

Higher critical hogwash

A review of
*From Creation to New
Creation*
by Bernhard W. Anderson
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Bernhard Anderson is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. This work is part of the ‘Old Testament Perspectives’ series and is a reissue of the Augsburg/Fortress Press original.

It is clear right from the outset that Anderson is writing from a liberal higher critical perspective. On the very first page, in relation to the purpose of the creation account, he asserts that ‘Its primary concern is not the speculative question of the origin and genesis of the earth, a question that lies properly in the domain of natural science.’ He adds: ‘Whatever “science” is found in the biblical creation narrative is a legacy from the cosmological speculation of Israel’s neighbors and has been outmoded by the *Weltbild* or world-picture that modern science has brought to view.’ Rather than being a true and accurate historical account, Anderson asserts that ‘The atmosphere pervading the first chapter of Genesis is that of the community of worship’ (p. 2).

The book covers Genesis 1 (creation) to Genesis 10 (new creation), and its central message is that human beings, as image bearers of God, are His representatives on earth; that human dominion should be exercised wisely and benevolently; that misapplication of human dominion harms God’s creation; that human rebellion leads to judgment as evidenced by the Flood; and that the Noahic covenant reflects God’s irrevocable and unconditional commitment to His creation. Thus, ‘the story of creation is related theologically

to God’s redemptive activity, which is the ground of Israel’s praise’ (p. 210). Anderson does, however, acknowledge that the young-earth creationist view which sees Genesis as literal history was the mainstream view for many centuries.¹

The genre of Genesis

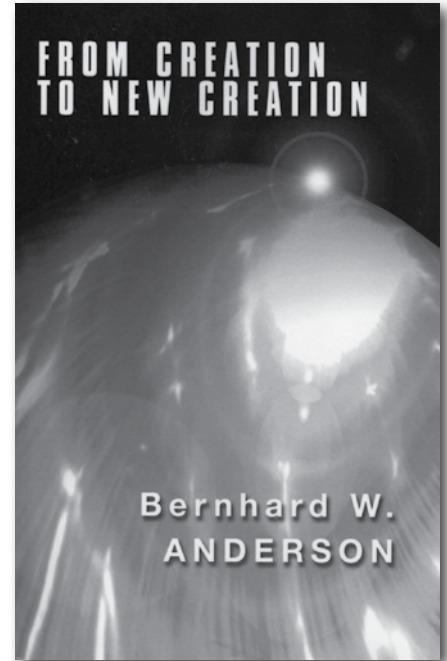
Anderson uncritically accepts the consensus of modern science, and therefore goes to great hermeneutical lengths to avoid any suggestion of the possibility that the creation account may actually have something to say about the actual world and its historical origins. He is content to see it purely as a theological treatise. But there is no need to think that theology and historical reality are mutually exclusive. Christianity is rooted in history. God has revealed Himself and interacted with His people in history, and Christ lived and died in history. If there was no historical Eden and no historical Fall, then there is no need for a historical death and resurrection.

Anderson also makes the following alarming observation:

‘There is increasing agreement that the creation account belongs to the genre of story, not history. Even conservative “evangelical” scholars are moving in this direction ... I would prefer to say that this is a mythopoetic account, in which imagery known in the ancient world ... was used to present an imaginative portrayal of creation’ (pp. 239–240).

This is alarming because Anderson is correct in noting that many ‘evangelical’ scholars are indeed moving toward this kind of interpretation! Yet, they do so against all the textual (and indeed scientific) evidence. The reason for this shift in interpretation appears to have more to do with scientific intimidation than with genuine exegetical and theological analysis.

According to Anderson, the biblical doctrine of creation ‘presupposes and



builds on the mythopoetic views of divine creation found in the ancient Near East ...’ (p. 19). However, Gerhard Hasel has shown that the so-called similarities between the Genesis creation account and the creation accounts of other ancient near-eastern civilizations are greatly exaggerated and are, in reality, quite superficial.²

Therefore, there appears to be no good reason to doubt that the early chapters of Genesis which discuss creation, the fall of mankind and the global Flood are any less historical or should be interpreted any differently than the rest of Genesis. As Gerhard Hasel rightly notes:

‘Compared to the hymns in the Bible, the creation account is not a hymn; compared to the parables in the Bible, the creation account is not a parable; compared to the poetry in the Bible, the creation account is not a poem; compared to cultic liturgy, the creation account is not a cultic liturgy. Compared to various kinds of literary forms, the creation account is not a metaphor, a story, a parable, poetry, or the like.’³

In fact, Steven Boyd has objectively shown, using statistical methods, that Genesis 1:1–2:3 is indeed historical narrative.⁴ By counting each of the four finite Hebrew verb forms

(preterite, imperfect, perfect and *waw*-perfect) in Genesis 1:1–2:3 and 96 other texts spread throughout the Old Testament (including 47 narrative and 49 poetic texts), Boyd demonstrated that preterite verb forms (also called *wayyiqtol* forms or *waw*-consecutive imperfects) clearly dominate the narrative texts, while perfect and imperfect verb forms clearly dominate the poetic texts.⁵ Using logistic regression—a technique commonly used to make predictions when two choices are involved—Boyd was able to classify each of the texts as narrative or poetry depending on its distribution of preterites. In the case of Genesis 1:1–2:3, it was statistically classified as narrative with a probability of 0.9999. This is an extraordinary level of confidence that amounts to virtual certainty.

Warped hermeneutics

Anderson uncritically accepts the standard higher critical approach to interpreting Genesis, including the discredited Julius Wellhausen's JEDP Documentary Hypothesis, which views the first eleven chapters as being the work of four different authors or authorial communities. This hermeneutical approach forms the basis of Anderson's interpretive framework, and he makes constant reference to it throughout the book. For example, 'Repetition, duplicate narratives, varying names of God, and other changes in vocabulary were typically seen as marks of different sources.'⁶ But, as Gordon Wenham explains, 'according to literary theory, such features may not be signs of a change of author but of the skill of one sophisticated author intent on holding his hearer's attention by recapitulating the story at key points (repetition) and by introducing subtle variation (contradictions).'⁶ In any case, scholars who adhere to the higher critical approach

'... fail to read Genesis as a coherent unity. Rather they still see it as two works (J and P) running in tandem. They use one part of J to elucidate other parts of J, and parts of P to elucidate other P passages,

but hardly ever is a J passage used to explain the meaning of a P passage or vice versa. This is a methodological blind spot. If a final redactor of Genesis worked with at least two sources J and P, he must have seen connections between the pieces of J and P that he arranged next to each other. It is the commentator's first duty to understand the present form of the text, what Genesis meant to its final editor or author ... This approach is not only sounder from the point of view of literary method, but also theologically. For at least two millennia, the Synagogue and then the Church read only the final form of the text. The final form was seen as the canonical and inspired text, on which the godly meditated and modeled their lives.'⁶

There is no doubt that the author or final redactor of the Genesis account (Moses) used different sources—be they written documents or, more likely, oral traditions—but evangelicals with a high view of Scripture believe that the selection and modification of source material occurred under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (cf. 2 Peter 1:20–21), and the final form of the account takes precedence over any reconstructed hypothetical source texts.

In light of his acceptance of higher critical theories and methods, it is not surprising to find that Anderson arrives at some rather bizarre conclusions. For example, he claims the Bible 'deals not with the processes and interconnections of the how but with the purpose and design of the who. Moreover, the Bible is not written in the kind of language in which words represent the precise sense of factual propositions (Wittgenstein)' (p. 99). Quoting Conrad Hyers and R.R. Marett: '... religion is not so much thought out as danced out ... But even when thought out, religion is focused in the verbal equivalent of the dance: myth, symbol, and metaphor. To insist on assigning to it a literal, one-dimensional meaning is to shrink and stifle and distort the significance' (p. 99). He adds: 'Biblical language does not aim for accuracy of description but uses language inaccurately, as

does a poet, to allude to God, who is beyond description and explanation' (p. 102). Fortunately, he does not go so far as to accept the reader-response hermeneutic, where, in the words of Northrop Frye, the Scriptures and other literary works are 'like a picnic to which the author brings the words and the reader the meaning' (p. 134).

The author's warped hermeneutical approach is also demonstrated by the fact that he spiritualises many of the elements in the Genesis 1–2 narrative in order to deny it represents literal history, yet has no problem interpreting elements in poetic texts literally (Psalm 148:4; 24:2; 104:5) in order to argue that the Israelites had a scientifically ignorant view of the physical world, even though these elements are either figures of speech or examples of phenomenological language! For example, in relation to Psalm 24:1–2, Anderson asserts: 'The statement in v. 2 that God founded the earth upon the "seas" ... established it upon "rivers" ... clearly reflects the ancient view of the earth as an island suspended over the primeval ocean ...' (p. 207). Yet, he also has no problem in rationalising certain texts when it suits him. The Flood, for example, is 'reminiscent of a natural calamity caused by rampaging waters of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers' (p. 159).

According to Anderson, we must '... regain an artistic appreciation of creation and the dwelling of human and nonhuman beings in it. If this is to happen, we must also liberate ourselves from a literalistic (and hence rationalistic) view of the biblical creation tradition, which in the past has led to unnecessary conflict between science and religion ... The rediscovery and refurbishing of the biblical creation tradition can take place on if we reject a hermeneutic that accommodates to a rationalistic, technological world and instead cultivate an artistic, poetic appreciation of the creation story. Viewed as story or narrative, the creation tradition opens up new horizons of ecological, ethical,

and philosophical/theological understanding' (p. 152).

Yet, these comments indicate a great deal of confusion: yes, we should avoid the rationalistic hermeneutic employed by old-earth creationists since the biblical account is historical, not strictly scientific. However, purely artistic and poetic perspectives must also be avoided since the account is in no way poetic. If anything needs refurbishing and cultivating, it is the account's historical nature and factual foundation.

Anderson points out that '... the creation faith affirms that God alone is the author of the meaning that supports all human history and the natural world, which is the theater of the historical drama. Human history and nature do not generate their own meaning. Rather, God's revelation creates the meaning that undergirds all existence' (p. 3).

Anderson is certainly correct on this point, so one must ask why he goes out of his way to ignore the testimony of this revelation—the canonical Genesis account—while preferring to make up his own fanciful view!

Genuine insights

There are, however, the odd few insights. Although he believes the Hebrew text of Genesis 1:1 is ambiguous with respect to an absolute beginning, Anderson does acknowledge that stylistic and contextual factors favour an absolute beginning. He rightly points out that the 'idea of "nature" as an autonomous sphere governed by natural law or set in motion by a first cause is not found in the Old Testament. The Creator stands in personal relationship to the creation' (p. 31). 'The goal of history will be a return to the beginning, not in the sense of a historical cycle that repeats itself, but in the sense that the original intention of the Creator, frustrated by creaturely rebellion and threatened by the insurgent powers of chaos, will be realized' (p. 38). 'In short, the biblical creation story deals with a cosmic matter—the *origination*

of all things—and it is in this sense that theologians have understood creation down through the centuries. Creation means that the cosmos is finite: it had a beginning and it will have an end' (p. 101). He also rightly acknowledges that Christ is the fulcrum of all of history, and that the kingdom of God is here already but not yet fully come.

It was also refreshing to see Anderson advocate a balanced view of science: 'It is based on human observation, experimentation, and control, and is—above all—neutral about questions of meaning' (p. 102).

Other shortcomings

Like most commentators, he has a strawman view of creationist hermeneutics and refers to advocates of creation science as holding to a 'strictly literal' interpretation of the Genesis account. Although creationists interpret the account as literal history, this is not the same as holding to a strictly literal interpretation. Young-earth creationists (generally) hold to a *grammatical-historical hermeneutic* which interprets the text and its constituent elements in relation to their grammatical, literary and historical context.

In reference to the theological and ethical application of Scripture to today's problems and challenges, Anderson rightly notes that 'some of the ethical problems that are "burning issues" for us were not even anticipated in biblical times' (p. 134), but goes on to name 'problems' such as overpopulation, and potential exhaustion of natural resources which are, in fact, not problems at all.⁷ 'The command to be fertile, multiply, and fill the earth has been amply fulfilled, as evident from the teeming population of the earth. In our time human dominion over the earth must mean seeking ways to hold population growth within the bounds that the earthly environment and economic well-being allow' (p. 141).

Conclusions

Given the totally different presuppositions of Anderson, the average evangelical—both young- and

old-earth creationists—will be left scratching their heads wondering what to make of much of this book. Genuine insights are few and far between. There is far too much pseudo-intellectual theological drivel, lots of unjustified assertions and special pleading, and politically correct and misinformed ecological preaching, but virtually no attempt to exegete the key texts or to justify conclusions with sound reasoning. Instead, there is just a whole lot of 'proof-texting'.

Anderson correctly points out that the creation account 'has too often been torn out of its native scriptural context and used as a warrant for ethical or philosophical views arrived at on other grounds. One should avoid this "modern use of the Bible". The basic interpretive rule is: read the creation story in its own narrative context' (p. 153). This is a rather ironic statement given the author's dependence on, and preoccupation with, the Documentary Hypothesis and other source-critical theories. Anderson would do well to follow his own advice on this matter, and let the canonical form of the text speak for itself.

References

1. Kulikovskiy, A S., Creation and Genesis: An Historical Survey, *CRSQ* 43(4):14–20, March 2007.
2. Hasel, G.F., The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology', *Evangelical Quarterly* 46:81–102, 1974.
3. Hasel, G.F., The Days of Creation in Genesis 1: Literal 'Days' or Figurative 'Periods/EPOCHS' of Time? *Origins* (GRI) 21(1):15–16, 1994.
4. Boyd, S., A proper reading of genesis 1:1–2:3; in: De Young, D. (Ed.), *Thousands ... Not Billions*, Master Books, Green Forest, AR, pp. 157–170, 2005.
5. There were two exceptions: (1) Exodus 33, which contains a large number of future references that are indicated by the use of the imperfect verb form. (2) Ezekiel 19, which is actually neither narrative nor poetry, but rather, an apocalyptic text. Genesis 1:1–2:3 has none of the features of these two texts.
6. Wenham, G.J., *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary, Word, Dallas, TX, p. xxxvi, 1998.
7. Steyn, M., *America Alone*, Regnery Publishing, Washington, DC, pp. 1–40, 2006.