

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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The Psalms and Science

Together with Psalm 1, Psalm 2 introduces the major themes of the book of Psalms, the hymnbook of ancient Israel. Psalm 1 teaches that the blessed human being is the one who enjoys the “sumptuous meal” of God’s Word each day—and then meditates on it throughout the day. That person is like a tree planted by water (i.e., the Word) and he/she draws sustenance and nourishment from that Word. Psalm 2 helped the ancient Israelites to understand how they fit into God’s big picture. Psalm 2 is about worldview issues. Together, these two Psalms give focus to what is really important to God.

Psalm 2 is the coronation psalm of King David (see Acts 4:25-26). David asks rhetorically why the world is in such a mess. It is because humans and their leaders are in rebellion against God and His anointed one (i.e., His Messiah). They desire to be free (see v. 3) of God and His moral law. God responds by mocking the sheer absurdity of creatures rebelling against Him (see vv. 4-5), but He offers an alternative--His King, His Messiah (v. 6). That anointed one speaks in vv. 7-9 and we learn that God has promised His Son something (using the language of coronation, v. 7): That He will one day rule planet earth and crush the rebellion (see v. 9 and then see it quoted in Revelation 19:15 as a part of Christ’s Second Coming). What then do we do with truth such as this? Psalm 2:10-12 is a call to wisdom—for the leaders and for the people. We are admonished to “kiss the Son,” to worship Him. The alternative is His wrath and His judgment. But the Psalm ends with this powerful encouragement—“Blessed are those who take refuge in the Son.” The New Testament tells us how to do that—place our faith in Jesus Christ and His finished work through His death, burial and resurrection. Our task then is to represent the Son well and call men, women and boys and girls to a wise response to God’s offer of salvation in His Messiah.

Finally, Psalm 19 is the perfect introduction to thinking about science, for it argues for the complementarity of God’s two revelations—His world and His Word. As Allen Ross argues in his masterful commentary on the Psalms: “If the sun is the most glorious gift of the creator for physical life, the word of Yahweh is the most glorious gift for the spiritual life. . . There is no physical life without the sun; there is no spiritual life without the word. There is a perfect complementarity between the two parts, showing that their connection was well designed.” In the Psalm’s first six verses, King David asserts that creation reveals God (*El* here, as in Genesis 1), His value, His worth and His importance. The revelation through creation is continuous and never fails and it communicates truth (v. 2, reminding me of Romans 1:18-32). God’s creation reveals His power and His divine nature. It is indeed nonverbal revelation (v. 3) but it is everywhere available and no one can deny its benefits or its nature as revelation (vv. 3-4). In a stinging polemic against the sun worshippers of the ancient world, David makes clear that the sun is not to be worshipped; God is, for He created it. Using six different terms for God’s verbal revelation, David next focuses on Yahweh’s Word, and affirms the central role it plays in his

life. It is necessary for spiritual renewal, forgiveness, and restoration and its testimony is reliable, trustworthy, and a source of wisdom (v. 7). God's Word gives him spiritual perception and enables him to live out God's plan for his life (v. 8). Finally, it energizes his worship and is a valid source of truth and righteousness in his life (v. 9). God's Word encourages David to pursue a life of spiritual integrity and commitment (vv. 10-12). In short, the revelation of God in nature and the revelation of God in His Word provide a perfect balance in his life. God's world provides the necessities for him to live physically and His Word provides the necessities for him to live spiritually—thereby filling his life with meaning and purpose. Together with Psalm 1 and 2, Psalm 19 provides the foundation for a fully integrated worldview.

What then does all this have to do with science? Recently, I read an important article by Calvin College philosophy professor, James K.A. Smith, "What Galileo's Telescope Can't See." Smith summarizes the contention of many when it comes to the relationship between the Christian faith and modern science: That ours is a "'Galilean' moment: a critical time in history when new findings in the natural sciences threaten to topple fundamental Christian beliefs, just as Galileo's proposed heliocentrism rocked the ecclesiastical establishment of his day. This parallel is usually invoked in the context of genetic, evolutionary and archeological evidence about human origins that challenges traditional Christian understandings." Before any evidence is even placed on the table, such a framework is "characterized by chronological snobbery and a self-congratulatory sense of maturity and progress." This means that those who view science through the grid of biblical orthodoxy are backward, timid and "fundamentalist." Those who view Christians in this manner treat theology as a kind of bias against science and the seeming "progress" it represents. As Smith suggests, a natural conclusion emanates from such logic: "Just as Galileo's telescope taught us to give up on what wrongly seemed 'essential' to the faith, so today's fossil record and genetic evidence press us to give up clinging to a historical couple or a historical Fall." The challenge is that the scriptural witness seems to tell us one story about the world while evolutionary science seems to tell us another. To invoke Galileo into the argument supposedly then ends the argument. Who wants to stand against the progress of science, especially the science built on the foundation of the evolutionary hypothesis? The Bible, theology and historical, biblical Christianity are all roadblocks and need to be set aside—or changed.

But, as Smith argues, we do not need to do this. The early church is a wonderful and affirming model for us in the 21st century: ". . . their central conviction of the lordship of Christ over all creation gave them a courage and confidence to theorize imaginatively and creatively. They did not look for ways to blunt or downplay the particularities of the gospel. Animated by the conviction that all things hold together in Christ, early Christian theologians forged new models and paradigms which we now receive as magisterial statements of the faith. . ."

As 21st century Christians, we must also begin our thinking with the proposition that Jesus Christ is Lord over all creation and that He sustains that creation (see Colossians 1:15-20). Modern advances in genetics or in evolutionary science are not to be feared. Rather, as with all things, critical thinking and the freedom to explore should be embraced. Careful examination of the evidence for the evolutionary hypothesis should be encouraged. As with anything, it should be open to critical scrutiny. It is not a sacred dogma that cannot be questioned. This is why it is unconscionable for Bill Nye, "the Science Guy," in an online video to urge parents not to pass

their religious-based doubts [of evolution] on to their children. He says that parents can dismiss evolution, “but don’t make your kids do it. Because we need them.” I have no idea what he means by “we need them,” but intellectually honest people do not need to set aside their beliefs about Christ as the creator and sustainer of the universe in their pursuit of truth. The sacred idols of Darwin and secular science are just that—idols. As Psalm 19 explains, to study God’s world (science) is to study about God and that study will be enhanced, not destroyed by the study of His verbal revelation—His Word. They form a perfect complement in the pursuit of truth. That proposition most people once affirmed. We who name Christ’s name must not be ashamed to still affirm it.

See James K.A. Smith in www.christianitytoday.com (1 October 2012); Marvin Olasky in *World* (5 May 2012), p. 11); Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms: Volume 1*, pp. 465-488; and Dylan Lovan in www.StatesmanJournal.com (25 September 2012).