

## Thinking About the Bible

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### Whatever Happened to the Supernatural?

In the early 1800s, Thomas Jefferson created his own new and improved (in his view) harmony of the four Gospels.<sup>1</sup> In one of the first cut/paste word processing operations (literally—cutting up a Bible and reorganizing it) Jefferson produced *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, commonly called “The Jefferson Bible.” He purposely omitted all miracles and supernatural references, concentrating on the moral teachings of Jesus. This has caused criticism over the past two centuries, although Jefferson claims his objective was simply to use the work in his personal devotions. Whatever the intent, it’s clear that Jefferson was uncomfortable with the supernatural.

We would certainly expect the secular world to hold a wide range of beliefs about the supernatural.<sup>2</sup> There are plenty of disbelieving naturalists on one end of the spectrum with glassy-eyed mystics on the other and everything imaginable in-between. It’s disturbing, however, when Christianity’s response, like Jefferson’s, is to slice out those “embarrassing” miracles and narrow the focus exclusively to the physical.

While talk shows and paperbacks make millions peddling the supernatural, mainline Christianity seems to treat it as a pimple on the face of the gospel. Some pastors (and even entire denominations) tend to teach “around” the miraculous... “Surely there’s a natural explanation for the awkwardness of a talking donkey (Numbers 22) or a natural reason for the delay of a sunset (2 Kings 20). When the Red Sea parted (Exodus 14) wasn’t that just an exaggeration of the annual drought cycle? And that big fish story (Jonah 1)—isn’t it just an allegory?”

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<sup>1</sup> *Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia*, www.monticello.org, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> The TV series *The X-Files* offers a smorgasbord of paranormal scenarios. I’m not advocating binge-watching it all, but it does seem to be almost a metaphor for our current supernatural confusion. Throughout the hodge-podge collection of paranormal episodes, the viewer senses a common thread. Some believe, some don’t, some “want to believe.”

Christian discourse today seems quite pleased to limit biblical supernatural elements to a nebulous deity, a naturalistic creation, and an allegorical resurrection. I believe this fragmented view of the supernatural has seriously disabled the view of reality held by many Christians. Our hymns and creeds readily affirm a transcendent, intervening Creator, but on Monday, a vague once-upon-a-time creation event is more tolerable. We ease our “miracle-anxiety” with a clockwork, cause-and-effect physical universe that is comfortably explainable. When cornered by the supernatural, we often rush to make up arbitrary rules about it, then struggle to make them fit the visible universe. Bland, deconstructed scriptural miracles fit more smoothly into secular conversations, as we keep the supernatural at a safe distance, tucked far away in time and space.<sup>3</sup> Michael Heiser rightly notes...

...many Christians claim to believe in the supernatural but think (and live) like skeptics. We find talk of the supernatural world uncomfortable.<sup>4</sup>

It seems ironic that one could believe an almighty Creator spoke into nothingness and an entire universe sprang into existence, then doubt that the same Creator can create new limbs on a paraplegic. Can a Creator who designed the DNA of a vine, then swirled a solar system so that fruits grow in the sunshine of a balanced ecosystem, not be able to change molecules of water into molecules of wine? When God chooses to intervene miraculously, it's neither harder nor easier for him than creating the cause-and-effect universe in which he intervenes. To the motion of the smallest subatomic particle, he remains sovereign over his creation.

Our problems with miracles are directly proportional to problems with our view of God himself. As J.B. Phillips chided, “Your God is too small!”<sup>5</sup> Yet this is occurring despite the most intimate indication of the supernatural. Within our very souls—our inner selves—we feel hopelessly entangled with the transcendent. We sense that the Story *must* have a sequel beyond the front and back covers of the present plot.

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<sup>3</sup> Another segment of contemporary Christianity pushes the view of the supernatural to the other extreme. In growing numbers, these believers pursue transcendent experiences as a regular component of worship. There is certainly nothing wrong with the Spirit-led desire for the miraculous, but not at the expense of balanced spiritual discipline. According to Heiser this group is “so busy seeking some interaction with [the supernatural] that it has become unconcerned with its biblical moorings...” In the end, contrived or exaggerated “miracles” lead away from scriptural truth as effectively as naturalism.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> J.B. Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small*, (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1952).

I don't follow the naturalists' line that this experience is merely the psychological result of some evolutionary survival trait. Scripture informs us that God has "set eternity in the human heart."<sup>6</sup> The thought of an absolute "final page" is foreign to our spiritual DNA. We can understand a change from *this to that*, or *here to there*, but not *something to nothing*. One of the characters in the play *Our Town* sums it up...

We all know that something is eternal. And it ain't houses and it ain't names, and it ain't earth, and it ain't even the stars... everybody knows in their bones that something is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings.<sup>7</sup>

And certainly not to be overlooked, true believers have the very Spirit of God living within. In some incomprehensible, yet palpable way, his Spirit communicates with ours. God graciously provides the gift of an immediate connection to *his* supernatural realm.

Much of our supernatural apprehension can be traced to the emphasis on scientism that emerged during the Age of Enlightenment.<sup>8</sup> The shift from God-centered to man-centered paradigms in many different disciplines concentrated our thinking on material explanations rather than those unseen. Empirical thought became the preferred source of truth over mere faith and tradition...

The liberalism of [the nineteenth century] denied all of the supernatural elements of the Christian faith, including the virgin birth of Jesus, His miracles, His atoning death, and His resurrection. The supernatural was stripped altogether from Christianity.<sup>9</sup>

It's doubtful that many would want to rewind all the changes brought by the Enlightenment. Antibiotics are my first choice for treating strep. Yes, I pray for healing, but I usually don't have to resort to exorcising a spirit of sickness. And good scientific reasoning has clearly revealed much about the creation. Many scientists eagerly used the scientific method as a tool of theology. At the dawn of this Age of Reason, Johannes Kepler saw this new empirical science

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<sup>6</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:11.

<sup>7</sup> Thornton Wilder, *Our Town: A Play in Three Acts*, (U.S.: HarperCollins, 1938).

<sup>8</sup> As opposed to pure scientific methods and objective conclusions, scientism refers to the philosophy that advocates empiricism to the exclusion of other ways of knowing.

<sup>9</sup> R.C. Sproul, "Christianity is a Supernatural Faith," [www.ligonier.org](http://www.ligonier.org), Nov 11, 2013.

as “thinking God’s thought after him.”<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, the miraculous in large part has taken a backseat to the natural.

From 1985 to 2006, a group of Bible scholars and lay leaders met under the name *The Jesus Seminar*. Their objective was to determine which of the “Jesus accounts” in the Bible were true. The group of Christians essentially accomplished what Jefferson had done previously, namely, eliminating any associations of Jesus with the supernatural.

A more recent contributing factor has been the rise of the militant “new atheist religion” and their “deacons” within the naturalistic scientist congregation. A relatively small band of outspoken atheists has disproportionately muzzled many in academia, especially seminaries. Christian professors, scientists, pastors, and lay-thinkers, in general, are often bullied by the politically correct leanings of their peers. It’s far easier to ignore biblical super-nature and dwell on social engagement.

To the dismay of leaders within radical atheism, most of those who identify as non-theist still seem to sense and believe in something beyond.<sup>11</sup> But even though belief in the transcendent is widespread, a significant problem remains. Without a genuine relationship with the supernatural Christ of Scripture, unregenerate humans tend to seek some other path of transcendence, usually one without that old-fashioned sin-and-accountability stigma.

And adding to the confusion, many within mainline churches follow suit. They feel that the transcendent is undeniable, but distorted and human-oriented experiences seem to offer a better and easier way to pursue the supernatural.

One recent study revealed that belief in the biblical supernatural has no bearing on a person’s belief in the non-biblical paranormal.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the average American could believe in God *and* ghosts with no notable contradictions. Other polls regarding ghosts, UFOs, and the paranormal in general, reveal that there isn’t even a significant difference between believers and non-believers. Why do many Christians seem so hesitant to accept biblical supernatural events, yet dive headlong into the deception *du jour*? Both extremes undermine a truly Christian worldview.

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<sup>10</sup> Johannes Kepler, “A letter to the Bavarian chancellor Herwart von Hohenburg,” 1599. Likely a paraphrase of “Those laws [of science] are within the grasp of the human mind; God wanted us to recognize them by creating us after his own image so that we could share in his own thoughts.”

<sup>11</sup> John Templeton Foundation, “Towards a Psychology and Sociology of Atheism and Non-belief,” [www.templeton.org](http://www.templeton.org), 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Tom W. Rice, “Believe It or Not: Religious and Other Paranormal Beliefs in the United States,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 2003, 42(1), 95-106.