2014 GES Conference Workshop

**CLEARLY SEEN BUT SUPPRESSED: THE RELEVANCE OF ROMANS 1:18-32 TO THE MODERN DAY INTELLIGENT DESIGN AND NATURALISM DEBATE**

**PHILIPPE R. STERLING**

1. **Introduction**

The popular king of horror stories, Stephen King, told NPR in a recent interview that he believes in God and intelligent design.[[1]](#footnote-1) “If you say, ‘Well, OK, I don’t believe in God. There’s no evidence of God,’ then you’re missing the stars in the sky and you’re missing the sunrises and sunsets and you’re missing the fact that the bees pollinate all these crops and keep us alive and the way that everything seems to work together.” The cosmos, he tells NPR, is “built in a way that to me suggests intelligent design.”

The Apostle Paul explains in Romans 1:18-23 that mankind has an awareness that the universe was designed but that awareness is suppressed. Design is such an observable feature of living things that biologist Richard Dawkins begins his book The Blind Watchmaker with the statement: "Biology is the study of complicated things that give the appearance of having been designed for a purpose." Working under the assumptions of scientific naturalism, he goes on to explain in the rest of the book how this "appearance of having been designed" is false. Stephen Hawking writes in his book *The Grand Design*: **“**Because there is a law such as gravity, the universe can and will create itself from nothing. Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist. It is not necessary to invoke God to light the blue touch paper and set the universe going.”

A modern intelligent design movement has arisen to counter the claim of scientific naturalism with great ensuing controversy.[[2]](#footnote-2) An analysis of Romans 1:18-32 can help to understand why there is a controversy. An application of the main truth of Romans 1:18-32 can contribute to the evaluation of the current theistic and naturalistic views on the origin of the universe and life.

1. **Message and Summary Analysis of Romans 1:18-32**
2. **Message of Romans 1:18-32**

God is revealing His wrath from heaven against all human beings who are without excuse since they suppress the obvious truth from the created order about God’s eternal power and divine nature and exchange God’s glory for idolatry. The revelation of God’s wrath consists of a three tiered abandonment to sexual impurity, immorality and idolatry.

1. **Summary Analysis of Romans 1:18-32**

**Verse 18: Summary Statement – Two Facts**

18For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Verse 18 stands as an interpretive summary of the theme of the passage. It sets forth two facts. First, the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of human beings. Second, human beings suppress the truth about God.

The wrath of God is His settled hatred of sin that is continually expressed in giving people over to their sinful folly. This will be more fully developed in verses 24-32. God gives people over so that they will experience the ruin of their sin and perhaps call out to him for deliverance.

Human beings suppress “the truth”. In context “the truth” is a summary of the content of natural revelation.[[4]](#footnote-4) “The truth” then is a term that refers to God as He reveals Himself through His works in creation and the created order.

“Suppress” describes an activity which is directed against the truth. It is an active opposition to the truth of God’s natural revelation through His works. Humanity seeks to hold back God’s truth in natural revelation. This tendency is on display in our day.

Human beings suppress the truth about God. This needs an explanation. Paul provides it in verses 19-20. He points out that humanity is, indeed, suppressing self-evident truth.

**Verses 19-20: Reality of Natural Revelation – Two Aspects of the Truth and a Conclusion**

19For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20For 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.

Verses 19-20 serve as an explanation of how human beings suppress the truth about God. They present two aspects of “the truth” and a conclusion. The first aspect of the truth is that what can be known about God is plain to human beings, for God has shown it to them. The second aspect of the truth is that since the creation of the world God’s eternal power and divine nature are clearly seen through what has been made. The conclusion is that human beings are without excuse.

Creation provides a partial revelation of God. Paul uses a number of present forms which mark the present reality of the revelation. God’s revelation is an ongoing revelation ever since the creation of the world. God created out of nothing and orderly arranged the heavens and the earth in their complex order and composition subject to natural laws to govern their operation.

Zane Hodges in his commentary on Romans observes that all of the information humanity might need about God does not fall under the category of self-evident truth.[[5]](#footnote-5) The phrase “what is knowable” may be taken to imply the reverse. There is something to be known about God that is available to everyone, though we might deduce that there is also what is unknown. What Paul has in mind is defined in v. 20 as His invisible attributes, specifically, His eternal power and deity. These attributes are seen clearly by means of the creation of the world. That is to say, the visible creation testifies to the awesome power, and hence the Deity, of the Creator. Eternal power and Deity are amply attested by nature, but other realities are not. The gospel Paul proclaims is a special divine revelation and is not deducible from the natural world.

The objective natural revelation is evident to all human beings and bears witness to God’s eternal power and divine nature. This renders humanity without excuse in suppressing this knowledge of God.

**Verses 21-23: Rejection of Natural Revelation – Humanity’s Response and the Results**

21For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22Claiming to be wise, they became fools, 23and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Verses 21-23 give the reason why human beings are without excuse in suppressing the knowledge of God from creation. Human beings are without excuse because although they know God they refuse to honor God.

God has universally revealed Himself through that which is created. Human beings have a natural knowledge of God through creation. But they refuse Him. They do not give Him the honor and thanksgiving that is due Him as God. The refusal starts a process. Human beings became futile in their thinking. Their senseless hearts were darkened. They became fools. The folly expresses itself in idolatry. They exchanged the glory of the immortal God with the image of a mortal man or animal.

Humanity has the truth about God’s eternal power and divine nature but it suppresses it. The natural revelation has not disappeared but is the present reason why human beings are without excuse. Hodges pithily captures the modern relevance:

Despite many centuries in which the intellectual elite of Western civilization have played down this simple form of argumentation, it remains as valid as ever. The view that the cosmos as we know it could have developed without the activity of a creating Agent, is in the final analysis, an absurdity. It defies all rationality and common sense. The greater the complexity of a system, the more emphatically that system testifies to a Designer.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Something like this darkening process has repeated itself in our present time. Although the scientific evidence for a Creator mounts steadily as the cosmos is studied ever more intensively, still the intellectual leaders of our day profess to find no adequate basis for a belief in divine creation….most of academia holds tenaciously to the view that natural processes explain everything, when in fact they explain nothing. What caused the “big bang” remains a mystery. The delicate balance of elements in our universe that permits the existence of life is thought to be a fortuitous accident.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The supreme Intelligence that is so obvious in our cosmos, and becomes more and more obvious as new discoveries are made, is excluded from human calculations. Thus, even today, *claiming to be wise*, the wise have become fools.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Naturalism cannot bridge the gap from nothing to something (creation), from something to life (complexity), from life to self-conscious human life (consciousness). The existence of the cosmos and its fine-tuning, the existence of life and information, and the existence of human consciousness are among the many natural indicators of God’s eternal power and divine nature.

**Verses 24-32: Revelation of God’s Wrath – Three Levels of Abandonment**

24Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, 25because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

26For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; 27and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

28And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. 29They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, 30slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, 31foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. 32Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

God reveals His wrath upon human beings who suppress the truth about His eternal power and divine nature by abandoning them over to the full expression of their ungodliness and unrighteousness. Paul presents three successive levels of abandonment.

1. **An Application of Romans 1:18-32 to the Naturalism/Intelligent Design Debate**
2. **Current Theistic and Naturalistic Views on the Origin of the Universe and Life**
3. Naturalism
4. Anti-religious Evolutionists

Anti-religious evolutionists affirm that only apparent and not real design exists in the physical and biological realms, whose creation and subsequent development are wholly attributed to natural processes.[[9]](#footnote-9) Proponents seek to show that even religious phenomena have naturalistic explanations. Examples of such proponents are Richard Dawkins, William Dennett, Steven Weinberg.

1. Non-religious Evolutionists

Non-religious evolutionists affirm that only apparent not real design exists in the physical and biological realms, whose creation and subsequent development are wholly attributed to natural processes. Proponents allow that religious beliefs may be compatible with belief in naturalistic explanations of origins. Examples of such proponents are Stephen Jay Gould, Michael Shermer, Michael Ruse.

1. “Weak” Theistic Evolutionists

“Weak” theistic evolutionists affirm the recognition but not empirical detectability of real design in the physical and biological realms by a transcendent Theistic Being who has causally acted both during and after its initial formation, having designed biological complexity via universal common ancestry during the past 4.5 billion years. Examples of proponents are Francis Collins and *BioLogos*.

1. Intelligent Design
2. “Strong” Theistic Evolutionists

“Strong” theistic evolutionists affirm the recognition and detectability of real design in the physical and biological realms by a transcendent Theistic Being who has causally acted both during and after its initial formation, having designed biological complexity via universal common ancestry during the past 4.5 billion years. An example of a proponent is Michael Behe.

1. Old Earth Creationists

Old earth creationists affirm the recognition and detectability of real design in the physical and biological realms by a transcendent Theistic Being who has causally acted both during and after its initial formation, having designed discontinuous biological complexity during the past 4.5 billion years. Examples of proponents are Hugh Ross and *Reasons to Believe*, and perhaps William Dembski.

1. Young Earth Creationists

Young earth creationists affirm the recognition and detectability of real design in the physical and biological realms by a transcendent Theistic Being who has causally acted both during and after its initial formation, having designed discontinuous biological complexity 6,000 to 10,000 years ago. Examples of proponents are *The Institute for Creation Research* and *Answers in Genesis*.

1. **Contribution of Romans 1:18-32 to an Evaluation of the Views**

Romans 1:18-32 supports the expectation that the unbelieving world will suppress the evidence of design in creation and adopt naturalism. Intelligent design proponents should not be surprised at either the hard antagonism of anti-religious evolutionists or the more respectful rejection of non-religious evolutionists.

Romans 1:18-32 can be used to support the varieties of views that fall under the broad intelligent design category. It appears to rule out a “weak” theistic evolutionary view. Believers who subscribe to that view may be simply capitulating to naturalism.

1. **Conclusion**

The recent Bill Nye the Science Guy debate with Ken Ham of *Answers in Genesis* shows that there is widespread interest in the matter of origins. Over three million people watched the live debate on streaming video with millions more the recorded debate over the following days. For a time, the event was the number 1 trending topic on Facebook and Twitter. The topic for the debate was “Is creation a viable model of origins in today’s modern scientific era?” Nye presented the argument against creation, basing many of his assertions on an advanced age of the Earth. Ham argued that there is a difference between observational and historical science: “There is a distinct difference in what you observe and what has taken place. Creationists and evolutionists disagree on how to interpret data regarding the origins of our universe, and we can’t prove either way observationally, because all we’ve got is the present. When it comes down to it, this is a battle over philosophical worldviews.”

The current *Cosmos* television series shows suppression and antagonism to the truth of natural revelation. The first episode began with the late Carl Sagan’s words from the original series: “The cosmos is all that is, or ever was, or ever will be.” This is not a scientific observation but instead a philosophical assertion of naturalism.

Human beings suppress the truth of God’s natural revelation. Still discussion of the topic of creation’s witness to a creator may lead to an opportunity to present the life message. It is the Holy Spirit working with the proclamation of the life message that can overcome the suppression of the truth and bring people to the point where they might believe the promise of Christ for eternal life.

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1. Conclusion
1. See <http://www.npr.org/2013/05/28/184827647/stephen-king-on-growing-up-believing-in-god-and-getting-scared> (accessed 3/10/2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Stephen C. Meyer presents a good summary of the controversy in the paper “A Scientific History – and Philosophical Defense – of the Theory of Intelligent Design” which can be found at <http://www.discovery.org/scripts/viewDB/filesDB-download.php?command=download&id=3241> (accessed 3/10/2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The text of Romans 1:18-32 is from the ESV. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Natural revelation is the revelation of God through creation. Passages like Psalm 19:1-4 and Romans 1:18-20 express the fact that creation declares and shows God’s power and divine nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Zane C. Hodges, *Romans: Deliverance from Wrath*, (Grace Evangelical Society: Corinth, TX: 2013), 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The descriptions of the various views are adapted from Marcus R. Ross, *“Who Believes What? Clearing Up Confusion over Intelligent Design and Young-Earth Creationism,”* Journal of Geoscience Education, 53 (3), May, 2005, 319-323. A PDF file is at <http://serc.carleton.edu/files/nagt/jge/abstracts/Ross_v53n3p319.pdf> (accessed 3/10/2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)