

# When God Uses Science

Matthew 2.1-12  
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First Christian Church

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In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who is to shepherd my people Israel.” ’

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Before I begin, I want to apologize for the length of this sermon. I was trying to edit it to digestible size last night while I watched the TCU game, and was succeeding until TCU was down 31-0. After that, I got a little distracted.<sup>1</sup>

Religion and science—what is the relationship? Do they occupy two totally different places? Or are religion and science two of the Biblical binaries, like heaven and earth, law and grace, justice and mercy, crucifixion and resurrection? Let’s answer by starting with today’s scripture.

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<sup>1</sup> At the Alamo Bowl in San Antonio, TCU was losing to Oregon 31-0 in the first half, and came back to win 47-41 in triple overtime.

The reading concerns a group of religious scientists who observed a striking celestial event and chose to seek out its meaning. Those scientists—though they wouldn't have used that term—were the wise men, the magi. They were, in all likelihood, Zoroastrian priests from the Parthian Empire, who were inspired by their religion and their science to make a long trek to the side of the infant Jesus in Bethlehem.

Though Zoroastrianism was not a monotheistic religion, it was morally serious, and its magi believed in their absolute obligation to behave justly. The magi were also accomplished stargazers, finding meaning in the movements of the planets and the stars. According to our scripture, they beheld a celestial phenomenon—something that looked like a star, but didn't behave like one—that persuaded them to strike out to find the newborn King of the Jews. What did they see? Here are two possibilities. One comes from a Cambridge professor and astronomer named Colin Nicholl, who argues that it was a great comet, like the Hale-Bopp comet, which was visible for almost a year in 1996-1997. Nicole calls it “The Great Christ Comet,” and has just recently published a book by that title. The other, more complicated possibility has to do with astronomical records. In 7 B.C. there was a conjunction of the planet Jupiter, considered the royal star, and the planet Saturn, which was thought to be a special star for the people of Mesopotamia; in fact, the prophet Amos denounced the Israelites for turning away from God, and worshipping Saturn as a star god known as *Kaiwan* [Amos 5.26]. The conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, which occurred three times in 7 B.C., appeared in the constellation Pisces. Pisces, the fish, was considered the special constellation of the Jews. That occurrence—a triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation Pisces—occurs only once every 900 years. It is quite possible that these stargazing magi should conclude

that this was a sign in the heavens that the King of the Jews had been born, and to wonder if he might be their own long-prophesied *Sosyant*, or Savior. What kind of convoluted sign was this? Maybe a strange one for scientific 21st Century types like us, but if you read your daily horoscope, you are using the same data. Even though the science that led them to Jesus' side is now far outdated, and there are very few Zoroastrians left in the world, God reveals things to us through the tools we have at hand, which includes contemporary science. But scientific understandings are always changing, always evolving. That is why, if the Church weds the science of any age, she will find herself a widow the next. But we are enthralled by the story of the wise men not because of the science they used, but because of their journey to the side of Christ.

When does God use science? When does God not? Last week, I prayed with the family of one of our beloved members that his impending surgery would be a means of his healing—surgery that was itself a modern scientific marvel. Both religion and science ask, “Why are things the way they are? What language can we use to describe the things that we observe?” Science does not answer every question we have about the world, but neither does religion. I don't look to the Bible to find out how to maintain my car or operate my computer; I don't look to an operator's manual to find out how I should live. Oxford's Alister McGrath, a molecular biologist and devout Christian, says that “Science asks the ‘how’ questions, while religion asks the ‘why.’ Science seeks to clarify mechanisms; religions offer meaning.” That said, some scientists and some believers see themselves locked in mortal combat. Richard Dawkins, the evolutionary biologist and militant atheist, said in his book, *The God Delusion*, “I am against religion because it teaches us to be satisfied with not understanding the world.” What a preposterous and ignorant

statement. The best definition of Christian education is that it is faith *seeking* understanding. As Proverbs 3.13-18 says,

Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her...

By the same token, those whose particular field of expertise is religion ought to be cautious in making judgments on scientific findings if they don't understand the science behind them. The late Jerry Falwell, God rest his soul, once said, "I believe that global warming is a myth. It is God's planet -- and he's taking care of it. And I don't believe that anything we do will raise or lower the temperature one point." Well, leaving aside the *science* of climate change—I wouldn't touch the *politics* of it with a ten-foot pole—the Bible itself says that human beings can mess up God's Creation. In the account in Genesis of the expulsion from the Garden, the Lord says to Adam and Eve, "Cursed is the ground because of you" [Genesis 3.17]. I can't speak with authority about human-activated climate change on the basis of science, but I can say that the Bible tells us that we, by our actions, can profoundly affect God's Creation.

Throughout history, people have always tried to explain why something is the way it is. The term for this is "etiology." It comes from a Greek term meaning, "giving the reason for." In medicine, it means trying to determine the cause of a disease or a condition: for example, why is this person suffering from diabetes, or heart disease? In law enforcement, it means an investigation to determine how a criminal act occurred—why is this bank missing two million dollars? In the Book of

Genesis, especially in the 2nd and 3rd chapters, there are many etiologies: Why do women give birth in pain? Why is growing a food crop so hard? Why do human beings have a natural revulsion to snakes? The Genesis answer is that the original humans, Adam and Eve, disobeyed God after being tempted by a serpent, and were cast out of the Garden of Eden. Some say that that this is the literal truth of what happened. But can some things be true without being *literally* true?

Let's use an example we've used before. Does anybody here love another person with all of your heart? Good for you. Is that *literally* true? No, it's not. Saying you love someone with all of your heart is not a literal truth because the source of the feeling we call "love" is not the heart, but a part of the brain called the limbic system, specifically the thalamus, the amygdala, and the hippocampus. But we don't say to someone we love, "I feel strong emotion for you in my thalamus, my amygdala and my hippocampus," unless we're Mr. Spock, or Sheldon Cooper. No, if we say we love someone with all of our hearts, we are telling the truth, but it is a metaphorical truth. If you read the first 11 chapters of Genesis, you are reading something that most Christians, I think it's fair to say, understand as metaphorical truth. "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep... Then God said 'Let there be light;' and there was light, and God saw that the light was good..." God "said," and suddenly there was light. That's totally consistent with the Big Bang Theory (and I don't mean the TV show with Sheldon Cooper). The theory was first propounded by a Jesuit priest and astronomer named Georges LeMaitre, and is an example of new scientific findings unintentionally affirming an ancient Biblical truth. In the Bible, God forms order out of chaos and everything God makes is good. Scientific knowledge about the beginnings of the earth have increased in the

last 3000 years, and will likely increase more in the years to come. But to say that Creation is *good* is a religious statement, a Biblical one.

Science, on its own, is capable of doing great things, but if those things are unmoored by the ethical understanding that comes from religion, than that “great thing” can be greatly destructive. Fritz Haber was a German chemist who, in 1918, won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for inventing the Haber-Bosch process, which synthesized ammonia out of nitrogen and hydrogen gases. That led to the invention of chemical fertilizer, which greatly increased agricultural productivity and, in the past century, has helped save millions of people from starvation. In fact, half of our food production depends on the chemical fertilizers derived from the Haber-Bosch process. Haber was also a leader in developing poison gases—he volunteered his knowledge for that end—which caused the agonizing deaths of nearly 90,000 soldiers in World War I. When his wife confronted him over what he had done—how could a man whose work helped feed so many now do something that killed so many?—he replied that he was a scientist. In despair, she took his service pistol and shot herself. He returned to the Front, leaving behind his 13 year old orphaned son.

Fritz Haber is a classic example of why the great discoveries of science should never be fully trusted without the ethical constraints that derive from religion. Here’s another. Charles Darwin, who propounded the theory of evolution, was a scientifically rigorous naturalist and a kindly human being who once studied to be a clergyman. His most influential role models were naturalists who were themselves men of deep faith. After his five year voyage around the world aboard *HMS Beagle*, Darwin prepared his notes for what would become the hugely consequential book, *On the Origin of Species*. As Darwin began to build a case for natural selection, he believed that what he found would exalt God: that creation on the basis of natural

laws, rather than miracles, “should exalt our notion of the power of the omniscient Creator.” Darwin’s subsequent atheism was, I fully believe, the result of deep personal grief—the death of a beloved daughter—rather than his scientific findings. In *The Origin of Species*, the word “Creation,” or its cognates, appear over 100 times. The word “evolved” is only used once; it is the last word in the book.

Many Christians were outraged by Darwin’s book, believing it contradicted the Biblical account of Creation. Other Christians thought it interesting, scientifically plausible, and not a threat to their faith. One of those who thought it plausible and not a threat to faith was an Augustinian monk named Gregor Mendel. But the ethical issue that arose from Darwin’s work was not whether it contradicted the Bible, but the extent to which its conclusion applied to human society. Because the full title of Darwin’s book is “On the Origin of Species by Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favored Races by the Struggle for Life.” Think about that last half of the title: “*The Preservation of Favored Races by the Struggle for Life.*” Social Darwinism—the survival of the fittest—became the philosophical underpinning of the eugenics movement, which sought to increase the number of people with desirable traits, and reduce, or eliminate, those with undesirable ones. Of course, what constitutes a desirable, or undesirable, trait, can be subjective. The Ku Klux Klan, and Adolf Hitler, had very definite ideas about who the favored races were, and who had desirable and undesirable traits, and how human society should be based on the survival of the fittest. Darwin would probably have been appalled by that, but ideas get incarnated into deeds. Now contrast Social Darwinism with the Biblical perspective that *all* people are made in the image of God; that the second greatest Commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves; that God so loved the world (which includes everybody in it) that he gave his only begotten Son so that

whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. Those are not scientifically verifiable propositions, but in terms of bringing hope, dignity and compassion into human affairs, which has the better record?

I mentioned Gregor Mendel, the Augustinian monk. At the monastery of St. Thomas of Brno, in what is now the Czech Republic, Mendel became director of the research gardens. By then, he had read the German edition of *Origin of Species*, and accepted evolution via natural selection. As the director of the research gardens, Mendel produced a host of new hybrids among plants (most famously peas) with improved yield and hardihood, thereby increasing overall food production. The Augustinian order had a special prayer:

May the Lord grant that you adhere to all these things in love, as lovers of spiritual beauty, bearing up the sweet perfume of Christ from your good way of life...

“Bearing up the sweet perfume of Christ” by his “good way of life,” this humble monk did extraordinary work, laying the groundwork for a revolution in crop development which later, under the leadership of Nobel Peace Prize winner Norman Borlaug, became known as the “Green Revolution” (incidentally, for a long time, Borlaug taught at Texas A&M). Borlaug used Mendel’s techniques to breed a new form of wheat, more disease-resistant, with shorter stems and more yield to the acre. This, coupled with innovations in fertilization and irrigation, has been credited with saving over a billion people from starvation. At his Nobel Prize lecture, Borlaug cited scripture five times (Amos 4:9; Joel 1:17-20; Genesis 41:54; Isaiah 8:21; Isaiah 35:1-7) and said:

Almost certainly, however, the first essential component of social justice is adequate food for all mankind. Food is the moral right of all who are born into this world. Yet today fifty percent of the world's population goes hungry. Without

food...all other components of social justice are meaningless. Therefore I feel that the aforementioned guiding principle must be modified to read: If you desire peace, cultivate justice, but at the same time cultivate the fields to produce more bread; otherwise there will be no peace.

Standing on the shoulders of Mendel, and others—and even, tangentially, Charles Darwin— Borlaug and his colleagues helped save as many as a billion persons from starvation. He was a scientist and a man of faith. The longest scripture reading in his Nobel speech was the one from Isaiah:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom...  
They shall see the glory of the Lord,  
the majesty of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands,  
and make firm the feeble knees.  
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,  
'Be strong, do not fear!  
Here is your God...  
He will come and save you.'

Christians and scientists have a common vocation, which is to follow the truth wherever it leads, as the wise men followed the star to the side of Jesus. As a Christian, I believe that if the truth is followed steadfastly enough, it will eventually lead to Christ, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Religion can be informed by science; but the products of science can only be fully trusted when they are in the service of a moral end ordained by God. "I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was sick and you cared for me," Jesus said.

Amen.