



Belief in God in the Age of Modern Science



Modern science has helped us discover many things about our world, in particular our physical world. Phenomena that used to be unexplained are now explained scientifically. Thus instead of saying “the gods did it,” we explain it according to natural laws derived from scientific observation. Does this mean that as science gets bigger, God gets smaller? No! Modern science is not inconsistent with belief in God. Modern science emerged in an environment of belief in God. Many of the founding fathers of modern science believed in God. Scientists who believe in God believe that nature can be studied because it operates according to a “created order.” Nevertheless, science is limited in its explanation of reality. It may explain how the physical universe works, but it cannot explain why it is here. Furthermore, belief in God is not based on the observations of science. Science neither proves nor disproves God. Though many believe science provides evidence of a divine intelligent designer, belief in God is not based solely on this evidence.

Belief in God is based on "revelation." God has revealed truth in various ways. Revelation includes "general revelation" and "special revelation." General revelation is God's revelation to all persons at all times and in all places. God reveals himself through nature, history, and human consciousness. Special revelation is God's revelation to particular persons at definite times and places. God has revealed himself in various special ways in human history, ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ. The Bible is the record of, and is, the essential special revelation of today. (The reason for accepting the Bible as God's special revelation is another subject.)

Natural science is the study of nature (part of general revelation). While a person can learn things about God through the study of general revelation, the study of special revelation is essential to understand truth about God and humanity's relation to God. The study of special revelation is the study of the Bible. To understand the Bible, we need to understand the nature of the Bible, and use good methods of interpretation.

Concerning the nature of the Bible, it is the word of God written by men. God "spoke" to the human writers in various ways. In general, the human writers were "carried along" by the Spirit of God to write the words of the Bible (2 Peter 1:20-21). Because the Bible was written by men, it reflects their situations, perspectives, grammar, and vocabulary. Because the Bible is the word of God (that is, God is the divine author behind what men wrote) we can be confident that the Bible reveals truth about God and his creation.



Concerning interpretation of the Bible, I believe good interpretation attempts to determine the original meaning of the text. The question is -- what was the intent of the original author? Thus interpretation involves consideration of the historical context, literary context, and language (words, grammar, structure, literary genre, etc.). By following this method, we better understand what a particular Bible passage meant to the original reader or listener. Then we attempt to understand the meaning to all people at all times. (I should mention that there is a spiritual component to understanding the Bible. That is, a person who has a relationship with God is better able to understand God's revelation.) So how does science influence understanding of the Bible?

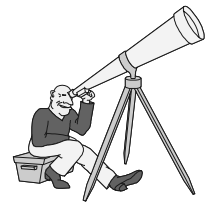
Science is an activity of man to understand nature (God's created order). While "scientism" claims science is the only reliable means of gaining knowledge, Christian theology accepts other means. The Bible is God's special revelation, and thus the Bible is the most reliable means of gaining knowledge about God and his purposes for his creation. If we interpret the Bible using the methods mentioned above, the current conclusions of science will not take authority over the meaning of the biblical text. We must interpret the Bible on its own terms. If we have soundly interpreted the Bible and there is a conflict with the opinions of modern science, what should we do?



We could assume science has more authority, and conclude that the Bible is in error (or else become very innovative and irresponsible in our interpretation of the Bible). But this is contrary to the belief that the Bible is the word of God. We could separate science from the Bible in an attempt to avoid the conflict. In other words, we could say the realms of science and the Bible are totally different. That is, since the Bible is not a science textbook, it does not intend to provide reliable information on matters that overlap with scientific knowledge. But that is not true. The Bible definitely makes claims that challenge the opinions of modern science. We could assume science is often plainly wrong, and reject any scientific conclusions that conflict with our own interpretation of the Bible. Each of these approaches has problems.

What do I think? I believe sound interpretation of the Bible follows the methods mentioned above. If I am attempting to understand the original meaning of a Bible passage (for example, one written in 1450 BC), I should not allow the current opinions of science to govern my interpretation because the original author did not have access to this knowledge. Some may say that the human author could have been inspired to write things that were beyond his current level of understanding. I believe this is true in some cases, but my first step in interpretation is to determine the intent of the human author. Since God is the divine author behind what the humans wrote, I will still expect a correspondence to reality that transcends time and human understanding.

So if science does not govern my interpretation, what is its function? I think science should be allowed to challenge or help confirm our understanding (after we have interpreted the text). Two examples may illustrate.



At one time, the common understanding of the universe was geocentric (our planet earth at the center). When Galileo presented evidences for a heliocentric universe (sun at the center), his conclusions not only conflicted with conventional understanding, they were perceived as inconsistent with the Bible (according to the Roman Catholic church). In particular, Psalms 93:1, 104:5 and Ecclesiastes 1:4-5 seem to express the immovability of the earth. Though Galileo attempted to demonstrate that there was no conflict (by noting that the Bible passages speak from an earthbound point of view), the Catholic church condemned Galileo's theories. Not until 1981 did the Catholic church officially admit their error. This is an example of not allowing science to challenge the conventional interpretation. The Bible passages which speak of the immovability of the earth, and the rising and setting of the sun, are presently understood within their appropriate context, and the proper interpretation does not conflict with the conclusions of science.

On the other hand, consider the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Bible clearly presents the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ as a real historical event, and the factuality of this event is essential to the Christian faith (1 Corinthians 15:14, 17). However, the majority opinion of the scientific community questions this claim. Why? Because, based on observations of human beings dying throughout the history of modern science, people do not rise from the dead. Furthermore, there is no conceivable naturalistic explanation for a resurrection from the dead. Therefore, these scientists conclude, it did not happen. At this point, the Christian cannot allow this opinion of science to overrule the clear teaching of Scripture. Does this mean there is a conflict between the Bible and science? Maybe, but it certainly means that there is conflict between the Bible and a particular opinion of a particular number of scientists.

Thus, in this case, the "scientific" conclusion must be rejected by the Christian. However, the grounds for rejection are not based solely on conflict with the Bible. Actually, science cannot disprove the resurrection, or any other "miracle." Science deals with the "natural world" and its methods are based on the regularity of nature ("science" is actually broader, but the nonbeliever is usually assuming natural science). A miracle, by definition, is an irregular event, and is likely (if not surely) outside the limits of accepted scientific method. Thus denial of the resurrection is not really a scientific conclusion but the result of a philosophical presupposition. If miracles are impossible, then they do not occur! However, the honest philosopher must admit that miracles are possible (even if he believes they are so unlikely, it is unreasonable to believe in them). If miracles are possible, then other evidences can be honestly weighed.

Since the resurrection of Christ is a unique event, we cannot establish its believability through observation and experiment. Thus if the Christian is called to answer the nonbeliever, the Christian will likely appeal to historical data. The Christian has good reason to believe that the New Testament is an accurate, reliable source of historical information concerning Jesus Christ, including his resurrection (I have handouts on this subject if you are interested). Other reasons for believing in the resurrection of Christ may be less "objective" but the Christian faith does not deny the validity of subjective experience in gaining personal knowledge of God and truth (it just doesn't usually impress the nonbeliever).



In conclusion, the Christian has good reason to accept the Bible as a reliable and authoritative communication of truth. The Bible is primarily "theological" (about God and his relation to his creation), but it also presents historical information (much of which has been confirmed by archeology) and other information that overlaps with the realm of science. The Bible is reliable in everything it affirms to be true. Interpretation of the Bible is an activity of imperfect humans and is always subject to reevaluation. Some teachings are clearer than others. The Bible's claim that the resurrection of Christ actually occurred in history is very clear. The Bible's claim that the universe was created by God is also very clear. The details concerning how the creation occurred (as gathered from Genesis 1-2) are less clear. Proper interpretation of the Bible involves the methods mentioned earlier. Science should be allowed to challenge or help confirm the interpreter's understanding, but the latest opinions of science are not superior to the word of God properly interpreted. Ultimately, sound interpretation of the Bible and sound science should be in harmony, because both disciplines concern knowledge of reality.

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