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On Origins and Revelation

by John Byl

In a recent issue of *Pro Rege*¹ Dr. Russell Maatman discusses the origin of the human family. There he upholds the biblical teaching that Adam and Eve, the parents of the entire human race, did not have animal forebears.

This, of course, comes as no surprise when we recall that Maatman was one of the two authors of the CRC Report on Creation and Science who opposed an evolutionary origin of man. Yet, while Maatman has many excellent things to say, his method of relating science and Scripture may be a cause of dismay to some Bible believers. The purpose of this article is to point out a number of difficulties that arise from Maatman's approach to the question of origins.

General and Special Revelation

According to Maatman, God reveals Himself in two ways: through His special revelation (the Bible) and general revelation (Creation). Both are for all of life. In particular, concerning the origin of man, Maatman asserts: "Surely the Christian—the

Reformed—position should be one which acknowledges that God speaks infallibly and without error in both his special and his general revelation." Thus both revelations present us with infallible knowledge about origins.

But what if science and the Bible appear to contradict each other? Maatman handles such conflicts by noting that, while the revelations are infallible, our interpretations of them are not. Scientific evidence is "derived by responding to general revelation"; biblical conclusions are "derived by responding to special revelation." Both involve interpretation. Hence he concludes, "what God reveals in the Bible and in creation might not be what human study concludes is in the Bible and in Creation."

Is Maatman's view on general revelation indeed Reformed, as he asserts? While Maatman does not specifically define what he means by "Reformed," I can think of no simple definition other than that of "in accordance with the Reformed Confessions." Yet Maatman makes no appeal to this standard.

This is regrettable, for the Belgic Confession deals quite specifically with the relationship between nature and Scripture. Referring to the content of general revelation, it speaks only of God revealing *Himself* (i.e., His everlasting power and divinity) through creation (Article II). Nowhere in the confessions or in Scripture is there any hint of God revealing through nature any information about origins (in fact, such texts as, for example, Is. 41:21-24 and Job 38 indicate the opposite).

Rather than putting the two revelations at the same level, Article II goes on to state that God makes Himself more fully and clearly known to us by His

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word; only Scripture is described as infallible (Article VII).

I would not dispute that our *observations* of nature are of divine origin. But these alone tell us nothing about the distant past. For that we must extrapolate beyond the observations; we must rely on speculative theorizing. Such scientific theorizing can hardly be said to be “derived” from observations of creation. It is generally acknowledged that scientific theories are the free creations of man’s imagination, and as such are more imposed upon creation than derived from it.² Many theories can be devised to “explain” the same data; our choice of theories ultimately rests upon prior philosophical biases.

Maatman offers us no criteria by which we can distinguish true theories from false ones. This lack of objective norms is particularly acute when dealing with the remote past, since we shall never be able to acquire direct observational evidence. Thus, given their conjectural nature, no scientific conclusions regarding origins can attain any higher status than that of mere human writing, which may never be considered of equal value as Scripture (Article VII).

True, our reading of Scripture also involves interpretation, but not to the same degree as science. For there is a difference: general revelation comes to us in the form of observations, which in themselves say nothing about the past; special revelation comes to us in the form of propositions, some of which directly describe the past. With regard to Genesis, the problem there is not primarily one of ambiguity in the text: there is a large consensus that the traditional reading is in fact the exegetically preferred one. The problem is that this preferred reading conflicts with conclusions of secular science.

A Negotiable Bible?

What, Maatman asks, is the proper relation between scientific evidence and biblical conclusions? His answer is noteworthy: “First, some ideas derived from the Bible are non-negotiable.” [Note: only *some* ideas!] Scientific results may not contradict “*non-negotiable* biblical teaching” [my emphasis]. Regarding the origin of man, the only non-negotiable biblical teaching for which Maatman argues is that man did not descend from animals.

Thus, apparently, it is not enough that the Bible teaches something (e.g., the direct creation of Adam and Eve): it must also be established that this biblical teaching is *non-negotiable*.

But how are we to determine what is and what is not negotiable? Maatman gives us only one criterion. Regarding the uniqueness of Adam and Eve, he claims that this is non-negotiable because man’s separation and elevation are weaved into the Bible’s central message of God’s redeeming love expressed in the Incarnation.

I do not dispute the importance of the historical Adam. But to make its direct connection to the central biblical message the norm for what is to be non-negotiable raises serious questions. For example, theistic evolutionists might well respond that they too affirm man’s separation and elevation; they merely differ in their estimation as to which historical details of the creation story are to be considered non-negotiable. Or, perhaps, they might dispute whether man’s elevation is indeed non-negotiable or, for that matter, whether the central message is actually as Maatman discerns it.

There arises also the further implication that everything else that is not explicitly tied in to this central message is therefore “negotiable.” From whence comes this distinction between negotiable and non-negotiable Bible teachings? Maatman gives no justification for it. It is certainly not endorsed by the Belgic Confession, which asserts that we “believe *without any doubt* all things contained in them (i.e., Scriptures) (Article V). It would seem that Maatman’s bifurcation implies that Scripture merely *contains* God’s word, rather than being identified with it.

It is of interest that Maatman criticizes the notion that special and general revelation are complementary (the view of Dr. H. Van Till), on the grounds that we cannot decide a priori what kind of information is found in these sources. Yet Maatman follows the same path when he imposes—a priori—the restriction upon Scripture that only some of its teachings are non-negotiable. In essence I see no real distinction between Maatman’s negotiable/non-negotiable division of Scripture and Van Till’s partition of fallible wrapping/infallible message.³ The difference seems to be one only of degree, not of kind: both arbitrarily limit biblical authority in order to make room for so-called scientific conclusions.

Re-assessment of Genesis

As to scientific conclusions about the early history of man, Maatman grants that there is a general scarcity of evidence and that much of these conclusions rests on personal opinion and bias.

Nevertheless, in the event that such scientific evidence may pass the test of time, he is prepared to negotiate on our reading of Genesis. He suggests that man may have lived hundreds of thousands of years ago, perhaps even longer. While Maatman concedes that such a huge age may raise a few problems concerning the interpretation of Genesis, he brushes these difficulties away with a too-easy: "Christian scholars have proposed answers to these questions and it is evident that bible-believers need not necessarily reject such a great age."

Furthermore, the great ages of Adam and his descendants, as given in Genesis 5, are, according to Maatman, uncertain. However, if they are true, then they would be an indication of microevolution:

If we combine biblical information with observations . . . that life spans, if they change, change only very slowly, we might conclude that these changes took place in the human family over a very long period of time.

Such a conclusion overlooks the biblical evidence that the decline in ages was actually very rapid: Noah lived to be 950; Shem, undoubtedly his direct son, lived to be 600; Arpachshad, Noah's grandson, lived to be only 438: a drop of 512 years in only two generations. Are we to assume that such details, seemingly not directly related to the central biblical message, can therefore be "negotiated" away?

What concerns me here are not the particulars as such. They themselves are seemingly of minor importance and Maatman has no doubt shown cautious restraint in the application of his principles. What is of profound significance, however, is the introduction of a new hermeneutic that takes its cue from human theorizing. Given the high degree of subjectivity involved in the identification of non-negotiable biblical teaching—and, presumably, non-

negotiable scientific conclusions—the general acceptance of such an approach will lead inevitably to the ultimate demise of a perspicuous Bible. It is thus imperative that we stick to our Reformed standards and insist not only on the primacy of Scripture, but also on an epistemology, methodology, and hermeneutic consistent with that confession. Let us be careful to judge our scientific speculations in the light of Scripture, rather than allowing them to force a renegotiation of God's Word.

Conclusion

In summary, I believe that Maatman has overestimated the reliability of scientific theorizing, particularly regarding human origins. It is not at all clear to me how his virtual elevation of scientific theorizing to the status of divine (general) revelation, and the corresponding reduction of biblical authority, can be warranted in terms of the Reformed Confessions, which stress the epistemological supremacy of Scripture.

I realize that Maatman did not intend his article to fully address questions such as those raised here. Nor, I am sure, does he wish to embrace all the implications I have drawn. Nevertheless, since these issues bear strongly upon the very foundation of our Reformed faith, I would urge him to further clarify and justify his views. Particularly at this time, when many believers are becoming increasingly confused and uncertain as to the proper reading of Scripture, there is a pressing need for Reformed institutions to provide positive leadership.

NOTES

- 1 Russell Maatman, "The Origin of the Human Family," *Pro Rege* (March 1991) 8 - 17.
- 2 See, for example, Karl R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations* (London: Routledge, 1963) 192; or Carl G. Hempel, *Philosophy of Natural Science* (Engelwood Cliff: Prentice-Hall, 1965) 15.
- 3 Howard J. Van Till, *The Fourth Day* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 15-16.