

Is the Bible Wrong?

Putting science against the Bible is one of the favorite pastimes of unbelievers (cf. Romans 1). A Biblical Christian believes that God's Word, by its own testimony (II Timothy 3:16-17) is inspired by God's Spirit (i.e., He is the breath of inspiration) and without error or inerrant since, by its own testimony, God cannot lie (Numbers 23:19).

I also, as a Biblical Christian, believe that the Bible is the starting point (explicitly or implicitly) for understanding rightly any aspect of life (eternal or temporal). Hence, for science to be understood and done rightly, one must start with foundational presuppositions (involving epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics) that justify the "doing" of science. By the way, it was the presuppositions derived from the Bible (involving the nature of thinking, the nature of God, the nature of the physical world, and the nature of man's purpose in that world) that acted as the catalyst for the only viable birth of science in 16th and 17th century Europe.

I do *not* believe, as a Biblical Christian, that we can divorce the "Word made flesh" (John 1:1-14) from the words on the paper in our Bibles. I respect the authority of the Bible in that it reveals the authority of the one, true, infinite, personal, and triune God who is Lord over all things. I do not respect or revere the words of the Bible as mere "words" on paper. Divorcing the "words of Scripture" from the transforming power of the "Word of God" has been the source of much unnecessary misfortune and hucksterism in history.

Now, back to science versus the Bible. Even though the presuppositions revealed in Scripture are the foundation for doing science (i.e., operational science), scientific man, in his flight from God likes to "pull the rug from underneath him" by attacking the Bible. Pick and choose your era and you will see this conflict in a variety of forms. For example, consider Galileo's "so-called" attack on the veracity of the Bible with his cosmological views (Copernicanism). I bracket the word "so-called" because a somewhat simplistic version of the Galileo-church conflict cannot be done because the events of this affair are far too nuanced for a one or two-sentence summary. Both sides, the side for Galileo or the side against Galileo, tend toward "knee-jerk" reactions.

What I want to do now is analyze one passage of Scripture as a principled lesson in learning how to read the Bible, when it talks about an aspect of science, in the way that God delivered it to us.

He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches" (Matthew 13:31-32).

The message of this parable is the extensive growth of the kingdom of heaven in history; i.e., its fruits, starting small, shall eventually fill the earth (Isaiah 27:6; Habakkuk 2:14; Isaiah 11:1-10; cf. Romans 15:11). Jesus, as a master of Old Testament Scripture, retrieves many of its allusions in this declaration (cf. Psalm 80:9-11; Ezekiel 17:23-24; Hosea 14:7). What I also want to explore is that, to

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illustrate the truth of the expansion of the kingdom of heaven, Jesus made an assertion of science. He said that the mustard seed was “the smallest of all seeds.”

This assertion can be tested in the modern scientific laboratory. Ask any botanist if the mustard seed is the *smallest of all seeds*, and he will say, “No, it is not. There are smaller seeds and I can show you (e.g., the orchid seed).” Hence, via the method of modern scientific empiricism, the words of Jesus are false. But, are they really “false” words?



Mustard Seeds, David Turner (2005)

These words of Jesus are false only if you approach the Bible a certain way. There are those who hold to what I call a *radical* literalistic approach to the reading of Scripture. It is often promoted in the literature as the “plain reading of the language of Scripture” or the “strict adherence to Scripture.” There are Christians who are involved in science who believe that Scripture must be read this way and *it cannot be read any other way*. What usually happens when this approach is implemented is a “cut and paste” approach to Scripture, a method that tends to ignore historical context, Biblical context, the meaning of words, and import (or genre or type) of literature God is using to communicate truth to us.

Hence, given this approach, you must conclude that the mustard seed is indeed, by the authoritative words of Jesus, the “smallest of all seeds” because “all” means, radically interpreted, well, “all.” Now, the discoveries of modern science has proved Him, the God-man, wrong. There is no way around this: To accept a radical literalist grid for interpreting Scripture, you must be consistent (no exceptions are allowed) and conclude that Jesus, and therefore the Bible, is *not* inerrant (i.e., incapable of error).

How does a Biblical Christian address this issue? We consider the context:

- To whom is Jesus speaking? First century inhabitants of Palestine.
- What message is He trying to convey to these people? The growth of His kingdom.
- How is He doing this? Using a parable.

In this parable, he is connecting his hearers to their everyday sense experience in Palestine. All of them knew, *in this local framework*, that the mustard seed was, indeed, “the smallest of all seeds.” Hence, the modern day discovery of seeds tinier than the mustard seed does *not* prove Jesus was a liar; neither does this discovery of modern science invalidate the inerrancy or veracity of Scripture.

But, according to the radical literalist method of reading Scripture, Jesus has to be a liar, the Bible has to be false, and science, in the end, is the winner; i.e., science has trumped Scripture.

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We have to be careful not to confuse what that the Bible intends to teach us with what we think it is teaching us. In history (and even today), there have been many people running “fools errands” in exegesis (interpretation of Scripture). Hence, great care must be taken by the Biblical Christian when reading certain passages of Scripture that “seem” to be making a *technical claim* about some scientific theory (e.g., about the tiniest of seeds or about cosmology ... refer to the Galileo affair). *To do that is to misread the import of the Bible and, as an inference, to discredit and dishonor the God who gave it to us.*