

The Bible as Communication

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Abstract

During the protracted arguments over evolution and scripture, little attention has been paid to the limitations that human concepts and language have placed on what information could have been revealed to human beings at different stages of their history and what actions were necessary on God's part to enable the basic message of sin and salvation to be communicated. Likewise, those who claim that the Bible gives a complete account of creation need to consider how this technical data could have been transmitted to the writer of Genesis. This paper argues that such technical information was irrelevant to God's purposes and if transmitted at that time, would have obscured the purpose of the Scriptural revelation.

Key words

Evolution, communication, concepts, information, inerrancy, infallibility, revelation, salvation, Scripture.

Some basic Protestant positions on the Bible

'You can bet your life on it, the Bible is true!' Yes, that is exactly what a Christian does — not only his life but his eternal life too! Yet the issue is more complex.

The Scriptures are of a limited length yet span a vast period of time and involve many different cultures. It is inevitable that they must be highly selective in the data that they communicate. In dealing with historical events and the world of nature they usually convey only the information needed for their purpose of the revelation of God's message to humankind. This sometimes gives rise to apparent discrepancies. We are told nothing of the family life of Mary and very little about the childhood of Jesus. This information would be most interesting but is in no way vital to God's revelation, thus it is omitted. Likewise any details of the political and natural worlds are brief and simplified. Were it not so, the gospel would be obscured by irrelevant detail.

The key to evangelical theology is the place of the Holy Scripture as the final authority in all matters of faith and conduct. *Sola Scriptura* was the dominant theme of the reformation. This doctrine has given rise to such terms as 'inerrancy' and 'infallibility' being applied to Scripture. While these terms can be properly used to describe Biblical teaching, they can also be used in such a way as to make the evangelical position indefensible. This paper will examine some factors that are inherent in the communication of information from God to humankind.

Christians believe that the omnipotent, omniscient, transcendent God has communicated with rebellious, ignorant people, firstly through the prophets and finally through His son Jesus, the Messiah (Heb. 1:1 *RV*). Further the record of this communication is found in the Holy Scriptures. While God is in no way limited in His knowledge or ability to transmit information, human beings are extremely limited in their ability to receive this information. Modern scientific discoveries, while significant, have made little difference in this serious incompatibility. While evangelical Christians believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God and therefore true, it must be realized that God had to present His message in a form that sinful people could receive. (There is no point in transmitting a high definition television signal to a crystal set. The message sent must be compatible with the receiver.)

The Anglican position:

Holy Scripture contains all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.

(Thirty-Nine Articles 1563)

The Reformation position:

I. Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence, do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation; therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his Church; and afterwards for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.

VI. The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word; and that there are some circumstances concerning the

worship of God, and the government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.

Westminster Confession 1646

The Methodist position was, as John Wesley put it:

Concerning the Scriptures in general, it may be observed, the word of the living God, which directed the first patriarchs also, was, in the time of Moses, committed to writing. To this were added in several succeeding generations, the inspired writing of the other prophets. Afterwards, what the Son of God preached, and the Holy Ghost spake by the apostles, the apostles and evangelist wrote. This is what we now style the Holy Scripture: this is that 'word of God which remaineth for ever'; of which, though 'heaven and earth pass away, one jot or tittle shall not pass away'. The Scripture, therefore, of the Old and New Testament is a solid and most precious system of divine truth. Every part thereof is worthy of God: and altogether are one entire body, where in is no defect, no excess.

Wesley 1754

The language may seem archaic but the general position is still, not only defensible, but the correct position for a Christian. However to maintain this evangelical position there is a need for a detailed examination of our methods of exegesis and a consideration of what it is possible to communicate to people whose language and concepts are very different from our own and whose number system can only be regarded as primitive. Of course all these limitations are on the side of human beings and not God's side.

Some aspects of the problem of communication

The Bible can be considered as a record of some of the communications that God had with His people.

God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his son, whom he appointed heir of all things through whom also he made the worlds...

Heb. 1:1, 2 RV

Communication has a purpose. The Bible's major purpose involves the relationship of human beings with God. Other important teachings deal with relationships between human beings (Rom. 12:20–21), public health and safety (Deut. 22:8), sustainable agriculture (Ex. 23:10–11) and even some conservation practices (Deut. 22:6).

The chief purpose of the Scriptures is made very clear in these verses:

Thy word have I laid up in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.

Ps. 119:11 RV

And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

2 Tim. 3:15 AV

Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name.

Jn 20: 30-31 RV

There is no evidence that God planned to record a detailed history of humankind or even of the Israelite nation but only those things that were relevant to His revelation: of judgment upon evil, and His faithfulness to those who obeyed and trusted in Him. Even the account of Belshazzar's great feast (Dan. 5) gives no indication that, at that moment, the Persian army had the city of Babylon at its mercy (Lawrence 2006 p. 110)) and, according to Herodotus and Xenophon, were diverting the Euphrates river into the Aqarquf depression so that the army could attack the city entering along the river bed (12 October 537 BC).

The Bible was not intended to be a textbook of science. In fact such science as there is in the Bible is phenomenological (Ramm 1955 pp. 46-48) that is the Bible describes natural phenomena as they can be observed. It does not attempt to give explanatory mechanisms. This approach to natural phenomena does not date with new discoveries.

It may be a slight oversimplification but the idea that God's revelation is on a 'need to know basis' may be very close to the truth. Information that is irrelevant to God's purposes would only confuse the very important message that is being revealed to humankind.

Related to this is the question of truth and precision. If in a traffic accident case the witness were asked the colour of the traffic light a simple answer 'red' or 'green' would be adequate. The exact shade of red would be unnecessary. Two ladies discussing a dress may well require a much more detailed description of the exact shade. Optical scientists may need to know the wavelength or frequency of the light with which they are working. The provision of more precision than necessary only reduces the clarity of the communication. It does not add to its truthfulness. It is invalid to ask of the Scriptures more precision than is necessary or even possible given the available number system. Take for example:

And he made a molten sea, of ten cubits from brim to brim: round in compass, and the height thereof was five cubits: and a line of thirty cubits compassed it round about.

1 Kings 7:23 RV

This may seem to give a value for π of 3.0000 instead of 3.14159265..., but of course no matter how many decimal places we take the value of π to we could not have absolute precision. Further this precision could not

have been expressed in the Hebrew number system. The Scriptures give us an adequate idea of the molten sea's size and shape, which may well have deviated from a perfect circle. In any case the value 3 for Π is a reasonable approximation for the people of that time.

Good communication should be as simple and clear as possible and important messages need to have as much redundancy as needed to prevent loss of information when and if the messages are damaged in transmission. The Scriptures do this in many places. For example, there are at least two statements of the Ten Commandments and four gospels accounts of the life of Christ.

Communication between people of different cultures and languages always presents difficulties and these problems become even more acute when there is a large difference in time. For example ancient Hebrew had a very limited range of colour words compared to English (Cole 1986 pp. 306–307). (Even in English there is serious lack of precision.) Similar, but more serious, problems exist in regard to the names of animals, plants and gemstones. Even today in Australia the common name 'Mountain Ash' refers to two different species of eucalypt. In alpine New South Wales the common name 'Mountain Ash' is applied to *Eucalyptus delegatensis* (Child 1969 p. 57). The name 'Mountain Ash' is used in Victoria to refer to *Eucalyptus regnans* (Millett 1969 p.82). However in Tasmania *Eucalyptus regnans* is called 'Swamp Gum'. In the Northern Hemisphere the name 'Mountain Ash' is used for several different species of the genus *Sorbus* (Britannica 1998 p.376). If even today common names can lead to confusion how much greater is the possibility for misunderstanding across time and cultures.

The Hebrew classification of the natural world is quite different from the modern scientific classification, though it does have some resemblance to pre-scientific usage. Animals that live in the sea are regarded as fish regardless of their modern biological classification¹. Similarly bats are grouped with the birds. (Lev. 11:19, Deut. 14:18). If it were a whale (as in the *Authorized Version*) that swallowed Jonah, the Hebrews would have almost certainly have called such a marine animal a fish.

An important distinction exists with respect to the concepts 'earth' and 'land'. In the twenty first century when I hear the word 'earth' my first thought is of the planet Earth, that blue ball that we have seen in photographs from space. Such a concept was impossible in Biblical times, It was even difficult when I, as a schoolboy, had to learn 'proofs that the earth was round' in Grade 6.

The biblical use of 'earth' often is in contrast to 'water', 'sea', 'swamp',

¹Many of our common names followed a similar practice, only now is an attempt being made to bring common usage more in line with scientific usage: 'jellyfish' are renamed 'sea jellies'; 'starfish' are 'sea stars' etc.

etc. 'Dry land' may be a clearer concept. Of course I am not suggesting that God did not create planet Earth, for He created absolutely every thing, but in the time of Moses the word would have had a more restricted primary meaning. Nevertheless Genesis 1:1 can rightly be interpreted as 'God created absolutely everything'.

If communication is to be effective, relevant language and concepts must be developed progressively in the recipient of the information. It is possible to examine some of the preparation that was arranged by God before each development in His revelation and many of these occurred outside Israel. The idea of a codified law existed long before Moses². The development of alphabetic script by the Canaanites was very useful (Thompson 1986 pp. 239-240). In the theological area Moses and the prophets had a long battle to get the general Israelite public to accept the concept of monotheism. Still more difficult was to get the Israelite nation to accept an ethical God. Most of the gods of the nations round about were amoral. Examples of this situation are seen in the writings of Hosea, Amos and most of the prophets.

Likewise it was necessary to convey that YHWH was not localised to Israel and its territories but was the omnipresent God of the universe. The prophets and a very few other Israelites got this clearly quite early, as can be seen in the following references:

O LORD, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! Who hast set thy glory upon the heavens... When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained...

Ps. 8:1,3 RV

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork.

Ps. 19:1 RV

Most Israelites took much longer to understand that YHWH is the God of all creation. The idea that a particular god had jurisdiction only in his land was hard to overcome, not only in Israel, but also in neighbouring nations. There was a fear that if an Israelite was removed from Israel he could no longer worship YHWH. The captivity did much to convince the Jews that YHWH was not limited by location.

The serious manner in which God regards sin was not only taught by the Law of Moses and the prophets but even more dramatically by events. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the judgement of Achan (Josh. 7), the exile of the Northern Kingdom of Israel to Assyria (722 BC), the exile of the Southern Kingdom of Judah (586 BC), and death of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5) all demonstrate the seriousness of rebellion against the

² The Hammurapi code c.18 century BC is one of several examples.

LORD.

In preparation for the incarnation of Jesus, God used the brilliant minds of the ancient philosophers to develop the Greek language to a stage where it became a suitable medium to convey the gospel to the known world. Likewise God used the development of a relatively stable Roman state and the construction of the good Roman roads to facilitate the spread of the gospel. These enabled travel from Gaul (and later Britain) to Jerusalem without crossing an international frontier. In many ways Paul's statement is true:

when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that he might redeem them which were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.

Gal. 4:4, 5 RV

This very careful conceptual revelation that prepares a base for theological truth may be contrasted by the lack of any such preparation for a detailed revelation of scientific knowledge. Were God to have revealed even a small part of the mechanism of his creative activity a huge amount of conceptual preparation would have been required. This would have obscured the communication of the message of salvation.

As we have seen natural phenomena are dealt with descriptively. For example Ecclesiastes chapter 1, verse 5 speaks of the sun rising and setting but there is no attempt to explain the mechanism of these events such as is found in the pagan literature. Neither is there any attempt to build up scientific concepts, this is not relevant to the message being communicated.

However the Bible does make major contributions to the development of science. The Creator is viewed as being independent of the material creation. Thus it is not irreverent or blasphemous to examine nature and experiment with the created world. In contrast many eastern religions draw no distinctions between the gods and the creation, in which case scientific experiments become disrespectful or even blasphemous. Moreover in the Bible, the universe, including humankind, is viewed as the product of a rational mind and a divine plan. Hence it is reasonable to presuppose that the human mind might be, to some extent, rational too, and to look for order in the creation, thus making scientific experiment a reasonable activity.

It is the glory of God to conceal a thing; but the glory of kings is to search out a matter.

Prov. 25:2 RV

The Bible presents the world as the product of an intelligent creation and therefore one that can be profitably studied. It gives no information as to the mechanism of creation. It is neither pro-evolution nor anti-evolution.

Indeed it cannot be, since neither the species concept nor the evolutionary

concept was current in the time of Moses. The existence of an orderly world is one of the often unrecognised presuppositions of science. The statement 'after its kind' (Gen. 1) cannot be a rejection of evolution but it can and does reject the ancient myths of such creatures as the minotaur: part human, part bull. Reproduction is orderly because God made it to be so.

Some early Greek scientists such as Archimedes began to develop ideas and language that could have formed some basis for a revelation of some scientific information. In the event this seems not to have had any influence on the Scriptures and only limited effect upon latter Greek thinking.

Although nothing should be allowed to displace or distract from the central message of redemption there is still value in reconciling apparent discrepancies in Scripture. As Jesus said:

If I told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you heavenly things?

Jn 3:12 RV

However because we cannot be in possession of all the facts we cannot expect to solve all the difficulties that have been claimed.

In spite of the Bible's concentration on the salvation of humankind it does contain much secular information of great historic value. The first recorded association of rats with plague is found in 1 Samuel chapter 6. (Not being careful zoologists the Hebrews did not distinguish between rats and mice.) Luke, in Acts, preserves important information of first century maritime practices. He also carefully records the various correct titles of Roman officials. However this is not its stated purpose and attempts to make the Scriptures reveal more than is relevant to its main purpose can mislead us and create invalid apologetic difficulties. For example Genesis chapter 2, verse 5 has been used to 'prove' that there was no rain before the flood. Biblical silence must not be taken to imply that such events did not take place.

Conclusion

Those who seek in the Scriptures a major source of scientific or historical information are not only demanding that which would distract from its primary purpose but also requiring information that human beings were not yet ready to receive, and perhaps may still not be ready. When the Scriptures are properly expounded, the message is clear and the Reformation position valid. The Bible is primarily a record of God's communications to humankind sent for the purpose that human beings may be reconciled to God through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. It is not a scientific text book or even a text for the history of Israel. Its place is to be the final authority in all matters of faith and conduct.

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