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### Believing the Unbelievable: A universe of miracles

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# Believing the

*A universe of miracles*

**ANTHONY BOSMAN**

If you have struggled to believe in the miraculous, you are not alone. Even the great heroes of faith wrestled with unbelief. Abraham was sensible enough to realize his barren wife would not produce offspring and questioned God's promise to make a great nation out of him. Rather than rebuke Abraham's doubt, God instructed him: "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them" (Gen. 15:5).<sup>1</sup>

To the naked eye, several thousand stars are visible. If you have been privileged enough to escape the light pollution of the city and see the sky on a clear night, you know how breathtaking it can be. Yet the incredible images of the James Webb Space Telescope remind us that what we see with our naked eye is only the smallest glimpse of the richness of the cosmos. For instance, the first publicly released image of Webb, SMACS 0723, surveys a portion of sky that is about the size of a grain of sand held at arm's length.<sup>2</sup> When Webb peered into that tiny dark region, it revealed the light of thousands of galaxies, each containing billions of stars. I like to imagine that when God commanded Abraham to number the stars, He took him on a similar visionary experience throughout the cosmos.

Our best estimate is that there are around 200 billion trillion stars in the visible universe, though this is likely to increase. There are far too many stars for anyone to count, but that was the point of God's exercise: Abraham needed to be reminded of God's infinite creative power. As he looked to the heavens and tried to number the innumerable, Abraham's objections subsided, and "he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness" (verse 6). Perhaps it is providential that at a time when it's easy to doubt, we have been gifted images of the heavens through the Webb telescope to help us believe again.

## HOW DID WE GET SO SKEPTICAL?

Our modern skepticism can be traced to the Enlightenment philosopher David Hume. Hume argued that "a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature," but as "firm and unalterable experience has established these laws" we should reject the miraculous.<sup>3</sup> But this argument is circular, for it rules out miracles by *defining* them to be violations that cannot be violated, failing to account for the possibility that God can act in the world contrary to our ordinary experience. Indeed, in his two-volume work on miracles, Craig Keener documents the long history of well-attested miracles throughout the world.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, Hume's skepticism was widely embraced. It fits with the popular myth that now that we are scientific, we know better than the ancients who superstitiously believed barren women could conceive and dead men rise from the dead. But of course, the ancients well knew old women did not become pregnant and dead men rotted away, which is why they made such a big deal when something so out of the ordinary occurred.

Many scientists have recognized that the existence of the laws of nature is itself miraculous. In his essay "The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences," the mathematical physicist and Nobel laureate Eugene Wigner observed: "It is not at all natural that 'laws of nature' exist, much less that man is able to discover them."<sup>5</sup> Wigner uses the word "miracle" to characterize the ability of mathematics to describe the natural world. The history of science testifies to the fact that people were bold enough to look for the laws of nature precisely because they believed in a divine lawgiver. Neither under polytheism, where the cosmos is ruled by many competing gods, nor atheism, which denies any Intelligence behind the universe, would one expect to be able to discover universal mathematics laws.

# Unbelievable



**Just as ordinary physics breaks down at singularities such as black holes and the first moments of the universe, we should not be surprised that God's mighty acts are beyond our explanatory power.**

## A GOD WHO CREATES

Isaac Newton's theory of universal gravitation, for example, naturally arose from his belief in a God who created the heavens and the earth. And rather than think that it explained away God, Newton saw it as evidencing "an intelligent and powerful Being"<sup>6</sup> who created and actively sustains the universe, believing that behind the force of gravity was "an agent acting constantly according to certain laws."<sup>7</sup> Newton's view is well reflected in Ellen White's description of God's relationship to the laws of nature: "God does not annul His laws, but He is continually working through them, using them as His instruments. They are not self-working. God is perpetually at work in nature. She is His servant, directed as He pleases. Nature in her work testifies to the intelligent presence and active agency of a being who moves in all His works according to His will. . . . The hand of infinite power is perpetually at work guiding this planet."<sup>8</sup>

Granted, Newton's understanding of gravity was incomplete, and we continue to develop richer accounts—from Einstein's vision of mass warping spacetime to hypothesized graviton particles that are conjectured to mediate the gravitational force. Yet as science advances, God's power is not diminished. Every such theory is, after all, a mathematical model describing how the universe behaves, for equations have no creative or sustaining power. God alone governs the cosmos; "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

As such, the Bible does not treat natural explanation and divine intervention as mutually exclusive. Rather, it often blends these two kinds of explanations, portraying God as sovereign over nature and free to use His laws to accomplish His purposes. During the plagues of Egypt, Scripture records that God brought locusts by a wind from the east, and when God relented, they were dispelled by a strong wind from the west. And when Israel was trapped by the Red Sea, "the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land" (Ex. 14:21). The strong wind explains Israel's deliverance on one level, and God's activity explains it on another.

Thus we should not think that just because someone has offered a natural explanation of something it rules out God's hand in it. Nor is God constrained by what we deem the laws of nature.

Ellen White forcefully made this point when she observed, "As commonly used, the term 'laws of nature' comprises what men have been able to discover with regard to the laws that govern the physical world; but how limited is their knowledge, and how vast the field in which the Creator can work in harmony with His own laws and yet wholly beyond the comprehension of finite beings!"<sup>9</sup>

Events such as creation, the Incarnation, and resurrection are all singular occurrences that are exceptional to God's typical governing of the world. Just as ordinary physics breaks down at singularities such as black holes and the first moments of the universe, we should not be surprised that God's mighty acts are beyond our explanatory power. As Blaise Pascal reminds us: "The last proceeding of reason is to recognize that there is an infinity of things which are beyond it. It is but feeble if it does not see so far as to know this. But if natural things are beyond it, what will be said of supernatural?"<sup>10</sup>

If there is one lesson we should take away from the stunning images of the James Webb Space Telescope, it is that the universe is a much bigger, grander, and more miraculous place than we often imagine. This ought to teach us that just because something is incomprehensible to us does not mean that it is impossible for God. Rather, as we struggle to comprehend the incomprehensible, might we learn once more to believe that which we had mistaken as unbelievable. ▀

<sup>1</sup> Bible texts are from the English Standard Version.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nasa.gov/image-feature/goddard/2022/nasa-s-webb-delivers-deepest-infrared-image-of-universe-yet>

<sup>3</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L. A. Selby Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), p. 114.

<sup>4</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Miracle: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> E. P. Wigner, "The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences. Richard Courant Lecture in Mathematical Sciences Delivered at New York University, May 11, 1959," *Communications on Pure and Applied Mathematics* 13 (1960): 1-14.

<sup>6</sup> Isaac Newton, *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687); *Scholium Generale* (1713; 1726).

<sup>7</sup> I. Bernard Cohen, ed., *Isaac Newton's Papers and Letters on Natural Philosophy and Related Documents* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), vol. 8, pp. 259, 260.

<sup>9</sup> Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1890, 1908), p. 114.

<sup>10</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, p. 267.

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