

Scripture and general revelation

Andrew S. Kulikovsky

One of the challenges to those who hold to the biblical view of a relatively recent creation is the question of how to understand general revelation and integrate the conclusions of modern science with our understanding of Scripture. At present, the understanding of the majority of both Christian and non-Christian scientists stands in stark contrast to what the language of Scripture appears to be communicating. In response, many evangelical theologians, wishing to maintain the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, have felt compelled to modify their interpretation of what the Bible teaches about creation to bring it in line with the current scientific consensus. But is this the correct approach to the problem?

Two books of revelation?

Many evangelical scientists and theologians attempt to resolve this question by holding to the notion that God has revealed Himself in two ‘books’—*general revelation* and *special revelation*. This idea originated with Francis Bacon (1561–1626) in 1605,¹ and maintains that God gave humanity two revelations of truth, each of which is fully authoritative in its own realm:

1. Special revelation (the Bible): authoritative in all matters relating to spiritual truth, salvation, ethics, morality and Christian living.
2. General revelation: authoritative in all matters relating to the natural world.

Although these two revelations differ from each other greatly in character and scope, they cannot contradict each other, because they were given by the same self-consistent God of truth. Furthermore, the tasks of the theologian and the scientist are seen to be the interpretation of Scripture and the interpretation of nature, respectively, and each have their own specific methodology and procedures for determining the true meaning of the particular book they are studying.²

The basic tenet of the dual revelation theory is summarized by Baptist theologian Bernard Ramm: ‘God cannot contradict His speech in Nature by His speech in Scripture. If the Author of Nature and Scripture are the same God, then the two books of God must eventually recite the same story.’³ In fact, old-earth proponent Hugh Ross considers nature to be just as inspired as Scripture—a 67th book of the Bible⁴—and he appeals to Psalms 19 and 50 for

scriptural support.⁵ Indeed, the basic maxim for those who accept the dual revelation theory is ‘All truth is God’s truth.’ Yet, as theologian C.L. Deinhardt comments:

‘The prevalence of this maxim among Christian writers could make one think it is a quotation from Scripture, with very likely a long history of theological treatises about it and biblical exegeses supporting its use in justifying “truth” being drawn from science, nature, psychology, etc. But I have yet to find the text in the Bible.’⁶

Which ‘book’ wins any conflict?

Even on the face of it, the idea of two non-contradictory ‘books’ of revelation seems flawed. The fact is that these two ‘books’ do appear to contradict each other at numerous points. Such conflicts are nearly always resolved by simply reinterpreting the special revelation in Scripture. In other words, general revelation takes priority over special revelation, implying—at least in the minds of many interpreters—that the two are not equal. This has been demonstrated time after time in the publications of the American Scientific Affiliation (ASA). In his review article on the ASA and the Creation Research Society, Christian philosopher/apologist William Lane Craig notes:

‘[t]he whole point of the double revelation theory was supposed to prove that “these two revelations must agree; if they do not appear to do so, it must be because we are misinterpreting either one or both.” But the Bible always seems to come out on the short end.’⁷

David Diehi highlights the central interpretive implication of the dual revelation theory when he asserts that ‘general and special revelation are equally authoritative and infallible for the respective truths that they in fact reveal’.⁸ In other words, general revelation, through scientific study, is the final and infallible authority on matters pertaining to the natural world, whereas *the special revelation of Scripture may contain errors of fact when speaking about the structure, form, operation and dating of the universe*.⁹ Thus, the dual revelation approach implies that whenever there is an apparent conflict between the conclusions of the scientist and the interpretations of the theologian, then the theologian must re-evaluate his interpretation of the Scriptures at these points in order to bring the Bible back into harmony with science. Since the Bible is not a scientific textbook, it is not thought by many theologians to speak authoritatively on issues relating to the actual form and operation of the physical world. Proponents of the dual revelation theory believe that only careful scientific study can give us detailed and authoritative answers in these areas. This is especially true for those questions relating to the origin and nature of the universe, the effects of the Edenic Curse, and the reality, significance and effect of the Genesis Flood in the time of Noah. Therefore, it is not difficult to determine which ‘revelation’ gains the supremacy in any

dual revelation theory. Science conquers all.¹⁰

But is such an approach really justified? To answer this question it is necessary to further explore what is actually meant by the terms ‘general revelation’ and ‘special revelation’, as well as the nature and purpose of these two kinds of revelation.

General revelation

The classical definition of ‘general revelation’ is given by Bruce Demarest and Gordon Lewis:

‘[T]he disclosure of God in nature, in providential history, and in the moral law within the heart, whereby all persons at all times and places gain a rudimentary understanding of the Creator and his moral demands.’¹¹

Elsewhere, Demarest adds:

‘General revelation, mediated through nature, conscience, and the providential ordering of history, traditionally has been understood as a universal witness to God’s existence and character.’¹²

Systematic theologian Millard Erickson offers a similar definition but, as Robert Thomas points out, he slips in an additional connotation for the meaning of ‘general’.¹³ Erickson understands general revelation as ‘general’ not only in the sense that it is universally available to everyone, but also in the sense that its *content* is general.¹⁴

Diehi, on the other hand, appears to have invented his own definition:

‘General revelation is a revelation of God through his works of creation and providence in a natural, continuous, universal, indirect and nonpropositional mode.’¹⁵

Furthermore, he asserts that ‘the message of general revelation, while general about the character and will of God, is quite specific when it comes to matters about creation’.⁸ Clearly, Diehi’s and Erickson’s definitions represent a significant departure from the definition of general revelation traditionally used by theologians. How, then, should general revelation be defined and what is the biblical basis for such a definition?

Firstly, in what sense is general revelation ‘general’? While Erickson believes the content of the revelation is general, Diehi argues that the content of the revelation ‘about creation’ is quite specific, including what God has made (e.g. the heavens, firmament, rains and fruitful seasons).¹⁶ Yet it is difficult to see what Diehi actually means by this. The heavens, the

firmament, the rains, etc. are indeed quite specific things, but this only indicates that God has created many specific things that are distinct from each other. While this may provide some insight into the character and nature of the Creator, it says very little about the creation itself. Nevertheless, Diehi argues that if general revelation ‘includes both knowledge of God and knowledge of creation, and if it is an objective and infallible revelation, then not only does theology have a reliable and divinely authoritative source but so does science’.¹⁷ However, as Diehi acknowledges, such a conclusion is conditional upon showing that general revelation does indeed include ‘knowledge of creation’ and if so, to what extent.

Secondly, in what way is science related to general revelation? It is quite common for theologians and theistic scientists to view science and general revelation as one and the same thing,¹⁸ although most understand science as the study of God’s general revelation in the same way that theology is the study of God’s special revelation. For example, Christian apologist Norman Geisler declares:

‘Systematic theology is as meaningful as science is, for theology is to the Bible (God’s special revelation) what science is to nature (God’s general revelation). Both are a systematic approach to the truths God has revealed in a nonsystematic way. In each case God has given the truths and left it for man to organize them in an orderly way.’¹⁹

Progressive creationist Robert C. Newman claims that knowledge from general revelation is based on a much larger body of data than that of special revelation, and therefore provides far more detail than Scripture.²⁰ But Newman fails to see that data is just that—data. It is not communication and it does not speak for itself, since there are often different interpretations for the same data sets. Therefore, raw, uninterpreted data cannot be revelation.

Diehi, on the other hand, considers general revelation to be ‘progressive throughout the whole of human history ... As we investigate more deeply and fully the creation of God, he progressively unveils to us its true nature and structure ... Thus to progress in a knowledge of general revelation is to be able to better understand the significance and application of the teachings of Scripture. It is to be able to know more precisely what Scripture does and does not teach.’²¹

Diehi’s application of the term ‘progressive’ to general revelation



Francis Bacon was the originator of the idea that God has given humanity both a general revelation and a special revelation. This approach, however, results in reinterpreting the special revelation in Scripture. (Image by TFE Graphics).

is curious. He appears to be drawing a parallel with the progressive nature of biblical (special) revelation which is progressive in the sense that it was revealed over an extended but *limited* period of time. Describing general revelation as progressive, however, means something quite different, since according to Diehi, general revelation continues *indefinitely*. Diehi also assumes that the knowledge gained from general revelation through scientific study is cumulative in the same way that our knowledge of God grows as we see Him progressively reveal Himself in salvation history.

But this is a very naïve view of the historical progress of science which was not at all cumulative, but rather, occurred through ‘revolutions’, where many of the currently held paradigms and theories were completely overturned and replaced by new paradigms and theories.²² In fact, if Diehi’s conception of general revelation is accepted, then we are forced to view it as a dynamic, constantly changing source of ‘knowledge’. The problem is that at many points in history, scientific ‘knowledge’ has been quite wrong. But if general revelation (as Diehi conceives of it) has been wrong many times, then how can it be viewed as authoritative, let alone infallible?

Is there any warrant, then, for broadening the scope of general revelation to include scientific study? Robert Thomas answers in the negative for several reasons:

1. Knowledge of general revelation should be common to all people: ‘It is not something they must seek to discover. It is not hidden truth such as the mysteries of special revelation revealed to the Apostles. It is information that is common knowledge to all ... and impossible for mankind to avoid.’²³
2. Modern science is not general revelation, since most scientific knowledge is of recent origin, and only comprehensible to those with advanced training in the various scientific disciplines.
3. The subject of general revelation is God Himself (*cf.* Psalm 19:6; Rom 1:19–21; Acts 14:15–17; Acts 17:24–28; Rom 2:14–15, etc.), not the physical world.²⁴
4. Humanity’s invariable response to general revelation is *negative* (*cf.* Rom 1:18–21). As Thomas notes: ‘For human discoveries to be categorized under the heading of general revelation, those discoveries must be objects of rejection by the non-Christian world, not revelations of truth ... to suggest that discoveries of the secular Western mind are direct results of positive responses to general revelation is to contradict what Scripture says about unregenerate mankind’s response to that revelation.’²⁵ Therefore, the notion that general revelation includes scientific data, reasoning and conclusions cannot be maintained.

Diehi also argues that all biblical statements are ‘dependent on general revelation for rational, empirical and personal meaning’ and therefore, general revelation has an ‘epistemological priority’ over special revelation. ‘It is in the logical, empirical and personal structure of creation as

general revelation that we have a basis for the meaning of any proposition, Biblical or otherwise.’ Indeed, the laws of logic are ‘grounded in general revelation’, and without logic, no statement of Scripture is intelligible.²⁶ But on this point Diehi is quite mistaken. The capacity to reason is an inherent part of human nature. We are created in the image of God, and since God is a rational being, we, too, are rational beings. When God told Adam and Eve not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they understood what He meant and that death would result.²⁷ They did not have to turn to the scientific study of the garden to determine God’s intent! Diehi goes on to argue that in order to understand Psalm 23, for example, one has to have at least a basic knowledge about sheep and the role of the shepherd.²⁶ Again, Diehi is mistaken. Such knowledge is gained by studying the relevant culture, not by studying general revelation.

Finally, what do the Scriptures themselves teach about the nature and function of general revelation? Psalm 19:1–4 is often cited as supporting the concept of the ‘two books’ of revelation and that scientific study can reveal specific information about God and His creation:

‘The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.’

Regarding verse 1, Diehi points to the phrases ‘glory of God’ and ‘the work of his hands’, and argues that general revelation reveals not only knowledge of God Himself, but also knowledge of the things He has made.⁸ Yet, Diehi fails to note the synonymous parallelism between the two halves of this verse. While each half is distinct, it also serves to reinforce the other half. The ‘heavens’ reveal the majesty and greatness of God, while the ‘skies’ (synonymous to ‘heavens’) reveal His incredible creative activity. Both halves focus wholly on God, not on the actual creation. The skies do not proclaim themselves; they proclaim the work of God.

In addition, the translation of verses 3–4 is not straightforward. The recently published New English Translation (NET) renders the text as follows:

‘The heavens declare God’s glory; the sky displays his handiwork. Day after day it speaks out; night after night it reveals his greatness. There is no actual speech or word, nor is its voice literally heard. Yet its voice echoes throughout the earth; its words carry to the distant horizon.’

Note that the word ‘where’ in verse 2 in the NIV is not in the Hebrew, and the NET (and ASV, NRSV²⁸) translation rightly emphasizes the fact that the heavens do not have any actual audible voice.

Furthermore, the Hebrew Masoretic Text of verse 4 has קָוָם (*qāwwām*, ‘their measuring cord’) rather than קוֹלָם (*qōlām*, ‘their voice’). The LXX and all modern



Supporters of the dual revelation theory maintain that detailed and authoritative answers in areas such as the Edenic Curse (i.e. which resulted in man unable to lead his original strictly vegetarian existence) and the Genesis Flood can only be gained through careful, scientific study. But it is not difficult to see which ‘revelation’ gains the supremacy, as science conquers all.

translations, however, prefer *qōlām*, since it appears that a scribe erred by dropping the lamed (ל) when copying קולל, which resulted in קל, and ‘measuring cord’ does not appear to make much sense. Yet, the term ‘voice’ does not seem to fit the context any better, given that the preceding verse states that the heavens do not have a voice. Secondly, the principles of textual criticism suggest that the ‘more difficult’ reading is preferable.

How, then, should verse 4 be translated? In a number of other passages, קָדָם (*qāw*, ‘measuring cord’) is used to describe an extent. In Job 38:4–5, *qāwwām* is associated with the extent of the earth’s dimensions; in Jeremiah 31:29, it refers to a geographical area; in Isaiah 34:11 and Lamentations 2:8, *qāwwām* refers to the extent of God’s judgment, in Zechariah 1:16, it refers to the extent of Jerusalem, and in Isaiah 44:13, it refers to marking off an outline. Therefore, it is quite possible that in Psalm 19:4, *qāwwām* refers to the extent or reach of the testimony of the heavens. In other words, the measuring cord of the heavens extends out to the whole of the earth, and its message is carried to the distant horizon. This rendering makes good sense of both the text and the context. It should be clear, then, that Psalm 19:1–4 does not support the idea that general revelation includes science and reveals truth about the physical creation.

Another commonly cited text which supposedly supports the dual revelation theory is Romans 1:20:

‘For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.’

But note that what is clearly seen is ‘God’s invisible

qualities’ not scientific facts or knowledge about the physical creation. Note also the reason for this revelation: so that mankind cannot claim ignorance as a reason for not accepting God.

Richard Young argues that if the expressions in Romans 1:20 are interpreted in light of ‘the central Creator/creation/idolatry motif that runs throughout the passage’, it is apparent that

‘God’s eternal power would then pertain to God’s creative energy, and God’s deity would pertain to the idea that the Creator, not creation, is sovereign and deserving of worship. Thus what is manifest throughout creation is simply that God is the Creator who should be worshiped.’²⁹

Young also notes that if τὸ γνωστὸν (*to gnōston*, v. 19) is rendered as ‘what is known’ it would create a tautology: what is known has been made known. Therefore, it would be better to take it as a reference to that subset of knowledge about God which He has chosen to reveal to humanity.³⁰

Again, Romans 1:19–20 offers no support for the view that general revelation encompasses specific knowledge about the physical world, including modern scientific conclusions and theories. What, then, is the purpose of general revelation? Romans 1:19–20 clearly teaches that general revelation proclaims to *all* humanity, past and present, that God exists, that He created the universe and everything in it, and that He is great and powerful. Thus, *the physical world is not a second book of revelation from God, but a signpost pointing to God, the almighty Creator.*

In the final analysis, the double revelation theory fails to acknowledge the inherent limitations of scientific knowledge and method, especially in relation to the study of origins. Dr John Whitcomb adds:

‘The scientific method assumes without proof the universal validity of uniformity as a law of nature, by extrapolating present processes forever into the past and future; and it ignores the possible anti-theistic bias of the scientist himself as he handles the “facts” of nature in arriving at a cosmology (a theory concerning the basic structure and character of the universe) and a cosmogony (a theory concerning the origin of the universe and its parts).’²²

The primacy of special revelation

Wheaton College historian Mark Noll writes:

‘The height of foolishness is to confuse the tasks of creator and creature (Rom. 1). Humans are creatures, not the creator. As such we will always be limited by our finitude from seeing the whole picture. We will always be predisposed by our fallenness to misconstrue the results of historical

inquiry for our own idolatrous satisfaction. We will always be trading the advantages that come from living in the God-ordained particularities of our own cultures for the blindness that comes from being unable to see what is so obvious to those who gaze upon the past from other frames of reference.³¹

In other words, it is impossible to discover the truth about creation by relying on our own knowledge, ideas and methods, simply because we are finite and fallen human beings. Not only does our humanity prohibit us from having exhaustive knowledge, but our fallen nature also inhibits our ability to perceive, to reason and to assess. Moreover, the object of scientific study—the natural world—is also fallen. While it still reveals the glory and greatness of God, it is, nevertheless, ‘in bondage to decay’ (Rom 8:20–22). The image it presents is, to some extent, distorted.

Nevertheless, Diehi objects to using sin or sin’s Curse on creation or a supposed deficiency in general revelation as an excuse for reducing general revelation to a second-rate position such that, in theology and science disputes, Scripture is taken as the only trustworthy source of truth.⁸ However, not only does Diehi fail to understand the nature and purpose of general revelation, he also appears to place far too much confidence in the ability of scientists—who are fallen human beings with biases and agendas—to produce an accurate assessment and come to unbiased conclusions.

A much clearer picture of creation can be gleaned from the special revelation of Scripture. The scriptures tell the story of our creation, of our sin in Adam, and of God’s gift of salvation in Christ. General revelation in the natural world, on the other hand, does not tell a story at all. In fact, regarding salvation, Wolters posits that general revelation is ‘useless’, and the two revelations are not even comparable.³²

The scriptures, unlike general revelation, are presented in the words of ordinary human language. As Wolters points out:

[t]hey are plain in a way that general revelation never is, have a ‘perspicuity’ that is not found in the book of nature. In a way, therefore, the Scriptures are like a verbal commentary on the dimly perceived sign language of creation.³³

For this reason, the special revelation of Scripture should always take priority over both general revelation in the natural world and the conclusions of modern science. The revelation of Scripture is the filter through which all else should be interpreted. Indeed, Calvin, long ago, suggested that the Scriptures are the spectacles with which to read the book of nature and that the illumination of the Spirit is needed to give us proper eyesight for the reading.³⁴ As Graeme Goldsworthy points out, ‘all reality depends upon the creative word of God’. Thus, ‘the word of God must judge the ideas of men about truth and error, not the other way round.’³⁵

In addition, special revelation occurs in history and concerns historical events, and thus reinforces the link

between Christianity and factual history:

‘Is not God’s revelation first event, and only then knowledge? Does not revelation occur in history, and not first of all in ideation? Is not revelation the history of God’s acts in time and space, and not merely as information[?] Information is data, facts, measures, statistics, knowledge? [*sic*] While revelation yields information, it is not constituted by information as such but by God’s disclosure of himself through historical events.’³⁶

Yet the most important and significant attribute of special revelation is that it is the testimony of the Creator Himself regarding truth that is inherently inaccessible to human perception and inquiry. Allan MacRae summarized this point well:

‘The greatest importance of revelation lies in fields in which the facts are inaccessible to the observer. No human being was present when the earth was made. No one could see the various processes that occurred, or tell from his own observation what is their purpose and ultimate destiny. The earth as it exists today can be studied, and inferences made as to its past history. Processes now going on can be observed and measured, and estimates made as to their occurrence in past times. After all this is done, much remains to be learned. How much easier it would be, if a revelation about these matters could be secured from the One who made the earth.’³⁷

Indeed, it is precisely for this reason that, when studying origins, more attention needs to be paid to the Scriptures—the special revelation of ‘the God who is there’ and who ‘is not silent’.

Allowing the conclusions of modern science to determine our doctrine of creation is essentially a denial of the historic, evangelical doctrine of *sola scriptura*. It is often stated that *sola scriptura* applies only to matters of ‘faith and life’. Indeed, this has become the basis for allowing science to be the authority in matters concerning origins.³⁸ However, this is another instance of revisionist historiography. As New Testament scholar Don Carson points out:

‘Precisely because the Reformers’ theological formulations were shaped by the controversies of their age, it is clear that the “faith and life” formula was meant to be an all-embracing rubric, not a limiting one. They claimed that the deposit of truth lies in the Bible, not in the church or in the magisterium of the church. Their concern, in other words, was to spell out the locus of authority in order to rebut their Roman Catholic opponents, not to restrict the range of the Bible’s authority to religious life and thought, away from history and the natural world. The modern disjunction would have seemed strange to them.’³⁹

Unfortunately, Scripture is no longer the sole determiner of what the Christian church believes. Instead,

the scientific priesthood is now telling the church what to believe about creation and how the Scriptures should be interpreted to fit in with those beliefs. For many, the Bible ‘is to teach us how one goes to heaven, not how the heavens go’.⁴⁰ But the central issue is not so much about the scientific accuracy of Scripture, but rather its *historical* accuracy. Does it accurately describe past events in propositional form? While all agree Scripture is not a textbook on science, those who have a high view of Scripture believe that when it does touch on areas such as science and history, it does speak truthfully and authoritatively.

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Andrew S. Kulikovsky has a B.App.Sc.(Hons) in Computer and Information Science from the University of South Australia and an M.A. in Biblical Studies and Theology from Louisiana Baptist University. His Masters thesis was entitled ‘Creation, Fall, Restoration: A Biblical Theology of Creation’. He is currently working on a Law degree at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia, and is an active supporter of *Answers In Genesis* and a member of the Adelaide Support Group.