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CRITICAL HISTORICAL JUDGMENT AND BIBLICAL FAITH

C. Stephen Evans

Hans Frei has argued that the gospels contain “realistic narrative” that is “history-like” even if not historical. Many would regard the historicity of the narrative as dubious because of the miraculous and supernatural elements contained within it. I argue that the reasons commonly given for rejecting miracles and the supernatural by Troeltsch and Harvey are weak. The principles of critical historiography they advance gain their plausibility from a platitudinous reading, but the principles only cut against miracles and the supernatural when they are read in a less-plausible manner that presupposes dubious and controversial naturalistic assumptions. One should not reject the historicity of the gospel narratives simply because of miraculous and supernatural elements.

Historical accounting, by almost universal modern consent, involves that the narrative satisfactorily rendering a sequence believed to have taken place must consist of events, and reasons for their occurrence, whose connections may be rendered without recourse to supernatural agency.¹

—Hans Frei

In *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* Hans Frei tells the story of how what he terms the “realistic character of Biblical narrative” came to be “ignored, or—even more fascinating—its presence and distinctiveness came to be denied for lack of a ‘method’ to isolate it.”² As Frei tells the tale, the realistic or “history-like” character of Biblical narrative is an obvious feature of the text, so much so that it is “acknowledged by all hands to be there.”³ Nevertheless, because commentators tended to assume that meaning consists of ostensive reference, the history-like character of the narrative could only be coherently understood if the narrative was actually historical. However, the many supernatural elements in the narrative made it increasingly difficult and finally impossible to believe in the historical truth of the narrative, for “it is taken for granted that modern historians will look with a jaundiced eye on appeal to miracle as an explanatory account of events.”⁴ In the end, Frei maintains, the history-like character of the narrative was either ignored or denied. Since commentators could recognize the history-like character of the text only by thinking of it as actual history, they increasingly ignored that character. On Frei’s account, the alternative overlooked was that of “realistic narrative,” the type of narrative embodied in the modern realistic novel.



Now Frei is certainly correct to claim that a narrative may have a history-like or realistic character without being historical. Modern realistic fiction is a concrete demonstration of that. So he is correct to say that the question of whether a narrative has a history-like character and thus a "literal" meaning must be distinguished from the question of whether a narrative is historically reliable. However, as Frei certainly recognized, a narrative intended as history and not fiction is also "history-like." Having established that a narrative is history-like, it may also be valuable and important to establish whether it is intended as history, and if it is, whether the historical narrative is a reliable one.

In this essay I wish to discuss the assumption that seems to make it necessary for many people to regard the narratives found in the New Testament concerning Jesus of Nazareth as fundamentally historically untrue: the assumption that critical historical judgment rules out taking seriously accounts of events that involve miracles or supernatural agency. If miracles can occur as part of history, and if it is possible to have good historical evidence that miracles have occurred, then there seems to be no good *a priori* reason for denying the intended historical character of the New Testament narrative. If the narrative is history-like, one possible explanation of this fact is that it was written as history. Of course the deistic and humanistic dismissal of the narrative as untrue remains an option. However, I wish to show that those who are in some way committed to the truthfulness of the New Testament narrative are not forced by this commitment to deny its narrative character as history. The possibility remains that it is true history.

I. *The Significance of the Incarnational Narrative*

Since the narrative of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, as contained in the four gospels, is of supreme importance for Christian faith, for the remainder of the paper I shall focus my attention on this particular narrative.⁵ Part of the evidence that Frei is right in his contention about the eclipse of the realistic character of the New Testament narrative is that many readers may find it hard to understand why the historical truth of the narrative should be so important. Surely, they may say, what is really important is the moral ideal represented by the life and teachings of Jesus, regardless of the historicity of the story. Alternatively, they may say that we can "demythologize" the narrative and extract from it some moral or existential truth. Or, they may affirm, with Joseph Campbell, that the narrative can and should simply be read as myth that may or may not have some historical basis but communicates in a powerful way the basic metaphysical/psychological truth about the human condition, task, and destiny.⁶ Surely, it is something like this that is important, not the factual, historical truth of the narrative.

I cannot really demonstrate that reading the Bible in such ways is "wrong"; I am not even surely exactly what that would mean. However, I would like

to say something about why the historical character of the narrative has always been regarded as crucial for orthodox Christianity. The narrative in question is of course not simply the narrative as it might be “scientifically” reconstructed by Biblical scholars, but the narrative as developed from the New Testament by the church.

From the traditional Christian perspective, the historical narrative in the New Testament is not “mere” history, but it is fully history. The Christian rejects the divorce of fact and value, the real and the good, that is so characteristic of modernity. The Christian holds that the Bible contains a record of God’s revelation of himself in history. Nor is this revelation simply an historical communication of timeless truths. Rather, the revelation consists of God’s actions in history. Jesus is not merely a symbol pointing to some eternal truth about God, but God incarnate, making possible the redemption of the human race, and ultimately of the whole created order, through his life, death, and resurrection. The narrative is not simply an illustration of metaphysical truth, but is itself the record of how God has accomplished salvation. If God has not accomplished salvation in history in this manner, then the New Testament account is untrue in a fundamental sense.

I shall assume in what follows that this New Testament narrative contains supernatural and miraculous elements that are essential to the story and ineradicable from it. The fundamental miracle is simply the presence of Jesus himself as God incarnate. The claim is that Jesus was and is not merely human, even though he was and is fully human. Jesus is the Word, the One who is one with God, the One through whom all things were made.⁷ Jesus is one with the Father; he has the authority to forgive sins.⁸ His authority and divinity are manifested by his teachings, and ultimately attested by the miracles he performed, including especially the supreme miracle of his being raised from the dead by the Father. To remove references to supernatural agency from this story is to transform it into a different story altogether.

II. *The Assumptions of the “Critical Historian”*

Why precisely do “modern historians” or those who wish to emulate them find it impossible to take seriously as history a narrative with such supernatural elements? Why, to use Frei’s words, should it be “taken for granted that modern historians will look with a jaundiced eye on appeal to miracle as an explanatory account of events”? Though it is often assumed and frequently asserted that a “modern, critical” approach to the narrative must exclude the supernatural, attempts to explicitly argue for such a view are more rare. Perhaps the best known attempt to make such an argument has been provided by Ernst Troeltsch, the important turn of the century German theologian. Among contemporary theologians, Van Harvey, who makes no secret of his debt to Troeltsch, has repeated and reformulated Troeltsch’s position.⁹ I shall

give an exposition of the views of Troeltsch and Harvey, and in so doing critically examine the reasons they give for their view that taking miracles and supernatural agency seriously involves a “pre-critical” view of history.¹⁰

Both Troeltsch and Harvey are quite clear that the problem with traditional Christian approaches to the gospel narrative does not arise from particular historical findings, but from the *method* to which the modern historian is committed.¹¹ Thus, the issues to be faced do not concern the evidence for or against some particular miracle; rather they concern the general principles historians should follow. As is so often the case, this discussion of “methodology” is really a discussion of philosophical issues, and hence requires no special training as a Biblical scholar to understand.

Both Troeltsch and Harvey make several crucial assumptions that are questionable, but which I shall not examine in this essay. Both assume, I think, an internalist, evidentialist account of all historical knowledge. That is, both assume that if I am to know something about the past, I must know it on the basis of evidence of which I am aware or at least of which I could become aware. This ignores the possibility that at least some historical knowledge of justified beliefs may be the result of reliable, belief-producing mechanisms. On a “reliabilist” account of historical knowledge, beliefs formed by such mechanisms might constitute knowledge even if I am not aware of the evidence for the belief.¹² This possibility has real relevance to the case of historical religious knowledge, since some theologians, such as John Calvin, have attributed our knowledge of the truth of the Biblical narrative to the internal operation of the Holy Spirit, and while this could be construed evidentially, it might also be understood in a reliabilist manner.

Secondly, Harvey and Troeltsch seem to assume a kind of “ethic of belief” or “morality of knowledge” that implies that we have intellectual duties not to hold historical beliefs without the right kind of evidence. The topic of what are our intellectual duties is a fascinating one, but I shall not discuss it in this paper, except to point out that in most cases we don’t have voluntary control over our beliefs, and thus our duties can’t be construed simply as duties to acquire or refrain from holding certain beliefs, but more plausibly as duties to cultivate certain kinds of intellectual habits. For this paper, I will provisionally accept the general idea that with respect to historical beliefs, we have some intellectual duties to cultivate the kinds of habits a good historian would have, whatever those might turn out to be, and the assumption that our historical knowledge is best understood as based on evidence. Though I don’t believe Harvey has in fact clearly laid out a plausible ethic of belief to back up his charge that holding Christian beliefs in the face of modern critical history involves intellectual dishonesty, this is an issue I shall have to leave for another occasion.

According to Troeltsch, there are three principles of critical historical investigation that cause problems for the traditional Christian. There is first the

principle of criticism.¹³ Essentially, this is a claim that historical judgments are always provisional, corrigible and approximative. Such judgments are always more or less probable, based on the evidence available for them. Secondly, there is the *principle of analogy*.¹⁴ This principle is a kind of assumption of uniformity, in that it is assumed that our present experience is not radically different from the experiences of humans in the past. The same kinds of causal laws and natural processes operative today were operative in the past. Thirdly, there is the *principle of correlation*.¹⁵ This is essentially an assumption about causality, that holds that one must always understand an historical event in the context of its natural antecedents and consequences. Historical events must be understood in terms of their natural historical contexts.

Van Harvey essentially takes over Troeltsch's three principles, reinterprets them so as to eliminate certain obvious objections, and places them in the context of more contemporary discussions of evidence and epistemology. Harvey's own account of the "morality of knowledge" involves four aspects: (1) the radical autonomy of the historian,¹⁶ (2) the responsibility of the historian to employ arguments and statements that can be rationally assessed,¹⁷ (3) the need of the historian to exercise "sound and balanced judgment,"¹⁸ and (4) the need to use "critically interpreted experience as the background against which sound judgments are made about the past."¹⁹ When expressed in summary form, the last three of these sound platitudinous, but when developed by Harvey they are filled in with a "Troeltsch-like" content that gives them more critical punch.

Harvey himself says the first three of his principles go together as a kind of "package," while the fourth is logically more distinct.²⁰ I agree with this claim; in fact, it appears to me that suitably interpreted versions of the first three principles, without the fourth, would probably not get Harvey the conclusions he wishes. Nevertheless, all of his principles bristle with difficulties. I shall try to show that each of the first three principles is ambiguous in the following way; each has what I shall call a platitudinous interpretation, which gives the principle its plausibility, but which has no controversial implications for traditional Christian beliefs. Each allows for a more radical reading, which does conflict with traditional Christian beliefs about the supernatural. However, I will argue that the principles Harvey espouses are implausible as principles binding on all reasonable historians when interpreted in this more radical way.

1. The *autonomy* of the historian is understood by Harvey in terms of the Enlightenment ideal as articulated by Kant: "Dare to use your own reason." This is understood as the rejection of all authority; the only authority that exists for the critical historian is the authority that he confers on his sources.²¹ Harvey quotes Collingwood with approval: "Insofar as an historian accepts

the testimony of an authority and treats it as historical truth he obviously forfeits the name of historian.”²² Harvey himself says, “If the historian permits his authorities to stand uncriticized, he abdicates his role as critical historian. He is no longer a seeker of knowledge but a mediator of past belief; not a thinker but a transmitter of tradition.”²³ All this is justified by appealing to the historically conditioned nature of witnesses and authorities: “What a witness thinks he sees is in large part filtered through the prism of his own individual mode of perception and conception which, in turn is heavily influenced by the modes of thought of the culture of which he is a part. Men are historical creatures, and their judgments reflect the ‘world’ that they bring with them and to which they appeal in support of those judgments.”²⁴

Ironically, Harvey seems to think that “critical historians” are immune from this historical predicament and thus stand apart from the common run of humankind. He doesn’t see that the “critical historian” he puts forward as an ideal may similarly be a product of historical circumstances. Thus he is uncritical of the assumptions of this “enlightened” thinker. As we shall see when we examine Harvey’s fourth principle, the “modern, critical” historian is hardly innocent of philosophical assumptions that may reflect his historical situation, and which color the way he views ancient witnesses.

Harvey would probably defend himself here by noting the dangers of historical relativism; Harvey rightly deplores this relativism and affirms the possibility of “self-transcendence” on the part of the historian.²⁵ Thus, reliable historical knowledge is possible, he thinks. However, Harvey does not seem to notice that if “self-transcendence” is possible on the part of historians, it is likely that the people historians study must be capable of this self-transcendence as well.

Understood in one sense, the claim that historians must be “autonomous” seems quite uncontroversial. If someone is making an historical investigation, then she must decide what sources are reliable, what inferences to draw from the available evidence, and so on. The historian must certainly recognize general truths about the human condition, such as that humans are sometimes mistaken and deceived, and that sources are sometimes untrustworthy. It would be unreasonable for an historian to take a particular source as an absolute, unchallengeable authority. Rather, the authority of a source is the sort of thing that is open to question, and for which evidence is often appropriately sought.

However, it appears to me that Harvey does not wish to interpret his principle of autonomy simply as entailing such innocent platitudes. Rather, he seems to think that the autonomous historian is one who necessarily takes a superior and suspicious attitude toward all historical sources. People who leave us narratives about the past seem to be generally incapable of getting things right; their accounts are always colored by the biases that derive from

their historical situation. This is especially true of people of ancient times, with the notable exception of the Greeks. Harvey here reflects a standard attitude of "modern man," one that is especially clear in his hero Troeltsch, who speaks quite disparagingly of ancient peoples in whom "there is not the slightest trace of a desire for real knowledge or of a critical spirit."²⁶ We learn from the accounts of such people by reading *through* their stories and reconstructing what really happened on the basis of our superior understanding of the situation.

This concept of autonomy seems overblown to me, as does the exaggerated sense of superiority to ancient peoples. In fact, autonomy in this sense trips over the same kind of problem that plagues classical foundationalism in epistemology generally. Classical foundationalism says I should not believe a proposition unless I have objectively certain evidence for that proposition. The problem immediately arises of course as to whether I have evidence for my evidence. To stop a regress, it appears that I must have some evidence that either requires no evidence or that I am willing to accept without evidence. If I don't have enough evidence of the former sort, then it appears I am stuck with the latter.

Harvey says I can accept no authority without critical examination of that authority that gives me a basis for certifying that authority as reliable. However, if I can accept no authority without prior critical examination, then how can I possibly gain any reliable basis for my critical examination? Surely some authorities must be accepted (some "witnesses") in order to put into question others. I can't for example rely on things like the number and independence of witnesses unless I can put some basic credence in testimony.

Actually, it appears to me that Harvey is mistaken in the picture he accepts (perhaps unconsciously) of the historian as a godlike being who *bestows* authority on certain fortunate sources. I doubt that it is possible for historians to bestow authority or confer it. Surely, the normal procedure is for an historian to *recognize* an authority as reliable. In many cases it is through evidence that the historian comes to recognize this reliability, but it is unlikely that such reliability could ever be recognized if the historian did not generally accept a lot of evidence as trustworthy without any special evidence. It is true that knowledge of the historical circumstances of an historical source may give an historian insight into ways that sources may be unreliable, and thus sometimes the historian is rightly suspicious of sources. But this suspicion must be balanced by suspicion of the historian towards her own biases. A source may see things wrongly because of bias, but it is also possible that a source sees things rightly, but the historian may be blocked from realizing this because of *her* bias. Blanket, wholesale skepticism about the accounts of ancient peoples is surely as unreasonable as gullible acceptance of all accounts. Whether an account is fanciful and whether an ancient author had

a sense of what it means to tell a true story are matters to be determined by the nature of the text itself, and the evidence we have that bears on its story, and not simply determined on the basis of speculative claims about the supposed "mind" of ancient peoples.

2. The second and third principles of Harvey seem to me to be essentially linked together. Harvey says that the historian is committed to "publicly assessable evidence" for claims made and that "good judgment" must be employed in assessing that evidence.²⁷

As stated these principles look perfectly formal, and also perfectly platitudinous. To flesh out his principles, Harvey borrows a model from early work by Stephen Toulmin. An historical conclusion is founded on data which are linked with the conclusion on the basis of a warrant.²⁸ Warrants are essentially licensed argument-forms. Conclusions can be challenged by denying the relevance or applicability of the data and warrants to the conclusion or by challenging the warrant itself. These challenges, called rebuttals, are in turn met by giving reasons to accept the warrants, which are called backings.

However, all of this still looks perfectly formal and even platitudinous. It seems unlikely that inferences to supernatural explanations can be excluded by such formal machinery. Why, for example, should the following kind of warrant be excluded: "Since exceptions to laws of nature can only be attributed to the work of God, any event involving such an exception must involve divine agency"? If I accept this principle, then if my data involves an event that I have good reason to believe is an exception to a law of nature, such as a resurrection of a person from the dead, then I would have rational warrant for believing that God was part of the cause of the event.

Perhaps to exclude such a case, Harvey might want to understand the "publicly assessable" part of his principles as requiring warrants that are acceptable to all historians, including secular historians. A warrant principle such as the one above would then be excluded as not "public" since it is not accepted by those committed to the assumptions that are embedded in modern-day thinking, assumptions that are in practice naturalistic. In such a case, the principles of Harvey cease to be purely formal and platitudinous, but it is not at all clear that the principles are now obligatory for all reasonable historians. Why, the religious believer may ask, should the unbeliever have the authority to decide which warrants are proper and which are not?

If Harvey attempts to argue that the only warrants acceptable as licensing reasonable inferences are ones that are acceptable to all historians, then I am afraid that proper warrants may be hard to come by. For historians typically disagree about such things as what conclusions are supported by a particular body of data. Once more it seems that something akin to a classical foundationalist epistemology has seeped into Harvey's thought, if he takes this line, for the requirement that warrants be acceptable to all historians seems strik-

ingly akin to the characteristic foundationalist principle that the foundations of our knowledge generally must be acceptable to "all sane, rational beings."

Actually, it is not clear that Harvey would claim that legitimate warrants must be acceptable to all historians. He is much concerned to refute historical skepticism, which he sees as a refuge to the traditional theologian who wishes to evade Harvey's relentless attack. As Harvey sees it, the person who is generally skeptical about knowledge of the past can use this skepticism in the following way: since we don't ever really know what happened in the past, the religious believer is as entitled to her unjustified beliefs as anyone else.²⁹ Harvey argues that historical skepticism is usually the result of setting up one kind of warrant as an ideal, and despairing when historical judgments cannot all be grounded in that way. Instead, Harvey says one must look at the actual warrants used by historians, and not try to impose some uniform ideal.³⁰ However, if that is so, why should not Christian historians, and others open to supernatural explanations, employ the forms of warrant that seem reasonable to them? Personal explanations, that is, explanations that attribute an event to the actions of persons acting for reasons, are commonly given by sensible, rational people. If God exists, and if God is personal, then there is no obvious reason why such explanations should be rejected in advance, particularly if we can know something about God and God's character such that one might understand some of the reasons God might have for performing certain kinds of actions.

3. Because of the above arguments, I believe that the crucial principle of the group that Harvey advances is the fourth one: the need to use "critically interpreted judgment" in order to understand the past. It is here that the influence of Troeltsch can be seen most clearly. Harvey's first three principles seem to flesh out to some extent Troeltsch's first principle, the "principle of criticism." His fourth principle seems to embody both of Troeltsch's other two principles, the principle of correlation (the idea that past events must be understood with reference to a natural causal network) and the principle of analogy (the idea that human experience has a certain uniformity such that present day conclusions can be extended to the past). That is, Harvey seems to understand "critically interpreted judgment" in a particular way. Understood in one way, the claim that the historian should employ critically interpreted judgment once more sounds quite innocent and unobjectionable. However, Harvey understands this principle to imply that historians must apply his first three criteria in a way that is "informed by the new way of looking at the world created by the sciences."³¹ Concretely, this means that on the basis of our present experience of the natural world as governed by scientific laws, we rule out all causes other than natural causes.

He characterizes this requirement in a number of ways. The new thinking that is required of the historian is thinking which is rooted in "what we now

call the common-sense view of the world"; autonomous thinking is "thinking in terms of the new world-picture"; rational assessment is "appealing to the known structures of present experience."³²

Harvey does not accept the positivistic ideal that historical knowledge consists of or even is grounded in laws of nature; he agrees that our warrants for historical beliefs are more like "truisms" or probabilistic generalizations than true laws.³³ Nevertheless, Harvey argues that "history presupposes all the sciences" in the sense that certain events and certain explanations are ruled out as impossible. Thus, the laws of natural science play a negative function by ruling out certain things, even if they do not positively justify our historical assertions.³⁴ Nor does the new physics change this situation: "Nature, to be sure, may be far more refractory to mathematical description at the subatomic level than hitherto believed, but this does not warrant a return to the credulity once characteristic of a majority of the human race."³⁵

Harvey says that miracles may be logically possible, but to be a serious candidate as an historical explanation something must be a "relevant possibility, a likely candidate to account for certain data."³⁶ Since an alleged miracle "contradicts our present knowledge in a specific scientific field" it is always in tension with well-established warrants. Hence "the burden of evidence and argument suddenly falls on the one who alleges the report to be true," and Harvey thinks that it is extremely difficult to meet this obligation.³⁷

However, all of these claims made by Harvey seem philosophical in character, and all of them, like most philosophical claims, seem eminently disputable. It is not clear, therefore, why a historian who did not share Harvey's philosophical biases would be disqualified as a "critical historian." Since Harvey's claims about miracles seem to be at the root of his contentions, they deserve careful examination.

III. *Miracles*

We cannot possibly examine all of the different claims Harvey makes concerning miracles, and of course the philosophical literature on this issue dating back to David Hume's classical essay is vast. Nevertheless, we cannot assess his claims about the standpoint of the "critical" historian without at least a cursory analysis of his claims about miracles. I will limit my reflection to the following claims that one might take as at least implicit in various places in Harvey: (1) Miracles (understood as exceptions to laws of nature) cannot occur.³⁸ (2) If a miracle should occur, one could never have enough evidence to believe that it did occur; some non-miraculous explanation would always be more probable.³⁹ (3) An historian cannot appeal to miracles as a rational explanation, because we have no way of assessing the evidence for a miracle.⁴⁰ One might of course think that these claims are not completely

consistent with each other, but we can charitably interpret them as “fall-back” claims. That is, (1) is a claim that miracles cannot occur, and (2) can be read as a claim that even if (1) is mistaken, the evidence for a miracle would never be sufficient to warrant belief. (3) seems inconsistent with (2), since to know that evidence is insufficient it looks like we should be able to evaluate it, but perhaps (3) can be read as a claim that if we lack ways of assessing the value of evidence, the evidence cannot be sufficient to warrant belief. I will examine each of these claims in turn.

1. The first objection to miracles seems to be metaphysical in nature. Harvey seems to claim at certain places that miracles simply cannot occur; at least I think this is implied by his claim that our knowledge of the laws of the natural sciences rules out certain events and certain explanations of events as “impossible.”⁴¹ Presumably he has in mind here events and explanations that involve exceptions to natural scientific laws. Exactly what sense of “impossibility” he has in mind here is not completely clear, since he later seems to admit that miracles are logically possible.⁴² Perhaps he means that miracles are physically or naturally impossible.

How is this assertion that miracles are physically impossible to be understood? If it means only that miracles are events that could not occur in the normal course of nature, because they involve happenings that exceed the powers of “unaided” natural realities, then this claim seems one that can be accepted by all parties. However, being physically impossible or naturally impossible will not then imply that a miracle is impossible *simpliciter*, at least for the religious believer, because the believer will say that in the case of a miracle there is a causal power at work distinct from the powers of the natural objects.

So, presumably the claim that miracles are naturally or physically impossible must be taken in some stronger sense, as entailing that a miracle would involve an exception to a law of nature to which there can be no exceptions. The laws of nature must hold universally. But how could Harvey (or anyone) know that the laws of nature are exceptionless? If Christianity is true (or any form of theism), then the natural world, including the laws of that world, exist because of God’s creative activity. Many theists believe that if God chose to do so, he could alter the normal course of nature. This could be stated by saying that God could choose to “over-ride” those laws, but that would be a misleading way to put it. Since those laws only hold because of God, and indeed may be thought of simply as God’s “normal” pattern of creative activity, to bring about a miracle there is nothing truly independent of God for God to “over-ride.” God may simply alter the way he normally causes a particular bit of nature to function.

Some philosophers have argued that the very concept of a law of nature implies that there cannot be exceptions to such laws.⁴³ On this view the claim

that there cannot be an exception to a law of nature is a conceptual truth, for a law of nature is simply a description of a universal pattern. If the pattern is not universal, then we do not have a true law of nature. Thus, if a miracle is an exception to a law of nature, then we know *a priori* that there cannot be a miracle.

This argument commits the same sin that critics of the ontological argument for God's existence allege infects Anselm's attempted proof, namely, trying to decide what is true in the real world by the manner in which we define our terms. Surely we cannot decide whether or not there are any exceptions to the normal regularities of nature by how we choose to define such concepts as "law of nature." If someone insists that a true law of nature must be exceptionless, then the theist who believes in miracles may concede that terms may be defined as one likes, and simply point out that one can then simply redefine the term "miracle" accordingly. If laws of nature must be exceptionless, then we need a concept such as "quasi-laws of nature," which refers to natural regularities which hold except in those rare cases where God chooses to work a miracle. It will then be a factual question whether or not the regularities we observe in nature are "laws" in the strict sense insisted upon, and therefore there are no miracles, or whether there are miracles, and the natural regularities we observe are therefore merely "quasi-laws." It is hard to see how an historian qua historian can pronounce upon such a philosophical issue, where the truth seems to depend on the questions as to whether the laws (or quasi-laws) of nature depend on God or not, and if so, whether or not God might ever have reasons to make exceptions to such laws.

Sometimes theological reasons are given for alleging that there cannot be exceptions to laws of nature. However, it is hard to see why such theologically grounded reasons should be binding on the critical historian qua historian. In any case the theological reasons usually given appear flimsy to me. It is sometimes claimed that a miracle as an exception to a law of nature misrepresents the relationship of God to nature by picturing a miraculous event as caused by an intrusion into nature from "outside." God, however, is always at work in the natural order, upholding it by his creative power. Perhaps some ways of talking about miracles do suggest that God is normally not actively present in the natural order, but that is certainly not a necessary implication of belief in miracles. All that is needed is a distinction between God's "normal" creative activity in upholding the processes of nature and a special act in which God wills a particular end, and such a distinction can clearly be made without implying that God is deistically absent from creation.

Sometimes it is argued that a miracle would be a sign of inconsistency on God's part; God "would not violate the laws he has made." However, natural laws are not normative ethical or legal principles that it would be wrong for God to violate. Nor does it seem that it would be inconsistent of God to

perform some special action for a special reason on a special occasion. It is the sign of a brilliant stylist, and not an imperfection, for a writer to make an exception to a literary rule that she normally follows, and that a lesser writer may feel the need to slavishly obey. Nor is a miracle rightly seen as an attempt by God to step in and "fix" something that has gone wrong with the natural processes; a miracle may in fact be something God has intended to do from all eternity, a special event that symbolically "fits" the natural order. Thus, C. S. Lewis sees the death and resurrection of Christ as an event that is anticipated and figuratively expressed in the whole cycle of nature, where to produce life, a seed must be buried and "die."⁴⁴ A miracle may be a culminating and fulfilling event that symbolically expresses the character of the God who upholds all of nature.

The upshot of all this is that I see no good reason why a critical historian should believe that miracles cannot occur. It may well be, of course, that many modern historians, and even many modern theologians, believe this. However, if they do believe it, they do not believe it for reasons that have anything to do with history, but for philosophical reasons. The only good philosophical reasons I can see for holding such a view would be reasons for believing that God does not exist, or that, if God does exist, God would never have reason to perform a miracle. I doubt very much myself that anyone has good grounds for believing either of these things; at best they are philosophically controversial positions, certainly not views that historians must hold to be good historians, and they are views that Christians have very good reasons not to hold.

2. Perhaps Harvey will fare better with epistemological rather than metaphysical objections to belief in miracles. As noted above, he claims that even if a miracle were to occur, we could still never have sufficient evidence for the miracle. At the very least anyone who claims a miracle has occurred bears a heavy burden of proof, and Harvey thinks that it will be extremely difficult to satisfy this obligation.⁴⁵ This type of argument is, of course, a standard one, going back to Hume's famous objections to miracles, which are also epistemological in character.

Here my discussion must be even more sketchy than in the last section, since the philosophical literature dealing with Hume-type arguments against belief in miracles is enormous. Here again Harvey does not really develop his argument, but seems to assume that it is simply obvious that miracles require an enormous amount of evidence, and that it is difficult if not impossible to provide such evidence.

Hume's own main argument against miracles revolves around the concept of probability. Essentially, he claims that since a miracle involves a "violation" of a law of nature, miracles are highly unlikely events. Laws of nature for Hume are descriptions of the normal course of experience. Hume himself

says that a "firm and unalterable experience" has established these laws, and that our experience is uniformly against miracles.⁴⁶ Strictly speaking, this is a question-begging claim; if we really knew that our experience of natural regularities was "unalterable" then we would know that miracles could not occur, and we would be back to the metaphysical type argument just considered. However, such a claim would contradict Hume's own claims about the nature of experience and our knowledge of laws of nature, so we should probably regard this as a slip on his part. Nor are we entitled to say that our experience is completely uniform that miracles have not occurred, since that begs the question at issue, which is whether anyone has experienced a miracle. So probably what Hume means is that in the overwhelming majority of cases, our experience is that nature is uniform. Since he thinks we estimate probability on the basis of past experience, it follows that the *a priori* probability of a miracle is extremely low. For Hume, this means that the evidence on behalf of a miracle would have to be extremely powerful to warrant belief in the miracle, evidence of such force that "its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavors to establish."⁴⁷

I believe the first thing to say in response to Hume's argument is simply that extremely improbable events can occur, and that it is possible to have strong evidence for their occurrence. So even if Hume is right in his claim that the *a priori* probability of a miracle is always exceptionally low, it does not follow that belief in a miracle would always be unreasonable, though it would follow that we would need strong evidence reasonably to believe in a miracle. However, it is not at all obvious that Hume's claim about the probability of miracles is correct.

Estimates of *a priori* probability are very tricky, since they are usually made relative to some body of background knowledge. If we know that a box contains 9,999 white marbles and one black marble, then we know the probability of drawing a black marble on any particular draw is rather low. On the other hand, if we draw a great many marbles, then the probability of drawing a black marble sometime or other becomes increasingly high. Similarly, if miracles are very rare events, then the probability of a miracle at any particular place and time may be very low, while the probability of a miracle occurring at some time or other may be very high.

The number of people in the world who are Olympic swimmers is quite small compared with the total population of the world. Hence, if all we know about a particular person is that she is a member of the human race, the probability that she will be an Olympic swimmer is extremely small. If we know that this person attends a college known for producing many Olympic swimmers, the probability is somewhat higher, and if we know the person is a member of the swim team at that college, the probability may actually become quite high. If we see the person swim in a pool and by consulting

our watches determine that she is swimming at a world-class rate of speed, the probability may become still higher. The point is that in estimating probability, we bring to bear all the relevant knowledge we have, and not just our knowledge of the frequency with which events of the type occur. The difficulty with estimating the *a priori* probability of a miracle lies in determining what relevant background knowledge we have.

Clearly, it would be relevant if someone had some knowledge or well-founded beliefs about the existence of God and God's character and purposes. If I know that God does not exist, or that if he does, he is the sort of being who would not act in a way that would involve an exception to a law of nature, then I have good grounds for estimating the *a priori* probability of a miracle as very low. On the other hand, if I believe that God exists, miracles would be somewhat more probable. If I believe that God loves and has concern for his creation, and especially for the human race, and that this creation, particularly the human race, has gone terribly wrong, then it seems to me that it is not too improbable to believe that God would take some action to restore that creation and that fallen humanity. A miracle that was part of a plausible narrative, perhaps including other miracles, that involves such a restoration would be much more probable than a miracle that was an isolated occurrence, serving no discernible divine purpose. Exactly what the *a priori* probability of a miracle like the resurrection of Jesus may be if this is correct may be very difficult to say, since we have no way of quantifying such matters, but it seems reasonable to me to affirm that Hume is wrong in his dogmatic claim that the probability must be vanishingly low.

I believe that it must be possible for observers to recognize and give credible testimony that an exception to what is thought to be a law of nature has occurred. If this were not possible, then it would be impossible to test laws of nature, and almost all philosophers of science and working scientists agree that such testability is an important characteristic of genuine scientific laws. If we followed Hume's policy, we would in effect always reject an observation of an apparent counter-instance to a law of nature, on the grounds that it's *a priori* probability is too low, but this would make scientific progress impossible.

So it must be possible to believe on reasonable grounds that an exception to what is currently accepted as a law of nature has occurred. The opponent of miracles will probably object at this point that though such a case might be an exception to what is accepted as a law of nature, it may not be an exception to the true laws of nature.⁴⁸ Presumably, in the case of a scientific advance in understanding, it is just this situation that obtains. Event E appears to be an exception to accepted law of nature L_1 , which then leads us to revise L_1 in favor of L_2 .

Certainly, in the case where we have a counter-instance to an accepted law of nature, it is possible that we do not have an exception to a genuine law of nature. I believe that Richard Swinburne is correct in his contention that we decide whether or not this is the situation by determining whether the counter-instance is a repeatable or non-repeatable instance.⁴⁹ In a case where the counter-instance is repeated when the circumstances are similar, then the reasonable conclusion to draw is that the accepted law of nature should be revised to accommodate the counter-instance. However, in a case where the counter-instance seems to be a "one-time" occurrence, then it would not appear reasonable to revise the accepted law of nature, and it would seem we have a genuine candidate for a miracle.

Of course the judgment about which kind of case we have is a fallible one. Thus, we might judge an event to be a non-repeatable counter-instance and thus an exception to a law of nature, when in fact it is not. However, the possibility of error goes both ways. It is also possible a genuine miracle might occur and be unrecognized. Unless we know *a priori* that miracles are impossible or extremely improbable, we have no basis for asserting that it will always be more probable that the event could be explained if we had more accurate knowledge of the laws of nature. The mere abstract possibility that an event could be explained by some yet-to-be-discovered law of nature is no reason to believe that it actually can be so explained, any more than the abstract possibility that all of my perceptual experience of the external might be illusory is a reason to believe that the external world does not exist.

3. The third claim of Harvey is that we could not have sufficient evidence for a miracle because we have no way of assessing the force of any putative evidence.⁵⁰ Here it seems to me that Harvey is simply mistaken. The evidence for a miracle will consist of the effects of the miracle, and the testimony of those who claimed to observe the miracle and its effects. It would appear to me that this evidence is assessable in the usual manner for historical evidence. In estimating its force, such things as the number of the witnesses, the independence and credibility of the witnesses, and the *a priori* probability of the story must be considered.

Of course in the case of miracles, there is great disagreement about the outcome of this process of weighing the evidence, due in large part, though not exclusively, to the great disagreement about the estimation of the background knowledge that shapes the *a priori* probability of the story. This means that there is no algorithm by which such controversies can be settled to the satisfaction of all parties. However, this is a common occurrence in historical studies; historians often have deep and apparently unresolvable controversies about exactly what happened and why. Yet such disagreements by no means entail that individual parties in such disputes do not have good reasons for holding the views they hold.

IV. *Troeltsch's Principles of Correlation and Analogy*

Perhaps it is worth briefly looking at two of the principles of Troeltsch to see if they might lend some support to Harvey's rejection of the miraculous as historically credible. Troeltsch held, it will be recalled, that the historian necessarily follows the principles of analogy and correlation. The principle of analogy is a claim that judgments about the past presuppose that our contemporary experience is not radically dissimilar from past experience, and the principle of correlation is a claim that historical understanding involves placing an event in a network of causal antecedents and consequents.

It is difficult to state the principle of analogy in a manner that is both clear and plausible. As proponents of "modern, critical history" like Harvey would be the first to maintain, the world-views of people of diverse cultures and ages can be profoundly different, and so it is not at all obvious that their experience of the world cannot be profoundly different as well. Nevertheless, if one can state a plausible version of this principle, it is not obvious that it leads to negative conclusions about the possibility of miracles.

Put crudely, I believe that Troeltsch's principle of analogy is supposed to work something like this: Since we don't observe miracles occurring today, we can't reasonably believe they occurred in the past either. Now, as it stands, this inference seems dubious; many religious believers have thought that God would only perform miracles in quite unusual circumstances. If one believed that the incarnation of Jesus was an historical event that made possible the redemption of humanity and the whole created order, one might reasonably believe that miracles might accompany that event even if they do not occur today.

However, even if the inference is sound, the antecedent clause is questionable. That is, Troeltsch—and his followers such as Harvey—simply assume that miracles do not occur today. However fashionable such a belief may be among secular intellectuals, it is not shared by millions of people, including many highly educated people. Though I don't see why anyone should accept Troeltsch's principle of analogy, someone might well do so, and reason as follows: Since miracles occur today, it is likely that they occurred in the past as well. Even people who have no direct experience of miracles today might well think that Troeltsch's principle is harmless if they have experiences of God, experiences with a living God who reveals himself as the kind of being who could perform a miracle. Perhaps Troeltsch's principle reveals a kind of sociological truth: people who have no experience of miracles and no experience of the kind of God who could perform miracles find it hard to believe in miracles. Our culture may be such that there are many people who satisfy this description, though I suspect that there are many more who do not, but from this sociological principle no valid inferences can be made about whether miracles truly occur and can be rationally accepted.

Troeltsch's other principle, the principle of correlation, seems ambiguous. If we mean by this principle simply that events must be understood in relation to the actual causal forces and effects that surround them, then it seems plausible enough. However, the religious believer will claim that it is possible that God, who is actively at work in all of creation, is one of those causal powers (as well as being the ultimate creative source of all the other beings exerting causal power). Unless Troeltsch knows *a priori* that naturalism is true and there is no God, or that God never exercises causal power in the natural world except in accordance with natural laws, then he has no reason to exclude the possibility that the activity of God can be located in the causal network in terms of which an event must be understood.

V. *The Sociology of Knowledge and Appeals to Authority*

In the end I suspect that Harvey and others who share his view will be unmoved by arguments such as I have put forward. For Harvey, defenses of miracles are difficult to take seriously; such thinking violates "what we now call the common-sense view of the world."⁵¹ Such claims go hand in hand with sweeping claims about what it is possible for the "modern mind" to believe. Defenses of miracles are defenses of a lost cause, roughly akin to putting forward arguments in favor of a flat earth. Those like myself who put forward such arguments are viewed with wonderment; we are living fossils, "pre-critical" thinkers who have somehow survived into the late twentieth century, oblivious to the securely established conclusions of Hume and Kant.

There is a deep irony here, for the mind-set of the "critical" thinker I have just described is anything but critical. In fact, what we have here is an unacknowledged, and perhaps unconscious, appeal to authority, the anonymous authority of the "modern mind." Such an appeal is doubly ironical, for one of the accusations Harvey and his type bring against defenders of the reliability of the Biblical narrative is that such defenders uncritically accept the authority of the Bible, though I have been careful in this essay never to appeal to Biblical authority. Nevertheless, those who find Biblical miracles plausible are somehow unreasonable because they do not accede to the supposed common sense view that "we" all are supposed to share.

Though I am not a fan of everything in post-modern writers, one thing that post-modernism has usefully taught us to do when someone talks about "we" is to ask "Who is this 'we'?" Does this "we" include the poor? Does it include women? Does it include non-westerners and minorities of color within the west? Since traditional religious beliefs, including belief in the supernatural, are more common among the poor, among women, minorities, and in the Christian church in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (though not always more common among the self-appointed advocates of those groups), these questions are quite relevant. Nor of course, for that matter, is there any shortage

of white, western, educated males who believe in the supernatural, if one simply looks around at the actual world. It seems to me that theologians who are truly "critical" will begin to ask critical questions about their own inherited intellectual baggage, and will be much less quick to assume that the taken for granted assumptions of many secular western intellectuals over the past two hundred years form a necessary part of "common sense." Though there is much that is bizarre that is being put forward under the banner of "post-modernism," surely one thing that this intellectual movement should cause us to do is to reexamine the "modern" intellectual assumptions about the supernatural that we have inherited from the Enlightenment.

Deciding whether belief in miracles is reasonable on the basis of what "most intellectuals" in the west over the past two hundred years have thought is only a bit more reasonable than deciding who to vote for on the basis of who is leading in the opinion polls. Though an appeal to authority can be reasonable, it is not reasonable to appeal to authority to ignore an argument that challenges the grounds upon which an authority's judgment is based. Thus, if the options of many western intellectuals are rooted in dubious philosophical assumptions, an argument that points this out cannot be rebutted simply by appealing to the authority of the intellectuals in question.

Often the names of philosophers are cited by theologians in this connection: Hume, Kant, Marx, Feuerbach, and Nietzsche are frequently invoked. However, if this is to be more than the invocation of sacred mantras the specific arguments of the philosophers in question must be brought into the arena and defended, and this is all too frequently not done. So, when Hans Frei informs us that however dubious Karl Marx's views about the historical Jesus may have been, he was essentially correct in saying that the criticism of historical religion in Germany was a finished task,⁵² we must ask whether this is a historical, sociological report or something more than this. If Frei means by this merely that most intellectuals in Germany from this period on ceased to worry very much about the truth of historic Christianity, he may well be correct, but the crucial question is "So what?" Were these intellectuals right to ignore these questions? Were the philosophical assumptions that made it necessary for them to ignore the possibility that the Biblical narrative was truly historical good assumptions? The truly critical thinker, the one with the philosopher's spirit, is willing to ask such questions and ask them in a fresh spirit, without necessarily seeking to answer them "as the age demands," as the past age did, or as the present age tends to do.

I conclude that Van Harvey has by no means given any good reasons why the "critical historian" should rule out the possibility that supernatural, miracle-filled narratives are historically true. If Hans Frei is right in insisting that the New Testament narratives have a "realistic, history-like" character, then they should be considered as possibly historical. We may of course reject

the historical truth of the Biblical narratives; I have given no apologetic argument for the historicity of those narratives. However, those who wish to affirm the Biblical narratives as true are not automatically forced to reject their historical character in order to save the truth of the text. It is much too hasty to reject the historicity of a narrative simply on the ground that the narrative contains an account of miracles.

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NOTES

1. Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 14.

2. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, p. 10.

3. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, p. 10.

4. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, p. 14.

5. Of course many Biblical critics would insist that what we have in the gospels is not a single narrative but multiple narratives whose unity cannot be presupposed. In one sense this is undoubtedly correct; we do indeed have four gospels and no doubt each tells a tale that differs significantly from the others in various respects. Nor do I see any particular reason to deny that each of the gospels may embody different traditions that were preserved, orally or in written form. However, the church has always assumed that these different narratives were all attempts to tell one story, the story of Jesus of Nazareth, even if the story was told for different purposes and from different points of view. Furthermore, the church has assumed that it was legitimate to blend these diverse narratives in order to recover this story, however difficult it may be to "harmonize" some of the details. I shall therefore speak of the incarnational narrative (singular) without thereby denying that this narrative is derived from multiple narratives, or implying that the narrative can be legitimately rendered in only one way. A true story can still be told in different ways.

One should recognize that in speaking of this narrative, I give primacy to the account of the New Testament accepted by the church. That is, the reading of the New Testament that seems most relevant is the reading that was actually given by the church, the one that was actually formative for Christian faith. It is not simply a matter of developing an account from scratch on some supposedly scientific basis, but of testing the reading developed by the church.

6. See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

7. See John 1:1-3.

8. See John 10:30 and Matthew 9:6.

9. The fullest statement of Van Harvey's position is found in his book *The Historian and the Believer* (New York: MacMillan, 1966). A more contemporary statement of his position is found in an essay, "New Testament Scholarship and Christian Belief," in *Jesus: History and Myth* (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1986), pp. 193-200. A concise

statement of Troeltsch's views can be found in his essay, "Historiography," Vol. 6 of *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), pp. 716-23. Harvey himself cites Troeltsch's *Gesammelte Schriften* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1913), Vol. II, pp. 729-53, repeatedly in *The Historian and the Believer*.

10. Some of the arguments that follow are similar to arguments developed by William J. Abraham in his fine book *Divine Revelation and the Limits of Historical Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982). Abraham argues that critical historical judgment does not always preclude an acceptance of miracles. However, Abraham goes further than I am willing to in accepting the validity of the principles of Troeltsch that I wish to criticize, and then arguing that the religious believer can give a "rebuttal" that overcomes the negative conclusions that historical research would otherwise give rise to. In what follows I wish to challenge the prima facie validity of those very principles.

11. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, pp. 04-05.

12. For a good account of the difference between internalist "evidentialist" epistemologies and "reliabilist" externalist epistemologies see William Alston, *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989).

13. Troeltsch does not cite this principle in a clear form in his essay "Historiography," but it is perhaps implicit in his claim that modern historians "take a purely scientific attitude to facts." See p. 718. Van Harvey cites Troeltsch's *Gesammelte Schriften* II, pp. 729-53, as the basis of his discussion of the principle of criticism.

14. Troeltsch states this idea on p. 718 of "Historiography": "On the analogy of the events known to us we seek by conjecture and sympathetic understanding to explain and reconstruct the past."

15. In "Historiography" this idea is stated on p. 718: "The sole task of history in its specifically theoretical aspect is to explain every movement, process, state, and nexus of things by reference to the web of its causal relations."

16. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, pp. 39-42.

17. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, pp. 43-64.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*. The quote is from p. 38. The discussion of this principle occupies much of pp. 68-99.

20. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, p. 38.

21. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, p. 42.

22. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, p. 40.

23. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, p. 42.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, p. 221.

26. Ernst Troeltsch, "Historiography," p. 717.

27. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, p. 38.

28. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, pp. 49-54.

29. Harvey discusses this type of strategy in pp. 204-42 in *The Historian and the Believer*.

30. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, pp. 47-48.
31. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, p. 68.
32. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, p. 68.
33. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, p. 82.
34. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, p. 77.
35. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, p. 76.
36. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, p. 86.
37. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, p. 87.

38. The understanding of miracles as involving exceptions to laws of nature goes back at least to Hume, who defined a miracle as a "transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent." See Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1977), p. 77. Richard Swinburne, in his *The Concept of Miracle* (London: MacMillan, 1970), p. 11, also defines miracles in such a way that being a violation of a law of nature is a necessary condition for being a miracle. There have been many attempts to develop a concept of miracle that does not require this notion of an exception to a law of nature, usually on the part of theologians who believe that miracles in the Humean sense cannot be believed. For example, John Hick does this in *Philosophy of Religion*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1990), pp. 37-38. It seems evident to me that critics like Harvey presuppose the Humean type of definition. Since I think that miracles in this sense are possible and can be rationally believed, I do not object to this definition in principle, though I think that the term "exception" is to be preferred to the term "violation" with its unfortunate and misleading normative connotations. Of course the modern concept of a law of nature was not known in ancient times, and so the definition is anachronistic when applied to the Biblical writers. However, I think essentially the same idea can be conveyed using the concepts of natural powers and natural regularities, concepts that certainly were available to the Biblical writers. Using this terminology, a miracle can be defined as an event that involves an exception to a natural regularity, one that exceeds the natural powers of natural beings, and that therefore must be attributed to the work of God. People in ancient times, though they lacked the modern concept of scientific laws, were quite aware that in the normal course of things, it was not possible for a virgin to become pregnant or for a man dead for three days to rise from the grave.

Whether Harvey really wishes to deny that miracles in this sense are possible is unclear. I will consider in the next section his claim that miracles are logically possible, though evidentially weak; if that is his considered view, then he really does not hold the view I attack in this section. However, the stronger claim, that miracles are impossible, is suggested at many points in his work, in the claim that certain things are ruled out by the natural sciences as impossible. For example, on p. 81 of *The Historian and the Believer*, he says that it is simply impossible for us to entertain a story about a hero who, having stepped off a cliff, ascends bodily into the heavens, because we, unlike the "savages" who may have believed the story, understand the scientific principles that determine why bodies fall.

39. This is, I believe, the gist of Harvey's discussion of miracles on pp. 85-89 in *The Historian and the Believer*.

40. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, p. 229.
41. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, p. 77.
42. Actually, again it is frustratingly unclear whether Harvey actually affirms the logical possibility of miracles. What he appears to say is that the affirmation that miracles are logically possible does not really help the defender of miracles, since the real problem is that one cannot have good evidence for miracles. See Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, pp. 85-87.
43. For a good example of this type of argument, see Alistair McKinnon, "'Miracle' and 'Paradox,'" *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 4 (October, 1967), pp. 308-14.
44. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: MacMillan, 1947), pp. 116-20.
45. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, p. 87.
46. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, pp. 76, 77.
47. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 77.
48. An argument to this effect can be found in Patrick Nowell-Smith, "Miracles," *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (New York: MacMillan, 1955), pp. 243-53. Nowell-Smith argues that our inability to say that some future natural law will not explain the event in effect makes it impossible to define the concept of the supernatural as something to be distinguished from the natural order.
49. See Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle*, pp. 23-32.
50. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, p. 229.
51. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, p. 68.
52. Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 224-32. Though it is not completely clear how Frei himself wants us to take his comments here, it is fair to say that at various points Frei does engage in the kind of illegitimate appeal to sociological thinking I criticize here, in which options are dismissed on the grounds that they are not taken seriously any more by intellectuals of a certain group.