

The Supernatural Claim

GENESIS 1:1

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In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1).

From its earliest dawning in the first century, the Christian faith has been subjected to perennial challenges, denials and corruptions that spring up repeatedly across generations. Among the first of these heresies was the denial of the full deity of Christ, known as Arianism for its ancient popularizer, Arius of Antioch. A second heresy is named for the 4th century British monk, Pelagius. Pelagianism denies man's sinful nature and thus the need for divine grace in salvation. More recently, but with roots in the ancient church, is the denial of the inerrancy of Scripture. Seeing the Bible as a human product, scholars determine for themselves which parts are inspired and which other parts may be discarded.

In September 1896, the Princeton theologian Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield gave an address in which he pointed out that all of these historic challenges to biblical Christianity have a common root in denying or radical limiting the supernatural character of the Christian faith. "To curb the supernatural," he wrote, "yes, that is the labor with which the thinkers of our day have burdened themselves."¹ So it has been throughout church history. Anti-supernaturalism undergirded Arius' denial that Christ is "very God of very God," as well as Pelagius' false claim that man has within himself the power of salvation, just as this same anti-supernaturalism attempts to deny the divine inspiration and inerrancy of God's Word.

¹ Benjamin B. Warfield, "Christian Supernaturalism," in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1932, reprint 2000), 9:28.

In the Enlightenment, Voltaire took up the banner against the supernatural, crying, “Down with the infamy!”² In Warfield’s time, a leader voice declared, “The task which the bolder thinking of our time has undertaken, is to curb the supernatural, to bring it into the full service of reason.”³ That was, in fact, the grand agenda of the late 19th century, the success of which is seen in the increasing secularizing of America and the West in the 20th century and now in the moral chaos of the 21st century. In the opening scenes of his mesmerizing television series, *Cosmos*, Carl Sagan’s voice sounded mystically with a materialistic mantra: “The cosmos is all there is or ever was or ever will be.” More recently, atheistic writers such as Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins have excoriated the idea of the supernatural in best-selling books.⁴ There is no supernatural, all these voices shout, but only the material realm that we can touch and see. Perfectly anticipating these claims, the apostle Paul noted this denial as the very essence of rebellious human unbelief: “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Rom 1:21).

Responding to this perennial assault, Warfield noted that the religion of the Bible is thoroughly supernatural: “The supernatural is the very breath of Christianity’s nostrils and an anti-supernaturalistic atmosphere is to it the deadliest miasma. An absolutely anti-supernaturalistic Christianity is therefore a contradiction in terms.”⁵

Sounding against the upraised fist of unbelieving mankind, the voice of God is heard in the Bible’s first verse, making a supernatural claim in the very first sentence of divine revelation: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). The universe, Scripture says, has a supernatural origin, just as the creation will have a supernatural ruler throughout history.

² Ibid., 9:27.

³ Ibid., 9:27-28.

⁴ Most notable are Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve Books, 2007) and Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006).

⁵ Ibid., 9:29.

The Supernatural God

The idea of “God” can easily be conceived in non-supernatural terms. This is the point behind the “Big Bang” theory, made popular not because it solves any problems regarding our origins but because it ascribes creation to a material source. Likewise, the theory of evolution, which rose to widespread acceptance precisely during an era that was seeking to dispense with the supernatural, seeks to explain by natural processes phenomena traditionally ascribed to God. Faced with the recently accumulating evidence in support of a created design, some atheists have fallen back on the seemingly desperate strategy of ascribing our origin to visiting aliens from a distant but advanced civilization. Carl Sagan concluded his life resting on this proposal, which has also been suggested by the anti-Christian polemicist, Richard Dawkins.⁶ It seems that the secularist unbeliever will grasp at any straw, however thin, to avoid admitting a supernatural God.

The book of Genesis begins, however, by declaring a Creator God who is wholly separate from everything that he made and who is, thus, inherently supernatural. This means that the biblical God cannot be understood or accounted for by strictly natural or material means. In contrast to pantheism, which declares all of creation itself as god, the God of the Bible is entirely above nature, that is, supernatural. In light of Genesis 1:1’s teaching that “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” Warfield insisted on a particular view of God that is necessary to Christian faith:

When the Christian says “God,” he means, and if he is to remain Christian he must mean, a *supernatural* God – a God who is not entangled in nature, is not only another name for nature in its coordinated activities, or for that mystery which lies beneath and throbs through the All; but which is above nature and beyond, who existed, the Living God, before nature was, and should nature cease to be would still exist, the Everlasting God, and so long as this universal frame endures exists above and outside of nature as its Lord, its Lawgiver, and its Almighty King.⁷

⁶ Jonathan Wells, “Is the ‘Science’ of Richard Dawkins Science Fiction?” *Discovery Institute*, Apr. 21, 2008. Accessed online at <http://www.discovery.org/a/4809>.

⁷ Warfield, *Works*, 9:32.

For the past century and more, the dividing line between what is often cast as liberal theology versus evangelical or Bible-believing Christianity is precisely this question of the supernatural being of God and of the events described in Holy Scripture. In the conflict between these two camps we see the difference between those who are resolved on the one hand to conform Christian faith to the demands of the culture around it – primarily the anti-supernatural demands of unbelieving culture – versus those who resolve to conform Christianity to the Word of God as revealed in the Bible.

Over the decades since secular naturalism took hold in the late 19th century, this battle has raged at a number of points in the biblical account. In the early and mid-20th century, denominations split over the differing views of the virgin birth of Christ, the miracles of Christ, and the bodily resurrection of Christ. At each point, the secular-leaning side redefined these claims in a naturalistic manner, generally ascribing the biblical accounts to mythology or merely spiritualized metaphors. Jesus could not really have been born of a virgin, it was argued, since we know that it is rationally impossible for a virgin to conceive a child. Jesus did not really feed five thousand men with three loaves and two fish – a claim that is physically preposterous – but rather Jesus’ faith inspired people to share the food that they had with others. Jesus did not literally rise from the dead, since we know that the dead do not rise, but rather the church was encoding a metaphor for spiritual renewal. This battle has more recently extended into the social and gender instructions of the Bible. Secularists argue that we can no longer accept the idea that wives must submit to their husbands, positing that Paul wrote such things merely to conform with the social dynamics of his own chauvinistic time. The Bible’s teaching, therefore, can no longer be considered inspired in the sense of presenting God’s actual, inerrant Word, but rather provides human ideas about God and life. Revealing the spirituality of liberal theology, theologian Paul Tillich was once asked if he prayed. “I meditate,” he said, “but I do not pray.”⁸

⁸ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time*, in *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer*, 5 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1985), 2:15.

In response to culture-conforming liberalism, biblically faithful Christians have uniformly upheld the Scripture's own supernatural claim. Because the Bible reveals a God who is above nature, its believers have no problem imaging supernatural things happening throughout history, starting with creation. How can we believe that Jesus was literally born of a virgin, that he performed his miracles precisely as they are recorded by the apostles, and that he rose bodily from the dead in resurrection life? Because we believe in a supernatural God who is easily capable of suspending, over-ruling, and sovereignly commanding the rules of nature. The fact that modern science records no instances of virgin births, miraculously multiplied food, or bodily resurrections does not trouble the Christian, precisely because we have first accepted the biblical announcement of the supernatural God. Responding to the critics, Francis Schaeffer writes:

God not only brought the heavens and the earth into existence by divine fiat; He still works into history. He has not become a slave of His creation. Nor is He a slave of history because He made history as it is now. . . . Thus, while there is a uniformity of natural causes in the external world that God had made, it is not in a closed system. God can still speak when He will, and Peter says that one day in history He indeed will speak again, with judgment.⁹

Shaped by this view, Christians not only meditate, like Pannenberg, but we also pray to a God who we believe can do supernatural things.

The Supernatural Creation

As we approach Genesis chapter 1, this supernatural claim is central to the biblical doctrine of creation, especially as it conflicts with the secularist dogma of evolution. All through the record of creation in this chapter, Christians can take the text at face value – even when these events seem to collide with natural causes and relationships – because we proceed with the assumption of a supernatural God as revealed in Genesis 1:1.

In short, Christians who believe in the supernatural *being* of God also believe in the supernatural *acts* of God recorded in Scripture. These acts fall into two grand categories, the first of which is *creation*.

⁹ Ibid., 2:18.

Warfield writes the creation is “the product of an act of power. God spoke and it was: and the God that thus spoke nature into being, is necessarily a supernatural God, creating nature by a supernatural act. As Christian men, we must at all hazards preserve this supernaturalistic conception of creation.”¹⁰

The first implication of a supernatural creation is that Christians have a basis for upholding an *orderly* view of nature versus the *relativistic* view to which the anti-supernaturalist must be driven. It is in this way that the presuppositions of all objective science are Christian ones. Why do we believe that the laws of nature that we observe are stable and true? Because we believe that these natural laws, like the universe itself, were created by God. In contrast, once the secularist has discarded the supernatural God as Creator, he no longer has a basis for expecting uniformity in nature, especially when he realizes that science is capable of observing only a tiny portion of the overall data in the universe. Jason Lisle writes: “If the universe were merely the accidental by-product of a big bang, then why should it obey orderly principles – or any principles at all for that matter?” The only stable basis for objective and credible science, therefore, is the biblical belief in a Creator “who is logical and has imposed order on His universe.”¹¹ In contrast, the reason why contemporary science is willing to proceed from irrational presuppositions is that its purveyors have abandoned the idea of objective laws and have made science the servant of political posturing.

What is true of natural laws is equally true of moral laws. Those advocating cultural upheaval today is that there is no objective moral order, so that mankind is free to rewrite the rules of society at its own whim. This anti-supernaturalist worldview lies behind the recent granting of moral acceptance to adultery, homosexuality, and gender confusion. Since there is no supernatural authority and since nature does not have stable laws, the resulting relativism grants us liberty to do things according to whatever whims can gain cultural traction. In contrast, the Christian reads the Bible as the fixed revelation of the Creator, who made all things in the beginning and continues to rule

¹⁰ Warfield, *Works*, 9:34.

¹¹ Jason Lisle, “God and Natural Law,” *Answers in Genesis*, Aug. 28, 2006. Accessed on-line at: <https://answersingenesis.org/is-god-real/god-natural-law/>.

them all now. Thus, when Genesis 1:27 identifies only two genders for the human race, saying, “male and female he created them,” the Christian reads these words not merely as the social construct of more primitive societies but as the fixed truth of the Creator God. The same is true when it comes to the seventh commandment’s prohibition against adultery, as well as to the apostle Paul’s teaching regarding the complementary relationship between a husband and wife. Christians do not see these rules as life-inhibiting remnants of an unenlightened past but as the fixed order given by God for the obedience and blessing of his creatures.

The fact that its moral and societal revisions conflict strongly with the available evidence does not seem to bother today’s secular unbeliever. Examples of this irrational conflict abound. Social anarchists insist that there is no limit to the gender options available to us. Yet the evidence of biological nature clearly reveals only two genders, male and female. Or consider that sexual liberators claim that homosexual desires arises from an inherited trait at the same time that they adhere to the theory of evolution. Yet evolution argues that a homosexual trait could not survive a single generation, since such a trait is utterly opposed to reproducing itself by generating offspring. What motive, we therefore ask, can possibly produce such manifest irrationality among those who pride themselves on reason? The Bible ascribes this folly as the results of an idolatrous rebellion to God (see again Rom. 1:21). At times, the secularists are willing to admit this as well. Consider Aldous Huxley, one of the 20th centuries leading atheists, who wrote this admission in his autobiography:

For myself, as, no doubt, for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation. The liberation we desired was simultaneously liberation from a certain political and economic system and liberation from a certain system of morality. . . . I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning; consequently I assumed that it had none, and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption.¹²

This statement highlights why Christians must hold fast to belief in a supernatural God who created the heavens and the earth. Unless God created all things according to his own will, including the moral

¹² Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1946), 273.

order of life, we have no basis for opposing social anarchy. Thus, evolution is pitted not only against biblical creation, but it also undermines any claim to a fixed biblical morality. Peter Enns, an evangelical supporter of evolution, admits as much. He has argued that “evolution cannot simply be grafted onto evangelical Christian faith as an add-on,” because requires wholesale change to our religion. This includes biblical ideas of morality. Enns writes: “Some behaviors that Christians have thought of as sinful are understood in an evolutionary scheme as means of ensuring survival—for example, the aggression and dominance associated with ‘survival of the fittest’ and sexual promiscuity to perpetuate one’s gene pool.”¹³

The Supernatural Faith

The Bible’s supernaturalism is vital to upholding more than biblical morality, however. Indeed, the entire religion of the Bible and its message of salvation relies on the supernatural claim of Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” I earlier noted that the acts of God fall into two categories, the first of which is creation. The second category is *redemption*, and here too a biblical faith must uphold its supernatural claim.

According to the Bible, the great problem of this world arises from man’s rebellion against the righteous demands of its Creator God. Once we accept that sin against God is the source of mankind’s woes, leaving man guilty and corrupted, we also see that the remedy can only be provided by God himself. By our own natural labors we are unable to erase our transgression or counter a corruption that is ingrained in our nature. Therefore, mankind requires a supernatural salvation. Warfield notes: “We cannot confess ourselves sinners – radically at breach with God and broken and deformed in our moral and spiritual being – and look to purely natural causes . . . , for our recovery to God and to moral and spiritual health.”¹⁴ Just as Lazarus required Christ’s supernatural power to rise from the grave, so also the sinner, dead in transgressions (Eph. 2:1), can only rise to new life by divine power. Once we have accepted the biblical description of

¹³ Enns, *Evolution of Adam*.

¹⁴ Warfield, *Works*, 9:38.

mankind's plight in sin, we must be saved by a divine intervention that is supernatural at every point.

Along these lines, biblical Christianity requires faith in a supernatural Christ, who enters into our world from outside by supernatural means. Paul thus contrasts Adam and Jesus, saying: "The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven" (1 Cor. 15:47). It is in line with this teaching that Bible believers so ferociously defended the virgin birth of Christ during the assaults of the twentieth century. Liberal theologians argued that we can dispense with this kind of mythology and retain Christianity, but nothing could be farther from the truth. Both Matthew's and Luke's Gospels begin with an account of the supernatural origin of Christ, insisting on his own divine nature as God's Son and his conception in the womb of the virgin Mary by the agency of the Holy Spirit. The apostle John begins his Gospel by identifying Jesus with the very God who spoke at the dawn of creation: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn. 1:1). Only this Savior is able to overcome fallen human nature and provide the remedy of divine grace for the problem of our sin.

The Bible's supernatural claim must be upheld for the entirety of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven, along with his impending supernatural return from heaven to earth. The Bible teaches that Jesus overcame sin with divine power all through his life and ministry. Jesus then died on the cross, offering a sacrifice that can redeem the entirety of those who believe precisely because of the supernatural nature of his person and work. Likewise, Christ's resurrection was a true conquest of death, a situation that is inconceivable from purely natural resources. This is a great problem for Christians who succumb to secular pressure to replace biblical creation with naturalistic evolution: to concede the supernatural origin of creation is inherently to surrender the supernatural basis for Christ's saving work, especially his bodily resurrection from the grave.

The same necessity to uphold biblical supernaturalism occurs when we consider the biblical idea of saving faith and its results.

Conversion to Christ is not merely a moral decision resulting solely from natural means of persuasion and the exercise of our native wills.

Rather, according to the Bible, faith is a supernatural provision of God's grace: Paul says, "For by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8-9). Moreover, the results of saving faith extend far beyond a religious association but involve the supernatural rebirth of our souls. Paul taught: "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). Likewise, the believer's hope involves thoroughly miraculous and supernatural outcomes: membership in the family of God, access to divine aid through prayer, and an eternal life in glory beyond the grave.

On what basis does the Christian believe these claims which to our materialist society amount to astonishing lunacy? The answer is that we are brought to faith by a supernatural Bible, which is the very Word of God by the inspiration of the prophets and apostles and possesses the power of God to grant eternal life. Paul identified genuine Christians in precisely these terms, praising the Thessalonians by saying: "you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God" (1 Thess. 2:13).

The Word of Heaven, the Hope of Earth

As the Christian opens his Bible and reads its first verse, he discovers the great fact of a supernatural God who was in the beginning, who is the author of a supernatural creation and a supernatural redemption, providing the only source of hope for our fallen natural state. At precisely this central point we find ourselves in radical conflict with the unbelieving world, which looks only to material and natural realms of existence. This points out the great folly of our surrendering to secular dogma at any point in contention, as if such a surrender would lessen the overarching conflict between the Christian view and the anti-Christian view of everything.

The Christian and the non-Christian are not divided merely by nuances regarding our view of science or subtle differences in the doctrine of sin, salvation, or the Bible. We are in fact divided by a wide and fundamental conflict that begins and is decided at Genesis 1:1. Will we stand in humble awe before the divine Creator? Will we confess transgression not merely against human moral codes but

against the law of God? Will we look to heaven for salvation by a supernatural grace that can be provided only by the God-Man, Jesus Christ? If we answer these questions with the “Yes” and “Amen” of a supernatural faith, then we must be prepared to contend for the entirety of this supernatural claim. Warfield wrote a century ago that the secular demand to strip the Bible of its blatant supernaturalism assaults “Christianity in the very citadel of its life.”¹⁵ Is it possible for believers to accommodate the demands of secular science and culture, in this way removing the offense that so divides us from our secularist neighbors? Warfield answered, “No, let our answer be: as Christian men, a thousand times, no!” Why must we be so stubbornly militant? Warfield noted that to remove the supernatural from our belief is “to eviscerate Christianity of all that makes it a redemptive scheme, of all that has given it power in the earth, [and] of all that has made it a message of hope and joy to lost men.”

Indeed, when we remember that faith in biblical Christianity is the only hope of salvation for all the world, we then are willing to receive all the scorn of secular science, government, and culture. It is, in the end, out of love for both God and the world that we remain faithful to our calling to stand upon a supernatural Bible and its offer of a salvation that is entirely of heaven as the only hope of earth.

It is always in this stance – looking upward to heaven in faith and downward to earth in the redeeming love of Christ – that Christians not only bear testimony to the world but offer our worship to God. Charles Wesley expressed this supernatural stance in our hearts, stirred by the Bible’s truth in our minds:

Love divine, all loves excelling, Joy of heaven to earth come down;
Fix in us thy humble dwelling; All thy faithful mercies crown! . . .
Finish, then, Thy new creation; Pure and spotless let us be.
Let us see Thy great salvation, Perfectly restored in Thee;
Changed from glory into glory, Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before Thee, Lost in wonder, love, and praise.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid., 9:41.

¹⁶ Charles Wesley, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” 1747.