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AND
WORLDVIEW

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In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach

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Translating Truth: The Case for Essentially Literal Bible Translation

(with C. John Collins, Wayne Grudem, Leland Ryken,
and Bruce Winter)

INERRANCY
AND
WORLDVIEW

ANSWERING MODERN
CHALLENGES TO
THE BIBLE

VERN SHERIDAN
POYTHRESS

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Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible

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*To my wife,
who has faithfully encouraged me
in trusting God's Word*

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PREFACE

How do we understand the Bible? In recent decades a number of books, articles, blogs, and other voices within the broad community of evangelical Christians have urged us to rethink how we understand the Bible. These discussions about the Bible have special interest for evangelicals and fundamentalists who believe that the Bible is the word of God.¹

Some of the new voices express discontent with the traditional view of the Bible's absolute authority as the word of God. The traditional evangelical view says that the Bible is *inerrant*; that is, it is completely true in what it says, and makes no claims that are not true.² Inerrancy has become a sore point. Some of the voices directly attack inerrancy. Others redefine it.³

The struggle about the Bible has many dimensions. Modern challenges come from various directions. We confront postmodernist thinking, alleged discrepancies or errors in the Bible, growing information about the ancient

¹I consider fundamentalists to be a subgroup within evangelicals. I grant that the words *evangelical* and *fundamentalist* today are rather loosely defined. See D. A. Carson, *Evangelicalism: What Is It and Is It Worth Keeping?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

²The classic statement on inerrancy is found in Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948). See also Archibald A. Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield, *Inspiration*, with introduction by Roger R. Nicole (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979); Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *God's Word in Servant-Form: Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck on the Doctrine of Scripture* (Jackson, MS: Reformed Academic Press, 2008); John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 1, *Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 353–494. Some people have seen Bavinck and Kuyper as differing significantly from Warfield and Hodge, but like Gaffin I see all four—Hodge, Warfield, Bavinck, and Kuyper—in harmony. On the diversity of genres in the Bible, see Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), esp. chaps. 19 and 23 and appendix H. See also chap. 31 of the present book.

³Cornelius Van Til did not live to see the challenges thrown up in the last two decades; but what he wrote in responding to similar challenges in his own day is still pertinent. See Van Til, *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture* (n.p.: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1967); Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, 2nd ed., ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007).

Near East that allegedly throws doubt on traditional readings of the Bible, and tensions between the Bible and science.

I agree that our modern world confronts us with some distinctive challenges. But I do not agree with the modern attempts to abandon or redefine inerrancy. To respond to all the modern voices one by one would be tedious, because the voices are diverse and new voices continue to appear. Rather, I want to develop an alternative response in a *positive* way.

Some of the new voices tell us that we need to think through more thoroughly the humanity of Scripture. The Bible itself identifies some of the human authors who wrote its books—for example, Paul, John, Jeremiah, Amos. It also indicates that the writing of the books was superintended by God, and that God sent the Holy Spirit to the human authors to work in them in such a way that their writings were also God's writings, his own word (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21). Thus, the Bible does invite us to think about the human authors and what they did. But we are unlikely to appreciate the role of human authors accurately and in depth without understanding God, who made human beings in his image (Gen. 1:26–27).

The Bible has much to say about God and about how we can come to know him. What it says is deeply at odds with much of the thinking in the modern world. And this fundamental difference generates differences in many other areas—differences in people's whole view of the world. Modern worldviews are at odds with the worldview put forward in the Bible. This difference in worldviews creates obstacles when modern people read and study the Bible. People come to the Bible with expectations that do not fit the Bible, and this clash becomes one main reason, though not the only one, why people do not find the Bible's claims acceptable.

Within the scope of a single book we cannot hope to deal with all the difficulties that people encounter. We will concentrate here on difficulties that have ties with the differences in worldview.

INTRODUCTION

Many people—even people who would call themselves Christians—have difficulties with the Bible. Some people are morally offended by parts of the Bible. Some parts of it do not fit modern ideas about good religion. What do we do with these parts? The Bible has exclusive claims about what is right and wrong in religion. It makes exclusive claims about God. It says that Jesus is the only way to God (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). It talks about hell.

Some people are troubled by apparent discrepancies between the Bible and modern science. What do we do with these discrepancies? Some people have decided that we must give up on the Bible. They say that the Bible has been shown to be outmoded and primitive. Others hope to find some core of truth in it, though they argue that the “wrappings” around the core need to be discarded.

Still others think that the Bible is the word of God, true for all time. But can they explain how to relate it intelligently to the swirl of modern questions and controversies?

These are important questions, so important that we can profit from taking our time to work toward answers. The challenge of interpreting the Bible has many dimensions and many challenges. We cannot consider them all equally.¹ We focus here on issues involving response to our modern situation.

Our Modern Situation

Our modern situation offers us various competing assumptions about religion, about the nature of humanity, about what is wrong with the world,

¹All the books I have published relate in one way or another to biblical interpretation. For discussion of many kinds of questions about interpreting the Bible, I must direct readers to these books and books written by other authors. Readers who want an overview of most of the foundational areas, brought together in one place, may consult Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999).

about the purpose of life, and so on. These assumptions may have effects on how people read the Bible. We can begin to answer many of our difficulties in a number of areas if we make ourselves aware of the assumptions that we tend to bring along when we study the Bible.

But our deepest difficulties cannot be resolved merely on a narrowly intellectual plane. Our deepest difficulty is *sin*, rebellion against God. We have desires in our hearts that resist the Bible's views and what God has to say. We want to be our own master. The Bible talks about those who resist God as being "dead in . . . trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1) and "darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart" (Eph. 4:18). God himself must overcome our resistance (Acts 16:14; 2 Tim. 2:25–26; John 3:3–8). We will focus primarily on more intellectual difficulties, because these can be more directly and more easily addressed. But it is wise to remember that more stubborn difficulties lurk beneath the surface.

PART ONE

TWO COMMON
RELIGIOUS
DIFFICULTIES

1

HOW CAN ONLY ONE RELIGION BE RIGHT?

Let us consider one common difficulty that modern people have with the Bible: how can there be only *one* true religion?¹

The View that All Religions Are Right

People ask this question partly because they are aware of multiple religions—Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism, to name a few. How do we respond to this multiplicity? One person, whom we may call Sue, concludes that all religions are equally right. She says that they all have a common core having to do with a loving God and being kind to your neighbor. But in selecting a common core Sue shows her own personal religious preferences. Sue speaks of a loving God. But Buddhism does not believe in a personal God. So Sue has excluded Buddhism rather than being all-inclusive. She has also excluded polytheism, which believes in many gods rather than one.² Sue speaks of being kind to your neighbor. But some religions have practiced child sacrifice (Deut. 18:9–10).

¹See the further discussion in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 3–21.

²A more nuanced discussion would have to consider monism as religion. By breaking down the distinctions between religions and trying to move toward one God behind all religions, Sue may be on the way to trying to break down all distinctions whatsoever. All is one. This view, articulated within philosophical Hinduism, actually has an affinity with polytheism. According to Hinduism, the “One” has a plurality of manifestations

When Sue talks about a common core, she has also put into the background the irreconcilable differences between major religions. The Bible teaches that Jesus is the Son of God. The Qur'an says that he is not the son of God, but only a prophet. The New Testament part of the Bible teaches that Jesus is the Messiah promised in the Old Testament. Modern Judaism denies that he is. Sue implicitly disagrees with all of these convictions when she implies that they really do not matter. Christianity, Islam, and Orthodox Judaism all exclude one another by having beliefs that are denied by the other two. Sue in practice excludes all three by saying that the exclusive beliefs are not the "core." Tim Keller observes, "We are all exclusive in our beliefs about religion, but in different ways."³

The View that All Religions Are Wrong

Let us consider another example. Donald looks over the field of religions and concludes that they are all wrong. He thinks that they all make arrogant, overreaching claims to know the truth. The differences between the claims show that no one really knows.

Donald's position is just as exclusive as Sue's, and just as exclusive as the claims of any one traditional religion. How so? He claims to know better than any religious practitioner the true status of religious claims. But you have to know a lot about God—whether he exists, whether he reveals himself, what kind of God he is—to make a claim that excludes all religions before seriously investigating any of them in detail. Donald thinks that religious claims are arrogant. The irony is that he is acting arrogantly in claiming to be superior to all religions.

Social Influence on Religious Beliefs

Many people in many cultures have had confidence in their religious views. But Donald does not have confidence in any religion. And today in Europe, Canada, and the United States we meet many people like him. Why? Sometimes sociology of religion has played a role. Sociologists observe that many people hold the religion of their parents or the predominant religion in their location and in their ethnic group. Religious convictions are passed on by society, and especially by parents. When Donald observes this social dimension of religion, he concludes that exclusive religious claims are a

in nature, and this plurality is worshiped as many gods. See John N. Oswalt, *The Bible among the Myths: Unique Revelation of Just Ancient Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), esp. chap. 3.

³Keller, *Reason for God*, 13.

product of narrow ethnocentricity. Donald thinks that religion as a whole is suspect.

But now let us ask why Donald is so different from many people in non-Western cultures who confidently belong to a particular religion. Just like other people, Donald has received social influences, including the influence of sociology of religion. Donald's views about religion have been socially shaped. If social shaping undermines truth, it undermines the truth of Donald's views as well as everyone else's. Donald's views are just as "ethnocentric" as everyone else's, but Donald is unaware of it.⁴

Worldviews

Part of the challenge in searching for the truth is that we all do so against the background of assumptions about truth. Many basic assumptions about the nature of the world fit together to form a *worldview*. A worldview includes assumptions about whether God exists, what *kind* of God might exist, what kind of world we live in, how we come to know what we know, whether there are moral standards, what is the purpose of human life, and so on. Donald and those like him have inherited many convictions from the society around them.

Most modern worldviews differ at crucial points from the worldview offered in the Bible. When we come to the Bible and try to listen to its claims, we can easily misjudge those claims if we hear them only from within the framework of our own modern assumptions. Letting the Bible speak for itself, that is, letting it speak in its own terms, includes letting the Bible speak from within its own worldview rather than merely our own.

A Personal God

I propose, then, to explore this theme of differing worldviews through subsequent chapters. But I want to focus a little more narrowly. One crucial piece in the biblical worldview concerns who God is. According to the Bible, God is the Creator and sustainer of the world, and God is personal. God's *personal* character makes a difference. If you want to find out about an apple sitting in a fruit bowl, there are many ways you might go about it. You might photograph it, chemically analyze it, smell it, cut it up, eat it. It is up to you; the apple has no choice in the matter. But getting to know a person is different. You are not completely in charge. You may be able to observe

⁴"If the pluralist had been born in [Morocco] he probably wouldn't be a pluralist" (ibid., 11, quoting Alvin Plantinga, "A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," in *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennett [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 205). "You can't say, 'All claims about religions are historically conditioned except the one I am making right now'" (Keller, *Reason for God*, 11).

a stranger's actions at a distance. But for real acquaintance, you must meet the person, and the person must cooperate. It is up to the other person how much he or she will tell you.

Some of the thinking about religion makes a mistake right here. If, in our thinking, God or religion becomes like an apple, we are in charge and we do our own investigating in whatever way we please. On the other hand, if God is a person, and in fact a person infinitely greater than we, it is up to him how he chooses to meet us. Until we get to know him, we cannot say whether he makes himself known in all religions equally, or in none of them, or in one particular way that fits his character.

The Bible claims to be God's communication to us. That is an exclusive claim. But mere exclusiveness, as we have seen, does not disqualify the claim. We have to find out by reading the Bible, not by rejecting it beforehand. And we have to reckon with the fact that God as a person may be different from what we imagine him to be. Getting acquainted succeeds better if it takes place without a lot of prejudice getting in the way.⁵

⁵See chap. 32, on pride.

2

ARE MORAL RULES A STRAITJACKET?

Consider a second difficulty with the Bible. Some modern people see the moral instruction in the Bible as a straitjacket.¹ They may disagree with some of the Bible's specific moral pronouncements. But they have a deeper difficulty: absolute moral rules seem to them to be an assault on their freedom.

The Worldview Question

People in other cultures have not found the same difficulty with the Bible. Many Christians in previous centuries have valued its instruction. So what causes the differences?

Once again, competing worldviews are one source of difference. The God of the Bible is a personal God. According to the Bible's teaching and its personalist worldview, God has a moral character. Whether or not we accept his moral guidance matters to him.

But if that is all we say, we can still feel as though moral rules are an imposition on human freedom. The Bible has a many-sided reply to this modern feeling. God made human beings in his image (Gen. 1:26–28), so that we have a moral character ourselves. We have a sense of right and wrong. And God made us with a purpose, so that we would grow in fellowship with him and find freedom and satisfaction in fellowship with him rather than in isolation.

¹Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 35–50.

Different worldviews lead to different conceptions of freedom. If there were no God, freedom might mean freedom to create our own purposes. It might mean freedom from all constraint, which implies, in the end, freedom from the constraints of personal relationships. The ideal freedom would be to live in isolation. On the other hand, if God exists and is personal, freedom means not isolation but joy in appreciating both other human beings and God the infinite person. God's moral order is designed by God to guide us into personal fellowship and satisfaction. It is for our good. It is for our freedom, we might say, in the true sense of "freedom." The person who goes astray from God's wise guidance burdens himself with sorrows and frustrations. In fact, he ends up being a slave to his own desires.

What Makes Sense

The person who rejects the Bible's moral guidance thinks that he has good reasons for rejecting it. It seems reasonable to him to seek "freedom" rather than the Bible's instruction, which he deems to be oppressing and confining. But his judgments about freedom and about oppression are colored by a worldview. He already has assumptions about what would be a meaningful and fulfilling life—what true freedom would mean. And his assumptions depend on his conception of whether God is relevant, and whether God is personal. Thus, he may reject the Bible not because the Bible does not make sense in its own terms, but because he is not reading it on its own terms. He is injecting his own worldview and his own agenda about the kind of freedom that he pictures for himself as ideal.

The Bible's own view of the matter has still another dimension. The Bible indicates that God created us and designed us to have personal fellowship with him and to follow his ways. But we have gone astray and rebelled. We want to be our own master. That is sin. Sin colors our thinking and makes us dislike the idea of submitting to anyone else. Even though God's way is healthy and our own way is destructive, we do not want to stop following our own way. So when we interact with the Bible, we are not just innocent evaluators. We have a destructive agenda. And that is part of the problem. The problem is not just the worldviews "out there," so to speak, but the worldviews and sinful desires "in here." Our secret desires for sin mesh with the ideological offerings of the worldviews that are "on sale" in our society.

PART TWO

CHALLENGES
FROM SCIENCE
AND MATERIALISM

3

WORLDVIEWS AND MATERIALISM

Consider a third area of difficulty. Some people say that modern science has shown us that miracles are impossible. In addition, they may say that we now know that the world consists of matter and motion and energy. God is irrelevant. These claims are at odds with the Bible. How do we approach these challenges?

Worldviews

Once again, awareness about differing worldviews can help. We can generalize from the examples in the previous two chapters. In the first chapter we asked whether there can be one true religion. In the second chapter we asked whether absolute moral standards put a straitjacket on human freedom. The responses to both questions show that we are influenced by our assumptions—our worldview. Most modern people have a modern worldview that is deeply at odds with the view of the world that the Bible offers.

So what is this modern worldview? In a sense, the pluralism of our time offers many worldviews. The various traditional religions still exist, and each offers answers to basic questions. What is the nature of our world? What is its basic structure and meaning? Where did it come from? What is the significance of human nature and of each individual human being? What is the goal of living? What if something is wrong with the world or human beings in it? How can the wrong be remedied? How do we know what is morally

right and wrong? Is there an afterlife? What is it like? What implications, if any, does the afterlife have for the way we live now?

Modern Materialism

Alongside the answers from traditional religions come distinctly modern answers, especially answers that build on and appeal to the findings of modern science. One dominant influence is what we might call modern *materialism*. Materialism is a worldview that offers answers to the basic questions about the meaning of life. According to materialism, the world consists in matter and energy and motion. The world is *physical* in its most basic and deepest structure. Everything else is built up from complex combinations and interactions of matter and energy and motion. Elementary particles form into atoms; atoms form into molecules; molecules form into larger structures like crystals and living cells; cells form organs and organisms; and each one of us is such an organism. The structure of our brains leads to complex human actions and thoughts, and these lead to human meaning.

According to this view, the world has physical meaning that derives from matter and energy and motion. Everything else is added human meanings that we ourselves create in the process of interpreting what we experience.

According to materialism, the universe as we know it originated in the big bang. Human beings are random products of biological evolution, so we have no particular distinct significance except what we create for ourselves. The goal of living is whatever each of us as an individual chooses. But the cosmos as a whole has no goal, no purpose. And it looks as though life itself is only temporary, because the winding down of the amount of free energy in the universe will eventually make it impossible for life to exist. The universe will end up cold and inert.¹

According to this view, there is nothing wrong with the world—the world simply *is*. There is no afterlife. Morality is a byproduct of the human brain in its biological structure and human social interaction.

When considered in its totality, the materialist worldview is bleak and forbidding in comparison to human spiritual aspirations. We may meet people who try to hold to it consistently. But we meet many more who are influenced by it without swallowing every piece of it. They long for human

¹One current cosmological view holds that the observable expansion in the universe will gradually slow down, then stop, then reverse, leading in the far future to a “big crunch” in which all matter will come together into a very small area. The “crunch” would be like the Big Bang played in reverse. If such a crunch were to take place, it would wipe out all physical life as we know it. But most cosmologists think that the present expansion will not be reversed. They predict in the far future a universe that is cold and inert. In either case, either in a crunch or in inertness, life as we know it will eventually come to an end.

significance. They find ways of adding more comfortable extra stories onto the materialist substructure of matter and energy and motion. Some people may add a religious dimension of a pantheistic sort. They may postulate a kind of spiritual “energy” in the cosmos, with which they can commune. Nature becomes “Mother Nature.” There are variations on this theme. As a society, we become pluralistic in our views of human significance, just as we are pluralistic in many other respects. We autonomously choose which ideas we wish to embrace, even when those ideas are at odds with reality.

The Difference between Natural Science and Materialism

Materialism derives most of its prestige from modern natural science. Science² studies matter and energy and motion in their many configurations. The narrow and single-minded focus on matter and motion, and on larger things like cells that involve complex interactions of matter and motion, is one of the secrets for scientific success. Concentrate. Through concentration on matter and motion, scientists build up gradually more and more elaborate understandings of how they work.

But the path from natural science to materialism involves a key transition. The scientist makes a decision at the beginning of his investigation to narrow his focus. Materialism converts this scientific decision into a philosophy that says that the focus of science is not only *one possible* focus, but the *only* focus that is significant. The key idea of being the *only* focus is an addition. Scientific investigation, narrowly conceived, does not prove materialism. Rather, materialism arises from confusing two distinct moves: (1) the narrow scientific strategy of focusing on what is material and (2) the claim that the narrow focus is all that there is.

Materialism nevertheless has a broad influence. It influences even the people who do not adopt it as the complete story. They are tempted to think that materialism is at the bottom of the world, and much of the rest arises from human creation of meaning.

Materialism also influences our view of regularities in the world. Scientists study regularities. The more profound regularities are called laws, such as Newton’s three laws of motion.³ These laws are regarded as impersonal.

²Much depends on how broadly we conceive “science.” Do we, for example, include social sciences? Natural sciences, especially the “hard” sciences such as physics, chemistry, and astronomy, have the greatest prestige. So our summary is focusing on them. Biology studies living things, but these living things are often seen in modern times as “reducible” in principle to matter and energy and motion.

³Because of twentieth-century advances in the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics, we now know that Newton’s laws are an approximation. But they may serve as an example of how people think about scientific laws.

They are a kind of cosmic mechanism that keeps the world going according to general patterns.

Many people absorb from modern culture the conviction that matter and motion are the ultimate bottom layer. But, as we observed, not everyone today is a pure, hard-nosed materialist. A worldview with *only* the initial bottom material layer is too bleak. People add other layers on top: layers for living things, layers for beauty, truth, human society, maybe some moral convictions. But in their thinking these extra layers are just as independent of God as the bottom. After all, the extra layers are built on the bottom. And the bottom layer, the matter and motion, is just there, independent of God. The bottom layer is *impersonal*. And therefore the extra layers that we add are just as impersonal as the bottom. Human beings are of course persons, but all other kinds of structure are impersonal. These structures include the physical arrangements and physical activities in our bodies on which we depend. Human beings themselves are ultimately held in being by impersonal regularities.⁴

The word *impersonalism* is probably better than *materialism* for labeling these richer views that have materialism only as an initial bottom layer. In an impersonalist view, all the layers are just “there,” independent of God and unrelated to God.⁵

This ultimate *impersonalism* often goes together with some kind of acknowledgment of personal significances. In fact, it is not so hard for some people to desire to *reanimate* dead matter by ascribing semi-personal characteristics to phenomena of nature. We already mentioned the expression “Mother Nature.” Such an expression gives to nature semi-personal characteristics.

If matter is at the bottom of everything, there is continuity between human beings and trees. This conviction may lead some people to dismiss what is uniquely human: they could say that consciousness and moral judgments are illusory. But they could also travel in exactly the opposite direction. They could try to commune with trees and imagine that trees too must dimly possess quasi-human characteristics. A hard-nosed scientific materialism in one part of the mind can actually be combined with a soft yearning for communion with spirits; people can travel toward new forms of animism, spiritism, polytheism, and pantheism. Everyday, people within advanced industrial societies are looking into astrology and fortune-telling and spirits

⁴In a more robust account, we need to discuss chance, that is, apparent randomness, as well as regularities (lawfulness). Materialism sees both of these aspects as ultimately impersonal.

⁵On personalism and impersonalism, see Van Til, *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture* (n.p.: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1967), 37. Van Til's writings consistently emphasize the *personalism* of the biblical approach to the nature of God and the world.

and meditation. That direction might seem paradoxical. But actually it is not surprising. In principle a thoroughgoing materialism breaks down all hard-and-fast distinctions within the world. If a materialist viewpoint is correct, all is one. And the many—the diversity of phenomena—all flow into this one. This result has a name—pantheism—that shows its religious commitment.⁶ Such religious commitments may begin to populate the world with many spirits and many gods, which are semi-personal. When a viewpoint includes spirits and gods, it may in a sense appear to be *personalist*. But ultimately it is *impersonalist*, because the “one” dissolves what is distinctive to persons. In what follows we will focus on the impersonalist root rather than on the religious variations that may flourish on the basis of this root.

A Contrast with the Biblical Worldview

In contrast to impersonalism, the Bible indicates that God is involved in the world. God is personal, and he governs the world by speaking—by issuing commands. He created the world by speaking. He said, “Let there be light,” and there was light (Gen. 1:3). Scientists in exploring laws are exploring the speech of God and the mind of God that issued in the laws.⁷ The Bible in this way provides a role for science. But science is understood within a personalistic context. The view of the world offered in the Bible is personalistic at the core, while the mainstream modern worldview is impersonalistic. That makes a profound difference, especially when we ask about the meanings and purposes of things.

When we begin to study the Bible, the difference in worldview makes itself felt. We can gain many insights into the Bible using approaches to history, culture, and language that have been developed in the modern world. But these approaches, when we examine them more minutely, prove to be infected with the impersonalistic worldview of modern life. If we apply such approaches thoughtlessly to the Bible, we create difficulties. In fact, we are likely to think that the Bible shows deficiencies. But the deficiencies actually belong to modern thinking.

How Is Materialism Deficient?

Is materialism actually deficient? Whole books have been written on the question.⁸ We cannot enter into all the issues in detail. Perhaps the easiest

⁶Oswalt, *The Bible among the Myths* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), further articulates the implications of this kind of “mythic” thinking or “continuity” thinking that tries to surpass all distinctions.

⁷See the next chapter and Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), chap. 1.

⁸See, for example, John Lennox, *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford: Lion, 2009).

way of exposing one of its problems is by way of ethics. Is murder wrong? Is theft wrong? Why or why not? Do standards for human behavior have any foundation other than the fact that individuals or societies have invented them? If everything boils down to matter, that is, if materialistic, purposeless evolution gave rise to human beings, each individual is simply the product of evolution of matter and motion. We would then have to say that each person's moral preferences are also the product of evolution. You have evolved in such a way that you prefer helping the old lady across the street. Joe has evolved to prefer mugging the old lady and taking her money. According to this view, both you and Joe are equally products of the same impersonalist evolutionary process.

But if Joe were to mug you, you would know instinctively that it was wrong. No one actually lives on the basis of complete moral relativism or materialism. There is an obvious disconnect between someone's claim to be relativist and his own moral judgments, including his judgment that people *ought* to be relativist.

Can we rescue ourselves by appealing to a *social* rather than merely *individual* moral judgment? Is murder wrong just because society declares it to be wrong? We still have to deal with whole societies that have practiced child sacrifice or have enslaved outsiders. And in modern times we have had to deal with Nazism, where the oppression of the Jews had official government sanction. A whole society was in the wrong. We know that. And we also know when we make a judgment of that kind that we do not intend merely to express a personal, subjective preference, like preferring vanilla ice cream to chocolate. We instinctively know that there are absolutes in morality, even if some of us try to evade such knowledge by clever rhetoric.

The problem of having a foundation for ethics is serious not only because our moral judgments contradict relativism, but because every area of human endeavor, not just our attitude toward gross crimes, depends on moral foundations. People cannot practice science, or undertake historical investigation, or use language to make promises or communicate truth, or even argue for moral relativism, without presupposing that we *ought* to be faithful to standards for science and history and language. They presuppose an "ought," in the form of real moral standards. In particular, they presuppose that we *ought* to honor truth. If the standards are merely artificial social products, they are ultimately meaningless, and the products produced under the guidance of the standards have no trustworthiness or ultimate value. Why not rebel against social standards, as atheistic existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre contemplated doing? The disappearance of transcendent morality undermines not only ability to act against blatant crime, but ability to evaluate

anything at all. In particular, without moral standards, criticisms that people launch against the Bible from the platforms of science, historical research, or linguistics have no foundation.

The Bible provides a clear answer. God is the source of morality. He is absolutely good and he created us in his image, so that we have a sense of right and wrong derived from him. We depend on God being there whenever we make moral judgments. But our judgments are corrupted through sin. A lot more is corrupted as well. So we have to come to Christ to receive redemption. As part of that redemption, we receive instruction from the Bible about who God really is and what he requires, as well as instruction about redemption itself.

Influences of Materialism

Now we need to examine more closely the influences of the modern impersonalist worldview on various specialized areas of thought, such as history, language, and society. We will try to distinguish helpful insights from the unhelpful distortions that creep in from modern thinking. In the chapters to come we will consider difficulties having to do with science, history, language, social structure, and psychology.

Any one of these areas could receive more detailed discussion than what we can give here. I have chosen instead to concentrate on a common thread, namely impersonalism. For more detailed treatment of some of the areas, I must refer readers to other books. For a God-centered, personalist view of science, see *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach*. For language, see *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach*. For society and sociology, see *Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach*. For a general overview, see *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation*.⁹

⁹Poythress, *Redeeming Science*; Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009); Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011); Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999).

4

MODERN SCIENCE

Now let us begin to look in more detail at special areas where people find difficulty with the Bible. The most obvious difficulty in many people's minds comes from modern science. Science, it is said, contradicts the Bible. It shows that the Bible is just one among many collections of human religious ideas.

This challenge could receive an extensive answer. The short answer is that we have to look carefully at both the Bible and science to find out whether there are real contradictions. We have to avoid reading into the Bible false meanings. And we have to inspect the work of scientists to see whether their conclusions are sound in particular cases of dispute.

Challenges arise both with respect to natural sciences and with respect to social sciences. Let us first look at issues from natural sciences.

Two Forms of God's Word

Consider first the Bible's view of the world. The Bible indicates that God expresses his truth both in the Bible and in the commands by which he rules the universe. The commands from God control the weather.

He [God] sends out his command to the earth;
his word runs swiftly.
He gives snow like wool;
he scatters frost like ashes.
He hurls down his crystals of ice like crumbs;
who can stand before his cold?

He sends out *his word*, and melts them;
 he makes his wind blow and the waters flow. (Ps. 147:15–18)

God establishes the regularities of the universe.

By the *word* of the LORD the heavens were made,
 and by the breath of his mouth all their host. (Ps. 33:6)

The verses we have just cited show that God rules the world by his *word*; he rules by speaking. In addition, the Bible is a particular form of God's speech, namely, written speech from God addressed to human beings (2 Tim. 3:16). We must consider both forms of God's speech. God's word governing the world is the basis for science. God's word in the Bible is the basis for theology. According to the Bible's worldview, the two words are intrinsically in harmony because God is in harmony with himself. Because God is infinite and our knowledge is limited, we may not always have enough information to see immediately how all of the pieces fit together. But many pieces do fit together to reinforce the conviction that God knows what he is doing and can be trusted in both areas—in what he does in the universe and in what he says in the Bible.

To work out all the details does take time. So at this point let us consider only three sample issues: (1) the nature of miracles, (2) the issue of whether the Bible uses an obsolete earth-centered view of the world, and (3) the nature of the days of creation in Genesis 1. In each case we need to reckon with worldviews. (For further discussion I must refer readers to books that work out more details. My own book *Redeeming Science* and C. John Collins's book *Science and Faith* make good starting points.¹)

Miracles

First, let us consider the nature of miracles. Do miracles take place? Are they consistent with science? Do miracles violate scientific laws? Has science shown that miracles do not exist? To answer these questions, we need to step back and consider briefly the nature of scientific laws. How we think about these laws and about miracles depends on our worldview. That does not mean that all worldviews are equally right or equally wrong. Rather, it means that we must be circumspect and be aware that our own view may be at odds with what God has established. We must be prepared to change our thinking.

¹See Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006); C. John Collins, *Science and Faith: Friends or Foes?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003).

As we have observed, God created the world by his word (Ps. 33:6). And he rules the world providentially by his word: “he upholds the universe by the *word* of his power” (Heb. 1:3). The real law is God’s speech. Scientists who investigate the world in order to discern its laws are really looking into the mind of God and the speech of God. When they formulate laws, those laws are their human guesses about the real law, which is God’s word.

God’s word is personal. It is what he commands. His commandments specify the regularities, such as the phenomena of light and the movements of sun and moon and stars. He also specifies the extraordinary events that surprise us, including the resurrection of Christ. The extraordinary events, the miracles, conform to God’s word, just as do the regularities. Miracles are exceptional, but they make sense when we understand God’s personal plan, which accomplished salvation and brought new life through Christ’s resurrection from the dead.

For example, according to Exodus 19–20 God spoke in an audible voice to the people of Israel from the top of Mount Sinai. This speaking was an exceptional, miraculous event. It may or may not have happened in conformity with modern scientists’ formulations of various natural laws. It was in full conformity with God’s purposes: it was a special event in which God showed his power to his people and also inaugurated a personal relationship with them, as expressed in the Ten Commandments. The exceptional character of the physical manifestations at Mount Sinai makes good sense when we consider the physical events as an expression of God’s *personal* purpose for the people of Israel. The events make little sense, on the other hand, if they are viewed as merely the products of *impersonal* laws. Skeptics, reasoning on the basis of an impersonalist conception of law, prefer to believe that Exodus 19–20 is a made-up story, because only in such a way can it be reasonably integrated into their overall assumption that *impersonal* laws govern the universe.

The same principles hold for other miracles in the Bible. The common modern approach thinks of the laws of science as fundamentally impersonal. They become mechanical. Miracles are then thought to be impossible because a miracle would break through or violate the established impersonal order. This view not only misunderstands miracle by making it a violation of law; it also misunderstands the true character of law.

The change from a personal God to impersonal law makes a difference all the way through scientific practice. But the difference can be subtle. Scientists from all religious backgrounds appear superficially to agree about

what the law is. All scientists, for example, accept Newton's second law of motion, namely, $F = ma$ (Force F equals mass m times acceleration a). This law is a good approximate representation of the relation between forces and accelerations, provided the masses involved are not too large or too small, and the velocities are not too big.² All scientists "agree."

But if the real law is personal, we should give thanks to God for it. We should see this one law as an expression of the wisdom of God, which coheres with all the other expressions of his wisdom. The significance of the law is changed. In addition, we have to allow for the possibility that God, for personal purposes, may sometimes act in extraordinary ways that do not match our formulation for what is normal. For example, when Christ comes back and the whole universe is reconfigured for the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 21:1), Newton's second law might no longer hold in the new universe. That is up to God and his personal wisdom.

The Bible as Earth-Centered

Now consider a second issue: does the Bible use an earth-centered view of the world that modern science has made obsolete? Some people have pointed to Psalm 93:1, which says, "The world is established; it shall *never be moved*." Does this verse teach that the earth is fixed in space? Other verses describe the sun as moving.

The sun *rises*, and the sun *goes down*,
and *hastens* to the place where it rises. (Eccles. 1:5)

It is easy for modern people to conclude that the Bible is using an obsolete view where the earth is fixed and the sun moves. Ever since Copernicus, we know that in fact the earth rotates and moves around the sun. How do we understand the relation of the Bible to modern astronomy?

Once again, worldviews have an influence on interpretation. We as modern readers tend to be influenced by the impersonalism that has infected science. We may imagine that a scientific focus on materialist and quantitative explanations searches out what is deepest in the world. So when we come to read the Bible, we expect it to give us quantitative materialist explanations that answer the same questions on which modern science focuses.

In fact, God wrote the Bible so that its message would be accessible to people in all cultures of the world (Acts 1:8), not merely modern scientific

²These restrictions on masses and velocities are known to be necessary because of the additional complexities discovered in the twentieth century in the theory of relativity and quantum theory.

and technological cultures. He chooses to speak not in technical scientific terms, which only some people would understand, but in everyday terms so that everyone can understand.

For one thing, God describes his works of creating and governing the world as they might be seen from an observer on earth, because he is communicating with human beings who live on earth and observe events from that perspective. This earth-focused view is genuine and valid, and we use it constantly in everyday life. We say, for example, that the sun rises and sets. And we are right, because we are simply describing what we see. We are not proposing an astronomical theory that would give some more ultimate account than modern planetary astronomy.

An impersonalist worldview tempts us to think that *only* a technical astronomical account of the sun is valid. According to this view, the laws of astronomy are impersonal, and they are the only thing that is *real*. A personalist worldview affirms the importance of persons and the ordinary experience that God gives them. This ordinary personal experience is valid on its own level. It does not compete with planetary astronomy, which God has also established to be valid on its level. God created people with the capacity both for ordinary experience, in which we see the sun move, and for astronomical reflection, in which we develop quantitative descriptions of distances and planetary motions. Human beings can use more than one perspective, either the perspective of ordinary life or the perspective of astronomical theory.³ Both of these perspectives are valid. Both depend on the capacity we have as persons to think in multiple perspectives.⁴

An Alleged Three-Decker Universe?

Similar principles help us to understand the passages where the Bible makes a tripartite distinction in spatial regions. Exodus 20:4, for example, says, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in *heaven above*, or that is in *the earth beneath*, or that is in *the water under the earth*.” The three regions here are “heaven above,” “the earth beneath,” and “the water under the earth.” Some critics have said that this language

³In fact, twentieth-century science also offers still other perspectives, in particular the perspective of the general theory of relativity. In its mathematical formulation both the earth-centered observer and the hypothetical observer who is stationary with respect to the sun have mathematically equivalent roles. The earth moves only from one of these perspectives, and this perspective is mathematically no more “ultimate” than the earth-centered observational perspective. See Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, 218–19.

⁴For the basis for multiple perspectives in the personhood of God, see Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (1987; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001). According to the Bible, God is three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each person has his own “perspective.” Human beings dimly imitate this divine personal capacity.

belongs to a “three-decker universe.” They allege that ancient people had a cosmological picture with three flat “layers”: the water below, the earth on top of it, and the “heaven” above.

We should be more precise. There are many ancient peoples, and variations among them depend on both the peoples and the times. There is some evidence that when Babylonians began their astronomical work hundreds of years before the coming of Christ, they used mental pictures giving distinct space to waters, earth, and heaven. Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that the Babylonians had a detailed geophysical “theory” involving three flat “layers.”⁵ Does Exodus 20:4 endorse or evoke this theory? We have to be aware of the flexibility of language. Modern people may talk about their “ego” without endorsing everything in Sigmund Freud’s psychology, which introduced the word *ego* in a technical sense. We can distinguish between a common, everyday meaning and a technical concept of ego belonging to a full-fledged theory. The same holds with respect to any detailed theory that early Babylonians may have held. The Bible uses ordinary language to talk to people of all kinds. It is not using language in some technical sense, even if such a technical sense existed among Babylonian specialists.⁶

Moreover, the starting point for any Babylonian speculations lay in ordinary observations. You can observe (1) things going on above (“heaven”), (2) the ground and the land on which you stand and on which are land animals and plants, and (3) water that is lower than the land that is visible.⁷ Hypothetically, elaborate speculations might be built on these basic observations. But a person does not endorse the speculations merely by referring to these three distinct regions.

The Greeks by the time of Plato and Aristotle thought that the earth was a globe.⁸ Details of celestial motions with respect to the globe were worked out by Eudoxus of Cnidus (fourth century BC), Apollonius of Perga (third century BC), and Hipparchus of Bithynia (second century BC).⁹ Paul of Tarsus, as a result of his Hellenistic education,¹⁰ would have known the basics of Greek astronomy. The Hellenization of Palestine introduced Greek ideas even among Palestinian Jews. Against the background of these ideas,

⁵In fact, the scattered evidence that we have is complex. See Noel K. Weeks, “Cosmology in Historical Context,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 68, no. 2 (2006): 283–93.

⁶The distinction between common ordinary meaning and a theoretical system with detailed concepts is related to the distinction between word and concept mentioned in chap. 9.

⁷More fine-grained observation can distinguish between salt water (sea) and fresh water (the “Sea” of Galilee and fresh water springs and rivers): Rev. 14:7; 16:3, 4. Springs issue from water that is within the earth and literally beneath its surface.

⁸*Encyclopædia Britannica* (Chicago: Benton, 1963), 2:644; 18:61.

⁹*Ibid.* 2:644.

¹⁰Demonstrated in Acts 17:22–31.

Paul continued the practice of referring to three distinct spaces: “. . . every knee should bow, in *heaven* and on *earth* and *under the earth*” (Phil. 2:10). So did John: “And I saw every creature in *heaven* and on *earth* and *under the earth* and in the sea, and all that is in them” (Rev. 5:13), and an announcing angel: “. . . worship him who made *heaven* and *earth*, *the sea* and the springs of water” (Rev. 14:7).

This language functions literally to distinguish the spatial regions. There is nothing outmoded about it, because the distinct regions still exist, and have existed since the completion of creation. The language can also function by analogy: God dwells “in heaven.” That does not mean that he is physically confined or literally located in some region within the physical space above us (1 Kings 8:27; Jer. 23:24;), but that he is exalted and that his presence with the angels is not accessible to us. God designed physical space in analogy with his heavenly dwelling so that physical inaccessibility represents by analogy the spiritual exaltedness of God.

In addition, dead people are sometimes analogically described as dwelling “below,” because dead bodies are buried below ground (Isa. 14:9). These descriptions, occurring as they do in ordinary language with its flexibilities (see chap. 9), do not commit the writers to any detailed physicalistic theory.

The Days of Creation in Genesis 1

One more issue deserves our attention. People want to know about the account of creation in Genesis 1 and its relation to modern science. Genesis 1:1–2:3 indicates that God created the heavens and the earth in six days and rested on the seventh day (Gen. 2:2–3; see Ex. 20:11). How can this possibly be reconciled with the scientific accounts that say that the universe is about fourteen billion years old?

Actually, not one but several ways exist that try to do justice both to the Bible’s teaching and to the claims of modern science. The issue is complex, and we must leave the details to other books.¹¹ Here, we focus on impersonalism versus personalism in our assumptions about the universe.

Consider first the interpretation of scientific work. If we hold an impersonalist worldview, the laws that the scientists discover are impersonal and mechanical, and there can be no exceptions in the past. Scientists look at present evidence, such as light coming from distant galaxies, and the motions of distant galaxies. They then extrapolate into the past, using the assumption that the physical laws they now observe were also operative in the past. For example, they rely on the constancy of the speed of light and the constancy of

¹¹Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, chaps. 5–10.

laws of motion and gravitation. Using these laws, they infer that the universe is something like fourteen billion years old. When they make this inference, they assume that the laws for present-day phenomena are the same for all times.

But is this assumption about constancy of laws valid? Constancy seems inevitable if the laws are impersonal. But if God is personal, and if he governs the world personally, he may have reasons for acting differently in the past. One of the approaches for looking at science and Genesis reasons in precisely this way. This approach is called the theory of *mature creation*. This theory says that, according to Genesis 2, God created Adam and Eve as mature adults, rather than as babies. So, it reasons, God may have created the whole universe in a mature state. Adam and Eve would have looked twenty years old or more just after they were created. The trees in the garden of Eden would have looked mature. If a scientist had cut a cross section through a tree trunk, he would have found rings. By counting the rings he could have estimated the apparent age of the tree. Likewise the universe now looks coherently mature, with an age of fourteen billion years. But the age is only *apparent*, because God created it mature.

The theory goes on to observe that God acts in a regular way in sustaining the universe through time. This activity is called God's *providence*. "He upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Heb. 1:3). In addition, Genesis 2:3 says that on the seventh day "God rested from all his work that he had done *in creation*." He was no longer *creating*. But he was *sustaining* what he had already created. The distinction between creating and sustaining suggests that the regularities that scientists now observe belong to the *sustaining* phase, to God's providence. He may have acted in a very different way during the time of creation, that is, during the six days. In that case, the scientists' conception of scientific laws touches only on providence—it does not deal with the time of creation.

The crucial difference here is a difference due to a personal God. A *personal* God is superior to the regularities that scientists now investigate. These regularities, such as the constancy of the speed of light, are regularities that God sets in place from creation onward. But his acts of creation themselves are personal acts and may belong to a different order than the present regularities. The *personal* character of God sets a boundary to the character of scientific inference, particularly inferences into the far past.

The Nature of the Days

We can also think about the personal character of God's communication to us in Genesis 1. As we observed, in Genesis 1 God addresses all the people

in all the cultures of the world. So he does not use the word *day* as if it were a technical term for a precisely measured time as a scientist would measure it with an atomic clock. Rather, as a personal God he communicates with people in all cultures. All cultures experience the human daily cycle of work and rest. The days in Genesis 1 are God's days of work and rest, in analogy with human beings who experience work and rest in their own daily lives. In particular, consider the seventh day. It is the day on which God rested "from all his work that he had done in creation" (Gen. 2:3). God continues to rule the world through his acts of providence. But he has permanently finished his work of creation. Hence, his rest from creation goes on forever. Likewise, the seventh day goes on forever. The important thing about God's seventh day is that it is made holy by God's rest, not that it is exactly so long by some technical scientific measurement.

The seventh day of God's rest goes on forever, but it is analogous to the seventh day of Sabbath rest that the Israelites were told to celebrate (Ex. 20:8–11). Israelites imitate God by resting. The point in the analogy is not how much time a scientist would measure using technically precise clocks, but how human work and rest relate to God's work and rest. Work and rest, as purposeful actions by persons, are at the heart of it. Accordingly, we may infer that God's work days, the first six days, are analogous to human work days.

God's description is truthful, but has in mind the interests of ordinary human beings, not primarily scientists in their scientific specialties. In sum, God's account in Genesis 1 is *personalist*, not merely because God himself is personal, but because he takes into account the robust human interests among human beings in all the cultures throughout the world.

With this understanding of Genesis 1, we have taken a healthy step toward reading the Bible respectfully. This route can lead to any of several ways that people have explored as to how Genesis 1 and science can fit together well.¹²

¹²Many people are also interested in the relation of the Bible to modern evolutionary theory. See Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, chaps. 18–19; Collins, *Science and Faith*, chaps. 16–18.