

Climbing Out of a Swamp

The Evangelical Struggle To Understand the Creation Texts

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The lesson to be learned here is the principle of allowing the Bible to say what it wants to say and not impose our imperialistic agendas onto it; our exegesis ought to let the text speak and the chips fall where they may.

AN ESTEEMED EVANGELICAL GEOLOGIST and son of the late conservative Old Testament scholar E. J. Young has written: "The evangelical community is still mired in a swamp in its attempt to understand the proper relationship between biblical interpretation and the scientific endeavor;" and he added, there seems to be more effort being put into name calling than into finding higher and firmer ground to stand upon.¹

The problem Davis Young identifies is the proclivity of evangelicals to treat the creation texts of early Genesis as a source of usable scientific concepts and accurate historical information which can be employed in dialogue with modern science. This tendency is well known and has been dramatized for the public by the recent Arkansas court case,² the resur-

1. Davis A. Young, "Scripture in the Hands of a Geologist," *Westminster Theological Journal* 49 (1987), 1. This is a long two-part article which traces the centuries-old effort to harmonize the Bible and modern science and which, according to the author, has failed (pp. 1-34, 257-304).

2. See Langdon Gilkey's racy account of his experience at the creationist trial in December 1981, *Creationism on Trial: Evolution and God at Little Rock* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985). For another view, see Norman L. Geisler, *The Creator in the Courtroom* (Milford, MI: Mott Media, 1982).

gence of creationist fervor in its many forms,³ and by an acquaintance with popular fundamentalism, one of whose prominent traits in recent years is its stubbornly anti-evolutionary streak.⁴

So, to write about the evangelical interpretation of creation texts means that one has to probe an area of sensitivity and unsolved difficulty for evangelical hermeneutics. It will dramatize the fact that evangelicals have devoted much more time and energy to defending the inerrancy of the Bible than to interpreting it impressively.⁵ One is thus required to deal with a malady in interpretation rather than a serious interpretation of the doctrine of creation itself. Fortunately more and more evangelicals are asking themselves if they ought to be looking to the Bible for answers to scientific questions and embroiling themselves in these awkward debates. They are searching for ways to back out of a dead-end street.⁶

THE PRESENT SITUATION

The situation at present is roughly the following.⁷ On the one hand, there are various kinds of *concordists* who try in different ways to harmonize the results of exegesis and science. They understand early Genesis to be giving a more or less historical chronicle of what happened in the past and try to demonstrate a concordance or correspondence between Genesis and the actual events of creation. One of their difficulties is that there is little agreement among concordists on how to achieve this. One group practices narrow concordism. They take the days of Genesis 1 to be literal twenty-four hour days and appeal to the tradition of flood geology to explain the difficulties this creates. Why does the earth appear to be so old if it is not? Where did the enormous amounts of water which would be required in a universal flood go afterwards? Though this approach bears tremendous intellectual burdens and requires major leaps into speculation to deal with some of the problems, this is the approach presently

3. Ronald L. Numbers, "The Creationists" in *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter between Christianity and Science*, ed. David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 391–423.

4. George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism 1870–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 212–15.

5. There are hopeful signs this may be changing; see, for example, Moises Silva, *Has the Church Misread the Bible? The History of Interpretation in the Light of Current Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987) and Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1980).

6. This is one of the areas of change which Hunter notes in recent evangelical thinking; see James D. Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 27–28, 33, 120, 132–33.

7. Davis A. Young's articles are helpful for background, and *Christianity Today* recently published a major debate on these matters, "How It All Began," August 12, 1988, pp. 31–46.

enjoying considerable popularity.⁸

Another group practices broad concordism. More liberal in exegesis and more comfortable with the present scientific consensus, they construe the days of Genesis 1 as long periods of time or as intermittent days of creation amidst the lengthy process of billions of years. In this way they are able to accept much of the evolutionary picture, picking fault with it only in a general way, though they seem forced to stretch the text to achieve the concordance.⁹

On the other hand, there are evangelical nonconcordists, who do not read early Genesis to gain scientific information or to discover history as it really was. They read it more as a theological text, best understood in its own context, and therefore do not come into such severe conflict with modern knowledge. These scholars are of the opinion that the various efforts at concordance have failed rationally because they were misinformed literarily. It was a mistake ever to have supposed that scientific questions could be answered using biblical data.¹⁰ Davis A. Young can speak for the nonconcordists:

I suggest that we will be on the right track if we stop treating Genesis 1 and the flood story as scientific and historical reports. We can forever avoid falling into the perpetual conflicts between Genesis and geology if we follow those evangelical scholars who stress that Genesis is divinely inspired ancient near eastern literature written within a specific historical context that entailed well-defined thought patterns, literary forms, symbols, and images. It

8. Henry M. Morris, *The Genesis Record* (San Diego: Creation Life, 1976) and *Scientific Creationism* (San Diego: Creation Life, 1974); Donald W. Patten, *The Biblical Flood and the Ice Epoch* (Seattle: Pacific Meridian Publishing Co., 1966); Norman L. Geisler and J. Kerby Anderson, *Origin Science. A Proposal for the Creation-Evolution Controversy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987).

9. Nineteenth-century evangelicals practiced broad concordance before the battle lines hardened: David N. Livingstone, *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders: The Encounter Between Evangelical Theology and Evolutionary Thought* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987). Recent exponents would include Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (London: Paternoster Press, 1955); Pattle P. T. Pun, *Evolution: Nature and Scripture in Conflict?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982); John Wiester, *The Genesis Connection* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Publishers, 1983); Robert C. Newman and Herman J. Eckelmann, *Genesis One and the Origin of the Earth* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977). Davis A. Young himself was formerly of this persuasion, *Creation and the Flood* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977).

10. Nonconcordists would include N. H. Ridderbos, *Is There a Conflict Between Genesis 1 and Natural Science?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1957); Howard J. Van Till, *The Fourth Day. What the Bible and the Heavens Are Telling Us About the Creation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986); Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984); Meredith G. Kline, "Because It Had Not Rained," *Westminster Theological Journal* 20 (1958), 146-57; J. I. Packer, "The Challenge of Biblical Interpretation: Creation" in *The Proceedings of the Conference on Biblical Interpretation 1988* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1988), pp. 21-33.

makes sense that Genesis presents a theology of creation that is fully aware of and challenges the numerous polytheistic cosmogonic myths of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the other cultures surrounding Israel by exposing their idolatrous worship of the heavenly bodies, of the animals, and of the rivers by claiming that all of those things are creatures of the living God. The stars are not deities. God brought the stars into being. The rivers are not deities. God brought the waters into existence. The animals are not deities to be worshipped and feared, for God created the animals and controls them. Even the “chaos” is under the supreme hand of the living God. Thus Genesis 1 calmly asserts the bankruptcy of the pagan polytheism from which Israel was drawn and that constantly existed as a threat to Israel’s continuing faithfulness to the true God of heaven and earth.¹¹

Why is it, we may ask, that evangelicals are so powerfully drawn to the concordist pattern of trying to integrate modern science and Holy Scripture? There are at least two sets of presuppositions which encourage it—one is traditional and the other modern. First, evangelicals are theological traditionalists or conservatives, and therefore the mere fact that a Calvin or a Luther, for example, had no qualms about reading Genesis to be saying that God created the world in seven ordinary days impresses them, whether it should do so or not.¹² Then there is the fact that what Charles Darwin was proposing did administer a severe jolt to the pre-modern outlook and posed an apparent threat to traditional dogmatics, particularly at the point of the uniqueness of the human and the historicity of the fall into sin. Furthermore, when evangelicals look at what liberals have done when they accommodated to this new way of thinking in relegating biblical truth to the realm of the existential, threatening the historical reality of the entire biblical narrative, they become understandably nervous.¹³

Second, there is a modern set of presuppositions, linked to the realist epistemology most evangelicals favor, which has a profound influence on their exegesis. Having a realist epistemology means that they will tend to favor truth of a factual and scientific kind and not be quite so open to truth of a more symbolic or metaphorical type. One sees it in the evangelical doctrine of biblical inspiration, which is protective of cognitive truth in general and factual inerrancy in particular. It means hermeneutically that the “natural” way to read the Bible is to read it as literally and as factually as possible. In apologetics too evangelicals like to appeal to empirical reason:

11. “Scripture in the Hands of Geologists,” p. 303.

12. What they do not pause to notice is that Calvin also says in his commentary on Genesis that we should look elsewhere if we wish to know about astronomy and that Genesis 1 was using the language of ordinary description and not teaching us science.

13. Langdon Gilkey makes this plain, *Religion and the Scientific Future* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), Chap. 1.

They like to ask, If you can't trust the Bible in matters of fact, when can you trust it? In many ways then, evangelicals are in substantial agreement with the modern agenda which also prefers the factual and the scientific over the symbolic and figurative. What could be more modern than to search for scientific truth in texts three thousand years old? Such a modern presupposition will demand the right to read the Bible in modern terms whatever the authorial intention of the text might be. It just assumes that our values must have been the same as those entertained by the ancient Israelites.

The influence of these presuppositions and this mindset is overwhelmingly powerful, and the difficulty standing in the way of evangelicals transcending it is enormous. Changing one's presuppositions is a painful business, and it will not be easy for evangelicals to listen to the Bible's own agenda and to put their own on the shelf. Yet it can be done, and it is happening.¹⁴

GETTING OUT OF THE SWAMP

The way out of the swamp is to begin reading early Genesis appropriately in its own context, in the setting of the life of ancient Israel, and to stop forcing modern agendas upon it. Evangelicals who are supportive of the final authority of the Scriptures over all the other sources of human understanding ought to be open (at least in principle) to such a strategy. If they are sincere in wanting to submit their minds to Holy Scripture, then this is something they will have to learn to do in the case of the Genesis creation texts.

Does Scripture help us to decide about its own original intentions, or is it helpless in the face of contemporary reader interests? Are there indications in Genesis which support the suspicion that an attempt to find science in Genesis is likely to be a modernity-driven agenda? If there are such indications, it would be ironic, insofar as evangelicals believe it is exactly the opposite, namely, that people are attracted to a literary reading of early Genesis, not because the text requires it, but because they are over-awed by modern science. Let me explain the basis of my conviction that the text invites a literary reading which does not call for a close scientific concordance.

First, evangelicals need to attend to the purpose and function of the Bible and of the creation texts in that context. As Van Till puts it: "Taking the Scriptures seriously involves affirming its status as Word of God and covenantal canon."¹⁵ The Bible's purpose is to present a covenantal

14. Conrad Hyers makes this point gently but insistently, *The Meaning of Creation: Genesis and Modern Science* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984).

15. *The Fourth Day*, p. 78.

relationship between the Creator and his creatures. Genesis 1—11 in particular is a preamble to God's calling of Abram (12:1). It answers questions which have to do with God's decision to call him. Its purpose is not to inform us about history or scientific process as a modern scholar might investigate it but to explain how it came about that God issued this call to the patriarch. It also tells us how Israel came to exist and sets her election against the background of the creation and the fall into sin, thus helping us to understand the purposes of God in redemption. Genesis 1—11 sets the stage for what follows in the rest of the Bible. It places the drama of salvation in the universal context of the creation of the world, the nature of the human, and the fall of the whole race into sin. Its purpose first and foremost is to teach certain theological truths which lie behind God's striking a covenant with Abraham and his seed.¹⁶

One should add, in order to allay genuine fears, that this does not mean that one has the right to create an ironclad rule for Scripture as a whole that in no circumstances should readers ever "allow" the text to make historically and scientifically relevant claims. This would be to substitute one kind of imperialism for another and drive a false wedge between religious and factual truth. For even though the purpose of Genesis 1—11 is other than scientific, these texts are still talking about the real world and its history *in their own way*. After all, the creation of the world is the beginning of God's purposeful temporal activity in relation to history and the event of the world's coming into being. My point is more modest, that we should be guided in a general way by the macro-purpose of the Bible and the Book of Genesis and not unduly influenced by debates which have their meaning largely in the context of modern society.

This impression about the function of the Bible is reinforced by specific signals in the text itself which should alert us to it in other ways as well. The fact that God made the sun, moon, and stars on the fourth day, not on the first, ought to tell us that this is not a scientific statement (Gen. 1:14–19). This one detail in the narrative suggests that concordism is not going to work well and that the agenda of the writer must have been something other than one of describing actual physical processes.

Second, the original purpose of the writer of Genesis 1 is brought out rather forcefully in several ways. For one thing, there are numerous indications that he wanted to combat the errors contained in the creation myths of the ancient world such as the Babylonian Enuma Elish. When placed alongside this document, Genesis 1 reads like a strong polemic against the kind of pagan ideas we find there.¹⁷ In general, it thoroughly

16. Van Till leans on Meredith G. Kline for this perspective, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), pp. 53–57.

17. Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), Chap. 1.

demythologizes nature and sees it as the creation of the one true God. It presents the one God who created all things and who exists independently of nature. It says that there are no warring deities, and no monster goddess needing to be subdued and cut in half. It describes the separation of the primeval waters as a peaceful operation because the chaos is not a powerful force. Creation is by God's effortless word and requires no struggle at all. The text tells us that the heavenly bodies which the ancients worshipped and feared are just lights in the heavens (cf. Deut. 4:19) and that the great sea creatures are God's workmanship too and not mythical monsters. Most important of all, it teaches us that human beings are not a divine afterthought, created to do the dirty work of the gods. They were created to be lords of the world, because they are personal agents just like God is.¹⁸

The micro-purpose of Genesis 1 then is to counter false religious beliefs. The author wants to undermine the prevailing mythical cosmologies and call for a complete break with them. The chapter is not myth but antimyth. It is not history either in the modern sense, and it is mistaken to construe its interpretation in terms of the debate over Darwin. The text tells us all this, if we would only listen.

Third, the purpose of Genesis 1 is brought out rather plainly by evidences of literary artistry in its construction. In so many ways it shows itself to be a carefully composed and systematic essay. From one angle the text moves from what is farthest from God (v. 2) to what is nearest and dearest to him (v.26). It moves from the inanimate to the animate, from chaos to Sabbath rest.¹⁹ There is also an impressive pattern running through the passage: the announcement of God speaking, the command to let something be, the report that it was so, the evaluation that it was good, and the temporal framework of evening and morning. Most impressive of all, however, is the parallelism between the first (1–3) and second triad of days (4–6). The author is using the Hebrew week as a literary framework for displaying the theology of creation. First God creates the spaces, and then he populates them with inhabitants. God deals with the challenge posed by the world being “without form and void” by providing first the form and then the fulness.²⁰

18 The character of Genesis 1 as antimythical polemic was brought out by Adventist evangelical scholar Gerhard F. Hasel, “The Polemical Nature of the Genesis Cosmology,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 46 (1974), 81–102. Bruce K. Waltke echoes the same point in *Creation and Chaos: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Biblical Cosmogony* (Portland, OR: Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1974).

19 This majestic movement from chaos to order, which is preserved even when one opts for a literal interpretation of Genesis 1, opens the door to concordism again, but in a very general way and one which does not require Scripture twisting.

20 This literary framework is noticed by Ridderbos, *Is There a Conflict?* pp. 29–55, Blocher, *In the Beginning*, pp. 49–59, and Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), p. 46.

To spell it out, the first problem God confronts is one of darkness, and he overcomes it by creating the light on day one and by making the sun, moon, and stars on day four. The second problem is posed by the watery chaos, and God deals with it by creating a firmament to divide the waters on day two and by making birds for the sky and fish for the seas on day five. The third problem is the formless earth, and God takes care of that by separating the waters a second time and forming dry land with vegetation on day three and then making the animals and human beings to dwell upon it on day six. The author is obviously a literary architect who has created a framework which serves magnificently for presenting the totality of creation at the hand of God.²¹

The antimythical agenda coupled with the strong suggestion of literary artifice leads to the conclusion that the logic of Genesis 1 is primarily theological rather than historical or scientific. It is the evidence of the text rather than the desire to avoid modern criticism from science which ought to move evangelicals away from misreading the creation account as a scientifically informative tract and burdening themselves with enormous and unnecessary difficulties.

A SIMILAR PATTERN IN GENESIS 2

A similar pattern emerges when we examine the evangelical interpretation of Genesis 2. What the genre suggests comes into conflict with what these modern readers seek, and one is forced to choose between the intent of the text and reader presuppositions. The situation in this case is actually worse in that the passions are even more heated and agitated, because even more is thought to be at stake. Therefore, the dire warning is frequently issued that the moment one begins to move away from a nonliteral, nonhistorical reading of Genesis 2, the floodgates of criticism will open and threaten to overthrow the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. Listen to Francis A. Schaeffer: "If Paul is wrong in this factual statement about Eve's coming from Adam, there is no reason to have certainty in the authority of any New Testament factual statement, including the factual statement that Christ rose physically from the dead."²² In a similar vein, John Meyer speaks of the text providing reliable historical and scientific information and insists on maintaining its historical accuracy and inerrancy.²³

21. It is not at all unusual for biblical writers to arrange their materials artificially in order to make some point; see Ridderbos, *Is There a Conflict?* pp. 36–40; and Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), "A Theological Postscript," pp. 623–40.

22. *No Final Conflict* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), pp. 33–34.

23. "How It All Began," pp. 33–34.

Why would evangelicals respond so strongly to this issue? Part of the explanation relates to what has already been noted in connection with their interpretation of Genesis 1, that is, the expectation on the part of evangelical readers of finding historical fact and scientific information in the biblical text. It is an expectation which leads them, not surprisingly, to some remarkable speculations including: (1) The notion that Genesis 2 is just an explication of the sixth day of Genesis 1, which conveniently ignores the fact that verses 5–6 presuppose a totally different order.²⁴ (2) Efforts to date the appearance of Adam and Eve in history. James O. Buswell, Jr. puts it at 30,000 B.C. on the basis of the supposed rise of language, even though this creates another problem, namely, the neolithic cast of the Genesis 4 account, leading Millard Erickson to admit: "This is an area in which there are insufficient data to make any categorical statements. It will require additional study."²⁵ (3) The location of the Garden of Eden. In Iran, says Ramm; but Archer demurs, claiming that it cannot now be located because the geological conditions which the account assumes no longer obtain.²⁶

In addition to expectations of accurate information, there are other powerful assumptions at work as well. (1) There is deep resistance to the idea that Scripture might resort to myth, legend, or saga in order to communicate its truth. Although there is no a priori reason to exclude this possibility, there is the fear of liberal theology and what admitting such a thing here could lead to.²⁷ (2) There is fear that the uniqueness and the unity of the human will be jeopardized if we grant a theory of evolutionary origins. (3) There is also fear that the fall into sin as an historical event will be lost sight of and with it the evangelical soteriology dependent on it. Again, there is much by way of presuppositions to prevent a patient hearing of the text. The impression is given that the whole gospel depends on a literal reading of Genesis 2.

Here again the solution is to listen to the text and not let modern presuppositions overwhelm it. First, readers need to acknowledge what a very different narrative of creation this is in comparison to Genesis 1. The focus is narrower, on the creation of man, not the cosmos. It asks the human, not the cosmological, question: How did we come to be? It begins by describing a very inhospitable earth without any vegetation or rainfall

24. Compare Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), pp. 68–69.

25. *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), p. 487.

26. Ramm, *The Christian View*, p. 231–32; Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, pp. 69–70.

27. My suggestion that Scripture ought to be permitted to employ whatever forms of literary composition it chooses encountered a cool response, *The Scripture Principle* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), Chap. 5.

and then describes the creation of a man from the clay. The origin of woman is entirely unique. The whole ethos of the passage is pastoral. It describes the world of the shepherd, with its concerns about dry earth, abundant waters, fruited trees, and serpents.

Second, we have to be straightforward about the symbolic character of this narrative. This is a story with the following features: a talking snake, symbolic trees, Eve's origin through divine surgery, cherubim, a flaming sword, God walking in the garden, God modelling Adam from the clay and breathing into his nose, a perfect garden, the world rivers, the parade of animals. It is a story in which God is described very anthropomorphically as potter, as surgeon, and as gardener. Ramm suggests that one might view the account as a nonpostulational literary vehicle for conveying truth, the language of theological symbolism rather than literal prose. He mentions James Orr's view that this was "old tradition clothed in oriental allegorical dress."²⁸ Even J. I. Packer, a strong inerrantist, admits: "There is nothing inconsistent in recognizing that real events may be recorded in a highly symbolic manner."²⁹

The symbolic form of the account of course does not rule out the possibility that the fall into sin was an historical event. One of the purposes of Genesis 2 surely was to explain what went wrong in God's good creation. As Nahum Sarna says, "The story of the Garden of Eden is the answer of Genesis to this problem. It wishes to indicate very simply that man, through the free exercise of his will in rebellion against God, corrupts the good and puts evil in its place."³⁰ James Orr, Bernard Ramm, and James Packer are all concerned to defend the event character of the fall into sin, and properly so in my view; but this does not necessitate misconstruing the nature of the Genesis record. Our Christian belief in the historical fall of humanity into sin rests on a good deal more than Genesis 2 and does not require us to distort that narrative in order to protect this doctrine. In a real sense, the fall is the silent hypothesis of human history, and is one of the most empirically verifiable doctrines of all.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

1. Evangelicals as a group have to receive low marks for their performance in this area of biblical interpretation. It is certainly not their finest

²⁸ *The Christian View*, pp 223–24. More recently he speaks of Genesis 2 as "divinely inspired reconstruction" and theology in the form of narration, *Offense to Reason: The Theology of Sin* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), pp 68–75.

²⁹ "Fundamentalism" and the Word of God (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1958), p 99. He continues to hold this view; see *The Proceedings of the Conference on Biblical Interpretation* 1988, pp 30–33

³⁰ *Understanding Genesis*, p. 24.

hour. Many are still burdening their exegesis with presuppositions which need to be critically reexamined. The result is a set of interpretations badly flawed and a warfare with modern science and with one another which creates a bad impression.

2. In this, they are behaving contrary to their own principles of theological method and operating below their own ideal of letting Scripture speak definitively above the noise of human opinions. On this subject indeed they tend to act like certain religious liberals in allowing the modern demand for scientific information and accuracy to silence the agenda of God's Word.

3. This area of hermeneutics also reveals the "docetic" potential very near the surface of the evangelical doctrine of Scripture, an unconscious wish not to have God's Word enter into the creaturely realm.³¹ A strong emphasis on the divine inspiration of the text naturally tends to overshadow the obligation to read the Bible in its own human and historical setting in order to grasp its truth. It encourages readers to seek the pure divine message to themselves here and now and to assume they will grasp its meaning best by reading the text in the most "natural" way, which means, in a way congenial to the assumptions of the reader, maximizing the danger of text manipulation.³²

4. Inevitably this also leads to theological impoverishment. So much time and energy is consumed tilting at windmills that little gets said about the actual doctrine of creation. Look at this article, or pick up an evangelical book on creation, and you will seldom find a discussion of the issues which properly belong to the heart of the doctrine: our relationship with God the creator in contrast to systems of dualism and pantheism; the meaning and destiny of our own existence grounded in the purpose of God; the goodness of our created lives; creation as the basis of the belief in the intelligibility of our world. Evangelicals themselves are forced to turn to nonevangelical authors such as Barth, Torrance, and Gilkey.³³

5. One of the reasons many evangelicals are hesitant to grant that the creation texts ought to be read on their own terms and not anachronistically in the context of modern science is valid. They object to the way in which liberals tend systematically to transform biblical claims into existential

31. G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), pp. 17–38.

32. The obvious parallel is the evangelical hermeneutics of eschatological assertions which displays the same insensitivity to the all-important historical background of the symbols being employed by the biblical writers, Stephen Travis *I Believe in the Second Coming of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), Chap. 4.

33. Millard Erickson comments on some of these issues, but his discussion is limited as to space and overshadowed as to content by the strong presence of concordist concerns, *Christian Theology*, Chaps. 17 and 22.

symbols, not just when the text suggests it, but whenever it is convenient and practically across the board.³⁴ This means that they have difficulty accepting the idea that texts like Genesis 1—2 might be more theological than factual, despite the evidence in favor of it, due to their (warranted) anxiety on this score. Here is a case of a presupposition, born out of the painful experience occasioned by liberal theology and quite appropriate in the circumstances, being applied unwisely. Even though it may be valid to be wary of existential hermeneutics, that does not give anyone the right to twist Scripture into a convenient polemical instrument without exegetical permission. Besides, reading Genesis 1—2 in the way it itself commends does not negate the major factual issues. For when all is said and done, Genesis 1 still affirms a creation event and Genesis 2 still asserts a fall into sin at the beginning of human history. Evangelicals are understandably nervous about existential hermeneutics, but that is no reason to overreact and make the Bible a victim.

6. By placing the Bible and modern science in a strongly adversarial relationship, evangelicals have also created a problem surrounding the place of reason in their theological method. Normally reason plays a useful ministerial role in theology as faith seeks critical understanding in its assertions. The effect of this searching for scientific information in the biblical text is that it results in a much higher level of tension with current scientific endeavor than is necessary, which in turn gives the impression that reason plays no positive role in Christian interpretation. Of course Calvin took the days of Genesis 1 to be ordinary days, but after all he had no reasons to doubt that. The data had not accumulated which would have required him to deal with the issue of the age of the earth or the processes in its formation, but we are in the position of having to take seriously the information scientists have gathered from a careful study of God's world. Have astronomy and geology not told us some things which suggest it would be wiser not to regard Genesis 1—2 as a chronicle of creative acts but in some other way? Have not the broad concordists admitted as much when they stretch out the narrative to include billions of years unknown to premodern exegesis? One thing is certain—they did not find out about an ancient earth from reading Genesis. Scientists do not need any defense from me, but something has to be said on behalf of the freedom human beings enjoy to explore God's world without the clergy looking over their shoulders.³⁵

34. Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-language* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), p. 76–77.

35. Thomas Oden's treatment of the Wesleyan quadrilateral of sources for the theology including reason is helpful here, *The Living God: Systematic Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), I, 330–44.

7. The lesson to be learned here is the principle of allowing the Bible to say what it wants to say and not impose our imperialistic agendas onto it, squeezing it into our molds. I am not for a moment suggesting that religion and science occupy entirely different realms and never touch; or that evolutionary theory, when it puffs itself up and pretends to offer us a worldview which can take the place of biblical theism, is not something to be fought against; or that Christians ought not to raise questions about the hard evidence which is said to favor a purely naturalistic account of origins. My intention is to make the simple plea for the sovereignty of the biblical text over reader agendas. Our exegesis ought to let the text speak and the chips fall where they may.

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