

DARWIN, EVOLUTION & SCRIPTURE

New Light on Old Questions

Outline

1. The Question of Purpose
 2. The Question of Truth
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1. The Question of Purpose

a) The Purpose in a Word

Most stories have their punch-line at the end. The author of one of history's greatest punch-lines put his right at the *start*:

In the beginning God....

What a claim!

In just four words the author summarised his insight and his message. Everything else he wrote derived from it.

It was, of course, a *religious* truth, and it later formed the start of that famous *religious* book the Holy Bible (which comprises the Jewish Scriptures and the later Christian 'New Testament').

b) The Purpose Matters

It needs stating that the purpose of a book dictates two things:

- its contents
- and
- its use.

We know well enough that the task of an author of, say, a cookbook – is to tell us about *cooking*, and that the authors of a car manual have the task of teaching us about our *car*. But these days, the aim of a *religious* book is less obvious to many.

c) The *Religious* Purpose

What task, then, has the author of a *religious* book? Or, to put it another way – What is the main purpose of a *religious* book?

The answer is very simple, but even Christians tend to miss it -

**The purpose of a *religious* book is
to tell us about *God*.**

Put like that, it's pretty obvious. However, some folk (who would automatically know the purpose of a cookbook or a car manual and would use them appropriately) don't know really what the Bible is for, so they're unable to use it properly.

Considerable misunderstandings arise – among Christians and non-Christians alike – because people start using the Bible, a religious book, without really knowing its purpose. That's as silly as attempting to use a car manual for cooking a meal.

A reliable book can only be reliable if it is used for the purpose it was written.

The Bible is a particularly reliable book because it is divinely inspired, but – like any other book – it is only reliable if we use it correctly, i.e. as writing to tell us about God.

2. The Question of Truth

a) The Bible is True

Christians are united in the importance they attach to the Holy Bible, because it is the main source by which God’s revelation of himself in the person of Jesus Christ can be read. In a word: it tells us the **truth** about God. Reading the Bible is literally a ‘revelation’, since it reveals God to us.

When new Christians enjoy a personal encounter with the now-living and ever-present Jesus Christ, the Bible leaps into prominence because it explains it! They might well say, ‘What the Bible says about Jesus I have now experienced! It’s *true!*’ Such a wonderful experience is like a colour-blind person reading a book about red roses, and having their colour-vision restored: “Oh – *that’s* what ‘red’ is really like!”

Glorious and important as it is, it is not enough for Christian experience simply to convince believers that the Bible is ‘true’. Unless they ask a further question, they will tend to treat it as an infallible encyclopaedia and not as a *religious* book at all! (You sometimes meet Christians who have wrongly deduced that the Bible is authoritative about *everything!* – see next section.)

b) The Further Question

So, once we claim that ‘the Bible is True’, next must come the vital question:

What is it true *about*?

Since the Bible has a limited purpose – to reveal God to us - its scope and authority is obviously limited. Common sense tells us this. Scripture does not tell me how to cook a pizza or how to programme my computer. Nor does it give clear guidance on a cure for cancer or on the disposal of nuclear waste.

The Bible does not fail me if I ask it questions about such topics, it is I who fail the Bible by demanding of it answers to questions it was not designed to answer! The fault is mine. To return to the examples given earlier. A car handbook may be completely accurate and reliable, but it is not reliable if I use it as a cookbook! If a book is ‘true’, its truth is confined to its purpose. A car handbook is unlikely to be ‘true’ about cooking! A *religious* book is true about religious things, not about everything.

You have to ask a *religious* book *religious questions* if you want it to be useful. Like any other book, the truth and reliability of the Bible lies *within the limits of its purpose*. It is not a divine encyclopaedia, but a *religious* book with a *religious* aim, which gives truthful *religious* answers to *religious* questions. (And what a blessing that is to us!)

Scientists, of course, use *scientific* books. In their professional capacity, they have no use for religious books which concern realities far beyond the scope of their investigations. It is hardly surprising that so many scientists have little or no idea about the purpose of a religious book, or understand its distinctive use of language (see below). There are, unfortunately, Christians of whom the same could be said!

c) The Hierarchy of Truth

A written account of anything will have items of varying priorities. Some items will be, as the saying goes, ‘central to the plot’, while others may add little to it. Passages of teaching may include ‘key’ lines or verses that sum-up great themes, but may also have other verses that are only secondary, or relatively incidental.

To affirm the authority and divine inspiration of Scripture does not require the believer to reject the ordinary characteristics of written accounts. All down the ages, Christians have had ‘favourite texts’. These are the verses which most sharply put into focus the themes of Scripture.

John 3:16 is a famous example:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him
may not perish but may have eternal life.*

The verse: ...*there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night* [Luke 2:8] may be equally well-known, but does not have the same standing in Christian teaching and devotion as St. John's famous verse. This is where the concept of the 'hierarchy of truth' comes in. Both John's verse and Luke's verse are 'true', but Christians have always given John's verse precedence because it is closest to the purpose of Scripture - it tells us about God.

A verse like *When Herod...sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem...* [Matthew 2:16] stands lower still on the 'ladder' which we call the 'hierarchy of truth'. It tells us about Herod, but it does not tell us about God.

As the Spirit leads us into all truth [see John 16:13] so we begin to discern the great truths from the lesser truths, and which truth lies where within the breadth of God's revelation.

This brings us to the question of language - on which so much depends.

3) The Question of Language

a) Two Languages

Just as the most effective language for the scientist is *scientific* language, so the most useful language for religion is *religious* language.

The false division in education between Sciences and the Arts means that many people cannot understand both languages with equal ease. But the language of accurate observation and analysis differs greatly from the language necessary for significance and meaning.

Christians need not apologise for their use of non-scientific language, since so much of everyday life requires its use. Life almost runs on such non-scientific concepts as *thanks, love, hope, commitment, purpose, and pleasure.*

b) Religious Language

Since religion often has invisible themes, religious language frequently has to use words and phrases that can only *point to* invisible realities. (Some of the technical terms for such usage are: simile, metaphor, parable and analogy.)

A familiar example of such ‘pointing-words’ among Jews and Christians is to liken God to a *shepherd, a king, or a father.* God is, of course, neither one nor all of these.

Such words cannot

- *describe* him, they can only
- *point towards* him. (I will comment on the use of ‘him’ below.)

c) Pointer-words

The more pointer-words we have, the richer picture we get, and the greater our knowledge of God. That is why the Biblical authors almost swamp us with pointer-words about the God whom they are revealing to us.

Here are some of their pointer-words: *shepherd, king, lord, law-giver, judge, advocate, potter, father, vine-grower, husband, lover, singer, friend, builder, farmer, sower, harvester, thresher, metalworker, tent-maker, knitter, maker of clothes, gardener, house cleaner, instructor, teacher, composer, healer, helper, protector, comforter, saviour, fortress, rock, light, fire, lion, leopard, eagle, bear, hen* – and the most unlikely of all [Psalm 78:65] – a *drunken soldier!*

Such a rich and diverse selection prevents most readers from the error of shrinking God down to something he is merely likened to!

There's nothing odd about the use of pointer-words. They are quite usual.

Didn't one firm claim that its credit card was our 'flexible friend'? And there was an era when one brand of petrol 'put a tiger in your tank!' - which if taken literally would certainly make it go badly rather than well!

Robbie Burns used pointer-words for his beloved, when he likened her both to a 'red, red rose' and a 'melodie that's sweetly play'd in tune'. He believed the analogies were both true, but he knew for certain that they were not literal!

It is a common error to assume that for words to be 'true' they must be literal.

d) God, 'He' and Humanity

Even the frequently-used word '*he*' is only a pointer-word to the invisible God. God is not male (or female for that matter). English only has the two words for something personal - 'he' or 'she'. It has never suited Christian religious experience, nor tallied with the teaching of Jesus, to call God 'it' – as if God were merely akin to gravity, a brick or an omelette.

Human life is the highest category of life of which we have a deep and first-hand knowledge, so it is not surprising that so many of the pointer-words used in Scripture (some of which are listed in the previous section) are human-based analogies.

Related to this is the way in which various Bible writers use 'human' images of God in their teaching. One account has him enjoying an evening stroll in the cool of the day [Genesis 3:8]. (Not an image that an Icelandic author would readily use!) Important human attributes, like our faces and hands, are too expressive and useful not to use when writing about God.

The great Jewish/Christian blessing based on a Psalm prays that God would:
...lift up the light of your countenance upon us, and give us peace.

We have all probably experienced someone whose face has 'lit up' to see us. What a wonderful and comforting insight to learn that God is similarly pleased to meet us!

Fortunately, we are not required to believe that God literally has a face – and we would kill the image stone dead if we allowed our thoughts to wander in that direction! What problems there would be if God *did* have a face! At present he can be experienced everywhere. If he had a face, where would he put it? If the 'light' of God's countenance greeted me in England, how long would my friend Peter in Australia have to wait to enjoy the same Christian experience? How many Christians could see it at the same time? Would God show it to selected Christians according to rank or to need? Would he vary its colour to relate more meaningfully to different races?

You see, thinking literally - when it is inappropriate to do so - can lead us into a maze of absolute nonsense.

[The wonderful thing is that, in world history and in Christian belief, the invisible God himself solved the problem of our having to find adequate words merely to point to him. He became visible for us. That's what began at the first Christmas – *Emmanuel: God with us*. Since Jesus

was a male, from his cradle to his cross the word ‘*he*’ was no longer a pointer-word to the invisible God, but – wonder of wonders – ‘*he*’ became a literal description of God incarnate!]

e) The Power of Language

The language of picture and parable has immense power, and often deals with the greatest things in life – with meaning, with love, with purpose, with significance, and with destiny. Religious language can be at its greatest when it is freed from being literal.

Here are two familiar examples.

Jesus's parables of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan have influenced people world-wide for two millennia, because they guide us in each of our two great relationships – our relationship with God (The Prodigal Son) and our relationships with each other (The Good Samaritan).

The people described in them have become what many today would call ‘icons’ – such is their value, their standing and their relevance to us. They probably have had greater and longer influence than many famous world-leaders – yet they were most probably ‘types’ of people of Jesus's time and place, not specific individuals. They were verbal creations of Jesus's vivid story-telling, aimed to teach us - and teach us they do!

The questions ‘Who actually *was* the Samaritan?’ or ‘What was the name of the Prodigal Son?’ both miss the point. Neither question should even occur to us when Jesus is teaching us mighty truths about who our neighbour is, and what God himself is like!

4. The Message of Scripture

a) Misunderstandings

What I have written above may be unfamiliar to you, though most of you will, I suspect, have found much of it obvious. What will *not* have been obvious will have been its relation to the article's title 'Darwin, Evolution and Scripture'!

Let me assure you that everything written above is relevant to the title, because the alleged 'split' between Religion and Science becomes focused around the Genesis accounts of creation, especially that in Genesis chapter 1 (actually Genesis 1:1 - 2:3).

The tension between scientific deduction and religious belief is not inevitable, but arises largely from a series of failures to understand the items I have raised in Parts 1-3 of this article. Among them are:

- A failure to understand the main purpose of Scripture.
- A failure, therefore, to discern the range and focus of its authority.
- A failure to limit the use of Scripture to the purposes for which it was written.
- A failure to treat Scripture as a religious book that answers religious questions.
- A failure to understand the basic characteristics and aims of religious language.

b) Genesis revisited

I read Genesis chapter 1 again recently. I did not stop to study it or read what Bible scholars say about it. I shall bring this article to a close by simply putting down what I felt Genesis chapter 1 most obviously teaches us. I wrote it straight-off as my immediate impression.

My reason for doing it that way, was because it simply demonstrates the outworking of the principles and insights that I have outlined in Parts 1-3.

c) Understanding

As the main purpose of Scripture is to teach us about God, it is not surprising that it is the main purpose of the Bible's introduction in Genesis chapter 1.

What it teaches about God is summed-up in the great punch-line
In the beginning God created...

Here are the first dozen truths I felt the account was teaching us.

1. That behind the universe in which we find ourselves, and before it – was, and is, a divine being.
2. That what we know around us and beyond us is not an accident, or a chance, but a creation.
3. That the creation has order and reliability built into it.
(Interestingly, science requires order and reliability to function.)
4. That what was created was essentially and originally good.
(The Bible deals later with problems of evil.)
5. The Creator was responsible for all of Nature. It is a unity and whole, not a conglomeration.
6. The inbuilt abilities of Nature to flourish and grow are God-planned and God-given.
7. That humankind stands at the peak of the creation, and has the greatest likeness to God.
8. That Nature is humankind's God-given 'home' and resource, to cherish, use, and order.
9. That the man-woman unity in some special way reflects something of God himself.
10. That our human abilities to pro-create are God-given and God-purposed.
11. That God invites our human co-operation for his continuing and sustaining of humankind.
(He commands them to ***be fruitful and multiply*** [Genesis 1:28].)
12. That God's 'resting' after Creation expresses his pleasure and enjoyment of his Creation.
(The Jewish 'Sabbath' celebrates this weekly, when humankind are encouraged to stop and share God's delight, to pause, to enjoy creation, and to thank him.)

What exciting truths! What enormously positive implications they have for individuals, families, nations and the environment! Jews and Christians have the joy and responsibility of making them known.

It will have surprised some readers that my outworking of the principles upon which I base my love and study of Scripture did not bring me into conflict with the evolutionary theories of science. It is no surprise to me, because that is precisely why I wrote this article!

These great truths that Genesis teaches (some of which I have listed) cannot be questioned or undermined by Science. They cannot be examined in a laboratory. They lie outside the sphere of Science. Scientific theories of evolution could not, and do not, threaten or undermine any of the dozen *religious* truths outlined above.

Interestingly, however, there are two important items in which religious insights about Creation seem to dovetail neatly with the scientific analyses of its process.

1. Both point to the essential unity and reliability of what exists.
2. Both position humankind at the top of Nature's ladder.

Genesis does not record *scientific* truths in a *scientific* book to increase *scientific* understanding - like Darwin's *The Origin of Species*.

Genesis expresses *religious* truths in a *religious* book to bring *religious* understanding, and it might be re-titled - *The Origin of All*.

Its scope is much much deeper, and infinitely wider.

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Science may point us to the timing and processes of God's creating.
But it takes religious writing to answer the more important questions of Creation's meaning and purpose - and our significance and destiny within it.

Scientific truth cannot tell us whether we matter, while religious truth assures us that we do!
Science may shed light on the mechanics of life, but it cannot tell us its purpose.

The energies of Christians should not be wasted driving unnecessary wedges between Science and Religion. Truth is one - even if seen from many angles.

It is the world of God that scientists examine,
it is the person of God that religion reveals.

God's person and God's world cannot contradict themselves. Were true Religion to be 'versus' true Science - that would put God 'versus' his world! That I will never accept, for Scripture is clear -
God so loved the world that he gave...!

God and his world are very close - *whichever way you look at it!*