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The mission of the *TJNPT*:

We seek to discover and share truths of God's creation and God's word, through ongoing scholarly research and debate, for the edification of the church and for the glory of God.

"It is the glory of God to conceal a matter,
but the glory of kings is to search out a matter."

-- *Proverbs 25:2*

## I. Articles



## II. Book Reviews

# 1. The Apologetics of the Gospel of John

*Ernest Musekiwa*[1]

ABSTRACT: This article undertakes a critical examination of the Gospel of John, arguing that its narrative structure, theological themes, and rhetorical methods collectively operate as a sustained apologetic – specifically, a defense and encouragement of faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. The discussion situates the Fourth Gospel within the complex matrix of late first-century Jewish tradition and Greco-Roman thought, illuminating the significance of its context for interpreting its message. The study systematically analyzes key elements of John's Christological argumentation – such as the sophisticated Prologue, the enigmatic "I Am" sayings, and the highly symbolic signs (miracles). Attention is also directed to the Gospel's juridical emphasis on witness and testimony, underscoring its sustained effort to offer credible evidence for its claims regarding Jesus' identity. Furthermore, the article explores John's distinctive portrayal of the passion – not as a moment of defeat, but as an occasion of exaltation – emphasizing the Gospel's unique theological perspectives. The resurrection accounts, presented as the narrative's apologetic apex, are shown to supply both eyewitness attestation and robust theological coherence for the text as a whole. Thus, the article assesses the ongoing influence of John's Gospel upon early Christian apologetics and reflects on its value as a paradigm for contemporary, holistic apologetic practice – one that remains both Christocentric and acutely responsive to its cultural environment.

AMONG THE CANONICAL Gospels, John undoubtedly carves out a distinct and unmistakable identity. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which share notable similarities, the Gospel of John opens with an elevated, almost cosmic introduction, laden with symbolism and deeply theological language. Its narrative architecture is sophisticated and in-

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tentional, consistently weaving together significant themes and motifs.[2]

Yet, curiously, what has often been overlooked in Johannine scholarship is John's clear apologetic dimension. The text's aim is not simply to present theological claims or to collect traditions about Jesus; rather, John's Gospel emerges as a carefully crafted argument. It seeks to persuade, to reassure – essentially, to defend faith in the midst of religious and cultural turbulence. This apologetic purpose is not concealed – the author declares it unambiguously in John 20:30–31: the work is 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."

In the Greco-Roman context, an "*apologia*" denoted a formal defense – whether in the courtroom or in philosophical discourse – centered on rational justification and persuasive rhetoric.[3] Writing with an apologetic goal meant responding to challenges, addressing objections, and bolstering the credibility of one's position. John's Gospel, despite its theological depth, fits squarely within this tradition. Its structured narrative, reliance on witness testimony, and engagement with prevailing cultural and intellectual currents all signal its dual role as both proclamation and defense of the Christian claim.

### *The historical-critical context*[4]

To truly grasp the Gospel of John, it's crucial to understand its late first-century setting – a period marked by deepening friction between Jesus' followers and the synagogue establishment. Scholars routinely date John to the 90s CE, when these tensions escalated significantly. The reference in John 9:22 to believers being expelled from the synagogue (*aposynagōgos*) isn't a throwaway line; it reflects a genuine social crisis for early

[2] Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII* (Anchor Bible 29; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), lxxxviii–xc.

[3] Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:330–37.

[4] J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (3rd ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 38–45.

Christians, who found themselves increasingly accused of heresy and excluded from core community life. Importantly, John's Gospel is not directed solely at a Jewish audience. Its engagement with Hellenistic thought is hard to miss: the use of *logos* in 1:1 directly appeals to contemporary philosophical currents, while the nuanced dialogues with Pilate about truth (18:37-38) and kingship (18:33-19:22) show an awareness of the Greco-Roman intellectual world. In effect, John crafts his narrative to resonate on multiple fronts – addressing both intra-Jewish debates and the broader cultural skepticism of the era. Thus, John presents Jesus not only as the fulfillment of Israel's scriptures but also as a figure who speaks meaningfully to broader philosophical and existential concerns.

### *The apologetic strategy of John*

John's apologetic method in the Gospel integrates three principal components, each reinforcing the others in a cohesive manner. First, Christology is central. The narrative is intentionally crafted to assert Jesus' divinity while also emphasizing his genuine humanity. The Prologue opens with an unequivocal declaration of Jesus' divine status, a theme that resonates throughout. The famous "I Am" statements, accounts of miraculous signs, and climactic affirmations – such as Thomas's acclamation, "My Lord and my God" (20:28) – collectively underscore John's Christological focus. Second, John frames his narrative within a juridical context of witness and testimony. This motif is intricately woven through the Gospel. Multiple figures come forward as witnesses: John the Baptist, the disciples, the Samaritan woman, the Father, the Spirit, and the beloved disciple. Even those who oppose Jesus or remain ambivalent, like Pilate, are drawn into this overarching testimony. By casting the Gospel as a cosmic trial in which Jesus' identity is validated, John aligns his argument with concepts familiar to both Jewish and Greco-Roman audiences.

Third, John offers a distinctive interpretation of Jesus' passion and resurrection. Facing objections to the crucifixion –

since Roman execution could appear to undermine claims to divinity – John reframes the cross as an act of glorification rather than defeat. The resurrection narrative is detailed with the intention of addressing skepticism, anticipating potential challenges, and foregrounding eyewitness accounts. Rather than presenting the passion and resurrection as problematic, John positions them as the very foundation of his apologetic strategy. In sum, John's approach combines Christological emphasis, a juridical structure of testimony, and an elevated reading of the crucifixion and resurrection, thereby constructing a robust apologetic narrative within his Gospel.

### *The contribution of modern scholarship* [5]

Contemporary scholars increasingly acknowledge John's apologetic bent, though they swap labels – "polemical," "persuasive," or "rhetorical" – depending on who's writing. Raymond Brown argued that John's community was grappling with significant outside pressure, so the Gospel aims to strengthen their resolve, pushing believers to stand firm in the face of growing opposition. J. Louis Martyn leaned into the idea of a "two-level drama." Essentially, he sees the Jesus narrative as a mirror for the Johannine community's own struggles, particularly their run-ins with synagogue authorities – a kind of textual double exposure between past and present. On the other hand, Richard Bauckham puts his chips on John preserving genuine eyewitness testimony, especially through the figure of the beloved disciple, lending apologetic weight to the Gospel's claims.

Then there's Craig Keener, who highlights John's deep roots in both Jewish and Greco-Roman culture. He argues that the Gospel's apologetic techniques were crafted with an eye toward engaging a mix of audiences, not just insiders. Taken together, these perspectives push the conversation beyond seeing John as

[5] See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 358–63; Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Sacra Pagina 4; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 47–50; and Craig S. Keener, The Gospel of John: A Commentary (2 Volumes), (Peabody: MA: Hendrickson, 2003).

simply an inward-facing theological document. Instead, it's best understood as a robust defense of Christian claims, intended for the larger intellectual scene of the ancient world, and not just for keeping one community afloat.

## The Johannine Context of Apologetics

It's tricky to approach the apologetic angle of the Gospel of John without first rooting it in the whirling historical and social realities of its origin. The author wasn't composing his narrative in isolation – the setting was thick with religious tension, social boundaries, and competing intellectual frameworks. Honestly, if you want to get to the heart of John's rhetorical strategies, you need to look closely at the layered context: early followers of Jesus navigating both Jewish heritage and a world colored by Greco-Roman influence.

A key undercurrent in this environment was the souring relationship between those who confessed Jesus and the synagogue community. Take John 9:22: "His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be the Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue." The Greek term *aposynagōgos* (meaning "put out of the synagogue") turns up three times in John's Gospel, signaling this wasn't a one-off concern but a recurring, lived reality.

Exclusion from the synagogue? It wasn't just an abstract religious penalty. It meant being cut off from corporate worship, social recognition, even potentially losing your economic footing and family ties. In this volatile setting, the Johannine community wasn't just fussing over doctrine; they were experiencing actual social marginalization. Thus, the Gospel's apologetic function was dual: reaffirming Jesus' identity as Messiah and Son of God, and giving comfort to those now standing outside the synagogue, reinterpreting their exclusion as, in fact, a deeper inclusion in the life and promise of God through Christ.

Scholars such as J. Louis Martyn offer compelling frameworks for this, suggesting a "two-level drama" where the Gospel's stories of Jesus clashing with Jewish authorities echo the real-life struggles of the Johannine community with synagogue

leadership. While the specifics of that reconstruction remain debated, most agree: John's text clearly reflects a polemical landscape, where Jewish believers in Jesus were under tangible pressure. Consequently, John's Gospel aimed to convince fellow Jews of Jesus' fulfillment of Scripture, while also strengthening those facing marginalization – making its apologetic thrust focused both inward, among Jews themselves, and outward to the broader world.

### *Engagement with Hellenistic thought*

The Gospel of John engages intentionally with Greco-Roman intellectual frameworks. Right from the opening verse – "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" – the use of *logos* is hardly accidental. For Jewish audiences, *logos* resonates with the creative force of God in Genesis as well as wisdom traditions where God's pre-existent wisdom participates in creation (consider Proverbs 8 or even passages from Wisdom of Solomon).

Yet, for Hellenistic readers, *logos* is steeped in philosophical meaning. In Stoicism, it functions as the rational principle organizing the natural world, while thinkers like Philo of Alexandria treat it as an intermediary between the transcendent divine and the material cosmos. By employing such a term, the Gospel adeptly bridges these worlds, positioning Jesus both as the fulfillment of Jewish Scripture and as an answer to the intellectual pursuits familiar to Greek philosophers.

The text continues this pattern in other areas. Key sections dealing with truth – such as John 8:32's "the truth will set you free" and Pilate's famously complex, "What is truth?" (18:37-38) – clearly engage ongoing philosophical debates about the nature of truth. Similarly, the interrogation of Jesus' kingship before Pilate echoes Roman political discourse.

Altogether, the Gospel demonstrates an awareness of – and responsiveness to – contemporary Jewish and Greco-Roman thought. Its language and ideas are carefully chosen to present Jesus in terms accessible and compelling to both groups, suggesting an apologetic approach designed to address questions and objections from across the intellectual landscape of its time.

### *The challenge of the cross*

Addressing the so-called "scandal of the cross" was a significant apologetic challenge for the Johannine community. In the Roman world, crucifixion wasn't merely a method of execution, but rather the lowest form – a public spectacle reserved for society's outcasts: slaves, insurrectionists, outright criminals. In other words, it screamed public humiliation and defeat. Adding another layer, within Jewish thought, the image of a man crucified brought to mind Deuteronomy 21:23: "cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree." So, claiming a crucified Messiah? Let's just say, it was an incredibly tough sell in both Jewish and Gentile circles.

Yet, the Gospel of John faces this issue directly by reimagining the crucifixion as a moment of glorification. Jesus' own language is telling – he speaks about being "lifted up" (see 3:14; 8:28; 12:32-34). That little phrase cleverly signals both his literal elevation on the cross and his exaltation in a theological sense. Within the Johannine passion narrative, Jesus is presented as entirely sovereign: composed, in control, even embracing the path to the cross. When Pilate posts the sign, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews," John seizes on this as something more than Roman mockery. It becomes, in John's telling, an authentic declaration of Jesus' identity as king. In sum, this reworking flips the original objection – what could have been an insurmountable scandal – into the very heart of Christian proclamation.

### *The role of signs and eyewitness testimony*

John's approach to persuasion isn't some abstract theological exercise; it's deeply rooted in the cultural obsession with evidence and credible witnesses. Back then, if you wanted your claims to hold water, you couldn't just wax poetic; you needed witnesses, period. Jewish law (take Deuteronomy 19:15 for instance) made it official: two or three witnesses or your case didn't even get off the bench. The Greco-Roman world? Honestly, not much different – you needed proper testimony or your story sank without a trace.

Look at the Gospel of John: he lays out miracles – "signs" – like breadcrumbs. These are actual events. For witnesses he calls on John the Baptist, the Samaritan woman, the Pharisee Nicodemus, even cosmic heavy hitters like the Father, the Scriptures, and the Holy Spirit. Everyone gets a say, almost like a courtroom drama stacked in Jesus' favor. This isn't just for spiritual vibes. John is structuring his story so it'll hit home with anyone: Jewish, Gentile, male, female, you name it. He knows people want proof, and he's not shy about piling on the references. Was John's approach academic? Sure. But was it persuasive? Absolutely. The man knew his audience and played by their rules.

### *Apologetics and community identity*

In the Gospel of John, apologetics isn't presented as a strictly outward-facing effort – it's also undeniably internally directed. John isn't just appealing to skeptics; he's very much invested in supporting his own community. Consider the repeated calls to believe, the support for those excluded from the synagogue, and that memorable blessing for "those who have not seen and yet have believed" (20:29). Clearly, John's approach is as pastoral as it is polemical, offering his audience both theological scaffolding and evidence for staying the course – especially for those feeling marginalized or pressured.

If we peek beneath the surface, the Johannine context is actually layered: there's conflict with synagogue authorities, run-ins with Hellenistic thought, the challenge of the cross (which was a bit scandalous for the first crowd), and the constant push for credible testimony. John's not simply chronicling events; he's putting together a narrative aimed at defending and reinforcing the Christian faith from just about every angle. Anyone who wants to understand these apologetic strategies really needs to see how rooted they are in the real struggles and intellectual climate of the time. That's where the next stretch of analysis is headed – actually breaking down the strategies themselves.

## The Christological Core of Apologetics

At the core of the Gospel of John's approach lies its exploration of Christology. The persistent question – "Who is Jesus?" – anchors every dispute and discussion throughout the narrative and serves as the focal point of John's rhetorical and theological engagement. By presenting Jesus as the eternal *Logos* who has taken on flesh, acting as the ultimate revelation of the Father, John not only articulates a central confession of faith but also offers a sustained, thoughtful defense of the Christian understanding of Jesus.

### *The Prologue as apologetic framework* [6]

The opening lines of John's Gospel ("In the beginning was the Word…") do more than introduce the narrative; they lay down the central thesis: Jesus isn't merely a historical teacher, but the eternal divine Word who both existed with God and, in fact, is God. This section elevates Jesus as the agent of creation, the radiant light challenging darkness, and, crucially, as one who has become incarnate and now dwells among humanity.

The Prologue operates on several strategic levels. First, it tightly weaves Jesus into the tapestry of Jewish scripture. The phrase "In the beginning" unmistakably echoes Genesis, positioning Jesus not as an afterthought but as the creative force at the cosmos's origin. The language of light, too, references significant Hebrew texts: the hope of light in Isaiah and the guiding word in Psalms. Through such references, John's narrative roots itself firmly in Israel's spiritual expectations, presenting Jesus as their fulfillment.

Simultaneously, John's use of "logos" engages directly with Hellenistic philosophical discourse. In the Greco-Roman world, "logos" (the rational principle giving order to reality) was a cornerstone concept. Inserting Jesus into this philosophical

[6] For a thorough study, see C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 130–35, and D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (New Testament Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 12–15.

framework, John proposes him as the very answer to age-old questions about the divine's interaction with the world, speaking fluently to both Jewish and Greek audiences. This dual approach reinforces the universality and profound nature of Jesus within varying cultural vocabularies.

A third structural function – indicated by the immediate introduction of John the Baptist – is the theme of testimony. Here, John the Baptist is cast not as the light itself but as a witness, establishing the Gospel's apologetic method from the outset. Testimony, both direct and mediated, will frame the narrative, inviting readers into a process of discerning and weighing witness accounts regarding Jesus' identity.

In summary, the Prologue is not simply an introduction but a sophisticated, multi-layered argument. It simultaneously engages scriptural roots, philosophical inquiry, and the importance of testimony, all to underpin its claim that Jesus is the incarnate divine Word.

### *The "I Am" sayings as Christological defense* [7]

The "I Am" statements found in the Gospel of John represent a central component of Johannine Christology, underscored by their theological and polemical significance. These declarations are deeply rooted in the language of divine self-disclosure from Jewish Scripture, specifically where God reveals Himself to Moses as "I Am" (*ehyeh asher ehyeh*, Exodus 3:14). By utilizing this nomenclature, Jesus not only identifies with the divine name but also asserts a unique and direct relationship with God.

Scholars generally distinguish between two categories of "I Am" sayings in John. The first are the so-called absolute statements, such as Jesus' pronouncement in John 8:58: "Before Abraham was, I am." Here, Jesus appropriates the divine self-identification in a manner that elicits an immediate and hostile response, as the audience perceives this as a blasphemous claim. The second type encompasses predicate statements – metaphorical self-descriptions such as "I am the bread of life"

[7] Andreas J. Köstenberger, John (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 112–18.

(6:35), "I am the light of the world" (8:12), "I am the good shepherd" (10:11), "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25), and "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6). Each of these metaphors functions to elucidate distinctive aspects of Jesus's salvific mission.

From an apologetic perspective, these sayings function on multiple levels. They encapsulate profound Christological claims in memorable, metaphor-rich language, thereby facilitating both recall and defense among early followers. By anchoring Jesus's identity in the idioms of divine revelation, these sayings position him not merely as a human teacher but as the incarnate manifestation of God. Consequently, within disputes involving synagogue authorities, these declarations serve as direct responses to challenges, asserting unequivocally that Jesus shares in the divine identity.

### *The signs as apologetic evidence*

In the Gospel of John, miracles are not presented merely as displays of supernatural power; rather, John refers to them as "signs" (*sēmeia*), pointing symbolically toward Jesus' identity and mission. The evangelist curates a clear set of seven major signs: the transformation of water into wine at Cana (2:1–11); the healing of the royal official's son (4:46–54); the cure of the paralytic at Bethesda (5:1–15); the feeding of the five thousand (6:1–15); Jesus walking on water (6:16–21); the healing of a man born blind (9:1–41); and, climactically, the raising of Lazarus from the dead (11:1–44).

John is explicit about his purpose: in 20:30–31, he writes that Jesus performed many other signs "not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe." The selected signs function apologetically, as carefully chosen evidence to present Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, demonstrating his divine authority. For example, in John 9, the healing of the man born blind becomes a focal point for debating Jesus' identity. The man who receives sight is drawn into public testimony: "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see" (9:25). His story offers an apologetic model, showcasing the persuasive force of eyewitness testimony and irrefutable per-

sonal transformation. Likewise, the raising of Lazarus in John 11 serves as compelling evidence of Jesus' authority over death and foreshadows his own resurrection. This sign accentuates the Gospel's central claim: true life is found in Christ, and belief in him is built on these foundational signs.

### *Confessions of faith*

John's Gospel employs more than just narrative storytelling; it intersperses pivotal confessions which punctuate the text and serve a deliberate thematic purpose. It begins with John the Baptist identifying Jesus as "the Lamb of God," establishing a foundational claim early in the work. Shortly thereafter, Nathanael confesses Jesus as "the Son of God" and "King of Israel," further strengthening these Christological assertions. As the narrative unfolds, the Samaritan woman and her community shift the conversation outward, ascribing to Jesus the title "Savior of the world." Peter, representative of the disciples, affirms, "You are the Holy One of God." Martha's confession – "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world" – reinforces this momentum toward belief. The apex arrives with Thomas's declaration, "My Lord and my God," serving as a climactic acknowledgment of Jesus' identity. These confessions do not exist merely as isolated events; rather, they collectively demonstrate John's apologetic strategy. By presenting a diversity of witnesses, the Gospel models a progressive movement toward recognition and faith in Jesus. Ultimately, these varied testimonies coalesce to persuade the reader of a consistent and unified conclusion regarding Jesus' identity.

### *Theological depth and polemical force*

Johannine Christology operates on more than a merely devotional level; it is markedly polemical. The Gospel's emphatic affirmation of Jesus' divinity directly engages debates present in both Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts. For Jewish readers concerned that veneration of Jesus compromises monotheism, the Gospel positions Jesus as the Son who shares in the Father's glory, carefully maintaining the integrity of monotheistic belief:

"I and My Father are One" (John 10:30), said Jesus Simultaneously, for audiences shaped by Greco-Roman philosophy, casting Jesus as the incarnate *Logos* responds to longstanding philosophical inquiries about the connection between God and the world.

This polemical edge explains the uncompromising rhetoric found in certain Johannine passages. For example, in John 8, Jesus asserts, "If you do not believe that I am he, you will die in your sins" (8:24). Statements such as this highlight the exclusivity of his claims and serve as a form of apologetic, presenting belief in Jesus as essential. Consequently, the Christological focus of John's Gospel provides the framework for its apologetic project. The Prologue identifies Jesus as the Logos, the revealer of God. The "I Am" sayings employ scriptural and philosophical language to communicate his divine identity. The signs function as evidentiary support, while confessions of faith exemplify the appropriate response. Collectively, these elements advance a comprehensive apologetic: that Jesus is the Son of God, the Word made flesh, and the definitive source of life and truth.

## IV. Witness and Testimony as Apologetic

One of the Fourth Gospel's unmistakable preoccupations is the concept of *martyria* – witness or testimony. Right from the poetic prologue through to the dramatic resurrection appearances, the text unfolds not as a haphazard narrative but as a carefully assembled collection of testimonies about Jesus' identity. There's a clear juridical current running through the Gospel; it almost reads like a trial transcript at times. In the context of antiquity – where both Jewish and Greco-Roman legal systems hinged on the validation of claims through credible testimony – this isn't mere literary flair. By weaving together the affirmations of various witnesses, the evangelist constructs a framework designed to persuade the reader that Jesus' identity is substantiated well beyond reasonable doubt. The result is an apologetic strategy that invites the audience into the role of juror, weighing the evidence as it accumulates across the narrative.

### *The juridical framework*

From the very beginning, the Gospel of John underscores the significance of witness. The Prologue introduces not only the mysterious Logos but immediately brings in John the Baptist: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him" (1:6-7). Here, the narrative makes it clear: testimony isn't just a side note; it's fundamental to the Gospel's argument. John himself isn't the light; his role is to testify to it, reflecting the Gospel's overarching concern with the reliability of testimony.

This emphasis on witness takes on explicit juridical contours in John 5:31-47, where Jesus discusses the necessity of corroborating testimony. He notes that self-testimony is inadmissible ("If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true," 5:31), and then he points to a series of credible witnesses: John the Baptist (5:33), his own works (5:36), the Father (5:37), and the Scriptures (5:39). In doing so, the Gospel author aligns with both Jewish legal requirements (Deuteronomy 19:15 demands two or three witnesses) and Greco-Roman rhetorical strategies, which valued corroborative evidence. By presenting Jesus as supported by multiple, converging witnesses, the Gospel seeks to establish the legitimacy of his claims to both Jewish and broader ancient audiences.

### *Human witnesses*

The Fourth Gospel presents a deliberate sequence of human witnesses, each serving a crucial apologetic function within the narrative. John the Baptist inaugurates this sequence by publicly proclaiming Jesus as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29), establishing the initial framework for understanding Jesus' role. This testimony sets off a chain reaction: Andrew immediately informs his brother Simon with the straightforward declaration, "We have found the Messiah" (1:41), followed by Nathanael's explicit confession, "You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (1:49). Collectively, these early proclamations illustrate a deliberate progression

of recognition and affirmation among key figures at the outset of Jesus' public ministry.

Additional human witnesses are strategically woven throughout the narrative. The Samaritan woman, for example, bears witness by addressing her fellow townspeople with the statement, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" (4:29). Her candid testimony catalyzes broader communal belief, exemplifying the evangelist's nuanced portrayal of the expanding impact of personal testimony. The narrative of the man born blind in John 9 further strengthens this motif. When questioned by religious authorities, he responds with notable clarity: "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see" (9:25). His personal transformation provides compelling evidence, and his confidence increases as the episode unfolds.

Finally, Mary Magdalene emerges as a pivotal witness in Chapter 20, as she becomes the first to encounter the risen Christ and is designated to announce the resurrection to the disciples. Her prominence as the initial apostolic witness is particularly noteworthy, given the cultural limitations placed on women's testimony during the period.[8] By highlighting Mary's role, the Gospel grounds the apologetic importance of women as credible and authoritative witnesses within the developing Christian tradition.

### *The works of Jesus as witness*

In the Gospel narrative, Jesus consistently appeals to his actions as substantive proof of his divine origin. He articulates this explicitly in John 5:36: "The works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness

[8] Mary's witness as a woman calls to mind the scholarly "criterion of embarrassment." As Chilton explains it, "If the presented event contains details that are embarrassing to the writer, the earliest leaders, the founder, or the cause; then it could be said that the event is authentic." – Brian Chilton, "Resurrection Defense Stories: Embarrassing Details," April 10, 2021, CrossExamined.org, https://crossexamined.org/resurrection-defense-series-embarrassing-details/.

about me that the Father has sent me." The so-called "signs" within the text are not simply supernatural events for spectacle's sake; rather, they function as tangible evidence supporting Jesus' identity.

This method of substantiating claims is rooted firmly in both Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions. In these contexts, demonstrable actions were viewed as the ultimate test of truth. For example, within Jewish tradition, Deuteronomy 18:22 sets the standard that a prophet's validity hinges on the fulfillment of their signs. Similarly, Greco-Roman philosophy assessed the legitimacy of individuals based on the congruence between their teachings and their conduct. By framing Jesus' works as consistent, observable evidence, the author of John constructs a defense that addresses the epistemic expectations of his audience, grounding the theological claims in verifiable reality rather than abstract assertion.

### *The Father and the Spirit as witnesses*

The Gospel of John deliberately expands the array of witnesses by invoking divine testimony. Jesus explicitly states that the Father bears witness on his behalf (5:37), asserting in John 8:18, "I am the one who bears witness about myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness about me." This approach effectively satisfies the legal mandate for dual testimony. Further, the Gospel introduces the Spirit "the Paraclete" who is promised to "bear witness about me" (15:26). Within this narrative, the Paraclete operates both as advocate and as witness, thereby extending the task of apologetics beyond the ministry of Jesus himself. The Spirit's ongoing empowerment of the disciples enables their own testimony and ensures that the Gospel's apologetic dimension persists – not only within the written record but also within the lived experience of the believing community.

### *Scripture as witness*

Scripture operates as a form of testimony. You see this in John 5:39, where Jesus asserts, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that

bear witness about me." John positions the Hebrew Scriptures as pointing directly to Jesus, situating his argument within Israel's own sacred texts. This move was crucial in discussions with synagogue leaders who accused Christians of straying from the Torah. John flips this accusation: rejecting Jesus actually constitutes a rejection of the Scriptures themselves.

### *Hostile witnesses*

An interesting feature of the Gospel's apologetic strategy is how it incorporates testimony from antagonistic figures. Take Caiaphas, the high priest – his declaration about the necessity of Jesus' death for the people (11:50) ends up serving a purpose far beyond what he probably intended. Then there's Pilate, who, despite his wavering, publicly labels Jesus the "King of the Jews" with that inscription placed on the cross (19:19-22). So even individuals opposed to Jesus end up, unintentionally, underscoring core Christological claims. That kind of unintended corroboration from opponents actually bolsters the Gospel's overall case, suggesting that even resistance can bear witness to truth.

### *The beloved disciple as eyewitness*

The Gospel concludes by emphasizing the testimony of the so-called "beloved disciple," foregrounding the authority of an eyewitness. In John 19:35, immediately following the account of Jesus' side being pierced, the evangelist underscores, "He who saw it has borne witness – his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth – that you also may believe." Likewise, John 21:24 states, "This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true."

This insistence on eyewitness testimony serves a clear apologetic function. Within the Greco-Roman context, the most compelling form of evidence was the testimony of reliable witnesses. By anchoring the narrative in the direct experience of the author or close associate, the Gospel asserts its credibility and authoritativeness. As Richard Bauckham has persuasively

argued, this appeal to firsthand testimony reflects the historiographical standards of antiquity and substantially enhances the Gospel's apologetic legitimacy.

## V. The Passion Narrative as Apologetic

If anyone was seriously perplexed about the message of Jesus in the first century, the problem pretty much boiled down to the scandal and embarrassment of the crucifixion itself. The crucifixion provides more material fitting the criterion of embarrassment noted earlier. For Jewish audiences, a crucified man was flat-out "cursed" (as Deuteronomy 21:23 made clear), and for Greeks and Romans, crucifixion ranked as the absolute lowest, most disgraceful form of punishment – basically reserved for the outcasts of society, like slaves or insurrectionists. Proclaiming that the savior of the world had undergone such a death was shocking for Jews and came across as frankly laughable to the Greco-Roman world. Paul summed this stumbling block up succinctly in 1 Corinthians 1:23, calling it "a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles."

Against that backdrop, John's Gospel offers what is essentially a dramatic reinterpretation of the cross. Rather than defeat, John frames the crucifixion as victory; instead of shame, he sees significance and glory. John pushes the idea that Jesus's passion is not a moment of humiliation but of supreme glorification. This recasting stands out as a rather bold apologetic argument within the New Testament. John consistently builds this reinterpretation through the motif of Jesus's "hour." There's a marked narrative anticipation starting as early as the wedding at Cana, where Jesus tells his mother that "My hour has not yet come" (2:4). The same phrase recurs at the Feast of Tabernacles in Chapter 7, making clear that no one could arrest him because "his hour had not yet come" (7:30). Only as Jesus approaches Jerusalem does the shift happen: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (12:23).

For John, this "hour" aligns with the crucifixion – the event becomes the pinnacle of Christ's purpose. What people saw as degradation, John insists is exaltation. Jesus even says, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to my-

self" (12:32). The term "lifted up" is deliberately double-edged – both referring to being hoisted onto the cross and being elevated in a sense of glory. The paradox is central: the ultimate disgrace, seen theologically, becomes clear evidence of divine sovereignty.

Additionally, John's account accentuates Jesus's own authority and self-control throughout his Passion. In contrast to the Synoptic Gospels – where Jesus prays for the cup to pass and demonstrates human vulnerability – John presents Jesus as almost unshakeable. When the arresting party approaches, Jesus initiates the exchange and asserts his identity directly: "I am," a clear allusion to the divine name in Exodus 3:14, at which point his captors fall back in confusion (18:6). This moment signals both identity and intentionality. Furthermore, the scene before Pilate underscores John's perspective: "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above" (19:11). Even in this apparent weakness, Jesus asserts agency, turning the tables on his oppressor. For readers, the suspension of fear or uncertainty is strategic; it underlines that the crucifixion is no tragic accident, but a purposeful act within divine providence.

To sum up, John's gospel reshapes the cross, transforming what looks like absurdity or scandal into the very evidence of Christ's unique glory. It is a striking redefinition, one that marks Johannine theology as distinctive and demonstrates the theological creativity at work in early Christian apologetics.

### *Scriptural fulfillment*

John's approach to the events of the passion is, frankly, loaded with intentional references to Hebrew Scripture. The narrative almost feels like a running checklist of prophecy fulfillment: soldiers casting lots for Jesus' clothes? John's linking this directly to Psalm 22: "They divided my garments among them." Jesus saying, "I thirst"? That's a nod, again, to Psalm 69. Even the piercing of Jesus' side finds its parallel in Zechariah 12. John isn't subtle about it; he's effectively highlighting these references for the audience, signposting them as evidence of a divine plan playing out to the letter.

This repeated alignment of passion events with prophetic Scripture serves, at its core, an apologetic purpose. Instead of letting the cross undermine Jesus' messianic identity, John insists it actually proves it. The rhetorical implication is: if even the most humiliating aspects of the crucifixion are present in ancient prophecy, then the cross isn't an obstacle, but the very means by which Jesus is validated as the Messiah.

John also pulls back the narrative curtain in 19:35, slipping in a rare authorial assertion: "He who saw it has borne witness… his testimony is true." In taking this eyewitness stance, John stresses that his account is reliable, even verifiable. The detail about blood and water issuing from Jesus' side does double duty – it's both physical testimony and symbolic reference for his community, probably alluding to baptism and Eucharist. For John's readers, these sacraments aren't simply rituals; they're grounded in the historical passion, thus forging a link between the lived present and the foundational event of Jesus' death.

Pilate's actions amplify this apologetic strategy through irony. Despite his reluctance, Pilate refers to Jesus as "King of the Jews" and places that title above the cross. What's intended as political mockery or a deterrent, John reframes as an accidental proclamation of truth. Pilate's refusal to change the sign, "What I have written, I have written," tacitly affirms Jesus' kingship – even coming from a skeptical Roman mouthpiece. As for Jesus' death, John wants readers to see it not as defeat but as voluntary and triumphant. The final words, "It is finished" – *tetelestai* in Greek – signal not resignation but accomplishment. John diverges from Greco-Roman models of the noble death (think Socrates' stoic acceptance) by portraying Jesus' ending as purposeful fulfillment – a victory, not passive surrender.

Theologically, John moves beyond mere fulfillment and deeper into the notion of divine love. Echoing John 3:16, the crucifixion operates not as a contradiction of God's love, but as the highest proof of it. For a community dealing with ridicule, suspicion, or outright persecution, this framing wasn't just comforting; it was essential. It gave them arguments and a sense of spiritual coherence in the face of both Jewish objections and

Greco-Roman skepticism. Ultimately, John's narrative interweaves prophecy, eyewitness testimony, irony, and theological depth, transforming the cross from a symbol of failure into a focal point of divine intentionality, victory, and love.

## VI. The Resurrection as an Apologetic Defense

The resurrection occupies a central position in Christian apologetics, especially within the context of John's Gospel. If the crucifixion posed a significant challenge for early believers, the resurrection served as a pivotal affirmation of Jesus' divine identity. Without the resurrection, the claim that Jesus was the Son of God would lack foundation; with it, such assertions find concrete support. It's noteworthy that the Fourth Gospel dedicates two full chapters (20 and 21) to the resurrection narratives – accounts that serve both as declarations of faith and as systematic apologetic evidence.

The apologetic argument begins with the empty tomb. According to the narrative, Mary Magdalene discovers that the stone has been rolled away and immediately informs Peter and the beloved disciple (John 20:1-2). The narrative carefully details their actions: the beloved disciple arrives first and observes the linens but refrains from entering, while Peter goes in and notes not only the linens but also the face cloth, folded and set aside (John 20:6-7). When the beloved disciple enters, he "sees and believes" (John 20:8). The specificity of these details – the linens' arrangement and particularly the folded face cloth – serves an apologetic purpose: grave robbers would hardly have taken time to unwrap and neatly fold burial clothes. Rather than suggesting theft or human interference, the orderly condition of the tomb points toward divine intervention. The beloved disciple's belief in the face of this evidence becomes, symbolically, a model for the reader: given the testimony, recognition of resurrection emerges as reasonable.

Furthermore, John places significant emphasis on personal encounters between the resurrected Jesus and his followers. For instance, Mary Magdalene, overwhelmed with grief, initially mistakes Jesus for a gardener until he addresses her by name (John 20:16). This exchange underscores not only the continuity

of Jesus' identity but also the tangible reality of his resurrection: these are not mere visions or apparitions, but encounters with a living person. Jesus' subsequent appearances reinforce this notion. He manifests in the midst of his disciples – even in a locked room – displays his wounds, and offers peace (John 20:19-20). The material evidence of his injuries serves to confirm that the resurrected Jesus is indeed the same person who was crucified, reinforcing the physical and historical reality of the resurrection.

The narrative involving Thomas is especially relevant in the context of apologetics. Absent during Jesus' initial post-resurrection appearance, Thomas declares that he will not believe unless he can see and touch Jesus' wounds (John 20:25). When Jesus appears again, he directly addresses Thomas's doubts, inviting him to examine the wounds (John 20:27). Thomas responds with a significant confession: "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). This admits both the legitimacy of doubt and the necessity for evidence – John's Gospel does not shy away from skepticism but instead portrays Jesus as meeting it head-on. The Thomas episode thus models an intellectual journey from doubt to belief, demonstrating that faith can rest on credible, substantive grounds.

Finally, Jesus' pronouncement – "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29) – extends the apologetic argument to subsequent generations. Although the first witnesses had the evidence of direct, sensory experience, later believers depend on testimony. John's Gospel assures them that their faith remains legitimate and honored. In summary, John's resurrection narratives are meticulously constructed to provide both a foundation for faith and a defense against doubt, offering narrative and material evidence for the claim that the crucified Jesus was indeed resurrected.

### *The purpose statement*

John 20:30-31 stands out as the Gospel's explicit statement of purpose. The author frankly informs readers that Jesus performed many additional acts – far more than what's written here – but the selection is intentional. The aim? To inspire belief that

Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and to offer life in his name through that belief. At its core, this passage exposes the apologetic nature of the Gospel of John. The text acknowledges its own agenda: it isn't meant to catalogue every detail of Jesus's life, but rather to present targeted evidence. The resurrection appearances, in particular, are not exhaustive narratives but serve as persuasive testimony. In short, the evangelist is upfront: this Gospel is a purposeful argument for faith.

### *The epilogue (John 21)*

John 21 often functions as an epilogue, yet its significance reaches far beyond mere closure. The chapter presents the risen Jesus beside the Sea of Tiberias, orchestrating a miraculous catch of fish and then partaking in a meal with the disciples. This seemingly mundane setting underscores the full physicality of the resurrection – Jesus isn't a distant spirit but present in a tangible, bodily way: eating, conversing, engaging in everyday acts. Peter's reinstatement is especially notable in the context of apologetic concerns. By restoring Peter – the very disciple who had denied him – Jesus models both grace and a concrete reclamation of leadership. The narrative demonstrates how a flawed and fragile individual becomes commissioned as an authentic witness. Such transformation is not just narrative flourish; it operates as a powerful apologetic argument. If Peter, with his failures, can be redeemed and empowered, the Gospel's credibility becomes even more robust. Finally, the epilogue closes with a pronounced emphasis on eyewitness testimony: "This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true" (21:24). This self-assertion of direct testimony is a hallmark of John's apologetic strategy, grounding the Gospel's claims in purported historical reality and eyewitness reliability.

### *Theological significance*

John's portrayal of the resurrection isn't mere resuscitation – it's genuine transformation. Jesus retains the marks of crucifixion, yet moves beyond normal physical constraints: he enters

locked rooms, appears and disappears at will. These details highlight a paradox; the resurrection launches a new way of being that isn't limited by ordinary physics. From an apologetic perspective, John skillfully addresses concerns from both Jewish and Greek audiences. Jewish tradition anticipated a general resurrection at the end of time, and in John's narrative, Jesus' resurrection functions as a preview – an assurance that this hope is grounded in reality. For Greeks, who commonly regarded the body as inferior, John makes a counterpoint by emphasizing the bodily aspect of resurrection. He affirms that creation itself is good, and insists on God's active engagement with the material world. In short, John isn't just presenting a miracle; he's arguing for a fundamental shift in how existence, hope, and embodiment are understood.

## VII. Johannine Apologetics in Christianity: Then and Now[9]

John's apologetic methods clearly weren't limited to his original audience; their impact stretched far beyond, shaping the early Christian community and even informing present-day discussions. By skillfully blending narrative, theological insight, and persuasive techniques, the Gospel of John established a foundational model for defending and commending Christian belief. Honestly, his work set a standard that has resonated through centuries, and it continues to influence how faith is articulated and defended today.

### *Influence on early Christian apologetics*

Early Christian apologists frequently engaged with Johannine themes in developing their theological arguments. Justin Martyr, active in the second century, placed significant emphasis on

[9] This section draws heavily from the insights of the following sources: Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 61, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers,* ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 1:227. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*3.11.1, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:428. Tertullian, *Apology* 21, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers,* 3:35., and Origen, *Contra Celsum* 2.9, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 86–89.

Logos theology, presenting Christ as the divine Word through whom all rational beings receive enlightenment. This philosophical approach, resonant with the prologue of John's Gospel, provided a bridge for dialogue with educated Greek audiences.

Similarly, Irenaeus of Lyons drew extensively on Johannine categories, especially those surrounding truth and life, as seen in his work Against Heresies. In this text, he decisively countered Gnostic reinterpretations of Jesus, insisting on the historical and bodily realities of the incarnation, passion, and resurrection. Tertullian also utilized Johannine logic in his apologetic writing, particularly when addressing the apparent paradox of the cross. Where critics perceived only weakness, Tertullian, echoing the Gospel of John, identified divine strength – interpreting glory in humiliation as a distinctly Christian concept, which became a valuable resource in confronting both pagan critics and heterodox teachings.

Further, the evolution of Trinitarian theology owes much to John's distinct testimonial framework. The recurring Johannine emphasis on the relationship between Father and Son, along with the promise of the Spirit as witness, provided foundational material for later doctrinal developments. In the fourth-century debates with the Arians, passages from John's Gospel – including John 1:1 ("the Word was God") and 20:28 ("My Lord and my God") – proved decisive in authenticating the divinity of Christ.

### *Johannine apologetics and Jewish-Christian dialogue*

John's Gospel comes across as a sharp intervention in the intra-Jewish debates of the late first century. The intense criticism of "the Jews" – a phrase that's definitely loaded – should be read with an awareness of the context: followers of Jesus had been excluded from synagogue life (cf. 9:22; 16:2), leading to significant identity struggles within the Johannine community. John's Gospel responds by asserting that Jesus represents the very fulfillment of Israel's Scriptures, the true location of God's presence – the "real temple," so to speak.

For this community, pressing these arguments wasn't just a theological flex; it was about survival. Defensively, they needed

to reassure themselves (and perhaps others) that faith in Jesus didn't mean abandoning Israel's God – far from it. Offensively, John flips the script by arguing that rejecting Jesus is actually breaking away from Israel's Scriptural roots.

Modern scholarship can't just brush aside the negative historical impact; there's a long, sad legacy of anti-Jewish exploitation of John's language. Still, if we look at the Gospel in its original context, what emerges is a picture of a community striving to redefine its relationship with its foundational tradition. Interpreters today are challenged to approach John both with critical awareness and a measure of understanding, recognizing the apologetic drive to maintain continuity with Israel's God – even in the midst of social and religious upheaval.

### *Engagement with Greco-Roman thought*

John's concept of "Logos" is genuinely clever when you look at it through the lens of ancient Greco-Roman philosophy. He's not just doing his own thing; instead, by framing Jesus as the Logos, he's setting up a conversation with major philosophical currents like Stoicism and Middle Platonism. For people in that world, the notion of a rational order running the universe wasn't weird; it was basically a given. The real curveball is John insisting that this cosmic principle actually walked around on two feet.

Scholars like Clement of Alexandria and Origen weren't slow to catch on. They picked up this theme and used it to argue that Christianity wasn't some irrational cult or superstition, but a philosophy in its own right – honestly, the highest one. The Fourth Gospel, in their hands, became not just Scripture, but basically a philosophical battering ram: "You call us ignorant? Well, this faith is deeper than your best arguments." That's how they tried to win over the educated crowd, playing the game with their rules but flipping the script.

### *Contemporary apologetic relevance*

John's strategies in apologetics still carry significant weight today – surprisingly so, when you look closely. There are three aspects in particular that continue to resonate.

First, testimony remains foundational. Across both legal and cultural contexts, people are drawn to personal stories. The contemporary emphasis on lived experience, eyewitness accounts, and narrative change echoes John's use of figures like the Samaritan woman or the man born blind. Communities of faith continue to highlight these transformations, recognizing their persuasive power.

Second, John's reframing of the cross as glory offers a nuanced response to the problem of suffering. In a world riddled with injustice, hardship, and marginalization, the notion that divine presence is revealed through weakness is both challenging and relevant. Far from offering a simplistic answer, John's theology proposes the cross as the ultimate expression of love and victory – a concept that addresses existential concerns from a place of depth rather than denial.

Third, the resurrection narratives speak directly to modern skepticism around death and the afterlife. John's insistence on bodily resurrection stands in stark contrast to both materialist rejections of the supernatural and to more abstract, spiritualized interpretations. For Christians navigating secular or postmodern perspectives, these resurrection accounts provide not just a rallying point but genuine intellectual resources for credible proclamation.

Altogether, John's apologetic features – testimony, the reimagined cross, and the physical resurrection – demonstrate ongoing relevance for those engaging questions of faith in today's world.

### *Conclusion*

Compared to the other Gospels, the Gospel of John comes across as the most unapologetically apologetic. Seriously, it doesn't pull any punches. Through its intricate deployment of signs, layered testimony, fulfillment motifs, and the centrality

of glory and resurrection, John's Gospel systematically addresses concrete challenges faced by its community. One encounters a text deeply aware of its Jewish and Greco-Roman critics, actively responding to controversy and the complexities of nascent Christian identity.

Yet, the Gospel's apologetic is not strictly defensive or polemical. Its underlying strategy – articulated most explicitly in John 20:31 ("that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name") – frames belief not as an argument to be won, but as an invitation into transformative faith. Thus, the Fourth Gospel functions as both historical apologetic discourse and a sustained, living witness. Its patterns of argumentation and rhetorical persuasion have continued to provide Christian communities, past and present, with strategies for articulating and defending faith amidst challenge and skepticism.

# 2. Two Kinds of Creator: Distinguishing the *Kalam* and Thomistic Cosmological Arguments

*Felipe S. Forti*[1]

ABSTRACT: This article contrasts two versions of the cosmological argument: the *kalam* version and Thomas Aquinas' version. Highlighting the distinctions between them is essential to avoid confusions while presenting and criticizing each of the arguments. Christian apologists might be tempted to claim that Thomas defended the origin of the universe, while critics may try to criticize Thomas' argument thinking that's what the argument is about. The kalam cosmological argument, developed by Arabic theologians such as Al-Kindi and Al-Ghazali, is about the origin of the universe, but that is not the case with the Thomistic version, which is highly inspired by Aristotelian thought and Arabic philosophers from the Middle Ages. Since there are profound metaphysical distinctions between the two, it's important to explain each of the arguments and emphasize its differences with the other. At the end of the article is a discussion on which of these arguments might be better for contemporary apologetics.

TRADITIONALLY, according to William Lane Craig, there are two types of creation in Christian theology: *creatio originans* and *creatio continuans*. The first refers to the question of God as the Creator of the universe at a specific point at which the universe began to exist; the latter is about the preservation

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of reality in each instant of its existence.[2] While such a distinction is important, some people seem unaware of it when discussing cosmological arguments. In traditional natural theology, the cosmological argument has been defended in a variety of different versions: from the unmoved mover argument by Aristotle, to the Arabic form by medieval philosophers such as Avicenna, Averroes and Al-Ghazali, to more modern presentations. Its basic premises now feature in contemporary discussions with prominent philosophers like William Lane Craig, Robert Koons, Joshua Rasmussen and Alexander Pruss.

Recently, however, those versions of the cosmological argument have encountered critics that don't seem to be aware of its differences. For example, Richard Dawkins has publicly tried to refute Thomas Aquinas' first three ways to prove God's existence with a critique that, at best, would apply to Al-Ghazali's/Craig's version. In talking about Thomas' argument, Dawkins discusses how the Big Bang cosmological singularity or other unknown physical concept would be a "more parsimonious" alternative than God.[3] To call the first cause "God" is, according to Dawkins, "at best unhelpful and at worst perniciously misleading."[4]

Given such confusion, it would seem useful to present the deep metaphysical distinction between those two versions of the cosmological argument. More precisely, that distinction will be made through a presentation of both arguments: the *kalam* cosmological argument and the Thomistic cosmological argument. In doing so, the differences will be made clear.

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[2] William Lane Craig, "'What Place, Then, for a Creator?': Hawking on God and Creation," *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 41, no. 4 (1990): 475–76.

[3] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2006), 78.

### *The* kalam *cosmological argument*

This version of the cosmological argument was developed by Al-Kindi (801-873 AD) and, later, by Al-Ghazali (1058-1111 AD). They both were from the *kalam* school of Islamic theology in the Middle Ages (476-1453 AD) and defended a view of God as the creator, in time, of the universe. Although they both defended the same version of the cosmological argument, they differ in their approach. Key to this argument is the notion that the world had an absolute beginning in time. Al-Kindi and Al-Ghazali differ on how they could prove such a point.

Al-Kindi argued that for each moment of time there is another moment preceding it. However, it is not possible to have an infinite regress of such moments, for, "if it were possible, and after every segment of time there was a segment, infinitely, then we would never reach a given time".[5] This is basically a form of the argument against an infinite regress of days: if there were an infinite amount of days prior to today, then today would never arrive. Since it arrived (we're here), therefore the past is not infinite.

Al-Ghazali argued from a similar perspective, but using the impossibility of an infinite series of temporal phenomena. For example, according to the cosmology of his time, Ghazali believed that the Sun, Saturn and Jupiter revolved around the Earth. The Sun thus revolves once per year, while Saturn revolves thirty and Jupiter twelve. Now, if the past were eternal, that would mean that even Saturn doing 1/30 of revolutions of the Sun per year and Jupiter doing 1/12, would imply that all of them made infinite revolutions around the Earth.[6]

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[4] Dawkins, 78.

[5] Al-Kindi, *On First Philosophy*, in Alfred L. Ivry, *Al-Kindi's "First Philosophy" and Cognate Texts: Translation and Commentary* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oxford, 1970), 121.

[6] Al-Ghazali. *Tahafut al-falasifah:* Incoherence of the Philosophers, (Pakistan Philosophical Congress, Club Road: Lahore: 1963), 20.

That already shows, according to Ghazali, that the past cannot be infinite, but he has more to say: if the number of revolutions were infinite, then it would not be even nor odd, or it would be both, which is impossible.[7]

Ghazali's argument is presented simply as follows: every occurrent has a cause; the world is an occurrent; necessarily, therefore, the world has a cause.[8] Craig has simplified the argument as follows:

1. Everything that begins to exist has a cause.
2. The universe began to exist.
3. Therefore, the universe had a cause.

In this version, Craig adapts Ghazali's argument against an infinite regress of temporal phenomena to modern astronomy and adds the scientific confirmation of modern cosmology to show that the universe had a beginning.[9]

The key here is to understand that the *kalam* cosmological argument appeals strongly to the finitude of the past to argue that God is the Creator. In this regard, the argument doesn't stop on the demonstration of the origin of the universe but also presents a conceptual analysis of its cause. Given that the universe comprises all of space, time and matter, this cause must be timeless, spaceless and immaterial. It must also be extremely powerful, since it created the universe from nothing. Moreover, it must be personal, since it had to freely decide "when" to create the universe. Since there is no distinction between a moment or another in an eternal temporal past, nor does a timeless permanent state present any special property to begin a temporal

[7] Al-Ghazali, *Al-Ghazali's Moderation in Belief*. (Chicago, IL, USA: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 38.

[8] Al-Ghazali, 56.

[9] See William Lane Craig. *The kalām cosmological argument*. 2ª Ed., (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000); William Lane Craig & James Sinclair, "The kalam cosmological argument", In: J. P. Moreland & William Lane Craig (Org.), *The Blackwell Companion to natural theology*. (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

effect, the cause must freely choose to create the universe. Such a concept is essentially what everybody means by God.

### *The Thomistic cosmological argument*

Thomas Aquinas' cosmological argument is presented in his first "three ways" (of his famous Five Ways) to prove God's existence. The first way is based on Aristotle's Unmoved Mover argument, the second is based on Avicenna's cosmological argument and the third one is a version of Averroes argument. Key concepts are necessary to understand all three arguments:

First, the distinction between *act* and *potency*. To explain this distinction, it is useful to appeal to a practical example: the seed of an apple tree has the *potency* to become an apple tree. When it arrives at such a state it is an apple tree in *act*. Now, this movement from seed to apple requires a *mover*. Aristotle argued that the universe contains spheres that moved from eternity past. Therefore, they require an eternal mover. Since an infinite regress of movers is impossible, therefore this is an Unmoved Mover.[10] Thomas used this argument as the First Way. He says that, since everything that moves is moved by another, there cannot be an infinite regress of movers and, therefore, it is "necessary to arrive at a first mover, not moved by any other, and this, everyone understands: it is God."[11]

Second, the difference between *essence* and *existence*. While the essence of a thing is its own nature, it contains the potency of existence.[12] Etienne Gilson explains that Al-Farabi, who made the distinction prior to Avicenna, "was inspired by Aristotle's observation that the notion of what a thing is does not include the fact that the thing is".[13] To be actualized in the world, a thing requires an efficient cause. For Avicenna, the order of

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[10] See Aristotle, *Metafísica* Λ, 6, 1071b - 7, 1072b.

[11] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica,* I, q. 2, a. 3. ad. 1.

[12] William Lane Craig, *The cosmological argument from Plato to Leibniz*. (Nova Iorque: The MacMillan Press, 1980), 77.

[13] Etienne Gilson, *A filosofia na Idade Média*. 2ª. Ed. (São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2007), 428.

efficient causes cannot be infinite, even in an eternal cosmos. What that means is that, for Avicenna (and latter for Thomas), the order of efficient causes is not necessarily one "before" the other, but something that makes another exist, even if it is eternal. In other words, something *depends* on another to exist. The universe can exist eternally – from past eternity to endless future – but it requires a cause to keep existing. Therefore, the whole universe requires a cause that contains existence as part of its own essence; you cannot have an infinite regress of contingent causes.

Contrary to things that require a cause – which are contingent – this First Cause is necessary[14], for it cannot fail to exist, since existence is in its nature.[15] God, explains Anthony Kenny, "created by necessity: he is absolute goodness, and goodness, by force of its nature, radiates outwards. But if God is necessarily a creator, then creation must be eternal just as God is eternal."[16] Thomas bases his Second Way in this argument. He writes: "nor is it possible, among efficient causes, to continue to infinity, because among all ordered efficient causes, the first is the cause of the intermediate ones and the intermediate ones are the cause of the last, whether they are numerous or only one." And he concludes: "If there were no first among efficient causes, there would be no last or intermediate….Therefore, it is necessary to affirm a first efficient cause, which everyone calls God."[17]

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[14] Here, the concept of "contingent" and "necessary" is different from the one use in contemporary modal logic. Avicenna and other medieval philosophers and theologians are not interested in possible worlds, but rather on the dependence or independence of things from another beings.

[15] Avicenne. *Métaphysique du shifa*, Vol. II, Books VI-X, (Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1985), 71.

[16] Anthony Kenny, *Uma nova história da filosofia*: filosofia medieval, Vol. 2, 2ª Ed., (São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 2012), 325.

[17] Aquinas, *Su. Th*. I, q. 2, a. 3. ad. 1.

Third is Averroes' argument, which is based on the distinction between "truly possible" beings and "possible-necessary" beings.[18] Craig explains that the truly possible is anything caused and perishable; the necessary-possible, by contrast, is anything that maintains the caused nature of perishable being, but is not susceptible to generation or corruption.[19] Averroes argued: "Possible existents must, of necessity, have causes that precede them, and if these causes are again possible, it follows that they have other causes, there being an infinite regress; but if there is an infinite regress, then there is no cause at all, and the possible will exist without a cause, which is impossible."[20] If such an infinite regress is impossible, then what is the first cause: truly possible or necessary-possible? Averroes argued that this first cause must be simply necessary, which does not have a cause.[21] Based on that, Thomas says in his presentation of the Third Way:

> ...we observe that there are things in the world that can be and not be, such as those subject to generation and corruption. Now, everything that is possible to be has a cause, because insofar as it refers in itself to two terms, that is, to being and non-being, it requires, if being is appropriate to it, that this occurs from a cause. But, since one cannot proceed indefinitely in causes [...] one must admit something that is necessarily being.
>
> However, every necessary being has the cause of its necessity coming either from another or from itself, insofar as it is necessary in itself. Now, one cannot proceed indefinitely in the series of necessary beings that have the cause of their necessity coming from another. Therefore, one must admit a

[18] Averroes. *Tahafut al tahafut*: *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, Vol. I e II, (Cambridge: EJW Gibb Memorial Trust, 1987), 164.

[19] William Lane Craig, *The Cosmological Argument from Plato to Leibniz*, 106.

[20] Averroes, 165.

[21] Averroes, 165.

> being that is the first necessary and that is necessary in itself. This being is God, insofar as God is the first cause, as was demonstrated above. Therefore, God is eternal, since everything necessary in itself is eternal.[22]

Notice that Thomas' is not requiring a beginning in time of the world. Rather, since Aristotle, Avicenna and Averroes believed in the eternity of the world, and Thomas' argument works in an eternal universe. To illustrate that, imagine a lighter that exists from eternity past. The *kalam* argument proponent would argue that it is necessary that the fire begin at some point in the lighter. On the other hand, a Thomistic view (and Aristotelian or Arabic philosophy view) would say that the fire is burning from eternity past. The cause of the fire is, in both cases, the lighter, but one makes the fire *begin* to exist, while the other simply makes the fire *permanently* exist.

### *Closing remarks*

Both versions of the cosmological argument differ significantly in their metaphysical foundations and implications. While the kalam argument hinges on the impossibility of an eternal universe (with an infinite series of past events), the Thomistic version is more metaphysical in its appeal to concepts such as act and potency, essence and existence, and contingency and necessity. Thomas' argument can be divided into three different cosmological arguments influenced by Aristotle, Avicenna and Averroes. It is, however, the compatibility of Thomas' argument with an infinite past that differentiates it from the kalam version. Al-Kindi, Al-Ghazali and modern proponents of the kalam cosmological argument need the past to be finite to argue for God as the first cause, while Thomas Aquinas' first three ways works with an eternal universe and argue for God as a Cause that is First – Uncaused, Unmoved and Necessary.

It is important to say that even though the authors disagree about the role of God as the Creator in a metaphysical sense, the arguments do not contradict each other. The Thomistic argu-

[22] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*., I, c. XV, 124.

ment is compatible with an eternal universe but does not necessitate one. One might hold that God created the universe at some point in the finite past, but also that He sustains it's being as an efficient cause. This would warrant philosophically the Christian idea presented at the beginning of this article – that of *creatio originans* and *creatio continuans*.

Although both versions seem to have their strengths, these days it would be preferable to argue using the *kalam* rather than the Thomistic argument. The Thomistic version of the cosmological argument depends too much on Aristotelian metaphysics, which might be difficult to explain; and even bypassing that obstacle the argument might sound outdated, since some of Aristotle's thought is based on ancient cosmology (like the idea that the celestial spheres revolve eternally). The *kalam* argument is more in line with contemporary cosmology and mathematics, thanks largely to the work of William Lane Craig. Besides that, it is easier to explain that since everything that begins has a cause and the universe had a beginning, it also requires a cause. Thomas' argument is good for philosophical discussions in academia, but not a good argument for popular apologetics.

# 3. A Comparison of Ancient Israelite and Egyptian Cultures

*Daniel Williams*[1]

ABSTRACT: This essay examines the cultural, religious, and social parallels and distinctions between ancient Egypt and Israel during the period from approximately 1250 to 1000 BC, spanning from the Mosaic Exodus to the establishment of the Israelite monarchy. Egypt's profound influence on Israelite formation is undeniable, with over 269 references to Egypt in the Pentateuch alone. The historical context begins with Joseph's rise to prominence during the Hyksos period, followed by the deterioration of Hebrew status after the Hyksos expulsion and the subsequent Exodus under native Egyptian rule during the brilliant Eighteenth Dynasty. Both cultures shared a fundamentally religious worldview in which no distinction existed between sacred and secular realms. Divine presence permeated every aspect of daily life, with gods or God actively participating in human history. However, significant theological and practical differences distinguished these societies. The fundamental distinction between these civilizations ultimately rests in their contrasting conceptions of deity: distant, unrevealing Egyptian gods versus an intimately involved, self-revealing Hebrew God seeking transformative relationship with His people.

THE GOAL OF THE FOLLOWING is to briefly compare ancient Egypt with Israel as to their similarities in thought, worship practices, literature, and culture as well as some of the key differences between them that make Israel distinct and separate. The chronological scope of the investigation will cover from approximately 1250 to 1000 BC. which encompasses the events

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of the Mosaic Exodus from Egypt to the period of the Israelite monarchy.[2]

Egyptian thought and culture clearly had a powerful and lasting impact on the formation of Israel during this time period. Ernest Stock observes that "No country outside of Palestine itself has left a deeper or more lasting impression on the Jewish people than Egypt. The memory of their stay in the Nile Kingdom, of their enslavement and of their miraculous liberation has remained fresh in their consciousness to this day. There is hardly a chapter in the later Pentateuch and the prophetic books of the Bible which does not contain some reminder of the Exodus as the symbol of Israel's choice and as the matrix of its nationhood."[3]

The land of Egypt is referenced in over 269 verses in the Pentateuch.[4] For the purposes of this article no attempt will be made to authenticate the historic references made in the Biblical record. They will be assumed to be accurate, and the dates of events, persons, and cultural details will also be assumed to align historically with the time period under review.[5]

Prior to 1250 BC., the cycle of famine and the recourse of Abraham's family to Egypt for relief begins in Genesis 12 and continues through the rest of the book until the last verse. "So

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[2] K.A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Kindle Edition, 2003); Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel: 1250-587BCE* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1993), ix; William LaSor, David Allan Hubbard, Frederic Wm. Bush, *Old Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996).

[3] Ernest Stock, "Egypt – Israel: Some Earlier Relations", *The Reconstructionist*, 25 no 3 Mar 20, 1959, pp. 19-24.

[4] The Pentateuch comprises the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. They are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

[5] For a more thorough treatment of the issues surrounding this time period, see H.H. Rowley, *From Joseph To Joshua: Biblical Traditions in the Light of Archaeology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958); K.A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and the Old Testament* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press 1975); *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2006).

Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt."[6] Joseph, a great grandson of Abraham had, through a series of misadventures, been raised to a high governmental status in Egypt.[7] This is probably during the Middle or New Kingdom Ramesside/ Hyksos period.[8]

The Hyksos were a mixed Asiatic/Semitic people who conquered and ruled Egypt and much of Palestine during the Fifteenth and Sixteenth dynasties, also known as the Second Intermediate period. Their rulership may explain Joseph's rise to prominence and the friendly attitude of the Pharoah to his family due to their shared semitic origin. The Hyksos were expelled by Ahmose I around 1530 BC and Egyptian rule was reestablished.

With the expulsion of the Hyksos and the reestablishment of the native Egyptian rulers, the status of the Jews took a downturn, recorded in Exodus 1:8. "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph."[9] This explains why the prospering family of Abraham, with Joseph in a place of prominence, goes from riches to rags under the subsequent administration. The change in leadership from the semitic Hyksos to the native Egyptians brings suspicion and then enforced servitude. The Exodus is the eventual result.[10]

## Life in the New Kingdom

With the reestablishment of the native Egyptian rulers, the Eighteenth Dynasty is viewed as the most brilliant age in all Egyptian history. There is both stability and expansion as the

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[6] Genesis 50:26 NASB.

[7] The story of Joseph is found in Genesis 37 – 50.

[8] Jack Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past: The Archeological Background of Judaism and Christianity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 94-96.

[9] Exodus 1:8 NASB

[10] The date of the Exodus, during the New Kingdom, is estimated at 1446 BC under the reign of Thutmose III. See Finegan, 117.

horse-drawn chariot comes into general military use. Art flourishes, building projects abound, and Egypt takes on the role of empire builder under Thutmose III.[11] In comparing Egypt and Israel during this period we will explore several social categories. The first is the general understanding of religion which was held in both cultures.

### *Religion*

The concept of religion in the ancient world was very different from our current western understanding. "Culture, society, and religion were coextensive in the biblical world. There was no atheism and there was no separation of church and state. Religion pervaded every activity of daily life in the world of the Bible. Every hour of the day had its religious significance"[12]

Matthews and Benjamin point out significant similarities between the Jewish and Egyptian worldview perspectives. There is no secular and sacred divide; all of life is permeated by the divine. The gods of the Egyptians (Isis, Osiris, Horus, Re, etc.) or the one God of the Hebrews (Yahweh) do not intervene in human history, rather they are always present and interactive in that history and in people's lives. All experience is religious experience. For the Jews, this understanding of life as it should be lived is exhaustively and minutely detailed in the Mosaic law or Torah.[13]

By way of comparison, the gods of the Egyptians were not nearly as interested in the daily lives of their people. Though all of life was permeated by the gods who were responsible for what occurred in the world, the minute detail of YHWH's con-

[11] Finegan, 96-122.

[12] Matthews and Benjamin, xix.

[13] All of life and how to live it is exhaustively addressed in the Torah (law) of Moses. These have been compiled by various Jewish sages, the most famous of which is Moses Maimonides (12th century) in the Mishnah Torah. Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes* (Peabody: Hendrickson Academic, 2012).

cern with the daily life of His people, which we see in the Hebrew revelation, is not present in the Egyptian records.

### *Origin stories*

The gods of Egypt – with the possible exception of the god Nun – have an origin and are to be served by their human creation. "According to the most ancient account of how the universe was formed, in the beginning there was nothing but a watery chaos, personified as the god Nun: 'The great god who creates himself: he is water, he is Nun, father of the gods.'"[14] Another mythic tradition has the waters of Nun receding and exposing the primeval mound upon which the god Atum emerged. Atum then creates the gods from himself. In contrast, Yahweh has no origin story. There are no other gods involved as co-creators in the creation narrative of any of the Biblical accounts. The world is separate from, not part of Yahweh. The sun, moon and stars are not gods to be worshiped; rather they are created objects with roles such as time-keeping and festival observance.[15]

### *Public and private religion*

In Egypt, there was a significant difference between the state and the family understanding and participation in religion. Most of our documentation from the ancient world of Egypt revolve around the palace and the temple. Egypt's focus was on the king (Pharaoh) and the welfare of the state. All public worship centered on the image of the god. It marked the deity's presence and was the center of any ceremony involving the divine. The image was awakened in the morning, washed, fed, clothed, and then put to bed at night. It was most important to the welfare of everyone that the god was well cared for.[16] These were the 'great gods' who were interested in the Pharoah and the state.

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[14] Toby A. H. Wilkinson, *The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt* (Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition, 52.

[15] H.C. Brichto, *The Names of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 60-61.

[16] Siegfried Morenz, *Egyptian Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1977), 88

This is in sharp contrast to the Hebrew scriptural record. The temple rituals and the yearly festivals of the Jews were expressly for the people's participation, whereas the common people of Egypt had little to do with maintaining the god's favor.[17]

Family worship in Egypt was focused on practical matters of reputation, good harvests, health and the ability to have children.[18] There was a fragile relationship between the household gods and the family. This was due to the lack of revelation from the gods. People simply didn't know what the gods wanted at any given time. Any sickness, crop failure or miscarriage would be attributed to the divine disappointment, and then attempts would be made to figure out what went wrong in the relationship and how to appease the god.

Similarly, the presence of household gods is a part of the early history of the Hebrew people. The transition from a syncretistic blend of polytheism to monolatry (worship of a particular god) and then to a strict monotheism took many centuries.[19] In contrast to this lack of knowing and being unable to obey the will of the gods, the revelation of Yahweh's will is communicated in detail as to how to both know and then do His will. The Hebrew sacrificial system is clear not only on what rituals and sacrifices to perform for revealed offenses, but also on how to deal with the unknown committed in ignorance.[20]

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[17] John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 135-137.

[18] J. Baines, "Society, Morality and Religious Practice," in *Religion in Ancient Egypt*, ed. B. Shafer, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 128.

[19] "When Laban had gone to shear his sheep, Rachel stole her father's household gods." – Genesis 31:19 (NASB).

[20] For a thorough discussion of the concept of transference of guilt and atonement of sins committed in ignorance see, Roy E. Gane, *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005).

### *Morality and Order*

Morality has to do with what is personally and socially right and wrong, what is good and bad, what we should do and think, and what we should refrain from doing, particularly with respect to others. Religion provides the standards by which people have always measured themselves morally. In Egypt the moral standards related to the maintenance of order or *Maat.* The gods had established *Maat* at the beginning and, in concert with their human creation, were responsible for maintaining *Maat*. According to Walton, "*Maat* was the goal of existence for both humanity and the gods."[21] Jan Assmann defines it as "…the principle that forms individuals into communities and that gives their actions meaning and direction by ensuring that good is rewarded and evil punished."[22] He goes on to say that it is "…the spirit of mutual understanding, solidarity, and community that is the indispensable foundation of civil society."[23] It is the foundation of their sense of ethics.

This religiously informed community sense of morality is similar in Israel but with a significant difference. In Egypt, ethical behavior is connected to the gods through the concept of *Maat*. Judgement in the afterlife was in accordance with *Maat*.[24] However, the ways of Maat were not revealed by the gods but were taught and learned by experience. If things went well you were behaving, and promoting order; if things were going poorly, you were doing something wrong and you needed to discover what it was. You learned this through divination and ritual.

There is a significant contrast between this hit-or-miss method of serving the gods through ritual and seeking to preserve the general *Maat,* and the Hebrew conception of obeying Torah, living in relationship with Yahweh by loving Him with all their

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[21] Walton, 152.

[22] Jan Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt*: *History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 126-127.

[23] Assmann, 395.

[24] Morenz, 110.

hearts and being holy like Him. "The high ideal of imitating the deity did not exist in any other ancient Near Eastern culture."[25]

John Walton elaborates this concept of the people of Israel depending on a detailed revelation of Yahweh's desires toward them. It was one of intimate relationship and ethical transformation which demonstrated His character to the peoples around them.[26] He goes on to the first of the Ten Commandments in Genesis 20, which defines the relational nature of the covenant, referred to in Genesis 15, 17 and 19.[27] God is their Lord (Yahweh) and God (Elohim). He has rescued them from Egypt, the house of slavery and, in the process, defeated the gods of Egypt (Exodus 12:12). Based on these facts, He commands them to have no other gods before or beside Him.

[25] *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. F. Greenspahn (New York: New York University press, 1991), 371.

[26] Walton, 155-160.

[27] Kitchen, *Reliability*, Kindle Edition.

# 4. Incarnation and Christian Belief

*David Keeling*[1]

ABSTRACT: There is a dearth of scholarly treatments whose primary focus is the epistemic status of the Chirstian faith, together with the epistemizing work of the Holy Spirit within the life of the Christian. Furthermore, it appears that such an account that incorporates, exegetes and applies the relevant Old and New Testament data has yet to be written. Thomas V. Morris has said that a "Spirit Epistemology" would be a required core component for a full account concerning the "epistemic status of Christian doctrine." In this paper, I hope to show the relatedness between two separate and yet connected foundational themes, namely the historical and orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation and the universal innate human faculty which can, when restored to proper functionality, lead to the orthodox Christological belief that Jesus Christ is Lord. In Section One, I sketch out the foundational importance of the Incarnation with respect to theological and historically orthodox contexts and by interacting with Thomas Morris's view of the Incarnation in accordance with the conciliar Statement of Chalcedon. In Section Two, I propose that John Chapter Three is a foundational text for addressing the universal innate human faculty, which although impeded can be restored by an extramundane solution. I submit that this constitutes a crucial step towards the creation of a Spirit Epistemology as a core component of a full account concerning the epistemic status of Christian doctrine.

A GOOD ARGUMENT could be made, not only that there is a dearth of scholarly treatments that focus on the epistemic status of the Christian faith,[2] but that such an account that incorporates, exegetes and applies the relevant Old and New Testament

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[2] An exception is the last of Alvin Plantinga's epistemological trilogy entitled *Warranted Christian Belief*, (Oxford University Press, 2000).

data has yet to be written. In this paper, I hope to show the relatedness between two separate and yet connected foundational themes, namely the historical and orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation and the universal innate human faculty which can, when restored to proper functionality, lead to the orthodox Christological belief that Jesus Christ is Lord. In Section One, I sketch out the foundational importance concerning the doctrine of the Incarnation with respect to theological and historically orthodox contexts and also by interacting with Thomas Morris's view of the Incarnation in accordance with the conciliar Statement of Chalcedon. In Section Two, I propose that John Chapter Three is a foundational primary text when considering the universal innate human faculty, that which although impeded can be restored by an extramundane solution. I submit that this constitutes a crucial step towards the creation of a Spirit Epistemology as a core component within of a full account concerning the epistemic status of Christian doctrine.

## I. Incarnation: A Foundational Doctrine

With respect to the doctrine of the Incarnation, Daniel L. Akin opines that "there is no genuine Christianity other than that based upon the absolute truth of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son of God."[3] This is a straightforward and (one would hope) noncontroversial proposition that every professing Christian ought to readily agree with. The foundational nature of the Incarnation is grounded on the Christian claim that God has immanently revealed himself in human history through the specific individual of Jesus Christ, "by taking our human nature unto himself, by coming amongst us as a particular man, without in

[3] Daniel L. Akin, "The Never-Changing Christ for an Ever-Changing Culture," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, Vol. 1, Is. 1 (Spring 1997), pp. 32-41.

any way ceasing to be the eternal and infinite God."[4] The fundamental theological importance of the Incarnation as it relates to the Christian church throughout her history can hardly be overstated. Indeed as John H. Armstrong observes:

> Through 20 centuries the Christian church has consistently realized that what it confesses regarding the person of Jesus of Nazareth is of paramount importance. Christianity stands and falls by what it believes and confesses regarding this person! For this reason every generation since the first has been called upon to answer the question: "Who do you say that I am?"[5]

In assenting to the Apostle Peter's response, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16) and in order to be logically consistent with the preponderant New Testament data, one would have to conclude that a confession of Jesus Christ as the Son of God entails that He is the bearer of a fully divine nature and a fully human nature; the latter not promoted at the expense of the former and vice versa. Therefore Christian orthodoxy demands that "the Word" (Greek: Logos) took upon Himself human nature in accordance with John 1:14, thus becoming the specific historical individual known as Jesus Christ. Such historical Christological orthodoxy constitutes the bedrock upon which biblical soteriology is founded.

For as McDonald informs us:

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[4] Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Incarnation: Collected Essays in Christology* (Cambridge University Press: 1987), 21. See also p. 23, where Hebblethwaite assures us that even though the Incarnation remains "primarily a doctrine about God…nevertheless the doctrine also asserts the real humanity of Jesus."

[5] John H. Armstrong, "The Unique Christ and the Modern Challenge," Reformation and Revival, A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Spring 1993), pp. 85-100. For a summary of various Christological views commencing with Ignatius, and terminating with the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451, see H.D. McDonald, "Development and Christology," *Vox Evangelica*, 9 (1975):, pp. 5-27.

> The faith that saves is the confession with the mouth that Jesus is Lord and the belief in the heart that God has raised him from the dead. But can there be such a faith in Christ apart from the believing acceptance of the biblical affirmation concerning him that he was truly the Word who was with God and the Word that was God; and, who, according to Phillips' translation of John 1:14, 'became a human being and lived among us'? It is plainly of the biblical faith that God has come among us; not in an airy legend but as an actual life; not in a mythology to be divined by the initiated, but by a miracle to be known by the believing; not as a fancy of a poetic imagination, but as a reality of the prosaically historical.[6]

This prosaically historical reality is the warp and woof that constitutes the rich tapestry of unadorned and yet theologically profound biblical revelation concerning the Incarnation. Having briefly sketched out the foundational importance of the Incarnation in relation to the historical and theologically orthodox Christian faith, we now turn to the incarnational schema presented by Thomas Morris grounded on the conciliar Statement of Chalcedon.

## ***Thomas Morris*: The Logic of God Incarnate**

The paucity of literature relating to the alleged logical issues that attend the doctrine of the Incarnation[7] provided Thomas Morris with a raison d'être for writing what may turn out to be his seminal work, *The Logic of God Incarnate*.

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[6] H.D. McDonald, "The Person of Christ in Contemporary Speculation and Biblical Faith," *Vox Evangelica*, 11 (1979), pp. 5-17.

[7] See where Morris quotes Nicholas Lash, "Jesus and the Meaning of 'God'-A Comment," in *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued*, ed. Michael Goulder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979,, 42, in Thomas V. Morris, "The Logic of God Incarnate," 13: "The 'incarnation debate' badly needs, as one of its components a fresh look at the logical problems to which classical formulations in Christology give rise."

In so doing, Morris has arguably presented the Christian church with a contribution to high orthodox Christology, founded on considerable logical groundwork and philosophical explication in the analytic tradition. According to William Lane Craig, Morris has provided a groundbreaking and influential scholarly monograph that possesses considerable, and enduring apologetic merit.[8]Essentially, the text is a polemical work that seeks to address four philosophical challenges raised in opposition against the Incarnation. The fourth challenge addressed by Morris concerns "how the doctrine of the Incarnation, as articulated and defended in *The Logic of God Incarnate* relates to the doctrine of the Trinity."[9]

Morris selects specific *prima facie* objections from the philosophical and theological academy which are designed to impugn the historic and orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation. Such objections militate against the possibility of accepting the truth of the Incarnation as it is portrayed in the New Tes-

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[8] William Lane Craig, "Apologetics Ministry - Advice to Christian Apologists," https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/popular-writings/apologetics/apologetics-ministry-advice-to-christian-apologists/.Craig has the following to say with respect to apologetic literature, the sort of which he thinks will significantly feature within institutions of higher education, where the topics addressed will be discussed, debated upon, and may become required reading, within for example philosophy and theology studies, and form templates for more popular works in theology and philosophy: "Thus, paradoxically, the most effective books in apologetics will not be books on apologetics at all. Rather they will be scholarly monographs in areas of specialized study. I brought along with me a few of the best books I know of in Christian apologetics. They might surprise some of you: Alvin Plantinga's *The Nature of Necessity*, Robert Gundry's commentary on the Gospel of Mark, Colin Hemer's *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, William Dembski's *The Design Inference*, Thomas Morris's *The Logic of God Incarnate*. These are the sort of books that will be studied and discussed for years to come in scholarly circles and classrooms and will shape the thinking of future generations. They will provide the basis of popularizations like Lee Strobel's excellent apologetic books for laymen and thus influence even the masses."

[9] See Morris, 14-16.

tament and believed upon by countless Christian believers. Of these objections Morris observes that, "Nevertheless, it will be of significant theological interest to see that none of the few major arguments on the basis of which many contemporary philosophers and theologians reject the doctrine is a success."[10]

The incarnational view espoused by Morris concerning Jesus of Nazareth is compatible with the historical conciliar decrees of the Christian Church and specifically the credal formulation resulting from the Council of Chalcedon of A.D. 451, the latter essentially constituting a unanimous renewal of the Nicean credal formulation.[11] As Morris sees it,

> According to Chalcedonian orthodoxy, we have in the case of Jesus the Christ one person in two natures, divine and human. Since the times of the early church Fathers, it has been fully appreciated how different these two natures are. Indeed, since Old Testament times, it has been emphasized in the Judeo-Christian tradition that God is qualitatively different from man in the extreme. There is no greater divide in the ontology of the Bible than that between Creator and creature.[12]

Morris is clear that the Statement of Chalcedon represents New Testament theological orthodoxy in regard to the distinctly divine and human natures that are instantiated in Jesus Christ. This is indeed a major New Testament revelation, given that the greatest divide revealed in Scripture obtains between the Triune Creator God and specifically His creation; otherwise referred to as the Creator-creature distinction.

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[10] Morris, 16.

[11] Philip Schaff, Ed., "Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers," Series II Volume 14, (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 515.. See also "The Oecumenical Documents of the Faith: The Creed of Nicaea, Three Epistles of Cyril, The Tome of Leo, The Chalcedonian Definition," 242.

[12] Morris, 18.

Further, even though Christian theologians have, after careful thought and deliberation of Scripture, attributed divinity to Jesus within the strict context of the revealed Jewish monotheistic faith, the Christologically heterodox views witnessed during the early centuries of church history testify "to the theological tension that was felt from the very beginning in the attempt to bring together the concepts of divinity and humanity to characterize this one person."[13]

Indeed, we might agree with Graham Keith that, if credal formulations generally represent "tests of orthodoxy" with respect to the resulting polemical engagements of the fourth century and beyond, it is perhaps only natural that "where heresy troubled the church, it was natural for the leaders to look for a credal subscription to guarantee orthodoxy."[14] As the Chalcedon statement of faith has it:

> Following, then, the holy Fathers, we all unanimously teach that our Lord Jesus Christ is to us One and the same Son, the Self-same Perfect in Godhead, the Self-same Perfect in Manhood; truly God and truly Man; the Self-same of a rational soul and body; co-essential with the Father according to the Godhead, the Self-same co-essential with us according to the Manhood ; like us in all things, sin apart; before the ages begotten of the Father as to the Godhead, but in the last days, the Self-same, for us and for our salvation (born) of Mary the Virgin Theotokos as to the Manhood; One and the Same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten; acknowledged in Two Natures unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably ; the difference of the Natures being in no way removed because of the Union, but rather the properties of each Nature being preserved, and (both) concurring into One Person and One Hypostasis; not as though He were parted or divided into Two Persons, but One and the Self-same Son. and Only-begotten God, Word, Lord, Jesus Christ; even as

[13] Morris, 18-19.

[14] Graham Keith, "The Formulation of Creeds in the Early Church," *Themelios,* 24, 1 (October 1998), 13-35.

> from the beginning the prophets have taught concerning Him, and as the Lord Jesus Christ Himself hath taught us, and as the Symbol of the Fathers hath handed down to us.[15]

The Chalcedon schema represents the historical and orthodox (as opposed to heterodox) biblical Christology, viz., the two natures view of Jesus Christ; otherwise known as the *hypostatic union*.[16] Of the Definition of Chalcedon, Gerald Bray opines:

> It should come as no surprise to discover that the Chalcedonian Definition, and in particular its relevance both to the teaching of Scripture and contemporary thought, occupies a large place in modern christological discussion. A confession which has been the touchstone of orthodoxy for fifteen centuries cannot lightly be ignored or abandoned.[17]

Even though the Chalcedonian Definition has withstood the test of time insofar as it has proven to be relevant to Christian teaching and contemporary Christian thought, it would seem remiss not to observe that the Definition has its detractors who, broadly speaking, seek to construct a new Definition that will align with contemporary theological categories of thought, or "more frequently" will articulate a Christology that will accommodate theological pluralism "in which no one statement of faith could be claimed as definitive."[18] In brief, contemporary detractors argue that the framers of the Definition commenced erroneously with an ontological approach from above, in contradistinction to a functional approach that should have commenced from below. The framers of the Definition (or so contemporary detractors

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[15] Philip Schaff, Ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 516-517.

[16] John H. Armstrong, "The Unique Christ and the Modern Challenge," *Reformation and Revival*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Spring 1993), pp. 85-100. John H. Armstrong, "Editors Introduction," *Reformation and Revival*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Spring 1993), pp. 9-14.

[17] Gerald Bray, "Can We Dispense with Chalcedon?" *Themelios* 3.2 (1978), 2.

[18] Bray, p. 2.

submit) inserted their own presuppositions into the sacred text in order to obtain a high Christology that resulted in the classical two-natures formulation of Chalcedon. Although there may be some who would genuinely like to see a new construction of the Definition, we agree with Bray when he observes:

> For that reason, although it may be simplified for mass consumption, it can never be replaced. Ontological christology is part of the biblical revelation which cannot and must not be compromised in the name of historical and/or cultural relativism….Conversion to Christ today can only mean what it meant to our ancestors – that we must put on a new mind and a new heart as men and women transformed by the transcendent power of the Christian gospel. This is the reality which is enshrined in the Chalcedonian Definition which will stand unchanged and unsurpassed as long as Christian faith endures.[19]

Having shown that Morris has adopted the Chalcedonian credal formulation, which has continued to represent the orthodox, established and widely accepted doctrinal view of the professing Christian church for the past ca. 1500 years; I will now proceed to consider first how Morris and Alvin Plantinga (the latter following the lead of John Calvin) understand that all human beings possess a specific albeit impeded innate faculty that prevents the formation of the orthodox and historical Christian belief within the individual, that Jesus Christ is Lord and second, how that impediment/those impediments may be overcome on a per individual basis.

## II. The Holy Spirit in John Chapter Three

In Chapter Eight, entitled "The Nicodemian Modus Tollens," Morris addresses whether it is possible "that it be reasonable or rational to believe Jesus to be God incarnate," in accordance with both the orthodox and widely accepted Christological af-

[19] Bray, p. 9.

firmations enshrined in the Statement of Chalcedon.[20] Morris presents his own responses to various philosophical/logical arguments that stand in opposition to rational belief in the Incarnation outlined in previous chapters of TLGI. By rational, I understand Morris to mean that the one who holds the belief that Jesus is God incarnate is rationally justified in doing so.

Rational justification falls within the branch of philosophy known as epistemology.[21] Within the constraints of the epistemological endeavour, true belief and knowledge are distinct concepts; however the latter does require the former in order to count as knowledge. Briefly, we might say that a belief is rational in the narrow sense when it comports with a fact, or in the broader sense when it comports with objective reality.[22]

At the beginning of Chapter Eight, Morris introduces his readers to an individual who evidently considered himself to be in possession of a valid argument based upon empirical data that corresponded with facts/objective reality, and which therefore entailed a logically sound conclusion, with respect to Jesus Christ. The individual in question provides a very informative case study; not in the strict academic sense, but rather with respect to the type of conclusion that a well read and highly educated non-Christian might arrive at following a period of "rational reflection on the identity of Jesus." Morris continues by citing a well-known passage from the Gospel of John:

> Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said

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[20] Morris, 187. On p. 190, Morris proceeds to state that the claim that Jesus Christ is God Incarnate does not lie beyond the scope of reason. Further in 191-192, Morris argues that neither is the doctrine incoherent.

[21] Within the field of Western Philosophy, three of the half dozen or so main branches of study include metaphysics, which is the study of existence and reality; epistemology, the study of knowledge/truth, and ethics, the study of ethical values by which humans live.

[22] See Marian David, "The Correspondence Theory of Truth", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-correspondence/.

> to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no man can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."[23]

It seems likely that Nicodemus genuinely desired to talk to Jesus and understand who he was. When compared with the Pharisees of the sort presented in the gospel accounts, it would appear that Nicodemus had more in common with Gamaliel[24] than he did with the more adversarial members of the Pharisees who sought to interrogate Jesus on various occasions. Notwithstanding the moderate and reasoned approach taken by this particular member of the Sanhedrin, who not inconsequentially possessed considerable theological and philosophical learning; how might one then proceed to account for the fact that this initial evaluation of the Lord by Nicodemus fell so short of the

[23] John 3:1-2 in *TLGI*, 187. The visit of Nicodemus may have been predicated upon what the former might have witnessed of the latter during the Passover at Jerusalem, which is recorded prior to the close of John Chapter Two; "Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did." (John 2:23.) Joseph Benson opines that "there was a man of the Pharisees — Belonging to the sect so called. What is here related, doubtless, occurred while our Lord was attending at Jerusalem to keep the passover, as is mentioned in the latter part of the preceding chapter." "Benson Commentary: John 3:1," *Bible Hub*, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/benson/john/3.htm. See also, "Barnes' Notes: John 3:2," *Bible Hub*, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/john/3.htm, and "Bengel's Gnomon of the New Testament: John 3:2" *Bible Hub*, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/bengel/john/3.htm. For a view that the visit of Nicodemus occurred later in the ministry of Jesus, see "ICC New Testament commentary: John 3:1," *Bible Hub*, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/icc/john/3.htm.

[24] See Acts 5:34-39.

mark?[25] As Morris would have it, the crux of the issue relates to a form of cognitive impediment, that prevented Nicodemus from perceiving God in Christ. Now to state that Nicodemus was cognitively impeded such as to render him unable to perceive God in Christ, is not to imply that he was intellectually deficient or otherwise lacking in the process of ratiocination; for he evidently utilized "a deductively valid argument concerning the status of Jesus." Furthermore, neither was Nicodemus, in his condition of Christian unbelief, an isolated case of failing to derive truth concerning the status of Jesus;[26] for Morris demonstrates that individuals abiding in the same condition of unbelief as Nicodemus, have in similar fashion, failed by the use of logical argument to arrive at the conclusion that Jesus Christ is God Incarnate.[27]

Moreover, it is not the case that a Christian believer of the orthodox stripe is able to marshal either a deductive argument or an argument from individual Christian experience and in conjunction with the experience of other Christians, to conclude

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[25] The meeting between Nicodemus and Jesus is significant for the following reasons. First, subsequent to the words of Jesus on "the last day, that great *day* of the feast," (John 7:37), when many of those present took Him for "the Prophet" or "the Christ." (John 7: 40,41), upon returning to the Pharisees, the officers reported that "no man ever spoke like this man." (John 7:46.) "Then the Pharisees answered them, "Are you also deceived? Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed in Him? But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed." (John 7:47). It is at this moment that Nicodemus (the same person who spoke to Jesus in John Chapter Three) wisely intervenes: "Nicodemus (he who came to Jesus by night, being one of them) said to them, "Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing?" (John 7:50-51.) Second, the scripture reveals that Nicodemus assisted Joseph of Arimathea in preparing the body of Jesus for burial according to Jewish custom (7:38-42). Additionally, Nicodemus brought with him "a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds" (John 7:39), thereby demonstrating not only that he was a wealthy man, but also the honor in which he held Jesus and also the respect that he would now accord Him following His death.

[26] Morris, 198.

[27] Morris, 198.

"that Jesus is God the son, the Second Person of the divine Trinity."[28] Indeed Morris argues that while orthodox Christian belief is not arrived at via sound deductive or non-deductive means, such belief once produced is entirely reasonable:

> It does not seem that the reasonableness of incarnational belief is provided by deductive arguments from premises it is independently reasonable to believe, nor does it seem to be provided by any single sort of nondeductive argument consciously entertained or used by believers. Could it then be a simple function of direct experience? Could it be the case that traditional Christians have just *seen* Jesus to be God Incarnate, and that their belief in his deity, thus generated, is reasonable precisely in light of that experience?[29]

But what kind of direct experience could produce within the theologically orthodox type of Christian, the rational belief that Jesus Christ is God the Son? Furthermore, what are we to make of the cognitive impediment that would seem to prevent Nicodemus from achieving this sort of experience and the generation of just this sort of Christological belief? Also we should ask: is it possible that empirically based sensory data reports of the sort related by Nicodemus in regard to Jesus are not sufficiently fecund to generate the required Incarnational belief consistent with orthodox conservative Christian faith? Apparently so, especially if we are to take into account the cognitive impediment that afflicted Nicodemus. Thus on the one hand there appears to be a sort of cognitive impairment that prevents the individual from perceiving God in Christ, while on the other hand there are Christians throughout history, leading up to and including our current generation of believers whose personal testimony of Christian faith is such that God is in Christ, not only by faith but in fact.

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[28] Morris, 198.

[29] Morris, 198. Emphasis in the original.

Fortunately there exists a tradition in the literature that seeks to address this issue:

> Suppose that, as many theologians have suggested through the centuries, there is an innate human capacity, when properly functioning, allows us to see God, or to put it another way, to recognize God when we see him, in the starry heavens above or in the moral law within. If there is such a capacity to recognize God both in his products and where he is distinctively present and active, and if he is personally present and active in the life of Jesus of Nazareth as the ultimate subject of that life, then we would expect him to be recognized in his incarnate form by those whose relevant capacity for seeing is sufficiently unimpeded.[30]

If I understand correctly, Morris is asking us to consider the proposition that all humans have, as he refers to it, an innate capacity that permits us to perceive God in His magnificent creation,[31] perhaps in the restraining work of conscience when tempted to violate His Law and ultimately in the life of Jesus Christ as God Incarnate. John Calvin is a prominent voice among the many theologians who have opined on this innate

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[30] Morris, 201.

[31] See for example, Psalm 19; Romans 1:18-20. Concerning Romans 1:18-20, see "Calvin's Commentaries: Romans 1," *Bible Hub*, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/calvin/romans/1.htm. For an example of verse 19, Calvin states that "Inasmuch as what may be known of God, etc. He thus designates what it behoves us to know of God; and he means all that appertains to the setting forth of the glory of the Lord, or, which is the same thing, whatever ought to move and excite us to glorify God. And by this expression he intimates, that God in his greatness can by no means be fully comprehended by us, and that there are certain limits within which men ought to confine themselves, inasmuch as God accommodates to our small capacities what he testifies of himself." Further of verse 20, Calvin observes that "Since his invisible things . . . God is in himself invisible; but as his majesty shines forth in his works and in his creatures everywhere, men ought in these to acknowledge him, for they clearly set forth their Maker…"

human capacity. Indeed Alvin Plantinga recruits Calvin and Thomas Aquinas for the construction of his "Aquinas/Calvin Model" in relation to first, theistic belief and then in extended form "to a model in which specific and full-blooded Christian belief has warrant."[32]

Plantinga observes that Calvin agrees with Aquinas[33] with respect to the innate human faculty:

> In the opening chapters of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin concurs: there is a sort of natural knowledge of God. Calvin expands this theme into a suggestion as to the way in which beliefs about God can have warrant; he has a suggestion as to the nature of the faculty or mechanism whereby we acquire true beliefs about God. His idea here can also be seen as a development of what the apostle Paul says in Romans 1.[34]

For Plantinga, warrant is broadly speaking that complex quality or quantity which serves to epistemize true belief, to render it an article of knowledge as well as faith.[35]

Plantinga observes that "Calvin's basic claim is that there is a sort of instinct, a natural human tendency, a disposition, a nisus to form beliefs about God under a variety of conditions and in a variety of situations."[36] Thus in accordance with Morris, Plantinga is aware of a theological tradition that seeks to

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[32] Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 168.

[33] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*, I, q. 2, a. 1, ad 1, "To know in a general and confused way that God exists is implanted in us by nature." Cited in Plantinga, "Warranted Christian Belief," 170.

[34] Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 170-171.

[35] Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate*, vi. See also Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, Preface, where Plantinga commences by asking, "What is knowledge? More exactly, What is it that distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief? What is this elusive quality or quantity enough of which, together with truth and belief, is sufficient for knowledge? Call that quantity, whatever it is 'warrant' ..."

[36] Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 171.

address this human capacity, faculty or mechanism. Furthermore, this faculty, even when impeded – perhaps severely so – enables one to perceive the perfections of God, viz., "His invisible *attributes* . . . *even* His eternal power and Godhead"[37] manifestly demonstrated by the created world. Moreover, notes Plantinga, Calvin makes the claim that this human faculty is also shown to function, even when severely impeded so that the "many rejections of God, or attempts to do without him, are really further testimonies to this natural inclination."[38]

Therefore it would appear that this innate faculty (as yet unnamed) is possessed by every individual human being and furthermore, it is able to function, albeit in a restricted manner, under various conditions and situations in order that the individual might accurately perceive certain non-communicable attributes of God; for example His eternal power and godhead, thereby demonstrating to the individual in question, His existence and within the context of Romans Chapter One, the Creator creature distinction.[39]

In following Calvin with respect to this human faculty, Plantinga states:

> Separated from the extravagance of expression that sometimes characterizes Calvin, the basic idea, I think, is that there is a kind of faculty or a cognitive mechanism, what Calvin calls a *sensus divinitatis* or sense of divinity, which in a wide variety of circumstances produces in us beliefs about

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[37] Romans 1:20, in Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 171. Emphasis in original. See Ibid., 171, n. 5., where Plantinga observes that in Romans 1:19 "Paul seems to be speaking of all of us human beings..."

[38] Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 172.

[39] That is to say, an ontological impasse obtains between the immutable Triune Creator God and His finite mutable human creation. However God continues to provide evidence with respect to His eternal power and essential (Triune) nature via the created world, so that His human creation might be drawn to acknowledge and worship Him as the Creator of all things.

> God. These circumstances, we might say, trigger the disposition to form the beliefs in question; they form the occasion on which those beliefs arise. Under these circumstances, we develop or form theistic beliefs – or, rather, these beliefs are formed in us; in the typical case we don't consciously choose to have those beliefs.[40]

In a previous quote Morris referred to an innate human capacity that when properly functioning permits the individual to recognize God *in the starry heavens above or in the moral law within* and ultimately to recognize God in Jesus Christ *by those whose relevant capacity for seeing is sufficiently unimpeded.*

We have seen that Plantinga accords with Morris concerning the proposition that every individual human possesses a kind of innate capacity/faculty so that even though impeded, it retains some functionality insofar as the individual in question can discern something about the nature/essence of God and His eternal power. However, is this faculty in its currently impeded condition sufficient to permit the individual in question to recognize/perceive God in Christ and thus result in a genuine Christian confession of faith?

In short, it would seem that something more is required in order to enable the individual who perceives something of the glory of God in His creation, to transition to the more specific realization and subsequent Christian belief that Jesus Christ is Lord. Indeed Morris articulates the issue in summary fashion:

> If there is an innate capacity which, when properly functioning, allows us to recognize God when we see him, then if Jesus is God Incarnate, it is clear that there are widespread and deeply rooted impediments to this capacity's functioning. It seems likely, in light of what has just been adumbrated, that a reasonable belief that Jesus is God Incarnate will arise and flourish only with the removal of some of these impediments from the life of a person.[41]

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[40] Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 172.

[41] Morris, 203.

Therefore as Morris would have it, the deeply rooted impediments that severely inhibit the innate human capacity referred to by Calvin as the *sensus divinitatis*, prevent the formation in the one thus afflicted from forming the perfectly reasonable (rational) belief that Jesus Christ is God Incarnate. It would seem that an extramundane solution is not only required, but that it is a necessary requirement in every individual thus afflicted. This is why the case of Nicodemus is memorialized in John Chapter Three verses one and two, and furthermore, why it is particularly relevant to our current project:

> Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no man can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."

Nicodemus fell short with respect to his conclusion about Jesus, and that despite his rigorous theological and philosophical education, his firsthand observation and/or eyewitness testimony provided by those who witnessed the miraculous signs performed by Jesus – all of which culminated in his use of a valid deductive logical argument (John 3:2). But how does one account for the latter's response to the former? Morris suggests that Jesus's response is far from the "glaring non sequitur it can initially appear…" Indeed, the Lord's response "is a profound indication of the truth, or rather of the only way to come to the truth about who he Jesus) is."[42]

`Morris refers to this response as "the key;" for it denotes the extramundane remedy to the universal anthropological condition that impedes/impairs the correct functioning of the innate cognitive ability that permits one to ultimately perceive God in Christ and thereby to form the rational Christological belief that Jesus Christ is Lord.

[42] Morris, 203.

Although these words of Jesus are addressed to Nicodemus, they apply to all who abide in a state of Christian unbelief; thus "Jesus answered him [Nicodemus], 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God," (John 3:3). These words of Jesus take us to the threshold of what "we might call a Spirit Epistemology."[43]

## Conclusion

In this paper I have presented two separate and yet related foundational themes which are grounded on Scripture. First, the doctrine of the Incarnation, which according to its historic and theologically orthodox expression, insists that in addition to His essential divine nature, the eternally begotten Son of God took upon Himself a perfect human nature. This doctrine, otherwise known as the two natures view of Jesus Christ, is enshrined and set forth in the conciliar statement of Chalcedon of A.D. 451. Second, every individual has an innate faculty known as the *sensus divinitatis*. This faculty, although impeded and perhaps even severely so, can when restored to proper functionality, lead to the theologically orthodox Christian belief that Jesus Christ is Lord.

If it be granted that the Son of God became incarnate to provide a divinely mandated extramundane solution for the catastrophic results of the aboriginal fall, and that furthermore one of the results of that fall included a compromised/impeded *sensus divinitatis* for Adam's posterity of the sort summarized in this paper, then it seems apparent that a relationship obtains between the Incarnation and the possibility for the *sensus divinitatis* on a per individual basis to be restored to proper functionality, thereby leading to the Christian claim that Jesus Christ is Lord. Moreover if the Christian claim is predicated on a properly functioning (restored) *sensus divinitatis*, it seems evident that Christian belief is rational and therefore warranted. On the understanding that Christian belief is thus warranted, the question then arises, by what means or by what mechanism is it warrant-

[43] Morris, 204.

ed? Put another way, how or by what means can individual Christian belief be counted as knowledge? The answer to this question is found in Scripture itself. Scripture memorializes the case of Nicodemus as an exemplar for our serious consideration and instruction with respect to the impediment(s) that encumber the *sensus divinitatis*, thus precluding personal Christian belief.

Far from representing a glaring *non sequitur*, the words of Jesus, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God," do in fact denote the key to the extramundane solution to this widely occurring and individually present issue. This is an issue of first rate importance; for unless one is born again via the exclusive divine agency of the Holy Spirit, personal Christian faith of the sort summarized in this paper remains unattainable and therefore the individual remains in an unregenerate state and subject to the just condemnation of God. The words of the Lord Jesus to Nicodemus are not only explicit and perspicuous; but crucially, they constitute a univocal call to those who desire to not only know about Jesus, but to believe on Him unto salvation:

> "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. "He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:10-18).

# 5. Signs, Wonders, and Justified Belief in Miracles

*Don McIntosh*[1]

ABSTRACT: Objections to the veracity of miracle claims typically run something like this: even if we concede that miracles are logically *possible*, an event falling outside the bounds of the laws of nature (a miracle) is so outlandishly improbable, and human testimony supporting it so unreliable, that no amount of testimonial evidence is ever sufficient to justify a miracle claim. Given our knowledge of the laws of nature – fixed, observable regularities of the physical world – along with our understanding of probability and our familiarity with the vagaries of human nature, the only rational response to miracle claims is skepticism. Against that reasoning I will argue first that in light of the problem of induction and the incompleteness of our knowledge of nature's perceived regularities, there are no grounds for believing in natural laws that are universally binding. For that reason, I will argue further, miracles are best understood as "signs" of divine activity that defy the expectations borne of human experience rather than events that run against, around or beyond the laws of nature (whatever those are supposed to be). Finally I will briefly describe three categories of miracles which do not invoke the testimony of witnesses and in which belief appears justified: (1) miracles of cosmology; (2) miracles of prophecy; and (3) miracles of experience.

MIRACLES HAVE FALLEN on hard times. For most of the history of the Christian church (or at least for its first 1,500 years or so), accounts of miracles featured prominently, not only in doctrine and practical exhortation, but in natural theology and apologetics. Numerous apologists – from Justin Martyr to

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Augustine to Thomas Aquinas – contended that the biblical narratives provided good evidence of God acting miraculously in the history of Israel and the church. Even after the Scientific Revolution and the Renaissance, natural philosophers of the seventeenth century like Isaac Newton and Robert Boyle vigorously defended miracle claims. As Harrison observes, "Leading scientists of this era, almost without exception, had a dual commitment on the one hand to a science premised upon a mechanical universe governed by immutable laws of nature and on the other to an omnipotent God who intervened in the natural order from time to time, breaching these 'laws' of nature."[2]

That all began to change, however, with the further development of a naturalistic-scientific epistemology during the eighteenth century Enlightenment, and with the influential anti-miraculous arguments of David Hume in particular. Since the Enlightenment and yet more so into the twenty-first century, serious talk of miracles – at least here in an increasingly scientifically-minded West – has become muffled, if not muted. "From our contemporary perspective we are inclined to view many such beliefs, including the belief in miracles, as inimical to the scientific outlook."[3] These days many if not most scientifically educated observers, including not a few professing Christians, maintain that belief in miracles simply cannot be justified.

Largely inspired by Hume, objections to the veracity of miracle claims typically run something like this: even if we concede that miracles are logically *possible*, an event falling outside the bounds of the laws of nature (i.e. a miracle) is so outlandishly improbable, and human testimony supporting it so unreliable, that no amount of testimonial evidence is ever sufficient to justify a miracle claim. Given our knowledge of the laws of nature – fixed, observable regularities of the physical world – along with our understanding of probability and our

[2] Peter Harrison, "Newtonian Science, Miracles, and the Laws of Nature," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (October 1995). p. 531.

[3] Harrison, p. 552.

familiarity with the vagaries of human nature, the only rational response to miracle claims is skepticism.

Against that line of reasoning I will argue first that in light of the problem of induction and the incompleteness of our knowledge of nature's perceived regularities, there are no grounds for holding those perceived regularities to be laws that are universally binding. For that reason, I will argue further, miracles are best understood as "signs" of divine activity that defy the expectations borne of human experience rather than events that run against, around or beyond the laws of nature (whatever those are supposed to be). Finally I will briefly describe three categories of miracles which do not invoke the testimony of witnesses and in which belief appears justified: (1) miracles of cosmology; (2) miracles of prophecy; and (3) miracles of experience.

### *Miracles and laws of nature*

So what is a *miracle?* Though there are likely dozens of distinct definitions available, I would place them in two basic categories: (1) miracles as violations (contraventions, interruptions, breaches, suspensions, etc.) of the laws of nature; and (2) miracles as "signs and wonders" that demonstrate the power of God to alter the course of human affairs. The first definition, more commonly accepted among today's science-minded intellectuals, has it that the laws of nature are physical regularities so often and consistently confirmed that they should be considered absolute, exceptionless laws. Such a definition is problematic, if not incoherent. As Harrison notes, "[I]f there are miracles, this tends to destroy the very concept of a law of nature."[4]

Some philosophers of a naturalist persuasion go further to suggest that miracles should be defined so that a miracle not only contravenes our current scientific understanding of how nature operates but also precludes any conceivably rational naturalistic explanation for the evidence at hand: "Hence," says Keith Parsons, "a miracle must be partially defined as an event

[4] Harrison, p. 532.

that is in principle incapable of receiving a naturalistic explanation."[5] Convenient as such a burden of proof might be for naturalist philosophers, it's strictly impossible to meet because there is no conceivable form of evidence that could not be interpreted in naturalistic terms.

Let's take the paradigm example of the healing of an amputee. Imagine the following: An evangelist at a tent crusade prays for an amputee who is then healed on the spot. That is, a fully functional arm complete with fingers, muscles, nerves and all the rest emerges instantaneously from what just a moment before was a stump. In the audience is a well-known but skeptical psychologist, there to study the effects of religious faith on human perceptions of reality. Later asked about what he saw, the psychologist says it was odd, but not a miracle – probably just an elaborate magic trick. He would be convinced it was a miracle, he says, only if it were repeated under carefully controlled and monitored conditions and the event recorded. Arrangements are then made for the evangelist to pray for another amputee under the required conditions and with the psychologist present. Again the amputee is healed.

Fascinated and even bewildered, but still skeptical of miracles and suspecting a conspiracy of some kind, the psychologist then requests another experiment, but this time he gets to pick the venue, the monitoring authorities, and the equipment used to record the event. Another amputee is found willing to participate, the evangelist again prays for him, and yet again the amputee is healed. This time the psychologist, flush with excitement, rushes off to draft a new paper and announce a breathtaking discovery: given the right psychological state and socio-religious environment, humans can naturally regenerate their own limbs, similar to the way that garden-variety lizards regenerate their tails. Even more impressed with the creative-adaptive

[5] Keith Parsons, "Miracles, Confirmation, and Apologetics," Chapter Four from *Science, Confirmation, and the Theistic Hypothesis*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Queen's University at Kingston (1986). https://infidels.org/library modern/science-confirmation-and-the-theistic-hypothesis/.

power of natural selection than before (and no less skeptical of miracles), he encourages further scientific research.

The moral of the story? If a putative miracle cannot be replicated, skeptics need not trust human testimony affirming it, nor even their own senses; but if it *can* be replicated, they may safely regard it a natural occurrence rather than a miracle. Of course, it's true of *all* events that either they can be replicated or they cannot. This sort of "heads I win, tails you lose" approach to the question of miracles was first popularized by the great eighteenth century philosopher David Hume. Much like modern skeptics, Hume framed miracles in terms of their incompatibility with the laws of nature, and thus their improbability, yet he carefully avoided the potential veracity of extraordinary experience (what statisticians sometimes call the "problem of the single case"). "A miracle," said Hume, "is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be."[6]

Not surprisingly, Hume's argument has been subjected to extensive scrutiny. According to John Loftus, there are four main objections to Hume's argument: (1) Hume's argument is circular; (2) Hume's definition of a miracle makes miracles impossible; (3) Hume's argument would force us to reject all miracles *a priori*, prior to examining the evidence; and (4) Hume fails to understand Bayes' Theorem.[7] An atheist and skeptic of miracles himself, Loftus maintains that these objections all fail. I would disagree with him, particularly on (1) and (3).

For example, Hume says "…it is a miracle, that a dead man should come to life; because that has never been observed in any age or country." Then he says, "There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise

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[6] David Hume, "Of Miracles," in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (New York: Oxford, 2007), p. 83.

[7] John W. Loftus, "Questioning Miracles: In Defense of David Hume," *The Secular Web* (2024), https://infidels.org/library/modern/questioning-miracles/.

the event would not merit that appellation."[8] We know the experience against miracles is uniform, that is, because miracles have never been observed, and we know miracles have never been observed because the experience against them is uniform. That certainly *sounds* like circular reasoning. And by essentially *defining* miracles as events that run counter to uniform experience and (therefore) have never been observed, Hume does seem to dismiss all testimony of miracles on *a priori* grounds.

Most scholars would agree, however, that Hume is not easy to interpret. "Hume's argument against believing the testimony of miracles," says Rockwood, "is far and away the most influential treatment of the topic. Yet, for all the attention it receives, there is not yet a consensus on how to interpret Hume's argument."[9] So it's not clear whether Hume really does reject all miracle claims out of hand. One plausible interpretation has it that Hume's argument is basically an instance of *modus ponens*: there is first an argument for the conditional statement that if the evidence for a miracle never actually outweighs the evidence for the laws of nature holding true, then the miracle claim should be rejected – followed by an argument for the truth of the antecedent.[10] On that view, since he holds out the bare possibility of evidence sufficient to justify a miracle claim, Hume does not explicitly argue in circles or reject miracle claims *a priori*.

In any case, because the ground covering interpretations of Hume on the above points is already so well trod I will take a (somewhat) less traveled route, or at least one left unmentioned by Loftus. Instead I will propose that due to the notorious problem of induction, neither Hume nor anyone else can say exactly what the laws of nature are. More to the point, no one can explain exactly why certain perceived patterns of regularity in the physical world should be considered *laws* at all, and not simply descriptive generalizations borne of human experience. And

[8] Hume, p. 83.

[9] Nathan Rockwood, "Two (Failed) Versions of Hume's Argument Against Miracles," *Faith & Philosophy*, 39, 4 (2022), p. 573.

[10] Rockwood, p. 577.

given that there is no method available to verify the exceptionless regularity of the laws of nature, there is nothing to prevent rational acceptance of miracle claims on the testimony of evidently reliable witnesses.

### *The failure of inductivism*

Most atheists and skeptics follow a line similar to Hume. The basic idea is to call attention to our knowledge of the "firm and unalterable" laws of nature and then play that against the testimony of often biased, gullible, or dishonest humans who claim to have witnessed a miracle in violation of those laws. Now it's true that what we have come to regard as laws of nature are *understood* as firm and unalterable, and for good reason. Without accepting these highly distilled, mathematically precise theoretical abstractions as uniform, science cannot make much sense of the world, let alone make any further progress. But of course our scientific knowledge of the laws of nature, like our knowledge of most anything else, is ultimately derived from human experience.

The larger question, then, is whether human experience is *itself* "firm and unalterable" – that is, before scientists design controlled experiments, isolate variables, select data for analysis, disregard statistical outliers, file away unwelcome findings,[11] interpret results (with a built-in confirmation bias[12]), and otherwise squeeze out every last one of the very sorts of considerations that might lead us to question the firmness and inalterability of natural laws in the first place. On the face of it the answer to that question would be no, as the wide range of not only

[11] This is a recurring problem in scientific research. See Donald Kennedy, "The Old File-Drawer Problem," *Science*, July 23,2004, https://www.science.org/doi/full/10.1126/science.305.5683.451

[12] For research into the problem of confirmation bias in science, see Raymond S. Nickerson, "Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises," *Review of General Psychology*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1998.

conflicting human testimony but even presently conflicting scientific theories attests.[13]

Underlying my own skepticism of natural laws is an understanding that any appeal to past experience to justify belief in a law of nature runs up against the problem of induction. The classic example of the problem is the black swan. For centuries the inductive inference that all swans are white seemed perfectly justified for European observers – at least until 1697, when the Dutch explorer de Vlamingh discovered black swans in Australia. As Dinesh D'Souza remarks, "What was previously considered a scientifically inviolable law had to be retired."[14] Ironically, it was none other than David Hume who explained why there is no straightforwardly logical way to justify an inductive inference. Consider Hume's remarks in the *Enquiry* alluding to Newton's laws of motion and gravitation:

> The mind can't possibly find the effect in the supposed cause, however carefully we examine it, for the effect is totally different from the cause and therefore can never be discovered in it. Motion in the second billiard ball is a distinct event from motion in the first, and nothing in the first ball's motion even hints at motion in the second. A stone raised into the air and left without any support immediately falls; but if we consider this situation *a priori* we shall find nothing that generates the idea of a downward rather than upward or some other motion in the stone.[15]

"That's why," Hume concludes a bit later, "no reasonable scientist has ever claimed to know the ultimate cause of any natural

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[13] It's worth noting here that two of the best-established scientific theories of our time – general relativity and quantum mechanics – are known to be fundamentally at odds with one another. For a recent overview of the problem, see Joseph Aziz & Richard Howl, "Classical theories of gravity produce entanglement," *Nature,* 646 (2025), 813-817.

[14] Dinesh D'Souza, *What's So Great About Christianity* (Regnery: Washington, D.C., 2007), p. 184.

[15] Hume, p. 21.

process" – yet without knowing the ultimate causes of natural processes, there remains little justification for believing perceived regularities in the physical world to be "inviolable laws."[16] (He could have added that this is why scientific theories are always falsifiable in principle – and indeed, as the history of science makes clear, often falsified.[17]) Belief in cause and effect, i.e. functional laws of nature, as it happens is not derived from reason but from perceptual habit. D'Souza thus maintains that whereas Hume does not deny that there may be certain laws of nature operating in the universe, he does deny "that we know what those laws are."[18]

For skeptics like David Kyle Johnson, it's not actually important to know what those laws are, only that they govern "the way the universe works": "Whether you think that such laws exist as abstract objects, are true counterfactual propositions, or simply regularities that perpetuate throughout the universe, these laws of nature have been in effect since the beginning of the universe, and our ignorance of them does not cause them to cease to exist."[19] The problem of induction, however, is not the lack of an agreed-upon *metaphysical definition* for the laws of nature, but of any rational basis for believing those laws (no matter how defined) to operate uniformly, always and everywhere. Ironically, Johnson can maintain that "justified belief in miracles is impossible" only if he can first justify belief in induction – which appears itself impossible.

The problem is that inductive reasoning is circular. To justify induction requires a belief that the laws of nature operate uniformly; but at the same time to justify a belief that the laws of

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[16] Note on language: many scientists nowadays tend to shy away from talk of "cause and effect" when describing laws of nature, preferring the idea that one state is a *function* of a prior state.

[17] For a list of failed scientific theories and why they so often fail, see Larry Laudan, "A Confutation of Convergent Realism", *Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 48, No. 1, (Mar. 1981), 19–49.

[18] D'Souza, p. 186.

[19] David Kyle Johnson, "Why Justified Belief in Miracles is Impossible," *Science, Religion & Culture,* 2, 2 (2015), p. 65.

nature operate uniformly requires induction. Samir Okasha thus observes "that our inductive inferences rest on the UN [uniformity of nature] assumption. But we cannot prove UN is true, and we cannot produce empirical evidence for its truth without begging the question."[20] This might come as a shock to those trained in science rather than philosophy. Nonetheless, as Okasha notes further, "most people agree that it is very hard to see how there could be a satisfactory justification of induction."[21]

From all indications Hume was right about induction; and because he was right about induction, he was wrong about miracles. After all, Hume's argument against miracles is nothing if not an *inductive* argument. Whatever miracles may be, then, they are not contraventions of "inviolable laws of nature," because – as Hume demonstrated to the satisfaction of almost all philosophers – we have no reason for believing laws of nature to be inviolable in the first place. The consequent lack of a rational foundation for believing the laws of nature to be universally binding, i.e. prescriptive rather than descriptive, again leaves us with scant justification for maintaining that miracle claims should be considered universally unworthy of belief.

For objectivity's sake I should mention that this all comes with a caveat. While the problem of induction is an important part of my argument, the practical implications of that problem should not be overstated. Even if technically impossible to justify, a working confidence in induction appears eminently sensible, arising as it does from a universal human intuition, and even necessary in order to function in the world (let alone practice science). Implicit trust in induction is much like a properly basic belief in that respect. My point is simply that induction is not strictly *rational,* and therefore provides no reason to think there are not and have never been exceptions to even the most well-established inductively derived generalizations – *miracles*, in other words.

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[20] Samir Okasha, *Philosophy of Science: A Very Short Introduction* (New York, Oxford, 2002), p. 27.

[21] Okasha, p. 28.

### *Signs, wonders and miracles*

But if not a violation of the laws of nature, what exactly *is* a miracle? Scripture commonly denotes miracles as "signs and wonders." The signs given by Moses to Pharaoh in Exodus, for example, and the seven signs of Jesus' divinity in John's Gospel, are miracles in that they point to God's power and faithfulness to bless, deliver, heal and restore his people. These are marvelous indicators of God's activity, usually in the context of a human need or crisis. By this definition a miracle is humanly and spiritually/religiously significant, and not simply an antecedently improbable occurrence.

Consider the catastrophe of September 11, 2001. The day before 9-11, the probability of the destruction of the World Trade Center by foreign terrorists using domestic airliners as missiles must have been close to zero for anyone other than the terrorists themselves. Nassim Taleb remarks that given our nation's military readiness at the time, "had the risk been reasonably *conceivable* on September 10, it would not have happened."[22] Thus it was an extremely low-probability event (and thus extremely low-probability events sometimes occur). But there is no reason to think it was a *miracle* per se. Now suppose that Billy Graham or some other religious leader had prophesied on New Year's Day of 2001 that unless America turned from its crass materialism back to God, its mightiest symbols of wealth would be destroyed within a year's time as a sign of the Lord's displeasure. In that case the 9-11 events would seem to have miraculous implications.

According to Denis Alexander, what marks out a miracle is the "historical-religious context" in which it occurs – "an understanding in stark contrast to Hume's concept of miracles as isolated anomalies which violate the laws of nature."[23] Some of the best examples of signs and wonders, given their conspicu-

[22] Nassim Nicholas Taleb, "The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable," *New York Times*, April 22, 2007.

[23] Denis. R. Alexander, "Miracles and Science," *Faraday Institute for Science and Religion* (2017), p. 3.

ously religious context, would be the many accounts of miracles preserved in the biblical documents. Beyond the original miracle – the creation of the universe and life within it – signs and wonders in the Old Testament would include such marvels as the revelation of God through a burning bush ("this great sight," as Moses called it); the plagues on Egypt, followed by the Exodus; the collapse of the walls of Jericho; fire consuming Elijah's offering on Mount Carmel; the healing of the waters of Jericho; and numerous prophecies, now evidently fulfilled, concerning the coming of Messiah and the restoration of the Jewish people to their ancient homeland.

New Testament miracles include the virgin birth of Christ; Jesus calming the storm at the Sea of Galilee; Jesus (and Peter, briefly) walking on water; numerous healings and exorcisms at the hands of Jesus; the raising of Lazarus; the feeding of the five thousand (and the four thousand); Peter's great catch of fish; the resurrection of Jesus; and various miracles included among the Acts of the apostles. Beyond the biblical writings are accounts of widely attested miracles of healing and exorcism in the subsequent history of the church, as reported by Justin Martyr, Origen, Tertullian, and Irenaeus. Kelhoffer observes that Justin in particular took pains to document a number of contemporary miracles, especially exorcisms, to which he appealed as evidence of divine power to the Roman Prefect Urbicus, who had apparently witnessed the same: "Thus the performing of exorcisms is regarded as a regular activity of certain believers in Rome."[24]

That miracles would continue after the advent of the apostles should not be surprising to Christian believers. "These signs," said Jesus to his disciples, "will follow those who believe"– referring to casting out demons, speaking in tongues, healing the sick, and odd phenomena like handling deadly snakes or drinking poison without suffering harm (Mark 16:17-18). Elsewhere Jesus said of those who believe in him, "the works that I do, he will do also" (John 14:12). So it is that miracle testimony

[24] James A. Kelfhoffer, *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies*, 42 (2001), p. 18.

remains commonplace even in today's scientifically enlightened society. According to Craig Keener, eyewitness reports of miracles number in the many millions:

> A 2006 Pew Forum survey of just ten countries on four continents suggests that about two hundred million Pentecostal and Protestant charismatics in those countries alone claim to have witnessed divine healing. Perhaps more surprisingly, some 39 percent of Christians in those countries who are *not* Pentecostals or Protestant charismatics also claim to have witnessed divine healing.[25]

Many miracle claimants are highly credible witnesses, a substantial number of them medical doctors – people with considerable scientific knowledge who are specially trained to find *natural* causes for physical anomalies and abnormalities. "Indeed," adds Keener, "another survey suggests that nearly three-quarters of doctors in the United States believe in miracles. More importantly, over half…noted that they *witnessed* what they considered to be miracles."[26] The fact that so many highly educated observers have reported witnessing miracles immediately puts the lie to Hume's supporting premise that belief in miracles is the product of ignorant and superstitious minds.

Readers may recall that Hume analyzed the question of miracles as a matter of competing probabilities, where "more miraculous" means less probable: "That no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish."[27] Because the laws of nature are firm and unalterable, says Hume, the probability that the people claiming a miracle are lying or deceived will always be

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[25] Craig S. Keener, *Miracles Today: The Supernatural Work of God in the Modern World* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2021). p. 25.

[26] Keener, p. 26.

[27] Hume, p. 83.

greater than the probability that a miracle actually occurred.[28] But in light of the sheer number of credible miracle accounts documented to date, along with the problem of induction and a long history of failed scientific theories, the argument should be stood on its head. It appears far more likely, that is, that of the millions of miracle accounts given by credible witnesses, at least a few of them are true, than that the so-called laws of nature – as the latest scientific formulations have led us to understand them, that is – have not once failed to hold.

This ambiguity of probability could well be by God's design, in that answering the question of miracles would have to be somewhat subjective, and therefore somewhat a matter of faith. Belief in miracles would be justified, then, to the extent that the miracle appears – at least to a particular observer given his background knowledge and prior beliefs – to be the best explanation for the facts in evidence. In the following sections we will examine three categories of what I would consider miracles in which belief is justified, where "justified" means something like "reasonable to accept given the relevant evidence and the alternative explanations available." Moreover, they make no appeal to the miracle testimony of witnesses whom skeptics distrust. The first has to do with cosmology, specifically the origin of the universe and of life within it.

### *Miracles of cosmology*

Despite all that's been said about inductive inferences, some skeptics and critics may want to bite the bullet and assert that the physical regularities of nature are so firmly established that they should be considered absolute laws – in which case a mira-

[28] The standard procedure for some skeptical philosophers is to set the problem in the context of Bayes' theorem, where the prior probability of the laws of nature is presumed to be extremely high, and therefore the prior probability of a miracle extremely low; and then see if the evidence can somehow boost the probability for a miracle high enough to confirm it despite the odds. Even then good arguments can be made for miracles from a Bayesian perspective. See for example John Depoe, "Vindicating a Bayesian Approach to Confirming Miracles," *Philosophia Christi*, 10, 1 (2008), 229-238.

cle would indeed be a contravention of otherwise "inviolable laws of nature." Even in that case, though, I think a good argument for at least a couple of *bona fide* miracles could still be made, the first of which might run as follows:

1. The first law of thermodynamics states that energy cannot be created.
2. The first law of thermodynamics is a law of nature.
3. If the universe originated from nothing, the energy in the universe was created. (given)
4. The universe originated from nothing.[29]
5. The energy in the universe was created. (from 3 & 4)
6. The origin of the universe contravened the first law of thermodynamics. (from 1 & 5)
7. A miracle is an event that contravenes a law of nature. (definition)
8. The origin of the universe was a miracle (from 2, 6 & 7).

Granted, it may be possible to evade the miraculous implications of a big bang cosmology (assuming the big bang is an accurate cosmological model). Mark Vuletic for example points out that on general relativity the origin of the universe means the origin not only of space but of time: "That means that on this view there can be no such thing as a time $t<0$. But if there is no time $t<0$ when there was no energy, then the presence of any amount of energy at $t=0$ cannot violate the first law of thermodynamics."[30] In other words, while the first law forbids the creation of energy within an existing (closed) system, there's

[29] It turns out that "nothing" means different things to different people. For physicists like Lawrence Krauss, it means something like an unstable "quantum vacuum" that produces random energy fluctuations, one of which birthed our universe. In that case the origin of the quantum vacuum would violate the laws of thermodynamics.

[30] Mark Vuletic, "Did the Big Bang Violate the First Law of Thermodynamics?", *Defender's Guide to Science and Creationism*, February 2018. https://ninewells.vuletic.com/science/defenders-guide-to-science-and-creationism/big-bang-first-law-of-thermodynamics/.

no law saying that a closed system chock full of energy cannot *itself* be created – or at least "come into being." Thus it seems that even if the universe is a closed system, a possibility remains for a thermodynamically non-miraculous origin of the universe. There's a more straightforwardly logical way to look at it, though, which involves no special pleading. Even if time and energy were created *together*, it still follows that energy was created. The first law says energy cannot be created. Therefore the origin of the universe violated the first law.

Following Stephen Hawking and others, Vuletic appeals alternatively to the "zero-energy universe hypothesis," that the negative energy of gravitation exactly equals the energy put into the universe at the big bang, so that they cancel out one another and there is no net increase of energy. This bit of speculation seems to me another instance of special pleading rather than a straightforwardly rational explanation. We don't actually know that negative and positive energies in the universe precisely cancel one another; we only know that they *must* if we are to avoid a miracle according to the laws of thermodynamics. Besides being largely speculative, problems with the theory include an inability in principle to measure total energy in a universe composed largely of dark matter/energy; and the difficulty of calculating negative gravitational energy.[31]

In short, a non-miraculous origin of the universe seems highly improbable, but at the same time not entirely impossible – which makes it ironically much like a miracle in that respect. But even if they were somehow scientifically plausible in principle such objections would still come at a price. For if the natural order is really all there is, as naturalism entails, and yet had a beginning, as general relativity entails, it must have all emerged from *nothing whatsoever*.[32] At the same time if the natural uni-

[31] Giedrius Pakalka & Alius Noreika, "What Is [the] Zero-Energy Universe Hypothesis?", *Technology.Org*, https://www.technology.org/how-and-why/zero-energy-universe-hypothesis/.

[32] Given that the natural order had a beginning, it could not have come from an existing singularity, or from vacuum energy, or quantum foam, or a multiverse, or anything else, because on naturalism these would all have to be parts of the natural order itself.

verse itself emerged from nothing whatsoever, this would arguably constitute a miracle far greater than a temporary violation of the laws of physics, in that it would have no cause and no explanation – scientific or otherwise – not even in principle.[33] Here we would do well to recall Hume's rational dictum which requires us to "reject the greater miracle."

A similar argument could be made for the miraculous origin of life, through an appeal to the "law of biogenesis" (or *theory* of biogenesis as Louis Pasteur called it). The law of biogenesis states "that life can only come from other life."[34] This is a law as well-established as any, in that while we have many billions of recorded instances of reproduction, there have been no recorded instances of abiogenesis, i.e. living organisms arising by means *other* than by reproduction of other, already existing organisms. Rudolph Virchow stated the same principle: *Omnis cellula e cellula,* ("every cell from a cell"); and as F. M. Harold puts it, "Virchow's law has stood the test of more than 3 billion years…"[35] Thus the argument:

1. The law of biogenesis states that living organisms are generated only by the reproduction of other living organisms.
2. The law of biogenesis is a law of nature.
3. If the first living organism was not generated by the reproduction of other living organisms, its generation contravened the law of biogenesis. (from 1 & 2)
4. The first living organism was not generated by the reproduction of other living organisms. (given)
5. The origin of life contravened the law of biogenesis. (from 1 & 4)

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[33] On a big bang cosmology, the original singularity is a point at which, according to physicists like Stephen Hawking, "the laws of science break down" (laws of thermodynamics included). And clearly if the laws of science can break down, miracles can happen.

[34] Allen L. Gerwin & Frank Sherwin, "Louis Pasteur's Views on Creation, Evolution, and the Genesis of Germs," *Answers Research Journal*, 1 (2008), p. 46.

[35] Franklin M. Harold, 2001, p. 99.

6. A miracle is an event that contravenes a law of nature. (definition)
7. The origin of life on earth was a miracle. (from 2, 5 & 6)

This argument appears somewhat stronger than the previous argument. Almost everyone agrees, after all, that life originated on earth (or elsewhere within our universe) at some point in the past, whereas a few serious observers believe the universe to have *always* existed in one form or another. Some skeptics would contend further that if belief in a universe whose origin is uncaused or inexplicable is irrational, then so is belief in God. (On that point I would suggest that a self-existent God who transcends the physical universe is *prima facie* more plausible than a self-existent universe which somehow transcends its own physical properties, particularly entropy.) The argument from biogenesis, by contrast, doesn't face the kinds of deep metaphysical questions and paradoxes often associated with the origin of the universe.

All told, though, neither the origin of the universe nor of life within it can be easily squared with our understanding of certain so-called laws of physics and biology. Hence both appear strong candidates for meeting Hume's definition of a miracle as a violation of the laws of nature. Importantly, they also provide empirical "precedent" for miracles, thereby considerably increasing their prior probability in Bayesian analyses of historically attested miracles like the resurrection of Jesus.

### *Miracles of prophecy*

Because even the most intelligent of humans cannot predict the futures of nations or of individuals, specific prophecies uttered in the name of the Lord and later fulfilled constitute evidence of the foreknowledge of God. Hume himself observed that "all prophecies are real miracles,"[36] and for that reason alone was skeptical of them. Scripture is loaded with prophetic declara-

[36] Hume, p. 95.

tions – precisely 1,817 of them according to Grant Jeffrey.[37] One of the more impressive examples is the destruction of the Phoenician coastal city of Tyre in "waves," as prophesied by Ezekiel and fulfilled in a succession of assaults by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, Alexander the Great, as well as Egyptians and Romans.[38] Also noteworthy are a whole host of prophecies, from the Psalms, Isaiah, Zechariah and other books, foretelling the ministry, crucifixion and resurrection of the Messiah, all fulfilled in Jesus Christ.[39] Space forbids discussion of these in an article like this one.

Instead I will briefly examine the physical restoration of the nation of Israel, as prophesied in various biblical books, notably Ezekiel, and fulfilled in the twentieth century. I chose this example because the fulfillment clearly occurred well after the prophecies given; and I will focus particularly on Ezekiel, since his predictions were more detailed and specific. In Ezekiel 36, the prophet declares that after he "scattered them among the nations" (v. 19), God would restore the people of Israel: "For I will take you among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land" (v. 24)."

Sure enough, in 1948 the prophecy was decidedly fulfilled against great odds and opposition. Following their violent expulsion from Jerusalem in 70 A.D., roughly 1,800 years of wandering and persecution, the expansion of Nazism and fascism, and just three years on the heels of a Holocaust that threatened to destroy them completely, the Jewish people established their own state and returned *en masse* to their ancient

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[37] Grant R. Jeffrey, *The Signature of God: Astonishing Biblical Discoveries* (Frontier Research Publications, 1996.

[38] See Hank Hanegraaff, "Has Ezekiel's Prophecy Against Tyre Really Been Fulfilled?," *Christian Research Institute* (2024), URL= https://www.equip.org/articles/has-ezekiels-prophecy-against-tyre-really-been-fulfilled/.

[39] See Douglas D. Scott, "Is Jesus of Nazareth the Predicted Messiah? A Historical-Evidential Approach to Specific Old Testament Prophecies and their New Testament Fulfillments," Ph.D. Dissertation, Liberty University, May 2017.

Palestinian homeland. (Jeffrey goes to some lengths to argue that Ezekiel actually prophesied the *exact day* of Israel's restoration, in Ezek. 4:3-6.[40])

But the prophecy adds that God would so bless the land that it would become practically unrecognizable. "I will call for the grain and multiply it, and bring no famine upon you. And I will multiply the fruit of your trees and the increase of your fields,…" (vv. 29-30). Since 1948, Israel's GDP has continually increased, often booming, and the state has become highly educated and modernized. Her Jewish population has grown steadily even while the democratic government has encouraged widely diverse non-Jewish citizenry (including Arabs). And in a notably specific fulfillment, where there was once desert, thousands of acres have been irrigated and millions of bountiful fruit trees planted.

Also since the day of its founding, the modern state of Israel has unfortunately had to fight desperate wars, surrounded, outnumbered and outgunned by a host of nations openly committed to wiping her "off the map" – yet over the course of those conflicts has become a regional military power and has often gained territory. As a result of the Six-Day War of 1967 in particular, Israel took command of the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and the Sinai Peninsula (from Syria, Jordan, and Egypt respectively).[41]

Now I realize that the modern history of Israel is a source of controversy for many. Regardless of one's political views on Zionism or the fate of the Palestinians, however, modern Israel stands as a testament to the astonishing accuracy of biblical prophecy. Of course, skeptics may consider this, along with untold dozens of other fulfilled predictions, just a big coincidence. But at some point an objective view of prophecy requires

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[40] Readers are encouraged to examine the full argument in Jeffrey, pp. 165-170.

[41] Information on the economic and military development of modern Israel has largely been taken from H.J. de Blij & Peter O. Muller, *Geography: Realms, Regions & Concepts* (10th Ed.) (John Wiley & Sons, 2002), pp. 311-317.

that we acknowledge the wisdom of Yogi Berra: "That's just too coincidental to be a coincidence."

### *Miracles of experience*

At this point I will turn to my own experiences of the miraculous. Most of my life as a Christian believer has been routine, unremarkable, often difficult and sometimes even desperately painful. But I have also experienced a handful of miracles and I remember them distinctly. Beyond my initial conversion forty years ago from a life of habitual selfishness, foolishness and drunkenness to a life of seeking God and his kingdom – arguably a miracle in its own right – two experiences stand out in particular. The first was a healing that I experienced back in 1987 while a university student recently converted to the faith. I will quote from the draft of a book I have currently in the works, *The Shadow of Leviathan:*

> I had just returned to my apartment after finishing my mid-term exams for the Spring semester, following two or three days of virtually non-stop, around-the-clock cramming. I had consumed so much coffee that I could see little flashes of light streak across the screen of my mind like tracer bullets whenever I closed my eyes. And while my head had been mildly throbbing for the previous day or so it began to pound incessantly; yet pain relievers seemed to have no effect. As a result of all this I couldn't manage to sleep despite total exhaustion. Increasingly desperate but having no doctor, health insurance or money, I knelt over on my bed and quietly prayed for God to heal me….What followed a minute or two later was the most powerful miracle I have experienced in all my years as a believer….I was visited by the presence of God and supernaturally healed. All my pain and distress was somehow swept away in a few moments with a sound much like a rushing wind.

On another occasion in 1993, my lovely wife Tricia and I were travelling during cloudy and freezing weather from Lubbock, Texas to a Bible conference in Amarillo, when I lost

control of my little Nissan pickup truck. We had slipped sideways for a second or two along a stretch of ice on the highway when my tires caught a patch of dry ground near the shoulder and the truck flipped onto its side, rolling over completely down a snow-covered embankment and then coming to rest upside-down in the snow dozens of feet from the road. While I was able to crawl out the window of my truck unharmed, Tricia cried out that she couldn't move; she was pinned between the dashboard and the roof of the cab. There was no one nearby to help and the only other vehicles I could see were off in the distance, either stuck themselves or creeping slowly in the opposite direction; and I had no phone to call anyone (this was before everyone carried cell phones). Dazed and despairing over what to do, I began to pace back and forth in the snow muttering prayers for God to help us.

Within a few moments a voice behind me interrupted my pacing and prayer. I turned and saw a man with dark hair wearing a black Harley-Davidson T-shirt over what looked like long underwear. He stood in the snow in front of me and said something like, "Listen, I've already called 9-11 and they're on the way." I distinctly remember that he then said, "You believe in God, right?" – to which I nodded yes – and then, "Well, he's going to help you." Then he pointed over to my truck and said, "But right now your wife needs you to go over there and be strong for her." I said, "You're right," and turned toward the truck; but when I turned back around to thank him, he was gone.

To this day I have no idea who that man was, where he came from or where he went. I did what he said, though, and went over to encourage and console my wife. Some minutes later an EMS truck arrived. Using "Jaws of Life" hydraulic rescue tools, the crew carefully extracted Tricia from the truck and discovered she had sustained a fracture to her pelvis. Though at the time she was four months pregnant and the paramedics feared the worst, she gave birth to a handsome, healthy baby boy five months later. I said all that to suggest the possibility that the mysterious man who appeared out of nowhere to help me and then disappeared just as quickly was an angel sent by God. In

Scripture, angels are not always brightly shining beings, but sometimes take on human appearance. The book of Hebrews instructs believers to be hospitable to strangers, "for by so doing have "unwittingly entertained angels" (Heb. 13:2).

I still remember these events vividly. I have no doubt they actually happened. If someone were to strap me to a lie detector and ask me if the above accounts were true, I would say *yes* without hesitation and (assuming the machine worked the way it should) I would certainly pass the test. So what to make of my testimony? One viable possibility is that despite my assurances to the contrary, I am simply lying and have made up both stories. But I am a sincere believer with no reason to fabricate such stories; indeed, I am prohibited from lying by the very God in whom I profess my faith. It seems to me that something is wrong with a skeptical philosophy that requires countless numbers of apparently honest people to be shameless liars instead.

Another possibility is that in each case what I experienced was something naturally explicable, even if unusual, and over time my memory of the event, aided by a religious mindset willing to believe in miracles, gradually became more embellished with miraculous elements over time. The problem there is that my experiences of the events in question were so powerful that the memories of them have been with me and reflected upon often since the day they occurred, so that there has been no lapse of time in which they could have become substantially distorted. Finally, it could be that in each case I was simply deceived by an elaborate trick of the senses. But that argument cuts both ways: if my senses can deceive me, other people's senses might well fail to convince them of the truth – in which case it may be that skeptics have witnessed any number of *bona fide* miracles themselves but been deceived into believing they were just seeing things.

Now it's true that there can be no external *evidence* (other than my testimony) for my personal experiences, because by definition my personal experiences cannot be examined by others. Critics might regard this as groundless subjectivism, or maybe epistemological egoism. But personal experience – that is, *direct* experience – is really one of the most powerful forms

of epistemic justification, whether others assent to my belief or not. Plantinga offers a scenario in which he has been accused of a crime, and considerable evidence suggests he did it, but he doesn't remember committing it, nor being anywhere near the scene, and instead remembers going hiking the day on which it occurred. Therefore, even though his belief is disputed by others and he cannot explain the evidence presented against him, he is justified in holding that belief: "Because I remember where I was, and that puts me within my rights in believing that I was off hiking, even if others disagree with me."[42]

In other words, a properly basic belief carries more epistemic weight than an inductive inference. Admittedly, though, an argument for miracles from experience cannot work for those who have not experienced such miracles themselves, and who further dispute the testimony of believers (which would include me along with the apostles of Jesus and countless millions of others). For those who distrust not only the testimony of believers but the miraculous implications of the evidence of cosmology and of prophecy, I suspect little can be done – short of a miracle – to convince them otherwise. But precisely because I believe God still works miracles, I hold out hope that even my most skeptical friends will one day put their trust in him.

[42] Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2000), pp. 450-51.

# Book Review
## *Social World of Ancient Israel 1250-587 BCE* by Victor H. Matthews & Don C. Benjamin

*Daniel Williams*[1]

*Social World of Ancient Israel 1250-587 BCE*
Victor H. Matthews & Don C. Benjamin
Baker Academic, 1993 (revised 2005)
352 pages

IN THE INTRODUCTION to their *Social World of Ancient Israel 1250-587 BCE,* Victor Matthews and Don Benjamin inform their readers that, though the social world of the Bible is now extinct, the Bible remains and those who read it are justifiably curious about what people in the Bible were like. Their book is meant to be an introduction and a guide to the culture and social life of biblical people.

The world in which the Bible developed was dramatically different from our world. The authors make several claims concerning what they believe to be necessary for our understanding and appreciation of the Bible. The world of the Bible was ancient, not modern, Eastern not Western, and changeless, not a changing world. The biblical world was agricultural, not industrial. It was a limited and not a renewable world. It was communal, and not an individualistic world. All of these combine to make understanding the people and context of the Bible difficult for modern readers.

As a social science, anthropology can be an important aid to our understanding of the Bible. Anthropology seeks to understand the principles which govern human physical and cultural

[1] See footnote on p. 45 for a brief bio of Daniel Williams.

development, and mainly studies the behavior and material culture of humans as a group rather than as individuals.

Matthews and Benjamin advise that to understand the Bible, we must attempt to understand the world from which it comes. We cannot divorce their stories from their history. Due to the brevity of this review (more of a *precis*, really) and the length of the book, only a small selection of the chapters and sections will be surveyed.

## Part 1: Ancient Israel as Villages

Matthews and Benjamin believe that "The two most important social institutions in the Mediterranean world were the village and the state." Based upon documents recovered from Egyptian and Hittite sources dating from around second millennium, many scholars date the appearance of ancient Israel to around 1250 BCE, established in a village structure of from 50 to 300 persons. More than 300 village sites have been identified which date from 1250 to 1000 BCE. They were established in the hill country, which provided some security but were barren and difficult to farm limiting population expansion. The economy was subsistence rather than surplus. Due to this lack of resources there were "no monarchs, no soldiers, no slaves, no taxes and no war" (p. 5).

### Chapter 1: *Village Politics: The Father*

"The basic community in the Bible was the extended family or household headed by a father" (p. 7). This arrangement of as many as five generations living together in mutual support has continued with the Arab Bedouins to the present day. Leviticus 18:6-18 lists four generations making up an extended household. This kinship arrangement was complex, comprising not only blood relationships but also economic, social status, financial worth and community standing.

The family relationships were often more legal than strictly biological. The concept of covenant relationship is part of the relational familial understanding of this world. The father was the protector of the extended household comprising blood rela-

tions, servants, and slaves (p. 8). Covenantal relationships based on family ties are reflected in treaty language. In 2 Kings 16:7 for instance, Ahaz, in his treaty with Tiglath-Pileser III, says that he is his servant and his son.

When a child was born, the father had to decide whether to adopt it into the household. Life began with adoption. If the father did not adopt the child, it was exposed in a field to declare it eligible for adoption by another household.

Honoring your father and mother (Exodus 20:12) had political expectations. Sons honored their parents by a willingness to farm, to herd, to bear children for the household. If the son was unwilling, the father had the authority to judge what punishment should be administered up to and including death.

Sexual relations in the Bible were not only romantic (Song of Solomon) but also political and economic. Marriage was a negotiated covenant sealing a social contract. It was designed to bring two households together that were willing to mutually support one another. The father most often chose the marriage partners based on the benefits which would accrue to the household. The virginity of the daughter meant she was eligible to marry. Such a status was guarded by the family as it provided the base for household covenantal alliances. The relationship of the father to covenantal alliances is illustrated in the story of Jacob, Leah and Rachel. (Genesis 25:20-37:2).

The oath of Jephthah in Judges 11:1-40 is compared in the book with a similar story in the Enuma Elish, by which sacrifice is viewed as necessary for success in battle. The oath shows the sincerity of the clan chief in his commitment to the desired outcome.

### Chapter 3: *Village Economics: The Farmer*

Matthews and Benjamin believe that the economy of the biblical world was dedicated to the two basic resources of land and children (Genesis 12:1-8). Possession of land and children distinguished free households from their slaves, and residents of a village from the exiles who lived with them.

Some detail is spent explaining the organization of the land into zones for production, the harsh conditions which made this

a subsistence economy, and the cycles of rain and drought which impacted the people. Prosperity was believed to be based on God's blessing, and drought on the people's sinful non-compliance with His will (Deuteronomy 7:13).

Cisterns were used to collect and store the scanty rainfall. They have been estimated to be able to support from eight to ten adults in a household. Yahweh is called a farmer in Isaiah 5:1-7, showing the importance of this occupation. The importance of farming is part of the initial story of creation in Genesis 2:4-6.

**Chapter 6: *The Host and the Stranger***

Reciprocal hospitality was vital for survival in the ancient world. The village was understood to be corporately responsible as they attempted to identify strangers as either friend or foe, and treat them accordingly. Hospitality was actually a method of neutralizing the implicit threat strangers brought into the community.

The concept of hospitality was extended to legal action for unexplained murders. Certain cities were designated as zones of hospitality to which persons could flee for safety if accused. (Deuteronomy 19:1-13; 21:1-9).

The link between the village showing hospitality to strangers and the provision of the land to its inhabitants as hospitality from the divine patron was understood. The Jews understood themselves as strangers and not landowners. Only Yahweh owned the land.

Only fathers of households could extend hospitality to strangers in the name of the family. The father was responsible for the protection and well-being of the family and, by extension, the village. (Deuteronomy 16:13-15). Part of the ritual of invitation and acceptance was bathing and washing. The social status of the stranger becomes that of protected guest.

The protocols involved in hospitality and guest privileges are important for understanding much of the social interchange in the Old Testament. Matthews and Benjamin use it to explain the story of Jael and Sisera in Judges 4:17-23; the story of Abra-

ham and the three divine guests in Genesis 18:1-10; and several political succession stories.

## Part 2: Ancient Israel as Cities

In the ancient Near East the city was fundamentally an economic community. Food was provided by villages in exchange for protection from enemies. This developed into symbiotic relationships. In addition to protection, the city provided the environment for various arts and skilled trades. These included writing, tanning, and pottery making which could be found within its protective walls.

### Chapter 12: *The Monarch*

The shift to a centralized and monarchical political structure from the village-elder model took place between 1000 and 587 BCE under the pressure of hostile neighbors. The need for a standing army for defense, improved centralized organization of the land for food production, and negotiated alliances for protection was understood as requiring this shift in structure.

Authority passed from the father and the village elders to codes of laws developed by the monarch and the priests. This shift from village to state and from elder to monarch is helpful in understanding many of the stories centering on the relationships which develop in the Bible. (2 Sam. 9:1-13; Dan. 1:1-5.)

### Chapter 18: *The Storyteller*

Continuity of laws and customs was maintained orally by storytellers. Monarchs relied on storytellers to maintain order and good management of their domains. Written documents were scarce and expensive, so traditions were maintained in communities by scribes and sages.

The rituals which were vital to the good communication between the divine and human spheres were done in accordance with traditions passed on by the storytellers. These could be reduced to writing for a perpetual memorial in papyrus or on stone as in Joshua 24:25-27.

The Bible we read today is the work of ancient storytellers. They recorded what took place between people and Yahweh, how biblical peoples lived and related to other people and to God. The wisdom, the strife, the way God spoke, and His provision are still our guides as we attempt to live out the divine plan.

# Book Review
# *Engaging Religions and Worldviews in Africa: A Christian Theological Method* by Yusufu Turaki

*Ernest Musekiwa*[1]

*Engaging Religions and Worldviews in Africa: A Christian Theological Method*
Yusufu Turaki
Hippo Books, 2021
472 pages

ONE OF NIGERIA'S foremost evangelical theologians and ethicists, Yusufu Turaki, has long been recognized for his pioneering work in African theology and ethics. A professor, scholar, and advocate for contextual theological education, Turaki has consistently explored the church's responsibility in shaping African societies. Across decades of teaching and publishing, he has emphasized that African Christianity cannot be sustained without critical and respectful engagement with the continent's own intellectual and spiritual heritage. In Engaging Religions and Worldviews in Africa: A Christian Theological Method, Turaki gathers years of reflection into his most systematic and comprehensive work to date. The result is a monumental volume of nearly 500 pages, offering a theological method for Christian engagement with African Traditional Religion (ATR) and related worldviews.

[1] See footnote on p. 7 for a brief bio of Ernest Musekiwa.

***Summary***

The book opens with substantial methodological chapters that prepare the ground for Turaki's argument. Here he defines key terms such as "religion," "worldview," and "method," and insists that careful definition is essential for constructive dialogue. By "worldview," Turaki means the fundamental orientation by which people interpret reality, encompassing cosmology, anthropology, ethics, and community life. Religion, in his usage, is inseparable from worldview; it structures thought, behavior, and society. For Turaki, Christian theology in Africa must take seriously this comprehensive character of African Traditional Religion rather than reducing it to isolated practices or superstitions.

Part I situates the argument historically by examining Western Christianity's encounter with Africa. Turaki critiques missionary Christianity for importing not only the gospel but also Western cultural assumptions. The worldview of European Christianity often clashed with African categories of thought, producing tension and even alienation. Yet, out of this encounter, African theologians began to articulate contextual responses. Turaki surveys the emergence of African theology, identifying typologies such as inculturation, liberation, reconstruction, and evangelical approaches. He notes both the achievements and limitations of these trajectories, especially the persistent difficulty of holding biblical fidelity together with cultural sensitivity.

Part II offers a systematic description of African Traditional Religion itself. This is one of the most substantial sections of the book, covering ATR's doctrine of God, its divinities and spirits, the role of ancestors, and beliefs in mystical forces. Turaki emphasizes that ATR is not merely a collection of rituals but a totalizing worldview that informs ethics, law, politics, and personhood. For example, he highlights how concepts of communal solidarity, kinship, and ancestral presence shape African understandings of morality and justice. He also explores ATR's view of humanity as embedded in networks of relationships rather than as autonomous individuals. By presenting ATR as a

coherent worldview, Turaki argues that Christian engagement must be equally comprehensive.

Part III, the theological core of the book, develops a Christian response to ATR. Turaki structures this engagement around central doctrines: the being of God, creation, sin, redemption, humanity, morality, and eschatology. He consistently places biblical teaching in conversation with ATR categories. For instance, while acknowledging ATR's affirmation of a Supreme Being, he argues that only in the biblical doctrine of the Trinity is God's nature fully revealed. Similarly, while ATR emphasizes community and ancestral mediation, Turaki insists that Jesus Christ alone fulfills and transcends these roles as the universal mediator. His method is not to dismiss ATR outright but to engage it respectfully, showing both points of resonance and areas of fundamental divergence. The closing chapters summarize his theological method, which involves definition, description, dialogue, and biblical evaluation. He calls African theologians to continue this work in ways that are both contextually rooted and scripturally grounded.

## Evaluation

Turaki's work displays several impressive strengths.

***Comprehensiveness.*** The book's scope is remarkable. Few works attempt such a thorough integration of theological method, history of missions, analysis of ATR, and systematic theology. Each section could stand alone as a substantial monograph; together they create a reference resource for students and scholars alike. This comprehensiveness ensures that the book will serve not only as a contribution to theology but also as a textbook in seminaries and universities.

***Respectful engagement.*** Although Turaki writes from an evangelical commitment, his tone is consistently fair and charitable. He resists the common evangelical temptation to caricature ATR as merely idolatrous or demonic. Instead, he insists on understanding ATR in its own terms before engaging it theologically. This posture models a dialogical spirit that is crucial for

interreligious encounters, particularly in societies where ATR and Christianity coexist.

***Theological depth.*** One of the hallmarks of the book is its grounding in Christian doctrine. Turaki does not allow contextual theology to drift into relativism. By rooting his method in doctrines of creation, incarnation, sin, and redemption, he affirms Christianity's normative claims while still engaging African worldviews. His consistent Christocentrism—insisting on Jesus as mediator and redeemer—gives the work clarity and focus.

***Relevance for society.*** Turaki is not content with abstract theology. His chapters on leadership, governance, morality, and justice illustrate how theological engagement shapes real-world issues in Africa. For example, he discusses how ATR's communal ethic can both enrich and challenge Christian approaches to governance. In contexts where corruption, injustice, and weak institutions hinder flourishing, his theological insights provide moral and ethical resources.

***Methodological clarity.*** Perhaps the book's greatest pedagogical contribution is its procedural outline for engaging worldviews: define, describe, dialogue, and evaluate. This sequence gives students and pastors practical steps for theological reflection in their own contexts.

Nevertheless, the book is not without limitations.

***Accessibility.*** At nearly 500 pages, the book is dense. Some sections read like a textbook, replete with lengthy lists and categorizations. While this detail enriches the scholarly reader, it may overwhelm pastors or students looking for a more concise guide.

***Overgeneralization.*** Despite his awareness of diversity, Turaki often presents ATR as if it were a single, coherent system. In reality, African traditional religions vary widely across regions and cultures. While his account captures broad patterns, it

sometimes lacks the ethnographic nuance that would ground his theological claims in particular contexts.

***Theological orientation.*** The explicitly evangelical framework is both a strength and a limitation. It gives the work clarity of purpose but narrows its engagement with other disciplines. Anthropologists or scholars of religion may find that Turaki too quickly moves from description to biblical critique without sustained dialogue with non-Christian perspectives.

***Limited interaction with peers.*** While Turaki acknowledges major African theologians such as John Mbiti, Kwame Bediako, and Lamin Sanneh, he does not engage them in sustained comparison. Greater dialogue with these figures would situate his project within the wider trajectory of African theology and clarify what is distinctive about his evangelical method.

## Contribution

Despite these weaknesses, Turaki's contribution is undeniable. He provides one of the clearest evangelical articulations of how Christianity might engage ATR as a worldview. His insistence that theology must address whole systems of thought, not merely isolated practices, represents an important methodological insight. By integrating systematic theology with social ethics, he also demonstrates that theology is not only about doctrine but about public life.

For scholars, the book provides a methodological framework that can shape further research in African theology and interreligious dialogue. For pastors and church leaders, it offers tools for grappling with the enduring influence of ATR in congregational life. For students, it provides an invaluable survey of worldview, theology, and mission in Africa.

More broadly, Turaki's work contributes to the ongoing project of African Christian identity. In a continent where Christianity is vibrant yet deeply entangled with traditional worldviews, his book offers a pathway for theological reflection that is faithful to the Bible and attentive to African realities. Whether or not one agrees with all his conclusions, his methodological rigor ensures that the conversation will continue.

## Conclusion

Engaging Religions and Worldviews in Africa is a demanding but rewarding volume. It combines biblical fidelity, contextual awareness, and social concern in a way that few works in African theology achieve. While its density and evangelical assumptions may limit its accessibility for some audiences, its methodological clarity and theological depth guarantee its lasting influence. For years to come, Turaki's book will serve as both a reference work and a methodological guide for African theologians, pastors, and students committed to engaging the religious and cultural worldviews of the continent.