

## The Bible and Science: No Conflict If Read Rightly

**"But these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31).**

**"The Word of God is not intended to teach us how to chatter, or to make us eloquent or subtle, but to reform our lives" (John Calvin).**

The primary purpose of the Bible is to lead us to Christ. It addresses the mind, the will and the emotions. It calls us to repentance, to reversal of lifestyle, renewal and obedience. The Bible is God's Word to us, His revelation, the standard by which the claim of all people must be judged.

The language of the Bible is not mystical. God used human language to reveal His message. He placed Himself under its limitations. When God spoke to Adam he understood what was said. God used words, expressions and metaphors His hearers could grasp. This is a basic principle which modern man doesn't seem to understand. Can we use the Bible for a science textbook? Is it in conflict with science? Since the Bible is inerrant, all facts contained in it are correct. But as I have shown, the purpose of the Bible is not to teach science. But many claim that it is not relevant in matters of science because its human authors had only a limited understanding of the world and its origins. To prove the point they suggest that the Bible teaches a three-story universe. Heaven is in the skies and hell is below the surface of the earth. Rudolph Bultmann (1884-1976), German New Testament scholar, is a case in point. His contention was that the Gospel needed radical re-interpretation before it can become a faith to live by in the 20th century. The Bible uses the language of myth, and what is more, it presupposes a cosmology, a worldview, which is no longer ours. He wrote in a famous sentence, "It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of demons and spirits." The Anglican Bishop John A.T. Robinson (1919-1983), author of *Honest to God*, popularized Bultmann's ideas. He claims that the Biblical picture of a "three-decker universe" of the heavens above, and the earth beneath and the waters under the earth, was once taken quite literally. "Even such an educated man as St. Luke can express the conviction of Christ's ascension--the conviction that he is not merely alive but reigns in the might and right of God--in the crudest terms of being 'lifted up' into heaven, there to sit down at the right hand of the Most High. "Some scholars say that when Paul wrote in Philippians 2: 10, "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth," he referred to a three-decker view of cosmology. What did Paul really teach? Dr. Russell Maatman rightly says that he maintained that no part of creation is beyond Christ's authority (p. 27, *The Bible, Natural Science, and Evolution*).

In medieval times the Roman Catholic Church tried to reconcile Aristotle and the Bible. Its scientists and theologians made the Bible prove their view of cosmology. Galileo argued that it couldn't be turned into pronouncements on science. When this is done theology and science become a mismatch, but Galileo was not adverse to employing Bible texts to back his arguments. Even Martin Luther, the great Reformer,

misunderstood the relation of science to Scripture. He once said of Copernicus, who wanted to prove that the earth moved and not the sun, "So it goes now. Whoever wants to be clever must agree with nothing others esteem. He must do something of his own. This is what this fellow does who wishes to turn the whole of astronomy upside down. Even in these things that are thrown into disorder I believe the Holy Scripture. for Joshua commanded the sun to stand still and not the earth." Times have not changed. A knowledge of the past helps us understand the present. History teaches that error is usually old and unoriginal. Michael Bauman observes, "a thoughtful mastery of the debates of the past serves as a foundation for untangling and resolving contemporary quarrels" (p. 213, *Pilgrim Theology*). Today's liberal theology illustrates the truth of this claim. Bultmann, Robinson and others all use the context of the 20th century to determine how we should and can read the Bible. They may not use the philosophy of Aristotle or the theological system of the medieval Thomas Aquinas but they approach Scripture with their own philosophical baggage. And while they think they can win modern man by reinterpreting Scripture, they are stumbling blocks instead.

Modern theologians employ a technical language which the ordinary layman finds hard to understand, a jargon all of its own. When a scientist writes a paper or a text, the terms used also need interpretation. Dorothy Sayers notes, "When the common man reads a scientific book, he has to learn what is the precise technical use of the terms employed by the scientists. When the scientist reads a work of literature, he has to remember that every word in that book must be interpreted--not absolutely, as though it were a technical term, but relatively to its context" (p. 97, *The Whimsical Christian*).

Is the Bible only for the initiated few, the scholars, theologians, philosophers? The principle at stake is whether the truth of Scripture is accessible and clear to all who can read it for themselves. But if the Bible can be read by all and is accessible to all, how then do we read it? How can we believe its claims in this space age? Doesn't the Bible teach that Jesus went up to heaven? Is this not in conflict with our modern understanding of the cosmos? The answer is simple. The disciples, who witnessed the ascension, didn't have a specific scientific statement in mind when they recorded what they had seen. All what the Bible says about the ascension is that Jesus led the disciples to a place over against Bethany and that as they looked on He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of sight. It ought to be plain then that the "UP" refers to the every day experience of the disciples who were standing on earth. They spoke the language of everyday experience. But doesn't the Bible also speak of sunrise and sunset? How can the Bible be factually correct when it employs these expressions? But the CBC does the same thing when it informs its audience about the times of the rising and the setting of the sun. And nobody claims that Canada's national radio broadcasting corporation is out-of-date. And what happens in observatories, those sanctuaries of science? The habitual language of the astronomers is still like that of Scripture.

If we let Scripture be Scripture and don't read our own preconceived notions into it, we will discover that the Bible and science are not in conflict with each other. There is no physical error in the Word of God. Scientism, modern man's worship of science and scientific knowledge, has intimidated the church, and is reading its own apostate view

back into the Bible. And Christians have become almost afraid to speak about a beautiful sunset lest they get ridiculed for believing a primitive cosmology. The Bible does not present us with some sort of scientific system. Its human authors, guided by the Holy Spirit, spoke about sunset and sunrise because they used the language of appearance to describe what they saw. We don't choose between science or religion, reason or faith. Science and faith are not in conflict. The question is which religion or loyalty or commitment guides us in our pursuit of life as a whole and of science specifically (p. 99, Jan H. Boer, *Science Without Faith is Dead*).

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