

Science and the Authority of Scripture

(Part 2)

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Introduction

One of the great challenges for all students of the Bible is how to integrate general revelation and the conclusions of modern science into our understanding of scripture and, in particular, our doctrine of creation. At present, the understanding of most Christian and non-Christian scientists stands in stark contrast to what the language of scripture appears to be communicating. In response, many evangelical theologians, wishing to maintain the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, have felt compelled to modify their interpretation of what the Bible teaches about creation to bring it in line with the current scientific consensus. But is this the correct approach to the problem?

In Part 1 of this series, I discussed the nature of General and Special Revelation, and demonstrated the priority and superiority of God's Special Revelation in Scripture. In this second part, I discuss the limitations of science and its application to the interpretation of Scripture.

Biblical Inerrancy and Science

Presuppositions and pre-understandings have always played a significant role in the hermeneutical process, and one such presupposition is biblical *inerrancy*. Inerrancy is a complex doctrine, but it is internally coherent, and consistent with a perfect and righteous God who has revealed Himself. Broadly speaking, the doctrine of inerrancy identifies scripture as true and without error in all that it affirms, including its affirmations regarding history and the physical universe.¹ Article IX of *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* states:

WE AFFIRM that inspiration, though not conferring omniscience, guaranteed true and trustworthy utterance on all matters of which the Biblical authors were moved to speak and write.

WE DENY that the finitude or fallenness of these writers, by necessity or otherwise, introduced distortion or falsehood into God's Word.

¹ For detailed expositions of inerrancy see "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy" *JETS* 21/4 (December 1978), 289–96; Norman L. Geisler (editor), *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan, 1980); D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (editors), *Scripture and Truth*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker, 1992); D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (editors), *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1995).

Concerning the role of history and science in the interpretation of scripture relating to creation and the flood, Article XII states:

WE AFFIRM that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit.

WE DENY that *Biblical* infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science. We further deny that scientific hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood.

Indeed, as Herman Bavinck noted, when scripture touches on science it does not suddenly cease to be the Word of God.²

Of course, a high view of scripture is “of little value to us if we do not enthusiastically embrace the Scripture’s authority.”³ Unfortunately, many scholars who claim to be evangelical have either rejected this doctrine outright, or have redefined it to allow for errors in historical and scientific references. Francis Schaeffer described the denial of biblical inerrancy as “The Great Evangelical Disaster.” He noted that accommodating scripture to the current scientific consensus has led many evangelicals to a weakened view of the Bible and to no longer affirm the truth of all that it teaches—especially in regard to science and history.⁴ Why, then, have many so-called evangelical historians and theologians denied inerrancy and infallibility in relation to history and science? John D. Woodbridge suggests they believe that if the Bible is only infallible for faith and practice, then it cannot be negatively affected by evolutionary hypotheses.⁵ The irony of this position is that in trying to defend inerrancy, they have essentially given it up!

David F. Payne, on the other hand, acknowledges the primacy of biblical revelation when he states:

[I]t must be decided what exactly the biblical teaching is before any criticism of its accuracy can be made. ... The majority of Concordists take the scientific data as their starting-point, and interpret the biblical statements to fit them. But it is essential to achieve first a sound exegesis of the latter; and then, if any rapprochement is necessary, it can be made on a firm basis. Biblical exegesis is paramount, even when the scientific challenge is under consideration.⁶

Propositional Revelation and Truth

God’s linguistic communication to humanity as recorded in the Bible takes the form of *propositional revelation*. God supernaturally communicated His message to a chosen spokesperson in the form of explicit cognitive statements of truth, and these statements are recorded in sentences that are not internally contradictory.⁷ As Carl Henry states, “the inspired Scriptures contain a body of divinely given information actually expressed or capable of being expressed in propositions. In brief, the Bible is a propositional revelation of the unchanging truth of God.”⁸ By proposition, Henry means “a verbal statement that is either true or false; it is a rational declaration capable of being either believed, doubted or denied,”⁹ and adds that “[n]othing can be literally true but a propositional statement.”¹⁰

² See E. J. Young, *Studies in Genesis One* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker, 1964), 43.

³ D. A. Carson, “Recent Developments in the Doctrine of Scripture” in D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (editors), *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker, 1995), 46.

⁴ Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Westchester, Illinois, Crossway, 1984), 37.

⁵ John D. Woodbridge, “Some Misconceptions of the Impact of the ‘Enlightenment’ on the Doctrine of Scripture” in Carson and Woodbridge, *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, 269.

⁶ David F. Payne, *Genesis One Reconsidered* (London, Tyndale, 1964). 6, 8.

⁷ C. F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols (Waco, Texas, Word, 1976–1983), 3:457.

⁸ *Ibid.* 3:457.

⁹ *Ibid.* 3:456.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 3:430.

Roger Forster and Paul Marston claim that a statement can still have genuine historical content but be allegorical in form.¹¹ In other words, a distinction is made between historical fact and historical event. A particular historical fact may be presented in the form of a non-historical event. But on what basis can one claim that a non-historical event represents a true historical situation? Such distinctions are not only arbitrary they lack any coherence, and are surely motivated by concerns totally external to the Bible. Mcquilken and Mullen add: “To deny the possibility of words corresponding to reality is ultimately an attack on the nature and activity of God...Evangelical faith is that God can communicate and indeed has communicated in words all the truth about ultimate reality he thinks it necessary for us to know.”¹² Viewing the Bible as propositional revelation from God implies there is the possibility of verifiable facts involved. God has verbally communicated in a propositional form to humanity, not just truth about spiritual matters but also truth relating to history and science. If truth was not expressed in this way then the interpreter can never be sure of anything—even their own salvation.

Bernard Ramm, on the other hand, is more subtle: “Revelation is the communication of divine truth; interpretation is the effort to understand it.”¹³ Nevertheless, the implication is the same. Although God communicates inerrant truth, the interpreter may misunderstand it. Despite God revealing Himself in history as recorded in the Bible, the interpreter can never really be certain about the meaning of this revelation, and must always remain open to alternative interpretations. Unfortunately, those who hold such a view rarely apply it consistently. Their scepticism and uncertainty are almost never applied to scientific interpretations and conclusions.

In contrast to previous generations,¹⁴ evangelicals appear to be caught in a state of biblical and theological uncertainty. As Mcquilkin and Mullen poignantly note, “we seem to be in the process of losing any assurance of certainty about knowing and communicating objective reality. And many evangelicals are becoming at least moderate relativists.”¹⁵ This has serious implications for biblical and theological studies. If the meaning of a text cannot be known for certain because no particular understanding can claim to be authoritative, then there is no basis for integrating it with other related texts in order to produce an overall theological statement or synthesis. In fact, the problem runs deeper still. Interpretive uncertainty essentially implies that it is meaningless to talk about the authority, infallibility and inerrancy of the scriptures because the scriptures do not really tell us anything—or at least anything of which we can be certain. The meaning ascribed to each text is merely a human interpretation which may or may not be correct. This, of course, means that the central pillars of Christianity, the doctrines of sin, atonement and judgment, the virgin birth, and the physical resurrection are mere interpretations that may or may not be correct. Indeed, since historic Christianity is merely a systematic framework of biblical interpretations it too may not be correct. Therefore, this view of biblical interpretation can only lead to liberalism or agnosticism.

¹¹ Roger Forster and Paul Marston, *Reason and Faith* (Eastborne: Monarch, 1989), 217. They cite John 4:38 in support, but this verse is clearly a metaphor. In commanding the disciples to reach out to the Samaritan people, Jesus employed a common saying as an illustrative metaphor. While Jesus’ command relates to a real and actual situation, the individual elements of the metaphor are not referring to real and historical people, places and events. In other words, Jesus did not have a literal reaper and a literal field in mind.

¹² Robertson Mcquilkin and Bradford Mullen, “The Impact of Postmodern Thinking On Evangelical Hermeneutics” *JETS* 40/1 (March 1997), 71.

¹³ Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*, 31.

¹⁴ For example, Luther held that it was possible to be certain about the meaning of scripture (Robert L. Thomas, “General Revelation and Biblical Hermeneutics” *TMSJ* 9 (Spring 1998), 16.

¹⁵ Mcquilkin and Mullen, “The Impact of Postmodern Thinking,” 71.

Furthermore, arguing that interpretation is always uncertain due to the supposed limitations of language is ultimately self-defeating and incoherent, as McQuilkin and Mullen point out:

If we do not do interpretation on the premise that God has spoken and that he can be understood, that truth about him can be communicated accurately in words, we run the danger of ending up where postmodern thinking has taken some proponents: speaking nonsense. That is, they use words in an attempt to communicate their own thought about how impossible communication with words is.¹⁶

Is it possible, then, to be certain about the meaning of a given text? If we assume that scripture is revelation from God, that it is the word of God, then it *must* be possible for any person, regardless of their culture, language or historical situation, to comprehend, at least in a general sense, what scripture is saying. If God's communication is not objectively understandable then He has essentially failed to communicate. In effect, He may as well not have spoken at all! If this is the case, then on what basis can the Bible be regarded as the word of God? What authority can it possibly have? Indeed, what is the point of having an authoritative, infallible, inerrant message if it is impossible to ascertain its meaning?

In reality, the task of interpreting the Bible is apparently much simpler and less error-prone than interpreting scientific data. Scientist Taylor Jones acknowledges that the "Word of God is inherently more reliable than science," and that scripture is much easier to interpret than nature.¹⁷ Likewise, Newman admits that since general revelation is not in human language, "it is more liable to misinterpretation than is special revelation."¹⁸ Diehi also concedes that propositional revelation "has a certain advantage over nonpropositional revelation."¹⁹ In any case, all misinterpretations and misunderstandings of scripture result from either false presuppositions, insufficient data, or an inadequate or inconsistent hermeneutic. However, all these problems can be overcome if the interpreter is willing to thoroughly investigate the text's historical and grammatical context.

Cultural Accommodation?

Theologians of a more liberal persuasion have long believed that divine revelation necessitated the use of time-bound and erroneous statements. This position was never held by the Reformers or ascribed to by the Protestant scholastics (Lutheran or Reformed), but arose in the eighteenth century in the thought of Johann Salomo Semler and his contemporaries.²⁰ Nevertheless, there is now a growing trend among evangelicals to redefine inspiration and inerrancy to allow for errors when scripture speaks on matters of history and science. Inerrancy is limited to truth concerning spiritual and moral matters. For example, Bernard Ramm, under the influence of German higher critical thinking, was convinced that "language of accommodation" contained errors.²¹ Such language "employs the culture of the times in which it was written as the medium of revelation,"²² and that all direct references to nature are most likely "in terms of the prevailing cultural concepts."²³ This is

¹⁶ Ibid., 75.

¹⁷ T. Jones, "Science and the Bible: Guidelines for Harmonization" *The Master's Current* 4 (Fall 1997), 2.

¹⁸ Robert C. Newman, "Progressive Creationism," in J. P. Moreland and John Mark Reynolds (editors), *Three Views on Creation and Evolution* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan, 1999), 131.

¹⁹ Diehi, "Evangelicalism and General Revelation," 448. However, he attempts to nullify this concession by claiming the advantage "is easily exaggerated." Nevertheless, his concession is still an admission that the authority of scripture is greater than that of general revelation.

²⁰ Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker, 1985), 19.

²¹ Woodbridge, "Some Misconceptions of the Impact of the 'Enlightenment,'" 264–266.

²² Ramm, *Christian View of Science and Scripture*, 48.

²³ Ibid. 53. Ramm actually seems to be a bit confused on this point. He states elsewhere (Ibid. 51) that he believes the biblical writers "do not teach *any cosmological system* or follow *any cosmogony, ancient or modern*. Rather their writings are prescientific and phenomenal or non-postulational" (my emphasis). Ramm's belief that scripture is "prescientific" is surely an attempt to insulate it from scientific criticisms, since (despite Ramm's claims to the contrary) "prescientific" is another way of saying it is not correct.

essentially another way of saying that scripture is always wrong when it contradicts modern scientific conclusions. As Woodbridge points out, Ramm “is actually advising [evangelicals] to consider departing from the central tradition of the Christian churches regarding the authority of Scripture.”²⁴

While it is true that an infinite God must in some way accommodate Himself to finite human ways of knowing in order to reveal His nature, law and gospel, this neither implies the loss of truth, nor the lessening of Scriptural authority. Accommodation occurs specifically in the use of human words and concepts, and refers to the manner or mode of revelation, not to the quality and integrity of the revelation itself.²⁵ It is accommodation to human finitude not accommodation to error. Communication directed at mankind may involve less precision, but imprecision must not be confused with error. Inerrantists do not require scientific precision in order for a statement to be true.²⁶

In any case, why stop at the possibility of errors in only those texts which relate to history and science? Why not allow for errors in spiritual, moral and ethical matters also? If the language of accommodation does indeed allow for errors, then limiting such errors to nature and history is surely an arbitrary decision. Ramm and others who adopt the same approach appear to accept that although much of scripture is true, some parts are false, and the interpreter decides in which category a particular text should be placed. Thus, the standard of truth ultimately becomes whatever the interpreter decides at that time.

Understanding the Scientific Enterprise

Science has become an integral part of modern society. Many technological advances have resulted from scientific breakthroughs, and these success stories have resulted in scientists being highly regarded, and the scientific enterprise being highly valued. Thus, in the eyes of the masses, scientists command much respect and influence, and whatever they say is usually accepted without question. But is this authority warranted? How does science really work? What actually goes on?

Most people understand science as an objective and largely empirical process involving observation, analysis, hypothesizing, and testing. This is what Charles Thaxton, Walter Bradley and Roger Olsen identified as “operations science.”²⁷ Yet, when it comes to the study of origins and earth history, science works in a very different way. The process is much more subjective, involves many unprovable assumptions, and is based on a great deal of extrapolation rather than direct observation.²⁸ Thaxton, Bradley and Olsen call this “origins science.”²⁹ Unfortunately, most

²⁴ Woodbridge, “Some Misconceptions of the Impact of the ‘Enlightenment,’” 267.

²⁵ Note that verses such as Isa. 55:8–9 do not imply that God’s thoughts cannot be expressed in human language because they are so much higher than our own. As Carson (“Recent Developments,” 37) points out, the context shows that God’s thoughts are ‘higher’ *in the moral realm*, and therefore “our response must be repentance, not some kind of awareness of the ineffable.”

²⁶ E.g. Stating that the approximate value of π (π) is 3 is no less truthful than saying it is 3.1415926535897932384626. Both values are approximations but the latter is more precise.

²⁷ Charles B. Thaxton, Walter L. Bradley, and Roger L. Olsen, *The Mystery of Life’s Origin* (Dallas, Lewis and Stanley, 1984), 202–206.

²⁸ By direct observation we mean that both the cause and the effect are actually witnessed and recorded, rather than just the effect or final state.

²⁹ Thaxton et al, *Mystery of Life’s Origin*, 202–206.

people—including most scientists—do not understand or acknowledge this difference.³⁰ The successful application of particular areas of scientific research does not automatically guarantee a proper understanding of origins science.

Subjectivity in Science

The subjective element of scientific study, especially in the area of origins science, is most significant when considering a biblical theology of creation, since it essentially negates the great authority usually ascribed to it. Although Forster and Marston tend toward empiricism—a belief in plain “scientific facts”—they also acknowledge the subjective element in the scientific method:

In observing we interpret, though we may not be aware that we are doing so. ... In “seeing” the event each also “interprets” it, not as a separate act but as part of the perception. An implication of this recognition that observation is not purely passive is that scientific discovery is creative. It actually involves a mixture of painstaking methodical work together with creative intuition and imagination. Seeing, then, always also involves interpreting.³¹

Unfortunately, intuition and imagination all too often override or dominate what has actually been observed. Objective reality becomes subservient to artificial constructions or models of reality. Francis Schaeffer comments: “One often finds that the objective reality is getting dim and that which remains is the model in the scientist’s thinking.”³² Michael Bauman agrees:

The translation of things into numbers is, after all, a translation. Neither the words nor the numbers in scientific theories are complete and exact representations of the constitution and behaviour of the universe, much less are they the things themselves which they are intended to describe in words or embody in numbers and formulae. ... The classification of physical phenomena as suitable and useable scientific data, the arrangement of that data into groups, the translation of that data into numbers, the manipulation of those numbers via computation, and the transformation of the results of that computation into more data and new conclusions are all guided by philosophical deliberations that are prior to and apart from science’s alleged empirical nature and militate against it, all of which ought to cause us to hold science’s supposedly assured results with less assurance.³³

Is Science Truly Empirical?

In reality, many conclusions of modern science are neither purely scientific nor genuinely empirical. The common perception that science deals only with verifiable facts and direct observation is utterly naïve, as is the notion that scientists are purely objective truth seekers.³⁴ Indeed, many of the so-called facts of nature are more “interprefacts” than verifiable facts.³⁵ Even Forster and Marston admit “[t]he notion that science is ‘verifiable’ is dead. Scientific knowledge is always partial, and even a scientific ‘theory of everything’ never will be total knowledge.”³⁶

Yet many theologians continue to treat scientific conclusions as simply “matter of fact,” while failing to recognize the ideology behind them. Presuppositions, the need to interpret scientific data, and the selective inclusion or exclusion of data are rarely acknowledged.³⁷ Despite this, many

³⁰ Bernard Ramm, for example, fails to distinguish between the truth claims of modern science and the practical application of operations science (*Christian View of Science and Scripture*, 23).

³¹ Forster and Marston, *Reason, Science and Faith* (Crowborough, East Sussex: Monarch, 1999), 367-368.

³² Francis A. Schaeffer, “He Is There and He is Not Silent” in *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy* (Leicester, IVP, 1990), 313.

³³ Michael Bauman, “Between Jerusalem and the Laboratory: A Theologian Looks at Science” *Journal of Creation* 11/2 (1997), 23.

³⁴ Schaeffer, “He Is There and He is Not Silent” in *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy*, 312.

³⁵ Arthur Holmes, *All Truth Is God’s Truth* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1977), 81.

³⁶ Forster and Marston, *Reason, Science and Faith*, 395.

³⁷ A good example of such theologians is Bernard Ramm, *Christian View of Science and Scripture*, 24–26.

continue to think that what scientists tell us is always true and reliable. Scientific analysis is assumed to be balanced and objective and conclusions are presumed to be tested and proven. Indeed, many Christians appear to believe that what scientists say is akin to what God says! Yet in reality the situation is quite different. As Bauman points out, scientists “sometimes appear to be narrowly informed, unteachable, and as dogmatic as any ecclesiastical or political inquisition could ever hope to be.”³⁸

Another common misconception about science is the notion of falsification. It is generally believed that scientific theories are falsified and discarded if and when contrary data is discovered. However, Thomas Kuhn has categorically shown that this is not what actually happens. He points out that scientists do not “treat anomalies as counter-instances, though in the vocabulary of philosophy of science that is what they are.”³⁹ He adds: “In part this generalization is simply a statement from historic fact...No process yet disclosed by the historical study of scientific development at all resembles the methodological stereotype of falsification by direct comparison with nature.”⁴⁰ Ultimately, scientific theories are considered to be valid, not by rigorous testing and verification, but by their ability to explain the available data.⁴¹ But if contrary data is discovered the theory is either modified by adjusting one or more of its parameters, or the data is ignored in the hope that a solution will be found in the future. In any case, a theory is never rejected unless there is a ready replacement.⁴²

The Big Bang cosmology is a prime example of contrary data being ignored. For example, three-dimensional mapping of galaxy positions indicates that the universe is very “clumpy,” rather than homogeneous and isotropic. James Trefil writes: “There shouldn’t be galaxies out there at all, and even if there are galaxies, they shouldn’t be grouped together the way they are.” He continues: “The problem of explaining the existence of galaxies has proved to be one of the thorniest in cosmology. By all rights, they just shouldn’t be there, yet there they sit. It’s hard to convey the depth of the frustration that this simple fact induces among scientists.”⁴³ Furthermore, William Tifft of the University of Arizona discovered that the red shifts of galaxies fall into distinct packets or quanta, like the rungs of a ladder.⁴⁴ This is like saying the speed of particles coming out of an explosion fall into distinct groups of fixed velocity, instead of being evenly distributed across a range of velocities. Tifft was ignored at first, but continued to amass data for many years. But in a major study of more than two hundred galaxies using very sensitive equipment, Bill Napier (Oxford) and Bruce Guthrie (Edinburgh) have confirmed that the phenomenon is real.⁴⁵ The Big Bang theory has absolutely no way of explaining this phenomenon. Indeed, it totally under-cuts the most basic assumption of the Big Bang cosmology—the Copernican (or Cosmological) principle.

Indeed, geneticist Richard Lewontin has openly acknowledged the role that ideology plays in modern scientific enterprise:

We take the side of science in spite of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, *in spite* of its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, *in spite* of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is

³⁸ Bauman, “Between Jerusalem and the Laboratory,” 18.

³⁹ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996), 77.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 77.

⁴³ James Trefil, *The Dark Side of the Universe* (New York, Macmillan, 1988), 3, 55.

⁴⁴ Red shifts are the degree to which the light from distant stars is shifted to the red end of the spectrum, which is supposed to measure the speed at which the star is moving away, and hence how far away it is.

⁴⁵ See *Science* 271 (February 9, 1996), 759.

not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our *a priori* adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is an absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door. The eminent Kant scholar Lewis Beck used to say that anyone who could believe in God could believe in anything. To appeal to an omnipotent deity is to allow that at any moment the regularities of nature may be ruptured, that Miracles may happen.⁴⁶

Henri Blocher paints a far more accurate picture of scientific progress:

What is the progress of science, but a perpetual groping in the dark? Every day readjustments are made, periodically there are major reversals. Without going into the personal dimension of the researcher, we should denounce as utterly illusory the notion of pure objectivity, in the sense of neutrality or autonomy. No science operates without presuppositions, guide-lines and organizing models which are above ordinary verification. Ideological choices readily interfere at this basic level ...⁴⁷

In reality, scientific theories are always vulnerable to revision or rejection in the light of new data, and “[t]oday’s accepted scientific ‘truth’ might well turn out to be tomorrow’s discarded theory.”⁴⁸ Biologist Jean Pond admits that in science, new data arrives daily, and that scientific knowledge is provisional.⁴⁹ The need to periodically overhaul and totally revise current scientific knowledge should also cause the interpreter to think long and hard before attempting to make the teaching of scripture fit inside the current scientific consensus. Indeed, this is precisely why a theology of creation based on the Bible will always be far superior than a theology based on the uncertain and provisional conclusions drawn from the limited and ever-changing data gleaned from nature.

Scientific Consensus and Peer Review

It is often argued that the general consensus of scientists and the peer review process ensure the integrity of all scientific results and conclusions, and guard against faulty reasoning, over-extrapolation, poor methodology and similar. Henri Blocher, for example, believes the agreement between many thousands of researchers is not a matter of chance or conspiracy.⁵⁰ Mark Noll also finds consensus convincing: “If the consensus of modern scientists, who devote their lives to looking at the data of the physical world, is that humans have existed on the planet for a very long time, it is foolish for biblical interpreters to say that ‘the Bible teaches’ the recent creation of human beings.” But again, the way scientific research is actually undertaken reveals a very different story.⁵¹

Firstly, consensus should never be used to determine truth since this would be committing the logical fallacy of *argumentum ad numerum*.⁵² Moreover, consensus also seems to be applied rather inconsistently. For example, many Christians accept the scientific consensus that the universe is 8–15 billion years old, yet those same Christians are usually vehemently opposed to the consensus that

⁴⁶ Richard Lewontin, “Billions and Billions of Demons” *The New York Review* (9 January 1997) 31 (original emphasis).

⁴⁷ Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning*, translated by D. G. Preston (Leicester, IVP, 1984), 22.

⁴⁸ Mark Ross, “The Framework Hypothesis: An Interpretation of Genesis 1:1–2:3” in Joseph A. Pipa and David W. Hall (editors), *Did God Create in Six Days?* (Taylors, SC, Southern Presbyterian Press, 1999), 115.

⁴⁹ Jean Pond, “Independence” in Richard F. Carlson (editor), *Science and Christianity: Four Views* (Leicester, IVP, 2000), 74–77.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵¹ For a thorough examination of the problems and limitations of peer review, see Andrew S. Kulikovsky, “Creationism, Science and Peer Review” *Journal of Creation* 22/1 (2008), 44–49.

⁵² *Argumentum ad numerum* asserts that the more supporters there are for a particular proposition, the more likely that the proposition is correct.

all life came about by naturalistic evolution. Secondly, history shows that the consensus has often been wrong—indeed, hopelessly wrong.⁵³ Thirdly, as Kuhn points out, scientists do not start from scratch rediscovering all the currently known scientific facts and repeating all the experiments that lead to major new discoveries. They do not personally inspect all the evidence, read through all the data, and check all the logic. Rather, as students, they learn and accept the currently held theories on the authority of their teachers and textbooks.⁵⁴ This is indoctrination, not consensus. Fourthly, much of the apparent consensus is artificial and enforced. Scientists have to choose which projects to pursue and how to allocate their time. Younger scientists need to choose which research projects will lead to tenure, gain them grants, or lead to controlling a laboratory. These goals will not be achieved by attacking well established and widely accepted scientific tenets and theories. As a visiting fellow at Australian National University recently pointed out, many researchers feel that any new research which challenges or threatens established ideas is unlikely to be funded, and therefore, they do not even bother to put in an application.⁵⁵ Older scientists, on the other hand, have reputations to defend. Thus, Bauman concludes: “Whether we want to admit it or not, there is a remarkably comprehensive scientific orthodoxy to which scientists must subscribe if they want to get a job, get a promotion, get a research grant, get tenured, or get published. If they resist they get forgotten.”⁵⁶

Science and Scripture

How, then, should science affect biblical interpretation? Should science be interpreted in the light of scripture or vice versa? The disagreement among evangelicals over the age of the earth illustrates these two different approaches. The old-earth view is built on the position that science has proved beyond reasonable doubt the great antiquity of the earth. Therefore, the true meaning of scripture must be interpreted to show that it is not out of harmony with this fact. On the other hand, the young-earth model is based on the position that the scientific data used to establish the “fact” of an old earth is at best incomplete and can legitimately be interpreted to fit within a young earth model.

But which approach is better? Milton S. Terry offers the following incisive comments:

That certainly is a false science which is built upon inferences, assumptions, and theories, and yet presumes to dogmatize as if its hypotheses were facts. And that is a system of hermeneutics equally false and misleading which is so flexible, under the pressure of new discoveries as to yield to the putting of any number of new meanings upon an old and common word.⁵⁷

The problem with allowing scientific “knowledge” to influence the meaning of the text has not escaped Blocher’s attention. When the Bible teaches something contrary to established scientific “fact,” he notes the tendency to argue that God did not actually mean what the Bible appears to communicate. Blocher considers this to be subjecting the Word of God to our own supposed knowledge: “And this is what we would say: we know that the genesis of the cosmos took millions of years, *therefore* the ‘seven days’ must be taken allegorically; and that is conferring an unacceptable authority on scientific opinions... You might as well say that the resurrection of Christ is a symbol because we ‘know’ that the dead do not come back to life!”⁵⁸ Indeed, applying the same scientifically-constrained hermeneutic to the gospels would eliminate all Christ’s miracles. For

⁵³ E.g. The phlogiston theory, formulated in 1667 by Johann Joachim Becher, stated that an additional fire-like element called “phlogiston” was contained in all combustible bodies, and was released during combustion. The theory was an attempt to explain oxidation processes, such as combustion and the rusting of metals.

⁵⁴ Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 80.

⁵⁵ Leigh Baker, “Rising Fears for Academic Freedom” *ANU Reporter* 32/7 (May 11, 2001).

⁵⁶ Bauman, “Between Jerusalem and the Laboratory,” 20.

⁵⁷ Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1974), 534.

⁵⁸ Blocher, *In the Beginning*, 26. Original emphasis.

example, in John 2:1-11 Jesus turned water into wine. Yet, this is scientifically impossible. To create wine, both sugar and yeast are required, yet neither were added to the water. Moreover, the process of fermentation usually takes weeks! Thus, according to those who believe scripture should be interpreted in the light of known scientific facts, the account given in John 2 cannot be literally true because it clearly goes against well established science. Yet, evangelicals who reject the Genesis account of creation are rarely prepared to give up on Christ's miracles, virgin birth, resurrection and ascension, even though they are clearly not scientifically possible. In other words, they suffer from an acute theological blind spot.

The other danger with allowing scientific conclusions to determine the interpretation of scripture is the likelihood that these scientific conclusions will either significantly change or be abandoned altogether. As Marvin Goodman points out, "time after time, well-intentioned Bible scholars have found how unstable and shifting the ground becomes when they embark on a course of accommodation to scientific theories."⁵⁹ Even Davis Young admits that such concordism gives us "a Bible that is constantly held hostage to the latest scientific theorizing. Texts are twisted, pulled, poked, stretched, and prodded to 'agree' with scientific conclusions so that concordism today undermines honest, Christian exegesis."⁶⁰

Thus, it is far more prudent to start with the Bible and interpret scientific data in a biblical framework rather than a framework built upon the very limited knowledge and understanding of scientists which always seems to be changing. As Graeme Goldsworthy rightly notes,

we also need to be reminded of the relationship of God's word to the reasoning of man the creature about what is true—one does not take a pocket flashlight and shine it on the sun to see if the sun is real! The truth of God's word cannot be subject to the puny light of man's self-centered reason. God's word created what is and must interpret what is.⁶¹

Thus, scientific views should never play a part in the actual interpretation of scripture. Interpretation must be based solely on the text and its context. Indeed, if the Bible is the word of God, then no other authority, including scientific reasoning, may dictate how it is to be understood.⁶² In fact, it is *science* that needs to take *its* cues from biblical revelation. As Goldsworthy observes: "Creation means that true science or knowledge needs God's revelation in his word to give it direction, and to prevent it from entering the realm of superstition and magic. Creation reminds us that modern theories which suggest that life, personhood, love and moral value are all the result of chance, have long since abandoned the realm of real science."⁶³

Summary

Although scientific data may compliment or clarify our interpretations, it can never be used to contradict or trump the results of a careful and judicious application of the historical-grammatical method to biblical text. If interpreters begin their task by assuming that the Bible is God's special, inerrant, propositional revelation to humanity in human language, then most interpretive problems will quickly disappear. Biblical interpretation is never easy, but careful and judicious exegesis is worth the effort, and gives virtual certainty or at least a very high level of confidence in one's interpretation.

⁵⁹ Goodman, "Non-literal Interpretations of Genesis Creation" *GJ* 14/1 (Winter 1973), 34.

⁶⁰ Davis A. Young, "Scripture in the Hands of Geologists (Part One)" *WTJ* 49/1 (Spring 1987), 6.

⁶¹ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom* (Carlisle, Paternoster, 1981), 49–50.

⁶² Blocher, *In the Beginning*, 25.

⁶³ Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan* (Leicester, IVP, 1991) 127.

Yet, so many interpreters continue to be intimidated by the truth claims of modern science, and either deny what the scriptures apparently teach or stretch them to fit the current scientific consensus. The truth claims of science always seem to trump exegesis, regardless of how thorough it is, or how well it is done. At this point, one would do well to heed the warning of John D. Hannah: “[In the nineteenth century] science appeared to speak with the inerrancy that we accord to Scripture alone. It behooves us to remember to be cautious not to neglect the exegesis of Scripture and the qualitative gulf between special and general revelation.”⁶⁴ As E. J. Young asked: “Why is it so difficult to [get at the meaning the author sought to convey] with the first chapter of the Bible? The answer, we believe, is that although men pay lip service to the doctrine of creation, in reality they find it a very difficult doctrine to accept.”⁶⁵ Indeed, it appears that when considering the doctrine of creation, the difficulty is not *understanding* the teaching of scripture, but *believing* it.

⁶⁴ John D. Hannah, “Bibliotheca Sacra and Darwinism: An Analysis of the Nineteenth-Century Conflict Between Science and Theology” *GTJ* 4/1 (September 1983), 57, 58.

⁶⁵ E. J. Young, *Studies in Genesis One*, 101.