

biblical books, especially where the evidence might be construed to point against authenticity, as with 2 Peter and the pastoral epistles. However, Ehrman's book only succeeds if one is determined to ignore the growing number of evangelical scholars who strongly affirm biblical inerrancy. As Ehrman argues, their theological stance *does* inform their arguments about the canonical books, but no more than Ehrman's stance informs his.

This book should be read by people who want to read the best arguments from a 'skeptical' perspective on authorship, but it should not be read in isolation from the perspective of noted evangelical scholars who affirm genuine authorship of the various NT books.

Ehrman has, perhaps inadvertently, performed two valuable services for the Christian community. He has brought together a comprehensive and interesting account of forgeries coming out of early Christianity, and he has gathered together in one place the arguments against the NT canon that Christians should be prepared to address so that we can defend our faith.

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In the beginning ... they misunderstood

*In the Beginning ...
We Misunderstood*

Johnny V. Miller and John M. Soden

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Johnny Miller is a pastor and a professor emeritus at Columbia International University, a Christian college in South Carolina. John Soden is a former pastor and now teaches Old Testament at Lancaster Bible College, Pennsylvania. Both are graduates of the conservative, evangelical Dallas Theological Seminary. They start the book by recounting how they began as young-earth creationists who understood the Genesis account as a largely literal account of what actually happened in the beginning, but began to question their beliefs as a result of scientific truth claims.

Miller, for example, says he discovered that what he thought were watertight proofs for a young earth were highly debatable, although he gives no specific examples. He was apparently confronted by the question of whether God would introduce into the world apparent evidence of an old earth if it would deceive people into believing something that was not true. He also claims to have checked the footnotes of a handful of creationist publications and found that many other citations of scientific literature were taken out of context or were impossible to find. Again, he offers no specific examples to substantiate his claim.

Soden claims to have been told by young-earth creationists that if he did not believe in the literal creation (young Earth and 24-hour days) then



he did not “believe the Bible or have the faith of Abraham” (p. 22). He took this to imply that they believed he was not saved. However, no leading or notable YEC would ever claim that belief in a young earth is necessary for salvation.

Miller and Soden claim to share the concerns of Christian students who flounder in a fight when challenged with a scientific worldview that conflicts with young-earth creationism and who are unaware of alternative biblical interpretations. Therefore, their target audience is lay Christians who have a high interest in the creation account and who are either unprepared or unmotivated to wade through highly technical material on the subject.

Meaning, intention, and the audience

The authors claim they have repeatedly been told that the only reason Christians would not take Genesis 1 literally is if they are really

Darwinists and are therefore trying to change scripture to fit their scientific beliefs. There is a core of truth to this claim. I would not go so far as to argue that Christians who argue against a young-earth interpretation are necessarily Darwinists, but I do believe that such people are intimidated by scientific truth claims about uniformitarian geology, and see them as more authoritative than scriptural statements. Indeed, creationist writings on the history of abandonment of a straightforward Genesis point to the influence of Darwin's mentor Charles Lyell and his denial of a global Flood.¹

Miller explains that he assumed that Genesis was written to answer the questions of origins that people are asking today, but adds that he had never asked the most vital question of all:

“What did Moses mean when he wrote this text? . . . Was he writing to discredit any modern theory of evolution? Were his readers troubled by calculations of the speed of light and the distance of the galaxies from earth? Were they puzzling over the significance of DNA? Were they debating a young earth versus an old earth? . . . [T]he logical question is, what was on their minds? How would they have understood Genesis 1? . . . What did Genesis mean to the original author and original readers?” (p. 21).

Likewise, Soden posits that Genesis 1 was not written to answer the question of how long it took God to create, but instead is more concerned with the character and role of the One who created. He claims that he was presented with increasingly complex issues and began to realize a renewed force to questions he had once easily dismissed. Moreover, he contends that science should cause a careful re-examination of the text and what it actually says, as opposed to what we assume it says.

But all this is irrelevant. Genesis 1 is not a dialogue. It is written revelation in the form of historical narrative that intends to tell us something, not to answer arbitrary questions. Indeed, the authors themselves note that

“[t]he most vital question for the interpreters of any literature . . . to ask is, what did the human author (and ultimately the divine Author, God the Holy Spirit) intend for his original audience to understand when they read this passage?” (p. 35).

Nevertheless, the authors repeatedly make the listeners' point of view not just the dominant view, but the only view. Over and over they assume that God was speaking to the Hebrews on the basis of ‘what they would hear’, rather than on the basis of what God intended to communicate (p. 152). The authors do this by erroneously claiming that how the Hebrews understood things is the guiding principle of interpretation. This frees the interpretive process from any empirical verification against the actual Genesis text and transfers locus of meaning to the Hebrew audience.

The authors' basic thesis is that God used ideas and concepts they were already familiar with in order to communicate His truth, i.e. ‘God was meeting people where they are.’ But if this is really the case, why did Jesus not come to Earth as a conquering Messiah? This was, after all, precisely what the Jewish people, including Jesus' own disciples, were expecting (Matt 2:1–6; 20:20–21). Indeed, from a humanist perspective, Jesus would have been seen as *lousy* at ‘meeting people where they are’, because He lost most of His disciples (John 6:66).

In any case, the authors' claims reflect a great deal of chronological snobbery, as C.S. Lewis would say. That is, the early Hebrews, being a pre-scientific people, were really a mob of stupid, ignorant, unsophisticated, culturally backward people, who were incapable of understanding basic

narrative regarding how something was accomplished. But if these same dumb Hebrews could not understand a basic account of how God created the universe, then how could they understand that *Elohim* was the only god, especially since *Elohim* is in the plural form!

Moreover, the authors hold to a view of progressive revelation which assumes this means that newer revelation supersedes previous revelation. To them, revelation is ‘evolutionary’, so we can do away with many of the things in the Old Testament.

Science, theology, or history?

Miller and Soden repeatedly refer to the YEC position as a belief that the Genesis account is a ‘scientific’ description of the creation. This is a straw man. What YECs actually believe is that Genesis 1–2 is primarily a *historical* account of God's supernatural acts during Creation Week. Indeed, the text itself has all the characteristics and hallmarks of classical Hebrew historical narrative.² The authors' incorrect view of what YECs believe leads to other straw-man arguments in the book and severely weakens their position. This should not be surprising given that they hardly cite any recent YEC works.

The authors claim that both old-earth and young-earth creationists read the biblical text through the worldview of a modern person, not through the worldview of ancient Israelites. In addition, they assert that the YEC view goes against clear science evidence:

“Young Earth Creationists treat the Bible with the same concordist approach when they read Genesis 1 as if it were science, and then try to make it fit into a scientific framework. They have the additional problem of trying to squeeze science into what they understand from Genesis 1, working against the majority of scientific indicators that seem to point to an old earth” (p. 38).

Again, YECs read the account as historical revelation, not as a scientific description. We do not need to squeeze science into our interpretation because we believe the account is inherently supernatural. Moreover, scientific data only indicates an old earth if certain assumptions are made. If other assumptions are made, that same data is consistent with a young earth and a global Flood.

Miller and Soden claim that there are indications that Genesis should not be taken literally:

“... if we understood that it was meant to be read literally as a scientifically accurate explanation of creation and the origin of all forms of life, then we would read it as a text written deliberately to contradict much of the scientific teaching and theory of today The text would contradict the apparent significance of the mapping of animal and human genomes, which seem to show interrelationship between different species. It would contradict generally accepted scientific conclusions relating to the age of the universe and the earth. Were it to be believed scientifically, it would force an entirely different approach to science” (p. 47).

These statements demonstrate the authors’ total ignorance of genetics and the way science works. The mapping of human and animal genomes does not indicate an interrelationship—rather, the interrelationship is *assumed* as the best explanation for cherry-picked similarities (homologies), while a common Creator is rejected *a priori*. And the history of science clearly and repeatedly demonstrates that generally accepted scientific conclusions are often quite wrong!

Nevertheless, the authors are convinced that Genesis 1 should not to be taken literally. Instead, they assert that Genesis 1, when understood in the original language and setting, leads them to conclude that it is “a broadly figurative presentation of literal truths”

(p. 48), and that the text itself indicates this more figurative approach. Yet, these beliefs and assertions are at odds with the authors’ own personal stories in chapter 1. Despite both having received post-graduate training in theology and exegesis at a first-rate theological seminary, they appear to have been blissfully unaware of the supposed figurative nature of Genesis until relatively recently.

While the Bible—and, indeed, the Genesis account—does contain some figurative language, that does not mean or imply that the creation account as a whole is figurative. Indeed, the authors themselves, citing Tremper Longman and Numbers 12:7–8, acknowledge that God spoke to Moses “mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles” (p. 59).

Note also that Jesus makes only one direct reference to creation (Matt 19; Mark 10). In Matthew 19, Jesus cited Genesis 1:27, Genesis 2:24, and Genesis 5:2. In these passages, Jesus clearly understood the creation of Adam and Eve as a literal, historical act. There is no hint of figurative language, nor did Jesus make any reference to Egyptian or other ANE myths (figure 1). Then again, perhaps Jesus simply misunderstood? Indeed, some theistic evolutionists even explicitly say that Jesus was wrong about this.³

Exegetical issues

Miller and Soden argue that the presence of the definite article on Day 6 alone is significant because it is very unusual, and argue that this is not what a Hebrew reader might have expected. “It is as if the writer is telling the reader to pay attention because this is not a normal week” (p. 50). They cite Bruce Waltke: “The lack of the definite article on each of the first five days suggests they may be dischronologized.” Apart from being presumptuous about what a Hebrew reader would expect, the authors are telling only half the story. Unlike the

following days, the designation of the first day employs a cardinal (‘one day’).

“[The] omission of the article . . . must be read as ‘one day,’ thereby defining a day as something akin to a twenty-four hour solar period with light and darkness and transitions between day and night, even though there is no sun until the fourth day. This would then explain the lack of articles on the second through fifth days. Another evening and morning constituted ‘a’ (not ‘the’) second day. Another evening and morning made a third day, and so forth.”⁴

Moreover, the article on Day 6 actually modifies the ordinal number *sīssī* (sixth), not *yôm* (‘day’). Therefore, Steinmann concludes:

“This would indicate that the sixth day was a regular solar day, but that it was also *the culminating day of creation* . . . the use of אָחַר in Gen 1:5 and the following unique uses of the ordinal numbers on the other days demonstrates that the text itself indicates that these are regular solar days [emphasis in original].”⁵

The authors also bring up the old chestnut of having evenings and mornings before the creation of the sun: “‘Evening and morning’ are ordinary terms that refer to the setting and rising of the sun from the perspective of the earth” (p. 52). This is a nonsense argument, as they would have known if they had bothered with even a minimal check of YEC resources. Rarely, if ever, do people use the terms ‘evening’ and ‘morning’ to refer to the actual moment of sunset and sunrise respectively. The terms ‘morning’ and ‘evening’ may simply refer to particular (short) periods of time during the day. The word ‘evening’ is often used to generally describe the period of time at the end of the work day, that is, between finishing work and going to bed. Indeed, it is during this period of time that most people have their ‘evening’ meal, yet this does not necessarily mean that they actually eat it while the sun is setting! Similarly,

‘morning’ can refer to any time before midday, not just the short period of time when the sun is emerging from the horizon.

Another explanation for the existence of evenings and mornings before the creation of the sun is that God created a temporary directional light source and a rotating proto-Earth. Indeed, the rabbinic interpreters held that God created a primeval light not dependent on the sun, which came into existence at God’s command but was later withdrawn and stored up for the righteous in the messianic future. One rabbi wrote: “The Holy One, blessed be He, enwrapped Himself in light like a garment, and the brilliance of His splendor shone forth from one end of the Universe to the other.”⁶ Indeed, in the book of Revelation, there is a future with no need for the sun because the Lamb of God will be the light (Rev. 21:23).

Again, the authors argue that the absence of the formula “and then there was evening and then there was morning” from Day 7 is evidence that it was a perpetual, never-ending day. But this is an argument from silence. Just because the author of the account did not explicitly refer to an evening and a morning on the seventh day does not mean there was no evening or morning! In any case, Herman

Hoeksema has highlighted the futility of this argument:

“It has sometimes been alleged that the seventh day, the day of God’s rest, certainly must have been a longer period, seeing that the Lord God is still resting of His work of creation, and that therefore it is exegetically very well conceivable that also the six days of creation were long periods. But against this it may be remarked, in the first place, that this argument annihilates itself. For if this were the significance of the seventh day, then the seventh day lasts forever. God never creates again. In that case also the other days of the creation week were everlasting. And this last supposition is, of course, nonsense. But, in the second place, this certainly is not the significance of God’s rest on the seventh day. This rest was a hallowing, through which the Lord God, together with His creature that was created in His image, rejoiced in all the works of His hands. And this certainly was not an everlasting day, although the rest of God was [an] image of the eternal rest in His tabernacle. But the day itself was twenty-four hours.”⁷

According to Miller and Soden, Exodus 31:17 also indicates Genesis 1 is figurative, because it refers to “the refreshment of God”. God was not literally weary. Thus, they claim this is “an analogy rather than an equation” (p. 54). Although the authors acknowledge that Exodus 31:17 is used as an argument for a literal seven-day week, they claim there is a problem with such reasoning: “If all is to be taken literally, then it must be literally true that God became tired and was refreshed after his rest” (p. 53). The Hebrew word *nāpāš* (‘refresh oneself’) does imply a recovery from tiredness and fatigue. But note that fatigue and tiredness are distinctive consequences of bodily existence. Since God has no body, and in the light of the verses

discussed above, *nāpāš* cannot refer to God being literally refreshed after being tired from His creative activities. Rather, this is an anthropomorphism. God was refreshed in that, after a short stoppage, His desire, excitement, and enthusiasm for interacting with His creation was reignited. Leon Morris writes: “So we should think of the rest as something like the satisfaction that comes from accomplishment, from the completion of a task, from the exercise of creativity.”⁸ The presence of a simple anthropomorphism does not imply the entire verse is anthropomorphic or figurative in any way.

Miller and Soden contend that “... everyone who assumes the two accounts are not contradictory but complementary will also argue that the author intended to give a nonchronological order in chapter 2 in order to make a theological point If chapter 2 is out of order for theological reasons, why must chapter 1 be in order chronologically?” (p. 56).

They add:

“One cannot take both Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 ‘literally’ without creating contradictions between the creation accounts.”

But this is nonsense. Genesis 2 is not out of order as such. Rather, it is an expansion or elaboration of the events of day 6, and the verb ‘to form’ in Genesis 2:19 should be understood as *pluperfect*, as commentators have pointed out before these authors were born: “Now the Lord God *had formed*”

Questions of science

Miller and Soden claim to know several scientists who love God intimately and are committed to the absolute authority of Scripture, but who also believe in an ancient creation. This may be true, but that does not mean their interpretation of either Scripture or scientific data is correct. Indeed, Miller acknowledges that science does not determine what the Bible



Figure 1. Gilgamesh Epic. Miller and Soden believe Moses simply adapted Egyptian and other ANE creation texts.

means nor does it determine whether the Bible is true. He acknowledges that the latest scientific research has never been the last word. The latest opinion or discovery always stands ready to be modified or discarded by a subsequent finding. Nevertheless, despite the authors' acknowledging that "the latest science isn't always right but neither is the church's interpretation of the Bible always correct" (p. 26), their general approach throughout the book is that the truth claims of scientists are more reliable than any interpretation of Scripture.

In an attempt to illustrate their point, they cite the trial against Galileo (figure 2), which they ignorantly view as a conflict between empirical science and church doctrine. This popular but erroneous notion has been thoroughly refuted elsewhere,⁹ but a few factual errors in this book need to be pointed out. Their claim that "Galileo studied the heavens through his improved telescope [and] confirmed by observation that the revolutionary teachings of Copernicus (1473–1543) and Kepler (1571–1630) were true: the earth along with other planets, moved around the sun" (p. 27) is not remotely

true. Galileo confirmed nothing with observations, because he was not a strictly experimental scientist. He regarded the Copernican system as axiomatic, and therefore did not feel any need to provide proofs, except one involving tides that was fallacious. To cover for his lack of proof, he resorted to mere rhetoric. Moreover, Galileo ignored Kepler's work and continued to advocate Copernicus' circle-based 'epicycloids', even though Kepler had already presented a much better theory of elliptical orbits.

Miller and Soden claim Galileo was the victim of a kind of groupthink—centuries of tradition, both in the church and in academia. Moreover, the young-earth interpretation of Scripture is the result of similar groupthink. But the authors appear to assume that 'groupthink' only applies to young-earth creationists! In any case, Galileo's main opponents were in the scientific community rather than the church, which was generally supportive. In fact, after Galileo and his former friend turned bitter enemy, Pope Urban VIII, had both died, the personality politics ended, and intel-

lectuals in the church readily taught geokinetic theories.¹⁰

While the authors do at times acknowledge that science is not the final word, this appears to be just a philosophic sop, an insincere concession to make the authors appear 'balanced' and grounded in Scripture. The reality though, is that they place more weight on scientific truth claims. It is very clear in a number of places that modern science is considered authoritative and beyond question regarding the age and origins of the earth.

Ancient Near-Eastern background

Miller and Soden assert that Moses used Egyptian mythology to communicate a theological message to the ignorant and totally unscientific Hebrew people. In other words, Moses used an unscientific and false description of creation to show that Yahweh is the one true God and superior to the host of Egyptian gods. They claim the kind of literature that Genesis represents was not unique to Moses, and that Moses, because of his privileged upbringing and education, was well acquainted with different literary genres.

The authors assert:

"[T]here is clearly a correlation between the Egyptian material in the biblical account. We would expect that if Israel did indeed have a history in Egypt as the old Testament claims. The significance is powerful. Understanding the biblical allusions to the Egyptian mythology greatly enhances our understanding of the biblical text, including its theological perspective, and the worldview that Moses portrays with his account" (p. 95).

They go on to acknowledge that, for the most part, Egyptian creation documents consist of brief statements and allusions, spread among many different texts and inscriptions, although the most extensive descriptions occur



Figure 2. As usual, the authors completely misrepresent the Galileo affair.

in the Memphite theology and the Hermopolitan cosmogony. However, Miller and Soden have selectively picked and chosen bits and pieces of Egyptian cosmology to suit their purpose of showing parallels to the biblical creation account.

The authors contend that God took the Egyptian creation story and adapted it to communicate His message—“not *copying* it, but *recasting* it” (p. 98). In other words, Moses merely took the elements of the Egyptian myth and rearranged them, not to reflect the true creation account—because that was not His intent—but to communicate that the Hebrew God is greater than the Egyptian gods. They explain:

“We are not saying that Genesis 1 is untrue. We are suggesting that by borrowing the events of Egyptian cosmogony and placing them in a seven-day framework, the author was emphasizing the theological significance for the nation of Israel. He was not making a statement about what he considered to be (or what God considered to be) a historical timeline, particularly one based on the precision our modern minds require. With its context in ancient Egypt, Israel would not have required or expected a strict (modern) historical correlation” (p. 156).

One could just imagine a Hebrew saying to an Egyptian: “My God made up a better story than your gods!”

It should be noted that most of the ancient Near-Eastern texts and inscriptions bear little or no resemblance to the biblical account, and those that do have some similarities may be derived from a common source. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the Genesis account may have been constructed from an originally monotheistic oral tradition that was passed down for centuries. Furthermore, this oral tradition was also the likely source of other Egyptian (and Mesopotamian) accounts that became distorted with polytheism. Indeed, this is a long-standing proposal.

In any case, if Moses simply adapted Egyptian myths, what reason is there to accept the biblical account as authoritative and emanating from the one true God? Would the audience not be inclined to believe that the God of Genesis was just another God in the Egyptian pantheon?

To summarize, Miller and Soden are suggesting that Moses, in order to communicate God’s message, created a fanciful account of creation, based on Egyptian mythology, because the Hebrews were very familiar with such mythology, and were not sophisticated enough to understand a factually accurate description. They do not claim that Genesis 1 is untrue. They merely claim that it is historically inaccurate. Moses had the right intent even though he misled people as to the true nature and mechanics of creation.

History and interpretation

Miller and Soden assert that the current young-earth creationist movement dates back to the publication of *The Genesis Flood* by Henry Morris and John Whitcomb. While Morris and Whitcomb may be responsible for the resurgence of the young-earth creationist movement in the 20th century, their book did not influence British and European YECs, nor does it account for the history of interpretation that clearly documents that the young-earth view was the mainstream and dominant interpretation right up until the time of the enlightenment.

In fact, Miller and Soden completely ignore the history of interpretation of the Genesis account. This is unforgivable given that their thesis rests on the belief that modern readers have imported a modern scientific worldview into their reading of the texts, and that the original readers understood the account in light of Egyptian and ancient Near-Eastern cosmogonies. If this really was the case, then surely the history of interpretation would clearly demonstrate this. I suspect the authors

do not present the history of interpretation because it does not support their thesis—in fact, it contradicts it!

Conclusion

I learnt nothing at all from this book, and reading it was tedious. The scholarship was extremely poor. The authors admit that they have consciously tried to avoid confounding the reader with lots of technical details, but that is no excuse for sloppy work. Moreover, there is an arrogant and condescending tone in the whole work. The same old tired arguments against the YEC view are re-presented, and no attempt is made to interact with YEC scholars. The thesis and methodology are fundamentally flawed. Reading this book is a complete waste of any serious student’s time. *In the end, Miller and Soden misunderstood . . .*

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