
Pro Rege

Volume 15 | Number 3

Article 10

March 1987

Letter

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Recommended Citation

Van Till, Howard J. (1987) "Letter," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 15: No. 3, 27 - 28.

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Letter

Dr. Russell Maatman, Editor
Pro Rege

Dear Russ:

Thank you for reviewing *The Fourth Day* in the December, 1986, issue of *PRO REGE*. I appreciate the positive attitude in which it was written; this provides the proper context for a fruitful exchange of ideas. In response to your review I would like to comment briefly on a couple of matters on which you offered constructive criticism.

First, let me assure you and your readers that I do *not* discount the possibility of God's having chosen to form his Creation in ways that are unexplainable in terms of the kinds of patterns for physical behavior that natural science is capable of apprehending. However, having granted that possibility among others, we are still eager to discover what choice God actually made. Furthermore, it is exceedingly important to remember that the regular, scientifically apprehensible, patterned behavior of the physical world is just as dependent upon divine governance as any extraordinary phenomenon is. In that sense, the ordinary phenomena of daily experience are no less "miraculous" than are the extraordinary "signs and wonders" recorded in Scripture.

But there are reasons why I choose not to *demand* that God's creative activity in forming either the inanimate physical universe of planets, stars and galaxies or the animate world of living creatures be characterized by irruptive discontinuities. In the first place, because of the overwhelming evidence that God has chosen to

form the inanimate universe in a manner marked by continuity and regularity (a point that you have already granted), I would be surprised to discover that God adopted an entirely different strategy—one marked by discontinuity and disruption of pattern—in forming the closely interrelated system of living creatures. While readily admitting that contemporary biological theory has not yet been able to provide that full spectrum of mechanisms required to make the macroevolutionary scenario comprehensible, I see no reason to demand, or even to anticipate, that it will always be so. (Remember the pitfalls of a god-of-the-gaps approach.) Furthermore, the extraordinary miracles recorded in the Bible were all, I believe, performed as special signs to human observers present on the scene. The kinds of miracles envisioned in the usual progressive creation picture, on the other hand, would stand in quite a different category from these "signs and wonders." And simply placing them under the common heading of "once-only, unexplainable events" does not strike me as providing any guidance for discovering how God has actually chosen to form his creatures.

The second issue I want to address here, even though it is not a central issue in *The Fourth Day*, is occasioned by your statement, "Using Van Till's approach, problems arise concerning the nature of the human race, problems of its unique relation to God, its calling, its destiny, and so forth." Russ, that strikes me as a classic *non sequitur*. If God chose to form all of his creatures in a continuous (evolutionary) manner and to direct that formative history in such a way as to culminate in a human race capable of moral responsibility, then why would God

have any difficulty whatsoever in entering into a special (covenantal) relationship with that human race so formed under divine direction? Neither God's sovereignty nor mankind's responsibility is threatened in any way by the continuity of the macroevolutionary picture of biological history. What may very well be threatened, however, is an inadequate theological system or a deficient concept of how the elements of a sound theological structure relate to the specifics of cosmic or biological or hominid history.

Therefore, let me challenge my colleagues in biblical and theological studies with a few questions: If the idea that God formed all of his living creatures, mankind included, in a manner that resulted in a continuous succession of forms (something like the succession that is indicated by the paleontological record) stands in tension with some elements of our theological or exegetical tradition, could it be that the problem lies not with the concept of continuity in God's creative work but the elements in our tradition? Is it possible that, while our formulation of the *doctrine* of creation (which speak principally to questions concerning the identities and interrelationships of God, mankind

and the physical world) is sound and adequate, our traditional ways of *picturing* God's creative activity in forming his Creation and his creatures is inadequate—rooted, perhaps, in the medieval concept of a statically structured universe? Is it perhaps time to allow the results of empirical investigation of the Creation to inform or modify our *pictures* of God's creative work without disturbing sound *doctrinal* positions? Is it time to put certain traditions to the test by searching both God's Word and God's Creation?

There was a time when to be Reformed was to challenge the authority of tradition, and we still say that to be Reformed is to be continually reforming, but do we dare put these slogans into practice? And if we don't, will the Reformed witness to a scientifically well-informed world be given a hearing in the next century?

Cordially,

Howard J. Van Till
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Response

Dear Howard:

Thank you for your letter. I want to make one point. You state that biblical miracles were performed "as special signs to human observers present on the scene." What of creation from nothing in the beginning? Perhaps intensive scientific investigation is revealing to us the difficulty of crossing the gap between non-life and life. Such results can suggest that there was also unexplainable creation after the beginning.

Russell Maatman