



The Resurrection, With a Little Help from Richard Dawkins

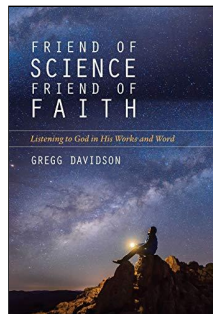
Gregg Davidson

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My arrival into the world was at the tip of a culturally odd lineage. My two grandfathers were preachers who valued science. My father was a biology professor who embraced his Christian faith. I was taught to question everything while also being told that the basic tenets of Christianity were true.

Following an educational path similar to my father's, I pursued advanced degrees in geology and hydrology, culminating in a PhD where part of my time was spent in the University of Arizona radiocarbon lab that dated the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Shroud of Turin. I was immersed in the scientific enterprise, conducting research that relied heavily on carbon-14 measurements, and plugged into my local church, even filling the pulpit on a few Sundays. Where others saw conflict between these two parts of my life, I saw only coherence. The study of the natural realm gave me a greater appreciation for the artistry of the Creator, and the study of the Bible gave me a richer sense of purpose in my scientific pursuits. I was content with the harmony I had found between the two.



Well – *mostly* content. There was one part of my experience that bothered me. I was raised in a Christian home, and believed the Christian faith to be true. But I knew that if I had grown up in the Middle East, chances are I would have been raised a Muslim, and believed that Islam was true. Or if raised in post-Christian Europe, I

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might now be convinced that there is no God at all. How could I be sure that my beliefs were not just artifacts of my upbringing? Flukes of geography?

The nagging question eventually prompted deeper investigation. I began studying the scriptures of multiple world religions – the Koran, the Bhagavad gita, the teachings of Buddha, the Book of Mormon, and even rabbinic translations of the Hebrew scriptures to avoid Christian bias – doing my best to give them each a fair reading.

Applying basic principles of logic, I began to narrow the field. As an example, the Koran speaks of the Bible as being true (the Torah and the Gospels, specifically), yet disagrees on the most central aspect of the Bible: the divinity of Christ, his sacrificial death, and the resurrection. If Book 1 says Book 2 is true, and contradicts Book 2, Book 1 eliminates itself as a candidate of ultimate truth. Applying similar principles, I felt confident in ruling out the non-Christian faiths as being viable contenders. But that did not automatically mean Christianity was true. It was possible that *all* religions were false, including Christianity, leaving only materialism in their wake.

This left me with a question. In the face of modern science, can one truly believe that someone could be raised from the dead? Or that miracles occur at all?

Searching for answers in an unlikely place

Addressing the latter questions led me to the works of Richard Dawkins, perhaps the most well known and outspoken apologist for evolution and atheism at the time. I read two of his books in full, *The Blind Watch Maker* and *The God Delusion*, along with articles and chapters from his other books. As I progressed through his work, starting with his scientific arguments, I felt he did a reasonable job building a case for how natural processes could have brought about life, how the notion of “selfish” replicating genes could have given rise to increasing diversity and complexity of life, and even how that same process *could have* led to a sense of moral and religious belief. As he moved into more direct challenges against religious belief, I also took no issue with his insistence that there is no evidence *that can be subjected to scientific testing* for the effectiveness of prayer, the verification of miracles, or life after death.

Based on his scientific observations, Dawkins felt confident in declaring there is no God, or at least not one with any discernible involvement on planet Earth. Here, the wheels of his argument started to wobble.

For one, I had always thought of God as the ultimate architect – designing a world that did not need supernatural tweaking to function. [Genesis 1](#) twice says that God *told the Earth to bring forth* various forms of life, once for plants and again for animals. Abiogenesis and evolution seemed like simple acts of obedience. How was this evidence against God?

A second issue I had with Dawkins' logic was his confidence that only that which is testable by science is true. The tools of science are, by definition, limited to the natural realm. Miracles, by definition, are acts superintended outside of the natural realm. How, exactly are tools confined to time and space supposed to test that which may lie beyond? Science might detect a fraud that is really a natural phenomenon, but a genuine miracle or supernatural exchange? One might as well test a theory of star formation with ketchup and a butter knife.

The alternative is not the often repeated Bertrand Russell definition of faith: “[belief in something for which there is no evidence.](#)” Logic and evidence testing is not the sole domain of science. Historical documents, eye witness accounts, and personal experiences cannot be fully subjected to the scientific method, but nonetheless represent evidence that can be logically evaluated. As one example, [textual analysis](#) of ancient manuscripts document that the Bible is far and away the most copied and preserved ancient text, and that differences between copies are minor. Such work increases confidence that the Bible we have today accurately represents the original. This was an important recognition for me in moving beyond questions of authenticity to engage the writers' claims. Two examples of significance for me are the following:

1. *Martyrdom of Eye Witnesses.* The Gospels were written by those with either firsthand knowledge of Jesus, or recording the history shared by firsthand accounts. Of the eleven disciples who witnessed the gruesome execution of Christ, many eventually suffered martyrdom for refusing to disavow their claim that Jesus rose from the dead. As others have noted, people will die for something they have been *mised* to believe is true, but no one dies for something they *know* is a lie.
2. *Isaiah 53.* I mentioned that part of my dissertation research was done in a radiocarbon lab that dated the Dead Sea Scrolls. These scrolls include a copy of the book of Isaiah, consistent with copies in modern Bibles. [Isaiah 53](#) records a description of the future Messiah that matches the life and death of Jesus so well, one might be forgiven for believing it was written or edited after the time of Christ. [Radiocarbon dating](#) confirms the age as predating the life of Jesus.

The sum total of such evidence was sufficient to convince me of the plausibility, perhaps even the *likelihood* that Jesus was who he claimed to be—including the possibility of his resurrection. But all such evidence fell short of proof. I knew there was another step that science and literary investigation were wholly incapable of assessing: a personal encounter with God.

I am amazed at the different ways in which fellow Christians describe such encounters.

Dawkins' Contradiction

For me, a pivotal moment came as I prayed and continued to read from Dawkins' works. His assessment of life is summed up well in quotes from two of his many books:

“The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.” [River Out of Eden](#)

“We are survival machines – robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes.” [The Selfish Gene](#)

While such a universe seemed hopelessly bleak, I at least found this part of his argument to be consistent with his materialist worldview. If our moral sense is nothing more than our genes mindlessly competing for survival, one can argue for behaviors that are more or less favorable to our continued existence, but not for any behavior as being good or evil.

What I found next was perplexing. After building a plausibly logical case for the assertions above, Dawkins overflowed with *moral* outrage, particularly in [The God Delusion](#), declaring monotheism to be a great *evil* (pg 37), and that teaching religion to children is abuse worse than sexual predation (pg 317). In contrast, vocal support was repeatedly argued for the apparently self-evident goodness of civil rights, womens' suffrage, animal protection, and, of course, the fight against religion.

I scratched my head.

If the universe has no plan for me and does not care – if there is no final judgement for my actions in this life – if all sense of morality is simply chemically induced neurological reactions – why should I be motivated to be led by these chemically-induced promptings that serve only to perpetuate my planet-killing offspring? Why should Dawkins care if a dog is beaten, if a person is enslaved, or if humans three generations distant wipe themselves out? All life is going to eventually fade away to entropic death anyways.

I could not fathom how Dawkins could argue that there is no intrinsic right or wrong, and in the next breath insist that we must fight for something described in terms of moral imperatives. How could someone as smart as Richard Dawkins not see the self-contradiction?

With the greatest of irony, the words of Dawkins in that moment were gifts from God to me. The only answer that made any sense was that God does not just exist, but is personal, touching hearts and minds as befits each person's disposition. A God who grants and withholds even our ability to engage in logical thought.

For those who declare the conditions for belief, who draw the boundaries around their minds to hear and see only what the limited tools of science can sample, the result is self-determined. The existence of the spiritual realm will remain hidden from conscious view. A view that cannot see the illogic of intrinsic morality in a universe devoid of purpose and destined for extinction.

To those who invite the relational presence of God into their lives, eyes are opened to see. In *this* light, more resplendent than the sun, the truth of the resurrection does not just appear possible to me, but an evidential certainty.

Note: This article was updated on April 10, 2020 at the author's request to more accurately describe the contents of The Blind Watchmaker, which is not best described as "a tome dedicated to replacing antiquated religious belief with faith in science." We are grateful to readers on the forum for pointing this oversight out to us.

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