

CHRISTIANITY ON TRIAL

God? god? gods? Or Nothing?

I have two goals today. One is to write this chapter. Another is to write an opening statement for a case I begin trying in a few weeks.

This chapter concerns whether or not there is a God. The case is about whether Ms. Johns's car experienced "unintended acceleration." In other words, did her car accelerate, even though she was not pushing the accelerator? Ms. Johns's says she was at a stop sign about to turn right. As she lifted her foot off the brake, before she put her foot onto the gas, her car "took off like an airplane." It shot forward, and she was unable to turn right. Instead she hopped the curb before her, shot through a school yard dodging the playground, and six seconds after her ordeal started, smashed into the gymnasium wall.

Ms. Johns says once the car took off, she immediately pressed the break, to no avail.

The car company has taken the position the car did no such thing. It believes that Ms. Johns's *thought* she was pressing the brake, but was in fact pressing the gas pedal.

I do not have a video of Ms. Johns's foot. Beyond her testimony of what she thought she was doing, there is no direct testimony. There were no witnesses in the car. All I have is what in the opening statement (last chapter) I described as "circumstantial evidence." Here is what I mean.

Ms. Johns's health at the time was good. The ambulance checked her over, as did the hospital. Her blood sugar was fine. Her mental clarity was fine. There were skid marks at a place where you would expect them had she been applying the breaks. The first responders on the scene, including the EMS personnel, all heard her repeatedly say, "It wouldn't stop... It wouldn't stop." This car manufacturer had installed an electronic control system just a few model years earlier that drives the car through a computer rather than an old-fashioned cable that goes from the gas pedal to the carburetor. Since the usage of this computer system, the number of complaints like Ms. Johns's has skyrocketed to 37,900. Ms. Johns was not distracted at the time – no cell phone, no eating while driving, no radio, etc.

Now the jury will have to decide, based on the circumstances, is it more likely than not that Ms. Johns hit the wrong pedal, or did her car go wild?

This opening statement I will work on today is not unlike this chapter. I have no immediate eyewitness to God in a physical or mystical form in front of me. I cannot subject him or some apparition to lab tests nor can I tote physically him around to show people for their belief. God is not a transferable fellow that is going group to group among the 7.1 billion people on the planet proving he exists as a corporeal, all-powerful being.

In the preface, I spoke of a post-dinner discussion I had with a small group of lawyers who wanted me to prove God exists. In legal speech, they wanted a “*Daubert* hearing” which means a presentation under court rules that allows a judge to assess a theory as credible enough to go before a jury. One of the lawyers was a professed agnostic, and at one point he reached out his hands to me and said,

“Come join me. Leave the certainty of your faith and embrace the unknown! Be an agnostic with me ... You can do it!”

I responded truly,

“I am sorry. I do not have enough faith to do that! It would take too much faith to turn away from the certain belief I have about God.”

He was stunned. He thought it was a leap of faith to believe in God. It had not occurred to him that his agnosticism was a leap of faith. That I thought faith more intellectually reasonable was a foreign concept to him and several others in the group. Yet for me, it wasn't. I was quite sincere. He wanted my proof.

The proof of God comes from circumstantial evidence. We look around us and within us and we ask, is it more likely than not that there is a God? I suggest it is not only possible there is a God, but that it is the most logical answer to the world as we see and experience it. God is the best explanation for the circumstances of life, whether we are looking outward at others or inward to ourselves.

In this lesson, I explain why.

THE JURY SYSTEM

In the history of human civilization, mankind has used many approaches to determine historical truth, especially in the context of one making a claim that was open to dispute. For a while in history, these questions were posed to God (or gods) with religious rituals set up to discern the answer. Throughout a great bit of history, cases of “he said/she said” were decided through duels or some other trial by battle, generally based on the idea that the gods would protect the truthful one. As civilization progressed, wise or powerful people were designated to determine

the truth. Frequently, these were either associated with the secular power structure (the king or other nobleman) or the religious power structure (the clergy).

In the eleventh century, Western civilization reached a milestone when William the Conqueror (c.1028-1087) began using citizen inquests to determine and record certain financial matters. The role of ordinary citizens continued to grow in the legal system and in 1215, a core legal document for Western society was forced on King John of England. Called the *Magna Carta* (Latin for the “Great Charter”), significant parts of this law are still on the books in England, including clause 39, which reads,

No Freeman shall be seized or imprisoned, or stripped of his rights or possessions, or outlawed, or exiled, or deprived of his standing in any other way, nor will we proceed with force against him, or send others to do so, *except by the lawful judgment of his equals* or by the law of the land (italics added).

This was the seed from which trial by jury became a right.

Courts began a transition toward having disinterested groups of ordinary citizens (initially limited to white, citizen landholders) taking the role of “fact-finder.” The value of citizens to act as the finder of fact in disputes was one of the reasons the Americans declared independence from the King of England in 1776. The Declaration of Independence justified itself with “facts submitted to a candid world” including that of the King of England deprived the people,

in many cases, of the benefits of trial by jury.

Not surprisingly, the shortly after establishing the United States of America, the Constitution was amended with a Bill of Rights that included the Seventh Amendment to ensure the right to a jury trial.

In suits at common law, ... the right of trial by jury shall be preserved, and no fact tried by jury, shall be otherwise re-examined in any Court of the United States, than according to the rules of the common law.

This cornerstone of the American judicial system has its fans and critics. It is certainly not perfect, but it is still reckoned the most reliable system for determining fair and impartial findings of fact. “Finders of fact” is a phrase frequently used in legal circles for the jury. The judge, a legal scholar, is responsible for knowing and applying the law. But the determiner of facts, the ones who decide what truly happened in history, is the province solely of the jury.

Generally consisting of twelve people, although sometimes groups of six, the idea is that a group of ordinary people brings collective memories and common experiences to bear on the decision process. In determining what ordinary events transpired (the “findings of fact”), these ordinary people trump the value of trained scholars and the world’s highest intellect.

While trained scholars may disagree about whether they are more competent to uncover the facts of historical events, the historical consensus is that those experts bring biases in themselves, generally from a focus that is only through their academic or their training lens. A jury, on the other hand, has the benefit of listening to experts, the benefits of hearing pro and con’s, and the opportunity to comprehend, assess, and determine what is more likely or not the truth.

The English writer Gilbert Keith (“G. K.”) Chesterton (1874-1936) wrote on many subjects, including philosophy, politics, and Christianity. Regarding the jury system, he wrote:

Our civilization has decided, and very justly decided, that determining the guilt or innocence of a man is a thing too important to be trusted to trained men. If it wishes for light upon that awful matter, it asks men who know no more law than I know, but who can feel the things that I felt in the jury box. When it wants a library cataloged, or the solar system discovered, or any trifle of that kind, it uses up its specialists. But when it wishes anything done which is really serious, it collects twelve of the ordinary men standing round. The same thing was done if I remember right, by the Founder of Christianity.¹

There are certainly times where juries get it wrong – they are, after all, made up of humans. Over time, various rules and structures have evolved that better insure valid jury results, and the simple truth is that the American judicial system, when it is working right and under its rules, remains a bulwark for citizens’ rights and for determining historical facts behind differing claims. The jury’s decision is so sacrosanct, that the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights ensures that it is not even open to re-examination absent some minor exceptions.

THE DISCUSSION

In making this “legal argument” on the existence of God, I want to organize my approach into several areas that need to be addressed and understood individually before drawing a final conclusion.

1. The burden of proof

One of the keys to a jury's decision is the basis on which a jury is instructed to find truth. I was discussing this point recently while fishing with a United States Supreme Court judge. We were joined in the boat by a guide who maneuvered us artfully through the Louisiana waters in search of dinner. As the day wore on, our discussion turned to the issue of why we believe in God. The justice, a well-educated man who is brilliant – plain and simple – is a devout Christian believer. I suggested to him, as I now suggest to you, that framing the deliberation process before framing the question is of paramount importance. Here is what I mean.

There are many valid units of measurement. Gallons and quarts measure liquids (or liters if we use the metric system). Inches, feet, yards, meters, kilometers, miles, all express distance. Fahrenheit and centigrade scales measure temperature. Each term works to measure its category, but not matters outside its category. While I can validly measure the heat outside as 72 degrees Fahrenheit (or 22 Celsius), I would never say the temperature is 6 gallons. Conversely, if I was discussing how much gas I put in my car, I might say 6 gallons, but never 72 degrees Fahrenheit. We must be careful to use the right measuring system for the category or item being measured.

In the same way, we err in any discussion of the existence of God, or many other matters in this book, if we use the wrong measure of proof. It is as absurd to think of proving God in the scientific sense of a lab process or the mathematical precision of a calculator, as it is to measure distance by gallons. Ultimate questions like God's existence call for an appropriate measurer of proof. I suggest the proof from the American jury system.

History has fine-tuned our jury trials to efficiently and fairly determine truth. It is done in civil cases by a “preponderance of the evidence” burden of proof. This means that before a jury can find for the party that carries the “burden of proof,” the jury must be persuaded by the “greater weight of the credible evidence.” This is also defined as “What is more likely than not?”

This is the appropriate measurement for truth, and is my suggestion for our consideration of the existence of God. We should no more seek scientific proof of God than we seek to determine time by kilograms and pounds. The proper measure of proof is to ask simply: what is more reasonable to believe – that there is a God or that there is not? With that burden of proof set out, we move into the direct question under consideration.

2. Dialogue with the “Golden Rule atheist”

Mike was sitting to my right. He was a lawyer who had initially studied for the priesthood, but that was before he lost his faith. Now he was a middle-aged man who proclaimed to our group,

“I am a Golden Rule atheist.”

He explained that he believed in the Golden Rule, but not the God who taught it. I asked him what he understood the golden rule to be. He responded properly,

“to do to others what you would like for others to do to you.” I was intrigued.

“Why on earth would you believe in or live by the Golden Rule?” I asked him.

He replied that he thought it was the way of the world and inherent in nature. I was a bit incredulous and replied,

“I am stunned! Do you *really* think so? Or does this just sound like a noble and nice thing to say?”

He replied that he wasn't saying it to sound noble, but that it is the way of civilization and life.

“But don't you believe in evolution?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied as a few others in the group began to realize where I was going.

I hit the pointed question:

“Are you actually believing that Darwinism and evolution brought about humans because animals were treating others the way they would like to be treated? For that matter, does the history of the human race indicate it is the normative behavior for people groups?”

As we worked through it, he had to admit that animals have not embraced that motto or ethic. The lion that separates the young gazelle from his mother so that he can devour the flesh off the bone is not treating that young gazelle the way the lion would like to be treated. For that matter, Mike himself was no vegan, readily devouring the steak we had just had for dinner.

Mike then shifted his position to the idea that human consciousness makes this a new ethic that did not exist in the universe for its first few billion years, but has cropped up in the last few millennia of human civilization. Where it came from, Mike couldn't say. How he knew it was valid, Mike couldn't say. Why it

suddenly appeared, Mike couldn't say. Would it be here to stay, Mike couldn't say. One thing Mike could say – he didn't live up to his ethic.

As much as Mike believed it was “right,” he readily admitted he saw it as an ideal, but not as something he was able to do day-by-day, minute-by-minute. This was just something that internally Mike felt was right and proper, even though it was unachievable.

My suggestion to Mike was that he needed to give the most “reasonable” explanation on why this was such a core belief to him. Recognizing it was something apparently unique to humans, he had to make some choices on why.

While Mike didn't have the immediate response, if he had time to consider it, he might have argued that the Golden Rule is a uniquely human ethic or trait because humanity has a brain that enables empathy, while other creatures do not. In other words, humans can think about what it would be like to be in another's shoes. From this *ability* to empathize comes a *responsibility* to empathize. But even with that response, I would have pushed him further. That ability to empathize does not mean a responsibility to do so in the sense of the Golden Rule. That is not a fair deduction.

The lawyer in me would declare, “Objection! This is akin to *post hoc ergo proctor hoc*.” In other words, just because one event precedes another, it does not mean that the first event caused the second. Just because people developed a brain to empathize, does not mean that people have a responsibility to treat others as they would like to be treated.

The ability to empathize could also be seen as a weapon to be used to help one advance over others. There is inherent in most people, to some degree or another, a competitive streak. Few really like to lose. Perhaps empathy is a tool to help one imagine another's thoughts so that one can anticipate actions. This would be key to winning in “the game of life.” Any chess player would tell you their winning odds go way up if they know what move their opponent will make long before the move is executed.

We will keep moving through the dialogue, but I suggested before moving on, that Mike's recognition of a morality he is unable to live up to is in fact an indicator that there is something beyond Mike, and beyond the universe, that is prescribing right and wrong. We see this more fully in the next discussions.

3. Dialogue with the non-vegan vegan

I moved my discussion with Mike to another subject.

“Did you eat your steak?” I asked, having just finished our dinner.

“Of course! And it was great!” he replied.

I looked surprised as I asked, “Wow – don’t you feel guilty?”

He knew I was headed somewhere, but didn’t know where yet.

“No, why should I feel guilty?”

“Because,” I replied, “You have eaten another living being. Would you eat your grandmother?”

“Of course not,” he replied appropriately.

“How about some old person you don’t know. Would you willingly eat them?”

“Never!” he answered.

“Why not?” I asked wanting a real answer. “After all, don’t you believe that people are just the same energy and matter just collected in a different form than the energy and matter collected in a cow?”

“Well, for one...” he answered, thinking it through as it was slowly coming out of his mouth, “people have consciousness different than a cow.”

I pushed further, “So if someone is in the hospital brain dead, with no hope of ever resuscitating, you would have no problem eating such a one, or feeding the comatose person to one who is starving and in need of nourishing protein?”

No, he wasn’t okay with that either.

As we continued down this road, I pointed out to him that he seemed to give some greater significance to the collection of atoms and energy we call “people” as opposed to any other collection of matter and energy. He had no real reasonable explanation beyond the idea of human nobility, but why that dignity for a human should be there, Mike didn’t know.

My suggestion, of course, was that we were looking at another way that Mike’s life and his core beliefs were actually aligned with the idea that there is a God who has made man special (in his “image” is the Biblical phrase) and hence different

than all other animals. Of course, without a God, there is no “image” and the uniqueness that flows from that is gone.

4. Dialogue with the objective subjectivist

“Objective” and “subjective” are two very critical words in any trial or any discussion of truth. “Objective” means that something *outside* of a person is involved in defining or making a truth. “Subjective” means that the truth proceeds from a person or a subject. Here are two examples.

- If a witness offers “objective” testimony that John died of a heart attack, the witness might refer to an autopsy that showed the myocardial infarction, with not only heart tissue death from oxygen deprivation, but also the presence of a clot in the appropriate vessel. In other words, there was an “objective” finding upon autopsy that showed the heart attack.
- If a witness offers “subjective” testimony on whether John died of a heart attack, the witness might say, she or he felt that John was a likely candidate for a heart attack and, even though they do not know for certain, think it the reason that John fell down dead.

A judge would allow the objective evidence into trial. The judge would not, absent some other reason, allow the subjective opinion of John’s death into trial. There is no legitimate basis in the subjective opinion to let it into evidence. It is just one person’s opinion that is really little better than another’s.

“Objective” and “subjective” are important ideas also in the conversation I was having with Mike and others. For Mike, the Golden Rule was his core ethic. Not so for others in our small discussion group.

One in our group was quick to point out that the Golden Rule was not his guiding principal, nor should it be. His point was that we are in a competitive dog-eat-dog world, and the goal is to be the one on top, not the one putting others on top. He would not run roughshod over people, but his clear intent is to die with the most toys. His moral compass is pointed to self-interest, not the betterment of society.

Now lest we think him callous, he might readily rejoin that capitalism is built on his ethic, not on the Golden Rule. It is the desire to capitalize on one’s own industriousness and self-interest that propelled Western civilization, and certainly America, into its leadership position in technology, inventions, and productivity. We want more money to buy more things, and so we work to get that money. We may want more money to acquire security or prestige, rather than chattels (a legal word for personal property), but we are still seeking things for ourselves.

Here is where Mike’s dilemma lies. Mike wants an objective ethic, he wants his rule of right and wrong to be more than a concoction of his head or noble desire of his heart. In fact, every fiber in his being shouts that there is an objective right and wrong. As Mike kept reiterating to me,

“I don’t know why its right, but it is!”

Mike has no basis for such an objective view. As we will discuss in a later chapter, without God or some other outside objective source for right and wrong, Mike is stuck with an ethic that is his, but only out of choice – not because of its inherent truth as an ideal or what is truly right.

5. Dialogue on creation versus evolution

Nick propelled our discussion into something a bit more concrete – creation or evolution. His request was simple,

“How do you square the truth you know with Genesis? Do you expect us to believe in Adam and Eve? How can you write off all the proof of evolution?”

I loved his question, and told him so! The lawyer in me, however, would have to file two objections to the question as phrased. First, it is “multifarious.” By that I mean that the two questions are distinct and need to be addressed separately. The second objection would be the questions “assume facts not in evidence.” Here is how I explained my answer, along with the objections.

“Nick, what if I were to tell you that one can read Genesis faithfully to its message and not engage the evolution question one way or the other?”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

I told him that I believed Genesis to be true, but that I think Nick and others are reading it for a truth that is not necessarily in the text. The text is not written for science; it is written for significance. Science is really a product of the last 500 years. It was not the concern of the Israelites living in the midst of pagan tribes and nations over 3,000 years ago. Before we read the Bible from the perspective of our current moment in history, we need to read it from the perspective of when it was written. If I write “7 up” I might refer to a drink, to a score, or to a number that is next in line. It all depends on context. Often that context is historical.

Before asking what Genesis says to us today, we have a responsibility to ask what Genesis said to those Israelites to whom it was first written. Genesis told the

Israelites that creation was not what their neighbors thought, either as it reflected the value and role of people or in its reflection on the presence and nature of God.

As a witness here, we might call to the stand Assyrian King Ashurbanipal. Over 2,500 years ago, he maintained a tremendous library with thousands of clay tablets. Those tablets covered most every subject, from the mundane to the fanciful (legal tablets, transactional tablets, *etc.*). Of course, the king died, his empire crumbled, and time overcame his library, burying the building and its contents.

But Ashurbanipal ruled in a hot, dry capital city named Nineveh. The weather was perfect for preserving the clay tablets. So when in the mid-1800's, archaeologists discovered these tablets, the ancient stories were found, and scholarship of the Old Testament has never been the same. (The tablets provide insight in a number of areas, not just the creation myths of Israel's neighbors.)

Two of the important ancient Mesopotamian stories found in clay cuneiform tablets are called the *Atrahasis* and the *Enuma Elish*. In these stories, we read how Israel's neighbors thought that the gods were created. After being created, the gods first efforts were to fight chaos and bring order to the world. As the gods continued to multiply, they did all sorts of human things, though on a grander, more god-like scale. There were working gods who dug the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, piling up the dirt into mountains. There were warring gods, who fought against each other, hacking one dead goddess into two and hurling half of her body into the sky to form the dome of heaven.

In these stories of Israel's neighbors, the gods held possession over the aspects of creation they either made or came to own. So the god who owned the storms had jurisdiction and control over the weather. The god who owned the sea was the sea. The god who had possession of a certain area of the earth could be both in that earth and also presiding over that part of earth.

Those stories also explained an origin of people. Men and women were made to take burdens off the gods. The gods' chores were hard work. It started to wear on them, and they decided to make people so people could finish the chores of the gods.

Radically, into cultures built from these ideologies came the Bible creation story, one that is as opposite as possible. In the Bible, there is one God, not many. God is not made; he is the maker. God does not war against chaos in an effort to bring order; God creates the world in an orderly fashion, forming and filling in ways that are "very good." God does not simply make one aspect of creation to inhabit and rule over. God makes all of creation. He makes everything. God is not relegated

to a certain piece of real estate; he presides over all there is. Creation is not a part of God, nor an aspect of his body. Creation is independent of God, something he spoke into being.

Unlike the neighboring stories, God did not grow weary from creating. He was not challenged in digging creeks and rivers or in building mountains. God made all with simple words. He rested not out of fatigue, but because his work was finished, and it was “very good”!

Man was not made to relieve God of burdens; man was made in God’s image to enjoy his fellowship and company. God made man and gave to man!

The historical context view sees the Genesis account as setting out the truth of God and his creation, not in the sense of science and history, but in the sense of story that taught a competing reality to the stories surrounding the Jews.

Now there are more intricate discussions to be had on Genesis; that is certain. But for my purposes with Nick this was a sufficient starting point. It allowed me to move past the issue of whether Genesis or evolution was “right.” It also allowed me to propose the scientific question to him,

“Exactly where do you think the subject matter for the Big Bang came from?”

He replied there were a number of theories on this. I agreed that I had read and considered those, but my question for him was *which* one he found more reasonable than that a God created it.

“Maybe it just was always there!”

I asked him his basis for that. Where has he ever seen anything that suggests something can just be. That involves quite a leap of faith. Of course, he could argue the same might be said for the belief in God, for I was not asserting that God was “made,” but rather than God has always been.

Had Nick been prepared better for our discussion, he might have suggested that the “M-theory” of famed physicist Richard Feynman indicates that our universe might have come about as a part of many universes being created from nothing. Or Nick might have suggested a mathematical solution as follows: zero equals nothingness. So if we have a +2 and a -2 (or a positive universe and a negative universe) then they net out as nothing, for +2 plus -2 equals zero.

Of course this mathematical solution is not a real solution in the real world. For we even in our mathematical formula, for the expression that a positive two and

negative two exist, it means there must be something beyond a zero. They may net out to zero, but they are expressed in form as something real. You must have a reality of something.

Of course there is a ready answer at my disposal that Nick is missing. The idea of God existing outside of space and time means that beginning and end is no longer a question or issue. Time itself is a creation, not something that has always been and always will be. Now in terms of the universe, time is irrevocably interwoven in to the warp and woof of space and matter. But the idea of a God outside the space/time continuum is exactly that – a God outside of time.

The discussion then moved from creation versus evolution to Nick's second question.

6. Dialogue on Adam and Eve

Nick's question to me included an argument for Adam and Eve. As he worded it,

“How can you believe there was one woman and one man?”

Now this is an interesting question. Look at it carefully. How can you believe there was one man and woman? Shall we say, as opposed to two? Three? One-hundred?

I came from one man and woman. They are my parents – Mom and Dad. Each of them came from one man and one woman – my grandparents. Each of those came from one man and woman. I daresay we have not even a hint in our lineage that anyone came from more than one man and one woman!

How does that go back in history? Current statistics indicate a world population of roughly 7.1 billion people. Scholars generally accord that the population has grown continuously since the Great Famine and Black Death in 1350. Then the population stood around 370 million.ⁱⁱ Going back historically from there, it is more difficult to assign population numbers with precision. Still, at some point, the population will go back to a mother and father, even among the evolution believers.

Some might think that the first evolved modern people were so closely related genetically to the previous primate species that there was interbreeding, but even that would source to a single mother.

The biblical teaching that modern women and men are direct descendants of a man and woman are not any more far-fetched than the idea posed by evolution. To me,

these are issues worthy of discussion, but they are not issues that got to the existence or non-existence of God. Therefore, even though I would have loved to have discussed them with Nick (or with us in this book), they are readily subject to the lawyer's cry, "Objection, relevance." These issues are not relevant to whether there is a God, except for one aspect. The biblical account teaches us a profundity of humanity that helps explain much of our earlier discussion. This is the lesson of Genesis that I next discussed with my friends.

7. The significance of biblical account

The challenge of Nick for me to square reality with Genesis hinged upon an important point. My question was simple,

"Do you want me to square Genesis with what it says or with what you *think* it says?"

Those two I knew to be vastly different.

I told Nick I would do two things with Genesis. First I would square Genesis with what it actually says, not what Nick thought it said. Second, and more importantly, I was going to square Genesis with *reality*. Genesis was my source to make sense of the world as Nick, Mike, me, or anyone else, experiences it. Genesis makes sense with the circumstantial evidence of life.

Most anyone reading the ancient pagan creation accounts would be immediately struck by the uniqueness of Genesis. If we are reading Genesis for ideas contained in the accounts, we come away with several noteworthy points that argue for a certain perspective of God, of the world, and of humanity. These points are quite distinct from the views of Israel's neighbors. This is important as I give the argument that concludes this chapter.

- **One God versus many.**

The first and obvious difference between the Bible and the religious documents of other ancient neighbors to Israel concerns the number of gods. Rather than believing in many deities (some systems had hundreds of gods), Genesis taught Israel that there was only one. In Genesis, one God creates everything: heavens, earth, sky seas, land, vegetation, sun, moon, stars, animals, and people. There are not gods for each item or area. There is no competition between gods. There is no need. The one God as revealed is over all of nature. He controls everything.

- **God above creation, not a part of creation.**

Another notable point in the Genesis account is the “transcendence” of God. As a God who existed before any creation, and as the God who does the actual creating, the Bible’s God is apart from the things created. In a sense, God is the “Super Nature,” the one beyond and outside of the natural order, from which we derive the term “supernatural.”

As we read in Genesis of God creating all things, we must note how different this was from Israel’s neighbors. For many of the neighbors, the gods themselves *were* the sky, the moon, the sun, *etc.* (or at least they were inextricably linked to those elements of nature).

If you were to go to Egypt and look at the ceiling of a monument built by or for Pharaoh Seti I (ruled from ca. 1291-1279 BCE) called the Osirion, then you would see the engraved story of a goddess called “Nut.” Nut was the goddess that was stretched out above the atmosphere as the sky. Another god named Shu (who *was* the atmosphere) held up Nut. Shu in turn was standing on Geb, the god who was the earth. Other gods, including the sun, moon, and stars, would come forth from various parts of Nut and then return at their appropriate times. Shu was not only holding up Nut, but with the help of another four to eight gods, Shu also held back the waters in the heavens.

Not so with God as revealed in the Bible. He was not found in the sun, nor was he a nearby storm. God was beyond creation and controlled creation. In this sense, we consider the next point.

- **God is outside space/time, not captive to space/time.**

When we speak of space and time, we are using modern scientific ideas and words. However, the gist of those concepts are valid ways to verbalize a difference in understanding that came from Israel’s revelation apart from the imaginings of their neighbors.

A singular God who reigns *over* all nature, whether in space or time, is a God who is not subject to the laws of nature. This is a miracle-working God who can bend, suspend, or alter things at the mere word of his mouth. An over-age couple can have a baby, dreams can have meaning, famine can be foreseen, bushes can burn without getting burned up, seas can be parted and people can be delivered—all of which we read about in the later pages of the book of Genesis.

In contrast, in the Babylonian epic the *Enuma Elish*, we read of the main god (Apsu) being put to sleep by a magical spell cast by his offspring, a god named Ea. While asleep, Apsu is tied up and killed. This can happen when gods are not over the laws of nature. Unique to its time, the Bible taught a God that was not so vulnerable. God was above creation, neither a part of it nor subject to it.

Another aspect of God's existence beyond space and time is the genesis of God himself. Over and over in the writings of Israel's neighbors, we read ideas and proclamations of how the gods were made. In the *Enuma Elish*, Apsu and Tiamet "were mingling their waters together" when "the gods were formed between them."

In the Bible account, God revealed himself to Israel as beyond the material world and its time. God made time ("morning and evening, day one, *etc.*); he was not subject to time.

- **God is not a sexual being.**

As Israel's neighbors went about constructing images of the gods, they conceived of the gods as they did all other beings—male and female. Not like the unique view we find in the Bible.

A reading of the Hittite legends includes sordid tales of physical and sexual conquest among the gods that impact their interactions with creation. In *Elkunirsa and Asertu*, we read of the god El (creator of earth) and his goddess wife Asertu. Without El's knowledge, Asertu attempts to seduce the god Ba'al, who refuses her advances. Asertu then complains to her husband and we read about the gods plotting and scheming behind each one's back in a divine saga that reads like a lurid soap opera.

This is not what is taught in the Bible. Genesis teaches that God made humanity in his image, "both male and female" (Gen. 1:27). As such, God is neither male nor female, but both sexes find themselves expressing some aspects of God.

- **God does not have man's limitations.**

God is not a person in a super-sized form. God does not have limitations of strength, drive, or emotions. This sets apart the God of Genesis from the gods of Israel's contemporaries.

Contrast the gods in the *Enuma Elish*. A point was reached where the younger gods were bothersome to the older gods because of their "offensive behavior" and their "noisome actions." The older god Apsu yelled at his wife (mother of the younger gods):

Their behavior is noisome to me! By day I have no rest, at night I do not sleep! I wish to put an end to their behavior, to do away with it!
Let silence reign that we may sleep!

With that, the gods started plotting to kill each other. After the killing starts, war is brought on for some time until a peaceful accord is reached.

As we continue to read the story, we see more human limitations on the gods. One principle victor in the *Enuma Elish* was the god Marduk. Marduk was also the god who made the decision to create man. His reason? The gods were tired from their hard work! People were made to:

bear the gods' burden that those [the gods] may rest.ⁱⁱⁱ

Similarly in the Atrahasis, people were made because the gods:

did forced labor...digging watercourses...They heaped up all the mountains...Forced labor they bore night and day. [They were com]plaining, denouncing, [mut]tering down in the ditch... [the gods then say], "Let the midwife create a human being, Let man assume the drudgery of god."^{iv}

These gods were also subject to human pouting. In a Hittite story, one god named Telipinu gets angry, leaves his job post and goes to sleep in a meadow. To understand the significance of this to the people, we must realize that,

In the Hittite view, the operation of the universe required that each deity and human conscientiously perform his or her proper function within the whole. Calamity manifested in some sector of the cosmos was an indication that the god or goddess responsible for it had become angry and had abandoned his or her post.^v

Once Telipinu leaves, the world falls apart! Breeding of livestock stopped, the weather went haywire, crops would not grow as famine hit the land, and even the gods themselves could not eat a satisfying meal. The Storm-god (Telipinu's father) does not know where his son is and refuses to go look for him in spite of his wife's (the "Mother-goddess") vehement demands. So, the Mother-goddess sends a bee to find her son, the god Telipinu.

The bee finds the god, stings him a few times to wake him up, which only increases his anger. At that point, everyone (human and divine) went to work to get Telipinu in a better mood and restore order to the world.

Into these cultures and these mindsets comes the Bible's revelation of God as the Creator given in Genesis. God is not a larger version of a human. He has none of the human foibles. In fact, humanity itself has none of those foibles until sin enters the picture.

Creation was not hard work for God. He spoke and it came to be, over and over again. At the end of six days of creation, there was a day of rest, but the text gives no indication that God was resting on the seventh day out of fatigue. Instead, we need to see that the "rest" of the Sabbath was at its core the simple "stopping" of the creative activity.

Sabbath is our Anglicized version of the Hebrew word formed from the root *sbt*. The verb in its root means, “to cease.” On the seventh day, God quit working, but not out of fatigue. God had made a world that was very good. He quit because his work was finished.

On a similar note of tiresome work, the gods in neighboring cultures had a lot of work in making humans. They had to kill gods for the necessary blood to mix with clay. Needless to say, the process of figuring out which god to kill and then killing that god was no simple matter. In Genesis, we see the contrast of God simply speaking and things coming to be. Man was fashioned out of the dust of the field, but no gods died for animation. God simply breathed life into man.

God stands out as the authority over all there is. All of Scripture begins with the declaration, “In the beginning God created heaven and earth” (Gen 1:1). When the earth was formless and void, God spoke and it was both formed and filled. God does not fight with his counsel in his creation, he speaks his plans, “Let us...” and the plans come to fruition. God had no human limitations.

- **Nature’s role with mankind**

Where the Genesis creation account stands out from the secular versions is in the makeup and the function of nature. The makeup we discussed above. For most of Israel’s neighbors, these celestial features were actually associated with individual gods. In Genesis, nature was simply creation. God was not the elements; God made the elements.

Even beyond that, Genesis teaches uniqueness to the function of the created cosmic elements. For Israel’s neighbors, the cosmos contained elements tamed by the gods and then used for the gods’ purposes. People were made to work the cosmos to the benefit of the gods. Genesis sets the story the other way around.

In Genesis, God makes the cosmos for people. God sets the forms of heaven, earth, sky, and seas filling them with fish, birds, and animals. Each is set to produce more after its own kind. These are made with the view that people would have stewardship and dominion over them and they would serve humanity, not God (Gen. 1:26). God makes plants as food for beasts, but ultimately for people (Gen. 1:29). God sets the sun and stars, but does so not for his purposes, but to set out seasons for people (Gen. 1:14).

- **The Genesis teaching on men and women**

Like the conception of God, the revelation of man/woman and their purpose and role is as different from that of Israel’s neighbors as night is from day. Only Genesis speaks clearly of two people as the progenitors of the entire human race; the neighbors have the gods making people in groups.

Also unlike Genesis, a number of ancient accounts from Israel's neighbors have the creating deities providing necessary physical elements in making humans (tears, flesh, blood, *etc.*) often mixed with clay. This shows the connection between humans and deities by shared physical material. In Genesis, however, the connection is by the breath (Spirit) that God provides to people as God makes them in his image. This sets Adam and Eve in a connection that is a familiar relationship with the Creator (walking and talking in the Garden of Eden), not simply some lesser extension.

Very importantly, Genesis says that people were made in God's "image" (Gen. 1:26-27). Genesis does not suggest this is a physical image. Rather than physical likeness, image is a responsibility and identity of role and function. In other words, people had the responsibilities God assigned as well as the abilities necessary to accomplish the tasks. This has a number of implications.

People have the ability to create, to think, to choose, to plan, to accomplish, to appreciate, to discern, to process, and to communicate. These abilities are those that God possesses and dispensed to everyone. In Genesis, humans are embodied with the necessary qualities of God to do his work as his representatives and on his behalf.

The implications for human value are paramount. Our value lies in the imprint of God's image. Our true value is not in looks, brains, social position, physical dexterity nor athletic talent. Our value is in his nature as an image bearer of an almighty creator God.

- **The Genesis teaching on the effects of the "fall"**

Genesis teaches that as God made things, they were "very good." But after God's good work was finished, humanity took control and, at some point, went about doing things contrary to the will and nature of God. By so doing, Adam and Eve lost the intimate fellowship they enjoyed with God and lived the life of rebellion, with all of its consequences. These included nature and the world fighting against human survival, rather than aiding it. As Genesis put it, man was due to toil the ground among thorns and thistles to eek out a living. Women would find the child birthing process to be painful, not simply a blessing of life.

Genesis records the world as at enmity with the beauty of things as God created them. This leaves you and I, according to the Genesis story, living a life with struggles and stress, always inherently knowing there could be so much more. There is within each, a voice that cries out against injustice. There is a recognition or at least wishful thought that life should have some kind of meaning. We are able to think of a situation more beautiful or better than that which we have, and we long for it and work toward it, as if we were made for it.

This human experience is explained in the Genesis story. It is rooted in who we are and who we were made to be.

8. The point

One of the things I always look for in any argument is consistency. Does an argument have internal consistency? Can a position be tested and measured against other beliefs to determine consistency.

I might say that I believe that Team A is the best football team in the world, but if I look at their win-loss record and find it abysmal, I have a consistency issue between what I believe and what reality reflects. Now maybe there are reasons reality is inconsistent with my beliefs, and perhaps my beliefs are right in spite of reality, but the odds are quite low. What is more reasonable, is that reality needs to correct my opinion.

So it is with life. Mike, Nick and others want to believe there is no God. They want to embrace a world and life that has nothing beyond humanity as its ultimate significance. Yet I beg for a reality check. Do they live a life consistent with this perception? How can Mike be a Golden Rule atheist? His life is reflecting a truth in morality that is difficult to square with his atheism.

Both Nick and Mike, and actually many, many others who ascribe to atheism and agnosticism, hold to ideas and values that argue for a value or source beyond themselves. We don't eat other humans because the human is something special. This works from the Biblical perspective, but not so well from Mike's and Nick's.

The 20th century Oxford and Cambridge scholar C. S. Lewis was an atheist for his early adult life. From there he became a theist, believing in God, but not necessarily the Christian teaching of God. From there, his final step was to become a believing Christian. In an essay he entitled, "Is Theology Poetry?" Lewis wrote,

I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.^{vi}

Lewis makes a compelling point. Even the most ardent atheist or agnostic, upon close examination, will find their lives reflecting the world with a God and the values imparted by such a reality. The inconsistency of life and belief is a compelling reason to accord the existence of a God reality beyond simply nothingness. At least to this lawyer, it seems the more reasonable likelihood. It better represents the reality I see day to day.

Now who this God might be... well that is an examination that begins in the next chapter!

ⁱ Chesterton, Gilbert Keith, *Tremendous Trifles*, (Dufour 1968), at 55.

ⁱⁱ Biraben, Jean-Noel, “An Essay Concerning Mankind’s Evolution,” *Population*, (National Institute for Population Studies 1980).

ⁱⁱⁱ Hallo, William, ed., “Epic of Creation (Enuma Elish)” *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World* (Brill 1996), Vol. 1 at 400, transl’d by Benjamin R. Foster.

^{iv} “Atra-Hasis”, Hallo at 450-451, transl’d by Benjamin Foster.

^v “The wrath of Telipinu”, Hallo at 151, transl’d by Gary Beckman.

^{vi} Lewis, C. S., *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, (Harper 1949).