

Why I Believe, IV *Science and Religion*

Psalm 19; John 1: 1- 5

When Clarence Darrow prepared his famous examination of William Jennings Bryan in the Scopes trial, he chose to focus primarily on a chronology of Biblical events prepared by a seventeenth-century Irish bishop, James Ussher. Ussher added up the ages of all the people listed in the Bible back to Adam, and pronounced that he had determined that the date for Creation was October 23rd, 4003 BC.

American fundamentalists in 1925 rediscovered Ussher's calculation of dates —and generally accepted it as accurate. In fact, until the 1970s, the Bibles placed in nearly every hotel room by the Gideon Society carried Ussher's chronology. Today, there remains a split in the evangelical community between people whose very literal views of the Bible compel them to accept Bishop Ussher's chronology, or something close to it. There are people called “young earth creationists” who are convinced that Ussher got it right, that the Bible's intent was to give specific, accurate, scientific information.

They believe that fossil records, as well as scientific methods such as ‘carbon dating’ and other evidences of a much older universe was actually built into the world – planted, if you will – by God, to confuse people and to test their faith in the Scripture.

There are other Christians – and I think this would be a great majority today – who accept fossil evidence, etc., and hold a more metaphorical interpretation of the “days” in Genesis 1, but who still insist that species were intelligently designed by God, and were not the products of blind evolution.

In any message on “Science and Religion” it is pretty clear that the main issue on the table – some might say the *only* issue – is right here. Do we have to believe in a 6,000-year-old world to be a Christian? Is it necessary to fight against evolution to believe in God? Is Richard Dawkins correct – that we have moved beyond need for belief and that this whole religion thing is simply holding back our further development as human beings? Do we *have* to take Gen 1 – 3 *literally*?

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Must we lay aside what our minds know is true to believe something else?

And I would ask this: Would God's character allow him to create our minds, to give us rationality as part of our Creation made in God's image, and then *force* us to distrust those very minds? Is that consistent with God's revealed character?

There are Christians who have questions about these things, some may be sitting here today. There are others who really *don't* have questions, but truth be told, you would feel better if someone were to affirm to you that you aren't being unfaithful by holding a view other than that of a young earth, 7 - Day creation.

I've been saying since we began this series five weeks ago that there are no ultimate scientific proofs of God. Ultimate faith questions tend to be decided on grounds other than empirical evidence. We all know that different people can look at the same information and come up with completely different conclusions. You might remember that famous quote by one of the Russian cosmonauts back around 1955, in the early days of Space flight, who came back to earth and proudly announced "*I didn't see God up there!*" And yet, not too long afterward, the US astronaut Frank Borman, orbiting the moon on Christmas Eve, 1968, read the Creation story on national TV. He *did* 'see' God!

Some look up into the night sky and see...sheer emptiness. One of the 'arguments' against the existence of God comes from the incredible vastness of the universe. People look at it and wonder, "How can this be *about us*?" Some conclude, "It can't! We're too small and insignificant."

Others look 'up', even from a pre-scientific perspective and see the hand of God - Psalm 19 is a good example. "*The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*" I think it is sad that so many seem to feel that we have to choose between faith, and 'rationality'. I have always believed that not only can you be a thoughtful, intelligent person who loves science and uses their brain, and still believe in God; but in fact, I've always been convinced that the best Christians are those who are thoughtful, intelligent, and who think. (That

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is certainly the way that I picture you when I write my messages.)

My goal in this message is to give you some information that might help your perspective in this matter, and to give you ‘permission’ to use the intelligence that God has entrusted us with.

The Scientific method is something that nearly all of us have been taught since elementary school: you make an observation about something in nature, and you come up with a hypothesis – something that explains why a thing is the way it is, or how it will react in certain conditions. Then that hypothesis is tested ... if the tests are affirming, the hypothesis becomes a theory. You can then work with that theory, test it, experiment with it, refine it...

Richard Dawkins is an evolutionary Biologist who has become an “evangelical atheist.” Some of you may have read his book The God Delusion. He states that his goal is that ‘everyone who reads this book will become an atheist by the time they’re finished.’ He’s an angry guy. He is a scientist, one who has attained much knowledge based on this scientific method. And he’s really upset over his understanding of some people who question his work based on their understanding of a pre-scientific book.

But I think that he is reacting to a certain kind of Christianity, and as I said earlier, I don’t know how prevalent it is, but I think it is losing steam. I don’t think I know of anyone who believes that the earth is only 6000 years old. (At least I don’t know of anyone who has actually come out and told me that, maybe there are some.) Most put age of the earth in billions of years.

I also don’t know of a Christian person who doesn’t believe that evolution teaches a *mechanism* by which living organisms change over time. In itself evolution is not an anti-Christian theory. In fact, it explains a lot. (Now, I think people go to great extremes with it, and some use it to avoid any encounter with the Supernatural.)

I don’t believe that evolution was a completely unguided process – and I am in good scientific company in that regard. I have read articles by mathematicians (talking about statistical

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probability), microbiologists (such as Michael Behe), Physicists (writing about the laws of entropy and the second law of thermodynamics and on and on) – who convincingly argue that *scientifically speaking*, the odds against random changes and ‘chance combination’ of amino acids, and proteins and all the rest leading to the complexity of the multiple systems needed to sustain life – the probability of these things happening on their own are so vastly small that we really have no way to conceptualize how small it is!

One mathematician (Roger Penrose) wrote about the statistical probability of life arising by chance and he came up with a number, an exponent with an exponent (I don’t know how to say it). For a frame of reference, another mathematician said that this number is approximately the number of atoms in the universe. To me, that’s pretty slim odds.

I read an article in a recent National Geographic magazine about fresh water dolphins. They look a lot like the dolphins that we find in the open oceans, but they live in fresh water. They are rather aggressive, and have developed long, pointy snouts with sharp teeth that help them in the flooded rain forests in which they are found to hunt for fish and whatever else they need to survive.

Well, the article explained that there are three *distinct* strains of these rare fresh water dolphins; and, further, it said, that *they are not related to each other*. So, in an amazing stretch of logic that made me laugh, the author (apparently with a straight face) said that this is an *example* of ‘concurrent evolution’. Now, that is a nonsensical statement that doesn’t *explain* anything at all.

If it’s an example of anything, it is an example of how little we understand the process of how things came to being! Evolution by definition is a *chance* process (in which, contrary to the laws of physics we are asked to accept that mutations are advantageous and ultimately move from simple to more complex) but forget that for now. Here’s this scientifically respected magazine saying that this process could happen in *three separate locations* and produce almost *exactly* the same result, independently.

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And then say, “Here’s ‘an example’ of this!” (which implies that there are others too.)

Kind of mind boggling, I think.

Of course, one rebuttal to that is the current postulation that there are an infinite number of universes out there – existing in different dimensions, so we can’t see them. Which then lowers the odds. But, as there is no scientific evidence for this *at all*, it seems to me to be just as much a matter of faith as believing in God’s direction of this process!

I read another article referring to the combination of amino acids into protein chains (a basic starting block of life, but still a long way from the real thing.) This too, has been demonstrated to be an extraordinarily small probability of happening by chance. But some are saying that it wasn’t by chance at all, it happened ‘according to laws of Physics’; which seems to me to beg the question – who set up the Laws of physics? And why do other laws of physics *not* apply? (Such as the Second Law of Thermodynamics?) Do we get to choose which laws when it’s convenient?

I think there is a better explanation. And I don’t have to be ‘anti-science’ to believe it.

As we took a few weeks in this series to look at the Scripture (“Why I Trust the Bible”), I tried to make the point that the Biblical authors need to be allowed to live in their own time. We need to understand the purpose of their writings, and to be careful not to ask 20th and 21st century questions of pre-scientific people.

I don’t believe that Genesis 1 and 2 is to be looked at as a scientific text designed to teach us how the world was formed. It is clearly epic poetry whose purpose is to teach us theology and anthropology: i.e., it is teaching us **about God** and **about ourselves**. As such, these are two of the most important chapters in the entire Bible, as they answer vitally important questions for any age. The truths are expressed in poetic language, but it is truth nonetheless. You can clearly see the poetry in the writings as we read those familiar repeated lines:

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It was Evening and morning... the first day.

And God saw it was good. All repeated again and again. It is poetry! Which is not saying that it does not convey truth!

Writers took what they knew of the cosmos of the time and infused it with theology. But it *is* interesting to consider that up until 100 years ago people thought the universe was static. Then, following up on Einstein's theory of Relativity, scientists came up with the 'Big Bang' theory – stating that there was a beginning to the universe. The term itself was first used in by Fred Hoyle in 1949.

But 3200 years ago, Genesis got it right! There was a beginning! The universe was created (as the philosophers put it), *ex nihilo* – out of nothing. Now scientists agree with Genesis. Evolutionists tell us: life first came from the seas. And we read that in Genesis as well.

Evolutionists tell us that life developed from simple to more complex: same in Genesis. The writer puts it in terms of days, which may have been periods of time, and even huge periods of time. Science helps us understand what happened more clearly.

Most important things we read in Genesis, though, are not about the method, or order of the beginning of the Cosmos. We can, perhaps list at least four or five important – *foundational* – truths found in Genesis 1 and 2:

1. God started it all. (In the beginning...God created!) Just think of the implications of that one statement. We're not an accident. There is a purpose in our being.

2. Everything is *good*. The things God made were infused with God's character. It is all good.

3. Humans are the crowing point of the creation. We are set apart from the rest of creation in that we alone reflect the image of God – meaning, we can think, and reason; we are self-aware.

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4. Putting together # 1 -3 - We have a responsibility for *stewarding creation* as well. What we do with our lives, together, as the human race, is *important to God!*

5. From Genesis 2, we know that we humans wrestle with temptation (because we know the difference between right and wrong), and we can choose freely. And yet we often fall. And when fall, there are consequences, we lose paradise. As I've said before, the Bible tells *our story*. No where more so than in Genesis 1 – 2!

In past ages God was a convenient way of explaining things that people couldn't explain otherwise. There is a term for this: **God of the gaps**. People didn't understand lightning, and so they accepted that it was an expression of God's anger. John Wesley himself believed that earthquakes were expressions of the wrath of God – and in fact, droughts, infertility etc. were best explained as acts of God. Today we know *how* these things happen. To some degree... We know about tectonic plates, and their movement, and how Tsunamis form, we know about weather patterns and *el Nino*, and the temperature of the Gulf of Mexico, so we understand that Katrina was not the judgment of God on the southern US, the 2004 Tsunami in the Indian Ocean wasn't God's judgment on Indonesia. (But both were opportunities to demonstrate compassion on hurting people (a subject we'll talk more about next week).

The problem was that if God was the explanation for these things, as other causes were discovered by science, then God ends up smaller and smaller to the point where we simply don't need God anymore.

But... that whole conceptualization was based on an error. That's not what God wanted us to know about himself. There are life questions that are terrifically important, questions which will never be answered simply by science. Explaining the mechanism of something doesn't mean that we understand anything about the designer of that system! Doesn't mean that we know anything at all about the *purpose* of its design. And God tends to 'reappear' outside the gaps.

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In his book *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, William Lane Craig observes how difficult it is for an atheist to live with the logical conclusions of his or her beliefs:

“Unable to live in an impersonal universe in which everything is the product of blind chance, atheists sometimes begin to ascribe personality and motives to the physical processes themselves... For example, the brilliant Russian physicists Zeldovich and Novikov, in contemplating the properties of the universe, ask, why did “Nature” choose to create this sort of universe instead of another? “Nature” has obviously become a sort of God-substitute, filling the role and function of God.

*Francis Crick, halfway through his book *The Origin of the Genetic Code*, begins to spell nature with a capital N and elsewhere speaks of natural selection as being “clever” and as “thinking” what it will do. Sir Fred Hoyle, the English astronomer, attributes to the universe itself the qualities of God. For Carl Sagan the “Cosmos,” which he always spelled with a capital letter, obviously fills the role of a God-substitute. Though these men profess not to believe in God, they smuggle in a God-substitute through the back door because they cannot bear to live in a universe in which everything is the chance result of impersonal forces.¹*

I think a better explanation: God.

Everything came from nothing...the laws that govern the universe. Incredible mathematical precision of the universe. Amazing. Was it all chance?

In the mid- 70s we began hearing about something called the “Anthropic principle”. (Now, I’m not a scientist, so I may not explain this as well as some of you could...) Basically, the idea is that there are some constants in this solar system, i.e., the distance from sun, the size and distance of our moon...the composition of our atmosphere, there are something like 75 constants that need to exist in *exact precision* to produce life. If just *one* was off by a fraction, we would not be here. Even Richard Dawkins admits that the odds of all these coming together are extremely slim, but he says, “Nonetheless, its what happened.”

I think: not chance. A better explanation is God.

Think of the First cells: (Richard Behe writes very well about this in [Darwin’s Black Box](#)), the first cells to crawl out of the ‘primordial soup’ were not simply ‘living’. They had to have the

¹ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Crossway Books, 2008), p. 82

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ability to use energy, reproduce themselves, they had some kind of internal ‘software’ that told them what to do. These separate parts – complex systems – needed to emerge *simultaneously* or, that ‘mutation’ would have been wasted.

Adam Hamilton points out that that ‘simple code’ that controls one cell contains more information than all the words found in Dawkins’ book The God Delusion. Yet Dawkins says it all organized itself, with no other force exerted on it.

Just last Tuesday (cnn.com) I read an article about a spot that suddenly appeared on the surface of Jupiter. (It was noticed by an amateur astronomer.) Apparently, some rather large meteor crashed into the planet. It appeared so tiny on Jupiter's surface yet, it was the size of our Earth, which led to some to wonder Tuesday whether our planet might be in danger of a similar collision.

But an astronomer named Wesley was quoted saying that that shouldn't be a concern “because Jupiter functions almost like a celestial vacuum cleaner, sucking up any objects that would be of danger to Earth and its neighbors. Jupiter is doing a very good job in scooping up a lot of this material that's still floating around in the solar system.” he said. “It's just got so much gravity as it swings around the outer part of the solar system, it can really pull in and swallow up many of the cometary objects and debris left over from the formation of the solar system. So it's doing a good job in keeping us safe by cleaning out a lot of these bits and pieces.”²

Just *happens* to be there?

We had the opportunity a few nights ago to visit our son and daughter-in-law in far upstate NY (Potsdam). Jo’s parents live on a small farm, with large gardens behind their home and behind that, some fallow fields and a distant line of forest. We made a fire in a fire pit Monday night and were sitting out looking at the night sky, seeing stars that seem to be invisible in NJ.

I saw the brightest meteor that I’ve ever seen. And as I was marveling at it all, we heard a pack of coyotes just out of sight, but very close, yelping and howling as they passed by. It was very

²<http://www.cnn.com/2009/TECH/space/07/21/jupiter.nasa.meteor.scar/index.html?iref=mpstoryview>

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eerie sounding. I put our dog on a leash and walked out to the edge of the field to try to catch a glimpse of them, but it was a new moon, and I couldn't see anything (but they stopped yelping when I walked down there, so I guess they were watching me!)

I came back to the group and we looked up again and saw something very bright, very high, and very fast moving across the night sky. It was too fast to be a plane, too bright for a satellite. I made a guess that we were looking at the Space Shuttle. So the next morning I checked a NASA website which tells you where you can view the shuttle.³ And, sure enough, it had gone right over us at that exact time. (We saw it again on Wednesday night!)

I sat outside on a deck the next morning, with my computer, writing this message, and thinking of the combination of sights that I had seen the night before: awesome stars, the cloud of the Milky Way, the space shuttle flying over us, a meteor (a piece of debris from some ancient time), coyotes, the incredible array of wild flowers that I seen the previous morning, the potatoes that we had dug up and cooked immediately...

And I thought to myself: what conflict? I don't see a conflict. The Space Shuttle didn't make me feel that God was unnecessary. Science has expanded our wonder by revealing just how amazing this universe is – how complex, how vast, how intricate - but it hasn't made it any less beautiful. And it hasn't given us anything to add to our understanding of *why* we are here.

We are ever reaching out and learning more, and that is a wonderful thing. God has blessed us with the capacity to do much good (and evil) through knowledge. And knowledge is good, basically. But I'm convinced that there are some things that will never have a better explanation than "In the beginning...God"

³ <http://spaceflight1.nasa.gov/realdata/sightings/cities/skywatch.cgi?country=United+States>