



Texts in Context

Tracing the Fingerprint of God: Faith and Science (Psalm 8)

CLAYTON J. SCHMIT

In the twelfth year of the new century, one of the key questions facing culture (and thus, the church) is the relationship between faith and science. What *do* we—what *can* we—ultimately believe in? We have learned the trustworthiness of science. If something can be measured, it can be proved. If it can be observed, it can be trusted. Such confidence has funded our modern world: exploration of space, mapping chromosomes in the human genome, charting the ocean's depths, discovering new species, probing the subatomic world, projecting the notion that the universe is populated by micro-atomic strings that fold into multiple dimensions (mind-bogglingly, as many as eleven!), and the possibility of multiple parallel universes. As postmodernism claims to overtake our modern ways of learning and thinking, science holds as much sway as ever in our systems of belief. We still believe that the key to sorting out mysteries is to probe deeply, to experiment unceasingly, and to find the funding to do more research. If science is sufficiently engaged, we can still cure cancer, put people on Mars, calculate the size of the universe, and reveal the secrets at the singular centers of black holes. But, can it help us contend with the biggest of all big questions? Can it show us the fingerprint of God?

Must faith and science be at odds? The writer of Ps 8, like a good scientist, was a careful observer who faithfully reported what he saw. He saw what many scientists have seen as well: the fingerprints of God. Careful observation and faithful reporting provide a place for preachers to begin to understand both the Scriptures and the world.

THE DILEMMA FOR PEOPLE OF FAITH

People of faith are caught in a tangle. For some, though Fundamentalist approaches to biblical interpretation are waning, the claims of faith simply run counter to what we observe in the universe. Faced with the necessity to believe in the science that has created the fast-paced, wired world we inhabit and the desire to believe in the Bible, some believers live bifurcated lives of cosmic denial. They preach a Genesis view of “firmament,” where there are waters in the heavens, while watching television programs beamed to earth from satellites. They conflate the two biblical accounts of creation and uphold their ironic factuality while driving cars fueled by dinosaur remains.

Others of us use the methods of science to interpret the Scriptures and wrestle in our hearts between trusting scientific examination and the realization that it may prove our faith to be untenable. Where do faithful people draw an epistemological line between empiricism and belief? The old and not very funny joke in seminary is that it is a theological “cemetery,” the place where living faith dies through study of the Scriptures.

Where do faithful people draw an epistemological line between empiricism and belief?

Fueling the dilemma are the voices of those who, once believers, have become such careful students of the universe that they have deduced that God does not exist. Perhaps chief among them is Richard Dawkins. He was raised faithfully in the Anglican Church. He became an evolutionary biologist who ultimately came to deny his faith. “[I]nsofar as theology studies the nature of the divine, it will earn the right to be taken seriously,” he said, “when it provides the slightest, smallest smidgen of a reason for believing in the existence of the divine. Meanwhile, we should devote as much time to studying serious theology as we devote to studying serious fairies and serious unicorns.”¹ If we live in a culture that is keenly dependent upon the modern developments that have established our ways of life, we are, by extension, likely to trust the voices of research. How can we imagine a life today without the Internet and the iPad? Those who make the gizmos upon which we depend are the gurus with persuasive say in what we think and how we believe. If Steve Jobs was right about the iPhone, how could he be wrong about God? In his recently published biography, he is reported to have left the Lutheran Church of his upbringing at age thirteen when the pastor said that God was in charge of the plight of the starving children of Biafra.²

Science is the process of learning through examination. The scientist’s job is

¹Richard Dawkins, The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, at [http://richarddawkins.net/quotes?page=2&search\[author_eq\]=Richard+Dawkins&utf8=✓](http://richarddawkins.net/quotes?page=2&search[author_eq]=Richard+Dawkins&utf8=✓) (accessed February 23, 2012).

²Walter Isaacson, *Steve Jobs* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011).

to observe and report. Whether looking through telescopes at the vast cosmos, through microscopes at the construction of molecules, or through particle accelerators at the inner workings of atoms, the goal is to construct reliable knowledge. For people of faith who see the hand of God at work in all aspects of the natural world, it seems sad, even lamentable, that people can spend their entire lives looking at what God has made without ever seeing the Maker behind it. More than not seeing the forest for the trees, people like Dawkins miss the astonishing powers and intellect of the Creator while carefully peering at the powerful and brilliant objects of God's invention. People of faith cannot imagine a more reliable conclusion than that scientific discovery pushes us even more certainly to an awe-filled awareness of the Divine.

Pastors in the church are on the front line of defense against this onslaught of reason over against faith. It is to them that the people of our congregations naturally turn. How can pastors make sense of the debate? How can we who preach the gospel give thoughtful assistance to those—some of whom are engineers, mathematicians, and scientists themselves—who seek to put faith and reason in perspective?

THE PSALMIST AS OBSERVER

While we cannot fruitfully turn to Scripture for answers to scientific questions, we can—and naturally, must—turn to the Bible as the source for discernment and wisdom. Preachers, more than anyone else, realize that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 9:10). For a wise approach to the dilemma, then, turn with me to Ps 8. Here we have the words of a poet who, in an ancient sense, was at work observing the world and providing a report about it in the best way he (probably a male writer) knew to do. We might find here a parallel between the work of science and the life of faith.

The psalmist was a careful observer of the cosmos. We can imagine him walking out into the dark Palestinian night, moving far away from campfires or town lights in order to behold the stark definition of the night sky. Looking heavenward, he observes “the moon and the stars,” the very work of God's fingers. He sees how God has set his “glory above the heavens,” and proclaims in wonder, “How majestic is your name in all the earth.” Then, he looks around him and sees how God cares and provides for people. He asks an obvious question: If you have so placed the celestial objects in the sky and keep them aligned in their magnificent array, how can you at the same time care about insignificant creatures? “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” His observations go on: “You have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.” He notes that God has given mortals dominion over the other works of creation, the service beasts and the ones who provide milk and meat, those that fly and those that swim. In wonder, he proclaims again, “O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth.”

The psalmist is like a scientist. He observes and reports. He uses the best scientific instruments available to him: his eyes and ears, his smell and touch. They are the same instruments Newton used when he timed the period of a pendulum according to his own heartbeat. The psalmist gathers data and gives a report of what he has observed. When he looks at the heavens, he sees in the stars and moon the very fingerprints of God. And when he looks upon himself and people like him, he sees evidence of the overpowering tenderness with which God cares for his people, and makes them the jewel of creation.

The psalmist uses the best scientific instruments available to him, his eyes and ears, his smell and touch. They are the same instruments Newton used when he timed the period of a pendulum according to his own heartbeat.

If it is pitiable to look and not perceive, then how blessed it is to observe and discover all that God has placed before us to see: the grandeur, wonder, brilliance, stunning evidence of God's glory. The world is displayed before the psalmist's eyes, and he sees all that is there and all that stands behind it. He believes in God and knows God and erupts in a rhapsody of praise, because God is so achingly apparent to anyone who has no veil of wisdom or learning or corruption to obscure their vision. The psalmist has no telescope or microscope, yet he observes the universe with the intensity of a scientist and sees—truly sees—all there is to see. He sees the face of God.

A POINT OF VIEW

Not all scientists are atheists. Many are believers in some First Mover and some are believers of God and followers of Christ. What is wrong with them? Are they blind to the methods of science so that they miss the purely mechanical possibilities that may have brought the cosmos into its present form? Or, perhaps the better question to ask is, What is right with them? Are they seeing even more deeply than those who use scientific instruments that cloud their judgment about the truth of the universe?

The scientist's method is to be objective. But, even a stance of pure objectivity represents a particular footing, a perspective, a selective point of view. One cannot ever be completely objective. A critical example can be seen in the work of the well-known Jesus Seminar,³ a group of biblical scholars who have looked at the Gospels with such objective scrutiny that they have overlooked the most obvious conclusion: the words of Jesus have survived the eons and continue to transform human lives because they are inspired by the Spirit of God. Their "objective"

³See "The Jesus Seminar Forum" at <http://virtualreligion.net/forum/> (accessed February 23, 2012).

stance begins with a bias against the conclusion that best matches the historical data. Such objectivity, of course, is not pure. It results in a conclusion heavily weighted by the prejudgment of the subjects doing the research. Such selective objectivity is a methodology that fails before it begins. But it yields results that are attractive in their cultural “correctness.” The best science lets the experimental data chips fall where they may, allowing observation to reveal things that reason, preference, and previous experience deny. For example, recent explorations in quantum physics push toward the conclusion that Einstein’s theory of general relativity is either flawed or at least wrong in relation to the physics of subatomic particles. More science is needed to determine the extent to which the conventional wisdom of the last hundred years represents a reliable account of the laws of the universe.

The scientist’s method is to be objective. But, even a stance of pure objectivity represents a particular footing, a perspective, a selective point of view. One cannot ever be completely objective.

SEEING THINGS AS THEY ARE

For science, then, to be open to finding evidence of God through unbiased observation is an issue of particular interest to the church. How refreshing it is for people of faith when scientists peer at the fingerprints of God and see them for what they are.

I have a personal letter from one such scientist, one who looked into the heavens and saw God. I have never published its contents publicly, but it speaks so thoughtfully to our consideration of Ps 8 in the context of the faith/science debate, it seems appropriate to share a portion of it here. This is a letter written to a retired engineer who was a member of my congregation when I was a boy. He had written to the great rocket scientist Werner von Braun, the father of the NASA space program. The engineer knew von Braun to be a man of faith and boldly wrote to ask him how he reconciled faith in Christ with his life as a scientist. The rocket man took a long time in writing back, because “I do not like to move hastily in matters of such grave import,” he said. Then, in a hand-typed, five-page, single-spaced letter on NASA letterhead, von Braun provided a careful answer to the engineer’s question. The date of this correspondence is January 3, 1972. I was mailed a copy of this letter during my first year at seminary when the engineer’s widow was going through her husband’s papers. She thought a young pastor would appreciate the value of the correspondence. Here is a portion of what von Braun told his inquirer:

I would have to say that for me the grandeur of the cosmos confirms my belief in the certainty of a Creator. There are the gift of love, the will of a species to live and propagate, the powerful force at work on a galactic scale, and the growth of an ungainly seed into a beautiful flower....The universe, as revealed through

scientific inquiry, is the living witness that God has indeed been at work....My experience with science...led me to God—it was as if I were putting a face on God.

There are some clear parallels between what the scientist and the psalmist are saying. In another age, we might imagine that von Braun could have written Ps 8. Or that the psalm writer, in another era, might have been a great scientist. Both were poets, observing the world and declaring what they had seen.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge gave what he considered a homely definition of poetry: “the best words in their best order.” We might extrapolate that definition for the work of science: the best numbers in their best order. Take, for example, $2 \times 2 = 4$. That order works and represents a true description of reality. Another order ($2 \times 4 = 2$) or a different set of numbers ($3 \times 5 = 7$) do not work. Best numbers in their best order are what scientists use to define the cosmos: $E = mc^2$. In a sense, we might also say that the work of science and the work of poetry have a parallel kind of symmetry. For each, the work is to observe and report, using the best means of observation available and the best symbols at their disposal. Poets use human senses and words; scientists use instruments and mathematics.

The writer of Ps 8 has given us a good report of his observations. He looked over the cosmos and saw there the finger of God. Perhaps in our debates about faith and science we can find common ground by opening our ears to the words of that poet, who in his own best way was making a reliable claim about the reality of the universe. ⊕

CLAYTON J. SCHMIT is the Arthur De Kruyter/Christ Church Professor of Preaching at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California.