

all times and the language used is often inflammatory, nevertheless, the intent behind this book is well-founded, and its message should be heeded. As such, I deem it a profitable read.

Reviewed by Bradford McCall, Regent University, Virginia Beach, VA 23464. ✕

Letters

The River Pishon Flows Again?

I received an interesting e-mail from a Saudi Arabian who read my article "Garden of Eden: A Modern Landscape" on the *PSCF* website (*PSCF* 52, no. 1 [2000]: 31–46). Here is what his e-mail said:

I read your article on the Pishon River – this totally amazed me as something interesting happened recently. Just in November 2008 there were very heavy rains in northern Saudi Arabia – the heaviest in 70 years. There was so much water that the desert turned into lakes (still there, and people are jet-skiing in these waters!). The flow cleared a lot of dust and sand from an ancient riverbed that nobody cared much for. This is Wadi Rumma (or Rimah as per the map in your article). I did go there a week later and saw the water was still flowing. Unfortunately my camera conked out on me but I do have pictures taken by others.

This e-mail helps support the idea that the Wadi Rimah-Wadi al Batin was the ancient Pishon River of Gen. 2:11–12, and if climatic conditions were right, it could flow again!

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Chasms in Gaps

Ronald G. Larson, in "Revisiting the God of the Gaps" (*PSCF* 61, no. 1 [2009]: 18), wrote:

If we apply methodological naturalism to the history of Christianity, and avoid GOG thinking, are we not led to seek the origin of Christianity entirely naturalistically, and so assume that the early church came to believe in the resurrection of Jesus through error, fraud, or legend?

This question tragically assumes that methodological naturalism is philosophical naturalism, dogmatically equivalent to scientism and materialism. But an empirical method does not determine philosophical and theological outcomes. It only provides that science is limited to what is empirically testable, whether directly or indirectly. The resurrection of Jesus is outside of the scope of science, first, because it is unique; second, because it is ascribed to a Power outside of nature. Larson's question involves an egregious error.

A second error that permeates the paper is the unspoken assumption that the explanations filled by God

of the Gaps arguments represent places where natural explanations are impossible. It is, for example, the dogmatic assertion that the Almighty God could not have created a universe where natural processes produced life. Is Larson competent to place this limit of the wisdom, knowledge and power of God? The "Summary and Final Thoughts" (pp. 20–21) indicate that he is not aware of the tension between the body of his paper and classical theology.

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Natural Explanation but Half the Story: No Room for God There

The wide-ranging article "Revisiting the God of the Gaps" (*PSCF* 61, no. 1 [2009]: 13–22) by Ronald G. Larson made me uncomfortable because of how often the phrase "argue for the existence of God" appears. I wonder whether a scientific (natural) explanation trumps a Christian explanation. Let me make three points.

First, here is a situation which makes plain that there are always two explanations (if not more). A plane crashes. The first question: Was it pilot error or a system failure? Science deals with things like the system of this plane and the system of the world. The question of pilot error shows that there can also be an explanation in which the agent responsible for the flight made a mistake. Although in this case we have alternative explanations, they are not of the same type.

Consider the following scenario: I walk into a room and see the kettle boiling. I ask, "Why is the kettle boiling?" A wise-acre in the room tells me that electrons running through the heater wires collide with irregularly placed atoms and make them vibrate violently. These vibrations pass to water molecules and when they vibrate with sufficient energy some molecules leave the liquid phase. We say the water is boiling. Of course, I was expecting another explanation, "we are making tea." Here we have two valid explanations, at least two that will always exist when humans do something.

Second, a God-of-the-gaps explanation will always fail if it is offered at the level of science, because proper scientific explanations do not invoke an agent as a factor in the phenomenon considered. The examples of the boiling kettle and the plane crash make it plain that this material kind of explanation is complete in itself.

Since the Christian faith is so utterly materially based (the Creator's choice), I do not think it impossible that there will be a scientific explanation found for everything to which we pay attention. But as Polanyi in *Personal Knowledge* makes clear, both choice and moral questions enter into the doing of science: thus the explanation of even scientists' actions can always be made in terms of the agent's purpose.

Third, since without invoking an agent one cannot discuss design, let us go to a level where both kinds of explanation can be used. At this level, when observing

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the world around us, we face an ambiguity. I look at the cosmos and assert that God the Creator made and sustains it. The materialist, when looking, retorts that the cosmos just exists; there is no evidence of God. I want to show evidence of God's existence, but then realize that I can only demonstrate his presence in one place in the cosmos by contrasting it with his absence in another. However, I am comforted because I perceive that the materialist has the same difficulty. The conclusion: barring information from another source than the nature we observe, we are stuck with this ambiguity.

Looking at the cosmos, are we looking at an artifact with a designer? Again we have ambiguity unless there are grounds for claiming some communication from the artificer. We are inevitably forced back to Scripture and history, and our personal relationship with God.

For an exciting and detailed discussion, in which the author faces and appreciates all of scientific theory, I recommend *Pascal's Fire: Scientific Faith and Religious Understanding* by Keith Ward. He makes a very complete theistic speculation, using only the revelation common to the monotheistic religions and matches it to the best naturalistic or materialist speculations. For his own reasons, he stops with the theistic case—although, because of other things he has written, I know he could go further.

In sum, let us insist on the existence of the two basic kinds of explanation—it is not a matter of preference or religion. Christians need to recognize the essential ambiguity of all we observe, namely, the cosmos. This ambiguity is an expression of the freedom and responsibility God has given humankind.

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Larson Responds to Taylor and Siemens

C. P. S. Taylor expresses discomfort with my “arguing for the existence of God” and reminds us of the “essential ambiguity of all we observe.” I agree that our observations are interpreted in different ways, and I did emphasize that apologetics cannot, on its own, bring us to God. It is also true that for many, no argument from design is necessary for them to believe in God, and for many more, no argument will ever be sufficient. However, there are both Christians and non-Christians who find such arguments to be useful “pointers” or indicators that the material world is not all there is. Some former atheists (such as Antony Flew) have been helped by such arguments. Taylor feels that one can only argue for God's presence in “one place in the cosmos by contrasting it with his absence in another.” However, I believe that some of us simply recognize God's design more easily in some phenomena (such as “fine tuning”) than in others.

David Siemens takes issue with my suggestion that consistent avoidance of God of the gaps reasoning would lead one to seek to explain the resurrection of

Christ naturalistically. He argues that this “assumes that methodological naturalism is philosophical naturalism, dogmatically equivalent to scientism and materialism.” He explains that the resurrection of Jesus is “outside the scope of science.” I agree that science cannot prove that the resurrection occurred. However, it can, in principle, provide evidence in support of, or, hypothetically, against the biblical account. Carbon dating can be used to establish the antiquity of documents (such as the early fragment of the Gospel of John), or could, again hypothetically, establish the antiquity of any remains that might be claimed to be those of Jesus. While it is highly unlikely that an airtight case can be made either way from such findings, the examination of the physical evidence (e.g., manuscripts or archeological findings) has led a number of initially skeptical individuals, such as Lee Strobel, to embrace the resurrection as historical. In his books and debates, William Lane Craig makes compelling arguments based on evidence and reasoning. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15, points out that many of the five hundred witnesses to Christ's resurrection were still alive at that time, and, in principle, available to support Paul's claims. Even more significantly, Jesus himself asked Thomas to touch his wounds, thus providing physical evidence of his resurrection.

Siemens' argument, applied to this case, would correctly conclude that even direct physical evidence of this kind would not prove that God had raised Jesus from the dead, since this would involve “a Power outside of nature.” But the evidence was convincing to Thomas. To invoke any such evidence, now or then, is to risk a “God of the gaps,” since any new evidence, for example, that Jesus had survived the cross without dying, or that the disciples had stolen his body, would undermine the case for the resurrection. “Gaps” lurk in all arguments for the resurrection of Jesus, since one can always claim that strong evidence against the biblical account might arise in the future and its absence at present is a “gap” that can eventually be filled. In this sense, to avoid completely “God of the gaps” arguments is to abandon any rational defense of Christianity, despite the examples of such defenses mounted by the apostle Paul.

Siemens' second point is that I make the “unspoken assumption” that explanations involving God represent situations where “natural explanations are impossible.” This assumption was unspoken, because I did not wish to claim such a thing! Design arguments involve not impossibility but implausibility based on what is currently known. Future findings may alter one's assessment of the situation. I do not wish to “dogmatically assert that God could not have created a universe where natural processes produced life.” Nor do I wish to assert that God “could not have created” the universe and everything in it only 6,000 years ago, if he wished to do so. I only say that, based on reasoning from the evidence, it does not appear to me that God did either of these.

I thank both Taylor and Siemens for carefully reading and critiquing my article.

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