

What's the Relationship between Science and Religion?

Gen. 1:1-2:3

June 28, 2020

Kory Wilcoxson

The author of Genesis chose an incredibly understated way to start the most famous book in history. "In the beginning." Those words launch a story that has profoundly shaped and transformed culture to this day. Who knew that three little words could be the start of a book that inspires such great faith and such great controversy? "In the beginning."

Here's what I want to know: In the beginning of what? That's a very dangerous question. Because as soon as you start asking questions about the Bible, you have to start looking for answers. The Bible in general, and the creation story in particular, has been mined repeatedly for answers to all the significant and meaningful questions in life. And some people have claimed to have found all the answers. Really? If they've found all the answers, I'm not sure they're asking the right questions.

Let me explain that statement this way. A four-year-old boy came to his mother one day and said, "Mommy, where did I come from?" The mother, caught off-guard, began hemming and hawing, trying to figure out how to appropriately answer. She mumbled something about when a man and woman really love each other, they hold hands until a stork comes to give the woman an epidural and brings a baby in a basket. The boy looked puzzled for a second, then said, "That's weird, because Jimmy said he comes from Indiana."

When we are looking for answers, we have to be sure we understand the question, or else we may end up finding a perfectly plausible answer to the wrong question. I believe this happens a lot with the creation story at the beginning of Genesis. People ask questions like, "If God didn't create the sun until the fourth day, where did the light come from when God said, 'Let there be light?' Where did the water come from? Where did the seeds come from for the first plants? Where are the dinosaurs? Why does God say, 'Let us make humans in our image?' Who's us?"

These are all very good questions that deserve answers. So why doesn't the Bible answer these questions? How are we supposed to reconcile the Creation Story with what we have learned from archeology and physics and chemistry and biology and other scientific fields? Some people say science and the Bible can't co-exist, that you have to choose one or another. But I'm not so sure. In fact, I believe the Bible and science can complement each other through what we learn from them. But we have to be aware of our cultural context. One danger of our times is that children are being educated in matters of technology and science, but under-educated in matters of religion. That's a serious problem. To bridge this wide gap, we have to help them learn how to understand the purpose of this story and what questions it is – and is not – addressing.

I'm in no way condemning or condoning a particular scientific understanding of how we got to where we are, be it creationism or evolution or the Big Bang Theory or intelligent design. But what I have learned is that the book of Genesis wasn't written to for that purpose. There is not a single example of God revealing scientific information to the Israelites. God didn't create the plant life and then say, "Let's watch this filmstrip about how photosynthesis works." Using Genesis to support a scientific hypothesis is like using a cookbook to learn how to fix a car or using a Picasso painting to explain human anatomy.

We can't prove the events of the creation story. But we don't have to, because the Bible and science aren't trying to do the same things. Instead, they could be seen as working in

harmony with one another. My understanding of harmony is that different notes and different voices combine together to make the final product. Likewise, scripture and science work in harmony to help us try and understand what is ultimately not understandable. In fact, you could say that science is one way of describing the work of God in this world.

When we approach Genesis, we have to be sure we're asking the right questions. We shouldn't ask, "Can I use Genesis to defend this or that theory of creation?" We should ask, "What is God trying to tell me here? What can I learn about my faith through this story?" If the primary purpose of the Bible is to reveal God to us, we shouldn't ask, "What does this story say about us?" We should ask, "What does this story say about God?"

For me, the essence of the issue between science and religion is truth. Which creation story is true, the scientific version or the biblical version? It's a fair question, for sure, but it needs to be followed up, not with an answer, but with another question: What kind of truth are we talking about? Webster's defines "true" as "in accordance with fact or reality." In that case, the Bible isn't true. For example, in Genesis 1, when God created the world, the writer tells us, "And God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.' So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky." As we know today, that answer is not in accordance with fact or reality.

Back when Genesis was written, they didn't have NASA and space shuttles. They didn't even have a VHS copy of "E.T.!" So they could only write what they knew. They looked up and saw this blue expanse, which was the same color as the water around them, so they assumed there was a dome holding back those waters. And they called the dome "Sky." That was true for them, so that's what they wrote. We know now there is no dome holding back the waters. From a factual standpoint, from a scientific standpoint, that's just not true.

But is that the only kind of truth? When I walk out on my patio in the morning and see light appear in the sky, I say, "The sun is rising in the East." Now, a meteorologist or astronomer would be quick to point out that statement is factually untrue. The sun doesn't rise or set; it stays still while the earth moves. But my experience tells me that the sun rises and sets. That is true for me, even if it's not true in other ways. Could there be more than one kind of truth?

A quick history lesson may help us answer that. A change occurred in the mid-17th century that fundamentally altered the understanding of what is true. Until that point, the church had a lot of control over what was considered true, and the Bible was a primary authority on all truth. But in the 1500s, people like Galileo and Copernicus began asking questions the Bible couldn't answer, and that set off a seismic cultural shift. Instead of using religion to explain the natural world, people started using science. The only things that were true were things that could be proven true. The scientific method was born. Experiments were conducted. Telescopes were used. And the Bible was no longer the primary source of truth. This was the beginning of the Enlightenment.

But people knew there were other truths that were beyond proof. Does love exist? Of course! Can you prove it using the scientific method? Not a chance. During this time, a division occurred called the fact-value split. Facts can be proven, they can tell you what something is or HOW it works. Values cannot be proven, but are no less true. They tell you what something means, WHY it is important. There are truths out there that go beyond our ability to prove them as being true. Some things are true as facts, like $2+2=4$; some things are true as values, like love and freedom.

So, is the Bible factually true? Not entirely. We know now the world isn't flat, that evil doesn't live in the ocean, and there's not a dome above us. But is the Bible true in other ways? Absolutely, because for Christians there's a difference between fact and truth. Here's one way I can think of to highlight the difference. To say "Jesus died" is a fact, as best as we know. To say "Jesus died for our sins" is a truth, one that goes much, much deeper than any fact.

There were certain truths the biblical writers were trying to convey, and they wrote in order to convey those truths, truths like God is love and Jesus is the Messiah and we are God's children. Are those facts? I don't know. I can't prove them to you. But are they truths? Absolutely. It's OK to believe that not everything in the Bible is factually true. It's OK to have doubts about the historical validity of some of the stories. That doesn't mean you're a bad Christian or an irresponsible person. It means you're human and you're using your God-given brain to try and make sense of this thing called faith.

That's where science and religion can hold hands in helping us make sense of the world. Science is trying to answer the "how" question and religion is trying to answer the "why" question. If we try to use either one to answer the wrong question, then we're distorting the harmony God created between them. Religion was not meant to answer "how." It helps us answer "why."

We've been told we have two choices: believe everything in the Bible and toss out all we've learned through science, astronomy, archaeology, and medicine; or don't believe everything in the Bible and go to Hell. I believe there's a better way. I choose to believe the biblical writers wrote what they knew at the time. I choose to believe we've used our brains to learn more about our natural world, sometimes in ways that contradict or even disprove the Bible. And I choose to believe the Bible is true in ways that go so much deeper than what we can prove. Thank God for the Bible which helps us answer the "why" questions, and for science, which continues to help us answer the "how" questions. If we keep each of them in their own lanes, then it's fair to say that both science and religion are right. Thanks be to God.