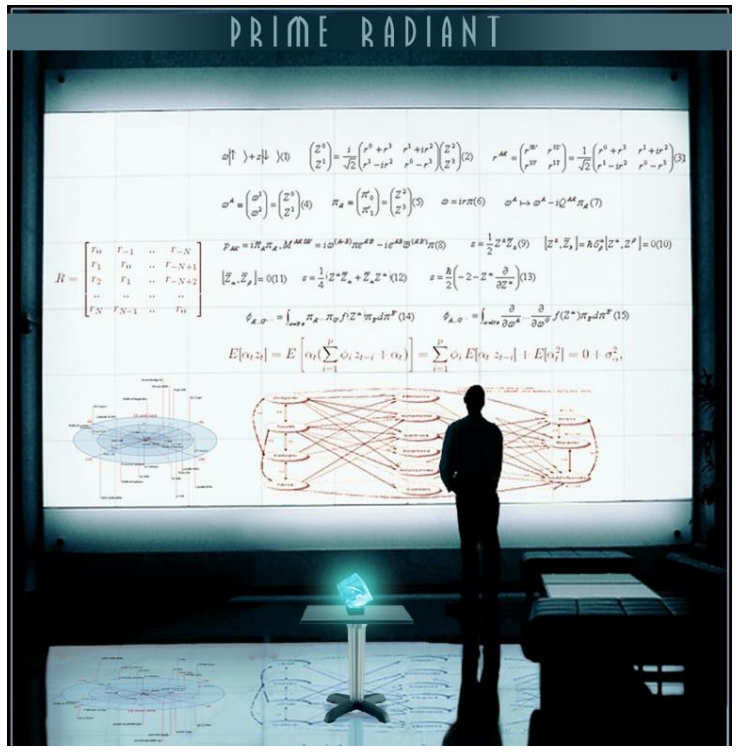


Does the name Hari Seldon mean anything to any of you? Okay, I must be the only science fiction geek in the room...

Hari Seldon is a main character of Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* novels which first came out way back in the early 50's. The books are set thousands of years in the future, in a world where humans have developed extensive space travel capabilities. Turns out that the galaxy is mostly empty other than human life, so there aren't any Vulcans or Wookies or Daleks to complicate things. But there are millions of habitable planets in the galaxy, and so humans have spread across the galaxy until there are thousands of trillions of people living in this massive civilization known as the Galactic Empire.

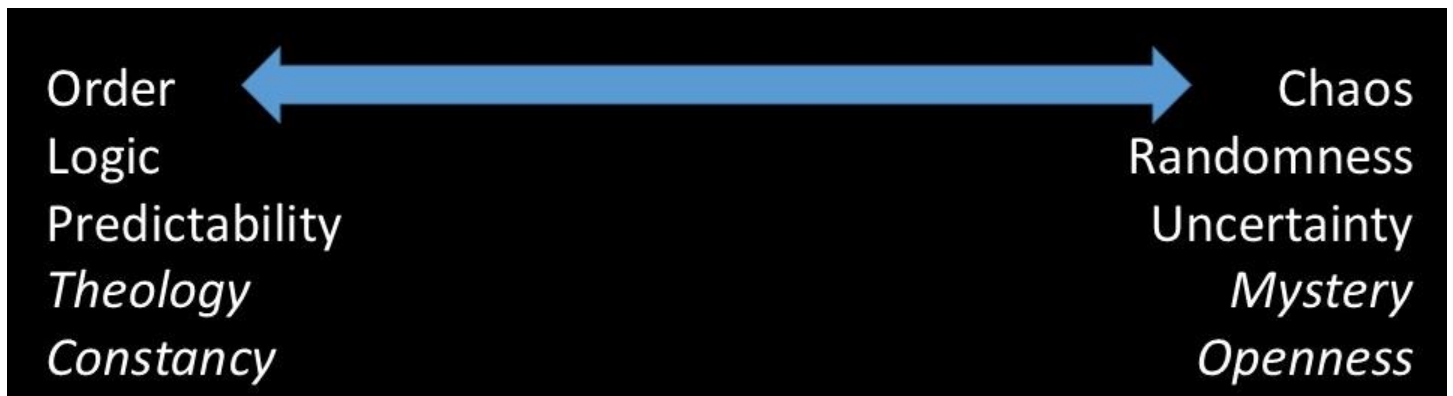
I know, I'm rapidly losing some of you... 😊 I do have a point. The *Foundation* stories center around the work of this man, Hari Seldon. He's a mathematician who develops a new field of science that he uses to predict the future. He calls it "psychohistory," using tools of psychology, sociology, and history to predict human behavior on a massive scale. Basically, Seldon's theory is that while there is no predicting what might happen to a particular individual, and while the behaviours and reactions of a group of people might seem random, if you pull back and include a large enough group, say a group the size of a planet or even better a million planets, predictable patterns will emerge.

With a large enough sample size, the complex behaviour of humanity loses its randomness and becomes as understandable and predictable, a series of mathematical equations. The results look something like this, where the scientists put all of their formulas and predictions about the future into a computer projector called the Prime Radiant that displays the endless possibilities as a series of mathematical equations.



And so the scientists stand there, with all of reality in their view, objectively able to evaluate and interpret and even control, all of eternity in their hands.

What do you think? Is that the kind of world that we live in? Not the science-fiction of a Galactic Empire, of course, but is the universe that we live in an essentially logical place, where we can ultimately learn and understand everything there is to know? For a lot of people, that's the way the world works, that there's a rational explanation for everything, and every effect has a cause, the world is governed by consistent patterns and universal laws.



Or is the universe closer to the other to the other end of the spectrum, unpredictable and chaotic. Many people and cultures throughout history have seen the world that way, primarily random, governed by chaos. Not in the modern emo anarchist “life is meaningless” kind of way, but in the “Vanity, vanity, there’s nothing new under the sun” philosophy of the book of Ecclesiastes. Or the Buddhist “Wheel of Samsara” or suffering.

In some ways, human history has been a struggle to come to terms with these two extremes. Various societies have valued opposite ends in different ways. Of course our modern world is heavily weighted towards this end of Order and predictability, and many of us are even taught to see history as a steady progression from chaos to order. That’s what progress is, right? Or maybe not? History is littered with societies of learning and structure that have crumbled while their more chaotic and primal neighbours lived on.

And where does faith fit into this picture? Christians have found themselves at both ends of the spectrum. Some see God mostly over here, in the realm of systematic theology, consistency, justice. Others see God more on this end, in mystery, transcendence, openness.

Today we're looking at two stories about miracles in the Bible. Miracles are one of those things that challenge folks at both ends of the spectrum.

For those on the order and consistency side of things, miracles are problematically inconsistent and unpredictable. Why does God choose to heal sometimes and not others? Are there really such things as miracles, or do we just call something a miracle when we can't explain why it happened, even though there really is a cause-and-effect explanation?

For those towards the mystery and chaos end, miracles are challenging because they point to a world of meaning. In the Bible stories, God acts not at random, but with purpose. Miracles are God revealing who God is, coming near, pushing against the chaos of the universe.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

First, the story of Abraham and Sarah. They came from the ancient Sumerian culture of Mesopotamia—definitely over here on the Chaos side of things. Their world was an unpredictable, untamed place. Their creation story was about a warrior god named Marduk who fought against Tiamat, the chaos monster of the ocean. The story says that Marduk killed Tiamat and tore her body in half, using one half to make the sky, and the other half to make the earth and seas. And so the world itself was made out of chaos, and existence was a struggle for survival in the turmoil of an inhospitable world.

It's out of that worldview that God called Abraham and Sarah. It's a familiar story: God told them to leave their homeland, that God would give them a new land of their own and descendants that would outnumber the stars. That was a bit of a stretch, because Abraham was 75 and Sarah was 65 when they left their homeland.

But that was the promise, and so they went. And God did bless them, and Abraham quickly became very wealthy and made quite a name for himself with his new neighbours. But after they'd lived there for 10 years, they still had no children. And so they decided on a surrogate mother, and Abraham took a slave girl named Hagar into his bed, and she got pregnant and gave birth to a son, Ishmael.

But that wasn't the child that God had in mind. Thirteen years after Ishmael's birth, God again appeared to Abraham, by then 99 years old. And God called Abraham

back to the original promise, that God would give Abraham a child with Sarah. The text says that “*Abraham fell facedown and laughed and said to himself: ““Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?”*” And yet, that’s what God promised, and that’s what happened a year later, a miracle baby.

On our spectrum, Abraham and Sarah came from over here in a world of chaos, but God called them out of that. God promised that the world was not random, that their lives were actually filled with purpose and meaning. The revelation of the miracle was that while the universe maybe be filled with chaos, God is knowable, consistent, trustworthy.

And so faith for Abraham and Sarah was a huge step in this direction. But when nothing happened on the baby front, and they started to drift back down the line. There was no baby like God promised, so maybe the world really is random... So they went back to their culturally ingrained struggle to control the chaos, and took matters into their own hands with a surrogate mother. And so out of chaos Ishmael was born, and brought even more chaos into their family for generations.

But again, God called them away from chaos, urged them to trust in God’s promise. To live by faith in a God that is knowable and consistent even when the world is not. That was the purpose of God’s Covenant, to ground the People of God in awareness and trust in God’s Presence, to call them away from chaos.

As Abraham and Sarah’s descendants grew into a nation, their culture shifted to the other extreme. A second story, this one from the time of Jesus, around 2000 years later. John chapter 9 tells the story of Jesus and his disciples walking by a blind man sitting by the side of the road. Apparently they knew this man, at least enough to know that he had been blind since birth.

On this day, the disciples asked a question of Jesus: “Teacher, tell us who sinned to cause this man to be born blind: was it his own sin or that of his parents?”

The question itself says a lot about where these disciples were on our spectrum. They could have thought it was random, this happens sometimes. But no, they assumed that there must be a reason for this to happen. There must be some cause to his blindness.

In the many generations since Abraham and Sarah, the religion of the Jews had come to center on the laws and practices of the Temple. They took God's Covenant and institutionalized it. And perhaps because the original purpose of the covenant was to call God's People away from the chaos worldview, it ended up being very much the opposite. It was all about cause-and-effect. Particular sins demanded particular consequences; if you did action A, then you had to bring sacrifice B in order to avoid punishment C. It was a strong system of order and education and accountability.

And so when the disciples saw this man who had been blind at birth, the question came naturally: "Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents?" What caused this?

And so Jesus answered: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus...

Now, I need to pause here for a brief lesson in biblical translation. As you probably know, when the books of the Bible were first written down in Hebrew and in Greek, they didn't use any punctuation and there weren't divisions into verses or chapters. It was just word after word, in all capital letters. It was mostly to save space, because writing materials were very expensive and rare; that's how it was done for all kinds of writing.

It wasn't until much later in history that punctuation and verse divisions were added to the Biblical texts. Most of the time, it's pretty obvious where those should go so it's not a big deal. In this particular case, though, the punctuation and sentence structure makes a big difference in understanding.

Allow me to demonstrate. The *New International Version* finishes verse 3 this way: "*Neither this man nor his parents sinned,*" said Jesus, "*but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. ⁴As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me.*"

At first glance, this seems pretty normal. You may have even heard this preached in church before, that God allowed this man to be born blind so that one day Jesus come along and heal him and bring glory to God.

The *New Revised Standard Version* emphasizes that even more strongly: *Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me^[b] while it is day.*

But there's a problem with that, namely that that's not what Jesus actually said. Specifically this part, "but this happened" in the NIV and this part "he was born blind" in the NRSV. Neither of those phrases are actually in the text. What the text says is:

ΑΠΕΚΡΙΘΗ	Ο	ΙΗΣΟΥΣ	ΟΥΤΕ	ΟΥΤΟC	ΗΜΑΡΤΕΝ	ΟΥΤΕ	ΟΙ	
answerED	THE	JESUS	NOT-BESIDES neither	this-one this-man	missED sinned	NOT-BESIDES nor	THE	
ΓΟΝΕΙC	ΑΥΤΟΥ	ΑΛΛ	ΙΝΑ	ΦΑΝΕΡΩΘΗ	ΤΑ	ΕΡΓΑ	ΤΟΥ	ΘΕΟΥ
parents	OF-him	but	THAT	MAY-BE-BEING-made-APPEAR he-may-be-being-manifested	THE	ACTS works	OF-THE	God
ΕΝ	ΑΥΤΩ	ΕΜΕ	ΔΕΙ	ΕΡΓΑΖΕCΘΑΙ	ΤΑ	ΕΡΓΑ	ΤΟΥ	ΠΕΜΨΑΝΤΟC
IN	SAME him	ME	IS-BINDING it-is-binding	TO-BE-working	THE	works	OF-THE	One-SENDing one-sending
ΜΕ	ΕΩC	ΗΜΕΡΑ	ΕCΤΙΝ					
ME	TILL while	DAY	IS it-is					

John 9:3-4

Sorry, that's really confusing. I showed you that because I really wanted to prove that I'm not making this up.

Anyway, the correct translation here, according to me and to the best gospel scholar I know, is this:

Jesus answered, "Neither this man sinned nor his parents. But that the works of God may appear in him, I must work the works of the One who sent me while it is still day."

Both the NIV and NRSV shift the period from here (after "appear in him") and then to make the sentence make sense, they add the phrase "this happened so" (NIV) and "he was born blind so" (NRSV). I know, scandalous, right? 😊

Okay, I'm more excited about this than you are. But can you see the difference the translation makes? One way, Jesus is saying that this man was born blind so that God would be glorified. Imagine how that would have sounded to that man—you've been blind your whole life basically so you can be a sermon illustration for Jesus.

The other way, Jesus is saying that it doesn't matter what the cause of the man's blindness was, it is Jesus' actions *now* that matter. If you've ever been told that

your pain is because of something you did or that you would be healed if you just had more faith, that's a huge difference.

The Message translation says it nicely:

His disciples asked, "Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?"

³⁻⁵ Jesus said, "You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do. We need to be energetically at work for the One who sent me here, working while the sun shines. When night falls, the workday is over. For as long as I am in the world, there is plenty of light. I am the world's Light."

And then Jesus healed him. The disciples were trying to figure out whose fault it was. They were over here on the spectrum, trying to make sense of the universe, perhaps trying to control it. But Jesus called their attention up here: don't stand there pointing fingers, help him! God is not in the cause of suffering, God is in the work of healing.

That seems to be the point of a lot of the miracles that Jesus did. We call them miracles, but the gospels more often talk about "signs and wonders," or "mighty deeds." Jesus was giving a message to those who thought they knew how things worked, and especially those who thought they were in control. "God's Kingdom, God's Presence is here and now, bringing healing, bringing hope. Watch this!"

That seems to be the message of these miracle stories to us now as well. I suspect that most of us live over here most of the time, I know I do. We think we know things work, we think we know how things are going to play out. If I do this, then this will be the result.

And yet God calls us to a higher view. God is breaking into our world, doing things that we don't expect and can't explain, bringing healing and hope to a broken and hurting world.

But not at random. God's supernatural work isn't just the ping-pong balls of the lottery, hoping your number comes up. God's work is intentional, revealing who God is, calling us towards a relationship of trust and faith.

That's how I understand the miracles of Jesus, as the call to move off of this line towards trust and hope. To live not in certainty, but neither in uncertainty. To live in expectation that God is breaking in to our reality, growing up between the cracks and sliding around the edges, inviting us to a higher way of seeing.

That's the biblical story, that God is present and active.

Sometimes God moves in ways that might seem mysterious and random, like miracle babies and blind men who can see. Skeptical as we may be, unexplainable things do happen and, hope against hope, prayers are answered.

Sometimes God moves in ways that are ordered and predictable, like the faithful revelation of a book written and passed down through the generations. Just because we know how a thing works doesn't mean that God is not in it.

And sometimes, perhaps most often, God moves in subtle, persistent, patient growth that we barely even notice. Changing hearts and minds, slowly but surely, miraculously calling and shaping people in the image of God.

That's the Upside-Down and Inside-Out call today. Sometimes the world is random and chaotic, but we're not left alone to make meaning out of the chaos on our own. And sometimes the world is deterministic and rational—but we're not stuck with that, either.

God is at work in our midst, inviting us to live in trust, hope, and expectation.

Join me in reading this prayer:

PRAYER OF CONFESSION AND INVOCATION (by Lori Forrester)

One: Because you made the world, and intended it to be a good place,
and called its people your children;
because, when things seemed at their worst,
you came in Christ to bring out the best in us;
so gracious God, we gladly say:

**Many: Goodness is stronger than evil,
Love is stronger than hate,
Light is stronger than darkness,**

Truth is stronger than lies.

One: Because confusion can reign inside us, despite our faith;
because anger, tension, bitterness, and envy distort our vision;
because our minds sometimes worry small things all out of proportion;
because we do not always get it right,
we want to believe:

**Many: Goodness is stronger than evil,
Love is stronger than hate,
Light is stronger than darkness,
Truth is stronger than lies.**

One: Because you have promised to hear us,
and are able to change us,
and are willing to make our hearts your home,
we ask you to confront, control, forgive, and encourage us,
as you know best.
Then let us cherish in our hearts that which we proclaim with our lips:

**Many: Goodness is stronger than evil,
Love is stronger than hate,
Light is stronger than darkness,
Truth is stronger than lies!**