

# By the Waters of Naturalism:

Theology Perplexed  
Among the Sciences

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For the folks in Livermore



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# Chapter 1

## Finding God in Physics

### 1.1 Dilemma

It appears we have to choose between science and religion today—and the only kind of “religion” is Christianity (or Judaism, but Judaism is not much different), and science is not a religion at all. Or that is how things appear. To believe in God means to believe in some kind of a supernatural. Whether or not there is a supernatural today, “religion” says there was one at some times in the past. And if you are religious, you have to give up at least some scientific ideas, because science and religion conflict; science does not allow belief in any kind of supernatural. If you believe in science, then the natural world is all there is, there “is no God”, and so making sense of human life must proceed with reference to nature alone. The basic shape of the difficulty is clear: the choice is between “science” and “religion,” and biblical religion is having a hard time articulating its own faith in an age of science.

There are a lot of hidden confusions here, and it will take some work to sort them out.

Perhaps the basic idea that lies behind all this is the notion that if God is to act in the world, he has to push things around, just like I do when I step on the gas in my car or turn the steering wheel. Thus God takes his place alongside other actors in the world, and becomes one

more like all the rest, even if his “pushing” is of a slightly different kind. Maybe his pushing on things can’t be inspected the way the law of gravity can be, but it still has to be a “pushing” of some sort.

Thus an action not only has to have an intention, it also has to take effect in the real world by means of physical causes. This is the second assumption behind our dilemma.

This is where the collision with science happens. For science understands the notion of a physical cause in ways that make it very difficult to make sense of divine actions.

It is as if for God to act in the world, something in the world has to move over to make room for God to act. There has to be a hole cut in the world to make space for God to act. For God to act, he has to push on something, and for that to happen, ordinary forces have to stop pushing on that something, or he has to add his own force on top of whatever natural forces are also pushing on the thing that he has to move in order to act. Over and over again we will see this simple assumption, that the world has to make room for God to act, or else God can’t act at all. It is a natural mistake, but a mistake nonetheless. It assumes that for God to act he has to come “into” the world and act the same way that other actors act in the world.

Even human actions are hard to make sense of from the point of view of physics. The foot moves, the car goes, the wheel turns, and the car turns, but all that is just physical motions, forces and levers. It is not a human action, it is just the motions of the body-parts in a human action. (You can call the body-parts the “material substrate,” because that’s what the person is composed of, but the person is more than just his material substrate, fond of it as he may nevertheless be.) We describe human actions in another language, a language of intentions, not the language of forces and motions. The language of physics is mathematics, but the language of action is narrative.

Nevertheless, in human actions as we commonly think of them, there is a material substrate, and the substrate moves. Physics can understand the material substrate and its motions even if it cannot understand or talk about the action itself. If divine actions are like human actions, they should work the same way.



Some questions arise at this point. Is such a “pushing” on the world a supernatural phenomenon? And if it were, what would “supernatural” mean? Does the language of action, divine or human, really work the way it appears to here?

To spill the beans, I don’t think so. The concept of action and the language we use to speak of actions do not work the way our original dilemma assumes they do. Action is a concept from history, not from physics, and once the differences between thinking in historical terms and thinking in physical terms are seen, all these problems will go away. The rest of the book is an exploration of this sort of thinking. We begin with the problem in its original form, when people looked for God in physics, and show that even in terms of physics, it doesn’t really make sense. Then, turning to history, things will begin to clear up.

Most of the book will be spent on history because thinking in history is still strange and unintuitive. It is not enough just to say that God doesn’t make sense as a scientific explanation. After that, you have to see how thinking about a God of history works, or else the idea of God will come back seeking refuge in nature and the sciences.

## 1.2 Cause Laundering

If the problem for Christianity seems to come from science, some theologians have tried to defend religion in an age of science with ideas taken from recent physics. It is well known that at microscopic scales, the motion of sub-atomic particles is not deterministic. For these theologians, indeterminism opens up a realm of causation where God can act, giving God the tip of a long lever by which he could influence the motion of bodies at macroscopic scales. Physical causes are presumably traceable from the macroscopic domain to some microscopic scale after which they cannot be traced any further, and there God can act. When divine action has been conceived as “just like human action,” and a very particular model of human action at that, this is the most natural way to ask whether divine action “really” happens in the world. In the end, I would prefer other ways to understand both divine

and human action, and another sense of “really,” but this one is close to the heart instincts of contemporary culture. Any discussion of acts of God today must at least implicitly take notice of it. Before looking for other ways to explain what is going on in acts of God, let’s see how this one works.

What, then, is an “act of God,” as it has appeared to those who want to find the acts of God in the microscopic interstices of physics? The tacit assumption is that acts of God make sense only if there are realms of physics where the behavior of bodies is not determined by physical law: then and only then is there room for objective acts of God. (This is how to cut a hole in the web of physical causation to make room for God to act.) Attributions of an event to an act of God and to deterministic explanation by physical law are taken to be mutually exclusive. The motions of physical bodies in regions where there are no physical causes can be ascribed to God. Presumably there is enough leeway so that God can influence the course of events and act in providential ways. (I have never seen actual calculations to show that there is enough leeway for God to act, but let that pass. It may not be a hard problem.)

One early example of this approach was William G. Pollard’s *Chance and Providence* (1958), in which he argued that quantum uncertainty supplies just the indeterminacy that is needed to give God room to act. Pollard was a good physicist and a good theologian, but when he was doing philosophy of religion, he tended to switch back and forth from reasoning in physics to reasoning in theology without realizing what he was doing. Since then, many others have tried his same strategy, often more carefully, but not with any better results. I am dubious about whether the strategy itself will do what is demanded of it.

Usually, people assume that with quantum mechanics, the gaps in physical causation are essential and permanent and cannot be removed by any advances in knowledge of physics. If the gaps are irremovable, and if their indeterminacy allows enough room for God to act effectively, then they presumably would provide theology with breathing room and a secure realm that science cannot penetrate. It is this strat-

egy and its tacit assumptions that I would like to contest, and I shall do it by stages. It is an assumption about the way to articulate biblical religion today, in the context of a scientific culture. At the beginning, it will be enough to see what is going on in the theological arguments about physics.

Opponents have called this approach “the God of the gaps,” a derisive dismissal of it on the grounds that the gaps are not large enough to make a difference, or are evanescent and will evaporate with the course of progress in science. The phrase “God of the gaps” expresses the pathetic straits to which attempts to exhibit God within the language of physics had been reduced. But there is a deeper and more instinctive rejection of attempts to introduce God into nature in this way, because it is an intrusion into the integrity of nature. The grounds for rejecting providence by intrusions are at least as strong from the point of view of history as from that of physics, and we shall come to that in later chapters.

The “God of the gaps” was to act in regions of physics that we don’t know *now*, gaps in present knowledge of how nature works. Theologians rejected such a strategy because those gaps in physical theory get filled with time and the progress of science. Any theological claims located in those gaps would be cut down like fresh grass before the lawn-mower of advancing scientific research.

The accusation of peddling a “God of the gaps” has been hurled at theologians by “atheists” for some time. But so far as I am aware, the notion of a “God of the gaps” was used first not by atheists but by a theologian. After reading in Weizsäcker’s book, *The World-View of Physics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a letter to Eberhard Bethge remarked on “how wrong it is to use God as a stop-gap for the incompleteness of our knowledge. . . . We are to find God in what we know, not in what we don’t know. God wants us to realize his presence, not in unsolved problems but in those that are solved” (Bonhoeffer, 1971, p. 311). We are not to use God as a stop-gap for the incompleteness of what we know, but what is currently being proposed is not a stop-gap until future knowledge, but instead a program licensed by a permanent ignorance, one that is guaranteed ontologically. (How a program dependent on

permanent ignorance (or even on what *cannot* be known) can be based on what we know rather than what we don't know baffles me.)

This way to make sense of divine action takes advantage of a simple feature of modern physics. For in physics, some things are *determined* by their causes, and other things, other motions, are random and *indeterminate*. This is true in many areas of physics, not just quantum mechanics, and in some places, the randomness is essential, where in other places it is just a convenient approximation for the physicist. It seemed impossible to make divine actions effective through determinate causes in physics, and so a refuge was sought in the indeterminate causes of physics.

If theologians are not careful, we shall be accused of cause laundering: In money laundering, drug lords put their money in bank accounts where it (or its sources) cannot be traced, and then it can be withdrawn and invested in "legitimate" businesses. Cause laundering is like money laundering. If causes can be traced to places where they cannot be traced any further, then a theologian is free to use them for his own purposes, such as ascribing them to "acts of God." Now classical chaos could be called classical cause laundering, because there are real causes that go into the laundry, and are untraceable when they come out. But quantum cause laundering is the drug lord's dream machine! There are *no* causes that go in, and yet effects come out, and they are guaranteed to be untraceable forever. If only drug money worked that way!

There are many problems with this approach. For only one, it is not clear what it would mean to say that physical causation can be traced back so far and no further—but agent causation *can* be traced back further than that limit. I think acts, especially divine acts, work differently from what has been tacitly assumed here, and we shall come to that soon enough. But first, there is more to be learned from examining the implications from physical theory for such a conception of divine acts.

## Chapter 4

# Theology Bewitched

### 4.1 By the Waters of Naturalism

By the waters of naturalism we sat down and wept,  
when we remembered you, O land of History.

As for our guitars, we hung them up  
on the trees in the midst of that land.

For those who led us away captive asked us for a song,  
and our oppressors called for mirth:  
Sing us one of the songs of History.

How shall we sing for the Lord of History  
on an alien soil?

If I forget you, O land of History,  
let my right hand forget its skill.

Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth  
if I do not remember you,  
if I do not set life in History above my highest joy.

Permit me this parody of Psalm 137. It is a metaphor of historical

religion captive on the alien soil of naturalism.

Psalm 137 is a psalm of the Exile, when little Judah was hauled off to Babylon captive in 586 BCE, after Nebuchadnezzar sacked and burned Jerusalem, and permanently ended the kingdom of Judah and with it the House of David. (This is *the* Babylonian Captivity.) The psalm comes from the experience of being taunted for the entertainment of her captors. Taken captive, transported to an alien land and treated as beneath contempt, slaves or little better, mocked, it is easy to empathize with the bitterness we hear in this Psalm.

Religion in the modern world (or at least the religion of Christianity and Judaism in the modern world) faces a predicament uncomfortably like this. We live in a culture where anyone can claim that science has disproven religion, science has replaced religion, and whether or not he is *believed*, he will be *understood*. Christianity used to shape European culture, and theology was the queen of the sciences. Today, Christianity has lost much of its credibility. Theology is a bag-lady. Nowhere is biblical religion well explained enough to have an immediate and intuitive plausibility. Only those brought up in it well enough to know how to work its arcane language can use it to make sense of their lives. It is not that America lacks believers; it is far more religious than Europe. But Christianity has lost enough of its ability to explain itself so that its enemies (and there are some) can now attack it more or less openly.

I contend that much of the problem (and the only part of it that we look at in this book) comes from confusions about nature and history, especially about how a historical religion works. These pains began in the 1600s. The new science of Galileo, Newton and Boyle, and the philosophy of Descartes and Locke and their successors in the eighteenth century, all worked to put the world in a new light. (A hundred years after them, history also came to be seen in a new light, and two hundred years after them, history was beginning to be understood in ways it never had been before, but that is to get well ahead of our story.) The new science and the new philosophy were worked out by people who were all devout Christians or Jews, and so it looked like things would all turn out “for the greater glory of God.”

Things did not work that way. Soon, the new science looked like it would explain everything, leaving nothing for God to do. God was unemployed.

Now there is at least one difference between the Babylonian Exile and the modern-day conflicts between science and religion. The Babylonians were foreigners, and Judah was conquered by a hostile power. But modern science was a child of religion, it was as if the child had turned against the parent. (It was only because the scientists believed in an all-powerful God who could impose laws on nature that they thought they could understand nature, and so do science at all.) So despite the dissimilarities between the Exile and modern science and religion, there is some of the same feeling of Psalm 137 in the latter-day difficulties of religion in a world of science. Perplexity might be better than bitterness, for religion today has trouble understanding itself, and even more trouble explaining itself in a world of science.

A little history may help. The physicists (Robert Boyle prime among them) sought to make sense of acts of God in terms of the new physics that they had invented. This was to be an act of praise, an offering of first-fruits to the God who had made their work possible. Things did not work that way. For the English physicists imagined acts of God to have efficient causes in the new way that the motion of bodies was understood in physics. Philosophers in France (and later, Hume, in England) demolished this idea like a house of cards. Many of the faithful, however, had bought into the crucial assumption, and naturalistic theology was born at this time. (For those who want the details, R. M. Burns's book (1981) gives a very readable account.) In naturalistic theology, acts of God have to be understandable in the terms and in the language of modern science.

Some definitions are in order. Formerly (and still, among those who care), God was thought to be transcendent to the world. Now transcendence is a concept easily misunderstood, and even the word is not more than a few centuries old. In the simplest sense, transcendence just means going beyond, something outside. But if one thing (God) is outside of another (the world), what is to stop us from just expanding the world to include God, and now God is no longer really outside the

(enlarged) world? It doesn't help much to say, "Don't talk that way," because people always *can* talk that way, and so the meaning of the idea of God is permanently changed. Changed for the worse.

The word "immanence" used to mean the presence of the transcendent within the world, and if you do it right, transcendence *always* includes an immanent presence. It is not something stuck outside trying to get in, locked out by natural laws that won't let it in, like a kid peeking through the window unable to attract attention from the people inside. What is "immanent" is completely different from the "intramundane." What is "immanent" is always the presence of something transcendent. The "intramundane" means what it says in Latin—what is inside the world, but it means what is *just* inside the world, part of the world and of the workings of the world, explicable in the terms of the world without any reference to anything transcendent.

Now we can see how the modern sciences got started. For they decided they were not interested in purposes, human or otherwise (Aristotle called these "final" causes). Instead, they would look only at what they called "material causes" and "efficient causes." To ask about material causes is just to ask what something is made of. (Chemistry tells a lot about material causes.) Efficient causes were the realm of the new physics, because an efficient cause is the kick by one thing that makes another thing move. And motion is the real interest of physics. More grandly, the sciences are a search for intelligible intramundane connections between intramundane phenomena. (Actually, the sciences are interested in only a certain very limited kind of intramundane connections.) We just want to know "how things work," in intramundane terms. Since God is about transcendence, God is ruled out as an explanation in the sciences. To do science at all, you have to assume that there *are* intelligible intramundane connections between intramundane phenomena. *This* assumption requires some knowledge of transcendence, for it is not something that those intramundane connections could explain. They display it, but they do not explain it. To assume that the natural world is intelligible is an act of faith, the faith that the world is orderly. There are people enough who do not believe that, though they have a bad reputation these days. This act of faith



came from latter-day biblical religion, for it was the God of biblical religion who made the world orderly and intelligible. And so it was the better instincts of religion itself that insisted that God is not to be an explanation in the natural sciences.

This world-view is a lot different from what we call *philosophical* naturalism, the idea that nature is all there is, and there is nothing that transcends nature (and so no immanent presence of transcendence, either). *Theological* naturalism goes one step further and concludes that nature should be the proper focus of human life, and everything that is humanly significant can be understood in terms of nature.

Now theologies can have quite various gods. If the gods are located in nature, what results is some sort of nature-religion, whether candid or not. It may be like the ancient polytheism or the shamanism that is the first known religion in every part of the world. Or it may be nominally “Christian,” but a kind of Christianity that forces God to act in nature like any other natural cause.

As fascinating as shamanism is, let’s stick with theological naturalism of a nominally Christian kind. This sort of naturalism assumes that *immanence* can only work by pushing aside a part of the *intramundane* to make room for the immanent presence of transcendence. (The idea of pushing things in this world aside to make room for the presence of transcendence comes from Robert Sokolowski, in *The God of Faith and Reason*.) Something can be an immanent presence, or it can be intramundane, but it can’t be both at once. I don’t know why people think this way, but they often do. It is a very naturalistic way to think. (It comes instinctively in the modern world.)

Clearly the comic strips and TV advertisements don’t work this way, for we do not take the comics or TV ads literally. If we did, we would ask whether Mr. Clean *really* comes up out of the kitchen sink in a burst of light and sparkles. We would ask whether buying a Toyota Camry V-6 *really* will get you a better job and lots of glamour. We don’t. There, we understand how language works.

And we have seen that there are lots of other problems with naturalistic explanations when we try to apply them even to human actions. For a naturalistic explanation is presumably unique, and once you have

the one true naturalistic explanation, nothing more can be added to it. But the actions of the kid cruising on a summer evening are not like this. Narrative is the better kind of explanation for human actions, for it tells more than physics can, and it is open in ways that physics can never be.

One can find in Saint Augustine's *City of God* (around the year 430) places where he talks as if a human intention or a human will is the cause of the motions of the resulting human action. Twelve hundred years later, the sense of "cause" changed, and the human will becomes a *physical* cause of the motions of human actions. And here the problems start. For the physical motions of human actions, like raising an arm or hitting a ball (when human actions even *have* physical motions; they don't always) can't be traced back to anything *physical* that we could call a "will" or a "self." And so some people assumed that there is an *un-physical* human self or soul that exerts physical causes on the human body. This dodge hasn't done much better. Present day cognitive science is romping through the remains of such nonsense, having a field-day in its victory over "folk" psychology. And divine action pretty much went the way of human action, a hundred years earlier.

So where are we, how far have we come? We have seen how what really matters to us about human actions can't be explained in naturalistic terms. We can see what a naturalistic basic life orientation would be. For naturalism, all things are either determined or completely and essentially random, and there is nothing else, and no other kinds of explanation are allowed. All things humanly significant are forced to speak such a language. At least in "public," when we are being "official" and speaking on the record. After hours, when we read the comics, we don't notice that we don't think in naturalistic terms.

And when the sons of history are asked to sing a song of history on the alien soil of naturalism, what comes out is cause laundering. That's the only way to make history work in the land of nature. But no longer is it really a song of history.

## 4.2 God's Driver's License

Cause laundering is only the latest scheme to sneak God into the workings of nature. Traditionally, it has been done by what were called “miracles.” It is only in the modern world that the miracle texts in the Bible were reinterpreted as “exceptions to natural laws,” and it is not entirely clear how they were read before the modern period. When action has to work within natural laws, cause laundering is the inevitable mechanism. When action (divine action, at least) can make exceptions to natural laws, things are much easier, and cause laundering is not required. How miracles work will tell us a lot about how the religion of history thinks when it lives on the soil of naturalism. (Actually, it grew up on the soil of naturalism. In its original form, in the Exodus, it was a mutation of naturalistic religion, but that is well ahead of our story.)

Miracles are (or were) supposed to be the basis for faith. Their character as exceptions to natural laws supposedly certifies them as the basis for faith. There are too many hidden assumptions here, and it will take some work to unpack them. Supposedly, the anomalous events are acts of God.

Consider one, the “Virgin Birth”; it supposedly certifies Jesus as “divine.” (That this is a disastrously oversimplified Christology, at least by the standards of theology in the fourth and fifth centuries, doesn't matter here. It is a fair approximation to much popular theology.)

The first problem is that it is impossible to say *what* happened: how did he get born without a human father? If the conception process was within the known laws of nature, then there is no miracle, and the events of his birth cannot be used to certify faith. If they are outside the known laws of nature, then as a practical matter, we do not know what happened. It would be extremely odd (to say the least) to try to rest a religion on events that are unknown and unknowable. It will not do to wave the hands and say that somehow the molecules just rearranged themselves—in something that anomalous, this is insufficient. Strong claims require stronger evidence than what we have in the virgin birth texts.

Which brings us to the second problem: assuming that one could

is a way to evade its message, de-claw its challenge, and domesticate the transcendent in it, all in the most invulnerable strategy one could devise: in the very act of claiming to respect its challenge.

None of this, by the way, should be used to impugn the reverence traditionally accorded to Mary's virginity. Her virginity is about her relations to other people and to God, not about the material circumstances of Jesus's conception. Her virginity doesn't need biological anomalies. We revere her for a constellation of virtues most prominent among which are humility, obedience, and chastity. Those virtues are themselves at the service of the Incarnation. My first point has merely been that the Incarnation (and with it, the Virgin Birth) are neither certified by biological anomalies nor refuted by absence of biological anomalies. The second point was that the historian has no responsible basis for claiming that there were any biological anomalies, and the theologian has no need of such a claim.

Only on assumptions of theological naturalism would biological anomalies be either necessary or sufficient to prove anything about Jesus. Naturalism is a commitment to understanding the human world solely in naturalistic terms. Theological naturalism is a commitment to understanding God's action in this world *solely* in naturalistic terms. But if faith (and theology, bringing faith to language) are to find some basis other than naturalism, that basis has to be in something transcendent to the world, and not just a mere extension of the world. Naturalism in science seems to be a necessary condition of doing science at all; naturalism in theology seems to me to be perverse. But science and theology do not have to think in the same terms.

### 4.3 Beyond Nature

People often think that if Biblical religion is incompatible with naturalism, then the only remedy is to have a supernatural, "exceptions to natural laws," places where God can act miraculously. Naturalism in philosophy is the thesis that nature is all there is, there is nothing more than nature, nothing outside of nature. And this does appear to rule out the sort of miraculous events the Bible talks about, because they

don't happen in the natural world as we know it today.

The supposed alternative to naturalism is supernaturalism. Allowing a supernatural gives God room enough to act, and this is supposedly a minimal requirement for Biblical religion to make sense, whether in its ancient or contemporary varieties. Supernaturalism is a way to get divine efficient causes into the world we live in, and the world we live in is just the natural world. Plausible as such a thesis is, I don't think it works.

Supernaturalism is just naturalism by other means. Supernaturalism is a super sort of naturalism, naturalism writ large. Forced to speak of God within the language of naturalism, theology does so—and supernaturalism results. But the real alternative to naturalism is history. History goes well beyond nature, but does not contradict it. Transcendence is visible in history (as it is in nature, at a lower level) but its immanent presence does not disturb the normal workings of nature or history.

Maybe it would help to look at how the language of naturalism works, and how the several kinds of language in history work by contrast. Each has a kind of responsibility, but they are very different kinds of responsibility. The language of naturalism, at least today, abstracts from human involvements, it leaves human concerns out. The languages of history (and there are more than one) focus precisely on the human involvements, human concerns.

When we ask about the motions of natural bodies, all we want to know are the natural causes. That means a certain kind of efficient causes and material causes, causes that obey strict laws and always produce their effects. Often we want causes that can be described mathematically. We want causes that are *unique*, causes that are not open to multiple interpretations. In history, multiple interpretations are allowed, but not in science. And in the natural sciences, responsibility means leaving human concerns out of the description of nature and producing a description that other people can verify or observe in their own laboratories.

In history, by contrast, we ask quite different sorts of questions. In fact, there are (at least) two ways of approaching history, each with its

characteristic questions and its own characteristic kind of responsibility. I think the difference is like the difference between a first-person account and a third-person account. In a third-person account, the one telling the story (the historian) is not taking responsibility for the actions he tells, but only for the truthfulness of the story he tells. In first-person history, the one telling the story takes responsibility for both, for the story *and* for the actions it tells. These two kinds of history work a little differently. When we listen to first-person history, we want to know what the events *meant* for the people who experienced them and for the people who identify with those historical actors after the fact, now, in the present. In third-person history, it would be true but not entirely helpful to say that we want to know “just the facts, please, just the facts.” The two kinds of history can become confused, mixed, as when we ask the kid on a summer evening, “were you cruising?” If we are involved in the events, as family or friends (or police, God forbid), the texture can shift from third to first-person history easily.

In third-person history, we want to know how much one event has influenced others. In first-person history, we want to know the worth of an event, its value for the people involved. In third-person history, time is quantitative, a matter of dates and sequences. In first-person history, past time is present in the lives of people now. It is a matter of personal experience, but it is shared in a community, and so it does not have the capriciousness that we don’t like when we call something “subjective.”

I could go on, but these are fair examples of the differences. For those who relish a challenge, H. Richard Niebuhr’s *The Meaning of Revelation* (1940) will provide many happy hours of reading. That book is my source, and it has some problems, but I have no intention of debugging it here.

One noticeable difference between third-person history, “external” history, “they” history, and first-person history, “internal” or “we” history, is that “we” history often uses figurative language to show how things felt or what they meant in the lives of people then and now. External history tends to be much more sparing (and much more

careful) of such language. We can read an internal history and more or less reconstruct what an external history of the same events would look like. People do this with the internal accounts of history in both the Common Documents and the New Testament.

Sometimes these literary devices are what we would today call “special effects.” How the stories arose in the first place is a question for Biblical scholars, and not always an easy one to answer. The Biblical texts usually make it clear that the kind of responsibility they are after is that of a first-person narrative, one person’s challenge to the life and lifestyle of another, and not the third-person responsibility to the “facts” of an external historian.

Special effects, whether in the Bible, in movies, or in advertisements, work to make visible what would otherwise be invisible. They show how it felt to experience the events, what it was like to be changed by the events. Because they show what it was like to be *changed* by the events, one can hardly dismiss them as “subjective” in the sense of “making it up,” reading things into the events that were not “really” there. They tell us what the Israelites experienced in the Exodus and the Exile. They tell us what the Church and the Synagogue experienced in the disasters of the first century.

These texts have been changed in the modern world. What were literary devices to explain the subjective experience of events that were very objective have become something quite different. (Little Judah was, after all, very objectively carried off into Babylon, and very much against its will.) The responsibility implicit in the texts has been shifted. It was an *avowal* of an experience, and undertaking of responsibility for an experience in the past and for its implications in the present. It has become (for the modern world) a *report* of a phenomenon, precisely as naturalistic language abstracts from and hides human involvements. The emphasis of the stories in both the Common Documents and in the New Testament has been radically changed. A people in history has been eclipsed, and what used to be the story of its life has become mere “evidence” for God. In the Common Documents, prophets’ warnings about the (then) near future have been turned into predictions of events long after. In the New

Testament, the “miracle” stories have become the preternatural events that work as God’s Driver’s License.

The responsibility *for the experiences* has now been shifted. For the physical phenomena, observable in naturalistic terms, are now supposed to take the responsibility for the experience. That experience and its accompanying commitments are no longer avowed. One need no longer answer Jesus’s question (just to take the Christian side of the problem), “Who do you say that I am?”, openly and candidly. We no longer hear “Who do *you* say that I am?”, nor do we feel the discomfort of being put on the spot. Instead, we think we can answer with, “You said you were so-and-so”, or “We know from the miracles that you are such-and-such.”

The special effects were a way of externalizing something that was internal and existential, personal, a matter of lived experience. Externalization is a literary way of making the invisible and internal visible for other people. But what was externalized figuratively has been taken literally, and now what was externalized and taken literally has become objectivated. What is objective and treated in objective language is separated and divorced from human avowal, human responsibility. The people who have allowed this to happen to their language have been alienated from the events and the history that was supposed to be the center of their lives.



