such things as ghosts, according to the Bible, they absolutely cannot be the disembodied spirits of deceased human beings.

The Bible teaches very clearly that there are indeed spirit beings who can connect with and appear in our physical world. The Bible identifies these beings as angels and demons. Angels are spirit beings who are faithful in serving God. Angels are righteous, good, and holy. Demons are fallen angels, angels who rebelled against God. Demons are evil, deceptive, and destructive. According to 2 Corinthians 11:14-15, demons

masquerade as “angels of light” and as “servants of righteousness.” Appearing as a “ghost” and impersonating a deceased human being definitely seem to be within the power and abilities that demons possess.

<https://www.gotquestions.org/ghosts-hauntings.html>

- 1.** It's true that we need to take demonic activity into account. The question is whether that's an ad hoc explanation for all prima facie apparitions of the dead.
- 2.** The respondent's major proof-text is Heb 9:27. However, he doesn't exegete that text or explain how it disproves the existence of ghosts. Let's examine the text:

*And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment* (Heb 9:27, ESV).

- i)** Considered in isolation, this might be a universal statement: every human will die. Moreover, every human will die just one time.
  - ii)** In addition, both claims might be universal. Those who face judgment are coextensive with those who die. If death is universal, then judgment is universal.
- 3.** Let's consider the first clause. Is it universally true that everybody dies just once? For that matter, is it universally true that everyone dies? You can't die more than once unless you die at least one time. You can't die more than once unless you die a first time. But in Scripture, there are exceptions:

**i)** Elijah (1 Kgs 17) and Elisha (2 Kgs 4) raise the dead. But presumably, the children they restored to life were not immortal. So they died a second time. There's also the somewhat enigmatic statement about the revived corpse in 2 Kgs 13. But that might be another case of someone who's temporally revived, only to die a second time.

In addition, Jesus raised the dead, viz. Lazarus (Jn 11), the daughter of Jairus (Lk 8), and the widow's son (Lk 7). Likewise, Peter raised the dead (Acts 9). More ambiguous is the case of Eutychus (Acts 20).

Presumably, although these people were revived, they were still mortal. So they died a second time.

**ii)** In addition, Paul indicates that Christians who are alive at the time of the Parousia will become instantly immortal (1 Cor 15:51; 1 Thes 4:17). So they won't die at all.

**iii)** Likewise, there's the translation of Enoch (Heb 11:5) and Elijah (2 Kgs 2), who escape death by that intervention.

In addition, what happened to the saints in Mt 27:50-53?

**iv)** Assuming the inerrancy of Scripture, Heb 9:27a is a general claim rather than a universal claim. Not a statement about what happens to everyone, but what happens to humans in general.

And that's confined to examples from Bible history. But the Bible is not an encyclopedia. It doesn't detail everything that exists or everything that happens.

**v)** Put another way, Heb 9:27 is not an absolute claim, but a statement about what happens to humans, all other things being equal. Yet it makes allowance for exceptions, all things considered. Like many unqualified statements in Scripture, it has an implicit *ceteris paribus* clause. If other conditions hold constant, if other factors remain unchanged, then that's what will happen. But in some cases, a different outcome is possible if there's a countervailing factor.

**4.** In addition, this 1C statement doesn't address situations in which someone who's clinically dead is resuscitated by medical technology. Take someone who falls through ice, drowning in a fridge pond. He dies, but the chilling effect temporarily prevents necrosis, so in some cases he can be revived. But he'd be dead by 1C criteria.

**5.** Let's consider the second clause. Is that a universal claim? Does it mean every human will undergo divine judgment? That depends on what the author means by "judgment" in this context:

**a)** Sometimes "judgment" has is a synonym for condemnation, damnation, eschatological punishment (e.g. Heb 10:27-30). But the author doesn't mean everyone will face judgment in a punitive sense. To the contrary, he sets "judgment" in v27 in contrast to "salvation" in v28. Some experience judgment while others experience deliverance from judgment. So the claim isn't universal in *that* sense.

**b)** Sometimes "judgment" denotes a verdict of acquittal or conviction (e.g. Heb 4:13; 12:23; 13:4). So it might be universal in that discriminating sense.

**6.** In addition, Scripture presents a two-stage afterlife: (i) the intermediate state, followed by (ii) the final state. In that sense, most humans will be "judged" *twice*:

**i)** There's what happens to you after you die. The period in-between death and the Day of Judgment. Postmortem judgment is repeatable and individual. It happens at different times throughout human history, because people die at different times.

**ii)** Then there's eschatological judgment. The Final Judgment. That's a corporate, one-time event at the end of the church age (or thereabouts).

**7.** According to Scripture, every human will experience one of two divergent eternal destinies. The concise statement in Heb 9:27 doesn't unpack all these subdivisions.

**8.** Does Heb 9:27 preclude apparitions of the dead? In principle, there are three or four possible options:

**i)** There's no possible contact between the living and the dead

**ii)** It's possible for the saints to contact the living

**iii)** It's possible for the damned to contact the living

**iv)** Both (ii) & (iii)

**9.** Some Christians think "judgment" in Heb 9:27 means that damned are quarantined, so that contact between the damned and the living is impossible. Even if that's true, it doesn't address the very different case of sainted believers.

We have apparitions of the dead (Moses) at the Transfiguration (Mt 17). 1 Sam 28 is a prima facie apparition of the dead, in the context of necromancy. (Some readers dispute that interpretation.)

In addition, Jesus appears to Paul (Acts 9) and John (Rev 1).

The "dead" is ambiguous terminology. Jesus is alive, yet he usually resides in the realm of the "dead" (e.g. with the saints in heaven).

So even if Scripture ruled out apparitions of the damned, it doesn't rule out apparitions of the saints. (I'm using "saints," not in the Roman Catholic sense, but in reference to dead Christians.)

And, once again, it's important to keep in mind that the Bible is not an encyclopedia. We need to draw a distinction:

**i)** Scripture doesn't say if X happens

**ii)** Scripture says X doesn't happen

But (i) is not equivalent to (ii). The silence of Scripture is not a denial.

**10.** Are the damned quarantined? Maybe so, maybe not. That depends on the nature of postmortem punishment and the intermediate state of the damned. Suppose, until the "great separation" at the Day of Judgment, some of the damned are "wandering spirits" or "restless spirits". That in itself is a punitive condition.

**11.** Consider the alternative explanation: demons impersonating the dead. But if demons aren't quarantined,

why insist that the souls of damned humans are quarantined? After all, doesn't Scripture depict fallen angels as imprisoned spirits (e.g. 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6; Rev 9:1-3)? But if that picturesque language makes allowance for demonic activity on earth, why not ghosts?

**12.** Yes, believers go to heaven when they die. Does that mean they're confined to heaven? Was Moses confined to heaven? Or Elijah? Or Jesus. Or celestial angels?

**13.** What about the parable of Lazarus and Dives (Lk 16)?

**i)** That's tricky because it's a fictional illustration, so the question is how much it is meant to illustrate. For instance, if you press the details, this would mean the damned can contact the saints. But do Christians who deny the existence of ghosts think that's generally the case? Can the denizens of hell initiate contact with the denizens of heaven whenever they feel like it? Is that realistic? Or is this an imaginary conversation between someone in "heaven" (Abraham) and someone in "hell" (the rich man) to illustrate whatever lesson(s) the parable is meant to teach?

**ii)** In addition, the barrier in that scene isn't between heaven and earth, but heaven and hell. There's no traffic between heaven and hell (v26), but that doesn't rule out the possibility of traffic between heaven and earth. When the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus back to warn the rich man's living relatives, Abraham doesn't say there's another barrier which prevents that. Rather, he says it would be futile since they wouldn't listen.

Moreover, v31 is an allusion to the Resurrection, not the intermediate state. That verse doesn't speak directly to the status of ghosts. Rather, it foreshadows the incredulous



reaction of the Jewish establishment to the resurrection of Christ.

**14.** BTW, I don't subscribe to universalism, annihilationism, postmortem salvation, or Purgatory. My analysis takes for granted a traditional evangelical view of the afterlife—which I've defended on other occasions.

## Tales from the crypt

### **Stranger Things? Does God Still Speak?**

June 15, 2017 by Roger E. Olson

One day, recently, as I was just going about my weekly Saturday routines—mostly working in the yard—suddenly and “out of the blue” a face from the distant past came to my mind. I immediately remembered his first name but struggled to think of his last name. His first name was “Dean” and I knew him very well for about three years—at that same church where I served as assistant pastor many, many years ago. Dean and I saw each other two or three times weekly—at church on Sundays, at men’s breakfast prayer meeting midweek, and at Bible study on Wednesday evenings. He was somewhat older than I, but we were in Christian fellowship with each other—together with a group of men. We attended retreats together and he served as counselor at the summer Bible camp I organized and led each summer. All that is to say that for about three years we knew each other well. Then, when I moved far away, we lost touch. I had not thought of him in years.

Soon after his face came to my mind and I remembered his first name I remembered his last name. For the next three days, after his face and name came imposingly and seemingly arbitrarily to my mind, I thought of him along these lines: “I need to look him up and see if I can find his address or phone number and contact him.” I had no idea why. It didn’t even occur to me that God had anything to do with it. If I analyzed it at all I simply assumed it was a “brain hiccup.”

After three days during which I could not stop thinking about Dean I finally got around to looking him up using the world wide web. I entered his name and the city where we both lived in a search engine. (I assumed he still lived there.) What I found was his obituary. He died three days before—on the day his face and name suddenly came to my mind, in that city where we knew each other many years ago.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2017/06/stranger-things-god-still-speak/>

## Spooked

<http://www.beliefnet.com/inspiration/articles/are-ghosts-real.aspx>

I believe Rod Dreher is Eastern Orthodox. I don't share his belief in Purgatorial punishment.

Evidence of the existence of ghosts disproves atheism inasmuch as atheists typically deny the afterlife. Most atheists, at least Western atheists (in contrast to Buddhists), are physicalists.

Oddly enough, many Christians agree with atheists regarding the nonexistence of ghosts even though Christians traditionally believe in the immortal soul, which is separable from the body.

Although I think death seals our eternal fate (I reject postmortem salvation), that of itself doesn't imply that there can be no contact between the living and the dead (or the damned). Of course, necromancy is forbidden, but that doesn't mean contact is impossible. And there's an elementary moral distinction between soliciting initiating contact with the dead, which is prohibited, and having the dead initiate contact.

## Premonitions

In this post I'm going to give some examples of what I consider to be credible premonitions or premonitory dreams. Scripture records a number of revelatory or premonitory dreams. Some happen to believers and some to unbelievers. And, of course, we have the programmatic promise in **Acts 2:17-18**. So it's not surprising if some people have premonitory dreams today.

Premonitions can happen apart from dreams. In addition, dreams can intersect with crisis apparitions, where a dead relative appears to the dreamer. By the same token, apparitions can happen within dreams or apart from dreams.

What's the purpose of premonitory dreams? The most direct function is to warn or prepare the dreamer for an impending crisis. But suppose it doesn't seem to serve any purpose?

Of course, that could be evidence that it's not premonitory. Just coincidence. However, it might still be premonitory. The purpose would simply be to give the dreamer evidence that there's more to reality than meets the eye. That this physical world is not all there is. Uncanny things happen that don't fit into the tight confines of naturalism. That can be an encouragement to Christians. Likewise, it can give unbelievers reason to reconsider their naturalism.

I'll begin with a few accounts I find plausible, but a bit doubtful:

**i)** I've read that Loretta Lynn has premonitions. Something she inherited from her mother. It's possible those are tall

tales. However, I don't see what she has to gain by it. She didn't make her fame and fortune as a reputed psychic. According to Kurt Koch, mediumistic magic is hereditary.

**ii)** Many years ago I heard a UMC minister share a personal anecdote at a Bible study. He said he was a coal miner's son. He said his mother dreamt about a room she'd never seen before. It may have been a college dorm. Later, she went to the place she dreamt about, and it looked exactly like the dream.

What's striking about this anecdote is that he himself is politically and theologically liberal, so he's not predisposed to believe things like that. However, I'm somewhat hesitant about the account. It's not something that happened to him, but something his mother related to him. So he can't vouch for the experience. And I heard it just once, many years ago, so my recollection might be a little off.

**iii)** In the late 80s (I think), a friend took me to his church. We didn't go for the service. Instead, We went upstairs to listen to a talk by a retired missionary. It was a small group gathering.

She was an older woman. She was the daughter of missionaries. She grew up on the mission field.

She married a Christian who was gung-ho about going into missions. Ironically, she was far less enthusiastic than he was. She knew from personal experience that foreign missions was very hard.

But she was dutiful, so she agreed to return to the mission field with her new husband—even though she really didn't want to resume that life.

While they were there, one day her daughter told her that she (her daughter) had a death premonition. And, in fact, her daughter died two weeks later.

At that point the missionary told us, "What can you say? It's God's will." She kind of shrugged.

The missionary described how hard it was to get in touch with her relatives back home. The missionaries were in a backwater (in Africa, or maybe Latin America) with poor telephone communications. And when she did get hold of her parents, they were in total shock, since the death of their granddaughter (just a teenager at the time) was completely unexpected.

Aside from the premonition, what came through was her faithful submission to the will of God, despite a very difficult life. A life of hardship and wrenching disappointment.

It's possible that the story of the premonition was something she just made up, but I don't know what would motivate her to do that. She wasn't famous. She was just sharing her life-story with a handful of people in church. Not even in the main sanctuary.

It wasn't a story about miraculous deliverance. It didn't have a happy ending. It wasn't: "God spoke to me! God gave me a vision! Now send me a 'seed faith' offering to make it happen."

My main hesitation is that I heard it just once, many years ago, so I'm fuzzy on the details.

Now I'll move on to stronger examples. #1 is a dream I myself had, back in 2010. #'s 2-4 are anecdotes that Christian friends have shared with me (which I reproduce

with their permission). These have been anonymized to protect the confidentiality of the source. I hasten to add that none of them is charismatic. #'s 5-9 are already in the public domain. Rauser is a Christian philosopher. Ruskin was a Victorian art critic and social commentator. Crespin was an opera diva. The rest are self-explanatory.

#1. I had a very tiring day, so I went to bed unusually early for me (9PM). I dreamt of two women walking their dogs (2 dogs) at night. Then I woke up. It was 11PM. (I know the time due to the illuminated digital readout on my clock.) I looked out my bedroom window (which faces the street) and saw a woman walking her two dogs in the moonlight.

#2. My wife and I were speaking with our landlady today. She's an older woman somewhere in her 60s, I think.

For some reason, our landlady told us a story about how she once saw her mother's apparition. At the time, it sounded like she was an adult in her 30s or perhaps 40s. She had gone to visit or follow-up with a well-known doctor who had a practice in an upscale part of town. The doctor had run some tests on her earlier. But on this visit the doctor told her the tests had come back positive for cancer. He also told her the cancer was so widespread that she would likely succumb very shortly. There was nothing they could do. The cancer was inoperable.

She said she went home feeling completely numb. She was in shock and couldn't really sleep. Instead, she just stared at her bedroom wall for most of the night.

However, while she was staring at her bedroom wall, she said her mother suddenly appeared to her. She said her mother had already passed away years ago at this point.



But her mother appeared to her and told our landlady that she (our landlady, her daughter) was in perfectly fine health. That there was absolutely nothing wrong with her. Also, our landlady said her mother's apparition spoke to her in a very authoritative voice, which was surprising to her, cuz her mother in life had been a very meek and uncertain woman. Not the type of woman who would speak in an authoritative or confident voice. Our landlady also said she wasn't asleep or dreaming at the time she saw her mother's apparition (since I asked), but was wide awake, just staring at the wall, although she did feel completely numb to everything.

The next day our landlady said that she started to drive to work. But suddenly she broke down and started crying in her car. The diagnosis of cancer had suddenly hit her, and she wept and wept and couldn't stop.

Then she said for some reason she felt she had to drive to the nearest hospital, and so she did. She said she parked right outside the hospital, leaving her car running, and ran into the ED or emergency dept. It took a while for the doctors to calm her down, but when they did, and when they figured out what she was crying nonstop about, they decided to run some tests as well.

She waited in the ED for most of the day, and when the tests came back, the emergency doctors told her that none of the tests showed any sign of cancer. She had come back negative. So the emergency physicians wanted her to check again with her doctor, which she did, and it turned out she was fine. No cancer.

Strange story. I don't know what to make of it. Our landlady doesn't seem like a liar, so I don't think she's lying. She doesn't seem like an emotional or hysterical type either. In

fact, she seems quite level-headed most of the time, although she can have a temper at times.

Our landlady is either a nominal Anglican or possibly a lapsed/backslidden one. I can't really tell. I asked, and she told me her mother was a professing Anglican.

#3. I had something happen to me about 13 years ago. When my mother was dying, I and my other 3 siblings were trying very hard to contact our brother in Texas (there are 5 of us all together). I finally did get in touch with him, and he explained he would try, but could not make it to see my mother. It all seemed rather suspicious. After my mother died, I began going to church with my father (at his dispensational church) so he would not be alone. I would then go to breakfast with him (he and my mom did this every Sunday), I would then drop off my dad at his house, meet up with my wife and go to my Reformed church.

Within a few weeks after my Mother died, one night before church I had a dream. My mother appeared in my dream, quite vividly and said, "Tell your father to get to Texas to see your brother. He's very sick, he has problems with his heart valve." She was emphatic. I woke up quite unnerved. At breakfast after church I said to my father, "Dad I don't believe this sort of stuff, but make of it what you will." I then told him what my mother had said. I did so almost jokingly, if not arrogantly skeptical. I also told my sister, who then made a more concerted effort to get in touch with this brother. We eventually came to find out he was in hospice with only days to live, with a number of health issues, and yes, with heart valve trouble. My sister and father made it down to Texas. My sister said as the doctor explained his condition, when he began explaining the heart problems, she was stunned. My sister made one last effort to share the Gospel with him (he lived a very rough and

ungodly life). At this point, he was conscious, but not able to speak. My sister said as she went through the Gospel with him, tears were flowing down his face. Now, I don't know if he, like the thief on the cross, came to faith that day. But, it is certainly within the realm of possibility.

I've never been able to wrap my brain around this experience. If indeed this was a "miracle," I don't think they happen every minute, but are rather the exception. In other words, I'm typically very skeptical.

#4. I have read in the paranormal literature that oftentimes the powers of individuals can be weak, or that an omen may only be fully understood after the fact. My story is (I think ) of the later sort. My marriage fell apart in the winter of 2013/2014. Before I get to that I need to point out that my marriage ended in an adulterous affair, My ex-wife met the man she ended up in a relationship in October of 2013. I cannot be sure of the exact date of their meeting, but it was around the first of the month, I have confirmed this with her. So that sets the stage for the dream, and the other odd event that happened, which I suspect is possibly paranormal.

This nightmare occurred during the first few days October 2013. I don't remember my dreams very often, and only rarely have a nightmare, but when I do have them they are detailed. I have common places in my nightmares; specifically, a very large brick building of about two stories. It is hard to tell from my dream whether this is a school building or a very large house. In this particular dream it appears it was a house. The house is always in a very densely wooded area with flora you would see in Southern Indiana (where I am from). The dreams usually take place in the fall just when there is a bite in the air. Winter's first bite I guess. I came up to the house and I enter into a side

door. The door opened up into a foyer type area, there was a sitting room to my left, that was unusually small, with a small sitting couch next a fire place with white trim. The room was rather elegant. To my right was a wall, and straight ahead was a hallway leading into what looked like a kitchen area that trailed off to the left but was hidden by the wall of the hallway. On the hallway wall was a door. At this point in the dream I realize my oldest son John is standing next to me. He had regular clothing on and tennis shoes. We both went to the door and opened it. The door opened onto a cellar with makeshift wooden stairs that went down into the basement. The walls were made of the old stone you see in very old houses with cellars. You could see only a little of the cellar because the wall that lead down with the stairs blocked the view until you got half way down the stairway. I could see an orange glow. Maybe the glow came from a fire but I am not sure. My son and I took a couple steps down, and when I looked up there was a little boy at the bottom of the stairs looking up at me. He looked like my son, but it wasn't him. In the dream I could tell it wasn't him because there was something about his shoes, though I have no clear recollection of what it exactly was about them. Also, my son was standing next to me, but that wasn't what tipped me off it was the shoes. I still find that weird. Anyway, the "boy" looked up at me and simply said "5 days" in a very non-boy like tone. I became extremely frightened and picked my son up and ran up the stairs and back into the foyer room. I went for the door but one of the pieces of furniture from the sitting room slid in front of the door, and we couldn't get out. That is when I woke up in absolute terror. The dream was so realistic it frightened me. That is the end of the story. I was on edge for the five days after the dream. I was worried that something bad was going to happen to one of us.

The man my wife had the affair with was the assistant swim coach at the High school at which my wife is the coach. I know they met in the week after I had the dream, because that is the beginning of the swim season. I wouldn't put these pieces together until later, and maybe it is just me looking for patterns. The second event was when I met the man. My ex-wife had asked me to go pick up some swim team warm up uniforms at the local sports store. I brought them to the school after her swim practice one evening. I dropped them off and the assistant coach was there. I am a pretty friendly person, and I usually have no problem talking to strangers. I shook his hand and introduced myself. Now, I usually do not think negatively of people when I first meet them, but this time I had a strong revulsion for this person, and something internally inside of me said that this man was going to cause a lot of pain in my life.

There is one other fact about this time period and I am not sure how it could factor into the story, but I have read a little on the occult. I know at this time there was a woman who worked in my ex-wife's department at the school who was into Wiccan. I am speculating here, but I guess it is possible that my wife may have been dabbling in some of it. I do not know for sure, but she did get a tattoo associated with druidism. I don't have any evidence that this is the case. Maybe she got the tattoo because she liked the way it looked or some other non-spiritual reason. I do find it a rather interesting possibility.

#5. Thirty years ago my dad [Randal Rauser's father] designed, built and sold grandfather clocks and he couldn't figure out how to assemble a particular movement. Since the engineering of this movement was critical for the future success of the business so he prayed for instruction/guidance/insight and continued to pray until he

sensed God would provide an answer. That night he had a dream in which all the parts of the movement were laid out and then it self assembled in just the way he needed. He woke up, drove straight down to the shop before the sun was up, and completed the movement just as he had dreamed it.

If my dad were a non-theist, of course he could just chalk that up to chance and natural insight. But as a Christian he reasonably interpreted the experience as an answer to prayer.

<http://randalrauser.com/2016/09/irrationality-conversion-christianity-atheism-compared/#comment-2926627065>

#6. Some years ago I got up one morning intending to have my hair cut in preparation for a visit to London, and the first letter I opened made it clear I need not go to London. So I decided to put the haircut off too. But then there began the most unaccountable little nagging in my mind, almost like a voice saying, "Get it cut all the same. Go and get it cut." In the end I could stand it no longer. I went. Now my barber at that time was a fellow Christian and a man of many troubles whom my brother and I had sometimes been able to help. The moment I opened his shop door he said, "Oh, I was praying you might come today." And in fact if I had come a day or so later I should have been of no use to him. C. S. Lewis, "The Efficacy of Prayer," *The Atlantic* (January, 1959).

#7. Suzanne was an elderly woman in a hospital suffering the final stages of a terminal disease. One morning she told her doctor she had just awakened from a dream:

She sees a candle lit on the windowsill of the hospital room and finds that the candle suddenly goes out. Fear and anxiety ensue as the darkness envelops her. Suddenly, the candle lights on the other side of the window and she awakens.

The same day Suzanne died, "completely at peace". K. Bulkeley & P Bulkley. *Dreaming Beyond Death: A Guide to Pre-Death Dreams and Visions* (Beacon Press, 2005), 63.

#8. Before her illness took its fatal form—before, indeed, I believe it had at all declared itself—my aunt dreamed one of her foresight dreams, simple and plain enough for anyone's interpretation; that she was approaching the ford of a dark river, alone, when little Jessie came running up behind her, and passed her, and went through first. Then she passed through herself, and looking back from the other side, saw her old Mause approaching from the distance to the bank of the stream. And so it was, that Jessie, immediately afterwards, sickened rapidly and died; and a few months, or it might be nearly a year afterwards, my aunt died of decline; and Mause, some two or three years later, having had no care after her mistress and Jessie were gone, but when she might to go them. J. Ruskin, *Praeterita* (Oxford 1978), 61.

#9. Which reminds me of something really strange that happened in 1953. I had come from Nîmes to sing Faust in Rouen and stayed in Paris overnight to get my costume. I had a strange dream. I was walking along a street and a man walking toward me on the opposite side crossed over and tore off the front of my dress. Half undressed and very embarrassed, I tried to cover myself. The next night I had the same dream.

I sang Faust the following evening, and in the last act, when Marguerite, now mad, is in prison for killing her baby, I wore a sort of thin nightdress that floated around me, and as I moved toward Faust, a voice from the hall exclaimed,

“What a beautiful bosom.”

It caused a murmur of laughter and embarrassed me into trying to cover the area in question with the long hair from my wig. After the performance, the dresser opened the door of my dressing room to a gentleman blushing with embarrassment, who asked my pardon for the remark that had escaped him. And it was exactly the man from my dream. In shock, I asked if he knew me, if he had ever seen me before. No. Regine Crespin, *On Stage, Off Stage: a Memoir* (Northeastern University Press 1997), 260-61.



# X. Occult apparitions

---

## The Night Hag

Concerns regarding sleep disorders in Hmong immigrants in the US emerged when an astonishingly high mortality rate of Sudden Unexplained Nocturnal Death Syndrome (SUNDS) was documented in Hmong men.

In 1981, an unusual new condition came to the attention of the medical community: based on mortality reports first appearing in 1977, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) issued an international note that Southeast Asian refugees, primarily Hmong, to the US were dying in their sleep (Centers for Disease Control, 1981). What made this occurrence unusual was, not only the circumstances of the nocturnal deaths, but the fact that the victims were young men, previously in good health. Reports of these cases increased over the following six years; a mortality rate of 92/100,000 showed these Hmong men were dying at a rate equivalent to the leading five causes of death for American-born men of the same age range.

In contrast to the novelty of SUNDS to Western science in 1981, Hmong and other South–East Asian populations have long feared the personal experience epitomized by SUNDS. Culture-specific names have been given to this experience; Hmong refer to the terrifying nighttime occurrence of the crushing spirit on their chest as *dab tsog* (Adler, 1995; Bliatout, 1982; Fukuda, Miyasity, Inugami, & Ishihara, 1987; Holtan et al., 1984). Victims of visits from this spirit report that *dab tsog* sat on their chest with crushing force, making it impossible to move and “took their breath”. Although parallels are drawn between SUNDS and the *dab tsog* experience, the high fatality of the medical syndrome of SUNDS differs from that of *dab tsog*: historical and ethnographic reports indicate that the experience of *dab*

tsog is not rare or fatal, and is often experienced repeatedly by the victims (Adler, 1995, 2011). Thus, the cultural pattern, collective knowledge and universal description of dab tsog suggest a prevalent bio-psychosocial condition of which only a limited number of cases results in a SUNDS fatality. In a study of 118 Hmong in California, 58% reported at least one experience of the dab tsog visit; in-depth interviews clearly indicated widespread fear, stress, and dread of sleep abnormalities in the Hmong population (Adler, 1994).

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3616878/>

Victims discovered in the night terrors are unarousable, and in the few successfully aroused patients, terrifying dreams were often experienced.<sup>40</sup> In addition, frequent experiences of “dab tsog (frightening night spirit pressing on chest),” nightmares, sleep paralysis, and hypnogogic hallucinations still exist in Hmong after immigrating to the United States for decades, probably putting Hmong at high risk for SUNDS.<sup>41</sup>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5866328/>

## Interpreting Old-Hag syndrome

I'm going to quote some representative statements from the standard academic monograph on Old-Hag syndrome:

[David J. Hufford](#), **THE TERROR THAT COMES IN THE NIGHT: AN EXPERIENCE-CENTERED STUDY OF SUPERNATURAL ASSAULT TRADITIONS** (University of Pennsylvania Press; 2nd edition, 1989).

I have not found the experiences recounted in this book to be associated with ethnicity religious background, or any either ethnographic variable. Nor have I found any association with those features of medical history that I could elicit using a basic illness checklist (xxi).

The problem of identity recurs consistently in Old Hag accounts. It is a result of the merging of two distinct possibilities that stand alone in some other traditions. The first is that the hag, or whatever the attacker is called, is a supernatural creature, not a living human, sometimes acting on its own and at other times called upon by a human to carry out an attack, as in demonic assault, vampirism, and ghosts. The second explanation is that the haggling experience is directly caused by a living human who travels as a spirit to carry out attacks or other activities, leaving its physical body behind. Witches, wizards and sorcerers are the primary actors here (8).

It is good scientific practice to seek the simplest theory possible to account for a set of data, but that should

not be accomplished by simplifying the data (168).

Can we say that sleep research has "explained" the Old Hag? No, we cannot. We cannot because what has been gained has been a description of physiological events that seem to account for the production of the state, that is, paralysis in wakefulness, preceding or following sleep, during which a complex and frightening experience may take place. The specific contents of the experience, however, have not been explained. They seem if anything more odd that they did before. If they are related to ordinary dreams by the presence of REM physiology, why is their content so consistently the same without apparent regard for culture (169)?

These accounts are rich in secondary features: footsteps, prior dream recall, complex tingling sensations, directly perceived "presences," difficulty in expressing the experience of immobility, unpleasant odor...Finally, in addition to paralysis episodes, these attacks are associated with many of the events traditionally reported in connection with hauntings: furniture being moved; ghostly footsteps; people's names behind called; the unhinged door being heard to open and close, strange smells... (205).

Again, an apparent Old Hag attack is found in the company of traditional haunting motifs: chairs rocking by themselves, doors opening and closing, spectral footsteps, a history of violent death associated with the house, and the cessation of all these phenomena when the ghost is addressed by name and told to go away (210).

Given the strong connections in Newfoundland between the Old Hag and traditions of witchcraft, it is not

surprising that similar connections are found elsewhere... (212).

The authors found that of sixteen Eskimos asked about the attacks all knew of them and "some had experienced it."...They state that traditional explanations of the attacks are supernatural and center on belief that "when people are entering sleep, sleeping, or emerging from sleep, they are more susceptible to influences from the spirit world." Specific Eskimo explanations given include spirits in a "certain place [that is haunted] and one patient who felt that "during an attack...she was not in her body, and that she was fighting to get back in (235).

At this point, a note of caution is necessary. Some readers may be considering whether they wish to elect to "go along with" the paralysis attack if they should have (another) one. I would advise strongly against it. Madge is not the only one who has reported having regretted her "openness" to the experience. I have spoken with people who had reported years of anguish, some of it involving symptomatology much like some of the features of psychosis, after having intentionally cultivated this experience. On the other hand, I have never encountered anyone who resisted the basic Old Hag experience who seem injured by it even if it returned frequently (243).

My conclusion from reading his study is that Old-Hag syndrome probably has an occult source, given how it often occurs in connection areas where witchcraft and hauntings are prevalent, as well as the deleterious effects when subjects are "open" to the overture. A waking state is a barrier to this experience. During stages of sleep, the threshold is lowered. I'm also reminded of what Vern Poythress has written about territorial spirits.



## "From Sleep Paralysis to Spiritual Experience: An Interview with David Hufford"

[From Sleep Paralysis to Spiritual Experience: An Interview with David Hufford](#) by [John W. Morehead](#).

**David Hufford** has been pursuing research on the "Old Hag" sleep paralysis phenomenon for quite some time. Perhaps his best-known work on this is *The Terror That comes in the Night: An Experience-Centered Study of Supernatural Assault Traditions* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press; 2nd ed, 1989). Hufford joined the faculty of the Penn State College of Medicine in 1974 in the Department of Behavioral Science. When he retired in 2007 he held a University Professorship and was chair of the Department of Humanities with appointments in Departments of Neural and Behavioral Science, Family & Community Medicine, and Psychiatry. Hufford is now University Professor Emeritus at Penn State College of Medicine, Senior Fellow for Spirituality at the Samueli Institute, and Adjunct Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Hufford is also a founding member of the Editorial Boards of *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing* and *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*.

**John Morehead:** David, thank you for your willingness to be a part of this interview. Your research on the sleep paralysis phenomenon is well known. How did you come to develop a personal interest in it, and how did your research on the "Old Hag" phenomenon in Newfoundland perhaps begin this process on an academic level?

**David Hufford:** That, John, is a very good question. It goes to the very center of my professional interests, values and goals. In December of 1963 I was a college sophomore. One night I went to bed early in my off campus room. I had



just completed the last of my final exams for the term, and I was tired. I went to bed about 6 o'clock, looking forward confidently to a long and uninterrupted night's sleep. In that I was mistaken.

About 2 hours later I was awakened by the sound of my door being opened, and footsteps approached the bed. I was lying on my back and the door was straight ahead of me. But the room was pitch dark, so when I opened my eyes I could see nothing. I assumed a friend was coming to see if I wanted to go to dinner. I tried to turn on the light beside my bed, but I couldn't move or speak. I was paralyzed. The footsteps came to the side of my bed, and I felt the mattress go down as someone climbed onto the bed, knelt on my chest and began to strangle me. I really thought that I was dying. But far worse than the feelings of being strangled were the sensations associated with what was on top of me. I had an overwhelming impression of *evil*, and my reaction was primarily revulsion. Whatever was on my chest was not just destructive; it was absolutely disgusting. I shrank from it.

I struggled to move, but it was as though I could not find the "controls." Somehow I no longer knew how to move. And then I did move, I think my hand was first, and then my whole body. I leaped out of bed, heart racing, and turned on the light to find the room empty. I ran downstairs where my landlord sat watching TV. "Did someone go past you just now?" He looked at me like I was crazy and said "no."

I never forgot that experience, but I told no one about it for the next eight years. There was no question of interpreting this experience, locating it within my cultural frame. There was no place for it there. Dream? I knew, absolutely knew, I had been awake. Hallucination? I was sure that I was not crazy, but I also knew this would not be convincing to

others. The insane are, according to stereotype, the last to know. So the experience just hung there, unconnected. Disturbing.

In 1970 I traveled to Newfoundland, Canada, to do my doctoral dissertation fieldwork. I went to study supernatural belief. I was probably influenced by my bizarre experience, but I was also responding to a larger interest. In graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania I had been taught that supernatural beliefs are non-rational, unsupportable by proper reasoning, and that they are non-empirical, lacking any sound observational basis. This seemed too sweeping and a bit arrogant, so in my research I proposed to ask whether traditional beliefs might have *some* rational and empirical elements. I went to Newfoundland because it is isolated and has a strong traditional culture, the kind of place where I had been taught one might find remnants of pre-modern belief. It proved to be a good choice.

While doing my research I taught at Newfoundland's Memorial University in the Folklore Department and worked in the department's extensive archive. Almost immediately I found the Old Hag, although at the moment it happened it felt more as if the Old Hag had found *me* - again. When you "have the Old Hag," Newfoundlanders said, you awoke to find yourself unable to move. The *hag*, a terrifying something, could be heard coming, footsteps approaching your room. The hag would enter your room and press you, crushing the breath out of you. If the experience is not interrupted they said it could end in death.

The Old Hag presented me with a dilemma. I had been taught that stories about supernatural experiences confirming local traditions are produced by cultural influences, what I have called *The Cultural Source Hypothesis* (CSH). But the Old hag had come into my room in 1963 out of a cultural void. Tradition says, "We believe

this because it had happened to us." Modern scholarship reverses this and says, "You think this happens because you believe it." My dilemma: I could explain the Old Hag based on cultural processes that confirm local cultural traditions - although I knew that my own prior experience flatly contradicted such explanations. Or I could develop an entirely new kind of explanation.

This all amounted to a stunning discovery. I now knew something about the Old Hag tradition that no one else seemed to know. But I was in no better position to proclaim this publically than I had been to talk about my experience in 1963. I did not want to say, "Hey, that happened to me too! So that tells us that.... Trust me on this!" Personal experience lends authenticity and expertise to scholarly work, when the experience is granted to be real - experiences of illness, of being in prison, of being an artist, of gender, of race, of all sorts of recognized categories of experience. But contested experiences have the opposite effect; they are seen as pure bias, "Oh, he's a believer (and therefore not be trusted)." If I were to place my experience and my Newfoundland findings within a sensible cultural frame, it would have to be a frame partly of my own making. In that way the personal became professional, academic.

**John Morehead:** How has your academic discipline of folklore studies been important in your understanding of the phenomenon? And what do you think about the use of other disciplines like anthropology being utilized to help us understand it?

**David Hufford:** I entered the discipline of folklore in the mid-1960s because it included "folk belief" as a recognized topic for research, and because it had a populist orientation. In general it showed great respect for the views of ordinary people. In art, architecture, oral literature, agricultural

methods, etcetera folklore stood up for the worth of ordinary culture. But I quickly discovered in graduate school that unlike other cultural genres, folk belief and respect for the knowledge claims of ordinary people occupied structurally antithetical positions in the discipline. Although folk music scholars did not judge by the standards of classical composition, folk belief scholars did, in fact, judge "superstition" by its conformity to current scientific opinion. Considering that most folk beliefs had never been subjected to systematic scientific research this seemed pure, unjustified ethnocentrism. My anthropology training presented a related but more modern problem.

The Boasian turn from blatant ethnocentrism to a sort of protective hermeneuticism offered the kind of patronizing acceptance that a psychotherapist offers to a psychotic patient: I believe that your hallucinations are real *to you*. Finding internal consistency and rejecting evaluative comparisons to external knowledge, folk belief was accorded "its own logic." This fit well with the 20th century scholarly resistance to comparative method. The post-modern turn rejected not only scientific reduction but also all other efforts to obtain objective knowledge through comparison. Scientific positivism reduced all sorts of folk beliefs to cultural fictions. Folklore and anthropology, in fact the social sciences and the humanities in general, were of little assistance as I wrestled with the "Old Hag." In fact, with regard to "folk belief" I came to see these academic disciplines as functioning to protect modernity from being challenged by the knowledge of other cultures and times. Ironically, this is similar to the function of positivism, but it offers the advantage of apparently respecting the knowledge claims it rejects.

**John Morehead:** Can you summarize the basic elements that define the sleep paralysis phenomenon?

**David Hufford:** Sleep paralysis (SP) refers to the loss of voluntary movement either during the period just before sleep (hypnagogic stage or sleep onset) or just after (hypnopompic stage). The paralysis is produced by a cholinergic mechanism in the reticular activating system in the brain stem that functions to prevent the sleeper from physically carrying out actions occurring in dreams. This atonia-producing mechanism is a normal feature of rapid eye-movement sleep. In SP this mechanism intrudes into wakefulness. This might suggest that the "intruder" experience of SP is "just dreaming" while awake. The problem is this: dreams vary greatly from subject to subject and over time, and their content tends to reflect inputs from the dreamer's waking life, together with aspects of the sensed environment (e.g., in a hot room one may dream of a tropical environment). The "Old Hag" is very different. It is as if dreamers all of over the world and throughout history report *the same dream*, and that repeated content does not require the subject's prior knowledge! Furthermore the contents do not reflect the range of possible features that could arise from waking consciousness during REM sleep, rather being restricted to a very narrow spectrum; e.g., people do not experience the ceiling falling on them or terrorists entering their room, either of which would conform to the pressure and immobility of the experience.

**John Morehead:** In the 1980s you wrote [\*The Terror That Comes in the Night: An Experience-Centered Study of Supernatural Assault Traditions\*](#). What types of conclusions did you come to about the phenomenon at that time?

**David Hufford:** My conclusions were data driven, and my data was especially rich, ranging from anthropological and historical documentation to phenomenology to medical and neurophysiological findings, because I employed mixed methods, including ethnographic interviews, surveys, and

literature review. The ethnographic interviewing was phenomenologically oriented, aimed at developing a detailed description of the range of perceptual features of SP. These interviews began with open-ended questions such as, "Please tell me all that you recall about your experience." No questions probed for the features with which I was familiar; e.g., I never asked, "Was there a presence in the room with you?" My research design predicted that "the Old Hag" could be explained by the cultural source hypothesis as cultural elaborations of SP (although my own experience had already shown me that this was not possible), and asked whether objective findings conformed to that prediction. They did not.

My interviews revealed a stable phenomenological pattern very similar to what I had experienced in college. The surveys showed that this pattern did not depend on cultural input or prior knowledge of any kind. The literature review documented reports consistent with SP in cultures all over the world and throughout history, although such reports had not previously been connected with SP. The terms used for description in different traditions were obviously culturally determined, such as "Old Hag," the *Mara* (Tilhagen, 1969) of Sweden, the *da chor* (Tobin & Friedman, 1983), *dab coj*, *poj ntxoog* (Munger, 1986), or *dab tsog* (Adler, 1991) in Southeast Asia, the sitting ghost or *bei Guai chaak* (being pressed by a ghost) (Emmons, 1982) in China, *kanashibari* in Japan, and many more from around the world and throughout history refer to the same event characterized by paralysis, the conviction of wakefulness before or emerging from sleep. These cultural terms were associated with a variety of other details such as soft shuffling footsteps and the shadow man' or misty presence, regardless of cultural context. A detailed review of modern scientific knowledge of SP found neither any awareness of

this distinctive phenomenological pattern, nor any mechanisms that would account for it.

So, my conclusions in *The Terror* stemmed from the way that my research contradicted the Cultural Source Hypothesis as an explanation of "the Old Hag" and similar traditions. In its place I found that this phenomenon fit, instead, the Experiential Source Hypothesis: (1) many traditions of supernatural assault around the world refer the phenomenon known as sleep paralysis in modern sleep research, (2) scientific knowledge of SP lacks knowledge of its cross-culturally consistent phenomenology and has no adequate explanation for that pattern, (3) the cross-contextual perceptual patterning is what reason leads us to expect of accurate reports from independent witnesses, therefore (4) traditions of supernatural assault that contain the SP pattern are empirically based and rationally derived.

**John Morehead:** Of course, your research continued beyond the 1980s. How did this develop, and how did your understandings develop by 2005 when you wrote your essay "[Sleep Paralysis as Spiritual Experience](#)" for the journal *Transcultural Psychology*?

**David Hufford:** In 1974 I finished my Ph.D., returned from Newfoundland and accepted the position of Assistant Professor of Behavioral Science at Penn State's College of Medicine. I was offered this position based on the stance I developed in my doctoral dissertation, *Folklore Studies Applied to Health* (University of Pennsylvania 1974), which was focused on folk belief. I explored ways that the study of folk belief could serve medical research and care. Chapter 6 was devoted to the Old Hag and SP. I saw two major connections to medicine: (1) belief is a major determinant of health behavior (from patients' beliefs about etiology and treatment to doctors' beliefs about patients), and (2) the fact that in the 20th century medicine, psychiatry in

particular, had provided practically all explanations for "folk belief" (meaning false belief traditionally supported), especially experiential claims in support of folk belief, through psychopathology (wish fulfillment, unconscious sexual forces, delusions, hallucinations, etc.). The journey I embarked on in my Newfoundland research was perfectly suited to the medical context, although in a somewhat perverse way. I accepted the appointment to work to improve medical care and diagnosis, but to do that I would have to directly address the harm done by medical misunderstandings. Ironically, folklore and anthropology (et al.) had been complicit in those misunderstandings. So, I went to medicine to subvert the received worldviews of modern intellectuals, in order to advance medical care. *The Terror* was a major part of that program.

A central aspect of my subversive agenda was to pursue the extension of the Experiential Source Hypothesis beyond SP to other *spiritual experiences*. By *spiritual* I mean whatever refers to *spirit*, which in English means the immaterial part of a living being. Part of my subversion has involved constantly working against the academic misuse of the term *spiritual* to refer to whatever gives one meaning in life. That definition, rooted in Christian existential theology (for example, the work of Paul Tillich), is a misappropriation of the natural language word, reflecting the philosophical and theological inclinations of many academics. But it is a false and confusing characterization of the concept in common English. You should also note that *spiritual* in this traditional, non-material sense is at the heart of the word *supernatural*. The words are not identical in meaning, but believing in one entails believing in the other.

Anyway, in 1974 I had wondered whether SP with a presence was the only such anomalous experience giving rise to supernatural folk belief - belief in spirits being the



main such belief. Beginning in 1974 I searched for broader implications, lessons that Newfoundland's "Old Hag" might teach us about other supernatural traditions. Could other supernatural beliefs also arise from experience rather than vice-versa? In 1974, the year I returned from Newfoundland, Raymond Moody published *Life After Life* (1st edition, Atlanta: Mockingbird Books), "Actual case histories that reveal that there is life after death." Moody coined the term "near-death experience" and described the NDE as common among resuscitands. The immediate skeptical response, especially from the medical community, was that this could not be common or "we would have known about long ago!" My SP work showed me the flaw in this reasoning, and a little fieldwork quickly showed me that the NDE seemed to be another case of experientially based supernatural belief. Subsequent research reporting NDEs from other cultures and other times showed that it fit the Experiential Source Hypothesis in the same way that SP with a presence does. At about the same time I found the work of W. Dewi Rees, M.D., a Welsh physician whose study published in *The British Medical Journal* (1971) showed that visits from the spirit of a deceased loved one are common among the bereaved. Contrary to contemporary psychiatric thinking, which had labeled such experiences symptoms of pathological grieving, Rees showed that these visits (now called "after death contacts," ADCs) were consistently associated with less indications of depression and better resolution of grief! Continued research over the past 30 years has confirmed Rees' early conclusions, and the characterization of the experiences in the psychiatric literature has changed dramatically.

During my 30 plus years at the College of Medicine I made the study of modern resistance to the facts of what I came to call "extraordinary spiritual experiences" (ESE's, as opposed to ordinary experiences interpreted spiritually) as

much a part of my research as the experiences themselves. I found the cultural context within which the experiences occur, dominated not by science *per se*, but by materialistic philosophical beliefs assumed to be inextricable from science, to be essential to the study of the experiences. Among my conclusions has been the conviction that science and well-established scientific knowledge do not contradict "folk beliefs," either those about spirits or folk medical beliefs such as those that underlie herbalism in the treatment of disease. I realized that what was at issue was the cultural authority of science, that that authority had been excessively extended over the past century or so. This did not amount to a disagreement with either the scientific method or the well-established findings of science. In fact, I came to believe that what was needed to begin to appreciate the remarkable knowledge of folk traditions was *better science*, more rigorous and less biased.

**John Morehead:** What are the various interpretations that are brought to the phenomenon in the cultures in which it is found?

**David Hufford:** That's a really interesting question. There is variety, but a constrained variety. The interpretations center, as you might imagine, on the intruder. In almost all cases this entity is described as *evil* or at least threatening. It may be interpreted as a sorcerer or a ghost or demon or some other kind of supernatural, such as a vampire. In many locations it is assumed that more than one kind of creature can do this, such as both sorcerers and ghosts. The definitive characteristics of these categories, of course, are not unambiguously presented in the SP experience. If the intruder is recognized as a particular living person (which seems rare) then it is understandable that it will be interpreted as a sorcerer. If the attack is sexual, which seems infrequent but it does happen, and if there is a term

such as incubus or succubus, that will be applied. If the attack occurs in a house believed to be haunted, which is common, then the intruder is generally assumed to be a ghost. When features of an attack do not obviously suggest one kind of entity or another, then local categories fill in, such as the *aswang* (Tagalog) in the Philippines. This remarkable consistency and similarity across cultures is a product, obviously, of the robust and consistent cross-cultural pattern of the phenomenology of SP.

**John Morehead:** Let's focus specifically on how the phenomenon is interpreted in Western cultures where secularism, advances in the neurosciences, and skepticism toward religious or spiritual experiences, are prevalent. How have paranormal or other spiritual interpretations been received in this context?

**David Hufford:** The conventional view in anthropology, folklore and other disciplines has always been that all experience is somewhat ambiguous, so the values and assumptions resident in one's culture will determine one's interpretation of events. This is the central understanding of the Cultural Source Hypothesis (CSH), and it extends even beyond interpretation to perception in many theories (e.g., the Whorf-Sapir Hypothesis). As you note, the conventional view in the modern academic world is philosophical materialism, especially with regard to matters of spiritual belief and religion, which are assumed to be very ambiguous. But ironically, the Cultural Source Hypothesis accounts for the academic interpretation of SP, not for the interpretations found among most that have experienced SP! Despite evidence to the contrary most academics assume that somehow prior learning, presumably through cultural processes, yields expectations that produce the content of all sorts of spiritual experiences. This is what has been called the universal hermeneutic approach; it is

illustrated by the influential work of philosopher Steven Katz. Katz, who was most concerned with "mystical experiences," insisted that visionaries only experience what they have been taught to experience.

Contrary to modern intellectual assumptions, most subjects in the modern Western world, the *disenchanted* world to use Weber's term, interpret SP events as spiritual or "paranormal." This is because the events are, in fact, minimally ambiguous. And the available interpretations for an intruder who can through walls and paralyze its victim (etcetera) are very few: hallucination or something spiritual or "paranormal." The SP consciousness is very lucid, unlike dream consciousness, and many of the observations (e.g. the physical environment) made in this consciousness are veridical. This clear sense of reality warrants this interpretation for most subjects. Of course, there is also the fact that we now know that the "disenchantment" of modern consciousness has been greatly over-rated!

**John Morehead:** In the conclusion of your *Transcultural Psychiatry* essay you state, "that there is nothing specific within our scientific knowledge of [sleep paralysis] that contradicts spirit interpretations." Given our growing understanding of the brain through the neurosciences, can you expand a bit on what you mean and how there may be connections here between scientific knowledge of the brain in religious experience and a spiritual interpretation of that experience?

**David Hufford:** Another good question! In considering the relationship between scientific knowledge and spiritual belief we need to be scrupulous about the meaning of the term *contradiction*. Two propositions are contradictory only if they negate each other, that is, if it is the case that if Proposition 1 is true Proposition 2 *must* be false, not just that Proposition 1 challenges Proposition 2 or *suggests* that

Proposition 2 may be wrong. The scientific proposition "that the Earth is billions of years old" negates the Young Earth Creationist proposition "that the Earth is 6,000 years old." If one of these propositions is true, the other must be false. Logical analysis requires that we understand the meaning of the terms involved. Therefore, the hermeneutical idea that "6,000 years" in scriptural terms might mean something very different from what we mean by it today removes the contradiction but makes the proposition rather meaningless.

A proposition that would negate the traditional interpretation of SP would be "that there are no immaterial spirits." If that were true, it would negate the traditional idea "that the shadow intruder in SP is a spirit of some kind." These propositions would contradict each other. But "that there are no spirits" is not a scientific proposition. There are no scientific experiments, nor can we easily imagine one, that would establish this proposition. If it were true "that the intruder in SP is a spirit" that would not contradict any scientifically established knowledge. It would not be relevant to the mechanistic REM explanation of the cholinergic "switch" for SP atonia. On the other hand, the knowledge that the SP phenomenology is independent of cultural context does contradict the conventional social science use of the Cultural Source Hypothesis (CSH) to explain SP. But this use of the CSH has no valid empirical base, being more a reflection of ideology than a scientifically derived conclusion.

Scientific method and scientific knowledge about sleep are very useful in understanding SP, but they do not include some crucial information that is widely available in folk tradition, and that can be checked empirically. In this sense the two traditions are complementary. But brain science at present no more explains the consistent phenomenology of SP than folk tradition explains its neurophysiology.

Common spirit experiences do not show that the Earth is flat, that germs do not cause disease, etc. They do not contradict and are not contradicted by modern knowledge. The observation that many people with modern knowledge reject these beliefs does not constitute a contradiction. Much more common than contradiction is the idea that modern knowledge makes supernatural belief unnecessary by providing superior explanations for the same observations. This is the argument from parsimony or Occam's Razor. This claim has its roots in the old notion of supernatural belief as consisting of primitive explanations for observations of natural phenomena.

The kind of direct perceptual "spirit experiences" reported in SP (and NDEs, ADCs, *et cetera*) do not inherently offer an account of any natural phenomena. If they did there would be the possibility of contradicting scientific knowledge. What they do offer is an account of some of the characteristics of spirits and their relationship to humans. All conventional theories of such experiences treat them as hallucinations or illusions and rely on assumptions of cultural sources to account for their patterning, because no psychological theories exist that explain (or even acknowledge the existence of) complex hallucinations having a broad, cross-cultural, perceptual stability. However, these experiences cannot be accounted for by cultural models because of their cross-cultural distribution. Therefore, even on grounds of parsimony, modern knowledge does not conflict at all with the most basic beliefs that follow from such experiences.

**John Morehead:** In your research you have noted similarities between the sleep paralysis phenomenon and out-of-body and UFO abduction experiences. Are there any similarities or parallels to other things, and what does this tell you about sleep paralysis?

**David Hufford:** One partial exception to the spiritual/"paranormal" interpretation, arising from modern ideas, is the notion that these events are "screen memories" for alien abduction. Contrary to what some researchers have claimed, this remains a minority interpretation, and it relies on the spurious idea that these "screen memories" conceal a forgotten scenario that can be retrieved through hypnotic regression. The prevalence and distribution of SP with a presence, historically and cross-culturally, is entirely at odds with this idea. The same is true for the tragic error of treating SP as a screen memory for repressed memories of sexual abuse, or as the root cause of Sudden Unexplained Nocturnal Death Syndrome (SUNDS) among Southeast Asian men.

The similarities in these cases come largely from the outside observer rather than the subject. In both alien abduction and sexual abuse scenarios the presence of a threatening intruder in the bedroom is similar. The pressure of someone lying on you may be similar to sexual abuse, and the feeling of leaving your body, present in a substantial minority of SP events, resonates with the alien abduction scenario. In SUNDS the impression of impending death common in SP is a similarity. But these are tenuous similarities. In SUNDS, for example, the subject actually dies, but all epidemiological and medical evidence indicates that people simply do not die from SP. Also, SP OBEs do not involve trips to alien space ships, unless the SP experiencer is subject to extensive interrogation under hypnosis by a UFO researcher. And only a small - but important - fraction of SP cases involve sexual aspects. These and other misattributions of SP result from widespread ignorance of SP, and they can be VERY destructive. I have dealt with them at some length in my *Transcultural Psychiatry* article.

What we learn from the erroneous connections of SP with a variety of unrelated phenomena is that even robust, consistently stable classes of spiritual experience will be the subject of extreme efforts at assimilation to interpretations that seem more "modern" than the common understanding of subjects. Even alien abduction, as unconventional as it is, provides a modern sounding account in contrast to ghosts! These reinterpretations of SP are not so different from the interpretation of near-death experiences as delirium or after death contacts as hallucinations of pathological grieving. In all cases the fit of the data to the interpretation is poor, but the goal seems to be modernization rather than objective accuracy.

**John Morehead:** In your *Transcultural Psychology* essay you discuss "the persistence of spirit beliefs in modern society despite the cultural and social forces arrayed against them." You argue that this may be accounted for due to "transcendent, spiritual experiences." How do you see sleep paralysis functioning as a "core spirit experience?"

**David Hufford:** By *core spiritual experiences* I mean *perceptual* experiences that (a) refer intuitively to spirits without inference or retrospective interpretation, (b) form distinct classes with stable perceptual patterns, (c) occur independently of a subject's prior beliefs, knowledge or intention (psychological set), and (d) are normal (i.e., not products of obvious psychopathology).

Here *perceptual experiences* means episodes of awareness that are subjectively appear to be observations rather than inferences or emotional states. Most SP experiences (about 80% in my survey data) include a "spirit (that is, an apparently non-physical) intruder," and many develop into complex scenarios of assault.



It should be obvious, then, why I consider this a spiritual experience: it usually involves a spirit (the intruder), and when SP produces an OBE it presents the experience of *being* a spirit. Despite the typically ambiguous meanings of *spirituality* so common among intellectuals today, lexical research has overwhelmingly shown that in English for many centuries *spirituality* refers to *spirits*. By *core* spiritual experience, I mean that such experiences provide a central (core) empirical foundation from which some supernatural beliefs develop by inference. You may recall that at the beginning of my career I set out to ask whether traditional supernatural beliefs might have *some* rational and empirical elements. The discovery of core spiritual experiences answers that question with a clear *yes*.

**John Morehead:** Are there any new trajectories in your research in this phenomenon? What can we look forward to in your future work in this area?

**David Hufford:** Remarkably it seems my original trajectory remains both viable and productive. I still want to assess and understand the empirical and rational grounds of widespread spiritual beliefs. I want to find additional core spiritual experiences. For example, in 1985 I collaborated with Genevieve Foster in the writing of her memoir of a particular kind of mystical experience (*The World Was Flooded with Light*, University of Pittsburgh Press). There is reason to believe her experience is a member of another core experience set, but we have very little relevant data. I would love to pursue that. I am trying to understand the common intellectual resistance to traditional spiritual belief both from the materialist side and from the theological side. Keep in mind, even though core spiritual experiences are found in most religious traditions around the world, they are either absent or severely constrained within modern, mainstream religion. I also want to understand fully the role

of medicine, especially psychiatry, in stigmatizing and suppressing this topic in the modern world through psychopathological theories.

Out of each of those strands, my central desire is to facilitate a change in the modern understanding of spirituality, a change that needs to reform both science (including medicine) and religion. A change that recognizes that Weber's disenchantment of the world did not, in fact happen, and for good reason. The world we live in is far more interesting than we have been taught. The spiritual aspect of the world demands the attention of educated and sophisticated thinkers, not the kind of anti-empirical dogmatic denial of human spirituality that we see today. The public needs to know that if they have a near-death experience or a visit from a deceased loved one that they have good reason to feel the consolation that comes naturally with such experiences, and not the anxiety imposed by modern sanctions against spiritual experience. They need to know that if they have a scary experience of SP it does not mean they are crazy OR that they can't tell the difference between waking and sleeping. Other cultures throughout the world have knowledge that helps to deal with SP. We should not be the only ones left in ignorance. The ignorant and irrational rejection of spirituality so common among intellectuals in modern society makes the public vulnerable to all sorts of cult claims and religious extremism. I would like to contribute to changing these things. I am far from alone in this, and I see the change coming. I hope to live long enough to contribute to reaching the turning point!

## The worlds of spirits

In the year of his death, Richard Baxter, a preeminent Puritan, published **THE CERTAINTY OF THE WORLDS OF SPIRITS**. As he explains:

When God first awakened me, to think with preparing seriousness of my condition after death, I had not any observed doubts of the reality of spirits, or the immortality of the soul, or the truth of the gospel...But when God had given me peace of conscience, Satan assaulted me with those worse temptations...I still saw that to be an atheist was to be mad. But I found that my faith of supernatural revelation must be more than a believing man, and that if it had not a firm foundation and rooting, even sure evidence of verity, surely apprehended, it was not like to do those great works that faith had to do, and to overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil, and to make my death to be safe and comfortable. Therefore I found that all confirming helps were useful...And finding that almost all the atheists, Sadducces and infidels, did seem to profess, that were they but sure of the reality of the apparitions and operations of spirits, it would cure them, I thought this the most fruitable helped for them... (Preface).

I confess, very many cheats of pretended possessions have been discovered, which hath made some weak, injudicious men think that all are such. Two sorts of persons have oft been found deceivers: (i) persons prepared and trained up purposely by Papist priests to honor their exorcisms; (ii) Lustful, rank girls and young

widows, that plot for some amorous, precacious design, or have imaginations conquered by lust.

Tis hard to know by their words or signs when it is a devil, and when a human soul that appeareth...we are not fully certain whether these aerial regions have not a third sort of wights, that are neither angels (good or fall) nor souls of men, but those called fairies and goblins... (chap. 1).

It's a mixed bag. I think a few of his examples are just ecclesiastical legends (e.g. incubi and succubi, blood-sucking imps, the devil's familiars). Some may reflect ignorance of botany which undergoes legendary embellishment (e.g. Glastonbury thorn).

Likewise, the primitive state of 17C medicine invites misdiagnosis in some cases. And some folk medical treatments aggravate the condition. For instance, some cases might have a natural explanation (e.g. gallstones, kidney stones). By the same token, some people might have undiagnosable conditions, by 17C standards, that result in mental illness.

He cites reports of grain falling from the sky (chap 10). Perhaps that has a natural explanation.

They don't understand the nature of lightning. He also mentions a case of ball-lightning (chap. 8). From what I've read, that remains a mysterious phenomenon.

He mentions the case of a maid who was hexed by having a pin thrust in her thigh. It's well-documented, and more examples like that might demonstrate malicious spells, but he only gives one example.

He mentions a few cases of xenoglossy. That would be evidence for spirit-possession, but his examples aren't well-documented.

More impressive are cases of people spitting up pins, needles, knives, shards of glass. There may be natural explanations why some people are motivated to swallow sharp objects. In some cases it might be staged, although that's a very hazardous hoax. And there are ways to detect imposture.

What's harder to explain naturalistically is how they could swallow and cough up such objects without incurring fatal internal bleeding. And these aren't single incidents, but repeated.

Likewise, objects levitating and flying in a room have no natural explanation.

I find his collection of anecdotes is quite uneven. That reflects his limited access to relevant reports. I think modern scientific knowledge renders some of his examples dubious. Conversely, modern science and telecommunications cast a far wider net, so the available evidence for miracles and occult phenomena is much greater than Baxter had at his disposal.

With those caveats in mind, I'll quote what struck me as the more uncanny examples:

Mary Hill, a maid of about 18 years of age...was taken very ill, and being seized with violent fits, began to vomit up about two hundred crooked pins...About a fortnight after, she began to vomit up nails, pieces of nails, pieces of brass, handles of spoons, and so

continued to do so for the space of six months and upwards.

The persons bound over to give evidence, were Susanna Belton, and Ann Holland, who upon their oaths deposited, that they hooked out of the navel of the said Mary Hill, as she lay in a dead fit, crooked pins, small nails, and small pieces of glass...Whereupon Mr. Francis Jesse, and Mr. Christopher Brewer declared, that they had seen the said Mary Hill to vomit up several times crooked pins, nails, and pieces of glass, which they also produced in open court, and to the end, they might be ascertained it was no imposture, they declared, they had searched her mouth with their fingers before she did vomit...That to prevent the supposition of a cheat, I had caused her to be brought to a window, and having looked into her mouth, I searched it with my finger...For my farther satisfaction, I got some at my own charge to sit up at nights with her, and watch her mouth, and see it was kept close shut. Whist this was done, the vomiting of nails ceased, and that for thirteen nights successively; but when it was neglected, she would be sure to bring up something of nails or some such stuff (chap. 3).

I doubt not but abundance of reports of such matters have no better causes than are here mentioned, even the mistake of the ignorant; but that there are true as well as false report of such things, is past all reasonable cause of doubting. I will begin with the most convincing instance...the Devil of Mascon.

And what wonder if such things that are talked of but a few days, be forgotten after fifty or sixty years...They may go to my kinsman, William Baxter, now schoolmaster...could it be counterfeit, and never

contradicted in fifty or sixty years (I remember not just the year) that in a city, so many of both religions for so many months together might crowd at a certain hour into the room, and hear a voice answering their questions, and telling them things far off, and to them unknown; and disputing with a papist officer of the city, and the whirling him oft about, and casting him on the ground, and sending him home distracted.

Several letters to Mr. Richard Baxter, in relation to an apparition in the house of Lt. Col. Bowen...But the night following, the gentlewoman, with several other godly women, being in the house, the noise of whirlwind began again, with more violence than formerly, and the apparition walked in the chamber, having an insufferable stench, like that of a putrified carcass, filling the room with thick smoke, smelling like sulfur, darkening the light of the fire and candle, but not quite extinguishing it...striking them so that the next morning their faces were black with the smoke, and their bodies swollen with bruises.

Mr. Maur. Bedwell's inclosed letter...One night was very remarkable, and had not the Lord stood by the poor gentlewoman and her two maids, that night they had been undone; as she was going to bed, she perceived by the impression on the bed, as if some body had been lying there, and opening the bed, she smelt the smell of a carcass somewhere dead, and being in bed (for the gentlewoman was somewhat courageous) upon the tester, which was of cloth, she perceived something rolling from side to side, and by and by, being forced out of bed, she had not time to dress herself, such cries and other things almost amazing her, but she (hardly any of her clothes being one) with her two maids, got upon their knees by the bedside to seek the

Lord, but extremely assaulted, oftentimes she would by somewhat which felt like a dog under her knees, be lifted a foot or more high from the ground; some were heard to talk of the other side of the bed, which one of the maids hearkening to, she had a blow upon the back. Diverse assaults would be made by fits; it would come with a cold breath of wind, the candles burn blew and almost out; horrible screechings, yelling, and roarings, within and without the house, and smells of brimstone and powered, and this continued from some nine at night to some three the next morning...fires have been seen upon the house, and in the fields.

And he sent me this narrative here following, at Brightling in Sussex...The house, though it burned down to the ground it flamed not...They abide under a hut; the goods are thrown upside down, Peuter-dishes, knives, brickbats strike them, but hurt them not... Ministers came to pray with them, when a knife glanced by the breast of Mr. Bennet...a wooden tut came flying out of the air...likewise a horseshoe...and it was observed of its own accord to rise again and fly to the man, and struck him in the midst of a hundred people (chap 2).

A husbandman, who was tormented in one of his sides, and at least felt a nail of iron under the whole skin, which the surgeon cut out, but his pain still increased so that in impatience he cut his throat, and died...when he was opened, they found in his stomach a long, round piece of wood, and four knives of steel, partly sharp, and partly toothed like saws, and two sharp pieces of iron, every one above a span long, and a ball of hair.



A little girl in the ninth year of her age...[she] vomited needles, pins, pieces of glass windows, nails, an iron knife a span long...For these things could not possibly come out of her body. For how could it be, that the pricking of so many pins, should bring up no blood? How could a sharp knife come up the narrow throat of a young child, without cutting the passage?...she caught my hand, and put it to her throat. Feel, sir, said she, a pin without a head coming up, and which will come out presently. I felt, and immediately when I thought verily I held it fast betwixt my fingers of my left hand within her throat, I perceived it to be forced violently from me, and presently seeing the child avowing to spit, I received it in my right hand...In like manner, I have frequently at other times, felt the ends of points, while they were yet in the very orifice of her stomach, and while they were coming up, and ready to come out of her mouth (chap 5).

In my weakness...there suddenly rose upon one of the tonsils of my throat a round tumor, seeming to me as hard as a bone, and about as big as a great pease, or small button, half out of the flesh, and half in...I had constantly felt it (and too oft looked at in the glass). As soon as I had preached and spoken those words, I felt no more of it. As I came out of the pulpit, I put my finger in my mouth to feel it, but could feel nothing: I hasted home to the glass and saw [nothing] (chap. 10).

## Kanashibari

This seems to be the Japanese equivalent of Old Hag syndrome:

<https://randalrauser.com/2011/02/awake-in-japan-a-first-person-account-of-demonic-oppression/>

## Hare Krishna commits hara-kiri

I'm going to comment on a recent post by Michael Sudduth:

<http://michaelsudduth.com/interview-on-postmortem-survival/>

I'd say that my curiosity in survival-related questions began when I was around eight years old. After having recurrent apparitional experiences in the house I lived in with my parents at the time, I began wondering whether there were real things that I could not normally see but which became visible under certain conditions. And seeing as I recognized some of the apparitions as deceased members of my family or friends of the family, the experiences prompted the question, is death really the end of our existence? I never said anything about these experiences to my parents, but I remember feeling encouraged when a couple of years later my grandmother shared with me an apparitional experience she had of my grandfather shortly after his death. And I recall, on another occasion, overhearing another family member secretly discussing her apparitional experience of my grandfather. In my teenage years I had a variety of paranormal experiences over a two-year period. Given my prior experiences, I decided to document the experiences in a journal I kept at the time. I was also inspired by the 1972 television series the Sixth Sense to explore these experiences through various readings in parapsychology. Interestingly enough, during this time my mother reported an apparitional experience of my grandfather a few days before the death of my grandmother. Although my mother had no knowledge of my grandmother's experience several

years earlier, her description of the apparition was remarkably similar to what my grandmother had described. In 2002 I left Saint Michael's College and moved into a historic home in Windsor, Connecticut. There my ex-wife and I had a large number of paranormal experiences, which I documented in written form. After moving out of the house in 2004, I conducted some interviews with prior occupants of the home and learned that they had similar experiences. I became very fascinated with the nature of these shared experiences, seemingly tied to a particular physical location, and their possible implications for postmortem survival. I've had the added benefit of participating in a number of paranormal investigations and developing friendships with various mediums over the past eight years. So my thinking on this topic has been shaped by a wide-range of first-hand experiences, as well as my research and training as a philosopher.

The interview indicates that his experience of the paranormal goes back to childhood. It predates his teenage dabbling with a Ouija board. So this may be a family curse that's been passed down from one generation to the next. And befriending mediums invites further self-delusion.

Although I was greatly impressed with Price's reflections on the empirical approach to survival, my conservative Christian views at the time, together with my focus on other topics in graduate school, dissuaded me from a further exploration. On my current view, I think there is a legitimate debate about what exactly paranormal phenomena establish about the reality and nature of postmortem survival. That's an issue at the center of my present work. I am a Vedantin philosopher, so I certainly accept the idea of survival, at least broadly understood as the postmortem

persistence of consciousness.

Well, let me begin with some important caveats and clarifications. Unlike many other philosophers, I don't object to the survival hypothesis itself, nor do I deny that people can be epistemically justified in believing in survival. I've already stated that I subscribe to the eastern philosophical and spiritual tradition of Vedanta. So I don't believe that what I essentially am shares in the limits or destiny of my body or individual mind. I am a survivalist.

On the one hand, he doesn't hesitate to promote positions which contradict Christian theology. On the other hand, he can't bring himself to take a position that contradicts Hare Krishna.

I'd like to make a few general observations about the interview:

**i)** I think his analysis suffers from reductionism. He seems to be seeking a single causal explanation for all the phenomena in question. But what if there's more than one cause? On the face of it, there are potentially three different parties to one or another of these transactions: ghosts, demons, the medium. So perhaps the correct explanation varies. In some cases a ghost might be the best explanation. In other cases a demon. In still other cases, the medium might be psychic.

I'd add that the demonic explanation and the psychic explanation are not mutually exclusive. A medium might be demonically empowered thru possession.

**ii)** We need to draw some theoretical distinctions in terms of apparitions. In principle, there are two or three distinctions:

**a)** The dead initiating contact with the living.

**b)** The living initiating contact with the dead. A medium opens a two-way channel. Whether the dead respond might be voluntary.

**c)** Summoning the dead. The dead are compelled to appear. Classic sorcery.

I'm not vouching for the reality of these distinctions. Just drawing them for conceptual clarity. Having a bigger toolbox helps us classify and assess the evidence. Likewise, I'm discussing what's possible, not permissible.

**iii)** Both (b) and (c) would be cases of necromancy. A Biblically forbidden activity.

**iv)** Assuming, for the sake of argument, that it's possible to summon the dead or initiate contact with the dead, what class of decedents would be available? Departed saints? Or the damned?

Since Scripture forbids necromancy, it seems antecedently unlikely that God would make departed saints available to mediums. However, we have the counterexample of the medium summoning Saul (1 Sam 28). That, however, may be quite exceptional. Saul's attempt to contact Samuel backfires. For Samuel uses the occasion to denounce Saul. The exercise seals the fate of the apostate king. God may have allowed Saul to appear for that express purpose. That would also explain why the medium seemed to be surprised. Perhaps wasn't expecting Samuel to actually appear.

Assuming, for the sake of argument, that necromancy is sometimes successful, it seems more likely that only the damned would be accessible. Admittedly, that's speculative.

**v)** But what about (a)? Is it permissible for departed saints to appear to the living? That's hard to say.

There are credible reports of apparitions of the dead. That, of itself, doesn't necessarily establish the identity of the apparition. It *appears* to be the decedent. But at least in some cases, appearances might be deceptive.

**vi)** As a Christian, I'm not ashamed to admit that I discount reincarnation on theological grounds.

**vii)** In addition, reincarnation isn't clearly the simplest overall explanation for certain phenomena. That's because simplicity involves more than one variable. For instance, even if reincarnation is the simplest discrete explanation for certain phenomena, that must be counterbalanced by the fact that reincarnation is metaphysically cumbersome. It would require elaborate offstage machinery to pull that off. So the explanatory simplicity of reincarnation is deceptive.

**viii)** I've also analyzed prima facie evidence for reincarnation on several occasions:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2013/03/deja-vu.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/03/reincarnation-or-retrognition.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/03/possession-reincarnation.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/03/stigmata-reincarnation.html>



## The haunting of old Epworth rectory

Apparitional evidence is a neglected line of evidence in contemporary Christian apologetics. Although it doesn't necessarily prove the Christian faith directly, it debunks naturalism. Moreover, some kinds of apparitions intersect with Christian theology.

A striking example involves the Wesley clan, made retroactively famous by John and Charles Wesley. When their father pastored a church in Epworth, the parsonage was assailed by poltergeist activity. This is recorded in Adam Clarke's, **MEMOIRS OF THE WESLEY FAMILY**. Clarke quotes primary source documents from the parents and siblings of John and Charles. So we have multiple independent attestation.

In theory, some of the auditory phenomena might be naturally explicable if attributed to malicious neighbors pranking the Wesleys. However, there's also physical (visual, tactile) phenomena inside the parsonage, witnessed by members of the household. These are firsthand reports, by multiple observers:

I know not whether it was in the morning after Sunday the 23d, when about seven my daughter Emily called her mother into the nursery, and told her she might now hear the noises there. She went in, and heard it at the bedstead, then under the bed, then at the head of it. She knocked, and it answered her. She looked under the bed, and thought something ran from thence, but could not well tell of what shape, but thought it most like a badger.

Several nights the latch of our lodging-chamber would be lifted up very often, when all were in bed. One night, when the noise was great in the kitchen, and on a deal partition, and the door in the yard, the latch whereof was often lifted up, my daughter Emilia went and held it fast on the inside : but it was still lifted up, and the door pushed violently against her, though nothing was to be seen on the outside.

After nine, Robert Brown sitting alone by the fire in the back kitchen, something came out of the copper hole like a rabbit, but less, and turned round five times very swiftly. Its ears lay flat upon its neck, and its little scut stood straight up. He ran after it with the tongs in his hands; but when he could find nothing, he was frightened, and went to the maid in the parlour.

The next evening between five and six o'clock my sister Molly, then about twenty years of age, sitting' in the dining room, reading, heard as if it were the door that led into the hall open, and a person walking in, that seemed to have on a silk night-gown, rustling and trailing along. It seemed to walk round her, then to the door, then round again: but she could see nothing. She thought," it signifies nothing to run away; for whatever it is, it can run faster than me." So she rose, put her book under her arm, and walked slowly away.

In the morning she told this to my eldest sister, who told her, "You know, I believe none of these things. Pray let me take away the candle tonight, and I will find out the trick." She accordingly took my sister Hetty's place; and had no sooner taken away the candle, than she heard a noise below. She hastened down stairs to the hall, where the noise was. But it was then in the kitchen. She ran into the kitchen, where it

was drumming on the inside of the screen. When she went round it was drumming on the outside, and so always on the side opposite to her. Then she heard a knocking at the back kitchen door. She ran to it; unlocked it softly; and when the knocking was repeated, suddenly opened it: but nothing was to be seen. As soon as she had shut it, the knocking began again. She opened it again, but could see nothing: when she went to shut the door, it was violently thrust against her; she let it fly open, but nothing appeared. She went again to shut it, and it was again thrust against her.

Till this time, my father had never heard the least disturbances in his study. But the next evening, as he attempted to go into his study, (of which none had any key but himself,) when he opened the door, it was thrust back with such violence, as had like to have thrown him down.

But my sister Hetty, who sits always to wait on my father going to bed, was still sitting on the lowest step on the garret stairs, the door being shut at her back, when soon after there came down the stairs behind her something like a man, in a loose nightgown trailing after him, which made her fly rather than run to me in the nursery.

If you would know my opinion of the reason of this, I shall briefly tell you. I believe it to be witchcraft, for these reasons : About a year since, there was a disturbance at a town near us, that was undoubtedly witches ; and if so near, why may they not reach us ? Then my father had for several Sundays before its coming preached warmly against consulting those that

are called cunning men, which our people are given to ; and it had a particular spite at my father.

Beside, something was thrice seen. The first time by my mother, under my sister's bed, like a badger, only without any head that was discernible. The same creature was sat by the dining room fire one evening; when our man went into the room, it run by him, through the hall under the stairs. He followed with a candle, and searched, but it was departed. The last time he saw it in the kitchen, like a white rabbit, which seems likely to be some witch...

One thing I believe you do not know, that is, last Sunday, to my father's no small amazement, his trencher [wooden plate] danced upon the table a pretty while, without any body's stirring the table.

When I was there, the windows and doors began to jar, and ring exceedingly...Before I was out of the room, the latch of the back kitchen door was lifted up many times. I opened the door and looked out, but could see nobody. I tried to shut the door, but it was thrust against me, and I could feel the latch, which I held in my hand, moving upward at the same time. I looked out again: but finding it was labour lost, clapped the door to, and locked it. Immediately the latch was moved strongly up and down: but I left it, and went up.

The bed on which my sister Nancy sat was lifted up with her on it. She leapt down and said, "for surely old Jeffrey would not run away with her." However, they persuaded her to sit down again, which she had scarce done, when it was again lifted up several times successively a considerable height, upon which she left

her seat, and would not be prevailed upon to sit there any more.

## Yes, Virginia, there is a real devil

Here's a personal anecdote (which I post with permission) by a long-time Tblog reader who was into the occult prior to his Christian conversion:

Just before being saved, I was attending prayer meetings with this group of charismatic roman catholics (this isn't the weird part, believe it or not). One night one of the priests was speaking and his voice kind of faded out as this very oppressive, palpable darkness filled the room. It wasn't so much a lack of light as it was an unbearable sense of evil. After a while, I could clearly make out the sound of cloven hooves stalking around nearby. When I was saved that night, I had a vision of sorts - one in which I saw two paths, at one end was Satan and at the other was the Lord. I went towards Christ and I was immediately filled with the realization that everything in Scripture was true. All the stories about David, everything about the Apostles, I knew that the whole thing was true from the first page to the last.

With regard to the sound of hooves, I know that this is a popular cliché and that if Satan has any physical form at all then maybe he doesn't actually have goat horns and hooves etc. But who knows, he might be willing to use that form in order to fulfill expectations. As for the vision, I sometimes wonder if that was really the result of my imagination or not. Jesus looked kind of the same way that you see him in paintings. Satan looked like a being cloaked in smoky, shadowy darkness. Perhaps if it was a real vision, I would be more sure of it.



## Witch lights

*You will not fear the terror of the night,  
nor the arrow that flies by day,*

(Ps 91:5)

*The sun shall not strike you by day,  
nor the moon by night.*

(Ps 121:6)

These are rather obscure allusions. Ross offers a naturalistic interpretation. He thinks they refer to surprise attacks at night. A military assault or invasion.

By contrast, Goldingay presents evidence that Ps 91:5 may have its background in nocturnal demons, although he's noncommittal on that interpretation. And Ps 121:6 might be a comparable metaphor.

On a possibly related note is the disputed identity of Azazel in Lev 16 (cf. Lev 17:17). Michael Heiser defends a supernatural interpretation:

<http://drmsch.com/day-atonement-leviticus-16-goat-azazel/>

There is, though, the danger of anachronism when we use later traditions to interpret earlier texts.



But let's assume for argument's sake that these have supernatural referents. That's a reasonable, albeit inconclusive identification.

I thought about these biblical passages when reading this:

<https://henrycenter.tiu.edu/2017/08/the-mysterious-flying-witch-lights-of-aru/>

Now, I'd like to have more corroboration. And this raises a similar issue. Assuming the reports are accurate, are these mysterious lights natural, but unexplained phenomena—or occultic entities?

Is this the kind of thing that the biblical passages are alluding to? Since we don't live in the ancient Near East, we don't have the same experience or frame of reference. But given the proliferation of witchcraft in the ancient Near East, would there be analogous phenomena?

In that regard it might be instructive to do a cross-cultural study of witchcraft in American Indian tribes. Are there similar reported phenomena?

Finally, you can see how this luminous phenomena, if genuine, might feed into ufology, where secular observers reinterpret their experience in reference to categories supplied by scifi movies.

## Fox spirits

I attempt to read the Bible counterculturally. I was raised in a hitech civilization with strong secular and Christian crosscurrents. That's completely different from the world of the Pentateuch, where paganism and witchcraft were pervasive. So I like to ask myself how certain Biblical narratives might come across to people with a background that's more like ancient pagans.

I haven't done in-depth study of fox spirits, but from what I've read, it's a fixture of Chinese and Japanese folklore. Here's one example:

<http://www.koryu.com/library/dlowry12.html>

There are different ways to interpret this kind of material:

- i)** We might discount it in toto as sheer folk mythology.
- ii)** By the same token, we might discount it on the grounds that where there's a preexisting explanatory category, many people default to that generic category.
- iii)** Or we might say it has a basis in fact, but it's undergone legendary embellishment. In other words, this derives from actual encounters with malevolent supernatural agents, but as a result, people invent a backstory to explain where these "spirits" came from, where they normally reside, how their world intersects with our world. Stories about their origins, social order, &c., are mythological, but a genuine experience underlies the narrative overlay.

I'm sure that (ii) is often the case, but I also think (iii) is likely to be the ultimate reason.

If fox spirits exist, what are they? In principle there are three possible candidates:

**i) Animal spirits**

**ii) Demonic spirits**

**iii) Ghosts**

What's notable is the distinction between a physical animal and a roaming "spirit" that's detachable from the body. Given the association in some cultures between animals and malevolent free-ranging "spirits," it may be instructive to consider how the Tempter in Gen 3 would register to the original audience. What cultural connotations would that evoke?

## Ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggety beasties

Some cable TV channels are running shows on apparitions and hauntings. Needless to say, that's not the most reliable source of information. To put this in proper perspective, I'll be quoting some excerpts from an old book by John Warwick Montgomery:

Everyone enjoys a good ghost story. But are ghosts "real"? And if they are, *what* are they and how is their reality to be correlated with established biblical teaching? What is to be said for the spiritualist movement in its endeavor to establish contact with those who have passed to the other side?

Ghosts are most definitely real. At least, *some* ghosts are... Facts are relatively easy; it is the interpretation of them that is often hard! When faced by such data as those just presented [137-40], many persons simply refuse to accept them because they think that the interpretations will destroy their faith (in non-Christian materialism; in Christian judgment after death; etc). Some viewpoints—such as materialism—are indeed in tension with spectral evidence; but others—including orthodoxy Christianity—are certainly not. Consider the following multi-level explanatory scheme.

1. Ghosts as telepathic hallucinations arising from the minds of the living...however, it hardly seems to be able to account for the powerfully objective focus of so many ghost accounts, particularly when more than one person sees the

ghost at the same time, or independently at different times.

2. Ghosts as telepathic hallucinations arising from the minds (brains) of the dead...MacLellan's theory, by its shift of emphasis from the living to the dead, handles problems not covered in 1., but it fails in those cases where the specter represents a person whose brain has been cremated (death by fire) or totally destroyed in some other way.

3. Ghosts as residual human aura. The aura is a radiating luminous envelope or cloud projected from and surrounding the body. It is sometimes referred to as the "subtle body" or "etheric body" or (when separated from its body) the "human double." A tremendous literature exists on this subject...Most ghostly apparitions involve suicide, passion, violent death, or high emotional tension of some kind; perhaps extraordinary emotion is the trigger that releases the aura to "haunt" for a time the places familiar to the deceased person—and especially those places connected with the emotional trauma. Ghosts generally represent recently—or fairly recently—deceased persons. Since the aura gradually fades away after death, this would serve to explain why few ghosts of Roman soldiers are reported these days! If the more violent the death-trauma or emotional level of the decedent, the longer the "life" of his aura, then castle ghosts could be accounted for, since the stories associated with them almost always involve hideous events of one kind or another. Note that the aura is *not* the person; thus this explanation says nothing whatever against the immediate arrival of the deceased person at his appropriate eternal habitation, even while his aura continues for a time to walk the earth.

4. Ghosts as the dead themselves, on their way to the

reward determined once for all by their relationship or lack of relationship with Christ on earth, but not yet entered fully into that reward...no postponement or possible reversal of the judgment at death is suggested. Only the time-lag between death and heaven, or death and hell, is extended to account for ghostly phenomena that show more self-direction than the "human aura" would allow for, and yet to not engage in either angelic or in demonic missions for the living.

5. Ghost as the damned sent back to haunt the living or as Satanic counterfeits of the dead.

6. Ghosts as the saved sent back to earth by God for a special mission. Elijah and Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration seem to be clear instances of this phenomenon (cf. particularly [Mt 17:3,8](#)).

These six explanatory levels offer the tools for dealing with most attested spectral phenomena. Sometimes one interpretation will best fit the data, sometimes another.

**PRINCIPALITIES AND POWERS** (Bethany 1973), 136-43.

## Beat the devil

William Holman Hunt (1827-1910) was a Victorian painter best-known for his famous *Light of the World*. To my knowledge, he was the most pious member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. He made four trips to the Holy Land, which he used to lend verisimilitude to his paintings. For instance, his painting of *The Scapegoat* was set on the shores of the Dead Sea. The unforgiving landscape is authentic.

His Christian paintings harmonize realism with religious symbolism by evoking traditional typology. He encountered technical barriers in attempting to paint *The Triumph of the Innocents*. This painting blends elements of the Flight into Egypt with the Massacre of the Innocents. In this painting, the souls of the martyred children accompany the Holy Family into Egypt. There's an interplay between natural lighting (moonlight) with supernatural lightning (the nimbic aura of the sainted children).

In a letter, Hunt recounts an uncanny experience he had, when he felt he suddenly achieved a psychological and technical breakthrough. His experience reminds me of how Daniel's prayer was impeded by demonic opposition (Dan 10).

The story about the unaccountable noise, you will remember, I gave as an illustration of the degree to which the difficulty with my picture has distressed me. For four years this torment has been going on, wasting my life, and health, and powers, just when I believe they should be at the best, all through a stupid bit of temper on the part of a good friend. I don't like to hold

him responsible, although his agency caused the beginning of my difficulties, but I have got into the way of thinking that it is one of many troubles during these seven years (balanced by much joy of my last four years) which the Father of Mischief himself only could contrive. What I told you is only a good story, as my impressions give the experience. It is not evidence, remember, one way or the other, although I give the exact truth. I was on Christmas Day induced to go and work at the studio because I had prepared a new plan of curing the twisted surface, and, till I could find it to be a practicable one, it was useless to turn to work which I had engagements to take up on the following days. When I arrived it was so dark that it was possible to do nothing, except with a candle held in my hand along with the palette. I laboured thus from about eleven. On getting to work I noticed the unusual quietness of the whole establishment, and I accounted for it by the fact that all other artists were with their families and friends. I alone was there at the group of studios because of this terrible and doubtful struggle with the devil, which, one year before, had brought me to the very portals of death ; indeed, almost, I may say, beyond these, during my delirium. Many days and nights too, till past midnight, at times in my large, dark studio in Jerusalem, had I stood with a candle, hoping to surmount the evil each hour, and the next day I had found all had fallen into disorder again, as though I had been vainly striving against destiny. The plan I was trying this Christmas morning I had never thought of before the current week, but it might be that even this also would fail. As I groaned over the thoughts of my pains, which were interwoven with my calculations of the result of the coming work over my fresh



preparation of the ground, I gradually saw reason to think that it promised better, and I bent all my energies to advance my work to see what the later crucial touches would do. I hung back to look at my picture. I felt assured that I should succeed. I said to myself half aloud, "I think I have beaten the devil!" and stepped down, when the whole building shook with a convulsion, seemingly immediately behind my easel, as if a great creature were shaking itself and running between me and the door, I called out, "What is it?" but there was no answer, and the noise ceased. I then looked about ; it was between half-past one and two, and perfectly like night, only darker ; for ordinarily the lamps in the square show themselves after sunset, and on this occasion the fog hid everything. I went to the door, which was locked as I had left it, and I noticed that there was no sign of human or other creature being about. I went back to my work really rather cheered by the grotesque suggestion that came into my mind that the commotion was the evil one departing, and it was for this I told you the circumstance on the day of your visit. I do not pretend that this experience could be taken as evidence to support the doctrine of supernatural dealings with man. There might have been some disturbance of the building at that moment that caused the noise which I could not trace ; indeed, I did not take pains to do this. Half an hour afterwards I heard an artist, who works two studios past mine, come up the stair, and before he arrived by my door he said to some one with him, " It is no use going in, it is as dark as pitch," and they went down again. This was the only being that came to my floor during my whole stay, which was till 3.30. I perhaps should have taken more pains to explain the

riddle, but while I quite accept the theory of gradual development in creation, I believe that there is a "divinity that shapes our ends" every day and every hour. So the question to me is not whether there was a devil or not, but whether that noise was opportune, for I still hope that the wicked one was defeated on Christmas morning about half-past one. Thus, you see what a child I am ! — Yours truly, W. Holman Hunt.

William Minto, ed., **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTES OF THE LIFE OF WILLIAM BELL SCOTT : AND NOTICES OF HIS ARTISTIC AND POETIC CIRCLE OF FRIENDS, 1830 to 1882** (New York: Harper Brothers, 1892), 2:229-31.

## Animal clairvoyance

22 But God's anger was kindled because he went, and the angel of the Lord took his stand in the way as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him.

23 And the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand. And the donkey turned aside out of the road and went into the field. And Balaam struck the donkey, to turn her into the road. 24 Then

the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. 25 And when the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, she pushed against the wall and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall. So he struck her again. 26 Then the angel of the Lord went ahead and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left. 27 When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, she lay down under Balaam. And Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff. 28 Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you

have struck me these three times?” 29 And Balaam said to the donkey, “Because you have made a fool of me. I wish I had a sword in my hand, for then I would kill you.” 30 And the donkey said to Balaam, “Am I not your donkey, on which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Is it my habit to treat you this way?” And he said, “No.” 31 Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand. And he bowed down and fell on his face. 32 And the angel of the Lord said to him, “Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to oppose you because your way is perverse[b] before me. 33 The donkey saw me and turned aside before me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let her live.” 34 Then Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, “I have sinned, for I did not know that you stood in the road against me. Now therefore, if it is evil in your sight, I will turn back” (Num 22:22-34).

Many unbelievers regard that as one of the most fabulous stories in the Bible. They single out the donkey's

supernatural ability to speak.

However, the account also credits the donkey with the ability to perceive the angel, which was invisible to Balaam. Are there other examples of animal clairvoyance?

At one time, Michael Sudduth resided in a haunted house in Windsor Connecticut. At the time he and his wife didn't know they were buying a haunted house. It was a historic colonial home. After living there they discovered that it was haunted. And subsequently, they found out that the previous owners had the same experience. (I think Michael's experience in the haunted house, on top of his youthful dabblings with the Ouija board, is one of the things that pushed him off the deep end.) Among other things, he recounts the following:

The family dog (a golden retriever named Abbey) also seemed to sense something in the house. Early on she had some very strong reactions to something we could not see, much like she would if a stranger come to the house. She would go a particular spot in the house and look up and bark at something she had focused her eyes on. Sometimes she would stare down the stairs from the top of the stairs, as though she were looking at something in the foyer downstairs.

This happened in several places in the house, sometimes when we heard things and some- times when we had not. On one occasion Abbey became extremely aggressive, almost violent. She was really spooked by something. On at least two occasions, while I was teaching night classes, Jill had locked herself in the master bedroom with Abbey for fear that someone had broken into the house. Over time while Abbey continued to act as though she sensed

something, she was not as disturbed, exactly as she behaved with guests with which she had become acquainted.

You might dismiss this as subjective, but Sudduth also recounts objective phenomena which corroborate the dog's clairvoyance. For instance:

One day after we had been in the house for a few months, Jill and I were having an argument about the house. At one point, Jill said: "We should just sell this damn house and leave!" Immediately a short umbrella we had hanging on the coat rack by the backdoor flew off the peg and landed about six feet or so from the door. The peg did not break. There was no door or window open. And the umbrella was still rolled up. This umbrella just launched itself across the room. We were speechless.

Out of curiosity, I wrote Dr. David Hufford. He's a college prof. at the Penn State College of Medicine (Hershey), where he has appointments in Medical Humanities, Behavioral Science, and Family and Community Medicine. He's a world authority on old-hag syndrome, based on extensive original research (e.g. interviews, case studies) that he's conducted over the years.

In your research, have you run across credible reports that animals, like pet dogs and cats, can perceive the unseen presence of "spirits." Sense the presence of personal entities which are invisible to human observers?

To which Dr. Hufford responded:

I have reports I consider credible. Most do not involve "hagging," but some do. I am convinced that this happens.

So there is corroborative evidence for animal clairvoyance, of the kind exhibited by Balaam's donkey.

I should add that Rupert Sheldrake has done extensive research on animal telepathy:

<http://www.sheldrake.org/Research/animals/>

# XI. Occult

---



# The Pauli effect

## I. THEISM, ATHEISM, AND THE PARANORMAL

Atheists are generally hostile to the paranormal for the same reason that they are hostile to miracles and the supernatural. For one thing, some kinds of paranormality suggest a mind-over-matter type of dualism that's at odds with materialism. In principle, atheism can accept dualism. But once you accept dualism, you can no longer reject God, angels, demons, ghosts, or souls as a matter of principle. That makes it harder for atheist to argue against Christianity.

In addition, the paranormal is too much like the "divine foot in the door" for atheism. As Richard Lewontin notoriously put it:

Our willingness to accept scientific claims that are against common sense is the key to an understanding of the real struggle between science and the supernatural. We take the side of science in spite of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, in spite of its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, in spite of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our a priori adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive,

no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door. The eminent Kant scholar Lewis Beck used to say that anyone who could believe in God could believe in anything. To appeal to an omnipotent deity is to allow that at any moment the regularities of nature may be ruptured, that miracles may happen.

[http://www.drjbloom.com/Public%20files/Lewontin\\_Review.htm](http://www.drjbloom.com/Public%20files/Lewontin_Review.htm)

It's not that paranormal abilities, if they exist, are confined to God, although we can still debate the ultimate source of paranormal abilities—assuming they exist.

But the problem for atheism is that, once again, if you admit the existence of the paranormal, then you can no longer rule out the existence of miracles as a matter of principle. For miracles, if they happen, are the effect of personal agency. And that's not quantifiable. That's not predictable—except by the agent.

Atheists typically contend that the prior probability of a miracle is so vanishingly low that the evidence for a miracle must overcome an overwhelming presumption to the contrary. But other issues to one side, the paranormal plays havoc with that assumption.

## II. WOLFGANG PAULI

Atheists try to dismiss paranormal claimants out-of-hand as quacks and charlatans. And no doubt a lot of paranormal claims are bunk. However, there are some serious researchers in the field, such as Stephen Braude and Rupert

Sheldrake. And in this post I'm going to briefly examine the Pauli effect. Wolfgang Pauli can't be easily dismissed as a quack or charlatan.

By common consent, he was a scientific genius. A Nobel Laureate in physics. One of the architects of quantum mechanics. And a contributor to field theory. As a scientist, he's vastly more distinguished than Richard Dawkins, Jerry Coyne, or PZ Myers.

Moreover, he can't be dismissed as a religious fanatic. From what I've read, he was a secular Jew. For political reasons, his family converted to Christianity, but that was a cynical, pragmatic exercise—in the tradition of Jewish assimilation. As an adult he was not a Christian or observant Jew.

In addition, his scientific colleagues witnessed the Pauli effect. They are credible witnesses.

### III. THE PAULI EFFECT

Here are some examples of the Pauli effect:

There was something about Wolfgang Pauli. From early on in his career, colleagues couldn't help noticing that whenever he entered a laboratory, equipment spontaneously broke down. The Pauli effect, as it became known, was obviously impossible; it had to be just a matter of coincidence. But nevertheless it happened again and again. A. Miller, *137* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2009), 18.

On one occasion Pauli was present at the observatory when it was discovered that a terrible accident had befallen the great refractor telescope. It was almost

destroyed. Naturally everyone chalked it up to the Pauli effect. [Cf. O. Frisch, **WHAT LITTLE I REMEMBER** (Cambridge 1979), 48-49]

Pauli himself fervently believed in the Pauli effect and began to wonder whether he emanated powers (57).

On another occasion, Pauli was on a train when, unknown to him, the rear cars decoupled and were left behind while he proceeded to his destination in one of the front cars (175).

That same year the physicist Engelbert Schucking visited Pauli in Zurich. Along with Pauli's assistant Charles Enz and another colleague they took a tram from the ETH to Bellevue Square, where they planned to have a "wet after-session," with plenty of drinking. Bellevue Square is a bustling intersection where several tram tracks cross each other in a seemingly random way. Just as they reached the square, two streetcars collided right in front of them with an enormous bang. Schucking was standing with Pauli next to the driver of the streetcar (268-69).

Returning to Otto Stern's interview with Res Jost, Stern then said: 'but, of course, it was very nice with Pauli for, although he was thus highly learned, one could all the same really discuss physics with him. And...you know, he was not allowed to enter our laboratory, because of the Pauli effect. Don't you know the famous Pauli effect? Jost: Did something ever happen? Stern: Alas, many things did happen. The number of Pauli effects, the guaranteed (verbürgten) Pauli effects, is

enormously large. C. Enz, **No TIME TO BE BRIEF** (Oxford 2002), 149.

During Speiser's time in Zurich a multiple Pauli effect happened, as Thellung recounts: "In commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the special theory of relativity, on 26 May 1955 in the evening, Pauli gave a talk on Einstein to the Zurich Physical Society. Before, Kronig (who was in Zurich on his yearly visit), Jost, David Speiser and I met for dinner at the "teetotal restaurant Zurichberg," near the tram terminus near the Zoo. On the way from the restaurant to Pauli's talk the following happened: Speiser, discovering that the gasoline tank of his Lambretta [scooter] was empty, went to a filling station. There the Lambrett suddenly caught fire. It was extinguished with the water from an ewer but was not usable anymore, so that Speiser had to walk. I found my bike with flat tires and, hence, also had to walk. Kronig, finally, went by tram—a stretch he had traveled many times already—but he forgot to get out at Gloriestrasse, and noticed it only many stops later (492).

George Gamow, himself an eminent physicist, gives the following description of the Pauli Effect:

A mysterious event that did not seem at first to be connected with Paul's presence once occurred in Prof J. Franck's laboratory in Göttingen. Early one afternoon, without apparent cause, a complicated apparatus for the study of atomic phenomena collapsed. Frank wrote about this to Pauli at his Zurich address and, after some delay, received an answer in an envelope with a Danish stamp. Paul wrote that he had gone to visit

Bohr [in Copenhagen] and at the time of the mishap in Franck's laboratory his train was stopped for a few minutes at the Göttingen railroad station. You may believe this anecdote or not, but there are many other observations concerning the reality of the Pauli Effect!

The same anecdote, slightly differing in detail, was sent to me by a reader who had not read Gamow.

I put this question to Prof. Werner Heisenberg, the doyen of modern quantum-physicists, who had been a lifelong friend of Pauli's. Heisenberg wrote back:

As for the "Pauli Effect," Pauli himself took it half seriously, but only half. I could of course tell you anecdotes about this effect, or particular cases which I have witnessed myself.

Arthur Koestler, "Anecdotal Cases," Alister Hardy, Robert Harvie, & Arthur Koestler, **THE CHALLENGE OF CHANCE** (Random House 1974), 192-93.

#### IV. ASSESSING THE PAULI EFFECT

i) I've given a sampling of cases. This includes the specific details of some cases, as well as general reference to other cases in kind. It would be nice to have more cases with specific details. But this furnishes prima facie evidence for the Pauli effect.

The Pauli effect could be chalked up to mere coincidence. However, given the apparent frequency and improbability of these incidents, at what point does a "coincidence" cease to be an isolated event and become a pattern?

ii) The Pauli effect seems to be a case of subliminal telekinesis. In its random destructiveness, the Pauli effect is reminiscent of poltergeistic activity.

## V. PAULI'S OPINION OF THE PARANORMAL

Fierz wrote: "Pauli himself thoroughly believed in his effect. He has told me that he senses the mischief already before as a disagreeable tension, and when the anticipated misfortune then actually hits—another one!—he feels strangely liberated and lightened" C. Enz, **No TIME TO BE BRIEF** (Oxford 2002), 226.

Considering Pauli's "very rejecting conscious attitude towards horoscopes and astrology"... (464)

Experience has indeed shown me that what you call an "event of conjunction," is in general favorable for the occurrence of...the "synchronistic" phenomenon (150).

The existence of this phenomenon [archetypal symbols] is known to me for about 12 to 13 years from personal dreams which evolve completely uninfluenced by other persons (422).

First he observes in relation to Rhine's experiments on the statistics of guessing cards at a distance..."Personally, I have a much stronger relation to such happenings, in which an external event coincides with a dream, than to the behavior of statistical series...This whole kind of experiment, in which all irrational factors are excluded and the unconscious has no possibility to act, obviously could

not proceed differently...For, here the reproducible is concerned, and not the unique" (425).

Pauli suggested that the decline in the success rate of Rhine's subjects was due to the "pernicious influence of the statistical method," by which he meant that the statistical approach only dealt with large numbers of successful and unsuccessful tests. The size of the sample was so huge that the fact that some subject has achieved an extraordinarily high success rate simply disappeared in the welter of figures and "the actual influence of the psychic state on the participants" became imperceptible.

Added to this, the mechanical nature of the experiments meant that the participants eventually got bored. As their interest in the experiment decreased, so did their psychic power, thereby blurring the initially exciting valid results, A. Miller, 137 (W.W. Norton & Co., 2009), 191-92.

**i)** In addition to the Pauli effect, Paul also seems to be saying he had precognitive dreams. An example of synchronicity.

**ii)** And the same time, Pauli is discriminating in his evaluation of paranormal claims.

## **VI. THE OCCULT AND THE PAULI EFFECT**

Directly after describing the second dream Paul writes: "Thereupon I woke up very shaken. The dream was an experience of numinous character which influenced my conscious attitude in an essential way. It then



motivated me to resume work on Kepler” C. Enz, **No TIME TO BE BRIEF** (Oxford 2002), 417.

According to this characterization the “stranger” is a ‘double-layered’ dream figure, ‘on the one hand, a spiritual figure of light [with] superior knowledge, on the other hand a chthonic spirit of Nature’...he is, in a certain sense an “anti-scientist,” where under “science” here the methods of the natural sciences have to be understood in particular, above all those that today are taught at Institutes of Technology and Universities. These latter he perceives...as the place and symbol of his oppression, to which (in my dreams) he sometimes also sets fire. When he is paid too little attention, he manifests himself by all means, e.g. through synchronistic phenomena...He longs for redemption, but his liberation will come only in a form of culture... (463-64).

A few days later Pauli dreams that he is rooted to the center of a circle formed by a serpent biting its own tail. A. Miller, **137** (W.W. Norton & Co., 2009), 133.

This is the first time the veiled woman has entered Pauli’s dreams. She has done so because the serpent has created a protected area where she can safely appear (134).

A short time later Pauli dreams that an unknown woman is standing on a globe, worshipping the sun (137).

Then one night Pauli has a terrifying nightmare. People circulate around a square formed by four serpents....In

the center of the square, a ceremony is going on to transform animals into men. Two priests touch a shapeless animal lump with a serpent, transforming it into a human head (141).

Pauli, too, consulted the **I Ching** for advice “when interpreting dream situations” (182).

**i)** His dreams, with their menagerie of idolatry, alchemy, and numinous snakes, makes me wonder if he wasn't under occult bondage to some degree.

**ii)** Consulting I Ching, a classic occultic text, is, itself, a case of dabbling in the occult. Indeed, using I Ching to interpret his dreams could well be a vicious cycle. Occultic dreams interpreted by reference to pagan divination.

**iii)** This, in turn, raises the question of whether his paranormal abilities (assuming he had any) had their source in the occult.

**iv)** His dream about the “stranger” is clearly autobiographical to some degree. Pauli as a scientific antihero who enjoys preternatural insight into the workings of nature, yet yearns for redemption. The self-portrait is part Faustian, part Mephistophelean, part alchemical. Incidentally, Thomas Mann, author of a classic adaptation of the Faust legend, was a personal acquaintance of his.

This illustrates the degree to which Pauli's imagination and subconsciousness was permeated by the occult.

**v)** To some extent this may be a self-fulfilling prophecy, where—like Faust—Pauli's scientific achievements were the

result of a devil's pact. Not that Pauli was consciously in league with the dark side.

## VII. PAULI'S WORLDVIEW

From what I've read, Pauli seems to draw parallels between the paranormal and other phenomena. He places the paranormal within a larger set of dualities.

What knowledge is gained and what other knowledge is irrevocably lost is left to the experimenter's free choice between mutually exclusive experimental arrangements. This situation is designated "complementarity" by Bohr. The impossibility of controlling the interference of the act of observation with the system observed is taken into account by the impossibility of atomic objects in a unique way by the usual physical properties. Thus the precondition for a description of phenomena independently of the mode of their observation is no longer fulfilled, and physical objects acquire a two-valued, or many-valued and therefore symbolic character.

The observers or instruments of observation which modern microphysics has to consider thus differs essentially from the detached observer of classical physics.

...western psychology has set up the idea of the unconscious, whose relation to consciousness exhibits paradoxical features similar to those we meet in physics

W. Pauli, **WRITINGS ON PHYSICS AND PHILOSOPHY** (Springer-Verlag 1994), 40, 42

In spite of the logical closure and mathematical elegance of quantum mechanics there is on the part of some physicists a certain regressive hope that the epistemological situation we have sketched may turn out not to be final, this is in my opinion due to the strength of traditional thought-forms embraced in the designation of "ontology" or "realism."

The postulates...have been formulated most clearly by Einstein, for instance, recently in the following form: "There is such a thing as the real state of a physical system, which exists objectively, independently of any observation or measurement..." this ideal, so pertinently characterized by Einstein, I would call that of the detached observer (47).

Einstein of course conceded the logical consistency of the new wave mechanics; but he regarded the statistical laws of the new theory as incomplete. "One can't make a theory out of a lot of 'maybe's'" he often said, and also "deep down it is wrong, even if it is empirically and logically right." A mode of thought in terms of pairs of opposites [i.e. wave and particle], visualisable images depending on the choice of experimental arrangements, a priori probabilities—these Einstein could not accept.

Yet these views and concepts which he rejected are essential constituents of the so-called "Copenhagen interpretation" of quantum mechanics, founded by Bohr, which I also follow, in common with most theoretical physicists..."Physics is after all the description of reality" he said to me, continuing, with a sarcastic glance in my direction "or should I perhaps say physics is the description of what one merely

imagines"? This question clearly shows Einstein's concern that the objective character of physics might be lost through a theory of the type of quantum mechanics, in that as a consequence of its wider conception of the objectivity of an explanation of nature the difference between physical reality and dream or hallucination might become blurred (122).

As regards the situation of cognition, modern psychology has established that all understanding is a long drawn out process initiated by processes in the unconscious, long before the contents of consciousness can be rationally formulated: On the preconscious level of cognition the place of clear concepts is taken by images with strong emotional content, not thought but beheld as if painting them (125-126).

What is it that mirrors and what is mirrored? (139).

The mere apprehension of the dream has already, so to speak, altered the state of the unconscious, and thereby, in analogy with a measuring observation in quantum physics, created a new phenomenon (153).

In conclusion, I should like to discuss briefly the controversial question of "extrasensory perception" (ESP), which constitutes a borderland between physics and psychology, and can just as well be called "parapsychology" as "biophysics"...More recent investigations of such phenomena give fresh actuality to the old question of how the psychic state of persons taking part in the experiment fits into the course of external events. Can the phenomena of ESP be artificially influenced, positively or negatively? Results so far agree in showing the so-called "fatigue (decline

effect),” which points to the importance of the emotional factor in the experimental subject (163).

If we supplement these statements with biographical background information about Pauli, I think we can interpret his position as follows:

**i)** He sees a parallel between how a quantum physicist affects what he’s observing, and how a “psychic” affects what he’s observing. In both cases, there is no “detached observer.” Rather, the individual has a dialectical influence on reality—as both reflector and reflection.

**ii)** Likewise, he sees a parallel between introspection and quantum mechanics. When we remember a dream, reflect on a dream, interpret a dream, that has an autosuggestive influence on our subconsciousness. That feeds back into our subconsciousness. When we remember a dream or analyze a dream, that may, in turn, influence what we dream about the next time.

Likewise, the quantum physicist is isn’t merely an outside observer, but a participant who exerts an influence on what he observes. His involvement simultaneously changes the object of observation.

**iii)** There’s an idealistic quality to quantum mechanics, especially on the Copenhagen interpretation, which dovetails with telekinesis: mind over matter. This is what always bothered Einstein about quantum mechanics.

**iv)** Pauli’s dreams weren’t all nightmares by any means. Some of his dreams graphically modeled problems in modern physics. Some of his dreams were a source of scientific inspiration for further theorizing or discovery.

**v)** Pauli speaks of Newton "deanimating" the physical world. Cf. "The Influence of Archetypal Ideas on the Scientific Theories of Kepler." In a sense, Pauli's view of quantum mechanics and the paranormal reanimates nature.

Pauli's life and work illustrates the instability of a secular outlook—as well as the tragic fate of a life adrift, without the guidance of divine revelation or saving grace of the gospel.

## Satan casting out Satan

**1.** Reports like this raise questions regarding the status of non-Christian or occult exorcism:

<https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/devils-of-manhattan/>

This issue crops up, not only in reference to Catholic exorcists, but also cult members and witchdoctors. (By non-Christian, I'm not necessarily including Jewish exorcists. God might well honor exorcisms performed by Jews in OT and Second Temple Judaism.)

**2.** I assume the standard Christian objection to the possibility of non-Christian/occult exorcism is this:

*25 Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. 26 If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand? 27 If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own exorcists cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. 28 But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you. 29 Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his property, without first*



*tying up the strong man? Then indeed the house can be plundered (Mt 12:25-29).*

**3.** Although I haven't done a survey, I presume many readers think what he says precludes occult exorcism. If their interpretation is correct, then we must summarily discount all reported cases of occult exorcism, however well-documented.

**4.** Consider a different interpretation: Christ is using a tu quoque argument. Posing a dilemma for his accusers. Whichever way they answer they will lose the argument. Reinforcing this interpretation is the fact that v27 takes the explicit form of a tu quoque argument. On that interpretation, Jesus isn't ruling out occult exorcism, but responding to his accusers on their own grounds and putting them on the defensive—without endorsing the assumptions of the argument. A tu quoque argument is a kind of ad hominem argument or argument from analogy—where the speaker temporarily adopts the opposing viewpoint for the sake of argument.

**5.** Assuming that leaves open the possibility of (successful) occult exorcism, what might be the motivation? One can imagine the dark side using occult exorcism as a tactic to delude the masses into following a false religion. The demon cooperates with the exorcist because that lends credibility to the false religion. So that wouldn't be a case of the dark side working at cross purposes. Rather, it collaborates with human representatives of a false religion to lead people astray.

**6.** Here's another possible motivation. I'm guessing that many Christians think the dark side has a militaristic

command structure with Satan at the top. Demons take orders from Satan and his lieutenants. The dark side is a unified "army of darkness".

Perhaps, though, the dark side is more like rival crime families. The fact that they all hate God doesn't mean they like each other. Indeed, given the psychology of evil, demons may well detest each other. They hate everything. Maybe the dark side is riven with turf wars and competing power centers.

Or it might be like a military dictatorship where betrayal is the mechanism of promotion. Subordinates collude to frag their commanding officers and take their place. On both comparisons, the dark side is both united and disunited. United in common opposition to God and the good, but disunited insofar as they jockey for dominance among each other.

**7.** Apropos (6), maybe some demons are more powerful than others. Maybe some angels are more powerful than others, by divine creation, and when they fall they retain the power disparity. If so, perhaps the most powerful demons are bullies who like to push around weaker demons. In that respect, a stronger demon might overpower a weaker demon and expel him from a demoniac just to throw his weight around.

This is all speculation, but it's consistent with the phenomenon of occult exorcism. It proposes different backstories to explain the phenomenon. Although they go beyond revelation, they have a starting-point in revelation. A possible inference.

**8.** What Christ says has specific reference to the demonic realm, but it may be the case that humans can be

possessed by the souls of the damned as well as demons. If so, that falls outside the immediate purview of Christ's statement.

**9.** Another issue is whether there are follow-up studies on occult exorcism. Is it permanent? Witchcraft can be effective, but there's a catch. It replaces one thing with something worse. Occult healing or exorcism is a curse in disguise.

**10.** A possible objection to the alternate interpretation (4) is that if Christ's riposte is merely a tu quoque argument, then he failed to directly refute the allegation. So where does that leave the allegation?

Assuming the alternate explanation is true, perhaps he resorted to a tu quoque argument because a direct refutation would be too complex to articulate in that setting. But if his answer leaves the allegation hanging out there, is there a way to refute it?

**i)** From a tactical or strategic standpoint, one can understand how the dark side might play along with exorcism if that promotes an evil religion, steering people away from God and redirecting them into the hands of Satan. If, however, the Christian faith has the opposite effect, then the Jewish allegation is counterproductive. The Christian faith is liberating people from depravity and occult bondage.

**ii)** That allows us to differentiate purer forms of Christianity (e.g. evangelicalism) from more adulterated forms (e.g. Catholicism) or cults (e.g. Mormonism) or paganism (e.g. witchdoctors). So the success of exorcism in divergent religious contexts has different, but consistent explanations.

**iii)** In addition, Christianity has a special relationship to Judaism that's lacking in paganism or even Islam. If Christianity is false, then God has allowed a false religion to completely obscure the true alternative (rabbinic Judaism), as the perceived successor to Judaism. In that case, rabbinic Judaism is like a candle at high noon. You can barely see it because the overwhelming brightness of the alternative all but drowns it out. Moreover, Muhammad wasn't an exorcist or wonder-worker, so there's no comparison at that level.

## Satanic gang wars

24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons." 25 Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. 26 And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? 27 And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges (Mt 12:24-27).22 And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "by the prince of demons he casts out the demons." 23 And he called them to him and said to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? 24 If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. 25 And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. 26 And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end. 27 But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house (Mk 3:22-27).15 But some of them said, "He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons," 16 while others, to test him, kept seeking from him a sign from heaven. 17 But he, knowing their thoughts, said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls. 18 And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul. 19 And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. 20 But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the

kingdom of God has come upon you. 21 When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe; 22 but when one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil (Lk 11:15-21).

**i)** Because Mormonism apes Christianity, we run across reports by Mormon missionaries which mimic reports of Christian missionaries. This includes spiritual warfare. The exorcism of possessed individuals or infested houses. You also have alleged exorcisms in Voodoo. Cf. F. Goodman, **HOW ABOUT DEMONS: POSSESSION AND EXORCISM IN THE MODERN WORLD**, 90ff.

But that generates an ostensible dilemma. To the extent that a member of a cult or false religion is, himself, a representative of the dark side, how could he play against his own team?

**ii)** Of course, we have to consider the source. Given the source, are these reliable reports?

**iii)** Likewise, the diagnosis of possession isn't always clear-cut. Were they really possessed?

**iv)** But suppose, for the sake of argument, we grant the authenticity of some accounts. How would we explain that?

**v)** It could be analogous to occultic healings, where the patient is "cured," but the process brings him under bondage. He exchanges one affliction for another. There's a catch. A hidden cost when you resort to the dark side. Even if you get what you ask for, you pay a terrible price down the line. The cure is worse than the disease.

**vi)** This is reminiscent of the illustration Jesus uses about a demoniac who is temporarily exorcised (Mt 12:43-45). The exorcism was a short-term success, but a long-term failure, which aggravates his original condition.

**vii)** One commentator makes the additional point that:

Perhaps the devil might permit a few exorcisms to bring fame to a sorcerer and gain ground in the long run; Jesus' widespread expulsion of demons, however, constitutes no minor strategic retreat but a wholesale assault on Satan's kingdom on earth. C. Keener, **A COMMENTARY ON THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW** (Eerdmans 1999), 363.

Satan has an incentive to lend credence to cults and false religions. So he might sometimes throw the game to give his representative more credibility. If we can think of that, so can he.

**viii)** There's the question of how much control Satan has over demons. Do we think of the demonic realm as a crack military unit with a single chain-of-command? Or is there a degree of civil war within the demonic realm? A turf war? Like gangbangers.

In their accusation, the scribes and Pharisees evidently view the dark side in hierarchical terms. Satan is the commander-in-chief. He gives the orders. He empowers subordinates. In pop demonology of the Derek Prince variety, we have the same military model. But do we know for a fact that the dark side has a command structure? How does Satan maintain discipline? How does Satan police demons? What actual power (if any)

does he have over them? Can he punish them? Can he make them feel pain?

Conversely, do demons feel loyal to Satan? Is there an oath of allegiance? But we wouldn't expect an honor code among evil spirits.

Obviously we can raise questions we can't answer. But it's worth raising the questions when we consider unexamined assumptions.

**ix)** Perhaps the military model is ill-founded. To consider one alternative, an occultic exorcism might be like a war between rival witches or competing covens, where black magic counters black magic. Where they hex each other.

**x)** Presumably, there's a symbiotic relationship between a witch or medium and the incubus. The demon gets something from the human host in exchange for empowering the host. But, then, what happens in case of rivalry between one Satanist and another? Does each demonic faction back its own horse?

**xi)** But doesn't that play into the conundrum of a house divided against itself? That raises some interpretive issues. To some extent, Jesus is answering the scribes and Pharisees on their own grounds. They framed the issue in terms of a demonic hierarchy. He responds on their own terms by pointing out how their objection generates a dilemma for their own position. But that doesn't commit Jesus to their operating premise.

Certainly his reference to Jewish exorcises is ad hominem. So there's no presumption that he actually conceded the premise of their argument.



And even if he did grant the premise (whether in fact or for the sake of argument), the logic of the conundrum is that we wouldn't expect Satan to work at cross-purposes *by design*. That, of itself, doesn't preclude the possibility (or probability) that Satan sometimes loses control of the situation. Satan isn't omniscient or omnipotent.

Are demons twisted idealists? Are they on a mission? If so, we wouldn't expect them to intentionally sabotage their goals.

Or is this a personal power trip? If so, then they might be at loggerheads.

What are we to make of "territorial spirits"?

<http://www.frame-poythress.org/territorial-spirits-some-biblical-perspectives/>

Does this mean they've been assigned to a military outpost, as part of Satan's world empire? Or do these represent rival power centers? Like demonic street gangs.

## Hexed

I find it striking that some peoples' lives seem to be marked by difficulty, chaos, or disaster—one apparent nuisance or tragedy after another. Wherever they go, whatever they do, they seem to have trouble, whether it's problems with their cars, computers, pets, or gardens, or with the postal service, credit cards, personal injuries, ordering products on the Internet, using household appliances, making routine repairs around the house, or making everyday purchases.

There's even a Yiddish term for a person who suffers so regularly and conspicuously: shlemazel...Shlemazels are what we might call unlucky souls, people who seem to be victimized by impersonal forces or by the universe at large.

One reason I take this seriously is that I've known a number of shlemazels. In fact, I believe I was once married to one (actually, many of her family seemed to be lightning rods for misfortune). But for various reasons, it's probably wiser that I tell you instead about some former neighbors...For example, it seems as if everything my neighbors bought was defective. Brand new appliances and other electronic equipment routinely failed to work and had to be returned or exchanged; an apparently solid rocking chair collapsed within the first days of ownership (with the infant sitting on it), and their cars frequently needed repair, even though they owned brands noted for reliability. S. Braude, **THE GOLD LEAF LADY AND OTHER**

**PARAPSYCHOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS** (University of Chicago 2007), 148-9.

Assuming this is true, what's the explanation? As an atheist, Braude proposes a secular, albeit paranormal explanation. But from a Christian standpoint, an obvious explanation is that these people were hexed. Victims of witchcraft.

In Scripture, Balaam is the best-known example of a seer and sorcerer who's hired to cast an evil spell on the Israelites. He's a spectacular failure, but that's due to divine intervention. A more effective example is Ezk 13:17-23.

Another possibility is individuals or their ancestors who dabbled in the occult. That might produce a family curse that dogs them, even if a descendent had no direct dealings with the occult.

## Folk magic

One strategy Mormon apologists use is to excuse Joseph Smith's antics by claiming that his use of folk magic can be paralleled in the Bible. Let's consider that.

### i) False prophets

We mustn't make a religious belief-system so flexible that it's impossible to show that someone is a false prophet. It is not in the self-interest of Mormons to stake their salvation on a charlatan. So they should want to have criteria that distinguish charlatans from true prophets. Certainly that's a running concern in the Bible, from the OT to the NT.

### ii) Descriptive and prescriptive

The Bible describes examples of folk magic, viz., mandrakes as aphrodisiacs ([Gen 30:14-17](#)), sympathetic magic in selective breeding ([Gen 30:37-42](#)), teraphim ([Gen 31:19,34](#); [1 Sam 19:13](#)), a divination cup ([Gen 44:2,5](#)).

There is, though, a fundamental distinction between what the Bible *describes* and what the Bible *prescribes*. The fact that Scripture records a character doing something doesn't ipso facto carry any presumption of approval. Indeed, Scripture frequently records characters doing things which are prohibited and condemned.

Syncretism posed a chronic threat to OT Judaism. The law and the prophets condemn syncretism on a regular basis. Ancient Israelites were surrounded by heathen, superstitious cultures. It took constant vigilance to guard against moral and theological contamination.

The fact, for instance, that Gideon had a gimmick to determine God's will ([Judges 6:36-40](#)) doesn't imply divine

approval rather than divine accommodation. That's very different from God *proposing* a sign (e.g. [2 Kgs 20:8-11](#)).

### **iii) Randomizing device**

Casting lots isn't necessarily a method to determine God's will. In some cases, it can simply be a randomizing device, in the same way we use coin flips to make impartial selections (e.g. [Lev 16:7-10](#); [1 Chron 24:5,31](#); [25:8-9](#); [26:12-14](#); [Lk 1:8-9](#)). That's a fair way to make arbitrary selections. It eliminates favoritism.

To combine prayer with casting lots doesn't, by itself, indicate that casting lots is a way to determine God's will (e.g. [Acts 1:23-26](#)). For instance, Christians are often confronted with forced options. We must choose between alternate courses of action. We have a deadline. We pray about it, but making a decision isn't contingent on God answering our prayer. We can't compel God to give us guidance. We're not at liberty to refrain from action or wait to take action unless and until we have a sign or hear an audible voice. Circumstances force us to make a choice. If it's an arbitrary choice, we might use a randomizing device, like tossing a coin. Heads represent one course of action, tails another course of action. We hope and pray that God will bless our conscientious choice, but there's no presumption that God is bound to act on cue.

The OT discourages a talismanic mentality. Saul found out the hard way that God's will could not be mechanically compelled ([1 Sam 28:6](#)). Likewise, when the Israelites superstitiously treated the ark of the covenant as a rabbit's foot, their plan backfired (1 Sam 4). God humiliated their presumption.

### **iv) Authorized/unauthorized divination**

There's a fundamental distinction between licit and illicit divination. The Urim and Thummin was a form of divinely sanctioned divination. We don't know what it was or how it worked. But it could sometimes be used to determine God's will. That, however, doesn't license the use of divination in general, which is condemned in the Mosaic law.

Another example is trial by water ordeal (Num 5). That's a miraculous maternity test. But that doesn't mean people are entitled to concoct their own gimmicks.

### **v) Bronze snake**

Num 21 appears to be an example of polemical theology. It appropriates popular belief in sympathetic magic, but uses that ironically to subvert paganism, like burning an effigy:

It is clear that the uraeus was a fiery snake which the Egyptians believed would protect the Pharaoh by spitting forth fire on his enemies...Clearly, then, the biblical writer employed Egyptian background material and motifs when recording the Num 21 incident...The raising up of the bronze serpent on a standard may also be a symbol of Yahweh's vanquishing Egypt. The Egyptians fashioned images of threatening forces in order to demolish those forces...Sometimes it is the hostile power to be destroyed that is thus counterfeited and done to death. So the replication of snakes, scorpions, crocodiles, and the like not only served to protect whoever made use of such an image, but on occasion functioned as a force of destruction against the object represented. Since the serpent was the emblem of ancient Egyptian sacral and regal sovereignty, Yahweh's command in Num 21 to fashion a model of a serpent was a sign of his conquering the nation. This point would be especially clear to those

Hebrews who desired to return to Egypt and who believed that their security and deliverance rested in Pharaoh and his people. Yahweh was proclaiming the annihilation of Egypt. Egypt could in no way liberate Israel. Salvation came only from the hand of Yahweh.

J. Currid, **ANCIENT EGYPT AND THE OLD**

**TESTAMENT** (Baker, 2001), 147-49.

## Brazilian witchcraft

Greenfield is an academic anthropologist with extensive fieldwork in Brazil. Here's an example of syncretistic witchcraft:

What takes place between a patient and a supernatural provider in Brazil's alternative health care system incorporates elements from the still vibrant transaction between a petitioner in the pre-Reformation folk variant of Roman Catholicism brought to Brazil by its first settlers and a saint or the Virgin Mary. According to the assumptions of Roman Catholicism, a saint is a special individual who, after death, has been reborn "and elevated to everlasting life in heaven by an all-powerful creator God believed to have control over all aspects of the universe, including the destinies of those on earth...." Saints "are considered 'friends of God,' able to act as intermediaries with him on behalf of supplicants on earth" (Greenfield and Cavalcante 2005:7).

I had observed and filmed other Spiritist healer-mediums previously (see Greenfield 2008) and thought I knew what to expect. I had seen people sliced into with knives and scalpels. I had witnessed pieces of flesh, said to be tumors, removed. The patients reported experiencing little if any pain when cut. The instruments were not treated with antiseptics and no visible anesthesia was given.

As Carlos lay nervously waiting, not knowing what to expect, his brother joined him. Pedro spoke words of reassurance. A few minutes later Antonio, dressed in a



white coat, walked rapidly out of the building onto the porch pushing a cart laden with "surgical" instruments. Without saying a word he reached across the cart and picked up an electric saw with a serrated circular blade. Rapidly he attached the tool to an extension cord handed to him through a window from inside the building. Carlos, wide-awake, continued his conversation with Pedro and seemed to pay little attention to the approaching man with the saw in his hand. Antonio methodically turned on the tool and still not addressing or interacting with Carlos, drove the spinning blade into the left side of the patient's chest. As it spun, the skin parted and blood spurted out. The onlookers gasped. The patient did not cry out or move, but he did continue his conversation with his brother. After withdrawing and reinserting the blade several times, Antonio removed it and, with his fingers, picked up a strip of flesh from near the patient's heart, the same piece Carlos showed me the next day in the airport. The procedure took but a few minutes. The saw blade had not been cleaned before it was used and no effort was made to sterilize it afterwards when the healer turned it on his next patient. Carlos did not receive any anesthesia and was wide-awake as the blade severed his flesh and the healer removed the tissue. Without uttering a word to the man whose body he had violated in this extreme manner, Antonio unplugged the saw and walked away, pushing the cart in the direction of his next patient. A few minutes later a woman, also dressed in white, holding what looked like an ordinary sewing needle and thread, closed and bandaged Carlos' wound. She then helped the patient from the cot and escorted him back into the building where he was given a glass of "specially prepared

water." After drinking the liquid, he was chaperoned to yet another room where he was told to rest quietly. In the airport I asked Carlos if he could tell me what he experienced. Perhaps still in shock, he said that he did not remember when the blade entered his flesh because he had perceived no pain. There was no distress when the wound was closed or as he rested on the bed. Even now, although the left side of his chest felt "numb," the discomfort was minimum.

I asked if he understood and could explain to me what had happened to him the previous day. He replied that he could not but added that he wanted to learn about the beliefs that informed the treatment he had received.

I asked if I might telephone to learn about Carlos' progress. Pedro gave me his card and offered to provide me with reports. I called several months later and was told that Carlos had gone to a nearby Kardecist-Spiritist center the day after he returned home. He said he was feeling better and stronger and walked the six short blocks to the center. Intrigued by what he learned, he returned frequently; and, after attending several lectures and beginning a class on the basic beliefs, he explained to Pedro that it had not been Antonio who had operated on him. Antonio, the bricklayer with a first grade education, was a medium whose body at the time of the surgery was inhabited by a spirit, the spirit of a Dr. Ricardo Stans, a German national who received his medical education in Italy during the 19th century. Sometime after his death he is reported to have returned to "our world" to treat living patients using the bodies of mediums like Antonio. When operating, Carlos informed his brother, Dr. Stans

was assisted by a number of other spirits who had been trained in various aspects of medicine, or in other healing traditions, in previous lives. He was told that they brought with them “advanced” medical techniques from the spirit world. It was these spirits who had cleaned the instruments and provided the anesthesia for Carlos and the other patients.

<https://www.concordia.ca/content/dam/artsci/research/polanyi/docs/conference-2014-papers/Greenfield%20Sydney%20Montreal%202014.pdf>

## Shapeshifters

This is a sequel to my previous post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2015/12/skinwalkers.html>

Is there any evidence for the existence of shapeshifters? Does Scripture speak to that issue? This is of some potential relevance to Christian missionaries who minister to people-groups where traditional witchcraft is prevalent.

**i)** There are OT passages which suggest angels can materialize. Assume physical form.

**ii)** Ps 91:5 might allude to the night hag. However, the passage is poetic.

**iii)** Isa 13:21 & 34:14 may allude to desert wraiths, night hags, and goat-demons. However, the language could be mythopoetic.

**iv)** The OT bears witness a pagan cult of goat-demons (Lev 17:7; cf. 2 Kgs 23:8; 2 Chron 11:15). And that may lie in the background for the aforesaid passages in Isaiah.

That, however, doesn't testify to their existence, but to a type of idolatry.

**v)** Mt 12:43 refers to desert demons, although that may be picturesque rather than literal.

So I'd say all these passages are neutral on the question of whether shapeshifters exist.

**vi)** Finally, you have the identity of Azazel in Lev 16. It's difficult to determine what that refers to. On one interpretation, Azazel is a desert demon. And it would be tempting for Israelites in the Sinai to placate a desert demon with an offering. The obvious problem with that explanation is that Lev 17:7 explicitly forbids that very practice.

A variation of that interpretation is not that the scapegoat an offering to Azazel. Rather, because the nature of the scapegoat is to be sent away, it will enter the domain of Azazel. That's a side-effect of the offering, rather than the intention of the offering. An incidental consequence. But the passage is admittedly obscure.

In sum, I'd say the Scriptural evidence is inconclusive. It allows for the possible existence of shapeshifters, but doesn't attest their existence.

Certainly many things are possible on a Biblical worldview that are impossible on a naturalistic worldview. Of course, what's possible and what's actual are two different things.

What about extrabiblical evidence for shapeshifters? The most reputable evidence I've run across is from psychiatrist M. Scott Peck, describing two of his patients, whom he exorcised:

I still did not know precisely when and why Beccah had become possessed. I knew that around age six she had developed an abnormal attraction to a book of woodcuts that told one version of the pact with the devil story. M. Scott Peck, **GLIMPSES OF THE DEVIL: A PSYCHIATRIST'S PERSONAL ACCOUNTS OF POSSESSION,**

**EXORCISM, AND REDEMPTION** (Free Press 2005), 214-15.

The extraordinary amount of restraint required was one of the less remarkable features of the exorcism. The most remarkable was the change in the appearance of Beccah's face and body. Except during break times and a few other occasions when Satan would seemingly be replaced by Beccah, she did not appear to be a human being at all. To everyone present, her entire face became like that of a snake. I would have expected it to be the usual kind of poisonous snake with a triangular head, but that was not the case. The head and face of this snake were remarkably round. The only exception to this roundness was its nostrils, which had a distinct snub-nosed look. Most remarkable of all were the eyes. They had become hooded, *ibid.* 173.

During another appointment, again for but a minute, Beccah's face appeared to be that of a very dry, thick-skinned, lizardlike creature—possibly an iguana. Definitely a reptile but nothing like a snake. *ibid.* 225.

On a related note, I'm reminded of Michael Sudduth's experience:

My two years in Windsor, Connecticut deepened my long-standing and recently re-wakened interest in survival. Within a couple of days of moving into the early Federal-style home built by Eliakim Mather Olcott in 1817, my wife and I (and dog) began to experience a combination of prototypical haunting and poltergeist phenomena. Although we critically investigated the various phenomena as they occurred, we were unable to trace the phenomena to natural causes. Given the

fairly astonishing nature of some of the phenomena, my curiosity about our experiences peaked and I began research into the history of the home and the experiences of its former residents. This led to what has been a ten-year long investigation, including interviews with former residents, visitors to the home, and acquaintances of residents as far back as the 1930s. My inquiry turned up testimony from several prior occupants to experiencing phenomena identical, even in detail, to the phenomena my wife and I experienced. What I found equally fascinating, though, was the fact that occupants of the home prior to 1969, including long-term residents, claimed not to have experienced anything unusual. 1969 was the year resident Walter Callahan Sr. committed suicide in the home. In this way, the pattern of experiences surrounding the home fit a more widespread pattern in which ostensibly place-centered paranormal phenomena are associated with a suicide or other tragic event at the location.

<http://michaelsudduth.com/personal-reflections-on-life-after-death/>

Likewise, I read a book a while back about an Eskimo community that relocated to ancient burial grounds, where witchdoctors were interred. According to the anthropologist who wrote the book, based on her extensive contact, that gave rise to hauntings. Cf. Edith Turner, **THE HANDS FEEL IT.**

Finally, a friend shared some anecdotes from Reddit. Whether or not we find these credible depends on how we evaluate testimonial evidence in general:

My grandmother on my mothers side has always been very superstitious, for lack of better word, she's not religious, but she does believe in a lot of paranormal stuff.

Her mother was full blooded Navajo and her father was Irish. Either way, she'd never been anywhere East of Montana and she grew up in Nevada.

One year, when I was in grade school, we went to visit her, most of the visit was pretty uneventful, typical boring old people stuff, except she always kept her curtains drawn shut and would always peek out the window and when someone asked what she was doing, she would simply reply "Yenaldlooshi is watching me" This went on for nearly the entire visit until a few days before we were due to leave, My grandma and my (then) baby brother (he's 19 now lol) were in the front yard that evening, planting flowers when all of a sudden, my grandmother starts shouting "Insert little brothers name here get away from that creature! It's not safe!" of course, being in Nevada, we all assumed that my brother had found a scorpion or a rattle snake, so we all run outside, to see my Grandmother clutching my little brother and shaking in terror against the side of the house, standing out in the yard, was a large, black, great-Dane sized dog, it was staring at my grandmother with an intensity I'd never seen before. It looked up at us, gave a little huff and bounded off, I don't remember if it moved unusually fast or not, but do remember it had really deep yellow eyes.

When my mother asked my grandmother what had happened, she kept repeating "The Yenaldlooshi has found me". She moved a couple weeks after that.

(Source)



Anybody that has been on the Navajo reservation has either probably heard of some creepy things or have experienced pretty creepy things. Namely skinwalkers. I have only seen one. Here is my story. I come from a small town in northern Arizona that's sandwiched between the Paiute reservation to the north and the U.S.'s largest Navajo reservation to the south. My high school being so small (a 1A high school that has, on average, 80 students enrolled every year.) always had to travel south about 5-10 hours one way to play another high school in any sport. This means that we traveled A LOT on the Navajo rez. And we also usually stayed at hotels when we would head out to play and come home in the morning but this trip was a little bit different. I remember the basketball coach saying that the school didn't have enough money to put up the teams in a hotel that trip so we were going to be on the road for a total of about 12 hours. I was the only male senior to play basketball that season. We had just got done playing our game and headed home on our bus "Big Blue." We were headed out and it wasn't long, about 2 hours of driving, before we had entered the rez. By this time, everyone was asleep with it being about 2 in the morning. When we had crossed the rez's border I noticed the bus driver had sped up and was now going about 85 mph. I thought this was a little weird because he never exceeded the speed limit, at least not in my high school career. For some reason, I couldn't fall asleep like the rest of my teammates, and I just sat at the back of the bus staring out across the desolate desert landscape that was lit up by the full moon. As I looked out, I could see a figure running towards the bus at an angle of pursuit...and keeping up with the bus at 85 mph. As the figure got closer I saw

that it was a humanoid form. As a matter of fact it looked exactly like a human, only that the face was painted half black and half white with glowing eyes. Glowing eyes like a rabbit's eyes reflecting light from a spotlight. I immediately thought, "Holy crap! It's a skinwalker!!" The skinwalker ran up to the edge of the road and just kept up pace with the bus hurdling sage brush and rocks while staring at me. After I made eye contact with the thing, I COULD NOT look away. It was as if something was holding my head and eyes in place. The skinwalker just smiled at me this inhuman smile that went ear-to-ear, showing crooked, yellow, pointed teeth. I felt like I was going to throw up and I was panicking through the whole ordeal. The skinwalker started to crumple down on to all fours, still keeping up with the bus. I could see his bones crack and reform, hair started appearing all over the skinwalker's body and in about 3 seconds was now a coyote and it ran off back into the desert out of view. As soon as it was gone, I ran to the onboard bathroom and puked a mixture of food and blood. I didn't want to tell anyone for fear they would think I was crazy. I confided in my Navajo friend. She told me that I needed to see the chief, who also happened to be a friend of mine, and get a blessing. I saw him the next school day in the parking lot. He just came up to me and mumbled something in Navajo while waving a feathered scepter-like thing, turned around, got in his truck and drove away. To this day, I haven't seen another skinwalker. It might be due to the fact I moved away from that town and rez, and, if I do have to go south, I go around...WAY around.

(Source)

I was about 15-16 years old and walking home from a friend's place at about 2-3 O'clock in the morning with the friend I was living with at the time. My mate was pushing a BMX and we were just talking and laughing as we walked home. All of a sudden we saw what looked like 2 very large Greyhounds jump over a set of mailboxes at some flats (apartments) and landed in the middle of the road. The mailboxes appeared to be about 1.5 meters tall and about 5-6 meters from the road.

At the moment I thought it was a little strange but kept watching them. What I witnessed was something I will never forget in my life. The 2 "Greyhounds" as they ran down the road appeared to both stand up on their hind legs and morph into a much bigger much beefier being of which I can only describe to be looking like a "Yowie" which I guess is the equivalent to a Sasquatch to our friends from American and other countries. These "Yowies" both ran around a corner about 200 meters in the direction we came and we both sat there dumbfounded. A few seconds later we heard what sounded like a small female child scream in terror. Keeping in mind it was around 3am in the morning and there were no children out. We both looked at each other in horror without saying a word I jumped on the handle bars on the bike and he peddled that bike non stop all the way home about 2 kilometers away.

## "Magic trees"

**i)** Atheists mock the Bible for having "magic trees." Atheists refer to the tree of life, the tree of knowledge, and the burning bush. In fact, I've encountered two illiterate atheists who said the burning bush was a talking tree.

**ii)** To begin with, I doubt the narrator thought the tree of knowledge or the tree of life had the innate ability to confer godlike knowledge or immortality.

**a)** For one thing, knowledge is psychological, but immortality is physical. Even if, for the sake of argument, the fruit of the tree of life had the chemical properties to confer immortality, knowledge operates on a very different principle.

**b)** Moreover, from the viewpoint of the narrator, just because there's a correlation between eating the fruit and a particular result, that doesn't mean the fruit caused the result.

To take another Pentateuchal example, if unauthorized personnel touched the ark of the covenant, that was deadly. But contact wasn't lethal because the ark itself was fatal to the touch. It's not like the ark was radioactive. It was simply a gold-plated wooden box. Authorized personnel could open the ark and put things inside without suffering harm.

It's not the ark that killed you, but God. The ark was an emblem of God's holiness. For unauthorized personnel to touch the ark was an act of profanation. God struck the offender dead.

**iii)** Likewise, as I've argued elsewhere, I doubt the bush itself was on fire. In context, I think it was the luminosity of the angel within or behind the bush that made it seem to be on ablaze from a distance.

Mind you, I have no antecedent objection to a bush that miraculously burns without consuming itself.

**iv)** But what about "magic trees"? Is that inherently absurd?

Of course, what's absurd is relative to your worldview. To a Christian, atheism is absurd. Indeed, some atheists think atheism is absurd (i.e. existential nihilists)!

It depends, in part, on what you mean by "magic trees." Take animism. Animism was one of the most popular pagan religions. And unlike many dead pagan religions, animism continues to have huge numbers of adherents in parts of the Third World.

According to animism, the physical world is inhabited or haunted by nature spirits and ancestral spirits. That includes rocks, trees, and streams.

On this view, it's not that a particular tree has inherent "magical" properties. The tree itself is just a tree. But the tree has become the host for some ancestral spirit.

That doesn't mean that if you cut open a "magic tree," you will find a wood nymph inside. The framework isn't that physical.

**v)** From a Christian standpoint, I don't believe in "nature spirits." But I do believe in evil spirits. This includes demonic spirits. But it might also include "restless spirits."

By that I mean, souls of the damned that linger on earth. They are doomed. They await the final judgment. But in the meantime they "wander." They tend to hang around places where they used to live.

On this view, "magic trees" are no more or less absurd than haunted houses. It depends on what you believe about ghosts, demons, and the intermediate state of the damed.

**vi)** Apropos (v), this is related to the notion of territorial spirits:

<http://www.frame-poythress.org/territorial-spirits-some-biblical-perspectives/>

This may also be related to the Biblical concept of bloodshed polluting the land (Num 35:33-34).

It wouldn't surprise me if there's a circular dynamic in play. For instance, it wouldn't surprise me if a locus of human sacrifice became a magnet for evil spirits. Conversely, it wouldn't surprise me if a locus of evil spirits became a magnet for human sacrifice.

Evil feeds on itself. Evil gorges itself on evil. And if you conjure the dark side, you may get what you ask for.

Now, the Bible is not an encyclopedia. It doesn't attempt to record everything that exists. So I just offer this as a working hypothesis, not a settled fact.

**vii)** That said, there is corroborative evidence. For instance:

Well do I recall the almost overwhelming depression that came upon me as I entered the premises and inner "sanctuary" of the "goddess" (Kali) in Nandi, Fiji

with its horrifying blood-smeared image. The pace of walking became abnormal and breathing irregular. Similar was the experience in the Kali temple premises in Calcutta, India. Attendance at a ceremonial dance in eastern Zaire brought an impact of oppression and ill feeling to me in the "electrified" general, negative and depressive atmosphere of the situation. It was very similar in Dahomy, West Africa, as we observed a priest at the altar sacrificing chickens and chanting incantations to appease the evil spirits at the bottom of an "indwelt" tree.

I cannot help but believe that there is such a thing as demonic focalization in certain objects and operating uniquely through certain formulas. These objects (including words) become special embodiments and vehicles of demonic powers and convey supra-human and supra-natural potency. Strange phenomena proceed from them. Sounds and voices are heard, flames are seen shooting forth from rocks and trees as lightning or bright flashes, and strange and destructive influences are emanating from them. Dr. John S. Mbiti reports several rather peculiar experiences in **AFRICAN RELIGIONS AND PHILOSOPHY** (pp194-97). Trustworthy eyewitnesses have informed me that they have seen flames shooting up from rocks repeatedly in Timor, Indonesia, and trees have been seen burning without being destroyed. Experiences as described by Dr Mbiti and the reports from Timor are quite common in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific.

It has been experienced that the transportation of an idol has actually brought serious physical disturbances,

destruction, and death to the new locality and community.

The books **DEMON EXPERIENCES: A**

**COMPILATION** [Tyndale House 1972] and [Robert Peterson's] **ARE DEMONS FOR REAL?** (Moody Press 1972) report numerous instances to support the view.

My personal experiences in Africa, especially in Dahomy and certain villages in Nigeria and in Timor, Indonesia, leave no room for doubt in my mind. Unforgettable are the impressions and mental pressures that I experienced in the peculiar atmosphere that surrounded two very large trees in the interior of Dahomy at which trees numerous twin children had been sacrificed to the spirits of the ancestors who were supposed to indwell those trees. Peculiar stories were being told of terrifying phenomena that seemed to proceed from those trees, especially in the evening hours and at times of "sacrifices." George W. Peters, "Demonology on the Mission Field," J. W. Montgomery, ed. **DEMON POSSESSION** (Bethany 1976), 198-200.

**viii)** I will close with a personal anecdote. I used to go for afternoon walks along a woody paved trail that was frequented by cyclists.

I began to notice that every so often a bicycle accident would occur right around a particular tree. I don't know if I'd classify it as one tree with several trunks or several trees bunched together.



This didn't happen every day or every week. But the frequency seemed to be unusual.

Now someone might say that's just a coincidence. In the nature of the case, I can only witness an accident if I happen to be at a particular place at a particular time. Similar accidents may occur elsewhere that I don't see because I wasn't there.

Okay, I get that. But it fails to explain why bicycle accidents happened to cluster at that particular spot. There weren't any bumps, cracks, or loose gravel at that spot along the trail.

The stretch of trail I used to walk along was about 2 miles in either direction. Yet I didn't witness bicycle accidents clustering elsewhere along the same stretch of trail.

Moreover, two other points along that same stretch were naturally more accident prone. That's where the trail bottlenecked, with barriers on either side. That's where you had a bend in the trail around blind curves.

A speeding cyclist couldn't see what was just around the curve. He'd be unable to stop in time to avoid a collision. Yet I never witnessed a bicycle mishap at those locations.

So it *seems* as if there was something about *that* tree. Did something evil happen there years ago that made it treacherous be around?

I don't have a firm conviction. It could just be a coincidence. But it's one of those things I notice as I go through life. If you're observant, you pick up on little uncanny things that happen here and there. Not something you expected or sought out.



## Water witching

I've read that Joseph Smith was into water witching. I haven't studied that accusation in depth, and I haven't studied water witching in depth, so in this post I'll discuss the issue hypothetically.

If we assume that at least in some cases, water witching is more than randomly successful, two explanations present themselves:

- i) The douser might be genuinely clairvoyant. By dabbling in the occult, he acquires extrasensory knowledge. Of course, that's a nice way of saying he's in league with evil spirits.
  
- ii) If a douser plants evidence, or if he's already familiar with the area, acquainted with spots where there's surface water, then he can "discover" what the client paid him to find. That's impressive...unless you consider the possibility that he went to places where he already knew what he was going to find.

In that case, the rod is just a prop. The rod points because the douser is manipulating the rod.

## Paganism, Satanism, and witchcraft

I'm going to quote this as a foil:

Paganism should not be understood as a synonym for Satanism. For many Pagans such an association is offensive, being understood as one of the many ways Christians have historically sought to demonize indigenous, nature-venerating religions. Most contemporary Pagans will insist that because Satan does not feature in the Pagan worldview, and because Satanists work with a perverted understanding of the Christian worldview, Satanists are not Pagans, but rather Christian heretics. Indeed, many Pagans will actively distance themselves from Satanists and Satanism. The Paganism-Satanist confusion, which probably stretches back to the Christian denunciation of Pagans as "devil-worshippers," has been exacerbated in recent years by misrepresentations in films, horror novels and popular books dealing with the occult. "Pagan and indigenous religions," **NEW DICTIONARY OF CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS** (IVP 2006), 524b.

This raises a host of issues:

i) Methodologically speaking, I imagine it must be difficult to find any "pure," indigenous forms of paganism or witchcraft in the modern world. After 2000 years of church history and Christian mission, contemporary paganism and witchcraft have almost inevitably been impacted by contact with Christian theology and practice. Indeed, it is often in deliberate reaction to Christianity.

**ii)** Of course, we have many literary and archeological sources for varieties of pre-Christian paganism and witchcraft. However, that's problematic for the sanitized image of modern pagans and modern "wiccans," inasmuch as ancient pagans often practice human sacrifice or child sacrifice in particular.

**iii)** There's an obvious sense in which pre-Christian witchcraft isn't a synonym for Satanism. Pre-Christian witches and pagans didn't consciously worship Satan. That requires a revelatory perspective. However, it's quite possible to be unwittingly in the service of the Devil.

**iv)** As scholars have documented, European witchcraft evolved into diabolical witchcraft. Cf. J. B. Russell, **WITCHCRAFT IN THE MIDDLE AGES** (Cornell University Press, 1984), J. B. Russell & B. Alexander, **A HISTORY OF WITCHCRAFT: SORCERERS, HERETICS, & PAGANS** (Thames & Hudson; 2nd ed., 2007).

Due, moreover, to the global reach of Christianity, European witchcraft is hardly confined to a particular period or geography. To take one example, consider Voodoo's amalgam of Catholicism and witchcraft.

**v)** European witchcraft was an eclectic synthesis of sorcery, old paganism, necromancy, folklore, and heresy (e.g. the Cathars, Luciferians, Adamites). That's often an explicit version of diabolical witchcraft.

**vi)** One interesting question is the degree to which Roman Catholic sacerdotalism and sacramentalism might have been a partial catalyst for European witchcraft. To what extent is Satanism black magic to Catholicism's white magic (as it were)?

**vii)** I also wonder if European witchcraft wasn't influenced by the "whore of Babylon" in Rev 17-18. Both at a substantive and iconographical level, the image of a harlot and sorceress riding on the back of a scarlet beast is rife with connotations (e.g. immorality, bestiality, seduction, spells, human sacrifice) that feed into Satanism. Did that contribute to the development of diabolical witchcraft on the Continent?

**viii)** A pagan/wiccan apologist might object that European witchcraft isn't "true" paganism, but an artificial, culturebound construct. No doubt there's a grain of truth to that complaint, although paganism and witchcraft are inherently syncretistic and opportunistic.

**ix)** However, it could also be argued that the encounter between paganism and Christianity was a clarifying moment for paganism. The shock of recognition. Removing the mask to reveal what (or who) actually lay behind paganism and witchcraft.

**x)** Finally, what about the incendiary charge of child sacrifice? I doubt contemporary Western pagans and witches generally practice child sacrifice. However, I suspect the basic reason is the fact that, at present, child sacrifice is illegal. Murder. A punishable offense.

There are, however, parts of the world where life is cheap, where there are many unwanted children, abandoned children, street children. Children sold into slavery. There are parts of the world where modern-day witches could probably procure children (for a price) for ritual sacrifice. And that would mark a reversion to pre-Christian pagan practice.

## Totemic animals

As Kenneth C. Way documents in **DONKEYS IN THE BIBLICAL WORLD**, certain animals had an "ominous" (i.e. omen) or divinatory significance in ANE paganism. This includes talking animals.

I wonder if there's a conceptual parallel with the role of animal spirit guides in so-called "Native American spirituality." From what I've read, these "totemic" animals aren't confined to American Indians. This is, of course, very popular in the New Age movement. According to this paradigm, animal spirit guides are able to communicate (telepathically) with receptive humans. Likewise, various techniques can be employed to induce a trance, putting one in a receptive state to receive communications. In witchcraft, the tradition of "familiar spirits," which sometimes assume bestial form, intersects with this outlook.

One wonders, in this connection, if Num 22 might not be, among other things, a polemic against totemic animals. Balaam is a heathen seer, steeped in the occult. Gen 3 may trade on the same sinister connotations.

I don't know if anyone has ever investigated the connections, if any, between "ominous animals" in ANE paganism, "familiar spirits," in witchcraft, and "animals spirit guides" in American Indian paganism.

## What's a genius?

From what I've read, Ramanujan is a contender for the greatest math genius who ever lived. Contemporary mathematicians are still playing catch-up with his insights.

What's striking is that he himself didn't take personal credit for his insights. He attributed his insights to religious dreams. A devout Hindu, he said the Hindu gods gave him visions of mathematical formulas. When he awoke, he simply jotted down what he remembered. He was just a scribe of the Hindu muses (as it were). And, in fact, he only wrote down a fraction of what he saw in his dreams, because that's all he remembered.

This raises the question of how we should interpret his claims. On the one hand, we might consider a naturalistic explanation. Discount his self-testimony. On this view, mathematical intuition operates at a subliminal level. But because Ramanujan has internalized his religion, his mathematical intuition manifested itself in these cultural categories. That's how he tapped into his subconscious. Dreams are part of our subconscious mental life, which intersects with intuition.

On the other hand, we might take his explanation more seriously. What if he really was tapping into a superior mind? What if the Hindu "gods" did, in fact, reveal these insights?

Of course, from a Christian standpoint, we'd say that's occultic. But it's possible that his mathematical discoveries were, indeed, supernatural in origin. Perhaps he was truly "inspired." The supernatural isn't confined to the divine. And the notion that genius is a type of possession is a very old notion.



Assuming that's the case, then he wasn't a genius after all. He may have been a man of average or even below average intelligence who was channeling the dark side. A medium. His own contribution was merely instrumental.

## Forbidden knowledge

Precognition is a common theme in science fiction as well as sword & sorcery literature. To take a stock example, a character has a premonitory dream.

Let's discuss this on fictional terms, then consider this from a realistic perspective. A premonitory dream generates a *prima facie* paradox. If the character is previewing what will happen, then there's nothing he can do to prevent what he foresees from happening.

However, that seems incoherent. For doesn't that very preview give him a chance to interject himself into the chain of events and redirect the outcome? Yet we then seem to be caught in a causal loop. What he foresees prompts him to change what he foresees. But then, he wouldn't foresee it in the first place.

Screenwriters often gloss over these paradoxes, but is it possible to make that scenario coherent? There seem to be two related ways.

First of all, perhaps a character foresees what will happen, but key details are omitted from his dream. He sees the outcome, but not the events leading up to the outcome.

If he tries to intervene, his intervention may not introduce a new factor into the chain of events. Rather, that may have been part of the causal pathway all along. But because his dream left him in the dark regarding his own role, his intervention is not an additional factor. Unbeknownst to him, he was always going to be a necessary participant. Moreover, the premonitory dream is, itself, a contributing

cause to its own fulfillment by motivating the character to unwittingly contribute to its realization.

Second, the “future” he sees may be ambiguous. Is he previewing the actual future, or a possible alternate future? More precisely, is he seeing what would happen if he does something? Conversely, is he seeing what would happen if he does nothing? Will his action cause the premonition to eventuate? Will his inaction cause the premonition to eventuate? The dream itself may not furnish that crucial, differential information. Perhaps this a premonition of what would have happened had he acted on the premonition. Unless this is a premonition of what would have happened had he not acted on the premonition.

So there’s lost opportunity if he makes the wrong decision. And the dream poses a dilemma, for the dream itself doesn’t tell him which is which. He’s confronted with a forced option, and there’s no way to quantify the odds. Ignoring the premonition may be risky, or maybe the real danger lies in playing his part in the scripted outcome.

Let’s shift to a real-world situation. Suppose someone dabbles in divination. According to Scripture, that’s forbidden knowledge. Prying into the future is morally prohibited. But, of course, many people do it anyway.

Suppose, as a result of their occultic activity, they have a premonition. And suppose it’s “true”—in the trecherous sense that I just discussed.

BTW, this isn’t just hypothetical. We have an actual case of this in Scripture, where a pagan king gets the right answer using three different convergent divinatory techniques (Ezk 21).

However, there's a sense in which this can be divine punishment. You learn the "future" by forbidden means, but you don't know what to do with your knowledge. Maybe that's guiding you into a trap. You allow yourself to be drawn ever deeper into the enchanted forest until you are hopelessly lost.

## Infernal espionage

*9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.*

*10 And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. 11 And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son with you I am well pleased.”*

*12 The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.*

*21 And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. 22 And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.*

*23 And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, 24 “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.” 25*

*But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. 27 And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." 28 And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee (Mk 1:9-13,21-28).*

Interesting how these things together. Jesus undergoes baptism, which inaugurates his public ministry. Satan then confronts him. I doubt that's coincidental. Christ's ministry smokes out the dark side. The kingdom of light, in the person of Christ, is a conqueror who invades the kingdom of darkness. That makes the dark side sit up and take notice.

This in turn is followed by an exorcism. The setting is striking. Why would a demoniac attend a Jewish worship service? Do demons go to church? Would we normally expect to find demoniacs in a synagogue?

Seems likely the demon was there because Jesus was there. An infernal spy. Apparently, the dark side had minders shadowing Jesus. Keeping track of his whereabouts. Satanic surveillance. Jesus is a mortal threat to the kingdom of darkness. So the dark side dispatched covert operatives to gather intel on Jesus. Tail him wherever he went.

They recognize his true identity before humans do. They have inside knowledge. They have a history with the preexistent Son.

## Divination

*The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord (Prov 16:33).*

*1 The word of the Lord came to me: 2 “Son of man, set your face toward Jerusalem and preach against the sanctuaries. Prophecy against the land of Israel 3 and say to the land of Israel, Thus says the Lord: Behold, I am against you and will draw my sword from its sheath and will cut off from you both righteous and wicked. 4 Because I will cut off from you both righteous and wicked, therefore my sword shall be drawn from its sheath against all flesh from south to north. 5 And all flesh shall know that I am the Lord. I have drawn my sword from its sheath; it shall not be sheathed again.*

*18 The word of the Lord came to me again: 19 “As for you, son of man, mark two ways for the sword of the king of Babylon to come. Both of them shall come from the same land. And make a signpost; make it at the head of the way to a city. 20 Mark a way for the sword to come to Rabbah of the Ammonites and to Judah, into*



*Jerusalem the fortified. 21 For the king of Babylon stands at the parting of the way, at the head of the two ways, to use divination. He shakes the arrows; he consults the teraphim; he looks at the liver. 22 Into his right hand comes the divination for Jerusalem, to set battering rams, to open the mouth with murder, to lift up the voice with shouting, to set battering rams against the gates, to cast up mounds, to build siege towers. 23 But to them it will seem like a false divination. They have sworn solemn oaths, but he brings their guilt to remembrance, that they may be taken.*

*28 “And you, son of man, prophesy, and say, Thus says the Lord God concerning the Ammonites and concerning their reproach; say, A sword, a sword is drawn for the slaughter. It is polished to consume and to flash like lightning— 29 while they see for you false visions, while they divine lies for you—to place you on the necks of the profane wicked, whose day has come, the time of their final punishment (Ezk 21:1-5,18-23,28-29).*

Divination has always been popular. It's just as popular in the scientific age as it was in the prescientific age—much to the consternation of Carl Sagan et al.

As a rule, the Bible condemns divination. An exception is the mysterious Urim and Thummim.

Another possible exception is casting lots. That is not inherently divinatory. It can simply be used as a randomizing device, like flipping a coin. However, it was undoubtedly used for divinatory purposes by some people sometimes.

On the face of it, most divination appears to be pure bunk. Take astrology. How could the apparent position of the stars in relation to earth have any predictive value? That simply reflects the parochial viewpoint of an earthbound observer. It's not a privileged frame of reference. How the stars appear to us on earth is a relative frame of reference. If we could see them from the moon or Mars or Venus, they would have a different apparent position. For that matter, the apparent position of the stars is different in the southern hemisphere than the northern hemisphere—as ancient explorers noted.

And yet there's prima facie evidence that astrology is sometimes accurate. Cf. S. Braude, **THE GOLD LEAF LADY**, chap. 8; D. Berlinski, **THE SECRETS OF THE VAULTED SKY**, chap. 10.

There is a theological explanation. What we might call judicial providence. God sometimes curses divination with success to wreak judgment on the godless. Poetic justice.

Ezekiel 22 is a case in point. As commentators explain:

The Babylonians are merely a tool to do his will (Ezk 21). God's control over the entire situation is such that he can even determine the outcome of the Babylonian king's efforts to consult his gods through examining the liver of an animal (Ezk 21:21).

Ezekiel pictures the king utilizing all the pagans means of decision-making...The irony is that this use of pagan means of discerning the will of the gods is here an accurate discernment of the will of the true God. The "lying divinations" that found such favor with God's people (Ezk 13:7) now become the very means through which judgment comes on them (21:23).

I. Duguid, **EZEKIEL** (Zondervan 1999), 36, 276-277.

Of course, Jerusalem's citizens, like Ezekiel's hearers, would not be disposed to take seriously Nebuchadnezzar's divinatory games. Yet ironically this non-Yahwist was taking a path marked out for him by Yahweh.

L. Allen, **EZEKIEL 20-48** (Word 1990), 27.

This sign-act has been precipitated by a critical juncture in Nebuchadnezzar's campaigns. Poised to advance southward into the Levant, he must decide whether to direct his attack against the Judeans or the Ammonites...According to Ezekiel's interpretation, Nebuchadnezzar hesitated at Damascus, uncertain

whether to attack Rabbah or Jerusalem first. In customary ancient Near Eastern style, he resolves the issue by divination, a series of procedures designed to determine the mind of the gods.

The manner in which this oracle is presented is filled with irony. A pagan king employs strictly forbidden techniques of divination and discovers the will of Yahweh, a fact confirmed by the precise correspondence of the results to earlier oracles. The “people of Yahweh” adopt an orthodox stance in rejecting the omens as false, but in so doing seal their own fate. In the pagan oracle Ezekiel hears the judgment of God.

D. Block, **THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL: CHAPTERS 1-24** (Eerdmans 1997), 685,688.

Dabbling in the occult is sometimes effective, but it comes at a terrible cost.

## Pagan divination

It's informative to compare these two passages:

*Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" (Num 22:28).*

*And it [the Beast] was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast might even speak and might cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain (Rev 13:15).*

As one scholar notes:

The second striking feature of this paragraph is that Balaam is not surprised by the donkey's unnatural ability to speak.<sup>11</sup> Why is this so? I have suggested in a previous study that a characteristic of the Balaam traditions is that they employ omens by means of animal activity.<sup>12</sup> It was also noted that donkeys are associated with divination throughout ancient Near Eastern literature.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, instead of marveling at the donkey's unusual behavior, it appears that Balaam immediately accepts it as an omen<sup>14</sup> and proceeds to investigate by engaging the donkey in dialogue.

However, he cannot determine the meaning of the omen—at least not by his own ability.

K. Way, "Animals in the Prophetic World: Literary Reflections on Numbers 22 and 1 Kings 13," JSOT 34.1 (2009), 50

Compare this with David Aune's comments on Rev 13:15. Among other things, he says:

This reflects the world of ancient magic in which the animation of images of the gods was an important means for securing oracles.

Much earlier, Babylonians had rituals intended to give life to statues of the gods...In ancient Egypt, beginning at an even earlier period, statues of the gods were vitalized through a ceremony of "opening the mouth."

The magical rituals for animating images of the gods in Egypt probably influenced that special branch of magic called theurgy...Theurgists developed a special complex of rituals...which was primarily concerned with consecration and animation of statues in order to receive oracles from them.

For the ancients, a statue that speaks is a statue that gives oracles.

**REVELATION 6-16** (T. Nelson 1998), 762-764.

The talking cult image is analogous to a talking, divinatory donkey. This suggests the Balaam account is a polemic against pagan divination generally, and equid divination in

particular. God uses the donkey like a ventriloquist dummy to lampoon pagan divination.

## What really happened to Muhammad?

According to Muslim tradition, the angel Gabriel appeared to Muhammad from time to time to give him revelations. For Christians, that raises the question: What *really* happened to Muhammad?

Short answer: I don't know. I know what *didn't* happen to him. I know he didn't have an audience with the angel Gabriel. But barring that, what are the alternatives?

In principle, there are naturalistic and supernaturalistic explanations. We can also distinguish between mental and extramental experiences.

**i)** An angel did, indeed, appear to Muhammad. But of course, some angels are fallen angels.

**ii)** Arguably, not all evil spirits are demonic. Ghosts are a well-attested phenomenon. What if the souls of the damned sometimes appear to the living? That may be what happens during some seances.

For all we know, Muhammad dabbled in necromancy.

**iii)** He was possessed. I presume that's the most popular explanation among Christians. It can't be proven or disproven in Muhammad's case.

At his trial (according to Plato's **APOLOGY**), Socrates talked about a "demon" (*daimonion*) that used to give him guidance. Of course, he didn't mean "demon" in the Christian sense, but he may have spoken better than he knew. Perhaps Muhammad's case was similar.



**iv)** He was psychotic. Suffered from hallucinations. That might be a naturalistic explanation.

On the other hand, possession and psychosis are not mutually exclusive.

**v)** William Blake was a visionary. As I recall, Kenneth Clark attributed his "visions" to Blake's eidetic memory. That's a naturalistic explanation. Might apply to Muhammad, although that's not the first explanation I'd reach for.

**vi)** He was a charlatan, like Joseph Smith. He made it all up.

That's entirely possible. There's certainly evidence, even in Muslim tradition, that he sometimes improvised.

We can't say for sure because we don't have as much information about Muhammad as we have about other cult leaders like Swedenborg, Joseph Smith, Sun Myung Moon, Herbert W. Armstrong, or Ron Hubbard—to name a few

In the case of Smith, Hubbard, and Moon, a naturalistic explanation is preferable.

In the case of Swedenborg, it may be more than that. Unlike Smith, who was a social climber, and had much to gain by conning suckers, Swedenborg came from the upper crust. He was a noted scientist. At the same time, he inherited his father's esoteric theology.

In his case, I tend to think something weird really did happen to him which could either have a naturalistic or supernaturalistic explanation. Psychosis. Possession.

Perhaps he dabbled in the occult. Or maybe he suffered from mental illness.

There's the same range of diagnostic possibilities for Muhammad. Our information about Muhammad is one-sided, although it includes hostile testimony.

## XII. Ufology

---

## Hollywood ETs

Regarding the true identity of UFO and ET sightings, one question I have, which I haven't bothered to research, is the extent, if any, that their resemblance coincides with the advent of Hollywood movies from the 1950s about alien invaders.

I'm not suggesting that reports of ETs and UFOs date from that period. For all I know, they may go back centuries or millennia. Rather, the specific question is whether the appearance of ETs and their spacecraft have evolved in ways that that correspond to Hollywood movies. If that's the case, then it seems unlikely that these are genuine ETs. We shouldn't expect their physical appearance or their technology to mimic Hollywood movies. At least, that wouldn't be realistic. I suppose you could salvage that explanation by claiming that they are playing to human expectations. But it certainly invites the explanation that whatever else they are, these aren't really intelligent biological organisms from another galaxy.

However, I admit that I haven't studied the issue. I have a limited interest in ufology because it doesn't threaten my theology. Moreover, ufology is a vast trackless swamp, so you can easily lose your bearings as you get drawn deeper into the many layers of ufology.

## Extraordinary claims demand extraordinary explanations

Carl Sagan famously asserted that extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence. That's Hume in a nutshell. Sagan wasn't a philosopher, so his criterion is vague and dubious. And the maxim targeted miracles, among other things.

But suppose we turn his criterion around. Suppose we've verified an extraordinary claim. An implication is that extraordinary claims, if true, demand extraordinary explanations. We don't demand extraordinary explanations for ordinary claims. Ordinary explanations will suffice for ordinary claims. If, however, an extraordinary claim has been verified, then that calls for a special explanation for why it is the case. Explanations that are too unnatural, too implausible, too farfetched to be reasonable explanations for ordinary claims may be warranted or rationally necessary in the case of verified extraordinary claims. The ironic upshot of Sagan's maxim is that it points to a supernatural cause if the claim has been established.

## Do UFOs demand extraordinary evidence?

Carl Sagan famously stipulated that extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence. Many unbelievers treat his axiom as unquestionable. Recently declassified military footage of UFOs has caused quite a buzz. And these aren't completely isolated incidents. Here's another I read about:

During training exercises, a carrier fleet monitored multiple objects over a period of days. The objects not only hovered for days at a time, but were tracked moving from 80,000 feet to just above sea level in .74 seconds—an impossible feat by all physical standards. They were witnessed by eye as well as on multiple imaging systems.

[https://www.reddit.com/r/news/comments/eond7n/top\\_secret\\_ufo\\_files\\_could\\_cause\\_grave\\_damage\\_to/fef2tav/](https://www.reddit.com/r/news/comments/eond7n/top_secret_ufo_files_could_cause_grave_damage_to/fef2tav/)

An acceleration rate that's impossible by all physical standards surely meets the definition of an extraordinary event. Indeed, it's almost the definition of a miracle, except that if it happened in this situation it was the result of highly advanced technology.

What I'd like to point out as is that secular skeptics and debunkers who discount reported miracles but believe in reported UFOs of this kind don't apply Sagan's standard of evidence to UFOs. On the one hand, the UFO reports involve extraordinary claims. On the other hand, the evidence is ordinary. Imaging systems and eyewitness testimony.

In fairness, I don't think Reddit is the most reliable outlet for information, and I haven't been able to track down the

original source of the quote. However, the same incident has been reported in mainstream sources:

<https://www.history.com/news/ufo-sightings-speed-appearance-movement>

<https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/a14456936/th-at-time-the-us-navy-had-a-close-encounter-with-a-ufo/>

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/12/18/former-navy-pilot-describes-encounter-with-ufo-studied-by-secret-pentagon-program/>

My immediate point is not to vouch for the report but to note that many unbelievers have contradictory rules of evidence. They apply Sagan's criterion to reported miracles but ditch his criterion when it comes to UFOs and ETs.

## ET religion

This post will be speculative.

**1.** Confirmed military footage of UFOs heightens longstanding questions about the status of UFOs:

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/27/politics/pentagon-ufo-videos/index.html>

**2.** On the one hand it's odd that the Pentagon would confirm the existence of military technology superior to our own. That's an admission that we're vulnerable to military conquest. Some regime or entity has technology that could defeat us. Render us defenseless. Perhaps it's not specifically military technology, but it seems to have a military application that could neutralize our own technology.

**3.** This also raises the source. Is it terrestrial or extraterrestrial? Naturalistic or supernatural/paranormal?

Is it terrestrial technology produced by another country or corporation? If so, you'd expect the Pentagon to know the identity.

**4.** Obama let our national security assets slide. He allowed Chinese agents to hack American assets with impunity. He redirected NASA to focus on global warming. He tried to sabotage Israeli national security while enabling Iran to develop nuclear weapons. So it's possible that we're behind.

**5.** There are now corporations richer than many countries that might have the R&D resources to develop next-



generation military technology, either independently or in collaboration with a nation state

**6.** Another naturalistic explanation, albeit more farfetched, is intervention from ETs. A stock objection to ETs is that the distance is prohibitive. But perhaps 20C physics is mistaken about the cosmic speed limit.

Yet from what I've read, even if superluminal travel is possible, that results in backward time travel. A traveler moving faster than light is moving into the past. Assuming that's correct, it's unclear how ETs could get here that way.

**7.** Another issue is that if these are ETs, why are they so elusive? If they wish to conceal their existence from humans, their behavior is very careless. But if they wish for us to be aware of their existence, why is the evidence so ambiguous? Why not make their existence unmistakable?

**8.** There's nothing in Christian theology that rules out the existence of ETs. The question would be the confusing and disruptive impact that would have on human history and religion. But arguably, that's not different in principle from demonic interference.

**9.** Human technology is getting out of control, with experiments in animal/human and machine/human hybrids, as well as general eugenics and genetic reengineering.

**10.** In theory, there are supernatural/paranormal ways to simulate advanced technology. Agents with telepathic powers could make humans hallucinate anything. Simulate convincing illusions.

However, that wouldn't explain photographic evidence inasmuch as cameras can't hallucinate. On the other hand,

the UFOs seem to leave no physical trace evidence. No permanent after-effects. So in that respect it's spectral. Rather like ectoplasm, that materializes and dematerializes.

**11.** Another supernatural/paranormal explanation would be psychokinesis. The ability of certain minds to directly generate or manipulate states of matter and energy to create objective physical phenomena. If, say, the source was ETs, they wouldn't have to be here to do that. They could be living millions of light years away. The effects we witness on earth would be the mental projections of their psychokinetic abilities. Mental action at a distance.

**12.** Mind you, assuming that some agents have psychokinetic abilities, they don't have to be ETs. That might include angels, demons, psychic living human beings, human beings in league with demons, or damned human souls.

**13.** There's also the question of whether the hypothetical ETs are benevolent or malevolent. If malevolent, they'd have the power to conquer and subjugate the human race, although they might introduce themselves as beneficent saviors of humanity. It's easy to imagine an ET religion that becomes the dominant religion, co-opting historical religions. In terms of biblical eschatology, that would be consistent with Mt 24:24 (2 Thes 2:9; Rev 13:13-14).

**14.** The evidence for Christianity is copious, diverse, ancient, and modern. But it might be necessary for God and his agents to intervene to counteract their influence. If this represents an invasion force, we're no match for it, but God's agents could keep it in check.

**15.** Thus far, the current pandemic doesn't seem to pose a threat to the survival of the human race. The larger threat is coming from public officials and Big Tech who use the crisis as a pretext to abrogate civil liberties and instigate a global depression. Will we end up with a worldwide Venezuela? Global social unrest would be an opportunity for the powerbrokers to take over.

**16.** We also see the suppression of Christianity under the guise to combatting the pandemic. Not only is public worship illegal, but depending on how long the lockdowns and mass house arrest continue, many churches will never reopen because they went broke.

The discrimination extends to prosecuting churches that practice drive-in services as well as Tech Giants that block electronic services if they disapprove of the sermon content.

**17.** Perhaps it's just coincidental that the coronavirus, which originates in a Chinese lab, from which it "escaped," is happening at about the same time that Red China has been purging Christianity in China—with the collaboration of the Vatican, I might add.

I'm not suggesting this is a human plot. Humans aren't that smart or organized. But it could be diabolical. I don't have any firm opinion about how this episode will end. Perhaps the economy will come roaring back.

But many churches have capitulated to a very dangerous precedent. And some churches won't recover because they were unable to bring in enough revenue to cover the overhead. Pastors will have to quit the ministry and take jobs in the private sector.



## XIII. Possession & exorcism

---

## How the mind uses the brain

In this post I'm going to present a model of dualism. I'm not going to spend much time defending it. I've defended aspects of this elsewhere. And I don't want to get bogged down in supporting arguments.

I think it's useful to explain a certain way of looking at issues. Provide a model.

According to classical theism, God is timeless and spaceless. I agree.

That raises the question of how to interpret statements about God interacting with the world. God coming and going. Having conversations with Abraham or Moses.

This, of course, is an issue that crops up in open theism. And open theism serves as a warning against naive hermeneutics.

I think the short answer is analogous to how a novelist relates to the story. A novelist exists outside the story. He doesn't physically interact with the characters, time, or space of the story.

Rather, a novelist is involved in the story by writing the story. He's responsible for everything that happens. Directly or indirectly, he causes everything that happens. He controls events. He directs the outcome.

Sometimes a novelist can write himself into the story by making himself a character in his own story. In that respect, he exists at two different levels. He still exists outside the story. But he has a counterpart within the story who represents the novelist. His counterpart speaks like the novelist, thinks like the novelist, believes whatever the

novelist believes. Has the same viewpoint as the novelist. His counterpart can even know everything the novelist does.

In addition, I'm a Cartesian dualist. An interactionist. I think the soul is immaterial. Same thing with angels and demons. But there is some Scriptural evidence that angels have the ability to materialize.

In popular Christian discourse, we speak of "casting out" demons. An out-of-body experience. The soul "separating" from the body at death.

I think popular usage is innocuous so long as we don't derive metaphysical conclusions from popular usage. Otherwise, it's misleading. But it's a convenient shorthand.

However, I don't think the soul is literally in the body. Rather, I think the soul uses the body. The mind uses the brain.

Neuroscientist Wilder Penfield employed the following analogy: the mind is to a programmer as the brain is to a computer. Likewise, neuroscientist John Eccles talks about "how the self controls its brain." My point is not to expound or endorse the details of their respective positions. I'm just sketching a general way of framing the issue.

There are various ways of illustrating this relation:

**i)** Telerobotics. Remote-control signaling. We might say the body is to the aerial drone as the mind is to the operator. The operator is "linked" to the drone. He directs the drone. The drone does what he wills it to do. But he is not in the drone.

Telerobotics involves teleoperation and telepresence. Through wireless communication, it's action at a distance.

**ii)** Virtual reality. If all your sensory relays are hooked up to VR equipment, the only thing you can perceive is the simulated world. Your sensory perceptual system is patched into the program. That's all you hear, see, and feel.

That's in spite of the fact that you are not actually a part of that world. You exist outside the program. And if you are disconnected from the equipment, you resume your perceptual awareness of the external world. But it's one or the other at any given time. You can't be simultaneously conscious of both.

That analogous to visionary revelation. In his altered state of consciousness, the seer is only aware of the visionary scenes. But once he emerges from the trance, he resumes his ordinary sensory perception.

Let's compare these illustrations to a haunted house. Let's view a ghost as a disembodied mind or disembodied consciousness.

What would it mean for the postmortem soul to go back to the house where the decedent grew up? Two things:

**i)** It's a matter of what the soul is thinking about. He remembers the house. In his mind, he "goes back" there. That's the object of his mental concentration. That's what he's aware of.

**ii)** In addition, he can act at a distance. He has the ability to point his thoughts and intentions in the direction of that location. Project power. Make things happen—within the limits of a finite agent.

For instance, we might view this as a preliminary punishment during the intermediate state. He is condemned to hang around the scenes of his past, as a passive, frustrated spectator. He laments the past. Laments his loss. Cut off from the life he knew. He can enviously watch others



doing what he used to do, but he can't participate. That's before the day of judgment, when there will be a total separation between the living and the dead, the saints and the damned.

Many miracles are essentially mind over matter. Psychokinetic or telekinetic. Where an agent is able to will a change. He needn't be in physical contact with what he brings out.

## Pandemonium

Here's a striking account of possession and deliverance:

On the last evening of the Rhineland Keswick Convention three of us set out, at about 10:15 p.m. for a walk through a small wood which led to a village on the other side. Nathan, one of the party, started to tell the story of his life, and when we came to a clearing in the wood Thomas suggested that we should sit down for awhile. Nathan continued to relate his story. On joining the Royal Air Force he had missed the influence of home, and fell into bad company, unable to resist temptation. As Nathan finished his story there was silence. I sat with my eyes closed, wondering how I, as one of the convention leaders, could help the young fellow. What happened next was over in a very short space of time. Breaking through the silence, and crashing through the darkness with tremendous power came my voice, "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ depart." Immediately Nathan let out a half shout, and fell towards me. He said afterwards, "At those words I saw a black form appear from somewhere at my feet and vanish into the wood, and, at the same time, something indescribable left me."

I felt an urgency for prayer, and if Nathan did not pray, something would happen to him. It was at this point an event occurred so dreadful that since I have prayed that it should never happen again. It seemed as if horrifying pandemonium had been let loose; as if all the powers of hell were concentrated in that spot in the wood. I saw numbers of black shapes, blacker than the night, moving about and seeking to come between

myself and Nathan, whom I was gripping hard...Quite independently, Nathan told of how he had seen seven black forms emerge from the trees in the wood, and how he felt some power pushing him forward out of my grip. P. Wiebe, "Deliverance and Exorcism in Philosophical Perspective" in **EXORCISM AND DELIVERANCE: MULTIDISCIPLINARY STUDIES**, edited by William K Kay and Robin Parry, 175-77. London: Paternoster, 2011.

What's interesting about this report is the veridical element. While we might dismiss the description of shadowy demons as a subjective impression, we have two witnesses who saw the same thing: the Anglican priest who reported the incident, and the demoniac who was exorcised. Of course, this still depends on the credibility of the witness. But that's a consideration for eyewitness testimony in general. I have no antecedent reason to believe the Anglican priest was a liar or self-deluded. And in any case, there's a tipping-point where, even if we don't find any particular report compelling, there's a cumulative effect when we read enough accounts by prima facie credible witnesses.

## Exorcism and healing

According to one standard theological paradigm, a Christian healer is someone who can miraculously cure medical conditions in general.

But according to the Gospels, an exorcist can be a healer. The Gospels distinguish between natural medical conditions and demonic medical conditions. Some medical conditions have natural causes while other medical conditions have demonic causes. Possession can manifest itself in medical conditions.

In addition, Ezk 13:17-23 seems to indicate that it's possible to cause a medical condition by hexing the victim. Both possession and witchcraft can result in some medical conditions.

That, however, complicates the analysis of miraculous healing. In principle, an exorcist could cure someone of a medical condition that's caused by demonic activity (i.e. possession, witchcraft), but be unable to cure someone of a medical condition that's caused by natural factors.

Moreover, there is no gift of exorcism. The ability to cure medical conditions in that situation is indirect. An exorcist doesn't have the power to simply heal someone of their medical condition. At most, he has the power to break the occult bondage that's causing the medical condition.

Furthermore, exorcism is really a matter of invoking God's mercy and power. It's not really an ability on the part of the exorcist.

This, in turn, imposes a potential limitation on a Christian healer—assuming that's an accurate classification to begin with (see below). What if Christian healers can only cure medical conditions that have occultic causes rather than natural causes?

There's also the question of whether there's such a thing as a Christian healer. In the locus classicus (1 Cor 12:9), Paul's usage is ambiguous. He doesn't say a "gift of healing" but "gifts of healings."

So he may not even mean that some Christians have a gift of healing. Rather, every healing is a gift from God.

That's not to deny that some Christians might be agents of God's healing power, but this might be intermittent or unrepeatable. Say, on one occasion, God grants a Christian mother the ability to lay hands on her deathly ill child and convey healing. That might be a once-in-a-lifetime event.

On that interpretation, both the charismatic and cessationist paradigms are defective.

## Dousing strange fires

...the carriers of the Christian religion in East Africa refused to incorporate exorcism ritual into their religious services. The reasons for this are not readily germane to the present study, but one does wonder why this deliberate avoidance of the possession phenomenon in cultures where it is experienced.

And here is the testimony of a Luo Christian lady:

The Western missionaries do not understand the sufferings of the Africans...The Gospel is clear on this point. Jesus did give his disciples power to expel demons. If the missionaries do not use it, they are either refusing to put it at the service of Africans or they have lost it.

The churches established by mission societies tend to disregard totally the possession and exorcism phenomenon. If a baptized member exhibits classical symptoms of possession, he is usually treated medically or disregarded entirely. In twenty years as a missionary in Tanzania and Kenya, I know of only a few cases where the "mission type" churches exorcised demons.

I cannot help believing that this reluctance on the part of mission churches to speak and act meaningfully in the face of the possession phenomenon has contributed significantly to the startling rise of Christian independency in many areas of Sub-Saharan Africa today. Generally speaking, these independent churches confront the traditional power constellations in a forthright manner.

In the late 1960s, for example, the Masai exorcists in the Moshi area of Tanzania were unable to cast out a strange and highly malevolent demon by traditional means. They observed, however, that people who were baptized into the Christian faith were immune to the power of the strange new demon.

Generally speaking mission churches do not experience very significant community. The independent churches do. Donald R. Jacobs, "Possession, Trance State, and Exorcism in Two East African Communities," J. W. Montgomery, ed. **DEMON POSSESSION** (Bethany 1976), chap. 9.

i) MacArthurites indict charismatic theology because they think Africa is overrun with WoF quacks and heretics. And you have charismatics like Craig Keener who concede that this is a serious and widespread problem in Africa.

However, as Jacobs explains, cessationist mission churches were completely unequipped to deal with African witchcraft and possession. That's not a live theological paradigm for them. As a result, African Christians turned to independent churches which practice exorcism.

To some degree, the fact that the cessationist churches are totally out of their element when confronted with indigenous witchcraft and possession was a stimulus to the development of charismatic churches. To that extent, cessationists helped to create the very thing they now deplore.

And that's not confined to Africa. The same issues resurface in Latin American and other Third World regions.

If the most orthodox seminaries and denominations neglect to forearm missionaries who are heading into a country that's rife with witchcraft; if, indeed, they disarm missionaries by a theology that has no resources to counterattack, then they unwittingly delegate that task to less orthodox Christians. Christians with a less reliable theological tradition—not to mention outright heretics and charlatans—will take up the slack.

However, I'd add a couple of caveats:

**ii)** The Bible doesn't specifically say or necessarily imply that Christians have the authority to perform exorcisms. By the same token, the Bible contains no ritual or formula for exorcising demoniacs. So we need to guard against overconfidence in that department.

Whether or not it's possible to cast out demons is something we can only find out by experience. There is, moreover, no guarantee that our efforts will be successful. Perhaps we will succeed in some cases, but fail in others. Ultimately, it's a question of God's will in any particular case.

Although Jesus was, among other things, the paradigmatic exorcist, he's not a good role model in that regard. He's not an exorcist in the familiar sense.

Normally, exorcism is a long drawn-out process. It may take hours or days. Multiple sessions. A team of exorcists.

By contrast, Jesus simply commanded a demon to leave, and that was that. The demon had no power to effectively resist—or even to put up short-term resistance.



**iii)** In cultures where witchcraft is prevalent, there's not merely the danger of genuine possession, but the danger of playing-acting. Some people are highly suggestible. They do what's expected of them. They sincerely play the role that's assigned to them. They may imagine they are possessed, and mimic symptoms of possession. But it's make-believe.

# The Exorcism of Emily Rose

## I. Introduction

I first ran across *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* in a movie review in *World Magazine*. Unlike the two Exorcist films I recently reviewed, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* is roughly based on a “true story”—the exorcism of Anneliese Michel.

Of course what, exactly, is true about the true story is a matter of interpretation. And that’s part of what makes this interesting.

Not only is the film based on the case of Anneliese Michel, but the source material for the script seems to be drawn primarily from **THE EXORCISM OF ANNELIESE**

**MICHEL** (Resource Publications 2005) by Felicitas Goodman. For instance, one of the characters (Dr. Sadira Adani) is clearly modeled on Felicitas Goodman. And other details are clearly cribbed from the book.

If that’s correct, then we have three layers to consider: the historical case itself, the documentary record of the case in Goodman’s monograph, including her ethnographic interpretation, and the cinematic adaptation of Goodman’s monograph—among other things. So this post is part book review, part film review.

## II. The Exorcism of Anneliese Michel

i) Because of her access to so many primary sources materials, Goodman’s monograph remains an indispensable

resource. However, there are also a number of problems with her monograph:

**ii)** To properly interpret the phenomenon, it's essential to know who said what when.

**a)** Sometimes Goodman will attribute a statement to a particular speaker, but at other times we're left in the dark regarding the source.

**b)** Sometimes she'll make a summary statement, but leave out crucial details which are necessary to evaluate the statement.

**c)** Some of her material is drawn from Michel's letters and diaries. But while Michel's own statements supply important, firsthand evidence, that doesn't settle the correct interpretation. For if Michel was mentally ill, then her perceptions and self-perceptions are often delusive. So while they reveal her state of mind, they don't reveal the extent to which her perceptions square with reality.

**iii)** It's also clear throughout the work that Goodman has her own agenda.

**a)** Goodman has a decided bias which may owe something to her Hungarian Catholic background, as well as Hungarian folklore—which she specifically references

**b)** Goodman was a cultural anthropologist who specialized in "trance possession." As such, she's predisposed to interpret the case of Michel as a genuine case of possession—in light of her cross-cultural paradigm.

**c)** Goodman is using the case of Michel to launch a general attack on the “scientific tradition,” which places a premium on ordinary states of consciousness as the norm.

**d)** Goodman takes a more than professional interest in “trance possession.” She founded a New Age type of “institute” which is dedicated to inducing states of altered consciousness. In the book she makes favorable use of Carlos Castaneda’s material. Yet Castaneda was a notorious popularizer of the occult. In the same book she also makes favorable reference to Kundalini yoga, which—once more—is plainly occultic.

So this all creates a certain slant to her coverage.

**iv)** There’s a basic problem with Goodman’s ethnographic paradigm of spirit-possession. While cross-cultural studies may indeed reveal the reality of the phenomenon, they fail to reveal the reality underlying the phenomenon. They simply describe the phenomenology of “possession.” But whether these symptoms attest the actual invasion of a human host by some discarnate intelligence is a different question.

**v)** The distinction is more than pedantic, for in many cases there is clearly an autosuggestive dynamic in play—where impressionable subjects assume the role which their culture or subculture assigned to play. Both the precipitating factors, as well as the interpretation thereof, are shaped by their social expectations.

That doesn’t mean we can discount their testimony out of hand. But it also doesn’t mean that we can take whatever they say at face value.

**vi)** Michel died in 1976, at the age of 23. Diagnostic testing was less advanced back then. So it's possible that she had a neurological condition which went undetected due to the more primitive state of medical science at that time.

Let's review some of the symptoms and explanations which Goodman cites. She describes Michel as a sickly child (7). Followed by examples of adolescent moodiness: "There were occasions when her sisters would find Anneliese crying in her room about yet another time that she had been forbidden to go dancing" (10).

Followed by examples of loneliness and homesickness when she was sent to a sanitarium (16-17), and later went to college (50).

In addition: "For Anneliese the excitation was often so unbearable when she was a teenager that she became sick to her stomach; as the mass reached its high point she felt like she had to run out of church or else she would scream" (203).

This suggests the possibility of a mundane explanation. We're dealing with a highly excitable, impressionable girl. A girl prone to hysteria.

Possibly, Michel was a neurotic teenage girl who never outgrew that condition but, instead, sank deeper into mental illness due to isolation. In fact, Goodman herself classifies Michel as a "hypersensitive."

On the other hand, this doesn't preclude a religious interpretation. For these factors may have created a

susceptibility to possession or “circumsessio” (60-61).

Although she was lonely and homesick in the sanatorium, she was sent there after her first episode. So her stay in the sanitarium can't, itself, be the precipitating event—although it might be an aggravating factor.

Likewise, there's a reference to a “fall on the forehead” (18). That might suggest the possibility of a neurological disorder.

On the other hand, an autopsy didn't reveal any brain damage. But this is also ambiguous. It could either mean there was no brain damage, or it could mean an autopsy was too crude a procedure to reveal subtle evidence of a neurological disorder. I'm not qualified to say.

We're told early on that Michel's EEG revealed an “irregular alpha pattern” (20).

Is that symptomatic of a neurological disorder—or the inference of an alien personality?

Goodman mentions that, when “possessed,” Michel emitted a “stench.” Is that paranormal, or does it have a biochemical basis? I'm not qualified to say.

Quoting a fellow anthropologist, Goodman says: “Women experience possession more frequently than men” (223).

Assuming this is accurate, that raises a question. Does this mean that women are more susceptible to genuine impression? Or that women are more impressionable? Autosuggestive?

Goodman says that at one point Michel's "whole body seethed with heat" (82).

In principle, that might be an indication of something paranormal. However, we need more details. Was this objectively measurable, or is this a statement of Michel's subjective impression?

Later in the book, Goodman says: "Peter measured her temperature before Fr. Renz started. It was 38.9 centigrade" (175).

But while a temperature of 102 (Fahrenheit) is feverish, it's hardly paranormal.

We're told that "muscle power that was close to superhuman. Peter saw her take an apple and effortlessly squeeze it with one hand so that the fragments exploded throughout the room. Fast as lightening she grabbed Roswitha and threw her on the floor as if she were a rag doll" (82).

Superhuman power would be consistent with possession. However, I don't see that these examples are superhuman.

In reference to Michel's corpse, Goodman relays some vague, conflicting reports about the odor of sanctity" (181).

That would be evidence of something paranormal if the reports were more consistent or better confirmed. But there's no evidence that Goodman interviewed the alleged witnesses.

At one point, an exorcist, who had been a Chinese missionary, questions Michel in Chinese. And xenoglossy would be evidence of possession.

However, the reported response of the "demon" was: "I am not tell you anything, you damn dirty sow!" (101).

This invites a mundane interpretation. The "demon" couldn't answer back because there was no demon. Instead, it was just Michel, and since she didn't know Chinese, that's all that she could say.

This would also be consistent with Michel faking possession, although I imagine it would be equally consistent with a mental patient.

We're also told that "In one astounding instance the demon himself suggested what might be most unpleasant for him: the recitation of the Litany of the Five Sacred Wounds" (231).

I don't see why a demon would assist the exorcist by volunteering helpful information. Seems awfully accommodating. This is more like what I'd expect a Catholic schoolgirl to say.

We're also told that Michel was a stigmatic. If true, that would be a paranormal symptom.

However, as Goodman also reports, Michael would mutilate herself. So the "stigmata" might just as well be a case of self-injury.

At least, Goodman's record doesn't supply enough



information to eliminate either possibility.

We're told that "There were clouds of flies that appeared and then vanished unaccountably, and shadowy little animals that scurried about...after a while, even her family saw them come and pass" (83).

**i)** Assuming that this description is accurate, the fact that she "saw" it first, and others at a later time invites an autosuggestive interpretation.

**ii)** However, assuming that they really saw spectral animals, how does that implicate possession? Wouldn't that be a case of "infestation"? That's consistent with a hex, or haunting, or poltergeist.

At least, more than one paranormal explanation seems to be in the offing.

We're told that in her later stages, she was "telepathic, knowing, for instance, who was praying for her in some other town and at what time" (236).

If true, that would be a paranormal ability. However, this statement lacks the detailed information which we need to properly assess the claim.

Who was praying for her? A friend? Stranger? Did she know this person? Did this person know her? What was the content of the prayer? And so on and so forth.

We're also told that "She began divining" (236).

If she exhibited genuine precognition, then that would be a

paranormal ability.

However, Goodman also reports false prophecies which Michel uttered. So was this precognition? Or hit-and-miss guesswork?

“He attempted to lift her from the bench, but she had become so heavy that he could not budge her...She stiffened up and become so heavy that the men had difficulty carrying her to the car” (166).

If true, then this would be the clearest example that something paranormal was afoot.

Goodman also mentions dilated pupils (19; 211). But that doesn't strike me as paranormal.

In fairness, it can be a bit misleading to interpret each symptom in isolation. Even if each symptom could be explained in mundane terms, yet the cumulative effect of so many odd symptoms might be too unusual to plausibly suggest a mundane explanation. There's a point at which a series of “coincidental” incidents becomes just as extraordinary as a supernatural explanation.

At the same time, we also have to examine each piece of evidence on its own merits. And from what I can tell, most of the evidence is fairly ambiguous.

We're told that Michel “blacked out” at school (13). Then: “That night, shortly after midnight, she woke up and could not move...A giant force was pinning her down. It pressed on her abdomen...Then, nearly a year later, during the night of August 24, 1969, whatever it was struck again, exactly

as before. There was the brief blacking out during the day... And in the middle of the night that frightening paralysis" (14).

"It was then that she was struck again, on a Wednesday night, June 3, 1970" (17).

To my knowledge, this would be a classic case of Old Hag Syndrome. That, of itself, is not equivalent to possession. From my reading and observation, many individuals have experienced Old Hag Syndrome, yet that never developed into anything like full-blown possession.

Perhaps we're to view this as a precursor to possession. And, in some cases, perhaps it is.

I don't know what to make of the claim that she blacked out. There may or may not be a physiological explanation. It would be interesting to see a physician or psychiatrist comment on that reported experience and its relation to the subsequent experience.

Goodman cites some people who classify Michel's experience as a case of "penance possession" (172). On this view, she suffered possession to atone for the sins of her iniquitous contemporaries.

Whether or not one regards that as a viable or plausible interpretation depends on other things:

**i)** Even on Catholic terms, does the Church of Rome officially acknowledge this type of experience? Or does a "penance possession" simply reflect the private option of some theologians?

**ii)** There's something oddly dualistic about the spectacle of a teenage girl who becomes the battleground between Jesus and the Virgin Mary, to one side, with Lucifer, Nero, Hitler, Cain, and Fleischmann (a dissolute priest), to the other.

Surely these aren't evenly matched opponents. If Michel was really receiving visions and apparitions of Jesus and Mary (as the book reports), it doesn't seem like much of a battle. Wouldn't Mary and Jesus have the devil and his minions outgunned?

In the Gospels, we don't see a prolonged tug of war between Jesus and a demoniac. Jesus speaks, and out comes the evil spirit. Omnipotence versus creaturely might is no contest.

Likewise, if Mary really is the Queen of Heaven, then surely the Devil is no match for her.

**iii)** The notion of a "penance possession" assumes the insufficiency of Christ's atonement. While that's acceptable for Catholics, that's unacceptable for Bible-believing Christians.

**iv)** For God to allow a pious Catholic girl to become the victim of possession is a pretty counterproductive way to promote her salvation or sanctification.

On another front, we're also told that one of her exorcists (Fr. Alt) was a "douser," with telepathic and precognitive abilities (45).

Assuming, for the sake of argument, that this is true, it raises questions about his own situation. Were these occultic powers? How did he acquire them? Is this a case of the dark side exorcizing the dark side? Isn't that a stalemate?

Early on, Goodman says: "They also talk of women in Klingenberg, women who have evil powers...They are no longer called witches these days, but there are those who are envious, who can utter a curse and imbue it with life. Long after they are dead it may sicken an innocent person or rob him of his mind, and no doctor has any cure for it. There were those in Klingenberg who thought that Anneliese was the victim of such a curse" (5).

Since black magic and possession, if real, are both paranormal phenomena, this explanation has as much antecedent probability as possession. Yet, if she was hexed, then that's not equivalent to possession—much less a "penance possession."

Perhaps Goodman might argue that possession was the result of her accursed state. That her curse took the form of possession. In principle, maybe so.

On the other hand, to judge by what I've read on the subject, these can have very different symptoms and outcomes.

So what's my personal opinion? I don't know enough to have a firm opinion, but this is my provisional assessment:

i) If we stipulate to the accuracy of Goodman's presentation, then I think a malefice is a more likely

explanation than possession. It better accounts for peripheral phenomena like spectral animals. And it better accounts for some features which appear to be inconsistent with possession (see above).

ii) At the same time, I think we must also make allowance for the fact that Goodman's coverage is deficient. She's often vague at the very point where she needs to be precise. And she's using this case to advance her New Age agenda. So the coverage is skewed.

With that in mind, it's possible that Michel was just a mentally unstable girl who fell into a tragic spiral of self-destructive insanity—with religious fanaticism as an aggravating factor.

I'd note that both interpretations are available to the reader from the book itself. I don't have to introduce my own presuppositions into the discussion to offer either one.

### **III. The Exorcism of Emily Rose**

The film is several notches above the average horror film. A thoughtful and respectful treatment of a religious theme.

In its favor:

- i) The principals are all well cast. That includes a virtuoso performance of the lead. Not only does the actress have the dynamic range, but the physical plasticity for the part.
- ii) It's scarier than the average horror flick by showing less. Special effects are minimal. It relies on acting and subtle photography to create the unnerving atmosphere. It also

benefits from the pitiless landscape.

**iii)** But the film also has a tradeoff. It tries to be very evenhanded. Open to more than one interpretation.

In large part, we see the action through the eyes of Emily. But even though we see what she sees, what are we seeing? Reality—or her hallucination?

At one level this is potentially interesting, since the audience is left to decide whether or not Emily was really possessed.

On the other hand, in playing it safe by playing it straight down the middle, it lacks the dramatic flair or tension that comes from the risk of taking sides. Studied neutrality can be philosophically interesting, but dramatically uninteresting.

The closest thing to a deal-breaker in the film is where the star witness sees a malefic apparition, which remains invisible to the defense attorney, then backs into an oncoming car—killing him instantly.

The “accidental” death of the star witness, triggered by the vision of some malefic specter, seems a tad too coincidental to happen naturally. Still, the audience doesn’t see what he sees. And being run over by a car is out of the ordinary, unlike freak accidents in *The Omen*. So even this preserves a measure of ambiguity.

**iv)** In principle, the director could turn this to dramatic advantage. After all, diabolical evil might well be ambiguous. Favor a degree of concealment. Now you see

me—now you don't!

But that would require the director to distinguish between the viewpoint of the omniscient storyteller and the viewpoint of the characters—where the storyteller knows more than the characters, and tips his hand to the audience.

Yet it seems more like the director wanted to be “fair” by presenting both sides. That makes it a bit more like a classroom lesson than a compelling drama.

This is a bit ironic inasmuch as the director found the experience of making the film quite unsettling. As he explains in an interview:

*DERRICKSON: It wasn't until the initial excitement had passed that we realized we didn't know a lot about exorcism and possession; we didn't know a lot about courtroom procedure either. So there was a tremendous amount of research. I read maybe two dozen books on possession and exorcism, from a variety of perspectives, from skeptical psychiatric perspectives, Catholic perspectives, Protestant perspectives. It didn't matter what the perspective was; the material was incredibly dark and deeply disturbing. To read so many of those books in a row, that was the only time I felt a little weirded out."*

*BOARDMAN: He actually took all the material, brought it to me, and said, 'Look, this doesn't bother you quite as much as it bothers me. I don't want it in my house.'*

*DERRICKSON: All my exorcism tapes are in his garage!*



*DERRICKSON: It was interesting. I was surprised at how many documented cases are out there, how much information is available about this subject. We viewed videotapes of real exorcisms. The whole 3:00am thing—there was a number of books that talked about this idea that 3:00am was the demonic witching hour. After I read that, I kept waking up at 3:00am—exactly! It started to freak me out a little bit; that's why it ended up in the script. For me, that was the only strange thing that happened, and that was during the research phase. Once we got into the writing, then it became creative and fun. Making the movie was real positive. We don't have great mythological stories about the "Curse of The Exorcism."*

*BOARDMAN: That 3:00am thing is a perfect example: Is that the power of the Devil or the power of suggestion? Or is it both? It was working on him, on some level.*

*DERRICKSON: There was one guy in New York who has this vault of stuff. Of all the things he showed us, the one Paul and I found most compelling was not a videotape of an actual exorcism or had any paranormal phenomena. It was a tape this cop had made, interviewing an Italian family in New York who were having all this demonic activity in their house. He interviews them separately, like a police officer, to see if their stories match up. It was probably the most disturbing. The level of fear that these people had, all of them—you could feel how terrified they were. By the time it was over, all you could think was, 'They're not lying.'*

*DERRICKSON: Watching Jennifer Carpenter work herself up into hysteria [as Emily], I think everybody got very energized. We actually got an R-rating on the film when we first submitted it to the MPAA. I think we cut less than,*

*maybe, ten seconds out to get a PG-13: little things here and there, like the autopsy photos were in color; we had to make them black-and-white. They were all relatively painless. One of the things we had to cut was in the barn exorcism. When she first sits down on her knees and growls at Father Moore with hatred -- when we shot that, her face contorted so severely, it was the strangest thing I've ever seen. I was sitting next to Tom Stern, our director of photography, next to the monitor, and he kept saying, 'Oh my god! Oh my god!' It kept getting worse, until she looked like an alien. Finally, the scene was over and I yelled cut. Steve Campanelli, the camera operator, put the camera down—it was a hand-held shot—and walked over to the monitor. He was white. He said, 'Did you see that? Did you see that? Do you know what was going through my head? I thought, she just became possessed—we got to get out of here!' It was so great; that was one of my favorites. That was hard to cut. The MPPA was like 'It's too disturbing.' I remember arguing with them: 'So, if I had a worse actress, I wouldn't have to cut this. That's what you're telling me.' No make-up effects, no special effects. It will be on the DVD, I'm sure.*

<http://hollywoodgothique.bravejournal.com/entry/14419>

**v)** Another problem with refusing to present a clear viewpoint is that it makes the story artificially symmetrical. The evidence and counterevidence are evenly balanced. But real life tends to be asymmetrical.

**vi)** Likewise, an unbeliever plays the defense attorney whereas a believer plays the prosecutor. This is supposed to be interesting because it presents a role reversal—with the believer prosecuting the exorcist and the unbeliever

defending the exorcist.

And up to a point that has some dramatic potential. The defense attorney starts out as an agnostic, but she has some "spooky" experiences in the course of the trial which cause her to take the whole notion of possession more seriously.

Mind you, this type of enlightenment bit of a cinematic cliché, but as clichés go, it retains some potency.

On the other hand, this isn't quite as successful in reverse. For while there's character development in the case of the defense attorney, there's no corresponding development on the prosecutor.

The idea of making a Christian character act out of character by prosecuting the believer is a gimmick. Too clever to be clever. And it's not a trick that improves with repetition.

In addition, this is another case where an artificial symmetry is introduced into the story. Again, though, real life tends to be lopsided and ragged around the edges. The story would benefit from less sense of being tightly controlled by the hidden hand of the director or screenwriter.

Finally, the idea of depicting the prosecutor as a devout believer is unwittingly subverted by the fact that he doesn't come across as a devout believer, but as a militant sceptic.

In the film he's more than a man doing his job. He's an avenger or scourge. From a dramatic standpoint, it would

be more effective to make the prosecutor lapsed churchgoer who has a personal grudge against men of the cloth due to a bad experience with the church. That would give it more edge and evident motivation.

However, I don't wish to leave the wrong impression. Because the actors are so good, they rise above the limitations of the material. It's better on screen than it looks on paper.

**vii)** One thing the film develops from the book is making the exorcist advise Emily to stop taking her psychotropic medication because it insulates her from a successful exorcism. Whatever the objective merits of that advice, it makes dramatic sense.

**viii)** By contrast—in the film, God allows Emily to be possessed, not as a form of penal substitution, but as an apologetic display. Her possession demonstrates the existence of the Devil—and, by implication, the existence of the Devil's heavenly adversary.

But whatever the dramatic merits of that rationale, considered in isolation, it's sabotaged by the noncommittal perspective of the film—which is deliberately ambiguous about the true nature of Emily's affliction.

By treating a naturalistic explanation as equally viable, the rationale loses its clear-cut apologetic appeal.

## Jesus and the psychiatrists

My approach to the NT is usually that of a scholar, but in the area of exorcisms it is likely that my personal background will color any conclusions reached. Before going into academic Biblical studies, I studied medicine for four years. My main interest was in psychiatry which resulted in the neglect of other areas, so I never completed my training. My thinking has therefore been shaped by modern psychiatric theory and practice. However, certain experiences I had while I was a medical student, and subsequently when I was a Baptist minister, have also shaped my thinking in a completely different way.

Most psychiatrists do not accept the reality of demons or exorcism. They would regard the exorcisms of Jesus as old-world descriptions of psychiatric problems...A psychiatrist could therefore feel fairly satisfied that the Gospel accounts of demonization can be dealt with in terms of modern psychiatry or medicine.

However, I have personally been persuaded away from this viewpoint by a series of events which occurred while I was studying psychiatry, and during my time in pastoral work...I went once to interview a patient but found that he was asleep. He was lying on his bed, facing the wall, and he did not turn round or respond when I walked in. I sat in his room for a while thinking that he might wake up, and after a while I thought I might pray for him. I started to pray silently for him but I was immediately interrupted because he sat bolt upright, looked at me fiercely and said in a voice which was not characteristic of him: "Leave him alone—he belongs to us".

Startled, I wasn't sure how to respond, so we just sat and stared at each other for a while. Then I remembered my fundamentalist past and decided to pray silently against what appeared to be an evil spirit. I prayed silently because I was aware that an hysterical disorder could mimic demon possessed...I can't remember exactly what I prayed but probably rebuked the spirit in the name of Jesus. Immediately [as/after] I did so, I got a very hostile outburst along the same lines, but much more abusive. I realized then that I was in very deep waters and continued to pray, though silently.

An onlooker would have seen a kind of one-sided conversation. I prayed silently and the person retorted very loudly and emphatically. Eventually (I can't remember what was said or what I prayed) the person cried out with a scream and collapsed on his bed. He woke up a little later, unaware of what had happened. I was still trying to act the role of a medic, so I did not tell him anything about what had happened. His behavior after waking was quite striking in its normality. He no longer heard any of the oppressive voices which had been making him feel cut off and depressed, and his suicidal urges had gone.

This incident made me question every assumption I had made about Gospel exorcisms. Unfortunately for the person involved, this was only the beginning, and as time went on there were many more spirits which had to be dealt with...The story has a happy ending in that this person is no longer troubled by such problems, and has remained so for several years.

When I was dealing with strange personalities which spoke out of this person I was always careful to speak silently, even if the person appeared to be asleep... These voices answered specific silent questions such as What is your name?, When did you come? This gradually convinced me that I was not dealing with with a purely psychiatric disorder. David Instone Brewer, "Jesus and the Psychiatrists," A. Lane, ed., **THE UNSEEN WORLD** (Baker 1996), 133-34,140-41.

What's striking about this account is the veridical element. It defies a naturalistic explanation inasmuch as the patient couldn't physically hear what Brewer was thinking. To react to the specific content of silent prayer is telepathic. In fact, initially, the patient wasn't even in a position to be naturally aware of Brewer's presence in the room—much less be able to read his mind.

Apparently, Brewer is someone from fundamentalist background who rejected his religious upbringing in light of secular science, then, due to firsthand experience as a med student, became convinced that his religious upbringing was right after all.

## Demon-haunted world

One curious question is why the Synoptic Gospels have so much to say about demons, in contrast to the paucity of references in the OT, or the rest of the NT.

The short answer is that we don't know the answer. We can only speculate.

**i)** I suppose the liberal explanation would be evolving belief in demons. However, that's implausible—even on liberal assumptions. Belief in evil spirits is very common in primitive societies.

At best, what would evolve is an explanation for their existence. A backstory. An organizational chart.

Moreover, the evolutionary explanation fails to explain the paucity of references outside the Synoptic Gospels. Take John's Gospel—or Acts.

**ii)** There's a pattern. Demons are typically mentioned in reference to exorcism. Absent the context of possession and exorcism, there's little occasion, from the viewpoint of Bible writers, to mention demons. That's their basic selection-criterion. The existence and presence of demons is a topic that normally crops up in that particular context.

**iii)** That's true in extrabiblical Jewish literature, viz. Tobit, Josephus (i.e. Eleazar), the Genesis Apocryphon, Qumran lit. (hymn 11Q5/11QPs-a).

We also have the Jewish exorcists in Acts 19:13-19). That's an incidental witness to the practice. Luke happens to mention that only in connection with Paul's ministry.



So belief in demonic activity was more widespread than the relative silence of Scripture would indicate. The fact that references concentrate in the Synoptic Gospels doesn't mean this is novel or exceptional in the general culture.

**iv)** I doubt it's incidental that in all three Synoptic Gospels, Christ's encounter with Satan precedes accounts of exorcism. That's the first skirmish in an ongoing series of spiritual battles. Having lost the first round, Satan delegates subsequent engagements to his lieutenants, although he makes a strategic reappearance to recruit Judas.

**v)** The fallen angels were expelled from God's abode. Now God enters their abode. His presence behind enemy lines, in the person of the Incarnate Son, naturally draws them out of the shadows. He invades their sphere of influence.

This, in turn, generates situations of mutual recognition. Both Jesus and demons are outwardly human. Both Jesus and demons can discern what lies within. Hidden divinity and hidden possession.

**vi)** Jesus had inherent authority to expel demons. And he authorized his disciples to expel demons. Due to his reputation as a powerful, successful exorcist, many people brought possessed friends or relatives to him (or people they deemed to be possessed), to be delivered.

The reason the OT has so little to say about this may be because, as a rule, OT Jews had no special ability to recognize possession or expel demons. Possession isn't evident unless the demon chooses to manifest itself.

Moreover, there's no presumption that Jews or Christians have specific authority to command demons. That doesn't

mean Christians can't perform exorcisms. But there's no guarantee that their efforts will be successful. So we wouldn't expect the same emphasis outside the Gospels.

**vii)** Likewise, the Gospel has a preemptive effect, by suppressing the occurrence of possession. By driving the dark side back into the shadows.

## **Demons demons everywhere!**

Some readers are struck by how often the Synoptic Gospels mention demoniacs. Were there really that many demoniacs running around 1C Palestine? Were Jews that susceptible to possession? The OT never mentions exorcism. A few quick considerations:

**i)** Perhaps OT prophets weren't granted the authority to cast out demons. Maybe that was reserved for Jesus and his disciples. When the dark side got wind of the fact that God Incarnate was traipsing around Palestine, it was DEFCON 1 for the occult. Hit Jesus with everything you've got.

The conflict between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light comes to a head with the advent of Christ. Open warfare.

Jesus had the intrinsic authority to cast out demons to demonstrate who's ultimately in charge. To the extent that his followers can do the same thing, that's in the name of Jesus.

**ii)** When friends and relatives brought people to Jesus to be exorcized, that reflects their diagnosis, not his. They think the individual is possessed—which doesn't imply that Jesus always shared their suspicions.

Since Jesus has the mojo to cure anyone of anything, it really doesn't matter what's wrong with them. In some cases the individual might be mentally ill, which friends and relatives misdiagnose as possession. Jesus can still heal that individual. His ability isn't contingent on the accuracy of their diagnosis.

The Synoptics record some dramatic cases of demonic possession and exorcism. However, that very fact may indicate that those were the most memorable cases. So the actual percentage of demoniacs may have been fairly low.

## Possession in the Gospels

Some Christians, even though they believe the Gospels, are sometimes perplexed by what they regard as the disproportionate occurrence of possession. By that I mean, not that cases of possession are overrepresented in the Gospel record, compared to other stories, but that cases of possession seem to be overrepresented in the general population. It's not a question of Mark's selection criteria, Mark's interest in possession, but the fact that Mark has so much raw material to choose from.

They wonder why there would be so many cases of possession in 1C Palestine. To begin with, that's a center of Judaism, so we'd expect possession to be less frequent there than in pagan parts of the world. Moreover, it seems to be out of proportion to our own experience. In the modern world, cases of possession are evidently rare. So why would there be such a concentration in the time of Christ? To be blunt, this strikes some readers as unrealistic.

I'm not stating my own position. I'm just summarizing the baffled reaction that some Christians have, when they compare the Gospel accounts to the observable world. By way of response:

**i)** I think some Christian readers have a misimpression of the Gospel data. The vivid stories of possession and exorcism make such a memorable impression on the reader that they think the reportage is more prevalent than is actually the case. The actual number of Gospel references to possession is fairly sparse, and primarily confined to Mark, with Matthew as a distant second, then Luke and John trailing even further behind.

You have four exorcism accounts in Mark (Mk 1:21-28; 5:1-20; 7:24-30; 9:14-29), two short reports in Matthew (Mt 9:32-34; 12:22; par. Lk 11:14) and a few summary statements (Mk 1:32-34,39; 3:7-12). You also have the possession of Judas (Lk 22:3; Jn 13:2). So there's less material than we might mistakenly recall.

**ii)** We also need to distinguish between reported cases of possession which were brought to Jesus, and cases where Jesus or the narrator identifies the individual as a demoniac. When the narrator describes people bringing cases to Jesus, that's a reflection of their diagnosis, not the narrator's. They bring the troubled individual to Jesus because they think that individual is possessed. When the narrator explains their motivation, that isn't an endorsement of their diagnosis.

**iii)** Unlike a disease, whose symptoms are automatic, the symptoms of possession are under the voluntary control of the demon. It's a question of the degree to which he chooses to manifest himself. Having Jesus on the site brings the behind-the-scenes spiritual conflict out into the open. That invites a direct confrontation between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light. That smokes them out of hiding. So it's not surprising if a demon surfaces when brought face-to-face with his arch rival. Ordinarily, he might maintain a low profile.

**iv)** What about modern counterparts? Demonic possession may well be underreported and often go undiagnosed. Most psychologists and psychiatrists have a secular outlook. And psychotropic drugs might mask the symptoms of possession. Illicit drug use might have the same effect. Also, even if a psychologist or psychiatrist suspects possession, he may decline to offer that diagnosis, for fear of damaging his professional reputation.

Of course, you have the opposite problem in folk pentecostalism, where possession is routinely overdiagnosed. And that, in turn, can lead to a backlash, by bringing the demonic attribution into disrepute.

## Devil may care

For reference, here's Lieberman's background:

<http://profiles.columbiapsychiatry.org/profile/jalieberman>

LIEBERMAN: I've never believed in ghosts or that stuff, but I've had a couple of cases, one in particular that really just gave me pause. This was a young girl, in her 20s, from a Catholic family in Brooklyn, and she was referred to me with schizophrenia, and she definitely had bizarre and psychotic-like behavior, disorganized thinking, disturbed attention, hallucinations, but it wasn't classic schizophrenic phenomenology. And she responded to nothing," he added with emphasis. "Usually you get some response. But there was no response. We started to do family therapy. All of a sudden, some strange things started happening, accidents, hearing things. I wasn't thinking anything of it, but this unfolded over months. One night, I went to see her and then conferred with a colleague, and afterwards I went home, and there was a kind of a blue light in the house, and all of a sudden I had this piercing pain in my head, and I called my colleague, and she had the same thing, and this was really weird. The girl's family was prone to superstition, and they may have mentioned demon possession or something like that, but I obviously didn't believe it, but when this happened I just got completely freaked out. It wasn't a psychiatric disorder—you want to call it a spiritual possession, but somehow, like in *The Exorcist*, we were the enemy. This was basically a battle between the



doctors and whatever it was that afflicted the individual.

ME: Do you completely disregard the idea of possession?

LIEBERMAN: No. There was no way I could explain what happened. Intellectually, I might have said it's possible, but this was an example that added credence.

<http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2016/10/father-amorth-the-vatican-exorcist>

# A Pastor's Reflections: Demon Possession and Mental Illness

**JANUARY 31, 2017**

VFT

I can remember sitting in church as a young teenager as my pastor posed a question about the possible links between demon possession and mental illness. His brother-in-law was a board certified psychiatrist and a professing Christian, which lead him to pose the following question: "What if I told you I was counseling someone who spoke in multiple different voices, was violent, prone to hurting others, and disposed to harming others? How would you diagnose such a person?" His brother-in-law responded along the following lines: "Not being able to examine the patient first hand, my arm-chair diagnosis would lead me to believe that he was perhaps suffering from dissociative identity order or perhaps some sort of psychosis." My pastor asked him a probing and legitimate question, namely, "Why not demon possession? After all, I just described the behavior of the demoniac at the tomb of the Gerasenes and the text clearly states that he was demon possessed" (Luke 8:26-39). My pastor's question raised some important issues vis-à-vis how we diagnose and therefore treat certain ailments. Do we treat all mental health issues as matters pertaining to sin or is there a legitimate place for medical science? I desire to address these questions as a pastor, not as an expert in either demon possession or psychiatric medicine. What does the Bible have to say on these issues?

We live in the wake of modern assumptions about the Bible and after the famous "demythologizing" program of biblical scholars such as Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann once

asked how people who use electricity, drive cars, and know of the wonders of modern medicine still believe in a three-tiered world (heaven, earth, and hell) inhabited by demons and angels? He sought, therefore, to remove the “mythical” elements in the New Testament and boil its message to its purest form—a message that would could be embraced by moderns. On the other hand, there are God-fearing, Bible-believing, well-intended Christians who approach psychiatry with a degree of skepticism given the propensity for doctors to take common moral problems, provide a fancy label, and then excuse immoral conduct as a disease. Criminals are no longer guilty of their crimes but can provide exculpatory reasons for their immoral actions. Recall the recent case where a teenager was placed on ten years of probation for four counts of vehicular manslaughter even though his blood-alcohol count was three times the legal limit. “Expert” testimony for the defense claimed that the boy suffered from *influenza*, a psychological state where a person is unable to possess a sense of right or wrong because of profound wealth. Both extremes fail to approach the question of the possible relationship between demon possession and mental illness with care, nuance, and especially wisdom. Liberal theologians too quickly dismisses the reality of the demonic on the basis of preconceived prejudices about the Bible’s claims (down on the farm it’s called, *disbelief*), and the well-intended Christian fails to recognize that all physical problems are not immediately related to sin.

We must first recognize the reality of the demonic. The Bible is clear about this. All you have to do is read the gospel accounts of Christ’s numerous encounters with demons (e.g., Matt. 4:22, 24; 7:22; 8:16, 31; 9:33-34; 10:8; 12:24ff; 15:22; 17:18). Moreover, a cursory survey of these passages reveals that demon-possession is real. But on the other hand, these same passages inform us that

Jesus not only cast out demons from those who were possessed, but that he healed “the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics” (Matt. 4:24). In other words, there were those with numerous afflictions, both spiritual and physical. Take for instance the fact that Matthew records that Christ healed epileptics but in addition healed those who were demon possessed. These were, according to Matthew’s account, two different classes of people in need of healing. By way of contrast, there were those who were demon-possessed who were gripped by epileptic-like seizures (e.g., Mark 9:18). This is to say, not all epileptics were demon-possessed and not all demon-possessed people were epileptics. The Scriptures appear to recognize the fact that some epileptics suffered from a medical condition (Matt. 4:24), while others suffered from a spiritual malady (i.e., demon possession, Matt. 17:14-18). This distinction has important pastoral implications.

First, like a good doctor, a pastor must properly diagnose his counselee. Are there any indicators, for example, that reveal that the person dabbles in the occult? Do they spend great amounts of time engaged in immorality of any sort? That is, do they imbibe from evil practices that might expose them to the demonic? Are they engaged in idolatry of any sort? This might be an indicator that demon-possession is a factor.

Second, is the person a Christian? I do not believe that a Christian can be demon-possessed because the “house,” so to speak, of the person can only have one of three conditions: inhabited by demons, uninhabited, or inhabited by the Spirit of the living God. If a person is a genuine believer inhabited by the Spirit of God, they might dabble with the demonic, but demon possession is not possible. Paul rebuked the Corinthians, for example, for partaking of

food sacrificed to idols, which was a form of demon-worship (1 Cor. 10:21). But these Christians were not demon-possessed. One of the points the gospels make is that with the arrival of the king, namely Jesus, comes the arrival of the kingdom. And if the king and his kingdom are here, then he casts out every offending thing, especially the unwelcome demons. Believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and constitute the new Holy of holies—a sanctified place unsuited for demons.

Third, is it possible that the person you are counseling is suffering from a medical ailment? While we are all sinners and therefore subject to the effects of the fall, guilt, spiritual pollution, and even death itself, not all medical ailments, even those of the mind, are connected to demon possession. I once suffered from migraines, insomnia, fatigue, irritability, and aching joints, among other symptoms. I was firmly convinced that I was suffering from a spiritual malady—that I failed to trust Christ in the midst of some trying circumstances. I thought my mouth was saying I trusted Christ in the midst of the trial but my body was calling me a liar. My wife, on the other hand, was not equally convinced and encouraged me to see my doctor. Long story short—I needed surgery because of a medical issue. I had the surgery and my symptoms disappeared virtually over night. Not all physical problems are related to sin.

These three questions are by no means exhaustive but they do touch upon chief points that you should explore as you seek to determine the source of a person's problem. We need to have a high regard for the Scriptures and not be afraid to identify sin when we see it, whether in ourselves or in others. But we should also have a high regard for the good gifts that God has given in the creation of humanity, such as mathematics, science, literature, and even

medicine. Psychiatry is a medical science, one devoted to the study, diagnosis, and treatment of the human mind, one of the most fascinating organs in the human body. We should not be too quick to dismiss the diagnosis of a medical physician, especially if we are not trained in medicine ourselves

In the end, we must look to Christ to give us wisdom when to dispense medicine from a pharmacy and when to dispense the medicine of the gospel. Pray that Christ would give you this much needed wisdom until we will all be delivered from every form of suffering and sin when on the last day we behold the face of God in the face of Christ and he wipes away every tear.

## Lay exorcism

*38 John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."*

*39 But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. 40 For the one who is not against us is for us (Mk 9:38-40; par. Lk 9:49-50).*

This is an intriguing passage.

**i)** In what sense is the anonymous exorcist not "following them"? Perhaps that means he was not a Christian. Possibly a Jewish exorcist (e.g. sons of Sceva) or syncretist (e.g. Simon Magus).

**ii)** However, it may simply mean that he was not a "follower" in the narrow sense of being one of Christ's handpicked emissaries. He wasn't one of the Twelve, or one of the Seventy. But in a broader sense, Christ had many followers who weren't formally attached to the Jesus movement. Although Christ didn't personally choose them for ministry, they were Christian believers.

Indeed, that seems to be the point of the story, where the independent exorcist represents disciples outside the tight circle of those whom Christ directly commissioned for special service.

**iii)** Did the anonymous exorcist actually cast out demons? That is John's impression. However, it's possible that John was mistaken. Prior to Pentecost, the apostles were not inerrant teachers. So this is his fallible interpretation of what the exorcist did.

Christ's reply doesn't entirely settle the question, for his statement is hypothetical. Nevertheless, his approving comment assumes a positive view of the man's motivations—and other like-minded individuals.

**iv)** However, the passage certainly leaves the door open for crediting the independent exorcist with success. If so, then this would be a case of "lay" exorcism. He had no ecclesiastical authorization to cast out demons. He was not a church officer. He was a freelance exorcist. Yet, at least hypothetically, Jesus sanctions the practice.

Of course, that doesn't mean every Christian who attempts or presumes to perform an exorcism will be successful. At most it means that *some* Christians can pull that off.

**v)** What does it mean to cast out demons "in Jesus name"? Is that a formula (e.g. "The power of Christ compels you!"), or is that just a way of saying the exorcist was a Christian?



## Fallen angels

It's striking how little the Bible explicitly has to say about the fall of angels. Just a few scattered, sometimes ambiguous passages.

Liberals say the theology of fallen angels is a Second Temple development (e.g. 1 Enoch). And because it's a later development, this is legendary embellishment or pious fiction. Tacked on at a later date. But there are basic problems with that characterization:

- i)** Even in the NT, reference to the fall of angels is scant. Even in the Gospels, Satan isn't classified as a fallen angel. Yet the theological narrative of fallen angels was already in place by then.
- ii)** Even if we grant liberal dating for the sake of argument, they also tend to date the Pentateuch to the Exilic period, so on their own dating scheme, the fall of angels isn't an especially late development in relation to the OT narrative.
- iii)** Although Scripture doesn't say much about the fall of angels, the OT has a lot to say about angels generally, as well as moral evil generally. This goes all the way back to the Pentateuch, including Genesis in particular. So angels and moral evil already figure in the earliest stages of the OT plot.

It is, however, a short step from the existence of angels in general to evil angels in particular. Likewise, the origin of moral evil is a natural question to ask. Is that confined to the human realm? Or does it have a parallel in the angelic realm? And given the interaction between men and angels in Scripture, it's a short step to the idea that evil angels as

well as good angels intersect with human history. So there's no overriding reason to assume this is a late theological development.

## Wise men from the East

Saelma While leading a Bible study with a group of young adult Hmong Christians, active members of an LCMS congregation with a Hmong ministry, the topic of demons came up. Usually I deal with this topic and the occasional morbid interest very simply by saying: 1) Demons are real, and 2) Don't play with fire.

To my astonishment, members of the study group began to share experiences of personal encounter with what could only be considered demonic entities. These included audible, visual, and even physical manifestations. Every single person there was well aware of such incidents with close friends or family members, and in many cases the events were witnessed by or happened to the people there present. (One of them was currently serving as a congregational elder!) This went on for some time and I kept, for the most part, a shocked silence.

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/geneveith/2018/11/the-lutheran-approach-to-exorcism/#comment-4204620267>

It must be very strange for non-Christians from the Third World who believe in the supernatural from personal experience to come to the West and encounter mainline denominations and progressive Christians who deny the supernatural! Likewise, it must be amusing for Third-World Christians to encounter the same disconnect!

## From bane to blessing

*you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord ([1 Cor 5:5](#)).*

*among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme ([1 Tim 1:20](#)).*

Given the elliptical nature of these enigmatic passages, we can't be sure what they mean. In his revised commentary on 1 Corinthians, Fee denies that Paul is using an "execration formulation."

Fee thinks this is a colorful metaphor or personification for excommunication. However, a basic problem with that explanation is how excommunication would have a purifying effect on the wayward Christian. He's cut off from the sanctifying influence of Christian fellowship. And that, in turn, leaves nothing to offset the moral and spiritual corruption of his heathen environment.

So it seems more likely that Paul is alluding to the judicial or punitive role that the OT assigns to Satan ([Job 1-2](#); [1 Chron 21:1](#); [Zech 3:1-2](#)).

In effect, he may be hexed. Cursed to suffer a string of bad luck. One setback after another. Things go from bad to worse.

His misfortune constitutes remedial punishment—prompting contrition.

Of course, it is not Satan's intention to restore a wayward Christian to the fellowship of the church. That's a case of

God's overruling providence. God uses Satan to achieve a beneficial result in spite of Satan's malicious designs.

I think that's the most reasonable interpretation. God can use misfortune and personal tragedy as spiritual discipline. That can be instigated by Satan, even though the end-result is at cross-purposes with Satan's malevolent intentions.

# XIV. Cessationism

---

## Enlightenment cessationism

The boast of many scientists throughout the latter half of the 17th century that the mechanistic worldview greatly devolved to God's glory, had a hollow ring. Such a devout Christian among them as Robert Boyle could bring himself to accepting only the biblical miracles. Only there could be no rational defense for such a restriction. With Pierre Bayle the rationalist attack on miracles got in high gear at the start of the 18th century. The Enlightenment had not yet run its course when the attack reached its logical denouement in Hume's skepticism and Kant's apriorism.

...the question of miracles imposed itself in the measure in which the laws of nature began to appear as subtly ultimate realities...Many divines, in fact, lost their faith in miracles as they saw those holes being filled up with the relentless progress of science. They turned to an increasingly radical reinterpretation of biblical miracles culminating in the exegesis of Bultmann and in the philosophy of Ernest Bloch.

Newton's willingness to admit the reality of biblical miracles alone never cut ice with rationalists. It was quite possibly a tactic on Newton's part to cover up his Unitarianism, which if discovered, would have cost him the Lucasian chair in Cambridge and, later, the Directorship of the Mint. Unbelievers could, of course, be reassured by Newton's categorical denial of Christian miracles postdating New Testament times.

Here Newton merely followed none other than Robert Boyle...Boyle's dismissal of post-biblical miracles as being unworthy of God, the clockmaker, is a perfect example of the vengeance which one's lack of sound

philosophy can take both on one's theology as well as one one's broader interpretation of science.

Clearly Newton believed less in Christianity than he should have and believed more than a Christian should in the laws of science and nature. One wonders whether Newton had ever as much as suspected the miracle of creation at the beginning lurked behind all laws of nature, and their totality, or the miracle of a specific nature stable in its ordinariness. For only with an eye on that miracle can the possibility of miracle be raised meaningfully.

S. Jaki, **MIRACLES AND PHYSICS** (Christendom Press, 2nd, ed., 1999), 4,33-34.



## "How to recognize a false prophet"

I'm going to comment on some claims by [Nathan Busenitz](#):

<http://thecripplegate.com/strange-fire-modern-prophecy/>

**The Need to Test Prophets** Throughout history, there have been many people who have claimed to be prophets, who have claimed to speak for God. But all Christians—whether charismatics or cessationists—would agree that at least some of these prophets were false prophets.

Agreed. That said, our criteria need to be consistent with Scripture, not undercut Scripture.

**How to Recognize a False Prophet** All of this raises a critical question for believers to ask: "**How can we recognize a false prophet?** How can we know when a person who claims to be prophesying for God, who claims to have received new revelation from God that he or she is now reporting to others ... how can we know when that person is telling the truth?" The Bible articulates three objective criteria for evaluating self-professed prophets. If a so-called prophet fails on any one of these three points, he shows himself to be a false prophet.

Are these in fact Biblical criteria?

What are these three tests? Let me just state them briefly, and then we will look at them each in more detail:

**1. Doctrinal orthodoxy** – Because God is a God of truth, those who truly prophesy on His behalf proclaim doctrines that are right and true. Conversely, any self-proclaimed prophet who deceives people by leading them into theological error is a false prophet.

On the face of it, [Busenitz](#) overlooks some obvious counterexamples to his hasty generalization:

i) Didn't Caiaphas truly prophesy in [Jn 11:50-51](#)? Was Caiaphas doctrinally orthodox? Weren't the high priests at that time Sadducees? Didn't the Sadducees have heretical views on angelology and the afterlife? Likewise, by the standards of 1 John, the Christology of Caiaphas was heretical. He denied that Jesus was the Messiah, much less God's Son Incarnate.

ii) What about Balaam? In one respect, we might classify Balaam as a paradigmatic false prophet. He was a pagan diviner ([Josh 13:22](#)). Yet he prophesied truly under divine inspiration ([Num 23:7-10, 18-24](#); [24:3-9, 15-24](#)). He's paradoxical in that regard.

Both Balaam and Caiaphas prophesied truly in spite of themselves.

iii) Scripture also records pagans who received prophetic dreams (Abimelech; Pharaoh, the Egyptian baker, the Egyptian cupbearer; Nebuchadnezzar, the Magi, Pilate's wife).

Were all these pagans doctrinally orthodox?

iv) We need to draw some distinctions which [Busenitz](#) fails to draw.

a) We might distinguish between a true *prophet* and a true *prophecy*.

b) A prophecy is false if the content of the prophecy is heretical.

c) Even if the content of the prophecy is true, the speaker is a false prophet if he exploits the true prophecy to lead the faithful astray.

**2. Moral integrity** – God's true prophets are those who not only proclaim His truth, they also live out His truth. Any self-proclaimed prophet who lives in unrestrained lust and greed shows himself to be a false prophet. So again we see that false prophets can be identified by their lifestyle. As Jesus said, we can know them by their fruits. And when we see the fruit of gross immorality and impurity in someone's

life, we can be confident that he is a false prophet no matter what he might claim.

Well, that's very high-minded, but once again, [Busenitz](#) seems to overlook some obvious counterexamples to his hasty generalization:

i) Saul was said to be a prophet ([1 Sam 10:6,10-11](#)). Yet Saul later murdered Jewish priests who gave David sanctuary when David was on the run from Saul. And Saul resorted to necromancy.

ii) Wasn't David a prophet? Aren't the Psalms of David inspired? Don't some of them contain Messianic prophecies?

Yet according to 1 Chron 3, David fathered sons by at least 8 different wives. Then there's the Bathsheba incident, which involves at least three major transgressions:

(a) The adulterous affair itself; (b), the coverup, in which he engineered the death of her husband, (c) and, relatedly betraying a soldier (Uriah) under his command.

iii) Wasn't Solomon a prophet? On traditional views of authorship, he made significant contributions to the OT canon. Yet his lifestyle wasn't exactly distinguished by frugality or sexual restraint.

**3. Predictive accuracy** – Because God knows the end from the beginning, a true prophet declares divine revelation regarding the future with 100% accuracy. Or to put this in the negative, if someone claims to speak prophetic revelation from God about the future (or about secret things), but then those predictions do not come to pass, the Bible declares that person to be a false prophet.

That is, indeed, the classic, and most direct, test of false prophecy. However, the application of that criterion is complicated by the fact that it isn't always easy to discern fulfillment. Scripture itself contains cases of *apparent* prophetic nonfulfillment. Conservative exegetes spend a lot of time defending these.

Take one well-known case: on the face of it, Jeremiah's oracle regarding the destruction of Babylon (Jer 50-52) wasn't fulfilled as he envisioned it. There are different ways of finessing that issue. Maybe it remains to be fulfilled.

As one commentator notes:

The conclusion must be that in some cases the reputation of the prophet established the truthfulness of his words (rather than the truthfulness of his words established his reputation). M. Brown, **JEREMIAH**, REBC (Zondervan 2010), 7:565.

There are, of course, examples, especially in the case of short-term predictions, where a claimant's forecast was clearly wrong. But it's not always that straightforward.

As is often the case in my experience with MacArthurites, their opposition to the charismatic movement betrays them into using arguments which, if applied consistently, would sabotage the Bible.

It's striking that men like [Busenitz](#) don't even pause to consider obvious Biblical counterexamples to their strictures. What does that say about their insular mindset?

The problem, of course, is that Scripture isn't their frame of reference. Rather, the charismatic movement is their frame of reference. Rather than Scripture, they begin with what they oppose, then concoct ex post facto tests to discredit continuationism. But the end result is to discredit Scripture in the process. MacArthurites do this routinely.

## Suicide-bomber cessationism

I'll make a few observations on this post and some of the ensuing comments:

<https://hipandthigh.wordpress.com/2016/04/26/continuationism-is-not-a-non-essential-doctrinal-issue-2/>

**i)** I appreciate the fact that people like Fred expose hucksters and heretics in the charismatic movement. We need more of that.

**ii)** That said, both here and in his initial post, Fred's entire objection to continuationism is an argument from experience. The experience of hucksters and heretics in the charismatic movement.

Problem is, the argument from experience cuts both ways. If an argument from experience is legitimate to falsify continuationism, then an argument from experience is legitimate to verify continuationism.

**iii)** Keep in mind, too, that the burden of proof for the continuationism is infinitely lower. Cessationism denies the occurrence of a single continuationist miracle. It doesn't deny the occurrence of modern miracles, per se, but the occurrence of miracles consistent with continuationism.

Therefore, it only requires one good example of the contrary to falsify cessationism.

edingess on April 27, 2016 at 2:52 pm said:  
Hey Fred...spot on my brother! I simply ask these

people to put up or shut up. When a Charismatic/Pentecostal starts talking about this nonsense, I simply say, okay then, lets go down to the hospital or the morgue. That is where this debate will take place. Show me what you've got or just shut up. The claims made by these people are empirical claims in my opinion. So, lets see you raise the dead, open blind eyes, empty wheelchairs, etc. Unless you are willing to show me, then please don't waist [sic] my time. That shuts them up every time.

**i)** And atheists raise the mirror image of that very objection. Why doesn't God heal children with cancer? Because there is no God! If there were a God, he'd clean out the cancer ward at a children's hospital.

**ii)** Apropos (i), doesn't Jesus have the ability to heal? He still exists, right? So why doesn't Jesus go down to the hospital, nursing home, or morgue, raise the dead, cure cancer patients, empty wheelchairs, &c? By Ed's logic, Jesus doesn't have what it takes.

**iii)** Fact is, healing everyone has downsides as well as upsides. A person who was healed may become the father of a murderer. Atheists, as well as people like Ed, treat it like a self-contained issue. But reality isn't that compartmentalized.

**iv)** Now, I don't object to calling the bluff of self-styled faith-healers. But it doesn't take a hundred miracles to prove one miracle.

edingess on April 28, 2016 at 3:05 pm said:  
Ken, your claim to having witnessed a genuine miracle needs documentation. Name, contact information, doctor certification of an illness, doctor certification of

restoration, media story reporting the event, eyewitnesses, name of the healer by whom the miracle was performed, etc. Thanks for the information.

**i)** First of all, people like Ed demand documentation, then turn their back on the documentation.

**ii)** We need to draw distinctions. If someone I know, someone whose judgment I trust, tells me about a miracle he experienced, I don't require corroboration.

**iii)** That said, it's good to demand solid evidence for reported miracles. However, Ed raises the bar artificially high. He raises the bar so high that his standard discredits every miraculous healing in the Bible. This is suicide bomber cessationism. They are so fanatical that they will blow up the Bible in order to blow up continuationism.

**iv)** And it won't do for Ed to hold biblical miracles to a different standard. According to cessationism, the function of biblical miracles is to attest the messenger. In that event, you can't invoke the authority of Scripture to validate the miracle. Rather, the miracle validates the authority of Scripture. That's the structure of the cessationist argument. That's how miracles figure in the argument. The messenger doesn't authenticate the miracle; rather, the miracle authenticates the messenger.

So according to cessationism, a Scriptural miracle must be credible independent of Scripture. Yet Ed's criteria rule out every miracle in Scripture. It would really behoove cessationists to avoid suicide bomber tactics.

## Wingnut cessationism

I'm going to comment on a post by Fred Butler:

<http://biblethumpingwingnut.com/2018/11/05/the-man-in-white-appearing-in-muslim-dreams/>

David Platt gave a missions report to the IMB. The highlight, when the audience erupted in thunderous applause, is when he told of how Muslims are having spiritual dreams that allegedly bring them to salvation. The story Platt recounts tells how a Muslim man had a dream over the course of three nights of a man wearing white who told him he knew the way to salvation for his family. The Muslim man then encountered some SBC missionaries the next day,

When GTY hosted the Strange Fire conference back in 2013, attendees were given the opportunity to write out questions for the presenters to answer during the Q&A times. One of the frequently asked questions was about the alleged reports of Muslims all across Islamic countries who were coming to faith in Christ after having a dream about a man in white (or in some cases, Jesus Himself) directing them to a missionary who presents the Gospel.

Those dream testimonies are offered as evidence that God is actively working among Muslims in Islamic nations where Christianity is strongly opposed or completely outlawed and where Christian missionaries are in grave danger with the threat of death. But are those dreams legit? What is a biblically-minded Christian to think of them? Is God really bringing



revival to Islamic lands in this fantastic manner, outside the means He ordained to bring the Gospel?

The New Testament consistently teaches the God-ordained means of proclaiming the Gospel is through human preaching [Mt 28:19-20; Rom 10:14-15; 1 Cor 1:21-24]...Those texts indicate that God has ordained the proclamation of the Gospel message by human preachers who declare biblical and theological truth from Scripture. Those who hear the message choose either to reject it or to believe it by God's grace.

Fred is doing a bait-n-switch. They aren't converted by revelatory dreams rather than the Gospel. Revelatory dreams don't take the place of the Gospel. Instead, revelatory dreams make them receptive to the Gospel.

If a man in white was directing appearing to Muslims in dreams and visions to direct them to the Gospel, would not God be contradicting what He has clearly ordained in Scripture regarding the legitimate means of Gospel proclamation in this age?

No, because Fred's argument is fallacious. This is Fred's inference:

If Scripture says X is the case, that means X is *only* the case.

Compare that to: if a Gospel says one angel appeared at the tomb of Jesus, then *only* one angel appeared at his tomb. But Fred needs to show that his prooftexts are logically exclusionary. As it stands, his inference is invalid.

To say God has ordained the human preaching of the Gospel to save sinners doesn't entail that God *only* uses the human preaching of the Gospel to save sinners.

If we trust that God is sovereign over all nations (cf. Acts 17:26) and is the author and finisher of salvation (cf. Hebrews 12:2), then is it biblical to believe He is able to accomplish His will in those Islamic nations according to the ordained means of human preaching?

Consider the Book of Acts. That's the official record of NT evangelism and missions. How the NT church was initially planted. Is it just through the human preaching of the Gospel? I don't think so.

Peter's miracles and exorcisms (Acts 3; 5; 9).

Paul's miracles and exorcisms (Acts 13; 14; 16; 19; 20; 28).

Ananias, Sapphira, and Herod Agrippa struck dead (Acts 5; 12)

Miraculous jail breaks (Acts 5; 12; 16)

Angelic apparitions (Acts 5; 8; 10; 12)

Christophany (Acts 9)

Revelatory dreams and visions (Acts 2; 7; 10; 16; 18)

Prophets/prophetesses (Acts 11; 21)

In Acts, God employed a variety of supernatural means to enable evangelism and to provide a supernatural witness to

the Gospel. Consider the angelic apparition to Cornelius. That was instrumental in his conversion to Christianity.

Even if we say the supernatural accoutrements to evangelism and missions are now defunct (a la cessationism), they don't *contradict* God's ordination if he employed supernatural accoutrements to further the Gospel in the 1C.

Suggesting that God must now resort to sending mysterious dreams to Muslims implies God's power to save certain sinners is curtailed by evil men and His chosen method of evangelism revealed in Scripture now needs adjusting because of the unforeseen problem of radical Islam.

The Bible is chock-full of dreams and visions, miracles and angels. Does the fact that God resorts to a diversity of supernatural means and agents to convey or certify the message impugn his omnipotence or omniscience?

That also raises the question, does God only give dreams and visions to Muslims? What about Hindus and Buddhists or other members of world religions that live in countries hostile to Christianity? Or those in China, or North Korea who are so utterly anti-religious the government kills them? Do people in those closed cultures have similar dreams that bring them to a missionary who gives them the Gospel? Maybe they do, but I am unaware of their stories.

**i)** North Korea is a closed country, so I wouldn't necessarily expect reports to leak out.

**ii)** By Fred's logic, we ought to deny that God was doing supernatural things in ancient Israel and the 1C Roman

Empire unless he was doing similar things in other parts of the world.

What do Bible-believing Evangelicals like Platt do with Catholics reporting similar events happening with their missionaries? Many Catholics claim Muslims have dreams of a man in white, or in their case, the virgin Mary, that supposedly brings the Muslims to encounter priests or missionaries. See [HERE](#) for example. That raises the serious question as to why God would reveal Jesus to these individuals only to bring them to a false Gospel.

Folks should also understand that Muslims don't necessarily have a problem with Jesus. He is a large part of Islam and even has an important role to play in their eschatology according to Islamic theology. What matters is the right Jesus — the True and Living Jesus who rose from the dead and is the only way to God and who is God Himself, the Second Person of the Trinity. Is that the Jesus Muslims are directed toward when they see the man in white appear in their dreams? Why would God send dreams to Muslims that only converts them to a false form of Christianity?

**i)** That's a legitimate issue. Again, though, it parallels Hume's objection that reported miracles in one religion cancel out reported miracles in another religion. By Fred's logic, if we discount Marian apparitions, then we should discount biblical reports of angelic apparitions, theophanies, or the risen Jesus.

**ii)** Keep in mind that Protestants exist because early "Catholic" missionaries proselytized Europe and Great Britain. Their theology was defective, but further down the line that made the Protestant Reformation possible.

If many Muslims are having dreams and vision that bring them to Jesus, why aren't their immediate cultures changed by their conversion? In other words, I would think that with scores of Muslims having dreams that brings the Gospel to them, there would be an "awakening" of sorts taking place in these hostile places like Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan; but there isn't really. Where is the visible proof of the revival that should be taking place if Christ is breaking into the hearts and minds Muslim people through their dreams?

Did miracles in the 1C church instantly transform the Roman Empire?

Why the need to resort to subjective dreams and visions? How are modern day Islamic cultures (or any anti-Christian culture, for that matter) any more hostile than the pagan ones encountered by first century Christians and then later when missionaries took the Gospel to remote areas like Briton, Norway, and India?

**i)** Miracles and exorcisms in the ancient church were instrumental in the conversion of pagans to the Gospel. And that pattern is often replicated on the mission field. So Fred's objection boomerangs.

**ii)** Does Fred think dreams and visions are inherently subjective? Are biblical dreams and visions subjective? What about veridical dreams and visions? Corroborated dreams and visions?

## Tom Schreiner on the spiritual gifts

Recently I was reading Tom Schreiner's new book, *Spiritual Gifts: What They Are & Why They Matter* (B&H 2018). His book is an irenic defense of cessationism. I should say I skimmed it, so I may have missed some things.

**I.** Let's begin with some positives:

**1.** Chap. 1 has an evenhanded overview of the strengths and weaknesses of the charismatic movement.

**2.** Commenting on Acts 10:44-48, Schreiner says:

This is not an argument for baptismal regeneration; the point is that baptism with the Spirit and baptism with water are both initiatory events. The fact that Cornelius and his friends were baptized with the Spirit meant they were qualified to be baptized with water! (53).

**3.** He uses Acts 16:16-18 to illustrate what Paul may mean by distinguishing between spirits (1 Cor 12:10).

**4.** A familiar crux is that tongues in Acts clearly seem to be xenoglossy whereas tongues in 1 Corinthians seem to be something else. Schreiner believes that tongues in 1 Corinthians are xenoglossy, too, and has a simple argument for harmonizing the two representations:

First, that those in Acts 2 understood the languages spoken doesn't prove that the gift of tongues is different. They understood the tongues because they knew the languages. The problem in 1 Corinthians is that no one was present who knew the languages

spoken. It isn't the gift of tongues that was different; the situation was different (128).

**II.** In general, Schreiner's book is full of sanctified common sense. His analysis is beneficial and edifying even if you disagree with his primary thesis. That said, I'll turn to some disagreements:

**1.** Although he's branched out over the years, Schreiner's center of gravity is Pauline theology. He uses his interpretation of 1 Cor 12-14 as the primary frame of reference. He filters other NT data through his Pauline lens.

His treatment of Acts 2 is cursory. There's no discussion, that I could see, of Jn 14:12.

The result of his Pauline emphasis is to neglect non-Pauline paradigms of the spiritual gifts as well as imposing a Pauline interpretive grid onto non-Pauline material. But that's hermeneutically defective.

**2.** For instance, he denies that Spirit-baptism is a postconversion experience. He harmonizes passages in Acts by reference to Pauline pneumatology. As a result, he regards the delay in Acts 8 as anomalous.

I agree with him that as Paul defines it, Spirit-baptism is not a post-conversion experience. However, Schreiner just assumes that Luke and Paul are referring to the same phenomenon. By contrast, I think Luke in Acts 8 is using shorthand for supernatural manifestations of the Spirit—rather than Spirit-baptism in the sense of regeneration or spiritual renewal.

**3.** On p22, I don't think he quite gets the point of the plural usage ("gifts of the Spirit"). Fee's argument is that this

doesn't refer to a gift of healing. Paul isn't saying there are healers, in the sense of Christians endowed with the ability to heal. Rather, Paul describes each healing as a gift of God.

On p89, Schreiner seems to appreciate that distinction. Yet that distinction undermines his case for cessationism, for on that interpretation, you didn't originally have healers in the ancient church, followed by the abeyance of that gift. There was never that contrast in the first place. Rather, there are miraculous healings. Same thing with xenoglossy and miracles generally.

#### **4.** Schreiner says:

Those with the gift of prophecy declare God's word... When Luke says that both your sons and daughters will prophesy (Acts 2:17-18), it probably means that both men and women will declare God's word, but it doesn't necessitate that they are all prophets, that they all have the spiritual gift of prophecy (95).

**i)** Acts 2 unpacks the definition of prophecy, not in terms of declaring God's word, but revelatory dreams and visions. But visionary revelation and verbal revelation aren't interchangeable categories. Images aren't words.

**ii)** Dreams and visions can include a divine speaker or emissary (e.g. angel) who speaks on God's behalf. But sometimes dreams and visions are just images.

**iii)** In addition, revelatory dreams can be literal or allegorical. Literal in the sense of representational (i.e. photographic realism) or allegorical in the sense of analogical symbolism.



**iv)** The gift isn't the revelation itself, but the Spirit. The Spirit is given, who, in turn, sometimes grants Christians revelatory dreams and visions.

**v)** Not coincidentally, the promise in Acts 2 is illustrated by revelatory dreams and visions in the course of Acts. So that's generally what's meant by "prophecy" in this context.

5. On pp157-59, Scheiner argues that the Apostolate was temporary. I agree. But that depends in part on how we define our terms and concepts. Consider Keener's nuanced analysis:

<http://www.craigkeener.com/are-there-apostles-today-part-1/>

<http://www.craigkeener.com/are-there-apostles-today-part-2/>

<http://www.craigkeener.com/are-there-apostles-today-part-3/>

*Pace* Keener, I think it invites confusion and abuse to say there are modern-day prophets, so I'd assiduously avoid that terminology. Still, it's necessary to engage more nuanced positions, like Keener's.

**6.** Schreiner says:

Since prophecy is defined here as speaking the infallible word of God and since the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, there are no longer prophets today, since the foundation of the church has been laid. The sole and final authority of

Scripture is threatened if so-called prophets today give revelations which have the same authority as Scripture.

If one adopts this definition of prophecy, for anyone to claim such a gift of prophecy today would constitute a threat and danger to the church. Such claims would compromise the unique authority of Scripture, and the potential for spiritual abuse and a cultic type of authoritarianism would be great (160-61).

**i)** Given how Schreiner defines his terms and frames the issue, I agree with his conclusion. However, the issue can be recast:

**ii)** Even if we define prophecy as the infallible word of God, which is a reductionistic definition, his conclusion doesn't necessarily follow, since he fails to distinguish between public and private revelation. Consider the following:

*26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza"...29 And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot."  
(Acts 8:26,29).*

That's verbal revelation. So it seems to meet Schreiner's definition. An audible voice representing God. Speaking in sentences.

But that's not a revelation for the church. It's not a revelation for humanity in general.

Rather, it's a highly topical, time-sensitive form of divine guidance. It's to and for Philip, for one calendar date. It was defunct a day later.

**iii)** In addition, as I already noted, visionary revelation isn't synonymous with verbal revelation. If a Christian tells me they had a premonitory dream, that's not "the infallible word of God". Even assuming they indeed had a premonitory dream, that's not propositional revelation. Rather, it's nonverbal communication that requires interpretation to articulate what they saw. The dreamer must supply the verbal description. He must put into words what he saw in his dream.

**iv)** And even if there was a speaker in his dream, unless the dreamer has verbatim recall, he will summarize or paraphrase what he heard. So there's a difference between what he was told in the dream and what he tells you.

**v)** Then there's the question of verification. Suppose a charismatic comes to me and says: "God told me to tell you to marry Jennifer".

But since God didn't tell *me* that, there's no obligation for me to act on that secondhand claim. I didn't have the experience he purports to have. I'm not privy to his purported experience. Even if he knows what God told him, I don't know that God spoke to him.

**vi)** Now, there can be veridical dreams and visions. Take synchronized dreams, where two different people have the same dream.

Or dreams that come true. If the dreamer shares his dream with other people, before it comes to pass.

**vii)** In addition, God is not the only supernatural agent. Sometimes a miracle is a test of faith. Sometimes you're supposed to disregard the miracle or revelation (e.g. Deut 13:1-5; Mt 24:24; 2 Thes 2:9; Rev 13:13-15).

## **7.** Schreiner says:

How should we think about miracles and healings?...If a person has a gift of healing, it seems there would be a pattern of healing. And the healings should be on the same level that we see in the NT: healing of the blind, of those who are unable to walk, of those who are deaf, and of those who are near death. Claims to healing are often quite subjective: colds, the flu, stomach and back ailments, sports injuries, &c...The issue is that it is often difficult to verify that a miracle has truly taken place. It isn't clear to me that particular people have a *gift* of healing or miracles (164).

**i)** One problem is that Schreiner has bundled two or three distinct issues into one: Are there healers (do some Christians have the gift of healing)? Are these the same kinds of miraculous healing we find in Scripture? Are these verifiable?

**ii)** As I pointed out before, what if there never were healers? What if there wasn't a gift of healing in the first place? Then that's not a point of contrast between the NT church and the subapostolic era.

**iii)** You could deny the ongoing existence of healers but affirm the ongoing occurrence of miraculous healing. Those are separable claims.

**iv)** What if God occasionally works through a particular individual, but that individual can't heal at will? Perhaps he

can only heal when God tells him to lay hands on someone and pray over them.

v) It's unclear what case-studies Schreiner has consulted. The standard collection is Craig Keener's **MIRACLES: THE CREDIBILITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT ACCOUNTS**.

He's updated that in "The Historicity of the Nature Miracles" in G. Twelftree, **THE NATURE MIRACLES OF JESUS**.

In addition, Robert Larmer has two books on miracles which contain case-studies in the appendices: *The Legitimacy of Miracle*; *Dialogues on Miracle*.

There are other collections, but that's a place to start.

**8.** Schreiner says:

Yes, God works miracles, but they are relatively rare (165).

i) Perhaps, but that depends on the frame of reference. Given tens of billions of human beings over the centuries, even if only a fraction experience miracles, that's still a lot of miracles.

ii) Moreover, some miracles may be invisible. Take a Christian who prays to God to prevent something. If it doesn't happen, was that a miracle? There's no evidence for a nonevent, but what if that nonevent is an answer to prayer?

**9.** Schreiner says:

Perhaps God is pleased in cutting-edge missionary situations to grant the same signs and wonders we see in the NT era (165).

Now that the church has the authoritative guidance for faith and practice in the Scriptures, the gifts and miracles which were needed to build up the early church are no longer needed, and they are not common. This is not to say, however, that God never does miracles today (167).

But these two claims are tugging in opposite direction. If a new missionary situation is in some measure a repetition of establishing the church in the 1C Roman Empire, then by Schreiner's own argument, we might expect similar phenomena.

**10.** Schreiner says:

Last, I think it is significant that the great teachers whom God used to bring about the Protestant Reformation were cessationists...They would have loved to see signs and wonders and miracles like there were in the apostolic age (167).

What about prophecies attributed to John Knox? What about reported miracles among the Covenanters and the Huguenots?

## Dembski on Thurman Scrivner

I'm going to comment on Dembski's assessment of Thurman Scrivner:

<https://billdembski.com/theology-and-religion/faces-of-miracles-chapter-3/>

**i)** I think Dembski sets the bar too high for miracles. The purpose of many miracles isn't to prove God's existence but to provide for a need that's humanly hopeless. Of course, miracles like that are still a witness to God's existence, omniscience, and omnipotence, but they're limited to the need.

**ii)** Apropos (i), even in the case of miracles whose primary purpose is evidentiary, they are not designed to satisfy a Cartesian skeptic. Setting the bar artificially high is like skeptical thought-experiments (e.g. the Matrix, brain-in-vat).

Reported miracles vary in their conclusiveness, and in some cases we ought to grant a strong presumption that this was a miracle. It needn't rule out every conceivable naturalistic explanation—although some miracles do so. The issue is not whether it's the only possible explanation but the best explanation, given the evidence at hand.

Many would argue that there's no way to predict who will receive a miracle and who will ask in vain. The decision is God's alone and God's plans and reasons are beyond our ability to understand.

Agreed.

Later in his professional life, Scrivner began a healing ministry after hearing God's voice speak to him for the first time in 1977...When asked how he knew it was his prayers alone that led to healing, Scrivner answered, "I just know that. I just know. Because God speaks to me." He adds that the sound of God's voice is "just like a normal man," just like the interviewer's (AT).

**i)** I'm highly skeptical of people who say God speaks to them on a regular basis. I think God speaks to some Christians on rare occasion, like an emergency.

**ii)** Moreover, his ministry is so dangerous and damaging that I think his impression is delusional.

Scrivner bases his belief on several key Bible verses. Others often interpret these verses very differently, saying that they refer specifically to Jesus or his disciples or to specific situations, and that applying them without qualification takes them out of context and distorts their meaning. Scrivner, by contrast, accepts the words at their most literal face value. To him there is no room for debate or discussion: anything other than his reading is simply misguided and wrong.

In Deuteronomy 28:1-2, Moses promises the people of Israel, "And if you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I commanded you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations and the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you..." Moses then lists both the many blessings in store for those who obey God and the even greater multitude of curses that await the disobedient. According to Scrivner, this passage affirms his belief



that you have to do exactly what God commands in order to get a miracle.

**i)** That's a *corporate* threat/promise.

**ii)** Moreover, it's a promise to OT Jews, not to Gentiles under the new covenant. Even if, for argument's sake, God restores the promised land to ethnic Jews in the world to come, the promise is irrelevant to Christian Gentiles.

Scrivner believes that the message of Romans 10:17 is that the faith we need for healing comes from the teachings of Jesus: "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ."

That's a promise for *salvation*—contingent on faith, not a promise for *healing*, contingent on faith.

Faith makes it possible to please God, who then rewards us by healing us, as explained in Hebrews 11:6: "And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him."

But that doesn't say or imply a promise to heal on condition of faith.

Not only do Scriptures tell Scrivner he can heal, but they also tell him he can do a better job of it than Jesus. He derives this conclusion from John 14:12-14, Jesus' words to His disciples following the Last Supper: "Truly, truly I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the

father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.”

I'll revisit that.

Furthermore, according to Scrivner, anyone, not just Jesus, has the power to forgive sin. To justify that claim, and thus his own authority to forgive sins, Scrivner points to John 20:23, in which Jesus appears to the disciples after the resurrection and declares, “If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.”

This verse gives a good example of how Scrivner interprets Scripture and why his approach is controversial. Backing up to verse 21, we read, “As the father has sent me, even so I am sending you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive ... etc.’” To many biblical interpreters, Jesus appears to be saying these words specifically and exclusively to his disciples, not to you or Thurman Scrivner or anybody else. Scrivner politely but firmly disagrees.

Agreed.

Standing beside his granddaughter’s hospital bed, Scrivner recited John 15:7: “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” Then he followed with an assurance of his own: “He is my God. He honors faith, and so I’m going to ask Him to raise that little girl up and make her well. And He will.”

Thurman fed his granddaughter by mouth against doctor's orders based on his reading of Mark 11:24: "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." He prayed that she would be able to eat solid food and then gave it to her. He fed her applesauce and orange juice that day and she has been eating normally ever since. Furthermore, she seems to have recovered completely from her injuries.

Thurman Scrivner's theology hinges on two points. First is absolute reliance on what the Bible literally says. The tricky part here is that people have to accept his interpretations of Scripture without question or variation, absolute and unwavering. Yet from Bible scholars on down, credible people see the meaning of Scripture very differently.

**i)** A basic problem with his face-value hermeneutic is the mismatch with his own experience. His prayers aren't uniformly answered. Even if he gets a few hits, that falls far short of how his prooftexts are worded.

**ii)** He falls back on the lack of faith escape clause, yet his prooftexts don't condition the efficacy of healing prayer on the faith of who is prayed for but at best on who offers the prayer on their behalf.

What happens when you take the Bible out of context? We looked earlier at John 14:12-14, where Jesus speaks to his disciples following the Last Supper, "Truly, truly I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father."

Many Bible students and scholars agree that these words are specific to the disciples, who were invested with healing powers to demonstrate they were acting in Jesus' name as human representatives — deputies, if you will — designated specifically and personally by Christ. Of course, other interpretations are possible. What if Jesus, in talking of greater works performed by his disciples, was referring not to healing but to the suffering of martyrdom? Indeed, it's not clear that Jesus' miracles have been exceeded by his disciples, but their suffering for his name has in some cases been more extreme than crucifixion.

**i)** I have serious reservations about that interpretation. It's true, of course, that some promises which Jesus addresses to the disciples are exclusive to the disciples and not Christians in general. Many readers stumble because they fail to make allowance for that distinction.

**ii)** In Johannine usage, the works denote miracles, not martyrdom. Just consult standard commentaries. Moreover, martyrdom is hardly exclusive to the Eleven.

**iii)** If the promise is exclusive to the Eleven, that excludes St. Paul.

**iv)** It's a misleading way to phrase a promise restricted to just eleven people.

**v)** Consider other promises in the Upper Room Discourse:

*13:34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. 35 By this all*

people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

14: 2 In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. 4 And you know the way to where I am going.” 5 Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” 6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. 7 If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

12 “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. 13 Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 If you ask me[e] anything in my name, I will do it.

15 “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father,

*and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, 17 even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.*

*18 "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. 19 Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live.*

*23 Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.*

*27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.*

*15 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. 3 Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in me,*

*and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. 5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. 9 As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.*

Are these exclusive to the Eleven just because they were the initial audience? Do these not extend to Christians in general?

A better explanation is that Jesus frequently employs hyperbole in his teaching. Although Jn 14:12 isn't confined to the Eleven, the promise is hyperbolic. The promise includes garden-variety Christians but not all (or even most) Christians—and even among the subset, not all (or even most) of their petitions are granted.

## Gifts of healing

*to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles ([1 Cor 12:9-10](#)).*

According to Gordon Fee, in his revised commentary on 1 Corinthians (Eerdmans 2014):

The plural charismata ["gifts of healings"] probably suggests, not a permanent "gift," as it were, but that each occurrence is a "gift" in its own right. So also with the plurals in the next item [lit. "workings of miracles"], 659.

[Quoting Bittlinger] "Every healing is a special gift..." 659n134.

That's a potentially revolutionary take on the typical cessationist/noncessationist debate or stalemate. It's not so much that the healer has a "gift of healing," but that each healing is a divine gift. An act of God's gracious merciful kindness.

It's possible that some Christians are healers, viz. God heals more often through some Christians than others. But it's not a resident ability which the healer can switch on and off at will. It's just that God chooses some Christians to sometimes act in that capacity.



## The prayer of faith will save the sick

*13 Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. 14 Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. 17 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18 Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit ([Jas 5:13-18](#)).*

How does this passage fit into the cessationist paradigm?

i) One strategy would be to say it represents miraculous healing, and, as such, this promise was confined to the apostolic age. We've retired this passage from our practical canon of Scripture.

Remember, cessationists distinguish between miraculous healers and miraculous healing. They deny the ongoing existence for the former, but allow for the ongoing

occurrence of the latter. Yet this passage clearly involves human intermediaries. So is it past or present?

**ii)** Another strategy is to say this represents non-miraculous healing. Ordinary providence, or maybe a "remarkable" providence.

In order for it to be miraculous, the elders would have to exercise the "gift of healing" ([1 Cor 12:9](#)). We know that elders lack the gift of healing since not every one they minister to is healed. If they had the gift of healing, this exercise would be uniformly successful.

What are we to make of that explanation?

**iii)** If it's non-miraculous, then is it a homeopathic remedy? Is it just a cheap alternative to modern medicine? Would the patient have the same results if he went to the doctor? Took a pill? Had a shot?

That explanation makes cessationism indistinguishable from a naturalistic, rationalistic interpretation.

**iv)** What about contemporary Christians who turn to [Jas 5:14-15](#) because modern medicine has failed them? This is their last resort. They have terminal cancer, or some incurable chronic or degenerative illness. A debilitating or life-threatening condition which medical science is unable to cure.

If [Jas 5:14-15](#) represents nonmiraculous healing, then there's no point in medically hopeless patients resorting to this promise. Is that the position cessationists take?

**v)** Did James expect the prayer of faith to be a fail-safe? Or does v15 presume an implied proviso, which is made explicit in [Jas 4:15](#)?

**vi)** Is the "prayer of faith" in [Jas 5:15](#) categorically different from the "gift of healing" in [1 Cor 12:9](#)? Paul prefaces the

gift of healing with the gift of faith (v8). The gift of faith evidently refers to a wonderworking faith. The "mountain-moving" faith of 13:2.

In other words, faith that works miracles. A miracle-effecting faith, of which miraculous healing is a special case. The gift of healing and the gift of faith go together, where the latter depends on the former.

But isn't that precisely what [Jas 5:15](#) has in view? The prayer of faith effects the cure. The prayer of faith heals the sick. The same linkage we find in [1 Cor 12:8-9](#).

**vii)** Does the gift of faith ensure healing? Paul was a healer ([Acts 14:8-10](#); [19:11-12](#); [28:7-9](#)), yet he didn't heal Trophimus ([2 Tim 4:20](#)). Did he leave Trophimus uncured because he was able, but unwilling to heal Trophimus, or willing but unable to heal Trophimus? It's hard to see why he'd refuse to heal a valued coworker if it lay within his power to do so. Likewise, why didn't Paul heal Timothy ([1 Tim 5:23](#))?

If, then, the gift of healing doesn't guarantee success, the fact that [Jas 5:14-15](#) isn't uniformly successful doesn't mean it's non-miraculous. Hence, (iv) & (vi) disprove (i).

**viii)** What about the parallel with Elijah (vv17-18)? James uses that to illustrate the prayer of faith. Elijah was a wonderworking prophet—second only to Moses. Although rain and drought are natural conditions, in the narrative, these are the natural effect of a supernatural cause. God answering his prayer. Isn't the reader supposed to view that as something miraculous? A nature miracle? Controlling the forces of nature? Nature acting at your bidding?

**ix)** Incidentally, in James, the prayer of faith refers to the faith of the elders, not the patient. If the patient remains ill, that doesn't represent a deficiency of faith on his part. He

exercises faith by calling in the reinforcements to add their faith to his.

## Reporting miracles

I'd like to spend a little more time on this example:

When people were healed, it was an undeniable, extraordinary work of the Spirit healing an individual (Acts 4:16). Something the "Amazing" Randi could not deny. Think Iraqi war veterans getting their limbs back completely whole or the late Christopher Reeves having his spinal cord injury reversed. When we MacArthurite cessationists ask for evidence of such occurrences, it is not because we deny God can heal. It is that the track record for such testimonies has been consistently tarnished with the exaggerations of eager enthusiasts or outright fabricated all together by flimflam artists. The reality is that none of those kind of miracles are happening, because if they were, everyone would certainly know about it, including the most militant critics of Christianity.

<https://hipandthigh.wordpress.com/2013/08/16/hunting-benny-hinn/>

i) For starters, Acts 4:16 refers back to this incident:

*Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. 2 And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate to ask alms of those entering the temple. 3 Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked to receive*

*alms. 4 And Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." 5 And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. 6 But Peter said, "I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" 7 And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. 8 And leaping up he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. 9 And all the people saw him walking and praising God, 10 and recognized him as the one who sat at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, asking for alms. And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.*

**ii)** I'm tempted to think Fred must be waxing hyperbolic when he says this is the kind of miracle that even Randi or the "most militant critics of Christianity" could not deny. Surely Fred isn't serious. If he is serious, then that just confirms my earlier contention that MacArthurites like Fred don't seem to have much experience with secular debunkers.

But perhaps Fred is serious. It may well be that his cessationism commits him to position.

**iii)** The cardinal rule of secular debunkers (e.g. Hume, Bart Ehrman, Richard Lewontin, Richard Carrier) is that any naturalistic explanation, however implausible, is more plausible than any miraculous explanation.

**iv)** It's child's play to imagine how secular debunkers would dismiss Fred's paradigm-case:

**a)** There's no scientific evidence that the man was really disabled, much less than he was miraculously healed. We'd need before-and-after medical records. What's more likely, that parents lie or that miracles happen?

**b)** Even if we had medical records, what's more likely: that doctors lie or that miracles happen? What's more likely: that a technician mislabeled the x-rays (putting the wrong patient's name on the x-rays), or that miracles happen?

**c)** This could clearly be a financial scam. He conspires with a couple of friends to fake his disability in order to collect alms, which he splits with his coconspirators. Easy money.

**d)** Secular debunkers think some cures are easier to fake than others. It's a lot easier to fake the healing of someone allegedly lame from birth than to fake the regeneration of limbs. So Fred's comparison backfires.

**v)** What of Fred's further claim that "none of those kind of miracles are happening, because if they were, everyone would certainly know about it, including the most militant critics of Christianity"? Well, has Fred really give that much thought? What about his test-case?

**a)** For staters, this was a public miracle. It happened in an urban setting. It happened near a national shrine,

frequented by locals and pilgrims.

But some biblical miracles occur in more private settings, like someone's home. Take Jesus reviving the daughter of Jairus, or Elisha reviving the Shunammite's child.

By the same token, in the past, as well as many Third-World countries, a greater percentage of people live in isolated rural areas rather than urban population centers. So you'd have fewer witnesses.

**b)** Even though Peter's miracle took place in a public setting, would this be widely known? This event occurred around the Temple precincts of Jerusalem in the early 30s of the 1C. You have however many spectators who happened to be there in the minute or so it happened. But who else would know about it?

Well, there's word-of-mouth. Not doubt the eyewitnesses told their friends and relatives. But Fred is very dismissive of second-hand testimony. As he said recently:

I too have read many accounts of modern miracles. I find them to be mostly hearsay and apocryphal.

<http://hipandthigh.wordpress.com/2013/07/28/why-wont-faith-healers-heal-amputees/>

But beyond the circle of the actual eyewitnesses, how else would others learn about it except by "hearsay"?

**c)** Even if the miracle became well-known in Jerusalem, was it well-known in the Roman Empire?

**d)** We know about this particular miracle because Luke recorded it, and Christian scribes copied and recopied the



NT down through the ages. But what about a miracle that doesn't enjoy that kind of official patronage?

Suppose miracles like that happen every so often in the course of church history. Surely some or most of those would occur among illiterate spectators.

Of the fraction that occur among literate spectators, what fraction of a fraction would be written down (e.g. diaries, private letters)?

Of the fraction that are written down, what fraction of a fraction of written reports would survive the ravages of time?

Of the fraction that survive, what fraction of a fraction are published and/or translated?

## Raising the dead

One popular cessationist argument is that modern "faith-healers" don't perform the kinds of miracles we see in the NT. If they really had the gift of healing, they could raise the dead. We'd expect them to do so on a regular basis. And they'd become famous for raising the dead.

Now, it may well be the case that many or most faith-healers are frauds. But this objection cuts both ways.

Problem with this argument is that it undercuts apostolic miracles. In the NT, there's only one clear-cut example of an apostle raising the dead (the case of Peter raising Dorcus). Paul reviving Euthychus might be another instance, although that's more ambiguous.

There's no record of most of the apostles raising the dead. And even in the case of Peter, he only did that once.

Now, a cessationist might counter that the NT record is selective. But in this context, that's a problematic defense. For one thing, we'd expect a selective account to selectively include the most impressive miracles. If you're going to be selective, that's what you select for.

Moreover, if we postulate that all the apostles regularly raised the dead, even though that went unreported, a continuationist could invoke the same defense where church history is silent. You could do it, but not be famous for it.

Perhaps a cessationist would contend that the apostles were able, but unwilling, to raise the dead on a regular basis. But is that plausible?

To begin with, if the apostles could raise the dead at will, there'd be a tremendous demand for that service. Why would they be willing heal the sick, but be unwilling to raise the dead?

Indeed, the death of Christians precipitated a theological crisis (1 Thes 4:13ff.; cf. 1 Cor 15:6). That could be solved by raising the dead.

If, moreover, few decedents were revived because the apostles were able, but unwilling, to restore them to life, then a faith-healer could resort to the same excuse.

## Apostolic miracles

*12 "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. 13 Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it ([Jn 14:12-14](#)).*

**i)** Here are some elements of the cessationist argument:

**a)** They typically take Paul's discussion (1 Cor 12) of the spiritual gifts as their framework. Individuals who have a gift of healing, gift of xenoglossy, gift of prophecy. What ceases in cessationism is miraculously gifted individuals.

**b)** They typically argue that if someone has a miraculous gift, then he can exercise that gift at his own discretion. Once God endows an individual with a miraculous gift, it operates autonomously. God has delegated that ability to the gifted individual. For instance, a healer is able to heal whoever he is willing to heal. (From what I've read, that's the position of Fred Butler and Sam Waldron.)

**c)** They regard these gifts as essentially apostolic miracles. Their primary function is to authenticate the divine mission of the apostles. Hence, they cease with the apostles or their immediate disciples. That's the cut-off. It may be transmitted from an apostle to his disciple, but it's not transmitted from disciple to disciple.

**d)** Some cessationists deny that answered prayer, however extraordinary, is ever miraculous. At most, an extraordinary answer to prayer is merely providential. (For instance, I've read things to indicate that's the position of Phil Johnson and Mike Riccardi.)

Other cessationists might concede that answered prayer is sometimes miraculous, but it's not a "gift" of working miracles. (For

instance, I've read things to indicate that's the position of Lyndon Unger and possibly John MacArthur.)

ii) Cessationists of my acquaintance (e.g. Sam Waldron, Fred Butler, Matt Waymeyer) restrict the promise of [Jn 14:12-14](#) to the Apostolate. Let's grant that narrow referent for the sake of argument.

iii) In v12, "greater works" denote miracles. That's admitted by cessationists. For instance:

Jesus was referring to miraculous works in [John 14:12](#) when He spoke of "the works that I do." This is clear not only from the immediate context of John 14 (see verses 10-11) but also from the greater context of John's Gospel in which the miraculous works of Jesus gave evidence of His identity (see 5:36; 10:25; 20:30-31). And what miraculous works was Jesus referring to? He doesn't name them, but the Gospel of John—which records only a fraction of the signs and wonders Jesus performed (21:25)—provides several examples:

- Jesus changed water into wine (2:1-11).
- Jesus healed a boy who was about to die (4:46-54).
- Jesus healed a man who had been crippled and unable to walk for 38 years (5:1-9).
- Jesus fed 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish (6:1-14).
- Jesus walked on water (6:16-21).
- Jesus healed a man born blind (9:1-41).
- Jesus resurrected a man who had been dead for four days (11:1-45).

<http://thecripplegate.com/michael-brown-authentic-fire-john-1412/>

iv) But notice the relationship between v12 and vv13-14. Even though, according to cessationism, these are apostolic miracles, this

does not involve an autonomous ability to work miracles. Rather, these are miraculous answers to prayer. Performing these miracles is conditioned on asking God to make it happen. It's not a blank check, where an apostle can simply fill in the desired amount, then cash it. Rather, it happens at God's discretion, not the apostle's. They can't just perform a miracle at will. Rather, God must will the miracle by honoring their prayer.

[Jn 14:12-14](#) is not about spiritual gift to work miracles, but a promise regarding God's willingness to perform a miracle upon request.

That's a very different paradigm than the standard cessationist paradigm. Yet this is the programmatic statement of how the apostles perform miracles (assuming we restrict the promise to the Apostolate).

v) By implication, this means that if miraculous answers to prayer occur in postapostolic times, that's a continuation of the promise in [Jn 14:12-14](#). It doesn't terminate with the apostolic age. It's not confined to the Apostolate.

It's arbitrary to cast the cessationist/noncessationist debate exclusively in terms of the continuation or noncontinuation of "gifts" or gifted individuals. That's not the only operative framework in the NT. That overlooks [Jn 14:12-14](#).

vi) Interpreters struggle with the unqualified language of vv13-14. Is that really meant to be unexceptional? Is that a command performance? Does God do miracles on demand?

Since this passage occurs in the Johannine corpus, there's probably an unstated caveat that's made explicit in [1 Jn 5:14](#): And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.

## Do you believe in miracles?

What should we believe about modern miracles?

**i)** Let's begin with Biblical miracles, which—in turn—implicates our position on Biblical authority. There are different positions you can take on that:

**ii)** If you believe in the presuppositional authority of Scripture, then you will have greater confidence (indeed, unconditional confidence) in Biblical miracles than you do in modern miracles, however well attested. According to the presuppositional authority of Scripture, the Bible is our ultimate standard of knowledge.

The presuppositional authority of Scripture concerns religious epistemology. An a priori argument.

**iii)** Likewise, if you ground your confidence in the witness of the Spirit, that warrants a greater level of assurance than mere historical evidence. To take a classic statement: "Our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts" (WCF 1.5). This is the Puritan position (e.g. John Owen; WCF).

It concerns religious experience. An a posteriori argument.

The presuppositional position and the Puritan position are not mutually exclusive. You can accept both. Indeed, it's advisable to accept both.

**iv)** Because the Westminster Confession is a consensus document, it reflects certain internal tensions. As an essentially Puritan document, it appeals to the witness of the Spirit (see above). And there it carries that over from Calvin.

However, it also has a classic cessationist statement (1.1,6,10). That stands in tension with the continuationist experience of the John Knox and the Covenanters. It also stands in tension with the appeal to the infallible witness of the Spirit.

The classic argument for cessationism denies the presuppositional authority of Scripture. Cessationism typically appeals to the argument from miracles. Before you're entitled to believe a prophetic claimant, he must evidence his divine mission through miracles. On that view, the authority of Scripture is contingent on miracles, which are—in turn—contingent on testimonial evidence.

That's an evidentialist argument. That places Biblical testimony and extrabiblical testimony on an evidentiary par. That places Biblical miracles and extrabiblical miracles on an evidentiary par.

In my observation, many contemporary cessationists fail to think through their position on this issue. They mash together Puritan, presuppositional, and evidentialist arguments. They need to work out a consistent position.

**v)** It's also useful to draw some further distinctions. There are degrees of belief or receptivity with respect to modern miracles.

**a)** I believe it happened.

**b)** I believe something *like* that happened.

**c)** I'm *inclined* to believe it happened.

**d)** I'm *prepared* to believe it happened.

When we sift through reports of modern miracles, it's useful to keep these distinctions in mind.



## Compartmentalized Christians

Secular scientists, as well as many professedly Christian scientists, espouse the uniformity of nature. They regard that as a prerequisite to science. The uniformity of nature makes nature predictable. Not only does that make it easier to extrapolate from the present to the future, but to extrapolate from the present to the past—which is important in the historical sciences. In addition, it makes it easier to interpolate. In the historical sciences, there are often gaps in the surviving evidence. If, however, nature is uniform, if the same kinds of events occur, then it's easier to postulate what happened in the absence of direct, extant evidence. Because nature is continuous, change is incremental.

As a result, many professedly Christian scientists are scientific deists. They believe God's contribution is to put the initial conditions in place, then conserve the status quo. Everything occurs with law-like regularity.

As a further result, many professedly Christian scientists have a very compartmentalized belief system. Take Ard Louis, who's a Reader in Theoretical Physics and a Royal Society University Research Fellow at the University of Oxford. He's also a contributor to BioLogos.

What's ironic about Louis is that he's a charismatic theistic evolutionist. A charismatic who subscribes to methodological naturalism. To illustrate:

"I remember one girl who had a very severe back injury. She was in traction and about to be airlifted back home to the United States. Before she left, one of my friends prayed for her to be healed. She instantly jumped up and started running around. Though I found

this incredible, I did recognize that this girl's experience of prayer and healing matched exactly what I had read in the Bible."

On another occasion Louis was sick with the early stages of malaria. He called two of his friends to pray for him and within moments felt completely recovered. "I was sincerely shocked." Thinking that he might be imagining the change, he went to a dorm wall where he had often jumped to see how high he could touch. Now, he jumped and touched higher than he had ever done before.

"In my work, we have a very peculiar way of looking at the world, a very powerful way we call methodological naturalism. As a Christian I can make a good argument for it. It would be odd if there were miracles in my lab or in my calculations. What I am studying are the regular ways God sustains the world. If there is a God who is faithful, then I expect his rules to be trustworthy and regular, and if God is intelligent I might even need to understand his rules.

"I think Western cessationism comes from people acting like that all day long, and they think that's the way it is. But I don't think that's the way it is. If you read the Bible, that's not the way it was. It's particularly important for me as a scientist to be involved in something like praying for the sick because that does act on a different plane."

Louis believes that pentecostal and charismatic Christians have a particular contribution to make to the discussion of evolution.

T. Stafford, ed. **THE ADAM QUEST** (T. Nelson 2013), chap. 9.

Louis is oddly oblivious to the glaring ironies of his position. He's a cessationist in the lab, but a charismatic in church.

What kind of world do we live in if God sometimes heals a terminal cancer patient in answer to prayer? That introduces an element of discontinuity into natural processes. That makes nature less linear. Less predictable.

The outcome is no longer like a machine that always does just what it's programmed to do. For God can and sometimes does override the default setting. And that, in turn, introduces more uncertainty into historical sciences like astronomy and paleontology.

How does Louis combine methodological naturalism, medical science, and miraculous healing? Something has to give. If God is rule-bound, then God can't intervene to miraculously heal a patient. That would interrupt the usual chain of cause and effect.

## Spotting charlatans

When dealing with reputed healers and other reported miracles, how should we weed out the charlatans? I'm going to briefly discuss some criteria:

**i)** Let's begin by distinguishing ad hoc criteria from objective criteria. Here are some ad hoc criteria for assessing miraculous healings: complete, immediate, permanent, undeniable.

**ii)** The Bible has some classic criteria for distinguishing true prophets from false prophets (Deut 13:1-5; 18:15-21). This has some bearing on modern claims or claimants. Is the reported miracle in character with God's revealed nature? Is it a purposeful miracle or a stunt? Is it consistent with God's wisdom? Is the reported miracle consistent with prior revelation?

**iii)** Does the report meet minimal standards of prior plausibility? Does it conflict with our understanding of how the world works? Of what's possible or implausible?

Obviously, our plausibility structure is indexed to our worldview. What's credible for a Christian may be incredible for an atheist.

**iv)** Is the claim consistent with other known facts at the time and place of the alleged event?

**v)** What's the source of information? Firsthand? Secondhand? Is there a reliable chain of testimonial custody?

**vi)** Is this a memorable event? Is it the kind of event that observers normally remember?

**vii)** Does the witness have an incentive to be truthful or untruthful?

**viii)** Is the witness forthcoming or evasive?

**ix)** Does the witness belong to small community and/or honor/shame culture where his livelihood depends on his reputation for honesty?

**x)** Does the report enjoy multiple attestation? Is there medical verification? Is there a reasonable expectation that medical records would be available?

Is it the kind of ailment that requires medical verification to confirm the diagnosis and cure, or is the ailment of a clearly public nature?

Corroboration is useful, but not always necessary. We justifiably believe many things on the testimony of a trusted informant.

**xi)** Finally, here's a useful analysis:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2008/02/sifting-testimonial-evidence.html>

## Naturalizing miracles

Mike Riccardi

Even if we say that it was a miracle, though, that doesn't at all concede the continuation of miracle-workers. Similarly, if someone gets healed as an answer to prayer, neither does that mean that the gift of healing has continued. That part of my comment got left out of your citation: "MacArthur certainly believes that God can and does heal today. He simply believes that the gift of healing is not given today. So God heals, but not through healers."

**i)** One problem is that MacArthurites oscillate between divergent criteria. On the one hand, they frame the issue in terms of the continuation or discontinuation of certain "gifts." On the other hand, they frame the issue in terms of the continuation of direct miracles but discontinuation of indirect miracles. But those are not equivalent propositions. For instance, Phil Johnson says There are two kinds of miracles noted in Scripture. 1. Some are remarkable works of God apart from any human agency, where God unilaterally intervened or where miraculous events happened apart from any human agency. 2. The other kind of miracle involves a human agent, who from the human perspective is the instrument through which the miracle comes.

However, God using a human agent as an instrument through the miracle comes is not equivalent to a "gift" for working miracles. What if God empowers someone to heal someone else just once? That involves human agency. But if

that's a one-time event, is that a gift of healing? Why must human agency involve a gift of healing?

ii) Another problem is the ad hoc, hairsplitting distinction, where you say answered prayer is never miraculous. But what is your justification for that false dichotomy?

By collapsing all answered prayers into providential rather than miraculous answers, you're unable to distinguish between three qualitatively different kinds of answered prayers. Let's take some examples:

**a)** A teenager is hours late arriving home. His Christian parents are very worried. They pray that nothing bad has happened to him. They pray that God will return him safely home. Turns out his car broke down on a deserted road. So there's nothing miraculous about his belated homecoming.

Of course, the parents are still thankful to have him back safe and sound. And it's possible that their prayers had a counterfactual effect. Absent their prayers, perhaps he would have been murdered by a serial killer.

**b)** A woman has advanced macular degeneration. Her ophthalmologist tells her that her condition is medically incurable. She will soon go blind.

She has the prayer chain at her church intercede for her. Next week she returns to the ophthalmologist. Her eyesight has been restored. Her ophthalmologist has no explanation. Her recovery is scientifically inexplicable.

**c)** Although this is presented as a true story, it will suffice to treat it as a hypothetical illustration:

Early in my ministry I heard teaching on how to pray specifically while attending a seminar in Southern California. In a few weeks, I was to return to Colorado to start my ministry at the Colorado School of Mines in Golden with Ray Womack, a fellow Campus Crusade worker. Unknown to anyone, I wrote a prayer request in my prayer notebook and began to pray specifically that God would provide for me and Ray a white house with a white picket fence, a grassy front yard, within two or three miles from campus, for no more than \$130 per month. I told the Lord that this request was a reasonable one on the grounds that (a) we wanted a place that provided a home atmosphere for students, accessible from campus, that we could afford and (b) I was experimenting with specific prayer and wanted my faith to be strengthened. I returned to the Golden area and looked for three days at several places to live. I found nothing in Golden and, in fact, I only found one apartment for rent for \$135/month about twelve miles from campus. I told the manager I would take it and she informed me that a couple had looked at the place that morning, they had until that afternoon to make a decision, and if they did not want it, I could move in the next day. I called late that afternoon and was informed that the couple took the apartment, the last available one in the complex. I was literally back to ground zero. Now not a single person knew I had been praying for the white house. That evening, Kaylon Carr (a Crusade friend) called me to ask if I still needed a place to stay. When I say yes, she informed me that earlier that day, she had been to Denver Seminary. While there, she saw a bulletin board on which a pastor in Golden was advertising a place to rent, hopefully to seminary students or Christian workers. Kaylon gave me his phone number, so I called and set up an appointment to meet the pastor at his place at nine the



next morning. Well, as I drove up, I came to a white house with a white picket fence, a nice grassy front yard, right around two miles from Campus, and he asked for \$110 per month rent. Needless to say, I took it, and Ray and I had a home that year in which to minister. This answer to prayer, along with hundreds of others I and my Christian friends have seen, was an event that was (1) contingent and did not have to happen according to natural law; (2) very improbable; and (3) independently specifiable (a number of features of the event were specified in my prayer prior to and independent of the event itself taking place).

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/scriptorium/2007/04/how-to-detect-answers-to-prayer-the-discipline-of-journaling/>

Because a MacArthurite is precommitted to a cessationist explanation, he must arbitrarily consign each case to "providence." He can't allow himself to draw any qualitative distinction between these three very different types of answered prayer.

In my judgment, that kind of statement is light-years away from the kind of deistic/naturalistic rationalism that you seem to want to pin on cessationists.

**i)** When MacArthurites exhibit the same dismissive attitude towards testimony evidence for modern healers, miracle-workers, or "prophecies," then that replicates the reflexive disbelief of secular debunkers.

**ii)** When, moreover, MacArthurities always opt for a naturalistic explanation over a miraculous explanation in the

case of modern charismatic miracles, that replicates the presumptive naturalism of secular debunkers.

**iii)** Another problem is that you're taking God's existence for granted. However, the cessationist paradigm argues for God's existence from miracles. In the argument from miracles, God's existence is a conclusion rather than a given.

If, however, you explain away many "extraordinary" events as the result of natural processes or natural forces, and if you fail to distinguish between providence and coincidence miracles, then you reject a direct and primary evidence for God's existence.

Saying that the mysterious absence of cancer might simply be owing to an extraordinary working of God's meticulous providence isn't a concession to naturalism.

You're using words ("extraordinary working of God's meticulous providence") without defining your terms or unpacking the key concepts. How do you define providence in contrast to a miracle? For instance, the Westminster Confession explicates the concept of providence by reference to second causes (WCF 5.2).

On that definition, to say that someone with stage-4 pancreatic cancer was providentially healed in answer to prayer means the cancer disappeared through second causes. It followed a natural chain of cause and effect. No skips or jumps. No outside intervention. There was no interruption in the causal continuum—in contrast to a miracle, which is discontinuous with the chain of second causes.

My question is, why should we believe that's how it happens? Do you know a natural mechanism by which stage-4 pancreatic cancer is reversible? Can you identify a continuous natural process by which that occurs? Can you describe the incremental steps by which a dying cancer patient undergoes sudden and complete remission?

(Perhaps some day medical science will discover a natural explanation for spontaneous remission. In that event, I'd reclassify this as a coincidence miracle.)

And, of course, I don't at all deny any of the miraculous works that God has done that are recorded for us in Scripture. Jesus' miraculous healings, the resurrection, even the divine inspiration of Scripture are all things we believe firmly. I hope you would acknowledge that that separates us from the rationalists and naturalists who would seek to explain away even the biblical miracles because they truly cannot abide supernaturalism. Even us "MacArthurite cessationists" are supernaturalists!

**i)** A basic problem is that MacArthurites define a miracle, not by reviewing biblical events, then classifying different types of biblical events, but by starting with the opposing position (continuationism), then coming up with an armchair definition which will exclude whatever continuationism maintains. It's a reactionary, makeshift definition. Take Phil Johnson's definition: In a Biblical sense "a miracle is an extraordinary work of God that involves His immediate and unmistakable intervention in the physical realm in a way that contravenes natural processes."

**ii)** Apropos (ii), given their reactionary, defensive definition, MacArthurites shorten the list of Biblical miracles. Do all of

Christ's miracles fit the definition? The draught of fish? Cursing the fig tree? Performing exorcisms? Dispelling fever? The coin in the fish's mouth? Curing internal bleeding? What about other Biblical miracles like the earthquake which freed Paul and Silas? What about natural disasters: the flood (Gen 7), destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19), plague of boils (Exod 9), plague of hail (Exod 9), and plague of locusts (Exod 10), or other divine judgments involving natural mechanisms: the fate of Korah and his cohorts (Num 16:31-33); God sends a deadly plague (e.g. Num 11:33; 14:37; 16:46-50; 25:8-9; 1 Sam 5:6ff.; 24:15).

## Matches in the dark

What is the meaning of life? That was all- a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years, the great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead, there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one.

– Virginia Woolf, **TO THE LIGHTHOUSE**

Some impressive testimonial evidence from Keener and Moreland:

<http://www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog/2013/11/j-p-morelands-story-about-god-healing-an-amputee/>

That said, I'd like to segue from this to make a different point:

**i)** Cases like this can be both encouraging and discouraging. It can be encouraging to have corroborative evidence of Biblical promises. Examples of God's active presence is the present as well as the past.

**ii)** But cases like this can also be discouraging. I imagine many Christians read accounts like this and say to themselves, "Why does God do that for some believers, but not others? Why did God do that for *him*, but not for *me*, or *my* loved one?" "Why did God answer my prayer at one point in life, but turns his back on me during the low point of my life, when I need him more than ever?"

A danger of charismatic theology, especially among its more enthusiastic proponents, is the failure to counterbalance credible reports of modern miracles with the recalcitrant mystery of providence.

As a rule, it's easier for us to explain why God *did* something than why he *didn't*. If he does something remarkable, we can usually think of plausible reasons for how that makes things better. But the seemingly haphazard character of God's miraculous intercession is more resistant to easy explanations. It's hard to discern a pattern to such intermittent miracles.

Like using a matchbook to light your way home in the dark, you must use them sparingly. There's just enough to keep you from getting lost, but not enough to keep you from stumbling.

## Modern xenoglossy

I'm going to quote a passage from a book by a noted missionary:

Now Motilones wanted to tell Yukos about Jesus. At that time they didn't understand that there were languages other than the Motilone language. They thought that the Yukos spoke just as they did. But the languages are totally different. I couldn't see how they would manage to communicate anything about Jesus.

But I wasn't going to try to restrain them. I suggested that they go to the lowland tribes, who hadn't heard about Jesus. A few days later they left. I prayed that it wouldn't be a shattering experience for them, that God would comfort them in any disappointment at being able to communicate.

They were gone for several weeks. When they got back I went to see Arabadoyca, curious about what had happened.

"How did it go?" I asked.

He was making arrows, and he looked up at me with his familiar crooked grin. "Wonderful," he said. "They had not known about Jesus before."

"And did they understand?"

"Oh, yes, we told them a great many things about Jesus."

"You spoke to them?"

Of course!" Arabadoyca was a little concerned about my surprise. "How would you have told them?"

"Oh...in the way way. But how do you know they understood?"

Again he looked perplexed. "Why, they told us that the did. They were very excited to hear the news, Bruchko."

"You mean you opened your mouth and spoke to the Yukos, and they understood you and talked to you, and you understood them?"

"Yes, of course."

The Yuko language is not a dialect of the Motilone language. It is a totally different language. You could never understand one from knowing the other. Yet I am sure that Arabadoyca and the others were not lying. Lying was almost unknown among the Motilones. And they had no reason to lie. There is also the fact that there now are Christians in the Yuko lowland where there were none before.

I can only conclude that God's Holy Spirit made the Motilones speak and understand Yuko. It was a miracle to me. But to the Motilones everything God does is a miracle.

Bruce Olson, **BRUCHKO** (Charisma House, updated ed., 1977), 140-42.

For more on the author's background:

<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevinwax/2006/12/28/bruchko-the-story-of-bruce-olson/>





## The healing debate

I listened to the White/Brown debate on healing. It's a ramshackle debate. Sometimes White and Brown debate each other, sometimes they debate the moderator, sometimes they field questions from audience.

In general, I thought Brown had the better of the argument, but there are some tensions in his position—which I will get to.

**i)** White appeared to come into the debate to dispute a position other than Brown's position. The majority position: it is always God's will to heal.

That lack of preparation was a weakness in the debate. Apparently, White hadn't studied Brown's position.

**ii)** In his opening statement, Brown said the gifts continue to eschaton (1 Cor 13).

The gifts are not reserved for the apostles, but for the common good. The list (1 Cor 12:28) separates the gift of healing from apostles. He later added that in the NT we see non-apostles performing miracles.

He denied healing on demand. Healing is not automatic. For in that very letter, Paul mentions sick churchgoers at the same time the gifts were flourishing.

**iii)** In his opening statement, and later on, White argued that over the course of NT church history, we seen the gifts petering out. He compared Acts 3, where some people are healed by Peter's shadow, with the Timothy's chronic illness, and the further fact that Paul didn't (couldn't?) heal

Trophimus. He also stressed Paul's incurable "thorn in the flesh."

White discerns a transitional phase even during NT times. He appealed to the Pastorals, where Paul is writing to the next generation, looking beyond the apostolic period. White noted that in the Pastors, provision is made for widows. But if the charismatic position is correct, why didn't God simply resurrect their late husbands?

White appealed to the evidential value of miraculous healing to divinely accredit the apostles.

White also said, throughout the debate, that God is free in the exercise of his gift of healing. We can't command the power of God.

**iv)** Brown countered that if Book of Acts is trying to show us that the gift of healing was on the wane, why, in last chapter, does it record Paul healing every sick person brought to him on Malta? That's hardly a decrease.

Brown mentioned the Timothy was gifted through the imposition of hands, as well as guided by prophetic words. So Brown sees the Pastorals as charismatic.

Brown appealed to categorical promises like Jn 14:12 and Jas 5:14-16.

He reminded White that there were sick churchgoers in Corinth. So we don't see the gift fading away. Rather, it was never automatic. You don't push a button and it happens.

And he reminded White that in 1 Cor 12:28, healing is not an apostolic gift.

Brown said resurrections are very rare even in the NT. That's the exception, not the rule.

In general, I think his pushback was strong. Not only did he counter White's argument, but he already anticipated some of White's objections in his opening statement. Because, apparently, White hadn't boned up on Brown's specific position in advance, White was recycling stock cessationist objections to continuationism which failed to anticipate or target Brown's actual position.

**v)** There are other tensions in White's argument.

**a)** White's appeal to divine freedom is at odds with his cessationism. For if cessationism is true, then that's a case of divine self-limitation rather than divine freedom. Although God is still free to heal directly, he is no longer free to heal by empowering a second party to heal the sick.

**b)** Likewise, the appeal to divine freedom is at odds with White's appeal to a pattern whereby healers or gifts of healing peter out during the course of NT history. For if God retains the freedom to heal or refrain from healing, then it's unpredictable. God is free to gift someone to be a healer at any time and place.

**vi)** But there were also tensions in Brown's position. He says we should build our position on revealed promises rather than experience. And he rejects the caveat that we should pray conditional prayers for healing ("If it be your will"). Rather, we should pray with expectant faith.

Problem is, Brown's prooftexts create an expectation. They are predictive. "Do this, and that will happen."

There's nothing wrong with judging by experience if they promise a particular experience.

Conversely, if, when we practice Jas 5, the patient isn't usually healed, then it's wishful thinking to pray for healing with expectant faith. That's a false expectation. And that invites disillusionment when our hopes are dashed.

So Brown has difficulty finessing his prooftexts with reality. That should cause him to reconsider his interpretation.

**vii)** The issue of whether God wills or sends illness cropped up throughout the debate. One question from the audience challenged White's appeal to Paul's thorn in the flesh. This came from Satan rather than God.

White countered that Satan's intentions can't be the ultimate explanation. Why would Satan do something to Paul to keep him from boasting. He wants to trip him up.

Behind Satan's agenda is God's ulterior agenda. God is using Satan. Satan is the unwitting instrument. Satan intends to do harm, but God intends to do good. Satan ends up doing God's will, in spite of Satan's malicious intent. God's beneficial intent overrides Satan's malicious intent. And that was in the cards all along.

**viii)** On a related note, Brown argued that if God wills sickness, then a prayer for healing runs counter to God's will.

That's one of the old uncomprehending objections to Calvinism.

**a)** To begin with, God wills sickness as a means to an end, not an end in itself. Not illness for the sake of illness, but

to facilitate some second-order good—either for ourselves or another.

**b)** We don't know ahead of time if God has willed to answer our prayer. Perhaps our illness has served its divinely-appointed purpose. God predestined our illness, but if he answers our prayer, that's a predestined answer to prayer. So there's no inconsistency here. Indeed, that's one way of discovering God's will.

## Same product, different label

Cessationists draw a hard and fast distinction between providence and miracle. There's some basis for that distinction. Providential and miraculous events are frequently distinct. So that's a valid distinction in principle. And it's often a valid distinction in practice.

There are, however, times when it breaks down. And there are times when that a priori distinction is imposed on events rather than derived from events. Let's take two scenarios:

1) A Christian is dying of terminal cancer. He has stage-4 liver cancer.

A "faith-healer," who has "the gift of healing," lays hands on him and prays over him. A week later, the cancer is gone.

Cessationists exclaim: "That's miraculous!"

2) A Christian is dying of terminal cancer. He has stage-4 liver cancer.

He calls for the elders of the church. They anoint him with oil in Jesus' name and pray over him in faith. A week later, the cancer is gone.

Cessationists exclaim: "That's *not* miraculous. That's providential. A *remarkable* providence!"

Same patient. Same cancer. Same result. But these are said to be categorically different. Providential—even *extraordinary*, but not a miracle.

What's that if not a rhetorical shell-game?



## What cessationism is not...or is it?

Compare these three statements:

But it [cessationism] does acknowledge that there was something unique and special about the age of miracles and miracle-workers that defined the ministries of Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, and Christ and His apostles. Moreover, it recognizes the seemingly obvious fact that those kinds of miracles (like parting the sea, **stopping the rain**, raising the dead, walking on water, or instantly healing the lame and the blind) are not occurring today.

[http://thecripplegate.com/what\\_cessationism\\_is\\_not/](http://thecripplegate.com/what_cessationism_is_not/)

Now: Does God answer prayers for relief from our migraines? When we pray for a dear saint suffering from severe cancer and that person goes into remission, can we confidently praise God for answering that prayer? Of course. Even when you take an aspirin to get rid of a headache, you should thank God for the relief. He is at work as truly and as personally in the cure we get from an aspirin as he was in the raising of Lazarus. One is a miracle; the other is an ordinary providence.

<http://thecripplegate.com/strange-fire-providence-is-remarkable-phil-johnson/>

*17 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18 Then he prayed again, and heaven*

*gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit* ([James 5:17-18](#)).

The first statement classifies the stoppage of rain as a miracle. Indeed, the *kind* of miracle that's not occurring today.

The second statement denies that answered prayer is miraculous.

Yet James attributes the stoppage of rain to answered prayer.

## Putting God in a box

I'm going to quote and comment on some statements by Phil Johnson from these three sources:

[http://www.biblebb.com/files/combating\\_charismatic\\_theology.htm](http://www.biblebb.com/files/combating_charismatic_theology.htm)

<http://phillipjohnson.blogspot.com/2006/01/youre-probably-cessationist-too.html>

<http://thecripplegate.com/strange-fire-providence-is-remarkable-phil-johnson/>

Let's begin with common ground:

Those claims, that God is routinely doing miracles and He is still revealing new truth, those claims constitute the whole gist of the Charismatic movement. But nothing in Scripture teaches us to expect or believe that miracles should be the normal experience of all Christians. That's not the case, even in the biblical record. That's because, the only way the typical charismatic can envision God as active and personal is if He is constantly displaying His presence in creation by miraculous means; through constant, direct, extra-biblical revelation; or with supernatural signs and wonders in the heavens.

Notice how Phil frames the alternative: God is *routinely* or *constantly* doing miracles; miracles should be the *normal* experience of *all* Christians.

To that extent, I agree with Phil. I think cessationists and charismatics are both guilty of putting God in a box. They put God in two different boxes. Charismatics are cocksure of

what God *will* do while cessationists are cocksure of what God *won't* do. That's why I disagree with both positions.

Cessationism and charismaticism represent opposite extremes, opposite errors. The cessationist argument is easier to make by targeting the opposite extreme. Cessationists make things easy on themselves by ignoring any mediating positions.

Miracles are extremely rare—extraordinary. Miracles are not common, everyday experiences. And that is true by definition.

**i)** It's true by definition *if* you define it that way, but, of course, that's circular. That begs the question.

To say any alternative to cessationism is false by definition smacks of special pleading. At best, that shifts the debate back a step. It then becomes an argument about how we ought to define a miracle.

**ii)** Phil's framework presents a false antithesis:

Miracles are either

**a)** common, constant, routine, normal, everyday experiences

or

**b)** extremely rare

That positions miracles on either end of the spectrum. But why can't miracles range somewhere along the middle of the spectrum? "Extremely rare" is not a synonym for uncommon. If something doesn't happen every day, that doesn't make it extremely rare, or even rare.

**iii)** The reason Phil says miracles are "extremely rare" by "definition" is that cessationism needs miracles to be

extremely rare in order to tightly correlate miracles with revelation. Cessationism requires that definition. But to say that definition is a requirement of cessationism is only compelling on the prior assumption that cessationism is true—which is the very issue in dispute. (In fairness, the truth of continuationism is also in dispute. It cuts both ways.)

**iv)** *Are miracles "extremely rare"?* In Scripture, God is not the only supernatural agent. You also have angels and demons. Perhaps even ghosts (e.g. necromancy). They generally operate behind the scenes. Yet their invisible actions have real-world effects. That would usually be undetectable.

In fact, here's a proper definition: A miracle is an extraordinary work of God that transcends or contravenes the ordinary laws of nature.

**i)** That's certainly a popular definition. One problem with that definition is that before Phil is entitled to use that definition to defend cessationism, he needs to show that that's how NT writers understood the charismata. It's illicit for Phil to begin with an a priori definition of miracles, slap that onto the NT, then declare cessationism true by definition. He needs to demonstrate that NT writers shared his definition of a miracle.

**ii)** Another problem is that many Biblical events which are customarily classified as miraculous—indeed, paradigmatic miracles—would be disqualified by that narrow definition. For instance, in what sense do natural disasters like the flood (Gen 7), destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19), plague of boils (Exod 9), plague of hail (Exod 9), and plague of locusts (Exod 10) transcend or contravenes the ordinary laws of nature?

That's a problem when cessationists begin with an a priori definition of miracles, rather than beginning with Biblical

miracles, then deriving their definition from those examples. In fairness, Pentecostals often begin with their experience, then define Biblical terms according to their experience.

**iii)** How does Phil classify [Jas 5:14-16](#)? Is that natural or supernatural? If a sick Christian is healed by that means, is it miraculous? Or is it equivalent to homeopathic medicine?

Likewise, it is not technically a miracle when you pray for some need and get an unexpected check in the mail in exactly the right amount. And there are unusual providences as well. The Puritans used to refer to them as "remarkable providences"—startling coincidences; amazing and timely events that rescue people from destruction (or sometimes sweep them into disaster); natural phenomena that seem to have cosmic significance. These aren't miracles, and we need to be cautious about what kind of significance we read into them.

**i)** This claim suffers from the same problem. He's drawing a bright line between miracles and "remarkable providences" without first showing that NT writers draw the same line. But if he's going to use that definition, then he needs to take the preliminary step of demonstrating that Bible writers operated with that hard and fast distinction.

**ii)** In addition, his own claim is "technically" false, for there's more than one technical definition of miracles. In fact, one type of miracle is a coincidence miracle. For instance:

R.F. Holland (1965) has suggested that a religiously significant coincidence may qualify as a miracle. Suppose a child who is riding a toy motor-car gets stuck on the track at a train crossing. A train is approaching from around a curve, and the engineer who is driving it will not be able to see the child until it

is too late to stop. By coincidence, the engineer faints at just the right moment, releasing his hand on the control lever, which causes the train to stop automatically. The child, against all expectations, is saved, and his mother thanks God for his providence; she continues to insist that a miracle has occurred even after hearing the explanation of how the train came to stop when it did. Interestingly, when the mother attributes the stopping of the train to God she is not identifying God as its cause; the cause of the train's stopping is the engineer's fainting. Nor is she, in any obvious way, offering an explanation for the event—at least none that is intended to compete with the naturalistic explanation made possible by reference to the engineer's medical condition. What makes this event a miracle, if it is, is its significance, which is given at least in part by its being an apparent response to a human need.

Like a violation miracle, such a coincidence occurs contrary to our expectations, yet it does this without standing in opposition to our understanding of natural law. To conceive of such an event as a miracle does seem to satisfy the notion of a miracle as an event that elicits wonder, though the object of our wonder seems not so much to be how the train came to stop as the simple fact that it should stop when it did, when we had every reason to think it would not.

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/miracles/#H9>

On the face of it, a number of Biblical events which are customarily classified as miracles are better covered by this definition. Take the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. That's a natural disaster. It employs natural forces. What makes it miraculous is the specificity of the event in time

and place. It singles out that particular locality for divine judgment.

Same thing with the coin in the mouth of the fish ([Mt 17:27](#)). That's a miracle of timing.

These events reflect divine intentionality. Inanimate nature, operating mechanically, wouldn't be that discriminating. The opportune conjunction of highly improbable, causally independent events reflects a divinely orchestrated outcome. The miraculous element is covert rather than overt: the evidence of a guiding intelligence behind the scenes.

If miracles include coincidence miracles, then miracles are not necessarily rare, much less "extremely rare." Many answered prayers would be coincidence miracles.

**iii)** A further problem if you define or redefine providence so broadly as to include "remarkable providences"—startling coincidences, amazing and timely answers to prayer and other suchlike, then you've only scored a semantic victory. Your definition is so expansive that it fails to exclude modern charismatic phenomena. For Pentecostals could change the label, but retain the same phenomena.

But miracles almost totally disappear from the biblical record after Acts 20, when Paul restores Eutychus to life. The final eight chapters of Acts record no miracles, except for two incidents in Malta, where Paul casually shakes off a poisonous viper, and then he heals the father of Publius. For the rest of the New Testament (excluding the book of Revelation) no specific miracles are described...In fact, after the gospels and the book of Acts, no other New Testament writer gives miraculous phenomena any significant mention whatsoever.



I don't know if Phil is making a statement about the canonical order or the chronological order. Is he suggesting that even in NT times, miracles begin to dissipate?

In any case, his inference is fallacious. We expect the Gospels and Acts to record more miracles because these are historical narratives. The epistolary genre doesn't focus on recording historical events—whether natural or supernatural.

That's how liberals often pit the historicity of the Gospels against the epistles. Well, if the epistles are silent on something in the Gospels, that's suspect. But, of course, it's not.

In a Biblical sense “a miracle is an extraordinary work of God that involves His immediate and unmistakable intervention in the physical realm in a way that contravenes natural processes. “Let me make one more distinction: There are two kinds of miracles noted in Scripture.<sup>1</sup> Some are remarkable works of God apart from any human agency.<sup>2</sup> The other kind of miracle involves a human agent, who from the human perspective is the instrument through which the miracle comes.

There are several problems with that definition:

**i)** He has given two contradictory, back-to-back definitions of a miracle:

**a)** On the one hand he defines a miracle in terms of God's immediate intervention which contravenes natural processes.

**b)** On the other hand, he defines one of the two kinds of miracles in terms of instrumental human agency.

But these two definitions are mutually contradictory. If, by definition, a miracle involves God's immediate agency, which contravenes natural media, you can't turn around and say, by definition, a miracle may employ a human intermediary to facilitate the result.

**ii)** In addition, he sets up a false dichotomy between immediate divine agency and mediate human agency. For Biblical miracles sometimes employ physical agencies, viz. inanimate natural forces or processes. Personal agency, be it human or divine, is not the only miraculous category.

Nonetheless, every true evangelical holds to some form of cessationism. We all believe that the canon of Scripture is closed, right?

But notice this: if you acknowledge that the canon is closed and the gift of apostleship has ceased, you have already conceded the heart of the cessationist argument.

Unfortunately, that line of argument proves too much. Compare:

*I contend that we are both cessationists. I just believe in fewer miracles than you do. When you understand why you dismiss modern apostles, you will understand why I dismiss modern charismata.*

*I contend that we are both atheists. I just believe in one fewer kind of miracle than you do. When you understand why you dismiss modern charismata you will understand why I dismiss all miracles.*

## Postmortem on the Waldron/Brown debate

This is a sequel to my previous post on the Waldron/Brown debate.

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2013/11/brown-v-waldron.html>

I've gone back and taken notes on the debate.

**i)** A basic disagreement between the two men involves hermeneutics. Brown is suspicious of Waldron's methodology, which places greater emphasis on logical inference, as well as interpreting a passage of Scripture within a larger theological framework.

I think at least part of the difference is due to their different educational backgrounds. Waldron is a seminary educated scholar. And he's a systematic theology prof. So that's how he approaches Scripture. It's not how he approaches the charismatic issue in particular. He didn't devise this method to evade charismatic prooftexts. Rather, that's his general approach.

Ideally, the interpretation of Scripture is concentric. You start by interpreting a book of Scripture on its own terms. In some cases, books of Scripture are literary units. In that case, you'd begin with more than one book as your frame of reference. For instance, you should interpret Genesis in light of the Pentateuch as a whole, or Acts in light of Luke.

Moreover, NT books usually cite or allude to the OT, so you also interpret the NT writer in light of his engagement with the OT texts.

Furthermore, if a NT author has written more than one book, you use his entire corpus as a frame of reference. So that widens the interpretive circle.

Finally, systematic theology attempts a synthesis of Biblical teaching. This provides the largest frame of reference.

Now, that's circular. You interpret the parts in light of the whole and vice versa. But it's not necessarily a vicious circle. Ideally, you compare and contrast different ways of relating the part to the whole, and vice versa, until you arrive at a synthesis that integrates the most data.

On a related note, this means a systematic theologian deals with concepts and categories as well as individual passages. What's the function of miracles? What's the function of the Apostolate?

By contrast, Brown received a secular university education, with a focus on Near Eastern languages and literature. As a result, he has a narrowly textual focus.

That may be sufficient explanation for their different hermeneutical approaches, but it may also go deeper. Waldron is a Western Christian. There's a tradition of systematic theology in Western theology. The **SUMMA THEOLOGICA** of Aquinas is a seminal example. Other paradigm-cases involve Calvin's **INSTITUTES**, Turretin's **INSTITUTES**, John Gill's **BODY OF DOCTRINAL DIVINITY**, and so forth.

Especially since Aquinas, Western theology has had a fairly Aristotelian methodology, in the sense of classifying and categorizing, seeking unifying principles, defining terms,

drawing logical inferences, analyzing concepts, and correlating revealed truths in a larger set of logical relations.

Now, Jewish converts to Christianity are immediately confronted with a decision. What are their theological models? Do they begin with 2000 years of Gentile Christian theology as their frame of reference? Or do they look for something more Jewish? For instance, do they go back to the Talmud as their frame of reference?

As a Messianic Jewish apologist, Brown is to some extent a Talmudist. He has to be conversant with the Talmud to debate fellow Jews. So that may be another difference between Waldron and Brown. Each has a different standard of comparison.

Since I myself am a Western Gentile Christian, I don't find anything alien or suspect about Waldron's basic approach. Mind you, I can disagree with the specifics. But I don't have Brown's reaction.

**ii)** Brown accuses cessationists like Waldron of forbidding what Scripture commands and promises. Although this didn't come up in the debate, one potential problem with his accusation is that cessationists return the favor by accusing charismatics of disobeying Scriptural commands and promises. That's because cessationists don't think charismatics are in fact doing what Scripture commands or promises. They think charismatics have substituted something else. They think charismatics begin with their experience, then read that back into their prooftexts. And I think charismatics are often guilty of that.

**iii)** Brown says that when the NT commands or promises something, that creates a presumption of continuity. We

need explicit revocation to overcome that presumption.

Waldron doesn't deny a burden of proof. But he says preceptive duties only last as long as the situation which the duties presuppose. If God changes the underlying situation, then the corresponding duties change. If there are no prophets, there's no duty to prophesy.

His position is logical. Whether it's correct is a different issue. Since we're dealing with the new covenant, there's a general presumption that new covenant commands and promises will endure until the Parousia.

At the same time, there are some transitional elements in the NT, as it shifts from the old covenant to the new covenant. And some commands are culturebound. So there's no general answer. We have to examine the issues on a case-by-case basis.

**iv)** Brown contends that healing and deliverance are integral to the in-breaking of God's messianic kingdom, and that occurs whenever and wherever the gospel spreads into unreached parts of the world, which is Satan's domain. Waldron responds by contending that Satan's power was broken at the first advent of Christ.

That's a classic amil position. However, it's not clear to me how Waldron squares that with 1 Jn 5:19. Also, Acts illustrates the fact that the first advent of Christ didn't automatically put Satan on the run. He has to be chased away, as Christian missionaries push into pagan parts of the world.

**v)** Brown appeals to Jn 14:12 as a continuationist proof-text. He treats this as a universal promise because it employs a universal formula "whoever believes." He thinks that's

bolstered by the next two verses on prayer. Waldron restricts the passage to the apostles, based on 15:27, viz. any one of you apostles.

Both men have a point. It's clear from 15:27 that you can't apply Jn 14-16 in toto to Christians in general. However, the actual wording of Jn 14:12 supports Brown's interpretation. In addition, does the promise of the Spirit in Jn 14-16 only apply to the Apostolate? Doesn't this also pick up on Jn 3:5-8, 4:23-24, 6:63, and 7:37-39?

**vi)** Waldron defines a spiritual gift as the ongoing possession of a miraculous ability with repeated manifestations. However, he doesn't exegete that definition.

**vii)** He stipulates three marks of an apostle: (a) appointed by Christ, (b) a physical eyewitness, (c) having the miraculous sign-gifts.

(b) is ambiguous. Does he mean physical in the sense that an apostle saw Christ with his own eyes, or physical in the sense that he saw Christ in the flesh? Must it be an objective vision? Or would a subjective vision count? If Christ appeared to someone in a trance or vision, would that count? Or must it be external to the observer? Christ physically present?

(c) is problematic since we have no NT evidence that every apostle performed miracles. Conversely, the "sign gifts" weren't confined to apostles.

**viii)** Waldron says the apostolic/prophetic foundation in Eph 2:20 is historical and chronological. But he doesn't take time to defend that interpretation.

**ix)** Conversely, Brown appeals to Eph 4:11-16 as a continuationist proof-text, but he doesn't explain why. This raises the question of whether Brown believes in modern apostles. Brown says yes, in the lower-case rather than upper-case sense of an "apostle." There are no modern apostles in the sense of Acts 1:21-22. But are there any modern apostles who are directly commissioned by Christ? That question doesn't come up.

There are at least three problems with Brown's appeal to Eph 4 as a continuationist proof-text:

(a) His position commits him to the view that Paul is referring to lower-case rather than upper-case apostles in this passage. What reason is there to think that's what Paul had in mind?

(b) As one scholar, commenting on v11, points out,

The final clause of the verse (until we all arrive), should be attached not to the verb "he gave" in 4:11, but to the verbal idea contained in the closer noun "building up." Paul is not saying that Christ continues to give apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers to the church "until we all arrive," but that the work of building up the church continues "until we arrive," F. Thielman, **EPHESIANS** (Baker 2010), 280.

Of course, Brown might disagree. If so, he needs to defend his understanding of the syntax.

(c) He also needs to define what he means by a lower-case apostle. Does a lower-case apostle have all the gifts? Does he prophesy and heal and work miracles and speak in



tongues? Does Brown think there are living apostles in that sense?

**x)** Based on 1 Cor 15:8, Waldron contends that Paul is the last apostle. Brown denies that by distinguishing between upper-case and lower-case apostles. Indeed, Waldron draws the same distinction. So that's a stalemate.

**xi)** Brown says that, in any event, 1 Cor 15:8 doesn't mean that Paul was the last person Jesus ever appeared to.

**xii)** In reference to Jas 5:13-16, Brown says the prayer of faith means the elders expect God to answer their prayer for healing, whereas Waldron reserves that expectation for faith-healers, in contrast to the elders. Neither man takes time to defend his claim exegetically.

**xiii)** Brown says the gifts are indexed to the Spirit rather than the apostles. I think he's on firmer ground.

**xiv)** Waldron says that if prophecy continues, then we have an open canon. Brown denies that by saying that even in the OT and NT, not all prophecies are canonized or inscripturated. Waldron also admits that some prophecies may be local rather than universal.

**xv)** In addition, Brown says there's no competition between the gift of healing and the closing of the canon.

**xvi)** Waldron restricts Mt 28:18-20 to the apostles, even though he concedes that this necessarily extends beyond the lifetime of the apostles. But by parity of argument, Acts 2:17-18 would extend beyond the lifetime of the apostles.

**xvii)** Waldron restricts Acts 2:17-18 to the Apostolate. However, that passage is a programmatic statement which

we see illustrated in subsequent episodes in Acts, where it's not restricted to the Apostolate.

Conversely, Brown takes 2:17-18 to mean every Christian is potentially a prophet. That, in turn, affects his view of Deut 13 & 18. If every Christian is potentially a prophet, unlike OT Jews, then modern prophets (or prophetic claimants) don't have the same authority as OT prophets (or prophetic claimants), for it's no longer a relationship between prophets and non-prophets, but between fellow prophets. Christian prophets assessing the prophecies of other Christian prophets.

However, that's not how I take it. I think 2:17-18 means Christian dreamers and visionaries will be represented in each broadly defined sociological category.

Brown combines 1 Cor 14:29 with Acts 2:17-18. However, each passage must be understood on its own terms before we correlate them.

**xviii)** Waldron takes 1 Cor 13:8-12 to refer, not to continued *prophecies*, but the continued *product* of prophecy, i.e. the knowledge imparted by prophecy. It's not a distinction between partial/perfect gifts, but partial/perfect knowledge. But there are problems with that interpretation:

**a)** The passage doesn't refer to "gifts of prophecy," but "prophecies."

**b)** The passage doesn't distinguish between prophecies and the products of prophecies.

**c)** If we accept Waldron's interpolated distinction, that would mean prophetic knowledge ceases. But what does

that mean? We will forget what we used to know, via prophecies?

I think the point of 1 Cor 13:8-12 is that at the Parousia, we will no longer need prophecies, both because all prophecies are fulfilled at that point (or shortly thereafter), and because we will all be equivalent to Moses at that point.

**xix)** Brown takes issue with Waldron's appeal to Deut 13 & 18 because those are qualified by speaking "presumptuously in God's name" or speaking in the name of other gods (as well as making false predictions).

**xx)** Brown claims that no one in NT times had the concept of a NT. For a refutation, cf. Michael J. Kruger, **THE QUESTION OF CANON: CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO IN THE NEW TESTAMENT DEBATE** (IVP Academic, 2013).

**xxi)** Waldron asks Brown how he thinks the early church recognized the canonicity of the NT books. What criteria were employed.

However, this is ambiguous. Does he mean, descriptively speaking, what criteria did the early church actually employ, or does he mean, normatively speaking, what criteria should we employ? Likewise, is he asking a historical question regarding the actual historical process, or an axiological question regarding the proper criteria?

Since Protestants had to revisit this issue, Waldron is presumably concerned with the normative question rather than the historical question.

## Healers and healing

*11 And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, 12 so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them. 13 Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims." 14 Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. 15 But the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?" 16 And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded ([Acts 19:11-16](#)).*

**i)** One of the issues in the cessationist/charismatic debate is whether the "gift of healing" is something a healer can exercise at will. Has God delegated that ability to the healer, to exercise at the healer's personal discretion.

**ii)** In his passage, Paul's healing ability is strictly instrumental. God heals *through* him.

This is evident from the fact that even Paul's bandanas had a healing effect. Paul doesn't intend to heal anyone in particular, or anyone generally, through his bandanas. He may not even be aware of how some people were using them. And how they use them, once they leave his possession, is clearly beyond his control. Healing at a distance, without his cognizance, approval, or disapproval. Paul is not even the proximate source of power.

Just as Paul's healing ability is purely instrumental, the efficacy of the bandanas is purely emblematic. They are tokens, in whose association God healed the sick.

**iii)** If all we had were vv11-12, that might create the impression that healing power is stored in relics, like Paul's bandanas. As if you can siphon off the healer's power, and contain it in a "battery," for future use. That reduces divine healing to magic amulets.

However, the subsequent story, which—not coincidentally, comes right on the heels of this incident—quashes that inference. The Jewish exorcists mistakenly thought the name of Jesus possessed talismanic power. They found out the hard way that the power lies, not in physical media, but personal agents. It's not an inanimate energy force which you can manipulate.

**iv)** Finally, this passage is sometimes compared to [Acts 5:15-16](#). However, that passage doesn't say Peter's shadow had any healing effect. Rather, some sick people were hoping or expecting his shadow to have healing efficacy.

## Charismatic miracles

This is a sequel to my previous post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2013/10/denying-undeniable.html>

Since, by definition, cessationists reject modern charismata, I will use "charismatic miracle" as a convenient designation to refer to the type of modern miracle which MacArthurite cessationists deny.

The challenge facing the MacArthurite cessationist is to define miracles in such a way as to include any and all biblical miracles while excluding any and all postbiblical charismatic miracles.

From what I've read, Fred Butler offers two criteria for miracles:

***i) Public***

***ii) Naturally inexplicable***

By implication, his criteria yield a fourfold classification scheme of events:

***i) Public and naturally inexplicable***

***ii) Public and naturally explicable***

***iii) Private and naturally inexplicable***

***iv) Private and naturally explicable***

On the face of it, the public criterion and the natural inexplicability criteria are different types of criteria. The public criterion is an epistemological criterion. An event (miraculous?) must be public to warrant our belief in the event.

The natural explicability criterion is a metaphysical criterion: an event must defy natural explanation to be miraculous.

Presumably, Fred doesn't think the public nature of an event is a sufficient condition of a miracle. After all, most public events aren't miraculous.

To take a comparison, both the Sermon on the Mount and the multiplication of fish are public events, but I assume Fred only regards the latter as a miraculous event.

When I say "naturally inexplicable," I'm not defining that category on my own terms, but in terms of how Fred seems to define that category, given his examples (e.g. Mt 8:23-27; 12:9ff; 14:23-33; Mk 2; Mk 8:22ff; Jn 2; 6; 11; Acts 4:16).

Evidently, Fred is using some biblical miracles as his standard of comparison to evaluate reported modern miracles. However, Fred only uses some biblical miracles as his standard of comparison. That generates a dilemma:

**i)** If he's saying only events which satisfy both criteria (public, naturally inexplicable) count as miracles, then his criteria exclude many biblical miracles.

**ii)** But perhaps his intention is to select certain biblical miracles as paradigm-cases of the miraculous, then use that as his frame of reference for judging reported modern

miracles, without prejudice to all the other biblical miracles which don't measure up to his twofold criteria.

If, however, that's his unstated principle, then that's too loose to exclude modern miracles which don't meet one or both criteria.

Finally, let's apply his criteria to some Biblical examples:

**1)** The burning bush (Exod 3:3) is naturally inexplicable, but essentially private. Moses was the only human witness.

**2)** The metamorphosis of a staff into a snake and vice versa (Exod 4:2-4) is naturally inexplicable, but private. Moses was the only human witness.

**3)** The special creation of Adam and Eve (Gen 2:7,21-22) is naturally inexplicable, but private. There were no human witnesses to either event.

**4)** Jonah's survival inside the fish (Jonah 3) is naturally inexplicable, but private. He's the only witness.

**5)** Balaam's talking donkey (Num 22) is naturally inexplicable, but private. He's the only human witness.

**6)** Conversely, natural disasters like the flood (Gen 7), destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19), plague of boils (Exod 9), plague of hail (Exod 9), and plague of locusts (Exod 10) are public events, but not naturally inexplicable, inasmuch as these employ natural mechanisms.

**7)** The she-bears attacking the hecklers (2 Kgs 2:24) is public, but naturally explicable. These aren't supernatural bears.



**8)** The multiplication of food and oil, as well as revivification of the widow's son (1 Kgs 17; par. 2 Kgs 4), are private, but naturally inexplicable

**9)** Elijah's answered prayers for drought and rain (1 Kgs 17-18) are both private and naturally explicable. He's the only witness. Both rain and drought are natural meteorological phenomena.

**10)** The exorcisms of Christ are public, but naturally explicable (i.e. psychosomatic).

I could give other examples. Remember where Fred set the bar: something that even James Randi couldn't deny.

Question is: could Randi either deny that these events ever happened, or assuming their occurrence was undeniable, deny that they were naturally inexplicable?

My concern is that, in their zeal to debunk charismatic miracles, MacArthurite cessationists are implicitly (albeit unintentionally) attacking the integrity and credibility of biblical miracles.

## Denying the undeniable

One tactic which MacArthurite cessationists use to discredit modern miracles is to claim that, unlike Biblical miracles, modern miracles are deniable. Now there are different ways in which a miracle might be deniable. Here are two:

**i)** The occurrence of the event is deniable. You can cast reasonable doubt on whether it actually happened.

**ii)** The occurrence of the event is undeniable, but the nature of the event is deniable. You can deny the miraculous character of the event.

For instance, Fred Butler says:

The miracle wasn't confined to a small number of witnesses, or a small congregation of people. They were done publicly, in full view of a great multitude of believers and unbelievers alike, and they were so extraordinary they were undeniable. Think Iraqi war veterans getting their limbs back completely whole or the late Christopher Reeves having his spinal cord injury reversed. Continuationists are arguing that real signs and wonders recorded in the NT documents still exist today among God's people. Specifically that means the miraculous healing of people with severe physical health problems and handicaps. Considering the NT documents, it would be individuals with spinal cord injuries and paralysis (Mark 2), those with crippling deformities (Matthew 12:9ff.), those with incurable blindness (Mark 8:22ff), and those who had even died being raised to life again (John 11).

Fred isn't including all Biblical miracles. Rather, he's whittling them down to a subset of Biblical miracles.

Some are undeniable in the sense of (i), because they are public miracles.

Some are undeniable in the sense of (ii), because they defy a natural explanation, viz., regenerating dismembered limbs, restoring sight to the congenitally blind.

But that's a theologically dangerous strategy, for by Fred's criterion, this means many or most Biblical miracles don't rise to the level of undeniable miracles. Some Biblical miracles are private rather than public events.

More importantly, some Biblical miracles aren't really miraculous so long as a natural explanation is possible or available. So Fred naturalizes modern miracles by a tactic that implicitly naturalizes many or most Biblical miracles.

That places many Biblical miracles on a par with reported postbiblical miracles, by making both deniable, in the sense of (ii).

However, Fred also deploys the opposite argument.

They were done publicly, in full view of a great multitude of believers and unbelievers alike, and they were so extraordinary they were undeniable. Even the Pharisees recognized they were the real deal and the only explanation they had was the Devil did them. Other passages of Scripture imply that miraculous activity can be produced by our demonic enemy designed specifically to lead people into theological error. That is why I am loathe to embrace the examples of Keener as being genuine works of

God. There may be something supernatural happening, yet the vast majority are no where near the level of quality recorded for us in Scripture, and certainly not from God at all if they are tied to false religions.

That tactic presupposes that reported modern miracles are so undeniable that it's necessary to attribute their origin to the dark side. And that, too, places postbiblical miracles on a par with biblical miracles.

Are modern miracles deniable or undeniable? Fred says both.

MacArthurite cessationists wish to privilege Biblical miracles, but their hostility to continuationism is so intense that their position threatens to debunk Biblical miracles in the process of debunking postbiblical miracles.

## Is this charismatic?

Cessationists frequently begin with definitions. They then stretch or shrink the data to fit their a priori definitions. Now I don't necessarily object to starting with definitions—although in my experience, cessationists don't really begin with Scripture or get their definitions from Scripture.

That said, it can also be good to start at the other end of the process. Begin with credible reports, then decide the best way to classify the phenomena. I'm going to quote some examples of what I consider some credible reports. I think they have prima facie credulity because the sources are credible. By that I mean, they come from credible witnesses, scholarly sources, or sometimes both.

The reader can decide how he thinks they should be classified. Are they miraculous? Prophetic? Charismatic? If you think they're consistent with cessationism, that's fine. If cessationism can accommodate this kind of phenomena, then cessationism and continuationism bleed into each other.

You can also reject all these reports. If so, you need to explain how your criteria ultimately differ from godless debunkers.

Only once do I remember hearing him [William Nobes] speak and that was truly an occasion to be remembered. It was at the Fellowship Meeting...[when] he told us the story of his conversion.

He said little about his early days...And then, with his youth behind him, when he was well on to middle age, he had a dream. The horror of that dream was real to

him yet, and he managed, in the hush of that meeting, to involve us, too, in the horror of it. In his dream he was hanging over a flaming inferno, helpless and frantic. Above him and almost obstructing the opening of the pit was an enormous ball, like a great globe, and he found himself trying to climb up the roundness of this ball to get away from the heat of the flames below, and out into the clean, cool air above. Sometimes he would make two or three feet, sometimes more, at times only two or three inches.

Once he thought he had really got over the widest part of the ball, but in spite of all his efforts and his mounting fear and agony, the result was always the same—he would fail to keep his hold, fail to make another inch, fail to keep what ground he had gained, and in helpless weakness slide and slither back along that fearsome slope, to find himself back where he had started.

This seemed to go on for an eternity, and then at last, all hope gone, and hanging over the open jaws of hell, he looked up once more at the light above him and uttered one great despairing cry and there was a face in that light looking down at him, full of love and pity, and a hand reached down and grasped his, and drew him up out of all the horror below him and stood him on the firm sweet earth and in the pure clear air...From then on he walked before the Lord in love and thankfulness.

Bethan Lloyd-Jones, **MEMORIES OF SANDFIELDS** (Banner of Trust 1983), 61-63.

A gentlewoman [i.e. Cotton Mather's late wife] whom I may do very well to keep alive in my memory, fell into grievous languishments wherein a pain of her breast and an excessive salivation were two circumstances that were become as insupportable unto her as they were incurable. She apprehended (in her sleep, no doubt) that a grave person appearing to her directed her, for the former symptom, to cut the warm wool from a living sheep and apply it warm unto the grieved part; for the latter symptom, to take a tankard of spring water, and therein over the fire dissolve an agreeable quantity of mastic and of gum-isinglass and now and then drink a little of this liquor to strengthen the glands. The experiment was made, and she found much advantage in it.

**SELECTED LETTERS OF COTTON MATHER** (Louisiana State University 1971), 116.

Even within a fortnight of my writing this, there was a physician who sojourned within a furlong of my own house. This physician, for three nights together, was miserably distressed with dreams of his being drowned. On the third of these nights his dreams were so troublesome, that he was cast into extreme sweats, by struggling under the imaginary water. With the sweats yet upon him, he came down from his chamber, telling the people of the family what it was that so discomposed him. Immediately there came in two friends that asked him to go a little way with them in a boat upon the water. He was at first afraid of gratifying the desire of his friends, because of his late presages. But it being a very calm time, he recollected himself. "Why should I mind my dreams or distrust the Divine Providence?" He went with them, and before night, by

a thunderstorm suddenly coming up, they were all three of them drowned. I have just now inquired into the truth of what I have thus related; and I can assert it.

**MAGNALIA CHRISTI AMERICANA** (Banner of Truth 1979),  
2:468.

John Sanford wrote of a dream his father experienced a week before his death. Sanford's father was dying of kidney failure:

In the dream he awakened in his living room. But then the room changed and he was back in his room in the old house in Vermont as a child. Again the room changed: to Connecticut (where he had his first job), to China (where he worked as a missionary), to Pennsylvania (where he often visited), to New Jersey, and then back to the living room. In each scene after China, his wife was present, in each instance being a different age in accordance with the time represented. Finally he sees himself lying on the couch back in the living room. His wife is descending the stairs and the doctor is in the room. The doctor says, "Oh, he's gone." Then, as the others fade in the dream, he sees the clock on the mantelpiece; the hands have been moving, but now they stop; as they stop, a window opens behind the mantelpiece clock and a bright light shines through. The opening widens into a door and the light becomes a brilliant path. He walks on the path of light and disappears.

K. Bulkeley & P. Bulkley, **DREAMING BEYOND DEATH: A GUIDE TO PRE-DEATH DREAMS AND VISIONS** (Beacon Press 2005),



64.

The present writer has a personal interest in the subject of religious visions, since he became a Christian as a result of a vision of Jesus. This occurred one winter afternoon when he was sixteen years old, during term time in a residential school. Sitting alone in my study, I saw a figure in white approach me, and I heard in my mind's ear the words, "Follow me." I knew that this was Jesus. How did I know? I have not the slightest idea. I had no knowledge of Christianity whatsoever—it had intentionally been kept from me. My parents were both Jewish—my father was president of his synagogue. I had never been to a church service. I had never read the New Testament. I had never discussed Christianity with my friends. The only manifestation of Christianity that I had witnessed was that a few boys knelt beside their bed to say their prayers at night in the dormitory. (Jews do not kneel to pray.) Apart from at school, all my friends and acquaintances were Jewish. I had been barmitzvahed at my synagogue, and at school I did not attend chapel or religious education lessons. Far from attending them, someone from outside the school came to give me lessons in Judaism. I had not been searching for a faith: indeed, I had even thought of becoming a rabbi. Yet I immediately recognized the figure I saw as Jesus. How I knew this, I have no idea. He was not a person who had crossed my conscious mind. (Naturally I do not know what happens in my unconscious, or it would not be unconscious.) In my vision, Jesus was clothed in white, although I cannot remember the nature of his clothes, nor yet his face, and I doubt if I ever knew them. I feel sure that if anyone had been present with a tape recorder or a camcorder, nothing would have registered.

It was certainly not caused by stress: I was in good health, a happy schoolboy with good friends, leading an enthusiastic life and keen on sport as well as work...Again, I am sure it was not wish fulfillment. I was (and still am) proud to be Jewish.

I cannot account for my vision of Jesus by any of the psychological or neurological explanations on offer. That does not prove that it was of divine origin, but my experience over the last sixty plus years of Christian life confirms my belief that it was.

H. Montefiore, **THE PARANORMAL: A BISHOP**

**INVESTIGATES** (Upfront Publishing 2002), 234-35.

Close friends recently told me about Hilda (not her real name), a woman of their acquaintance who recently died of cancer at forty years of age. Hilda's parents have been involved in Christian ministry all of their lives, and her maternal grandparents were, too, while they were alive. Hilda's parents received three unusual telephone calls on the day after her death. One was from a city close to my own, where someone reported a dream in which Hilda's grandparents were seen in heaven with their arms outstretched welcoming someone whose identity they were not given. A second telephone call came from a family friend from Wales, where someone had a dream that was identical to that reported in the first call. Finally, a chaplain who occasionally visited Hilda phoned her parents, saying that he had dreamed that he met her in heaven and began to converse with her about her sufferings. He did not know that Hilda had just died. In the conversation, she dismissed her pain as insignificant in

comparison with the joy she was experiencing. Hilda's parents do not think these three individuals had any contact with each other.

P. Wiebe, **GOD AND OTHER SPIRITS: INTIMATIONS OF TRANSCENDENCE IN CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE** (Oxford 2004), 66-67.

I have had firsthand, incontrovertible experience of extrasensory perception, and a little precognition. But the experience I want to mention here is relevant to the matter of the resurrection.

Many of us who believe in what is technically known as the Communion of Saints, must have experienced the sense of nearness, for a fairly short time, of those whom we love soon after they have died. This has certainly, happened to me several times. But the late C. S. Lewis, whom I did not know very well, and had only seen in the flesh once, but with whom I had corresponded a fair amount, gave me an unusual experience. A few days after his death, while I was watching television, he "appeared" sitting in a chair a within a few feet of me, and spoke a few words which were particularly relevant to the difficult circumstances through which I was passing. He was ruddier in complexion than ever, grinning all over his face and, as the old-fashioned saying has it, positively glowing with health. The interesting thing to me was that I had not been thinking about him at all. I was neither alarmed nor surprised nor to satisfy the Bishop of Woolwich, did I look up to see the hole in the ceiling that he might have made on arrival. He was just there—"large as life and twice as natural"! A week later, this time when I was in bed reading before going to sleep, he

appeared again, even more rosily radiant than before, and repeated to me the same message, which was very important to me at the time. I was a little puzzled by this, and I mentioned it to a certain saintly Bishop who was then living in retirement here in Dorset. His reply was, "My dear J..., this sort of thing is happening all the time."

J.B. Phillips, **RING OF TRUTH** (Harold Shaw Publishers 1989), 116-17.

Some years ago I got up one morning intending to have my hair cut in preparation for a visit to London, and the first letter I opened made it clear I need not go to London. So I decided to put the haircut off too. But then there began the most unaccountable little nagging in my mind, almost like a voice saying, "Get it cut all the same. Go and get it cut." In the end I could stand it no longer. I went. Now my barber at that time was a fellow Christian and a man of many troubles whom my brother and I had sometimes been able to help. The moment I opened his shop door he said, "Oh, I was praying you might come today." And in fact if I had come a day or so later I should have been of no use to him.

It awed me; it awes me still. But of course one cannot rigorously prove a causal connection between the barber's prayers and my visit. It might be telepathy. It might be accident. I have stood by the bedside of a woman [his wife] whose thighbone was eaten through with cancer and who had thriving colonies of the disease in many other bones, as well. It took three people to move her in bed. The doctors predicted a few months of life; the nurses (who often know better), a

few weeks. A good man: laid his hands on her and prayed. A year later the patient was walking (uphill, too, through rough woodland) and the man who took the last X-ray photos was saying, "These bones are as solid as rock. It's miraculous."

C.S. Lewis, **THE WORLD'S LAST NIGHT** (Mariner Books 2002), 3-4.

He [Spurgeon] also mentioned the sermon at Exeter Hall, in which he suddenly broke off from his subject, and pointing in a certain direction, said, "Young man, those gloves you are wearing have not been paid for: you have stolen them from your employer." At the close of the service, a young man, looking very pale and greatly agitated, came to the room, which was used as a vestry, and begged for a private interview with Spurgeon. On being admitted, he placed a pair of gloves upon the table, and tearfully said, "It's the first time I have robbed my master, and I will never do it again. You won't expose me, sir, will you? It would kill my mother if she heard that I had become a thief'."

The H.J. Harrald, ed. *Autobiography of Charles H. Spurgeon* (American Baptist Publication Society 1878), 3:88-89.

While preaching in the hall, on one occasion, I [Spurgeon] deliberately pointed to a man in the midst of the crowd, and said, "There is a man sitting there, who is a shoemaker; he keeps his shop open on Sundays, it was open last Sabbath morning, he took nine pence, and there was four pence profit out of it; his soul is sold to Satan for four pence!" A city missionary, when going his rounds, met with this man,

and seeing that he was reading one of my sermons, he asked the question, "Do you know Mr Spurgeon?" "Yes," replied the man "I have every reason to know him, I have been to hear him; and under his preaching, by God's grace I have become a new creature in Christ Jesus. Shall I tell you how it happened? I went to the Music Hall, and took my seat in the middle of the place: Mr Spurgeon looked at me as if he knew me, and in his sermon he pointed to me, and told the congregation that I was a shoemaker, and that I kept my shop open on Sundays; and I did, sir. I should not have minded that; but he also said that I took nine pence the Sunday before, and that there was four pence profit; but how he should know that, I could not tell. Then it struck me that it was God who had spoken to my soul through him, so I shut up my shop the next Sunday. At first, I was afraid to go again to hear him, lest he should tell the people more about me; but afterwards I went, and the Lord met with me, and saved my soul."

I [Spurgeon] could tell as many as a dozen similar cases in which I pointed at somebody in the hall without having the slightest knowledge of the person, or any idea that what I said was right, except that I believed I was moved by the Spirit to say it; and so striking has been my description that the persons have gone away, and said to their friends, "Come, see a man that told me all things that ever I did; beyond a doubt, he must have been sent of God to my soul, or else he could not have described me so exactly." And not only so, but I have known many instances in which the thoughts of men have been revealed from the pulpit. I have sometimes seen persons nudge their neighbours with their elbow, because they had got a smart hit, and they have been heard to say, when they were going

out, `The preacher told us just what we said to one another when we went in at the door.

The H.J. Harrald, ed. **AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF CHARLES H. SPURGEON** (Flemming H. Revell Co., 1899), 2:226-27.

Cessationists are correspondingly susceptible to the sins of the debunker. I am much less likely to get a cessationist to believe in a remarkable response to prayer than I would be able to get a charismatic to believe it.

For instance. A number of years ago a good friend of ours was dying. When she finally passed away, Nancy and I were on the road (in Philadelphia). It was the middle of the night and we both woke up. Are you awake? Yeah, are you awake? How come? Beats me. A few minutes later the phone rang, and it was the news that our friend had gone to be with the Lord. Back home, our grandson Knox had been praying regularly for her, and he was two or thereabouts. But that night while praying for her, he stopped, and said, "She died. She is in Heaven." They found out later that she had in fact died that night.

<http://dougwils.com/the-church/excesses-of-the-wahoo-brethren.html>

Before her illness took its fatal form, before, indeed, I believe it had at all declared itself – my aunt dreamed one of her foresight dreams, simple and plain enough for anyone's interpretation; – that she was approaching the ford of a dark river, alone, when little Jessie came running up behind her, and passed her, and went

through first. Then she passed through herself, and looking back from the other side, saw her old Mause approaching from the distance to the bank of the stream. And so it was, that Jessie, immediately afterwards, sickened rapidly and died; and a few months, or it might be nearly a year afterwards, my aunt died of decline; and Mause, some two or three years later, having had no care after her mistress and Jessie were gone, but when she might go to them.

John Ruskin, **PRAETERITA: AND, DILECTA** (Borzoi Book, 2005), 63.

When I first came to America, thirty-one years ago. I crossed the Atlantic with the captain of a steamer who was one of the most devoted men I ever knew, and when we were off the banks of Newfoundland he said to me:

"Mr. Inglis, the last time I crossed here, five weeks ago, one of the most extraordinary things happened which, has completely revolutionized the whole of my Christian life. Up to that time I was one of your ordinary Christians. We had a man of God on board, George Muller, of Bristol. I had been on that bridge for twenty-two hours and never left it. I was startled by some one tapping me on the shoulder. It was George Muller: "'Captain, he said, 'I have come to tell you that I must be in Quebec on Saturday afternoon.' This was Wednesday.

"'It is impossible,' I said.

"'Very well, if your ship can't take me, God will find some other means of locomotion to take me. I have never broken an engagement in fifty seven years.'



"I would willingly help you. How can I? I am helpless."  
"Let us go down to the chart-room and pray."

"I looked at that man of God, and I thought to myself, what lunatic asylum could that man have come from? I never heard of such a thing.

"Mr. Muller," I said, 'do you know how dense the fog is?'

"No," he replied, 'my eye is not on the density of the fog, but on the living God who controls every circumstance of my life.'

"He got down on his knees and prayed one of the most simple prayers. I muttered to myself: 'That would suit a children's class where the children were not more than eight or nine years old.' The burden of his prayer was something like this: 'O Lord, if it is consistent with Thy will, please remove this fog in five minutes. You know the engagement you made for me in Quebec Saturday. I believe it is your will.'

"When he finished. I was going to pray, but he put his hand on my shoulder and told me not to pray. "First, you do not believe He will; and second. I believe He has. And there is no need whatever for you to pray about it.' I looked at him, and George Muller said.

"Captain. I have known my Lord for forty-seven years, and there has never been a single day that I have failed to gain an audience with the King. Get up, captain, and open the door, and you will find the fog is gone.' I got up, and the fog was gone!

"You tell that to some people of a scientific turn of mind, and they will say, 'That is not according to natural laws.' No,

it is according to spiritual laws. The God with whom we have to do is omnipotent. Hold on to God's omnipotence. Ask believingly. On Saturday afternoon, I may add, George Muller was there on time."

**THE HERALD OF GOSPEL LIBERTY** (August 25, 1910), 1060.

## Rearguard cessationism

I'm going to comment on a few of Tom Pennington's arguments, from his Strange Fire presentation:

<http://thecripplegate.com/strange-fire-a-case-for-cessationism-tom-pennington/>

I'm going to skip most of his arguments because I've already interacted with the arguments of the most astute cessationists (e.g. Richard Gaffin, O. P. Robertson, Dan Wallace, B. B. Warfield).

Cessationism does not mean, as our critics present it, that God no longer does anything miraculous. Cessationism also does not mean that the Spirit cannot, if He should choose, to give a miraculous ability to someone today. He's God, He can do whatever He wants. If He wants to, He could give a language to someone they've never studied, it just wouldn't be the New Testament

gift, because it wouldn't be revelation from God.

Really? That's not how another MacArthurite defines cessationism:

Let me make one more distinction: There are two kinds of miracles noted in Scripture.<sup>1</sup> Some are remarkable works of God apart from any human agency.<sup>2</sup> The other kind of miracle involves a human agent, who from the human perspective is the instrument through which the miracle comes.

[http://www.biblebb.com/files/combating\\_charismatic\\_theology.htm](http://www.biblebb.com/files/combating_charismatic_theology.htm)

Pennington allows for God to miraculously empower somebody today, whereas Johnson disallows that very thing. Pennington erases the line Johnson draws.

Of course, MacArthurites are free to disagree with each other. But when Pennington accuses "our critics" of misrepresenting cessationism, even though Johnson confirms what they say, that sends mixed signals.

Because the primary purpose of miracles has always been to confirm the credentials of a divinely appointed messenger—to establish the credibility of one who speaks for God.

Yet Pennington just said: the Spirit, if he so chose, could give a miraculous ability to someone today. It just wouldn't be a revelation from God.

How, then, does that square with his claim that "the primary purpose of miracles has **always** been to confirm the credentials of a divinely appointed messenger—to establish the credibility of one who speaks for God"?

But how were the people to know if a man who claimed to be a prophet was in fact speaking God's own words? Moses faced this dilemma. [Reads 4:1-5] So understand that God enabled Moses to perform miracles for one purpose only: to validate Moses as God's prophet and Moses' message as God's own words. Moses was universally accepted as God's prophet, and what he wrote were literally the words of God and came to be accepted as such. Why? Because the power to work miracles validated his claims to speak for God.

I'm sorry, but on the face of it, that claim is exegetically preposterous. In Exodus, the primary reason Moses is a miracle worker is to trounce Egyptian religion, thereby

exposing the vanity of the Egyptian deities, in contrast to the omnipotence power of the one true God. See Currid's analysis.

The first was that of Moses and Joshua, from the Exodus through the career of Joshua (1445-1380 BC), about 65 years. The second window was during the ministries of Elijah and Elisha (ca. 860-795 BC), again only about 65 years. Here in Deuteronomy Moses laid down 3 criteria for discerning a true prophet. The true prophet's predictions must always come true (v. 21). In [Deut 13:1-5](#), God says that if He chose to authenticate a true prophet He would do so by empowering him to work miracles as He did with Moses. Also in Deuteronomy 13, He said, even if He works miracles, the third criterion is that the prophet's message must be always in complete doctrinal agreement with previous revelation.

If we apply Pennington's criteria to Pennington's examples, Moses, Joshua, Elijah, and Elisha were the only true OT prophets. Hosea, Micah, Jeremiah, Zechariah, Malachi, &c. were false prophets, for they fail to meet the three criteria of a true prophet. Most of of them performed no miracles.

It's also odd that Isaiah doesn't make the cut, since miracles are associated with him. Why doesn't Pennington include him?

Consider the gift of healing. In the New Testament when someone with the New Testament gift of healing used his gifts, the results were complete, immediate, permanent, undeniable, every kind of sickness, and every kind of illness.

**i)** How does he know that every NT healing was permanent? The NT contains no record of long-term follow-up studies. So what's his evidence for that claim? Is it his

assumption that a temporary healing would be defective? If so, he needs to supply a supporting argument for his theological assumption.

**ii)** By permanent, does he mean that if Christ or an apostle cured someone, that immunized them from the recurrence of the same disease? If so, how does he know that? Suppose St. Peter healed a man of syphilis. Does that mean the man could no longer contract syphilis, even if he continued to indulge in sexual immorality?

To take another example: elderly women are at a higher risk of dying from pneumonia. Did they die of pneumonia, or did they die of old age? Both. Age made them more susceptible to pneumonia.

If Christ or an apostle "permanently" healed a younger woman of pneumonia, does that mean she could never again catch pneumonia?

Or take Christ's warning to the invalid: "See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you" ([Jn 5:14](#)). This insinuates that his particular disability was due to sin, and if he returned to a life of sin, his disability, or worse, would return. A potentially impermanent cure.

**iii)** What does he mean by "undeniable"? Does he mean a miracle no one would deny? But atheists deny Biblical miracles in toto.

Does he mean a miracle which no reasonable person would deny? But to say no modern miracles are undeniable in that sense begs the question.

Moreover, it comes into conflict with his prior admission that "the Spirit, if he so chose, could give a miraculous ability to someone today." Would that be deniable or undeniable?

The purported healings of today's faith healers are the antithesis: incomplete, temporary, and unverifiable.

**i)** What's his evidence that the healings of today's faith healers are "unverifiable"? What's his source of information for that blanket denial?

**ii)** Suppose an atheist turned tables by demanding verification for Biblical miracles? What is Pennington's comeback?

**iii)** What's his evidence that all their healings are temporary?

**iv)** What about temporary healings? To some extent I'm sympathetic to this objection. A "temporary" healing suggests a psychosomatic healing. Put another way, a "temporary" healing suggests a face-saving euphemism for a failed healing. In other words, no healing at all. So I think many temporary healings are suspect. There's a presumption against their authenticity.

**v)** But our assessment still comes down to the specifics. Take the famous case of Joy Davidman. She had advanced cancer which went into remission in answer to the prayer of an Anglican priest who had a reputation as a healer. Yet she suffered a fatal relapse two years later.

**vi)** Where does [Jas 5:14-16](#) fit into Pennington's paradigm? Does he think that expired in the 1C AD? If not, does he think that necessarily results in a permanent cure?

What if a dying father or mother is estranged from his or her children? What if God heals the parent long enough to effect a family reconciliation? Does Pennington rule that out?

Pennington's cessationism has a veneer of Scripturalism, but the more you scrutinize it, the more a priori it turns out to

be.



## Cessationism and selective standards

Dan Phillips and Fred Butler like to use Acts 4:16 as their paradigm-case of what a modern miracle has to be like to qualify as a genuine miracle. But there are obvious problems with their criterion.

**i)** The Bible contains many types of miracles. It's arbitrary to single out this particular miracle as the paradigm.

**ii)** Apropos (i), not only is that arbitrary as a standard of comparison for modern miracles, it's arbitrary in reference to Biblical miracles, given the variety of Biblical miracles.

**iii)** Apropos (ii), Biblical miracles are not all of a kind. Even Warfield, a classic cessationist, distinguishes between miracles of healing, miracles of speech, miracles of knowledge, and miracles of power. For instance, Acts contains revelatory dreams and visions. But those aren't directly comparable to a miracle of healing—are they?

**iv)** Apropos (i-iii), in their effort to screen out modern miracles, Fred and Dan have a criterion that screens out many Biblical miracles. For there are Biblical miracles which don't "measure up" (as it were) to their chosen yardstick. For instance:

**a)** Philip was an exorcist (Acts 8:6-13). But is that an "Acts 4:16-level miracle"?

**b)** What about the burning bush (Exod 3)? Surely that's a paradigmatic miracle. It involves both a nature miracle and an angelic apparition. Yet it's an essentially private miracle, for Moses is the only witness to this event. Likewise, the fate of Lot's wife was only witnessed by Lot and his

daughters. And we don't have their testimony. We only have the testimony of the narrator.

What about the talking donkey (Num 22)? Surely that's a remarkable miracle. That involves both a nature miracle and an angelic apparition. Yet it's an essentially private miracle, for Balaam is the only witness to this event. And we don't even have his own testimony. We only have the testimony of the narrator.

Other examples include the rod of Moses changing into a snake (Exod 4), Elijah fed by ravens (1 Kgs 17), the widow's food replenished (1 Kgs 17), her son revived (1 Kgs 17), and the Translation of Elijah (2 Kgs 2). We could add the bears that attack Elijah's hecklers (2 Kgs 2), Naaman's cure (2 Kgs 5), and the blinding of Elymas (Acts 13). There are very few eyewitnesses to these events. In many cases we're dependent on the secondhand report of the omniscient narrator.

**c)** Keep in mind, too, that many of these are miracles of power. But how is a miracle of power directly analogous to a miracle of knowledge? Take Joseph's premonitory dream (Gen 37), or Pharaoh's premonitory dreams (Gen 41). Are those "Acts 4:16-level" miracles? How do you measure a miracle of knowledge by a miracle of healing? What's the common denominator?

**d)** Or take glossolalia. Fred and Dan construe all cases of glossolalia in Acts and 1 Corinthians as xenoglossy. But even if we accept their disputatious identification, is xenoglossy an "Acts 4:16-level miracle"? In what respect is xenoglossy analogous to healing?

**e)** Or take the apparitions of Moses and Elijah at the

Transfiguration. Is that an "Acts 4:16-level miracle"? If so, in what respect?

Fred and Dan aren't really using a Scriptural standard, for their singular example from Acts filters out many other Biblical examples. If they were really using the Bible as their template, they'd say that modern supernatural claims must generally correspond to Biblical supernatural examples. Their sample would include all types of Biblical miracles as a reference class.

## "Acts 4:16-level miracles"

I'm going to comment on this post:

<http://hipandthigh.wordpress.com/2013/08/19/skeptical-inquirers/>

Steve Hays and his boys continue with this befuddling defense of modern day claims of the miraculous among charismatics and Pentecostals.

**i)** I by no means assume that miracles are confined to charismatics and Pentecostals.

**ii)** Moreover, it should be unnecessary to correct Fred's misstatement of my position. I haven't been defending the Pentecostal/charismatic position. I take a mediating position on this issue.

This is one of the persistent problems with the MacArthurites. They are so conditioned to debate the issue in binary terms that even if you present a third alternative, they automatically reassign you to the usual suspects. This reflects a lack of critical detachment on their part, which is ironic given how they attack the lack of critical judgment on the part of Pentecostals and charismatics.

Jason Engwer left similar sentiments in the combox under [my previous post](#).

Well, I can't speak for Jason.

They both seem to be bothered about my insistence that miracles, in order to even be considered genuine, have to be in the category of undeniable by such debunkers like James Randi. We could also add other similar men like Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett.

And in my response to Fred, I will hold him to that self-imposed standard.

To insist that any claims of the miraculous must be in that category demonstrates a profound ignorance of atheist debunkers on my part, or at least according to Steve and his friends.

As we shall see.

I had initially cited [Acts 4:16](#) in reference to my claim about atheist debunkers. That verse says, What shall we do to these men? For, indeed, that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. A few important observations about that verse are in order. First, the statement is being made by the religious leaders. In fact, [Acts 4:1](#) says it is the liberal religious leaders, the Sadducees. You know them. They're the guys who consistently denied any supernatural workings by God, and yet they were among the ones who could "not deny" the miracle.

Several problems. Just for starters:

- i)** Not all members of the Sanhedrin were Sadducees. Remember Nicodemus? He was a Pharisee. Likewise, remember how Paul played both sides off against the middle ([Acts 23:6](#))?
- ii)** The Sadducees were liberal in denying the existence of discarnate spirits and the resurrection of the body. But they were conservative in denying the oral Torah.
- iii)** What is Fred's evidence that the Sadducees "consistently denied any supernatural workings by God"? Doesn't that go considerably beyond the extant record?

Keep in mind that these aren't just *my* objections. It's not as if secular debunkers are going to cut Fred any slack.

**iv)** For them to say it's "undeniable" is ambiguous. "Undeniable" to whom? In context, this is a PR issue. Damage control. They can't publicly deny the miracle without loss of face. To discredit the miracle would discredit them in the eyes of their constituency.

So there's no reason to assume it was undeniable to *them*. Rather, it's undeniable vis-a-vis public opinion. In context, that's the frame of reference.

And even if Fred doesn't think that's the best interpretation of the statement, it doesn't matter what *he* thinks—since he's not the standard of comparison. Rather, he's made secular debunkers the standard of comparison. When in doubt, they are not going to give his interpretation the benefit of the doubt.

Second, the miracle was evident, meaning that it was undeniable. In other words, it was just clear that a seriously crippled individual was made whole.

Up until now I withheld the biggest problem with Fred's appeal. The biggest problem is that secular debunkers won't grant his source of information. As Fred himself has framed the terms of the debate, that evidence ([Acts 4:16](#)) is inadmissible. That's not public information. Secular debunkers won't grant that Luke was privy to the closed-door deliberations of the Sanhedrin. The only information that Fred can appeal to within the confines of his own challenge is information in the public domain. What a debunker could see and hear with his own eyes and ears if he were living in Jerusalem when that happened. By contrast, a debunker would say that [Acts 4:16](#) is, at best, hearsay. After all, the narrator (Luke?) wasn't a member of the Sanhedrin.

And third, it was made evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, so everyone was talking about it. The miracle wasn't confined to a small number of witnesses, or a small congregation of people, or to the subjective evaluation of two sets of X-rays.

I find Fred's argument odd. Supposedly he's responding to me, yet as I already pointed out in the post he's responding to, that appeal violates Fred's own rules of evidence. For Fred is skeptical of "hearsay" evidence (to use his own term). "Everyone" in Jerusalem was talking about it due to word-of-mouth dissemination. Yet Fred dismisses "hearsay" evidence of modern miracles.

Moreover, it doesn't even matter what Fred thinks, since, by his own admission, his judgment is not the standard of comparison. A secular debunker would say this is a prime example of how quickly rumors become legendary.

First, we see that this guy was a regular outside the gate leading into the temple. Thus, all the religious leaders would have been familiar with the man and his physical situation. They would have seen him there day in and day out, probably one among many crippled people, and perhaps even given him alms every once in a while.

So Fred is already shifting away from those who saw the miracle take place. Rather, he's appealing to the before and after condition of the man.

Secondly, this man was born without the use of his legs, "from his mother's womb." Hence, he was seriously malformed and had never walked in his life... [Acts 4:22](#) says this man was over 40 years in age, so he had been in that condition for over 40 years.

Notice how Fred treats the details of the account as unquestionably accurate. Problem is, that reflects *his* viewpoint, *not* the viewpoint of a secular debunker.

Once again, Fred is appealing to inadmissible evidence. A secular debunker will ask, How do we know that the cripple was *congenitally* disabled? You can't appeal to the narrator's claim. How is the narrator in a position to know that? Did he interview the parents? Even if he did, a debunker will say, What's more likely: that parents lie or that miracles happen?

As Fred has framed the issue, the only admissible evidence would be what a debunker could observe for himself, had he been on the scene at the time. Not Luke's *record* of the event, but the event itself.

When the religious leaders passed him by every day, they would have seen his atrophied legs and his otherwise frail body because of his physical condition.

**i)** Why assume that his body was *generally* frail? What if he developed his upper body musculature as compensation?

**ii)** But that's not the main thing. Notice how Fred tacitly assumes a Southern Californian dress code, as if the cripple was wearing shorts. But isn't it more likely that a Palestinian Jew was wearing an ankle-length tunic? And it's not as if debunkers are going to give Fred the benefit of the doubt on how the cripple was dressed.

Third, it is clear from the text that he was completely made whole. Luke wants his readers to know this guy was utterly incurable by human means and in an instant, his ankle bones were strengthened and he jumped up and began walking about.



Once again, Fred isn't even beginning to project himself into the mindset of a secular debunker. Yes, that's what "Luke wants his readers to know." And therein lies the problem, a debunker would say. Religious propaganda. Fred has implicit faith in the minute accuracy of Luke's account. By contrast, a debunker is prepared to relegate the entire story to pious fiction.

Additionally, since the man had been living in that condition for over 40 years, the muscle tissue to his atrophied legs had to have been restored and he knew how to walk immediately apart from any physical therapy. That is an undeniable miracle and one that James Randi could "not deny."

**i)** First of all, this piggybacks on a string of assumptions which, as I just noted, a secular debunker would never concede.

**ii)** Secondly, Fred apparently has no inkling of how creative debunkers can be. In principle, a debunker could stipulated to just about everything Fred has claimed thus far, and still have an out.

He could say, Yes, the man they saw everyday at the gate was congenitally crippled. But the "miraculously healed" man wasn't the same individual. Rather, that was his able-bodied identical twin!

Think I'm making that up? Think again. That is Robert Greg Cavin's fallback position for the apparent resurrection of Christ. The man who died on the cross wasn't the man who reappeared on Easter. Jesus had a twin brother!

A secular debunker will say the existence of a twin brother is infinitely more likely than a healing miracle.

Consider the following fantasy scenario in the context of modern day miracles and what I am talking about...

That's a miracle that cannot be denied. Obviously something happened to this guy that is not explainable by the means of normal medical procedure.

I don't see how floating a hypothetically undeniable miracle is supposed to prove anything.

My point with recounting that little make-believe scenario is to say if people with the gift of healing are exercising that gift with regularity in churches as continuationists claim they are, then I wouldn't have to research medical records and the like. The reality of the miracles would testify of themselves. A person with significant deformities or other serious medical issues would testify about his healing. His friends would testify to me about his healing. Neighbors and townsfolk who knew the guy before he was healed would tell me of his healing. And most importantly, those who reject miracles, but would refuse to believe God's healing in spite of him being healed, would testify about his healing, because it is "undeniable."

**i)** Notice how Fred is conceding that secondhand evidence can be compelling evidence. But in that case, why did he previously say:

I too have read many accounts of modern miracles. I find them to be mostly hearsay and apocryphal.

<http://hipandthigh.wordpress.com/2013/07/28/why-wont-faith-healers-heal-amputees/>

**ii)** Notice how Fred rigs the answer: "If people with the gift of healing are exercising that gift with regularity in churches as continuationists claim they are..."

I haven't make that claim. To my knowledge, Jason Engwer hasn't make that claim. I haven't make any claim about the frequency of healers.

**iii)** Why do MacArthurites chronically repeat the same fallacy? To say that "[Acts 4:16](#)-level miracles" aren't happening *all* the time doesn't imply that "[Acts 4:16](#)-level miracles" *never* happen. Why do MacArthurites keep making the illogical leap from "unless it happens *all* the time, it doesn't happen *any* time"?

**iv)** Apropos (iii), for the umpteenth time, we have a MacArthurite reject an empirical claim a priori.

## Christian debunkers

I'm going to comment on a recent tweet by Dan Phillips:

When "continuationists" can point to 5 thoroughly documented resurrections by "faith healers" in the last year, let me know

This raises several questions:

**i)** When he demands documentation, what has he actually read on modern miracles?

**ii)** We don't have 5 recorded resurrections per year in the book of Acts. In fact, we don't have 5 recorded resurrections in the entire the book of Acts—roughly 30 years.

**iii)** Restoring someone to life is attributed to only two apostles: Peter (Acts 9:37-40) and Paul (Acts 20:9-10). And I don't know if they'd count as "resurrections" rather than miraculous resuscitations. Dorcus was only dead for a few hours, and Eutychus was only dead for a few minutes. That's not like Lazarus, who was dead for four days (Jn 11:39).

**iv)** Miracles are attributed to Stephen (6:8), yet there's no record of his raising someone from the dead. Yet if he had, we'd expect Luke to record that, inasmuch as Luke recorded the cases involving Peter and Paul. Same thing with the other apostles. So if Dan is suggesting that resurrecting someone is a litmus test for continuationism, hasn't he disqualified most of the apostles?

**v)** How does Dan think Peter and Paul healed people? Does he think God delegated healing powers to them, so that they could heal anyone at will? Or did God retain sovereign discretion over the outcome?

**vi)** How is Dan's taunt different than asking, "Why won't God heal amputees"?

Pentecostalism is a target-rich environment. However, it concerns me when Dan seems to adopt the same debunking mentality as knee-jerk skeptics like Paul Kurtz, James Randi, and Martin Gardner.

## Was Kathryn Kuhlman a charlatan?

I'm going to briefly assess the claims of Kathryn Kuhlman. I'm doing this because some unbelievers use her as a standard of comparison to judge the miracles of Christ. Of course, that comparison is fundamentally inapt. We wouldn't expect her to be able to do what Jesus did. But let's play along with the comparison for the sake of argument.

I should say at the outset that my interest in Kuhlman is pretty limited. As such, I have a fairly cursory knowledge of her life and work. I haven't attempted to conduct in-depth research. So this post is less about arriving at definitive conclusions than laying down some markers. These are the questions I'd ask, the considerations I'd bring to bear, in evaluating her claims.

**1.** In principle, there are several different possible ways of classifying Kuhlman:

**i)** She was a charlatan. A deceiver. A gold-digger.

**ii)** She was sincere, but self-deceived.

**iii)** She was a "sensitive" who had natural paranormal abilities.

**iv)** She was a medium who had occult paranormal abilities. If so, that wouldn't necessarily mean she was consciously in league with the devil.

**v)** She was a divinely-empowered healer.

The available evidence may be insufficient to pin down the correct classification.

**2.** Are there reliable sources of information about her and her ministry?

**i)** Jamie Buckingham wrote her "authorized biography." He was a graduate of SWBTS, so he's not obviously a flake. The fact, moreover, that he wrote a warts-and-all biography might suggest that he's not just a shill for Kuhlman. But he is sympathetic.

**ii)** William Nolan, a Christian physician, published classic exposés of Kuhlman. I'll be discussing this.

**iii)** Kurt Koch wrote an exposé. As a Lutheran exorcist, he is not predisposed to dismiss her claims on naturalistic grounds. He's not Martin Gardner. On the other hand, he was opposed to Pentecostalism, so there may be some hostile bias.

**3.** According to one allegation, she was guilty of financial malfeasance. Diverting funds to finance a "lavish lifestyle."

**i)** That would certainly be consistent with the antics of a charlatan. Financial scandals are characteristic of fraudulent faith ministries.

**ii)** On the other hand, Buckingham defends her. I find his explanation plausible, although the corruption charge is also plausible.

Her ministry's a personality-cult, centered on her. Personality-cults attract a greedy entourage who are there to feather their own nest. So it's possible or probable (I don't know which) that she was personally guileless, but

surrounded by sharks. It wouldn't surprise me if she took little interest in the bookkeeping end of the operation. But I don't know that for a fact.

**iii)** From the little I've read, the accusation is less about *personal* expenses than *professional* expenses, viz. fancy robes, a private jet. If so, that's not the same thing as a lavish lifestyle.

However, that would still interject commercialism and showmanship into her ministry.

**iv)** According to Koch, she gave Nolan contact information for some of the people she (allegedly) healed. If she was a charlatan, I wouldn't expect her to volunteer that information. I'd expect her to be evasive and uncooperative. So her transparency is consistent with her sincerity.

In addition, I don't think she took issue with Buckingham's candid, sometimes embarrassing, biography. If she was a charlatan, I'd expect her to insist on a hagiographic treatment.

In sum, there is conflicting evidence regarding her personal integrity.

**4.** Now let's review Koch's assessment, from his **OCCULT ABC**. He begins with some background information:

From 1946, she conducted an average of 125 healing meetings per year. She used the largest halls in the USA, and her healing meetings were attended by about one and a half million people each year. This figure is given by a doctor named William Nolen. The background of my views is the material I collected



during many lecture tours in the USA. At the time of writing, I have been there thirty-four times for tours. I have read Miss Kuhlman's books, I have attended a four-hour healing meeting at the First Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh; and I have had a personal conversation with her. I also have many verbal and written reports from people who attended her meetings. At this point, I must thank most warmly my two principal informants. Mrs. H. Maynard Johnson, wife of the technical director of the Eifel Hospital in Minneapolis, collected twenty-eight cases of healing, with full addresses, from Minneapolis and the surrounding area for me. I also received an excellent, scientifically based article from Dr. H. H. Ehrenstein of Songtime Boston. Names of further assistants will appear in the course of the chapter.

Moving along:

**5.** First of all, I must give a brief sketch of the style of these healing meetings. After a fantastic organ prelude, Kathryn would appear on the stage dressed in a long blue or white robe. Everyone would stand up. She would say: "How glad I am to have you all here. The Holy Spirit will perform a great work among you." The atmosphere was heightened by an introductory hymn sung by thousands of expectant people. This was followed by prayer and a short sermon. Then Kathryn would suddenly announce, "Up there in the second row of the balcony a man has just been healed of cancer. Please come down to the platform," or "a girl in the seventeenth row has just been healed of a lung disease." It would continue in the same way for several hours. The people who had been healed came to the platform. Kathryn would hold her hands about six inches above the head of each and pray. They then

would fall backwards to the floor. Two attendants would catch them as they fell, so they would not hurt themselves. The people who had been healed would lay for ten to thirty seconds unconscious on the floor. When they stood up, they would say that they had a wonderful feeling. While I was watching, I saw even ministers falling to the floor unconscious, one of them a Catholic priest. Kathryn would then ask those who had been healed one or two questions, different every time. For instance, she asked a woman in her fifties, "Do you believe in Jesus?" "No, I am a Buddhist." A young man about twenty years old was asked: "Are you a Christian?" "No, I am an atheist." "Won't you believe in Jesus now that He has healed your wife?" Kathryn asked. A long silence passed. After much pressing on Kathryn's part, he finally said, "I will try." Many people have tussled with the question of how it was that Kathryn could tell which person had been healed of which disease. Many doctors investigated this problem and came up with various answers. Was it clairvoyance or mediumistic contact?

How should we account for her apparent clairvoyance?

**i)** It's possible that she really was clairvoyant. I don't rule that out. And I don't consider that less likely than naturalistic explanations.

However, let's consider some naturalistic alternatives:

**ii)** "Psychics" do cold readings. This doesn't require any genuine extrasensory insight. However, that wouldn't explain how she could know about a perfect stranger at a distance.

**iii)** It's possible to obtain information about attendees, then transmit that to the healer. The notorious scam involving

Peter Popoff is an oft-cited example.

However, I have no evidence to support that explanation in the case of Kuhlman.

By the same token, it's possible to plant imposters in the audience. But, once again, I have no evidence to support that explanation in her case. And it would be difficult for an operation that size to recruit and conceal new plants year after year. How would you keep a lid on that? You'd be very vulnerable to blackmail.

**iv)** Self-selection bias. In the nature of the case, her healing services would attract hordes of people with terminal, degenerative, or life-threatening diseases—as well as the disabled. Combine that with the sheer size of the audience, and the odds are high that there will be people in attendance who approximate her descriptions. Every row would have hundreds of attendees. Or so I assume.

In sum, her apparent clairvoyance is consistent with paranormal abilities, but it might also be consistent with natural means.

**6.** Ex 105 At the healing meeting in Pittsburgh a woman doctor brought a woman on to the stage. The doctor gave the following report: "This woman had multiple sclerosis in an advanced stage. She used to wear two splints and was almost blind. Her abdomen was partially paralyzed. She had a permanent catheter for three years. Three months ago I went with the patient to one of Kathryn Kuhlman's meetings. The patient was healed. Since then she has needed neither splints nor catheter. The paralysis has disappeared. She is now a nurse in the hospital in which she used to be a patient."There is no reason to doubt the truthfulness of this testimony. We know, of course, that

the fact of healing gives us no indication of what power it was that brought it about.

That's impressive as far as it goes. It would certainly be consistent with a genuine healer. But it would be more impressive if Koch (or other reputable sources) could cite more cases like that. Given the huge cumulative number of people who attended her services over the years, if even a fraction were healed, that would be a large absolute number. So it should be possible to obtain many well-attested cases, if she was a genuine healer.

**7.** Ex 107 A third experience made me begin to have doubts. It was during a personal interview with Kathryn. She suddenly began to pray with me. She held her hands about six inches above my head. At once I began to pray in my heart, "Lord Jesus, if this woman gets her power from You, then bless both her and me. If she has gifts and power which do not come from You, protect me from them. I do not want to come under an alien influence." While Kathryn was praying, two ushers came and stood behind me to catch me as I fell. I felt nothing, however, and stood like a rock without losing my consciousness in the least. Then came a second surprise. Kathryn nudged me gently, probably in order to make me fall. She did not succeed. Then she asked me, "Do you have a healing ministry yourself?" I answered, "In my pastoral counseling it has happened occasionally, but that is not my calling: my task is to preach the Gospel and bring people to salvation."

This is inconclusive. The problem with this example is that, by his own admission, nothing out of the ordinary happened. If he hadn't prayed, and he felt himself "coming under an alien influence," then this would indicate that she

had had some sort of paranormal ability, but as it stands, we have no basis of comparison. We don't know if his prayer made the difference. We don't know if there was anything for his prayer to block.

**8.** Ex 111 "I went to a second meeting and tried to pray the whole time, but also to watch carefully. After the healing service, K. K. left the platform, and went through the crowd standing in the big hall. Suddenly I felt an oppression and a fear that she should touch me. I closed my eyes, lifted my arms and prayed in Jesus' name that God would help me. When K. K. passed in the place where I stood, she gripped my right arm very strongly for a moment. Nothing happened. After a while, I felt strong power, like electricity, above me, I felt like I was going to die. My arms were paralyzed and I couldn't take them down immediately.

If this is true, it would be consistent with paranormal abilities. However, it's very subjective. Given, moreover, the highly charged atmosphere of the services, it could be autosuggestive.

**9.** One year after meeting with Kathryn, the state of all twenty-eight people said by her to have been healed was as follows: Ten had not been healed, seven had experienced an improvement in their condition, eleven had diseases in which the mind can play an important part. In the whole of this extensive report, there is not one clear case of healing from an organic disease. So for all the trouble taken by Mrs. Johnson, for which I thank her again, nothing has been proved. Dr. Nolen had the addresses and telephone numbers of eighty-two people in Minneapolis sent to him. These people had been to the Kuhlman meeting and had been said to be healed. Some of them were sufferers from cancer,

multiple sclerosis, and other diseases. Dr. Nolen followed up those who had been healed in order to get an accurate picture of the whole story. Dr. Nolen also obtained from Kathryn Kuhlman a list of eight people who were alleged to have been cured of cancer. Again the result of his investigations was completely negative. Dr. Nolen comments,

The more I learned of the results of Kathryn Kuhlman's miracle service, the more doubtful I became that any good she was doing could possibly outweigh the misery she was causing ... I don't believe she is a liar or a charlatan or that she is, consciously, dishonest ... I think she sincerely believes that the thousands of sick people who come to her services and claim cures are, through her ministrations, being cured of organic diseases ... The problem is - and I'm sorry this has to be so blunt - one of ignorance. Miss Kuhlman doesn't know the difference between psychogenic and organic diseases. Though she uses hypnotic techniques, she doesn't know anything about hypnotism and the power of suggestion. She doesn't know anything about the autonomic nervous system. Or, if she does know something about these things, she has certainly learned to hide her knowledge.

On the face of it, this undercuts the credibility of her healing claims. The problem is not that she failed to heal everyone who came to her. The disciples failed to heal the demoniac.

The problem is that, given the sheer number of people who attended her services, even if she only healed a small percentage of attendees, *some* of those ought to be caught in the sample.

Now, Nolan's analysis could be offset if we had testimony from other doctors of patients who corroborated healings. But I haven't seen that.

**10.** A sensational aspect was the way those who had been healed fell backwards. What powers were involved? Was it hypnosis? Kathryn's friends called such people the slain of the Lord.

Dr. Nolen's report, which I have reproduced here in a shortened form, does not answer all the questions raised by these strange healings. In particular, he does not deal with the falling backwards of the patients or he simply calls it hypnosis. Such an explanation is inadequate. Doctors, ministers, and strong-willed people cannot be laid out on the floor, as if they had been knocked out by hypnosis. Here other powers are involved. Again, the sometimes accurate indication of the place where the patients are sitting and of the nature of their diseases sounds remarkably like psychic contact.

With due respect to Koch, I find that unconvincing. Falling backwards ("slain in the Spirit") is such a cliché at healing services that I don't think it's reasonable to chalk that up to paranormal influence. Surely that happens at services where the faith-healer is undoubtedly a charlatan. I think that's a conditioned response.

In sum, I haven't read any compelling evidence that Kuhlman was a genuine healer. But that could reflect my limited reading.

UPDATE:

Craig Keener has a well-documented section on Kuhlman in his **MIRACLES**, 1:459-68. I think he marshals some impressive evidence for miraculous cures in connection with her ministry.



## The Church of Hume

It forms a strong presumption against all supernatural and miraculous relations, that they are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations; or if a civilized people has ever given admission to any of them, that people will be found to have received them from ignorant and barbarous ancestors, who transmitted them with that inviolable sanction and authority, which always attend received opinions. When we peruse the first histories of all nations, we are apt to imagine ourselves transported into some new world; where the whole frame of nature is disjointed, and every element performs its operations in a different manner, from what it does at present. Battles, revolutions, pestilence, famine and death, are never the effect of those natural causes, which we experience. Prodigies, omens, oracles, judgements, quite obscure the few natural events, that are intermingled with them. But as the former grow thinner every page, in proportion as we advance nearer the enlightened ages, we soon learn, that there is nothing mysterious or supernatural in the case, but that all proceeds from the usual propensity of mankind towards the marvellous, and that, though this inclination may at intervals receive a check from sense and learning, it can never be thoroughly extirpated from human nature. It is strange, a judicious reader is apt to say, upon the perusal of these wonderful historians, that such prodigious events never happen in our days. The advantages are so great, of starting an imposture among an ignorant people, that, even though the delusion should be too gross to impose on the generality of them (which, though seldom, is sometimes the case) it has a much better chance for

succeeding in remote countries, than if the first scene had been laid in a city renowned for arts and knowledge. The most ignorant and barbarous of these barbarians carry the report abroad. None of their countrymen have a large correspondence, or sufficient credit and authority to contradict and beat down the delusion.

– Hume

**i)** One of the things I'm struck by when I see some members/followers of the MacArthur circle dissing reported modern miracles is how their arguments unwittingly mimic the arguments of infidels like Hume. Take the way they breezily dismiss reported miracles in Third World countries, as if a reported miracle from Ethiopia, the Philippines, rural India or China, is inherently suspect. This is precisely the argument Hume uses. And it's the very same argument modern-day atheists deploy against Biblical miracles. Biblical miracles are reported by primitive, backward, superstitious writers.

**ii)** I think part of the problem is that many members/followers of the MacArthur circle don't seem to have much experience debating atheists. They generally seem to prefer intramural debates involving eschatology, creationism, &c. That renders them oblivious to the way they are aping atheist objections to miracles in general. It would be pitifully easy for an atheist to turn the tables. It's not as if we can compare reported Biblical healings with PET scans, CT scans, and MRIs of the patient, before and after.

**iii)** Now, for reported miracles from contemporary Western nations, I don't think it's unreasonable to request medical documentation. At least in a certain percentage of cases, if a miraculous cure took place, we'd expect there to be medical records to bear that out. That's because, in a

certain percentage of cases, the patient ought to have medical records. So that's a reasonable standard, given the setting.

It's not reasonable to impose that standard in settings where that's not to be expected. Are we going to take the position that no Christian before the age of modern medicine is a trustworthy witness to a miraculous healing? Should we summarily scratch off 1800 hundred years of church history? Likewise, should we be reflexively skeptical of miraculous divine activity among the poor illiterate masses? Do we really think the distribution of divine activity lopsidedly favors the Northern hemisphere over the global south? Urban areas over rural areas? College grads over pious peasants? What about all the Christians who *have* to live by faith and prayer because they have nothing else to fall back on but the mercy of God?

It's like those infamous "prayer studies," where God is supposed to submit to randomizing protocols—as if answering prayer is equivalent to card-guessing experiments.

## In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son

This is one of the more sophisticated arguments for cessationism:

<https://bible.org/article/hebrews-23-4-and-sign-gifts>

I have reservations about one of his arguments:

Yes, this seems to be the case. Does this mean that the sign gifts continued to exist for second-generation Christians? Not exactly. Three careful distinctions need to be made: (1) God bore witness with someone (the sun-prefix on sunepimarturo'nto" implies this) "to us." The only option is "those who heard"--thus, eyewitnesses. Thus, these believers were recipients or observers of such sign gifts; they were not performers of them. The eyewitnesses seem to be the only ones implied here who exercised such gifts. This, in itself, may well imply that the sign gifts lasted only through the first generation of Christians: once the eyewitnesses were dead, so were these gifts. (2) The aorist indicative ejbebaiwvqh loses much of its punch if the author intends to mean that these gifts continue.<sup>1</sup> He so links the confirmation to the eyewitnesses--and the proof of such confirmation by the sign gifts--that to argue the continued use of such gifts seems to fly in the face of the whole context. If such gifts continued, the author missed a great opportunity to seal his argument against defection. He could have simply said: "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which was . . . confirmed to us by those who heard and is still confirmed among

us while God bears witness with signs . . .” By way of contrast, note Gal 3:5 (written when the miraculous was still taking place; two present participles are used): “Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?” (RSV) This contrast is significant: The author of Hebrews, who is so articulate a defender of his position, lost a perfect opportunity to remind his audience of the reality of their salvation by not mentioning the current manifestation of the sign gifts. That is, unless such were no longer taking place. Though an argument from silence, I think the silence is fairly deafening. The sign gifts seem to be on their way out. (3) But what about this confirmation “to us”-- second-generation Christians? I take it that Hebrews was written in the mid 60s (shortly after Paul had died), but that it was written to a long-established Jewish church which was waffling in their faith. If so, then we would expect some of the first-generation believers to have had some contact with them. (Good grief--first-generation folks even have contact with third generation folks at times!) There is no question that some of these folks had witnessed such miracles. There is a rather large question, however, as to whether they had performed them themselves. One simply can't find support for such a view in Hebrew 2:1-4. All in all, Hebrews 2:3-4 seems to involve some solid inferences that the sign gifts had for the most part ceased.<sup>2</sup> Further, it offers equally inferential evidence of the purpose of the sign gifts: to confirm that God was doing something new. The whole argument of Hebrews rests on this assumption: there is a new and final revelation in Jesus Christ (cf. 1:1-2). He is the one to whom the whole OT points; he is the one who is superior to the Aaronic priesthood, to prophets, and to angels. He is indeed God in the flesh.

Is it not remarkable that in this exquisitely argued epistle, the argument turns on Scripture over against experience? The strongest appeal the author makes to the audience's experience is to what they were witnesses to in the past. If the sign gifts continued, shouldn't we expect this author (like Paul in Gal 3:5) to have employed such an argument?

The problem with this argument is twofold:

**i)** There's the artificially narrow classification of the miracles as "sign-gifts." But the Biblical purpose of miracles is not confined to attesting the messenger or the message. For instance, one function of dreams and visions in the Book of Acts is to give the recipient directions regarding where to go next, or where not to go.

**ii)** From my reading of Hebrews, the recipients never doubted the Gospel message—as they construed it. They didn't need additional proof that Jesus was the Messiah. Their error was not regarding the *veracity* of the new covenant, but the *finality* of the new covenant. They seemed to operate with a dual-covenant theology: Jews are saved by the old covenant while gentiles are saved by the new covenant. They failed to acknowledge the fact that the new covenant *supersedes* the old covenant.

An argument from experience wouldn't resolve that question. Rather, that requires an exegetical argument, showing the provisional nature of the old covenant, from the OT itself.

## Is continuationism false by definition?

I'm going to make some comments on this speech:

[http://www.biblebb.com/files/combating\\_charismatic\\_theology.htm](http://www.biblebb.com/files/combating_charismatic_theology.htm)

For the first time ever, multitudes believe that the "signs of the apostles" ([2 Corinthians 12:12](#)) are actually meant for every believer. There are many Charismatics today who will tell you that if you are not seeing miracles and obtaining messages directly from God or speaking in tongues or any of those things-- then if your ministry, in other words, is built on the authority of Scripture alone, apart from any kind of miraculous signs and wonders--according to them, your ministry is lame--you have cut the power out from under your testimony.

I agree with Phil's criticism.

Now again, consider the implications of that claim. Deere and Grudem have, in effect, conceded the entire Cessationist argument. I would say, that whether they will admit it or not, they themselves are Cessationists of sorts. They believe that the true apostolic gifts and miracles have ceased, and they are admitting that what they are claiming today is not the same as the gifts described in the New Testament. That's Cessationism. In other words, modern Charismatics, at least the mainstream, in Grudem's words, "the reliable ones, the legitimate ones," have virtually adopted a Cessationist position. And when pressed on the issue they are forced to admit that the gifts they practice today are lesser gifts than the gifts of the apostolic era.

**i)** This introduces an element of equivocation into Phil's analysis. Assuming that these are "lesser gifts," does that render them nonmiraculous?

**ii)** Moreover, why is it necessary to *predict* what kinds of miracles may or may not occur in the course of church history? Why do we have to stake out a position on that in advance of the facts? Why can't we take a wait-and-see attitude? Is that something we need to *prescribe* ahead of time? Why can't we *discover* what God is prepared to do?

Above all, despite all the fanciful and unsubstantiated legends that have been circulated, despite the vast numbers of Charismatics who claim the ability to do even greater works than Jesus Himself, there is not one single, credible, verifiable case of a Charismatic miracle worker who could raise the dead.

Why should raising the dead be the litmus test? After all, Scripture contains many miracles which fall short (as it were) of raising the dead.

The truth is that even in Scripture there are very few miracles comparatively. There is ample evidence that miracles were extraordinarily rare events, always associated with people who spoke inspired and infallible utterances.

What about the Egyptian sorcerers (Exod 7-8)? What about the witch of Endor (1 Sam 28)? What about the fortune-teller ([Acts 16:16-18](#))?

Let me make one more distinction: There are two kinds of miracles noted in Scripture. 1. Some are remarkable works of God apart from any human agency...unilateral miracles, mighty works of God alone. 2. The other kind of miracle involves a human agent, who from the human perspective is the instrument through which the



miracle comes...miracles that are done through some kind of human agency.

I agree with Phil that there are examples which fit this distinction—although I don't think Phil's illustrations are good examples. A better example would be raising Lazarus from the dead.

However, there are also examples where Phil's distinction breaks down.

Suppose you pray for a friend or relative with terminal cancer. Suppose his cancer disappears overnight. Assuming that God healed him in answer to your prayer, is that a case of God working *apart* from human agency? Wasn't God working *through* you? Wasn't your prayer instrumental to the outcome. Suppose, absent your intercessory prayer, that your friend or relative was bound to die?

For example, when Christ was crucified there was darkness over all the earth for three hours--that fits our definition of a miracle. It was an extraordinary work of God; it overrode the natural order of things--it was a miracle. Other examples where God unilaterally intervened or where miraculous events happened apart from any human agency would include the destruction of Sodom, when brimstone and fire rained down from heaven--I believe that was a miracle. The flood in Noah's time, when it rained forty days and forty nights and flooded the entire earth. I don't think we need to seek a natural explanation for that--it was a miracle. Those were undeniably miraculous events, they were not acts of providence because they overturned the natural order of things. And in all the examples I just cited, God did the miracle apart from any prophet or worker of miracles--He did it unilaterally without a human agent.

Phil is conflating two different issues:

**i)** Do these events occur apart from *human* agency?

**ii)** Do these events occur apart from *natural* agency?

Doesn't the Bible attribute the flood waters to natural sources (e.g. rain, "fountains of the deep")? So the flood had "natural" causes. Sure, God was the *ultimate* cause, but that fails to differentiate miracles from providence, as Phil defines it.

Likewise, why assume that God had to "override the natural order of things" to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah? Does Phil think that happened out of the blue? That God created the fire and brimstone *ex nihilo*?

What makes that a miracle? Is *how* it happened what makes it miraculous? Or *when* and *where* it happened? Seems to me that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah could be a natural disaster. What makes it miraculous is the *specificity* of the event. The *selective timing and placement*. This was designed to *single out* Sodom and Gomorrah for punishment—unlike many natural disasters whose distribution appears to be *random*.

And those acts of providence, even extraordinary acts of providence are not miracles, they are not the same as miracles. Now, what is a miracle? Another definition: In a Biblical sense "a miracle is an extraordinary work of God that involves His immediate and unmistakable intervention in the physical realm in a way that contravenes natural processes."

There are many problems with this definition:

**i)** There's the risk of special pleading. Phil is saying that, *by definition*, continuationism is false. His definition acts as a filter to preemptively exclude continuationism.

But in that event, he's not beginning with the Bible. He's beginning with continuationism, then devising a definition which is custom-made to rule out continuationism. It's an artificial definition. To take a comparison, consider how atheists try to incorporate methodological naturalism into their definition of science.

**ii)** Moreover, the Bible doesn't actually define miracles. Rather, the Bible gives paradigm-cases of miracles. The Bible describes certain events which the reader is inclined to identify as "miraculous." At most, Scripture gives us the raw materials for an *ostensible* definition of miracles. We try to define miracles by abstraction for those examples.

Take the ten plagues of Egypt. Scripture treats that as a paradigm-case of the miraculous. Yet a number of the plagues could utilize natural forces. What makes them miraculous is not that God acted "immediately," in a way that "contravenes natural processes," but the *targeted* quality of the event. Moses threatens a natural disaster. Pharaoh ignores the threat. The threatened event then occurs right on schedule.

We need to distinguish between inanimate forces that operate *automatically*, and events which involve natural forces, but are specially *guided* by a superior intelligence. What makes some natural disasters divine judgments is the *directional* aspect of the event—like *aiming* a gun. They reflect rational *discretion*—unlike ordinary natural disasters, which are *indiscriminate*.

**iii)** Phil's definition assumes a hard-edged distinction between natural and supernatural events. But that's basically a Humean definition. It's essential to atheism to demarcate nature from supernature. For instance, in atheism, angels would be supernatural entities. But in Scripture, angels are natural entities in the sense that

angels are creatures. As creatures, they belong to the natural order. The only categorical distinction in Scripture is between God and creatures.

**iv)** This, in turn, raises the question of whether certain "miraculous" or paranormal abilities are natural or supernatural. For instance, angels "naturally" have certain abilities that humans lack. If a human did it, we might consider that "supernatural"—but if an angel did it, that would be natural *for an angel*.

**v)** Phil's definition fails to make allowance for coincidence miracles:

Coincidences like this reported by Weaver (1963) undoubtedly occur but do they call for any special explanation? Are they in any sense miraculous? Clearly they do not contravene any law of nature so there is no question of a conflict with science and so in that sense, at least, they are not miracles. But are they so improbable that some agency outside the normal working of nature must be invoked to explain them?

Of a rather different kind is the following coincidence reported by Koestler (1972) and retold by Inglis (199) related to a young architect who in 1971 narrowly escaped death when attempting suicide by throwing himself in front of a London underground train. It turned out that a passenger on the train had pulled the emergency handle just in time to avert disaster. Attempts at suicide in this manner occur from time to time and so do false alarms with the emergency system...Can one argue in this case that because the conjunction of the two events was so highly unlikely to have occurred by chance that some other agent must have been at work? Did some external being or force act at that moment to stop the train through the

agency of the passenger who operated the braking system? The short answer, of course, is that we do not and, perhaps, cannot know. But if it could be shown that such events occurred more frequently than one would expect "by chance" there would be good grounds for believing that there was something "going on".

The question for us is whether such happenings can be accommodated within the scientific worldview and, if not, whether they are indicative of an unseen hand at work. On the face of it "significant" coincidences such as the train incident appear to be ideal candidates for miracles in the sense that C. S. Lewis defined them for they seem to point to the hand of a divine agent operating within the framework of natural law.

In order to get our thinking clear it may help to begin with the definition with which Diaconis and Mosteller (1989) begin their discussion of coincidences:

*A coincidence is a surprising concurrence of events, perceived as meaningfully related, with no apparent causal connection.*

Notice the inclusion of the phrase "meaningfully related" which sharpens the focus to those events which might call for some extra-scientific explanation.

The notion of coincidence is analyzed from a philosophical point of view by Owens (1992). According to him, a coincidence arises when the events involved result from independent causal chains. The separate events thus have causes but, because of the independence, there is no explanation for their coincidence. In the cases of interest to us there is an apparent dependence between the causal chains involved—due to God's alleged action—and we are

concerned with whether probability arguments can help us determine whether it is real.

Before we leave the subject of coincidences there is one closely related kind of event in which believers have a special interest. This concerns alleged answers to prayer. If someone prays for the healing of another and if at that time a change in the patient's condition occurs it is natural to conclude that the prayer was instrumental in effecting the cure. If it was not, then the coincidence between the two events in time is very remarkable. Now such coincidences have occurred very often in the realm of healing and elsewhere.

Archibishop William's Temple's reported remark that "When I pray coincidences happen; when I don't, they don't," may not be based on the counting of cases but does reflect a common experience. D.

Barthlowmew, *Uncertain Belief* (Oxford 2000), chap. 4.

## Skeptical cessationism

I'm going to comment on this post, by my friend, Fred Butler:

<http://hipandthigh.wordpress.com/2013/07/28/why-wont-faith-healers-heal-amputees/>

Knowing Dan like I do, I would imagine he has read much. He has to have had, or his tweet is pointless. I too have read many accounts of modern miracles. I find them to be mostly hearsay and apocryphal.

What's his source of information? Who has he read?

More to the point, however: if modern day faith healers are genuinely healing people like they claim, then documentation would be easy to confirm. We would know someone with a serious spinal cord injury and atrophied limbs who would be completely restored. Individuals like that would be identifiable and people would testify as to their testimony. None ever come forth.

Fred's denial begs the question. Once again, what is his source of information?

The problem is that both Fred and Dan are guilty of hasty generalizations—a classic informal fallacy.

That's exactly the point. Miracles on that level done by men who were supernaturally gifted to perform them, were rare. That is unlike the claim of modern charismatics who insist they are happening all the time all over the world.

Fred and Dan are picking on easy targets. Now, there's a place for that. It's good to expose popular charlatans like Benny Hinn, Peter Popoff, Kenneth Hagin, Robert Tilton, &c.

However, that no more disproves the existence of genuine healers than false prophets disprove the existence of true prophets. Dan is using a standard which will easily circle back and bite things that he himself believes in.

Not sure what Steve means here. Certainly he isn't suggesting those individuals were NOT dead. Or maybe mostly dead?

If you're demanding modern medical documentation, then I doubt Dorcus or Eutychus would count (or the daughter of Jairus, or the widow's son). It would be easy to say, "How do we know they were really dead?" It's not like an EKG or EEG was performed. Take cases of people who wake up in the morgue. Heck, you can be skeptical about Lazarus. After all, people can survive for four days without food and water. So that raises the question of whether Dan is using consistent criteria.

But Stephen did miracles.

That misses the point. For Dan, evidence for miracles in general is insufficient. He's specifying a particular type of miracle. Unless the individual performs a particular type of miracle (e.g. "resurrecting" the dead), then you can dismiss evidence of other miracles. That's the classic "Why won't God heal amputees?" criterion of secular debunkers.

Raising the dead was only one of many abilities that Christ invested into His apostles, and by extension,



those Christians associated by the apostles after the apostles laid hands on them. Their ability to do any miracle, particularly heal the lame and incurably sick, is suggested by the NT documents, especially when Christ sent the 12 out among the people in Matthew 10.

The disciples failed to heal the deaf-mute demoniac (Mt 17:14-20).

I can't speak for Dan, but I figure we are pretty like-minded in this area, so I'll go ahead and answer for him. Peter and Paul healed people because Jesus delegated to His apostles such abilities. See again Matthew 10. So yes, they could heal anyone at will, and did so on a number of occasions in Acts.

The problem with the delegation model is that we are shortsighted creatures. Human lives have ripple effects. Suppose you're a faith-healer who can heal anyone you choose. Suppose you heal a teenager with terminal cancer. Suppose he celebrates by getting drunk, driving home, and accidentally killing a pedestrian while he's under the influence.

Seriously? Dan's "taunt" is different in that Dan believes in the God of Scripture and the holy testimony of written Scripture. He is not attempting to disprove God's existence, nor His ability to perform miracles ala' Randi and other anti-theist in their war against God.

Dan is using the same kinds of arguments.

Dan is merely challenging the assertion of modern continuationists who insist the spiritual gifts of the NT era, especially miraculous healing by the hands of

gifted individuals, continue today in the 21st century at the same level of quantity and quality that were performed by Jesus and His immediate followers.

No, Dan is doing more than that. Dan is a hardline cessationist. Therefore, he is committed, a priori, to dismissing every miracle attributed to a faith-healer.

The reality, however, is that they are not. I don't have to read Craig Keener's book on the subject or any of the others listed in the comments under Steve's original post. IF a person with the gift of healing laid hands on an amputee, that amputee should have his or her missing limbs fully restored. Family and friends who knew the person before his or her healing could easily document with pictures and personal testimony that person had no right arm for 10 years after an automobile accident and such-and-such Christian with the gift of healing laid hands on the person and the arm was fully restored and usable without physical therapy. Rather than asking "why won't God heal amputees?" a better question should be asked, "Why won't people with the gift of healing heal amputees?" Both Dan and I believe God can heal amputees if He so chose to do so. The point of contention is with individuals who claim they can if they chose to do so and say they do in spite of the overwhelming evidence against them.

Once again, Fred and Dan are guilty of overgeneralizing. They are resorting to the same evidentiary standard as secular skeptics who treat lack of evidence as equivalent to counterevidence. By that standard, unless God answers *every* prayer, there's no evidence that God answers *any* prayer. Apparent answers are dismissed as lucky coincidence.

Secular skeptics routinely discount positive evidence for miracles by drawing attention to all the cases in which a miracle didn't happen, then acting as if the absence of evidence in some cases cancels out the presence of evidence in other cases. They elevate lack of evidence to contrary evidence, which they oppose to positive evidence.

Never thank God if you survive an accident, for what about all the accident victims who didn't make it? God had nothing to do with it. You just got lucky. Odds are, some people naturally survive accidents. Odds are, some cancer patients go into spontaneous remission. Odds are, it was bound to rain on someone's farm. That's statistical, not miraculous. Take your chances.

That's exactly the point. Miracles on that level done by men who were supernaturally gifted to perform them, were rare. That is unlike the claim of modern charismatics who insist they are happening all the time all over the world.

I can't speak for Dan, but I figure we are pretty like-minded in this area, so I'll go ahead and answer for him. Peter and Paul healed people because Jesus delegated to His apostles such abilities. See again Matthew 10. So yes, they could heal anyone at will, and did so on a number of occasions in Acts.

**i)** How does Fred's first statement regarding the rarity of miracles cohere with his second statement that they could heal anyone at will?

**ii)** Likewise, if they could heal anyone at will, why didn't Paul heal Trophimus (2 Tim 4:20)?

## The charismata

Since the issue of cessationism/continuationism has cropped up in the combox, I'm going to briefly revisit the issue.

We should begin with some definitions. I'd distinguish between strong cessationism and moderate cessationism. (These are my own definitions.) Strong cessationism is the view that divine miracles were tied to the era of public revelation. They ceased with the death of the apostles. God doesn't perform miracles in the post-apostolic church age.

That might strike some readers as quite extreme. Indeed, that might strike some readers as a straw man.

However, this isn't a purely hypothetical position. For instance, the late Francis Nigel Lee was a learned proponent of this position. And he classifies B. B. Warfield as a proponent of this position, but I find Warfield's position ambivalent. A classic exponent of this position was Conyers Middleton.

Although this might strike modern readers as a fringe position, it's my impression that strong cessationism was fairly typical among past Protestant writers. It's related to the traditional polemic against Rome.

One of the stock arguments for Roman Catholicism is the argument from miracles. Rome claims to be the "church of miracles."

A straightforward way for Protestant apologists to undercut that claim was to adopt strong cessationism. To simply deny

any appeal to ecclesiastical miracles on the grounds that God doesn't perform modern miracles.

BTW, it's quite possible that Middleton was a closet Deist who cloaked his Deism in traditional rhetoric against ecclesiastical miracles. Deism was politically risky, so one way of arguing for Deism without tipping your hand would be to use the Church of Rome as your foil. That tactic had unimpeachable theological credentials. It would give you cover.

More common today is what I'll call moderate cessationism. In the nature of the case, this isn't quite as clear-cut as strong cessationism. One way of drawing the distinction is to evoke Warfield's distinction between a miracle-working *church* and a miracle-working *God*. Cf. **COUNTERFEIT MIRACLES**, 58.

As Warfield goes on to state:

All Christians believe in healing in answer to prayer. Those who assert that this healing is wrought in a specifically miraculous manner, need better evidence for their peculiar view than such as fits in equally well with the general Christian faith (ibid. 187).

First of all, as regards the status quaestionis, let it be remembered that the question is not: (1) Whether God is an answerer of prayer; nor (2) whether, in answer to prayer, He heals the sick; nor (3) whether His action in healing the sick is a supernatural act; nor (4) whether the supernaturalness of the act may be so apparent as to demonstrate God's activity in it to all right-thinking minds conversant with the facts. All this we all believe.

The question at issue is distinctly whether God has pledged Himself to heal the sick miraculously, and does heal them miraculously, on the call of His children—that is to say without means—any means—apart from means, and above means; and this so ordinarily that Christian people may be encouraged, if not required, to discard all means as either unnecessary or even a mark of lack of faith and sinful distrust, and to depend on God alone for the healing of all their sicknesses (ibid. 192-93).

However, this still leaves his position somewhat obscure. He seems to distinguish between divine, supernatural healing, on the one hand, and miraculous healing (defined by healing apart from medical means), on the other hand.

I take it that he's alluding to the traditional distinction between miracle and providence. If God heals someone in answer to prayer, but utilizes medical science, this is still divine, supernatural healing in these sense that providence is divine and supernatural. But that's distinct from "miraculous" healing, in the sense of healing "apart from" or "above" medical intervention.

So it's unclear whether Warfield is open to the possibility of miraculous healing in the modern age. Is he opposing the notion that miraculous healing should be our default setting? That we should count on God to heal us miraculously? That that's the norm? Or is he opposing miraculous healing in toto?

Cessationists typically oppose the continuation of the "spiritual gifts" or "sign-gifts." The charismata listed in 1 Cor 12, viz. tongues, prophecy, healing, miracles. On a related note, they typically oppose exorcism or "deliverance" ministries.

Warfield conveniently categorizes the spiritual gifts as miracles of healing, miracles of power, miracles of knowledge, and miracles of speech (ibid. 5).

Tied to both strong and moderate cessationism is the view that the overriding purpose of the charismata was to attest the apostolic kerygma.

An oddity of Warfield's position is that it seems to make allowance for miracles outside the church, yet it removes miracles from the community of faith. But isn't the praying, believing community the natural environment in which God does wonders for his people?

This is perhaps understandable as a hangover from the polemic against Rome, but it's peculiar to think God might miraculously heal a Christian in a hospital, but exclude healing in a more religious setting, like Jas 5:15-16.

In defense of Warfield, Roman Catholicism lies in the background. For instance, exorcism is traditionally a church office. Minor orders. Spiritual gifts are channeled through the clergy. Warfield was right to oppose that ecclesiastical paradigm.

BTW, some people also think Warfield's antipathy to "faith-healers" was influenced by personal experience. When they were hiking in the mountains on their honeymoon, Warfield's newlywed wife was struck by lightning. This did permanent damage to her nervous system, leaving her an invalid or semi-invalid for the rest of her life. From what I've read, her condition went from bad to worse.

In addition, they had a childless marriage. I assume this meant they abstained from conjugal relations because they

didn't think she was up to the physical demands of maternity.

This was a great hardship on both of them. And it's possible that Warfield personally resented slick faith-healers, given his wife's pitiful condition, and his own deprivations.

Cessationist opposition to the charismata tends to focus on just a few of the gifts. Moreover, it's my impression that the emphasis has shifted somewhat over the years. Cessationist literature used to target glossolalia, but nowadays cessationist literature is more likely to target prophecy.

I think there are historical reasons for the shift. On the one hand, Pentecostalism fixates on glossolalia. Every Christian is supposed to speak in tongues. That's the gateway gift to other gifts. Spirit-baptism is a post-conversion experience, signified by glossolalia. Speaking in tongues is also prevalent in Pentecostal circles because it's far easier to fake glossolalia than it is to fake the gift of prophecy, healing, or other miracles.

So it was natural for early critics of Pentecostalism to focus on tongues. However, the charismatic movement has broadened over the years.

Nowadays, I think the emphasis has shifted from tongues to prophecy because prophecy is more theologically significant than tongues. Cessationists view modern prophecy as a threat to the authority and sufficiency of Scripture.

Charismatic writers are often sensitive to this charge. One way they deflect the charge is to distinguish between canonical prophecy, which is infallible—and the NT “gift of prophecy,” which is fallible. There are some Jewish



precedents for that distinction. Cf. D. Aune, **PROPHECY IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY AND THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN WORLD** (Wipf & Stock 2003); C. Keener, "5. The Nature of Prophecy," **ACTS: AN EXEGETICAL COMMENTARY: INTRODUCTION AND 1:1-2:47** (Baker 2012), 902-908. They also cite examples of what they take to be fallible Christian prophets in Acts 21:4,11.

Cessationists counter on various grounds. What's the point of fallible prophecy? Isn't that innately unreliable?

There's some merit to that objection. However, prophecy doesn't have to be prospectively edifying to be retrospectively edifying. Even if you don't act on it, if it comes true, that's something you can appreciate after the fact.

O. P. Robertson raises another objection:

So what impact will this ambiguity have on the Christian's peace of mind? Can a person's conscience remain guilt-free when he deliberately chooses to disobey a prophetic declaration addressed specifically to him, knowing that the prophet's directions very likely are based on a revelation from God about his concrete situation? **THE FINAL WORD** (Banner of Truth 2004), 123.

This objection is ironic, for we have a NT illustration of that very thing: Paul blithely disregards a "prophetic" warning (Acts 20:22).

There's also a tendentious assumption built into Robertson's objection. We don't know that the "prophet's directions very likely are based on a revelation from God."

There's a basic difference between the level of confidence I might place in a premonition *I* had, and the (alleged) premonition of a *second* party, precisely because *his* experience isn't *my* experience. I'm not directly privy to what he saw, *thought* he saw, or *said* he saw.

Robertson raises an additional objection:

It is now appropriate to consider a central OT passage that has significance for understanding the phenomenon of prophecy as it appears in the NT. The classic "prophecy about prophecy" in Joel 2 links the OT experience with the NT phenomenon.

Joel uses the identical term for "prophecy" found throughout the rest of the OT. Does this word suddenly have a new meaning? Is Joel expecting a different kind of prophecy from that described in the foundational passages already considered?...No. Joel draws on the passage in Num 12 which so clearly describes the origin of prophetism in the days of Moses.

So what did Joel expect? What would be the experience of God's people with respect to prophecy in the future? Joel predicted a widespread manifestation of prophetic revelation in the future. The consummation of the ages would be accompanied by extensive revelatory experiences (ibid. 11-12).

**i)** It seems to be that Robertson's appeal to Joel vis-à-vis Acts backfires. Surely the scope of this prophetic promise, which deliberately cuts across demographic boundaries

(age, gender social class), in implicit contrast to the more restrictive scope of OT prophetism, directly undercuts his attempt to confine prophecy to canonical prophecy. The referents are hardly limited to apostles or NT writers.

**ii)** Robertson also fails to draw two crucial, interrelated distinctions:

**a)** This isn't talking about propositional revelation, but visionary revelation. Nonverbal rather than verbal revelation.

**b)** Visionary revelation also subdivides into theorematic revelation, which is representational—and allegorical revelation, which is symbolic. Allegorical visions are inherently ambiguous. That's why, in Scripture, visionary revelation (especially allegorical dreams and visions) are frequently accompanied by propositional revelation. Inspired interpretation to explain the inspired dream or vision.

The meaning of an allegorical dream may also be clarified by its realization. Suddenly you see how it all falls into place. But, of course, that's hindsight rather than foresight.

Absent that, it's easy to see how a Christian prophet or his listeners could misconstrue the dream or vision. And that, of itself, furnishes a principled distinction between infallible canonical revelation and a fallible gift of prophecy.

A lot also depends on content. For instance, a mark of false prophecy is if it contradicts prior revelation.

My own position on modern miracles, healing, and prophecy is that God is unpredictable. We need to take a wait-and-see attitude. We shouldn't expect God to act miraculously in

any given situation, and we shouldn't expect him not to act miraculously in any given situation. To that degree, I disagree with charismatics and cessationists alike. I don't think there's a presumption one way or the other. I don't think we can anticipate God's next move in that respect. God takes the initiative.

Up to a point I think it's good for both sides to make their best exegetical case. That said, I don't think this is one of those issues we need to debate to death. Every issue can't be resolved by trading arguments and counterarguments.

It's like weather forecasting. Will it rain tomorrow? There are probabilistic methods of predicting the weather, with varying degrees of success. Or you can just wait until tomorrow and find out for yourself.

On some issues, our only real source of knowledge is divine revelation. Take the eternal fate of the lost. Even if there are veridical NDEs, even if there are real ghosts, that doesn't give us any long-term information about the afterlife.

But the situation is different with the charismatic/cessationist debate. If charismatics are right, that should have real-world consequences. If charismatics are wrong, that should have real-world consequences. If cessationists are right, that should have real-world consequences. If cessationists are wrong, that should have real-world consequences.

Both positions, as well as their negations, should be evidentially distinguishable. Have observable implications.

If God's intentions are what charismatics claim, that should be manifest. Same thing in reverse for cessationists.

And each position has potential downsides in case you're wrong. If you're a cessationist, and that's wrong, you run the risk of living like an atheist. Acting as if God ceased to exist 2000 years ago. In practice, it makes no difference if God does or doesn't exist. You live your life the same way. The uniformity of nature. A closed causal continuum.

If you're a charismatic, and you're wrong, you run the risk of being easily duped and easily disillusioned. Nursing false expectations. Trusting charlatans. Making important decisions based on dumb luck or imaginary leadings. Straining to hear God's faint voice or squinting to see a divine sign. Blowing real opportunities in a futile quest for manna from heaven.

Admittedly, I'm just scratching the surface in this post. I've discussed related issues on other occasions. Here's my general position on Christian prophecy:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2012/07/dreams-and-visions.html>

Here's my general position on the occult and the paranormal:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/02/bell-book-candle.html>

And here's my general position on Catholic miracles:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2007/01/miracle-of-sun.html>

## Undeniable exorcisms

Fred Butler But could they deny it? The Pharisees didn't believe Jesus miracles, but they couldn't deny them.

That's very revealing. Fred's usual schtick is amputees. But what kind of miracle is Fred referring to in this instance? Presumably, he's alluding to this incident:

*22 Then a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute was brought to him, and he healed him, so that the man spoke and saw. 23 And all the people were amazed, and said, "Can this be the Son of David?" 24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons" (Mt 12:22-24).*

The Pharisees don't deny it. They can't deny it. So they try to discredit the miracle by reassigning the cause. Instead of attributing the miracle to divine agency, they attribute the miracle to Satanic agency.

But notice the kind of miracle which this account narrates. It's not Jesus healing amputees, but Jesus casting out demons.

Is it Fred's position that exorcism is an undeniable miracle? A "NT quality miracle?" That's what his appeal to Mt 12:22:24 commits him to.

But by that logic, if some modern-day Christians perform successful exorcisms, then that would meet Fred's criterion. That would prove continuationism and disprove cessationism.

## NT quality miracles

Fred Butler I guarantee none of them have witnessed a NT quality miracle. Amputees having limbs restored & quadriplegics restored. None of them. But restoring limbs was a regular work of Christ along w/ restoring sight & hearing. Why doesn't it happen now? The same with amputees. Jesus healed amputees in Mt 15. Any Iraqi veterans having limbs restored? Why not?

There are numerous problems with Fred's argument;

**i)** Why does he set the bar at "NT quality miracles" rather than Biblical quality miracles? Why doesn't he include OT miracles in his standard of comparison?

**ii)** Does Mt 15 say Jesus healed amputees? As various scholars have pointed out, the terminology in 15:30-31 is influenced by OT usage. The text alludes to Isa 35:5-6. And Nolland, in his standard commentary on the Greek text (639-40), makes a case for taking "maimed" as an allusion to Zech 11:16. In that event, the meaning is colored by OT usage. Moreover, the genre is poetic. Figurative usage, which plays on the shepherd/sheep metaphor. So Fred's interpretation is linguistically dubious.

**iii)** Moreover, appealing to Mt 15 falls short of showing that restoring limbs was a "regular" work of Christ.

BTW, Jesus still exists. He rose from the dead and ascended to the Father. He's quite capable of healing at a distance. Yet by Fred's lights, he hasn't regularly healed amputees for the past 2000 years. So where does that leave Fred's comparison?



**iv)** Furthermore, his argument either proves too much or too little. Notice that Fred confines his appeal to Christ rather than the Apostles. He doesn't quote any examples of apostles healing amputees. But if restoring amputees is a litmus test of a true healer, then by his own yardstick, the apostles were charlatans. At least, we have no record of their healing amputees. So we can't presume that they did so, in the absence of any textual evidence to that effect. In that event, how can we hold contemporary Christians to a higher standard than the Apostles?

**v)** Finally, there's the problem of what constitutes a "NT quality miracle." Is the draught of fish a NT quality miracle? Is dispelling the fever of Peter's mother-in-law a NT quality miracle? Is the coin in the fish's mouth a NT miracle. Is exorcism a NT quality miracle?

## Praying for amputees

Fred Butler So you would pray that an Iraqi war veteran would have his limbs restored fully? Lay hands on him to that end?

**i)** I don't know the point of Fred's question. Is he suggesting that Christians shouldn't pray for physical healing? Is he suggesting it's wrong to pray for the physical restoration of an amputee?

Speaking for myself, I don't see why we shouldn't pray for that. Whether or not God grants the request, there's nothing wrong with praying for that—since we don't know ahead of time what God is prepared to do.

**ii)** By the way, I've encountered MacArthurites who deny that answers to prayer are ever miraculous. If you pray for someone dying of cancer and he recovers, that's "providential" rather than miraculous.

Is that Fred's position? If so, he can't say God no longer performs that kind of miracle in answer to prayer, if MacArthurites don't even classify that as a miracle.

Fred Butler James 5:13-14 is abt restoring a sinner to fellowship (sickness due to their sin).

**i)** I'm not clear on Fred's answer. Do elders at Grace Community church refuse to obey Jas 5:13-14?

**ii)** Is Fred saying Jas 5:13-14 is about restoring a sinner to fellowship rather than physical healing? Is it merely about confession and forgiveness rather than a prayer for healing?

Fred Butler If God were doing the miracles today as you say, it would be evident to all his people.

**i)** So Fred admits that MacArthurites do judge continuationism by experience. Yet they chide charismatics for judging continuationism by experience. Why the double standard?

**ii)** How evident would miracles be? For instance, there's credible evidence that Joy Davidman went into remission when an Anglican priest laid hands on her and prayed for her. However, that's only public knowledge because she was the wife of a famous Christian. And even then, I daresay many Christians don't know about it because they aren't into C. S. Lewis.

Dan Phillips Dude, happens all th time. In Africa, or like the Australian bush. 23 feet beyond camera-shot.  
Daily!

Or like the reported miracles in the Sinai desert. Or like the reported temptation of Christ in the wilderness. Why is Dan Phillips the dummy to Carl Sagan's ventriloquist?

## Sacerdotal cessationism

Cessationism takes the position that the charismata were sign-gifts designed to validate the divine mission and message of the apostles. As such, they had a built-in expiration date.

One obvious problem with that argument is that NT miracles aren't confined to apostles. However, cessationists have a fallback argument. They say the charismata were transmitted by the apostles through the imposition of hands. Therefore, even if the charismata weren't the unique possession of the apostles, they were uniquely linked to the apostles.

If sound, this argument has an additional advantage of giving an approximate cutoff date for the charismata. The charismata passed away when the apostles or their immediate disciples passed away.

Cessationists like to cite Acts 8 as a proof-text for transmission of the charismata through the apostolic imposition of hands. But there are several problems with appeal. I've dealt with some of them before, now I'll mention a few more:

**i)** If the case of the Samaritans ([Acts 8:14-17](#)) demonstrates that possession of the charismata was contingent on the apostolic imposition of hands, then the case of Cornelius ([Acts 10:44-47](#)) demonstrates that possession of the charismata was not contingent on the apostolic imposition of hands. There is no standardized pattern in Acts.

**ii)** But there's a deeper problem. Acts is concerned, not with the reception of the spiritual gifts, but reception of the

Spirit himself. Not gifts of the Spirit, but the gift of the Spirit. Not the gifts, but the Giver. For the gifts are contained in the Giver.

If, however, reception of the Spirit is contingent on the apostolic imposition of hands, then no Christian in the last 1900 years has the Holy Spirit.

Cessationists try to split the difference by saying the spiritual gifts are contingent on the apostolic imposition of hands. But in Luke, the spiritual gifts are conferred indirectly by the gift of the Spirit. In Lukan theology, you can't say reception of the Spirit is independent of the apostles while reception of the spiritual gifts is dependent on the apostles.

**iii)** The only alternative would be for cessationists to adopt sacerdotalism, where reception of the Spirit is mediated through the priesthood, who, as lineal successors to the apostles, transmit the gift. And, of course, you have variations on that model in Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. The apostles laid hands on their disciples, who, in turn, laid hands on their disciples, all down the line (or so goes the argument).

**iv)** There's yet another problem. As one arch cessationist contends:

Using narrative literature as a basis for doctrine is precarious for a variety of reasons.

<http://www.tms.edu/tmsj/tmsj14k.pdf>

If, however, the genre of Acts is unsuitable to proof-text continuationism, then by the same token, that's equally unsuitable to proof-text cessationism. It's a double-edged sword, slicing away Acts 8 as well as Acts 2.

**v)** His argument is worth considering in its own right. In fairness to Thomas, it's true that you must be careful about deriving doctrine from historical narratives. You can't simply convert descriptions into prescriptions or proscriptions.

However, his argument is overstated. There's such a thing as narrative theology. Most Biblical teaching is narrational. It teaches more by way of showing rather than saying. The teaching method is oblique. But I hope Thomas doesn't take the position that the Gospels are a poor source of Christology. We can learn a lot about the person and work of Christ from the Gospels. Indeed, they were written with that express purpose. Scholars like Leland Ryken and Meir Sternberg present sophisticated guidelines for interpreting narrative theology.

Moreover, Acts isn't simply a description of events. It includes speeches, prophecies, commands, &c.

**vi)** Finally, as long as we're on the subject of contradictory arguments, here are two more:

On the one hand, Sam Waldron (in his debate with Michael Brown) defines a spiritual gift as "the ongoing possession of a miraculous ability with repeated manifestations."

This is a convenient weapon in the cessationist arsenal. It enables the cessationist to summarily discredit a healer unless the healer cures everyone who comes to him. Doesn't matter how often he succeeds. One failure nixes his credentials as a bona fide healer.

On the other hand, a fellow cessationist has said:

For instance, Paul healed multitudes ([Acts 19:11-12](#)), but couldn't heal himself ([Gal 4:13](#)), Epaphroditus ([Phil 2:25-30](#)), or Trophimus ([2 Tim 4:20](#)). That would also explain why Paul did not direct Timothy ([1 Tim 5:23](#)) to a person with this gift. Someone who had exercised it

on one occasion would have no reason to suspect that it would be manifested again.

<http://www.tms.edu/tmsj/tmsj14j.pdf>

But these two positions can't both be true. You can't simultaneously say a true healer has the ability to heal everyone at will and then cite Paul's inability to heal everyone, even though Paul was certainly a healer, as evidence that the gift of healing was fading away.

This is a problem when people begin with their conclusion, then cast about for supporting arguments. They use opposing arguments to support the same conclusion. As long as both arguments support a common conclusion, even though they contradict each other, the proponent ignores the incoherence.

# For further reading

---



James N. Anderson, **DAVID HUME** (P&R 2019)

Robert Larmer, **THE LEGITIMACY OF MIRACLE** (Lexington Books, 2013)

Robert Larmer, **DIALOGUES ON MIRACLE** (Wipf & Stock, 2015)

Craig Keener, **MIRACLES: THE CREDIBILITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT ACCOUNTS**, 2 vols. (Baker, 2011)

J.D. King, **REGENERATION: A COMPLETE HISTORY OF HEALING IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH** (Lee's Summit, mo, Christos, 2017).  
Volume i, 489 pp., Volume ii, 508 pp., Volume iii, 414 pp.

Phillip Wiebe **VISIONS OF JESUS** (Oxford 1998)

Clyde Kluckhohn, **NAVAHO WITCHCRAFT** (1944)

Edith Turner, **HANDS FEEL IT: HEALING AND SPIRIT PRESENCE AMONG A NORTHERN ALASKAN PEOPLE** (Northern Illinois University Press 1996)

<https://sda.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/media/courses/deist-controversy/lecture-18/>

<https://sda.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/media/courses/great-debate/>

<https://drfrancisyoung.com/2018/06/29/publication-of-a-history-of-anglican-exorcism/>

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/geneveith/2018/11/the-lutheran-approach-to-exorcism/>

<https://billdembski.com/theology-and-religion/the-faces-of-miracles-chapter-1/>

<http://www.premierchristianity.com/Blog/Derren-Brown-wants-to-see-objective-evidence-for-miracles-Challenge-accepted>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/testing-prayer/201203/how-should-prayer-be-studied>

<https://rationalityofaith.wordpress.com/2016/10/30/how-the-17th-c-french-catholic-use-of-pyrrhonian-scepticism-against-calvinism-created-the-french-enlightenment-skeptics/>

<https://rationalityoffaith.wordpress.com/2016/10/30/from-attacking-jansenist-miracles-to-naturalistic-disenchantment-of-history/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/24/opinion/sunday/varieties-of-religious-experience.html>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1550198/pdf/bmjcred00586-0027.pdf>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1550198/>

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/07/01/as-a-psychiatrist-i-diagnose-mental-illness-and-sometimes-demonic-possession/>

<http://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/04/health/exorcism-doctor/index.html>

<http://www.craigkeener.com/exorcism-stories/>

<http://www.craigkeener.com/demon-possession-spiritual-warfare-video-of-craigs-lecture/>

<http://alexanderpruss.blogspot.com/2009/03/some-remarks-on-hume-on-miracles.html>

<http://alexanderpruss.blogspot.com/2015/05/miracles-visible-and-hidden.html>

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2015/01/mission-to-ethiopia.html>

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/12/grand-theft-auto.html>

<http://www.veritas-ucsb.org/library/russell/Miracles.html>