

LIFE, TIME AND MAN

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ABSTRACT

This presentation will focus on the various attempts to harmonize the Genesis account of origins with geological and anthropological theory, especially as they are reflected in "Gap Theory" and "Day-Age Theory" of Genesis one. Special attention will be given to the theory of "Theistic Evolution" which many recent Christian and non-Christian scholars have found fashionable.

INTRODUCTION

With scientifically loaded agendas, scholars have approached the data of Gen. 1-2 with something less than dispassionate objectivity. Clearly, the hermeneutic yields of the material are in serious tension with all modern theories of evolution.

A common solution to this dilemma has been to identify the cosmology of Gen. 1-2 as religious poetry, then construct the model of the earth's origin on the basis of empirical data and scientific speculation concerning it. Indeed, the curious and sometimes clandestine treatment of Gen. 1 in the light of its clear grammatical character is solid evidence that rather heavy speculative scientific baggage has been brought to the task of interpreting the text.

It is of importance to establish at the outset the character of the text with which we are working. If the subject matter of Genesis were changed while retaining its present syntactical and grammatical character, no one would question that it was historical prose. The abundant use of the Hebrew waw consecutive, direct object signs, and calendrical arrangement of events all point to prose and not poetry.¹ This simply means that the narratives of Gen. 1-11 should be treated hermeneutically with the same sober attention as is commonly given to chapters 12-50. Furthermore, as an organized and lofty presentation of origins, Genesis stands in stark contrast to other cosmologies of the ancient Near East.

Several attempts have been made to accommodate the material of Genesis to scientific speculation and this, in turn, has seriously compromised sound rules of interpretation.

GAP THEORIES

Popular among interpreters of a generation ago was the so-called "Gap Theory" which suggested that there was an indefinite period of time between the original perfect creation of Gen. 1:1 and a supposed state of destruction in 1:2. This theory, in one form or another, has been advocated for centuries.² In more modern times, the principal motive for developing this idea has been to make the text of Genesis less offensive to modern geological opinion.

Proponents of this theory insist that the verb hāyētā, which appears in verse two, must be translated "became" or "had become." The chaotic condition of the earth in verse two is then attributed to a divine judgment which occurred during a vast period of time--a period of time to be coordinated with the standard geological periods. The Hebrew term tohû ("waste") and bohû ("void") are viewed negatively as the result of sin and judgment. Also, strong emphasis is placed on absolute distinctions between the verbs bārā' ("create") and 'āsā ("made"). It is further argued that verse two cannot be describing the original creation because "darkness was upon the face of the deep," and in God there is no darkness (I John 1:5).³

Space will not permit a consideration of all the arguments proposed for defense of this theory, but special consideration will be given to the rigid distinction between the Hebrew verbs bārā' ("create") and 'āsā' ("make"). The term bārā' occurs 49 times in the Old Testament, 43 of which (exclusively in the Qal and Nipal stems) refer to God's creative activity.

The principal point of emphasis is the initiation of an object's being rather than its shaping or forming. The subject of this verb in the Qal and Nipal stems is God exclusively and such a limitation "indicates that the area of meaning delineated by the root falls outside the sphere of human ability."⁴ The verb, therefore, clearly points to the uniqueness of the creative act, but should not be rigidly distinguished from the other verbs of Gen. 1, especially in light of the fact that it is used interchangeably with 'āsā' (Gen. 1:21, 25; Ex. 20:11). Marine animals, for example, were "created" (bārā', v. 21) while land animals were "made" ('āsā', v. 25). On this distinction one surely would not argue that land animals were not created!

Regarding the verb hāyâ in verse two, it should be observed that the same syntax is employed elsewhere in Zech. 3:1-3 ("He showed me Joshua . . . now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments") and Jonah 3:3 ("Jonah arose and went to Ninevah . . . now Nivevah was an exceeding great city."). In both cases the verb hāyâ describes a condition already in existence. This is a circumstantial clause relative to the earth's condition at that point in God's creative activity.

Another questionable aspect of the Gap Theory is the suggestion that there was a pre-Adamic population on the earth which was destroyed by a special judgment. Fossil remains from millions of years ago are supposed to be identified with this pre-Adamic history.

The serious difficulty with this model of Gen. 1 is that the Bible is silent about any pre-Adamic populations on the earth. In fact, it is clear that sin entered the world due to Adam's rebellion, not because of the activities of a supposed pre-Adamic race (cf. Rom. 5:12). Also, it is doubtful that geological data really can be made to suit the nature of this interpretation in spite of some noble attempts.

Furthermore, the Gap Theory must redefine the "very good" assessments of Gen. 1:31. Adam, in fact, was walking on an earth that contained the fossilized remains of life which had suffered agony, death, and destruction long before his appearance. It should be noted that if there was a total destruction of this pre-Adamic order, then the fossil remains bear no genetic relation to the Adamic world of today and, therefore, the model does nothing to coordinate Genesis with historical geology.

Also, if Gen. 1 does not describe the original world, then the Christian is without any information on the nature and character of such a world. He possesses only the summary statement of Gen. 1:1. One wonders why God would not choose to reveal the perfection of his creative work, and instead, put all the focus of Genesis on matters of judgment and reconstruction.

Finally, the Gap Theory accounts for the fossilized material in the earth on the basis of a supposed watery judgment reflected in Gen. 1:2, thus making the universal flood of Noah's day something of no geological consequence.

A more recently modified form of the Gap Theory argues that Gen. 1:1 is a general introductory statement to the creation narrative and 1:2 contains circumstantial clauses relative to v. 3. Essentially then, v. 3 describes only God's work of renovating a judged universe. It is maintained that the ideas of "waste and void" (v. 2) could never be appropriate descriptions of God's original creative work because they describe negative, sinful, and chaotic conditions. Such conditions could only be the result of judgment.

One feels rather uneasy with the above proposal on several grounds. First, the model presented is frequently done so out of special reference to the Babylonian Enuma Elish which contains similar cosmological characteristics. Second, the physical "darkness" of Gen. 1:2 which God made (Psa. 104:20) and named (Gen. 1:5) is given qualities of ethical evil. Third, no clear origin is then provided for matter, leaving one with the possibility of dualistic perceptions of matter and spirit.⁵ Finally, the terms "waste and void" describe, not chaos, but only the uninhabitable nature of the earth at that stage of God's work (cf. similar uses of tohû in Deut. 32:10; Job 6:18; 12:24; Psa. 107:40). The uses of tohû and bohû in Isa. 34:11 and Jer. 4:23 only describe the empty and uninhabitable condition of the land after judgment.

DAY/AGE

While there are numerous theories⁶ as to the nature and sequence of the "days" of Gen. 1, the most popular one suggests that these days were actually long periods of time--perhaps

even millions of years. The purpose of such an approach is to allow the cosmology of Gen. 1 to fit into the widely accepted geological epoch during which all life is supposed to have evolved.

Disturbing is the fact that a lot of modern exegesis on the early chapters of Genesis is more concerned with what the text will allow, than what it was intended to say. Commentators have involved the biblical text in a semantic ballet that requires verbal contortions which are not only contextually painful, but cosmologically destructive.

The Day-Age theory of Gen. 1 argues that the Hebrew word for "day" (yôm) is used metaphorically elsewhere in the Old Testament and can, therefore, include periods of time that are more than a literal day. While there are instances of yôm referring to a period longer than a normal day (as in "the day of the Lord") these are clearly identified by the context and in no case are numerical adjectives involved with the expression.

In the Old Testament the word yôm is employed with a numerical adjective 200 times and in all cases the meaning is clearly that of a normal, solar day of 24 hours (as in Num. 7:12-78). The same can be said of the plural form of that noun (yāmim) which appears more than 700 times (e.g. Ex. 20:11 - "in six days").

While it has been argued that the expression "evening and morning" is merely a figure of speech⁷ meaning "beginning and ending" in Gen. 1, the consistent employment of that expression elsewhere argues quite the opposite (cf. Dan. 8:26). Some have cited Psa. 90:6 as an example of the figurative employment of "evening" and "morning" but it should be noted that the Genesis formula is not utilized here and, as a matter of fact, the order of words is reversed.

The most popular argument in favor of the Day-Age theory is the concept of the Sabbath day. It is maintained that since the expression "evening and morning" is absent from the description, it must be a "day" of long duration. But this is too much weight to place on negative evidence. An argument from silence here ignores intended literary diversity. Note, for example, that creative work of days 1, 3, 4, 5, 6 are described as "good" but nothing is said of day 2. Does this mean that God's work on the second day was not good? Surely not in the light of 1:31. It is maintained that the seventh day has not yet ended, but God is still resting from his work of creation (cf. Heb. 4:3-11). But this confuses the issue. The "rest" of Hebrews 4 has primary reference to the spiritual rest of salvation (cf. Matt. 11:28-30) whereby the believer shares in the eternal blessing which God has provided. Crucial to our understanding of that original Sabbath day is the fact that it was not established for God's benefit (cf. Isa. 40:28; John 5:17) but for man's (Mark 2:27).

E. J. Young has noted that "the seventh day is to be interpreted as similar in nature to the preceding six days. There is not Scriptural warrant whatever (certainly not in Heb. 4:3-5) for the idea that the seventh day is eternal."⁸ The ancient Hebrews understood quite well how long that original Sabbath was, for their religious Sabbath was based on it (Ex. 20:9-11). As a matter of fact, if the Hebrews regarded the Sabbath day in any way other than a 24-hour period, they would have starved to death (Ex. 35:3)!

The argument that "day" in Gen. 1 can be thousands of years long since "with the Lord one day is as a thousand years" (II Peter 3:8) is not impressive. This verse clearly does not suggest that God's days last a thousand years each, but only in the light of God's infinite and timeless character, a day with Him is as a thousand years. Furthermore, if "one day" in this verse is construed to be a long period of time as has been done in Gen. 1, the expression becomes absurd. It would then read, "With the Lord a long period of time is as a thousand years."

The most natural reading and the traditional Judeo-Christian understanding of Gen. 1, therefore, is that the days of creation were normal days of 24 hours each. This is, by the way, the conclusion of most modern Hebraists. This is strongly suggested by the seven day week, the expressions "morning and evening," the use of numerical adjectives, the clear declaration of Ex. 20:11 and the use of the word "years" in linkage with the word "days" (Gen. 1:14). The latter is very significant for it points to the solar orientation of the expression rather than cultural or figurative factors.

The suddenness and perfection of God's creative acts should not come as a surprise in the light of His incredible power. The same skepticism that has surrounded the creation narrative in Genesis was characteristic of Jesus' critics as they witnessed instantaneous miracles which clearly superseded the known laws of nature.

THEISTIC EVOLUTION

Scientists who are theists and theologically knowledgeable have found themselves in the center of swirling evolutionary controversy that is, on one hand, unsettling and, on the other professionally embarrassing.

In an attempt to maintain a theistic commitment and at the same time a creditable standing in the world of modern scholarship, many have suggested that God's creative acts were actually no more than a providential supervision of evolutionary processes. But it should be noted that the Bible clearly distinguishes God's creative work from His providential (cf. Col. 1:16-17; Heb. 1:2-3). In essence, theistic evolutionists have allowed the Bible to declare the existence of a living, active God, but the terms of his activities in relation to the origin of the world are sought in the speculations of science.

Of course, the issues as to whether God could have produced the present natural order through the slow processes of change is really beside the point if Scripture is to be taken seriously. The fact is that God is the only one qualified to make authoritative statements on the origins of the earth and man because He was the only one there. The real issue in the debate is the locus of final authority. If the Bible declares that God created all living systems by fiat declaration and in sudden fashion, then the issue is solved. If, however, Scripture is not viewed as a revelatory document with full, Divine authority (II Tim. 3:15), then the issue becomes immediately clouded with man establishing himself as the arbiter of truth on this issue.

The problem with the proposals of theistic evolution is that even if God did only establish natural laws and let them operate, it takes much more than natural law to account for the complexity of modern biological forms.

Gen. 2:7 has long been a foundation stone for those attempting to blend creation narratives with evolutionary biology. It is asserted that "dust" in the passage is really a reference to animal life and it was into this higher animal that God breathed a "soul" thus, giving it the characteristics of self-conscious man. This is the view of Rabbi Kushner when he assumes that the expression "let us make man" in Gen. 1:26 is God speaking to animals. His argument is that the animal kingdom contributed to man's body, but it was God who gave him his soul.⁹

This interpretation must be rejected on several grounds. First, dust cannot be a metaphorical reference to animal life. Human beings return to this at death (Gen. 3:19, cf. Eccl. 3:20), thorns and thistles grow in it (Gen. 3:17-18), and it was to be part of the serpent's diet (Gen. 3:14). "Dust" in Gen. 2:7 must refer to inorganic material into which God breathed biological life (Heb. nepeš hāyā cf. Gen. 1:20, 21, 24, 30, etc.).

Second, Scripture is abundantly clear that God directly created the bodies of Adam and Eve wholly apart from the use of existing animals. Matt. 19:4 (cf. Gen. 1:27) clearly asserts that God not only created Adam and Eve with spiritual qualities ("image and likeness"), but also their bodies ("male and female"). Furthermore, the Apostle Paul recognized a distinction between the flesh of animals and that of man (I Cor. 15:39).

Finally, the Christian who rejects the supernatural creative acts of Genesis under the pressure of modern scientific opinion will eventually be forced to reject the miracles of Christ on these same grounds. The theistic evolutionist is also naive about the scientific value of his system. Actually, theistic evolution is no more acceptable to the modern scientific community than is supernatural creationism.

The Genesis doctrine of creation is far from being a biblical footnote or theological option. It is a teaching that is normative and persistent in both testaments. The sovereign rights of God in human history are predicated upon it, and the meaning of life and human destiny are established by it. The most sensible explanation for the origin of our world and the life in it is still, "In the beginning God . . .".

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