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## Relating to the Bible (Part 2)

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*How to interpret Scripture—God’s Holy Word—is a crucial issue in the life of a Christian.*

By Roy E. Gane

## PART 2

Part 1<sup>1</sup> of this article outlined strategies for attempts to change Scripture in order to avoid allowing its system of divine principles to guide belief and lifestyle (against 2 Timothy 3:16, 17). Those strategies include:

- 1. Cutting out what you don’t like.**
- 2. Supplementing Scripture.**
- 3. Treating Scripture as obsolete.**
- 4. Treating at least some of Scripture as merely**

## **human through historical criticism.**

Randall Younker<sup>2</sup> addresses another approach that has received quite a bit of attention lately:

**5. Adjust its interpretation to make it harmonize with science.** “Generally,” Younker says, “this school of thought has denied that the author of Genesis intended the narratives to be understood literally or historically. Rather, these narratives were intended to be read in a non-literal way. Some argue that the text is mythological; some say it is poetic—a literary artwork not meant to be understood literally; some say it is theological; some say it is symbolic. Some have proposed interpretations that the days of Genesis were not 24-hour days, and that the Flood was local instead of global—or not real at all. A number of Adventist scholars have been attracted to the interpretations of this school.”<sup>3</sup>

This is a vastly broader issue than that of the Genesis Creation. For example, another locus of such harmonization would be the tendency of some behavioral scientists (or those influenced by them), who regard homosexual orientation as innate and unalterable, to try to explain away biblical passages that condemn homosexual practice (e.g., Leviticus 18; 20; Romans 1).

Creation is difficult to deal with because CNN was not there to report on the event.

The Bible claims to present information that humans received from the Creator God Himself as His “eyewitness” account. If we believe that He inspired the whole Bible, as 2 Timothy 3:16, 17 says (cf. 2 Peter 1:20, 21), we can accept that He created Planet Earth in six days (Genesis 1). The narrative genre of Genesis indicates that these days (plural) consisted of periods of alternating darkness and light determined by the relative movements of the Sun and the Earth, as in later narratives of the book. So these days were basically like our

days, although we cannot be sure that their length was exactly the same as our present 24 hours because we do not know the precise speed of the Earth's rotation on its axis at that time.

Biblical scholars who accept the six-day Creation can have differences regarding other factors. For example:

- Granted that God originally made everything out of nothing (Ps. 33:6, 9; Heb. 11:3), did He begin the Creation week with a lifeless planet that had existed in an unformed state for a long time?

- Did God make all the stars of the universe on the fourth day of Creation (Gen. 1:16), or do the words "and the stars" (NRSV) mean that He made them, but not necessarily on the fourth day, and perhaps a long time previously?

Rather than receiving information from a personal superhuman being whose witness is accepted by faith, modern science receives information by empirical human observation and experimentation. Sophisticated technologies and bodies of accumulated data make such science a truly impressive source of knowledge. All of us rely on science in countless aspects of our lives. In fact, we entrust our lives to science every time we ride in a car or airplane.

But scientists admit that the question of ultimate origin is elusive. Even if there was a "Big Bang," a theory extrapolated from the fact that the universe is expanding, this does not answer the question: What was before the bang? Why did it go off? How was the "DNA" of the universe encapsulated so densely in what exploded?

Some have recognized that a Big Bang is not necessarily incompatible with an Intelligent Designer, or perhaps even God as we know Him from the Bible: He could have used such a bang as an instrument to make the universe, perhaps long before the creative activity recorded in Genesis 1, provided that this chapter does not describe the creation of the entire universe.

Neither does Darwinian macro-evolution explain ultimate origins. This theory has to do with the progressive origin of new species over a long period of time through chance mutations. But what conditions made the process begin and allowed it to continue, given the delicate balance of elements necessary for life as we know it? Unlike the Big Bang theory, Darwin's hypothesis directly collides with Genesis 1, which recounts the origin of the basic species during one week through the instrumentality of God.

Obviously there has been a form of evolution since then, so that the German shepherd and Chihuahua could develop from the same pair of canines preserved on Noah's ark (Genesis 7). This variety is significant, but it is manifested within the boundaries of a basic type created by God.

There are many forms of evolutionary theory and many areas of investigation that scientists use to support it, such as the geologic column, which appears to show stratified development of species over long periods of time. Impressed by all this accumulated data, some Christians have accepted macro-evolution to varying degrees. Then they are faced with the problem of what to do with Genesis 1 and other biblical references to Creation by God in six days (e.g., Ex. 20:11). To harmonize science and the Bible, they compromise the latter. To make Genesis 1 compatible with science, they feel compelled to try to make this chapter something other than a literal account of the origin of life on Planet Earth in one literal week. None of these attempts have really worked, as recognized by proponents of historical criticism who acknowledge that Genesis means what it says but simply do not believe its message because they do not accept miracles or divine inspiration of this book.

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 or 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.

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?

There are plenty of valid 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:

*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.

*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.

*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 or she cannot be a person of faith (see, e.g., the Book of Job). Of course, a sincere, open-minded, thinking person of faith (who may quite naturally have questions), will speak of God and His written Word with respect and will not use his or her questions to undermine the faith of others.

*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.

*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.

*Problems should not be manufactured or exacerbated. 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 synonymous with nature: It is human observation and 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 its scope 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.

*Don't view apparent contradictions as threats.* Instead, take

up these challenges as opportunities for stimulating collaborative research. As in many lines of investigation, areas of conflict give birth to exciting new breakthroughs.

**6. Rely on political correctness.** "Widespread use of the term *politically correct* and its derivatives began when it was adopted as a pejorative term by the political right in the 1990s, in the context of the Culture Wars. Writing in the *New York Times* in 1990, Richard Bernstein noted 'The term 'politically correct,' with its suggestion of Stalinist orthodoxy, is spoken more with irony and disapproval than with reverence. But across the country the term p.c., as it is commonly abbreviated, is being heard more and more in debates over what should be taught at the universities.'" . . .

"Within a few years, this previously obscure term featured regularly in the lexicon of the conservative social and political challenges against curriculum expansion and progressive teaching methods in U.S. high schools and universities. In 1991, addressing a graduating class of the University of Michigan, U.S. President George H. W. Bush spoke against 'a movement [that would] declare certain topics "off-limits," certain expressions "off-limits," even certain gestures "off-limits"' in allusion to liberal Political Correctness. The most common usage here is as a pejorative term to refer to excessive deference to particular sensibilities at the expense of other considerations. . . .

"The central uses of the term relate to particular issues of race, gender, disability, ethnicity, sexual preference, culture and worldviews, and encompass both the language in which issues are discussed and the viewpoints that are expressed."<sup>4</sup>

I have become aware of this approach when some individuals have taken offense to written or oral presentations in which I was simply presenting what the Bible unambiguously says. While they were ostensibly objecting to what I said, it was obvious that their real quarrel was with the Bible.

The first such occasion that I recall came after publication in 1996 of my Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide: *Judges: Deterioration and Deliverance*. A few months later, I received a letter from a woman who blasted me because I had insulted her by referring to the obesity of Eglon, the repulsive ancient king of Moab who oppressed Israel and was assassinated by Ehud, the Israelite deliverer (Judges 3). It was clear that to her, mention of obesity was “off-limits” because it placed a pejorative value judgment on a person.

Of course, I heartily agree that we should be sensitive to the feelings of others, including when we refer to bodily characteristics and challenges. But for several reasons, it is not possible to get the point of Ehud’s assassination of Eglon in practical or theological terms without negative reference to the extreme royal corpulence:

- “The obesity of Eglon (see verse 17) was a potential obstacle to the effectiveness of a sword short enough to be concealed (see verse 16), but the facts that the king stood up and Ehud struck so hard that he used the maximum potential of the sword’s length (including the handle!) aided Ehud in killing the king.”<sup>5</sup>

“When Eglon’s servants found him dead, the cause of his death would not have been immediately apparent, due to the fact that Ehud’s sword was buried/concealed in the body of the king. Any confusion of the Moabites regarding the cause of death would have delayed their pursuit of Ehud.”

- The name *Eglon* likely means “calf.” So scholars have recognized that an Israelite who heard the story would receive the distinct impression that the Moabite oppressor was like a fatted calf ready to be slaughtered.

- The Bible describes Eglon’s demise in physically repulsive terms (my description was very mild by comparison!), which fitted his character. “However, we must keep in mind that

grotesqueness, satire, and comical twists in the story not only rivet the reader's attention and elevate the Israelites at the expense of their enemies, they also contribute to a profound theological and historical point: . . . Opposing God is foolishness!"<sup>7</sup> In other words, it is fatuous nonsense.

In my study guide and its companion book (*God's Faulty Heroes*), I dealt with and tried to reflect accurately the story of Eglon (without overemphasizing its offensive aspects) because it was there—in the Bible. The problem is that the Bible is not politically correct: It offends people through expressions that are not currently deemed polite.

Individuals such as the woman who wrote to me are OK with leaving such a story in the Bible, just as long as everyone ignores it. That is, we are supposed to treat the Bible as if the story is not there because it is not nice. This state of denial avoids a disturbing question: If God is responsible for what is in the Bible, is He not nice?

Is our loving Creator-God, who cares about sparrows and numbers the hairs on our heads (Matt. 10:29-31) really less sensitive to human feelings than we are? Or does He sometimes have reasons for risking offense that outweigh the imperatives of politeness?

During His earthly ministry, Jesus was very sensitive to feelings (e.g., Luke 7:36-50; John 4). But when a Canaanite woman from Phoenicia kept entreating him to cast a demon from her daughter, Jesus replied: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (Matt 15:26, NRSV). Talk about a politically incorrect insult! But Jesus was simultaneously testing her faith and teaching His disciples to revise their attitudes toward Gentiles, for the ultimate benefit of millions of people. On that occasion, those priorities were more important than being nice on a superficial level.

God also shows great sensitivity in the Old Testament. For

example, the Lord says in Isaiah 66: "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you" (vs. 13, NRSV). But two chapters earlier, the prophet says: "All our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth" (64:6, NRSV). The real meaning of the Hebrew expression rendered "filthy cloth" is so jarring that modern English translators don't have the courage to render it literally: "cloth of a menstrual period." For an ancient Hebrew reader/hearer, this language would have been even more extreme and disturbing because menstruation was a form of physical ritual impurity that had to be kept away from the sacred domain (e.g., Leviticus 15).

So why would a prophet of God employ such disgusting language, which we would never think of using in polite speech among ourselves, let alone in a sermon? Apparently, it was more important for Isaiah to emphasize the extreme inadequacy of human works for salvation and utter dependency on divine grace than it was for him to be "nice."

There are, of course, much more serious clashes between the Bible and political correctness than the issue of giving offense regarding matters such as obesity. A few years ago I made a public presentation regarding the Israelites' divine mandate to exterminate all the corrupt inhabitants of Canaan in holy war (e.g., Deut. 20:16, 17). I reluctantly had to write on this topic in my commentary on Numbers because such a policy toward non-Israelites, which modern people would term "genocide," is recorded in that book.<sup>8</sup> After my presentation, there was an outcry against the idea that God would ever actually authorize such atrocities. The idea came through that Moses and the Israelites must have mistakenly supposed that God commanded holy war!

According to the Bible, Moses was the great prophet who uniquely enjoyed face-to-face access to God (Num. 12:6-8; Deut. 34:10) and was barred from the Promised Land for failing to represent God properly in one particular incident (Num. 20:10-

12). If direct biblical assertions that Moses received his cues from God regarding holy war (e.g., Numbers 31; Deuteronomy 7 [cf. 6:1]; cf. Joshua 6; 1 Samuel 15) are false, how can we trust anything else in the Pentateuch? Or in the later biblical books recorded by lesser individuals, including the New Testament writers? Do you want to believe in Jesus? He treated the laws of Moses as divinely authoritative (Matt. 8:4; Mark 12:26; Luke 24:27). If He was mistaken about Moses, how could He be the Son of God?

Once we start bracketing out parts of the Bible that we deem inaccurate because they do not conform to our notions of what a good God can or cannot do, everything logically unravels, and none of the Bible has any credibility whatsoever. By virtually editing Scripture, we put our own authority in place of God's like other higher-critical thinkers, such as those who physically cut out what they don't like (Thomas Jefferson), obscure its meaning with an overlay of human tradition, or separate divine from human elements through historical-critical methodologies. The logical outcome of such approaches is agnosticism.

Why not let God be God and admit that He is not bound by constraints of political correctness? He loves the world (John 3:16) and does not want any to perish (2 Peter 3:9). But when He has exhausted His options in reaching people with salvation and they still reject Him, He abandons them to destruction (Isa. 5:4-7). In fact, He takes responsibility for destruction of the finally impenitent as an unpleasant task that is alien to His nature (Isa. 28:21). His retributive justice directly and miraculously annihilated the entire pre-Flood world (Genesis 7), Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19), and Israelite rebels (Numbers 16, 25), and He will ultimately destroy all evil, including rebels against His government, with fire (Revelation 20). In this way, He will end all suffering and death caused by sin and oppressors (Revelation 21).

According to the Bible, the idolatrous inhabitants of Canaan, who had enjoyed four centuries of grace (Gen. 15:13, 16), richly deserved direct destruction by God (Lev. 18:3, 24, 25). In fact, He was planning personally to drive them out of the Promised Land before His people (Ex. 23:23, 27-31) so that they would not lead the Israelites to worship other gods (vs. 33). But when the Israelites initially refused to take the land by faith (Numbers 14), God subsequently required more active cooperation in warfare to develop their trust in Him (Deuteronomy 7; 20; Judges 3). In this way, God accomplished two things at once: He executed the wicked and taught the Israelites, who served as His agent of destruction for a limited time in a very limited geographical area.

This by no means legitimates any form of holy war during the Christian era. Already three millennia ago, God meted out punishment resulting from the misguided zeal of King Saul, who initiated genocide on the Gibeonites without direct authorization from Him (2 Samuel 21).

This doesn't mean that we feel comfortable about what happened to the Canaanites or that we fully understand the ways of God. But the fate of those ancient people can be a warning to us and a motivation for us to reach out to all the modern "Canaanites" around us so that they can be saved as Rahab was (Joshua 2; 6).

Concerning the Canaanites, Leviticus 18:3 says: "You shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you" (NRSV). Following this command is a list of laws against incest, sex during menstruation, adultery, Molech worship, homosexual practice, and sex with animals (vss. 6-23). Verse 24 begins the conclusion to the chapter: "Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves. Thus the land became defiled; and I punished it for its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants" (vss. 24, 25, NRSV).

Here in Leviticus 18:22 we find the hottest current battleground between the Bible and political correctness: homosexual practice. Leviticus 20 raises the stakes: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them" (vs. 13, NRSV). Needless to say, in today's culture, this is radically politically incorrect. However, notice two crucial points:

- That which is condemned is not homosexual tendencies, but acting on them.

- The death sentence was to be administered under the ancient Israelite theocratic judicial system, which no longer exists. In modern secular states, we should respect the human rights of all citizens, including those who commit adultery and homosexual acts.

Even so, the New Testament raises the stakes even higher: "Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:9-11, NRSV).

The good news is: There is redemption for sinners when they accept the transforming, free grace of God provided through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. This miraculous change is available for those whose sins are humanly impossible to overcome. The apostle Paul knew actual people in Corinth like that: "And this is what some of you used to be" (vs.11, NRSV). But those who choose to keep their sins, rather than giving them up to God's cleansing, sanctifying, justifying process will not go to heaven. This applies to any sinners, and would also be true of more "respectable" categories of the "morally challenged," such as the self-righteous.

But the fact that “sodomites,” i.e., practicing homosexuals (vs. 9, NASB, NIV), cannot be saved as such without giving up their lifestyle is offensive to some Christians. After a public presentation in which I discussed the biblical view of homosexual practice, a few individuals were clearly angry with me because I presented what the Bible said. Shame on anyone who permits the sacred book to contradict the higher cultural norm and authority (and therefore god) that they have adopted: political correctness!

Insofar as “political correctness” seeks to be inclusive and to protect people from being hurt or marginalized, it has positive intentions that coincide with strong social concerns in the Bible (Exodus 21; Leviticus 19; 25; Isaiah 58). But any social consensus or contract, including political correctness, goes too far when it attempts to stifle discussion, revise sacred history, or replace God as the ultimate arbiter of morality. If someone doesn’t want to accept the Bible, he or she should just admit it, rather than attempting virtually to rewrite part of it or to attack someone else who presents it without rewriting it.

I began Part 1 of this two-part article with another passage by Paul: “*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work*” (2 Tim. 3:16, 17, NKJV, italics supplied). Some of Scripture may be hard to understand (2 Peter 3:16), but all of it is our friend from God to enhance the quality of our existence in this life and the life to come.

Like a friendly physician, the Bible sometimes wounds us so that we can be healed. As the wise man said: “Well meant are the wounds a friend inflicts, but profuse are the kisses of an enemy” (Prov. 27:6, NRSV). As sinners, our only safe course is to submit to the accurate surgery of Scripture, rather than seizing the scalpel ourselves to discard it or to make light scratches of our

own choosing rather than deep incisions. "Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12, NRSV).

Our only compassionate approach to other sinners is not to treat their condition lightly by saying, "'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace" (Jer. 6:14, NRSV), as if their problems are inconsequential. Rather, it is to introduce them to Jesus, the Friend of sinners, who came to "save his people *from* [not *in*] their sins" (Matt. 1:21, NRSV, italics supplied) in order to give them true and enduring peace with God (Rom. 5:1).

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