

COULDN'T GOD GET IT RIGHT?

George L. Murphy, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Akron OH and Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus OH

Theologians and scientists have made a great deal of progress in relating their fields during the past twenty-five years. Many Christians have gotten past the old "warfare" model of the relationship between science and religion and can relate modern discoveries about the world with doctrines about creation and God's action in the world in positive ways. This helps the church to proclaim the gospel in a scientific world and provides guidance for decisions with which science-based technology confronts us.

But there remains a problem, one exploited by influential "creationists" and which is a stumbling block for non-Christians when they consider Christianity. Prominent biblical texts dealing with the origin and properties of the world seem, from a modern standpoint, to be incorrect. To note just Genesis 1, modern science doesn't speak of a flat earth covered by a solid dome, all of which came into being in six days. Thus, the thinking goes, either modern science or the Bible must be wrong.

Theologically sophisticated folks may be tempted to skip the rest of this essay. "Murphy is hopelessly out of date, a naïve inerrantist, etc. Doesn't he know that the Bible isn't a scientific textbook?" No, I live in the twenty-first century, try to read the Bible critically, and don't go to it to learn science. What I'm doing is to point out a problem with our attempts to communicate the message of the Bible, including what modern critical study has learned, to people in a scientific world.

People can understand that the Bible isn't a scientific textbook. Its purpose is to speak about God's relationship with the world and will for our lives. They're not bothered by its lack of detailed scientific information. But it has descriptions of the world and its history that its writers clearly thought were true but just aren't! And if the Bible is in some sense God's Word, if it means anything to say that it's inspired, why couldn't God manage to get better science into it? It needn't have been highly technical, but why not an elementary description of a cosmic explosion and gradual development of living things instead of what we have in Genesis?

The strength of such feelings is shown by the popularity of concordist interpretations of Genesis. Here the antiquity of the earth, a big bang and perhaps biological evolution are accepted, and biblical texts are interpreted in terms of those realities. The light of the first day may refer to the primordial fireball, the firmament is the atmosphere, the days periods of millions of years, and so forth. The biblical description is made into an elementary modern scientific description.

This approach does violence to the text itself. (This becomes especially clear when the second creation account is "harmonized" with the first.) But what is a better approach? It doesn't help simply to tell people that they're naïve and shouldn't expect

scientific truth in scripture. They may reply, “Why not? Didn’t God know about the big bang and evolution?”

There is a long history of Christian discussion of what can be meant by the inspiration of scripture. (Bruce Vawter, The Inspiration of Scripture [Westminster, 1972] is a helpful introduction.) It is surely more subtle than God putting words into a writer’s brain. Here I’ll emphasize one theme that may be helpful in considering texts like the Genesis creation accounts.

In The Cosmos in the Light of the Cross (Trinity Press International, 2003) I suggested that religious issues raised by science and technology are best understood in the context of a theology of the cross. The character and *modus operandi* of the God who is active in the world are revealed in the event of the death and resurrection of Christ. This can also help us to understand the way in which biblical texts speak about the natural world.

An important aspect of this is the idea of kenosis, the divine “emptying” of Philippians 2:7. As in the Incarnation Christ gave up the full exercise of divine power, so God chooses to limit divine action in the world to what can be accomplished with created agents and their natural operations. This is why the world can be understood in terms of natural processes even though God is always active in the world. The fact that science can understand what happens in nature without reference to God is thus implied by God’s fundamental self-revelation.

This idea can be applied to the inspiration of scripture. God could have moved biblical writers and redactors to give elementary descriptions of the big bang and evolution. But that isn’t how knowledge of the world developed in the cultures of the ancient Near East, and if the Holy Spirit acted within the limits of human knowledge about the world, the cosmologies of those cultures – which are now outdated – would provide the language in which biblical statements about creation would be expressed.

The idea of “accommodation” in the inspiration of scripture goes back to some church fathers and was used by Calvin. It’s important to understand, however, that it is God who accommodates the divine message to the limitations of human culture, being willing to use even views that would turn out to be wrong. (There are no “waters above the heavens.”) But though there is scientific error in the Bible, there is no intent to deceive. It’s even a blessing that the Bible does not freeze scientific understanding of the world at any stage of development, that of the first millennium B.C., the time of Newton or today.

An analogy has often been drawn between the inspiration of scripture and the Incarnation. As Christ is both fully human and fully divine, the Bible is both human writing and the Word of God. When we remember “Incarnation” includes the divine kenosis we will be able to see that the scientific limitations of scripture are not embarrassments which must be explained away but a result of the fullness with which God enters into the history of our world.