



Communication

Reading God's Two Books

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George L. Murphy



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The metaphor of God's "two books" has often been used in discussions about the possibility of knowledge of God.¹ The idea is that there are two sources for such knowledge, the book of God's works—nature—and the book of God's words—the Bible. There is a natural knowledge of God which can be gained from observation of, and thought about, created things, and there is a revealed knowledge that comes from special disclosures of God in history. These can lead, in turn, to natural theology and theology based upon revelation, and one then needs to ask about the relationships between these two theologies. (It should be noted that I do not speak about "revealed theology." Distinctively Christian theology is not revealed, but is faithful reflection upon the content of revelation and—if one allows the concept—natural knowledge of God.)

My concern here is not with the historical development of the two books concept in the Jewish and Christian traditions. We may note the reflections of the medieval Jewish philosopher Judah Halevi on the universe as *sefer*, text.² A statement of the concept in Francis Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* is of special interest because it is one of the quotations which Darwin included on the reverse of the fly-leaf of *The Origin of Species*:

To conclude therefore, let no man upon a weak conceit of sobriety or an ill-applied moderation think or maintain, that a man can search too far, or be too well studied in the book of God's

word, or in the book of God's works, divinity or philosophy; but rather let men endeavor an endless progress or proficience in both.³

The metaphor of the two books is not generally found as a separate item in theological dictionaries or encyclopedias, and is often used in whole or in part simply as a phrase to introduce science-theology discussions. A recent book with the title *God's Two Books* does not examine the metaphor in any detail.⁴ R. J. Berry's Gifford lectures, *God's Book of Works*, do have some material on the history of the concept.⁵

I have often been critical of ways in which natural theology has been used in the science-theology dialogue.⁶ My purpose here, however, is not simply to reject the two books concept. It is rather to ask some questions about it, point out its limitations, and suggest some cautions about its use.

We first need to ask how appropriate "book" language is in this context. It is clear that its use for nature is metaphorical: We do not literally "read" the world. But what about special revelation? The meaning here seems at first to be straightforward: God's "other book" is the Bible. In support of this idea, one might appeal to Psalm 19, one of the classic texts used to argue for a twofold revelation. Here a statement about the proclamation of the glory of God by the heavens continues with verses praising the law, precepts, etc. of YHWH.

We need to be careful, however. God's fundamental revelation is his actions in the history of Israel which culminate in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. As part of those actions, God inspired prophets and apostles to *proclaim*—before they wrote—God's will and point to Christ as its fullest expression. The Bible is the authoritative written witness to that revelation and the basis for its transmission.

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This is not to deny that the Bible can properly be called revelation insofar as it testifies to that historical revelation. But Christians are not to believe that the Bible is God's ultimate revelation, as Muslims believe the Qur'an to be. God's ultimate revelation is not the written Word, important as that is, but the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ.

Let us grant for the sake of argument that we can speak legitimately of God's two books. We then need to pose a question that is not asked often enough: "In what order are we to read these books?" It is often assumed that we can begin with the book of nature, but that assumption needs to be challenged.

Does it matter? Very much so. If I can cite an example from my own experience, I would refer to the way I first read Isaac Asimov's famous science fiction *Foundation* trilogy.⁷ Simply through the vicissitudes of finding the separate volumes, I read them backward: *Second Foundation*, then *Foundation and Empire*, and finally the first volume of the set, *Foundation*. It was somewhat confusing. I could figure out the basic story line but some things made little sense. I did not know some of the events that were referred to and when some names were mentioned, I would wonder, "Who are these people?" And this was in spite of the fact that in the second and third volumes the author had provided brief prologues to summarize the story line up to that point. Things would have been clearer to me if I had started at the beginning.

Nancey Murphy has, I think, described the situation well in some comments on Owen Gingerich's use of the two books metaphor. She is commenting here on a paper in which he deals, *inter alia*, with design arguments based on anthropic principles.

Gingerich uses the metaphor of the two books, the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature, both pointing to God. However, it seems clear to me, based on the considerations I have raised here, that these books ought not to be read independently of one another. In fact, the Book of Nature ought to be read as a sequel to the Bible. As with the sequel to a novel, it is important to read the first volume to find out about the characters. Or to drop the metaphor, we get our hypothesis of design from revelation. Discoveries like the fine tuning come along later, and their strength as evidence lies in confirming an already-existing hypothesis that already has other confirmation from other realms of experience. Without revelation, we would be at a loss to know what we mean by designer in such arguments.⁸

In our case, the proper reading order is even more important than it is if you are trying to decide whether to see the sequel to a movie before you have seen the original film. If you are a reasonably intelligent person, you can probably understand at least the basic plot of the second movie without knowing the first. And most importantly,

if you are a reasonably intelligent person, there is nothing inherent in you to distort your understanding of the film. That is not the case theologically because of the basic problem of human sin.

In what order are we to read these books? ... We should begin with the knowledge of God revealed in the history of Israel which culminates in Christ. Then we know that the creator, the author of the book of nature, is to be identified with the crucified and risen Christ, and we can read the book of God's works in that light.

In the traditions of the Reformation, it has been widely agreed that sin has had some effect on the image of God in humanity, but the extent to which it has been lost, distorted, or obscured has been debated. The issue does not have to be posed in terms of the *imago dei*. The basic aspect of original sin is that all people are from birth "unable to have true fear of God or true faith in God" as the Augsburg Confession puts it.⁹ And if we are in rebellion against God, we do not *want* to know God.

This is the point of Rom. 1:18-31, which is sometimes offered as an argument for natural theology. However, this is to misunderstand Paul's purpose here. The text speaks of the availability of a natural knowledge of God but warns about the way in which it is misused. What Paul says is that the natural world offers material from which God's "eternal power and divine nature" (NRSV) could be known, but that people uniformly refuse to know God and instead construct idols. The problem, in other words, is bad natural theology.

That indictment does not apply only to pagans before the advent of Christ. It is true of *all* people who try to develop an understanding of God from nature alone, apart from God's historical revelation. The result is not just the types of idols Paul speaks of in Romans—"images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles." There are more subtle and sophisticated idols that are palmed off as the true God—the



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If we begin by reading the Bible, and read it as first of all a witness to Jesus Christ, we know that God has been willing to share in the suffering and perishability of the world. Knowing that, we can see the suffering and extinction of the evolutionary process as the sign of the cross placed on creation.

Supreme Philosopher, the Cosmic Emperor, the Uncompromising Moralist, or the Intelligent Designer. While each of these images expresses something true about God, an overemphasis on any one of them results in an understanding of God which is quite different from the knowledge of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

To avoid this error, we should *begin* with the knowledge of God revealed in the history of Israel which culminates in Christ. Then we know that the creator, the author of the book of nature, is to be identified with the crucified and risen Christ, and we can read the book of God's works in that light. Metaphors of God as philosopher, ruler, moral teacher, or designer then have to be adapted to this revelation.

We can put this in another way. Nature understood as text tells us about—nature. That, of course, is the basic idea of the natural sciences: We come to understand the universe by reflection on the way it really is. In the same way, reading any book tells us about the story that author gives us. But reading a book does not necessarily tell us anything about the book's *author*. As the poet and critic Ezra Pound said, "You can spot the bad critic when he starts by discussing the poet and not the poem."¹⁰

This is the basis of Karl Barth's criticism of the *analogia entis*, the "analogy of being," which is at the root of the idea of natural theology independent of revelation. There simply is no reason to think that there must be such an analogy—that creation must in some way resemble the creator. It is quite another matter, once we know the creator, to look for evidence of his creative activity in the world.

Part of the confusion here arises because of our tendency to look at order, beauty, and other things in the world that are attractive to us as key aspects of nature that tell us something about its author. When we do that, we are actually smuggling in ideas about God from somewhere else. How do we know *a priori* that God is a God of beauty and love and not one of ugliness and hate in whose creation the beautiful elements that appeal to us are not mere accidents?

What does natural selection—what Stephen Gould called the "messy relentless

slaughter" of evolution¹¹—tell us about the creator? If we read the book of nature first, we might reasonably conclude that what is behind the evolutionary process is a cruel and ruthless God. If we begin by reading the Bible, and read it as first of all a witness to Jesus Christ, we know that God has been willing to share in the suffering and perishability of the world. Knowing that, we can see the suffering and extinction of the evolutionary process as the sign of the cross placed on creation.¹²

So where do we finally end up on the connection between natural theology and theology based upon revelation? I have previously described four possible ways of understanding the proper relationship.¹³

1. The Classical view, in which natural theology provides a foundation upon which distinctively Christian theology—that based upon revelation—can build.
2. The Enlightenment view, according to which the natural knowledge of God is all we really need. This would be very difficult if not impossible for a Christian to hold consistently, since the book of nature as commonly understood simply does not tell us about salvation through Jesus Christ.
3. The Barthian *Nein!*, which rejects natural theology.
4. The Dependent view, in which knowledge of the natural world is able to tell us something about God when placed in the context of revelation. Some writers would refer to this approach as a "theology of nature" rather than a "natural theology."

The Classical approach means reading God's books in the wrong order—or at least in an awkward order—and thus runs the risk of bringing misconceptions and prejudices to our interpretation of God's revelation in Christ. Certainly many theologians and parts of the Christian church have taken this approach, but it is risky. It carries the danger that we will become so intrigued with the book of God's works that we will not bother to move on to the book of God's Word, and thus slide into an Enlightenment position. Even if this does not happen, it is likely that this approach will introduce philosophical assumptions that relativize the importance of the core Christian beliefs in the Incarnation and the Trinity.

That in fact happened to a significant degree during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and Barth's view, the denial of natural theology, was in part a reaction to that. But while his negative view of natural theology is understandable in its historical context, it is clearly incomplete. It would mean finally that the natural world is of no importance for theology. The essence of Barth's position is the rejection of natural theology as an independent enterprise. The necessary positive completion of this position is accomplished, as Thomas Torrance has argued, by seeing natural theology as *dependent* upon revelation for its validity. In other words, natural theology must be a part of distinctively Christian theology.¹⁴

While science as an investigation of the natural world can be done without any religious presuppositions at all, it can only tell us something of value for theology if it is viewed in the light of revelation. To return to the book metaphor, we can learn about nature simply by reading the book of nature. But that book will tell us something about its author only if we have first read the Bible and understood its witness to Jesus Christ. ❧

Notes

¹This paper is a revised version of one presented at the 2004 annual meeting of the American Scientific Affiliation, Trinity Western University, Langley BC, Canada.

²Barry S. Kogan, "Judaism and Contemporary Scientific Cosmology: Redesigning the Design Argument" in David Novak and Norbert Samuelson, ed., *Creation and the End of Days* (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1986), 117-22. For more on the history, see G. Tazella-Nitta, "The Two Books Prior to the Scientific Revolution," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 57 (2005): 235-48.

³Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, ed. William Aldis Wright, 5th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1926), 10. Darwin's citation differs from this in minor ways.

⁴Kenneth J. Howell, *God's Two Books* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2002).

⁵R. J. Berry, *God's Book of Works* (New York: T & T Clark, 2003), 32-4.

⁶E.g., George L. Murphy, "'Chiasmic Cosmology' and 'The Same Old Story': Two Lutheran Approaches to Natural Theology" in *Facets of Faith & Science* 4, ed. Jitse M. van der Meer (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1996), 131-42.

⁷Isaac Asimov, *The Foundation Trilogy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1951).

⁸Nancey Murphy in Murray Rae, Hilary Regan, and John Stenhouse, eds., *Science and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 69-70.

⁹Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1959), 29.

¹⁰Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London: Routledge, 1934), 71.

¹¹Stephen Jay Gould, "Darwin and Paley Meet the Invisible Hand," *Natural History* (November 1990): 8.

¹²George L. Murphy, *The Cosmos in the Light of the Cross* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003).

¹³*Ibid.*, Chapter 2.

¹⁴Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic, 1985).