



Mary L. Vandenberg

Article

What General Revelation Does (and Does Not) Tell Us

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The Reformed theological tradition tends to affirm scientific inquiry and often seeks to harmonize the discoveries of science with the biblical text. Much of what underlies the Reformed affirmation of science and the desire to harmonize the findings of science with the Bible is related to the theological understanding of the “two books” of revelation: nature and the Bible. Because God is the author of both books – the physical world and the Bible – so the argument goes, there can be no disagreement between them. Although one can appreciate the basic sentiment expressed by the assertion of agreement between the physical world and the Bible based on a common author, this assertion is fraught with problems. At a minimum, using the metaphor of the two books to advocate for a harmonization of the findings of science and the stories of the Bible with regard to the nature of the physical world represents a misunderstanding of the two-books metaphor as traditionally articulated and, therefore, a misappropriation of the theology of revelation to the task of harmonization.

Science and the Bible

For many people, the relationship between these two subjects is ambiguous at best, hostile at worst. Christians, especially those who affirm traditional notions about the reliability of the Bible, have waged war over this relationship. Battle lines are often drawn, fortresses built, and various forms of ammunition are lobbed back and forth. Since the Enlightenment, but especially since the publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and the explosion of scientific research and knowledge that has followed in its wake, Christians have increasingly moved in one of two directions.

On the one hand, there are Christians who reject the knowledge science pro-

vides, particularly in the areas of evolution and cosmology, and insist that the biblical accounts of creation and cosmology must be read in a woodenly literal fashion. They feel no need to harmonize the Bible and science because, for the most part, the scientific academy is wrong.¹ On the other hand, there are Christians who insist that what the Bible says about the origins of the universe does not, in fact, cannot, contradict what science has discovered.² In contrast to those in the first group, those in this group tend to affirm the discoveries of science while seeking to harmonize them in some way with the biblical text. The Reformed tradition, of which I am a part, tends to fall into line with the latter group, and it is this tradition I wish to examine.

Much of what underlies the Reformed affirmation of science and the desire to harmonize the findings of science with the Bible is related to the theological understanding of revelation.³ Reformed people are keen on speaking about

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revelation in terms of “two books.” General revelation, understood as the physical world or creation, is the first “book.” Special revelation, the Bible, is the second “book.” Because God is the author of both “books”—the physical world and the Bible—so the argument goes, there can be no disagreement between the two books. In other words, the findings of science *cannot* contradict the stories of the Bible.

Although one can appreciate the basic sentiment expressed by the assertion of agreement between the physical world and the Bible based on a common author, this assertion is fraught with problems. There are two main issues in this conversation, (1) how much concordance is there between what the Bible and science tell us about the nature of the physical world? and (2) how much concordance is there between what the Bible and science tell us about God?

This article will demonstrate that the theological concept of the two books of general and special revelation offers an answer to the second question but not to the first. Furthermore, using the metaphor of the two books to advocate for harmony between what the Bible and science tell us about the nature of the physical world represents a misunderstanding of the two books as traditionally articulated and, therefore, a misappropriation of the theology of revelation to the task of harmonization.

I will begin by giving some detail to the “two books” metaphor itself, including some historical perspective. I will then move to an explanation of the doctrine of revelation, especially as outlined in the Reformed tradition, paying special attention to John Calvin, from whom many derive the “two books” metaphor. Elucidating the doctrine of revelation as outlined by Calvin will demonstrate how the misunderstanding of this doctrine has led to its misappropriation with regard to resolving apparent conflicts between science and the Bible. I will conclude by offering some suggestions for moving forward in the ongoing discussions concerning the relationship between scientific findings and the Bible.

The Two Books and Science

As noted above, the “two books” metaphor for understanding the relationship between science and

the Bible has as its basic premise the idea that God has given human persons two sources of knowledge: nature and the Bible. These are sometimes referred to as “two books.” Furthermore, these two books cannot contradict one another.

Various scientists have grabbed hold of this metaphor as a way to defend a particular version of harmonizing the teachings of science with those of the Bible. Arthur McCalla offers a historical look at the notion of unified truth in the book of nature and in the book of the Bible. He traces the history of concordance between the two books to the tradition of natural theology.⁴ He offers Isaac Newton as an example of a seventeenth-century scientist whose belief in the fundamental unity of the two books drove his diverse research interests. For Newton, “whatever knowledge God has revealed in the (uncorrupted) Book of Scripture,” McCalla writes, “is harmonious with what he has inscribed in the Book of Nature.”⁵ McCalla also describes the work of seventeenth-century scientists Robert Hooke (perhaps best known for coining the term “cell” as the basic unit of life) and Dane Nicolaus Steno, regarding an explanation of the presence of fossils. McCalla notes that the explanation these men offered in no way upset their understanding of the Book of Nature as divinely inspired and in concordance with the other book, Scripture.⁶

Hooke ... read a providential intention into the function of fossils as signs of the history of the Earth. Steno similarly accepted that what we learn about nature both confirms and is confirmed by the Bible.⁷

The idea that the book of nature and the book of Scripture must agree with regard to what each teaches about the nature of the physical world was clearly present among certain prominent scientists well before the modern era.

The notion of agreement between the two books has continued into the more recent past. Creationists Henry J. Morris and John C. Whitcomb Jr. assert that the idea of two books is prevalent among Christians.⁸ They are adamant that the Bible leads people to accurate knowledge of the nature and operations of the physical world and that this knowledge cannot contradict the findings of science. They affirm that these two sources cannot be in conflict because both are modes of God’s revelation. They further suggest that when there is

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an apparent contradiction between the two books, Scripture has the final answer. They write,

It has often been maintained that God has given us two revelations, one in nature and one in the Bible and that they cannot contradict each other. *This is certainly correct*; but when one subconsciously identifies with natural revelation his own interpretations of nature and then denounces theologians who are unwilling to mold Biblical revelation into conformity with his interpretation of nature, he is guilty of serious error. After all, special revelation supersedes natural revelation, for it is only by means of special revelation that we can interpret aright the world about us.⁹

For Morris and Whitcomb, it is clear that the findings of science and the teachings of Scripture must agree.

Perhaps the best contemporary assertion of the validity of the “two books” metaphor is in a recent popular book written by professors of astronomy and physics Deborah B. and Loren D. Haarsma. The Haarsmas are Christians who are keenly interested in helping their students understand and appreciate the relationship between sound scientific inquiry and the Christian faith. They clearly affirm the authority of Scripture while urging Christians to take the findings of science seriously. To that end, they offer the “two books” metaphor as a way to understand the intersection between the Bible and science.

The Haarsmas’ argument is linked with the Reformed doctrine of revelation. Appealing to the Belgic Confession, a sixteenth-century document subscribed to by many in the Reformed tradition, they explain that God has given people two “means” or “books” of revelation: nature and the Bible. Nature is known as God’s general revelation. The Bible is God’s special revelation. God is the author of both. They then explain, “Because God is the author of both revelations, we believe that nature and Scripture do not conflict with each other.”¹⁰ They continue, “God is not false or changeable, and we do not expect God to contradict himself by revealing something in nature that is contrary to Scripture.”¹¹

They admit that this “two books” metaphor is not perfect but is nonetheless useful for understanding the relationship between science and the Bible.¹²

They propose that the conflict people are confronted with lies not between nature and the Bible, for those two books cannot conflict as already explained. The conflict comes at the level of human interpretation. “Science,” they write, “is our human attempt to understand the natural world. Biblical interpretation is our human attempt to understand the Bible. Conflicts can arise, because our human understanding of one or both books may be in error.”¹³

It seems that there could be little dispute about human fallibility in attempting to interpret either of the books in question. Humans are finite. Our knowledge is always incomplete. The recognition that our knowledge is partial and our interpretations subject to error is, at least at some level, what drives our inquiry, scientific or biblical. Given this potential for error, it should be no surprise that our biblical interpretation of special revelation and our scientific interpretation of general revelation conflict at times. But is interpretation really the problem? The following section will offer an explanation of the theological term *revelation* and how the “two books” metaphor has functioned in the history of the church as a way to understand revelation.

The Two Books of Revelation

Revelation is the technical theological term that refers to how God makes himself known to humans. The Christian tradition has generally asserted that if finite humans are to have true knowledge of the infinite God, God must make himself known to them. In other words, God must reveal himself if humans are to know him and have fellowship with him.¹⁴

The metaphor of the two books, nature and the Bible, is directly tied to the doctrine of revelation, that is, the doctrine regarding how humans come to have knowledge of God. Article 2 of the Belgic Confession, which was quoted by the Haarsmas, is entitled “The Means by Which We Know God.” As already noted, the two means, according to Guido de Bres, the author of the Belgic Confession, are creation and the Bible. De Bres is probably following the thought of his teacher, sixteenth-century reformer John Calvin.¹⁵

Unlike de Bres, who speaks of two *means*, Calvin actually uses the language of two *books* in describing knowledge attained from nature and the Bible.

Calvin's writings are frequently referred to and quoted in support of this popular metaphor. What is often overlooked, however, is the fact that when Calvin is speaking about knowledge that we can gain from these two books, he, like de Bres, is specifically addressing the knowledge of God available in nature and in the Bible, not knowledge in general.

After a few preliminary observations, Calvin begins his discussion of knowledge of God by describing a general knowledge of God found in all people. He calls this general sense the "awareness of divinity."¹⁶ He writes, "God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty."¹⁷ In other words, all humans instinctually know that there is a higher being. However, apart from God's grace, he goes on to explain, humans will inevitably corrupt this natural awareness with the result that they will not end up with an accurate knowledge of God.¹⁸

Not only do all humans have this basic knowledge of God written on their hearts, but God has also revealed himself in the world in such a way that humans are without excuse for their ignorance of God. Calvin writes,

The final goal of the blessed life, moreover, rests in the knowledge of God. Lest anyone, then, be excluded from access to happiness, he not only sowed in men's minds that seed of religion of which we have spoken but revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him.¹⁹

Calvin is not doing something innovative here. He is simply following the teaching of Paul in Romans which states, "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 people are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20, TNIV).²⁰ Commenting on Rom. 1:19, Calvin writes that when humans look at the visible world, they might, "by looking on so beautiful a picture, be led up to the Author himself."²¹ Calvin further describes the visible world as a kind of mirror in which humans can see God.²²

So where in the created order does Calvin think God reveals himself? Calvin explains that there are "innumerable proofs" in creation.²³ He points to the

"heavens and earth" generally, but also to the study of the creation as bearing witness to God. He writes,

There are innumerable evidences both in heaven and on earth that declare his wonderful wisdom; not only those more recondite matters for the closer observation of which astronomy, medicine, and all natural science are intended, but also those which thrust themselves upon the sight of even the most untutored and ignorant persons, so that they cannot open their eyes without being compelled to witness them.²⁴

For Calvin, the wonder of a baby nursing at its mother's breast is more eloquent than a preacher in declaring God's glory.²⁵ It is clear that Calvin thinks no one has any excuse for missing the evidence of God in creation. But it seems from his statement that he would think those engaged in the study of the physical world through the natural sciences have even more reason than "ignorant persons" to acknowledge the reality of "divine wisdom."

By "divine wisdom" Calvin does not mean divine revelation concerning the nature and properties of the physical world. Divine wisdom in creation refers to a recognition of the wisdom of God—his attributes—as displayed in the physical world. Despite human distortion of this display of wisdom, there is enough evidence of God that we should "break forth in admiration of the Artificer."²⁶ In other words, regardless of whether one is studying astronomy, medicine, physics, geology, or any other science, the knowledge one acquires about the physical world should lead to recognition of divine wisdom and praise for the Designer and his providential care of the world as observed in the intricacy, orderliness, and beauty of nature. The function or purpose of the book of nature—general revelation—is, therefore, to reveal knowledge of God.

There is a problem with the knowledge of God revealed in creation, however. Calvin asserts that although we have before us all this evidence of God, we are so blinded by sin that we do not read the evidence of God in creation accurately anymore. In fact, humans have in front of them, especially in their own bodies, the most eloquent witness to God. Nonetheless, they choose to suppress or distort this witness and blind themselves to it. Calvin explains,

How detestable, I ask you, is this madness: that man, finding God in his body and soul

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a hundred times, on this very pretense of excellence denies that there is a God? ... They set God aside, while using "nature," which for them is the artificer of all things, as a cloak.²⁷

Once again, Calvin is merely following the teaching of Paul in Romans.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal human beings and birds and animals and reptiles. (Rom. 1:21–23, TNIV)

The problem with general revelation, therefore, is not that we interpret the data incorrectly with regard to any particular scientific subject we are studying, although that might be the case at times. The problem is that we miss or distort the author of the data, God.

In light of this problem, sometimes referred to as the noetic effect of the Fall, Calvin tells his readers that God has graciously given his people a way to "read" creation correctly: the Bible. Calvin even compares the Bible to spectacles:

Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.²⁸

In other words, once our vision has been corrected by the witness of the Bible, the second book, we will clearly see that the author of the beautiful book of nature is none other than God.

One must remember at this point that Calvin is not suggesting that what science discovers regarding the laws and processes of the physical world must, in some way, be read through the lens of Scripture in order to interpret the data of the physical world and its operation correctly. For example, Genesis 1 suggests to some that the world and everything in it came into being in six, twenty-four-hour days about 6,000 years ago. Geologic evidence, by contrast, suggests that the earth is billions of years old and the various life forms came into being

through a process of development and change. Calvin's teaching about the two books of revelation in no way suggests that the geologic evidence must somehow be pounded into the model presented in Genesis 1 in order to "read" it correctly.²⁹ Calvin is not concerned with knowledge of the physical world at all, except for how that knowledge points one to God. He makes this point in the preface to his commentary on Genesis, "The intention of Moses, in beginning his Book with the creation of the world, is, to render God, as it were, visible to us in his works."³⁰ In other words, the "two books" metaphor drawn from this section of the *Institutes* is not concerned in the least about the conflicts between scientific or naturalistic accounts of creation and biblical accounts of creation with regard to how those accounts explain processes of the physical world. The two books are simply two means by which humans come to know God, with Scripture providing the corrective lenses needed to see clearly the glory of God which is revealed in nature.

To summarize, Calvin's own description of the relationship between the two books is significantly different from how this metaphor has often been employed by those attempting to reconcile the findings of science with the Bible, whether a century later by Newton and Hooke, or in more contemporary debates by people like Morris and Whitcomb. Even the Haarsmas' scheme, which suggests harmony at the level of the two books themselves and conflict at the level of interpretation, misunderstands the basic premise of Calvin's argument, because the Haarsmas are addressing the problem of conflict between the interpretations of science and the Bible with regard to the physical properties and operations of the world.³¹ Errors of interpretation would only be a problem from Calvin's point of view insofar as those errors corrupt knowledge of God, not insofar as they lead to a lack of harmony between the Bible's description of the physical world and that of modern science.³² In other words, when we read the book of nature apart from the corrective lenses of Scripture, it is not that our scientific findings will necessarily go awry. Rather, the knowledge of God that can be obtained from the physical world will be corrupted. The harmony of the two books lies in the fact that both books will offer the reader knowledge of the author, God—enough knowledge, in fact, to leave one without excuse for turning away from God.

One scientist who recognizes this historical connection of the “two books” metaphor with the doctrine of revelation is geologist Davis Young. Like the Haarsmas, he begins by referencing Article 2 of the Belgic Confession, explaining that this article “expresses the view that there are two complementary sources of divine revelation: God’s written book, the Bible, and God’s unwritten book, Creation.”³³ He explains that those who hold this view think that since the Bible and creation both come from God, they “must be in perfect harmony.”³⁴ Interestingly, Young footnotes this statement with an explanation of the fact that the “two books” referred to in the Belgic Confession are concerned not with information about the created world, but have specific reference to revelation about God.³⁵ He writes,

Christians have typically understood “general revelation” as having to do with science. Again, however, the idea is not that *data* are divinely revealed but that *God* is revealed through the created order.³⁶

However, he ends this helpful footnote with the following statement:

Nonetheless, in spite of these qualifications, we are persuaded that both Creation and the Bible are from the same living God and that underlying them both is a fundamental unity that is grounded in God himself.³⁷

It is unclear to me exactly what Young is asserting here, but, at the very least, he seems to be saying that since both “books” are God’s books, we should expect some amount of harmonization between them with regard to the physical world, not just knowledge of God.

Young’s assertion, however, leaps from the category of “author” to the category of “content.” Certainly there is fundamental unity from the standpoint that God is the author of both books in the same way that Madeleine L’Engle is the author of *The Crosswicks Journal* and *A Wrinkle in Time*. In other words, one could ask, “What do the two books share in common?” The answer is, “The author.” The question is whether the same author entails the same or even similar content. That is much less clear.

While having the same author may imply identical or similar content, it does not entail it, and,

I think, that is nothing against the author. To employ the example of Madeleine L’Engle again, the two books mentioned share very little in common. One is a personal journal aimed at adult readers, recounting personal experiences and reflections on those experiences. The other is a fictional story aimed at young children. While there might be similarity between the two books as far as the style of writing, use of language, and so forth are concerned—features that might point one toward a single author—the genre and, presumably, even the purpose of the two books are different. In the case of the Bible and creation, there may be, as with L’Engle, similarity in content insofar as that content points one toward the author. In fact, that is what both Calvin and the bulk of the Christian tradition would assert through their use of the “two books” metaphor. Additionally, the doctrine of revelation suggests that there is also similarity in purpose between the Bible and creation: revealing knowledge of God. But there is no reason to believe that the similarity goes any further than that.

Perhaps Young is drawing on the established Christian tradition of *analogia entis*, the analogy of being. The *analogia entis* is, according to Richard Muller,

the assumption of an *analogia*, or likeness, between finite and infinite being which lies as the basis of the *a posteriori* proofs of the existence of God and at the heart of the discussion of the *attributa divina* [divine attributes].³⁸

Like the two books, however, the tradition of *analogia entis* is concerned with likeness between God and the world—in particular, human beings, although it may concern creation more generally. With respect to humans, the argument states that because human beings are made in the image and likeness of God, certain human attributes can be predicated of God, particularly what became known in many Reformed circles as the communicable attributes.³⁹ If one extends this to creation as a whole, the *analogia entis* would suggest that certain aspects of creation could also be predicated of God. For example, if creation is essentially characterized by order, one could suggest that God is a God of order, not chaos. *Analogia entis*, however, functions in the same way as the two books. It leads one to some sort of general knowledge of God, knowledge that would not contradict but will be enlightened by any knowledge gained

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from the Bible. Thus, the unity of knowledge between creation and the Bible as explained via an understanding of the *analogia entis* is still a unity regarding knowledge of God, not a unity regarding knowledge of the physical operation and structure of the world.

Suggestions for Moving Forward

The critique of using the “two books” metaphor as justification for harmonizing the findings of science with the stories of Scripture leaves us with the question of where we should go from here. This article began by noting two main issues. The first issue mentioned was how much concordance there is between what the Bible and science tell us about the nature and operations of the physical world. The second issue, and the focus of this article, was how much concordance there might be between what the Bible and science tell us about God. With both questions, interpretation of the data or story has a role to play. This article has tried to explain that the “two books” metaphor relates to the second issue—that of revelation—and, that because in both books God is revealing himself to humans, we could expect a fairly high degree of harmony between how the Bible and the findings of science point us toward God.

The first issue, however, is considerably more complex and moves well beyond the scope of this article, except for the fact that the metaphor of the two books of revelation, as understood in the broad Christian tradition and explained by Calvin, offers no basis for advocating concordance between the findings of science and the information about creation found in the various types of literature of the Bible. Nonetheless, it seems that some level of reconciliation between the findings of science and Scripture would, at the very least, be existentially helpful.⁴⁰

For Christians who affirm a high view of the inspiration of Scripture, the findings of science can cause great angst when read alongside certain biblical accounts of the natural world.⁴¹ Rather than reading with interest the marvels of creation that science continues to uncover and praising the imaginative God who is behind all of this wonder, some Christians seem to prefer to ignore the findings of science, or even deny them, out of fear that these findings could, in some way, undermine the majesty of God.⁴² Helping people see that many of the

apparent conflicts between science and the Bible are simply *apparent* conflicts could help lower the anxiety of persons worried about offending God.⁴³

A helpful starting point for this project would be to recognize that the primary purpose of theology and the primary purpose of the physical sciences are not identical. Theology, as the word itself suggests, is the study of God. More specifically, the object of theological study is God as he has revealed himself.⁴⁴ Theologians should remember this primary purpose of theology as they exegete texts that seem to conflict with the findings of science. They should neither be too eager to reinterpret the Bible in order to make sense of the latest scientific data, nor too eager to disregard the findings of science in order to make sense of certain biblical texts. Rather, they should read with excitement the latest results of scientific inquiry. As Scott Hoezee writes, “Christians, of all people, can take proper, holy joy in such things, giving glory to God for a universe so wondrous and endlessly surprising.”⁴⁵

On the other side of the coin, astronomer Howard Van Til explains that nonphysical things are not the object of study for the natural sciences. Science, as Van Til points out, is the study of the physical world, “no more, no less.”⁴⁶ Scientists, therefore, should not be overly anxious to reinterpret various biblical texts, the purpose of which is to offer humans saving knowledge of God, in an effort to harmonize the Bible with the findings of science.⁴⁷ Rather, regardless of whether their findings regarding the nature of the physical world agree with the various accounts in the Bible, those findings, in addition to the obvious ways they enhance the world, should also have the theological purpose of pointing us to the Creator. The result of all our endeavors should be that we join with the ancient psalmist (maybe an amateur astronomer??) who gazed at the starry skies and with wonder declared, “O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Ps. 8:1, 9). In that way, the work of the scientist, the work of the theologian, and the work of any other vocation is identical: to bring glory to God. ☉

Notes

¹Many in this camp, however, while rejecting secular science, have set up an alternative often referred to as “Creation Science.” Although I am referring specifically to how Christians deal with science and the Bible, many

secular scientists also fall into the category that rejects any harmonization but for a completely opposite reason: the Bible is wrong with regard to anything it has to say about operations of the physical world.

²¹I recognize that this two-fold division may not be entirely accurate. There may be those who do not fall into either camp on all issues in the debate between science and the Bible. Nonetheless, I believe that these two generalizations fairly characterize the debate as it tends to play out in Christian circles.

³It might be helpful at this point to define what is meant by *science*. In the most general sense, *science* simply means *knowledge*. Thus, theology is also a science. Aquinas even calls theology the “queen of the sciences” because it deals with things that “transcend human reason” (*Summa Theologica*, Prima pars, Q. 1, Art. 5). Nonetheless, for the sake of clarity, I am going to use the word *science* to refer specifically to those disciplines that specialize in study of the natural world.

⁴Arthur McCalla, *The Creationist Debate: The Encounter between the Bible and the Historical Mind* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 2.

⁵*Ibid.*, 13.

⁶*Ibid.*, 20.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸Henry M. Morris and John C. Whitcomb Jr., *The Genesis Flood: The Biblical Record and Its Scientific Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1962), 458.

⁹Morris and Whitcomb, *The Genesis Flood*, emphasis mine, 458, n. 1.

¹⁰Deborah B. and Loren D. Haarsma, *Origins: A Reformed Look at Creation, Design, and Evolution* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive, 2007), 58.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 58.

¹²*Ibid.*, 59.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1983), 153.

¹⁵P. Y. DeJong, *The Church's Witness to the World* (Pella, IA: Pella Publishing, 1960), 26–8.

¹⁶John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.3.1.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.4.1.

¹⁹Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.1.

²⁰It may also be helpful to note that Calvin is not innovative with regard to the general Christian tradition up to his time either. The metaphor of nature as a book goes back at least as far as Augustine. The general understanding in the western tradition is that the book of nature is a means of revealing God to humans. For a brief, but well-written history of the metaphor of nature as a book which reveals God, see Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti, “The Two Books Prior to the Scientific Revolution,” *Perspectives on Science and the Christian Faith* 57, no. 3 (2005): 235–45. This in no way suggests that the work of science to discover more about the workings of the physical world is unimportant. Calvin himself in his comments on the human body writes with admiration about the skill of Galen in elucidating the genius of the Creator. I merely want to point out that the term “revelation” with which the so-called book of nature

in the tradition is concerned, refers to knowledge of God that is available in nature to all people. How adequate nature is for providing true knowledge of God is a debatable point within the tradition, even into the twentieth century.

²¹John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, trans. and ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948), 70.

²²Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.1; see also Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, 70.

²³Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.2.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.3; Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948), 95–7.

²⁶Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.2.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 1.5.4.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 1.6.1.

²⁹It should likewise be noted that his teaching also does not suggest that the Bible’s account be hammered into that of science. Neither scenario is suggested by what Calvin is explaining.

³⁰John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948), 58.

³¹Because the Haarsmas’ book is written for lay persons, it lacks a certain amount of detail that might be helpful for clarifying their argument. It was not entirely clear, e.g., that their statement regarding the lack of conflict between nature and the Bible was referring only to the nature and operations of the physical world. Perhaps they had knowledge of God in mind here, too (p. 58). Their general use of the term *revelation* throughout their book, however, seemed frequently to refer, not only to knowledge of God available in the natural world, but to knowledge of the operations of the physical world itself. For example, the age of the earth arguments presented in chapter 5 are discussing differences between interpretation of what God has *revealed* in the biblical text regarding the age of the earth, and what God has *revealed* via scientific data regarding the age of the earth. This is a category mistake, however. What God “reveals” in both the Bible and nature, even interpreted through the findings of science, is himself. See especially the introduction to chapter 5, pages 80–1.

³²This assumes that one can misinterpret the data of science and still recognize the sort of general knowledge of God one obtains from creation. If knowledge of God from general revelation depended on accurate scientific data, the knowledge provided during Calvin’s own time to which he refers would not have had the potential to point people to God. As with biblical exegesis, however, some errors can lead to a badly distorted view of God that in no way coincides with an orthodox understanding of God as defined by the Christian tradition. For example, those who suggest that God created the world with apparent age (i.e., the world only “appears” to be billions of years old), run the risk of making God look like a deceiver who is trying to fool the very people with whom he desires to be in relationship, a view that contradicts a good, loving, and just God affirmed by the Christian church. Perhaps this is where the “spectacles” of Scripture as a whole could offer some correction to this god of our own making.

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What General Revelation Does (and Does Not) Tell Us

³³Davis A. Young, "Where Are We? Perceived Tensions between Biblical and Scientific Cosmogonies," in *Portraits of Creation: Biblical and Scientific Perspectives on the World's Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 4.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 4.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 4, n.6.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 5, n.6.

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1985), 32-3.

³⁹Herman Bavinck, *God and Creation*, vol. 2 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 131.

⁴⁰I say "at the very least" because I do not mean in any way to suggest that there are not other, very compelling reasons one might want to engage in this project. I merely want to offer one very basic reason why this project might be important.

⁴¹The issues that seem to raise the most difficulty are those dealing with cosmology and the origins of the earth, and much of this is the result of insisting the Bible be read as a science text, rather than as a text that, first and foremost, tells us about God and his salvific work for all of creation. In fact, it is interesting that sometimes the same people who have difficulty with issues concerning the age of the earth seem to have little difficulty with biblical statements regarding the movement of heavenly bodies, such as those that refer to the sun rising and setting.

⁴²This could, in part, be the fault of scientists who too often present their findings in a way that is either inaccessible to those who are untrained, or boring, or both. Christian scientists may want to take up the challenge of presenting

their findings in a way that could inspire awe, not of science, but of the God to whom all scientific endeavors should point.

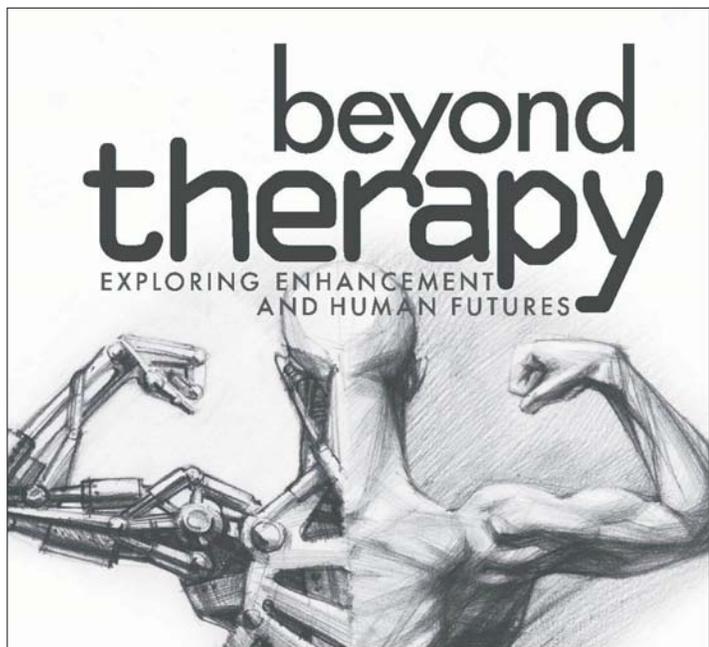
⁴³The Haarsmas' book, aside from my critique of their use of the two books metaphor, makes great strides in this direction. They also offer excellent insights for helping Christians understand the part that worldview plays in shaping how Christians approach science. This Reformed perspective has great potential for better dialog and less conflict between the broad Christian community and the scientific community.

⁴⁴Herman Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, vol. 1 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 34-8; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 21-2; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1938), 39-44; Donald G. Bloesch, *God the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, Love* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 27-30.

⁴⁵Scott E. Hoezee, *Proclaim the Wonder: Engaging Science on Sunday* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 69.

⁴⁶Howard J. Van Til, "The Character of Contemporary Natural Science," in *Portraits of Creation*, 127.

⁴⁷Even if everyone could agree on a particular exegetical method, the difficulty involved in dealing with ancient texts, including identification of genre, context, pericope, audience, and so forth, would likely still lead to some disagreement with regard to the conclusion of any given text under consideration. Genesis 1 is a good example. Regardless of everything else involved in interpreting this particular text, there is continued disagreement about the seemingly simple issue of the genre of this important text.



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