

Can a Scientist Trust the New Testament?

The James Gregory Lecture, February 17 2014

Professor N. T. Wright, St Mary's College

Introduction

I am grateful for the invitation to give the James Gregory Lecture for the second time, after an interval of nearly seven years. And I begin with the same disclaimer, I am not, and have never been, a 'scientist' in the strict sense. I have engaged in dialogue on issues of science and faith; I have been friends with scientists who have written on theology, like Alister McGrath, John Polkinghorne, the late Arthur Peacocke, and not least one of America's leading contemporary scientists, Francis Collins, probably the only man to possess a guitar with a double helix engraved in mother-of-pearl up the fretboard. But I remain a historian and theologian looking over the shoulder of my scientific colleagues. It would be interesting to have a kind of return match, perhaps on the question, Can a Theologian Believe in Black Holes? But for the moment we must do what we can.

The question assumes, of course, that we know what a 'scientist' is; and also, in its second half, that we know what it might mean to 'trust' the New Testament. That latter question is more complicated than it looks. It begins, I assume, with a historical question: Can a scientist, or indeed anybody, trust the New Testament to give an accurate account of events which occurred in the first century, especially granted the peculiarity of some of those events. But it goes beyond, because to trust the New Testament is not just like trusting the newspaper to tell me the football results. The New Testament constantly asks a different kind of question, namely whether we will trust the God of whom this strange old book still speaks.

When you ask a Christian theologian to address this question there is a boring inevitability to the answer. You know and I know that I'm going to say 'Yes'. A scientist *can* trust the New Testament. But, as often with science itself, the interesting bit is how we get there. Are we simply going to sweep away all possible objections to trusting the New Testament, or are we going to engage with them? I have come here tonight to try to engage, and I shall look forward to questions and further discussion at the end.

Which Scientist? Which Questions?

A sentence with the phrase ‘a scientist’ in it is not itself scientific. There are many different types of scientist, the types varying not only with the subject-matter but with the approach. We do not want to go back to the old caricature of a white-coated, wide-eyed researcher, working from within a positivist frame of reference, committed to believing nothing that cannot be established by experiment. There are still, however, plenty of people who adopt a slightly milder version of this, and I suppose their high priest is Richard Dawkins. Such folk often hold a reverse caricature of people of faith, as living in a fantasy world where angels dance on pinheads and there are probably fairies at the bottom of the garden. Let us shed these caricatures and get to business.

When we talk about modern western science (as opposed, say, to ancient Chinese science or mediaeval Islamic science), we find ourselves in a world where two different narratives have become twisted together. Sometimes the twisting is so tight that the two stories appear as one, but they remain two different things, and it’s important we separate them at least in thought. The first of these is straightforward; the second is more complex.

On the one hand, there is the continual exploration of the natural world. As new technologies have enabled more fine-grained observation, new evidence has come to light, whether it be through the telescopes which tell us about the furthest stars or the microscopes which tell us about the smallest sub-atomic particles. Some of these, like the investigation of the origin and age of the universe, are of great interest though not much immediate practical use to anyone. Others, like the study of microbiology, are of urgent interest and importance, for instance, to the medical profession and hence to all of us. Work of this sort has gone on for many centuries. Most of those who practiced it before the eighteenth century, and several of those who practice it today, are in one sense or another people of faith, and it has never been a problem to them to hold the two together. They have understood themselves to be, in the time-honoured phrase, thinking God’s thoughts after him. And of course such work uses the method of repeatable experiment. To establish something, it must be possible in principle for someone else on the other side of the world to do the same experiment and get the same result. That is how normal science works, and at that level it has nothing to say for or against trusting the New Testament, or the Koran, or *Mein Kampf*, or anything else. This continual exploration of the natural world is the story of science proper.

On the other hand, there is the second story, which is the broad intellectual and social development of the western world since the eighteenth century. This is really far too complicated even to summarize, but I have to try. Let this shorthand account serve as a signal that there are questions here awaiting further investigation.

The main event, in terms of intellectual, cultural and social life in the western world, is the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. This itself is complex, taking different forms in different countries. But, as its self-awarded name implies, the movement

understands itself to be a new awakening. All that has gone before, it declares, is superstition and muddle; now we understand the way things really are, and can proceed unhindered towards a better world. At this generalized level we should recognise what's happened, because at the popular level we are constantly reminded in the media and elsewhere that we are children of the Enlightenment. Every time someone says 'Now that we live in the modern world', or 'in this day and age', or even 'now that we live in the twenty-first century', they are appealing implicitly to a narrative to which we are all supposedly signed up, a narrative in which a new day has dawned, bringing freedom, especially from the constraints imposed by older tyrannies, including that of the church. The word 'progressive', used by columnists in the *Guardian* as the catch-all term for a whole range of agendas, expresses this belief. There is an almost touching faith in this story of inevitable progress. One might have thought that the history of the last nearly three hundred years, which is full of wars and genocides and atom bombs and terrorism, might have shaken it. One might have thought that the postmodern critique, showing the dream of progress to be riddled with corruptions of one kind or another, might have undermined it. Perhaps the real question today is, Can Someone in the Twenty-First Century still Believe in Progress? – and the answer ought clearly to be No. But this great myth still dominates popular and public discourse. And – this is the point – it has got muddled up with the quite different story of science proper. And when that happens we have something we might call *scientism*.

The point about 'scientism' is that it tries to extrapolate from the undoubted fact that we now know a great deal more about the natural world to the belief that we now know a great deal more about the moral, social and cultural world as well. In part this inference was due to historical accidents. The sudden advances in science and technology happened to be going on around the same time as the American and French Revolutions and the rise of modern democracies. Somehow it was assumed that just as modern medicine would now cure all ills, modern systems of government would bring in utopia. The fact that this hasn't happened yet hasn't stopped people believing it in principle. And this is due to a further, vital train of thought which has become a central element in the narrative of 'progress'. I refer to the philosophy of Epicureanism, which remains the beating heart of the scientism which is bound up in people's minds with science itself.

Here there is a great irony. Part of the rhetoric of the Enlightenment was the claim to a new vision of reality, but actually at this central point what was happening was a new lease of life for one of the well-known philosophies of the ancient Roman world. Again, we have to keep this simple and brief. In the ancient pagan world there were, of course, many gods and goddesses: Zeus, Apollo, Aphrodite and the rest. They were continually interfering in our world in unpredictable and dangerous ways. Faced with this popular belief, the ancient philosophers came up with alternative accounts of reality. The Academics declared that there wasn't really enough evidence to be sure, so one should keep the old religions going to be on the safe side. The Stoics

were bolder. They said that divinity pervaded the whole cosmos, humans included: what people perceived as different divine beings and actions were simply manifestations of this single underlying divine power. The Epicureans went the other direction. They said that if the gods existed at all they were a long way away and took no interest in our world. They certainly didn't intervene within it. So how did the world work? Here is the point, which is at the heart of contemporary scientism too: *the world works by itself*. It evolves slowly and gradually, changing this way and that because of the unpredictable 'swerve' in the movement of atoms. It is this philosophy, in new but recognisable forms, that has become the default mode for western modernism. And here, in case my colours are not already rather clearly nailed to the mast, we come to the point: the great lie of scientism is to suggest that science has somehow proved Epicureanism.

The attraction of Epicureanism is obvious. Who would choose to believe in all those dangerous and cranky pagan gods, threatening to invade the world for their own ends, when you could believe instead that the world and the gods (if any) had nothing to do with one another? Better, many thought, to be alone in an unpredictable world than to share that world with unpredictable gods. Exactly the same argument took hold in Europe after the rediscovery of Lucretius, the basic text of Epicureanism, in 1417, and the groundswell which began there continued, taking over the Deist movements of the seventeenth century, reaching its peak in the eighteenth and nineteenth. Let us be clear. When Charles Darwin went on his famous voyage and wrote his famous book, he found all kinds of things which did, more or less, demonstrate the high probability of the evolution of species. Like many Christian thinkers of Darwin's time, I have no problem with that. But Darwin's findings were seized upon by those who, continuing this much longer narrative, had for quite other reasons wanted to believe that the world simply made itself, under its own internal steam, without any divine intervention. Science was contextualised within, and then taken over by, scientism.

What were those quite other reasons? Well, for a start, there were the political ones. It is no accident that getting rid of outside intervention, and allowing local processes to take their course, was popular as the Americans were rebelling against George III and the French were busy guillotining their own royal family. Then there were wider imperial ambitions: new western technology was enabling global colonial expansion. If the world now belonged to us, then it was ours to exploit, with no-one to say us nay. There were many other factors as well; but this will suffice to show that the eager embrace, not just of science but of scientism, not just of evolution but of evolutionism, was part of a wider philosophical, social and cultural movement which had nothing whatever to do with the findings of science proper. Nevertheless, the two strands have become so tightly woven together that now, at the popular level, people in this country still assume, and people in America still assert shrilly, that science has disproved religion; that you can't be a scientist and a believer or vice versa. It will not

surprise you that I disagree, and I will shortly explain why. But first, another point about knowledge and trust.

The language of modern western enquiry in almost all fields goes back in particular to Rene Descartes in the early seventeenth century. Among his many other accomplishments, his quest for a fixed point from which knowledge could begin led him to his famous *Cogito, ergo sum*, 'I think, therefore I am' – with the corollary that the 'I' could at least be sure of itself, so that other knowledge to proceed from that point. This, of course, has proved complicated, partly because of our almost infinite capacity for self-deception, and partly because of the problem of the essentialization of the 'self', undermined by postmodern deconstruction. But Descartes set the western world on a course of radical distrust, leading to a hermeneutic of suspicion about almost everything. It is against this dark background, of course, that the light of science then claimed to shine: everything else may be uncertain, but here at least are facts you can rely upon. We've proved them. As Alasdair MacIntyre famously said, 'Facts, like telescopes and wigs for gentlemen, were a seventeenth-century invention.' Of course, people before then knew the difference between things that happened and things that didn't. But only then, with the suspiciously bright light of an incipient scientism, did they suddenly come into prominence. Everything else is suspect; give us facts. Science says, 'Well, we'll try'; Scientism says, 'Here you are – and you must take our philosophy as well.'

Now anyone standing firmly in the tradition of Descartes, when asked if they could trust the New Testament, might feel obliged to say, 'Of course not.' Where are the facts? Where is the scientific proof? They would have to say the same about Caesar's account of the Gallic War, or indeed Churchill's account of the Second World War. And anyone combining the Cartesian tradition with Epicureanism would say, 'Not only can we not trust it; it says things which we know, *a priori*, to be false.' Anyone then combining these traditions with the doctrine of 'progress' would say, 'And anyway, we know that these are only old fables, suitable for their time perhaps, but irrelevant to us who have escaped the dark night of superstition.' That is the world in which we live. And that is the world in which, if you press its spokespeople for justification, they will say, 'We are following modern science.' But they aren't. They are following scientism.

Here is the problem. Science, by itself, cannot say which of the many philosophical positions is the true one. But once all sides accept an implicit Epicureanism, then every advance in understanding causation within the natural world looks like another nail in the coffin of the 'god of the gaps'. All this, as I say, was already around in the eighteenth century, and it prepared the way for Darwin, and for the multiple misunderstandings which have bedevilled subsequent discussion, especially in America.

Now, as I shall shortly explain, the ancient Jewish world in its classical statements held to a sophisticated view of reality which was neither that of paganism, nor that of any of the great philosophies. But part of the tragedy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the western world has been that the churches have, by and large, gone along with the prevailing Epicureanism. Very well, they have said: if there is a distant God, we will tell you about him, and how from time to time he does after all 'intervene', how in particular he sent Jesus across this huge ontological gap, to rescue us and take us back home with him. When a Christian witness colludes with either Deism or Epicureanism this is what you get: a detached spirituality in the present, a distant heaven in the future, leaving earth behind, and no reason to work for any improvement in the world. Within my own discipline, Bultmann's programme of demythologization was the most obvious version of this: we can't believe in all that ancient Jewish stuff now that we have modern medicine and electric light. But many would-be 'conservative' teachers have effectively done the same thing, reducing the promise of new creation to a detached, spiritualized version of itself, and turning the promise of the Kingdom of God, on earth as in heaven, upside down. Instead of the new Jerusalem coming down from above, this vision results in a kind of Gnosticism in which the citizens of the heavenly city bid farewell to earth.

This, very broadly, is where we are in western culture. And the results are all around us. When the terrorists flew their planes into buildings, as the iconic moment of the early twenty-first century, our leading politicians were reduced to frantically reading the Koran to see what the problem was. Many people had been telling them for a long time that if you took the religious element out of life you wouldn't be able to make sense of geopolitics or anything else either, but they were modern western people so they hadn't wanted to listen. Happily, there is a new institute now proposed in London which will bring together vital religious insights and allow them to contribute in fresh ways to the common good. Better late than never, and no doubt still resisted by those who like the world to be neat and tidy, utterly explicable in positivist and progressivist terms. And our discussion this evening thus takes place, not in a rarefied academic context for those who like abstract questions, but in the real world where progress went sour already with the Holocaust, where positivism was declared dead by its chief exponent, the late A. J. Ayer, and where Epicureanism has been shown up as what it always was, a convenient philosophical posture for those who could afford it, while those who couldn't suffered the consequences.

For consider. The last hundred years of scientific enquiry, at least so far as a rank amateur like myself can understand it, has contained massive challenges to the very foundations of what people thought they knew at the end of the nineteenth century. Whether it be General Relativity or Quantum Mechanics; whether it be Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle or Schroedinger's Cat; whether it be black holes, dark matter or dark energy – those at the cutting edge of actual science are continually coming back to report to the rest of us that the rumour of solid facts has been greatly exaggerated. As Matt Ridley said in a *Times* article last week (February 13, 2014: blogged at

<http://www.mattridley.co.uk/blog/science-discovers-new-ignorance-about-the-past.aspx>), ‘Science is not a catalogue of known facts; it is the discovery of new forms of ignorance.’ That, he says, is ‘the beauty of science: the more you find out, the more you realise what you did not know. . . On the voyage of science we are perpetually sighting great continents of ignorance that we did not even know were there.’ Ridley, being what he calls a ‘rational optimist’, turns this new ignorance, as his predecessors turned their new facts, against what he calls ‘silly forms of superstition and mysticism’, which I suspect means something like traditional Christianity.

Now of course it would be possible to seize upon this new moment of radical uncertainty and to say, ‘There you are! There *were* gaps after all! Now we can put God back in those gaps again!’ But this, of course, would be to miss the point once more. The Jewish and Christian traditions never believed in a God of the gaps. It is time to turn to what they *did* believe in, to show how that came to full flowering in the New Testament, and to assess tonight’s question, whether and to what extent a scientist, qua scientist, can trust what we find there.

As we do, a word about different kinds of knowing. It is common to make a distinction between science and history. Science studies the repeatable; history studies the unrepeatable. There are overlaps. Geology is, in a sense, the history of part of the natural world; so is astronomy. But we tend to use the word ‘science’, in a strict sense, for disciplines which proceed by experiments which can be repeated. The geological evidence is open to anyone. Anyone with a telescope can look at Jupiter’s moons. And so on. With history, we are dependent on testimony, sometimes deliberate (as with those who have written accounts), sometimes accidental (archaeological remains, coins, and so on). Here the strict Cartesian, let alone the strict positivist, ought to have qualms: can we *know* what happened in the past, in the same way that we know the composition of a hydrogen molecule? And yet historians solidly claim that there are certain things they *do* know: the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, or of Jerusalem in AD 70. And the fact that a young Jewish man called Jesus of Nazareth was crucified by Roman soldiers outside Jerusalem in Passover week, probably in 33 AD. And that, very shortly afterwards, his erstwhile followers became convinced that he was alive again. As a historian, I can say that we know all this as securely as we know about Jupiter’s moons or the composition of the rocks in the Cairngorm mountains.

But there are different types of knowing beyond science and history. Here we lack the right word, because there are all the areas in which the right brain specialises: music, faith, love, values, beauty, ethics, wisdom, hope, and so on. These are vitally important ingredients of all human life, and humans have always enquired after them, and debated about them, as they have about science and history. Attempts have been made, within positivism, to collapse them all into subjectivity, but this, though popular in some ethical debates, will hardly do. Saying ‘that sunset is beautiful’, or

‘murder is wrong’ is more, and is almost universally recognised to be more, than saying ‘I like that sunset’ and ‘I don’t like murder’. If we have lost our grip on clearer ways of saying such things, and justifying them against objectors, that merely shows what happens, long term, when you live within an implicit Epicurean culture. The bright light it tries to shine on one level of reality results in dark and confusing shadows elsewhere.

Over against this, I take, for a start, the recent book of the former Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks. In his treatment of science and religion, entitled *The Great Partnership*, Sacks repeats a formula which sets down a marker: ‘Science takes things apart to see how they work; religion puts things together to see what they mean.’ History itself, of course, points in the same direction, because the discipline of history is constantly striving to know not just ‘what happened’ but ‘why’, and especially the ‘why’ of human motivation: Why did people want to start the First World War, to drop the atom bomb, to launch the Crusades, to crucify Jesus? And with the ‘why’ comes the question of ‘meaning’, slippery though that is. Without the ‘why’ questions and the ‘meaning’ questions, science and history alike become dry and bleak. And the point is this: science can only pronounce in its own sphere. It can tell you how to make a bomb, but not whether to drop it, or on whom. Wise scientists are aware of their limitations, and will point to other spheres of activity to produce the other dimensions. Those who believe in scientism, however, will not want to do that. They are hoping for a complete account of reality, and even if that still eludes them they don’t want to admit that there are other spheres of enquiry which have their own integrity. I suggest that there are, and that the trick is to bring them into fruitful conversation with one another.

After all, these spheres have essentially the same pattern of knowledge. They all work by hypothesis and verification. The process begins with the raw, unsorted encounter with the world, whether it be with different types of substances, with different accounts of what happened two weeks ago or two millennia ago, or with different experiences of beauty and love. If we are content to stay with the randomness of ordinary experience, fine. The moment we move beyond that, we move to initial hypotheses about how all these things fit together, and we test these hypotheses against the data themselves and against any more similar things that may happen along. Whether at a formal academic level, or at a merely personal level, we come to initial conclusions which we modify in the light of subsequent data. Sometimes, we have what Thomas Kuhn famously called a paradigm shift, in which the accumulation of new data which doesn’t fit the model suddenly tips over and generates a new paradigm. I take it that this is common knowledge. All I am saying at the moment is that all three areas I have mentioned, science, history and the world of religion, culture and art, and all their sub-departments, proceed more or less by this means. It is how we come to know things. It is how we come to know *more* about things. And, when we put these three branches of knowledge together, it is how we

come to know *both* how things work *and* what they mean. And I think scientists in fact know this as well as the rest of us.

The fruitful conversation I have in mind can, I suggest, be found precisely in the ancient Jewish tradition that Lord Sacks represents, and particularly, in my view, in the fresh development of it that we find in the life and work of Jesus and the testimony of his first followers. This is where, at last, I turn to consider the New Testament itself. I want to argue, not only that a scientist, qua scientist, can certainly trust the New Testament to tell us the sort of thing it is trying to tell us, but that the New Testament itself articulates modes of knowing which could help us out of the mess of late-modern Epicureanism and the ‘progress’ belief, and into wiser, more humane and holistic ways of thinking and being.

Trusting the New Testament

So what might it mean, in the words of our title, to ‘trust the New Testament’? What obstacles might there be in the way, and how might we address them?

Let me first note, in case it trips us up later, that the New Testament seldom invites us to trust *it*, except by implication. It invites us to trust the God of whom it speaks. This could lead us in a false direction: it would be easy to say that, if the New Testament is there to tell us about God, we needn’t worry about the history. This would be wrong. The God of whom the New Testament speaks is precisely the *creator* God, but not a Deist absentee landlord. The roots of the New Testament are found in the Jewish world. And in the Jewish world we find, neither a god like the pagan gods, nor a pantheist god like the Stoics, nor a detached divinity as in Epicureanism. We find the God who, having made the world, continues in a dynamic relationship with it, and who has called one people, Israel, to be his people for the sake of the world. We find a God who declares at the same moment that he is the high and lofty one who inhabits a different world entirely *and* that he dwells with his people, whether in the Temple in Jerusalem or even in the hearts of the meek and lowly. This God is *both* other *and* present, with these held in delicate balance. The Temple in Jerusalem symbolizes all this: the Temple, they believed, was where heaven and earth met. When you were in the Temple, it wasn’t ‘as if’ you were in heaven; you were actually there. The two spheres intersected without being identical – something neither the Stoic, nor the Epicurean, would have been able to grasp, but something which is absolutely basic to the New Testament.

Israel’s ancient scriptures express this belief from many angles, but taken together they form a narrative which points ahead to a moment of truth, a moment of decision, a moment of judgment, revelation and demonstration. And the New Testament says, This moment arrived with Jesus of Nazareth, Israel’s Messiah. It is not, then, open to us to say that we will allow the New Testament to tell us about God, but not about

history. What it is telling us about God is that the God who made promises to Israel, promises involving this creation, not some other one, has kept those promises in Jesus, in other words, in history. This means that actual events in the actual world of space, time and matter are invoked as the turning-point of world history. What might it mean to trust this testimony?

For a start, obviously, it means taking it seriously *as history*; and this, naturally, is where the problems are focused. When people ask this evening's question, I think they normally mean three things. First, can we trust the rough outline record of Jesus' public career? Second, can we believe in the 'miracles'? Third, as a specific example of that, can we believe in the resurrection? Let me take these in reverse order.

I spoke in my previous James Gregory lecture on the resurrection, and since those remarks have found their way into other publications I don't want to repeat them now. But let me just stress two things. First, beware of the idea that it is only through modern science that we discovered that dead people don't rise. This is a classic example of 'scientism', not only to make claims not only about what we 'now' know but to suggest that nobody knew it before. Whenever the topic of resurrection comes up in the ancient world, the poets and philosophers all know the answer: of course it doesn't happen. It isn't the case that prior to 1750 people didn't know the laws of nature, so were ready to believe in resurrection, whereas now we do so we aren't. As C. S. Lewis says, the reason Joseph was worried about Mary's pregnancy was not because he didn't know where babies came from but because he did. The resurrection of Jesus was just as difficult to believe in the first century as it is for us – equally difficult, but no more. Believing that Jesus was raised from the dead always takes a worldview-shift. It cannot be fitted into any other existing framework. I will come back to this.

Second, let's be clear what the resurrection is *about*. The danger here is that the churches, colluding with the prevailing Epicureanism, have imagined that the point about the resurrection was either that it proved life after death or that it showed that Jesus was divine. The resurrection then becomes a very odd 'miracle' which God performed to reveal these two truths. But of course it addresses neither of them. It speaks, not of 'life after death', but of a new, bodily life *after* 'life after death', whatever the intermediate state may be (about which it says almost nothing). The resurrection of Jesus is precisely *not* about 'going to heaven', but about something new, something *from* heaven, happening 'on earth as in heaven': a new form of this-worldly existence, the launching of new creation within the ongoing old one. The resurrection demonstrates that Jesus really was Israel's Messiah, leading the way into new creation. Generations of devout Christians in the western world have sold themselves badly short here, I think, and this is part of the problem: by retreating into claims which only made sense within the detached world of Epicureanism or at least Deism, we have failed to grasp the larger truth of what Jesus' Resurrection is all

about. That is cognate with other failures, including the retreat from the social, cultural and political spheres.

So: can a scientist trust the New Testament when it talks about Jesus' resurrection? *Scientism*, of course, will say, 'No, certainly not: we know that things like that don't happen.' I think a genuine scientist might say, 'Well, this is of course outside any other knowledge we have, so we will naturally be suspicious; but when we look at all the evidence about the rise of the early church, and the way it told these stories, so unexpected, so unlike anything else, so different even from the pictures of resurrection within the ancient Jewish world, it seems as though we have to take the claim seriously.' And, as I say, taking the claim seriously means taking seriously the possibility that something quite new might have happened within the middle of human history, something which requires that other worldviews be reworked around it. You can't fit it in to other worldviews, but that is precisely the point. Either it is the new centre, or it is just a bizarre oddity – which almost certainly means it is nothing at all. The question of whether you will treat it as the new centre is not a question that can be answered by science, or indeed history, alone. That is where you need all the other levels of meaning to be on the table.

When it comes to the other 'miracles', I draw attention to the way in which that word itself has slipped over the years. If you ask someone, 'Do you believe in miracles?', they will almost certainly hear that question within a solidly Epicurean framework. They will assume that you are asking whether they believe that a normally distant or absent divinity does occasionally reach in, across the ontological divide, do something strange, and then go away again. This is often connected in people's minds with the word 'supernatural'. The word had a perfectly good history before, simply drawing attention to dimensions of our present world not normally apparent on the surface. But the word, like 'miracle' itself, has now become firmly attached to Epicureanism's upstairs/downstairs world. Once you're thinking in that way, saying you do believe in miracles, or in the supernatural, is almost as bad as saying you don't. It's a bit like asking 'Have you given up burglary now?', or 'Is the Pope's wife Chinese?'. Wrong either way.

What the New Testament is asking us to trust is a startling account of what it might look like if two things are true. First, if it is true that the god the ancient Israelites knew as YHWH really was the creator God of the whole world; second, if it is true that this god really had promised to come in person and bring the story of Israel, the rescuing story of the whole creation, to its dramatic but unexpected climax. The New Testament isn't offering us all this as something we might like to try fitting into our existing worldviews. It is offering us these stories in the knowledge that they do not fit, but rather that taken together they constitute a challenge precisely to other existing worldviews and an invitation to reconstruct our worldviews in such a way that the story of Jesus will make sense – and that so will everything else.

This, I submit, is the sort of thing *in principle* which scientists are quite used to doing. As I said, the last century has seen dramatic changes in all sorts of things. Only the other day they found some prehistoric footprints in a Norfolk beach which they reckoned would require a whole new way of looking at early human history. I am not saying that accepting the New Testament's account of the life and deeds of Jesus is the same kind of thing, only that science, qua science (as opposed to scientism), not only cannot pronounce on the unexpected, but is precisely supposed to welcome new challenges, to be prepared for new paradigms. Of course, as Thomas Kuhn argued, those who invest heavily in the 'normal science' within a particular discipline usually put up strong resistance to paradigm shifts. And that is particularly the case with scientism, whose Epicurean worldview undergirds not only its scientific work but also its politics, ethics and culture.

But I would not, myself, begin with the so-called 'miracles'. They are, in a sense, the icing on the cake. The place to start is either with the resurrection itself, or with the picture of Jesus' public career in the gospels. Here, of course, massive effort has been expended in my own field, crawling over the texts with a magnifying glass to puzzle over every detail. But, for my money, the most important thing to say is that contemporary research on ancient Judaism, and on the world of the Middle East in the first century, continues to demonstrate that the gospels are not basically the retrojection of later fantasy onto a falsely historicized screen. They make sense in the world where they claim to make it, offering a robust and vivid portrayal of Jesus as a man of his time and yet a man exploding *into* that time, that moment, with the news that now at last Israel's God was becoming king on earth as in heaven. Here is the point. Generations of debate have centred upon the question as to whether we can trust – not just scientists, whether any of us can trust – the historical picture of Jesus. Did he do this? Did he say that? Did he really claim to forgive sins? But what few have noticed is that these questions, though important, are simply the gateway to the much larger question, not just whether what the gospels say about Jesus is true but whether what Jesus himself said is true. Might it after all be the case that then and there, in the first century in Palestine, the creator of the world was starting to take charge, was assuming control of his world, was challenging the principalities and powers, and doing so with the weapons not of revolution or military force but of forgiveness, healing and love? The real question faced by all of us, scientists included, is not just 'could these things have happened', but 'could it be the case that a new way of being has been introduced into the world?' Could it be the case that there is after all a God who, having made the world, would come at last to sort it all out? And that is not, of course, the sort of question upon which a physicist, an astronomer, a botanist or any other scientist would have an opinion arising out of their professional work.

Nor, interestingly, can it be answered by simply saying 'yes' to all the particular questions about Jesus' public career. It might be the case that there really was such a man, that he really did all those extraordinary things, and that he was just a kind of

freak of nature, nothing more. That is where we come back to his resurrection. If Jesus had not been raised from the dead, then that is the kind of conclusion his first followers would undoubtedly have had to draw. Their tradition knew of great prophets who had done remarkable things and had died. Jesus must have been just one more. The reason they didn't draw that conclusion was that they all believed, despite not having expected any such thing, that he had in fact been raised from the dead; and it is incumbent upon anyone who takes these questions seriously to see what they meant by that and how the question might be answered.

Jesus' resurrection, in fact, offers itself as a new centre not only of *what* we might know but of *how* we might know things. It doesn't, of course, fit into any of the prevailing philosophies, whether ancient or modern. It therefore invites the question: what worldview or philosophy *would* you need to adopt if it were true? This is the challenge scientists regularly face: here is some data which doesn't fit the theory, so you have to get a new theory. But with the resurrection something else seems to be going on, something which isn't just science and isn't just history, something in that larger, uncertain area about the meaning of all human life. What the resurrection offers is the introduction of a *new creation* – not a fresh creation out of nothing, but the rescue and revitalization of the old creation itself. And it therefore offers a new mode of knowing which is both continuous with, and yet transcends, the modes appropriate for the present creation, including science, history, and the larger world for which we don't have a good label. The resurrection gives us the bridge – as we see in Jesus' dialogue with doubting Thomas – to speak the new word in language that can be heard in the old world, to invite the old world to recognise that new life has appeared even within its own sphere. In terms of ancient philosophy, this generates a new physics, a new logic and a new ethics. That is a subject for another occasion.

So: can the scientist – can any of us! – trust the New Testament? We certainly can't trust it to fit into our preconceived notions. But we can trust it to tell us about new creation, in such a way as to enable us to see that the old creation, with its own modes of knowing, is redeemed and taken up within it. That may be enough challenge for one night.

But when we raise these key questions in the way I have done, we discover that the word 'trust' is itself more interesting than we had imagined. Trust is precisely what you have when you rely on something or someone without having mathematical proof for your action or belief. Trust is what we all used to have in the police force, in the banking system, in the health services, in our political institutions – and what, as we know, has been seriously eroded in recent years. Perhaps that, too, is the casualty of our implicit Epicureanism. When you embrace a seriously split world, even the things you thought you could rely on in the downstairs world turn out to be not so stable. In such a world, with questions old and new coming at us from all sides, it would be very odd if anyone, scientist or not, were to try to hide from the challenge

of trust by running back to the old model of positivism. With positivism you don't 'trust': you either know something absolutely and demonstrably, or you say there's nothing there to know in the first place. Most of human life doesn't work like that, and trust is precisely something we badly need to rebuild.

But how? Here the New Testament puts one of its central proposals before us. It speaks of *power*:

a power which works *through* the message about Jesus, through the announcement of his resurrection, to open doors where previously there seemed to be none. Here is the familiar paradox, known already to Plato: can there be genuinely new knowledge? If we fit new information into an old framework, it's not totally new; if we bring totally new information, we won't recognise it because we haven't got a framework for it. However, the Christian claim -- focused precisely on the resurrection -- has to do with the creation of the world, and of humans in God's image -- i.e. that there *is* a framework, of sorts -- but that this 'framework', according to the New Testament itself, needs to be shattered and remade precisely by this new knowledge. That, of course, is what this book is all about. 'Trusting the New Testament' isn't a matter of a cool, detached appraisal, any more than 'trusting' a human being with your money, your life, or your heart is a cool, detached thing. It is a huge risk, like all the biggest things in life. And the New Testament, when you trust it, tells a story which invites, not spectators, but participants: the story of a God whose love is so powerful, whose longing to rescue and heal the world so strong, that he comes in person, in the person of Jesus, and on the cross shatters all our modes of knowing, in order to remake them in the resurrection.

From one point, then, this is totally new: the resurrection doesn't fit, and everybody, not only modern scientists, has always known that. From another point, what the resurrection, and the message about the risen Jesus, generates is the new mode of knowing which makes sense of all other modes of knowing. From Thomas the empiricist to Saul the sceptic, the resurrection offered itself not simply as something you might believe, on the edge of your 'knowing', by stretching the category of 'what I can normally know' just a bit further. It offered itself, and the New Testament as a whole offers it today, as the thing you will need to put at the centre of a renewed vision of what it means to be human, what it means to be part of this extraordinary world. It is a paradigm shift, to be sure, but scientists ought to be up for that in principle. But the new paradigm is the new version of the ancient Jewish worldview, and that means abandoning our Epicureanism and any other inadequate frameworks and living with the challenge and the promise of the living Creator God and his inbreaking kingdom.

So . . . can a scientist trust the New Testament? Yes -- but, as in many other areas, our notional scientist will face questions and risks which, *qua* scientist, are off limits. That's not a problem. Not to face those risks would be to stop being human. The problem is that 'trust' is a larger category, involving the physical and natural world,

the world of history -- Jesus' history and our own! -- and also that larger, hard-to-define category where all the things that really matter are to be found. The question of 'can I trust this?' -- this person, this theory, this car, this promise, this God -- is not one that can be answered mathematically. If it could, it wouldn't be 'trust' anyway. So, to come back to where we began: it isn't a matter of 'trusting' the New Testament by itself. The challenge of the New Testament is to discern the picture of God -- the strange yet familiar God we see in Jesus -- and to learn to trust this God.

As we do this, we gradually realise that the way to ask the question is not, 'can *we* trust the New Testament, and the God of whom it speaks?' The question, really, is, Can this God trust us to follow him and make his glory known in the world? Trust works both ways.