
Pro Rege

Volume 17
Number 3 March/June Double Issue


Article 5

March 1989

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Recommended Citation

Adams, Charles C. (1989) "Christian Worldview and a View of Science: The Evolution Debate: A Response to Russell Maatman," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 17: No. 3, 35 - 38.
Available at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol17/iss3/5

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A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

A Christian Worldview and a View of Science: The Evolution Debate

A response to Russell Maatman

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Introduction

It must have been exciting to study science 2300 years ago—to sit and listen to Aristotle, the most influential scientist of all time. I call him that because the theories he formulated about the world went virtually unchallenged in Western thought for almost 2000 years. Perhaps you can imagine a gathering taking place in ancient Athens. Aristotle is surrounded by students and interested citizens as he explains the properties of a small stick of wood. Why does the stick fall when he lets go of it? Why does it float on water? It's really rather simple if you understand the theory of matter (in other words, chemistry). "You see," Aristotle would explain, "all bodies on earth are made up of a combination of the four basic elements: fire, air, earth, and water." These four elements tend to move to their natural home, their proper place in the universe. The proper place of earth is at the center of the universe (as everyone in the Athenian audience knew). Outside of the earth came first the sphere of water, then the sphere of air, and then the sphere of fire.

Now the reason the stick falls through the air when dropped is that it contains a good amount of earth; and earth, as I already said, tends to move

to its natural home, the center of the universe. Why does the stick float on water? Because, in addition to earth, it also contains a fair amount of air. The air in the stick tends to move toward its natural home, above that of water. Stones don't have as much air so they sink in water.

All of this made sense to the Athenian mind of 300 B.C. Today, of course, we have different explanations. In fact, if you try to describe Aristotle's theories to a chemistry class made up of high school juniors, you will likely get comments like "How dumb!," and "That's not science, that's superstition," and the comment that makes all teachers wish they were back in ancient Athens—"Is this gonna be on the test?"

As Christians, our attitude toward Aristotelian science ought to be more patient, more charitable. We recognize that science is a *process* of understanding God's good creation. He has called us to the *progressive* task of "working the garden," a task that will continue for eternity in the new heavens and the new earth. So it's natural that the scientific knowledge of 300 B.C. would be different, more primitive, less developed than the scientific knowledge of 1988.

Imagine that the Lord does not return for another 2000 years. How would people in the year 4000 A.D. view the scientific knowledge of today? How would they view this lecture series?

My point is that we are relatively ignorant about God's creation. We may understand primitive things like how to shoot satellites into orbit around the earth, but we can't even begin to understand how it is that with a little bit of faith we can uproot a mountain and toss it into the sea.

So we need to approach our subject with a great deal of humility. We need to ask, and to do our best to answer, these questions about origin. But we ought not take ourselves or our necessarily tentative answers too seriously.

Examining Our Language

In discussions such as this one Christians often talk past each other because they have significantly different understandings of certain common terms. Very often those different understandings can be traced to different world views—some biblical, some unbiblical.

So let me briefly examine four terms that Maatman uses in his paper—terms common to all debates of origins and evolution—namely, science, truth, history, and time.

Science. The word science (and here I have in mind phrases such as “scientific activity” and “scientific information”) means different things to different people. Most of us would generally agree that science is *that human activity whereby people gain by reasoning*. I want to emphasize that science studies God's good creation—all of God's good creation, not only its physical aspect. Thus biology, psychology, history, economics, aesthetic theory, and yes, even theology, are legitimate sciences.

Maatman asks, “May the Bible be the subject of scientific investigation?” Now, the Bible is God's Word. But it is also part of created reality. No one argues against theologians studying the Bible. But that might be because we have bought into a dualistic worldview, and don't see theology as a science. What about subjecting the Bible to a linguistic analysis? Surely it's important to understand the original Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic meaning of many biblical terms and phrases. I would also suggest that the Bible may legitimately be the subject of an aesthetic investigation—consider the aesthetic quality of the Psalms or the book of

Job. In these examples the Bible is legitimately the subject of scientific investigation.

Can the Bible be made the subject of *physical* science? Is there physical scientific information in the Bible? That's a difficult question.

We all agree that the Bible informs us about faith. In fact, the Bible is *the book* of the Christian faith. So it is certainly valid for theologians to investigate it. But it is not a theology textbook. You don't have to be a theologian to grow in your faith by reading it.

The Bible also informs us concerning ethics and jurisprudence. But while the ethicist or legal theorist may and should investigate it, it is not a textbook in ethics or in law. That is the error the theonomists make.

The Bible also has an aesthetic dimension. But it is neither a textbook on aesthetics nor mere literature like a Tolstoy novel or a Shakespearean play.

And, of course, the Bible informs us about Hebrew history. But it is neither a treatise on historiography nor a book like Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

What about physical science? Does the Bible inform scientists as they study physical reality? Again, I would start by saying that the Bible is not a textbook for physical science. You cannot pull physical theories from the Bible. Neither can you go to the Bible to test a physics hypothesis. You must go directly to the physical aspect of the creation for that. But the Bible informs your faith so that you can do physical science, or any other science for that matter. And I would argue that your faith will direct your choice of problems as well as your formulation of theories.

Truth. It should help our discussion if we consider what we mean by the word “truth.” There are two words, one Hebrew and one Greek, which account for 90 percent or more of the uses of the word *truth* in the bible. The Hebrew word, used over and over in the Old Testament, is *emet*. It means faithfulness, fidelity, or troth. The Greek word for truth is *aletheia*. Its original meaning is very much shaped by the Hellenistic worldview. Instead of faithfulness it means something more like “logical correctness,” “correspondence to reality,” the opposite of error.

What I find most intriguing is the way in which that Greek word is used in the New Testament. The context of almost every reference leads the reader

to interpret the word not in the Hellenistic sense, but in the Hebrew sense. Think of John 14:6. Jesus says, "I am the way and the *truth* and the life." Here Jesus is not referring to himself as "the logically correct one" or "the real one," but like God revealing himself to Abraham as Jahweh, the faithful covenant God of Israel, Jesus is referring to himself as "the truth," that is, God's faithfulness come in the flesh.

I conclude that when the Bible speaks of truth, even though it may speak in Greek, it means faithfulness. The central message of the Scriptures has to do with truth rather than logical certitude.

With that in mind, I would ask Maatman to clarify what he means when he says, "I know by faith that nothing can *contradict* the Bible," and "The Bible . . . stands above the rest of creation."

If I might have the privilege of putting words into his mouth, I think that he means the Bible "*pistically* stands above" the rest of creation. That is, in terms of the faithfulness of its message, it has no equal on earth. I may rest assured that God will keep covenant with me when I sit down and read his Word. Dostoevsky, Dickens, Dooyeweerd, or Dobson I must read critically—for these are human documents. The worldviews of these authors cannot be trusted completely. But the Bible, even though it was written by finite human beings, has been inspired by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, I can go to it uncritically, like a little child.

In addition to saying that nothing can contradict the Bible, and that the Bible stands above the rest of the creation, Maatman counsels us, "Do not sit in judgment on Scripture; never decide that any part of it is in error." Though I'm convinced he does not intend it, in that word "error" I think I hear echoes of the Greek notion of truth. Thus some may hear him saying that the Bible "logically stands above" the rest of creation. I think he and I would both disagree with that. A scientific textbook or journal article, because of its very nature, must be logical in every respect. But a poem, a love letter, or an act of faith need not conform in every respect to the laws of logic. Likewise the veracity of the Bible, which is God's faith message to his people, is no more dependent on its logical purity than it is on its aesthetic purity. Truth is far more than scientifically correct statements.

History. There is a very common understanding of the word history which, if I'm not mistaken, has

given many a good history teacher fits. It's the notion that history is "that which has occurred in the past." Thus, history students, poor history students, think that mastering the subject merely entails the memorization of dates, places, and names. I'm concerned that while not intending to, we use the word in this rather mechanical sense in our discussions of evolution. When Maatman refers to biblical accounts of certain miracles as "incontrovertibly historical," he goes on to say that "these accounts are themselves historical and describe miracles which *indeed occurred*." I don't wish to take issue with the basic point that these events actually occurred. But I caution against using the word *historical* to mean merely "occurring in time."

One particular perspective, which I have been very impressed with, understands history as the forming of culture. Thus history is a human activity, the response of God's image-bearers to the cultural mandate. The study of history is the investigation into how humankind, in times past, has worked out the calling to "tend the garden," to unfold and develop the potentialities that God has placed in creation. We can then talk, of course, about political history. But we also find it meaningful to study history of science, art history, church history, and so on. On the other hand, it makes little sense to talk, for example, about the history of stars, because stars are not forms of culture. Stars were never given the cultural mandate. When we discuss stellar evolution we are really talking about temporal sequences of physical events and their relationship to each other.

I favor this view of history tied to the cultural mandate because I feel that it effectively counters that reductionistic worldview which attempts to see the universe in terms ultimately of physical events occurring in absolute time.

Time. This brings me to my last point. We need to rethink our understanding of *time*. Maatman avoids an extended discussion of the age of the creation because this discussion has divided Christians. It has because we have not challenged a view of time rooted in the modern, secular worldview. Both evolutionists and so-called "creation scientists" (and for the most part, everyone in between) hold to an absolutized, Newtonian view of time. Units of time, whether seconds, hours, years, or centuries, are thought of as absolute, independent of the events which occur "within" them. A time axis

is imagined, the same way a Cartesian space coordinate axis is imagined, with a positive and negative direction. The universe exists on that axis at a certain point. In the negative direction is the past, which has already occurred and so is to some extent knowable. In the positive direction is the future which has not occurred and is not knowable except by God. When we think of the act of creation, we look in the negative direction, along the time axis, and *look for point "zero."* When we think about Christ's return, the eschaton, we look in the positive direction for the opposite end point of the line.

Now in one respect, I have to admit, there is something healthy about this view of time. It makes clear that the creation is not static, but rather is moving toward that apocalyptic day when our Savior will appear, our loved one who has died will be raised to life, and the New Jerusalem will triumphantly be ushered in.

But in another respect this Cartesian or Newtonian view of time becomes the source of all kinds of problems. When we absolutize time, we have a natural tendency to subject God to it as well as man.

Let's take a look at that first sentence of Genesis 1: "*In the beginning* God created the heavens and the earth." In the beginning. It's crucial for us to realize that those three words are written to *us*, God's finite and temporal creatures. They establish a temporal frame of reference for us, but not for God. Consider this statement: "In the beginning God created the beginning." Does that make sense? Not to someone who thinks the universe is made up only of mass-energy particles flowing through absolute time. But we believe in a God who is both immanent and transcendent. God created time. Time, as we know it, is part of creation. To the extent that God is immanent in his creation, for example when he spoke to the prophets, when he appeared in the flesh as Jesus Christ, or as he lives in our hearts as the Holy Spirit, he subjects himself to time. But as the transcendent Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of the universe, he is the author of time; he stands, so to speak, *outside of time*.

When we speak then of the act of creation, we need to realize that we are speaking of an event which has both temporal and super-temporal characteristics.

Because the Cartesian or straight-line view of time subjects God to a part of his creation, I prefer a different model. Instead of viewing time as a line with

a beginning and an end, and with the universe represented by a series of points along that line, I suggest we consider the four-dimensional, space-time model of Einstein and Minkowski. In that model space and time are interdependent dimensions of our universe. Time is no longer absolute, and the terms "beginning" and "end" are never understood in a strictly temporal sense. The transcendence of God becomes a little easier to grasp.

Let me make an analogy. When Steven Spielberg produces a film he needs to put together a script. That likely involves outlining the plot, identifying characters, imagining places and situations, and finally getting the script on paper. Then he needs to find actors and begin filming. The filming does not start with the opening scenes, but takes place in an economically determined sequence. The scenes are placed in order during the editing process so that when we view the film it has a natural beginning and end. But the beginning of the film is obviously not the beginning of the creation of the film. We are talking about two different dimensions of time: the dimension that is the perspective of the film (you might say the created-time dimension), and the dimension in which the process of producing the film took place (call it the *real time*, if you like).

This analogy has some limitation. But it makes the point that we ought not confuse—what I will call for lack of a better term—God's time, with our time. The act of creation, which takes place in God's time, is not itself part of creation, and thus, I believe, can never be the subject of scientific investigation. We can know it only by faith. If there was a "big bang" billions of years ago, it is as silly to equate that with "God's creating the heavens and the earth" as it is to equate the opening scenes of Spielberg's film with his creation of the film. Just as Spielberg can hold the original 70 mm reel, containing the whole film, in his hands, so God holds the universe in his hands. And then we can understand when we read in Psalm 90 that, "A thousand years in his sight are but as yesterday when it is past," or when we read in Isaiah 46, how he sees "the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done."

This view of time doesn't answer all our problems. Neither do the definitions I've suggested for science, truth, and history. But I hope that considering them will help as we seek the primary goal of this conference—unifying Christians on their stand in regard to origins.