

# PHENOMENAL LANGUAGE ACCORDING TO DR. BERNARD RAMM

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This paper has two main points or headings: First, the *meaning*, then the *application* of phenomenal language in the opening chapters of Genesis according to Dr. Bernard Ramm.

The following observations may be made concerning the meaning of phenomenal language, according to Ramm.

Dr. Ramm is none too clear on disputed points. This may be due to the fact that Dr. Ramm is neither a specialist in the natural sciences nor a specialist in Biblical linguistics and exegesis. His field seems to be philosophy.

His book has considerable value for general orientation, and in particular for orientation concerning what he calls phenomenal language. There is considerable truth to what he says about phenomenal language; and there are various items in Dr. Ramm's elucidation of his standpoint that deserve appreciation. But there are also features that deserve a critical analysis, especially when we come to our second main point, as we do now, the *application*.

This second main point deals with Ramm's APPLICATION of phenomenal language. This application is scattered throughout his book. We wish to begin with words of appreciation.

## A. Appreciation.

1. In the first place, this approach can be of considerable value and help to a young student of the natural sciences who is very seriously perplexed about the relations of Scripture and science, even though this statement must be made with important reservations or strictures, as we shall see later.

2. Secondly, by way of appreciation, we can all probably agree with Dr. Ramm that Genesis I does not speak in the jargon of the scientists, calling water H<sup>2</sup>O, but in the popular language of the common people, calling H<sup>2</sup>O water, where we read that the Spirit of God brooded on the face of the waters. (See also page 221). And there are many other items in Dr. Ramm's elucidation of his standpoint that deserve appreciation. But there are also several features that deserve reservations and possibly strictures. These reservations and strictures concern Dr. Ramm's APPLICATION of his idea of phenomenal language to various problems that every exegete and every Bible-believing natural scientist must face in considering the first few chapters of Genesis.

B. *Reservations and possible strictures* concerning Dr. Ramm's APPLICATION of his idea of phenomenal language to various exegetical problems occurring in any "natural exegesis" of the first few chapters of Genesis.

But the APPLICATION or connotation that Dr. Ramm has given to the term, phenomenal language, is open to several reservations or strictures.

1. First, there may be a lack of clarity on fiat, that is on fiat creation. On page 254 he says the following: "The extreme Fundamentalist would perhaps reply: 'Men, these philosophical subtleties are the workings of your own mind, and not of God's Word. God said what He meant, and meant what He said. God said He *made* life, the animals and man. I take this as a literal, direct fact, and seek no evasion from it. Therefore, I must believe in fiat creation or none at all. If evolution is true, the Bible is wrong; and I must give up Christ, salvation, and all the truth of the New Testament. Because so much is at stake, I must fight evolution at every turn'.<sup>1</sup> The very obvious mistake of the extreme Fundamentalist is that he equates divine causation with sudden creation and his thinking is brittle right at this point."

Now there are scholars who have interpreted Ramm's general position unfavorably in spite of the fact that he speaks favorably elsewhere of fiat creation. Thus Dr. Ramm says on page 256: "In summary, we accept progressive creationism which teaches that over the millions of years of geological history God has been fiatly creating higher and higher forms of life." But what then can be the objection to Dr. Ramm's presentation?

Let me quote Prof. Edwin Y. Monsma of Calvin College in the September, 1955, issue of "Torch and Trumpet". Dr. Monsma has been discussing Dr. Ramm's view of fiat creation and his view of the six days of creation and then goes on to say the following: "In sections devoted to a discussion of evolution, in the chapter on Biology, Dr. Ramm fails to distinguish between secondary creation and providence, two ideas that should be kept clearly distinct in our interpretation of Genesis, according to Professor Aalders. 'It will not do', says Aalders, 'to differentiate so sharply between primary and secondary creation that only primary creation is considered the unique work of God, whereas the secondary creation is in reality identified with providence.'" Says Dr. Monsma furthermore: "In Dr. Ramm's book we find not only an identification of secondary creation with providence, but a further identification of creation with evolution. Although evolution, in his opinion, can never be the actual or primary cause of the universe, it could be its secondary cause. He says, 'The only possible status which evolution could have is that of any other scientific law, viz., that of mediate or secondary creation'. The author (Dr. Ramm) concludes the section on evolution by saying: 'evolution may be entertained as a possible *secondary* cause or *mediate* cause of biological science'."

Having come to the end of our quotation from Dr. Monsma, we may observe that he correctly objects, as does Dr. Aalders, whom he quotes, against identifying secondary creation with providence. Now Dr. Aalders interprets the days of Genesis I as long periods, but even so he will not identify secondary creation with providence. Even the secondary creation, though it implies God's providence, also goes beyond the ordinary works of providence. The creation week is unusual in its character also on this score. Nor do we like Dr. Ramm's compromise with evolution.

2. Secondly, we now come to the application and connotation of Dr. Ramm's view of phenomenal language in connection with his view of the character of the days in Genesis I. This view is described on page 218 and following. He indicates his view thus:

"*Pictorial Day and Moderate Concordism*." Says he: "The theory we shall defend has been defended in some of its elements by such writers as J. Pohle, *God: The Author of Nature and the Supernatural* (1942); Hugh Miller, *Testimony of the Rocks* (1869); P. J. Wiseman, *Creation Revealed in Six Days* (1948); J. H. Kurtz, *Bible and Astronomy* (third German edition, 1857, in which Kurtz defends the gap theory in a most sane and reserved exposition, but also defends the pictorial method of revealing the acts of creation; Canon Dorlodot, *Darwinism and Catholic Thought* (Vol. 1, 1923); A. H. Strong, *Systemic Theology* (1907, II, 393, ff); L. F. Gruber, *The Six Creative Days* (1941)."

After passing up certain other views, Dr. Ramm expresses his view as follows, page 222: "We believe, in agreement with the authorities which we have listed, that creation was *revealed* in six days, not *performed* in six days. We believe that the six days are *pictorial-revelatory* days, not literal days nor age days. The days are means of communicating to man the great fact that *God is Creator*, and that *He is Creator of all*."

It is clear that such a view is capable of being used to allow for a great variety of compromises with evolution. Meanwhile, Exodus 20 does not say that God revealed

the creation of the world in six days, but that God made the heavens and the earth in six days.

As to the length of those days, scholars differ. Prof. Berkhof preferred to think of six ordinary days. Dr. Abraham Kuyper regarded the last three days as ordinary days, but the first three as periods. And Dr. Bavinck and Dr. Aalders regarded all six as periods.

Exegetically, the length of the days cannot be solved. But there are some exegetical loose ends that can be noted. In Genesis Chapter Two you have mist before rain. The article in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* on mist brings this mist into connection with the theory of the hot and cooling earth. Says this article, "In the account of creation, 'there went up a mist from the earth', giving a description of the warm humid atmosphere of the carboniferous ages, which agrees remarkably with the teaching of modern science." (Genesis 2:6).

Although a Babylonian meaning for the word mist has been proposed, we still have the word mist in the Revised Standard Version and the Jewish Translation of 1917 and 1955, and in the American Standard Version.

There is also an exegetical loose end in Psalm 9, a prayer of Moses. It looks retrospectively upon the past and says in verse 2, "Behold the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from age to age, Thou art God."

This may also be translated "from everlasting to everlasting," but the look is retrospective, and not explicitly prospective here. Hence the translation "from age to age" may refer to past ages, concerning which it may be said as in verse 4: "For a thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday . . ."

The implication may be that even before the mountains were brought forth, or ever God had formed the earth and the world, from age to age, in that distant past, the Lord is God.

Again there is an exegetical loose end in Hebrews 11:3, "By faith we understand the worlds (Greek *aionas*, ages or age-old worlds) have been framed by the word of God, so that what is seen hath not been made out of things which appear". Although the word *kosmos* could have been used, we have the word *aionas*, from which our word eons is derived, which may point to long ages as being involved in the work of creation.

Moreover, in Moses' day, the Egyptian Book of the Dead may have been familiar at least by its title to the Israelites. Now its title uses day as a long period: The Coming into the Day. The thought is as follows:

The soul, if it is weighed in the balances and not found wanting, will come out into the day, after it leaves the body, with the thought of a long period, but called day, because it is thought that there is no night there, such as is so often in this world.

Well, when the soul is thus thought to come out into the day of heaven, a very long period is intended for day in the very beginning of the Egyptian Book of the Dead. And if the Israelites had raised the question whether similarly Genesis I uses the word day as period, they may have speculated about the meaning of day here, as we still do today.

It will be seen that we do not go along with Dr. Ramm in his view that the work of creation was revealed in six days, but we hold that it was accomplished in six days—whatever one may think of the length of these days. They may have been vast eons, that stagger one's imagination. Nothing is too vast for our God. And the day of the Lord will even be one vast and endless eon in the new heaven and new earth.

There are other strictures to some of the positions of Dr. Ramm in an article

by Dr. John De Vries in *The Calvin Forum* of May, 1955, page 213, and I share these strictures, but space and time do not allow their treatment here. Dr. De Vries's book, *Beyond the Atom*, is a very commendable guide for the problems raised by Ramm.

Finally, by way of a few concluding remarks, we may illustrate that the so-called "phenomenal language," in which the creation story of Genesis, Chapter I, Chapter I, verse 1 to Chapter II, verse 3 is allegedly couched, and in which the story of the fall of Genesis, Chapter II, verse 4 to verse 24, is also allegedly couched, does not readily yield to a merely phenomenal interpretation. It has phenomenal characteristics, but it also goes beyond the merely phenomenal.

Thus the serpent is more than the phenomenal serpent, but it in some way involves that old serpent the devil and Satan. But that interpretation goes beyond merely phenomenal language. And thus the expression, these are the generations of the heavens and the earth, also goes beyond phenomenal language.

And the two-fold sequence of Chapter I, in the verses 24 and 25, respectively, involves one sequence that may be chronological and phenomenal; but, if so, the other sequence is not. Here now follows the sequence of verse 24: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth. But then follows the altogether different sequence of verse 25: beasts of the earth and cattle and everything that creepeth upon the ground. Thus, in the second sequence, not one of the three items has retained its original place in the first sequence, as the first or the second or the third item mentioned. If the one sequence is chronological and phenomenal, the other is not.

What is the other sequence then? Perhaps a logical sequence, as suggested by Ramm and J. H. Ridderbos, although that is not too sure, for it may also be a different sequence for the sake of literary variety, a merely literary sequence. But Dr. Ramm is apparently quite sure that part of the creation story is phenomenal and part is logical, in its sequence. Well, that may be true, but it has not been sufficiently demonstrated by means of exegetical data. Nevertheless, it may still be true, in the light of God's revelation in nature and in the light of the natural sciences.

Furthermore, the very expressions involving DAY, in day one, day second, day third, day fourth, day fifth, day THE sixth, and day THE seventh may go beyond phenomenal language. For the absence of the article, THE, with the Hebrew expressions for the first five days is certainly mysterious, and its intent apparently goes beyond that of mere phenomenal language, in some mysterious way or other.

Moreover, as Dr. Aalders has pointed out, none of these six days is explicitly associated with a night, and the words day, evening, and morning are also used in Scripture in another sense than that of merely phenomenal language.

Furthermore, in Genesis II, verse 6, you have mist before rain. If that allows for the view that a cooling earth is involved, then the language is not merely phenomenal, but the implications may be scientific.

In Psalm 90, verse 2, similarly, the language presents another loose end that may go beyond the phenomenal to the scientific — "Before the mountains were brought forth or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world. Even from age to age, thou art God." Are past great ages concerned here in Genesis, Chapter I?

And in Hebrews II, verse 3, we have another exegetical puzzle: By faith we understand that the (age-old) worlds (*aionas*) have been framed . . . Why does the author not use *cosmos* instead of *aionas*, from which our word eons is derived? Does he want to emphasize past great ages during which the worlds were framed, according to Genesis I?

And, incidentally, did the Hebrews of the days of Moses, when they may have read Genesis I, know that the Egyptian Book of the Dead uses the word DAY in the sense of a long period, in the title, The Coming out into the Day, meaning the coming out of the departing soul into the age-long day of heaven?

The alleged phenomenal language when it comes to the word DAY may involve too narrow a concept — more narrow than the rest of Scripture requires, especially in the light of Hebrews II verse 3: “By faith we understand that the worlds have been framed . . .”

In line with the rest of Scripture, and in line with God’s revelation in nature as understood by the natural sciences today, the word DAY may have involved a long period, even in Genesis I.

Somewhat similarly, the word DAY, in the expression “latter days” and “day of the Lord,” needs to be interpreted perhaps beyond the knowledge of the secondary authors of the Old Testament and in line with the knowledge of the primary author, the Holy Spirit, as indicated by the New Testament. It refers to various periods, and sometimes perhaps to that of the new heaven and new earth, involving an interminable age, eon or period. The latter days of the O. T. seem to include this eternal age even in the Shiloh prophecy of Jacob. (Gen. 49:1).

Meanwhile the term phenomenal language, in distinction from scientific language, can serve a useful purpose, in many contexts, and should by no means be discarded.