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Jesus's Scientific Knowledge

MANY FACTORS HELP to shape us: our genes, our biological and social environment, early childhood experience, and the decisions of our free will. And after the liberation that comes with being born of the spirit, the effect of our decisions is greater. Intelligent and wise decisions can integrate our increasing awareness of spiritual and heavenly realities with our knowledge of material and earthly things.

This chapter grounds us in down-to-earth knowledge. We begin with some ideas about Jesus's early cognitive development and continue by setting forth the qualities that make him a pre-modern scientist. Then we consider some examples of his excellent knowledge touching on various fields: psychology, sociology, political science, history, and the interpretation of texts.

Finally, we consider, in Jesus and ourselves, how science can be applied in daily life. We begin to see how scientific living and spiritual living can go together.

Jesus's Early Cognitive Development

As children (and like so many animals), we experience a natural curiosity about the world around us. During the first year of life, we learn to see and hear things. Then we start developing language and cognitive abilities. For the rest of our lives, in the brain and the mind, these abilities are intertwined with our emotional and social life. For normal early childhood development, it is important to interact with dependable, caring adults and with other children. Empathy grows, along with the ability to consider a situation from another person's perspective; the golden rule is on the horizon. We enjoy play, games, humor, and the beginnings of artistic creativity. Then, as I see it, once we start to exercise our moral and spiritual capacities, we begin to actualize all of our basic human potential; we are now growing as whole persons.¹¹

Thus, Jesus's knowledge of nature would have developed in the wider context of his life as a whole. I imagine him coming to know plants that were cultivated and in the wild; chickens, goats, sheep, and some wild animals; and desert and mountain wilderness.

As children, we explore and discover how things work. Even before we know the words "cause and effect," we are finding connections that make sense of the material world. We also learn about the social world, including our own reactions to it.

At first, our knowledge of things and people is mostly on the level of particular facts. This knowing comes from the experience of the inquisitive child, and it continues in adult life. We experience the satisfaction of inquiring and gaining intuitive insight,

personally verifying and establishing with care some fact that matters. If it is controversial, it likely matters to us and to others as well. As we grow, our knowledge becomes more extensive, better organized, and more scientific.

Jesus, the Scientist

As the human Jesus grew, his faith in the Creator would likely have led him to realize that natural regularities—and what we call laws of nature—have a lot to do with the Creator's control of the natural world. In other words, the Creator makes science possible, invites us to discover his ways in nature, and generally rewards humans for gaining scientific knowledge if it is used for good.

We need knowledge to function effectively, to love people intelligently, and to serve them helpfully. Scientific knowledge enables us to know something of how the Creator has designed our universe.

The human Jesus might have had a variety of ways to acquire scientific knowledge. Four miles from Nazareth was Sepphoris, a provincial capital of the Roman empire and an urban center of Hellenistic culture. It was bustling with building projects that could have offered employment to Joseph and perhaps to Jesus as well. Sepphoris itself was on the major east-west caravan route, traveled by people from civilizations in the ancient world where sciences were beginning to emerge.¹² Someone who was interested in the world and its peoples could have learned all kinds of things from travelers who stopped nearby.

China had developed herbal medicine and a host of technological advances; and the road for trade connecting China with southwest Asia had opened. The Babylonians had compiled precise observations in astronomy. The Egyptians had made

extraordinary achievements in architecture. The Greeks had begun mathematical physics and taken geometry and history to new heights. And the Romans had made strides in their technology and historiography.¹³

Assuming that Jesus acquired knowledge of carpentry from his father Joseph, he would have learned some geometry, properties of different kinds of wood, and all kinds of practical lore in using tools and maybe in dealing with various types of clients. He probably also sharpened his ability to think methodically and follow a sequence of steps to get a task done efficiently.

Whatever other knowledge Jesus acquired growing up, it is clear that he took great interest in people. His later teachings make it clear that he knew all kinds of people well. This helps make his lessons so insightful.

Since the times of Jesus, science has advanced in many ways. But modern science grew out of premodern science. And all science develops from capacities of mind that the Creator has given us. Jesus showed some traits of a scientist. He was

- A keen observer
- Patient, not jumping to hasty conclusions
- Sharp in his reasoning
- Insightful regarding causes and consequences
- Able to express his insights in general terms
- Interested in a wide range of truths

Every person develops these qualities to some extent; Jesus attained excellence. We don't notice the scientist in Jesus because he expressed knowledge in vivid language accessible to everyone.

Examples of Jesus's Scientific Insights

Consider a few examples. I imagine Jesus as a young boy watching his father Joseph create a pile of sawdust when he would saw off parts of a big log to get a beam for a house. One day, he got a speck of sawdust in his eye, and a boy next to him tried to take out the speck in a clumsy way. Later in life he turned this into: "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? . . . First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye" (Mt 7:3–5).

The core of knowledge here is a general truth of psychology: "It is much easier . . . to identify and label the mistakes of others than to recognize our own."¹⁴ See how Jesus used this truth. He did not talk like a teacher in a science class. Rather, he spoke with a vividness that would appeal to his hearers and help them remember. And he did so with a fresh touch of humor that softens the lesson and may intrigue us into thinking about what we are not seeing in ourselves that may be interfering with our attempt to do good to someone else.

Scientific realism and humor are both high priorities, and they are more powerful when artfully combined. When Jesus used animal metaphors to convey clear warnings, he expressed his insights with reassuring humor that could preempt the natural reaction of fear and anxiety.

A few examples. "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves." "Do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you." "I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves. So be wise as serpents and harmless

as doves.” Jesus’s way with humor and images of (non-human) animals helps us not to dehumanize our opponents or enemies, who are still our siblings in the family of God. The animal images also suggest behavioral traits similar to some types of human temperament (Mt 7:15 and 7:6; 10:16 NKJV).

Jesus’s humor also gives us a glimpse of our Creator Friend. If God has a sense of humor, dare we entertain the thought that the universe is ultimately friendly?

A sociological and political insight of Jesus touches on a central theme in this book: the importance of spiritual unity among believers. This teaching is a warning to families, cities, kingdoms, and other groups, including religious groups. “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand” (Mt 12:25). Here we have a general truth in sociology and political science with implications regarding the importance of spiritual unity in the kingdom of God. The warning to families stands in need of pondering today when the generation gap is often fraught with antagonism; at the very least, homes where parents are divided against each other tend not to provide the stability that children need.¹⁵

Jesus was also a master in another intellectual discipline, a science in the broad sense of the word. Hermeneutics is the discipline of interpreting the meaning of texts, for example, scriptures.

Jesus was called “rabbi” by people who appreciated his mastery of scripture. Jesus’s understanding of the Hebrew Bible enabled him to teach in the Jerusalem Temple at age twelve and know which passage would best speak to particular circumstances, for example in his wilderness decisions after baptism.

But Jesus did not relate to people as a member of the intellectual elite. On one occasion he explicitly drew on his hermeneutical insight to refute a critic. This was in conversation with

Sadducees, who specialized in the first five books of the Bible and denied that the dead could be resurrected. They asked him a trick question about a man who died after he had been married to seven wives one after another: whose husband would he be in heaven? Jesus replied:

“You are wrong because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection people neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels of God in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is God not of the dead but of the living.” And when the crowds heard it, they were astounded at his teaching (Mt 22:23–33).

In his study of this passage, Jesus had recognized the implication of the tense of the verb—“I *am* the God of Abraham . . .” The present tense indicates a present relationship between God and the resurrected Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Jesus’s capacity to interpret scripture was based on hermeneutical disciplines, including excellent knowledge of the original language (Hebrew) and a close attention to the implications of grammar. In addition, his hermeneutical insight was also based on knowing God, and in particular, here, knowing the power of God.

Science and Religion in Partnership

We have seen something of the opportunities that the human Jesus had to learn about the sciences of his day from travelers near

and far. From his father Joseph, he likely learned carpentry. Jesus acquired many strengths of a premodern scientist, and his insights embraced areas of knowledge that we could classify as psychology, sociology, political science, history, and hermeneutics.

We can also see how Jesus used his excellent knowledge. It was not only interesting for its own sake and for understanding more of the Creator's design; Jesus also used knowledge in his ministry to us. He would weave science together with vivid language that everyone could understand. And for dessert, he would add good humor, expressing relaxation and loving connection. This enabled some teachings that were challenging to be readily received.

Today the world needs to see spiritual values walking hand-in-hand with scientific responsibility. While some people look to science and technology to solve our major global problems, others look to religion. Jesus repeatedly brought forth a perspective that fully recognized both earthly and heavenly realities.

All our modern knowledge of causes and effects still leads back to the First Cause. The powerful, sovereign Creator has established the laws of nature, moral commandments, and the spiritual laws of love. To cooperate with these laws increases our practical effectiveness. Good knowledge, including good science, helps make our love intelligent.

Just a small step forward can be powerful. A student in one of my classes on science and religion took on an experiential project to quit smoking. He had tried before and failed. But this time he classified the temptations that arose as biological, psychological, or sociological. This simple use of science was enough, together with his motivation, to enable him to quit successfully.

We can always learn something more about health, psychology, pollution, and what we can do for our ecosystems. On divisive issues, we can reduce social antagonism and nurture

empathy by seeking out high quality journalism and other kinds of knowledge, including what we can learn from others, whether they agree or disagree with us.

The habit of intelligently applying knowledge of the material realm and social domain is essential for excellence in daily life. I call it scientific living. The ideal of acting in the light of the truths of science is something we can experience in small steps. Select a simple task and take time to awaken your curiosity. Then bring to mind relevant truths of science that you already know and learn a little more. Then activate your spirit of adventure and go forth into action. In doing so, you can discover significant benefits from taking even a small step of putting scientific knowledge into practice.

In this way, we can experience for ourselves how *easy* scientific living can be, how *meaningful* it is to cooperate with the truths of the Creator's design, how *enjoyable* it is, and *how beautifully it complements spirituality*.¹⁶ As we learn to understand the world, including ourselves, with greater care, and apply our growing knowledge responsibly, we contribute to progress in partnership with our Maker.

This inquiry is developed further in the next chapter. It focuses on righteousness and shows how scientific and spiritual living are united as we develop and exercise this virtue which meant so much to Jesus.

Questions and Invitations

- What personal growth project would help you become more like Jesus? List some of the facts about your growth need. What sciences are relevant to these facts? Bring to mind what you already know of science that is relevant to your project.

- Now learn a little more—from the most scientifically trustworthy sources that you have access to. What happens when you apply your knowledge as you begin to form new habits? Share your results with others, perhaps with vividness and humor.