

**How might Calvin's idea that biblical language is "accommodated" to its hearers contribute to a harmony of science and theology?**

Jonathan Appleby, March 2007

Science and theology are often portrayed as being in conflict. This essay aims to show that it is possible to harmonise Scripture with scientific understanding, without compromising our commitment to biblical authority. We will look first at the principle of accommodation.

The basic idea of accommodation can be summarised as a kind of speech-bridge between God and man. We, being human, finite and of limited understanding, are unable to fully comprehend God and his truth; and so God in Scripture adjusts his message so that we can understand it.

The principle of accommodation can be traced back to classical rhetoric, and is found in the writings of Cicero, Quintillian and Cato, where it is 'the adaptation of ... the matter under consideration to the persons being addressed, with full regard to their situation, their character, intelligence, and their emotional makeup.'<sup>1</sup>

In the early church it was recognised that as in human rhetoric there was a gulf between the learned and the unlearned, so in divine rhetoric there was an infinitely greater gulf to be bridged by the 'divinely appointed human authors' of

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<sup>1</sup> Ford Lewis Battles, 'God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity', *Interpretation*, 31 (1977), 19-38 (p.22).

Scripture, under the Spirit's guidance.<sup>2</sup> The patristic writer Origen likened God to a teacher communicating to small children: 'God condescends and comes down to us, accommodating to our weakness, like a schoolmaster talking a "little language" to his children.'<sup>3</sup> The modern-day example of the children's talk in a worship service illustrates this in a human context.

Other patristic writers, notably Augustine of Hippo, used accommodation as a principle of biblical interpretation, but it was Calvin who developed the idea and applied it consistently in his exposition of Scripture. For instance, when Scripture speaks of God having eyes and ears, Calvin states:

For who is so devoid of intellect as not to understand that God, in so speaking, lisps with us as nurses are wont to do with their children? Such modes of expression, therefore, do not so much express what kind of a being God is, as accommodate the knowledge of him to our feebleness.<sup>4</sup>

In his writings, Calvin repeatedly made the point that biblical language cannot necessarily be taken in a literal sense, and must be interpreted with wisdom.

At this point we make a brief digression to discuss the importance of nature and science within the Reformed tradition. McGrath notes that the Gallic Confession (1559) and Belgic Confession (1561) gave a framework which led to the development of the "two books" approach to nature and Scripture in Reformed theology, in which nature and Scripture are regarded as 'two complementary

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<sup>2</sup> Ford Lewis Battles, 'God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity', p.20.

<sup>3</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, (Blackwell Publishing, 2003), p257.

<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by Henry Beveridge, (Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002), 1.13.1, p81.

sources of our knowledge of God'.<sup>5</sup> This approach was adopted enthusiastically by such men as Galileo and Francis Bacon. Bacon published his work 'Advancement of Learning' in 1605, in which he 'commended the study of "the book of God's word" and the "book of God's works"'.<sup>6</sup> A key message of the "two books" tradition is that truth observed in creation must by definition be compatible with the truth revealed in Scripture, since both proceed from the one God.

Galileo found himself in conflict with the Roman Catholic Church in his championing of Copernican astronomy. According to Lucas, Galileo stated that 'the Holy Bible and the phenomena of nature proceed alike from the divine Word, the former as the dictate of the Holy Ghost and the latter as the observant executrix of God's commands'.<sup>7</sup> Galileo pointed out that apparent inconsistencies between the observed astronomical reality and biblical texts simply indicated the need to 'seek out the true sense' of Scripture.<sup>8</sup> How then do we 'seek out the true sense' of Scripture so as to work towards a harmony of science and theology?

We will answer this question by reference to Genesis 1-2:4a, as this passage is often cited as the main point of conflict between science and theology.

What was the cultural and linguistic context of Genesis 1-2:4a? Lucas notes that this passage is written in the style of 'elevated prose', with a distinct structure and

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<sup>5</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, p212.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p.212.

<sup>7</sup> Ernest Lucas, 'Science and the Bible: Are they incompatible?', *Science and Christian Belief*, 17 (2005), 137-154 (p.144).

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p.145.

form.<sup>9</sup> Such a style shows evidence of being highly influenced by Hebrew religious culture.

The language of Genesis 1-2:4a is the language of the common man, and in regard to nature it can be said to be a 'language of appearance'.<sup>10</sup> In commenting on verses 6-8 Calvin states:

To my mind, this is a certain principle, that nothing is here treated of but the visible form of the world. He who would learn astronomy... let him go elsewhere. Here, the Spirit of God would teach all men without exception; and therefore... the history of creation... is the book of the unlearned.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, in commenting on verse 16, Calvin commends the study of science; 'for astronomy is not only pleasant, but very useful to be known', and notes that whereas science states that Saturn is larger than the Moon, this is not a problem to Scripture, 'for to the sight it appears differently. Moses therefore adapts his discourse to common usage.'<sup>12</sup> Here we have an example of God using accommodating language in Scripture, speaking in plain words so that we can understand.

What use is made of literary form and symbolism in Genesis 1-2:4a? The structure of the creation account involves parallels between Days 1-3 and Days 4-6, the former being characterised by the creation of form and structure, and the latter being characterised by the filling of that structure. On Day 7 God rests, and

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<sup>9</sup> Ernest Lucas, 'Science and the Bible: Are they incompatible?', p.145.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p.146.

<sup>11</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis – Volume 1*, trans. by John King, (Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Grand Rapids, MI, 1999), p.33.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p.37.

the image is one of completion.<sup>13</sup> Writing of this Origen stated 'I do not think anyone will doubt that these are figurative expressions which indicate certain mysteries through a semblance of history.'<sup>14</sup> He evidently did not think that the creation account should be taken literally, because he had seen the symbolism within it. In this he was not alone; Augustine took a similar view of this passage, arguing that it should be understood symbolically.

For whom was Genesis 1-2:4a written? It is most likely that Genesis 1-2:4a was intended to be read aloud to Hebrew worshippers, possibly as part of an act of worship. When seen in that context, it is clear that the main purpose of the creation story is theological, and both Augustine and Calvin saw it as such. Genesis 1-2:4a differs from other creation accounts of the ancient world in stressing both one supreme creator God, and the non-deity of the sun, moon and sea-creatures. The special position of humanity in the created order is also a distinctive feature.

To conclude this brief look at Genesis 1-2:4a, we have seen above that this passage is 'a theological polemic expressed in a symbolic story addressed to ancient Hebrews'.<sup>15</sup> When interpreted in this light, which involves taking account of God's accommodating action, we see that this passage was not meant to be read as if it were a modern scientific text. When Genesis 1-2:4a was written, God accommodated his words to the human capacity and culture of that day. When we read Genesis 1-2:4a today, we have to be aware of God's accommodatory approach in the original text, and in addition we have to make

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<sup>13</sup> David Wilkinson, *The Message of Creation*, (IVP, 2002), p.24.

<sup>14</sup> Ernest Lucas, 'Science and the Bible: Are they incompatible?', p.148.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p.154.

allowances for the fact that this passage was written in a pre-scientific age and in a very different culture. To quote Paul Seely, 'there is no biblical reason why the theological message of Genesis 1 cannot be eternally valid, while the package in which it came was a temporal concession to the people of that time'.<sup>16</sup>

This brings us to an interesting point, namely, that science can in fact perform a valuable service to theology. When seeking to interpret a passage of Scripture, we can use our knowledge of science to help us recognise when the biblical writers are using accommodating language or analogy. Galileo put it this way; 'having arrived at any certainties in physics, we ought to utilise these as... aids in the true exposition of the Bible...'<sup>17</sup> In this way, we can help to avoid the biblical literalism which seems to set science against theology.

It should however be noted that the use of accommodation to harmonise science and theology is not without its critics. It has been pointed out that in practice, when the "two books" of Scripture and nature appear to disagree, it is usually the book of Scripture which "gives way" to our improved understanding of nature.<sup>18</sup> It would perhaps be more correct however, to see the process as a refinement of both our understanding of nature and of Scripture as time moves on.

Some theologians have regarded accommodation as the "thin end of the wedge", which ultimately could lead to a dehistoricisation of Scripture into myth and

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<sup>16</sup> Paul Seely, 'The First Four Days of Genesis in Concordist Theory and in Biblical Context', *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*, 49 (June 1997), 85-95.

<sup>17</sup> Ernest Lucas, 'Science and the Bible: Are they incompatible?', p.147.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew S. Kulikovsky, 'Scripture and general revelation', *Journal of Creation*, 19/2 (2005), 23-28 (p.24).

legend.<sup>19</sup> However, this is not a valid reason for abandoning the attempt to arrive at a true interpretation of Scripture.

Many Christians, whilst agreeing that accommodation is a valid principle in biblical interpretation, have focussed their attention on the incompleteness of scientific inquiry in order to resolve the apparent differences between the “two books”. Science is indeed incomplete in its knowledge, and it would be wise to bear this in mind; however it is in a state of continual refinement and readjustment as time goes on. Should not the same be true of our attempts to interpret the Scriptures?

In conclusion, we have seen that the work of biblical interpretation is invaluable in arriving at a balanced view of Scripture, and considering God’s work of accommodation is part of that process. We have seen that there is no inherent incompatibility between Scripture and nature, between theology and science; they are simply concerned primarily with different subjects. Science can perform a valuable service to theology by helping us to discard improper ways of reading Scripture; theology can help us to put scientific truth into a wider context. Finding a balanced view which harmonises science and theology requires effort and is not the easy option; however as we have seen above we have the examples of Calvin, Galileo and others to encourage us in this task.

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<sup>19</sup> Herman Bavinck, ‘On Scripture & Science’, trans. by A. Wolters, *Calvin Theological Journal*, 27 (2001), 91-95 (p.94).

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