



James C. Peterson

Jacob's Stick Trick and NOMA

The American Scientific Affiliation that founded this journal recently held its first-ever virtual annual meeting. As an interdisciplinary society for the sciences and Christian faith, how exactly these two relate to each other was endemic to a myriad of conversations and presentations. One of the most affirmed or challenged descriptions cited was Stephen Jay Gould's theory of non-overlapping magisteria (NOMA). For Gould, science and theology study two separate realms. NOMA protects the integrity and contribution of both science and religion. Both approaches bring important insights, and each has its proponents who warn that their perspective should not be corrupted by the other. Indeed, from the faith side, some warn that disaster ensues when the book of nature trumps the book of scripture.

However, it is a great good if looking carefully at God's Works helps one to realize what the Book of God's Words is actually saying. That is, to listen better to the text, not to escape it. All truth is God's truth. Scripture does not teach that water, H₂O, is made of two hydrogen atoms connected to one oxygen atom. But we know that is true. We can often learn from other sources what scripture does not address, and better interpret some scriptural texts to hear what it does. Indeed, one often finds insight in the interactions where overlap does seem present. At the conference, Bob Geddes cited the parallel that the edges in ecosystems of sea and coast, or woods and meadow, are often the most productive for life.

Here is an example that I did not hear at the conference. Genesis 30:29–43 tells of Jacob and his father-in-law Laban, making a deal. Jacob's wage would be the speckled lambs and goats born to the Laban flock that Jacob was shepherding. The text then tells us what Jacob thought and did. Jacob placed speckled sticks in the water trough where his

father-in-law's sheep and goats were mating so that more speckled lambs and kids would be born. As time passed, more of the new births were speckled, to Jacob's advantage. Jacob thought he had achieved this by his clever stick trick.

People have been breeding stock for millennia and actively doing so; they would have had good reason to be skeptical of whether Jacob's sticks were going to work here. Faced with omnipresent scarcity, shepherds would not support or mate progeny that did not meet their purpose. A sheep that ate the limited grass and drank hard-won well water, but did not lamb, would serve as food directly. The sheep that were nurtured to lamb were the sheep that consistently added to the flock. This knowledge of God's world, that some lines of sheep were more productive and could be selected and enabled for better breeding, would be quite evident. Shepherds who did not recognize that connection would likely not themselves survive. Laban understood this and so removed the speckled sheep from the flock he gave Jacob to tend. He knew by experience and observation that removing the speckled sheep parents would suppress Jacob's wage. Shepherds who heard of Jacob's stick solution would have good reason to laugh. Speckled sticks were not coming to Jacob's aid. Our present understanding of genetics helps us to see this, even more clearly. What sheep see does not determine the color coat of their lambs.

Yet Jacob's share grew. The subtext is once again God's grace and character. Jacob's increase in the flock was the result of God's accommodation and generosity. Although Jacob is blessed with the covenant for God's purpose, he connives to gain his own way by trading a meal for Esau's birthright when Esau was famished, and another time by stealing Isaac's blessing meant for Esau by pretending to be

Editorial

Esau; now he thinks that he is increasing his payment from Laban by placing speckled branches in the water troughs of the ewes before they mated. This is an account of Jacob's mistaken ideas and character. The sheep and goats had more speckled lambs and kids that hence belonged to Jacob, but ancient awareness of how the world works and the modern science of genetics tells us that this was the result of God's intervention, not Jacob's irrelevant attempt at influence. His share of the flocks does grow and prosper, but only because of God making it so, not because of Jacob's sticks. What we now know of genetics highlights what is actually happening: yet again, Jacob is prospering because of God's abundant generosity, not because of Jacob's conniving. Ancient shepherding know-how and modern science that studies God's Works—in this case, genetics—can help us to

see more clearly what is happening in the biblical account.

We should always make our best effort, but how often do we think we have accomplished something that actually God has kindly given? How often do we not even realize what God has done behind the scenes on our behalf? Genesis 30:29–43 is not teaching how inheriting coat color works in livestock. It is not about genetics. It is about God's care for God's people. Our knowing more of how God's creation materially works, helps us to see what was happening in this account as yet another occasion for thanks and praise to God for God's gracious provision in Jacob's life and ours. †

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Editor-in-Chief

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