

## FAITH AS AN EPISTEMOLOGY: HEBREWS 11:3 AND THE ORIGINS OF LIFE

JIM SAMRA<sup>1</sup>

As a pastor I am regularly asked to help people in my congregation think through the religion-science debate, especially when it comes to the origins of life, which tends to be ground zero in the larger discussion.<sup>2</sup> Usually with such questions I am being asked what I think, or what they should think, or what I think of what someone else thinks. Recently in preaching through the book of Hebrews I came to a well-known verse that hit me afresh because it changed the discussion on the origins of life from “what” to “how.” This shift from metaphysics to epistemology opened up new avenues for me to personally think through how we know what we know about the origins of life. It allowed me to give guidance to my congregation on these issues and most importantly to see our epistemology with regard to the origins of life as an integral part of fixing our eyes on Jesus in all areas of life.

Hebrews 11:3 states, “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen is not made out of what was visible.”<sup>3</sup>

This verse jumped out at me for three reasons. First, it is an assertion about epistemology more than it is about metaphysics. Most Scriptural statements that refer to creation focus on what we know, including the following examples: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1), “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:3), and “... God, who created all things” (Ephesians 3:9). But the emphasis in Hebrews 11:3 is that we know God created the world “by faith,” the term being emphatically fronted in the verse.

Second, the placement and form of Hebrews 11:3 is surprising in the context of the larger chapter. After defining faith in verse 1, the author comments that faith is what the ancients were commended for in verse 2. What one would expect at that point is a list of ancients who exercised faith and the results that they achieved through faith—precisely what comes in verses 4-38. But Hebrews 11:3 starts not with the ancients but with us. Furthermore, it doesn’t follow the standard format of “by

---

<sup>1</sup> Jim Samra is the Senior Pastor at Calvary Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

<sup>2</sup> Keith Thomson calls evolution “the bellwether point of contention” for the religion and science debate, in *The Religion and Science Debate: Why Does It Continue*, ed. Harold Attridge (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Scripture quotations in this chapter are taken from the New International Version.

faith so-and-so did something.” Instead it says, “by faith we understand.” Likewise, faith in Hebrews 11:3 is not forward-looking as it is in the rest of the chapter. It is not “by faith” we *will someday* come to know that God created the world, but that we do know this *now*. Given its placement between defining faith (vv. 1-2) and demonstrating faith (vv. 4-38), the best way to take 11:3 is as a transitional verse between the two sections showing how faith works.

Third, the verse is not an exhortation. It is a statement of fact. We are not encouraged to know that God created the world by faith—as if there were an alternative. Knowing “by faith” that God created the world is so fundamental that the author of Hebrews uses it to prepare the reader for what is coming. We can begin to understand how Abraham knew by faith that God would raise Isaac from the dead because we are already exercising that kind of faith in knowing that God created the world. This in turn prepares the reader to know by faith how to endure the cross that we have been asked to bear or to say with confidence that the Lord is our helper even when it doesn’t appear on the surface to be the case.

Because of this important verse, this paper proposes to use Hebrews 11:3 as a doorway to think through faith as an epistemology specifically in regard to the issue of the origin of life, but more broadly with regard to the hiddenness of God in general.<sup>4</sup>

I should be quick to confess that as a pastor with a background in Biblical studies, I felt more at home with questions of exegesis and Biblical theology, but this study encroached on philosophical issues such as natural theology and warranted belief for which I felt hopelessly lost. As a result I have chosen the Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga as a guide to help provide insights from the world of philosophy to illuminate the study.<sup>5</sup>

#### WHAT IS FAITH?

Faith in the book of Hebrews is a way of seeing what cannot be seen with human eyes alone.<sup>6</sup> Hebrews 11:1 says that faith is “the proof (ἔλεγχος) of what is not seen” (HCSB). The word translated here as “proof” indicates “the evidence, normally based on argument or discussion, as to the truth or reality of something—‘proof, verification, evidence for.’”<sup>7</sup> In Hebrews 11:7 Noah is warned by faith “about things not yet seen,” meaning that he came to know that a flood was coming, but not through

<sup>4</sup> Much of what is being proposed here fits with what Karl Barth has written in *Church Dogmatics III/1: The Doctrine of Creation* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 3-41 where he begins by discussing Hebrews 11:3.

<sup>5</sup> Plantinga has not only written extensively on faith but also specifically on the issue of faith and science, most recently in *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) and in debate with Daniel Dennett in *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Such a view of faith is consistent with other Scriptures (e.g., 2 Kings 6:8-23; John 9; 2 Cor. 5:7; 1 Pet. 1:7-9).

<sup>7</sup> “ἔλεγχος” in Louw and Nida. The more subjective ideas of “assurance” (NIV) or even “conviction” (ESV) are the result of the objective nature of this word.

human observation or logical deduction. God revealed it to him. Hebrews 11:13 says, “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only *saw them* and welcomed them from a distance” (emphasis added). By faith Moses chose Christ over Egypt because he was “looking ahead” to his reward and because “he saw him who is invisible” (11:26-27). Faith is the ability to see things like the future that cannot be seen using human eyes. The paramount example of this is Jesus who was able to see through the shame of the cross to the joy that was set before him (12:2). This is why he is “the pioneer and perfecter of faith.”

But all this language about “seeing” shouldn’t blind us to the fact that what is in mind is the whole range of human knowing. After all, by faith Abraham “reasoned” that God could raise Isaac from the dead (vv. 17-19), meaning that he chose to believe something that was not logical and for which he did not have a historical precedent.

This fits with the model of how faith works presented by Alvin Plantinga in *Knowledge and Christian Belief*.<sup>8</sup> Merging and extending the contributions of Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin, Plantinga argues that faith is “an epistemic or *cognitive* state or activity.”<sup>9</sup> It functions like memory, perception, reason, testimony, sympathy, and our other cognitive facilities as a means of receiving beliefs. Simply put, we can receive beliefs through our senses, through what others testify to us as being true, through what we remember happening, etc. *or* through faith.<sup>10</sup> Faith is one way of knowing among many.

#### HOW DOES FAITH BECOME KNOWLEDGE?

Hebrews 11:3 says, “By faith *we understand* that the universe was formed at God’s command” (emphasis added). The word for “understand” (*νοέω*) belongs to the semantic field of knowledge. Faith is the means by which Christians come to know that God created the world. But how does faith become knowledge?

According to Plantinga’s model, beliefs that are received by faith come when God reveals a message to us and we become convinced that this message is true through the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit. One of Plantinga’s great contributions to philosophy has been to show that such beliefs that come to us this way are properly basic with respect to warrant. What this means is that beliefs that come to us by faith do not have to be combined with things that come to us through our senses, memory, logic, etc. They can be, but faith in and of itself is a way of coming to know something.

<sup>8</sup> Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015. *Knowledge and Christian Belief* is the shorter and more user-friendly version of *Warranted Christian Belief*. It provides a useful doorway into Plantinga’s philosophy.

<sup>9</sup> Plantinga, *Knowledge*, 58.

<sup>10</sup> For Plantinga, beliefs received through faith are more than just cognitive. They are also affective—that is, they are “sealed on the heart”—but the point for us here is that they are not less than cognitive.

This affirms what Hebrews is saying: faith is a means of knowing. But Hebrews seems to be saying more than this with regard to the origins of life. It is saying that faith is *the* means of knowing that God created the world. This is more controversial because it touches on the notion of natural theology and the role of logic and scientific evidence in the establishment of knowledge about origins of life. We will return to these, but first more on Hebrews 11:3.

#### WHAT MAKES SOMETHING A CANDIDATE FOR FAITH?

Contextually, Hebrews is emphasizing that in order for something to be a candidate for faith, it cannot be seen some other way. Faith has as its object things that “we do not see” (11:1). If something can be seen, there is no need for faith.<sup>11</sup> This is explicit in Hebrews 11 with a number of the exemplars: Noah was warned about “things not yet seen.” Abraham went to the Promised Land, “even though he did not know where he was going.” Sarah was able to bear children even though she was past childbearing age. Abraham was about to sacrifice his one and only son Isaac “even though God had said to him, ‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.’” Moses persevered “because he saw him who is invisible.” In other words, if it made perfect sense to Moses that Egypt was a declining empire and Israel was a rising one, the truth that he belonged with the Israelites would have been made by wisdom and not “by faith.” In each case the author of Hebrews is going out of his way to show that knowledge was not available to these people by other means. What is explicit with Noah, Abraham, Sarah, and Moses is implicit in the remaining stories mentioned in Hebrews 11.

Plantinga leaves open the *possibility* that something that is known by faith could also be known on the basis of reason<sup>12</sup>—he posits that this is possible with Jesus’ resurrection, for example—but “there are many of the deliverances of faith such that it is at least plausible to think that they cannot be known by way of reason.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Romans 8:24-25 is similar, but Paul uses “hope” there. The Gospel of John seems to come at seeing and believing slightly differently in that seeing can be a pathway to believing (e.g., John 20:29), but even still “seeing” only moves someone so far and then belief is necessary.

<sup>12</sup> “In the model, the beliefs constituting faith are typically taken as basic; that is, they are not accepted by way of argument from other propositions or on the evidential basis of other propositions in this way, though perhaps some believers do in fact reason this way” (*Knowledge*, 60). He goes on to note that if knowledge came by way of something other than faith, it would fall short of the “conviction” and “deep-rooted assurance” that faith provides and so be something less than warranted knowledge. This hedging may be in response to criticism from those like James Beilby, “Plantinga’s Model of Warranted Christian Belief,” in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. Deane-Peter Baker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 125-65, 147-51.

<sup>13</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, 179. Compare this with Barth who says, “Our first emphasis is on this final point that the doctrine of the creation not less than the whole remaining content of Christian confession is an article of faith, i.e., the rendering of a knowledge which no man has procured for himself or ever will; which is neither native

But here we should point out a potential conflict with Plantinga's model. Plantinga follows Calvin in arguing that all humans have a *sensus divinitatis*—a sense of the divine—placed there by God. The *sensus divinitatis* is a belief-producing faculty that, seemingly apart from faith, can create knowledge of God as creator—not of the great truths of the gospel, but only of God's existence and possibly his role as creator. At times Plantinga appears to say that knowledge of God as creator does not come by faith but through the *sensus divinitatis*.<sup>14</sup> But the conflict may be more imagined than real since in the model the *sensus divinitatis* creates knowledge the same way that faith does, which continues to make his model a useful heuristic device for understanding Hebrews 11:3. It seems to me that for the Christian, faith takes over the role of the *sensus divinitatis* so that the Christian to whom God reveals in the Scriptures that he created all things knows this *by faith*.

So in my reading of Hebrews 11:3, God creating the world is in the category of deliverances that do not come to us through reason but only through faith.<sup>15</sup>

Further support for this reading of Hebrews 11:3 is found in the remainder of the verse: “the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what is visible.”<sup>16</sup> The relationship of the two clauses in the second half of the verse is important. At first glance it may appear that Christians believe that the universe was formed at God's command *and* what is seen was not made out of what is visible. But the second clause actually gives the *purpose* of God choosing to create the world using a command.<sup>17</sup> God used a command to create the world *because* he wanted what is visible to be made out of what is invisible. Or to translate it more woodenly so as to see the emphasis: “so that not out of what is visible the things which are seen might come to be.” By using the

---

to him nor accessible by way of observation and logical thinking; for which he has no organ and no ability; which he can in fact achieve only in faith” (Barth, *CD* III/1, 3).

<sup>14</sup> It seems that his rationale for doing this is the need to account for theistic belief in a Muslim, say, without attributing this to faith. But Hebrews (and this paper) are concerned with how a Christian knows that God created the world.

<sup>15</sup> Ernst Käsemann, as usual, says it quite strongly: “Just as creation occurred through the Word, and in it the will of God that shapes all things came to light ‘that we may not remain with the visible,’ so also creation is not recognized with the eye but with faith (cf. 11:3), as conversely *pistis* [faith] on principle has nothing to do with the world of appearance...there is no human leap or possibility of appropriation by the senses leading from one to the other. With *πραγμάτων ἔλεγχος οὐ βλεπομένων* [proof of what we do not see] in 11:1, an insurmountable barrier is erected between faith and the possibilities of this aeon.” Ernst Käsemann, *The Wandering People of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 40.

<sup>16</sup> On the exegesis of this verse, see Peter T. O'Brien, *Hebrews*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 402. O'Brien highlights the chiasm in the verse so that the first phrase, “the universe was formed at God's command,” and the second phrase are parallel. In other words, “so that what is seen [i.e., the universe] was not made [i.e., formed] out of what is visible [i.e. at God's command].”

<sup>17</sup> *Εἰς τὸ μὴ ἐκ φαινομένων τὸ βλεπόμενον γεγονέαι* could be taken as result, which does not substantially change the interpretation offered here, but *εἰς τὸ* plus the infinitive in Hebrews usually indicates purpose (2:17; 8:3; 9:14, 28; 12:10; 13:21) except in 7:25 where it is causal.

awkward wording of “not visible” as opposed to “invisible” (as in 11:27) and by fronting this awkward expression, the author is emphatically declaring God’s intent. He did not want the world made using something visible.

Why not? To hide the act of creating from human eyes.

#### THE HIDDENNESS OF GOD AND THE NECESSITY OF FAITH

God himself is invisible, hidden from our eyes (John 1:18; 6:46; 1 Tim. 1:17; 1 John 4:12). This means more than just that he we cannot visually see him. It means that he cannot be known through human wisdom (1 Cor. 1:21).<sup>18</sup>

In conjunction with this, there are things that God consciously chooses to hide from humanity. This is a pervasive theme throughout the Scriptures (e.g., Deut. 29:29; Dan. 2:22; Matt. 11:25; Rom. 16:25; 1 Cor. 2:7; 2 Cor. 3:13; Col. 1:26). These hidden things, like God himself, are inaccessible, especially to “the wise and the learned” (Matt. 11:25).

By creating the world using something invisible, i.e., his word, God purposed to keep the origins of life hidden. This can perhaps be visualized using the story of Jesus turning the water to wine in John 2:1-10. In that story Jesus turns water into wine “invisibly.”<sup>19</sup> As a result the master of the banquet has no idea that Jesus created the wine miraculously. And there would be no way for him to figure that out. When he tastes the wine, he is convinced that it has aged naturally. It would be impossible for him to know the actual age of the wine. Its origins are hidden from him by the way in which Jesus has chosen to create this wine. Likewise, when God created the world by his invisible command, this hid the origin of the world, its age, etc.

To continue the illustration, the fact that Jesus turned the water into wine is not hidden from the servants who performed the service because Jesus chooses to reveal it to them. Which leads to the important point: because of the hiddenness of God, the only way for humans to know God and that which God has hidden is for God to choose to reveal such things (e.g., Deut. 29:29).<sup>20</sup>

But revelation alone is not enough. Faith is required to process the revelation.<sup>21</sup> The prime negative example in Hebrews is the wilderness generation: “the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed” (4:2). This is why “without

<sup>18</sup> John 14:7 shows the connection between “seeing” God and “knowing” God. Cf. John 14:17.

<sup>19</sup> John seems to be highlighting just how invisible it was since the miracle is “buried within a participle” in verse 9. J. Ramsey Michaels, *John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 151.

<sup>20</sup> See further Marcus Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery in Ancient Judaism and Pauline Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> Consider Karl Barth’s statement, “Revelation occurs for faith, not for unbelief. God exposes Himself, so to speak, to the danger that man will know the work and sign but not Himself through the medium of the work and sign. A complete non-recognition of the Lord who has instituted and used the medium is possible” (Barth, *CD II/1*, 55).

faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb. 11:6); faith is the mechanism for processing revelations from God.

Plantinga’s model says something similar. First, God reveals himself (primarily through the Scriptures). Second, God provides the Holy Spirit who takes this revelation and produces faith, and through this faith the revelation of God becomes cognitive and affective knowledge. For Plantinga,

...faith may have the phenomenology that goes with suddenly seeing something to be true: “Right! Now I see that this is indeed true and what the Lord is teaching!” Or perhaps the conviction arises slowly, and only after long and hard study, thought, discussion, prayer. Or perhaps it is a matter of a belief’s having been there all along (from childhood perhaps), but now being transformed, renewed, intensified, made vivid and alive. This process can go on in a thousand ways; but in each case there is a presentation or proposal of central Christian teaching, and by way of response, the phenomenon of being convinced, coming to see, forming a conviction.<sup>22</sup>

These beliefs constituting faith are properly basic, meaning that they do not come through an investigation of rational arguments or a sifting of scientific evidence or processing arguments from other propositions.

To recap so far: *God chose to create the visible world using invisible means for the purpose of hiding the origins of life from human wisdom so that he could reveal it to us so that it would be known by faith and not by logic, philosophy, science, or any other way.* Alvin Plantinga’s model of warranted Christian belief provides a model that explains how faith can work in just such a way so that knowledge that comes by faith does not depend on perception, logic, science, etc. for its formation or justification.

Before I draw implications from this, two questions need to be addressed. (1) How does Romans 1 fit into this, and (2) if we know that God created “by faith,” is there any role left for science, reason, logic, etc. (or what role does natural theology play) in our understanding of God as creator?

## ROMANS 1 AND THE PARABLE OF CREATION

Romans 1:18-20 says, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.”

This much-discussed text seems to say that creation reveals God’s invisible qualities so that all humans can know that God created the world. Without attempting to unravel all of the mysteries of this text a couple of comments are necessary:

---

<sup>22</sup> Plantinga, *Knowledge*, 61.

- (1) Romans 1 is effectively saying that God uses nature to reveal something about himself as creator. This fits with Psalm 19, the other passage so often used with regard to natural theology. It also fits with Hebrews in the sense that it is saying that this revelation is not enough because without faith it is of no value. That is Paul's point in 1:16-17. It cannot be accidental that both Romans 1:18 and following and Hebrews 11 are launched using the same quote from Habakkuk 2:4 about the righteous living by faith (Rom. 1:17; Heb. 10:38). Romans 1 shows how this revelation from God does the same thing to humanity in general that happened specifically to Israel in Hebrews 3-4. Because the message from God was not combined with faith, it resulted in disobedience. That disobedience condemns people and prohibits them from entering God's eternal rest.
- (2) Romans 1 is not spelling out an apologetic process whereby people through the study of science gradually come to a position of understanding that God created the world.<sup>23</sup> In fact, Romans 1 seems to argue in the opposite direction: the more people attempt to reason their way to God apart from faith, the more they will be led away from the truth. When Jesus says that God has hidden these things from the wise but revealed them to little children (Matt. 11:25), the same truth is manifested. God has revealed to all humans something about himself through creation, but the more that humans attempt to be wise and gain understanding *apart from faith*, the more likely it is that they will be led away from what God is revealing in creation. This is comparable to Romans 11 where God speaks about those who "persist in unbelief" (v. 23) as those to whom God gave "a spirit of stupor; eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear" (v. 7)<sup>24</sup>
- (3) What God wants known by faith about creation is absolutely impossible to know via science, philosophy, etc.—namely, that God created all things through his Son.<sup>25</sup> Hebrews 11:3 cannot be divorced from Hebrews 1:1-2, which state that God has spoken by his Son "though whom also he made the universe." This is consistent with what Paul does in Acts 17 when he ties God as creator of all things to the message of Jesus now being

<sup>23</sup> See Morna Hooker, *From Adam to Christ* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 76.

<sup>24</sup> Likewise in 2 Thess. 2:11-12 God will send "a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth." Here God is actively blinding those who are in rebellion so that they cannot see.

<sup>25</sup> Plantinga points out that all one could possibly know from creation is that the universe is designed. You can't know that there is only one designer (many things in our world are designed by groups of people), that this person is morally good (because of the presence of evil), that he is spirit, etc. *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), 95-111.



proclaimed.<sup>26</sup> God's revelation in Jesus and God's revelation in creation are part of one message, and the whole message must be received by faith.

In this way, then, creation is like one of Jesus' parables. Not in the sense that it is a made-up story, but in the sense that Jesus spoke in parables to keep hidden the things that God wanted kept hidden even while proclaiming them clearly (Matt. 13:13-15). Jesus consciously chose a literary form that was designed to accomplish this. Is it strange that God would chose a way of creating the world out of nothing that was designed to accomplish the same purpose? Isn't this what Paul means when he says God in his wisdom made it impossible for the world to know him through the wisdom of this world (1 Cor. 1:21)?

Just like parables, creation is designed to showcase the spiritual state of listeners and to continue them on the path that they are on. "Whoever has will be given more. ... Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them" (Matt. 13:12).<sup>27</sup>

#### WHAT ROLE IS LEFT FOR "SIGHT" (OR WHAT ROLE DOES NATURAL THEOLOGY PLAY)?

If we accept that to believe that God created the world "by faith" is to believe based on revelation from the Holy Spirit and not based on rational arguments or evidential reasoning, does that mean that there is no role for scientific investigation or philosophical reasoning (which is often referred to as natural theology)? In Plantinga's model, there can still be a role for such things, namely, that faith can be affected by arguments, whether positively or negatively. Evidence that comes from the natural world apart from the inspiration of the Spirit can negatively or positively affect how much confidence (or warrant) Christians have for their beliefs.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Bock comments on Acts 17, "God will not be discovered through nature alone, even though nature does at least show us that God is not like humanity (vv. 28-29). One must come to grips with God's revelation, as Paul will emphasize in verses 30-31." Darrell Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 567.

<sup>27</sup> For example, consider the statement from theoretical physicist Lawrence Krauss: "By the same token, while much of the beauty of the animal kingdom may look on the surface like pure genius of design, there are manifest examples that should lead one to question this notion, beyond the simple fact that evolution provides a perfectly natural mechanism for living organisms *to have the appearance of design*." Krauss thinks that evolution falsely gives the appearance of design. In the same book Plantinga argues that God's causation in creation could give the appearance of being random to us. The fact that these two people who are earnestly investigating the origins of life using science and philosophy have come to such strongly held mutually exclusive beliefs is a result of how God chose to create the visible world—so that it is accessible only by faith. Lawrence M. Krauss, "Religion vs. Science?," 146 and Alvin Plantinga, "Science and Religion: Why Does the Debate Continue," 117 in *The Religion and Science Debate: Why Does It Continue?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>28</sup> See Alvin Plantinga, "The Prospects for Natural Theology," in *Philosophy of Religion*, ed. James Tomberlin (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1991). Also Graham Oppy,

Hebrews itself doesn't comment on doubts that might arise from the findings of Darwinian scientists, but it certainly does deal with the issue of Christians in danger of "throwing away their confidence" (Heb. 10:35). So clearly there are things that come from believers' perceptions of life, for example, that cause us to lose confidence in what we believe. But the response of the author of Hebrews is not so much to offer observations from science or philosophy or logic to bolster their faith. Instead the goal of Hebrews is to present revelation from God to reestablish or confirm their faith. After all, the book begins with a statement of God revealing himself in the past through the prophets and now through Jesus (1:1-2). The rest of Hebrews is an expounding and explanation of that revelation that has come through the Old Testament and through Jesus.

### IMPLICATIONS

So what are the implications if we accept that Hebrews 11:3 is stating that knowledge of God as creator comes by faith and not by science, philosophy, etc.?

First, people come to understand that God created the world as a result of the Holy Spirit's providing and processing this truth especially as revealed through Scripture. Coming to know that God created the world is not the result of sifting through various scientific accounts of the origins of life, weighing evidence, or meditating on various philosophical arguments for the existence of God. It is revealed to our hearts by the Spirit, and through faith he causes us to know that God created the world. The danger comes when people think their knowledge of God as creator is based on there being enough evidence. As a result, when science or philosophy calls into question that evidence, people feel it is only rational to give up their belief or to hold it more loosely. People who have been taught that we believe God created the world because creation shows the evidence of design find that belief shaken when science calls the evidence into question. To paraphrase Galatians 3, did we receive the Spirit by the findings of science or by believing what we heard? Are we so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are we now trying to finish by means of the flesh? Paul wants people to truly understand how they got the Spirit—by faith engendered by what they heard and not by means of the flesh—because if they do they will be more likely to continue by faith and not by the means of the flesh. Importantly, when we help people grasp how we came to understand that God created the world, we help them understand how the gospel works and how to keep believing.

Second, as a corollary, the solution to doubts (or defeaters) about God as creator is not *primarily* better scientific, philosophical, or apologetic arguments. I say *primarily* because there is a place for such arguments in helping Christians who are wrestling with doubts that have arisen due to reason. I personally found it very helpful to read Alvin Plantinga's philosophical arguments alongside those of Daniel Dennett when

---

"Natural Theology" and James Beilby, "Plantinga's Model of Warranted Christian Belief" in *Alvin Plantinga* were very helpful for understanding Plantinga's view of natural theology.

thinking about faith and science.<sup>29</sup> But if we know by faith that God created the world and faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God, central place must be given to God's revelation through Scripture. Seeing the power and love of God revealed in the Word even apart from those passages that specifically address creation strengthens our faith in God as creator.<sup>30</sup>

Third, if God has hidden the fact that he created the world, we should not expect that scientists or philosophers are going to figure out how the world was created. Part of the reason I believe that Jesus pointed out that God has hidden the truths of himself from the teachers of the Law was so that people would not look to the teachers of the Law. Christians today are led astray by teachers of the laws of nature because they don't realize that God has hidden truth from these teachers. This does not mean that nothing good can come from scientists and philosophers. On the contrary, Jesus agreed with many of the things the teachers of the Law taught. But they didn't understand the spirit of what was going on and couldn't see how it all fit together.

Fourth, as a corollary to the third point, simply calling oneself a Christian scientist or philosopher does not completely eliminate the problem of God's choosing to hide the origins of life. The faith that Hebrews 11:3 is talking about is not just saving faith. Each of us needs to continue to grow in our faith more and more (2 Thess. 1:3), which implies that some Christians are strong in their faith and some are weak (Rom. 15:1). Hebrews 11:3 is connected to those examples in verses 4-38 who were strong in their faith—Abraham, Moses, David, etc. Likewise it is possible for a Christian scientist to espouse intelligent design, for example, out of a position of weak faith because he feels it is necessary for God to give irrefutable evidence of his presence in creation. In the same way, it is possible for a Christian scientist to deny a historical Adam, for example, out of a position of weak faith because he can't see how God might have intervened in an evolutionary process to create a man and a woman from whom the whole human race is descended despite the genetic data currently available and the generally accepted hypotheses of how to read that data. Hebrews 11:3 reminds us that it is important to recognize *how* someone arrived at the position they hold. Simply being a Christian does not eliminate the problem of God's hiding creation.

Fifth, and much more broadly, what we see in how faith works with regard to creation helps make clear what it means to live by faith. Living by faith means that many things in our journeys of faith are hidden from us by God: Why did my child get sick? Why didn't all of the money come in that I needed? Why can I not escape this depression? Why won't God answer my prayer? God chooses to hide things from us when we attempt to use human wisdom and experience to make sense of our lives so that he can reveal them to us and therefore create faith.

<sup>29</sup> Plantinga and Dennett, *Science and Religion*.

<sup>30</sup> I might also imagine that time in nature (which is different than time in a lab studying nature) could contribute to strengthening a Christian's faith that God is creator since God's glory is revealed in nature.

Consider the example of Abraham's sacrificing Isaac. God hides from Abraham how the whole situation is going to resolve itself. Why? So Abraham can exercise faith. Where did he get that faith? In Genesis 15 when God revealed to him that through Isaac the blessing would come, this revelation created faith strong enough to help him endure the testing of Genesis 22. Additionally, in Genesis 22 when God reveals his plan to save Isaac once Abraham is at the top of the mountain, this revelation strengthens Abraham's faith that God will provide and that through Isaac he will be the father of many nations. If God had not hidden himself on Abraham's journey up the mountain, there would have been no need or opportunity for faith.

Hebrews 10:35-39 talks about not throwing away our confidence, needing to persevere, and not shrinking back. The point is that much will happen that makes it appear that we should throw away our confidence, quit, and shrink back. With regard to the origins of life: science does not seem to support that God created the world, there are not widely agreed upon philosophical arguments for the existence of God, and the intellectual world does not offer a nurturing environment for knowing that God created the world. But this is why Christians need to be exhorted not to throw away their confidence, to persevere, and to not shrink back.

While working on this paper I was reading the book *The Insanity of God: A True Story of Faith Resurrected* by Nik Ripken.<sup>31</sup> In it he tells his story of working as part of a team of Christians in Somaliland doing relief efforts. During six grueling years no one came to faith; there were millions of people that they couldn't help; they saw unspeakable atrocities; many of the people whose lives they saved through relief efforts probably died soon after; and Nik's sixteen-year-old son died while there. To live by faith means that there are not logical, philosophical, or scientific ways to make sense of what is going on. It can only be seen by faith. Believing God created the world despite the fact that it may not appear that way is the same as believing God is good in suffering and still in control. The way Ripken's faith is resurrected is not through someone presenting reasonable arguments for theodicy, but through God's revealing himself to him.

As we grow in our faith more and more (2 Thess. 1:3) through the persecutions, trials, and sufferings of this life, we will be better able to see issues surrounding the origins of life by faith because Hebrews 11 is emphasizing that faith in God as creator of the world is linked to faith in living life in his world.

Finally, recognizing that we know "by faith" that God created the world illuminates Hebrews most important command: "fix your eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith" (12:2). We normally refer to Jesus as the object of our faith—which he is—but in Hebrews he is also the example of faith. In other words, Jesus did not know everything by sight. He, too, had to put his trust in God the Father (Heb. 2:13; cf. 1 Pet. 2:23). In the face of God's hiddenness, whether in regard to the origins of life or life itself, we are to consider how Jesus exercised faith in his circumstances

<sup>31</sup> Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2013.

and to notice how such faith turned out for him so that we will not grow weary and lose heart.