

A Pastoral Perspective on *Homo naledi*

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When church members are faced with evidential challenges to a biblical world view (such as the initial interpretations of *Homo naledi*), how do pastors respond? Good question. The answers vary, depending upon the hermeneutical position of the church as it interprets Genesis 1-11.

First, a bit of context: liberal churches, as well as a few evangelical churches, have already embraced theistic evolution (or some permutation thereof), sanctioned by a hermeneutic that interprets Genesis 1-11 figuratively. For them, the question presumably would not be raised as a problem that requires harmonization. Some churches are at the other extreme, and close their eyes to any evidence that might challenge the Bible. Both approaches create dissonance for the person in the pew who reads the Bible plainly, but who also desires to answer legitimate challenges (1 Peter 3:15).

I am a “young earth” creationist; at the same time I am very aware that I don’t have answers to all apologetics questions. I am also concerned lest Christians “pad” evidence in a counter-argument in order to make the Bible look good. The Bible has withstood thousands of challenges over the centuries, and such dishonesty in effect dishonors Scripture.

So how do I respond when I field questions about finds such as *Homo naledi*? Oddly, I usually don’t get questions of this nature from older believers. They have enough mileage on their faith to wait until more evidence is in before needing a response. When I asked a high school science teacher in my church about *Homo naledi*, he responded, “If you just sit back and wait for a while, Scripture wins. God knows what He’s doing.”

I do get questions from university students. If they are Christians in a crisis of faith, I sometimes find that they are not troubled by only one intellectual challenge, but by accretions of issues (some intellectual, perhaps some moral). The truth is, when they are invited to enjoy the temptations the university offers, while at the same time their professor argues forcibly that we are all nothing more than amoral bipeds, their commitment to follow Christ can be derailed.

Having said that, I do want to address their intellectual concerns, but for many issues I do not have the training, or the time, to do so. I must rely on the work of others whom I trust, people whom I believe love truth more than they love winning a debate, and who are willing to admit both the strengths and weaknesses in their

own arguments. (If I offer parishioners bumper sticker answers that do not survive careful examination, I have done more harm than good.)

But what I can do is attempt to put their concerns in the larger context of a biblical world view. Generally I respond by considering three guiding principles: the question of sources of authority, the issue of burden of proof, and the trajectory of credibility.

1. Sources of Authority. Does science speak with the same clarity and authority as Scripture? For over 20 centuries Christians have anchored their world view (their answers to all ultimate questions: of origins, purpose, destiny) in the Scriptures (“God...has spoken”, Heb. 1:1-2).

There is a distinction between “general” and “special” revelation. General revelation is the apprehension of the existence and majesty of God through nature, from the telescopic level (“The heavens are telling of the glory of God; their expanse is declaring the work of His hands,” Psalm 19:1) down to the microscopic level (“You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother’s womb. I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; wonderful are Your works...,” Psalm 139:13-14).

The order and laws of nature (e.g., the complexities of photosynthesis or DNA) point not to Naturalism but to a Creator. But even so, the revelation found in observation of the creation is less perspicuous and its conclusions more subjective (anchored in the worldview of the observer) than the clarity and higher authority of “special” revelation—God the Creator speaking in words. Simplified, whenever there is a conflict between our best understanding of general revelation and our best understanding of special revelation, God’s Word has higher authority.

As the apostle Peter said, God’s Word trumps our interpretation even of our own immediate empirical experiences (2 Peter 1:16, “we were eyewitnesses” and 1:18, “we ourselves heard”—yet God’s Word is “more sure” [Greek] than what we see or hear, 1:19). Or put differently, following the epistemology of St. Augustine and St. Anselm, not “I understand, therefore I believe,” but “I believe, therefore I understand.”

2. The Nature of Theorizing and the Burden of Proof. We are all aware that “the assured results” of scientific theories are not always quite so assured. The history of science is littered with discarded certainties. While in college I studied the philosophy of

science and was surprised to discover that the paradigm shifts—not just interpretations of results, but the lenses through which interpretations exist—produce very different conclusions.

Indeed, when news sources sensationalize finds like *Homo naledi* and describe them in language that makes it clear the question of creation vs. evolution is now over, the argument has been won, and the books are closed—well, we've heard that story before.

3. Trajectory of Credibility. Historically, the Bible has withstood many historical, archaeological, and scientific attacks against its truthfulness. Many instances could be cited. The proclamation by Professor Bernard Ramm (not a young earth creationist) from a generation ago remains true: “A thousand times over, the death knell of the Bible has been sounded, the funeral procession formed, the inscription cut on the tombstone, and committal read. But somehow, the corpse never stays put” (Ramm 1953, pp. 232-33).

Therefore, we wait for the evidence to be sifted and interpreted, and then we evaluate the evaluations. We don't throw up our hands in despair over every latest finding, but acknowledge that God is on His throne. He's not wringing His hands over any discovery that the media may herald. We know that all interpreters of evidence (including ourselves) are fallible, and that theorizing is *theorizing*.

So when people come to me with concerns that some new finding has potentially undermined their entire world view, I encourage them to calm down, trust in the sovereignty of the Creator, be patient with the scientific (or historical, or archaeological, etc.) process, and then we'll talk.

References

Ramm, B. 1953. *Protestant Christian Evidences*. Moody Press, Chicago.