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Historians and Miracle Claims

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Abstract

Most biblical scholars and historians hold that the investigation of a miracle report lies outside of the rights of historians acting within their professional capacity. In this essay, I challenge this position and argue to the contrary. A definition of history should not *a priori* exclude the possibility of investigating miracle claims, since doing so may restrict historians to an inaccurate assessment of the past. Professional historians outside of the community of biblical scholars acknowledge the frequent absence of a consensus; this largely results from conflicting horizons among historians. If this is the present state among professionals engaged in the study of non-religious history, it will be even more so with historians of Jesus. Finally, even if some historians cannot bring themselves to grant divine causation, they, in principle, can render a verdict on the event itself without rendering a verdict on its cause.

Keywords

criteria – historical Jesus – method – methodological naturalism – miracles

A number of years ago, my wife was involved in a car accident and sustained a serious injury. The other driver's insurance company was stubborn and refused to pay most of the expenses we incurred. So it went to trial. I was one of the first witnesses called; at one point I stated that the insurance company had resisted assistance to the point of being unwilling to provide a rental car while ours was being repaired. The moment I said this, the defence attorney objected and made a motion. The judge then dismissed me, then the jury. A few moments later I learned that the judge had declared a mistrial. I had been unaware that 'insurance company' was a forbidden term in a trial of this nature.

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Something similar often happens in the field of historical Jesus research. There is a lot of discussion over what the 'real' Jesus actually said and did. But when anyone mentions the term 'miracle' it is not uncommon for some scholars to jump to their feet and shout, 'Objection! You cannot go there as a historian'. Although I am not an attorney, I am willing to bet there are good reasons for barring the mention of the insurance company involved. After all, insurance companies are big, impersonal corporations with deep pockets. Reminding jurors of this might bias them towards finding for the plaintiff. There are likewise reasons provided for why historians are forbidden from investigating miracle claims. If these reasons are valid, then historians interested in checking out the truth claims of particular religions such as Judaism and Christianity are forbidden from doing so, at least from within their professional capacity. Historians, for example, could acknowledge that a number of people had experiences they believed were post-mortem appearances of Jesus to them. But they would be unable to answer the question of whether Jesus actually returned alive from the dead. In this essay I challenge this paradigm.

Defining 'History'

While biblical scholars have begun to write more on the challenges inherent in historical knowledge and some are opting for postmodernist approaches, professional historians outside the community of biblical scholars have extensively debated the nature of history and historical investigation for the past few decades. In spite of the plethora of literature advocating postmodernist approaches to history, the majority of historians remain realists and hold that if a past event left traces, it can be the subject of historical inquiry. According to historian Brian Fay, the linguistic turn is over:

> Except for some interesting exceptions at the margins of the discipline, historical practice is pretty much the same in 1997 as it was in 1967: historians seek to describe accurately and to explain cogently how and why a certain event or situation occurred… For all the talk of narrativism, presentism, postmodernism, and deconstruction, historians write pretty much the same way as they always have (even though what they write about may be quite new).[1]

1 Brian Fay, 'Nothing but History?' *History and Theory* 37.2 (1998), pp. 83–93 (83). See also Mark T. Gilderhus, *History and Historians: A Historiographical Introduction* (6th edn; Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2007), p. 124.

Even some postmodern historians agree. David Roberts admits that Ernst Breisach may be correct that postmodernism has come and gone among historians.[2] Even Keith Jenkins who is one of the three leading lights among postmodernist historians confesses that 'most historians—and certainly most of those who might be termed "academic" or professional "proper" historians—have been resistant to that postmodernism which has affected so many of their colleagues in adjacent discourses'.[3]

Notwithstanding the prevalence of realism, there is still disagreement among historians pertaining to what it is they are actually doing or seeking to do in historical investigation. The term 'history' is itself an essentially contested concept; that is, there is no widely accepted definition for the term. In my research, I discovered 16 definitions of 'history', although many of them are not mutually exclusive. Philosopher of history Aviezer Tucker defines history simply as 'past events'.[4] Other historians contend that, since the past is forever beyond our reach, history is not 'past events' but rather a historian's reasoned hypothesis of what occurred in the past based upon its surviving traces.[5] I do not here wish to argue for a particular definition of 'history'. However, in this essay that addresses whether historians are within their professional capacity to investigate and adjudicate on a miracle claim, it is my objective to address a certain definition of history that may be employed as a means of *a priori* prohibiting historians from adjudicating on a miracle claim. This definition is espoused by R.G. Collingwood, Geoffrey Elton, J.H. Hexter, and more recently

2 David D. Roberts, 'Postmodernism and History: Missing the Missed Connections', *History and Theory* 44.5 (2005), p. 252.

3 Keith Jenkins, 'Introduction: On Being Open about our Closures', in Keith Jenkins (ed.), *The Postmodern History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 1–30 (1; cf. 9). See also Richard J. Evans, 'From Historicism to Postmodernism: Historiography in the Twentieth Century', *History and Theory* 41.2 (2002), pp. 79–87 (81); Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge with a New Epilogue* (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press), pp. 133, 145, 150; Nancy F. Partner, 'History in an Age of Reality-Fictions', in *A New Philosophy of History* (eds. Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner; Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 21–39; Perez Zagorin, 'History, the Referent, and Narrative: Reflections on Postmodernism Now', *History and Theory* 38.2 (1999), pp. 1–24 (1, 3, 9); John Zammito, 'Ankersmit and Historical Representation', *History and Theory* 44.5 (2005), pp. 155–81 (161, 163).

4 Aviezer Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past: A Philosophy of Historiography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 1.

5 Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), p. 107, cited by Rex Martin, 'How the Past Stands with Us', *History and Theory* 44.2 (2005), p. 140; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996), pp. 81–82.

by Robert Webb. These contend that historical inquiry 'concerns events in the past involving humans as agents'.[6] In this essay, I will focus my comments in relation to the recent essay in this same journal by Webb.

The practice of history can be a challenging exercise, since as Webb writes, 'we in the present…actually have no direct access to that past event at all, and we won't until time travel is invented!'[7] Webb rightly states that not all investigations of past events belong to the discipline of history. For example, the Ice Age that shaped the Rocky Mountains belong to the discipline of geology rather than history.[8] We may say the same concerning the formation of galaxies, which belongs to the discipline of cosmology. Even living beings such as dinosaurs belong to the discipline of palaeontology rather than history. Webb then concludes that human agency is a necessary component in the definition of history.

He further contends this requires a

> *definitional limitation: what is usually understood to constitute history is not making an ontological statement about the totality of reality; rather, it is recognizing that the modern discipline of history focuses on a particular facet of that reality* [Webb's emphasis]. For those whose worldview includes a supernatural realm and the possibility of theistic causation in human events, this view of history is limiting. Those who hold this worldview may respond in two different ways: they may define the breadth of history to include the possibility of divine causation…or they may view this understanding to be a definitional limitation of the modern discipline of history and how it functions, without it being an ontological statement about the nature of reality. This latter view I could call 'methodological-naturalistic history'—in other words, for the purposes of doing historical work, the historian is methodologically limited to

6 Robert L. Webb, 'The Historical Enterprise and Historical Jesus Research', in Darrell L. Bock and Robert L. Webb (eds.), *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus: A Collaborative Exploration of Context and Coherence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 9–93 (16). See also J.H. Hexter, *The History Primer* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), p. 5. Webb also mentions similar definitions offered by Collingwood and Elton (p. 16 n. 14). See R.J. Collingwood, *The Idea of History: With Lectures 1926–1928* (rev. edn; edited with an introduction by Jan van der Dussen; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 9–10; Geoffrey R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (2nd edn; Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 7.

7 Robert L. Webb, 'The Rules of the Game: History and Historical Method in the Context of Faith: The *Via Media* of Methodological Naturalism', *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9.1 (2011), pp. 59–84 (62).

8 Webb, 'Rules', p. 4; cf. Webb, 'The Historical Enterprise', p. 17.

> causation within the physical, space-time universe, but this does not limit the historian's personal ontological worldview, just her/his historical method as a historian.[9]

Webb goes on to suggest that causation belonging to the spiritual realm belongs to the discipline of theology.[10] This is a sort of compromise between ontological naturalists who hold that if God exists he does not interact within our space-time world and critical theists who are open to the possibility of divine intervention. Methodological naturalism understands history 'as description and explanation of cause and effect of human events within the natural sphere alone, without making ontological claims beyond the natural sphere'.[11] Webb contends that this approach may help to prevent historians of contradictory worldviews, such as ontological naturalism and critical theism, from dismissing the other's work too easily.[12]

Webb's thesis is admirable on several accounts. As a biblical scholar, he shows a rare knowledge of the literature written by philosophers of history outside of the guild of biblical scholars and he makes a fair attempt to bring epistemological humility to the process of historical Jesus research. In the end, however, I am uncertain how much progress if any is made when one adopts the sort of methodological naturalism he proposes. In what follows, I offer four criticisms of Webb's definition of history and propose a different solution. Let us begin with the criticisms.

First, historians need not adopt a definition of history based on the least common denominator of beliefs among historians. This is especially true within historical Jesus research where consensus is to be found on only a very few matters. Dale Allison comments:

> Study of the historical Jesus belongs to the diversity and pluralism of modernity, or, if you prefer, postmodernity, and there can be no easy appeal to the consensus on much of anything. The biblical guild is not a group-mind thinking the same thoughts. Nor are the experts a single company producing a single product, 'history'… So if we are to do something with the historical Jesus, it will have to be someone's particular historical Jesus—Wright's Jesus or Crossan's Jesus or Sanders's Jesus; it can no longer be the Jesus of the guild or the Jesus of the scholars, because

9 Webb, 'Rules', p. 78.

10 Webb, 'Rules', pp. 78–79.

11 Webb, 'Rules', p. 79.

12 Webb, 'Rules', pp. 83–84; cf. Webb, 'The Historical Enterprise', p. 48.

> they, in their writings and at their academic conferences, argue with each other over almost everything.[13]

It is clear that the horizon of atheist New Testament scholar Gerd Lüdemann is a driving force behind his historical conclusions when he *a priori* rules out the historicity of the ascension of Jesus reported in Acts 1.9–11 'because there is no such heaven to which Jesus may have been carried'.[14] Ontological naturalism similarly guides James Tabor. He writes:

> Women do not get pregnant without a male—ever. So Jesus had a human father… Dead bodies don't rise… So, if the tomb was empty the historical conclusion is simple—Jesus' body was moved by someone and likely reburied in another location.[15]

Not so obvious is Geza Vermes in his 2008 volume *The Resurrection: History and Myth*.[16] With hardly a comment, Vermes simply dismisses both 'the out-of-hand rejection of the inveterate skeptic' and the hypothesis that Jesus rose from the dead since it can only be made from 'the blind faith of the fundamentalist believer'.[17] He appears to regard D.F. Strauss and N.T. Wright as members of these groups.[18] However, inveterate sceptics may still be able to offer valid historical reasons for rejecting Jesus' resurrection. And irrespective of whether one agrees with Wright's approach or conclusions, it is difficult to regard his sophisticated and abundantly documented case in his volume *The Resurrection of the Son of God* as the product of 'blind faith'.

One must wonder, therefore, whether the acceptance of methodological naturalism as a canon in the discipline would prevent the sort of quick dismissals we see from Lüdemann, Tabor and Vermes. On the contrary, it could make it easier for them to conduct their investigations as usual yet without overtly revealing their horizons. We may ask whether it would be preferable to

13 Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids., MI: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 11.

14 Gerd Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Christ: A Historical Inquiry* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2004), p. 114. For a similar remark, see Donald Wayne Viney, 'Grave Doubts about the Resurrection', *Encounter* 50.2 (1989), pp. 125–40 (135–36).

15 James D. Tabor, *The Jesus Dynasty: The Hidden History of Jesus, His Royal Family, and the Birth of Christianity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), p. 234.

16 Geza Vermes, *The Resurrection: History and Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).

17 Vermes, *The Resurrection*, p. 141.

18 Vermes, *The Resurrection*, p. 101.

criticize the works of scholars when they exercise a method that appears to be strongly motivated by their worldview.

Second, methodological naturalism may handicap historians, preventing them in some cases from providing a fuller and more accurate account of the past. Molecular biologist Michael Behe provides a relevant challenge to this approach in his discipline. He writes:

> Imagine a room in which a body lies crushed, flat as a pancake. A dozen detectives crawl around, examining the floor with magnifying glasses for any clues to the identity of the perpetrator. In the middle of the room, next to the body, stands a large, grey elephant. The detectives carefully avoid bumping into the pachyderm's legs as they crawl, and never even glance at it. Over time the detectives get frustrated with their lack of progress but resolutely press on, looking even more closely at the floor. You see, textbooks say detectives must 'get their man', so they never consider elephants.[19]

In context, Behe is contending that when scientists limit their considerations exclusively to unguided natural causes they will forever keep themselves from discovering the actual cause if a Designer of some sort was responsible. A similar admonition may be issued to historians who *a priori* exclude a non-human agent as the cause behind a past event. Those who do so could actually be placing themselves in a position where they cannot appraise history accurately.[20]

We can eliminate this problem in Webb's definition of history if we were to change the word 'human' to 'person'. Although I may be mistaken, I do not believe there are sentient aliens in our universe. Let us say that a number of spacecraft suddenly land on Earth occupied with intelligent alien beings who are able to communicate with us. (If Webb can speak of time travel, I can speak of aliens!) As dialogue progresses, we discover that these beings are seeking a habitable planet having left their own prior to a cataclysmic and

19 Michael J. Behe, *Darwin's Black Box* (New York: Free Press, 1996), p. 192.

20 Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (2 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1994), I, p. 1468; Gary R. Habermas, 'The Resurrection of Jesus and Recent Agnosticism', in Norman L. Geisler and Chad V. Meister (eds.), *Reasons for Faith: Making a Case for the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), pp. 281–94 (290–91); Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979), p. 102, although, like Webb, he goes on to allow methodological naturalism as long as it renders no statements pertaining to ontology; Alan G. Padgett, 'Advice for Religious Historians: On the Myth of a Purely Historical Jesus', in Stephen Davis, Daniel Kendall and Gerald O'Collins (eds.), *The Resurrection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 287–307 (294–95).

life-destroying collision with an asteroid. The history of these alien beings would be of great interest to us. Billions of people would watch television interviews and read articles containing recollections of their past.

Would such inquiries be outside the purview of historians acting within their professional capacity, since the subjects of inquiry would not be…*human*? Would an entirely new discipline (alienology?) need to be developed in order to engage in the endeavour? I see no reason for answering affirmatively to either of these questions. Although the proposed aliens are not human, they are *persons* capable of intelligent communication with humans.

Let us now bring this closer to our question at hand. If the Christian God exists, he is an intelligent person capable of communicating with humans. This is not to presuppose either that the Christian God exists or that he has already engaged in intelligent communication with humans. It is to say that historians should not a priori exclude such a possibility in light of numerous reports that God has communicated with humans.

Third, the boundaries between disciplines are somewhat artificial. While one can recognize certain differences between the disciplines of geology and history, it is unnecessary to draw precisely defined boundaries between the disciplines never to be crossed. For in that case, biblical scholars seeking to understand the Genesis account of creation could not appeal to modern evolutionary sciences such as biology and palaeontology in order to challenge a literal understanding of the Genesis account(s), since that would be to do science and not history. Webb says he is not suggesting 'hard and fast divisions' between the disciplines. Instead, he is distinguishing between the 'core focus of each discipline'.[21] But this does not support the point he is trying to make: The discipline of history involves human agents. For, as stated above, one could easily substitute 'persons' for 'humans' and the investigation of miracle claims would then be allowable.

Fourth, as noble as Webb's move may appear, it is questionable whether it would have the pragmatic benefit he desires: historians of Jesus operate within the same definitional limitations of history while making no ontological statements. He correctly observes in a footnote that a similar discussion is taking place within the philosophy of science where methodological naturalism reigns.[22] But it is precisely the results of the widespread adoption of methodological naturalism within the disciplines of science that provide strong support for my concern. The methodological exclusion of divine causation pertaining to origins has led to a widespread attitude that non-science is nonsense. Even the

21 Webb, 'The Historical Enterprise', p. 19.

22 Webb, 'Rules', p. 79 n. 38.

Intelligent Design movement, which engages in the more modest attempt to identify design in the universe and life, is regularly referred to as creationism masquerading as science in spite of the fact that many of its members are prestigious scientists embracing a variety of worldviews.[23]

There is good reason to believe that the widespread adoption of methodological naturalism within the discipline of history would lead to similar results. Let us suppose that this author (Licona) were to contend that Jesus rose from the dead resulting from a supernatural agent. Another historian, it does not matter whether he is an ontological or methodological naturalist, replies, 'This is an illegitimate conclusion because history must only involve human events occurring within the space-time continuum and this, by definition, excludes divine causation. Accordingly, those who suggest a divine agent are making a theological conclusion rather than a historical one. In other words, Licona is practicing theology, which is a legitimate discipline; but it is not history. The rest of us are doing history'. Unfortunately, many will read an additional message being communicated: Theology is subjective and involves faith, while history is science and involves rationality and logic. The two are in conflict.

An Alternative Solution

I would like to suggest what I believe are two better solutions to the dilemma of defining the practice of history, neither of which create new problems while possessing only the last of the four problems intrinsic to Webb's methodological naturalism.

The first solution is to acknowledge the occurrence of the event and posit a theoretical entity for the cause. Physicists regularly posit theoretical entities to explain observable phenomena. No one has ever observed black holes, quarks, strings and gluons and probably never will.[24] These theoretical natural entities

23 Alan F. Segal, 'The Resurrection: Faith or History?' in Robert B. Stewart (ed.), *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright in Dialogue* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2006), pp. 121–38, refers to arguments for intelligent design posited by scientists as merely being 'Scientific creation 2.0' (138) while Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past*, appears unaware of it altogether. He claims that the community of creationists 'is quite homogenous, composed exclusively of biblical fundamentalists, almost all of whom are American Protestants. Their bias in favor of an anachronistic, historically insensitive interpretation of Genesis is the best explanation of their beliefs' (34).

24 John Polkinghorne, *Quarks, Chaos and Christianity: Questions to Science and Religion* (rev. edn; New York: Crossroad, 2005), pp. 116–17.

serve to explain how certain observable phenomena have their existence in the same way a theoretical divine entity serves to explain how an event may have occurred.

We will need to address a number of potential problems with this approach. To start, one might suggest the use of theoretical natural entities by scientists is an improper analogy, since one cause is natural (and observable) while the other is supernatural (and is not observable). Webb hints at this sort of thinking:

> [T]he historian's descriptions and explanations of events and their proposed causes and effects must be open to verification by the reader from observable data interpreted as evidence. Thus there is a necessary empirical element to the historical method. Such verification of descriptions and explanations is possible in historical representations because the foundation upon which it is built is observable data interpreted and presented as evidence. This observable data is open to all historians and their readers, for these observable data and their corresponding explanations exist within the physical, space-time universe.[25]

Webb continues that when historians fail to adopt this approach, problems result. '[I]t requires that a reader entertain some form of a theistic worldview before the explanation can be evaluated'.[26] Indeed, ontological naturalists are forced to 'step outside of who they are and entertain an alternate worldview'.[27]

This objection is problematic on several accounts. First, in respect to antiquity, it is difficult to talk about 'observable data interpreted as evidence', since none of the ancient human causes are observable in any sense except as they are portrayed in ancient literature and artifacts, although they allegedly existed within the physical, space-time universe. In fact, ancient human agents, such as Pontius Pilate and Herod Agrippa, are no more observable to modern historians than are ancient divine agents, such as the three persons who appeared to Abraham and the angels who appeared to the women at the empty tomb of Jesus. Since we have no direct access to the past, all ancient history is known to varying degrees through inference.

Second, those in the physical sciences go beyond the empirical when they postulate theoretical entities. If they can do so to account for present

25 Webb, 'Rules', p. 80. See also Webb, 'The Historical Enterprise', pp. 46–47.

26 Webb, 'Rules', p. 81.

27 Webb, 'Rules', p. 81.

phenomena, why should historians be prohibited from doing so to account for past phenomena? The difference is clear: Physicists posit theoretical entities within the space-time universe whereas critical theists must posit a divine cause outside it. That it is a meaningful difference is not clear, since one can find differences between every illustration and the corresponding reality it parallels. We must not fail to recognize the 'theoretical' nature of all theoretical entities, whether they exist inside or outside the space-time universe.[28]

Nobel laureate Francis Crick is one of two scientists responsible for the discovery of DNA. With two other scientists, he observed the chances of human life forming on Earth by natural processes to be somewhere in the neighborhood of 1 in $10^{2,000,000,000}$.[29] This finding created a tension with the horizons of Crick and Sagan, since both are atheists. Crick and Orgel have proposed a scientific hypothesis known as 'directed panspermia' in which aliens seeded the Earth with life.[30] This possibility cannot be ignored. What also cannot be ignored is the fact that the aliens to which they refer are no more empirical and no less theoretical than a divine cause. Theoretical entities are always unobserved and based entirely on inference. Thus, historians positing a supernatural cause would be acting no differently than Crick, Orgel, Sagan and many other scientists who regularly posit theoretical entities.

Third, Webb appears to eschew approaches that allow historians to be challenged to step outside of their worldview. Yet this is precisely the type of approach historians of Jesus should be adopting in order to engage in a fair and honest consideration of the data. Historians should force themselves to confront data and arguments that are problematic to their preferred hypotheses and must allow themselves to understand and empathize fully with the horizon of the author/agent and to be challenged fully by that horizon to the point of conversion.[31]

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28 Moreover, if God interacts in our world, he is in those moments within our space-time universe.

29 Carl Sagan, Francis H. C. Crick and L. M. Muchin, in Carl Sagan (ed.), *Communication with Extraterrestrial Intelligence* (*CETI*) (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1973), pp. 45–46.

30 Francis H. Crick and L. E. Orgel, 'Directed Panspermia', *Icarus* 19 (1973), pp. 341–46.

31 Donald L. Denton, Jr., *Historiography and Hermeneutics in Jesus Studies: An Examination of the Work of John Dominic Crossan and Ben F. Meyer* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), p. 99. Scot McKnight, *Jesus and His Death* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2005): 'everyone has an agenda, a motivation, and a purpose whenever studying the historical Jesus… What is needed is not so much frank admission and then a jolly carrying on as usual, as if admission is justification, but instead the willingness to let our presuppositions (Subject) be challenged by the evidence (Object)' (33); Brad S. Gregory, 'The Other Confessional History: On Secular Bias in the Study of Religion', *History and Theory*, *Theme Issue* 45.12

One way in which historians can do this is for them to be careful that they neither presuppose supernatural causation nor *a priori* exclude it. Rather, they can adopt a position of openness and let the data speak for itself. Otherwise, historians place themselves in a dangerous position where their investigations are guided largely by their worldviews rather than the data. The danger is manifest: Bad philosophy corrupts good history.

Roy Hoover offers a very pointed admonition:

> To cultivate the virtue of veracity, you have to be willing to part with the way tradition and conventional wisdom say things are, or with the way you would prefer things to be, and be ready to accept the way things really are. Veracity has to be the principal moral and intellectual commitment of any science or scholarship worthy of the name. That means, as I see it, that as a critical biblical scholar you have to be concerned first of all not with how your research turns out, not with whether it will confirm or disconfirm the beliefs or opinions or theories you had when you began the inquiry. You have to care only about finding out how things really are—with finding evidence sufficient to enable you to discover that and

(2006), pp. 132–49: 'The first prerequisite is one of the most difficult: we must be willing to set aside our *own* beliefs—about the nature of reality, about human priorities, about morality—in order to try to understand *them*' (147, emphasis original); Thomas L. Haskell, 'Objectivity is not Neutrality: Rhetoric vs. Practice in Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream*', *History and Theory* 29.5 (1990), pp. 129–57: The pursuit of history 'requires of its practitioners that vital minimum of ascetic self-discipline that enables a person to do such things as abandon wishful thinking, assimilate bad news, discard pleasing interpretations that cannot pass elementary tests of evidence and logic, suspend or bracket one's own perceptions long enough to enter sympathetically into the alien and possibly repugnant perspectives of rival thinkers. All of these mental acts—especially coming to grips with a rival's perspective—require *detachment*, an undeniably ascetic capacity to achieve some distance from one's own spontaneous perceptions and convictions, to imagine how the world appears in another's eyes, to experimentally adopt perspectives that do not come naturally' (132, emphasis original). 'The demand is for detachment and fairness, not disengagement from life. Most historians would indeed say that the historian's primary commitment is to the truth, and that when the truth and the "cause", however defined, come into conflict, the truth must prevail' (139); Paul R. Eddy and Greg A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007): 'in the name of epistemological humility and the ideal of objectivity…critical scholars [should] be open-minded and humble enough to try to seriously entertain claims that others find plausible, regardless of the fact that their own plausibility structures prejudice them against such claims' (85; cf. 81).

> with finding also whether or not what you think you have discovered is sustainable when it is tested by the critical scrutiny of others.[32]

James Charlesworth similarly writes:

> If we ask a question, we should not presuppose a desired answer or manipulate data to acquire a pleasing answer. We need to develop the maturity to be honest in asking questions, and be prepared for a possibly unattractive answer. In asking questions, we need to include all pertinent data and employ all relevant methods.[33]

Historians can adopt steps for placing their horizons in check while conducting their investigations.[34] It is their responsibility to do their very best to transcend the effects created by their horizontal sunglasses through which they perceive the world. It is not the responsibility of the data to shine so brightly that they render those glasses ineffectual.

Thus, rather than attempting to mediate a compromise between ontological naturalists and critical theists as Webb does, it may be preferable to chide sceptical historians such as Lüdemann and Tabor when it becomes obvious they have allowed their worldviews to dictate their historical conclusions. Theistic historians should also be cited when they are too quick to appeal to divine causation or the historicity of an event reported in the Gospels without reasonable supporting argumentation or on the grounds that the Gospels are divinely inspired. In this manner, poor historical method is identified and eschewed.

My proposed solution invoking theoretical entities by historians faces another challenge. Could it return us to 'god of the gaps' solutions where god is invoked as the cause of an event when the actual cause is unknown? Perhaps, if one is not careful. We are now faced with a new challenge: If a miracle has actually occurred, how would a historian properly identify it? This question

32 R.W. Hoover, 'A Contest between Orthodoxy and Veracity', in Paul Copan and Ronald K. Tacelli (eds.), *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Figment? A Debate between William Lane Craig and Gerd Lüdemann* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), pp. 124–46 (127–28). See also Dale C. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and its Interpreters* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005): 'What one wants to believe in the present should not be any guide to what one finds in the past' (143).

33 James H. Charlesworth, *The Historical Jesus: An Essential Guide* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), p. 121.

34 I have suggested six steps in Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2010), pp. 50–62.

differs from our earlier issue of defining a miracle. And it is at this point that we must once again engage in a brief sidebar discussion, since, like the term 'history', 'miracle' is an essentially contested concept. In this author's research, 23 definitions of 'miracle' were discovered.[35] And this is by no means an exhaustive count. Gerd Theissen, Annette Merz and Richard Swinburne define miracle as an extraordinary act performed by a deity that contains religious significance.[36] Bultmann, on the other hand, asserted that 'miracles are events which in themselves have no religious character, but which are attributed to divine (or dæmonic) causation'.[37] David Bartholomew defines miracle as 'an act by some power external to the natural world. If, therefore, something happens which cannot be explained by the natural processes of the world and which cannot be attributed to human agency then there is a prima facie case for supposing that a miracle has occurred'.[38] Bartholomew's definition is of interest, since it suggests a supernatural cause but does not specifically define that cause as divine.

There is an even larger issue before us, however. This concerns how we may distinguish a miracle from an anomaly. Let us say one defines 'miracle' as 'a divine act'. In this case, a person could ask God in prayer to assist them in an interview for a job. Let us suppose that the interview went very well and the person got the job. Was this a divine act or did the person get the job because they were the most qualified applicant? There may be no way of knowing. So, how may one identify when a miracle has occurred? I would like to suggest two criteria. We may recognize that an event is a miracle when the event (a) is extremely unlikely to have occurred, given the circumstances and/or natural law and (b) it occurs in an environment or context charged with religious significance.[39] The stronger the context is charged in this manner, the stronger the evidence becomes that we have a miracle on our hands, if the historical evidence for the event itself is good.

Let us suppose a cancer patient who goes into remission. Katja has been experiencing severe upper abdominal pain that radiates to her back. She

35 For references, see Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, pp. 134–36 n. 3.

36 Richard Swinburne, 'Violation of a Law of Nature', in Richard Swinburne (ed.), *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), p. 75–84; Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1998), p. 309.

37 Rudolph Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (London: Collins/Fontana, 1958), p. 173.

38 David J. Bartholomew, *Uncertain Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 81.

39 J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 569. See also Rex Martin, 'How the Past Stands with Us', who contends that historians must look to antecedent and subsequent (aftermath) matters (147).

notices a yellowing of her skin and of the whites of her eyes. She has no appetite, is depressed, and has lost a considerable amount of weight. An entrepreneur and never one to take time off from work, Katja finally visits a few physicians and, after undergoing a number of tests, is diagnosed with advanced pancreatic cancer and given less than six months to live. Distressed over the news, she leaves the physician's office in tears with an appointment to return the following day to discuss her options. At a staff meeting the following morning, the physicians and other staff members discuss how each had experienced a dream that night in which some saw an angel who told them it was not Katja's time to die while the others saw Katja cancer-free. When Katja arrives for her appointment later that morning, the staff are surprised to observe her positive countenance and hear her describe how the pain and jaundice had vanished for reasons unknown to her. With increasing curiosity, the physicians readminister the tests and are stunned to discover that Katja is now cancer-free. Because the context in which Katja's remission occurs is charged with religious significance, given the dreams of the staff, the physicians can declare that a miracle has occurred. Excluding the context of the dreams experienced by all of the medical staff, if Katja came in the following morning feeling well and was cancer-free, we would be left with an anomaly.

Let us look at another example: the early reports that Jesus of Nazareth had risen from the dead. This claim occurred in a significant context. That Jesus performed feats that both he and his followers interpreted as miracles and exorcisms is a fact strongly evidenced and supported by the majority of scholars.[40] Graham Twelftree, who is a leading authority on the miracles and exorcisms of Jesus, argues that the evidence suggesting Jesus was a miracle worker is so strong that it is one of the best attested historical facts about him and that there is an almost unanimous agreement among historians of Jesus that he performed powerful works.[41] That Jesus viewed himself as God's

40 Bultmann, *Jesus*, p. 124; John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), pp. 311, 332; Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 198; Richard J. Evans, *In Defense* of *History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999), p. 12; Robert W. Funk and The Jesus Seminar, *The Acts of Jesus: What Did Jesus Really Do?* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1998), p. 527; John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. II: *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), p. 970; E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1985), p. 11; E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Allen Lane—Penguin, 1993), p. 157; Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 281.

41 Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus: The Miracle Worker* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), pp. 258, 345; Graham H. Twelftree, 'The History of Miracles in the History of Jesus', in Scot

eschatological agent—the figure through whom the kingdom of God would come—is also widely recognized by biblical scholars and amply attested in the sources. Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz write: '[T]here is a consensus that Jesus had a sense of eschatological authority. He saw the dawn of a new world in his actions. Here he goes beyond the Jewish charismatics and prophets known to us before him.'[42]

Thus, strong evidence has resulted in a near consensus among modern scholars that Jesus thought of himself as an exorcist, miracle worker, and God's eschatological agent. These data create a significantly charged religious context in which the reports of Jesus' resurrection occur. And this context becomes even more charged if, with a growing number of scholars, we grant that Jesus predicted that his violent and imminent death would be followed shortly afterward by God's vindication of him via resurrection.[43] Accordingly, if the hypothesis that Jesus rose from the dead is superior to competing natural hypotheses in its ability to explain the relevant historical bedrock, we are warranted in concluding that a miracle occurred.[44] Moreover, if a natural hypothesis is superior to the resurrection hypothesis in its ability to explain the relevant historical bedrock, we are warranted in concluding that Jesus's resurrection did not occur. Historians may certainly differ on which hypothesis best explains the data. But that is an entirely different matter than whether historians can assess the resurrection hypothesis on the basis that it involves a miracle claim.

In summary, I am contending that we may identify a miracle when the event (a) is highly unlikely to have occurred, given the circumstances and/or natural law and (b) it occurred in an environment or context charged with religious significance. If these criteria are met and a non-human cause is the best explanation of the relevant historical bedrock, the historian is warranted

McKnight and Grant R. Osborne (eds.), *The Face of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), pp. 191–208 (206).

42 Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, pp. 512–13.

43 Michael R. Licona, 'Did Jesus Predict His Death and Vindication/Resurrection?' *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 8.1 (2010), pp. 47–66.

44 By 'historical bedrock' pertaining to the fate of Jesus, I am referring to (1) Jesus' death by crucifixion, (2) the beliefs of Jesus' disciples that he had risen from the dead and had appeared to them in both individual and group settings, and (3) the conversion of a persecutor of the Christian church later known as Paul based on an experience he perceived was an appearance of the risen Jesus to him. See Gary R. Habermas, 'Mapping the Recent Trend Toward the Bodily Resurrection Appearances of Jesus in Light of Other Prominent Critical Positions', in Stewart (ed.), *The Resurrection of Jesus*, pp. 78–92 (79); Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, pp. 277–464; John McIntyre, 'The Uses of History in Theology', *Studies in World Christianity* 7.1 (2001), pp. 1–20 (8).

in affirming that a miracle has occurred. The conclusion of a supernatural agent is arrived at via inference. And I reiterate that virtually all of historical inquiry, and certainly all that concerns antiquity, involves inference, since the past and all of its causes are forever gone. If natural explanations cannot come close to explaining the relevant historical bedrock when they appear in a historical context that is charged with religious significance, historians are justified in employing inference and positing a theoretical entity, even a supernatural or divine agent, in order to explain the relevant historical bedrock.

The fulfilment of both of the above criteria for identifying a miracle is important, since it places a check on those led by credulity from employing a 'god of the gaps' argument where one supplies a divine agent for a cause presently unknown to us. It likewise challenges those committed to ontological naturalism to avoid employing a 'naturalism of the gaps' argument where one demands a natural agent for a cause presently unknown to us and especially when a natural cause appears insufficient. It can also resolve the stalemate in which methodological naturalists sometimes find themselves as a result of defining history in a manner that *a priori* excludes the consideration of anything other than human agents.

The second solution I am proposing is more modest: Historians can offer a positive verdict pertaining to the historicity of an event while leaving its cause undetermined. This is a common practice of historians outside of the guild of biblical scholars. Plutarch noted that, although the corpse of Scipio Africanus laid dead for all to see, there were three competing hypotheses pertaining to the cause of his death: He died of natural causes, he intentionally drank poison and committed suicide, he was smothered by thugs while he slept.[45] Historians agree that King Ludwig II of Bavaria died on either June 13 or 14, 1886. The manner of his death is shrouded in mystery and conflicting reports exist pertaining to whether he and his attending physician were already dead or showed weak signs of life when they were discovered floating in Starnberg Lake outside of his Berg castle.[46]

We may say something similar when considering at least some reports of Jesus' miracles. While there is widespread agreement among historians of Jesus that he performed deeds that he and his followers regarded as divine exorcisms and miracles, even those historians who are open to divine causation may admit there is usually insufficient data for determining whether a psychosomatic or supernatural cause was responsible for the improved states of those

45 Plutarch, *Romulus* 26.4–5.

46 Julius Desing, *King Ludwig II: His Life—His End* (Lechbruck: Verlag Kienberger, 1976), pp. 30–35.

healed. In this manner, the historian can acknowledge the historicity of the event without adjudicating on its nature or cause. One could even call it a 'freak event' or an anomaly and refrain from statements pertaining to its ontology.

I wish to press this further. Let us suppose for a moment that the historical evidence for Jesus' remarkable return to life after having been tortured and crucified is so strong that natural hypotheses are insufficient for accounting for the relevant historical bedrock while the resurrection hypothesis accounts for all of it very well. Even if methodological naturalists remained unwilling to grant that a miracle had occurred, they could in principle grant the historicity of Jesus' remarkable return to life while leaving the matter of the cause unanswered.

Surprisingly, we observe this approach to be completely within the boundaries of methodological naturalism. However, it is less restrictive than the one typically proposed. For example, in Webb's approach, the historian conducts an investigation and weighs hypotheses. If no natural explanation proves adequate and a supernatural one does, Webb's approach reaches a dead end and restricts him from rendering a judgment pertaining to whether the event had occurred.[47] In the less restrictive approach, the historian conducts an investigation and weighs hypotheses. If no natural explanation proves adequate and a supernatural one does, the historian can render a judgment on whether the event occurred but stops short of naming its cause.

This less restrictive approach was, in a sense, employed by the Jewish scholar Pinchas Lapide who asserted that the historical evidence strongly suggests that Jesus rose from the dead. However, he remained unpersuaded of the incarnation or that Jesus is Messiah.[48] Lapide followed his historical method and granted the historicity of an event without jettisoning his worldview. Although conversion did not occur, he allowed the historical evidence to alter his horizon. He wrote:

> In regard to the future resurrection of the dead, I am and remain a Pharisee. Concerning the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday, I was for decades a Sadducee. I am no longer a Sadducee.[49]

It is doubtful that ontological naturalists would be willing to concede that Jesus rose from the dead while refraining from any statements regarding the

47 Webb, 'Rules', p. 82. See also Meier, *Marginal Jew*, pp. 513–14 and Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus*, pp. 350–51.

48 Pinchas Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus. A Jewish Perspective*, trans. Wilhelm C. Linss (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1983), p. 130 and in the 'Epilogue', pp. 152–54.

49 Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, p. 125.

cause of the event. For, although it would follow methodological naturalism, it would posit an even greater challenge to the horizon of the ontological naturalist than it did for Lapide. But notice that it is the horizon of the ontological naturalist and not the methodological naturalist approach which prevents them from going this far.

Bart Ehrman has objected that this less restrictive form of methodological naturalism is misguided, since a miraculous event such as Jesus' resurrection would have been impossible apart from a divine agent.[50] Accordingly, Ehrman is contending that historians should refrain from rendering a professional judgment pertaining to the occurrence of an event when it has theological implications. But is such a move justified? Let us suppose that a meteor has slammed into the moon. When the lunar dust settles, the message 'Jesus is Lord!'—in both Greek and Hebrew—can be clearly viewed through a telescope. Since this has clear theological implications, if Ehrman followed his argument, he would have to refrain from rendering a judgment, not only pertaining to the cause of the event, but also pertaining to the event itself. After all, Ehrman asserts that historians cannot adjudicate on an event when theological implications are present. Of course, this is absurd and demonstrates

50 See the April 2009 debate between Bart Ehrman and Michael Licona at http://vimeo.com/35235544. We may also state this objection differently: If the event occurred, the question pertaining to its cause is simultaneously answered, since the miraculous nature of the event is so certain that its cause is likewise certain. Perhaps. But this objection would only weigh in with one's metaphysics: God does not intervene in the world. But how would one know this for certain? After all, if Jesus was raised, this would be an event that disconfirms worldviews that disallow God's actions in our world. One could argue that since historians do not observe events of this nature occurring today they very probably did not occur in the past. However, one could counter-argue that events of an apparently miraculous nature occur today and that this increases the probability that they occurred in the past. See Craig Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), pp. 264–768. But we must not get off topic. Addressing this sort of argument is beyond the scope of this paper and has been addressed thoroughly elsewhere (see Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, ch. 2). The point for observation here in this case is it is not a particular philosophy of history that requires the rejection of miracle claims but rather the metaphysics of a particular historian. Moreover, we may even call into question Ehrman's inference that a resurrection may only be accomplished by God. For even if a supernatural cause may appear to be the best candidate, historians could not demonstrate that it is God who raised Jesus rather than an alien in a parallel universe whose doctoral project was to deceive humans into believing he is divine. In fact, I cannot think of any strong 'historical' reason for preferring God to an alien as the cause of Jesus' resurrection.

that Ehrman's argument is ill-founded, since we would know in this instance that the meteor had collided with the moon.

Webb agrees there are two distinct questions to be asked when reading about a biblical event: 'Did the event happen? What explains why it happened?'[51] As previously argued, his version of methodological naturalism is limiting. But it is more limiting than he may imagine. It will *always* prohibit historians from asking the second question in relation to the biblical report of a miraculous event, since it prohibits historians from making ontological claims. One cannot assert that Jesus' miracles and exorcisms were of a divine nature, since that would be speaking to the ontology of the event. But one is likewise barred from asserting they were of a purely psychological nature, since this too would be speaking to the ontology of the event.

The above two proposed solutions solve all but the last of the four weaknesses of Webb's methodological naturalism. However, there is an important difference between them: Webb's objective is to provide a broader playing field on which all historians of Jesus may work, whereas I have no such objective. If we may learn something from philosophers of history, let it be that there is no methodological solution to the interpretive polarities resulting from conflicting horizons that is acceptable to all practising historians. This is the subject to which we now turn.

Canons of History

As noted above, there is much in the discipline of history for which no consensus exists. In fact, a number of historians have noted the absence of any canons within the discipline. In his book *Historians' Fallacies*, David Hackett Fischer writes, 'Specific canons of historical proof are neither widely observed nor generally agreed upon'.[52] Philosopher of history Thomas Haskell observes 'the inherently dispersive character of a discipline that, unlike English and Philosophy, lacks even the possibility of defining a single canon familiar to all practitioners'.[53] Peter Novick made a statement in his book *That Nobel Dream* that has become somewhat famous in the philosophy of history literature:

> As a broad community of discourse, as a community of scholars united by common aims, common standards, and common purposes, the

51 Webb, 'The Historical Enterprise', p. 39.

52 David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1970), p. 62.

53 Haskell, 'Objectivity', p. 153, cf. pp. 168–69.

> discipline of history had ceased to exist [as of the 1980s]. Convergence on anything, let alone a subject as highly charged as 'the objectivity question', was out of the question. The profession was as described in the last verse of the Book of Judges. 'In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes'.[54]

These statements represent only a sampling and it is startling when we consider they are made by historians practising outside the community of religious scholars and who are investigating ordinary events. Many biblical scholars are beginning to make similar statements. Edith Humphrey writes:

> The bewildering plurality in biblical studies (and, more broadly, in religious studies) has led some to consider whether there remains a unified academic discipline, or whether the fragmentation is terminal… Some brave souls have tried to rearticulate a common core and have used theological, sociological, or ideological terms to tame the monster.[55]

It is doubtful that a change in this situation is forthcoming anytime soon, since horizons carry a powerful influence. Yet this quagmire has not prevented historians from conducting investigations. Like their colleagues who investigate nonreligious history, biblical scholars must become accustomed to not having a supporting consensus. Accordingly, since there is a lack of canons within the profession, it is neither realistic nor beneficial to require historians of Jesus to agree on a particular one: miracle claims are outside of historical investigation.

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54 Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 628. Gilderhus, *History and Historians*, writes, 'The body of literature on almost any historical subject takes the form of an ongoing debate… By the very nature of the subject, history tends to divide scholars and set them at odds… We no longer possess a past commonly agreed upon. Indeed, to the contrary, we have a multiplicity of versions competing for attention and emphasizing alternatively elites and nonelites, men and women, whites and persons of color, and no good way of reconciling all the differences. Though the disparities and incoherencies create terrible predicaments for historians who prize orderliness in their stories, such conditions also aptly express the confusions of the world and the experiences of different people in it' (86, 113).

55 Edith M. Humphrey, *And I Turned to See the Voice: The Rhetoric of Vision in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 24. See also the earlier statement by Allison, *The Historical Christ*, where he asserts that within historical Jesus research it is difficult to 'appeal to the consensus on much of anything' and that biblical scholars 'argue with each other over almost everything' (11).

A Turning Point for Historians

It is noteworthy that the climate is changing and professional historians outside the guild of biblical scholars are warming up to the notion of miracles. In the 2006 Theme Issue of *History and Theory*, 'Religion and History', David Gary Shaw opened with the following words:

> Another claim…is that history works *against* religion, as its other and opposite, but that this is not as it should be. The opposition is an artifact of modernity. Indeed, throughout these papers the theme develops that modernity is the obstacle or prejudice that stands not just between historians and the people of the past, but also between historians and many religious people today… We appear to be at a moment when we need new intellectual and professional approaches to deal with religion. Accounting for our own position is tricky, but always worthwhile, if only to try to appreciate our prejudices and assumptions in advance of doing our scholarship… this Theme Issue shows historians and others concerned with the study of religion to be at a sort of confessional watershed, a moment of collective acknowledgment that the interaction between religion and history is not at the position that most historians have thought, especially when we fall back only upon our own learned memories, graduate training, prejudices, or our grand narratives of historical development. The Issue's papers pulse with a sense that religion has turned out in a variety of ways to be more important and a more clearly permanent factor in history than our paradigms had supposed. The consequences of this include a need to reassess the historian's attitudes toward religious phenomena and religion's trajectory within the mass of forces we call historical… The methods that historians used may need revision or defense if they are to cope productively with believers past and present, even if we can disregard what historians themselves believe.[56]

A number of contributors in the same issue addressed the negative attitude many historians presently hold towards miracles, and questioned the

56 David Gary Shaw, 'Modernity between Us and Them: The Place of Religion within History', *History and Theory, Theme Issue* 45.12 (2006), pp. 1–9 (1, 3–4). See also Jon Butler, 'Theory and God in Gotham', *History and Theory*, *Theme Issue* 45.12 (2006), pp. 47–61 (53); Mark Cladis, 'Modernity *in* Religion: A Response to Constantin Fasolt's "History and Religion in the Modern Age"', *History and Theory*, *Theme Issue* 45.12 (2006), pp. 93–103 (esp. 93–94, 96).

assumptions of modernity.[57] According to Mark Cladis, 'secularization theories that suggest religious traditions are anomalies in modernity have not, in fact, provided adequate accounts of the modern world as we find it'.[58]

Ben Witherington echoes these thoughts:

> Even some contemporary Bible scholars assume that miracles must be left out of account if we are going to do 'scholarly' work like the 'other critical historians'. This is a carryover from the anti-supernatural bias of many Enlightenment historians, but it seems a very odd presupposition today. Our postmodern world is experiencing a newfound openness to miracles, magic, the supernatural, the spiritual, or whatever you want to call it.[59]

If my assessments in this essay are correct, historians are within their professional rights to give attention to miracle claims. Moreover, there are signs from the community of professional historians that the epistemological Ice Age of anti-supernaturalism appears to be coming to an end. Spring is in the air. The air is warming. Trees are blooming and birds are singing. Given this warming attitude towards miracles, those scholars who claim their rights to investigate miracle claims will find themselves in a growing company of colleagues.[60]

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57 See especially Shaw, 'Modernity', p. 4; Butler, 'Theory', p. 53; Cladis, 'Modernity', p. 94.

58 Cladis, 'Modernity', p. 96.

59 Ben Witherington, III, *What Have They Done With Jesus? Beyond Strange Theories and Bad History—Why We Can Trust the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2006), p. 5.

60 Brad S. Gregory, 'No Room for God? History, Science, Metaphysics, and the Study of Religion', *History and Theory* 47.12 (2008), pp. 495–519, comments that 'scholars of religion who want to try to move beyond secular confessional history should reject the status quo. They should dare to be intellectually nonconformist and counter-cultural' (519). Tor Egil Førland, 'Historiography without God: A Reply to Gregory', *History and Theory* 47.12 (2008), pp. 520–32 answers, 'So here is my challenge to Gregory and to those inclined to agree with him. Make full reference to the active—miraculous or less spectacular—influence of God in a work in which you attempt to explain actions or events in the past or contemporary world. Then gauge the reaction of readers in the discipline and the wider scientific community to the integration in your narrative of this significant part of your worldview. My contention is that such a work will meet with a mixture of amusement and bewilderment. I further contend that whatever other merits it might have…it will bring its author no scientifically respectable awards' (532; cf. 529). Førland is correct. And I am in agreement that historians may not be able to claim that 'God' is the certain cause of a particular event. However, if what I have been arguing throughout this essay is correct and historians may sometimes render a positive judgment on a miracle claim, academic integrity rather than fear and intimidation should rule in the minds of historians who are

Conclusion

In this essay we have discussed whether historians are within their professional rights to investigate miracle reports. We have focused on the definition of 'history' provided by Webb and articulated four inherent problems. We then offered two new proposals that eliminate all but one of those problems: (a) adjudicate on the event itself and posit a theoretical entity for its cause or (b) adjudicate on the event itself while leaving its cause undetermined. The second proposal is a form of methodological naturalism and is less restrictive than Webb's.

Since there are no canons of history, critical theists need not feel obligated to follow an approach guided by a restrictive methodological naturalism. When following strictly controlled historical method, if historians employ the two criteria for identifying a miracle mentioned above, they are capable of adjudicating on the historicity of a miracle report without having to resort to explanations that appeal either to a 'god of the gaps' or a 'nature of the gaps'. Historians of Jesus should have no expectations that their conclusions will be widely accepted by their peers. Indeed, this is the present experience of historians outside the guild of biblical scholars.

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unconvinced by the present arguments of Førland and others for barring the investigation of miracle claims by historians.