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NON-LITERAL INTERPRETATIONS OF GENESIS CREATION

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During this writer's university days, many hours were spent in discussion with aspiring young scientists already fully indoctrinated with the theory of evolution. Since that time, the creation account of Genesis has been one of his particular fields of interest. At this present time, the literal interpretation of the Creation account is under what seems to be the most intensive attack since the Renaissance, both by science and by liberal theological scholarship. There seems to be hope that simply through the sheer weight of intellectual prestige, the literal interpretation of Genesis one and two may be swept aside once and for all. To that end, those all too few scholars who take an effective positive stance for the literal account are subjected to constant attack by scornful and derisive rhetoric.

The most disturbing aspect about the present controversy is not the intensity of the attacks of agnostic science and liberal theology, but rather the increasing tendency of those who call themselves evangelical and orthodox to join the ranks of the enemy. One evangelical lays the blame for the repudiation of the Scriptures by science at the feet of "a narrow evangelical Biblicism, and the Plymouth Brethren theology."¹ Again, he strikes out at the defenders of a literal Bible interpretation by saying in reference to them, "there is no legitimate place for small minds, petty souls, and studied ignorance."² This type of attack is to be expected from unbelief, but is it really warranted from a Christian brother? Certainly, we may have disagreements about interpretations of Scripture, but should we employ name calling and derision to help put across our viewpoint?

What should be the attitude of a believer in a literal Bible interpretation toward "brethren" who are diverging from such an interpretation in the areas mentioned in this paper? Obviously, there are differing interpretations of the Genesis creation account among those who believe in a literal interpretation. Although the writer holds to the interpretation of a literal six day creation, and with no great time interval between the first two verses, yet he is willing to respect those who hold solidly

to verbally inspired inerrant Word and nevertheless take another interpretation within the literal framework. The question arises over the attitude towards those within the orthodox camp who advocate a non-literal interpretation.

Many references are made in this paper to "science." In most places, these references are to that aspect of science which formulates theories about origins, about how the universe developed. There is no intention to denounce science in its over-all aspect. Science and the theories it has derived from scientific observation and methods have contributed more than we can say toward the betterment of mankind's health and welfare. One might quickly add that science has flourished most in societies built on faith in a literal, inspired Bible.

It has been well said that Genesis 1-11 is the seedplot for the whole Bible. The basis for every great Bible doctrine is found therein. Take away the literal interpretation of this great section of Scriptures and the great plan of salvation is lost. If there is no fall, there is no need for salvation through the precious blood of Christ. The source of the attacks on the literal interpretation of these chapters is not hard to find -- it all goes back to the master deceiver himself. Certainly our response to even good Bible loving scholars who would give support to the non-literal interpretation should be that of our Lord to Peter when he became Satan's tool, "Get thee behind me Satan."

TWO POPULAR THEORIES

The Three-Story Universe Theory

One of the products of higher criticism is the assertion that the early Biblical account set forth the common world view of the time that the universe is tri-partite. In an article printed in the Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation, an evangelical publication, Paul H. Seely sets forth this theory in a rather complete and emphatic manner:

The three-storied universe is a cosmology wherein the universe is conceived as consisting of three stories. The ceiling of Sheol, the bottom story, is the surface of the earth. The surface of the earth, in turn, is the floor of the top story, heaven.³

Msgr. Conway, a Roman Catholic scholar, puts it this way:

The author's . . . world was a large plate floating on a vast expanse of waters; it was covered by an inverted bowl, blue and beautiful, in which the sun,

moon, and stars were stuck; this bowl kept the waters above it from swamping the earth, but it had floodgates which could be opened to let the rain come down.

Then one writer compares this supposed Hebrew cosmology with that of the Babylonians. "The world of the Hebrews was a small affair of three stories . . . The Babylonians had a larger view of the world and a longer historical perspective."⁵

Let us consider this amazing assertion by Jordan that the world of the Hebrews was small and that the Babylonians had a larger cosmological view. One wonders what Bible and what Babylonian sources this conclusion is drawn from. The Lord took Abram out into the night and said to him, "Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them . . ." (Genesis 15:5). And the Psalmist was so enthralled with the greatness and vastness of God's universe that he exclaimed in awe, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork" (Psa. 13:1). His view of the universe was so great that it was a befitting tribute even for the omnipotent and omniscient God. Then one turns to a perusal of the Babylonian legends. The very anthropomorphic and whimsical portrayal of its gods effectively serves to limit the grandeur of any world picture it contains.

In claiming that the Scriptures portray a three story universe, much is made of the conception of the "firmament." The critics assert that the Biblical picture of the firmament is that of a solid inverted bowl. One writer comments about it thusly: "It goes back to the Vulgate firmamentum "something made solid" which is based in turn on the LXX rendering of Hebrew raqia "beaten out, stamped" (as of metal), suggesting a thin sheet stretched out to form the vault of the sky."⁶

Let us note the interpretation of Delitzsch who was no mean scholar of the Hebrew.

There followed upon a second fiat of the creator, the division of the chaotic mass of waters through the formation of the firmament which was placed as a wall of separation in the midst of the waters . . . ragi from raga to stretch, spread out, then beat or tread out, means expansum, the spreading out of the air, which surrounds the earth as an atmosphere. According to the optical appearance, it is described as a carpet spread out above the earth (Ps. civ. 2), a curtain (Isa. xl. 22), a transparent work of sapphire (Ex. xxiv. 10), or a molten looking-glass (Job xxxvii. 18); but there is nothing in their poetical similies to warrant the idea that the heavens were regarded as a solid mass.⁷

As Livingston puts it: "The emphasis in the Hebrew word raqia is not on the material itself but on the act of spreading out or the condition of being expanded. The word 'expanse' (A.S.V. margin) is more appropriate."⁸

Even Mr. Seely grudgingly admits that "this historical etymology of 'raqia' and 'raqa' does not absolutely prove that 'raqia' in Genesis 1 is solid . . ." Of course, he then adds, "but it does give initial presumption to the idea that 'raqia' is solid."⁹ Any fair rules of interpretation demand that a document be taken at its face value and that it not be charged with error unless it is proved that this is the case. There is no proof of guilt here. Unfortunately, too many approach the Bible with the assumption that it is guilty until proved innocent.

We note that the windows or floodgates of Genesis 7:11 are made out to be literal openings in the solid dome through which God sends forth the rain. There is absolutely no reason why this can not be taken as a figure of speech. The manner in which rain comes upon the earth is plainly and correctly set forth in Job 36:27 and 28. Dr. John Whitcomb points out that Genesis 7:11 does not refer to an ordinary rain but a once for-all supernatural act. "It is obvious that the opening of the 'windows of heaven' in order to allow 'the waters' which were above the firmament' to fall upon the earth, and the breaking up of 'all the fountains of the great deep' were supernatural acts of God."¹⁰

There surely is no need to demonstrate here that the universe actually does contain three "stories," since the location of heaven is spoken of as "up" and Hades as "down." No one has ever proven that this is not literally true, nor can they. If one is to leave the face of this earth bodily, he can only do so by going "up" or "down." We await the day that we will be caught "up" to meet our Lord in the air. This is not contradictory with an understanding of the expanse of the universe in all directions. And no one has delved beneath the crust of the earth far enough to eliminate it as a possible location of Hades. No one has ventured far enough in that direction to make a declaration similar to the one made by the Russian cosmonaut when he got one-hundred miles up into the atmosphere and said, "There is no God, for I didn't see Him."

The Dual Revelation Theory

This theory holds that God has provided a dual revelation of Himself in the Scriptures and in nature. There is no conflict between these two revelations as long as they are used only for enlightenment on subjects which are in their proper sphere. The Bible is acknowledged to be the authority on spiritual and moral matters. But, whenever the Bible speaks on matters of the natural world, one will not expect to

find accuracy in the Scriptures, for they will merely reflect the ancient world view. To get the truth concerning creation of the universe, the beginning of life, and other natural facts, one must turn to the appropriate science.

Here is a statement on the matter by Gerald Holton in the book Science Ponders Religion:

God has revealed himself in different ways to the scientist and to the theologian . . . The Scriptures are not rejected, but understood as guides to the moral life, set in the language and imagery of antiquity. It is perhaps a triumph both of liberal philosophy and of good common sense that in our time so many scientists have come to accept this position even without being aware that they have done so.¹¹

Some of the graver implications of this theory are made clear in this excerpt from the pen of an "evangelical" geologist, Dr. J. R. Van DeFliert:

Our ideas and conceptions concerning the Bible may indeed appear to be vulnerable to the results of scientific development. This state of affairs seems to be difficult to accept, particularly for many evangelical Christians. It cannot be denied, however, that there is "revelation" (be it of a different kind than that of the Bible) in the development of this created world, also in the results of human scientific and technical advances during the last centuries. It cannot be denied and should not be denied that, as a result of this development, our (scientific) world picture (Weltbild) has obtained huge dimensions, both in time and space and has become entirely different from that of the authors of the Bible. But, this is the world God has wanted us to live in, we and our children.¹²

It is not difficult to determine which "revelation" gains the supremacy in this Dual Revelation Theory. Science conquers all. Anything in the Bible that would seem to disagree with scientific theories is relegated to the limbo as being only a vestige of the world view of antiquity. Cowperthwaite has well put it when he says, "This would mean that God has revealed Himself to man in a book written in terms of discredited science and outmoded cultural patterns."¹³ Is this the sure foundation upon which we stand and proclaim the message, "Thus saith the Lord"?

A fine refutation of this theory is provided by Dr. John C. Whitcomb in a monograph entitled The Origin of the Solar System."¹⁴

THE PROBLEM AND ITS CAUSES

The Inexorable Demands of Present Day Science

The espousal of non-literal theories of creation can not all be laid at the doorstep of Science as her full responsibility. There have always been those theologians who are ready to negate the power of the Word in their own right. However, the pressures built up by the scientific theories of origins and evolution have been a major factor in the proliferation of these theories among Bible scholars of today.

James H. Jauncey wrote a book entitled Science Returns to God, and in it he makes this observation: "When I was in school, the general outlook of scientific people was frankly hostile to religion. . . . Now the situation is entirely different. The atheist or the hostile agnostic, even in scientific circles, is becoming a rare bird indeed."¹⁵ Yet when one reads the scientific journals of today, where is the mention of God and the recognition of His existence and influence in the affairs of science? It is almost non-existent. The one reason why there is less open hostility to religion on the part of Science is that for all practical purposes Science has carried the day. There is so little vital, literal, living Christian doctrine being proclaimed today that it is scarcely worth the effort of Science to oppose it. Scientific theories have prevailed.

Let there be no doubt. There has not been any rapprochement of Science to fundamental vital Christianity. Indeed, there are some scientists who are also Christians in its real sense. But their voice is seldom heard. The impression one gets today is that Science is waiting with great expectation for that great breakthrough -- the announcement that life has been synthesized in the test tube. Why this expectancy? Will there then not come the outcry that the problem of origins has been solved? "Now, we have proved there is no need for God even as originator or first cause. Now we can explain all the secrets of life and the universe -- and there is no God!"

Science has not waited for a breakthrough in synthesis of life to shove God out the door or to relegate Him to the back seat. Here is a typical statement, "The best that scientific thought can do with the scriptural account of the origin of life on this planet is to consider it an allegorical picture of an evolutionary process that originated in the darkness of geological time."¹⁶ Science demands that it be heard and

conformed to by religious circles. And it controls its own colleagues with a heavy hand. Marsh writes of his experiences while sharing in the scholastic life of three different universities.

I repeatedly observed the dissatisfaction in the minds of students over the existing "proof" for evolution. The thing which repeatedly won them over to acceptance of the theory was sheer weight of authority on the part of scientists through a not always highly refined method of browbeating

In more than one public institution of higher learning in this country the candidates for a higher degree in science must at least claim to hold to the evolution theory of origins¹⁷

One can not help joining him in his conclusion that "the lack of this truly scientific attitude among the scientific body in general is a deplorable situation"18

Science, judged by the voices that make themselves heard, is completely intolerant of any literal interpretation of the Scriptures or the God which is revealed therein. Wilder Smith records some of the statements of these more vociferous leaders.

Sir Julian Huxley, Dr. Harlow Shapley, Dr. George Gaylord Simpson, and their colleagues are unanimous in maintaining that the concept of God has been elbowed out of scientific reckoning. . . . Huxley (London) maintains for example that "Gods are peripheral phenomena produced by Evolution." (The Observer, July 17, 1960, p. 17). . . . Science (April 1, 1960) reported that in a lecture before the American Association for the Advancement of Science on "The World into Which Darwin Led Us," Simpson (Harvard) stated that the modern development in the biological sciences had made the religious superstitions (Christianity was obviously meant) so rampant in North America intellectually untenable. Everything we see had come about spontaneously, produced by the laws of the universe we know about. Shapley (Harvard) is equally dogmatic on these matters. "There is no need for explaining the origins of life in terms of miraculous or the supernatural. Life occurs automatically wherever the conditions are right. It will not only emerge but persist and evolve." (Science News Letter, July 3, 1965, p. 10). . . .¹⁹

Inexorably, the voice of Science demands that religion conform to its theories and make Science the infallible guide rather than the Bible. Here is how one man sums up the case:

The great body of theologians who have so long resisted the conclusions of the men of science have claimed . . . "The Bible is true." And they are right -- though in a sense nobler than they have dreamed . . . each of the great sacred books of the world is precious, and all, in the highest sense, are true. Not one of them, indeed, conforms to the measure of what mankind has now reached in historical and scientific truth. . . .²⁰

The Capitulation of Theologians and Christian Scientists

With the great strides of learning in this past century, Science has been able to completely reverse the situation in its relationship with the Christian religion. In the Middle Ages scientists had to conform to whatever the Bible scholars of the day felt that the Scriptures taught about Science. Today, it seems as though Christian theologians must conform to whatever the scientists of today feel that Science teaches about the Bible.

Many of the liberal element in the Christian camp, currying favor and standing from Science, take the vanguard in condemning other Christian scholars who still choose to take a literal view of creation. Not wanting to be considered "unlearned," "unscientific," "non-intellectual," they turn to the literal, Bible-believing scholar, heaping him with scorn for not keeping pace with Science. Professor Van DeFliert, a geologist and paleontologist, and a member of a Christian Reformed Church in the Netherlands, has this to say:

For the fundamentalist, therefore, the reliability of the Bible as the Word of God is related to scientific reliability. For him this is particularly true with respect to the first eleven chapters of Genesis . . . But these "scientific" battles for an infallible Word of God have been lost right from the start. In constant retreat, the theologians have had to surrender every position they had once taken in this struggle. That's what the history of warfare between science and theology should have made conclusively clear.²¹

Of course this attitude among liberals is nothing new. The alarming thing is that there has developed a recent trend among supposedly

evangelical Bible scholars to adopt non-literal interpretations of the first chapters of Genesis. With the growing feeling in evangelical circles that the inexorable demands of science must be accommodated, every attempt has been made to find a literal interpretation of the creation which would be rated "scientific" by the intellectual circles. But every attempt has failed. Neither the Gap Theory nor the Day Age Theory could afford the necessary concessions required to satisfy science. Every concession has been followed by a demand for two more. Having chosen the course of accommodation to science, they have found science to be a hard taskmaster. Having ventured into a courtship with the scientism of today, they found that it brought them into the outer edges of a whirlpool that has drawn them steadily toward the vortex of complete capitulation.

Here is one case in point. Some, such as William F. Albright, felt that by pushing the date for the creation of men back 150,000 to 200,000 years they would satisfy the scholar's demands. And they professed that this could be done by enlarging the "gaps" in the genealogies of Genesis.²² Now, they find that science has pushed back the date of man's existence more than a million years! Zwemer has quoted this significant statement by Leaky, the noted paleontologist, from his book, Adam's Ancestors:

Perhaps some readers of this book, when they realize that prehistory has now traced back man of our own type to the beginning of Pleistocene, and has shown that he was contemporary with various other more primitive types of man and not evolved from them, will begin to think that there is evidence which is contrary to the theory of evolution. It has been suggested to me that . . . this may be taken to indicate that this type of man has his origin in a special creative act, and is not the result of any normal evolutionary process. This is certainly not the interpretation which I would put upon the available evidence. I should say rather that we have learned that evolution has been very much slower than we have sometimes been led to believe. . . There can be no doubt now that man has been in existence upon the earth much longer than the million years assigned to the Pleistocene period.²³

Those Biblical scholars who went out on a limb to say that 100,000 years could be accommodated in a literal interpretation of Genesis now find the limb neatly sawed off behind them. Whitcomb points out that having gone this far, Buswell is now willing to accommodate the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11 to allow a date of 1,750,000 years for the

antiquity of man. We can only agree with Whitcomb's conclusion: "Such men may see no problem in allowing 100,000 years between each of the twenty patriarchs of Genesis 5 and 11, but for most Bible-believing Christians this is an utter absurdity."²⁴ Going back to the quotation from Leaky, notice the familiar ploy so often used to defend evolution -- just push events a few million years back in time. That will silence all objections. And time after time, well-intentioned Bible scholars have found how unstable and shifting the ground becomes when they embark on a course of accommodation to scientific theories.

Now the ultimate in accommodation is being reached by some who at least started out as orthodox men. They have reached the point of abandoning any attempt at a literal interpretation of Genesis creation "out of respect" for the findings of science. Dr. Carnell had these words to say:

When orthodoxy takes inventory of its knowledge, it admits that it does not know how God formed man from the dust of the ground. The Genesis account implies an act of immediate creation, but the same account implies that God made the world in six literal days; and since orthodoxy has given up the literal-day theory out of respect for geology, it would certainly forfeit no principle if it gave up the immediate creation theory out of respect for paleontology.²⁵

What a revealing statement this is about the path of accommodation to science. Out of respect for paleontology, Carnell is willing to give up what he admits is the literal interpretation of the creation of man -- an immediate creation from the dust of the ground. And he has already given up the literal-day theory out of respect for geology. The obvious question to ask of the Carnells of our day is which literal Bible teaching will they give up next? There is a great deal of respect for Science here. But how much respect for God's Word? Certainly this goes down in direct proportion to the elevation of Science at the expense of the literality of the Bible. We join with Williams in this pointed question to men such as Carnell: "One cannot help wondering what the final outcome of such a surrender may be . . . Will such men, or their children, find it necessary to surrender the doctrine of the virgin birth and the bodily resurrection of Christ out of respect for biology and physics?"²⁶

Dr. Robert D. Culver, in what is overall a very restrained and sympathetic evaluation of Bernard Ramm's book, The Christian View of Science and Scripture, nevertheless makes this point about his chosen path of accommodation:

He (Ramm) aims to believe in an inerrant book and also to accept the results of contemporary scientific inquiry. Where there is apparent disagreement he feels that either the results of science are faulty as yet, or else the interpretations of Scripture are wrong. Now, whether he realizes it or not, Ramm has made most of the adjustments from the side of reinterpreting Scripture²⁷

Another tragic statement showing how far the path of accommodation leads toward capitulation was made by a consulting editor of the Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation in considering what choice he would make in case of conflict between Bible exegesis and scientific conclusions: "In that situation, I personally would temporarily accept the scientific conclusion rather than the exegetical one so long as doing so does not sacrifice the few basic spiritual concepts taught by the whole Bible."²⁸ How illuminating this statement is! Once very far along the road of accommodation, all one has left are "a few basic spiritual concepts taught by the whole Bible."

Perhaps the saddest example of the downward path of accommodation is found in the record of the spiritual disintegration of the American Scientific Affiliation. This organization was founded in the 1940's with the express purpose of investigating and refuting the theory of evolution and other anti-biblical theories of science. Christian scientists were to enter in to studies in the various branches of science and to develop biblically sound alternatives to these false theories. Dr. Barnes stated the objective in this manner: "In actually combatting erroneous theories we will strive to construct a more perfect hypothesis which is consistent with the Scriptures . . . and which places a permissible and logical interpretation on experimental observation."²⁹

One writer gives the following summary of what happened to many of the young scientists of this group:

Over twenty years ago a group of zoology majors at a Christian college agreed in all seriousness that as a part of his life's work each would take a certain phase of evolution, explore it carefully, and derive therefrom inherent data to refute the evolutionary concept As each made an honest and objective consideration of the data, he was struck with the validity and undeniability of datum after datum. As he strove to incorporate each of these facts into his Biblico-scientific frame of reference. . . he began to question first the feasibility and then the desirability of an effort to refute the total evolutionary concept³⁰

This conclusion has not been unanimous among the Affiliation members however. In 1963, Philip B. Marquart wrote a letter to the editor in this vein,

Dr. John Howitt of Canada also wrote his timely disapproval of the present evolutionary trend among us. He and I have agreed on this issue since 1946. Although the trend is toward theistic evolution, there are a few members . . . who oppose it . . . We remember the days when A.S.A. first organized. We were all against evolution then. Satan has thus worked fast to bring us to such a compromise³¹

As one reads the succeeding issues of the Journal of the A.S.A., it is easy to discern the shift in tone and attitude of this organization. In its latest issues, articles which deny any literal interpretation of Genesis creation are in the preponderance, e.g., the aforementioned article by Paul Seely, "The Three Storied Universe." When some readers wrote to the Journal in protest, the revised editorial policy was given as a reply. We quote: "It is not the function of the Journal to propagate a crusade for any particular interpretation of many questions in which science and Christian faith are mutually involved."³²

How much more evidence is needed to show the dangers of accommodation to today's scientific thought. Accommodation is a one way street leading to capitulation. May evangelical scholars think long and hard before embarking on its path.

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