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## God's Revelation in Nature

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### Introduction

Few words have been the source of so much confusion in theology as the word *nature*, for few words have been employed, as this has been, for a long period in two or three distinct, though related, senses'. Thus J. H. Bernard commences his article on 'Nature' in Hasting's *Dictionary of the Bible*.<sup>1</sup> In it he outlines three usages of the word, none of which coincides with the meaning of the N.T. Greek word φύσις (*physis*) translated 'nature' in the Authorised Version of the Bible, or with my use of the word in this paper. Furthermore, it is probably unrealistic to suppose that all the speakers in today's symposium, with their different backgrounds, will use the word uniformly. If this paper, therefore, is not to add to the confusion it must start with an explanation of the concept of nature that I, as a scientist, find most appropriate.

I use the word 'nature' here to designate the whole of the material universe as perceived by the senses, and therefore, in principle, open to investigation by the methods of natural science. It therefore comprises the whole inanimate creation as well as plants, animals, and man. It includes human activities and artifacts, and therefore events and objects that are sometimes regarded as *unnatural*. It includes all historic events, including miracles, and therefore events that are often described as *supernatural*. It includes historic documents, among them the Christian scriptures.

In defining 'nature' as the whole of that which, in principle, is open to scientific investigation, I am not implying that the scientific method is the only, or even the most important, way of investigating and describing the objects and events that nature comprises. In fact, to view a human being solely as a cluster of physiological mechanisms would be to demean him by reducing him to an experimental animal, and thus denying him the status of a being 'in God's image'.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, to investigate a letter by examining only the structure of the paper and the composition of the ink, and failing to read the message that it contains, would be to miss whatever revelation the writer intended to convey. Nevertheless, in both of these examples, a scientific knowledge might,

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1. J. Hastings, *Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol.3, Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1906.

2. Gen. 1:26f.

in subtle ways, throw additional light on the more important aspects of the man and the letter. Thus, if a scientific investigation of the man revealed extensive brain damage, it might be easier to understand behaviour that at first sight appears totally incompatible with the character of God, whose image, though marred, he bears. If the analysis of the letter showed it to be on very expensive hand-made paper, this might reveal something about the writer in addition to what he actually revealed in words.

This brings me to another definition, that of the word 'revelation', which has also been used in more than one sense. An effectual revelation involves (a) a mind capable of transmitting information, (b) some information actually transmitted, and (c) a receiver of the information otherwise unknown to him. On this basis some theologians have argued, quite logically, that until the potential recipient has received and understood the message there is no revelation. This emphasis on the subjective response of the potential recipient has opened up the way for some to assert that God's word, whether in creation or in the scriptures or in Christ, has no objective truth but becomes true for each individual however he understands it. Now it is, of course, true that the purpose of revelation is to elicit a subjective response on the part of the recipient, but this in no way detracts from the necessity and importance of the medium by which the message is transmitted. There must be an objective embodiment of the message in the medium, whether the recipient acknowledges it or not. Thus a letter may contain a revelation even if the addressee refuses to open the envelope. The New Testament uses the verb *ἠποκαλύπτω* (*apokalypto*) in both the subjective<sup>3</sup> and the objective<sup>4</sup> senses, but it recognizes that the objective revelation does not inevitably lead to the subjective revelation, because men may 'stifle the truth'<sup>5</sup> contained in that objective revelation. For the sake of clarity in this paper I shall restrict the use of the term 'revelation' to the objective disclosure of God, and refer to the subjective response by some such term as 'acceptance' or 'reception' of the revelation.

It follows from these definitions of 'nature' and 'revelation' that almost the whole of God's revelation is in and through nature, for it is normally through the operation of the senses that man gains information.<sup>6</sup> Christian orthodoxy, on the basis of scriptural statements, has always

3. E.g., Mt. 11:25; Mt. 16:17; Phil. 3:15.

4. E.g., Rom. 1:17; Gal. 1:16; 1 Pet. 5:1.

5. Rom. 1:18-20, NEB.

6. There are certain exceptions. The Bible records some divine revelations through dreams and visions. Another possible exception is the experience given to the mystic. Whether this is ever a true revelation from God, or merely a function of the mystic's

held that that revelation is in two parts: there is firstly a revelation available to all mankind in the creation, and known as general revelation; and secondly, a much fuller revelation given, historically through the prophets and through the Word made flesh, and at the present time through the scriptures and through the proclamation of the gospel. This is known as special revelation. The central topic of today's conference, and the main concern of this paper, is general revelation; but I have not entitled the paper 'God's general revelation' because I shall have something to say about special revelation as well. I shall argue that the two are mutually dependent, and that one can be fully understood only in the light of the other.

The role of general revelation has been the subject of a major debate, more philosophical than theological, centring on the question of whether, and to what extent, the natural universe, interpreted by reason unaided by special revelation, can teach man anything about God, His attributes, and His moral demands. It is not my task to tackle this complex philosophical question of the validity of natural theology, as other speakers are examining it. I have the simpler task of asking what the Bible indicates concerning the impact of God's general revelation on mankind generally and on those who have received His special revelation. This therefore is essentially a theological paper.

### The Biblical Basis of the Concept of General Revelation

Five passages of scripture have commonly been recognized as teaching that there is a self-disclosure of God in the physical universe; they are Ps. 19:1-6; Mt. 5:44-45; Ac. 14:15-17; Ac. 17:24-31; and Rom. 1:18-23. Now although these passages all speak of the natural order as pointing to different *attributes* of God, not one of them implies that it indicates the *existence* of a Creator-God. The writers or speakers do not argue God's existence; they either assume it or else proclaim it; and then from the features of His creation they infer something about His character.

Thus, it is obvious from the second half<sup>f</sup> of Ps. 19 that the author had a personal relationship with Jehovah ('thy servant', 'my rock and my redeemer') based upon a special revelation ('the law', 'the statutes', 'the testimony', 'the commandment' of the Lord); and if his words were intended for public liturgical use he could, in an Israelite setting, assume that his readers also would know of God's existence and His creation.

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personality, I am not competent to judge. If such experience is a revelation, it still takes place in nature but not through it. Some objective feature of nature may trigger the experience, but the mystical experience itself appears to be purely subjective and not determined by the senses.

7. Ps. 19:7-14.

Similarly, Jesus in instructing his disciples could assume a knowledge of God's creation, although he does remind them that it is their Father who sends the rain and makes the sun rise.<sup>8</sup>

When the gospel goes to the heathen, a recognition of God as Creator cannot be assumed: it has to be proclaimed. In Acts 14 Barnabas and Paul are reported as telling the crowd in Lystra that they were bringing good news about 'the living God who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them'.<sup>9</sup> According to Acts 17, Paul proclaimed to the Areopagites 'the God who created the world and everything in it, and who is Lord of heaven and earth'.<sup>10</sup> The trouble with the heathen, according to Paul, was not that they did not know God — they did, but the truth was suppressed'.<sup>11</sup>

All of the biblical arguments for a general revelation of God start from the premise that nature is God's creation; and without that premise the arguments would fail. They are all of the same type — not 'look around and learn that there is a God', but rather 'look around at God's creation and discover something of His character'. So before the natural order can become a natural revelation a missing stage in the argument has to be supplied, namely, that nature is the work of a Creator.

What supplies the missing premise? As for those who have received a special revelation, the Bible makes it quite clear that it is 'by faith we perceive that the universe was fashioned by the word of God'.<sup>12</sup> But what about the heathen of Rom. 1, who, Paul tells us, 'knew God although they glorified him not as God'?<sup>13</sup> Scripture does not answer that question, and we can only guess. Is it a universal inner conviction that is a relic of the *imago dei*? Is it a universal tradition handed down in Adam's race? Or is it some individually-generated belief — a hunch, an intuition, a product of the imagination, something begotten of a sense of awe, an invention to allay a feeling of insecurity? I do not know. But whatever its origin, an awareness of the fact of creation turns the universe into a revelation of the Creator.

But what does it reveal about God? In Ps. 19:1–6 the heavens are said to declare the glory of God: the regular alternation of day and night, and the majestic transit of the sun across the sky, speak, without words, to all the world. So, from the heavens all men might be expected to learn something of the greatness, the power, the majesty, and the reliability, of the Creator.

8. Mt. 5:45.

9. Acts 14:15, RSV.

10. Acts 17:24, NEB.

11. Rom. 1:18, RSV.

12. Heb. 11:3, NEB.

13. Rom. 1:21, KJV.

Barnabas and Paul, as recorded in Acts 14:17, told the Lycaonians that God had given a witness to Himself in that the regular provision of rain and harvests showed His concern that man should enjoy a pleasant life. Thus nature testifies to God's love.

In Acts 17:29 we find Paul pointing out to the Areopagites that the God who created human personality cannot Himself be anything less than personal, as are the idols of gold, silver, and stone.

Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount<sup>14</sup> indicates that God's love to man is impartial, as evidenced by His provision of sunshine and rain for the benefit of good and evil alike.

And lastly, Paul writes in Rom. 1:18-21 that even the heathen world, with its idolatry and immorality, has no excuse for its pagan philosophy, because the visible features of the creation bear witness to the eternal power and divinity of the Creator.

Thus nature is viewed as testifying to the glory, the reliability, the love, the caring providence, the impartiality, the personality, and the eternal power and divinity of its Creator.

What effect can such a revelation be expected to have on man? This obviously depends upon the human will. The man of good will (i.e., one who has not 'suppressed the truth') ought to be able to grasp something of these attributes of the Creator. But there is very little in this knowledge that involves his responsibility. He could appreciate most of these attributes of his Creator and still ask 'So what?' The fact that the Creator is glorious, loving, impartial, and provident, has no necessary implications for man. There is no logical reason why man should be obliged to be in any way like his Creator. In fact, he might justifiably argue that if he is selfish, uncaring, and partial, that is because he has been created thus: in any case, how could an omnipotent and glorious Creator expect weak man to resemble Him in any way? Furthermore, why should man differ from the animals, which are equally God's creatures? These aspects of general revelation in themselves impose no moral obligation on man.

The only aspects that do have implications for him are those that demonstrate the Creator's eternal power and personality. For if a man grasps these facts, he will not 'think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man',<sup>15</sup> and he will not 'exchange the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles'.<sup>16</sup> In other words, general revelation condemns idolatry; and it is no doubt significant that this is the

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14. Mt. 5:45.

15. Acts 17:29, RSV.

16. Rom. 1:23, RSV.

only point on which the Bible, on the basis of general revelation, judges man to be 'without excuse'.<sup>17</sup>

### The Rejection of General Revelation

General revelation, then, apart from special revelation, is of very limited value, even to men of good will. It shows them some of God's attributes and indicates that they are wrong to practise idolatry. Unlike special revelation, it is of no redemptive value: it can only condemn.

But Rom. 1 asserts that mankind in general, and the contemporary Roman world in particular, was not composed of men of good will. Rather, it consisted of those who in their wickedness suppressed the truth. The basic problem, therefore, was not an intellectual one but a moral and spiritual one. The intellect was nevertheless involved in the darkness of the pagan mind, but whether sin produced an intellectual blind spot or a deliberate closing of the eyes Paul does not say clearly; his wording appears to favour the latter interpretation.

In our own culture, where a corresponding intellectual darkness is prevalent, it is not difficult to recognize that one important factor in this is a popular logical fallacy that makes it easy to close one's eyes to the truth. The logical processes of the scientific method have proved to be so successful in answering certain questions about nature that many who 'profess to be wise'<sup>18</sup> have insisted that the same rational processes be brought to bear upon other questions, to which they are not applicable. Thus the question 'Has nature a creator?' cannot, in principle, be answered by the scientific method. For this reason, it is deemed by many to be intellectually respectable to deny that there is a Creator, or at least to assert that we cannot know that there is one.

Not everybody is so impressed by the scientific method. Others with a more artistic bent might adopt a more intuitive or imaginative approach to this question. During a recent *Songs of Praise* television programme the interviewer asked a lady why she believed so firmly that there is a God. Her reply went something like this: 'When I see all this beauty around me I cannot believe that it is all a matter of chance: there must be a God who created it.' This clearly is not a logical inference, and, no matter how convincing the conclusion is to the lady who drew it, it is unlikely to convince others influenced by a Western culture that emphasizes (overemphasizes?) the importance of logic.

To Paul the Apostle, this is all for the best. God in His wisdom has seen fit that human wisdom unaided should be unable to reach up to Him.<sup>19</sup>

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17. Rom. 1:20, RSV.

18. Rom. 1:22, KJV.

19. 1 Cor. 1:21.

The only secure faith for man is that based upon special revelation and mediated through the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>20</sup> We learn from Rom. 1 that Paul's remedy for heathen darkness is not better natural theology but the gospel.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Relation between General and Special Revelation**

It has been argued that the objects and events of nature, viewed objectively, do not in themselves constitute a revelation. They become a revelation, however, when they are accepted as a creation. They then tell us something about the attributes of the Creator, but with very little moral implication for mankind.

Special revelation, on the other hand, not only tells us that nature is a creation of God, but it also makes clear that it is a theistic creation. God did not just create the universe in the beginning in such a way that it would continue to exist automatically under the control of impersonal natural laws, but He holds all things together and sustains all things continuously by the word of His power.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the creation is teleological; i.e., it is so under His control that it achieves His sovereign purposes in every detail.<sup>23</sup> It follows therefore that the events in the world of nature have significance.

To understand the significance of many events is not easy, even for the man of faith who accepts special revelation. At the most he may be able to form an opinion on the significance of some major event, such as a war, a national spiritual revival; or the migration of a large number of Jews to Israel; but he would be a bold (or, more probably, naïve) man if he were to claim that the event was a divine revelation to him.

But there is a time when the man of faith would be justified in recognizing a revelation in the events surrounding him; that is, when he is seeking God's guidance. For many of the practical decisions of life, special revelation in the scriptures is inadequate by itself: it deals with general principles of behaviour but specifies no details. Thus it says 'Do good to all men',<sup>24</sup> but it is only when the Christian comes across a particular need that he realizes what good he must do. He is exhorted to work for his living,<sup>25</sup> but it is his circumstances that guide him to the right employment. Thus it is through nature that God reveals the details of the Christian's pathway. Although this is a natural revelation, it cannot be

20. 1 Cor. 1:17-2:16.

21. Rom. 1:14-16.

22. Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3.

23. E.g., Eph. 1:3-14.

24. Gal. 6:10, RSV.

25. 2 Thess. 3:10-12.



regarded as a general revelation as it speaks only to the man of faith concerned.

Special revelation utilizes nature in another way, and converts it into a revelation. Scripture frequently makes use of analogies between natural phenomena and God's person and activities. When the Bible speaks of His word, His hearing, His seeing, His love, His hand, His wrath, His son, it is drawing upon human analogies. When it tells us that He is a consuming fire or a rock or speaks of His throne or His footstool, it is utilizing analogies of inanimate objects. Poetry and apocalyptic literature are full of imagery based upon natural analogies. Many of the resulting metaphors are highly expressive. To say that God cares is true: but to say 'The Lord is my shepherd'<sup>26</sup> is far richer in meaning and of much greater impact. The oriental shepherd thus becomes a vehicle of revelation. It is reasonable therefore to suggest that one reason why He who created the universe made it as it is was that it might include symbols of His own person and activity, and thus facilitate special revelation.

It appears, then, that special and general revelation are interdependent. General revelation, to be effectual, requires the concept of creation, usually suppressed by unbelievers but supplied by special revelation. On the other hand, special revelation depends upon the use of words primarily referring to natural symbols of spiritual things. General revelation thus becomes a vehicle of special revelation.

In fact, the two are so intimately linked that it may be questioned whether the distinction is justified. Are we being too arbitrary in dividing revelation into two parts? Ought we rather to think in terms of a single unfolding revelation, pervading the universe, and having verbal and physical aspects? An analogy would be an illustrated textbook, in which the text explains the pictures while the pictures illustrate the text. Would not such a model accord well with scriptural thought? The Word by whom all things (and therefore the general revelation) were created was also the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us as the supreme special revelation.<sup>27</sup> The Son who was God's agent in creating the worlds was also the one through whom His special revelation through the prophets was completed.<sup>28</sup>

### **Use of General Revelation in Christian Witness**

If we accept that there is a biblical basis for a general revelation of God in nature, we may now enquire into the sort of use that can validly be

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26. Ps. 23:1.

27. Jn. 1:3 & 14.

28. Heb. 1:1f.

made of this in Christian evangelism. The commission of Jesus to his disciples was threefold. They were to herald (*κηρύσσω, kēryssō*<sup>29</sup>) the gospel; they were to teach (*διδάσκω, didaskō*) and make disciples (*μαθητεύω, mathēteuo*<sup>30</sup>); and they were to be witnesses (*μάρτυρες, martures*<sup>31</sup>) to Christ. These three forms of evangelism involve different methods of approach. A herald is one who makes a public proclamation, and he cannot assume that his hearers understand his message as he does, or that they are sympathetic. The teacher is one who addresses disciples, and he can assume a measure of understanding and sympathy. A witness is a person who, in public or private, recounts his own experience to those prepared to listen, whether sympathetic or not. In the New Testament there are examples of all three types of communication in which natural events are called in evidence.

In the two Acts passages<sup>32</sup> already referred to, we find Paul *heralding* the gospel to pagan audiences. He could not assume a knowledge of the Creator, for such knowledge had been suppressed, but neither did he argue the fact of creation from nature. Instead, he proclaimed the fact. Then, having told his audiences that God had made the heaven and the earth, he utilized his hearers' experience of nature to argue to the character of God.

In the Mt. 5 account Jesus was *teaching* his disciples. There was no need for him to tell them of the creation, for they were well aware that God had created the world, so he argues directly from their experience of the weather, and its testimony to the impartial love of God, to their responsibility to love friend and foe alike.<sup>14</sup>

In four passages in Acts<sup>33</sup> there are records of the Apostles Peter and Paul *witnessing* to their experience of God in natural events that made very deep impressions on them. They simply recounted the events to their audiences, whether sympathetic or unsympathetic, gave their personal interpretation of the significance of those events, and then left their hearers to form their own judgement.

I suggest that these incidents are patterns for the use of natural revelation today. In our evangelistic task of heralding to the world we cannot expect to convince our hearers of the existence of God by drawing inferences from nature, for, logically, natural phenomena are equally capable of bearing a materialistic interpretation as they are a theistic one. Rather we must proclaim (on the grounds of special

29. Mark 16:15.

30. Mt. 28:19-20.

31. Acts 1:8.

32. Acts 14: 15-17; 17:24-31.

33. Acts 11:4-18; 15:6-9; 22:6-22; 26:12-18.

34. Rom. 8:28, RSV.

revelation) the fact that God exists and that he has created and upholds the universe. Following such proclamation, we can go on to invite our audience to see His wisdom and glory in nature.

In the work of teaching (from the pulpit or in the Bible class) those who are aware of God, His creation, and His teleological activity in nature, we may point to historical or contemporary events and, with caution, draw inferences that illustrate or emphasize the character of God or man's responsibility to Him.

And lastly, if we as individuals take seriously the fact that 'in everything God works for good with those that love Him', we shall see in our multifarious circumstances plenty of evidence of the wisdom and love of God, and this should emerge quite naturally in our conversation with others if and when it becomes relevant. We may recount the events, with our appreciation of them, and leave our hearers to form their own opinions. These may or may not coincide with our own: our hearers may even think us mad (which was Festus's estimate of Paul on such an occasion), but at least we shall have witnessed to God's providence in nature.

In making these suggestions for the use of general revelation today, I am not, of course, implying that this should be our chief method of evangelization. It can be only ancillary to our main task of proclaiming God's special revelation.