

## IN DEFENSE OF THE SUPERNATURAL

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### The Supernatural: The Existence and Acts of God

One often hears the term 'supernatural' in today's culture. Usually the label is applied to the horror movies about ghosts or demons. Activities such as Ouija Boards and séances are sometimes categorized as supernatural. Some might say that those who practice occult religions such as Witchcraft are engaged with the supernatural. I suggest that these are all misnomers. In the strictest sense, none of these is supernatural. While some may think I am being too much of a stickler here, I have tried over the years to disabuse people of such characterizations. To be sure, something real is happening with these occult events. But the term 'supernatural' is too good of a word to let its special meaning be blurred to the point of inaccuracy.

What then is the nature of the supernatural? Technically, to be supernatural is to be beyond the natural. However, the term 'natural' can have several uses. Sometimes it is used to refer to what usually does or what ought to happen. This use of natural gives rise to the notion of the natural (physical) laws or regularities. It is natural for a young person to feel winded after climbing very many steps but not natural after just one or two. Sometimes it is used in contrast to artificial or designed. Stalagmites are a natural occurrence whereas obelisks are not. The challenge comes when one tries to categorize the actions of spiritual entities such as angels or demons. Certainly angelic or demonic activity is not just another physical law or regularity.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Moreover, I would contend that the activities of angels and demons are not manifestations of some kind of spiritual "law" or "regularity" either. Understanding the spiritual realm this way is the *sine qua non* of occult philosophy. Occultism is a world view of naturalism (though not materialism) in as much as it denies the existence of a transcendent God in the manner in which I will be discussing here. For more on this see Richard G. Howe, "Modern Witchcraft: It May Not Be What You Think," *Christian Research Journal* 25, no. 1 (2005): 12-21,

There is a vast difference between the waters being troubled because of an underground spring and the waters being troubled because of an angel (John 5). Yet to call such events 'supernatural' is to remove the option of having a term uniquely suited to refer to the nature and actions of God.<sup>2</sup>

Exactly what am I trying to preserve in confining the term 'supernatural' to God's nature and activity alone? Philosophically, only God can be said to be beyond nature. There are only two realms within reality, viz., the Creator and the creation. To say something is supernatural is to say that it is beyond the creation. To say that an event is supernatural is to say that the cause of the event is a supernatural entity, i.e., God. This is what is commonly called a miracle. Thus, I would take great exception to the casual use of the term 'miracle' in describing events that evoke awe or wonder. Someone might, for example, refer to the "miracle" of childbirth. I would contend that childbirth is quite natural in as much as the event is caused by the laws of nature and the choices of humans. To be sure, these laws (as well as the humans) are themselves created by God. But if we allow that to be a sufficient condition for calling childbirth a miracle, then all of creation, together with all of its regularities or laws, are miraculous. The term, then, is evacuated of any significance since there would be nothing to which it did not apply. Even if one says that the term 'miracle' applies because it evokes feelings of awe and wonder, this also waters the term 'miracle' down too much.

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available at <http://www.richardghowe.com/ModernWitchcraft.pdf> (accessed 07/12/13) and <http://www.equip.org/articles/modern-witchcraft/> (accessed 07/12/13).

<sup>2</sup> That is why I prefer the term 'paranormal' when referring to demonic activity. Since I would hold that any angelic activity is at the behest of God, perhaps the term 'supernatural' would be fitting for angelic activity such as John 5 with the understanding that the angel is only an agent of the supernatural activity of God. For a defense of the authenticity of John 5:4, both textually as well as theologically, see Zane C. Hodges, "The Angel at Bethesda—John 5:4" *Bibliotheca Sacra* (January-March 1979): 25-39.

As I will explore later on, miracles play the significant role they do in God's program precisely because they are acts of God that are special and rare and carry a message regarding the revelation of God to mankind. The expression 'revelation of God to mankind' amounts to what Christians now refer to as the Bible. Miracles are the way God confirmed His revelation as God spoke to mankind through His prophets, apostles, and ultimately through His Son Jesus Christ.

In this chapter I want to discuss two issues. First, I want to defend that there is something supernatural. To this end, I want to demonstrate that God exists and that He is transcendent to His creation.<sup>3</sup> Because God exists, we can know that miracles are possible. Second, I want to unpack a philosophy, a theology, and an apologetic of miracles as acts of God. This template suggests itself for several reasons. First, the notion of God is prior to the notion of miracle.<sup>4</sup> No event can be consistently deemed a miracle unless one recognizes that there is a God to work the miracle.<sup>5</sup> For our purposes, it is vital to understand specifically the nature of the miraculous as a way of understanding the nature of God's revelation to us through His prophets, apostles, and, ultimately, through His Son, Jesus Christ. It is my contention that God's use of miracles is the

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<sup>3</sup> If a skeptic takes my use of the expression 'His creation' to be tendentious (since, by definition, there can only be a creation if there is a Creator) then he should take me to say that God is transcendent to the universe (taking the universe to mean all that exists other than God).

<sup>4</sup> See my chapter "The Reliability of the New Testament Writers" in this volume for a brief sketch of the relationship of philosophical foundations, the existence of God, and the truth of Christianity vis-à-vis the question of miracles. What I briefly sketch in that chapter I shall unpack in this one.

<sup>5</sup> That is why, in the apologetic system (or method) known as Classical Apologetics, the existence of God must be established first before the specific truths of the Christian faith can be marshaled. Some of the evidences for the truth of Christianity (specifically miracles) only take on their meaning within the context of theism. But it should be noted that this point is one of principle. I do not deny that one could come to believe in the existence of God when confronted with the evidence of a miraculous occurrence (This is what the apologetic system or method of Evidentialism would hold). I only contend that, humanly speaking, one could only do so by reasoning inconsistently. For a discussion about the differences between apologetics systems (although the point I make here about Classical Apologetics is not emphasized in the book) see Steve B. Cowan, gen. ed., *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000). For a very thorough exploration of a number of apologetic systems and their respective proponents see Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *Faith Has Its Reasons: An Integrative Approach to Defending Christianity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2012). It is available as a free download at [http://www.kenboa.org/text\\_resources/free\\_articles](http://www.kenboa.org/text_resources/free_articles) (accessed 07/19/13).

means by which He vindicates His messenger and confirms the message as He reveals Himself to mankind. What is more, one must understand the questions surrounding the nature of miracles to avoid potentially misunderstanding the nature (and truthfulness) of that revelation.

### The Existence of God

The need to establish the existence of God (together with establishing a philosophy, theology, and apologetic of miracles) as a prerequisite to properly understanding the Bible was vividly illustrated to me by a documentary I watched on PBS. On John McLaughlin's television show *One on One*, the Aurelio Professor of Scripture Emerita at Boston University and Distinguished Visiting Professor of Comparative Religion at the Hebrew University Paula Fredriksen<sup>6</sup> together with freelance journalist Jeffrey L. Sheler<sup>7</sup> were discussing the historical Jesus with McLaughlin. When being queried about some particular point surrounding Jesus' virgin birth (and the Hebrew and Greek words utilized in specific verses marshaled to support the doctrine), Fredriksen pointed out that the Jewish Christians were using their Scriptures (what Christians refer to today as the Old Testament) to interpret (my word) or read into (my words) their understanding of who Jesus was. She likened such a procedure to McLaughlin writing a biography of John F. Kennedy by appealing to Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

The parallel is tendentious. Everyone would recognize (which is, of course, why Fredriksen uses the parallel) that there is absolutely no connection between the events surrounding the life of John F. Kennedy and the content of the Shakespearian tragedy. In

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<sup>6</sup> Works by Paula Fredriksen include *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Christ* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* (New York: Vintage, 2000); *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Works by Jeffrey L. Sheler include *Is the Bible True? How Modern Debates and Discoveries Affirm the Essence of the Scriptures*, reprint (New York: HarperOne, 2000) and *Prophet of Purpose: The Life of Rick Warren* (New York: Doubleday, 2009).

contrast, the Jewish Christians believed (whether rightly or wrongly) that their Scriptures were inspired by the Creator God. Further, they believed (whether rightly or wrongly) that these Scriptures prophesied about their coming Messiah and that Jesus was He. It made perfect sense to these Jewish Christians to apply the prophecies of their Scriptures to the life of Jesus. This is true regardless of whether they were right in doing so.

But no scholar with whom I am familiar believes that the writings of Shakespeare are divinely inspired or that they are prophetic about John F. Kennedy. I know of no "Shakespeare religion" that regards his writings to be in any way prophetic. If they did, then the parallel might be justified. But then, the rhetorical force Fredriksen seeks to make by employing the parallel would be evacuated. Since she (seemingly) assumes that the Jewish Scriptures were not inspired by God,<sup>8</sup> it would look to her like the connection between those Scriptures and Jesus is as insubstantial as the connection between *King Lear* and John F. Kennedy.

If she actually (or methodologically) denies God's existence (a stance some in this context would refer to as 'naturalism' or 'methodological naturalism')<sup>9</sup> this will distort her

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<sup>8</sup> Some may argue that Fredriksen may only be employing a weaker assumption, viz., that the Jewish Scriptures are irrelevant to the understanding of who Jesus is, irrespective of whether those Scriptures are inspired. But this cannot be, given the parallel she employs. For surely she is not merely assuming (for the sake of the parallel) that Shakespeare's "King Lear" just, in fact, has nothing to do with John F. Kennedy. Instead, she must be assuming that Shakespeare's "King Lear" *cannot possibly* have anything to do with John F. Kennedy since it was written more than three hundred and fifty years before Kennedy lived. In other words, Fredriksen is assuming (or explicitly claiming) that the Jewish Scriptures are not inspired of God and thus, cannot be prophetic writings (i.e., miracles).

<sup>9</sup> To deny God's existence methodologically is to utilize a particular research or critical thinking method which excludes the possibility (or likelihood) of God's causal activity in accounting for particular events. Thus, one could affirm the existence of God (which Fredriksen may very well do) and yet proceed with a method of research or analysis as if He did not. To be sure, there are many events where no one would try to factor in any causal activity of God. I know of no one who seeks to argue that economic trends somehow involve God's direct intervention (even if he argued that it was providentially superintended). But no one would call this a methodological naturalism. Such a characterization is reserved for those events about which one would find a legitimate debate regarding God's causal relationship to the event. Far from begging the question by insisting that Fredriksen *must* grant God's causal activity, I am suggesting that her method (even if unconscious) begs the question by *excluding the possibility* of God's causal activity. She clearly does not even consider this as an explanatory option.

understanding and interpretation of the data surrounding the life of Jesus. If there is no God (or if she thinks she can weigh in on such matters as virgin births as if there is no God) then miracles (properly so called) are not possible and, thus, Jesus could not have been born of a virgin.

Interestingly, McLaughlin pressed her on the possibility of a virgin birth apart from mythological or technological considerations. She retreated into a stance of skepticism on the matter. After all, how could she (she argued) know whether a virgin birth was actually possible (which would mean it was not myth) without some technological procedures. Her stance here breathes naturalism. This is so because if the God of the Bible does exist then it is entirely possible that miracles can occur. If miracles are possible then it is possible that Jesus was born of a virgin. This, of course, does not prove that He actually was so born. Instead, it shows that such an event is not impossible. Ascertaining whether He actually was born of a virgin will bring in historical and theological issues. Supernaturalism (the opposite of naturalism) does not commit one to affirming every purported miracle account. Whether one is reasonable in accepting such an account will depend upon one's theology of miracles (about which I will have more to say later). But the analysis cannot even get started if one already (either explicitly or implicitly; either consciously or unconsciously) denies the existence of God and the possibility of miracles.

Thus, one can see that the issue of whether these Jewish Christians were warranted in applying their Scriptures to the life of Jesus presupposes whether there is a God and whether such a God can make prophecies that He will fulfill. If one denies (or ignores) the existence of God, then trying to find fulfilled prophecies in sacred Scripture would be ludicrous if not outright meaningless, just as trying to apply *King Lear* to John F. Kennedy would be so. But, the questions of God's existence and nature are philosophical questions, not historical ones (more on

this below). Since Fredriksen denies (or at least ignores) God's existence vis-à-vis these matters, she can only offer what amounts to a completely misleading and irrelevant analogy.

### ***Philosophical Methodology***

I suggest that such biblical skepticism is more widespread (and sometimes more subtle) than some may realize. Some versions of the skepticism arise from a flawed philosophical method. This flawed method might even mask to the skeptic himself and to others the presence (or extent) of his own skepticism. To illustrate, consider the following.

The New Testament contains quite a bit of narrative. Early on one encounters a number of purported miracles. Suppose one was trying to decide whether he believed that the New Testament account of (for example) Jesus walking on the water was historically accurate. It is critical to ask what kind of question this inquiry is. More is present here than the ostensive historical aspect. There are significant philosophical issues that one must confront. Different aspects of reality require different methods of inquiry and tools of analysis.<sup>10</sup> Questions of mathematics require methods of inquiry and tools of analysis appropriate for quantifiable objects. Questions of science (as it is commonly understood) require methods of inquiry and tools of analysis appropriate for physical objects and forces. Questions of history require methods of inquiry and tools of analysis appropriate to historical events.

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<sup>10</sup> The reader should note that this issue is itself a philosophical one. In other words, in the process of making a philosophical point about method, I am making a further philosophical point about the nature of the object to which the method is applied. That there are different aspects to reality and that these different aspects require appropriate tools and methods of inquiry and analysis is a question that philosophy is uniquely qualified to address. We can see here, then, how critical these philosophical issues can be regarding this otherwise concrete question of historical reliability vis-à-vis miracles. For a treatment and remedy (to which I am indebted, in principle, for my analysis here) of how particular philosophical tools and methods have been erroneously employed by ignoring the nature of the aspect of reality under examination (giving rise to a flawed philosophical method), see Étienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience: The Medieval Experience, The Cartesian Experience, the Modern Experience* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999).

Reality has many different aspects besides mathematics, science, and history. There are aspects such as theology, logic, linguistics, ethics, aesthetics, and more. There are the disciplines of sociology, political science, economics, and psychology. Even particular aspects can be further divided. Science can be about the physical objects in as much as they are moving (physics) or in as much as they are living (biology) and more. To be sure, these have elements in common such as the laws of logic and language.<sup>11</sup> But what makes each aspect distinctive requires methods of inquiry and tools of analysis appropriate to that distinction. Confusion and error can arise when the methods of inquiry and tools of analysis of one aspect of reality are used inappropriately for another aspect of reality. For example, one cannot settle questions of ethics with only the methods and tools of science.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the beauty of a sunset is more than merely an assessment of the frequency of the light rays. What is required is that critics of the New Testament be held accountable for whether their criticisms legitimately arise from fair considerations or whether they are guilty of using the wrong methods of inquiry and tools of analysis in their assessment of the New Testament.

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<sup>11</sup> Admittedly my characterization here is not without philosophical controversy. For the time being, I will have to ask the reader's indulgence in granting to me that we can think (logic) and talk (language) about these aspects of reality.

<sup>12</sup> Again, this is not without philosophical controversy. For an attempt to reduce ethics to science, see Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2011). For a classical realist account of the nature of good and evil and of ethics (both theoretical and practical), particularly in light of the traditional view of the existence and nature of God see J. Budziszewski, *Written on the Heart: The Case for Natural Law* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997); *What We Can't Not Know: A Guide* (Dallas: Spence Publishing, 2003); Brian Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (London: Continuum, 2006); *Thomas Aquinas on God and Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Austin Fagothey, *Right and Reason: Ethics in Theory and Practice Based on the Teachings of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas* 2d ed. (Charlotte: Tan Books, 1959); Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010); *If God, Why Evil?* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2011); Norman Geisler and Frank Turek, *Legislating Morality: Is It Wise? Is It Legal? Is It Possible?* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998); Herbert McCabe, *God and Evil in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (London: Continuum, 2010).

Let us return to our question of Jesus walking on the water. Sometimes it happens that the historicity of the event is called into question because the reader has trouble believing that a miracle can occur. Since he knows that a human being cannot naturally walk on water, and because he fails to consider the possibility that Jesus is supernaturally walking on the water, he erroneously concludes that the event did not happen. But let not my point be misunderstood here. I am not criticizing the reader of the biblical text for denying that the miraculous event took place. Given his background beliefs about the nature of reality, it is quite understandable (and expected) that, if he believes that miracles are impossible, then he should reasonably discount any purported historical account of a miracle. Instead, I am criticizing the reader of the biblical text for regarding such a denial of the event as merely an *historical* judgment. It is not. Instead, it is an historical judgment in light of the philosophical assumption that miracles do not occur. Since, too often, the philosophical assumption is never acknowledged (much less defended), then, what is in reality a philosophical issue is being passed off as only an historical one. The judgment is passed off as entirely a historical matter with no regard as to the soundness of the unacknowledged philosophical assumption. But since the methods of inquiry and tools of analysis differ in relevant ways between history (as a discipline) and philosophy (as a discipline), to use the methods of one discipline to make a judgment in the other can be illicit.

This kind of confusion affected me as a young Christian. I remember being stumbled as a student when I heard the arguments that Isaiah could not have written the second half of the book that bears his name because this portion mentions Cyrus who did not live until 200 years after Isaiah. The result is the view known as Deutero-Isaiah.<sup>13</sup> Given that Jesus quotes from both

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<sup>13</sup>In his commentary on Isaiah, Geoffrey W. Grogan comments "This great passage, with its two explicit references to Cyrus, has attracted much scholarly discussion. For many modern scholars it represents the strongest argument for 'Deutero-Isaiah,' for they cannot conceive of supernatural predictive prophecy of such detail." (Frank E. Gæbelein, gen. ed. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1986), 269). Grogan specifically mentions the works of Charles Cutler Torrey, *The Second Isaiah: A New Interpretation*

halves of the book (John 12:38-39) and ascribes the words to Isaiah, some would argue that, if the Bible is inerrant, Isaiah must have written both halves. To conclude two different authors would be to ascribe error to the Bible.

Since this experience, I have used this issue to illustrate to my students (especially in my secular university classes) the role that assumptions can play in limiting one's options for how they interpret a biblical passage. As an experiment, I would give them the argument for Deutero-Isaiah and ask them to brainstorm about any assumptions upon which the argument might rest. Some suggested that the argument assumes that the Cyrus mentioned in the latter part of Isaiah is the same Cyrus who lived 200 years later than Isaiah. Perhaps there were two people from that era who were named Cyrus. Others suggested that perhaps Isaiah was written later than we thought or that Cyrus lived earlier than we thought. For each of the assumptions suggested, I would ask the students "To which department on the university campus would you go to explore whether the assumption was true?" Invariably the answer would be the history department or perhaps, with certain other assumptions, the literature department. Finally, someone would suggest (or I would suggest it for the class) that the argument assumes that Isaiah could not know the future. The thing to note here is that, to settle the issue of whether it is possible for a person to know the future, you would not go to the history or literature departments. Instead, you would need to go to the philosophy department. The lesson to be learned is that, often it would be the

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(New York: Scribner, 1928) and C. R. North, *The Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah: An Historical and Critical Study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948); *The Second Isaiah* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964) and others. For a short discussion defending the unity of Isaiah see Oswald T. Allis, *The Unity of Isaiah: A Study in Prophecy* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1980). See also his *The Old Testament: Its Claims and Critics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972). For a broader discussion of historical criticism and evangelicalism see Eta Linnemann, *Biblical Criticism on Trial: How Scientific is "Scientific Theology"?* Trans. by Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2001); *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology? Reflections of a Bultmannian Turned Evangelical*, trans. by Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990); *Is There a Synoptic Problem? Rethinking the Literary Dependence on the First Three Gospels*, trans. by Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992); and Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell, *The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1988).

case that the Deutero-Isaiah scholar would pass his conclusion off to his readers as the assured result of a historical or literary analysis. What would potentially be lost on the readers is that the argument arises because the scholar has assumed that it is impossible that human beings can know the future. He has an anti-supernatural bias.<sup>14</sup>

The above highlights what evangelicals have been claiming for quite some time, viz., that what underlies the (perhaps sometimes subtle) skepticism that certain biblical critics have regarding the historical reliability of the Bible is an antipathy towards the supernatural.<sup>15</sup> Because certain biblical narratives contain accounts of miraculous events, the narrative is doubted in direct proportion to the critic's world view which regards all events as natural. This is to be expected. If one has (either deliberately or dispositionally) a commitment to the notion that all events come about by natural causes, then, any reported event that suggests some divine causal activity will be denied, re-interpreted, or altogether overlooked.

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<sup>14</sup> I am reminded of C. S. Lewis's discussion of two authors of a school textbook who highlight a story of Coleridge at a waterfall. Coleridge overheard two tourists, one who commented that the waterfall is sublime and the other that it is pretty. Coleridge endorsed the former and rejected the latter. Lewis observes something about the authors' analysis of the statement about the waterfall's sublimity. The authors claim that when someone says "This waterfall is sublime" he only means that he has sublime feelings. Then the authors comment "This confusion is continually present in language as we use it. We appear to be saying something very important about something; and actually we are only saying something about our own feelings." Lewis points out the deleterious effect such a subtle statement can have on a student reading the book. "No schoolboy will be able to resist the suggestion brought to bear upon him by that word *only*. I do not mean, of course, that he will make any conscious inference from what he reads to a general philosophical theory that all values are subjective and trivial. The very power [of the two authors] depends on the fact that they are dealing with a boy: a boy who thinks he is 'doing' his 'English prep' and has no notion that ethics, theology, and politics are all at stake. It is not a theory they put into his mind, but an assumption, which ten years hence, its origin forgotten and its presence unconscious, will condition him to take one side in a controversy which he has never recognized as a controversy at all." (C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man: How Education Develops Man's Sense of Morality* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 13-17)

<sup>15</sup> Zane Hodges' observation regarding the skepticism about the authenticity of the angel at Bethesda in John 5 is welcome. "It must be said that the miraculous intervention of angels in human life is so well established in the Bible, and so variegated, that only those who are uncomfortable with supernaturalism itself are likely to be genuinely troubled by the content of these verses under consideration." Hodges, "The Angel at Bethesda—John 5:4": 38.

## *The Question of God*

With this, then, one can see how critical it is that the question of God's existence be answered in the affirmative so as to preempt the illicit importing of anti-supernaturalism into biblical analysis. Once one sees that God exists, then one can see that miracles are possible. Embracing theism will open the options when he comes to consider the truths of the Bible.

The world perhaps can hardly contain the amount of material that has been produced in exploring the question of God's existence. I can only hope here to give a skeletal outline of the arguments and suggest to the reader sources for further reading.<sup>16</sup> I have found most compelling those types of arguments for the existence of God that argue from some feature of the physical universe. There are arguments that show that God is the cause of the beginning of the universe (i.e., its coming-into-existence) and those that show that God is the cause of the being of the universe (i.e., its current existing).<sup>17</sup>

### The Beginning of the Universe

This argument says that since the universe began to exist a finite time ago, then it must have had a cause or a beginner. Since the cause could not itself be physical, temporal, or spatial (since it is the cause of these), then this cause must be non-physical, non-temporal, and non-spatial, making the cause look very much like what all have understood to be God. There are two versions of this argument. One is more philosophical and mathematical and the other is more scientific. The philosophical and mathematical version has been known historically as the Kalam

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<sup>16</sup> For a bibliography on the existence and attributes of God see <http://www.richardhowe.com/BibGod.html> (accessed 07/12/13)

<sup>17</sup> These are called cosmological arguments (from the Greek for *cosmos*). There are also the teleological arguments (from the Greek for *end, purpose, or goal*) which show either (i) that God is the cause of the intricate design in the universe, or (ii) that God is the ultimate end toward which all things in the universe (particularly human beings) find their completion or telos, and the moral arguments which show that God is necessary to ultimately account for morality. For discussions on these arguments see the bibliography referenced in note 16.

Cosmological Argument.<sup>18</sup> It shows that a beginningless past would constitute what philosophers and mathematicians call an actual infinite. It further shows that it is impossible for an actual infinite to exist. Therefore, it follows that the past cannot be beginningless (i.e., it must have had a beginning). In addition, the argument shows that an actual infinite cannot be traversed. Since the present moment has arrived (meaning that the past has been traversed) then the past cannot be an actual infinite. It cannot, therefore, be beginningless. The details of the argument are a tour de force of mathematics, including infinite set theory and the transfinite math.<sup>19</sup>

The scientific version of this argument marshals the current astronomical evidence that the universe began a finite time ago. This evidence comes from what scientists tell us about the expanding universe, the second law of thermodynamics, and the Big Bang Theory.<sup>20</sup> Regarding the expanding universe, scientists maintain that every object in the universe is moving away from every other object such that even space itself is expanding. The significance of this is that the universe could not have been expanding from eternity otherwise it would be infinitely dispersed (which it is not). Therefore, the universe began to exist a finite time ago.

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<sup>18</sup> The definitive work on this argument is William Lane Craig, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* (New York: Macmillan, 1979) reprinted (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2000). For a more succinct treatment of the argument see J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987), 18-33.

<sup>19</sup> The upshot of the arguments involves the counter-intuitive and contradictory things entailed by allowing either the existence of an actual infinite or the possibility of the traversing of an actual infinite (as defined within mathematics). For a treatment of some objections raised after Craig published his work, see Richard G. Howe, *An Analysis of William Lane Craig's Kalam Cosmological Argument*, unpublished Master's Thesis (University, MS: University of Mississippi, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> I realize that appealing to such scientific evidence is met with resistance among some Christians, especially young Earth creationists. Specifically, young Earth creationists have objected to the Big Bang Theory since they believe that it entails things that are inconsistent with a young Earth model. As a young Earth creationist myself, I sympathize with the concern. However, I take a cue from the Arizona State University Theoretical Physicist Paul Davies who said "Whether one accepts all the details or not [about the Big Bang Theory], the essential hypothesis — that there was some sort of creation — seems, from the scientific point of view, compelling." (Paul Davies, *God and the New Physics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 10.)

Albert Einstein observed "Hubble's discovery can, therefore, be considered to some extent as a confirmation of the theory [of an expansion of space]."<sup>21</sup> Physicist Steven Hawking commented, "The old idea of an essentially unchanging universe that could have existed, and could continue to exist, forever was replaced by the notion of a dynamic, expanding universe that seemed to have begun a finite time ago, and that might end at a finite time in the future."<sup>22</sup>

Regarding the second law of thermodynamics, scientists maintain that all closed systems (a system into which there is no energy input) will tend toward a state of maximum disorder or entropy. In a closed system the amount of energy available to do work decreases and becomes uniform, which amounts to saying that the universe is running down. The significance is that the universe could not have been running down from eternity otherwise it would have run down by now (which it has not). Therefore, the universe began to exist a finite time ago.

Physicist Rudolf Clausius, one of the central formulators of thermodynamics and the Second Law said, "We can express the fundamental laws of the universe which correspond to the two fundamental laws of the mechanical theory of heat in the following simple form: 1. The energy of the universe is constant. 2. The entropy of the universe tends toward a maximum."<sup>23</sup>

Astronomer and former head of NASA's Goddard Institute of Space Studies Robert Jastrow pointed out, "The laws of thermodynamics ... [point] to one conclusion; ... that the Universe had a beginning."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Albert Einstein, *Relativity: The Special and the General Theory* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1961), 134.

<sup>22</sup> Steven W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1988), 33-34.

<sup>23</sup> Rudolf Clausius, "The Second Law of Thermodynamics," in *The World of Physics: A Small Library of the Literature of Physics from Antiquity to the Present*, 3. vols. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 1:734.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Jastrow, *God and the Astronomers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1978), 111.

Regarding the Big Bang Theory, scientists maintain that the universe began in a colossal explosion a finite time ago. The significance is that the universe has not existed from eternity. Therefore, the universe began to exist a finite time ago. From Jastrow again: "Recent developments in astronomy have implications that may go beyond their contribution to science itself. In a nutshell, astronomers, studying the Universe through their telescopes, have been forced to the conclusion that the world began suddenly, in a moment of creation, as the product of unknown forces."<sup>25</sup> Astrophysicist Christopher Isham was even more pointed about the significance of the theory.

Perhaps the best argument in favor of the thesis that the Big Bang supports theism is the obvious unease with which it is greeted by some atheist physicists. At times this has led to scientific ideas, such as continuous creation or an oscillating universe, being advanced with a tenacity which so exceeds their intrinsic worth that one can only suspect the operation of psychological forces lying very much deeper than the usual academic desire for a theorist to support his or her theory.<sup>26</sup>

These quotations summarize the general scientific arguments that the universe began to exist a finite time ago. The implications of such scientific evidence were not lost on MIT Theoretical Physicist Victor F. Weisskopf who said:

The question of the origin of the universe is one of the most exciting topics for a scientist to deal with. It reaches far beyond its purely scientific significance, since it is related to human existence, to mythology, and to religion. . . . It hits us in the heart, as it were. The origin of the universe can be talked about not only in scientific terms, but also in poetic and spiritual language, an approach that is complementary to the scientific one. Indeed, the Judeo-Christian tradition describes the beginning of the world in a way that is surprisingly similar to the scientific model.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Jastrow, "Message from Professor Robert Jastrow" available at <http://www.leaderu.com/truth/1truth18b.html> (accessed 07/12/13)

<sup>26</sup> C. J. Isham, "Creation of the Universe as a Quantum Process," in R. J. Russell, W. R. Stoeger, and G. V. Coyne, eds., *Physics, Philosophy, and Theology* (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory, 1988), 378, quoted in David Berlinski, *The Devils Delusion: Atheism and Its Scientific Pretensions* (New York: Crown Forum, 2008), 81.

<sup>27</sup> Victor F. Weisskopf, "The Origin of the Universe," *American Scientist*, 71 (Sep.-Oct. 1983): 473-480 in *The World of Physics*: 3:300, 317.

One common response the skeptic makes against the scientific versions of the cosmological and teleological arguments is that the theist is committing the fallacy of the god-of-the-gaps. This fallacy is committed (according to the skeptic) when someone appeals to God to explain a "gap" in one's understanding of how some event happened. The skeptic insists that there is no need to conclude that God caused the universe to begin to exist or that (for example) God created first life because, given enough time, we should be able to find a natural cause of these things.

Several things need to be said about this fallacy. First, the arguments that the universe could only have come about (or, for that matter, can only be currently existing) by the act of God is not a god-of-the-gaps fallacy. I was accused of committing this fallacy during a debate with agnostic Michael Shermer after I had marshaled the above evidence (and more) that the universe was created by God. In response I pointed out that I was not positing God as the explanatory cause of the existence of the universe to fill some "gap" in my understanding. It was not the *lack* of any understanding I needed God to fill. Instead, it was the *presence* of evidence that pointed to God as the cause of the universe. My argument was like a fire official detective who concluded that a particular house fire was started by an arsonist. He had discovered partially burned accelerant soaked rags near the point in the house where the fire began. He also discovered a partially burned matchbook with a fingerprint on it. He knew that a fire insurance policy had been taken out on the house just the day before by the same person whose fingerprint was on the matchbook. Last, an eyewitness had seen the suspect leaving the house just minutes before the fire erupted. Because of this evidence, the detective concluded that this person was the arsonist responsible for the house fire. But what sense would it make for some skeptic to come along and charge the detective with committing the arsonist-of-the-gaps fallacy? How reasonable would it

be for the skeptic to insist that, given enough time, we should be able to find a natural cause of the house fire? Of course, it would not make any sense and it would not at all be reasonable because it was not the *lack* of evidence or some "gap" in his understanding that prompted the detective to make his conclusion. Instead, it was the *presence* of evidence that pointed to the arsonist. It is the same with my argument for the existence of God based on what we know scientifically about the origin of the universe. Something natural cannot be the cause of the universe because the universe *just is* all things that are nature. To be beyond the natural is to be supernatural. To be supernatural is to be God.

### The Existing of the Universe

To be sure, most people hardly think that the current existing of a thing needs a causal explanation. A bit of background and explanation are in order. Suppose you saw what looked like a giant ten-foot crystal ball sitting in front of a local business. It might occur to you to ask where such a thing came from. If you were told that it was actually a giant balloon that was placed there to promote a grand opening and that it had been manufactured at a balloon factory not far away, I suspect that you would find such a response to your question entirely satisfactory. Now suppose that you began to hear music playing. Notice that you would not ask (as you did about the balloon) where the music *came from*. Instead, you would ask something to the effect of where the music *is coming from*. This is because you realize that the music exists as music only as long as it is being caused to be music (presumably either by a sound system or musicians). You further realize that as soon as the cause of the music stops causing the music, the music ceases to exist. For the Christian philosopher Thomas Aquinas, the existence of all finite things

was like the music. For Aquinas, existence was act. It was something that essences do. You can find in his (and others') writings the expression "the act of existence."<sup>28</sup>

This notion of existence can figure into a philosophical argument for God's existence.<sup>29</sup> For Aquinas, there is a difference between essence and existence. Essence is *what* something is and existence is *that* (or *whether*) something is. The difference between being a human and being a dog is that the human possesses a human essence and the dog possesses a dog essence.<sup>30</sup> Consider yourself as a human being. Your essence is what makes you a human. Your existence is what makes you a being. Now, whatever is true of you is true of you either by virtue of your essence or not. For example, the fact that you have rationality is because you are a human. It is part of your essence as a human to have rationality. You have rationality by virtue of being human. Rationality is caused by your essence. But consider the fact that you are reading this

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<sup>28</sup> For philosophical treatments (primary and secondary) of the notion of being (existence) in Aquinas see Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, trans. Armand Maurer, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1983); *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, trans. John P. Rowan (Notre Dame: Dumb Ox Books, 1961); Dominic Báñez, *The Primacy of Existence in Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Benjamin S. Llamzon (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1966); Étienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto, Canada: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952) and Joseph Owens, *An Interpretation of Existence* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1968). For an analytic philosophical perspective on existence which stands in contrast to Aquinas's view see William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 187-193. For a broader exploration of the notion of existence in ancient and medieval philosophy see Parviz Morewedge, ed. *Philosophies of Existence: Ancient and Medieval* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982).

<sup>29</sup> The substance of this argument can be found in Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, 4, §7, pp. 56-57 and is to be distinguished from his famous arguments known as his "five ways" found in his *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q2. Interpreters of Aquinas differ whether the argument in *On Being and Essence*, strictly speaking, constitutes a proof of God's existence. (All agree that it is (both here and again in the *Summa Theologiae* I, Q3) an argument for God's simplicity.) You find formidable Thomists on both sides, including Joseph Owens (affirmative) and Étienne Gilson (negative). For specifics about the differences see Maurer's comments in the Introduction, p. 20, footnote 33.

<sup>30</sup> There is, of course, much more to the matter. A thing not only possesses its essence (by virtue of which it is what it is) but it also has accidents (such as being in a certain place or having a certain color) and can bear relationships with other beings (such as being to the left of). What is more, it is possible for there to be an essence that does not have existence (except only as a being of reason, also known as a concept), such as a Unicorn. For my purposes here, I am primarily interested in what can be shown regarding the relationship in things of essence and existence. For a defense of essence see David S. Oderberg, *Real Essentialism* (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, Routledge, 2007).

book. Is the reason you are reading this book (as opposed to reading some other book or not reading at all) because you are a human? Is it part of your essence as a human to be reading this book? Are you reading this book by virtue of being a human? Is reading this book caused by your essence? The answer to all these is no, otherwise, everyone else who is not reading this book would not be human. However, you can easily account for why you are reading this book even though it is not part of your essence to do so. You are reading this book because you caused yourself to be reading this book.

Now consider the fact that you are existing right now. Is the reason you exist because you are a human? Is it part of your essence to exist? Do you exist by virtue of being human? Is your existence caused by your essence? The answer to all these is no otherwise you would have always existed (as well have other attributes (as I will discuss below) which you clearly do not have). If not, then what is causing your existing right now? You cannot account for your existing in the same way that you can account for your reading this book. That is to say, you cannot be the cause of your own existing. The reason is that you would then have to exist (to be a cause) before you existed (to need to be caused) which is incoherent. As such, your current existing must be caused by something else. But what would we say about the existing of that thing? At some point, one has to admit that there must be something existing right now that exists by virtue of its essence. There must be something existing right now in which there is no distinction between its existence and essence. As Thomas succinctly remarked in another context: "All men know this to be God."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *St. Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologica: Complete English Edition in Five Volumes*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), I, Q2. All my English quotations of his *Summa* are from this translation. It should be noted that more often the title is spelled *Summa Theologiae* as I do for the balance of my citations.

Two objections are sometimes leveled at this argument. The first objection questions why it cannot be the case that the chain of causes goes on infinitely. If the existence of each of the elements in the chain is accounted for by being caused by the antecedent element in the chain, then seemingly the existence of every element in the chain is accounted for, which means that the chain is accounted for. The second objection sees no reason why one should call this cause God. Atheist Richard Dawkins sums up both of these objections in one tendentious comment. "Even if we allow the dubious luxury of arbitrarily conjuring up a terminator to an infinite regress and giving it a name, simply because we need one, there is absolutely no reason to endow that terminator with any of the properties normally ascribed to God."<sup>32</sup>

Dawkins' concerns can be directly addressed. First, regarding the infinite regress, whether he agrees with the philosophers' explanations and arguments or not, it is manifest that these explanations and arguments are anything but a "dubious luxury" that were "arbitrarily conjured" up. These explanations and arguments are indeed quite sophisticated, even if, after it is all said and done, one finally rejects them. Dawkins has not done his due diligence in wrestling with these explanations and arguments for why there cannot be the infinite regress.

Second, it should be noted that the specter of an infinite regress here is not the same kind of infinite regress in the Kalam Cosmological Argument. Here I can only summarize how it is, given that the infinite that Aquinas denies is different than the infinite that the Kalam argument denies, that in this argument here, such an infinite is impossible.<sup>33</sup> Consider the causal chain of a

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<sup>32</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 77.

<sup>33</sup> In my research for my doctoral dissertation, about half of the philosophical sources I consulted on this matter mistakenly took Aquinas to be making a Kalam type argument in his theistic arguments where he denies the possibility of going on to infinity. For a treatment of the differences see Richard G. Howe, "Two Notions of the Infinite in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae I, Questions 2 and 46*" *Christian Apologetics Journal* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 71-86.

child having been begotten by his parents who were begotten by their parents, and so on.

According to the Kalam argument, such a regress cannot go back infinitely. This kind of infinite was known in medieval philosophy as an accidental infinite (Latin: *infinite per accidens*).

Interestingly, however, Aquinas did not think that philosophy could demonstrate the impossibility of such an infinite.<sup>34</sup> He rejected the Kalam Cosmological Argument. He did not believe that philosophy could demonstrate that the universe has not always existed. As a Christian, he, indeed, believed that it had not always existed, but he held this belief by faith on the basis of revelation.

Contrast this causal chain with the causal chain of a stone being moved by a stick being moved by a hand. Aquinas argued that this causal chain could not be infinite. This kind of infinite was known in Medieval philosophy as an *infinite per se*. But what exactly is the difference? Notice in the first causal chain that when the parents of the child caused the child, their own parents were not involved in the causal relationship. To be sure, they brought the parents into existence. But the parents would be able to go on to cause their own child even if their own parents ceased to exist. The grandparents were not causing the parents to cause the child.

With the second chain, however, the causal relationship between the elements is different. Not only is the stick causing the stone to move, but, at the same time, the stick is being caused by the hand *to be a cause* of the stone being moved. As such, if the hand ceases to exist, the stick cannot be a cause of the movement of the stone. The causality, if you will, runs through the entire chain simultaneously. The only way to account for the motion of the stone is to have something in the chain that itself is not moving and, thus, needs no cause.

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<sup>34</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q46, ii, ad. 6.

Transfer this analogy to my examination of existence. If I exist right now, then either I exist by virtue of my essence (my existence would be, in a manner of speaking "caused" by my essence) or I am being caused to exist by something that *does* exist by virtue of its essence. Since it is clear that I do not exist by virtue of my essence, then there is something that exists that does so by virtue of its essence and is the current cause of everything else that is existing at every moment that it is existing. This cause is God. He is currently sustaining the universe in existence.

What about Dawkins' concern that "there is absolutely no reason to endow that terminator with any of the properties normally ascribed to God"? Assuming that by the phrase "properties normally ascribed to God" Dawkins means the classical attributes of God, if he had bothered to read Aquinas's discussion subsequent to his proofs (I should note that the context of the Dawkins quote is his examination of Aquinas's proofs) he would have seen that there is every reason to ascribe such properties to this cause. What Aquinas goes on to show is that, for any being whose essence is its existence, that being would necessarily have the attributes of perfection, goodness infinity, immutability, eternity, and unity. For Aquinas, being (or existence) as such contains all perfections without limit. Being is constrained by essence. As humans, we possess all the perfections of existence up to the limits of and according to the nature of our essences. A dog will possess all the perfections of existence up to the limits of and according to the nature of its essence. Because of the differences between a dog's nature and a human's nature, a dog will possess fewer perfections. Like a balloon that limits and shapes the air that infuses it, the essence of the creature binds the otherwise limitless fullness of the perfections of existence.<sup>35</sup> Aquinas says, "All perfections existing in creatures divided and multiplied, pre-exist in God unitedly."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> I am indebted to philosopher Max Herrera for this balloon illustration.

<sup>36</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 13, 5.

One can see that there is quite a bit to say about the question of God's existence. Admittedly, there are philosophers who have leveled their objections at almost every point. This certainly is not the place where the issue can be given a very thorough examination. But in light of all the detail we have just gone through, the reader should not forget the reason I broached the subject in the first place. By way of reminder, one must understand that, since God exists who is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe and who is all powerful, miracles are very much possible. Thus, any skepticism about the integrity of the New Testament arising from the fact that it contains historical accounts of miraculous events that one deems impossible, should be met with the appropriate philosophical tools that address the root cause of that skepticism, viz., anti-supernaturalism; the denial of the existence of the God.

#### The Acts of God

To talk about the acts of God broadly considered is to talk about many things. My concern for our purposes is the issue of miracles. Miracles should be understood as a subset of the category of the acts of God. But all of this presupposes that there is a God who can so act. That is why we first had to address the existence of God. Without a God, there can be no acts of God. Without any acts of God, there can be no miracles.

Miracles warrant special consideration precisely because of what they are and why they are. I said earlier that I take great exception to the casual use of the term 'miracle' in describing events that evoke awe or wonder. There are two reasons for this. First, it is important to maintain the proper distinction between those events that proceed according to the course of nature as created and superintended by God and those events that proceed according to an exceptional intervention by God. If such distinction exists, then surely God would not want us to blur that distinction. There must be some reason why God acts in these two very different ways. That

reason takes me to the second reason why I take the position I do about the use of the term 'miracle'. Given what God's working of miracles is and why it is, we can come to realize that miracles point to something that God is saying to us.

A Christian friend of mine once asked me why it was that the church today was not as the church in the beginning. I pressed her as to what she was referring. She expressed disappointment that the church today was not "walking in miracles" anymore. She made reference to Acts 2, claiming that the early church experience was replete with miracles. What is more, she took these experiences to be normative. I believe that she had a distorted perception of how prevalent miracles actually were in the time frame of biblical history. While one might argue that there were indeed a number of miracles surrounding the time of Christ and the apostles, how the number of those miracles looks within the broader picture of biblical history is revealing. Herbert Lockyer notes well:

Bible miracles—not including prophecies and their fulfillment, which are also miracles—fall into great periods, centuries apart: The establishment of the Jewish nation 1400 B.C. Moses and Joshua were conspicuous as miracle-workers. The crisis in struggle with idolatry 850 B.C. Elijah and Elisha are prominent in this era. The Captivity, when idolatry was victorious 600 B.C. Daniel and his friend were subjects of miracles. The introduction of Christianity 1 A.D. The virgin birth of Christ was the initial miracle of the New Testament. Christ and His apostles were the miracle-workers. The great tribulation. Great signs and wonders are to characterize this period.<sup>37</sup>

I think it says something that, in the vast millennia of biblical history, miracles are not that common and occur in clusters. It says that there is a purpose of miracles surrounding God's working His revelation and will with mankind. In this section I want to discuss a philosophy of

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<sup>37</sup> Herbert Lockyer, *All the Miracles of the Bible: The Supernatural in Scripture-Its Scope and Significance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), 17-18.

miracles (what they are), a theology of miracles (why they are), and an apologetic of miracles (that they are).<sup>38</sup>

### ***A Philosophy of Miracles: Demonstrating What Miracles Are***

Various definitions of miracles have been offered throughout the church. Augustine discusses these matters in his *City of God*. He comments, "For how can an event be contrary to nature when it happens by the will of God, since the will of the great Creator assuredly *is* the nature of every created thing? A portent, therefore, does not occur contrary to nature, but contrary to what is known of nature."<sup>39</sup> Aquinas draws a sharper distinction.

Those effects are properly called miracles which are produced by God's power alone on things which have a natural tendency to the opposite effect or to a contrary mode of operation; whereas effects produced by nature, the cause of which is unknown to us or to some of us, as also those effects, produced by God, that are of a nature to be produced by none but God, cannot be called miraculous but only marvelous or wonderful.<sup>40</sup>

I take Aquinas to mean that not every act of God is a miracle. The act of creation itself is not miraculous since God is not acting "on things which have a natural tendency to the opposite effect or to a contrary mode of operation." This is because, since creation is from nothing, there

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<sup>38</sup> A number of sources have shaped, to some degree or another, my understanding of miracles. Several such sources bear mentioning here. They include: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q178; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), III, ii, 101-106; *On the Power of God* (quæstiones disputatæ de potential dei), trans. English Dominican Fathers (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004), II, vi, pp. 151-227; R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997); Norman L. Geisler, *Miracles and Modern Thoughts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) revised as *Miracles and the Modern Mind: A Biblical Defense of Biblical Miracles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992); *Signs and Wonders* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1988); Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, Baker Academic, 2011); B. B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 1972).

<sup>39</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), XXI:8, p. 980, emphasis in the translation.

<sup>40</sup> Aquinas, *On the Power of God*, II, vi, 2, pp. 164-165.

was not anything there (before creation) upon which God acted and which could be said to have any natural tendency.

C. S. Lewis begins his book on the subject with "I use the word *Miracle* to mean an interference with Nature by supernatural power."<sup>41</sup> Norman Geisler, following Aquinas, says "In brief, a miracle is a divine intervention into the natural world. It is a supernatural exception to the regular course of the world that would not have occurred otherwise."<sup>42</sup>

These, and others I could cite, in their respective ways, serve as good, succinct statements of what a miracle is. Richard L. Purtill says that a miracle is "an event in which God temporarily makes an exception to the natural order of things, to show that God is acting."<sup>43</sup> His definition gives a helpful template for exploring some points about miracles, viz., that miracles are temporary, miracles are an exception, and miracles are wrought by the power of God.<sup>44</sup> First, miracles are temporary, which is to say that they do not change our expectations of what will continue to happen. After the miracle, we expect nature to return to its normal operations. When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, this did not change our belief that, by and large, dead people stay dead.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Lewis, *Miracles*, 5. His footnote reflecting on his own definition is interesting. "This definition is not that which would be given by many theologians. I am adopting it not because I think it an improvement upon theirs but precisely because, being crude and 'popular,' it enables me most easily to treat those questions which 'the common reader' probably has in mind when he takes up a book on Miracles."

<sup>42</sup> Geisler, *Miracles and the Modern Mind*, 14.

<sup>43</sup> Richard L. Purtill "Defining Miracles" in R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 62-63.

<sup>44</sup> Purtill, 61-72. I am indebted to Purtill for this template for this discussion but I am mixing some of this thinking with some of my own.

<sup>45</sup> Purtill, 63.

Second, miracles are an exception. It went against the nature of Lazarus to rise from the dead, indicating that the event was supernatural. Miracles can be exceptions in two ways. No one came to believe that just anyone could start raising people from the dead. There was something significant about Jesus and this situation that warranted this intervention by God. The miracle workers (Jesus and His apostles) are an exception to the way people normally are. Second, no one came to believe that such miracles would become a matter of course. While Jesus and His apostles were able (for example) to heal, they did not necessarily heal everyone. Jesus' raising of Lazarus did not lead anyone to expect that He would then raise everyone from the dead.<sup>46</sup>

Third, miracles being an exception indicate that they are so because there is a natural order of things.<sup>47</sup> Being an exception makes sense only in this context. A miracle, then, goes against a law of nature. The notion of law here needs to be appreciated. Often we use the term 'law' to mean a course of action that one is obligated to obey or risk suffering punitive consequences. One might think of the law that obligates drivers to stop on a red light. With respect to nature, the notion of law means a regularity that has been observed with such constancy that we reasonably expect reality to continue to behave the same way. What is more, one might argue that these laws arise out of the very nature of things themselves.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Someone might object that, indeed, Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead does retool our understanding in as much as it is part of the reason why we believe in the final resurrection. This point is well taken. The context of the event involves a discussion about the final resurrection (John 11:23-26). Without a doubt, Jesus' raising of Lazarus was intended to demonstrate who Jesus was as the One who would someday raise everyone from the dead (John 5:28-29). But it should be pointed out that, strictly speaking, Lazarus was resuscitated rather than resurrected, since he certainly went on to die again. (Purtill, 61) The final resurrection involves a transformation of our bodies in a way that did not seem true of Lazarus.

<sup>47</sup> Purtill, 61.

<sup>48</sup> For an insightful discussion about the philosophical shortcomings of modern science in as much as it ignores the role that a metaphysical notion of "nature" must play in one's understanding of physical laws (and, consequently gives rise to an unwarranted atheism seemingly based on "scientific" reasoning) see Edward Feser, *The Last Superstition: A Refutation of the New Atheism* (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2008). For a more extended and in-depth analysis of the relationship of science and metaphysics see William A. Wallace, *The*

Fourth, miracles are events that are wrought by the power of God. To be sure, everything in some sense is at the behest of the power of God in as much as God sustains all things in existence at every moment of their existence. But our normal understating of causality recognizes that events happen within nature whose efficient cause is also within nature.<sup>49</sup> As such, a miracle would be an event whose cause was God (either directly or through an agent such as a prophet or an angel) that is contrary to the normal course of the causal chain that would arise if left to its own devices. Last, miracles have a purpose. This will serve to be the most important aspect of a miracle (outside of the question of God as the cause). It is to this point that I now turn my attention.

### ***A Theology of Miracles: Discovering Why Miracles Are***

It is one thing for someone to claim that an extraordinary event has happened. It is another to understand whether and how that event plays into God's revelation of Himself. I contend that, strictly speaking, miracles are given by God to vindicate His messenger and confirm the message. This notion is what I refer to as a theology of miracles. One can find this view of the purpose of miracles throughout church history. A few examples will illustrate. Augustine reasoned, "Men would have laughed [Christ's resurrection and ascension to heaven] out of court; they would have shut their ears and their hearts against the idea, had not the possibility and actuality of these events been demonstrated by the divine power of truth itself or

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*Modeling of Nature: Philosophy of Science and Philosophy of Nature in Synthesis* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996).

<sup>49</sup> These causes may be extrinsic to the thing, as when a wind blows a billboard over to the ground, or they may be intrinsic to the thing (due to its nature), as when a child grows to become an adult. The latter here actually involves two sides of a causal "coin" viz., the efficient cause (that *by* which something is produced) and the final cause (that *for* or *towards* which something is produced). It is intrinsic to a human being (for example) to grow and change toward being an adult. This is (at least one aspect of) the human's telos in a way in which falling on the ground was not so for the billboard blown over by the wind.

rather by the truth of the divine power, with confirmation by miraculous signs."<sup>50</sup> Thomas

Aquinas argued,

Now just as the knowledge which a man receives from God needs to be brought to the knowledge of others through the gift of tongues and the grace of the word, so too the word uttered needs to be confirmed in order that it be rendered credible. This is done by the working of miracles, according to Mark xvi. 20, *And confirming the word with signs that followed*: and reasonably so. For it is natural to man to arrive at the intelligible truth through its sensible effects. Wherefore just as man led by his natural reason is able to arrive at some knowledge of God through His natural effects, so is he brought to a certain degree of supernatural knowledge of the objects of faith by certain supernatural effects which are called miracles.<sup>51</sup>

John Calvin concurs.

In demanding miracles from us, [our adversaries] act dishonestly; for we have not coined some new gospel, but retain the very one the truth of which is confirmed by all the miracles which Christ and the apostles ever wrought. ... The deception would perhaps be more specious if Scripture did not admonish us of the legitimate end and use of miracles. Mark tells us (Mark xvi. 20) that the signs which followed the preaching of the apostles were wrought in confirmation of it; so Luke also relates that the Lord "gave testimony to the word of his grace, and granted signs and wonders to be done" by the hand of the apostles (Acts xiv. 3). Very much to the same effect are those words of the apostle, that salvation by a preached gospel was confirmed, "the Lord bearing witness with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles" (Heb. ii. 4).<sup>52</sup>

James Arminius comments,

An illustrious evidence of the same divinity is afforded in the miracles, which God has performed by the stewards of his word, his prophets and apostles, and by Christ himself, for the confirmation of *his* doctrine and for the establishment of *their* authority. For these miracles are of such a description as infinitely to exceed the united powers of all the creatures and all the powers of nature itself, when their energies are combined. But the God of truth, burning with zeal for his own glory, could never have afforded such strong testimonies as these to false prophets and their false doctrine: nor could he have borne

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<sup>50</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, XXII:8, p. 1033.

<sup>51</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 178, i.

<sup>52</sup> John Calvin, "Prefatory Address by John Calvin to Francis I., King of France" in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1975), I, I, pp. 8-9.

such witness to any doctrine even when it was true, provided it was not his, that is, provided it was not divine.<sup>53</sup>

Nineteenth century Archibald Alexander Hodge (son of Princeton Seminary professor Charles Hodge) understands miracles this way as well. "A miracle is (1) an event occurring in the physical world, capable of being discerned and discriminated by the bodily senses of human witnesses, (2) of such a character that it can be rationally referred to no other cause than the immediate volition of God, (3) accompanying a religious teacher, and designed to authenticate his divine commission and the truth of his message."<sup>54</sup> Union Seminary professor, chaplain, and Chief of Staff to General T. J. (Stonewall) Jackson, Robert Lewis Dabney argues, "From this view [of the Duke of Argyle] I wholly dissent. It is inconsistent with the prime end for which God has introduced miracles, to be attestations to man of God's messages."<sup>55</sup>

Dallas Seminary founder Lewis Sperry Chafer asserts, "Though miracles are wonders (Acts 2:19) in the eyes of men and display the power of God, their true purpose is that of a 'sign' (Matt. 12:38; John 2:18). They certify and authenticate a teacher or his doctrine."<sup>56</sup> Further on Chafer comments, "Turning more specifically to the miracles wrought by Christ, it may be asserted that they were intended to sustain His claim to be Jehovah, the theanthropic [God/Man] Messiah of Israel, and to give divine attestation to His teachings."<sup>57</sup> Robert Duncan Culver, whose teaching career included Grace Theological Seminary, Wheaton College and Graduate

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<sup>53</sup> James Arminius, *The Writings of James Arminius*, 3 vols., trans. James Nichols and W. R. Bagnall (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), I, 129-130.

<sup>54</sup> A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology for Students and Laymen* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), 275.

<sup>55</sup> Robert Lewis Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), 283.

<sup>56</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), I, 256-257.

<sup>57</sup> Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, V, 172.

School, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and Southern Evangelical Seminary, summarizes the significance of miracles along the lines of the four Greek words used in the New Testament for such acts of God.

Biblical miracles are extraordinary events (*ergon*) which capture public notice, producing amazement (*teras, thaumadzō*) and which have meaning (*sēmeion*). This meaning is the special presence of God in some special way usually declared by a prophet (Aaron, Elijah, Moses, Jeremiah). Finally a biblical miracle is *dunamis*, the product of and evidence of divine power and authority, not only in the event itself but of delegated power in the divinely authorized person at whose word the miracle took place.<sup>58</sup>

To say that miracles were for the purpose of vindicating the messenger and confirming the messages is not to deny that God can perform miracles as an act of His grace apart from this purpose. It is to say, however, that, where the Bible is concerned, the miracles of God were always for some reason related to the messenger and message. This is how we can explain (for example) why Jesus just did not (and does not) heal everyone. Take the episode in John 9 of Jesus healing the blind man. The man was born blind from birth. Jesus miraculously gives him his sight back. But if the end goal was merely so that the man could see, then why would God have allowed him to be born blind to begin with? Further, when the disciples ask whose sin it was that caused the man's blindness, Jesus, in correcting their misunderstanding of the reason for the man's blindness, comments "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was in order that the works of God might be displayed in him."<sup>59</sup> Clearly, Jesus' healing of the blind man was more than just an act of grace in restoring his sight (though it certainly was that); it was

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<sup>58</sup> Robert Duncan Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical & Historical* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, Mentor, 2005), 206. For the sake of convenience I have left out of the quotation Culver's transliterations of certain Old Testament Hebrew words.

<sup>59</sup> John 9:3. All Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1977).

also a means by which Jesus could demonstrate that He possessed supernatural powers given Him by His Father.<sup>60</sup>

Since only God has the power over His creation to be able to suspend the natural laws that He created, we see, then, that a miracle is an event that could not have happened without divine intervention. God's bestowal of supernatural power shows God's approval or vindication (or, if you will, the Father's approval or vindication in the case of Jesus) of the messengers on whom that power was bestowed and, therefore shows God's confirmation of their message.

Other miracles wrought by Christ were clearly done to demonstrate who Jesus was. While most of the sermons I have heard preached out of Matthew 14 about Jesus walking on the water resulted in many exiting the auditorium thinking about Peter, the concluding verse of the story (v. 33) indicates the real reason for the event. "And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, 'You are certainly God's Son!'" Thus, the purpose of the miracle was to demonstrate who Jesus was. Whatever lessons one might think to draw from the story about Peter can only be secondary.

Jesus' calming the storm prompted the disciples to marvel and ask, "What kind of a man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?" (Matt. 8:27) The account of Jesus' healing the paralytic man (Matt. 9:2-7) indicates exactly why Jesus was performing the miracle.

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<sup>60</sup> I am inclined to say that Jesus performed His miracles, not so much by virtue of Him being God, but by virtue of His relationship with the Father. If we argue that Jesus could only perform miracles because He is God, then we would be hard pressed to show why Peter's and Paul's performing miracles do not indicate that they are God. However, if we argue that miracles vindicate the messenger and confirm the message, then we can be consistent. Peter's and Paul's message was (among other things) that Jesus was God. Jesus' message was (among other things) that He Himself was God. Thus, the miracles perform the same purpose in each case. This, to me, explains, in the story of the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5:25-34), how it was that Jesus perceived that "the power proceeding from Him had gone forth" as if He did not consciously send out the power. I take this to be that God the Father healed the woman before Jesus (in His human nature) realized what was going on. John Calvin, however, disagrees with me here. "How clearly and transparently does this appear in [Christ's] miracles? I admit that similar and equal miracles were performed by the prophets and apostles; but there is this very essential difference, that they dispensed the gifts of God as his ministers, whereas he exerted his own inherent might." (*Institutes*, I, XIII, pp. 120-121)

And they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic, "Take courage, son; your sins are forgiven." And some of the scribes said to themselves, "This fellow blasphemes." And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, "Why are you thinking evil in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, and walk '>? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—then He said to the paralytic, "Get up, pick up your bed and go home." And he got up and went home.

While Jesus was certainly showing mercy on the paralytic by healing him, He healed him not merely to make him well, but to demonstrate that He had the authority to forgive sins. The miracle pointed to a truth that the surrounding witnesses (and all who would subsequently read this account) needed to understand.

Luke records (7:16-17) the reaction within the region around Nain where Jesus raised the son of a widow. "Fear gripped them all, and they began glorifying God, saying, 'A great prophet has arisen among us!' and, 'God has visited His people!' This report concerning Him went out all over Judea and in all the surrounding district."

The same purpose of miracles is evident with the apostles. Norman Geisler points out, "Not every follower of Christ was an apostle. ... Apostles had a special task. They were the foundation of the Christian church. ... Paul declared that the church is 'built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ himself as the chief cornerstone' (Ephesians 2:20). Indeed, the early church 'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching' (Acts 2:42). Their special divine authority was exercised in both doctrine (Acts 15) and in discipline (Acts 5)."<sup>61</sup>

Walter J. Chantry observes, "New Testament miracles performed by men other than Jesus also confirmed the authority of prophets who were spokesmen of God's infallible Word."<sup>62</sup> He notes that in 2 Cor. 12:12 Paul call miracles "signs of an apostle." Later in the chapter Paul

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<sup>61</sup> Geisler, *Signs and Wonders*, 134-135.

<sup>62</sup> Walter J. Chantry, *Signs of the Apostles: Observations on Pentecostalism Old and New* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), 17.

points out to the Corinthians "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles." (2 Cor. 12:12) Paul makes a similar argument to the Romans. "For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ." (Rom. 15:18-19)

Not only can we see this purpose of miracles affirmed by the theologians in church history and modeled in the miracles wrought by Christ and His apostles, but it can be seen as the direct teaching of Scripture. Heb. 2:2-4 says,

For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.

We can conclude that the notion of signs indicates that the purpose of miracles was to vindicate the messenger and confirm the message. In the case of the life Jesus, miracles were always there to show that Jesus' message of who He Himself was, was true. They are there to move us to faith as John summarizes towards the end of his Gospel.<sup>63</sup> "Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;

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<sup>63</sup> In a discussion about miracles, the question invariably comes up (which I am not addressing in this chapter) whether miracles occur today. Christians differ on the answer. It seems to me that either answer can be compatible with what I have argued here as to their purpose, bearing in mind that there is a difference between the theology of miracles (that, biblically speaking, miracles serve as a vindication of the messenger and confirmation of the message of God in the communicating of His revelation to mankind) and whether God can perform a miracle (e.g., a healing) as an act of mercy (which also has a biblical base, albeit, in my estimation, a secondary purpose). The former is associated with the ministry of a messenger of God. It serves us today in the task of apologetics. The latter is not associated with any particular person who performs the miracle. It is a matter of systematic theology and is disputed among Bible-believing Christians. In my estimation, no matter how one comes down on whether God still performs miracles today it is important that one's theology of miracles preserves the role of the miraculous in vindicating the messenger and confirming the message of God throughout God's revelation of Himself through His prophets, apostles, and His Son.

but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name."

### ***An Apologetic of Miracles: Defending That Miracles Are***

There are other challenges to the plausibility of miracles besides those stemming from naturalism. For example, some dispute whether it is even possible to know if a miracle has occurred. Others argue that the seeming proliferation of miracles among ancient miracle workers and the world's religions renders miracles useless as an indicator of truth for any given religion.

The New Testament writers apparently (the argument goes) borrowed stories of other miracle workers and ascribed them to Jesus. There is nothing special about Jesus since His story is merely variations on a theme of the day. In addition, miracles cannot adjudicate the world's religions since they all claim miraculous confirmation. Yet many of the doctrines of those religions are mutually incompatible. These types of challenges are, for the most part, independent of the question of God's existence. In other words, even if one granted the metaphysical possibility that there existed a God who could perform miracles in the manner I have delineated above, there are epistemological challenges that still need to be met.

### **Defending Miracles from the Challenges from David Hume**

One such challenge was summarized by philosopher Antony Flew. "The argument to be presented now is epistemological rather than ontological. It is directed not at the question of whether miracles occur but at the question of whether—and if so how—we could know that they do, and when and where they have."<sup>64</sup> Flew is taking his cue from the formidable challenger to miracles, the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume (d.1776) who formulated his

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<sup>64</sup> Antony Flew, "Neo-Humean Arguments About the Miraculous," in Geivett and Habermas, *In Defense of Miracles*, p. 49.

arguments regarding miracles in a section titled "On Miracles" in his *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.<sup>65</sup> Hume took direct aim at a fundamental position of this chapter and of most contemporary Christian apologists with whom I am familiar. He claims that he can "establish it as a maxim, that no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle, and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion."<sup>66</sup> Hume defines a miracle thus: "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature."<sup>67</sup> He goes on, "Nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happened in the common course of nature. ... There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed. revised by P. H Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). The chapter is reprinted in Geivett and Habermas *In Defense of Miracles*, pp. 29-44. My citations are to the Selby-Bigge edition.

<sup>66</sup> Hume, *Enquiry*, §X, Pt. 2, Selby-Bigge, 127. While most commenters on Hume with whom I am familiar conclude that he was an unbeliever regarding the Christian religion (because of, among other things, his seeming skepticism on miracles (as in his *Enquiry*), his critique of the design argument for the existence of God, and his formidable marshaling of the problem of evil (both of which are in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1989)), a few who read Hume have a different take. J. C. A. Gaskin notes the difficulty of interpretation Hume has thrust upon us. "The problem with Hume's interpretation is that, although his actual arguments and the facts he adduces are regularly highly critical of religion and damaging to any belief in the divine, his affirmations (and sometimes the conclusions which he seems to draw) do not always look like the real outcomes of his criticisms." (J. C. A. Gaskin, "Hume on Religion," in David Fate Norton, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Hume* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 319) Every interpreter has to do something with statements from Hume such as this one: "Our most holy religion is founded on *Faith*, not on reason; and it is a sure method of exposing it to put it to such a trial as it is, by no means, fitted to endure." (*Enquiry*, §X, Pt. 2, Selby-Bigge, 130, italics in original) and this one: "The order of the universe proves an omnipotent mind; that is, a mind whose will is *constantly attended* with the obedience of every creature and being. Nothing more is requisite to give a foundation to all the articles of religion." (David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. revised by P. H Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), Appendix, 633, note 1, italics in original). While some take such statements as proof that Hume was an unbelieving dissembler, I take Hume to be a Christian fideist of the most radical sort. Thus, my interpretation of much of Hume's polemic is not that Hume was trying to use philosophy to disprove the philosophical doctrines such as causality, the existence of the external world, the existence of an enduring ego as a thing that has experiences, miracles, or God. Instead, he was trying to show that, if one tried to use philosophy to establish the truth of these doctrines, he will be completely disabused of them (if that was psychologically possible).

<sup>67</sup> Hume, *Enquiry*, §X, Pt. 1, Selby-Bigge, 114.

<sup>68</sup> Hume, *Enquiry*, §X, Pt. 1, Selby-Bigge, 115.

Based upon his definitions, Hume formulates the following argument against miracles. The argument is not trying to say that miracles *cannot* occur. Instead, it is trying to show that it would never be reasonable to *believe* that a miracle has occurred. Since, for Hume, a miracle is a violation of the law of nature, then "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."<sup>69</sup>

*Responses to Hume.* Philosophers and Apologists have made several responses to Hume. C. S. Lewis points out that the argument (as Lewis understands it) is circular. This is so because one can know that there is uniform experience against miracles only if one knows that all such reports are false. But whether such reports are false is the very issue being debated. Thus, according to Lewis, Hume is using what he is trying to prove as part of his proof. Lewis comments:

Now of course we must agree with Hume that if there is absolutely "uniform experience" against miracles, if in other words they have never happened, why then they never have. Unfortunately we know the experience against them to be uniform only if we know that all the reports of them are false. And we can know all the reports to be false only if we know already that miracles have never occurred. In fact, we are arguing in a circle.<sup>70</sup>

In addition, Lewis levels another criticism to the effect that Hume is being inconsistent with his own theory of knowledge. Lewis argues that Hume's argument against miracles employs a notion of the uniformity of nature that Hume elsewhere denies. The uniformity of nature is the idea that those laws or principles (however they are labeled) hold more or less uniformly and serve as the basis of our ability to extrapolate from past experience to future expectations and

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<sup>69</sup> Hume, *Enquiry*, §X, Pt. 1, Selby-Bigge, 114.

<sup>70</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: How God Intervenes in Nature and Human Affairs* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1947), 102.

from present experience to past explanations. If water has always frozen at 32° Fahrenheit in the past, we expect it to freeze at 32° Fahrenheit in the future.<sup>71</sup> Such expectations are the grounds of certain types of scientific reasoning. Since Hume explicitly denies such uniformity (Lewis's argument goes), he cannot employ such uniformity to level an argument against the reasonableness of believing the report of a miracle. Lewis argues:

There is also an objection to Hume which leads us deeper into our problem. The whole idea of Probability (as Hume understands it) depends on the principle of the Uniformity of Nature. Unless Nature always goes on in the same way, the fact that a thing had happened ten million times would not make it a whit more probable that it would happen again. And how do we know the Uniformity of Nature? A moment's thought shows that we do not know it by experience. ... Our observations would therefore be of no use unless we felt sure that Nature when we are not watching her behaves in the same way as when we are: in other words, unless we believed in the Uniformity of Nature. ... Clearly the assumption which you have to make before there is any such thing as probability cannot itself be probable.<sup>72</sup>

*Rethinking Hume's Challenge.* If, indeed, Hume is framing his arguments against the reasonableness of believing a report of a purported miracle based on these notions of uniform experience and intrinsic laws of nature, then the responses by Lewis evacuate the arguments of most of their force. What is worse, it exposes Hume as being a poor thinker (by employing a circular argument) and being inconsistent (by appealing to principles which he himself rejects elsewhere). However, I believe that these responses are taking Hume's arguments the wrong way. A different interpretation of the arguments shows that Hume is not employing any circular reasoning and is completely consistent with his own theory of knowledge. The problem with Hume's position is, I believe, much more sophisticated than first imagined. I can give here only the briefest account of Hume's views and what I think should be the proper responses.

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<sup>71</sup> The reasoning also goes the other direction. If a certain physical event happens today only under certain conditions, one concludes that the same event happened in the past only because of the same conditions.

<sup>72</sup> Lewis, *Miracles*, 102.

It is important that we understand exactly what Hume is and is not saying. Lewis and others take Hume to be inconsistent with his own theory of knowing here, in as much as in other places he seemingly denies that we can know that there are intrinsic laws of nature such as (for example) cause and effect.<sup>73</sup> Hume imagines a person who is dropped into this world. His initial experiences of the world would never allow him to know whether any particular event is connected to another (what would commonly be thought of as a causal connection). But Hume recognizes that, with continued experiences of the same patterns of one state of the world always following the same previous state of the world, that one dropped into this world could not help but come to believe and expect that the earlier state will always lead to the later state. Hume nevertheless denies that the experience can actually detect any real extra-sensible reality known as causality (as some sort of intrinsic feature of things). What then, according to Hume, accounts for the inevitable belief or expectation that the earlier state will always give rise to the later? "This principle is Custom or Habit."<sup>74</sup> Primarily for Hume, it is psychological. It is the nature of human understanding that it will incline to a particular belief precisely because of repeated experiences. He is not saying, however, that we philosophically *demonstrate* that these repeated experiences prove some intrinsic or metaphysical feature of the world that enables us to rationally (in the philosophical sense of the term during his day) make predictions and retrodictions about reality because of some necessity we have identified.

It is not unlike the experience a person may have upon hearing the phrase "Old McDonald had a farm" that makes him immediately think "ee-i-ee-i-o." One realizes that there is nothing in reality that necessitates the "ee-i-ee-i-o" to follow the "Old McDonald had a farm."

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<sup>73</sup> Hume, *Enquiry*, §V, Pt. 1, Selby-Bigge, 42-43.

<sup>74</sup> Hume, *Enquiry*, §V, Pt. 1, Selby-Bigge, 43.

What is more, no one upon hearing "Old McDonald had a farm" for the first time would immediately think "ee-i-ee-i-o." The expectation comes entirely by a "uniform experience" of the "constant conjunction" of the two. For Hume, this is exactly the same phenomenon that makes us expect that when (for example) the cue ball hits the eight ball, the eight ball will move. Since there is nothing real that connects the two (like causality) then Hume explains the expectation solely on the basis of custom or habit. He concludes:

What, then, is the conclusion of the whole matter? ... All belief of matter of fact or real existence is derived merely from some object, present to the memory or senses, and a customary conjunction between that and some other object. All these operations are a species of natural instincts, which no reasoning or process of the thought and understanding is able either to produce or to prevent.<sup>75</sup>

With this, I do not think that the problem with Hume's arguments against miracles is that, in setting up the definition of miracles, he then goes on to play off of any notion of fixed (intrinsic) laws of nature composed of necessary causal connections. I do not take his comment "firm and unalterable experience has established these laws" to mean that, by experience we come to know that there are unalterable laws of nature arising from causal connections between physical objects. I take his notion that "unalterable experience has established these laws" to be completely consistent with his denial of any connection. The reason they are consistent is because what establishes the laws (in our understanding) is *the habit produced* by this "unalterable experience" and not some notion of a real necessary connection that he clearly denies elsewhere in his writings.

The experimental reasoning itself, which we possess in common with beasts, and on which the whole conduct of life depends, is nothing but a species of instinct or mechanical power, that acts in us unknown to ourselves; and in its chief operations, is not

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<sup>75</sup> Hume, *Enquiry*, §V, Pt. 2, Selby-Bigge, 46-47.

directed by any such relations or comparisons of ideas, as are the proper objects of our intellectual faculties.<sup>76</sup>

In other words, Hume is merely saying that when, because of unalterable experience, one develops the state of mind (habit) such that he cannot but believe that one particular state of affairs will always follow a previous particular state of affairs, it is *this state of the habit of mind* that prevents that one from believing a report that a miracle has occurred. Since miracles (in Hume's estimation) are always rare, then it would not be possible for anyone whose mind is working correctly to ever develop the habit such that he could believe in these types of events. If he experienced so many resurrections that he could develop such a belief, then resurrections (by definition in Hume's understanding) would not be regarded as miraculous.

He is not saying that we know that there are intrinsic laws of nature and therefore know that miracles cannot occur, as if the laws of nature here were necessary causal connections between states of affairs. He clearly denies that this is ever the case (which is why, due to how Lewis interprets Hume's comments on miracles, Lewis takes Hume to be inconsistent). It is the habit of mind that makes things such that, for anyone who possesses that habit of mind (which he will if he has uniform experience), he will always disbelieve any report that a miracle has occurred.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Hume, *Enquiry*, §IX, Selby-Bigge, 108.

<sup>77</sup> This is why I disagree with those apologists who tout Hume's comment (below) as if he was conceding the viability of the philosophical notion of cause after all. Hume wrote, "But allow me to tell you that I never asserted so absurd a proposition as that anything might arise without a cause: I only maintained that our certainty of the falsehood of that proposition proceeded neither from intuition nor demonstration; but from another source." (David Hume to John Stewart, Feb. 1754, in *The Letters of David Hume*, 2 vols., ed. by J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), I: 187). When countering the skeptics who challenge our use of the notion of causality when claiming that the universe could not have come into existence out of nothing completely uncaused, these apologists respond "Even David Hume never believed such a thing!" But Hume's statement is completely consistent with his skeptical stance toward any philosophical notion of causality. The key phrase to pick up here is 'from another source'. The reason why Hume argues that we are certain that it is false that something could arise without a cause is not because our certainty is grounded in intuition (contra Rationalism) or demonstration (Empiricism) but from habit. The mind is so constituted that we could never believe otherwise. But that it is this way is a psychological not philosophical fact.

*Responses to Hume, Revisited.* If I have successfully exonerated Hume in light of these criticisms commonly made against his arguments, what then can we say about his skepticism toward miracles? Has Hume shown that it is never reasonable to believe a report that a miracle has occurred? I do not think so. It seems to me that Hume's theory of knowledge suffers from two problems. First, his accounting of his theory leads to something deeply incoherent. Second, it is simply false. One can see this deep incoherence when he examines what Hume understands what it is to believe something. For Hume, to believe something is *only* to have a feeling of a particular kind.

It follows, therefore, that the difference between *fiction* and *belief* lies in some sentiment or feeling, which is annexed to the latter, not to the former, and which depends not on the will, nor can be commanded at pleasure. It must be excited by nature, like all other sentiment; and must arise from the particular situation, in which the mind is placed at any particular juncture. Whenever any object is presented to the memory or senses, it immediately, by the force of custom, carries the imagination to conceive that object, which is usually conjoined to it; and this conception is attended with a feeling or sentiment, different from the loose reveries of the fancy. In this consists the whole nature of belief.<sup>78</sup>

Lest one wonders if Hume could possibly be talking about beliefs that have to do with (what someone might refer to as) objective reality, he gives an unambiguous illustration.

For as there is no matter of fact which we believe so firmly that we cannot conceive the contrary, there would be no difference between the conception assented to and that which is rejected, were it not for some sentiment which distinguishes the one from the other. If I see a billiard-ball moving towards another, on a smooth table, I can easily conceive it to stop upon contact. This conception implies no contradiction; but still it feels very differently from that conception by which I represent to myself the impulse and the communication of motion from one ball to another.<sup>79</sup>

For Hume, the *only* reason I say that I believe that the one ball will move when it is hit by the other is because, what it means to believe, is just a feeling that differs from another feeling to

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<sup>78</sup> Hume, *Enquiry*, §V, 2, Selby-Bigge, 48.

<sup>79</sup> Hume, *Enquiry*, §V, 2, Selby-Bigge, 48.

which Hume would attach the label 'fiction' (i.e., that one disbelieves it). But then, why should Hume's reader take Hume's theory of knowledge as a whole (including this accounting of what it is to believe) to be *true*? Why should anyone think that even Hume thought that it was true? By Hume's own account, for Hume to believe what Hume is saying is just for Hume to have a particular feeling. If it is *only* a feeling, then it has nothing necessarily to do with what the rest of us would mean when we say that we believe a particular view because we think it is true.<sup>80</sup> Since Hume's theory disallows the theory itself from being believed to be true (since to believe something is to *only* have a particular feeling) then it undercuts itself. If it is really true, it would not be *believed* to be true on the basis of it actually *being* true. It is incoherent for there to be a theory of knowledge such that, its being true has nothing (and could have nothing) to do with anyone actually believing it to be true.

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<sup>80</sup> Most apologists with whom I am familiar hold (as do I) to the correspondence theory of truth in terms of which a proposition is said to be true just in case it corresponds to reality. Admittedly the nature, theories, and tests of truth are large issues in philosophy. There have been many controversies over the nature of truth and over exactly what it is about a proposition that renders it true. Space constraints do not allow me to explore these views here to any great extent. The Classical definition of truth that has come to be known as the Correspondence Theory is cited by Aristotle: "This is clear, in the first place, if we define what the true and the false are. To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true; so that he who says of anything that it is, or that it is not, will say either what is true or what is false." (*Metaphysics* 4.7.1011<sup>b</sup>26-29. The translation is Richard McKeon, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941.) Other philosophers holding a correspondence theory of truth would be Plato (*Sophist*, 240d; 263b); Augustine (*Soliloquia* I, 28); Thomas Aquinas (*Truth*, Question 1, Article 1); René Descartes (*Meditations on First Philosophy: Third Meditation; Objections and Replies: Fifth Set of Objections* (see John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, trans. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984): 26, 196)); John Locke (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* II, XXXII, §2-§5); Immanuel Kant (*Critique of Pure Reason*, I, Second Part, First Div., Bk. II, Chap. II, §3, 3 (see, Norman Kemp Smith's trans. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965: 220)); Bertrand Russell ("On the Nature of Truth," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1906-1907), 28-49 as cited in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards, ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing, Co., Inc. & The Free Press, 1967), s.v. "Correspondence Theory of Truth," p. 232); and the early Ludwig Wittgenstein (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 2.0211-2.0212, 2.21, 3.01). Those philosophers who hold the correspondence theory of truth differ as to exactly where the "correspondence" obtains. Positions include that it obtains between the proposition and external reality (naïve realism), between the proposition and the internal reality of the form of the thing in the intellect as well as the same form of the thing in external reality (moderate realism), or only between the idea of reality in the mind and the thing in reality outside the mind (representationalism). Other theories of truth include coherence theory, pragmatic theory, disquotational, and performative theory. Clearly, debates about the nature of the truth of certain proposition will vary according to how one defines 'truth.'

Second, my contention is that Hume's theory of knowledge is simply false. I deny that all we have to work with when thinking about reality are the barest of perceptions. I affirm that the human senses can give us knowledge, not only of real sensible objects, but also of the real metaphysical constituents, characteristics, and principles of those objects.<sup>81</sup> As William A. Wallace says,

The human mind, contrary to the teaching of the skeptics of Aristotle's day, is capable of transcending the limitations of sense and of grasping the natures of things. To succeed in this quest it is endowed with a special capability, namely, that of reasoning from the more known to the less known, from the clearly perceived appearances of things to their hidden but intelligible underlying causes.<sup>82</sup>

One begins to appreciate why Hume developed his theory when one sees how his thinking fits into a flow of philosophical views since Descartes, but especially how philosophy was shaped by John Locke and Bishop George Berkeley (his immediate empiricist predecessors). Again, space will not allow me but the barest account of the relevant issues. The empiricist thinking of Locke finds commitment to certain cherished philosophical doctrines that some subsequent philosophers regarded as entirely unwarranted. I do not mean necessarily that subsequent philosophers rejected these cherished doctrines as false (though many did so reject

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<sup>81</sup> Thomas Aquinas says, "Our knowledge, taking its start from things, proceeds in this order. First, it begins in sense; second, it is completed in the intellect." (Aquinas, *Truth*, 3 vols., vol. 1 trans. Robert W. Mulligan (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952); vol. 2 trans. James V. McGlynn (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953); vol. 3. trans. Robert W. Schmidt (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1954). The three volumes were reprinted as *Truth* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), I, 11) He goes on to say, "For according to its [the human intellect's] manner of knowing in the present life, the intellect depends on the sense for the origin of knowledge; and so those things that do not fall under the senses cannot be grasped by the human intellect except in so far as the knowledge of them is gathered from sensible things." (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 5 vols., I, 3, §3, trans. Anton Pegis (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 64) For a succinct treatment of how we can know the real (particularly in light of the challenges from Locke onward culminating with Kant) see Étienne Gilson, *Methodical Realism*, trans. Philip Trower (Front Royal: Christendom Press, 1990), reprinted *Methodical Realism: A Handbook for Beginning Realists*, trans. Philip Trower (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011). For a more in-depth account and defense of classical (or, if you will, scholastic) empiricism see Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, *Man's Knowledge of Reality: An Introduction to Thomistic Epistemology* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1956). For the application of this (what some may fear is an archaic) theory of knowledge see the Wallace text cited in note 48.

<sup>82</sup> Wallace, *Modeling*, xi.

them). Instead, I mean that, at the very least, these doctrines could not be accounted for by what was passing as empiricist epistemology of the day. I am thinking here of such doctrines as substance, the reality of extra-mental world, natural theology, miracles, the existence of God, and more.

These (and other) philosophical notions reach far back into the history of philosophy flourishing among those philosophers who themselves can rightly be called empiricists. But the empiricism of the classical variety (in the tradition of Aristotle) was a very different theory of knowledge than the modern empiricism of Locke. The reasons for the changes in empiricism from its classical version to its modern version are interesting to examine but outside the purpose of this chapter. Let it suffice to say that those concerns that Hume raises as he realizes the inadequacy of modern empiricism (or what Hume would have known simply as philosophy) were virtually not be found among empiricist thinkers from Aristotle to Aquinas. For all my criticisms of Hume's philosophy, Hume is to be commended for exposing the bankruptcy of modern empiricism to adequately account for these cherished philosophical doctrines. What Berkeley did for (and to) Locke's thinking (in winnowing out what Berkeley regarded as unwarranted elements while insisting on maintaining certain of these cherished doctrines) Hume did for Berkeley's by finishing the purge. The end result was a system of empiricist philosophy that tried to reduce all thinking to its bare ingredients of perception itself, and which, in many ways, became an anti-philosophy. It was no wonder that, with such radical surgery, Hume's way of thinking revealed that very few (if any) traditional philosophical truths can survive philosophy's penetrating gaze. Hume did not receive the label of skeptic without warrant. But as I have said elsewhere (see note 66) I take Hume's point not to be that philosophy has proven so many things to be false, but, rather, that if one tries to use philosophy to establish certain

philosophical truths, he will be completely disabused of these truths (if that was psychologically possible). Hume sums it up thus:

By all that has been said the reader will easily perceive that the philosophy contain'd in this book is very sceptical, and tends to give us a notion of the imperfections and narrow limits of human understanding. Almost all reasoning is there reduced to experience; and the belief, which attends experience, is explained to be nothing but a peculiar sentiment, or lively conception produced by habit. Nor is this all, when we believe any thing of *external* existence, or suppose an object to exist a moment after it is no longer perceived, this belief is nothing but a sentiment of the same kind. Our author insists upon several other sceptical topics; and upon the whole concludes, that we assent to our faculties, and employ our reason only because we cannot help it. Philosophy wou'd render us entirely *Pyrrhonian*, were not nature too strong for it.<sup>83</sup>

For Hume, were it not for the way nature has disposed our thinking capacities, philosophy (i.e., his version of modern empiricism) would make us all absolute skeptics.

With all this, what can we say to Hume and his skepticism? In one respect, no one should have ever thought that certain of these cherished beliefs should arise from a rigorous philosophy. As I tell my students, you do not need to take a philosophy course to discover that there is a material world that exists external to your mind. Children know that this is the case, even if they never consciously reflect upon that truth.<sup>84</sup> What is worse, for those who think that such knowledge can rightfully be called knowledge only after (and because of) it has been philosophically demonstrated, it is a guarantee that such thinking will eventuate (if he follow his thinking far enough and consistently enough) into skepticism. This was Descartes' illusive

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<sup>83</sup> Hume, *Treatise*, Abstract, Selby-Bigge, 657.

<sup>84</sup> As a philosophy professor, I certainly do not want to dissuade anyone from thinking philosophically. It is where philosophy comes is that I am trying to point out. A child can know that a flower is not a puppy dog and that mommy is not daddy. This takes no training in philosophy to know. It is known directly by the normal sensory faculties. But suppose someone wanted to delve deeply into the nature of a flower or a puppy dog. In this case, one would need specialized training in botany or zoology. To go even deeper might require biology, or biochemistry, or physics. Similarly, there are metaphysical depths to sensible objects that require the tools and methods of philosophy. Understanding thing like natures, substance, causality, existence, and even understanding understanding itself (e.g., meaning, significance, semiotics) are issues that philosophy is designed to explore.

dream. The impossibility of this dream was demonstrated in subsequent philosophical thinking and climaxed in David Hume. The philosophical realism that all but faded from sight in Hume's time and place realized that the starting point of human knowledge is not to suspend what we actually do know by virtue of being a human with the faculties to know the world that God created. Instead, it is to take these observations about the sensible world and begin to reflect upon what can be discovered about it at a deeper, metaphysical level. We must begin with reality, not with philosophizing.

### ***Defending Miracles from the Challenges of Other Religions***

There are two ways that the New Testament miracles are challenged by other religions. First, some have alleged that the miracles of Jesus and His apostles are paralleled by pagan miracles workers before and after the time of Christ. The argument here is an attempt to evacuate the New Testament miracles of their unique place in history.<sup>85</sup> Second, David Hume argued that the presence of purported miracles in other contemporary religions renders useless the apologetic value of miracles for the Christian religion. I should like to take a look at each of these.

#### **Ancient Miracle Workers**

A search on the internet will reveal quite a number of writers who attempt to cast the credibility of the New Testament as being on par with other ancient sources that are themselves characterized as incredible. Richard Carrier comments,

We all have read the tales told of Jesus in the Gospels, but few people really have a good idea of their context. Yet it is quite enlightening to examine them against the background of the time and place in which they were written, and my goal here is to help you do just that. ... There is abundant evidence that these were times replete with kooks and quacks of all varieties .... Placed in this context, the gospels no longer seem to be so remarkable, and this leads us to an important fact: when the Gospels were written, skeptics and

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<sup>85</sup> For a discussion of certain other ways in which ancient pagan religions have allegedly influenced the formation of Christian doctrine, see my chapter "The Reliability of the New Testament Writers" in this volume.

informed or critical minds were a small minority. Although the gullible, the credulous, and those ready to believe or exaggerate stories of the supernatural are still abundant today, they were much more common in antiquity, and taken far more seriously.<sup>86</sup>

It is not uncommon to find web sites touting the "miracles" of Apollonius of Tyana, Vespasian, and others, attempting to draw parallels to the miracles of Jesus. Often, they draw these parallels to try to show that, just as no one today believes these stories of Apollonius or Vespasian, neither should we believe the stories of Jesus. But if we allow the historicity of the Jesus story, we cannot consistently (so the argument goes) disallow these other stories. If we allow these other stories (the critic continues), then the conclusions many have come to about Jesus as the unique Son of God are no longer warranted.

By far, the most thorough examination to my knowledge of a range of issues relating to miracles is the work by Asbury New Testament professor Craig S. Keener.<sup>87</sup> Among other things, it is an extensive examination of the sources from ancient times regarding purported miracle workers. Keener marshals the evidence from the ancient sources in his analysis of the comparisons and contrasts to the New Testament. I should like to briefly summarize some of his points most relevant to my purposes here bringing in certain other relevant sources to see if such associations are warranted.

*Apollonius*. Perhaps the most significant purported parallel to Jesus from antiquity is Apollonius of Tyana. "Of all ancient stories about miracle workers, those about Apollonius come closest to the stories about Jesus in the Gospels. Only these two figures stand out as immanent

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<sup>86</sup> Richard Carrier, "Kooks and Quacks of the Roman Empire: A Look into the World of the Gospels." ([http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard\\_carrier/kooks.html](http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/kooks.html), accessed 07/18/13)

<sup>87</sup> In addition to dealing with purportedly early miracle workers, Keener examines the philosophical issues related to the notion of miracles, proposed explanations, and demons and exorcism in antiquity.

bearers of numinous power of whom multiple healing narratives are reported."<sup>88</sup> He was purportedly an itinerant sage and wonder worker (particularly healings) roughly a contemporary of Jesus or right after. It is primarily this feature of pagan miracle workers, viz., "divine activity that could be mediated through human agents"<sup>89</sup> that commends the parallel. But, as Keener notes, this feature was "more common than not among human societies in general."<sup>90</sup>

Our knowledge about Apollonius comes primarily from a writer named Philostratus who lived towards the end of the second century and beginning of the third.<sup>91</sup> By Philostratus's own account, he gathered his information about Apollonius at the behest of the empress Julia Domna, wife of the emperor Septimius Severus. This information supposedly came from documents written by a man named Damis who had "resorted to Apollonius in order to study wisdom, and having shared, by his own account, his wanderings abroad, wrote an account of them."<sup>92</sup> Philostratus describes Julia as a "devoted admirer of all rhetorical exercises" who had "commanded me to recast and edit these essays, at the same time paying more attention to the style and diction of them; for the man of Nineveh had told his story clearly enough, yet somewhat awkwardly."<sup>93</sup> Philostratus says he also read other sources, including Maximus of

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<sup>88</sup> Keener, *Miracles*, I, 53. For the sake of convenience, I have left out of my quotations from Keener his parenthetical citations which reference other sources. In addition, any of my quotations from Keener that includes his (sometimes) extensive footnotes have been left out.

<sup>89</sup> Keener, *Miracles*, I, 45.

<sup>90</sup> Keener, *Miracles*, I, 45.

<sup>91</sup> Philostratus's *The Life of Apollonius* is available on-line at [http://www.livius.org/ap-ark/apollonius/life/va\\_1\\_01.html#%A71](http://www.livius.org/ap-ark/apollonius/life/va_1_01.html#%A71) (accessed 07/18/13)

<sup>92</sup> Philostratus, *Apollonius*, I, §3.

<sup>93</sup> Philostratus, *Apollonius*, I, §3.

Aegae who "comprised all the life of Apollonius in Aegae"<sup>94</sup> who Philostratus characterized as "a writer whose reputation won him a position in the emperor's Secretariat"<sup>95</sup> and Apollonius's will "from which we can learn how rapturous and inspired a sage he really was."<sup>96</sup>

Can the stories of Apollonius match the stories of Jesus in terms of historical credibility? There are several problems. First, the sources for Apollonius are later than the sources for Jesus. Keener observes that "the only extant literary account of Apollonius of Tyana, first appear in third-century literature, after Christian miracles stories had become widely known, and Christian and pagan expectations influenced each other more generally."<sup>97</sup> Keener goes on,

If we ask which stories circulated first, however, it is clear that miracle stories circulated about Jesus before Apollonius flourished, and Mark wrote about Jesus's miracles well over a century before Philostratus wrote about Apollonius's. The period between Jesus's crucifixion and Mark's Gospel, usually estimated at roughly forty years, may be less than a third of the period between Apollonius's death or disappearance and Philostratus's story about him.<sup>98</sup>

Geisler, in an article on Apollonius in his *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* gives a list of reasons to discount the stories of Apollonius in terms of both their historicity and supposed parallels with Jesus.<sup>99</sup> Regarding the contrasts between the story of Apollonius and the story of Jesus, the writing of Philostratus is the only extant literary source for information about

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<sup>94</sup> Philostratus, *Apollonius*, I, §3.

<sup>95</sup> Philostratus, *Apollonius*, I, §12.

<sup>96</sup> Philostratus, *Apollonius*, I, §3.

<sup>97</sup> Keener, *Miracles*, I, 46.

<sup>98</sup> Kenner, *Miracles*, I, 53.

<sup>99</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, Baker Academic, 1999), s.v., "Apollonius of Tyana, 44-45. I am utilizing Geisler's material here together with other sources that weigh in as well as some of my own thoughts.

Apollonius's life.<sup>100</sup> But Philostratus was not an eyewitness, "but was commissioned to compose his book by Julia Domna, wife of the Roman emperor Septimus 120 years after Apollonius's death."<sup>101</sup> It would seem that Philostratus was commissioned to write what he did to counter earlier criticisms of Apollonius as a magician and charlatan.<sup>102</sup> According to Keener, "the magical character of some of Apollonius's deeds still frequently surfaces in Philostratus, although he is trying to clear Apollonius of the charge."<sup>103</sup> The supposed accounts of Apollonius's miracles are actually stories that Philostratus records. In other words, it is not Philostratus's own eyewitness account that is claiming any purported wonders at the hands of Apollonius. Instead they are stories about Apollonius coming possibly from a (likely fictional) figure named Damis. Because of this thin connection between Philostratus as the writer back to Apollonius as the subject, Geisler concludes that "the authenticity of this account is unconfirmed."<sup>104</sup> In contrast, the story of Jesus has "many multiple contemporary accounts of his life, death, and resurrection."<sup>105</sup> These multiple accounts are preserved in a vast assortment of manuscripts, lectionaries, early translations, and early quotations.

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<sup>100</sup> This is not to say that Apollonius is never mentioned by any other early writer. The Christian historian Eusebius of Caesarea wrote a treatise reacting against a parallel drawn between Apollonius and Christ by a contemporary of Eusebius named Hierocles. "Against the Life of Apollonius of Tyana Written by Philostratus, Occasions by the Parallel Drawn by Hierocles Between Him and Christ" is available on-line at [http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/eusebius\\_against\\_hierocles.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/eusebius_against_hierocles.htm). (accessed 07/18/13) New Testament professor Richard Bauckham observes, "Sossianus Hierocles contrasted the works of Jesus Christ unfavorably with those of Apollonius of Tyana, and drew a response from the Christian theologian and historian Eusebius of Caesarea." (Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), 145). For the purposes of comparing the life of Apollonius and Jesus, Philostratus's work is our only significant source.

<sup>101</sup> Geisler, *Encyclopedia*, 45.

<sup>102</sup> Keener, *Miracles*, I 50-51 where he cites the sources.

<sup>103</sup> Keener, *Miracles*, I, 50-51.

<sup>104</sup> Geisler, *Encyclopedia*, 44.

<sup>105</sup> Geisler, *Encyclopedia*, 44. See my chapter "The Reliability of the New Testament Writers" in this volume.

Philostratus's work contains a number of historical errors. Damis is supposedly from Nineveh<sup>106</sup> even though Nineveh did not exist during his life time. In addition Philostratus has certain geographical and dating errors in his work. "Nineveh and Babylon were destroyed 300 years earlier [thus, Damis, a contemporary of Apollonius, according to Philostratus, could not have hailed from there]. The Caucasus Mountains are described as a dividing point between India and Babylon, which is inaccurate. Philostratus's speeches are anachronistically put into Apollonius's mouth."<sup>107</sup> In contrast, the story of Jesus and the New Testament has been meticulously confirmed as to its historical and geographical accuracy. Numerous people, places, and events are identified in the New Testament that we know are accurate and no person, place, or thing identified in the New Testament has ever been shown to be other than the New Testament says. Other differences are that the story of Apollonius ends with his death whereas the story of Jesus ends with His resurrection. Also, Apollonius was purported to have *become* a deity whereas Jesus was both God and man throughout. These contrasts show that, as a whole, Philostratus's story of Apollonius does nothing to bolster the critics' case against Jesus and His miracles.

Specifically, however, what are we to make of these claims of miracles? Depending on how one reads Philostratus here, one could argue that the miracle stories do not parallel (in their essence) the miracles of Jesus. For example, Philostratus tells us that Apollonius raised a girl from the dead. But, according to the account, Apollonius did so by "merely touching her and whispering in secret some spell over her."<sup>108</sup> This comports completely with the milieu of the

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<sup>106</sup> Philostratus, *Apollonius*, I, §3.

<sup>107</sup> Geisler, *Encyclopedia*, 44-45.

<sup>108</sup> Philostratus, *Apollonius*, IV, §45.

times of Apollonius where certain men allegedly could wield the powers of magic.<sup>109</sup> There is even the presence of magic, witchcraft and sorcery in the Bible.

And many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and began burning them in the sight of everyone; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver. (Acts 19:19)

He [Manasseh] practiced witchcraft, used divination, practiced sorcery and dealt with mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking Him to anger." (2 Chron. 33:6)

Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, 'This man is what is called the Great Power of God.' And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts."

It is not counterexample to the miracles of the New Testament for there to be wonder working by others who were not Christians. Indeed, the Scriptures warn about such dangers. (2 Thes. 2:9)

However, Jesus did not raise (for example) Jairus's daughter with a magic spell.<sup>110</sup> Since Apollonius used a spell, then this act is not, strictly speaking, a miracle. As I have argued, a miracle is an act whereby God suspends the natural, physical laws that He created for the purpose of vindicating a messenger and confirming a message. Since God is the Creator of the universe, He is not part of some overall matrix of causes and effects. He is transcendent to all creation. Miracles, then, as acts of a transcendent God (either directly or through His agents) are contrasted with occult events like those that would be precipitated by something like Apollonius's spell. In the occult, a spell is a spoken word or words that activate immaterial forces

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<sup>109</sup> I should point out that, by the term 'magic' (and related words) I am not referring to stage magic (prestidigitation) used by illusionists for entertainment.

<sup>110</sup> One internet site desperate to try to make the parallel work tried to associate Jesus' saying "Talitha cumi" (Mark 5:41) with the spell of Apollonius despite the fact that the text in Mark clearly indicates that Jesus was speaking some other language than the Greek of Mark's text. The words are Aramaic (or Syro-Chaldaic) for "Little girl, arise" (just as Mark says).

to bring about a spiritual or physical effect.<sup>111</sup> It could be thought of as analogous to the mechanistic relationships that obtain between physical objects. Just as one can (for example) add a chemical to another chemical to achieve a desired effect (like adding sugar to your tea to make it sweet), the occultist believes that the immaterial realm operates according to its own set of mechanistic laws (albeit immaterial) that can have both immaterial and material effects. The practice of the occult is the mastering of these laws.<sup>112</sup> This is not at all the working of a miracle.

Some may respond that perhaps Philostratus is speaking in phenomenological language. Perhaps to the original witness (be that Damis or whomever) Apollonius was not actually whispering a spell, but that was only how the witness understood the situation. It seems plausible that Apollonius could have said something not intending it to be a spell, but it would appear to someone watching that there was seemingly a causal connection (in an occult way) between Apollonius speaking and the little girl rising. Even granting this, the account of the event still poses problems for anyone who would use it as a parallel to the miracles of Jesus or His apostles. Note carefully that Philostratus's words when he says that Apollonius, by "merely touching her and whispering in secret some spell over her, at once woke up the maiden from her *seeming* death,"<sup>113</sup> allow for the possibility that the little girl was not really dead in the first place. In fact, Philostratus goes on:

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<sup>111</sup> Occultist Nevil Drury defines it as "an incantation, or invocation, performed by a witch, wizard, or magician, which is believed to have a tangible outcome—for either good or evil." (*Dictionary of Mysticism and the Occult* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), s.v., "spell," p. 243.

<sup>112</sup> As I stated earlier (note 1) the view that there is an immaterial realm that operates according to mechanistic "laws" working on "forces" that humans can be manipulated by speaking certain words or engaging in certain mind dynamics is the very essence of occult philosophy. It is my contention that there are manifestations that some may interpret as being of such forces. I maintain that they are really manifestations of demonic activity. Given that demons are not merely forces but are intelligences, they cannot be manipulated or controlled by any magician or occultist. Demons may allow the magician to think this as part of a deception about the nature of reality. For more on this see my article cited in that note.

<sup>113</sup> Philostratus, *Apollonius*, IV, §45, emphasis added.

Now whether he detected some spark of life in her, which those who were nursing her had not noticed—for it is said that although it was raining at the time, a vapor went up from her face—or whether her life was really extinct, and he restored it by the warmth of his touch, is a mysterious problem which neither I myself nor those who were present could decide.<sup>114</sup>

The vapor that was observed may very well have been an indication that she was breathing. It seems to me, then, that the critic who tries to use this story against Jesus and the New Testament is being disingenuous. According to Philostratus, not even the ones there could tell whether Apollonius actually raised the girl from the dead. Much less so could anyone today do so.

Another problem the story poses for the critic is Philostratus's commentary. He says that when Apollonius whispered and touched the little girl he "at once woke up the maiden from her seeming death; and the girl spoke out loud, and returned to her father's house, *just as Alcestis did when she was brought back to life by Heracles*."<sup>115</sup> The problem is that Heracles is a figure in Greek mythology. To be sure, it is entirely plausible for a writer to liken a real person or thing to a fictional person or thing. I can understand what someone might mean if they said "That Olympic runner was faster than Superman!" The difference, however, is that the audience would already know of the reality of the Olympic runner and would not be in danger of attributing the fictional nature of the Superman character to the Olympic runner, concluding that the Olympic runner did not exist after all. Only if we knew that Philostratus was confident that his readers would not make that same mistake, can we be confident that something else not was going on besides an actual event of raising the little girl from death. It does not seem to bode well for anyone who is desirous to marshal such a story as if it is real, only to have the narrative liken the event in question to a mythical event. Further, who is to say that Philostratus did not regard

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<sup>114</sup> Philostratus, *Apollonius*, IV, §45.

<sup>115</sup> Philostratus, *Apollonius*, IV, §45, emphasis added.

Heracles as real as well? In this case, one could regard the entire story as a literary device (perhaps to paint a portrait of the character of Apollonius) never intended to be taken as literally true. This then would have implications for how confident we can be in taking the story of Apollonius as real.

It would seem, therefore, that this story of Apollonius does nothing to cast doubt on the veracity of the stories in the New Testament of Jesus and His apostles working miracles. The differences, together with the internal problems with Philostratus's account, are just too much to sustain any meaningful parallels. Keener sums up the situation. "Philostratus's portrait suits a late second- or third-century setting (i.e., the author's own) much better than a mostly late first-century setting (i.e., Apollonius's); his accounts of Apollonius even resemble reports from Christian gospels, though especially of the 'apocryphal' variety."<sup>116</sup>

*Vespasian*. Another supposed miracle story focuses on Roman Emperor Vespasian and is found in Tacitus' *Histories*, 4.81. It talks about a blind commoner who threw himself at the Emperor's knees and "implored him with groans to heal his infirmity."<sup>117</sup> Tacitus goes on:

This he did by the advice of the God Serapis, whom this nation, devoted as it is to many superstitions, worships more than any other divinity. He begged Vespasian that he would deign to moisten his cheeks and eye-balls with his spittle. Another with a diseased hand, at the counsel of the same God, prayed that the limb might feel the print of a Caesar's foot.<sup>118</sup>

One, perhaps, is immediately reminded of Jesus healing the blind man in Mark 8:22-26 (where spittle was also used) and Jesus' healing of the man with the withered hand in Matt. 12:10-13.

Critics use this story of Vespasian to cast doubt upon the miracles of Jesus. What are we to make

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<sup>116</sup> Keener, *Miracles*, I, 54.

<sup>117</sup> Tacitus, *Histories*, 4.81, available on-line at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/tac/h04080.htm>. (accessed 07/18/13)

<sup>118</sup> Tacitus, *Histories*, 4.81.

of this account by Tacitus? There are a number of ways in which this story differs markedly from miracle accounts in the New Testament.

First, note that the encounter is at the behest of Serapis.<sup>119</sup> Serapis is not the Creator God but is, instead, an amalgam of certain Greek attributes with a previously existing Egyptian deity. The understanding of the deity arose as a result of the mixing of certain Greeks with the Egyptians in northern Africa. Thus, the event is precipitated by a deity that is not the Creator God. Lest someone misunderstand, my argument is not circular. I am not arguing: (1) Christianity is true (based on, among other things, my argument from miracles); (2) Serapis is not the God of Christianity, therefore (3) Serapis is a false God; (4) Serapis facilitated the situation by sending the commoners to Vespasian for Vespasian to perform his miracle, therefore (5) this miracle is false. I have no difficulty believing that someone actually spoke to the commoners to instruct him to go to Vespasian. The question is how the commoners could discern whether this was the true God (or one of His emissaries) or some malevolent entity or something else. My challenge is to the entire philosophical context within which this event takes place.

Second, someone might suggest that this part of the story only serves as a literary device to explain how it is that commoners could gain an audience with the Emperor and, thus, is neither literally nor figuratively true.<sup>120</sup> My question then is: if this part of the story is fiction,

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<sup>119</sup> Suetonius's account of the same event adds a few more details. "Apparently the god Serapis had promised them in a dream that if Vespasian would consent to spit in the blind man's eyes, and touch the lame man's leg with his heel, both would be made well." (Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars* trans. Robert Graves (London: Penguin Books, 1957), *Vesp.* 7, p. 284). I do not make too much of the translation 'apparently' as if there necessarily was any sense of uncertainty whether Serapis actually did appear in a dream. The Loeb Classical translation translates the Latin more categorically. "A man of the people who was blind, and another who was lame, came to him together as he sat on the tribunal, begging for the help for their disorders which Serapis had promised in a dream." (See [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Suetonius/12Caesars/Vespasian\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Suetonius/12Caesars/Vespasian*.html), accessed 07/19/13)

<sup>120</sup> Since a statement is true only where the statement corresponds to reality, then, failing to do so renders the statement false. But a statement may correspond to reality either literally or figuratively. Thus, employing a literary device as such does not necessarily mean that a given statement is one of fiction. When Scripture talks about a great dragon who took his tail and "swept away a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth" (Rev.

what might that say about the balance of the story. If Tacitus (or his sources) feels at liberty to employ (what some might regard as) a literary device (with no obligation that it have a referent in reality) then why should we think that the actual miracle event itself is not also a literary device?

Third, Vespasian's actions and reactions are very different from those of the New Testament figures. "At first Vespasian *ridiculed and repulsed* them. They persisted; and he, though on the one hand *he feared the scandal of a fruitless attempt*, yet, on the other, was *induced* by the entreaties of the men and *by the language of his flatterers* to hope for success."<sup>121</sup> God through Jesus used the apostles primarily as instruments of getting His revelation confirmed to mankind and secondarily as instruments of his grace and mercy (especially in case of the healings). But we see here that Vespasian "ridiculed and repulsed those who came to him for healing." Notice also that Vespasian "feared the scandal of a fruitless attempt." In other words, he worried that he might not succeed in effecting the healing. Neither Jesus nor the apostles doubted how God would use them regarding the working of miracles. Also, Vespasian was moved to action partially because of the "language of his flatterers." He overcame his fear of failing because of being moved by those who were hopeful that he could do it. There was no motivation here to be used by God for His glory and to be used as an instrument to advance His message.

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12:4) one is not necessarily committed to this being literally true (i.e., that it literally corresponds to reality). However, if the Bible is inerrant, then this statement must correspond to reality *in some sense*. The statement can be true even if the dragon and his actions are a figure of speech. But the point is, even if this is figurative language, it is figurative of *something in reality*. To say it another way, the statement has some referent in reality. As such, the statement figuratively corresponds to reality, thus making the statement true. Of course, there are other types of sentences that are not statements and, therefore, do not have a truth value at all. They are neither true nor false. Examples would be questions, commands, and exclamations.

<sup>121</sup> Tacitus, *Histories*, 4.81, emphasis added.

The episode departs even further from the biblical norm regarding miracles. "At last he ordered that the opinion of physicians should be taken, as to whether such blindness and infirmity were within the reach of human skill. They discussed the matter from different points of view."<sup>122</sup> Note that his first resort was to see if the physicians could do the healing without Vespasian having to chance failure by giving it a try himself. The physicians instructed Vespasian that if the commoner's sight "was not wholly destroyed" that it "might return, if the obstacles were removed" and that diseased hand "might be restored, if a healing influence were applied; such, perhaps, might be the pleasure of the gods, and the Emperor might be chosen to be the minister of the divine will."<sup>123</sup> We see here, in the opinions of Vespasian's physicians, it remained to be seen whether the gods would use Vespasian to effect the healing.

Last, Tacitus's commentary was that "persons actually present attest both facts, even now when nothing is to be gained by falsehood."<sup>124</sup> Two things should be noted here. First, it is clear that Tacitus himself was not an eyewitness to the event since he uses the third person in referring to those who were "actually present." Not being an eyewitness, we are left with the task of having to weigh the substance of Tacitus's sources. Aside from the parallel account by Suetonius (also not an eyewitness), I am not aware of the story being corroborated by anyone else, including any of the eyewitnesses. Second, for Tacitus to say that there was nothing *now* to be gained by falsehood is to tacitly imply that, at the time of the origin of the report, there was something to be gained. This, then, calls into question the veracity of the original account (from wherever it comes). If there is reason to think that a person might benefit from fabricating a

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<sup>122</sup> Tacitus, *Histories*, 4.81.

<sup>123</sup> Tacitus, *Histories*, 4.81.

<sup>124</sup> Tacitus, *Histories*, 4.81.

story, then the credibility of the person is called into question. To be sure, standing to gain from saying something does not automatically say that what was said was false. But, given that we are dealing with a purported historical account, the source of which cannot be evaluated by other means, this issue of motive becomes relevant.<sup>125</sup>

The episode takes place outside of a sound philosophical theology that understands the existence and nature of the true, transcendent, creator God. The account is also mixed with Greek mythology, calling to question what else might be fictional. Vespasian's actions stand in stark contrast to the workers of God's miracles in the New Testament. Last, Tacitus's commentary shows that his account is not his own eyewitness account, and that there might have been something to gain for the original source or sources of the story. It is clear that the supposed miracle of Vespasian bears almost no parallel to the actual miracles of Jesus and His apostles.

*Miracles in Other Religions.* We have seen how the philosopher David Hume weighed in on the believability of miracles. He also has something to say about the use of miracles to provide a foundation for accepting a religion. Specifically, he challenged

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.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> I am indebted to Glenn Miller's comment on the Triablogue web site for this point. (<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2006/06/alleged-miracles-of-vespasian.html>, accessed 07/19/13)

<sup>126</sup> Hume, *Enquiry*, §X, Pt. 2, 95, Selby-Bigge, 121.

For Hume, the world's religions have conflicting claims such that they cannot all be true.<sup>127</sup>

Hume should be commended for understanding this. It is only because Christian apologists realize that certain claims of other religions are incompatible with the claims of Christ that we bother to engage in apologetics in the first place to help people see who is correct. Unfortunately, in our growing pluralistic and relativistic society people seem to have less and less a tendency (or ability) to recognize the deep incompatibility of the world's religions not only with each other, but also with Christian. It is not uncommon to hear people say that all religions are basically the same at the core and that they merely differ in the peripherals. I contend that it is the inverse. Religions are basically the same in the peripherals and incompatible at the core.<sup>128</sup> By 'core' here I mean their essential, defining doctrines. One finds that many if not most of the world's religions and philosophies share common concerns such as respect for other's property, honor for parents and elders, the responsibility to nurture children, fidelity in marriage, honest in business dealings, respect for neighbors. To be sure, what constitutes who is one's neighbor might differ such that the prohibition against murder might not extend beyond one's own peoples group, language, skin color, or tribe. But the principle is there. C. S. Lewis summarized it well,

I know that some people say the idea of a Law of Nature or decent behavior known to all men is unsound, because different civilisations and different ages have had quite different moralities. But this is not true. ... Men have differed as regards what people you ought to be unselfish to—whether it was only your own family, or your fellow countrymen, or everyone. But they have always agreed that you ought not to put yourself first. ... Men

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<sup>127</sup> For a treatment of the origins and doctrines of the world's major religions see Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, IVP Academic, 2012).

<sup>128</sup> For a treatment of the differences between the world's major religions see Stephen Prothero, *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World—and Why Their Difference Matter* (New York: HarperCollins, HarperOne, 2010).

have differed as to whether you should have one wife or four. But they have always agreed that you must not simply have any woman you liked.<sup>129</sup>

One will notice that much of these commonalities are moral issues. It should be no surprise in as much as Rom. 2:14-15 tell us "For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them."

However, while such moral principles show up across religious boundaries, I would contend that these moral concerns do not constitute the core of these religions. Instead, they are (either consistently or inconsistently) and implication (and sometimes an application) of the core. This is also true of Christianity. In a conversation with someone who suggested to me that all religions were basically the same at the core, I ask what this core was. This person responded something to the effect that principles like "love your neighbor" represented that core. I responded that Christianity did not teach this. I did not mean that Christianity did not teach us to love our neighbors. Instead, I was arguing that "love your neighbor" was not the *core* of Christianity but was, instead, an implication and application of the core. The core dealt with issues like "Is there a God?" and "What is God like?" and "Who is Jesus?" and "How does one obtain eternal life?" and so on. A look at the world's religions will show that no two world religions are the same on these crucial questions. No two give the same answers. Thus, no two world religions are the same at the core. Some religions deny that there is a God (Theravada

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<sup>129</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 19. For examples of common moral principle among societies, see Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, 95-121; Geisler and Turek, *Legislating Morality*, 247-249. This notion that there is a core morality that can be known by rational creatures is called Natural Law Theory.

Buddhism and Anton LaVey's version of Satanism<sup>130</sup>), some are polytheistic (Vedic Hinduism, Bhakti Hinduism, Wicca, animistic religions), some are pantheistic (Upanishadic Hinduism), and some are occult (Jainism, Tibetan Buddhism, Wicca). For those religions that are theistic in some sense, only Judaism and Islam have a notion of a transcendent creator God. No world religion holds the view of Jesus that historic, orthodox Christianity does, viz., that He is the Son of God, God in the flesh the eternal second person of the Trinity. Only Christianity has a doctrine that the human race has morally affronted an infinitely holy God, that we are in need of salvation for eternal life, and that this salvation was bought by the sacrifice of Christ and is only available as a gift to those who do not work for it, but believe the gospel to receive it (Rom. 4:4-5). With this, I am happy to agree with David Hume that "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." In other words, they cannot all be true.

What is the Christian apologist to make of Hume's challenge that miracles in other religions render our appeal to miracles useless? Is it a standoff? In critiquing the plausibility of these miracle claims one need to consider three things: the philosophical plausibility, the historical plausibility, and the theological plausibility. First, one needs to examine the philosophical plausibility of the miracle claims in the various religions given their views on the nature of reality. I argued earlier that, by definition, a miracle can only be worked by the power of a transcendent God. Wonders worked by other entities within creation cannot, strictly speaking, be miracles (except in as much as these other entities are the agents of the transcendent Creator, as in the case of Jesus' apostles). Thus, in any given world religion, if that religion is not

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<sup>130</sup> For a discussion of the world view of Satanism see Richard G. Howe, "Satanism: A Taste for the Dark Side" *Christian Research Journal* 28, no. 5 (2005): 12-23, available at <http://www.richardghowe.com/Satanism.pdf> (accessed 07/22/13) and <http://www.equip.org/articles/satanism-a-taste-for-the-dark-side/> (accessed 07/22/13).

theistic (in the sense of having a transcended Creator) then it is not possible for that religion to make miracle claims that are consistent with its own world view. If there is no transcendent God, by definition there cannot be miracles. With this, we can philosophically dismiss purported miracle claims in all the atheistic, polytheistic, pantheistic, and occult religions since none of them maintain the real God. None of these religions claims that there is a transcendent Creator God who stands in metaphysical contrast to the world. But, since it can be demonstrated that such a God exists, then these various religions are already shown to be false from the very start. Since, as I have argued, the miracles themselves are not part of the arguments for God's existence, then, the apologetic role for miracles to play can only be within a theistic context. By and large, if we confine ourselves to this criterion, we are left with examining Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as the three great monotheistic religions. As Geisler and Turek point out, "Since this is a theistic universe, Judaism and Islam are the only other major world religions that possibly could be true. Miracles confirming the Old Testament of Judaism also confirm Christianity. So we are left with Islam as the only possible alternative to 'cancel' the miracles of Christianity."<sup>131</sup>

Second, one needs to examine the historical plausibility of the miracle claims. How do the specifics of the accounts stack up under historical scrutiny? Are the documents attesting to the miracles substantial? This question is especially interesting when one compares the manuscript evidence of the sacred texts of other religions with those of the New Testament. I have discussed the evidence regarding the New Testament in my chapter "The Reliability of the New Testament Writers" in this volume. Let it suffice to say that none of these other texts with these other religions comes close to the New Testament regarding its manuscript integrity as

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<sup>131</sup> Geisler and Turek, *Legislating Morality*, 323.

these texts have come down through history to us today. Without confidence in the very documents that relay the accounts and without any corroborating evidence of the miracles (combined with the world view of almost all of these religions which preclude miracles in the first place), it is hard to build too much of an apologetic case for them as compared to the apologetic case that exists for Jesus and His apostles. If it was the case that the miracle claims of other religions were on philosophical and historical par with Christianity, then there might have been some strength to Hume's argument. The fact is they are not.

What is more, Hume is wrong to say that they are all full of miracles. As we saw from the Lockyer comment even the Bible is not "full" of miracles. They are rare when considered in the biblical time line. Miracles in the world's religions are even rarer in the timeline of these other religions. Directing our attention to Islam as the only option that rival the claims of Christianity given its philosophical world view, we see that, when compare to Christianity, miracles in Islam are almost non-existent. It is controversial among Muslims whether Muhammad even performed any miracles. Mark A. Gabriel, a Muslim convert to Christianity who earned a doctorate in Islamic studies and taught at Al-Azhar University, Cairo, observes, "Whether Muhammad performed healings and miracles is a controversial topic among Muslims. Muslims accept that *Jesus* performed miracles (as supported by the Quran), but not everyone agrees on whether Muhammad performed miracles. This is because of contradictions between the Quran and the hadith (the record of Muhammad's teachings and actions)."<sup>132</sup> Gabriel goes on, "Some say his

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<sup>132</sup> Mark A. Gabriel, *Jesus and Muhammad: Profound Differences and Surprising Similarities* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House Book Group, Front Line, 2004), 107, emphasis in original. See his web site at <http://www.drmarkgabriel.com/> (accessed 07/21/13). Another resource for a Christian analysis of Islam is Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in Light of the Cross*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002).

miracles were a sign of Muhammad's prophet-hood, but the Quran declared that the revelations to Muhammad were the only sign that would be given. It is an issue of debate."<sup>133</sup>

To be sure, one can produce critics (even those professing to be Christians) who will challenge, and sometime outright deny, that Jesus worked miracles. They may say this because, against the evidence, they believe that Jesus never existed in the first place or they may say this because of their anti-supernaturalism. But what they cannot deny is that, *as far as the New Testament is concerned*, Jesus undoubtedly was purported to have worked miracles. In other words, no one denies that the account has Jesus (and His apostles) performing miracles. If the critic denies that Jesus and His apostles did not do any miracles, those critics would need to marshal arguments why it is that they believe against the historical record. In contrast, the dispute among those who examine the historical evidence of Muhammad is precisely over whether that historical evidence even purports to attribute miracles to Muhammad.

What is more, certain sections of the Quran seem to explicitly teach that Muhammad did not perform miracles. Sura 29:50 says, "They ask: 'Why has not sign [miracle] been given him [Muhammad] by his Lord?' Say: 'Signs are in the hands of Allah. My mission is only to give plain warning. Is it not enough for them that We [i.e., Allah] have revealed to you the Book for their instruction?'"<sup>134</sup> Gabriel comments, "In other words, Muhammad was to say, 'I'm the prophet. Don't ask me for signs. Signs are for Allah to do.' The revelation concluded, 'The Quran is sign enough for you!'" Indeed, some have suggested that to attribute miracles to Muhammad detracts from the real miracle in Islam which is the Quran itself.

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<sup>133</sup> Gabriel, *Jesus and Muhammad*, 119.

<sup>134</sup> *The Koran*, 4<sup>th</sup> rev. ed., trans. N. J. Dawood (New York: Penguin Books, 1974), 200.

Another reference in the Quran that seems to teach that Muhammad was not supposed to perform miracles is Sura 13:7 which says, "The unbelievers ask: 'Why has not sign been given him by his Lord?' But your mission is only to give warning."<sup>135</sup> Writer for the internet site *Answering Islam* Sam Shamoun observes, "The foregoing text presupposes that Muhammad's only function was to warn people, not to perform miracles. After all, the statement 'Thou art *only* a warner' would make no sense if a warner could in fact perform wonders. In other words, being a warner wouldn't preclude Muhammad from doing any signs unless, of course, the point being made by the Quran is that such individuals who assumed this role were not empowered to do miracles."<sup>136</sup>

Despite what some may regard as the clear teaching of the Quran regarding Muhammad and miracles, some Muslims nevertheless appeal to some events as examples of miracles wrought by him. Before I take a look at them, it bears repeating that it is telling that there can be a dispute whether these events are indeed miracles wrought by Muhammad. While someone may deny that Jesus really did miracles, it is inconceivable that there could be any dispute that the accounts New Testament *say* that Jesus worked miracles. No one denies that this is the testimony of the New Testament about Jesus even if they, after it is all said and done, reject the truthfulness of these accounts. It is different with these purported miracle accounts in the Quran. The controversy is not so much whether the event took place (though that can be one criticism) but whether the event was even a miracle in the first place, and, if it was a miracle, whether it was wrought by Muhammad or just an act of Allah without any reference to him.

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<sup>135</sup> *Koran*, Dawood, 143.

<sup>136</sup> Sam Shamoun, "Muhammad and Miracles: Analyzing Muslim Arguments for Muhammad's Supernatural Feats," at [http://www.answering-islam.org/Responses/Azmy/mhd\\_miracles.htm](http://www.answering-islam.org/Responses/Azmy/mhd_miracles.htm) (accessed 07/21/13). The translation of the *Koran* Shamoun is commenting on is that of A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted: A Translation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Touchstone, 1996).

One example of a purported miracle by Muhammad is the splitting of the moon. Sura 54:1-2 says, "The Hour of Doom is drawing near, and the moon is cleft in two. Yet when they see a sign the unbelievers turn their backs and say: 'Ingenious magic!'"<sup>137</sup> Some Muslims take this to be an account where the moon split into two pieces before unbelievers as a sign of his working miracles by the power of Allah. In this regard, the Muslim is employing the same apologetics strategy as the Christian when appealing to the miracles of Jesus and His apostles. They are arguing that, since it is beyond human power to do such a feat, it can only be explained by the power of God working through the human, thus, vindicating him as God's messenger and confirming his message. Several things can be said about this event. First, in the text of the Quran itself, there is no mention of Muhammad at all. There is nothing to indicate in the context that this event had anything to do with him. The only place where Muhammad is introduced into the story is in the hadith (stories told later on about Muhammad).

Second, if this was a miracle wrought by Muhammad, it is curious why Muhammad never appealed to this event when he was later challenged as to why he did not give any signs.<sup>138</sup> The best explanation is that this was not a miracle wrought by him.

Third, Shamoun comments, "The Quranic text doesn't give us any data whereby to connect this with the story found in the hadith that the moon was split during Muhammad's time. It is vague and can refer to any incident, whether before, during or after Muhammad's time. After all even Muslims admit that the text may in fact be referring to a future incident, a sign to occur during the Day of Judgment."<sup>139</sup> Thus, it is entirely possible that this event is not (yet) and

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<sup>137</sup> *Koran*, Dawood, 112.

<sup>138</sup> Gabriel, *Jesus and Muhammad*, 118; Geisler and Saleeb, *Answering Islam*, 159. It is my understanding that any dating by Muslims as to when this event took place is according to the hadiths not the Quran itself.

<sup>139</sup> Shamoun, "Muhammad and Miracles."

accomplished event and, as such, cannot serve as an apologetic for Islam regarding Muhammad's ability to work miracles.

A second example that is sometimes brought up is the incident of Muhammad's "night journey." Sura 17:1 says, "Glory be to Him who made His servants go by night from the Sacred Temple to the farther Temple whose surroundings We [Allah] have blessed, that We might show him some of Our signs. He alone hears all and observes all."<sup>140</sup> The account is supposedly about a trip Muhammad took from Mecca (Sacred Temple) to Jerusalem and then possibly on to heaven (farther Temple). The hadith adds certain details, including that it was the angel Gabriel who transported Muhammad on a heavenly steed where he was able to meet several of the other prophets.<sup>141</sup> Is this a miracle wrought by Muhammad? In response, it should be noted that some Muslims regard this, not as a literal journey, but rather a vision. Dawood comments, "Some Muslim commentators give a literal interpretation to this passage, other regard it as a vision."<sup>142</sup> Geisler and Saleeb point out, "Even according to one of the earliest Islamic traditions, Muhammad's wife, A'isha, reported that 'the apostle's body remained where it was but God removed his spirit by night.'<sup>143</sup> What is more, this apparently was not an event that was witnessed by anyone. We are merely told that it happened. As such, it has no apologetic value in pointing to Muhammad as a miracle worker.

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<sup>140</sup> *Koran*, Dawood, 233. The plural pronoun is a grammatical way in Arabic to indicate the majesty of Allah. (Gabriel, *Jesus and Muhammad*, 108 (footnote) and 247, n. 1)

<sup>141</sup> <http://www.islamicity.com/articles/articles.asp?ref=ic0608-3086> (accessed 07/21/13)

<sup>142</sup> *Koran*, Dawood, 233, n. 3.

<sup>143</sup> Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Rasul Allah*, trans. A. Guillaume as *The Life of Muhammed* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 183, as cited in Geisler and Saleeb, *Answering Islam*, 159-160.

Last, one needs to examine the theological plausibility of the miracle claims. Here I would like to suggest some penetrating questions surrounding the miracles in other religions. First, specifically regarding Islam, since the Quran itself acknowledges the previous revelation of the Bible, then Islam is falsified in as much as its teaching contradict this previous revelation. Sura 10:37 says, "This Koran could not have been composed by any but Allah. It confirms what was revealed before it and fully explains the Scriptures."<sup>144</sup> It is not uncommon for the Muslim to allege that Bible has been so corrupted as to be unreliable as a guide to truth. Such a corruption could only have occurred before the time of Muhammad. However, the Quran regards the Bible as reliable at the time of Muhammad. Sura 4:136 says, "Believers, have faith in Allah and His apostle, in the Book He has revealed to His apostle, and in the Scriptures He formerly revealed."<sup>145</sup> Lest there be any doubt as to what these "Scripture formerly revealed" are, Sura 5:46-47 explain, "After these prophets We sent forth Jesus, the son of Mary, confirming the Torah already revealed, and gave him the Gospel, in which there is guidance and light, corroborating that which was revealed before it in the Torah, a guide and an admonition to the righteous. Therefore let the followers of the Gospel judge in accordance with what Allah has revealed therein."<sup>146</sup> The readers of the Quran at the time could not be told to have faith in the Scripture and to judge in accordance with them if they had been corrupted. Thus, to the degree

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<sup>144</sup> *Koran*, Dawood, 67.

<sup>145</sup> *Koran*, Dawood, 380.

<sup>146</sup> *Koran*, Dawood, 392.

that the Quran departs from and conflicts with the teachings of the Bible, it has (by its own teaching) falsified itself.<sup>147</sup>

Second, think about how a given world religion regards itself vis-à-vis Christianity. I can think of four ways they might do so. First, the religion could say that it is true and Christianity is false. Second, the religion could say that it is compatible with Christianity (i.e., that they are both true). Third, it could say that it alone is the true Christianity. Fourth, it could say that it is a fulfillment of Christianity (i.e., Christianity is incomplete). A quick response to each is in order. The first one has already been answered in as much as I have shown that no other religion can refute the evidence that Christianity is true nor marshal the evidence supporting its own claims. The second point is refuted in as much as we can show that, at their core (i.e., in their essential doctrines) no other world religion is making the claims that Christianity makes. The third point is made by many of the new religious movements like Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses. Their claims can be refuted by showing that what they teach is incompatible with the teachings of the Bible. Certain of these groups (particularly Mormonism) can only maintain that their unique doctrines are biblical by asserting that the Bible has been corrupted beyond being able to be a source of theology. The fourth point is claimed by Islam. It can be refuted by showing that the Bible has not been corrupted and then by showing that, not only is Muhammad not a prophet of God, but that the teachings of Islam are false in as much as they conflict the (what they admit is) revelation from God.

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<sup>147</sup> A few critical places where the Quran conflicts with the truths of the Bible are: Jesus did not die on the cross (Sura 4:157-158); Jesus was no more than an apostle (Sura 4:171); Jesus is not God (Sura 5:173); that Christians believe that the Trinity is God, Jesus, and Mary (Sura 5:116); and God is not a Trinity (Sura 5:73).

## Conclusion

My defense of the supernatural was an attempt to prove two broad points. The first was that there exists a God who possesses attributes that allow for the possibility that miracles are possible. Only in the context of knowing that God exists, can the evidence for miracles perform the apologetic work that Christians need. To that end, I marshaled two arguments for God's existence. The first argued that God is the cause of the universe's coming into existence. The second argued that God is the cause of the universe's current existing.

My second broad point was that miracles, as acts of God, vindicate the messenger of God and confirm his message. To this end, I show what miracles are, why miracles are, and that miracles are. I also responded to the significant challenges leveled against miracles, primarily stemming from the philosophy of David Hume and from other religions, including the ancient miracles workers and other world religions. It is my contention that the miracles of God prove that Jesus Christ is His only Son and that the Bible is true.