



Uncle Arthur's God Or Probability?

In praise of a God who sustains an orderly universe *and* intervenes—but rarely.

by John M. Berez

THE ADVENTIST GOD IS AN INTERVENTIONIST God. He dispatches guardian angels to keep approaching drunk drivers from swerving over the yellow line and snuffing out my life. When I'm hitchhiking home from college during a blizzard, God sends angels disguised as people to pick me up.

From his or her earliest years, the *Bedtime Stories* provide the Adventist child's about-to-go-to-sleep mind some of the most vivid scenarios of divine intervention. And as drowsiness blurs the boundaries of reality, and the child slips from the world of consciousness to nebulous realms of the unconscious, he or she is carried along on angels' wings and on the assurance that all will be well—and especially so if he or she is a good boy or girl. Stories like "Little Miss Grumblestone," "The Hollow Pie," "Saved From the Flood," "The Boy Who Ran Away From Home," "Four Chocolate Eggs,"

"Saved From an Earthquake," "Peter and the Pumpkin Seed," "Walter and the Wolves," "Boy in a Well," all teach that God intervenes in our smallest affairs, as well as dramatic disasters—most willingly when we've been good.

Adventist children around the world are taught, about the same time they learn their mother tongue, that Jesus cares *and* that Jesus *intervenes*. Adventist toddlers are regaled with stories like the Red Sea splitting for the Hebrews while simultaneously drowning the Egyptians, or Jonah's ride in the submarine that belched. With biblical stories available, Adventism has little need for fairy tales. Jack and the Beanstalk pales alongside the story of a shepherd boy who, with only a slingshot and a small stone, saves his country by slaying the evil giant and later becoming king. It's hard to upstage the image of three Hebrew lads serenely standing unsinged in a furnace so hot it kills the captors who threw them in. Who can be impressed by Grimm's tales, when he or she can hear about faithful old Daniel calmly petting the lions who would have

John M. Berez, a graduate of Columbia Union College, received his Ph.D. in clinical psychology from Indiana University, and a diploma in clinical psychology from the American Board of Professional Psychology. He is currently professor of psychology at Andrews University, and practices in the area.

ferociously devoured anyone less faithful?

This fundamental Adventist assumption, that God takes care of those who are good, runs through a recent book entitled *College Faith*, edited by Ron Knott. In this book, which can be seen as a representative, if not truly random, sample of Adventist thought leaders, we are treated to numerous accounts of how God has intervened to help find a spouse, provide money for college, save the author's life, or prevent great harm from befalling him or her. Numerous examples abound, but I'll limit myself to two.

W. G. Nelson, the president of Walla Walla College, tells of driving home from his job in the rugged mountains of northern California one summer, when he heard a voice say, "Don, slow down." Rounding the next corner he found himself facing two huge logging trucks—one passing the other—bearing down on him. Although he admits the "voice" he heard urging him to slow down wasn't actually an audible voice, after telling us about his safe stop, he nonetheless concludes that, "With the extra speed I had been traveling at before I heard the voice, my little car, with me in it, would certainly have been smashed against that big truck. That experience showed me that God is indeed a loving Father meeting our needs. He had truly sent His angel ahead of me to guard the way" (pp. 180, 181).

Floyd Murdoch tells of being lost for 10 desperate days in the jungles of eastern Peru. Finally, on a Sabbath, he heard a *moo*. Correctly concluding that where there was a cow there must be people, he stumbled into an *Adventist* village while the community was at church. He concludes, "Except for the cow, we might still be lost. We had been 'saved' by a one-word 'sermon' from the Sabbath people's cow—*moo*" (pp. 34, 35).

At first blush, such stories seem innocent, even inspirational. After all, why question

someone who "hears a voice," slows down and avoids serious injury? And what should be more inspiring to someone like me, who grew up on a Wisconsin dairy farm, than the story of God saving life through the divine *moo*?

G. A. Bryant recounts how his friend Elaine promised to show him a shorter route home for Thanksgiving/Christmas break. They planned for him to follow her in his own car. However, he encountered car trouble, and was unable to leave. Not wishing to delay her further, he relates that:

Finally I gave up and told Elaine to go on ahead. I'd go the old way, which would take three hours longer. . . . About an hour after they left, my car repair work suddenly came together quickly and smoothly. Soon I was on the road, driving the old route home. . . .

Getting sleepy, however, he stopped to call home to get a relative's phone number.

When the phone was answered, I was greeted by a hysterical voice on the other end. It was my father, and he was frantic, asking where I was and if I was all right.

When he calmed down, he told me that Elaine had been killed in an accident, and several others in her car had been injured. Tears ran down my face. My friend was gone. And I recalled how upset I was with God just a few hours earlier because of the condition of my car. Now I realized that God, in His wisdom, had been looking out for me the whole time (p. 59).

What about this last sentence—"God, in His wisdom, had been looking out for me the whole time"? What about Elaine? Wasn't God looking out for her? Why didn't *she* develop car trouble? Why didn't *her* water pump, or carburetor, or transmission, or *something* go on the fritz and save *her* life? And what about the many good people who've gotten lost in the jungle and died without ever hearing the saving *moo* of God's cow? Were they not as faithful as Floyd? Was their mission not as important?

And what about the cars that *have* crashed head-on into trucks, instantly killing innocent passengers? Where was the warning “voice” for them urging a slower speed? Why were the lives of two of my most promising students, Bob and Elfrieda Oster, tragically ended weeks after their honeymoon, when they collided head-on with a drunk driver who had swerved into their lane? Where was the warning voice telling them to “pull over to the shoulder and wait for the next car to pass”?

I’d like to discuss three major problems with such deliverance stories: probabilities, selective sampling, and linear theories of causality.

Possibilities vs. Probabilities

I recall one of my professors saying, “Children understand the *possibilities*, but not the *probabilities*.” I’ve never forgotten that. Ever had your child engage you in this kind of conversation?

“Dad, could a lion get out of the zoo?”

“Yes, but it’s not very likely.”

“If a lion got out, could he walk as far as our house?”

“Yes, but something like that would probably never happen.”

“But at school our teacher said on the news there was a story ’bout a lion on the freeway.”

“I know, but it doesn’t happen very often.”

“Could a lion eat Taffy (pet Cocker Spaniel) if he got in the yard?”

“I suppose, but a lion isn’t going to get in the yard.”

“But you said a lion could . . .”

In a child’s world, anything is possible. As adults, we automatically temper our view of happenings with projections of probabilities. So even though I know it is *possible* that I will be killed on the highway before this article is published, I nevertheless continue to drive. Accidents are low-probability events. Sometimes when traveling by air, I occasionally find

that as my plane slowly starts down the runway, gunning its engines and gathering speed, I consciously remind myself that this is even *safer* than driving!

Christians, like children, sometimes speak eloquently about God’s limitless power—about the *possibilities*—but seem to forget *probabilities*. Let’s begin with the biblical rescue stories, and remind ourselves that typically there are *hundreds of years* interspersed between most recorded miracles. Even in the Bible, miracles are *low probability, low frequency* events.

In our storybook and children’s Sabbath school versions, it seems that a few years after God created the earth, Noah built the ark and God flooded the planet, people built the tower of Babel, and Moses was born. We seldom reflect on how long all this really took. Noah, for example, was *500 years old* before he even began a family. And it was hundreds of years after the Flood that God parted the waters of the Red Sea for the Exodus.

Although a veritable explosion of miracles accompanied the birth, life, and resurrection of Jesus, even here we lose time perspective, leaping in our minds from one miraculous event to another, as if there were no moments of ordinary living in between.

Historically condensing divine history in our minds, we naturally fit the pieces into the only time frame we understand—our own. And since historians tend to record *events* rather than nothingness, we lose the many moments—even in sacred history—of ordinary, possibly even boring, life. Jesus and his disciples presumably ate, slept, shaved, cleaned their teeth, changed clothing, used the bathroom, polished their sandals, and engaged in a host of *ordinary* events. Even in their lives, miracles weren’t exploding with the pop-pop-pop of popcorn.

Assimilating some 5,000 years of sacred history into our heads and trying to imagine it in our time frame produces “miracle overload.” We feel surrounded by the supernatu-

ral, mired in miracles thick as glue, and that's a distortion. It's especially a distortion when compared to our daily lives, where ordinary events predominate. It's a distortion that we maintain through selective sampling.

Selective Sampling

It is well known among researchers that people are prone to bias in everything from memory to prediction. It's a part of being human to always color perceptions. With respect to deliverance stories, this means that the narrator's recollection may become enhanced as the story is retold, much as family stories often become embellished with details as they are passed down from generation to generation.

But even granting that each narrator is recalling details with reasonable accuracy, there is usually an *institutional bias* in printing any compilation of rescue reports because we do *not* include stories of "failed" miracles. Where is the companion volume to *College Faith* titled *College Reality Check* or *Failures of Faith*? We are not likely to get one of those as the next missionary book of the year. Everyone wants to write and hear about success, not failure. I don't think *The Plague* by Camus or *Nausea* by Sartre would ever have been Pacific Press best sellers. We leave it to pessimistic existentialists to deal with the darker side of life. In the process, we fool ourselves.

Since I've been at Andrews University, nearly every year someone in this community meets an untimely death. A teacher drowned when he jumped off a pier to rescue the family dog. Others have lost their lives in car crashes. I've never seen any books about them, nor do I expect to. Yet most were splendid Christian people, individuals whom we cherished, prayed for, and even anointed. But they died. Where was God? Why no miracle? Finding comfort during the loss of a loved friend is

perhaps enough of a miracle. Under such circumstances, possibly a greater miracle than spectacular healing is a renewed faith in resurrection.

Christians are biased reporters, telling of "miracles" when things turn out in the prayed-for direction, but retreating to a quiet spiritual solace when—*most of the time*—miracles don't happen. We need to write about such things more honestly.

When I was in graduate school, I wanted to be a positive influence on a classmate who came from a Christian background but had abandoned his faith. One day I told him how my bicycle had been stolen from the bike rack in front of the psychology building, and that I'd asked God to help me find it. He laughingly interrupted my story, asking me why I had left it unlocked. But I had the last laugh, because I was able to tell him that a few days later, while driving near an elementary school, I spotted *my bicycle* being ridden by one of the hundreds of students. After retrieving my bike and taking the thief to the principal's office, I



fairly glowed with gratefulness to God and anticipation of how I would “witness” to my friend regarding the miracle of finding my bike among hundreds of school children.

However, in typical Christian fashion, I did *not* witness to him several weeks later when, due to my negligence in leaving it unlocked, my bicycle was again stolen. Although I repeatedly prayed and searched, I never saw my bike again. Of course, the Christian rebuttal might be that God worked a miracle once, but since I was too stupid to learn my lesson, he could not continue to bail me out. This story illustrates what we Christians know privately, but seldom admit publicly. We “witness” about the good events and remain silent when things don’t work out.

Nonlinear Causality

Philosophers of science, social psychologists, and others spend significant efforts analyzing how we arrive at conclusions about what *caused* something to happen. We will not explore a full discussion of causality, but it is necessary to touch on the most important points.

During the heyday of Newtonian physics, scientists thought they understood the universe, viewing it as similar to a giant clock. The celestial clockwork of orbiting planets was analogous, on a grand scale, to the clockwork motion of bodies on earth, circulation of blood, etc. Everything, it was thought, ran in vast harmonious order, following clearly understood laws of motion, thermodynamics, etc. In this milieu it was hardly surprising that God was seen as the divine clock maker, the vast intelligence, the Master Designer behind the scenes—a kind of divine engineer who makes sure all the gears are working. Of course, this picture of God isn’t particularly warm and fuzzy.

Just as Copernicus suggested that the earth

is *not* the center of the universe, Einstein came along and updated Newtonian mechanics and causality with the theory of relativity. Planck, Heisenberg, and Bohr opened things up even more by asserting that it is impossible to measure, predict, or precisely know both the position and momentum of a particle. Known as the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, this suggests that while we may calculate *probabilities* of how things will occur, we can never be certain in the case of an individual electron. This cuts to the very core of the kind of rigorous causality associated with Newtonian physics.

Even Einstein didn’t like this, arguing in his famous phrase that “God does not play dice with the universe.” However, many physicists today would argue that God *does* play with *probabilities*, rather than absolute *certainties*. Many equate quantum theory with the end of causality. Unfortunately, theology and psychology have not kept pace, and many psychologists (especially behaviorists) speak as if behavior always moves forward in time—each action *caused* by discrete prior events. Although this sort of billiard-ball approach to causality (analogous to Newtonian physics) is still prevalent in the behavioral sciences and even theology, newer theories of causality are slowly changing the linear ways in which we’ve thought behavior was caused.

Early Adventists reacted against mechanistic deism by infusing all of nature with God. Kellogg took this to the extreme of *pantheism*, but Ellen White was not far behind with her *vitalism*. And although she reacted strongly against pantheism, her vitalism seems a close cousin to Kellogg’s ideas. Though she did not equate nature with God, she sees God as actively and constantly energizing the system:

It is God’s power continually exercised that keeps the earth in position in its rotation. It is God who causes the sun to rise in the heavens. He opens the windows of heaven and gives rain. . . .

The mechanisms of the human body cannot be fully understood; it presents mysteries that baffle the most intelligent. It is not as the result of a mechanism which, once set in motion, continues its work, that the pulse beats and breath follows breath. In God we live and move and have our being. The beating heart, the throbbing pulse, every nerve and muscle in the living organism, is kept in order and activity by the power of an ever-present God" (*The Ministry of Healing*, pp. 416, 417).

I would suggest that if we believe God *caused* an event to occur, and we want to share this faith with another, we need to "flavor" our witness with the "spices" of uncertainty: "Do you think *maybe* God helped us out on this one?" "*Could it be possible* that Someone was looking out for us?" "Is there any *chance* we got some help from upstairs?" Far from watering down our witness, such probabilistic nuances would invite discussion and increase the *likelihood* that others might consider an interventionist explanation once in awhile.

Public Relations for God in the Late 20th Century

We still search for and try to find God in our daily lives. Can I not thank God for the blessings of a logical world? Is snow any less a miracle if the flakes form according to principles of crystallization?

Are the snowflakes that provide me cross-country skiing in the pastures surrounding my

house any less "miraculous" than the Israelites' instant-breakfast manna in the wilderness? Is the rainbow I see after a storm less a miracle than the "bow of promise" God gave Noah that he would never again destroy the world with a flood?

When it comes to understanding *if, when, or how* God intervenes in our lives, we must proceed with utmost prudence and respect. Remembering that God's ways are *not* our ways, it might be egocentric, narcissistic, or even arrogant to suggest that we *know* when and how God has intervened on our behalf.

A related point is that we ought to develop pictures of God and models of praise that do not depend on immediate divine intervention on demand. We need to praise God for the orderly universe in which we live, without necessarily assuming that God constantly interrupts his normal ways of acting. This doesn't make our witness less potent, and it makes more sense to our late-20th-century colleagues. I think that *most of the time* God does *not* intervene.

I find comfort in believing that a caring God created the probabilities of the universe. I'm inclined to believe that although the "dice" of the universe usually roll randomly, God *occasionally* "loads" them in my favor. I find it easy to admire a God who designed events to unfold in specifically unpredictable, yet probabilistically lawful ways. When it's all over, I only need *one* miracle; it's known as the resurrection.