

REVIEWS

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READING THE ARTICLES by Drs. Jason Lisle, Scott Oliphint, and Richard Howe was like watching ships pass in the night, except they were sailing on different seas. One is hesitant to dive into these waters, but I hope I am not too overly optimistic in my hope to bring some clarity and focus to the issue. Let me begin by giving a clear and concise response to the questions they were asked to address in their papers (though the order is altered slightly).

ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. **“Does a faithful commitment to the authority of Scripture lead one to a young earth interpretation?”** No, and for a good reason, namely, they are different issues. One may believe in the authority (and inerrancy) of Scripture and yet hold to different interpretations of it. What Scripture is and how it should be interpreted are two different issues. Most of the founders and framers of the early inerrancy movement of the 1900s (e.g., Warfield and Hodge) and the contemporary movement of the 1970-80s (e.g., the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy) held firmly to inerrancy but saw no necessary tie of it to a Young Earth view.

Further, none of the authors of the above articles demonstrated either biblically or logically that there is a transcendental necessity for such a conclusion. Some scarcely even addressed the question. The one who did never considered the biblical arguments on the other side of the issue (e.g., those of Don Stoner, *A New Look at an Old Earth*¹).

2. **“Does a presuppositional apologetic lead one to a young-earth position?”** No, not necessarily. No such necessary connection was demonstrated by Lisle. The fact is, there are presuppositionalists who are not young-earthers, and there are young-earthers who are not presuppositionalists. Further, no biblical, logical, or theological connection between the two was shown by any participant.

3. **“Is it possible to be a consistent presuppositionalist and an old-earth creationist?”** Yes it is, and as a matter of fact, some are. As a matter of logic, no one has demonstrated a logical connection between one’s view on presuppositional apologetics and the age of the earth. Those who have attempted to logically link presuppositionalism to a young-earth view have left gaping holes in their presentation. Since most proponents agree that presuppositionalism involves a transcendental argument, no one has demonstrated that a young earth is a necessary part of a valid transcendental argument.

4. **“What role, if any, should general revelation play in apologetic encounters with unbelievers?”** It should play a very important part since it is really the only common ground we have with unbelievers. It is, as one participant pointed out, the other part (along with special revelation) of the revelational reality that forms the basis for a Christian world view. Presuppositionalists tend to downplay the role of general revelation or obscure it by their view of the noetic effects of sin. They do not fully appreciate that general revelation is a crucial part of the reality we have from God and the only part of God’s revelation that we share with unbelievers.

5. **“What common ground, if any, does the believer have with the unbeliever to which he can appeal?”** He has the common ground of general revelation in nature (Rom. 1:20-21) and in conscience (Rom. 2:12-14). The apostle Paul set the example of how to use this in Acts 17. While we agree with Presuppositionalists that there is no truth apart from God’s revelation, nonetheless, God’s revelation is not

1. Don Stoner, *A New Look at an Old Earth* (Eugene: Harvest House, 1997).

limited to the Bible. The Bible is the only inspired and *written* authority for believers, but it is not the only source of revelation for us.

6. **“What effect do the noetic effects of sin have on man’s ability to study and interpret Scripture?”** The effects of sin hinder one’s understanding of both of God’s revelations. The image of God (Gen. 1:27) is effaced, but not erased, by sin. Only the work of God can help us overcome this in each case. However, the disadvantage caused by sin does not exist only for general revelation, as some presuppositionalists’ statements might lead us to believe. It also exists for those who are recipients of special revelation. Romans 1 makes it clear that there is no defect in God’s general revelation itself. General revelation is “plain to them” (unbelievers) and can be “clearly perceived” (Rom. 1:20). It is not the objectivity and clarity of either revelations (general or special) that is the problem; the defect is in man. But God by common grace can overcome this with regard to understanding His general revelation, and by special grace it can be overcome for believers with regard to special revelation. One does not need special grace to understand general revelation. He can understand it apart from the special light cast on it by Scripture.

Further, sin also affects the believer’s ability to understand God’s special revelation. So, grace (special grace) is needed here as well. The proliferation of cults, appealing to their twisted view of Scripture, is ample testimony that special revelation is not immune from the effects of depravity that are also seen in man’s inability to interpret Scripture properly.

7. **“Does calling into question man’s ability to correctly interpret general revelation (science) call into question man’s ability to correctly interpret special revelation (hermeneutics)?”** Not necessarily. The two are related but not causally. The defect is not in the revelation but in the fallen human being interpreting it. So, either revelation can be misinterpreted. And each has its own principles of interpretation. But the understanding of both is subject to the noetic effects of sin on the human mind. Hence, neither is immune from distortion.

8. **“When arguing for Christianity, does beginning with philosophy, science, or history elevate man’s reasoning above God’s revelation in the Bible?”** No, it need not be so. For errors do not arise because of flaws in the revelation but because of errors in the inter-

preter. One can have—and fallen men will have—conceptual biases that hamper his interpretation of either revelation from God. So, the problem is not with starting with general revelation; it is with biases one will have about it. And understanding special revelation will not eliminate the problem since biases due to sin are present in interpreting it as well.

Furthermore, this question is based on a false dichotomy. There is no conflict between God’s general and special revelations. God cannot contradict Himself, and He instructs us to “avoid . . . contradictions” (Greek: *antitheseis*) in 1 Tim. 6:20. The conflicts arise not on the level of the *revelations* but on the level of human *interpretations*. It is a false dichotomy to locate the conflict between God’s special revelation in the Bible and man’s misinterpretation of his general revelation in nature. Human reasoning (interpretation) about God’s revelation in the Bible can cause problems just as well as faulty reasoning about nature.

9. **“When, if ever, is it permissible to allow data from outside the Bible to interpret the Bible?”** The answer to this is when we are more sure of the interpretation of general revelation (called “data outside the Bible?”) than we are of the conflicting interpretations based on special revelation. For example, we are certain of the Law of Non-contradiction, and we know this apart from the aid of special revelation (since it is rationally undeniable). So, any interpretation of the Bible that involves a contradiction cannot be correct. Further, we are empirically certain that the world is not square. So, any interpretation of the Bible like the world having “four corners” (Rev. 7:1) cannot be taken to contradict this empirical certainty. But this does not mean that our given interpretation of God’s general revelation always trumps our interpretation of His special revelation. And it certainly does not mean that mere human views outside the Bible trump what the Bible clearly teaches. It simply means that the evidence for the certainty of our interpretation of general revelation in these cases cited is greater in these cases than our evidence for that particular interpretation of the Bible. Sometimes it is the opposite. For example, we judge that our interpretation of God’s special revelation about creation is stronger than scientific interpretation of general revelation, which holds to macro-evolution.

10. **“What can be known about God through general revelation [apart from Scripture]?”** General revelation is more general than is generally thought. It includes God’s revelation in nature (Rom. 1:20), conscience (Rom. 2:12), living creatures (Prov. 6:6), history (Acts 17:27), and human nature (Acts 17:26, 27). Space does not permit elaboration on these points (see our *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, chap. 4²). This general revelation would include the laws of human reasoning (logic) as well as the principles of interpretation. Of course, of all these are made possible because they are grounded in God. Nonetheless, man is able to discover and elaborate these findings in the various arts, sciences, and philosophies based on a proper understanding of general revelation. Of course, they, like our interpretation of Scripture, are all subject to human error. And in most cases we are dealing with degrees of probability on one side versus the other.

11. **Is it warranted for the Christian to reject the scientific claim that the universe is billions of years old on the grounds that this claim is based on fallible human reasoning?** No, it is not warranted to reject it on these grounds for several reasons. First, all interpretation of both God’s special and general revelation is fallible. Our reasoning about the age of the earth is not infallible, despite the tacit claim by some apologists on both sides of the debate. There are unprovable assumptions in the arguments on both sides. Even the presuppositionalists who claim certainty, based on his transcendental argument, have not demonstrated that the age of the earth is a necessary part of their transcendental argument.

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT SOME POINTS MADE IN THE DIALOGUE

After watching the bouncing ball of charge, counter charge, and counter counter-charge, one is left with several impressions about this debate. First of all, the opposing views in this discussion hold several important things in common. For example, they hold (1) the infallibility of Scripture, (2) the finality of the Christian world view, (3) the reality of general revelation, (4) the value of a transcendental argument, (5) importance of both evidence and reason in Christian

2. Norman Geisler, *Introduction, Bible*, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002).

apologetics, and (6) the biblical imperative to engage in apologetics, and other things.

Nonetheless, there are some areas in which one must choose between the views. In these areas, it would seem that the Classical approach should be favored in most cases above the Presuppositional view. A few examples can be noted here.

Distinction between Epistemology and Metaphysics

While both sides appear to agree ontologically, they differ epistemologically. Both are in accord on the necessity of the Christian view of God being the ontological ground for all meaning and truth (*what*). However, one would have to agree with the Classical view that *how* we know this is true. Here it seems that some sort of rational argument is needed epistemologically to establish one view over the other. In the final analysis, the Presuppositionalist has not successfully refuted the charge that it confuses epistemology and ontology. In brief, ontologically, the Presuppositional view is correct. Epistemologically, the Classical view is needed. Presuppositionalism is right about in *what* the nature of reality is; Classical Apologetics is correct in *how* we know this reality.

The Insufficiency of the Transcendental Argument

Presuppositionlists do a good job in showing the need for some kind of transcendental move. However, their reasoning (or lack thereof) that the entire Christian theology is a necessary part of the transcendental condition leaves one unconvinced. For example, one can see how it is necessary to posit a theistic God to account for meaning, truth, and morals. However, there seems to be no logical necessity for positing Trinitarianism. Why would not some form of monotheism do the job? Even if a plurality of persons is shown to be necessary, why three persons? Would not two or four persons in the Godhead do? What about seven, which is a perfect number?

Likewise, while it is transcendentally necessary for there to be a revelation from God in order to make sense of the world, what is the logical connection between a canon of 66 books (the Bible) and that conclusion? Would a Bible minus a small book here or there do the same thing? It would seem that whatever good reason one may have for believing in the canon of 66 books known as the Bible, nonethe-

less, these “reasons” do not appear to be a necessary part of the transcendental argument.

The Failure to Distinguish the Word of God and the Bible

Christians believe the Bible is the Word of God, but Muslims believe the Qur’an is the Word of God. Both cannot be right since these two books affirm opposite views of God, man, and salvation (see our book *Answering Islam*³). Presuppositionalists claim that the Word of God is self-authenticating. It needs no proof. It is the basis for all other conclusions, but it has no basis beyond itself. But what they fail to see is that while all of this is true of the Word of God, nonetheless, it is not thereby true of the Bible. For there must be some evidence or good reasons for believing that the Bible is the Word of God, as opposed to contrary views. The statement that “The Bible is the Word of God” is self-evident or self-sustaining. It calls for no evidence. Likewise, no Presuppositionalist would argue that “the Qur’an is the Word of God” is self-authenticating, needing no evidence beyond its own claim to be the written Word of God. And it begs the question to claim that the two statements are different because the Bible is the Word of God and the Qur’an is not. This leads to another problem.

The Unsustainability of the Circular Argument for Presuppositionalism

Presuppositionalists admit the circularity of their argument, and even attempt to defend it. However, this kind of reasoning would not be allowed in any other area. For example, what Christian would accept the argument that the Book of Mormon is the Word of God because it says it is the Word of God? And since God’s Word is the basis for all truth, even the truth that it is the Word of God, then it must be true that it is the Word of God.

Of course, as Presuppositionalists argue, the Word of God stands on its own, with no need of proof beyond it. But it begs the question to claim that “X book is the Word of God”—whether we are talking about the Gita, the Book of Mormon, or whatever. The fact is, that

3. Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in Light of the Cross*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 2002).

any such truth claim demands evidence and good reason—the kind provided by Classical Apologetics.

It is not sufficient to claim the circular argument for the biblical world view is okay, like the argument for the validity of the laws of logic, because it is not arbitrary but is inescapable. First of all, there is nothing logically inescapable about believing God is Triune or that Third John is in the canon. Second, the Law of Non-contradiction is not considered valid because it is based on the Law of Non-contradiction, but because it is self-evident and undeniable. It cannot be denied without being affirmed in the denial. And the predicate is reducible to the subject. Neither of these is true of the statement “The Bible is true.”

Several other flaws can be noted for which we have no time to elaborate. First, how can God be “Totally Other,” as some Presuppositionalists argue. Totally negative knowledge of God is no knowledge at all. We cannot know God is “not-that” unless we know what “that” is. Second, just because knowledge comes *through* the senses (as classical realists contend) does not mean it is *based on* the senses. Our knowledge of math comes through the senses but is not based on them. Third, no exegesis of Scripture, no matter how good, is rationally inescapable. But Presuppositionalism depends on a valid exegesis of Scripture. Fourth, to deny there is no reality outside of what the Bible’s declarations say there exists is to deny general revelation, which Presuppositionalists claim they accept. Fifth, just because it is necessary to hold that all truth depends on God, it does not follow that we necessarily *know* all that is essential to know about Him.