

Interpreting Biblical Descriptions of Nature

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Biblical Language

- One of the classic books on Science and the Bible is Bernard Ramm's *Christian View of Science and Scripture* (1954).
- He suggests that the language of Scripture is:
 - Popular rather than technical
 - Phenomenological rather than mechanical
 - Not theoretical
 - Cultural

Popular Language

- Actually we have little knowledge of what technical terms existed in classical Hebrew.
- The New Testament does use some Greek technical terms (see William K. Hobart, *The Medical Language of St. Luke*).
- Presumably the Bible is designed for a general audience rather than specialists.
- From God's perspective, it is designed for a wide range of cultures and centuries.

Phenomenological Language

- By this, Ramm means that Scripture says:
 - the "sun rises" rather than that the earth rotates so that the sun may be seen at certain longitudes;
 - "a seed dies" rather than that the seed germinates to produce a plant while the rest of the seed rots.
- Ramm's term "mechanical" is not ideal.
 - Perhaps "theoretical" would be a better term.
 - In any case, this is strongly linked to the next item.

Language not theoretical

- The Bible describes what happens, but tends to focus on the ultimate cause (God did it) rather than mediate causes.
- Not always:
 - Presence of wind at opening of Red Sea
 - Satan's activity in nature in Job 1 and 2
- Snow's remark in *Portraits of Creation*, 14, is better:

Language not theoretical

[Scripture has] a notable lack of systematic discussion concerning the ordered relationship linking phenomenon to phenomenon within the ordered world.

Robert E. Snow in *Portraits of Creation*, 14

Cultural Terminology

- The Bible uses the standard terms in its host languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek) for such things as time, psychology, medicine, measurements, etc.
- It is helpful to remember that the Jews did not invent Hebrew nor did the Christians invent Greek.

Biblical Language

- These features put the greater burden on those people who are more educated and sophisticated, rather than on those who are not.
- This is in keeping with the biblical principle that "to whom much is given, much is required."

Science & Theology in Scripture

- Ramm (in 1954, at the time he wrote) saw no scientific error in Scripture.
- Neither did he see Scripture as containing any scientific teaching.
- This is a rather common view among many evangelical intellectuals.

Science & Theology in Scripture

- I have some reservations about applying our modern science/theology distinction to the Bible.
- The remarks about Biblical Language above apply to some extent to theological statements in the Bible also.
- It does not use technical theological terms (Trinity, etc.) except where we have made Biblical terms technical (salvation, etc.).

Science in Scripture

- Particularly in the area of origins, it seems problematic to assert the Bible gives us no scientific information.
- Why not scientific information in popular language?
- See Dallas Cain's book, *And It Was So: The Genesis Creation Riddle*, on-line at www.ibri.org.

Science in Scripture

- I see no scientific error, but I don't insist there must be scientific teaching in Scripture.
- I think we should be willing to look for evidence to see if it is actually present or not.
- I find some in astronomy and medicine. See:
 - Newman, Phillips and Eckelmann, *Genesis 1 & the Origin of the Earth*; on-line at www.ibri.org.
 - McMillen and Stern, *None of These Diseases*.

Distinguishing Literal & Figurative

- This is not always easy, but certainly both literal and figurative language are present in Scripture.
- We want to reject a "methodological literalism" which tries to avoid figures at nearly any cost.
- We want to avoid allegorizing and other mystical approaches (e.g., numerology) which find figure and symbol when there is no reason to think the Biblical authors intended any such.

How do we recognize figure?

- How in literature in general? (Hirsch, 198)
 - Validation via probability
 - Generic validation (external/internal)
 - Small-scale validation (also external/internal)
 - Takes priority over Generic
- How in Scripture in general? (Berkhof, 84-85)
 - Genre – is figure allowed in this type?
 - Sense – literal unless contradictory/absurd
 - This seems somewhat overdone.
 - Context – internal helps; most important

How do we recognize figure?

- How in "science" passages?
 - Validation via probability
 - Don't be dogmatic
 - Genre
 - Don't invent special genres
 - Test various alternatives: narrative, teaching, poetry
 - Sense
 - Does it contradict well-established observation?
 - Author
 - Satan, Job, friends, God?

How do we recognize a standpoint?

- Standpoint
 - What point of view does the author seem to wish the reader to adopt?
- For example, for "death as sleep"
 - From perspective of those still living?
 - From perspective of the one who has died?
- Is creation account to be read as though:
 - We are observing from outer space or from earth's surface?
 - Addressed to scientists, theologians, or man in street?

How do we recognize a genre?

- Examples of genres:
 - Narrative, parable, teaching, exhortation, proverb
- Example: the Bible says "There is no god."
 - True, but the speaker is identified as a fool!
- Identifying genre:
 - Is Matthew 2 *midrash* as Gundry suggests?
 - Is Jonah a parable?
 - Is Song of Solomon allegory?
 - Is Genesis 2 parable?

Conclusions

- We have covered a lot of ground in a short time.
- Not intended to answer everyone's questions
- But to get us thinking along helpful lines, so as not to be dogmatic when we should be more modest, nor to be skeptical when we should be more trusting.
- I don't think the Bible has been shown to be mistaken about nature.

The End

Doubtless, discussion will continue
till the Second Coming on what the
Bible teaches about nature!

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