# Science and Faith

## A New Introduction

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# Chapter 4

## Do Miracles Really Happen?

### Conflict

No, miracles don't happen. People who believe in God trick themselves into thinking they do. Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe God answers prayers and acts in the world. But where is the evidence? The word miracle means a violation of the laws that govern the physical world, but science has never observed any such exceptions. Albert Einstein, we noted earlier, correctly ruled out any plausible place for a personal God who answers prayers. To respond to prayers or perform miracles in the world, God would have to suspend the regulations that run the universe, but such exceptions would make a mockery of our belief in the absolute consistency of the laws of nature on which science is based.

The Christian Gospels tell you that Jesus walked on water, multiplied loaves and fishes, and rose from the dead. Yet anyone who knows how the natural world works cannot take any of this seriously. The gospel stories and other religious accounts of miracles are wishful thinking and nothing more. Scientific method alone can put you in touch with the real world, and the real world is lawful through and through. Nature is completely obedient to the changeless principles of chemistry and physics. These immutable routines can be clearly represented in mathematical terms, and the equations allow no swerving from predictability. No room exists for a divine miracle worker to interrupt or change the rules that govern the natural world.

Consequently, you need to face the fact that religious accounts of miracles are pure fiction. Even if you believe in them with all your heart, science allows no exceptions to the rigorous dictates of nature. If being scientific means denying miracles and God's existence, then so be it. For some people such a loss might bring sadness, but we take solace in knowing that we have faced reality without blinking. Falling back on belief in miracles seems cowardly by comparison. Our naturalist vision is inseparable from a sense of tragedy, we admit, but we would rather live without hope than wallow in illusions.

Our rejection of miracles is tied closely also to our denial that there can be divinely inspired scriptures. It is hard to understand how even educated people still believe that the Bible or the Qur'an could have been "inspired" by God. To scientifically informed people these allegedly sacred writings, though at times lyrical and aesthetically attractive, must seem mostly crude, ignorant, and self-contradictory. As Christopher Hitchens, the late journalist and atheist, points out, the Christian Gospels of Matthew and Luke can't even agree on the historical facts surrounding the birth of Jesus. "Either the gospels are in some sense literal truth," Hitchens observes, "or the whole thing is essentially a fraud and perhaps an immoral one at that."[1]

Richard Dawkins and his friend Daniel Dennett are justifiably dismayed that after Darwin many educated people take the idea of biblical inspiration seriously even though the Bible has

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nothing to say about evolution and other scientific discoveries. Similarly, the philosopher Sam Harris rightly laments the fact that believers pay any attention at all to their scriptures in the age of science. If the Bible is "written by God," Harris inquires, why is it not "the richest source of mathematical insight humanity has ever known"? If the Bible is inspired by God, why doesn't it give us reliable scientific information? Why do people still enshrine it as the source of significant revelation?2

Not all representatives of our conflict position, we must point out, follow the biblical literalism of Harris, Hitchens, and Dawkins. Nevertheless, we all agree that no evidence exists of a miracle-working supernatural reality breaking into the tightly woven fabric of nature. Moreover, we deny that divine inspiration has shaped the all-too-human ideas presented by allegedly sacred writings. Things that seem miraculous can now be fully explained by scientific laws, and "inspired" scriptures turn out to be no more than culturally narrow imaginings motivated by wishful thinking. Close scientific analysis shows that nature is governed totally by impersonal physical laws. And careful historical study demonstrates that the sacred scriptures of Jews, Christians, and Muslims are so full of factual inaccuracies and groundless conjecture that no self-respecting scientifically educated person can take them seriously.

## Contrast

The simplistic critique just presented by the contemporary partisans of conflict (including the New Atheists) misunderstands what a mature faith or a reasonable theology means by "miracles." Likewise it completely misses the meaning of scriptural revelation and divine inspiration. Miracles are not violations of nature at all, nor is belief in biblical inspiration by God a contradiction of the fact that scriptures are also human compositions. Let us look first at miracles and then take up the question of scriptural inspiration.

We accept the fact that nature's laws are predictable and unbending. So we are willing to embrace the modern scientific understanding of the physical universe as a closed continuum of cause-and-effect relationships.3 We accept the notion that the natural world operates according to inviolable natural laws. However, for us a miracle is not an event that suspends, bends, or breaks the laws of nature in the slightest way. *Miracle* means "something to wonder about," and faith in the miraculous does not contradict the scientific search for regularity and lawfulness in the natural world. By a "miracle" we mean something much more dramatic—and much more interesting—than a suspension of the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology. The real miracles, indeed the only ones worth talking about at all, are the improbable transformations that occasionally lead a person from a life of mediocrity to one of authenticity and goodness. This is the only kind of miracle we are concerned with, so conflict only trivializes miracles by defining them as violations of the predictable routines of nature.

Something dramatically miraculous, and unpredictable, occurs when a person, against all expectations, undergoes a conversion from a life of despair to a life of hope and trust. Something truly "to be wondered at" happens when an irresponsible and selfish individual

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turns around and takes up a life of gratitude and self-giving. Such significant events of grace are not interruptions of nature. Rather, they are interruptions of banality and mediocrity. As far as contrast is concerned, this remarkable kind of transformation is the true theological meaning of miracles.

There is no way to measure or mathematically quantify such momentous events. They remain completely beyond the scrutiny of science. The way in which God works in the created world is not by breaking laws of nature but by quietly attracting human *subjects* to trust in the infinite meaning, truth, goodness, and beauty that have always embraced the universe but that remain completely beyond the horizon of scientism. God is the encompassing reality in whom "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). That which is deepest and most real—God, in other words—eludes comprehension by the finite human mind, and especially by the scientific mind.

The kind of awareness that contrast refers to as "faith" is nothing like the objectifying control sought by scientific experimentation. God can never be an object but is always a subject. So nothing less than an interpersonal kind of experience is essential to understanding miracles. The experience of faith is that of allowing oneself to be changed radically by a love that is infinitely larger than we are. We look for evidence of divine influence and presence not in the mundane data of scientific inquiry, but in the shining forth of joy and goodness that a transformed personal life can radiate. The kind of evidence that scientism holds up as the standard of truth is cheap by comparison. We are not disparaging scientific inquiry in any way, and we fully accept well-established scientific ideas. However, we notice a sharp difference or *contrast* between the "transformative" evidence on which faith in the miraculous is grounded and the publicly accessible "spectator" evidence on which science is based.

Countless people have testified to the wondrous renewal of their own lives that accompanies the call to faith. They have found that faith launches them onto a journey of discovery that makes the adventure of scientific inquiry pale in comparison. Many great scientists have themselves undertaken the journey of faith as well as that of science. They have never for a moment thought of their faith as contradictory to their science, nor have they thought of science as an impediment to religious transformation. The goal of each respective journey is distinct but compatible with the other. Moreover, the transition from an irresponsible life to one of selflessness requires not the slightest violation of the laws of nature. Indeed, the predictable and invariant operations of chemical, biological, and neurological processes are necessary conditions for the kind of personal transformation we are talking about. When a person of faith confesses, "I once was blind but now I see," there is no violation of nature's laws.

A good example of what we mean by a miraculous transformation is the journey from a state of mind shaped by scriptural literalism to a more serious way of reading sacred texts. We emphasize this point because conflict's rejection of scriptural "inspiration," our second topic, generally stems from the same mentality that wants miracles to fall within the field of spectator evidence. "Literalism" remains the characteristic mind-set not only of religious fundamentalists but also of many (though not all) devotees of scientism. Literalism is the result of a refusal to undergo the radical personal transformation required to "see" the deeper levels

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of meaning beneath the plain sense of our scriptures.

Literalism has been around ever since great literature first appeared. It occurs especially when readers stubbornly refuse to face the truly challenging meanings that inspired authors' attempt to communicate through mythic, symbolic, metaphorical, ironic, and paradoxical modes of expression. Today literalism often takes the form of treating ancient texts that could not possibly have had any scientific intentions, as though they should be sources of modern scientific information. This literalist expectation, we repeat, is characteristic not only of religious fundamentalists but also of many devotees of scientism who espouse the conflict position.

The New Atheists are the best example we can find of literalism's invasion of intellectual culture today. Dennett, Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris, along with many other educated people, devoutly believe that scientific method is the only reliable road to truth. For them scientism is the height of intellectual sophistication. To contrast, however, it is intellectually shocking that each of the New Atheists reads the Bible as though it should respond to scientific curiosity and be judged by scientific standards. Along with their creationist adversaries, the New Literalists completely miss the transformative meaning, for example, in the accounts of origins in the biblical Book of Genesis. They lampoon biblical creation stories for failing to give us the kind of cosmological and biological information that can compete with modern science. In doing so, they completely avoid the challenge to new life that lies beneath the literal sense of the scriptural narratives of origins.

Contrast, on the other hand, reads the biblical creation stories as attempts by our religious ancestors to arouse in readers a sense of gratitude, humility, and hope. The last thing we expect from the scriptures is a picture of nature that either confirms or competes with modern scientific understanding. Biblical accounts of origins contain a highly nuanced set of religious meanings that have nourished people of faith for centuries. Literalism, however, dodges these meanings altogether. It fails to see, for example, that Genesis is responding not to scientific questions but to the deeper human concern, for example, about why there is anything at all, or whether there is an ultimate reason for trust and hope (see chapter 5).

No doubt the transition from literalism to mature faith is difficult, but sometimes this miracle occurs, and we hope it will happen to you if it hasn't happened already. Literalism, along with a shallow sense of scriptural inspiration, is a way of taking flight from the real significance of biblical texts. If you are obsessed, for example, with the question of whether the miracle stories in the scriptures are scientifically verifiable, you too have missed their point. Maybe you have been tempted at times by the cheap allure of contemporary religious or scientific literalism. Perhaps you are impressed by the letter-for-letter approach of Sam Harris, who is incredulous that the ancient holy books tell us nothing about things like evolutionary biology or Big Bang cosmology. Or maybe you have nodded your assent when Christopher Hitchens condemns the evangelists Matthew and Luke for failing to agree on the historical details surrounding the birth of Jesus. We hope you will come to see that theologically transformed sensibilities ignore such surface disagreements and attend instead to the call to faith and hope that these artfully composed chapters of scripture bring to expression.

To sum up, then, contrast never looks to sacred scriptures for scientific information. In the

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words often attributed to theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, we take our sacred writings seriously, not literally. Did the Red Sea literally form walls of water to let the Israelites pass through? Did manna literally fall from heaven or water actually spring from rocks in the desert wanderings of Israel? Did Jesus literally walk on water and rise from the dead? Without faith, even if such wonders physically interrupted the normal course of nature, they would do very little to transform your life. Maybe this is why the Gospels tell us that Jesus was unable to work miracles among those who refused to open themselves to his message of radical hope, love of neighbor, and trust in God. His speaking so often in parables instead of plain speech indicates his own longing to overcome the paralysis of literalism.

What our scriptures are mostly about is transformation, not information. Genuine faith is not a state of believing in divine interruptions of nature, as though the influence of God could ever be the object of scientific comprehension. This is a childish way of thinking about faith. Instead, faith is a matter of undergoing a profound change of one's whole life in the presence of an infinite love and freedom that radically transcends nature. Scriptural accounts of the miraculous are not about events that interrupt the laws of nature but about a divine calling that interrupts the profanity of our lives.

## Convergence

We agree with contrast that both religious and New Atheist literalism completely misunderstand what miracle stories are about. Nevertheless, in our opinion the contrast approach does not address all the relevant issues in the conversation about miracles. The perceptive reader will have noticed that contrast still shares with scientific materialism an obsolete understanding of nature and nature's laws. Contrast concedes too much to the mechanistic and deterministic understanding of the physical universe that thrived during the early modern period and that still underlies much contemporary naturalism. Both conflict and contrast naïvely assume that nature is a dictatorship run by inviolable laws and that nature's laws are comparable to a system of legal enforcement.

The convergence approach, however, interprets the laws of nature as enabling conditions rather than crippling constraints. The rigid understanding of physical laws presupposed by conflict implies that all events in the natural world conform to ironclad regulations inscribed indelibly in physical processes from of old. This deterministic picture of the world is one in which human freedom finds no home and into which divine influence cannot enter. By taking the classical principles of inertia and momentum too literally, mechanism/determinism offers a picture of nature in which nothing truly new can ever happen. To most adherents of scientism, the prison of nature is forever hemmed in by fateful necessity. Everything that will ever happen in the physical universe is already embedded in the physics of the early universe and simply needs time to unfold. Nature, as Peter Atkins, a champion of scientism and materialism, puts it, is "simplicity masquerading as complexity."[4]

Contrast unfortunately follows conflict too closely in assuming that nature is a closed network of lawful occurrences. It differs from conflict by making a separate space for human

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freedom and divine action in a mysterious sphere of reality that somehow exists apart from nature. Contrast rightly acknowledges that what is most real lies beyond the grasp of the human mind, but in doing so it holds fast to the antiquated view that the physical universe itself is completely subject to deterministic laws. For contrast there is no room for freedom in nature itself, only in a world of personal "subjectivity" that transcends nature.

Our convergence approach, though, takes advantage of recent developments in science to portray nature as an ongoing story in which surprising new occurrences, such as the emergence of life, mind, and freedom, can occur as part of a still unfolding universe. Contrast, as you will see throughout this book, is content to take the view that we humans are not really a part of the natural world. Contrast allows that our bodily existence is continuous with nature, but it makes a separate place outside of nature for human subjectivity and freedom, the very core of personal existence. As you saw in the preceding section of this chapter, contrast allows that miracles can occur in the hidden realm of human freedom and subjectivity. In that arena, inaccessible to the objectifying gaze of science, a deeply personal encounter with God can take place and a miracle of personal transformation may then occur. However, the price contrast pays for this isolation of personal subjects from nature is that it sets the nonhuman physical world adrift in a sea of pointlessness.

Convergence, however, assumes that the human mind and human freedom are just as much a part of the natural world as rocks and rivers. For reasons that we can lay out only gradually throughout this book, convergence rejects the assumption that the laws of nature are all determining and that they are contrary to the existence of real freedom and personality. At the same time, our understanding of nature allows that God can act powerfully in the universe without violating any laws of nature. We don't pretend, though, to understand all that is meant by the term *miracle*. Our claim is simply that biblical accounts of divine activity and the resurrection of Jesus are ways by which faith affirms that something of transformative significance is going on in the whole *universe*, and not just in our private personal existence.

To allow for this more cosmic view of the miraculous we assume that the laws of nature are enabling conditions rather than iron-rail imprisonment. And where contrast speaks of miracles as hidden personal transformation, convergence highlights the greater miracle of cosmic transformation that science itself has enabled us to wonder about. Once we realize that the cosmos is a still unfolding drama rather than just an interesting collection of things in space, it becomes possible to speak of a momentous transformation going on in the entirety of God's creation and not just in the hidden arena of personal existence.

From the perspective of Abrahamic faith, miracles are inseparable from the more basic themes of promise and hope. The purpose of miracle stories is to awaken in us a sense of trust that God is doing something new (Isa 43:19 and Rev 21:5), not just in ourselves but also in the whole of creation. If we understand a miracle only as a local display of magic, we have lost touch with its cosmic significance.

How, though, can we reconcile faith's trust that the world is always open to unpredictable, even miraculous, transformation with science's sense that everything also obeys the inviolable laws of nature? Sometimes, to get across a new point of view we have to start with a change of metaphors. We can make both intellectual and theological room for miracles of transformation

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if we revise the terminology scientists have been using to describe nature. Specifically, let us think of nature's predictable and habitual routines not in terms of the ideas of law enforcement and imprisonment but as analogous to grammatical rules. In view of the fact that science has now shown nature to be a still unfinished narrative, let us exchange the juridical metaphor of nature's *laws* for that of nature's *grammar*. Likewise let us drop the outdated metaphor of nature as a set of mechanisms and adopt the richer metaphor of nature as a *drama*. Once we make these metaphorical adjustments, all the questions pertaining to science and faith, including those about miracles, take on a new look.

Ever since the late eighteenth century, discoveries in the fields of geology, evolutionary biology, and cosmology have increasingly forced scientists to understand nature as a still unfinished story or drama. And just as a Shakespearian drama may unfold in surprising ways without being unfaithful to syntax and grammatical rules, so also the universe unfolds in novel and unpredictable ways at the level of dramatic meaning while remaining completely predictable at the level of its grammatical constraints—or what conflict and contrast refer to as "nature's laws." A piece of literature can express a completely new and unpredictable meaning not by violating grammatical rules but by sticking to them. So can the cosmos.

In literature the writing of a drama or novel, regardless of the direction in which its meaning or set of meanings unfolds, always employs and obeys the same set of grammatical rules. Notice, however, that the rules of grammar are not prison walls but instead enabling conditions that allow for the expression of an indeterminate range of meanings. Whether one is writing fiction or nonfiction, the same set of syntactical regulations apply. Yet each piece of writing can be totally new and unprecedented. Grammar, rigid though it is, does not prevent surprising new meanings from appearing in speech and writing.

It is in the context of a still unfinished cosmic *story* of transformation that theology may speak of miracles without in any way contradicting science. We don't maintain that this is the only appropriate way to think of miracles theologically. Rather, our convergence approach simply acknowledges that the meaning of miracle stories in our holy books is to awaken us to the prospect that something new is breaking into the world as a whole and not just into our private subjectivity.

Conflict, dominated by the myth of scientism, understands nature as a collection of objects blindly bumping against or attracting one another physically in space and time. Following the dictates of scientific materialism, conflict interprets nature as driven by nothing more at bottom than unchanging and imprisoning physical laws. Such an outlook, however, is comparable to saying that a Shakespearean drama is nothing more than the expression of the invariant grammatical rules that underlie it.

To be sure, inflexible grammatical rules do "generate" every sentence and scene in a Shakespearean drama. But obviously there is much more going on in the drama than expertise in the rules of grammar can ever discover. Otherwise you would only have to go to a grammarian rather than a literary critic to understand a great piece of literature. Doing so, of course, would be silly. Likewise, consulting the expert in physics to find out whether the universe has a meaning or meanings is equally silly. There is much more going on in the cosmic story than chemistry and physics alone can illuminate. For example, there is the wondrous

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cosmic awakening to consciousness now taking place in our universe after nearly 14 billion years of dormancy. But scientific understanding of the mindless "laws" of physics and chemistry can tell you very little about any possible new meaning in this most dramatic epoch of cosmic transformation.5

Look at it this way. Each of us has to adhere scrupulously to the same set of grammatical rules if we expect our oral and written expressions to be intelligible to others. And yet we don't feel inhibited by these grammatical constraints. On the contrary, rigorous and unchanging grammatical rules expand, rather than reduce, the manifold ways in which our sentences can signify. Accordingly, you can safely predict that every intelligible essay you write in the future will adhere to the same inviolable set of grammatical regulations that you are using right now. Grammatical rules prescribe that the verb of every sentence must agree with its subject, that double negatives and sentence fragments should be avoided, and so on, but these rules don't inhibit your creativity. Just the opposite. Likewise, the regularity of the laws of nature is completely consistent with new and unexpected turns in the ongoing narrative transformation of what we call creation. If some of these events seem miraculous, it is not because they are violating the laws of nature, but because they are bringing something truly new into the sphere of being.

We now realize, in any case, that scientific laws are so abstract that they tell us very little about the concrete uniqueness or novelty of things that happen in the natural world or about any possible meaning in nature as such. In addition to the mathematical coherence that science seeks in its understanding of the laws of physics or chemistry, there is also a *narrative coherence* that faith and theology are seeking as they read the universe story. So there is no real conflict between faith and science. Understanding nature's laws as enabling conditions rather than fateful necessity allows us to interpret the mighty acts of God narrated by the Abrahamic traditions in a way that is completely consistent with scientific understanding on the one hand and the requirements of faith on the other.

Miracle stories and accounts of divine action are ways of expressing faith's conviction that something of special importance is going on in creation. But this dimension of importance cannot be grasped by science any more than studying grammar can comprehend Shakespeare's meaning. And just as Shakespeare's creative inventiveness does not disturb the predictable functioning of grammar, so also even the most dramatic developments in the story of cosmic transformation—especially the emergence of life, mind, freedom, and the miracle of love—do not interrupt the physical rules regulating atomic and molecular motion.

Unfortunately, the modern idea of scientific laws has made nature seem more like a lockup than liberation. The outdated legalistic metaphor still undergirds conflict's debunking of faith's expectation that surprising and unpredictable events can occur as the universe story continues into the future. To the mechanist the emergence of life and mind, for example, is nothing to wonder about since it is all just the playing out of physical necessity. Unfortunately, contrast also concedes too much to this shallow picture of what's going on in the universe. To convergence, however, once we realize that nature is a still unfolding story, the predictable "laws" of nature are no longer an oppressive set of restrictions. Instead they are grammatical conditions for the arrival of surprising new events and new meanings in the cosmic story.

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Viewing nature's routines as grammatical rules rather than draconian dictates allows for an endless reservoir of yet untapped meanings to be actualized as the cosmic story continues to unfurl.

The dramatic character of nature, therefore, now allows us to consolidate the theme of miracle with that of scriptural inspiration. Both "miracle" and "inspiration" are expressions of faith's sense that something radically new is breaking into the world. Convergence, therefore, views nature and scripture as two strands of a single inspired narrative. Before science discovered the cosmic story, people of faith thought we could learn about God by reading two separate books, the book of scripture and the book of nature. Theologians hoped the two books would not contradict each other, but reconciling them was often difficult.

Theologians and scientists both thought that perhaps they could find in nature's "design" a bridge between the two books. As we saw in the previous chapter, however, after Darwin nature does not seem to have been designed very carefully. Cells and organisms have been cobbled together haphazardly over an enormous amount of time, and most experiments have not worked. Only a few living beings have been adaptive enough to survive and reproduce. There have been tragedy and loss along with creativity. Evolution has at last given rise to consciousness, freedom, and the capacity for love, but it has also let into the universe an unprecedented capacity for suffering and evil.

Nevertheless, because the story of life and the universe is a work in progress, we may keep looking for a future coherence on the horizon up ahead. If the universe is a story, faith looks for its meaning not by fixing its attention on transitional instances of "engineering" or biological design, but by *waiting* for a narrative coherence that at present remains out of sight. The universe remains unfinished, so hope is still possible. It is their shared openness to the future that allows us now to merge our two books into one. The inspired books of our faith traditions, diverse though they may be, witness to a God who opens up not just our hearts but the whole universe to the creation of new meaning up ahead.

For centuries people everywhere have told stories and derived meaning from them without understanding formally the grammatical rules that make storytelling possible. The discovery and articulation of grammatical rules or "generative grammar" by modern linguistics is illuminating and interesting too. But even a sophisticated contemporary understanding of linguistics cannot tell you the meaning of a play or story. Comparably, nature has always been an unfolding story, but the recent scientific formulation of the laws of chemistry, physics, and biology will tell you nothing about any transformative meaning that may be coming to expression in this greatest of all epics. The quest for cosmic meaning leaves plenty of room for faith and theology in the age of science. And our sense of hope and expectation no more conflicts with science than the meaning of a story conflicts with the grammatical rules that allow it to be told.

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