

# *Modern Science and Biblical Miracles: The Boyle Lecture 2018*

with Mark Harris, "Apocalypses Now: Modern Science and Biblical Miracles: The Boyle Lecture 2018"; John Hedley Brooke, "The Ambivalence of Scientific Naturalism: A Response to Mark Harris"; and Mark Harris, "On 'the Natural Nature of Naturalism': Answers to John Hedley Brooke's Questions."

## THE AMBIVALENCE OF SCIENTIFIC NATURALISM: A RESPONSE TO MARK HARRIS

by John Hedley Brooke 

*Abstract.* Responding to Mark Harris, I reflect on his tantalizing question whether the provision of naturalistic explanations for biblical miracles renders the narratives more, or less, credible. I address his "reversal," in which professional scientists now feature among defenders of a literalistic reading, while professional biblical scholars are often skeptical. I suggest this underlines the ambivalence of scientific naturalism from the standpoint of Christian theology. Historical examples are adduced to show that, until the mid-nineteenth century, naturalistic and theistic explanations were commonly regarded as complementary. Accordingly, the primacy often accorded to scientific progress in accounts of secularization is questionable. Two concluding questions are raised. If a methodological naturalism inheres in biblical scholarship, as in the sciences, how do biblical scholars decide whether the historical trajectories they construct for the composition of biblical texts are destructive or affirmative of faith? Second, when the miracle is the Resurrection of the dead Christ, does not the scientific impossibility of this foundational event remain sacrosanct?

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A complaint we sometimes hear about the discussion of "science and religion" is that it can be too abstruse, too preoccupied with abstractions when debating the grounds of knowledge and belief. The concern is that questions of more immediate interest to religious believers (scientists among them) are sidelined. The subject of Mark Harris's lecture, the implications

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of modern science for the interpretation of the biblical miracles, surely is of mainstream interest. In thanking him for an enthralling lecture, I also want to congratulate him for the exceptional clarity he has brought to a topic that remains ever topical. When interviewed recently about his new book on William Tyndale, Melvyn Bragg explained why he himself is a “believing unbeliever”: “I find the Resurrection of Christ impossible to accept.” And on the question of eternal life: “Biology and Physics won’t let that happen” (Bragg 2018).

From time to time, we must all have considered what we mean by miracles and whether they need be understood as supernatural intervention. The word still thrives in popular parlance, referring to highly improbable events of deep personal significance to those who experience them. For the parents of the baby born with a heart outside its body, the unprecedented surgery that successfully led to restoration was a miracle. We have been treated to a lecture rich in insight and full of implications for further reflection. I was particularly struck by the conundrum that Harris has put to us all. If a scientific explanation can be found that shows a biblical miracle to have been possible, does that render the story more or less credible? I shall return to that question in a moment.

But, first, a word about Harris’s thesis that the professionalization of science and the professionalization of biblical studies—both nineteenth-century developments—have led to serious divergence on how the miracle stories should be approached. For a historian of science, his argument becomes more arresting with the claim that this divide between scientists and biblical scholars is “parallel to the long-running debate on how to do an historical science like geology.” I see what he means. There is an analogy. In the uniformitarian geology of Darwin’s mentor Charles Lyell, the historical sculpting of the Earth’s surface was explained by invoking only natural causes, acting with the same intensity as forces in evidence today. In the procedures of many biblical scholars, as they trace the historical processes that led to the biblical texts as we know them, only natural human agency is presupposed. Just as Lyell marginalized Noah’s flood from the science of geology, so the biblical scholars to whom Harris refers marginalize a literalistic reading of the miracles. In the process, science-based apologias for the veracity of the narratives are generally sidelined as implausible and misconceived.

There would be much to discuss here, but I would like to pick out a related feature of the nineteenth-century debate. It concerns an ambiguity in the theological implications of naturalistic explanation. In retrospect, as part of a secularist narrative, the “uniformitarian” geologists who followed Lyell became the heroes who expunged miracles from the Earth’s history. Lyell’s avowed aim had been to “rid the science of Moses.” The “catastrophists,” with their supposed preference for dramatic divine intervention, were the losers. Quite apart from the fact that catastrophes have

made a comeback, geologically if not theologically, there is a particular reason why the secularist narratives, when projected back to the 1830s, oversimplify the story. This is because one could be an uniformitarian like Lyell and still subscribe to a providentialist reading of nature. Lyell prided himself on having found a new argument for God's supervision of the world. It consisted in the fact that, wherever on Earth there was an environment that could support particular life forms, those very species had been introduced. In the adaptation of newly introduced species to their environmental niches there was surely evidence of intelligent foresight? And was there not a miraculous plenitude in nature as these niches had been filled? Conversely, but still contrary to the secularist caricature, there were geologists who did not identify their cataclysmic events with instances of divine intervention, just as with the asteroid collisions postulated today (Hooykaas 1959; Lunteren 2018). Crucially, whether one was a uniformitarian or a catastrophist, it was not a case of having to choose *between* natural causes and the involvement, at some level, of a deity.

This is a point that has rather receded from view in our secular age. From the mid-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century, scientific explanations invoking natural causes were frequently interpreted theistically. This was possible because the natural causes could be interpreted, as they were by Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton, as instruments of a divine will. For two hundred years and more, the very existence of natural laws testified to God's existence. It was not simply that laws presupposed a legislator. For the Cambridge polymath William Whewell, who first coined the word "scientist" in the 1830s, it was the remarkable *combination* of laws, making intelligent life possible, that provided compelling indications of a Creator. In this sense scientific naturalism was deeply embedded in a Christian culture, not an alien threat from outside.

This explains why Robert Boyle would compare God's relation to nature with that of an author to a book. Pen, paper, and ink were the natural instruments of the writer, who was nevertheless in immediate control of what went onto the page. It is why Isaac Newton could propose an analogy between God's activity in nature and our ability to move our limbs at will. It is why one of the original Boyle lecturers, Samuel Clarke, could equate the normal course of nature with the way God normally chooses to act, but is not constrained to do so. It is why Anglican geologists of the early nineteenth century found in the fossil record a refutation, not a vindication, of atheism (Brooke 1997). Species had not existed from eternity, as atheists classically argued. The new science of palaeontology showed that new ones had kept appearing. It is why Darwin—even Darwin—could say when explaining what he meant by nature: "By nature, I mean the laws ordained by God to govern the universe" (Richards 2009, 61). In short, during its fascinating history there has been no "natural" nature of naturalism. It has existed in a variety of theistic and nontheistic forms.

An important corollary is that scientific progress alone can never be a *sufficient* explanation for the expulsion of God from the world. Harris has reminded us that there is “almost nothing in the Bible that the modern sciences can’t explain if sufficient ingenuity is brought to bear.” Which leads us back to the conundrum he has voiced so well: “Do these scientific accounts *disprove* the miraculous nature of the stories? Or do they *affirm* it”?

Put crudely, his sophisticated answer is that much depends on where you are coming from. It depends on what you are *disposed* to believe in the light of your own experience, which may include education in a scientific discipline or in the historically based discipline of biblical studies. I welcome his analysis because it has great fertility. It generates questions that we may even, with profit, ask of ourselves. What account would we give of the origins of our own predispositions? It is, of course, a question historians have to ask when interrogating their biographical subjects. And here is the interesting point: the reasons given for their loss of faith by major figures in the secularist movements of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries rarely refer to the primacy of science. From the autobiographical testimony of some 150 unbelievers in the period 1850–1960, the Oxford social historian Susan Budd discovered that conversions to unbelief often mirrored a change from conservative to more radical politics. Religion was rejected as part of established, privileged society. The reading of radical texts, such as Thomas Paine’s *Age of Reason*, was another prominent influence. Ironically, another frequently mentioned subversive book was the Bible itself. But it was not that science had proved the biblical miracles impossible. Disenchantment had been rooted in a moral sensibility, in a recoiling from Old Testament depictions of a vengeful and anthropomorphic deity. In 1912, the President of the National Secular Society in Britain protested that biblical stories of “lust, adultery, incest and unnatural vice” were “enough to raise blushes in a brothel” (Budd 1977, 109).

Not wishing to end this response in a brothel, I have a couple of questions that I would put to Harris. The first relates to naturalistic assumptions in the historical practices of biblical scholarship. History is (historically!) one of the most secular academic disciplines in that references to divine activity have long been excluded from conventional historical explanation. This is where Harris’s analogy with geological uniformitarianism has substance. In his own words, the biblical scholar has to carefully “sift through layers and layers of mythological, theological, and cultural interpretation *which are built into the very story itself* before you get to the supposed historical kernel, if it’s indeed there in the first place.” Layers and layers, just as the geologists have had to sift through their strata upon strata. But if there is a methodological naturalism inherent in biblical scholarship, as there is in the sciences, how do biblical scholars decide whether their historical

trajectories for the content of biblical texts are destructive or affirmative of faith? What predispositions come into play when they ask whether the miracle stories do, as Harris suggests, possess a “transcendent quality” as “moments of revelation”?

My second question comes from a glance back to Harris’s assertion that there is “almost nothing in the Bible that the modern sciences can’t explain if sufficient ingenuity is brought to bear.” I am wondering about the “almost nothing.” What still lies beyond scientific encroachment? For Robert Boyle, writing in the seventeenth century, there were matters “above reason” and they would have included the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. As he wrote in a text of 1675, the Resurrection “is not to be brought to pass according to the common course of Nature, I presume, after the universal experience of so many Ages, which have afforded us no instances of it” (Boyle [1675]1999–2000). One of Boyle’s most original contributions to a Christian natural philosophy was his explanation for how it might be possible for personal identity to survive death without persons having to reside in a body identical to their earthly one. His account, drawing on his chemical research, depended on demonstrating that the human body does not always consist of the same material particles throughout its entire life (Vidal 2002, 952–56; Wragge-Morley 2018, 32). But the primary miracle, as for the majority of Christians before and since, was the Resurrection of the dead Christ. Is this not a case where the scientific impossibility of the event remains sacrosanct? A dialogue between Melvyn Bragg and Robert Boyle would, I think, not be without interest. My last word is of renewed thanks to Mark Harris for such an accessible, authoritative, and stimulating lecture.

## NOTE

The text above is an almost verbatim reproduction of a vote of thanks delivered to Mark Harris on February 7, 2018 on the occasion of his Boyle Lecture.

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