

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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- 3 PATRICK GARDINER, *The Nature of Historical Explanation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 112.
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“Might” Never Makes Right

EDWARD N. LUGENBEAL

THE CHRISTIAN VIEW OF SCIENCE AND SCRIPTURE

By Bernard Ramm

W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1954 368 pp

\$4.00

Fifteen years after its publication date *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* remains in many respects unique, significant, and, for Adventists, particularly relevant to much of our current discussion on science and religion.

The book differs from most of the apologetic literature on “Genesis and science,” because the author, Bernard Ramm, is a competent theologian who is also well informed in science. He is simultaneously a defender of the “fundamentalist” Protestant view of Scripture as fully authoritative and unerring, and a defender of the integrity of scientific inquiry and the validity of its results. In fact, probably the major point Ramm wishes to make in this book is that, contrary to what many conservative Christians have said, it is possible for the conscientious Christian scientist to accept much of modern biology, anthropology, and geology, and still believe in the Bible as infallible and verbally inspired. On the one hand, the book contains the usual conservative polemic against both secular non-Christian skepticism and liberal Christian skepticism regarding fiat creationism and supernaturalism, though it is a gentle polemic. On the other hand, Ramm vigorously defends most of the conclusions of modern science and roundly chastises the “hyperorthodox” for their obscurantism in scientific matters.

In research for this book I discovered that there are two traditions in Bible and science both stemming from the developments of the nineteenth century. There is the ignoble tradition that has taken a most unwholesome attitude toward science and has used arguments and procedures not in the better traditions of established scholarship. There has been and is a noble tradition in Bible and science, and this is the

tradition of the great and learned evangelical Christians who have been patient, genuine, and kind and who have taken great care to learn the facts of science and Scripture (p. 9).

Seventh-day Adventists are caught in the crossfire here. Ramm cites one of our pioneers, George McCready Price, as an example of the ignoble tradition and contrasts his work with that of J. W. Dawson, nineteenth century Christian geologist, who presumably exemplifies the noble evangelical tradition.

The book has two major divisions. The first three chapters contain a broad discussion of the relationship between science and Christianity. In these chapters Ramm develops his framework and methods for solving the specific problems he examines. The temptation for one who is oriented to science may be to skip lightly over these generalities and to "get on with it" into the second part of the book, four separate chapters that deal with the specifics of harmonizing biology, geology, anthropology, and astronomy with biblical teaching. This temptation must be resisted, however, since the value of Ramm's specific solutions cannot be assessed apart from their methodological and theological presuppositions. Particularly important are Ramm's discussions of the nature of the biblical language pertaining to science, the principles for interpreting such language, and the biblical philosophy of nature.

Since so much of the current debate on science and religion in Adventism swirls around problems related to geology, let us take a closer look at Ramm's treatment of that subject. His solution to the geological problems posed by Genesis is a synthesis of three theories: "We believe then the harmony of Scripture with geology is achieved by uniting together (i) the pictorial-day theory of Genesis' days, (ii) the moderate theory of concordism, and (iii) progressive creationism" (p. 229).

Briefly, Ramm's setting for this synthesis is as follows: The purpose of Genesis One is religious and theological and deals solely with primary causes. The secondary causes, including the time element and the process involved, do not come within its scope. The scriptural description of God speaking things into existence sets forth dramatically the primary cause of creation, but does not exclude a process in time involving secondary causes. The religious purpose of Genesis is to prohibit idolatry and point to God as the originator of the universe. Genesis challenges man to worship the good and omnipotent Creator; it prohibits all "superstitious" views of the universe; and it denies any view of nature that rejects the existence of God and a spiritual order (pp. 219-220).

This means that Ramm rejects a literal interpretation of the six-day creation week. For him the days are *pictorial days*, or days of revelation. The sequence is only *moderately concordant* with the sequence described by science; the Genesis sequence is at least partially logical rather than chronological. Ramm cites the creation of the heavenly bodies on the fourth day as an example of a logical rather than chronological order: "We believe . . . that creation was *revealed* in six days, not *performed* in six days. We believe that the six days are *pictorial-revelatory* days, not literal days or age-days (p. 222, italics in original). . . . A carpenter can tell his child that he made a house — the roof, walls, floors, and basement. The child realizes that his father made the house even though the father gave a topical order, not a chronological order" (p. 223).

Progressive creationism is the theory that creation occurred over the vast period of time indicated by the modern geological time scale, not as a "theistic evolution" but as widely separated *de novo* divine creative acts with much phylogenetic change occurring between creations. Ramm feels that this theory does justice to the fossil record with its "missing links" between major groups and its sequences and progressions within the major groups of living forms.

Convinced as he is that the evidence for the antiquity of the earth is overwhelming, Ramm is sharply critical of "Flood geology." Some of his most pointed criticisms are reserved for Price. (I find it unfortunate that Ramm so summarily dismisses the possibilities of Flood geology, a rejection based partially on identifying Flood geology with some of the interpretations of Price that may no longer be tenable in the light of present data.) Nonetheless, Ramm raises a key criticism of Flood geology that is worth considering carefully for the constructive value it may offer.

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The so-called strength of Price's work is his effort to poke holes into the uniformitarian geology of [Charles] Lyell as it is taught in standard books on geology. We must be careful of a logical fallacy at this point. To show the logical fallacies of another theory does not automatically prove ours to be right. It is admitted that the geological record is not completely lucid, and that there are problems. Suppose that 80 per cent of the geological record makes clear sense when interpreted from the Lyellian point of view, and that 20 per cent remains a problem to uniformitarian geology. We have our choice of taking the 80 per cent as established, and going to work on the 20 per cent; or, of taking the 20 per cent as normative, and trying to dissolve the 80 per cent. Price adopts the latter procedure. The author does not know what the actual percentages are, but he is sure that he is generous to Price in the choice of the above percentages. If by analogy Price's principle were followed *in other sciences* it is obvious that chaos would result (pp. 181-182, italics in original).

It seems to me that conservative Christian students of geology have been too often content to offer possibilities instead of probabilities. On a whole range of problems, they have been satisfied to say, "Yes, the usual interpretation looks reasonable, but it is not impossible that it *might* be like this." Obviously, to achieve scientific standing, a hypothesis has to be likely, not just possible. If Flood geology is to make an impact on the world of science, its interpretations must provide the most successful synthesis of the data. Perhaps more importantly, it is doubtful that Flood geology can pacify the haunting insecurities of its own practitioners so long as it can only say, "But it *might* be like that."

There are two further theses on which I would like to comment. One is Ramm's attempt to persuade conservative Christians to bring to science a wholesome respect. This is an emphasis often needed in orthodox circles. Too many conservative Christians tend to stress and to write about only "science falsely so-called" or the "delusions of science" or related themes. Ramm is quite right, for example, that geology cannot be shrugged into oblivion and that the picture of atheistic-evolutionary geologists seeking to disprove the Bible is unrealistic and unbecoming. In fact, Ramm challenges the belief widely held among conservative Christians that the only reason there are differences between the Christian and the geologist is that the atheistic geologist has a different set of presuppositions. There may be different presuppositions, but often these have little to do with the interpretation of a given set of data.

Too often, explanatory hypotheses are mistaken for presuppositions. For example, the conservative Christian apologist might say something like this: "I begin with belief in the Bible and its description of the Flood. If you shared my presuppositions, you would believe the Flood responsible for the formation of this rock and its fossils." Such an assertion, however, identifies the truly basic assumption of belief in the Scriptures as God's word with a particular interpretation of Scripture — that the Bible teaches that all or most of the rocks and fossils are the result of the Flood. Therefore, the explanatory hypothesis — "This rock was formed at the Flood" — becomes instead a "basic presupposition." There are any number of scientific tests for determining the mode of formation of the rock and evaluating the plausibility of its having been formed by a flood. The application and validity of these tests are rarely significantly affected by the presupposition "I believe in the Holy Scriptures."

71 Surely Ramm is correct in emphasizing that science must be respected. However, respect for science need not excuse the Christian from exercising caution in accepting the conclusions of science, for the scientist who thinks carefully must also respect the limitations of scientific inquiry. It is extremely difficult to assimilate what is known, and there is so much that is not known. It is also difficult to transcend the bias of one's own mind or intellectual community or era. Could it be that Ramm's confidence in the current results of scientific inquiry is uncritical? Is Ramm justified in saying with finality that the evidence is overwhelming and that the Scripture must therefore be reinterpreted?

A related theme is Ramm's caution against identifying one's own interpretation of Scripture with revelation or inspiration. "One cannot say: 'I believe just exactly what Genesis 1 says and I don't need any theory of reconciliation with science.' Such an assertion identifies revelation with interpretation" (p. 40). If nothing else, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* should arouse the reader to the realization that scriptural interpretation is in itself a science demanding careful training and scholarship. It is commonly assumed that anyone can interpret Scripture correctly, but that nature is complex, and that, therefore, if there is disharmony, the error is obviously in science. Ellen White, to be sure, knew better. She commented that science and Scripture are in full harmony when *each* is correctly interpreted. The Bible scholars in our midst know better also. There is a humility born of a continual grappling with the complexities of scriptural interpretation. (Surely, anyone can interpret Scripture so as to obtain a saving knowledge of Christ, and everyone can and should be a Bible student, but only those who possess the proper tools and information can truly be Bible scholars.)

It may be because I have identified interpretation of Scripture with revelation, but it is in matters of biblical interpretation that I find myself the most uneasy with Ramm. The challenging aspect of Ramm's reinterpretation of Genesis is that it is based on a view of biblical revelation and inspiration that parallels the view of Seventh-day Adventists, and so it is natural that Ramm's *principles of interpretation* parallel those of Seventh-day Adventist exegetes. In spite of this, however, his *interpretations* of Genesis are often radically different from ours.

I wonder whether Ramm does not find it necessary to do in biblical interpretation exactly what he criticizes Flood geologists for doing in science — interpret on the

basis of the 20 percent of the evidence instead of the 80 percent. Would he ever have come to such conclusions if it were not for the findings of science? If not, how does accepting the weight of evidence in science, while rejecting the weight of exegetical evidence, differ from accepting the weight of exegetical evidence, while rejecting the weight of scientific evidence? If the Flood geologist cannot rest secure in the notion that "might" makes right in science, neither can the interpreter of Scripture long maintain an honest confidence that "might" makes right exegetically.

Ramm's answers cannot be our answers, yet *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* remains a bold attempt to reconcile the Bible and science. In many respects, *how* the church goes about seeking solutions is as important as the actual solutions it may or may not find. Ramm can teach us much concerning the spirit and methods appropriate to our search for answers.

Brief Reviews

COMPLETENESS IN SCIENCE

By Richard Schlegel

Appleton-Century-Crofts, New York, 1967 xi plus 280 pp \$7.50

The gap between the culture of the scientist and that of the humanist has been the subject of much recent writing. There has been much talk, particularly from the humanists, about the need to build bridges between the two cultures. It seems significant that most of the bridges are being built by scientists. Richard Schlegel, a physicist, in writing the largely philosophical work *Completeness in Science* has provided an example.

In view of the title of the book, one reasonably expects the author to provide working definitions of *science and completeness* at an early stage. His treatment of *science* actually takes the form of a philosophy rather than a definition. Since science is the study of nature, this treatment leads to a philosophy of nature. For him, nature broadens as scientists wish to, or can, broaden their perceptions (pp. 58, 239). He believes that defining the scope of nature is a scientific rather than a philosophical problem.

Schlegel's definition of *completeness* is rather weak, in my opinion, since it may confirm the view of some readers that scientists flit from one field to another in the same frivolous way that people change from one fashion to another: "A science is complete when it gives as much descriptive detail as is desired . . . and when the theoretical structure of the science satisfactorily explains all the facts of the science" (p. 46).

It comes rather as a surprise to read that in one very important direction science *has* come to an end, "to have reached a limit of the understanding that came in the form of complete description" (p. 173; see also p. 236). This alarming conclusion, supported by three chapters (ten, eleven, and twelve) of argument, is further