

Rewriting the days of Genesis

Revisiting the Days of Genesis

B.C. Hodge

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Is the creation account history?

In this volume, Hodge claims to have found the true theological meaning of the early chapters of Genesis, and asserts that “the time period used by the Genesis author . . . [has] been almost completely misunderstood, even by scholars who see the primeval history as essentially a literary creation” (p. x). He used to view the Genesis account as straightforward narrative history, but now believes

“... the purpose of the narrative was not to describe the event, but use the event to convey a message in ancient mythic terms. In other words, the text was referring to an event, but was not describing the event in exact terms. It was conveying theology through an ancient language, which carried within its descriptions mythic imagery that formed epic genres that unfortunately only exist in our day in the form of fiction” (p. x).

He acknowledges that many scholars would take a mythological text as one that is not true, and a historically true text as one that is not mythological, but asserts that “[t]he biblical writers surely would have seen no such distinction” (p. xi). But how

could Hodge possibly know what the biblical writers would have thought?

Hodge rightly acknowledges that the text must be read in its context, and that the context includes more than just the immediate linguistic context, i.e. the sentence. Context also refers to the placement of the sentence in a paragraph, that paragraph in relation to the larger discourse, the larger discourse within a section or book, the book within the canon, and also the historical setting in which the words were written. He argues that misinterpretations of the text prevail due to a failure to read the text within all of these contextual spheres. However, he does not appear to understand that the priority and significance of these spheres decrease as we move out from the sphere of the sentence.

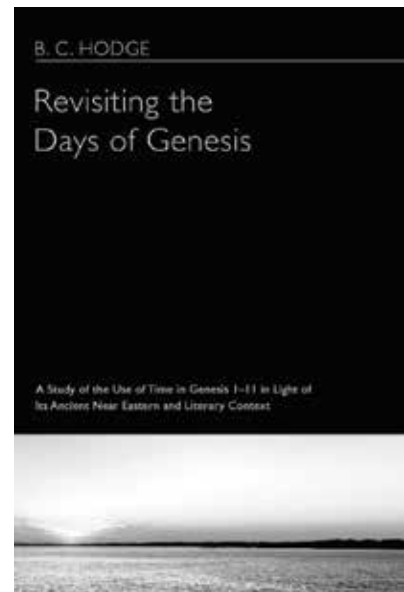
According to Hodge, “Genesis 1–11 is history, but not the type of history that the modern mind expects” (p. xxv). Instead, it is a history of God as Creator and Sustainer of His people. He claims it is ‘salvation history’,

“... a creation out of, and redemption from, chaos rather than something that seeks to report details of each and every event of the early history of the world as they literally occurred, as if that was even desirable or possible to record in a concise narrative in the first place” (p. xxv).

Hodge’s distinction is absurd. It is a bit like saying something is wet, but not in the same way that a modern mind understands the word ‘wet’! That is, Hodge’s notion of ‘history’ is not history at all! He has simply redefined the word yet retained its connotations.

Hodge asserts that the author is describing the creation event “in theological rather than literal terms”.

“This [salvation history], not the details of what is a largely unknown history, existing in bits and pieces of legendary material, is what is important to the author and



his readers, who are ever more concerned about survival and God’s intentions toward them in a chaotic and hostile world” (p. xxvi).

Apparently Hodge has superhuman knowledge and insight. How can he possibly know the minds of people who lived 4,000–6,000 years ago?

Unlike most other world religions, Christianity is distinct in that it is rooted in history, and the Bible is, above all, a book of history. As George Eldon Ladd wrote: “The God of Israel was the God of history The Bible is first of all a record of history. But history is recorded because it embodies the acts of God.”¹ Or as Graeme Goldsworthy explains, “the whole Bible presents its message as theology within a framework of history.”² Thus, the biblical record describes the origin of the universe as the beginning of history, and traces the acts of God and the exploits of humanity from creation to the incarnation of Christ and the establishment of the Church. As Francis Schaeffer argued, given that God revealed Himself in history, what sense would it make if this revelation in history was false?³

Again, it is precisely because Christianity is rooted in history that much of Scripture is historical. “God has set the revelation of the Bible in history;

He did not give it (as He could have done) in the form of a theological text book.”³ Therefore, as Rodney Decker points out, scripture employs historical narrative deliberately, and in such a way that

“[T]he historical basis (event) for the narrational [sic] depiction (text) is absolutely essential. The revelation value of the Bible depends on its history value Historical narrative explicitly appeals to history to verify what it teaches: names, places, events, dates etc. are cited If these references are not trustworthy, it casts grave doubt over the theology being propounded in narrative fashion.”⁴

Therefore, there is no reason to think that history and theology are mutually exclusive. A historical account can still be packed with theological motifs and teachings. What else would one expect from a God who has revealed Himself in history? It is no accident that Genesis 1:1, the first verse of both Genesis and the entire Bible, also sets the tone for both: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” This verse clearly and emphatically states that history had a beginning and this beginning originated with God. His creative acts brought about the process of human history.

Traditionally, the book of Genesis has been divided into two sections: primeval history (chapters 1–11) and patriarchal history (chapters 12–50).⁵ However, as David Clines notes:

“[I]t is most significant that there is no clear-cut break at the end of the Babel story. Clearly, Abrahamic material begins a new section of the Pentateuch, but the precise beginning of the Abrahamic material—and therewith the conclusion of the pre-Abrahamic material—cannot be determined. In the final form of Genesis, there is at no point a break between primeval and patriarchal history.”⁶

Therefore, since the ‘patriarchal’ history is generally regarded as an

accurate historical record, there is no reason why the ‘primeval’ history should not also be accepted as an accurate historical record. Thus, 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 noted:

“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.”⁷

Note also that the author, Moses, wrote in Hebrew using that language’s grammar and syntax, and in the exact form of classical Hebrew historical narrative. The form of the text of the creation account is exactly the same as that found throughout the rest of the book. The only sense in which the account can be considered unique is in regard to the actual specific supernatural events it records. In fact, Steven Boyd has objectively shown, using statistical methods, that Genesis 1:1–2:3 is indeed historical narrative.⁸

Nevertheless, Hodge appears to be obsessed with ancient near eastern myths and tries to fit everything he reads in these early chapters of Genesis into the framework of the mythical world presented in those accounts. They are the primary governing framework through which he reads the Genesis account. Yet Gerhard Hasel, however, 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.⁹ Furthermore, the patriarchs became patriarchs precisely because they

worshipped God, and believed Him, rather than the customs and myths of their neighbours. There is absolutely no indication in Scripture that they held any similar beliefs about creation. Indeed, it is inconceivable that the Old Testament writers would seek support in their neighbours’ pagan mythological works, which they would surely have detested and abominated. As Jewish commentator Umberto Cassuto writes:

“The purpose of the Torah in this section . . . is thus opposed to the concepts current among the peoples of the ancient East who were Israel’s neighbors; and in some respects it is also in conflict with certain ideas that had already found their way into the ranks of our people.”¹⁰

It is also highly unlikely that Moses and the Israelites were influenced by Egyptian and other ancient near eastern concepts. Although Moses was educated as an Egyptian, he was also the recipient of divine revelation, which stands in stark contrast to any Egyptian teaching. The Israelite people, on the other hand, lived separately from the Egyptians—in the land of Goshen (Genesis 46:34; 47:4)—and apparently maintained their culture and customs and did not intermarry with the Egyptians. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that they would have been educated alongside the Egyptians—particularly when they became the Egyptians’ slaves.

It should also be kept in mind that Genesis 1 is a revelation from God, not a description of the cosmology of the Hebrews or of Moses. Indeed, as E.J. Young points out, “[i]f the [Genesis account] is of human origination, how can it have a theological message or be regarded in any sense as the Word of God?”¹¹

There is no denying the creation narrative has a literary character and form. However, there is a tendency for many interpreters to de-emphasize the historical correspondence, and over-emphasize the literary attributes.

Regarding the straightforward nature of the language employed in the creation account, Calvin stated: “It must be remembered, that Moses does not speak with philosophical acuteness on occult mysteries, but states these things which are everywhere observed, even by the uncultivated, and which are in common use.”¹² Gerhard Von Rad writes:

“Genesis I presents the results of concentrated theological and cosmological reflexion in a language which is concise and always utterly direct in expression. Its statements are not allusive and charged with a hidden meaning ... but are everywhere clearly contoured and mean exactly what they say.”¹³

Likewise, Herman Bavinck affirms that the creation account presents no “saga or myth or poetical fantasy” but “presents history, which deserves faith and trust. And for that reason, Christian theology, with but few exceptions, has held fast to the literal, historical view of the account of creation.”¹⁴ Derek Kidner, also, notes the inescapable impression that the characters of Genesis “are people of flesh and blood” and “the events actual and the book itself a unity”¹⁵

Note also that the creation account contains all the usual grammatical markers one would expect to find in historical narrative. Gesenius’s Hebrew grammar states:

“One of the most striking peculiarities in the Hebrew consecution of tenses is the phenomenon that, in representing a series of past events, only the first verb stands in the perfect, and the narration is continued in the imperfect [emphasis in original].”¹⁶

Indeed, this is exactly what we find in Genesis 1: The first verb, בָּרָא (*bārā*, “created”), is a Qal perfect, which is then followed by a series of Qal imperfects, including וַיֹּאמֶר (*wāyyōmēr*, “and ... said”), וַיַּרְא (*wāyyārē*, “and ... saw”) and וַיְהִי (*wāyehi*, “and ... was”).

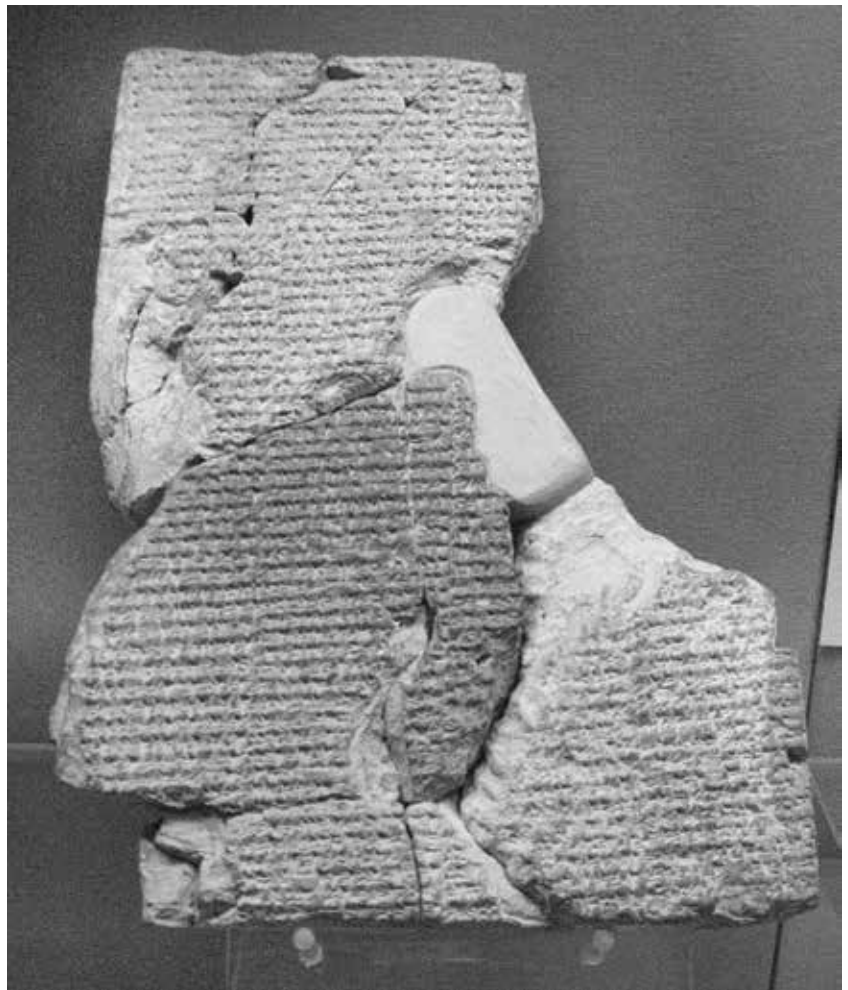


Photo: Wikipedia/Jack1956

Figure 1 Hodge appears more interested in myths and tales from the ancient near east, such as the Atra-Hasis Epic (pictured), than what the biblical text actually says. These myths govern the way he reads the Genesis account.

At the higher literary level, typical elements of Hebrew narrative include (1) point of view, (2) characterization, (3) dialogue, (4) narration framework or glue, (5) plot, and (6) repetition.¹⁷ Indeed, all of these elements are clearly exhibited in the early chapters of Genesis. The point of view is clearly that of an observer on earth. The serpent is characterized as shrewd and cunning. Dialogue occurs between God and Adam, Adam and Eve, and the serpent and Eve. The grammatical constructions outlined above form the narration framework, and the plot involves the creation of mankind in the image of God in a pristine universe, mankind’s rebellion against

his Creator and the cursing of creation as a consequence. The account also contains a great deal of repetition.¹⁸

In addition, many other scriptures make allusions to the historicity of the Genesis account.¹⁹ This led Leupold to conclude that

“[t]he account as it stands expects the impartial reader to accept it as entirely literal and historical. The use made of it in the rest of Sacred Scriptures treats every part referred to as sober fact, not as a fancy-picture.”²⁰

Similarly, Allan MacRae considers the passage to be “as factual and literal as any section anywhere in the Bible.”²¹ Indeed, “Hebrew

history taught and accepted the historicity of Adam.”²² Therefore, both the grammatical structure and the narrative style of Genesis 1–2, as well as the allusions to the creation events found in other scriptures, all suggest that the account is a positive record of things as they actually happened.

Mythic language

Nevertheless, Hodge repeatedly asserts that the Genesis accounts should be seen as “literary rather than literal because they primarily convey theological messages rather than historical events” (p. xx). But why do they have to be one or the other? Again history and theology are not mutually exclusive. Because he believes the text is primarily theological rather than a descriptive account, Hodge argues that “*If in fact* these traditional pieces of material represent, rather than measure and detail [sic] the events they describe, and are molded in accordance with the larger theological purposes of the narrative, then it is very likely that the temporal language used within the narratives is also representative of the time of those events. In other words, the author[’]s use of time within the text is literary rather than literal” (p. xxvii).

But the operative phrase here is “if in fact”—that’s the thing that must first be determined: *is it a fact?* Hodge asserts that the creation account employs mythic language, and then, without giving any evidence or support to substantiate this assertion, he simply proceeds to interpret the account by presupposing that it does indeed employ mythic language! For example, he claims that, for the biblical authors, truth “should be conveyed to its audience with all of the symbolism and excitement of mythic language” (p. 3). Why should mythic language be the primary vehicle for communicating truth? Given that evangelical theology is rooted in salvation history and evangelicals subscribe to the

correspondence theory of truth (i.e. truth is that which corresponds to reality), historical narrative is clearly best suited to communicate both historical and theological truth! In fact, Hodge makes no attempt at all to interact with the extensive scholarship (summarized above) that demonstrates that the early chapters of Genesis were indeed normal classical historical narratives which set the foundation for God’s progressive revelation through salvation history.²³

This book is full of bold and completely unsubstantiated assertions. Hodge states that “in Genesis, people, places, and events are all used to support very impressionist and abstract narratives that communicate theology to their religious audience” (p. 4). Firstly, what theology is the author trying to communicate, and why did he choose this particular form of language, among many other forms, to communicate his theology, especially since, according to Hodge, the vast majority of interpreters have got it all wrong? Secondly, Hodge appears to know as little about artistic genres and he does about biblical ones. ‘Impressionist’ artwork was not ‘abstract’! The Impressionists always depicted real people, objects, and events; they just embellished their subjects using short brush strokes and exaggerated unmixed colours, and tried to depict *movement*.²⁴

Regarding the biblical authors’ use of mythic language, he writes:

“I think it is more accurate to say that they are not attempting to describe reality in terms of understanding cosmology/nature, but instead employing mythic language, that they very well may have believed otherwise, as a means to understanding theology” (p. 7).

In other words, the text is only concerned with communicating theological truth and bears no relation at all to historical reality. But how can he possibly know this from simply reading the text? “I simply do not believe that there is any biblical text that attempts

to teach cosmology, but every biblical text does intend to teach theology” (p. 8). Once again, why can’t the Bible teach both theology and history? This is eisegesis not exegesis. Hodge is free to believe whatever he likes but he offers nothing to persuade the reader to adopt his position.

Temporal language

Hodge claims that temporal language can be added to a text in order to fit the purposes of the author’s theological message:

“Although many of the events, for the author, originally took place in real time, the temporal language that is employed for the purpose of setting and theology ought to be seen as connected to the larger language and purpose of the narrative. ... Hence, time measurements, especially in the primeval period, are representations of something else. Either they are symbolic of the real time during which an event took place, or they represent an imagery that contributes to the argument of the text in some way. In this sense, temporal language is symbolic” (p. 9).

His only support for this notion of mythic time is a citation from biblical theologian Brevard Childs (although he consistently but incorrectly refers to him as ‘Bervard’!), which is ultimately nothing more than an appeal to authority. Once again, Hodge simply assumes the very thing he has an obligation to substantiate and/or prove. Therefore, he feels free to spin the following tale without providing any evidence or support:

“The use of a time period in a particular text certainly conveys something real in the author’s mind, but the actual measurement of that time period often conveys something that supports the theological message of the narrative. Attempting to establish the time period of primeval events by their symbolic representations within

the narrative, therefore, is much like trying to establish the time period of Middle Earth in *The Lord of the Rings* In a similar manner, the author of Genesis uses these time periods that, in his mind, represent real events, but the actual measurements of those time periods employed convey ideas that support the theology he desires to communicate. Confusion between the internal and external referents of time, therefore, is often at play in misinterpreting the intentions of the narrative and its use of the event it subjugates to its purposes” (p. 159).

Firstly, the narrative does not have ‘intentions’ or ‘purposes’—the author does—and the author’s intentions and purposes can only be determined from what the author has actually written. Secondly, how can Hodge know that the author was not referring to actual time measurements in the Genesis account, when the same author was clearly referring to actual time measurements in the numbered sequence of days in Numbers 29:12–35.

According to Hodge, there is no “standard, orthodox interpretation of the temporal language used in Genesis 1–11 that automatically excludes further investigation into the text” (p. 18), and claims that those who advocate such a thing “ignore history” and “deny the text any further voice to speak beyond the reader’s cultural blinders, presuppositions, and fears in order to communicate to him a greater understanding of its theological message.” But who is really ignoring history and suffering cultural blindness here? Hodge offers no evidence or argument based on cultural factors, and his survey of the history of interpretation is extremely superficial and selective. The history of interpretation shows that the plain reading of the text with literal days is indeed the orthodox view and was held by the majority of Church Fathers and the early Jewish rabbis long before any modern attacks on the voracity of Scripture.²⁵

In response to those who cite Exodus 20:9–11 as proof that the days of creation were indeed literal, Hodge argues that this interpretation would “give credence to the false assumption that if two objects are placed in an analogy with one another, and one object is literal, then both objects must be literal” (p. 67). He adds: “Analogies from fiction are applied continually, in all quarters, to real events that occurred in life.” The problem with this objection is that Exodus 20:9–11 is not using the creation days as an analogy! An analogy is in an extended simile: it is used to state that X is like Y. But that is not what Exodus 20:9–11 is saying! Rather, it is establishing a pattern. The text states that we should work for six days then break on the seventh for the Sabbath, because that is what God did when He created the universe and everything in it. The Hebrew conjunction ׀, (*ki*) usually translated as ‘for’ or ‘because’ expresses a causal connection, not a conceptual similarity.²⁶

Conceit and hubris

The book is full of conceited claims like the following:

“The biblical authors are not realist painters. They are impressionists and abstract artists that seek to paint the historical picture in terms of a literary masterpiece that conveys a theological message, and will give their audience a greater understanding of God and his work in the world. “Hence, the much proclaimed objection that Genesis 1–11 is not a strict example of poetry, and therefore is not symbolic, has a base understanding of literature. . . . All literature, as stated above, is a picture that has been painted by an author. Symbolism, therefore, can be painted into any picture . . .” (p. 10).

He offers no evidence or argument to support any of these claims. His mere pronouncements simply make them true. According to Hodge, “[T]he assumption that the literalistic hermeneutic is the ‘plain reading’ is

only a modern illusion created by the Enlightenment-oriented reader who does not share the language and culture of the original recipients of the text” (p. 13). His hubris appears to have no limits:

“To pretend that accurate communication can only come from a realist view of an act, event, or conversation, rather than taking upon the clothing of an impressionistic or abstract form of communication, is not only inaccurate, but seeks to hinder God’s Word in a false form of piety” (p. 12).

Hodge’s superhuman knowledge and insight in relation to the writer of Genesis is simply astonishing! He asserts that the “plain reading” of the text is actually the way the ancient reader would have read it, rather than the way a modern reader “has his or her own language and conceptual world, which inherently causes him or her to take what he reads out of context without him or her even knowing it.” He is, of course, correct in that the text should be read as the original audience would have read it, but he seems to be forgetting that *he himself is a modern reader* with his own language and conceptual world! Hodge believes the account is mythical rather than a strictly historical description, and simply takes “what he reads out of context without him . . . even knowing it.” He makes no substantial attempt to argue why the account should be read his way, as opposed to reading it as a historical description. He simply asserts how the text should be read and proceeds on that basis.

Hubristic language pervades the whole book. If you disagree with the author, you are a naive and ignorant person who ignores history and is blinded by your own presuppositions. Hodge, on the other hand, is never blinded by *his* presuppositions. He just knows and understands what has escaped the very best exegetes in history.

The author's intent

Hodge repeatedly claims the author's intent was to communicate theological truth rather than literal history, or actual people, places, and events. But such claims can only be made for reasons apart from what the text actually says. Usually, it is motivated by the need to avoid any perceived conflict with modern science. Yet, the author's intent and purpose for writing is surely expressed in the text itself. How else can a reader know the author's intention apart from what the author actually states in the text? The meaning of the text must be discovered first, before there can be any hope of determining the author's intent. As Norman Geisler rightly states, "Purpose does not determine meaning. Rather, meaning determines purpose."²⁷ An interpreter discovers the meaning, and hence the purpose, of the text by studying the individual verses and their context. Suggestions of intent and purpose which are not directly derived from the text itself can only come from the interpreter's imagination. Therefore, ascribing an intent and purpose which is not directly derived from the text is to subordinate Scripture to the imagination of the interpreter.

Conclusion

Hodge's fanciful interpretation is just plain ridiculous. Would he be prepared to apply the same kind of hermeneutic to the Gospels? Don't they also primarily communicate a theological message rather than merely describing historical events? Perhaps Christ's virgin birth, miracles, and death, Resurrection, and Ascension are simply mythic language or literary devices that refer to events that were actually much different from their literary descriptions?

John J. Collins warns that "[m]any conservative biblicists have invoked literary criticism as a way of avoiding unwelcome historical conclusions. ...

It should be clear that such evasions will not work. ... 'Story' is not 'history'. It is essentially fiction, material which in some measure has been invented."²⁸

Such denials of intended meaning and purpose through literary criticism appear to be endemic in all modern historical studies. As Historian G.R. Elton observed:

"In battling against people who would subject historical studies to the dictates of literary critics we historians are, in a way, fighting for our lives. Certainly, we are fighting for the lives of innocent young people beset by devilish tempters who claim to offer higher forms of thought and deeper truths and insights. [This is] the intellectual equivalent of crack."²⁹

It is truly disappointing to see a graduate of institutions that have traditionally been staunchly evangelical with a high view of Scripture, proposing such preposterous readings of the Genesis account of creation. Unfortunately, it seems to be a growing trend among evangelical leaders, scholars, and institutions.

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- Kidner, D., *Genesis*, Tyndale, London, p. 22, 1967. Unfortunately, many interpreters do a poor job of interpreting narrative, and especially the creation account. Common errors include allegorizing (interpreting text in a manner which completely ignores its original meaning or in a manner which is completely arbitrary), and decontextualizing (ignoring historical or literary context).
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- E.g. "And God said ... and it was so." "And God saw that it was good." "There was evening and there was morning—the [Xth] day." Richard L. Pratt adds: "Perhaps the most common technique Old Testament [narrative] writers employed was *repetition* [emphasis in original]." (He Gave Us Stories, P and R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, p. 245, 1990.)
- E.g. Exod. 20:9-11, 31:17; Ps. 8, 104; Matt. 19:4-6; Mark 13:9; Luke 3:38; John 1:3,10; Rom. 8:19-22; Col. 1:16; 2 Pet. 3:5 and Heb. 4:4, 11:3.
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