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The Elemental Kingdom — APRIL 22, 2022

Carl Fictorie

Welcome, and thank you for coming to this dedication. I am Carl Fictorie, chair of the chemistry department. I'd like to take a few minutes to talk about the periodic table artwork (see page 44) that Matt Drissell created for the Elemental Kingdom project.¹

At the memorial for Dr. Russ Maatman,² the message was based on Job 28, well known as the wisdom passage. Job is seeking the answers to his suffering and his question about the ability of God to control creation. This seems an odd passage for the funeral of a chemist, until you start reading it. The passage opens by talking about miners digging in the earth looking for silver, gold, iron, and copper. We now know that all of these are elements. It speaks of smelting and refining, digging mine shafts and extracting precious gems. While these miners and the author of the book knew nothing about elements or atoms, the act of mining is the first step in obtaining the elements that you now see organized in this table and an early step in the development of chemistry as a scientific discipline. This activity involves learning how creation works: where to dig, how to smelt, and how to refine. As a result, the miners acquire knowledge about the workings of creation.

For Maatman, this effort to understand creation shows that chemistry is unified and ordered. In his book *The Unity in Creation*,³ Maatman writes, “what the modern periodic classification does is arrange the elements so that one can know a large number...of the properties of any element if he knows its position on the chart.” Later he adds, “The observations we make and analyze enable us to realize that the universe is ordered. God is not a God of chaos.”

In this artwork, we see this order in the overall layout of the element tiles, arranged in the standard form of the periodic table found in all chemistry textbooks. This and other features in this table illustrate the order and unity that Maatman talks about.

But Job 28 does not end there. Instead, the writer raises a deeper question: “Where is wisdom

found?” He rightly points out that wisdom is not found under the earth in the miner's tunnels, nor can it be found in the precious metals and gemstones they obtain. Likewise, neither the periodic table nor the elements themselves are the source of wisdom. Rather, we are reminded that wisdom is found first in the fear of the Lord.

In his book *Faith and Wisdom in Science*,⁴ Tom McLeish challenges the “banal reading” of this passage that says that the miner's work has no meaning. Instead, he observes that God himself “looked to the ends of the earth” and “established it and searched it out.” McLeish says that “wisdom is to be found in participating in a deep understanding of the world, its structure and dynamics.” Wisdom is not a destination, but a path that God invites us to take with him.

Then McLeish turns to the last chapters, where God invites Job to see creation from God's point of view. He takes Job on a whirlwind tour of creation: the sea, the clouds and rain, the constellations, various creatures including the Behemoth and the Leviathan. God is showing Job how to participate in a deep understanding of the world. This is achieved by study and hard work like the miners do, but also by awe and wonder in the vastness and order of creation that Job experienced. That is, the study of creation points to wisdom because it points to the power and glory of God, the source of wisdom.

Matt Drissell has echoed these ideas in this rendition of the periodic table.⁵ When we approached him to do this project, the only requirement we gave is that the artwork should look like the traditional form you see here. Beyond that, he was free to interpret as he was inspired. He then did his homework: studying the elements, their properties, their uses, and their stories, he himself participating in the deep understanding of this aspect of the creation. And more than one artwork, he created 118 unique tiles, one for each element. Simultaneously, Matt worked out ways to show various relationships among these elements.

When you look at any one tile, you see a little

montage of images reflecting properties and uses and history.

Elemental sulfur is yellow; strontium provides red light for fireworks; chromium is corrosion resistant; blood contains iron; copper was known in ancient times; yttrium was discovered in Sweden; and so on. These montages show that from the unity in an ordered creation comes incredible diversity and vast potential. From these 118 building blocks, the blocks from which all of material creation is formed, the chemist can envision a nearly infinite number of compounds and molecules. For everyone, these features can inspire awe in the creation and praise for the creator.

Justin Bailey hints at this in his book *Reimagining Apologetics*,⁶ where he talks about how our God-given imaginative vision explores new possibilities in thinking and meaning. It's not the iron or copper or gold that has meaning, but they are the products of God's imagination that then inspire our imagination. This is seen when the chemist is inspired by this periodic table to create new substances that push limits of our knowledge, or help bring healing to humanity, or teach a younger generation the order and wonder in creation. In all these ways, she works to bring Christ-centered renewal to this aspect of contemporary life.

Thus, in this artwork, based on one aspect of creation, we are invited to see unity and order, we are called to develop an awe-filled understanding, and we are inspired to imagine the potential of creation in the light of the wisdom of God the creator. This is the elemental kingdom. This is serviceable insight.

Solo Deo Gloria, to God alone be the glory.
Thank you.

Endnotes

1. <https://sites.google.com/view/dordt-elemental-kingdom/home>.
2. Dr. Russell Maatman (1923-2010) was Professor of Chemistry at Dordt College for 27 years.
3. Dr. Russell Wayne Maatman, *The Unity in Creation* (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 1978).
4. Tom McLeisch, *Faith and Wisdom in Science* (Oxford U Press, 1914).
5. Matthew Drissell, Assistant Professor of Painting and Drawing at Western New Mexico University and former Associate Professor of Art at Dordt University, where he authored and created The Elemental Kingdom Project, Dec. 12, 2021. Permission to publish.
6. Dr. Justin Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics: The Beauty of Faith in a Secular Age* (IVP Academic, 2020).

