

## “Science, Religion and the Bible; How do they all fit Together”

Fourth In a Series *The Most Asked Faith Questions*

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Script: Psalm 8; 2 Tim. 3:16; Luke 1:1-4

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A Christian who held the Bible to be literally true was once accosted by a scientist who said, “According to the Bible the earth was created some five thousand years ago. But we have discovered bones that point to life on earth a million years ago.”

Pat came the answer from the literalist: “Well, when God created earth five thousand years ago, he deliberately put those bones in to test our faith and see if we would believe his Word rather than scientific evidence.”

Obviously, this person has bought into the definition of faith as *believing things that are hard to believe*.

The earth is 5 billion years old, the universe roughly 13 or 14 billion years old and continues to unfold at the speed of light. It has no center, no boundary. 61% of Americans claim that they believe in Creationism instead of evolution as an explanation of how life emerged on this rock called earth. Clearly how we think about the Bible and science is a hot topic; eighty-some years after the Scopes trial it is still before us.

Our western, logical minds (forged by the Enlightenment), are focused upon what is scientific and historically “true.” Some people cannot buy what is in Scripture as they see it through the lens of science, and therefore throw God, Christianity and faith out the window as only a myth... wishful thinking, irrelevant or ridiculous. Like the literalist, they equate faith with *believing in things that are hard to believe*, rather than seeing faith as trust.

Biblical Scholar Marcus Borg claims that “Conflict about the Bible is *the* single most divisive issue among Christians in North America today.” I thought I was in enough hot water with my ramblings the last few weeks and now this! It is times like these that I wish I could invite my father or Phil Durkee to come and preach on this topic. They were infinitely more qualified than I to handle this sticky issue. I suspect that Marcus Borg is right in saying *how we understand the Bible* is the most divisive issue, because as I see it, all the controversial issues in one way or another boil down to how we see Scripture—its **origin, authority and interpretation**. So begging your forgiveness ahead of time, here goes my take on it. Science, Religion and the Bible; how do they all fit together?

Let’s begin by saying that we need to develop a healthy understanding of and relationship to the Bible. As Christians we understand it to be a means of grace... sacramental, in the sense that it is an occasion for an experience of God... a vehicle by which God becomes present (like water, bread and wine, prayer). It is important that we know this sacrament— it is important that we study, “read, mark and inwardly digest” it as the prayer in the hymnal suggests (No. 602). The Bible gives us a meta-story in which we orient ourselves, find meaning, purpose and direction, hope and tools to live by.

2 Timothy (a letter which its author never fathomed would someday be considered part of Scripture) tells us that, “*All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for*

*training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup>so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.*”

“Inspired by God.” A couple of generations after Martin Luther and the other reformers did their work, somehow “inspired by God” was changed to “dictated by God,” at least in their thinking. After freeing themselves from the tyranny of the Pope and his claims to ultimate authority (and infallibility), they soon turned the Bible into a similar power— inerrant, infallible, ultimate. Martin Luther, however, thought that the *Letter of James* was “Straw,” and argued that the *Book of Revelation* shouldn’t be in the collection. His followers soon lost his perspective.

The Bible clearly wasn’t dictated by God. Luke tells us he intentionally collected stories from various sources and wove them together, **“I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you.”** Likewise the whole of Scripture was penned by humans, reflecting upon their experience of God, filtering it through God’s Spirit, expressing it through the cultural norms of their day, and through their limited scientific understandings. For instance, the Psalms shout about God’s wondrous love, creation and covenant with us through the cultural norms of polygamy, ownership of slaves and subjugation of women. They practiced capital punishment for offenses such as disobedience to parents and adultery. They saw the universe as three-storied...earth flat, sun moving around the earth. Jesus proclaimed the mustard seed to be the “smallest.”

In other words, these were human beings, telling of their experience of God, within their limited circumstances, their worldviews, and knowledge. Knowing this relieves us of all kind of difficulties—and clears up some puzzling things in the Bible. Like why are there two different creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2. Why in Matthew it is called the *Sermon on the Mount* and in Luke the same teaching is called the *Sermon on the Plain*. Why in the Gospel of John Jesus’ ministry is three years long and doesn’t have a last supper, and in the others it is only one year long and clearly have last supper scenes.

Just as there are four gospels giving us each their perspective of Jesus, there were four sources that were edited together to form the Pentateuch—the first five books of the Bible. They didn’t smooth over differences or repetitions when they put them together and so we find those two creation stories, two names for the holy mountain that Moses received the Ten Commandments upon, and other quirks. They rather roughly spliced those four sources together— unhindered by repetitions and inconsistencies. Those things weren’t important for their purposes.

The number one problem we face with the Bible is ***asking the wrong question***. From our obsession with fact, history, and science, we ask the wrong question and miss the point. The purpose and authority of scripture is to reveal something of God to us and something of our true selves...in all our glory, belovedness, goodness, and sinfulness. Someone once asked me a good question: “Adam & Eve were the first man & women. They had two boys – Cain & Abel. They then “married.” Whom did they marry?” The answer the story gives is that they married into other clans that were roaming around that primordial river valley east of the garden. The Bible is not interested in giving us the genealogical history of humanity—the Bible is telling us that God is creator...that we grew up and out of innocence. The Hebrew name Adam literally means “all man.” The deep truths of who we are and who God is in the story outweigh any importance that history could give us. Yet we tend to get bogged down with these questions and in the process miss the point entirely.

The point of story of Jonah is God’s love for outsiders and our tendency as humans to want to corner the market in that department— hoard it for ourselves—nothing to do at all with the gastronomical habits of fish.

We read the Bible for truth. But the truth revealed is spiritual truth, not scientific. Scientific truth cannot heal us, cannot bring about reconciliation, salvation or peace. What possible difference does it make if

God created the world in six days or five billion years for our relationship with God? Why cannot God have created the universe through the theories of science like the big-bang, string or chaos theory, quantum physics or evolution? Talk about intelligent design! The point is that over a period of time God creates with intention, design, hospitality and love, and calls it “good.”

One image I often give my confirmation students is to imagine a statue of Abraham Lincoln in the pose of chopping the chains off a slave with an axe. I ask them if the statue is true. Did it happen? They concede that it never happened, yet the deeper and richer truth of the statue reveals that it is true. It is in *that* sense that we approach the Bible. Which isn't to say that it is all fanciful— much of the Bible is certainly grounded in what we call history or human collective experience— yet its deeper truth is not dependent upon it.

Science has to do with the physical world and what is provable through the controlled experiment. In the big picture of things it concerns itself with pretty narrow realities. Oliver Wendell Holmes was fond of saying: “Science gives us major answers to minor questions, while religion gives us minor answers to major questions.”

Russian Cosmonaut Titov, while orbiting the earth, looked out his window into the heavens and he didn't see God. He returned to earth to proclaim “There is no God.” (I have difficulty looking at the stars and not being overcome with such awe and religious mystery time and time again.) Perhaps he was looking for the stars to spell out “I exist”, (in Russian of course), instead of the more beautiful and wondrous cosmos that is there.

Science and philosophy have their areas of expertise. They astound us with their marvels. It is easy to want to worship them as our savior. The improvements to our material life in health and technology are nothing less than miraculous. Yet they are limited. If you can only believe in what you can prove, the world becomes a pretty narrow place— void of the things that bring meaning and richness to life (beauty, love, joy, self-giving, etc.); music becomes only vibrations in the air, a painting a collection of colored points, love a nebulous feeling that leads us to do crazy things. We cannot prove the existence of God because God would not violate our freewill in that way, and because we can only control in an experiment that which is inferior to us. That is why we have such difficulty with the human sciences. Of all of God's witnesses to us, nature and science are among them, but perhaps the least. Last week I mentioned the two eyes that we have— the eye of the body (the five senses) and the eye of the spirit. Each has its realm of purpose.

Frederick Buechner once said that “The conflict between science and religion, which reached its peak toward the end of the last century, is like the conflict between a podiatrist and a poet. One says that Susie Smith has fallen arches. The other says she walks in beauty like the night. In his own way each is speaking the truth. What is at issue is the kind of truth you're after.”<sup>1</sup>

About twenty five years ago there was a great excitement about the “Shroud of Turin,” the supposed burial clothes of Jesus. Somehow burned into the cloth was the image of a man crucified. He looked like what we always thought Jesus looked like. All the evidence seemed to be mounting that this was clearly authentic.

I was in college at the time, discussing this in a religion class when the professor asked us, “If it is revealed to be a fake, will your faith crumble? Is your faith based upon the authenticity of this cloth, or upon something else?” It was a good question that brought my excitement into line. I realized I was putting too much into this piece of cloth— worshiping it in a sense— basing my faith on *it* rather than in relationship with God. My faith grew at that moment. A few years later it was revealed by carbon-14 dating to be just a little over 600 years old. Certainly a mysterious relic, but not connected with Jesus in any physical way.

This same danger I believe is also present in our relationship with the Bible. We can approach the Bible as an idol, and our faith is crushed if something doesn't line up just right about it. Jesus was wrong. The mustard seed is not the smallest of seeds. Does that null and void the point, the meaning, the truth of the parable he taught about the Kingdom of God and Bible? Because Jesus didn't have his botanical facts correct, does that mean the rest of his teaching are worthless?

To be a Christian is not to believe *in* the Bible. It is to have a relationship with God through Christ.

To be a Christian is not to believe *in things that are hard to believe*— to check our brains out at the sanctuary door. It is to respond to God's love in a life of discipleship...following Christ, with our whole being.

A healthy understanding of Scripture sees it for what it is— a vehicle, a medium, a tradition. When we finish a reading of Scripture in worship I have invited us to say, **“May these words become to us the Word of God.”** This is offered in place of the traditional, “The Word of the Lord” intentionally to acknowledge that while “all Scripture is inspired and useful”, not all things literally taken should be equated with God's Word (capital “W”). We believe and trust that God's Holy Spirit does its work in opening up God's Word to us in our speaking, *and* in our listening to these old dusty words from another world.

Perhaps a helpful image is to think about your front window at home. When you look *at* the window you see flyspecks, dust from the last snow shower, the chips from that Frisbee toss two years ago. When you look *through* the window, the whole world opens up to you! *That* is how we are to read the Scriptures— seeing through the cultural norms, quirks, inconsistencies— the chips and flyspecks— seeing through the Bible into the heart of God and the truth about ourselves we find there.

The Bible is not a coke machine dispensing uniform cans of revelation. The can of Jesus' teaching about loving our enemies does not have the same value as the can that contains rules against making cloth from two different types of material.<sup>i</sup> Often though, we approach Scripture this way, opening the machine up to snatch the cans that we agree with or are convenient. In the end, we must choose between Jesus' command to “love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44) and the Psalmist's desire to, “take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” (Psalm 137:9).

Robert Capon suggests a better image for Scripture; the womb. Within the womb the fetus develops. While growing, all things there are needed (amniotic fluid, umbilical cord, placenta, hormones and proteins). Yet when the Word is delivered, those things are discarded, the cord is cut. Thus the sacrificial systems of offerings in the Old Testament is revealed not to be God's last word on redemption, but a necessary step in development towards the redemption we find in Christ. Slavery, food & purity laws and other things are discarded when a Word of God is born. Wisdom, discernment, humility, the guidance of other Christians and God's Holy Spirit are needed as we sort out what are cultural norms from another era that can be discarded— and what is God's Word for us.

For all of its humanness, its chips and flyspecks... its outdated worldviews and cultural norms, I find Scripture to have a life-giving power that is unequalled. It *is* inspired. When taken as it is offered, it is transformative... sacramental. It becomes to me the Word of God. So be it. Amen.

<sup>i</sup> Frederick Buchner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, p. 105

<sup>ii</sup> Robert Farrar Capon, *The Fingerprints of God; Tracing the Divine Suspect through a History of Images*, PP. 20-21