

The Hermeneutical Problem of Genesis 1-11

Noel Weeks

[p.12]

This article, which first appeared in *Theolog Review* (the journal of the Australian. TSF) vol. 8 (1972). Dr Weeks is a lecturer in Ancient History at the University of Sydney, and holds degrees in both zoology and theology; his PhD(Brandeis) dealt with some of the Nuzi texts.

Like any discipline, hermeneutics can suffer from being used to solve problems which lie outside its

[p.13]

sphere. Much of the modern discussion of hermeneutics is inconclusive because it involves an interchange between men who differ not at the level of hermeneutics but at the more fundamental level of religious presuppositions. Hence to put this paper in its proper context it must be stated that this investigation begins by assuming a certain approach to religion, namely that of evangelical Christianity and its view of Scripture.¹

1. INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE FROM OUTSIDE

In considering the hermeneutical problem of the early chapters of Genesis it is important that our own historical situation be clearly in view. We are not the first Christians to be troubled by the teaching of Genesis. Simply because the Bible has a different view of origins to those put forth in human philosophy there is a period of conflict whenever the church comes under the influence of a human philosophical system. Thus any defender of neo-Platonism in Augustine's day or of Aristotelianism in the late Middle Ages found himself in trouble with Genesis. It is a gross oversimplification to act as though we alone face a problem here. Nevertheless the problem for most Christians today is generated by a specific challenge, namely that of biological evolution and related theories. I believe that there are deeper problems than merely the problem of Genesis. If we take the theory of evolution as established and modify our interpretation of Genesis accordingly, then we introduce a problem for the doctrine of Scripture. It is nonsense to speak of the unique and total authority of Scripture at the same time as we change our interpretation of Scripture to accord with theories drawn from outside Scripture. Hence evangelicals have tended to seek for principles within Scripture itself which will allow them to interpret Genesis in a way that is compatible with evolution. If Scripture itself forces us to such an interpretation then we are not subjecting Scripture to evolutionary theory. It is with these attempts to find such principles within Scripture that this paper is mainly concerned.

Religion and science

However, there is need to establish first that the basic problem can really be reduced to hermeneutics. Particularly this must be demonstrated when there has been a tendency² to

¹ For the classic statement of the viewpoint that underlies this paper see B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia; Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1964).

² E.g. M. A. Jeeves 'Towards the Recovery of Harmony Between Science and Christian Faith', *Theolog Review*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 15-23; D. M. McKay (ed.), *Christianity in a Mechanistic Universe* (IVP, 1965).

solve the problem by regarding the biblical and the evolutionary descriptions as complementary rather than conflicting. This may be expressed in many different ways but the basic idea is a distinction between religious, theological and/or naive explanations as distinct from scientific, technical ones. It is argued that there is no conflict because the two approaches are in separate spheres or on separate levels.

It must be emphasized that this in itself does not solve the basic problem. It merely shifts the point to be proven. If we interpret Genesis in terms of this religious/scientific distinction we may be just as guilty of imposing an alien authority upon the Scriptures. We must first establish that such a distinction is warranted by Scripture. The distinction itself looks suspiciously like Kant's noumena/phenomena distinction. It makes little difference in principle if the foreign authority is that of Kant rather than Darwin.

In saying that the distinction must be demanded by Scripture itself before it can validly be employed one misconception must be avoided. If someone approaches the Scripture already accustomed to seeing things in terms of the Kantian categories, then the basic question has already been decided. Is Scripture a book of religious truths or a textbook of geology? We naturally tend to say it is the former. Yet this question may pose a false dilemma. There is always the possibility that it is a book of religious truths which lays down basic principles which are relevant, even mandatory, for geology. If the question is posed so as to exclude this last alternative, and Kantian philosophy so poses the question, then the basic problem has been solved not by appeal to the explicit teachings of Scripture but by a philosophical presupposition drawn from outside the Scriptures.

General revelation

A second way in which an attempt is made to solve the problem, without having to resort to the difficult task of establishing internal guide lines for the interpretation of Genesis, is by appeal to general revelation. It is claimed that since the creation is itself revelatory of God we do not impose an outside authority when we interpret Scripture in terms of science. However, once again, the basic problem is not solved but merely camouflaged. Is our concept and use of general revelation a valid one or is 'general revelation' merely a label which allows us to ignore or destroy biblical teaching? The question can only be decided by establishing a correct view of general revelation on the basis of Scripture. One may say categorically that a biblical view, of general revelation gives no support to the common use of

[p.14]

science to determine our interpretation of Genesis.

First there is no indication in the Bible that general revelation tells us about the means God used in creating the earth and life upon it. The passages which theologians appeal to in establishing a doctrine of general revelation, such as Psalm 19; Romans 1, *etc.*, tell us that creation reveals the nature of God. We may argue that the creation reveals the glory and power of its creator. We have no warrant for saying that it 'reveals' scientific theories.

Secondly Romans 1 is adamant that sinful man suppresses and distorts the revelation of the creation. Any view of the creation that commands a consensus amongst unbelievers must be suspect. The appeal to certain scientific theories as though they are to be treated as revelation is completely invalidated by the biblical teaching on general revelation.

Finally, even if one were to grant that the creation does clearly reveal the manner in which God created the heavens and the earth, we would have to maintain the distinction between what the creation reveals and what people say it reveals. This is equivalent to the distinction between infallible Scripture and fallible later theologies. Thus we would have to decide whether evolution *etc.* was actually what was revealed by creation. Discussion of this question lies beyond the realm of this paper but a few remarks may be made.

In order to conclude that a scientific theory is a correct interpretation of general revelation one must be certain that the method by which it was established was not in any way contrary to biblical teaching. We certainly cannot say this for a science which systematically excludes any supernatural factors. There is no logical alternative to evolution once the intervention of God has been excluded.³ Furthermore even amongst those who metaphysically accept evolution there is no certainty that it has been proven.⁴

'The thought forms of the day'

Another of the attempts to solve the problem is that which claims that God expressed himself in the thought-forms of the day.⁵ It would therefore be wrong to attempt to make these categories authoritative for our scientifically sophisticated age. The same reservation is valid here as previously. This assertion about the way in which God revealed the history of creation must itself be justified by Scripture.

Parenthetically it should be noted that this argument is formally identical with that used by Bultmann in his appeal for the demythologization of the resurrection narratives. He similarly argues that the resurrection narratives are expressed in terms of concepts held in that day which cannot be taken literally today. Here evangelicals typically maintain a great inconsistency, being ready to accept a form-critical method when it applies to the OT but not to the NT.⁶

To return to the main point, the argument being considered has a number of serious weaknesses. In order to apply it consistently one must first make some sort of a distinction between the cosmology implied in the terms used and the theological truth conveyed by the use of those terms. That is to say, unless one wants to remove the whole of Genesis 1-11 from the Bible, one argues that theological truths can be separated from the views of the physical universe implied. Such a distinction is just a variant on the Kantian noumena/phenomena distinction discussed above.

It would greatly help the discussion if this supposed use of concepts common to the era was more carefully specified and defined. One would like more than the bare assertion that the Bible employed the common concepts of the day. For the argument to be valid this would

³ Lest this strike the reader as fundamentalist rhetoric I would draw attention to the very important symposium, *Mathematical Challenges to the Neo-Darwinian Interpretation of Evolution*, ed. P. S. Moorhead and M. M. Kaplan (Philadelphia: Wistar Institute Press, 1967). On page 79 C. H. Waddington answers M. P. Schutzenberger's argument that evolution according to Neo-Darwinian principles is statistically impossible by arguing that it must be possible because the only alternative would be special creation.

⁴ As well as the symposium referred to in the preceding note see G. A. Kerkut, *Implications of Evolution* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1960).

⁵ E.g. J. A. Thompson, 'Genesis 1-3. Science? History? Theology?' *Theolog Review* 3/3, p. 16.

⁶ This is far from being a new situation. Many techniques of literary and form criticism were used first in the OT field and later created much greater opposition when consistently applied in the NT. Gunkel himself was moved to the OT field from NT when it was realized that his methodology could be applied there and incur less opposition.

have to be carefully established. Once again this lies outside the main subject of the paper but a few remarks are necessary. One must first reckon with the fact that certain ideas or stories may be shared by the Bible and surrounding cultures because they are both based on a historical event. For example it would be rather ridiculous to argue that God chose to convey certain theological truths in terms of the flood concepts already possessed by the Mesopotamians. Obviously both Bible and Sumerian traditions mention a flood because there was a flood.

As in the case of evolutionary theory there is a problem created by the fact that much work in the

[p.15]

ancient Near Eastern field specifically excludes God's activity. Hence the ideology and concepts of Israel must be considered as derived from its neighbours. As long as this view is prevalent the uniqueness of biblical thought is depreciated and denied. A more mundane problem is the fact that when the discipline was younger it was natural to use the known to illuminate the unknown. Problems were solved by the use of biblical analogies and the impression thus created of a greater degree of common ground than was warranted.⁷ More investigation has a tendency to remove this false overlap.⁸

If supernatural intervention in the history of Israel is rejected, the most plausible explanation for the religion of Israel derives it by a process of ideological evolution from Israel's neighbours. It follows then that the concepts of Israelite thought must be those common at the time. However, if we do not make this assumption, and Scripture will not allow its to make it, then we must carefully investigate the thought of the ancient Near East in order to see if the same concepts are used as in the biblical text. Even this search is fraught with problems of subjectivity. Some version or other of the flood story was known in Mesopotamia. There was also a memory of the fact that at one time man had a common language though to my knowledge the confusion of tongues was not connected with the tower of Babel. One resemblance which is often referred to is that between the creation of the heaven and the earth in Genesis and the splitting of Tiamat to form the heaven and the earth in the Mesopotamian *Enuma Elish* legend.⁹ The tree often depicted on cylinder seals has been connected with the tree of life.¹⁰

These last two examples raise another set of problems. When it is said that God employed symbols common in that day is it meant that both the symbol and what is symbolized were already known or that only the symbol was known with a completely different connotation? The distinction is an important one. For this argument to be convincing the former must be the case. Otherwise one is saying that God gave the symbol a completely new meaning. And

⁷ To use a trivial example, Philadelphia University Museum used to caption the well-known offering-stand from Early-Dynastic Ur which shows a billy-goat standing with its forelegs on the branches of a tree. (H. Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* [Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1954], p. 31 and pl. 28) as the 'ram caught in a thicket'. Saner minds seem to have prevailed and this caption has been removed.

⁸ Similarly the tendency of research is often to emphasize the discontinuity rather than the relatedness of animal groups (Kerkut, *op. cit.*, p. 149).

⁹ See J. B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 67 for translation of this text.

¹⁰ For discussion see H. Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals* (London: Macmillan, 1939), pp. 205ff. He argues that on Assyrian seals it is a symbol of the god Assur. It is hard to see any connection between this symbol and the trees of Eden.

if he did that we are no longer dealing with symbols common at the time, but with new symbols. Then the necessity of interpreting them against the Near Eastern cultural background is removed. Whether there is any ultimate relationship" between biblical and Babylonian accounts as we now have them they belong to different ideological worlds. The symbols are not the same because the ideology is different. The goddess Tiamat defeated in a war by the god Marduk, if she may be called a 'symbol'; must be seen as a symbol within the context of Babylonian polytheism whereas the creation of heaven and earth belongs within the context of biblical thought. It is meaningless to say that God used the same symbol but changed its meaning. It is then no longer the same symbol.¹¹

Furthermore there are important elements in the early chapters of Genesis with no real counterpart in contemporary thought. Of course it is quite possible that such a counterpart existed and has been lost. However, the onus of the proof lies on those who so confidently affirm that Genesis employs the common symbols of the day. There is no real counterpart to the fall into sin in contemporary literature.¹²

'Naive cosmology'

Sometimes it seems that those who claim that the Bible used the symbols of its day are merely trying to say that it used a naive as opposed to a scientific cosmology, or, to put it more popularly, it did not bother to correct the prevalent three-storey cosmology. If we assume for the sake of the argument that this is the case, then it should be clearly recognized that all we have established is that scientific dogma should not be made out of biblical cosmology. The argument has no relevance to other parts of the account like the creation of animals,

[p.16]

man, *etc.* Unfortunately this argument is generally used without this careful delimitation. Generally it is argued that the fact that one element shows the use of non-scientific concepts proves that the whole uses naive ideas whose details may not be pressed.

Yet once more the validity of the basic premise must be questioned. Was there ever a pure 'three-storey universe' idea in antiquity? For the pagan contemporaries of the Bible writers, cosmology was theology. The heavens expressed and were controlled by the various divinities. The sort of abstract spacial/mechanical interest involved in the idea of a three-storey universe is a product of the demythologization of Greek rationalism and Euclidian spacial concepts. One should not try to project a late idea back into biblical times in order to explain the Bible. In its rejection of polytheism biblical cosmology is of necessity radically different to its surroundings. It is *not* popular cosmology.

¹¹ It is possible that the Mesopotamian parallels are the results of distortions of the original creation narrative to fit a polytheistic system. If that is the case they would then belong to the same category as the flood account. The argument is often used that the Mesopotamian accounts must be the originals because the Mesopotamian versions are older than the biblical texts (E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964], p. 10). That is by no means certain. The text which is generally used as the supposed original on which Genesis 1 is based is the "Babylonian Creation Account", also referred to as *Enuma Elish*. The consensus is now to date it in the late second millennium BC. (W.G. Lambert, "The Reign of Nebuchadnezzar 1: A Turning Point in the History of Ancient Mesopotamian Religion" in *The Seed of Wisdom, Essays in Honour of T.J. Meek*, Toronto, Toronto U, 1964, pp.3-13; W. Sommerfeld, *Der Aufstieg Marduks*, Kevelaer, Butzon, and Bercker, 1982 (=AOAT 213), pp.174ff.) If, as the Bible says, Moses wrote the Pentateuch, Genesis 1 may be older.

¹² It is significant that Speiser who is convinced that the biblical story was derived from Mesopotamian prototypes (*ibid.*, p. lv) cannot find a better parallel than the 'Civilization' of Enkidu by a prostitute (*ibid.*, pp. 26f, For translation of this supposed parallel see Pritchard, *op. cit.*, p. 75).

Secondly, what is so wrong about a 'naive cosmology'? It is probably as close to the ultimate truth as modern cosmology. If we had not deified modern science we would not be embarrassed by those points in which biblical thinking diverges from prevailing modern ideas. Certainly biblical cosmology fits into a different structure of thought from modern cosmology, but it is the validity of that very structure of thought that is at issue. We tend to assume that the assumptions underlying modern physics are unquestionable. If we assume the validity of the structure of physics from any period with its philosophical presuppositions and concomitants¹³ we run the risk of accepting a structure which, because of its ultimate origin in a total humanistic philosophy, must clash with a biblical world view. What has generally happened is that the structure and method of modern science has been accepted as truth. When the conflict between this and a biblical view has been appreciated, an attempt has been made to give the biblical view a validity in some sort of restricted religious sphere. The basic question is whether our interpretation of the Bible is to be determined by the Bible itself or by some other authority. Once science has been set up as an autonomous authority it inevitably tends to determine the way in which we interpret the Bible. From the point of view of this discussion the outside authority may be Newton or Hoyle just as well as Darwin or Kant. The issue involved is still the same.

Somewhere in this sort of discussion poor Galileo is always dragged in. Yet if we want to learn from history we should at least begin with good history. There is nothing particularly Christian about Aristotelian cosmology. In fact there are points at which it cannot be reconciled with the Bible. How did the church find itself in the position of defending Aristotelian cosmology against the new Copernican cosmology? It found itself in that position because it accepted the argument of Aquinas that the biblical texts which contradicted Aristotle should not be pressed as the Bible was not written in technical philosophical language. Moses spoke the language of his day. This is not to say that the church should have accepted readily the new astronomy. In its neo-Pythagorean mysticism¹⁴ it was no more biblical than Aristotle was. Those who want to say that the Bible is written in the popular language of its day and should not be pressed where it differs from modern philosophical-scientific structures cannot claim to have learnt from the Galileo affair. They are merely repeating the arguments that helped to put the church in that situation.

2. INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE BY SCRIPTURE

The point to be made in connection with the whole preceding discussion is that the positions discussed tend to introduce a rule for the exegesis of Scripture which is not drawn from Scripture itself. If this is allowed then Scripture is no longer its own interpreter.

Is there any explicit teaching within Scripture itself that its details are not to be pressed in matters of the physical creation? I know of no such teaching and in the whole discussion of this issue I have seen no attempt at specific appeal to the teaching of Scripture. When reference is made to the original creation, the creation narrative is treated as fact without any reservations. Peter's argument in 2 Peter 3: 5-7 does not shrink from reliance upon some of the details of the Genesis narrative. Other examples of biblical references back to Genesis (e.g., Ex. 20: 11; Mt. 19: 4; Rom. 5: 12-19; 1 Tim. 2:13,14), to be considered in more detail below, show a similar reference to specific details. Scripture itself gives no warrant for the

¹³ For discussion of the philosophical presuppositions of physics, old and new, see M. Capek, *The Philosophical Impact of Contemporary Physics* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1961).

¹⁴ T. S. Kuhn, *The Copernican Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957).

oft-repeated claim that the details cannot be pressed and is not embarrassed to refer to specific details such as creation in seven days (Ex. 20: 11) and creation of woman from the man (1 Tim. 2: 13, 14).

This should in itself be enough to dismiss the frequent statement that we may not press the details of the account. Yet, as argued above, the position

[p.17]

being considered often rests upon a basis of Kantian philosophy. Is this philosophy itself sanctioned by Scripture? It is not, since there is no clear distinction made by the Bible between statements concerning the physical creation and theological statements. One influences and determines the other. Note that in the biblical references given above, the form which the original creation took is made the basis of theological and/or ethical teaching. The separation between physical creation and theology is one that has to be imposed upon the text by us. It is not naturally there in the Bible.

The literary character of Genesis 1

It seems a more serious attempt at exegesis when appeal is made to the literary nature of Genesis 1.¹⁵ Even here care is needed that an outside standard be not imposed. One cannot simply define Genesis 1 as poetry by using a standard of poetry drawn from outside the Scripture, without assuming the very point at issue. Even if Genesis 1 were poetry, we would still be entitled to enquire what truth it conveys. Our answer to that question would have to be framed in terms of the rest of Scripture. If we take the passages referred to above we obtain enough to place us in conflict with modern evolutionary approaches. Thus the claim that Genesis 1 is poetic does not resolve the problem.

Furthermore, by what criteria do we call Genesis 1 poetic? The parallelism of days 1-3 to 4-6 is often cited. This however is merely parallelism of ideas and is not the same parallelism that makes up Hebrew poetry. Hebrew poetry consists of a series of couplets or triplets exhibiting complementary, climactic or antithetic-parallelism *e.g.* in Psalm 5: 1, 'Give ear to my words, O Lord', is complemented and paralleled by 'Consider my meditation'. This is clearly different from the fact that on days 1-3 God creates the environment and on days 4-6 the creatures who are to live and rule in the respective environments. One is a parallel of ideas in successive stichoi, the other a parallel of ideas which may be several verses apart.

Nevertheless it may be argued that the very fact that Genesis 1 exhibits such a structure proves that it is not to be taken literally. Surely, to state this argument is to refute it. Short of some sort of metaphysical presupposition that regards history as totally random and all order in historiography as being a result of arbitrary human imposition, I cannot see how one would ever prove such a proposition. The attempt to make a case by analogy from the book of Revelation is quite beside the point. If we took elements of Revelation as symbolical without explicit biblical warrant then we would be guilty of imposing an outside standard upon the Scripture. Revelation itself tells us that we are meant to see symbolism in its pictures: 'the great city, which is allegorically called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified' (11: 8); 'And a great portent appeared in heaven' (12: 1); 'and on her forehead was written a name of mystery, 'Babylon the Great... I will tell you the mystery of the woman... This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains... and they are also seven

¹⁵ Thompson, *op. cit.*, pp. 17ff.

kings.... The waters that you saw, where the harlot is seated, are peoples and multitudes.... And the woman that you saw is the great city which has dominion over the kings of the earth' (17: 5-18). It is the lack of a similar interpretation of the 'symbolism' of Genesis which so sharply distinguishes Genesis and Revelation.

Structured history

Even though there is no logical reason why the presence of a structure should prove that a passage is not to be taken literally, this idea seems to have great emotive appeal. The whole question of structured history needs to be examined more closely. The title of this paper limits discussion to Genesis 1-11. This is because among evangelicals anyway there is a willingness to accept the historicity of the patriarchal narratives. However, the patriarchal narratives are structured history in the same way as the earlier chapters of Genesis. They fit within a framework created by the heading 'These are the generations of...' (2: 4; 5: 1; 6: 9; 10: 1; 11: 10; 11:27; 25:12, 19, *etc.*). There are clear instances of parallel structure. Thus the experiences of Isaac parallel those of Abraham. Both have barren wives (15: 2; 16:1; 25: 21). Both lie concerning their wives (20: 2; 26: 7). Both face famine in the promised land (12: 10; 26:1). Both make a covenant with the Philistines (21: 22-34; 26: 26-33). If parallelism of structure proves that a passage is not historical then the patriarchal narratives are not historical. This of course is the conclusion of many liberal exegetes, but evangelicals once more maintain an inconsistency, being willing to apply a higher-critical principle in one area of Scripture but not in another.

If one looks carefully at these structured histories one sees that the structure is theological. Abraham and Isaac both face barrenness and famine because they both experience the trial of faith in being forced to believe the promise of God contrary to the physical situation (Rom. 4: 17,18; Heb. 11: 8-

[p.18]

12).¹⁶ The structure that underlies the parallelism of Genesis 1 is that of covenant vassal and suzerain. On days 1-3 the environment or vassal was created and on days 4-6 the appropriate creature or suzerain to live and rule in that environment. This notion of covenant head and vassal underlies also the story of the fall in that on the fall of the suzerain the vassal is placed in rebellion against its lord (3:17-19). Further the idea of covenant structures the whole of history into old and new covenant each under their respective heads (Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15: 45-49). For the historian who proceeds on antitheistic assumptions such a theological history must be rejected. He must assign all such histories to the category of theological subjectivism. A theologically structured history presupposes a God who actively shapes history so that it conforms to his plan. A liberal exegete who denies the existence of such a God must dismiss as true history all biblical accounts which see theological patterns in history. The evangelical has no basis for such an *a priori* dismissal of structured history. The fact that Genesis 1 displays a structure in no way prejudices its claim to historicity.

¹⁶ The attempt to explain these parallel incidents in terms of the documentary hypothesis is shown to be ridiculous if an attempt is made to assign each parallel to a different source in every case in which a parallel exists. The cases of both Abraham and Isaac lying concerning their wives is often used as proof of the documentary hypothesis. However, inconsistently, the theory attributes both barrenness accounts and both famine accounts to J. The inconsistencies become more evident if the parallels in the life of Jacob are also considered. Basically the documentary hypothesis is able to make a plausible case by ignoring most of the incidents of 'duplicate' narratives. When all are taken into account then it is clear that the 'duplicate' narratives and the other 'criteria' for dividing documents come into conflict.

Scriptural interpretations of the Genesis account

So far the views discussed have consisted of statements about Scripture which were not themselves based on Scripture. An *a priori* statement about the Bible cannot claim biblical authority. Discussion of this area has been obscured by the number of these statements and there is a need to return to interpreting Scripture by Scripture and not by hypothesis. There are a number of passages which reflect upon the original creation. Some have been referred to in other connections above.

Exodus 20: 8-11 is significant in that it gives us a clear answer to the debated question about whether the 'days' of Genesis are to be taken literally. The commandment loses completely its cogency if they are not taken literally.¹⁷

This passage is also important in giving a proper direction to our thought. It is often said that the creation is described in seven days because this is the pattern of labour to which the Hebrews were accustomed. The text however says the very reverse. The Hebrews are to become accustomed to a seven-day week because that is the pattern that has been set by God. Rather than God being made to conform to an already established human pattern, man must conform to the pattern that has been set by God. The point is an important one as it is crucial to the distinction between true and false religion. The oft-repeated claim that human thought and custom has created the categories through which, of necessity, all God's activity must be viewed is a denial of the spirit of biblical religion. It gives to man the priority which rightly belongs to God.

Psalms 104 deserves more consideration in this question than it usually receives. The psalm follows in a general fashion the order of the creation days. The one point that is of particular interest is that the psalmist has integrated the account of Genesis 1 with that of the creation of springs in Genesis 2: 4-6. The reference to springs falls where one would logically expect it between the account of the creation of dry land (Ps. 104: 6-9) and that of vegetation (Ps. 104: 14-17). The problems of relating the accounts of Genesis 1 and 2 is outside the scope of this paper but any attempt must begin with Psalm 104. Unfortunately some evangelicals have accepted too readily the assertion of the documentary hypothesis that they are independent accounts of creation. The psalmist knew better.

A number of passages which refer to the original creation of man and woman and their relationship may be considered together (Mt. 19: 4; 1 Cor. 11: 8, 9; 1 Tim. 2: 13, 14). Note that the account is taken literally and made the basis of teaching on the relation of man and woman. Even if in only this point we take issue with evolutionary theory we find ourselves in complete antithesis to naturalistic

[p.19]

¹⁷ John Murray (in *Principles of Conduct* [London: IVP; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957], p. 30) claims that Gn. 2: 2 refers to 'the seventh day in the sphere of God's action, not the seventh day in our weekly cycle' (emphasis his). Consideration of this question would involve a lengthy treatment of the meaning of God's seventh-day rest. The frequent affirmation that the seventh day of Gn. 2: 2 is still continuing needs to be proven. Murray unfortunately omits such proof. Briefly it may be argued that the text gives no indication of such a sphere distinction. The text is not concerned with God as he is in himself but with God's activity in a temporally conditioned creation. Even the seventh day refers not to God in himself but to God in relation to his creation. At this point I can agree with Murray (*ibid.*, p. 31): 'God's rest is the rest of delight in the work of creation accomplished, "And God saw all that which he made, and behold, it was very good" (Gn. 1: 31). This is expressly alluded to in Exodus 31: 17 in connection with God's sabbath rest, "On the seventh day he rested and refreshed himself" and means surely the rest of satisfaction and delight in the completed work of creation.'

evolution. If on the authority of Scripture we hold to the biblical account of the creation of man and woman then we can give up all hope of a harmony between the Bible and 'science'. The proper subject of this paper is the hermeneutical problem and these passages are adduced to show that the rest of Scripture sees the early chapters of Genesis as literal history. It may be objected as a last resort that only those details of the account mentioned as literal by the rest of Scripture may be taken literally. Even if this point be granted there is still enough contained in just these few verses to reopen the battle with evolutionary theory. However, the argument that only those passages in Genesis 1-11 referred to elsewhere as literal accounts are to be taken as such may be summarily dismissed. The early chapters of the Bible are clearly a unity and whatever hermeneutical method is valid for part is valid for all. This fact has been realized by those who have sought by various arguments to find evidence of 'poetry' in one part and to extend it to all. Yet all these attempts in so far as they were not attempts to see how the rest of Scripture treated the chapters in question must be condemned as methodologically faulty. Scripture is its own interpreter.

Against this one might argue that even though the NT treats Genesis 1-11 as literal, this should not be taken as proving that it is a literal description. One may argue that the NT writers were accommodating themselves to the beliefs of the time or that these passages are referred to only as illustrations and that their literalness is not implied by the NT usage. The first alternative must be rejected as involving a denigration of Christ and his apostles. The accommodation argument when used as a way of avoiding the implications of Christ's use of the OT for the doctrine of Scripture has been rightly rejected by evangelicals.¹⁸ It is inconsistent to attempt to revive it to avoid the implications of NT teaching on another subject. Furthermore the fundamental objection against a rule of exegesis drawn from outside Scripture applies here also. If the accommodation idea is to be allowed in the discussion then it must first be demonstrated that it is itself taught by Scripture.

The second alternative will not bear examination. Clearly in 1 Corinthians 11: 8, 9 and 1 Timothy 2: 13, 14 the argument of Paul would collapse if the details of the account to which he refers did not happen as recorded. It is foolish to suggest that his point would still be valid even if woman was not created after and from the man and even if Eve was not beguiled into sin. Similarly Peter's point is without cogency if the world was not destroyed by the flood (2 Pet. 3: 5, 6).

3. CONCLUSION

The thrust of this paper has been to direct discussion away from theoretical pre-exegetical arguments over the interpretation of Genesis and to concentrate on the way the rest of Scripture interprets it. We meet simple literalism in the scriptural exegesis of Genesis. Certainly not every detail of the chapters in question is referred to elsewhere but when they are literalism prevails.

If this be the case why has so much discussion been concentrated on arguments which are not only inconclusive but also diminish the right of Scripture to be its own interpreter? I suspect that the real debate is not hermeneutical at all. If it were then it would have been decided long ago by a comparison of Scripture with Scripture. The real problem is that we as Christians have in a double sense lost our historical perspective. We have forgotten that the church has

¹⁸ J. I. Packer, *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God* (London: IVP, 1958), pp. 59-61.

always been under pressure to allegorize Genesis so that it may conform with Plotinus or Aristotle or some other human philosophy. We have treated the problem as though it were a modern one, as though we alone have had to face the onerous task of holding to a view of cosmic and human origins which is out of sympathy with the philosophical premises of our culture. The second sense in which we have lost our historical perspective is that we have forgotten that until our Lord returns we face strife and conflict in this world. We have sought to avoid that conflict in the intellectual realms. We have accepted the claim of humanistic thought that its scholarship is religiously neutral when the Bible teaches us that no man is religiously neutral. Man either seeks to suppress the truth in unrighteousness or to live all his life to the glory of God. In that total warfare scholarship is no mutually declared truce.

© 1978 Noel Weeks. Reproduced by kind permission of the author.

Prepared for the Web in June 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw. Footnote 11 has been updated by the author.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>
