

Chapter 1: Revelation and Authority

If theology, or Bible doctrine, concerns thinking about God, from whence do those thoughts come? How are we prompted to think about God? What makes us wonder about God?

Two Factors

Historically, there are two answers to this question. Theologians typically answer that our own natural lives and life experience is one factor that prompts us to wonder about whether there is a God and, if there is, what he is like, what he thinks of us, what he does, and what demands he might make on us. The idea is that God has made us a certain way, and put us in an environment or world, so that as we experience life, our environment and nature prompts us to think about God. This factor or category is often called “general revelation.”

General revelation concerns how the natural world influences our thinking about God. That is, there are certain things we can learn from the natural world that form our knowledge and opinion of God. We might look at the unfathomable complexity of life at all levels and conclude that there was a Designer of that complexity. The natural world, then, makes us wonder about how everything got here in such a way that our world fosters and sustains life. The world looks like the product of an intelligence. Hence general revelation makes think of a creator God. Psalm 19:1 puts forth the idea of general revelation clearly: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.” Further, general revelation is available to all people in all human contexts and places. This was part of the apostle’s Paul’s argument that no human being could claim to be exempt from the knowledge of God: “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse” (Rom 1:19-20; cf. Acts 14:15-17). Since general revelation is focused on our processing of the natural world, the concept also encompasses that which can be known by human rationality and inquiry. That which can be discovered through science falls under “general revelation” for that reason.

The second factor that prompts thinking about God is, in turn, labeled “special revelation” by theologians. Special revelation is information that cannot be gleaned from nature—it has to be given to us directly. This is where the Bible comes into the picture, for the Bible is divine revelation produced by men prompted by God to write that revelation. The Bible contains information about God that nature cannot tell us. For example, nature can prod us to the conclusion that there is a creator. It cannot tell us that we are born with an inherently sinful nature, are estranged from God, and that God decided it would become necessary to become a man (Jesus) to save us from sin (Romans 3; 10:14; 2 Cor 4:4). As vast and spectacular as creation is, it is much more limited in revealing truths to us about God than Scripture is. If we depended on nature, we would never learn what God wants and what we must do or believe to be part of his family. We need the Bible to tell us the way of salvation and a host of other things about God.

Another way to think about special revelation is that God speaks directly to humanity in and through the Bible. The Bible informs us that God spoke to humans before there even was a Bible. That is, biblical stories have God dispensing information to humans that they would never otherwise have known through nature (Gen 1:28; 3:8; Exod 3:14). In fact, God frequently spoke to biblical figures (Jer 18:1; Ezek 12:1, 8, 17, 21, 26; Hosea 1:1; Heb 1:1-2; 1 Cor 11:23-24), sometimes in the form of a man (Jer 1:1-9;

Gen 18-19). The Bible reveals a variety of other ways God made his will known to men, all of which constitute special revelation:

- casting lots (Prov. 16:33; Acts 1:21–26),
- divining stones (e.g., Urim and Thummim; see 1 Sam. 28:6),
- deep sleep (Job 4:13; 33:15),
- dreams (Gen. 37:1–11; Dan. 2:19; 7:1; Matt. 1:20; 2:13),
- visions (Isa. 1:1; Dan. 8:1)
- theophanies (Isa. 6:1–5; Ezek. 1:26, 28; Dan. 7:9, 13, 22; Rev. 4:1–5:14), and
- angelic messengers (Luke 1:26–38; Acts 7:38; Gal. 3:19).¹

The Bible's special revelation can come to us in the form of the history it reports. Events like the exodus from Egypt (Exodus 5-14) certainly informed the Israelites (and us) that, among the gods, none are like Yahweh of Israel (Exod 15:11). The destruction and exile of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel and Judah taught specific lessons about God, his people, and the nations other than Israel (2 Kings 17; 24–25; Isa. 10:5–6; Hab. 1:5–6). None of this information is obtainable by simply exploring creation.

I said above that these two categories, general revelation and special revelation, reflect the way theologians have looked at how or why we begin thinking about God. There's more to think about here, though. The division, while helpful, isn't terribly precise.

What (Really) Is Special Revelation?

There is no doubt that special revelation is not only needed for Bible doctrine but is present in the Bible. The problem is that there are many things in the Bible that its human authors and readers knew that didn't need to be directly revealed from the mouth of God. That is, the Bible contains plenty of material that falls under general revelation – things that were part of the normal human experience of its writers. The categories as conceived (simplistically, nature vs. the Bible) are not that exact.

For example, there is a good deal of content in the Bible that is delivered to readers in forms familiar to any literate person of the biblical period and succeeding generations of humanity. The biblical authors dispense information in the form of poetry structured in the same ways as poetry from the literature of contemporary civilizations. While it is true that certain thoughts about God put forth in biblical poetry will differ in significant ways from that of other writers in other cultures, there are often clear parallels in thought and form from those cultures that align to biblical content. Another example is law. The legal codes one encounters in the Torah have clear parallels in law codes of the ancient Near East (e.g., the Laws of Hammurabi). Biblical covenants made with Abraham (Gen 15) and Israel (at Mount Sinai; Exod 20-23), or between individuals (Jacob and Laban; Gen 31) follow the patterns of covenants found in literature external to the Bible. New Testament letters (epistles) follow the conventional techniques of letter writing in the first century of the Greco-Roman world. Descriptions of the end of days (the apocalypse) overlap with apocalyptic literature found in Jewish writings other than the Old or New Testament.

These are just a handful of examples. The point is that parts of "special revelation" aren't unique to the Bible. What is unique are the truth propositions put forth in the Bible through the many means biblical writers. So "special revelation" more accurately refers to information the Bible gives us about the true

¹ Don Thorsen, *An Exploration of Christian Theology*, Second Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2020), 14.

God, his plan for human salvation, the person and work of Jesus, and the supernatural world—not so much to the means used to express all those ideas in the Bible. Truth propositions and the way those propositions are expressed are two different things. Just because something appears in the Bible (like a law in the Torah) doesn't mean it is unique in all of ancient religious literature. What is *asserted* in the Bible about God, humanity, spiritual beings, human destiny, etc. is what's unique, or special, and what cannot be learned through the general revelation of creation.

Biblical Authority

Revelation from God, then, does come to us in two broad ways, creation and the Bible. Christians believe the Bible is the authoritative record of who the true God is and what he has chosen to reveal to us through the writers he prepared and prompted for the task of producing the Bible.

The authoritative nature of the Bible derives from the validity of its truth assertions in comparison with competing claims. Other religions have sacred books or oral traditions, but the truth claims therein do not correspond to reality to the same degree, or have the same level of logical coherence, as what the Bible teaches.

For example, what makes more sense? All religions either admit or deny human depravity. Those who deny it have great difficulty expounding a view of morality and evil that conforms to the evil humans experience every day. Those who affirm it must then offer a solution—how can evil be overcome and humans accepted by the holy God who made them? All religions except biblical Christianity have essentially the same answer: salvation, acceptance by a holy God, depends on human effort and performance to be holy and fit for God's presence. That is, some system of good works that merit God's love and acceptance is the answer. The Bible says this is an impossibility given the inherent imperfection of human nature, and rejects the idea that God leaves it to sinful people to erase their sin by doing good works. Instead, God loves sinful humanity (John 3:16; Rom 5:8) and offers salvation freely, apart from human merit, if and when humans embrace the means of atoning for sin—the voluntary sacrifice of Jesus Christ, God become man, to pay for human sinfulness that could never be erased by imperfect humans. These approaches to the human condition, reality of evil, and salvation from sin are diametrically oppositional. Only one conforms to the life we all experience. Only one makes logical sense. The biblical answer is alone honest with the impossibility of imperfect, sinful humans somehow ridding themselves of sin and guilt before a holy God. Other religions teach that man is the solution to man's problem with God. Only the Bible teaches that God provides the solution for the human dilemma in view of the impossibility of self-salvation by voluntarily exchanging his righteousness for our sin when we believe in Jesus and what he did on our behalf. As Bray puts it:

The Bible is the record of a relationship between God and man. It explains how God loves what he has made and wants us to enjoy the fruits of his creative acts in fellowship with him. But it also tells us how some of the highest creatures rebelled against him and rejected his love, and that the leader of that rebellion seduced the human race into following him. Out of this tragedy has come the message that God has not abandoned us but instead has revealed an even deeper love by sending his only Son to live our life, to die in our place, and to rise again from the dead so that we might dwell with him in eternity.²

Demonstrating the superior coherence of the Bible over all other religious texts and traditions is the role of apologetics, which, as noted in the last chapter, is beyond the scope of this book. There are many

² Gerald Bray, *God Is Love: A Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 11.

excellent works of apologetics that establish the superior truth claims of the Bible against competing claims or contrary ideas. Among them are:

- Van Til, Cornelius, and William Edgar. *Christian Apologetics*. 2nd ed. The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company: Phillipsburg, NJ, 2003.
- Geisler, Norman L. *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999.
- Geisler, Norman L. *Christian Apologetics*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976.
- Kreeft, Peter, and Ronald K. Tacelli. *Handbook of Christian Apologetics: Hundreds of Answers to Crucial Questions*. Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 1994.
- Kreeft, Peter. *Fundamentals of the Faith: Essays in Christian Apologetics*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988.

The truthfulness and coherence of the Bible in its truth claims about God, sin, humanity, salvation, the spiritual world, etc. are what make the Bible the authority for our theology. As special revelation, its own origins are an important topic for Bible doctrine. Christians believe the Bible ultimately comes from God through a process called inspiration. It is that topic we'll consider next.