

The Myths that Tell the Truth

DR CHARLES V. TAYLOR

Liberal theologians are usually given short shrift in a journal such as this. But, like atheists of the type of Thomas Huxley, they can be useful to creationists.

The reason is that they lose nothing by saying that:

- (a) The Bible really says God created in six literal days.
- (b) The original writers and readers clearly understood it that way.

Their scholarship tells them the Hebrew is to be understood literally by any reasonable reader. They're quite insistent about this, even sarcastic about conservative theologians who try to reconcile evolution with the text of Scripture.

T. H. Huxley, in an essay on science and religion in 1890,¹ criticised high Anglicans writing in the **Speaker's Commentary** for trying to reconcile the biblical text with modern science. He considered their position 'hopelessly untenable'. In other words, don't flirt with evolution. Choose Scripture text or the current theories of science.

In the same way, many liberal theological commentaries stress the point that Scripture really does speak of a six-day creation. It's against scholarship to pretend Genesis 1 is poetic or figurative. The text just doesn't bear that interpretation. Most of Genesis 1-8 is prose, with odd verses like 1:27, 2:23, 3:14-19 and 8:22 in poetic style. The vast majority of liberal theologians and agnostic archaeologists and linguists agree on this.

What, then, of evangelicals? Well, Francis Schaeffer insisted that unless evangelicals accepted what the Bible teaches on what he called 'history and the cosmos', there was no hope of maintaining evangelical doctrines. He was dissatisfied with the Lausanne declaration that Scripture is truthful and 'without error in all that it affirms', because some evangelicals now say it only affirms a value system, not historical facts.²

In spite of this, many evangelical commentaries on Genesis won't commit themselves to the literality of the accounts in Genesis 1-8. They espouse either 'progressive creation', with God intervening at strategic points along an evolutionary continuum, or 'theistic evolution', with God starting everything off in something like a 'big bang' and evolution taking over. Such views could be called 'neo-orthodox evangelical', because they're saying with Bultmann that truth is 'beyond the text'.

Their desperate desire is to harmonise popular science with the Bible. About the earliest of the commenta-

tors taking this line is:

- (1) Robert Candlish, who in 1843 stated that Genesis was 'not scientific but religious', though at that time he accepted, for example, the division of the waters horizontally to produce a literal upper hydrosphere. He regarded creation as recent, while noting the possibility of a gap between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2. But by 1868 he had come to doubt the recency of creation.³ After him:
- (2) Jamieson, Faussett and Brown said Genesis doesn't present 'a system of natural science'. They try, rather unsuccessfully, to harmonise Genesis with evolutionary theory.⁴
- (3) G. F. Maclear in his **Class Book of Old Testament History** (1864) says the creation 'took place in six Days, or vast Periods of time', but doesn't elaborate. Yet he does accept a universal Flood.⁵
- (4) Ellicott's **Commentary** tries to harmonise, but recommends that we go to science to find out what really happened.⁶
- (5) In **The Pulpit Commentary** we read of a six-day revelation to Adam, and of the day-age theory, both offered as possible answers.⁷
- (6) I. L. Jensen in **Genesis: A Self-Study Guide** (1967)⁸ accepts that Moses wrote Genesis about 1500 BC, but states that 1:14-18:

'does not necessarily teach the appearance of the luminaries. The sun and moon might have been created on the first day.'

Regarding 'days':

'... if the six days are long periods of time, or if they are days of twenty-four hours, there is nothing in the account to contradict either view.'
- (7) D. Kidner in the Tyndale **Genesis** (1967) floats a number of ideas, including Wiseman's revelation-days, liturgical days for celebrating festivals and 'literary form' days, rejects them all and offers J. A. Thompson's:

*'The author's concern is to display before us God's handiwork, not to inform us that this feature is older than that.'*⁹

Grand and persuasive words, these! But Kidner¹⁰ cannot accept that the text is only aesthetic and not informational. It's a story, a sequence, not a statement only:

'Simplicity has been a dominant concern. The language is that of every day, describing things by their appearance.' (p. 54)

However, the biblical writer is:

'free also to group together matters that belong together (so that trees, for example, anticipate their chronological place in order to be classified with vegetation . . . [There is a] remarkable degree of correspondence that can be found between this sequence and the one implied by current science.' (p. 55)

Finally, Kidner comes out into the open by saying:

' . . . a scientific account would have to speak of ages, not days . . . the present account surveys the . . . scene for its theological significance.' (p. 56)

- (8) G. H. Livingston in the **Beacon Commentaries** (1969) cites H. O. Wiley favourably:

'The Genesis account of creation is primarily a religious document. It cannot be considered a scientific statement, and yet it must not be regarded as contradictory to science.'

Concerning 'days' he says we can't dogmatise or 'demand unswerving restriction to only one . . . meaning'. He quotes Sheed as saying the Church has never confined the meaning to that of a solar day. I find this claim at odds with my own reading, for only Origen and Augustine are 'credited' with suggesting a figurative meaning for 'days', Origen being influenced by Greek and Egyptian myths, and Augustine thinking creation had really taken place in half a second.¹¹

All the above were in the evangelical stream, and would without hesitation say they believed in salvation by grace alone through faith in the precious blood of Christ. They would even swear that the Bible is true. Yet we see that they are caught in a kind of compromise position in regard to the historical reliability of Genesis 1–8.

When we come to the liberals, we find they reject any harmonisation between science and the Bible, regarding the latter as being in error. Yet their own scholarship generally acknowledges that the author(?s) of Genesis are not using figurative language. The following are representative:

- (1) Marcus Dods in **The Expositor's Bible** (1888) advises readers to go to science for detail about the age of the earth, but sees Genesis as really saying that God made everything in six solar days.¹²
- (2) H. E. Ryle takes a similar view about days in an article on the early narratives of Genesis, saying Hebrew cosmogony isn't scientifically accurate, and in the **Cambridge Bible** (1892) says 'the cosmogonies of Genesis are wholly defective', meaning that taken literally they conflict with current science. But of course, the text is literal in intention.¹³
- (3) S. R. Driver makes this explicit in the **Westminster Commentary** (1904), adding that we shouldn't try to harmonise the Bible and science, as this is impos-

sible.¹⁴

- (4) J. Skinner in the International Critical Series (1910) also regards harmonisation of evolution and Scripture as impossible.¹⁵

- (5) G. A. Simpson in The Interpreter's Bible comments on Genesis. He is a devotee of the J, E, D and P documentary theories, yet he maintains:

'There can be no question but that by Day the author meant just what we mean — the time required for one revolution of the earth on its axis.'¹⁶

We see, therefore, that liberal scholars, who by and large are unwilling to regard the text of the Bible as reliably the work of Moses through the Holy Spirit, therefore accurate in 'history and the cosmos', nevertheless support a literal reading of the text of Genesis 1 from a linguistic point of view. Yet neo-orthodox evangelicals dilute the text to make it acceptable to what they see as a scientific view of the origin of the earth.

Truly conservative evangelicals and 'fundamentalists', are 'foolish' enough (see 1 Corinthians 1:25) to accept Scripture text at face value. One who comments along these lines is H. C. Leupold (1942). He stands in the tradition of Keil, Edersheim, and a host of other witnesses going back to the Reformation and beyond.

For Leupold,¹⁷ Genesis is:

'a straightforward, strictly historical account rising, indeed, to heights of poetic beauty of expression in the Creation account, in the Flood story, in the record of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, in Judah's plea before Joseph, and the like. But the writer uses no more of figurative language than any gifted historian might, who merely adorns a strictly literal account with the ordinary run of current figures of speech, grammatical and rhetorical.' (pp. 12–13)

He cites Exodus 20:9–11; 31:17; Psalm 8; Psalm 104; Matthew 19:4–6; Hebrews 4:4 and 2 Peter 3:5 as other places in Scripture which take Genesis 1 literally. (p. 36) He is against a 'long geologic period', (p. 56) In fact, he cites the sun's creation on the fourth day as 'a strong argument that the first six days were days of twenty-four hours'. (p. 53)

One who appears to be thoroughly conservative in 1880, when evolution was 'coming in like a flood' is C. H. Mackintosh,¹⁸ who writes:

'Geologists . . . draw forth . . . materials from which to add to, and, in some instances, to contradict, the divine record. They may speculate upon fossil remains, but the disciple hangs, with sacred delight, over the page of inspiration. He reads, believes and worships.' (p. 17)

'With such "oppositions of science, falsely so called", we have nothing to do. We believe that all true discoveries . . . will harmonise with that which is written in the Word of God, and if they do not harmonise, they are perfectly contemptible in the judgment of every true lover of Scripture.' (p. 18)

Mackintosh accepts the Flood as universal and refers readers to 2 Peter 3 (p. 48). In E. J. Young (1949)¹⁹ we see a publication just prior to the explosion of 'creation science' as we know it today. His comments on Genesis 1 are so carefully written that it's almost impossible to detect on which side he stands:

'We are not to regard the chapter as the reworking by the Priestly School of a myth that was common to ancient tradition. Rather, the chapter is sober history. Although Genesis does not purport to be a textbook of science, nevertheless, when it touches upon scientific subjects, it is accurate. Science has never discovered any facts which are in conflict with the statements of Genesis 1. . . . It is geocentric only in a religious sense; not for an instant can its accurate statements be regarded as out of harmony with true science.'

(p. 49)

On the previous page his reference to 'days' is equivocal: 'The length of these days is not stated'.

In the accompanying diagram (Figure 1) I have sought to show the various approaches to Genesis 1-8. To follow the three movements, begin at the foot and work upwards. Creation scientists belong to the right-hand

side. They don't accept random events in the production of the universe, but purposeful acts of God. They differ from neo-orthodox evangelicals in accepting only one set of creative acts performed over six literal days.

Both neo-orthodox and conservative evangelicals believe in revelation and in creation as an act of God. However, the 'progressives' want to place these acts along a line of uniformitarian length at appropriate places. In particular, some see Adam and Eve as evolved humanoids with inbreathed souls. This makes Genesis 2:22 difficult. Also, in common with all except fiat creationists, they have difficulty with Genesis 1:14-18, as North is at pains to point out in his Genesis.²⁰

It will become clear from Figure 1 that neo-orthodox evangelicals use theological and 'scientific' (= evolutionary) suppositions to 'interpret' the Bible.

As a bonus, the diagram shows how an alliance with Marxism leads some liberal theologians into the 'liberation theology' now popular in the World Council of Churches. This regards salvation as not a personal but a political matter, taking some of Christ's sayings completely out of context. Instead of the social conscience which rightly belongs to the conservative evangelical,

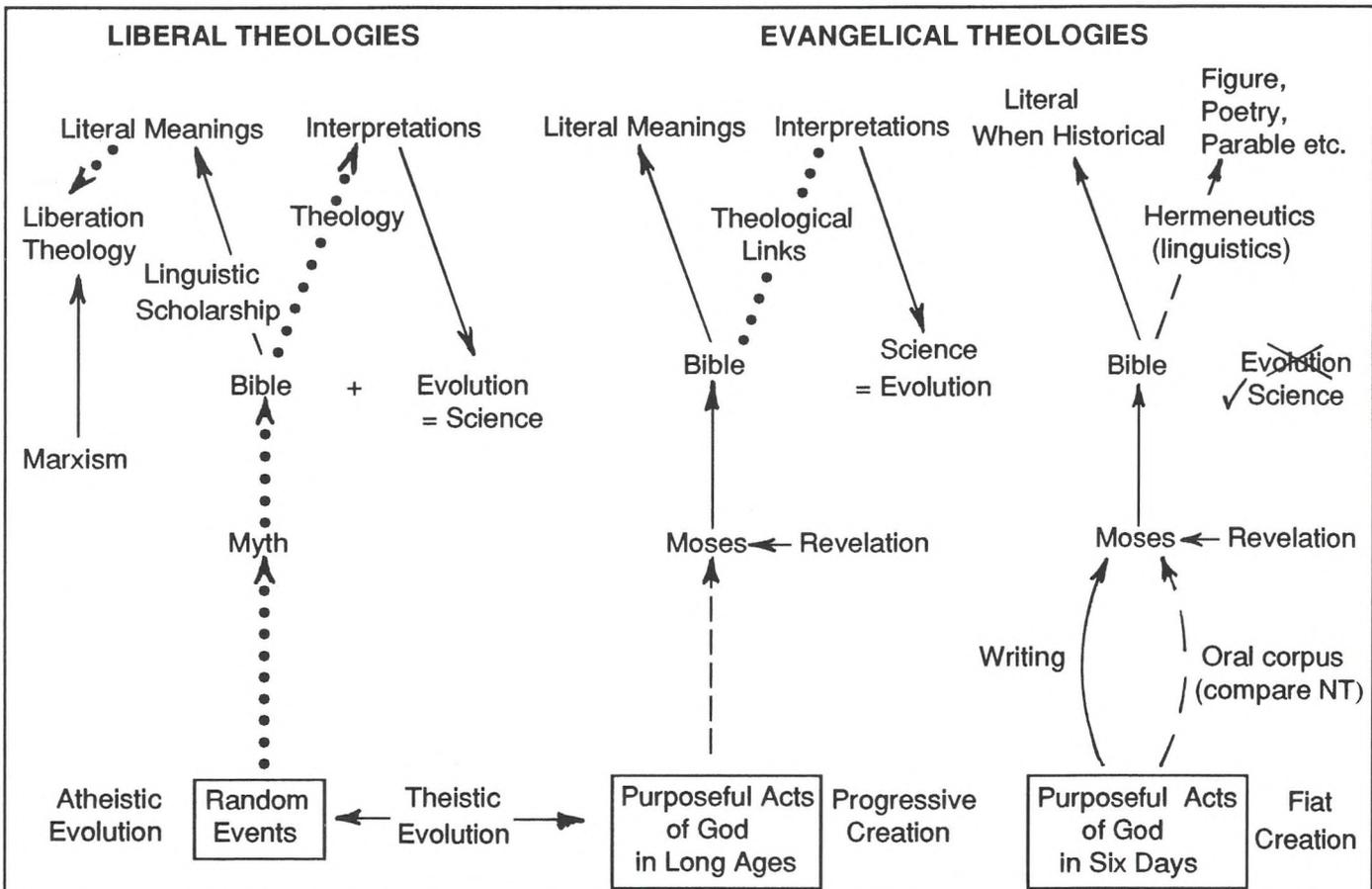


Figure 1. Summary of the various approaches to Genesis 1-8 amongst theologians.

they offer revolution, often violent. But their linguists frequently agree that the Bible literally says the earth was created in six days.

Why the complex situation indicated in the diagram? The weak point in people's thinking comes at the top of the middle section. Literal meanings in historical parts of Scripture have been replaced by figurative, literary or poetic interpretations. A false hermeneutic using a secularised theology in a deductive approach instead of a text-based biblical theology with an inductive approach is applied to the question of origins, judgment etc. Thus creation is reduced to tinkering with evolution and the Flood becomes a local accident.

A true hermeneutic accepts the plain reading of Scripture from a God who knows how to communicate. Figurative interpretations are valid only where literalism is illogical or ridiculous. It's not illogical or ridiculous to believe in an all-powerful God who can create a universe in six days, and even mend bodies by a creative process. And since He says just that in so many words there's no excuse for a super-spiritual approach to physical things which isn't truly spiritual but intellectual and philosophical only. With a God who raised our Lord Jesus from the dead, we are to expect miracles in the physical world.

One final point I would make is that miracle itself has to operate in the physical realm if it's to be credible to human beings. By over-dramatising the greatest miracle of the new birth, some have rejected as incredible the more tangible aspect of miracles. Scripture warns against this modern-day gnosticism (1 John 1:1ff). James warns that faith without works is dead, and Jesus used the raising of a paralytic to show that He had power to forgive sins. The physical realm is where God speaks to the unbeliever (Romans 1:20) and it is what sets Christianity apart from other religions, which are mostly mere philosophies.

A God who created such a remarkable universe and such remarkable genetic structures as those we understand to be in us, and all without benefit of ages of time, can certainly change an unregenerate sinner into a saved one and make him into a saint.

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