

THE RELEVANCE OF SCIENTIFIC THOUGHT TO
SCRIPTURAL INTERPRETATION*
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In what way can an appeal be made to science and its conclusions to help us interpret the Scriptures? How can scientific information, i.e., information from the world of science, aid in the interpretation of Scripture?

I see no way to address myself *directly* to this question. Some attention to definitions and/or presuppositions is first required. It would not be proper here to present an apologetic for a view of Scripture. But it is necessary to have in mind clearly what our view of Scripture is—our view of its authority—the Scripture about which we are concerned to find the relevance of science as an aid to interpretation.

Is this Scripture a pre-scientific document, with all the implications that this usually implies? Since it was written long before the modern world of scientific knowledge, are we at liberty to reject what it says about scientific things if that does not square with our modern scientific knowledge? No, by no means. If we give some thought to how it was written we can quickly see that that is not the way out for us.

It is not the state of knowledge of the human authors of the Bible that is here significant. How they acquired the information they subsequently recorded is not germane to our discussion. They were, perhaps, unlearned and ignorant men, judged by our standards doubtlessly so. It is irrelevant that the authors were living in a pre-scientific age and that they could have had no knowledge comparable to what we have today. How they acquired their information is not relevant to this discussion. **This**, the acquisition of information by the writers of Scripture, the theologians call revelation. It is distinct from inspiration, which has to do with the communication of information.

Inspiration, as it refers to Scripture, we define as a supernatural act of God the Holy Ghost on the writers of our Sacred Books by which influence their words were rendered also the words of God, and therefore free from any error of doctrine, fact or judgment.

It really does not matter what scientific knowledge the human authors had in detail. It matters that God supernaturally moved with and upon them as they wrote so that their words were also His. The sacred writers were guided in their writing in such a way that while their humanity was not superseded it was yet so dominated that their words became at the same time the words of God, and thus infallible.

This has been through the centuries and continues to be today the formulation of the church on what the Scripture is. We do not, therefore, escape the problem by blaming the ignorance of the human authors and then using modern scientific conclusions as the norm by which we interpret their words.

We shall not here enter into the problems of canon (what books) or textual criticism (which variants in the texts and which texts) or where are the autographs? Thousands of effective pages have been written on all of these points. Nor shall we go into the alleged charge of dictation or the mechanistic theory of inspiration; namely, that our view of the Bible must make man a mere robot of God in the reception of information. This is no new battle, nor are the charges new. Dr. J. G. Machen, writing in 1923 in his classic *Christianity and Liberalism*, referred to all of them.

Certainly that is a stupendous claim, and it is no wonder that it has been attacked. But the trouble is that the attack is not always fair. If the liberal preacher objected to the doctrine of plenary inspiration on the ground that as a

matter of fact there are errors in the Bible, he might be right and he might be wrong, but at any rate the discussion would be conducted on the proper ground. But too often the preacher desires to avoid the delicate question of errors in the Bible—a question which might give offense to the rank and file—and prefers to speak merely against “mechanical” theories of inspiration, the theory of “dictation,” the “superstitious use of the Bible as a talisman,” or the like.

Our view of inspiration is a basic campaign. It is an assumption. But it is *precisely* this which we must assume before we can take the words of the Bible as any basis of authority, and hence worthy of our taking time to bring science to bear on their interpretation. Any other view introduces the subjectivism of the human mind as the norm.

It does not weaken our case to state that it rests on assumption. The opposite rests on assumption too. Nor is this a new idea. In 1878, A. A. Hodge put it this way:

Now, it is held, on the basis of all the presuppositions of Atheism, of Materialism, of Agnosticism, and even of the old Deism, that it is absolutely absurd to talk of any supernatural revelation of God, or of any Bible as either *containing* or *being* the Word of God. I want, however, to assure the laymen who have not investigated these questions that nine-tenths of all the objections which men are making now to the Scriptures, in which they claim that the progress of knowledge, the progress of civilization, the progress of science, the progress of critical investigation, the vast aggregate of historical knowledge, all are sweeping away the foundations of our ancient faith in the Bible,—I wish to assure them that these objections are not only untrue, but absurd. Those that are made are not founded upon *a priori* philosophical principles. Neither science nor history nor criticism bears any testimony against the divine origin of the Bible. I appeal with confidence to the *a priori* principles of a contrary philosophy. We must meet them on their own ground, and appeal from the postulates of a false philosophy to the postulates of a true. We have as much right to believe our philosophy as they have to believe theirs. Renan, for instance, begins his discussion upon the Epistles with this assumption: “The supernatural is impossible;” therefore the supernatural is unhistorical, and therefore any piece of literature that claims to convey to us supernatural information must so far forth be incorrect and be the subject of correction by critical hands.

You see that this is a mere assumption, and the whole principle on which it rests is that which underlies the philosophy, atheistic, materialistic, agnostic or deistic, of these errorists; and if this be swept away not only all the foundations for such a claim, but all color of presumption on which it rests, is swept away at once. Doubtless there are very many men of great ability who are perfectly honest who hold to this belief. They are thoroughly convinced of the principles of their *a priori* philosophy, and these principles are evidently inconsistent with the truths of Christianity.

But if we discard the unproved assumptions, we invalidate their conclusions . . . (*Popular Lectures on Theological Themes, Lecture IV.*)

This is our view of Scripture. It has God’s authority for its words. But, we must interpret these words of men, these words of God too. What canons of interpretation can we use? The most basic is that we must interpret them literally. Ramm defines the literal meaning of a word as the customary, socially acknowledged designation of that word. A more classic, if less obscure, definition would be that we must use the grammatico-historical-theological interpretation.

This is to take the words at their customary, socially acknowledged designation—the literal meaning. What did those words mean in those days? What did they designate to the authors? *This is what is most basic.* It is not critical what they mean in translation today in our society. What did they mean then in the society of the authors?

If this be true, then archaeology, history, philology and linguistics are the important interpretative tools—the determining criteria—and not modern science.

What is the role, or relevance, of scientific thought to Scriptural interpretation? *It ought to stir up our minds, but it can not be the norm. It may give us a key, but it is not the final authority.* The final authority must, by definition, be the meaning of the words as interpreted in their culture.

Does this not bring us to an impasse, the same old blind alley where science is pitted against the Scriptures? If science could be a norm, and we could interpret the Scripture by it with certainty, things would be so much easier—in every age—but in which age would we finally have the right interpretation? I can not answer these questions. But I do have a practical suggestion which I feel is important. It is this: wherever there is a difference for Christians* between what science appears to say and what the Scriptures appear to say, since God is both the author of the physical World and the Word and therefore these two documents must be presumed to be complementary the one to the other, we cannot be sure which is correct, the Bible as interpreted in and by the light of twentieth-century science and culture, or our present understanding of science, or neither. We do not have the right to insist upon a final conclusion on such a point of difference until we can find the rationale between the two. This works both ways—for biblical interpretation and for scientific interpretation.

Let me illustrate the first, interpreting the Bible by 20th century meanings of words:

Genesis 2:7 “. . . the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”

Evolutionary theorists would have God make man out of an already animate brute by imparting the spirit to him at a given point in the brute’s evolutionary development. Millions of years likely intervened between the dust stage and the body-like-man’s stage. Then this brute became man by God’s inbreathing. However, this interpretation can not stand. The Hebrew behind “a living soul” in Genesis 2:7 is *nephesh hayah*. The same words are found in Genesis 1:21 and 1:24. There they are translated “living creature.” The words mean “animate” or “alive.” He created everything that has life. “. . . and God created great whales, and every *living creature*” (Genesis 1:21). This form made from dust, then, was not animate. It had no life prior to God’s breathing *nephesh hayah* into it. It was at this point that the inanimate clay became alive. It was not at this point that an already animate body became a man by the infusion of “spirit.”

Thus modern usage of words can mislead us. And, if the idea is scientific that before he became man “man” was a living brute, and if we must therefore use this “scientific” idea to interpret this passage of the Bible, (as some are doing), science leads to an incorrect interpretation. The interpretation that we must accept comes from philology, not science, in this case.

Finally, let me illustrate what I mean by the rationale of two complementary items.

Ephesians 4:8 states that Christ gave gifts to men. It is a quotation from Psalm 68:18 which states that He received gifts for men (at least in our English transla-

tions.) How can it be that He gave gifts and received gifts both at the same time? Which testament is correct? The usual answer is "The New Testament is later and it is correct." No. Is there no rationale or must we force one on the other. Using Ugaritic philology again, the Psalm may read "He received gifts from men," that is, from among men He received men. The gifts were men. Now the rationale is clear. The psalmist speaks of his taking gifts, namely, of capturing men. The apostle speaks of giving these gifts—giving these gifted men to men for the work of the ministry, some as apostles, some as evangelists, *et cetera*. The two complement each other, as we would like to hope, and therefore we can reasonably believe that we have a "true" interpretation of both passages.

So it should be with an interpretation of the Word and of the physical World, the one should complement the other, each should help to interpret the other, and we should be wary of forcing either by the other.

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*We cannot dispute the Virgin Birth of Christ, or the physical resurrection of Christ, or other items commonly accepted by Christians, in common agreement, as cardinal to Christianity. The differences referred to in the body of the article are differences in areas not of general agreement as between Christian men of science and Christian theologians. Obviously there will be debatable points as to which items are in this category and which are not. The principle enumerated is a "rule of thumb."