

From Acorn to Oak

Why Do We Believe the Bible is the Word of God? Part 5: Does the Bible Conflict with Modern Science?

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Bob and John had been chatting over the back fence for some time, when the subject turned to science and religion. “Well, frankly, I don’t buy any of it,” Bob firmly asserted. “The Bible is full of contradictions that have been exploded by modern science. For example, those places in the Bible where it talks about the sun rising and setting show how out of date that book is; science keeps us up to date on all we need to know.” If you were John, what would you say to Bob?

In previous essays we’ve looked at six reasons why it is reasonable to believe that the Bible is God’s Word and therefore true. We considered that Jesus, himself, affirmed the Old Testament. Eyewitnesses to Jesus’ Resurrection and other events, or their close associates as in the case of Mark and Luke, wrote the New Testament; and there were over 500 other eyewitnesses to the Lord’s Resurrection whom skeptics could have consulted. (1 Corinthians 15:6-8) Historical writings and archeological findings confirm Scriptural statements. The Bible contains an extraordinary number of fulfilled prophecies. The Bible is unique in its unity and consistency, even while being written by over 40 authors, some from different cultural backgrounds, throughout a 1500-year span. The first Christians chose death rather than deny Christ. Now, let’s consider another reality that supplies sufficient evidence to convince one who is sincerely seeking the truth.

Properly interpreted, the Bible is consistent with careful scientific research and other disciplines of inquiry.

One way to help people like Bob is to ask a question, such as, “Give me an example of a contradiction in the Bible.” Don’t be surprised if that ends your discussion of this subject, for many, if not most, people who reject the Bible have not read much if any of it; they’re just repeating statements they’ve heard others pass along.

In talking with those who raise critical questions, be careful to avoid generalizations. In love (being “patient and kind, not arrogant, rude, provoking, or behaving disgracefully, 1 Corinthians 13:4-5), insist they identify the specific text at issue; and discuss the intended meaning of the passage.

Nevertheless, Bob may recall one favorite contention of Bible critics who think they see a contradiction with science in such passages as Ecclesiastes 1:5, “The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises.” They usually follow this quote with a sardonic reference to the Galileo controversy.

Bob's objection raises the crucial question of interpretation, a subject we'll have to explore more fully in another essay. Since the Bible is written in several literary forms, e.g., historical narrative, poetry, and the apocalyptic genre, we must use the applicable grammatical and other rules for interpreting the intended meaning of a given passage. Such rules tell us for example when to understand a particular word literally or figuratively.

Applying the rules of interpretation to those passages Bob has in mind we see that the Bible is not teaching that the earth is the center of the solar system at all but is simply using a common expression people of all ages have used to describe a daily phenomenon. If you listen to the weather report on the news this evening you will hear your station's meteorologist, a scientist, tell you when the sun will rise tomorrow and when it will set. What do you think the likelihood is that this meteorologist or any other one today believes the sun orbits the earth?

Such is the case with the other supposed contradictions in the Bible. When examined carefully, using time-honored principles of literary (including those with specific application to the Bible) interpretation, the at first apparent conflicts are resolvable; God does not contradict himself.

The guidelines for interpreting language are one of the most important areas of learning today. Sadly, it is one of the most neglected and least understood.

Distinguish between but keep in mind the compatibility of general and special revelation.

As Christ's witnesses we also need to keep in mind some facts regarding science. My background in social science research has enabled me to develop an appreciation for the value of careful empirical inquiry. It has also given me the awareness that much of what passes as science "isn't worth the paper it is printed on," in the words of one of my graduate professors at Michigan State University, due to the failure to follow the established procedures of the scientific process. However, when scientific investigation is undertaken rightly, it is greatly beneficial to the Lord's work.

Historic Christian theology that is based on the Bible has taught that God's revelation comes to us in two main ways: general, sometimes called natural, revelation and special revelation. Special revelation comes to us in the Bible and in the life and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. (Psalm 19:7-11; 119:97-105; 2 Timothy 3:14-17; 2 Peter 1:20-2) It informs us of what we need to know and how to respond to the triune God in order to have salvation and be in God's eternal presence and service with our family and other loved ones and all God's other people.

General revelation refers to that communication from God about himself and his creation, which he has built into the universe, which people can see and that complements Scripture, but by itself general revelation is insufficient for salvation. (Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 1:18-20) One of the ways people can see this revelation from God is with the

lens of careful scientific research. Valuable information for understanding more of who God is and what he is like as well as for enhancing our living and his service is observed in scientific investigation of God's creation. For example, we can learn much about how our marvelous bodies are constructed (cf. Psalm 139:13-17) and from that the care they need in order to live longer and more productive lives. Such information enables us to care for one another and for the rest of God's creation (often called "the environment" by people who don't want to refer to it as God's work and his possession that he has temporarily given to us as its stewards).

Careful scientific research (the adjective, careful, is vital) is one way that we can see how God has been disclosing aspects of who he is and his great glory that should motivate us to praise him, offer thanks to him, and act in ways that serve him and bless us in so doing.

¹⁸ The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness,

¹⁹ since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

²⁰ For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

²¹ For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools.... (Romans 1:18-22)

Do the Bible and true science conflict? Of course not! Careful and honest science is simply the search for truth within the realm of the limits of empirical research. We have nothing to fear; all truth is God's truth. God is the one who gave us our minds, and he expects us to use them; he is the one who said, "Come now, let us reason together." (Isaiah 1:18)

By emphasizing the word, careful, I mean that we must be vigilant and always alert to "test the spirits." As we are warned in Scripture, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." (1 John 4:1) The false prophets in the field of science include the pseudoscientists who with many motivations do sloppy research, fail to follow the scientific method, allow their biases to shape their findings and their explanations as to what they think the findings mean, and produce faulty work as a result. Compounding that reality, the media pick up such "findings" and add their bias to the writing, which produces further error, and then people read such reports in their news media and too many accept the reports as factual.

An examination of the original research report usually shows rather quickly whether it has been done well or not. Two examples: The chapter on the researcher's plan is a key

chapter. Even a non-Christian carefully following the scientific method, can produce results that are significant and useful, but the key is “carefully following” the established scientific method and not cutting corners or omitting key procedures in the race for fame, fortune, and prestige. The final chapter where the researcher reports on his or her findings from following the plan also warrants careful consideration. Many scientists commit the same error as many Bible interpreters when they engage in eisegesis (reading into their data, imposing their worldview, assumptions and biases on what they’ve found, thus shaping their report accordingly) rather than exegesis (drawing out of the data what they reveal for scientists, and for theologians, pastors, and teachers, allowing the Bible passage to direct their thinking).

If one has not studied the scientific method, or at least not for many years, or doesn’t have the time to do so, and is unsure of being able to discern if the scientists have produced truth with their work, just compare and contrast the scientists’ report with the Bible. If the report contradicts Scripture, we know it is flawed science. On the other hand, if the report does not contradict the Bible and is consistent with what God’s Word teaches, then it is worth considering further. Of course, the basic premise here is that we need to be very familiar with the Bible ourselves. Let’s keep reading every day!

Moreover, it is no accident that modern science originated in the Western Hemisphere, the worldview of which has been shaped by the Bible. Science requires a cosmology with certain precepts, for example, a view of the universe in which physical laws are seen to be in existence that allow prediction.

Many scientists are Christians.

Thus it is not surprising that the first of the modern scientists were Christians. Consider just these few: mathematician and astronomer, Sir Francis Bacon (associated with the development of the scientific method and who believed that “God gave us two ‘books to study’; one being the Bible and the other being nature”¹); Johann Kepler, founder of physical astronomy; Robert Boyle, the father of modern chemistry; Sir Isaac Newton (discovered the Law of Gravity and three laws of motion); biologist Louis Pasteur (who also made important contributions to chemistry and physics); rocket scientist and former director of NASA Wernher von Braun; and Lord Kelvin (William Thompson), the first scientist to study the concept of energy, who established the first and second laws of thermodynamics. Belgian Cosmologist Georges Lemaitre, father of the “Big Bang” theory, was a Roman Catholic priest.

Moreover, many of our contemporary scientists are believers in the Lord, e.g., astrophysicist Hugh Ross, who is founder of Reasons to Believe. Geneticist Francis S. Collins, head of the National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI), said, “I have no reason to see a discordance between what I know as a scientist who spends all day studying the genome of humans and what I believe as somebody who pays a lot of

¹ Robert Driskell, “8 Famous Scientists Who Are Christian,” <http://www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com/8-famous-scientists-who-are-christian/> (Accessed 4/29/15)

attention to what the Bible has taught me about God and about Jesus Christ. Those are entirely compatible views.”²

Speech recognition specialist, K. K. Chin, tells how he became a Christian, and in so doing helps us learn more how to be an effective witness for Christ.

Many of my questions stumped my Christian friends. When they could not give me answers, they brought me to see people who could or lent me books on the subject. It took several years of soul-searching, intellectual struggle and serious study of the Bible, but finally I was able to overcome the many seemingly insurmountable hurdles that stood in the way of faith. From a staunch atheist, I was transformed into a believer willing to give my life for God's service. Looking back, I could see that the breakthrough had to be both intellectual and emotional.³

In 2014 sociologist Elaine Howard Ecklund and colleagues at Rice University in conjunction with the American Association with the Advancement of Science (AAAS) concluded the largest study of American views on science and religion; they discovered that two million out of the country's 12 million scientists identify as evangelical Christians. That number would populate the city of Houston. The study included scientists in health care, life sciences, computers, and engineering, and it revealed that these evangelical scientists tend to be more active than American evangelical Christians in general, reporting that they consider themselves very religious, specifically attending worship services every week and reading religious texts every week.⁴

Many other Christians have been scientists through the centuries. An extensive and thoroughly documented list of outstanding scientists in the past and present has been posted online.⁵

Consider more practical benefits for us.

Especially for our children who attend public schools, read secular literature, watch television and other media as well as talking with those who do, this Biblical distinction between general and special revelation is very valuable. It is vital for us as their parents and teachers to not set up a false dichotomy and require children to choose between the Bible and science. Many well-meaning but misinformed Christians are afraid of science, because so much of what has been presented as science is actually poorly done pseudoscience. Thanks be to God that he has given us the basis in his special revelation for seeing what he is saying to us in his general revelation.

² <http://www.tektonics.org/scim/scientistc.html> (Accessed 4/29/15)

³ <http://www.tektonics.org/scim/scientistc.html> <http://www.tektonics.org/scim/scientistc.html> (Accessed 4/29/15)

⁴ Christine Herman, “Which Scientists Believe,” *Christianity Today*, March 28, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/april/which-scientists-believe.html> (Accessed 4/29/15)

⁵ <http://www.tektonics.org/scim/sciencemony.htm> (Accessed 4/29/15)

In addition to very practical insights pertaining to human health and well-being, science yields fascinating findings as to the world around us. Astrophysics discloses that the universe is expanding and doing so rapidly. Mathematical calculations indicate that God's creation of the universe was around 14 billion years ago. Observations from telescopes in space that can view the cosmos more clearly (than telescopes on earth that are impeded with atmospheric interferences) and even those elements close to its outer edge, may in the not too distant future be able to show what the first components looked like at the time of creation.

So much more can be said, and the Lord wants Bob to hear it. One place to start is with the excellent book, *Know Why You Believe*, by Paul Little.