

Colyer, Peter J. *The Pre-Scientific Bible: Cultural Influences on the Biblical Writers and How They Affect Our Reading of the Bible Today*. Winchester, UK, Washington, USA: Circle Books. 2013. 215 pages, endnotes, bibliography, no index, ISBN 978-1-78099-913-5 (eBook). ISBN 978-1-78099-914-2 (Paperback). UK £12.99, US \$ 22.95. Reviewer: Jitse M. van der Meer.

Recent work on the relationship of science and Christian faith has focussed almost entirely on the philosophical and historical aspects of it because the interpretation of the biblical texts is fraught with innumerable disagreements. The very fact that a book appears on the Bible in relation to science must, therefore, be appreciated. Colyer wants to establish whether there was scientific knowledge in biblical times and how ancient and recent world views should interact. He sketches his approach in Ch. 1. The specific questions he brings to the text include what it means to say that God is in heaven above (Ch. 2), how the writers understood God's action in natural events such as the weather (Ch. 3), as well as in human events such as illness and politics (Ch. 4), and in miracles and magic (Ch. 5), whether among bible writers and their cultures there is evidence for mental attitudes conducive to science such as experimentation and causal reasoning (Ch. 6), and, finally, which partner should be reinterpreted in case of conflict, science, the Bible or both (Ch. 7).

I missed exegesis. The discussion of texts indicating that God is in heaven above (Ch. 2) illustrates this. All texts considered, Colyer concludes that the language cannot be physical because astronomy has not discovered a location for heaven. Rather it is metaphorical because God is spirit without spatial location. I agree. But couldn't the biblical language about God in heaven above be seen as using the knowledge of the location of an earthly king above his servants to speak about the position of sovereignty of the heavenly king. After all, the earth is referred to as the footstool of God (Isaiah 66.1). If so, the question of how the language relates to science is irrelevant because the language was not intended geographically. Thus no reinterpretation of the Bible in light of science is needed to get at the meaning of these texts.

A dominant concern of Colyer's is how to combine particular and general descriptions of divine action in the text (Ch. 3). He asserts that the long-term and continuous processes that cause weather conditions render questionable the biblical assertion that the particular occurrence of weather is a divine response to particular local conditions (73). For instance, Jeremiah (3.3) says that because of Israel's moral and religious misconduct, "the showers have been withheld and the spring rain has not come." Colyer acknowledges that the Bible presents God as using natural processes as instruments, but finds it confusing to see divine agency and natural causation as complementary perspectives on the same event (75). This puzzle returns in connection with human events (Ch. 4) and miracles (Ch. 5). He observes that "Our modern preference to interpret events in human and geopolitical terms renders the biblical attribution of events to God problematical (113). Miracles such as the resurrection of Jesus are essential for the faith, but problematic from a scientific perspective. Yet, he acknowledges that natural causes are under divine control (114-16). He interprets miracles as natural events at the limits of probability (152). Colyer seems to take the 'faith story' and the 'natural story' as mutually exclusive. Perhaps he distinguishes particular from general description in order to allow generalizations about

omnipotence only if offered by the text. He does not say so, but he uses the few texts that describe divine action in general terms as a justification for the generalization that God directs all natural events (70). Moreover, Colyer infers that God's power does not consist in omnipotence, but in the mysterious ability to ensure that those events take place. For him these texts tell about God's purposes and his knowledge about the future, not about omnipotence (135). This seems like a false dilemma unless one assumes that the author takes an inference to omnipotence as an imposition from outside of the text. All this depends on his distinction between particular and general divine action. The prior exegetical question is on what basis he makes that distinction. Are the texts he reads as generalizations not poetic exaggeration? That is not discussed.

Twice Colyer reads science into scripture. He characterizes the biblical emphasis on the permanence of the earth as restricted compared to the geological awareness of impermanence (57). But the texts he offers (49-54) describe both permanence and change, the former as a symbol of God's faithfulness and the latter as a symbol of his power. Thus, the Bible is not restrictive about God's faithfulness and power. Also, he asserts that if the Hebrews had possessed meteorological knowledge, the Bible text would have given a scientific explanation (73).

Chapter 6 asks "whether the biblical writings provide evidence that in the societies from which the Bible emerged there existed mental attitudes which later would be described as of a 'scientific' type." This kind of question, even though cautiously stated, invites anachronism. He takes observation, causal reasoning and experimentation as signals of such an attitude. But learning by trial and error and attributing error to causes are poor criteria because they characterize everyday life of people without a 'scientific' attitude. The outcome is predictable: "the biblical cultures were not scientific in the modern sense, . . ." (169).

Then follows a series of reflections on the competence of science to address the Christian religion and vice versa without an explanation of the transition. Science may raise questions about religious claims, but Colyer limits the questions to aspects of religious experience that fall within the competence of science, presumably the social functioning of religion or the neural effects of worship, but the results cannot apply to questions about the reality of God. Excluded is the spiritual realm (171).

Given the differences between scientific and biblical knowledge of nature, Colyer asks whether the one should be reinterpreted in light of the other or perhaps whether both should be adjusted (Ch. 7). Given that the biblical authors in their context understood that "God was directly active in the natural world and in the world of human events" (179), can modern people accept this conclusion? Distinguishing scientific explanation from religious interpretation, Colyer observes that from a scientific perspective the relevant texts can at best be characterized as poetry and then concludes that they are wrong. Again, I cannot follow Colyer's reasoning. To declare poetical texts wrong in the light of science misses the point that such texts are not intended to conform to a twenty-first century perspective. Thus, his conclusion that the poetic character of texts does not diminish their religious teaching remains unconvincing. It is perfectly possible for a fairy tale to contain moral teaching. But in the Hebrew Bible, God's faithfulness in human affairs is rooted in

the reality of his faithful action in nature.

In conclusion, the author does not present a thesis and it may be unfair to expect one on a topic of such complexity. But the result is that the book has no clear focus. Colyer seems to work through questions of personal concern. This can be helpful if the author had explained the perspective he brings to the topic. He has not done so and this leaves the reader guessing what his intentions are.

There are puzzling inconsistencies. For instance, why accept miracles, but not the possibility of supernatural revelation? When the Bible states what the Lord said “in his heart” (Gen. 8: 21) or what “God thought” (Exodus 3: 17), Colyer asserts that “The language is that of a story about God ...” (173). Could it not be supernatural revelation? Colyer suggests that the ancient Hebrews practised a God-of-the-gaps approach to divine action. For lack of scientific knowledge they attributed all natural events to divine action, but such attributions declined as knowledge increased. Not only does he fail to provide textual or historical evidence for this conclusion, but it also contradicts his conclusion elsewhere that the ancient Hebrews accepted divine and natural causation as compatible. Surprisingly, he comes to the sensible conclusion that “God must be seen as a ‘cause’ in a sense totally different from physical or human factors” (188). Colyer appears to be in a muddle about the relation of divine and natural causation. This may be why he also appears to be confused about the divine and human character of revelation

Given that the Bible aims at relating God’s purposes and human behaviour (13), one would expect the author to look to extra-biblical sources for an answer to the question whether the ancient Hebrews engaged in nature exploration. But he does not even raise that possibility.

Colyer acknowledges that scientific knowledge is limited to the operations of the body and to a lesser extent to the psyche. But the implications remains under-developed.

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