

## *Gospel of the Third Dimension*

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### *Which should we do: demythologize the Bible, or demythologize the modern Mind?'*

A great deal is being said these days about "demythologizing" the Bible, about making it acceptable to the "modern mind."

It is fairly obvious that this process, at least to a large extent, involves removing the supernatural element from the Bible. This can be done either by finding a natural explanation for an event that appears to be supernatural, or by assuming that the event in question did not happen at all—and removing the record of it from the text.

Obviously, removing the supernatural from the Bible touches the foundation facts of the Christian faith: the incarnation and resurrection of Christ. And it is interesting to observe that even scholars who engage in the demythologizing 'process take issue with one another over their treatment of these, crucial matters. Yet the dilemma seems to be that if one does not retain the incarnation and resurrection of Christ as actual events, he is hard put to account for the Christian faith. On the other hand, if he accepts them as actual events he has retained the supernatural in the Bible at points where it will be embarrassing to the "modern mind." Further, supernaturalism seems to be so interwoven into the Bible that one may legitimately wonder whether the surgery removing it can be performed without killing the patient.

Is it possible that the problem posed to the modern mind by supernaturalism must be handled not by demythologizing the Bible, but by demythologizing the modern mind?

Suppose someone lives where he has access neither to radio nor television. Countless programs are constantly being sent through, the atmosphere which surrounds him, but to this man they have no reality; he has no senses nor receptors for receive-

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ing them. Nor can he ever learn to receive these programs; his only hope for hearing and seeing them is to acquire a receiving instrument that can transform the electronic impulses into sight and sound.

To use another illustration, suppose our planet were visited by a man from a world where people possessed no such thing as a sense of hearing. After an extended visit among us we may imagine him returning to his own world and reporting. "I was fascinated by what the Earth people call 'music.' They took me to a hall where an orchestra was playing, and I can understand how one could, in time, develop appreciation for the symmetrical movements of violin bows and the conductor's arms. And the instruments did have a certain beauty to the eye. But I'm at a loss to explain the delight that these people experienced when they were—to use their word —'listening' to the orchestra. I did observe later that if I touched the loudspeaker of a radio with my finger I

could feel some slight vibration, and I then recalled that while watching the orchestra I had occasionally detected a similar vibration against my body, particularly when the conductor appeared agitated. Yet to comprehend how this minute vibration could cause pleasure must require a sensitivity to vibration that is beyond anything we've developed in our world."

The man in this fable is not primarily faced with a problem of learning, but of apprehension. While he can detect certain aspects of the phenomenon, the major practical reality of sound is lost to him because he lacks an organ for receiving it. Sound, to this man, is "supernatural." He can never "learn" to hear. He can hear only by being given a receptor for hearing.

But something more needs to be said to show the need for certain enablements or "categories," given by God to man, if men is to lay hold of the core of supernaturalism.

Some 75 years ago Edwin A. Abbott wrote a small book entitled *Flatland*, which now in its seventh printing is still a science-fiction best seller (Dover Publications, New York. \$1.00). The Flatlanders are two-dimensional beings—Triangles, Squares, Circles, and such—in a two-dimensional world, like cardboard squares lying on a sheet of paper. They know only length and breadth. Height as a dimension is not a part of their world and they have no faculty for recognizing it. Therefore, when a Sphere, a creature of three dimensions, comes into Flatland he is seen merely as a two-dimensional Circle, since his dimension of height extends outside the range of the Flatlanders' perception. When the Sphere tries to demonstrate "height" by moving up and down—a very natural movement for him—the Flatlander insists he is only a Circle with the ability to increase and decrease in circumference. Finally the Sphere in exasperation seizes the Flatlander and raises him up, and the Flatlander for the first time looks "down" and sees his whole flat world from the perspective of a new dimension.

Sent back to his own people by the Sphere to "preach the gospel of the third dimension," the Flatlander is imprisoned as a dangerous heretic. His persecutors make him a simple proposition: "If there is such a direction as 'up,' simply point to it for us and we shall be satisfied." But the Flatlander cannot do this. He has seen the third dimension and for a brief time has experienced it, but only by the "supernatural" assistance of the Sphere. He has no "up" in his intrinsic being. He can only declare what he has experienced, and knows is true, but he cannot demonstrate it, prove it or point to it. Nor could his tormentors see or understand if he could point to it, for none of them has receptors for perceiving a third dimension. Although the third dimension continually envelops them, the third dimension is supernatural to the Flatlanders.

Perhaps we may now make explicit the definition of "supernatural" which all of this has been assuming. By "supernatural" we don't mean something as yet unknown which may be learned in the future. Rather it is something that in the nature of the case human senses are not capable of comprehending in detail or of proving by "natural" means of testing.

The scientist, then, is not responsible either to prove or disprove the existence of the supernatural;

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in the nature of the case, the scientist's equipment is capable of handling only natural evidence. And the scientist, as a scientist, is disqualified from either affirming or denying the existence of

the supernatural by the very fact that his equipment can accept only "natural" evidence for testing.

At this point we can see that, it is; reasonable to accept the *possibility* of a dimension of existence, perfectly real and perfectly "natural" to its inhabitants, that is beyond the reach of human senses and whose existence cannot 'be proved or disproved by human methods. It is possible, moreover, that such a realm of existence could include our universe within its realm somewhat as the two-dimensional world of Flatland was included within the Sphere's three-dimensional world, without the Flatlanders' being capable of perceiving the third dimension. The acceptance of such a possibility does not necessarily imply the actual existence of such a realm. But it does suggest caution in automatically dismissing anything that cannot be squared with "natural" law as we know it. It suggests, moreover, that if an event is claimed by otherwise competent witnesses to be beyond the natural realm and if "natural" means of testing it offer no adequate explanation, we should at least be willing to see whether it can answer to the test of whatever faint glimpse of "supernatural" law or congruence may be afforded to men.

What we are saying rests upon the proposition that to perceive any phenomenon the mind must possess the appropriate receptors. It is at least possible that the human mind does not possess receptors to perceive all possible phenomena. The so-called "modern mind," on the other hand, as it is popularly presented, is apparently a mind that frequently makes the a priori assumption that every area of phenomenon can be perceived and understood by "natural" means, if the mind is sufficiently educated. When the "modern mind" combines this assumption with the further tacit assumption that natural means—i.e., the "scientific method"—form the only valid test of reality, then it appears that the "modern mind" has developed its own "myth" and constituted itself the final judge of what the limits of reality must be. And this rests on a prior myth, that it is possible for so-called inductive scholarship to be completely objective. This "objective" scholarship pretends to include all possible data in its scope of consideration; yet it actually rules out large segments of relevant data and at the same time rejects any categories for structuring data that go beyond the "natural" or can be tested by "natural" means.

However, man is not so completely divorced from God and the supernatural realm that he has no possibility of contact with God. By natural light men may, and often do, comprehend something of "that which may be known of God." However, the point is that man cannot by his own unaided human faculties comprehend supernatural reality as supernatural reality. As Christians we believe that the image of God is impressed upon man's nature in creation, and has survived the Fall, if only in mangled and weakened form. Man still longs for God; and God has; in fact, revealed Himself to man.

Yet God's supernatural assistance is necessary if man is to perceive supernatural realities. This is clearly pointed out in 1 Corinthians 2:14, "the natural man receiveth not, the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because, they are spiritually discerned"; and in 1 Timothy 5:15, 16, "the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see." Unaided human faculties can perceive only as much of a supernatural occurrence as can be perceived by "natural" means, just as the Flatlander looked at a three-dimensional object and saw only two dimensions. Man can perceive the supernatural as supernatural only with supernatural aid.

Now, to be specific: the Bible, taken at face value, claims to deal in part with supernatural matters. It presents a God who is beyond our world, some of whose operations become perceivable in our natural world. The Bible, moreover, describes

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Jesus Christ as likewise a supernatural being who came into the natural realm, lived a life that included numerous supernatural events, and whose earthly life following His death was climaxed by a supernatural resurrection and a supernatural ascension (to use a human term for the latter).

Now the Bible has in general proved itself to be reliable; and especially the Bible has been shown to be trustworthy in spiritual matters and relevant in moral matters—i.e., in matters that have to do with the relationship between man and the God whom the Bible presents, and relationships between man and man. Wouldn't it then be wise and intellectually honest to accept the possibility that there may actually be a supernatural realm and that the Bible may reflect this supernatural realm with some degree of fidelity?

This is not a plea for naiveté or gullibility. It doesn't suggest that the next time one sees a magician one should conclude that he has supernatural powers. It does not suggest that supernaturalism should be read into the Bible where the Bible itself does not indicate it clearly. Yet it does suggest that one should keep his mind open to the possibility of supernaturalism, and that one should be willing to accept it if and when appropriate evidence points to it.

In refusing to accept the possibility of the supernatural with regard to the birth of Jesus, for example, men have been willing to accept alternative explanations that reflect no credit upon either Jesus or His mother. In seeking for an explanation of the resurrection of Jesus that omits the factor of supernatural miracle, men have been willing to accept almost incredible "natural" explanations. Wouldn't it better accord with the character of the Bible and of the Christian faith, and with the results that these have produced in the lives of countless people through the centuries, to recognize that the evidence indicates that true supernaturalism and true miracle are real? That a supernatural God has seen fit to operate in our human realm in ways that are completely "natural" in His realm—not vagaries nor violations nor suspensions of law, but ways that in our limited human perceptions are truly supernatural?

I believe, and Scripture teaches, that if a man will seek God wholeheartedly, God will reveal Himself.