

THE RELEVANCE OF SCRIPTURAL INTERPRETATION TO SCIENTIFIC THOUGHT*

JAMES D. BALES

There are those who maintain that Scripture and Science move in two entirely different realms and therefore there can be no relevancy between the two. There can be no conflict for never the twain shall meet.

The author believes that there is some relationship between scriptural interpretation and scientific thought. The Bible does have a bearing on science.

We do find points of harmony and points of conflict between science and Scripture. It seems to me that it is inevitable that the historical revelation, and its view of man's nature and needs, should come into contact with various sciences.

If the peoples of the Bible really lived, then whenever their remains are located by the archaeologists, the Bible and the archaeologists are both dealing with at least some aspects of the same subject—although one may furnish some information which the other does not.

When a scientist studies man as a material being, to see how much can be learned on that plane, this is one thing. However, if he maintains that this is the whole story about man and that science proves that it is, immediately there is conflict between that science and Scripture.

When man is studied as an animal in order to learn all about man that can be learned about him as an animated physical body, the Scripture does not stand in the way. If one maintains that science shows that man is just an animal, conflict is introduced. The Biblical interpretation of man has priority for the believer, although the believer recognizes that the Bible does not tell us all there is to know about man, and thus we should learn from any source what it can teach us about man.

When so-called scientific socialism, as held by Marxists, maintains that there is no basic human nature, but only a reflection of a temporary economic system which will give way to another system, it comes into conflict with the Bible.

It seems to me, therefore, that to maintain that there is no relevancy is to imply that the Bible does not deal at all with the physical world, that it is unrelated to history and to human nature and that it is just a system of ideas which are unrelated to the world of reality with which science deals.

The Bible Is Not Anti-Intellectual

The relationship is not, as some on both sides have assumed, one of necessary antagonism. There may be believers who are against science, and scientists who are against the Bible, but it does not follow that of necessity irreconcilable antagonism exists. The Bible is not anti-intellectual and thus it is not anti-science.

The Christian should love God with all of his *mind* as well as with the rest of his being (Matt. 22:37). He also has a broad curriculum on which to *think* (Phil. 4:8).

The intellect is appealed to in the presentation of grounds for faith. In Acts 2, four lines of evidence were advanced: (a) Jesus' miracles (Acts 2:22); (b) Prophecy's fulfillment (Acts 2:16, 17, 25-28, 30, 34-35); (c) The resurrection (Acts 2:32); (d) Miracles on Pentecost—something seen, heard and done (Acts 2:33, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 11). On the basis of these lines of evidence faith was called for. "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36).

Not only do the credentials of Christ make an appeal to the intellect, but the intellect is involved in understanding the Bible and in applying its principles.

The condemnation of human wisdom in I Cor. 1 and 2 is not of the intellect but of man's arrogant determination to understand God, man, duty, life and destiny apart from—in fact, in repudiation of—divine revelation.

The author believes that the type of mind which the Scriptures teach is essential for faith in Christ is the type which is essential in discovering and understanding truth in any realm: (a) Willingness to hear the evidence, without being swayed by passion and prejudice (Matt. 13:14-16; 2 Tim 4:2-4); (b) Humility which leads us to be teachable (Matt. 13:1-4); (c) Love of truth (John 13:37; cp. 7:17-2; Thess. 2:10-12); (d) Good and honest heart which furnishes receptive soil for seeds of truth (Lk. 8:15).

As far as the author can see there is no field of scientific research into which the Christian cannot enter, unless it involved transgression of moral law.

The Scriptures Furnish a Magna Charta for the Scientist

There are principles in the Bible which furnish a Magna Charta, so to speak, for the scientist. Regardless of whether or not an individual derives these from the Bible, they are also found in the Bible.

(1) Man's dominion (Gen. 1:26-28). This is not passive, for man is to subdue the earth (Gen. 1:28), and it seems to me that science is involved today in man's subduing of the earth. Even in the Garden he was "to dress it and to keep it" (Gen. 2:15).

(2) The Bible keeps the scientist from becoming so submerged in his materials that he becomes depersonalized and depersonalizes others. Men are more than "personnel units," reacting mechanisms, mere matter in motion, etc. Science cannot completely explain the scientist.

(3) The Biblical view that man is a being with the power of rational thought, one who can weigh evidence, one who can think straight, is essential to science. If atheism, or any brand of materialism, is true, thought is but matter in motion which has been set in motion by previous motions of matter; none of which have been based on a thoughtful evaluation of evidence.

Karl Marx's view was that thought is but a reflection of the material world—of which the economic world is the basic factor—transformed into forms of thought and reflected in the mind. Thus not only would his materialism make rational thought impossible, but so would this view since he maintained that the world in which we now live was based on an irrational economic order (capitalism).

(4) The concept of an orderly, law-abiding universe is an essential concept for science.

Science would be impossible in at least most aspects of an animistic society; in fact, in all aspects if a society was wholly and consistently animistic. How can an orderly universe be postulated, and science possible, if nature is under the control of a wide variety of arbitrary spirits?

Superstitious attitudes keep the superstitious from being scientific in the matters towards which they have a superstitious attitude. For example, a French meteorologist in the Congo was accused by the natives of stealing their good weather and selling it to their enemies. It is difficult enough for the weatherman in the best of surroundings but how could a science of weather prediction be developed amongst a people who thought that through witchcraft their weather could be stolen and sold to someone else?

How could experimentation on animals be carried out in a society where these animals were worshipped or viewed as the reincarnation of human beings?

It may be objected that the Bible is animistic in that there are cases of demon possession recorded in it. However, the context in the Bible is quite different from the animistic society. In the Bible, demon possession was an unusual thing. Although people were driven crazy by demons, yet there are cases of lunacy in the Bible which are not attributed to demons. Furthermore, the sticks, stones, trees, etc., were not viewed as under the control of divers spirits. The context in the Bible is that demon possession is seen in the setting of a law-abiding universe, while an animistic society does not view the universe as law-abiding.

The Bible is also a friend of scientific investigation because for scientific investigation to flourish unfettered there must be freedom. And where the Bible is *known*, and *lived*, freedom does flourish.

Experimentation

Does the Bible have any relevancy to scientific experimentation? Yes, in at least two respects. First, with respect to basic attitudes which the Bible inculcates, such as industry and integrity. Second, it would rule out certain areas of experimentation since it affirms the reality of moral and spiritual values and views man as moral and spiritual and not just as a manifestation of matter. Although obviously a new medicine, or a new type of operation, after adequate testing otherwise, has to be tried out on some one, yet the use of human beings as guinea-pigs as Nazi scientists used them is ruled out. "Frequently they even used their victims indiscriminately and irresponsibly, killing hundreds when only a few (horrible as is even this) would have sufficed." (Robert E. D. Clark, *Christian Belief and Science—A Reconciliation and a Partnership*. London: The English Universities Press, Ltd., 1960, pp. 130-131. In a footnote he states: "For a brief summary see A. C. Laennec, *Medical Experimentation and Man*, Eng. trans., 1955, pt. IV").

The Scriptures would also keep man from experimenting with moral and spiritual values. Man should not endeavor to test immorality through personal experimentation. Obviously, he should apply to his own life the moral and spiritual values in the Bible and in so doing he will find them confirmed, in so far as it is possible for them to be, in the crucible of experience.

The Scriptures Can Guard the Scientist Against Certain False Conclusions and It Can Suggest Certain Leads

It seems to me that the Bible does indicate that it would be useless to conduct certain types of investigations. For example, the Bible teaches the unity of the human race in its origin and nature. God created man (Gen. 1:27-28) and "hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth" (Acts 17:25-26). The basic unity of humanity is implied in the great commission (Mk. 16:15; Matt. 28:18-20). Thus I believe it is futile for a scientist to try to prove otherwise; although when he tries he may find certain things wherein individuals and cultures differ, his research on the whole will point to the unity of the human race—that it is the *human* race to which we all belong—and he will confirm the Bible in this particular.

A knowledge of the Bible will enable the scientist in certain areas not to draw certain false, and in some cases destructive, conclusions from his data. If Dr. Kinsey had known and respected the Bible, he would not have implied that the fact that many people were doing a thing constituted ethical justification for that type of conduct. He recognized this, at least sufficiently to show that it raised problems, but as Barbara Benson said: ". . . Dr. Kinsey suggests that conflicts arising from sexual adjustment

would be fewer if standards more nearly coincided with practice. However, he repeatedly points out that facts of behavior cannot be accepted as the code of behavior without raising other serious problems." ("What Women Want to Know About the Kinsey Book," *Ladies' Home Journal*, Sept. 1953, p. 53.)

Kinsey's treatment of homosexuality led Dr. Edmund Bergler to write an article on "The Myth of a New National Disease" (*The Psychiatric Quarterly*, Jan. 1948, pp. 66-68), and to take Kinsey to task for attempting "to give homosexuals a clean bill of health" (*Ibid.*, p. 87). Regardless of the findings of investigators, homosexuality can no more be justified than can adultery.

There are some who have combined a misunderstanding of Science with a passage of Scripture and have ended up with a false charge against the Bible. For example, some have said that if woman was made from a rib of man, man should have one less rib than woman! A moment's thought, however, reminds us that such acquired characteristics would not be inherited. If Adam had had his appendix removed it would not mean that his children would be born without appendices.

Although science in its very nature seeks a natural explanation, and one may probe to see how far such an explanation may be pursued, yet the Bible would keep the scientist from concluding that everything can be explained naturally. And it is my understanding that entropy indicates at least that the universe is not a self-contained, self-explained system which can be explained in terms of present day processes. Although the scientist operates on the assumption of uniformity, yet an effort to explain naturally the totality of things breaks down when he postulates that in times past forces which work today produced results which they no longer produce.

The Scriptures kept informed believers from assuming, an assumption which science shows to be false, that the earth was always habitable or that man has forever lived on earth.

The Scriptures also show, what science confirms, that man arrived last. The Christian views man as the crown of creation, and even those evolutionists who hold to atheism regard him as the present crown of evolution.

Then, too, the Scriptures keep us from expecting a race of supermen on this earth as advanced over man as man is over the ape.

Although the Scriptures do not give us a definition of kind, and thus it does not tell us the exact extent of variation within a kind, yet the fact that it does show that there are boundary lines—for example, between man and the animals—keeps us from assuming that there are no unbridgeable gaps. However, as a scientist a Christian may probe to see to what extent variation may take place—with reference to the fruit fly, for example.

Although the Bible leaves the anthropologist free to investigate the various religious faiths, yet it would have kept him from seeking to prove that the history of religion must fit an evolutionary framework wherein religion evolved from atheism, animism, polytheism, etc., to monotheism. A great deal of energy went into the effort to prove that monotheism was the end product of an evolutionary development. More and more students, however, are concluding today that the evolutionary framework is artificial, and some have concluded—apart from the Bible—that monotheism was first.

The Bible would have kept men from assuming that primitive man was a savage barely out of the animal stage. Furthermore, it would have led them to understand that so-called primitive man in various parts of the world today is not primitive man but fallen man (Rom. 1).

The Scriptures furnish some guidelines which would have kept some psychologists from false and even very destructive theories. It would have kept them from assuming that man is wholly material and that he can therefore live by bread alone. Man needs a meaningful faith, some frame of reference, by which to live. Professor Adam Schaff, head of Warsaw University's Department of Philosophy, and who is on the Central Committee of the Polish Communist Party, said recently that a student asked: "Please don't be angry, but could you explain the meaning of life?" He saw that the student was not just baiting him, that others were concerned, and this jolted him, for up to now he had rejected "such subjects as so much blah-blah." He admitted that up to now Marxism had not really dealt with this, and that it would need to do so—on a "scientific" basis, of course. (*Time*, June 2, 1961, p. 58).

To take one other example, in the realm of psychology, the Bible in the many motivating appeals which it makes would protect one from taking one motivating appeal and viewing it as the only appeal. It would have kept some psychologists from taking the position, as some once did, that all appeal to fear is wrong. It would keep others from neglecting the appeal to love.

If I were a scientist, I think I would read through the Bible at times to see if there was anything there that might furnish some lead for me in my field, or that would keep me from an error in the interpretation of my data.

It might be, and I have not checked this story nor carefully studied the passage to see the meaning of "paths," that they will be stimulated as Matthew Fontaine Maury was when he read Psa. 8:8 about the "paths of the sea," and then finally charted lanes across the Atlantic. ("Pathfinder of the Seas," *Reader's Digest*, July, 1940).

When Conflicts Come

Conflicts between theologians and scientists will take place from time to time. But one of the reasons why the believer will not be upset by the latest hypothesis of some scientist, is that changes, even radical changes, take place in science. We say this not as a condemnation of science; in fact, it is a commendation of the scientist who changes when he sees that his previous hypothesis is inadequate.

It is also helpful, in dealing with points of conflict, or seeming conflict, to realize that the scientist is seeking to find a *natural* explanation. In the very nature of scientific research he searches for natural explanations and not a supernatural one.

In the March, 1958, issue of *The Christian Graduate*, Gordon E. Barnes wrote: "Religion is concerned with significance and purpose, while science is concerned with structure and mechanism. They therefore give different accounts which are not mutually exclusive but complementary, and which, taken together, give a more nearly complete picture of the truth than either alone."

". . . Science is concerned with describing *how* things happen and takes no account whatever of *why* they happen." (Warren Weaver, "Science and Faith," *The Christian Century*, Jan. 5, 1955, p. 11). ". . . I can assure you that Professor Einstein has no slightest idea of *why* gravity operates. Indeed any such question would completely and properly confuse him, for such a question lies wholly outside science." (*Ibid.*, p. 12).

If we are trying to understand nature by finding the answer to why the kettle boils—or rather, what causes the kettle to boil—we do not introduce a personal type of answer and say, Because I want tea. (D. C. Spanner, "The Methods and Limitations of Science," *The Christian Graduate*, March, 1953, pp. 12-).

To bring in God in our scientific explanation is to turn from the materialistic how to the personal why and who.

Furthermore, by bringing in God prematurely to bridge a gap in our scientific knowledge can lead to bad results. "Science breaks through the gaps, and religion seems once again to be in retreat." (*Ibid.*, p. 19).

The Bible May Be Misinterpreted

When a conflict between science and Scripture arises we may also reckon with the fact that it is possible to misunderstand the Bible. Some by misinterpretation of the Bible have tried to make the Bible relevant to science in a matter where it was not relevant. They have brought on unnecessary conflict. One must always be willing to study to be sure that he has not tried to speak for God where God has not spoken for Himself.

What right have we to tell scientists that God does not intend for man to explore space, to go to the moon or to Mars?

A careful study of the case of Jacob, the peeled rods and the flock shows that the Bible is not teaching the theory of maternal impressions (Gen. 30:37-42; 31:1-13. See also John P. Van Haitma, *The Supplanter Undeceived or Jacob's Divine Instruction in Heredity*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: H. Kuizema and Son, 1941).

Some things in the Bible are left in obscurity. The Bible was not given to make us experts in every field under the sun.

The Scriptures do not always distinguish between God's direct working and His indirect workings, so we must be careful not to conclude that in every place where God is said to do something that it means that it was done immediately, directly, without working through any secondary causes. For example, God sends the sunshine and the rain on the just and on the unjust, but to conclude that no laws of nature are involved would be wrong (Matt. 5:45). It is not an assault on the Bible to maintain that the evidence shows that laws of God are involved.

The Bible attributes the creation of man to God. Was this a direct act of God, or did God do it through laws over a long period of time, so that man in harmony with His laws evolved physically from the animal world?

In my judgment Genesis *One* does not tell us exactly *how* God created man and woman. In fact, we know from Genesis *Two* that Genesis *One* omits the first "stage," as it were, of the creation of woman. Although Genesis 1:26-27 does not say that man and woman were created at the same time, this is the conclusion which some draw from Genesis *One*. If Genesis *One* were the only passage in the Bible on the subject there would be no grounds on which either to affirm or to deny the simultaneous creation of man and woman.

However, Genesis *Two* shows that God created man first from the dust of the earth (Gen. 2:7). We do not know how much later it was that "Jehovah God said, It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a help meet for him." (Gen. 2:18). In the animal world "for man there was not found to be a help meet for him. And Jehovah God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept, and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof: and the rib, which Jehovah God had taken from the man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And the man said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." (Gen. 2:20-23).

This case should teach us that when the Bible leaves a blank we must be careful in assuming that the blank must be filled in after such and such a manner. It may have been in that manner, or it may not have been. For us to arbitrarily commit the Bible to a specific manner, when it has not committed itself, is to deal unfairly with the Bible and to run the risk of discrediting the Bible in the minds of some people.

We may suggest possible manners while clearly indicating that we do not have, from the Bible alone, sufficient grounds on which to definitely decide on a specific manner. If evidence from outside the Bible gives us grounds for deciding the manner, we can accept, and we should accept, this outside evidence without feeling that in any way it has set itself against the Bible.

It will be observed that the Bible does not say *how* God formed man's body from the dust of the earth, nor how *long* it took. However, it does not seem to me that the silence of the Scriptures in this place gives us any grounds, when we consider some other passages, for assuming that it was by an evolutionary process via the animal route.

First, although animal flesh was already in existence—and it, too, was formed of the ground (Gen. 2:19)—yet the passage in Gen. 2:7 does not say that man was formed from animal flesh but of the dust of the ground. Both animal life and dust existed when God created man. God made man from the dust and not from living creatures. This by itself might not show conclusively that animal flesh was not an intermediate step, with the dust of the ground being the original material and the basic material in both animal flesh and human flesh. But it does fit in with the idea of man as a special creation.

Second, Genesis 1:24-25 shows that God created animals and enabled them to bring forth *after their kind*. "And God said, Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind, cattle, and creeping things, and beasts of the earth after their kind; and it was so. And God made the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the cattle after their kind, and everything that creepeth upon the earth after its kind: and God saw that it was good" (Gen. 1:24-25). The law of reproduction in this passage reveals that the animals, who were created before man was created, were to reproduce after *their kind*. However, if man came by evolution via the animal route, some animals would have had to produce not their own kind, but mankind. God, if He so willed, could have in some cases made an exception to this law of reproduction but Genesis *One* and *Two* neither state nor imply such a tremendous exception.

Third, the evolutionists—so far as I know—believe that man and woman came by the same route. Even if man had evolved from animals it could not be assumed that woman so evolved, for the Bible expressly says that she was made from man. No evolutionists whom I know of maintain that man evolved and that later from man woman evolved.

Furthermore, if such were the case it would have to be a very speedy evolutionary process in order for woman to evolve, and offspring to be possible, before man died of old age!

Fourth, in Gen. 1:30 animals, birds, and creeping things are referred to as those "wherein there is life," or a living soul. These were living in contrast with the non-living. In Genesis 2:7 "man became a living soul." Although man was made in God's image (Gen. 1:26), and is more than an animal, yet he does also have the life of the body. Man is also a living creature. It is important to notice that Gen. 2:7 speaks of the *inanimate becoming the animate* (formed of the dust, the breath of life breathed into his nostrils "and man became a living soul"). In other words, man was not alive as a beast and then became alive as a man. He was not alive in brute form, and then developed into a human form. Instead, he became alive.

The Scriptures as the Authority for the Believer

When the Bible sets forth a position we must accept it, regardless of the current attitude of some scientists. Although we should be willing, if the evidence indicates, that such a re-examination is called for, to re-examine our interpretation of the Bible,

we should never approach it from the standpoint that the Bible must harmonize with some idea which is current in some section of the scientific world. The word of God must take priority over the words of men—whether scientists or not. We should not be appeasers who hastily seek to harmonize the Bible with the latest hypothesis.

On the other hand, humility is a Christian virtue and just as we are aware that there is a difference between hypothesis and assured result in science, just so there is often a difference between what some people say that the Bible teaches and what it actually teaches.

What shall we do when after study we are convinced that the Bible teaches a certain matter, and we also see no satisfactory answer to an hypothesis in science which conflicts with the interpretation of the Bible. *First*, we have good reasons to accept the Bible. *Second*, we know that science is characterized by change and tomorrow's investigations may bring the answer. *Third*, we may learn more about the Bible, and our previous explanation may be altered. *Fourth*, it is a sign of maturity in faith to be able to define the problem, and to carry it with one for years if necessary, without having the answer, and yet in spite of this in no way be hindered in our life of faith and our labor of love. Our privileges should not be dulled nor our duty lessened by the difficulty.

The Biblical Miracles and Science

It seems to me that there is no relevancy between the Biblical miracles and scientific investigation, since we believe that in the miracles God worked in a way in which Nature, left to herself, would not work. Science in itself cannot affirm or deny the proposition that some cause worked in these specific cases which is not working in the laboratory.

The Christian Who Is a Scientist Should Not Expect To Be Successful Just Because He Believes the Bible

Christians must not conclude that because they are Christians science will not involve hard work for them—that the Bible and prayer will substitute for work. Though they should pray about all things, they should not substitute prayer for hard work and straight thinking. There is no “royal road to learning” for even the child of the heavenly King. This is true concerning God's revealed book, the Bible, and His unrevealed book, Nature.

It is true that through God's word one can learn things which the wise of the world do not know, but in the field of science Christians must study as surely as must the non-Christian scientist. Scripture is not a substitute for science, and science is not a substitute for Scripture.

Harding College
Searcy, Arkansas

*Paper presented at the biennial joint American Scientific Affiliation-Evangelical Theological Society meeting, Goshen, Indiana, June 1961.