

~~"You don't believe in me," observed the Ghost.~~

~~"I don't," said Scrooge.~~

~~"What evidence would you have of my reality beyond that of your senses?"~~

~~"I don't know," said Scrooge.~~

~~"Why do you doubt your senses?"~~

~~"Because," said Scrooge, "a little thing affects them. A slight disorder of the stomach makes them cheats. You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of underdone potato. There's more gravy than grave about you, whatever you are."~~

~~"... You see this toothpick?" said Scrooge.~~

~~"I do," replied the Ghost.~~

~~"... Well!" returned Scrooge, "I have but to swallow this, and be for the rest of my life persecuted by a legion of goblins, all of my own creation. Humbug, I tell you! Humbug!"~~

~~At this the spirit raised a frightful cry and shook its chain with such a dismal and appalling noise, that Scrooge held tight to his chair, to save himself from falling into a swoon. But how much greater was his horror, when the phantom, taking off the bandage round its head ... its lower jaw dropped down upon its breast!~~

~~Scrooge fell upon his knees, and clasped his hands before his face.~~

~~"Mercy!" he said. "Dreadful apparition, why do you trouble me?"~~

~~"Man of worldly mind!" replied the Ghost, "do you believe in me or not?"~~

~~"I do," said Scrooge. "I must."<sup>21</sup>~~

~~Such studied skepticism as Scrooge's becomes untenable when confronted with the evident reality of such a striking miracle. Can we imagine, for example, doubting Thomas, when confronted with the risen Jesus, studiously considering whether what he saw palpably before him might not be the effect of an unknown natural cause? Had Jesus himself encountered such skepticism, would he not have attributed it to hardness of heart? In this light, such skepticism need not be demonstratively refuted but is self-condemned. Perhaps Pascal was right in saying that God has given evidence sufficiently clear for those with an open heart, but sufficiently vague so as not to compel those whose hearts are closed.~~

## *Hume's Objections*

### "IN PRINCIPLE" ARGUMENT

Hume's "in principle" argument, despite its influence, especially upon biblical scholars, is generally recognized by philosophers today to be, in the words of the

21. Charles Dickens, "A Christmas Carol," in *Christmas Books*, by Charles Dickens (London: Oxford, 1954), 18–19.

philosopher of science John Earman, an “abject failure.”<sup>22</sup> Even Hume’s admirers try at most to salvage some insightful nugget from his convoluted discussion, typically Hume’s maxim that “no testimony . . . is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless this testimony is of such a kind that . . . its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact which it endeavours to establish.” But, as we shall see, even that maxim requires re-interpretation.

Hume’s argument actually falls into two more or less independent claims. On the one hand there is his claim that miracles are by definition utterly improbable; on the other hand there is his claim that no evidence for a purported miracle can serve to overcome its intrinsic improbability. As it turns out, both of these claims are mistaken.

Consider the second claim first, that no amount of evidence can serve to establish a miracle. Stimulated by Hume’s argument against miracles, there arose a discussion among probability theorists from Condorcet to John Stuart Mill over how much evidence it takes in order to establish the occurrence of highly improbable events.<sup>23</sup> It was soon realized that if one simply weighed the probability of the event against the reliability of the witness to the event, then we should be led into denying the occurrence of events which, though highly improbable, we reasonably know to have happened. For example, if on the morning news you hear reported that the pick in last night’s lottery was 7492871, this is a report of an extraordinarily improbable event, one out of several million, and even if the morning news’ accuracy is known to be 99.99 percent, the improbability of the event reported will swamp the probability of the witness’s reliability, so that we should never believe such reports. In order to believe the report, Hume would require us to have enough evidence in favor of the morning news’s reliability to counter-balance the improbability of the winning pick, which is absurd. Paley was therefore quite correct when he charged that Hume’s argument could lead us into situations where we would be forced to deny the testimony of the most reliable witnesses because of general considerations. And that goes not only for miraculous events, but, as Sherlock and Less urged, for non-miraculous events as well, as Hume himself admitted with respect to the man in the tropics confronted with travelers’ tales of ice.

Probability theorists saw that what also needs to be considered is the probability that if the reported event has *not* occurred, then the witness’s testimony is just as it is. As Mill wrote,

To know whether a coincidence does or does not require more evidence to render it credible than an ordinary event, we must refer, in every instance, to first principles,

22. John Earman, *Hume’s Abject Failure: The Argument against Miracles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

23. See S. L. Zabell, “The Probabilistic Analysis of Testimony,” *Journal of Statistical Planning and Inference* 20 (1988): 327–54.

and estimate afresh what is the probability that the given testimony would have been delivered in that instance, supposing the fact which it asserts not to be true.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, to return to our example, the probability that the morning news would announce the pick as 7492871 if some other number had been chosen is incredibly small, given that the newscasters had no preference for the announced number. On the other hand, the announcement is much more probable if 7492871 were the actual number chosen. This comparative likelihood easily counterbalances the high prior improbability of the event reported.

The realization on the part of probability theorists that other factors need to be included in the correct calculation of the probability of some event comes to expression in Bayes' Theorem, which we encountered in chapter 1. Letting  $M$  = some miraculous event,  $E$  = the specific evidence for that event, and  $B$  = our background knowledge apart from the specific evidence, the so-called "odds form" of Bayes' Theorem states:

$$\frac{\Pr(M|E\&B)}{\Pr(\text{not-}M|E\&B)} = \frac{\Pr(M|B)}{\Pr(\text{not-}M|B)} \times \frac{\Pr(E|M\&B)}{\Pr(E|\text{not-}M\&B)}$$

On the left-hand side of the equation  $\Pr(M|E\&B)$  represents the probability of the miracle given the total evidence, and  $\Pr(\text{not-}M|E\&B)$  represents the probability of the miracle's not occurring given the total evidence. The odds form of Bayes' Theorem gives us the ratio of these two probabilities.<sup>25</sup> If the ratio is 1/1, then  $M$  and  $\text{not-}M$  have the same probability; the odds of  $M$ 's occurring are, as they say, fifty/fifty, or 50 percent. If we represent this ratio as  $A/B$ , what Hume wants to show is that, in principle,  $A < B$ —for example, 2/3 or 4/9 or what have you. So given the odds, one could never rationally believe, no matter what the evidence, that a miracle has taken place.

Now whether the miracle is more probable than not will be determined by the ratios on the right hand side of the equation. In the first ratio, the numerator  $\Pr(M|B)$  represents the intrinsic probability of the miracle, and the denominator  $\Pr(\text{not-}M|B)$  represents the intrinsic probability of the miracle's not occurring. We're asking here which is more probable,  $M$  or  $\text{not-}M$ , relative to our background knowledge alone, abstracting from the specific evidence for  $M$ . In the second ratio the numerator  $\Pr(E|M\&B)$  represents the explanatory power of the miracle, and the denominator  $\Pr(E|\text{not-}M\&B)$  represents the explanatory power

24. J. S. Mill, *A System of Logic*, 2 vols. (London: 1843), bk. 3, chap. 25, §6, cited in Zabell, "Probabilistic Analysis of Testimony," 331.

25. Given this ratio we can also compute the actual probability of  $M$ . If we represent the ratio as  $A/B$ , then we can compute the probability of  $M$  given the total evidence by  $A/(A+B)$ . So if the ratio is 2/3, then the probability of  $M$  given the total evidence is  $2/(2+3) = 2/5 = .4$ , or 40%.

of the miracle's not occurring. We're asking here which best explains the specific evidence we have, M or not-M.

Now notice that even if the ratio of the intrinsic probabilities weighs heavily against M, that improbability can be offset if the ratio representing the explanatory power of M or not-M weighs equally or greater in favor of M. For example,  $(1/100) \times (100/1) = 100/100 = 1/1$ , or a 50% probability for M.

Unfortunately, Hume never discusses the second ratio representing the explanatory power of the miracle's occurring or not occurring. He focuses almost exclusively on  $\Pr(M|B)$ , the intrinsic probability of a miracle, claiming that it is so inevitably low that no amount of evidence can establish a miracle. But that is plainly wrong, since no matter what non-zero value one assigns to the first ratio, the miracle may be very probable on the total evidence if the second ratio is sufficiently large.<sup>26</sup> So much for Hume's in principle argument!

Hume does say that "no testimony . . . is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless this testimony is of such a kind that . . . its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact which it endeavours to establish." This is the closest Hume comes to discerning the remaining factors in the probability calculus. Hume's way of putting his maxim is rhetorically loaded, however, equivocating on the term "miraculous." Since it is not at all miraculous that human testimony be false, any miracle, no matter how small, would seem to be more miraculous than the testimony's being false. Indeed, it would seem almost sacrilegious to suggest, for example, that the disciples' being mistaken would be a greater miracle than Christ's resurrection! But Hume's maxim is not really using "miraculous" in the sense of "naturally impossible." To see this point, suppose, for the sake of argument, that it is more intrinsically probable that Jesus would rise from the dead than that the disciples were either deceivers or deceived. In such a case their testimony may, indeed, be sufficient to establish the fact of Jesus' resurrection, even though Jesus' resurrection is, technically speaking, more miraculous than their testimony's being false. Of course, Hume argues that a miraculous event will always be more improbable than the falsehood of the testimony in support of it. But that only goes to underline the point that the real issue here is the probability of the events, not their miraculousness. The miraculousness of an event is merely the means by which Hume endeavors to show its improbability. It's the improbability of miracle claims that Hume is after. So as Paley correctly discerned and as contemporary thinkers recognize, what

26. A further factor which is neglected by Hume is the remarkable impact of multiple, independent testimony to some event. If two witnesses are each 99% reliable, then the odds of their both independently testifying falsely to some event are only  $.01 \times .01 = .0001$ , or one out of 10,000; the odds of three such witnesses' being wrong is  $.01 \times .01 \times .01 = .000001$ , or one out of 1,000,000; and the odds of six such witnesses' being mistaken is  $.01 \times .01 \times .01 \times .01 \times .01 \times .01 = .000000000001$ , or one out of 1,000,000,000,000. In fact, the cumulative power of independent witnesses is such that individually they could be *unreliable* more than 50% of the time and yet their testimony combine to make an event of apparently enormous improbability quite probable in light of their testimony. With respect to Jesus' resurrection, it is difficult to know how independent some of the witnesses are—though in the cases of people like Peter, James, and Saul independence is well established.

Hume's maxim, less pejoratively stated, really means is "no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless this testimony is of such a kind that its falsehood would be more improbable than the fact which it endeavours to establish." Paley accepts Hume's maxim and challenges Hume's argument that it is always more probable that the testimony in support of a miracle is false than that the miracle actually occurred.

There is a slogan beloved in the free thought subculture that "extraordinary events require extraordinary evidence." What we now see is that this seemingly commonsensical slogan is, in fact, false as usually understood. In order to establish the occurrence of a highly improbable event, one need not have lots of evidence. The only plausible sense in which the slogan is true is that in order to establish the occurrence of an event which has a very low intrinsic probability, then the evidence would also have to have a very low intrinsic probability, that is,  $\Pr(E|B)$  would have to be very low. So, to return to our example of the pick in last night's lottery, it is highly improbable, given our background knowledge of the world, that the morning news would announce just that specific number out of all the numbers that could have been announced. In that Pickwickian sense the evidence for the winning pick is, indeed, extraordinary. But obviously, that isn't the sense that skeptics have in mind when they say that it takes extraordinary evidence to establish the occurrence of an extraordinary event. For that condition is easily met in the Pickwickian sense. The skeptic can't reasonably mean that miraculous events require miraculous evidence, for that would force us to reject any miracle claim, even if wholly natural evidence rendered the miracle more probable than not. What the skeptic seems to be saying by his slogan is that in order to believe rationally in a miraculous event, you must have an enormous amount of evidence. But why think that that is the case? "Because a miracle is so improbable," the skeptic will say. But Bayes' Theorem shows that rationally believing in a highly improbable event doesn't require an enormous amount of evidence. What is crucial is that the evidence be far more probable given that the event did occur than given that it did not. The bottom line is that it doesn't always take a huge amount of evidence to establish a miracle.

J. Howard Sobel takes Hume's maxim to assert that  $\Pr(M|E \& B) > 1/2$  only if  $\Pr(M|B) > \Pr(\text{not-}M \& E|B)$ .<sup>27</sup> Sobel's rendering of "the falsehood of the testimony" as  $\Pr(\text{not-}M \& E|B)$  is controverted,<sup>28</sup> but his formula does state a necessary condition of  $\Pr(M|E \& B) > 1/2$ . But there is nothing in this formula to show that it is in principle impossible to establish the occurrence of a miracle. One might think that relative to our background knowledge a miracle is always more improbable than the miracle's not occurring and the evidence's being as it is. But that is by

27. Jordan Howard Sobel, *Logic and Theism: Arguments for and against Beliefs in God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 316.

28. Earman takes it more plausibly to be  $\Pr(\text{not-}M|E \& B)$  or  $\Pr(E|\text{not-}M \& B)$ . He concludes, "Hume's Maxim is just the unhelpful tautology that no testimony is sufficient to establish the credibility of a miracle unless it is sufficient to make the occurrence more probable than not" (*Hume's Abject Failure*, 40).

no means the case. Remember that the evidence itself may be extraordinary in the Pickwickian sense of being, like the miracle, highly improbable relative to the background information alone, so that  $\Pr(\text{not-}M \& E | B) < \Pr(M | B)$ . Ironically, the skeptic's own slogan returns to bite him, for the evidence may well be extraordinary, that is, highly improbable relative to our background knowledge, so that Sobel's condition is met.

In order to show that no evidence can in principle establish the historicity of a miracle, Hume needs to show that the intrinsic probability of any miracle claim is so low that it can never be overcome. This takes us back to the first part of Hume's argument, that miracles are by definition utterly improbable. Hume claimed that the uniform experience of mankind supports the laws of nature rather than miracles. Now such an assertion appears at face value to be question-begging. To say that uniform experience is against miracles is implicitly to assume already that all miracle reports are false. Earman interprets Hume to mean, not that uniform experience is against miracles, but that up to the case under investigation, uniform experience has been against miracles; that is to say, as we come to some alleged miracle claim, we do so knowing that all past miracle claims apart from this one have been spurious. Earman interprets Hume to construe  $\Pr(M | B)$  in terms of *frequency*. Miracles are utterly improbable because they diverge from mankind's uniform experience. But Earman points out that the frequency model of probability simply will not work in this context. For trying to construe the probabilities in Bayes' Theorem as objective frequencies would disqualify many of the theoretical hypotheses of the advanced sciences. For example, scientists are investing long hours and millions of dollars hoping for an observation of an event of proton decay, though such an event has never been observed. On Hume's model of probability such research is a waste of time and money, since the event will have a probability of zero. Earman concludes that in the case of  $\Pr(M | B)$  the guidance for assigning probability "cannot take the simple minded form" of using the frequency of M-type events in past experience; that frequency may be flatly zero (as in proton decay), but it would be unwise to therefore set  $\Pr(M | B) = 0$ .<sup>29</sup>

How we assess the intrinsic probability of M will depend on how M is characterized. Take the resurrection of Jesus, for example. The hypothesis "Jesus rose from the dead" is ambiguous, comprising two radically different hypotheses. One is that "Jesus rose naturally from the dead"; the other is that "Jesus rose supernaturally from the dead," or that "God raised Jesus from the dead." The former is agreed on all hands to be outrageously improbable. Given what we know of cell necrosis, the hypothesis "Jesus rose naturally from the dead" is fantastically, even unimaginably, improbable. Conspiracy theories, apparent death theories, hallucination theories, twin brother theories—almost any hypothesis, however unlikely, seems more probable than the hypothesis that all the cells in Jesus' corpse spontaneously came back to life again. Accordingly, that improbability will lower greatly the probability that

29. John Earman, "Bayes, Hume, and Miracles," *Faith and Philosophy* 10 (1993): 303.

“Jesus rose from the dead,” since that probability will be a function of its two component hypotheses, the one natural and the other supernatural. But the evidence for the laws of nature which renders improbable the hypothesis that Jesus rose naturally from the grave is simply irrelevant to the probability of the hypothesis that God raised Jesus from the dead. Since our interest is in whether Jesus rose supernaturally from the dead, we can assess this hypothesis on its own.

Let us ask, then, what is the intrinsic probability of the hypothesis  $R$  = “God raised Jesus from the dead.” How we assess  $\Pr(R|B)$  will depend on whether our background knowledge  $B$  includes the facts which support the arguments of natural theology for God’s existence, such as the origin of the universe, the fine-tuning of the universe, objective moral values and duties, and so forth. If it does not, the  $\Pr(R|B)$  will be lower than if it does, for then our evidence  $E$  will have to carry the full burden of justifying belief in God’s existence as well as Jesus’ resurrection. If we let  $G$  = God’s existence, the Theorem on Total Probability tells us:

$$\Pr(R|B) = [\Pr(R|G \& B) \times \Pr(G|B)] + [\Pr(R|\text{not-}G \& B) \times \Pr(\text{not-}G|B)]$$

Now  $\Pr(R|\text{not-}G \& B)$  is 0, since it is impossible for God to raise Jesus if God doesn’t exist! So  $\Pr(R|B)$  reduces to just  $\Pr(R|G \& B) \times \Pr(G|B)$ . As we have seen, the classical defenders of miracles did not treat them as arguments for God’s existence; rather God’s existence was taken to be implied by facts already included in  $B$ . So let’s include in  $B$  all the facts that go to support the premises of the arguments of natural theology. On this basis let’s suppose that the probability of God’s existence on the background knowledge of the world  $\Pr(G|B)$  is at least 0.5. The remaining probability to estimate is  $\Pr(R|G \& B)$ , the probability that God would raise Jesus from the dead, given that God exists. We may think of this probability as the degree of expectation that a perfectly rational agent would have that, given  $G \& B$ , God would raise Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. God has never before intervened to do such a thing, so far as we know, and there are other ways he could vindicate Jesus, should he want to, if he even wants to. So how would a perfectly rational agent assess the risk of betting in this case that, given  $G \& B$ , God would raise Jesus from the dead? In estimating this probability, we mustn’t abstract from the historical context of Jesus’ own life, ministry, and teaching, insofar as these can be included in our background knowledge. When we include in  $B$  our knowledge of the life of the historical Jesus up to the time of his crucifixion and burial, I don’t think we can say that God’s raising Jesus is improbable. So just for the sake of illustration let’s say that  $\Pr(R|G \& B) = 0.5$ . In that case  $\Pr(R|B) = 0.5 \times 0.5 = 0.25$ , or one out of four. Such an intrinsic improbability is easily outweighed by the other factors in Bayes’ Theorem.

Now in fact I think that it is impossible to assign a value to a probability like  $\Pr(R|G \& B)$  with any sort of confidence, and so  $\Pr(R|B)$  will remain inscrutable. The difficulty here is that we are dealing with a free agent (the Creator of the universe), and how do we know what he would do with respect to Jesus? But I



think we can say that there is no reason to think that  $\Pr(R|G\&B)$  is terribly low, such that  $\Pr(R|B)$  becomes overwhelmingly improbable. We certainly cannot take  $\Pr(R|G\&B)$  to be terribly low simply because of the infrequency of resurrections, for it may be precisely *because* of the resurrection's uniqueness that it is highly probable that God would choose so spectacular an event as a means of vindicating Jesus.

In any case, I think it is evident that there is no "in principle" argument here against miracles. Rather what will be at stake, as our example of Jesus' resurrection illustrates, is an "in fact" argument that handles a putative miracle claim in its historical context, given the evidence for God's existence. So the Humean skeptic has failed to show that any possible miracle claim has an insuperably low intrinsic probability. Couple this result with our earlier conclusion that even incredibly low intrinsic probabilities can be outweighed by the other factors in Bayes' Theorem, and it is evident why contemporary thinkers have come to see Hume's argument as a failure.<sup>30</sup>

Although the fallaciousness of Hume's reasoning has been recognized by the majority of philosophers writing on the subject today, still a widespread assumption persists that if historical inquiry is to be feasible, then one must adopt a sort of methodological naturalism as a fundamental historiographical principle. According to this outlook, historians must adopt as a methodological principle a sort of "historical naturalism" that excludes the supernatural. Antony Flew, while acknowledging the failure of Hume's argument, has sought to defend the presumption against miracles in historical studies. He writes:

It is only and precisely by presuming that the laws that hold today held in the past and by employing as canons all our knowledge . . . of what is probable or improbable, possible or impossible, that we can rationally interpret the detritus of the past as evidence and from it construct our account of what actually happened. But in this context, what is impossible is what is physically, as opposed to logically impossible. And "physical possibility" is, and surely has to be, defined in terms of inconsistency with a true law of nature. . . . Our sole ground for characterizing a reported occurrence as miraculous is at the same time a sufficient reason for calling it physically impossible.<sup>31</sup>

This viewpoint is simply a restatement of the nineteenth-century German theologian Ernst Troeltsch's principle of analogy. According to Troeltsch, one of the most basic historiographical principles is that the past does not differ essentially from the present. Though the events of the past are obviously not the same events as those of the present, they must be the same kind of events if historical investigation is to be possible. Troeltsch realized that this principle was incompatible

30. I'm indebted to Tim and Lydia McGrew, epistemologists who specialize in confirmation theory, for very interesting and illuminating discussions of Hume's "in principle" argument.

31. *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Miracles."



with the miraculous events of the Gospels and therefore held that they must be regarded as unhistorical.

In our own day, however, Wolfhart Pannenberg has persuasively argued that Troeltsch's principle of analogy cannot be legitimately employed to banish all non-analogous events from history. According to Pannenberg, analogy, when properly defined, means that in an unclear historical situation we should interpret the facts in terms of known experience. Troeltsch, however, uses analogy to constrict all past events to purely natural events. But, Pannenberg maintains, the fact that an event bursts all analogies to the present cannot be used to dispute its historicity. When, for example, myths, legends, illusions, and the like are dismissed as unhistorical, it is not because they are unusual but because they are analogous to present forms of consciousness to which no historical reality corresponds. When an event is said to have occurred for which no present analogy exists, we cannot automatically dismiss its historicity; to do that we must have an analogy to some known form of consciousness to which no reality corresponds that would suffice to explain the situation.

Pannenberg has thus reformulated Troeltsch's principle of analogy in such a way that it is not the *lack* of an analogy that shows an event to be unhistorical, but the *presence* of a positive analogy to known thought forms that shows a purported miracle to be unhistorical. Hence, he has elsewhere affirmed that if the Easter narratives were shown to be essentially secondary constructions analogous to common comparative religious phenomena, if the Easter appearances were shown to correspond completely to the model of hallucinations, and if the empty tomb tradition were shown to be a late legend, then the resurrection should be evaluated as unhistorical. In this way the lack of an analogy to present experience says nothing for or against the historicity of an event. Pannenberg's use of the principle preserves the analogous structure of the past to the present or to the known, thus making the investigation of history possible without thereby forcing the past into the mold of the present. It would therefore seem that Hume's "in principle" argument fares no better than Spinoza's objections.

#### "IN FACT" ARGUMENTS

If, then, there is no "in principle" objection to the identification of miracles, what may be said of Hume's "in fact" arguments? All of his points have force, but the fact remains that these general considerations cannot be used to decide the historicity of any particular miracle. They serve to make us cautious in the investigation of any miracle, but the only way the question of historicity can be solved is through such an investigation. Hume's fourth point (that miracles occur in all religions and thereby cancel each other out) does try to preclude an investigation, but it still remains an empirical question whether the evidence for any miracle supporting a counter-Christian claim is as well (or better) attested as the evidence for Jesus' miracles and resurrection. And if the latter should prove to be genuine, then we

can forgo the investigation of every single counter-Christian miracle, for most of these pale into insignificance next to the Gospel miracles.

### Conclusion

Hence, I think that for the most part the Christian apologists argued correctly against their Deist opponents; and it is sad that the nineteenth century failed to discern this fact. The presupposition against miracles survives in theology only as a hangover from an earlier Deistic age and ought now to be once for all abandoned.

### Practical Application

Like the contents of the last chapter, the material shared in this chapter does not, I must confess, admit of much practical application in evangelism. I've never encountered a non-Christian who rejected the gospel because of an overt objection to miracles.

Nevertheless, this section is extremely important because the presupposition of modern biblical criticism has been the impossibility or unidentifiability of miracles, so that an open-minded approach to the Scriptures necessitates a prior defense of the rationality of belief in miracles. For example, the infamous Jesus Seminar, a group of radical New Testament critics committed to reforming the church's view of Jesus, has dismissed most of the New Testament witness to the life of Jesus as unhistorical. In explaining the presuppositions with which its Fellows work, the Jesus Seminar is remarkably candid about its presupposition of the impossibility of miracles. Their Introduction to *The Five Gospels* states:

The contemporary religious controversy turns on whether the worldview reflected in the Bible can be carried forward into this scientific age and retained as an article of faith. . . . the Christ of creed and dogma . . . can no longer command the assent of those who have seen the heavens through Galileo's telescope.<sup>32</sup>

But why, we might ask, is it impossible in a scientific age to believe in a supernatural Christ? Here things really get interesting. According to the Seminar, the historical Jesus by definition must be a non-supernatural figure. At this point they appeal to D. F. Strauss, the nineteenth-century German biblical critic. Strauss's epochal book *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* was based squarely in a philosophy of naturalism. According to Strauss, God does not act directly in the world; he acts only indirectly through natural causes. With regard to the resurrection, as we have seen, Strauss states that God's raising Jesus from the dead "is irreconcilable with enlightened ideas of the relation of God to the world."<sup>33</sup> Now look carefully at what the Jesus Seminar says about Strauss:

32. R. W. Funk, R. W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, "Introduction" to *The Five Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 2.

33. David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*, trans. George Eliot, ed. with an introduction by Peter C. Hodgson, Lives of Jesus Series (London: SCM, 1973), 736.