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Higher-Critical Thinking And Its Effects (Part V)

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Memory, Meaning & Faith

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August 01, 2010

Higher-Critical Thinking And Its Effects (Part V)

To read Roy Gane's assessment of prior attempts to harmonize the Bible and science, [click here](#).



Must we choose either science or the Bible and compromise or ignore the one that we do not choose? Christians are all over the map on this question. Variety of opinion would not be such a problem if it were not for the fact that conflict between science and the Bible is damaging faith. For example, when a young person educated to respect science, but who has not yet developed solid personal faith, is confronted with choosing science or faith in the Bible and its Creator God, he/she will naturally be strongly tempted to give up the latter, become agnostic (or atheist), and leave the church at least in spirit. Tragically, this trajectory is not theoretical, as we see young people close to us who have been raised in Christian homes and educated in Christian schools exiting from faith.

Apologetic Research?

An attractive solution is to invest resources in apologetic science, that is, science that confirms the Bible. This quest is somewhat like exploration of archaeological material remains to confirm the historicity of the biblical account. There have been excellent contributions in these areas of science and archaeology. But sometimes we don't find what we are looking for, or what we find appears to contradict the Bible, pending further investigation.

Research in a single discipline is a messy process, with new data and breakthroughs answering some questions, but raising many more. Comparative study between two disciplines compounds the messiness of both disciplines and complex relationships between them. This is especially challenging if the two disciplines belong to different domains of epistemology, such as texts and material remains. Texts can state or imply ideas, including stories of events. But material evidence analyzed by science, including the science of archaeology, cannot directly tell a story; it presents effects of events preserved in a medium that is affected by various forces over time. So it is often difficult to know exactly how things got to be a certain way and how long the process took: Was it gradual or sudden/catastrophic, or a combination of both?

Observations And Suggestions

I have plenty of questions regarding the relationship between Genesis and science. But here are a few preliminary observations and suggestions regarding potential for positive, faith-building engagement in our Christian community:

1. *Let the Bible be the Bible and let science be science.* Let investigation in these areas be the best quality, taking as much evidence into account as possible, rather than picking and choosing what supports our preconceived convictions. We must learn to live with differences in perspective between science and the Bible, recognizing that our human knowledge is limited to small pieces of a huge puzzle. We can recognize harmony between God's written Word and nature, his "second book," but let's not force artificial harmonization where differences appear. We should not put a burden on biblical scholars and theologians to come up with interpretations of the Bible that fit science; nor should we put a burden on scientists to come up with scientific data that is apologetically correct from a biblical perspective.
2. *Theologians and scientists should seriously and patiently listen to each other* to understand problems and concerns faced by those working in the other area of inquiry, which is largely unknown to them. Because theologians are in the


“driver’s seat” in the church, they should make an effort to reach out to scientists and learn how to communicate with them where they are, rather than marginalizing them and driving them underground.

3. *We should work to build mutual trust and not jump to conclusions regarding each other’s Christian commitment.* Just because a person is grappling with big questions does not mean that he/she cannot be a person of faith (see, e.g., the book of Job). Of course, a sincere, open-minded, thinking (and therefore having questions!) person of faith will speak of God and his written Word with respect and will not use his/her questions to undermine the faith of others.
4. *The Creation issue is not simply a science versus religion debate,* with all scientists on one side of the question and all theologians on the other. Representatives of both sides are in both disciplines. In fact, some theologians have been at the forefront of those trying to bend the Bible to fit science.
5. *Definition of terminology is important for communication within any given discipline, and it is even more crucial for cross-disciplinary communication* when two parties have limited understanding of each other’s disciplines. Upping the ante even more is the fact that some terminology has become loaded. For example, the word “evolution” means “development.” We all agree that there has been some kind of evolution/development to bring about the phenomena that we know today. But to many, “evolution” instantly evokes Darwinian macro-evolution as an atheistic explanation for the origin of the species.
6. *We should not manufacture or exacerbate problems.* Science and true religion are not intrinsically in conflict. If the same God who created the natural universe has revealed himself and his activities in words, we would expect harmony between nature and his words. Of course, science is not simply nature: It is human interpretation of nature. Religion also involves varying degrees of human interpretation, especially of sacred texts. Regarding the origin of Planet Earth, the clarity of Genesis 1 (and other passages on creation, which should not be overlooked) leaves no real interpretive wiggle room to escape the idea that God made it from nothing and brought about life and its environment here in six days. Science can fill in many details regarding development since Creation, but it is simply beyond the scope of science to explain ultimate origins. So we should not pit science and the Bible against each other in such areas where their scope does not even overlap. Biblical revelation is intended to teach us about things that we cannot gain from our own investigation through science. The two branches of revelation should be complementary rather than contradictory.
7. *Rather than viewing apparent contradictions as threats, we can take up these challenges as opportunities for stimulating collaborative research.* As in many lines of investigation, it is areas of conflict that give birth to exciting new breakthroughs.

Posted by [Roy Gane](#) on August 01, 2010 in [Science and Theology](#) | [Permalink](#)

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"Variety of opinion would not be such a problem if it were not for the fact that conflict between science and the Bible is damaging faith." You're absolutely right.

Posted by: [Cammie Novara](#) | [August 03, 2010 at 06:29 PM](#)

professor,

thanks for your illuminating thought about hermeneutics, your articles have help me a lot. happy sabbath

Posted by: [Rodrigo Galiza](#) | [August 06, 2010 at 10:08 PM](#)

I like your point 3. It's obvious from experience that good, committed Christians come to different conclusions on such issues.

If we're all Bible believers, then we believe the judgment will be about how we lived our lives, not whether we were theological experts who could sort scientific discoveries as reliable or unreliable.

It will do us good to hear from Jesus on the last day that we fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and were merciful to our brother or sister who disagreed with us on science.

Posted by: [Paul Pavao](#) | [August 24, 2010 at 11:31 AM](#)

Roy,

All very good points. I appreciate this post.

I doubt anything in the below will be new to you. It's a standard pro-science, skeptic's viewpoint. But see what you think.

My only negative reaction would be to caution you not to be too eager to jump on the postmodern bandwagon with other creationists who want and need science to be so subjective that it is no better than the humanities. I don't think you're doing this, in fact, you're clearly not in general, but so many people do I'm preconditioned to be over-sensitive.

I guess what I'm reacting to is the implication in point one that theological understanding is independent of science (or vice versa, I suppose). If the Bible actually did say that the Earth is at the center of the solar system, then we'd have to say that it's wrong. That's because science leaves no room for interpretation on that point, to the point that supposed revealed truth must bow before observed truth.

Accepting antinome is only valid to the point that you believe the jury is still out on both sides. Often it is, so antinome is powerful -- but real conflict exists too.

What brings this up is the example you chose: "Regarding the origin of Planet Earth, the clarity of Genesis 1 (and other passages on creation, which should not be overlooked) leaves no real interpretive wiggle room to escape the idea that God made it from nothing and brought about life and its environment here in six days."

I realize you're an expert on the scriptural side of this area, and I've heard you discuss your differences with John Walden, for instance. As a non-theologian I certainly can't argue the point with any competence (especially not without saying things you'd disagree with, such as that maybe Moses believed in a six-day creation, or was even told of one by God, but that's still not what happened).

My point isn't the theology. It's that science *also* leaves "no real interpretive wiggle room" that the earth is 4.6 +/- 0.5 billion years old (to take a generous error margin), and life is very nearly as old. If level of consensus is any indicator, there is *much* less wiggle room in science than religion on this matter.

Cognitive dissonance, which I'm normally a fan of, doesn't hold here very easily. Something has got to give. Somebody must compromise. Yes, I will grant that science too must show humility, especially in the context of a belief in revealed truth. But while you can argue social bias and imperialist dominance all day, in the end I trust the scientific hermeneutic, when it finally speaks boldly, over the theological ones any day.

Yes, a religion which refuses to compromise on issues science considers settled beyond a doubt is "damaging" to my faith. As such, my Adventist background is in part to blame for my present atheism, to the extent that it denied rather than faced the evidence.

I'm glad you take seriously the importance of doing justice to the truth in both God's books. I wish more Christians recognized the issue with the depth that you do -- and I often wonder if my faith would have survived if I came to Andrews sooner. That said, I still don't see how all aspects of prescientific theology can survive such a synthesis without doing an injustice to the science. It must be more humble than that.

Siggy

Posted by: [Eric "Siggy" Scott](#) | [December 31, 2010 at 06:20 PM](#)

The epistemological question is probably the fulcrum of the Gospel. Is truth ascertained and defined by the perception and work of humans? Is truth defined through a scientific method? Is it determined by a hermeneutic? Is it managed by a community of authority? Is truth known by the human will or revealed by the Divine? How much truth do we get from science, from the church?

It seems the conundrum takes its toll when we consider it with human capacity. When Christ speaks to the Father concerning His disciples he affirms that they are still in the World and in need of His protection, yet he also affirms that they are not of the World and so are one with Him. How can it be both? Perhaps that description is the experience of those who are one with Him but still in this world. Do WE find God by OUR means? Do WE find truth by OUR means? Is the truth and god we find in this world of this world? When we conduct scientific inquiry who or what is the standard of truth? When we conduct theological research who or what is the standard of truth? Often we claim the answers are opposed but I suspect the answers are the same. We inquire with human minds and therefore arrive at human answers. If the objective of science is discovery of answers by means of human observations and the objective of theology is the discovery of truth by means of human study then both will be equally valid, but also equally limited.

So do we abandon science out of futility? Do we abandon theology out of the same futility? We are still in the world. Science provides

answers within our limited yet expanding perception. Theology provides understanding of how God has worked in human history. Both provide answers within the limits of their human capacity. When either makes claims to absolute and cosmological truth they have stepped beyond their authority. I believe only God holds this authority. In matters of truth we ought to surrender our authority and trust to Him that we may receive His mind for the revelation that doesn't lead to this world's standards or expectations of truth, knowledge, wealth, power, health or life. Christ has already shown us what is better and what leads to eternal life and it's not by the works of human hands but by the works of the Father. Will the Revelation benefit science or religion . . . I expect they will not; but then again who am I to hold expectations of what God will or will not do.

Posted by: David de la Vega | [January 03, 2011 at 12:16 PM](#)

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