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Response to Byl

by Russell Maatman

I shall attempt to remove some misunderstandings. Perhaps I did not write clearly enough. The clarification and justification Dr. Byl requests in his last paragraph takes much more space than available here. I expect to publish the required detailed discussion (including an analysis of the relation between general and special revelation) elsewhere. For the present, I group my answers to his objections under three headings—whether some parts of the Bible are negotiable, whether scientific theories are indeed free creations of the human mind, and the ages of human beings in early Genesis.

Negotiability

Perhaps the heart of the problem Byl presents has to do with the problem of negotiability. Are parts of the Bible negotiable, while others are not? None of the Bible is negotiable. All of it is the written word of God. It is not merely a matter of “containing” his word.

But of course that statement does not remove all problems. Four questions are relevant. (1) Does the

Bible taken as a whole have a central message? (2) If it does, do God’s people grasp that message? (3) Do God’s people have a clear understanding of the entire Bible? (4) Have God’s people changed any of their views concerning parts of the Bible?

First, I expect Byl agrees with me that the Bible taken as a whole does indeed have a central message. Although people do not agree on the nature of that message, that message surely involves God’s plan of salvation for his image bearers and his redemption of his fallen Creation.

Second, God’s people do grasp that message. Simply put, those who do not grasp it are not among his people.

Third, God’s people unfortunately do not have a clear understanding of the entire Bible. Often the concept of perspicuity has not been used properly. For, if we were to maintain that Christians always understand the Bible clearly, we would have to conclude that an extremely small number of people have been chosen. Thus, either the paedobaptists or the anabaptists would be outside the Kingdom; one of these groups has misunderstood part of the Bible. Pre-, post-, and amillennialists cannot all be correct; once again, the number of believers is reduced. Furthermore, if all Christians could understand the Bible clearly, ministers would not require years of education in hermeneutics and exegesis.

Fourth, God’s people have changed their views concerning parts of the Bible. Thus, my argument concerning perspicuity can be extended to specific passages. Let’s look at a passage that is not involved in the origins debate, the Song of Solomon. For centuries the Christian church held—as reflected by the chapter headings in the King James Version—that

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this book is an allegory, perhaps of God and Israel, Christ and his church, or Christ and the human soul. But the more recent conservative view, adopted by the New International Version, as given in the NIV introduction to the book, says that the Song is “a linked chain of lyrics depicting love in all its spontaneity, beauty, power and exclusiveness . . .” This change in the conservative view of the meaning of *an entire book of the Bible* was not the cause for a great uproar in the church. (Nor was there a great disturbance when conservative scholars decided they were no longer certain that Paul was the author of Hebrews.) The central message of the Bible remained; and every part of the Bible, including the Song, contributes to that message.

Concerning the first chapters of Genesis, the central biblical message is lost if one holds that human beings descended from animals. But that does not mean that of necessity everything else in those chapters is at the present time so clear that universal consent to a single interpretation is demanded. Can anyone show that the uniqueness of Adam and Eve is not essential to the central message of the Bible, or that a particular understanding of the days of creation is essential?

One more point concerning the perspicuity of the Bible. Byl maintains “there is a large consensus that the traditional reading is in fact the exegetically preferred one.” It depends upon who is counted. Byl is probably correct if the group he is considering is comprised of conservative scholars and conservative nonscholars. But if we count only conservative scholars (judged to be conservative by some test other than their views of the days of creation), then I think he is wrong. By a large margin, conservative scholars hold to the uniqueness of Adam and Eve, but not to the six 24-hour day approach, a prominent part of “the traditional reading.”

Nature of Scientific Theories

Byl claims, “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.” I take it that he refers to the rational nonrealist, or instrumentalist, understanding of phenomena. This position is the subject of a philosophical debate, but it would be difficult to show that this position is generally acknowledged among Christian physical scientists. I wonder if instrumentalism would be “generally

acknowledged” among nonscientists if we physical scientists would tell them more of what we know. For we know that an admittedly imperfect nineteenth century scientific theory was good enough to predict correctly that certain as-yet-unknown elements—*elements*, the building blocks of all substances in Creation—would be found. Even the properties of those elements were described by the theory before the elements were found. We ought also to tell those outside the physical sciences that physical theory predicted the existence and properties of many fundamental particles. The list of such successes is very long. I certainly cannot accept the “free creations” concept Byl mentions; and I wonder how many people outside of the physical sciences would accept it if they knew of the many amazingly successful scientific predictions. Do we fail to give God sufficient honor for the human minds that formulate these amazing theories?

In the sixth and seventh paragraphs of Byl’s first section, he seems to imply that theoretical prediction (applying his remark to one of my examples) of the discovery of elements not previously known, is different from the theoretical deduction that such-and-such occurred in the distant past. Can he prove that *time* (the nineteenth-century deduction new elements would be found versus deductions about the “distant past”) makes a difference?

Of course some theories fail. To dwell on failures is to be like the man who taught his dog to play chess, but claimed it was no great achievement, since after all he could defeat the dog in two out of three games.

Ages of Early Human Beings

I suggested that the great ages of the first human beings—about ten times today’s life expectancy—might be a biblical indication that the bodies of the first human beings differed from ours in a significant way. I also said that normally mutations to account for such changes take a long time. In the same discussion, I suggested that one would not expect raciation to occur rapidly. Obviously, I do not want to go to the stake defending the idea that these changes had to take a long time. But let’s consider a few things.

It is *possible* that Noah lived a very long time ago and that the decrease in age from Noah to Arpachshad that you cite was a fluctuation. (Moses lived to be 120, but he said in Psalm 90:10 that the

normal span is seventy.) At any rate, should we not expect that among the last long-lived persons there would be great differences—some very old, others only a few hundred years old?

In any case, I intended to focus attention on how strange we would find the world of the first human beings. Perhaps calling attention to great ages and the absence of racial differences did not make the point. The Bible also says that there was a time before which there were no metal objects, such as tools and musical instruments; these are more indications of strangeness. Such an observation does not prove that the first human beings may have

lived a very long time ago, but at least it is consistent with the idea of a very great age for the human family.

Wouldn't Christians carry on origins investigations more fruitfully if they agreed that the Bible has a central message, that all parts of the Bible contribute to this message, that human beings are unique, that some parts of the Bible are not yet understood clearly, that scientific theories are not free creations of the human mind, and that we can in principle learn things about early human beings from both the Bible and scientific investigation? Shouldn't these ideas be part of a Christian anthropology?