

Science, the Bible and reading Genesis 1

Introduction: Science versus Religion

- common view on street – science has disproven Christianity
- hard version (Scientism) and soft version (Bible is pre-scientific)

Hard version: What is “Scientism”?

- (1) Only science gives true knowledge | religion is just bad science
- (2) Our moral and religious questions are answered by science

Problems with Scientism

- (1) Scientism is contradictory | self-defeating
 - (2) Category mistake: science and religion are doing different things
 - in 1961, Russian cosmonaut returned, “no God up there”
 - idea of “two books of God”: Scripture and nature
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Soft version: Bible reflects a pre-scientific understanding of world

- plain reading of Genesis 1 contradicts modern science
- universe is 14 billion years old | Earth is 4.5 billion years old
- but Bible suggests time-scale of thousands of years

Three proposals for Genesis 1:

- Literal six-day view: plain-reading, contradicts science
 - Day-Age view: super-long “days,” agrees with science
 - Literary view: Genesis 1 is theology not science
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Is Genesis 1 giving us science?

- that’s assumption behind first two views | and Scientism
- Genesis 1 lays out time-scale and sequence of events

Asking the wrong questions

- Genesis 1 is not about material origins of universe | cosmology
- but about purpose and meaning of God creating the world
- asking: *what is creation for?* | not: *how did it come about?*

Remember, Moses wrote Pentateuch after the Exodus

- people of God rescued out of Egypt
- but they have many questions:
 - why were people of God in slavery?
 - what is God’s purpose in rescuing the Hebrew people?
 - what is the meaning of life? what does God want from us?
- ancient Hebrews were not asking about material origins of universe

Illustration – imagine walking into the middle of a play

- come late, in middle of Act 2, take a seat
- lean over to a friend, whisper: “what happened in beginning?”
- friend: “well, 6 months ago, built stage, hired director, casting actors”
- you would say – “Not answering my question! Asking about story!”

Genesis 1 was teaching the ancient Hebrews:

- God existed from all eternity – “in the beginning, God...”
- only God is God, not the natural world which was created
 - ancient Egyptians believed the natural world was deified
- God is ordering and governing the natural world
 - the natural world has no independent power apart from God
- God created the world good
 - evil and suffering are subsequent invasions into God’s good world

Genesis 1 is about primary not secondary causes

- Bible often speaks of God’s actions in anthropomorphisms

Psalm 139:13

You formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother’s womb.

- David is not saying God directly formed David in the womb
- doesn’t contradict natural processes of fetal development | not science!
- but poetic language that declares God is the ultimate cause

Genesis 1 does not preclude mediated creation

- God created the starry hosts | science of cosmology
- God created all living things | evolutionary biology

For July 30th class – “The Days of Creation”

Preview:

- (1) Arguments for “literal 6-day” view
 - implications for 4th Commandment
- (2) Problems with this view
 - Day 1 / Day 4 problem
 - eternal Sabbath day
- (3) Problems with “day-age” view
- (4) The case for the “literary” view
 - Genesis 1 is a song
 - oddity of verse 2
 - two triad structure of days
 - theology of an eternal 7th Day
- (5) Did Adam and Eve really exist?
 - challenge of genetics
 - theology of Adam as a real person
 - proposals in reading Genesis 2-3

Notes

Introduction

- 1st class: conflict between science and religion | philosophical
 - 2nd class: how read Genesis 1? | focus on Bible, exegesis

 - some just waiting for Genesis 1 | some satisfied w/ science
 - two parts fit together
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Science versus Religion

- common view on street – science has disproven Christianity
- new atheists: Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett

- two versions: hard version and soft version
- hard version – science replaces religion
 - answers questions religion tried to answer but failed
 - “Scientism”
- soft version – Bible is product of pre-scientific age
 - much of Bible reflects myths of ancient world
 - science discredits Christianity

Hard version | What is “Scientism”?

(1) Only science gives us true knowledge

- religion was attempt to explain nature through myths
 - Greek myth of Persephone, kidnapped to Hades
 - during time, mother (Demeter) is grieving -- “Winter”
- religion is just bad science
 - now that science has come, we don’t need religion anymore
 - religion is superstition | myths, stories of Tooth Fairy
- only empirical (testable) data counts as real knowledge

(2) Our moral/religious questions are answered by science

- *where did we come from?* | not God, but evolutionary process
- *what is meaning of life?* | not religious devotion, but psychology

Problems with Scientism

(1) Scientism is contradictory | self-defeating

- “true knowledge only comes from science” is itself not from science
- can’t test “Scientism” in lab | logical positivism

(2) Category mistake

- science and religion are doing different things
 - science studies natural phenomenon
 - religion tells us about the supernatural world

Fun story

- in 1961, Russia sent cosmonaut into outer space
- when returned, Khrushchev declared, “we did not find God up there”
- as proof of atheism

- CS Lewis wrote essay in response
 - if God, wouldn’t relate to God way person 1st floor to 2nd floor
 - relate to God the way Hamlet relates to Shakespeare
 - Hamlet wouldn’t go into rafters of stage looking for Shakespeare
 - instead, only way to know, if Shakespeare writes himself into play

Idea that modern science has defeated Christianity is very confused

- science and religion are entirely different things | different spheres

 - confusion between science and religion on both sides
 - atheists: science is right, so Christianity is wrong
 - Christians: Bible is right, so science is wrong
 - false conflict | phony war
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Earliest Christian theologians – “two books of God”

- ancients understood you can study natural world

- “science” is God’s book in nature | “Bible” is God’s book of theology
- each book is truthful and valid, and non-contradictory
 - but each addresses different questions

Soft-version | Bible reflects a pre-scientific understanding of world

- Bible is a product of how ancient peoples thought
- specifically, in the creation of world

Plain reading of Genesis 1 – God created world in six days

- directly contradicts modern science – universe 14b yrs old
- Earth is 4.5b yrs old, life evolved on earth over billions of years

But Genesis 1 suggests time-scale of thousands of years

- because world is only as old as humanity | created on 6th day
- based on genealogies: 6,000 years | gaping: few hundred thousand yrs

Direct contradiction between science and Genesis 1

- response: Christians hold to different readings of Genesis 1

Three proposals

(1) Literal six 24-hour days view

- plain-reading, contradicts modern science
- atheists also hold this view – mock Bible | but ignore other views

(2) Day-Age view

- super-long “days” | day = age/epoch, “first age”
- agreement with science (no contradiction)
- popular among lay Christians, but no credibility among theologians

(3) Literary view | also called Framework

- Genesis 1 is theology not science
- days of the week are literary device
- now majority view among evangelical scholars

Good Christians can disagree

- even in PCA, you have people in both camps

Next week – make exegetical case for literary view

- this week, lay some groundwork | give some paradigms

Is Genesis 1 giving us science?

- that’s assumption behind first two views | and Scientism
- Genesis 1 lays out time-scale and sequence of events

We’re asking the wrong questions

- Genesis 1 is not about material origins of universe | cosmology
- but about purpose and meaning of God creating the world
- asking: *what is creation for?* | not: *how did it come about?*

Think about context of original audience

- Moses wrote Pentateuch after the Exodus
- people of God rescued out of Egypt
- but many questions:
 - why people of God in slavery?
 - what is God’s purpose in rescuing the Hebrew people?
 - what is the meaning of life? what does God want from us?
- ancient Hebrews were not asking about material origins of universe
- asking theological questions about meaning and purpose

Illustration – imagine walking into the middle of a play

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- you would say – “Not answering my question! Asking about story!”

Science is interested in the composite materials of stage

- but Bible is focused on the story itself – meaning and purpose

Genesis 1 not answering scientific questions

- therefore, it can’t be in conflict with science
- talking about meaning and purpose of human existence
- science can’t answer those questions

Genesis 1 was teaching the ancient Hebrews:

- (1) God existed from all eternity – “in the beginning, God...”
 - he is center of reality | source of all existence
- (2) Only God is God | the natural world is created thing
 - ancient Egyptians believed the natural world was divine
 - rivers, mountains, stars, animal creatures were all gods
- (3) God is ordering and governing the natural world
 - the natural world has no independent power apart from God
 - natural world is a frightening place | but fear God
- (4) God created the world good
 - God intended for a world of peace and harmony
 - evil and suffering are subsequent invasions into God’s good world
 - death is not natural, but consequence of sin

These are the lessons Genesis 1 is communicating

- if read Genesis 1 for science, at minimum – reading in shallow way
 - missing out on the real drama of the story
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Genesis 1 is about primary not secondary causes

- primary cause is ultimate reason something happens
- secondary causes are intermediary steps to outcome

Example of pool

- human player is primary cause
- but pool balls themselves are secondary causes
- using secondary causes does not invalidate primary cause

Bible often speaks of God’s actions in direct way

- leaves out secondary cause, but it is assumed
- speaks of God’s actions in anthropomorphic language
 - “God’s hands” to indicate God’s power and actions

For example:

Psalm 139:13

You formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother’s womb.

David is not saying God directly formed him in the womb w/ hands

- doesn’t contradict natural processes of fetal development
 - so Ps. 139 is not a scientific blueprint
 - in fact, for David to write science would be boring!
- but poetic language that declares God is the ultimate cause

Apply this to Genesis 1

- is Genesis 1 telling us how God did it? | scientific information?
 - that would be least interesting thing for Genesis 1 to do
- instead, telling us about God, about our relationship to him

Therefore, Genesis 1 does not preclude “mediated” creation

- secondary causes can still be at play, just not made explicit

- many people think that if modern science offers explanation for material origins, then it excludes existence of God
 - “Big Bang, therefore no God”
 - “evolution, therefore no God”

Very natural God created through mediated natural processes

- God created the starry hosts | science of cosmology
 - God created all living things | evolutionary biology
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For next class:

- (1) Look at 3 views of Genesis 1 | case for Literary view
- (2) What about Adam and Eve? Are they actual, historical people?