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THE BIBLE AND THE "PROBLEM" OF TIME

By Paul J. Waddle

Modern science makes bold insistence that it alone has, in the last 250 years or so, unlocked the true formula for determining the age of creation. Christians under the influence of this thinking go along with the assumption that the creation account in Genesis is not already clear when read in its most simple and straightforward manner. They do this by isolating Genesis 1 from the rest of Scripture so the account of creation can be dismantled piecemeal and reconstructed in whatever way is necessary to conform to the wending ways of modern science. Rather than Scripture shedding light on science, modern science becomes the light by which all other things must be understood.

Davis Young and Ralph Stearley, authors of *The Bible, Rocks and Time*, represent this influential school of scientific thinking. In an effort to be inclusive of all possible views of creation (young earth excepted), they have determined that the creation account in Genesis 1 is "unique" in the pages of Scripture. Consider the following quote:

We believe that those writers are on target who suggest that Genesis 1 is a literary genre unlike any other. As John Stek has put it, Genesis 1 is *sui generis*, a genre in a class by itself, a genre of which we have no other examples.¹

The thinking seems to be, since the account is a "genre in a class by itself," there are few, if any, other places in Scripture to which we can appeal for clarification. Therefore the door remains open to various ways of interpreting the text in light, not of other Scriptures, but of modern science. The appeal to *Sui generis* is, at its heart, simply a way to accommodate views of the text that require something other than a straightforward reading.

Can Christians accept this argument? R.L. Dabney, 19th century theologian, said:

For creation is not only a physical fact; it is a theological doctrine...It is the first of those "things of God" which it is the proper and direct object of revelation to teach authoritatively...Instead, therefore, of requiring these passages to stand waiting until they receive their proper construction at the hand of natural science, they are to be construed...according to their own independent laws of exegesis, honestly applied.²

Dabney seems to be in agreement with Westminster Confession Article I.9, "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture, (which is not manifold, but one) it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly." If some claim that the creation account is "difficult" or "less clear" than it could be, then we can be assured that other places in Scripture will help interpret the account more clearly.

The entirety of the Scriptures makes it clear that there was a beginning of creation that coincided with the beginning of mankind. Consider these parallel passages from the first two Gospels:

And He answered and said, "Have you not read that He who created *them* from the beginning made them male and female..." Matthew 19:4

But from the beginning of creation, *God* made them male and female. Mark 10:6

Here our Lord is answering a question concerning divorce and provides His commentary by quoting from Genesis 1:27 and 5:2. If all we had was Matthew's account, we could conclude that our Lord is referring to the creation of man, as possibly distinct from the other acts of creation. But the clarification provided by Mark seems to decisively close the door on any such specula-

¹ Young DA, Stearley RF (2008) *The Bible, Rocks and Time*, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 178

² Dabney RL (1897) *Discussions, Vol. III*. Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 97-8

tion by adding the phrase from the “beginning of creation.” Creation is seen as one seamless act, the “beginning” which involved the creation of man as male and female included the rest of creation as well.

The next example deals with later history but uses creation as reference points:

For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will. Matthew 24:21

For those days will be a time of tribulation such as has not occurred since the beginning of creation which God created, until now, and never shall. Mark 13:19

Here, of course, our Lord is describing the horrible conditions that the inhabitants of Jerusalem faced in the besieging Roman army and destruction of the city in 70 A.D. In describing the uniqueness of that time, Matthew says that nothing like it has occurred since the “beginning of the world,” and Mark says it has been since the “beginning of creation.” Because these are parallel passages, the phraseology refers to the same event. Whatever and whenever this “beginning” was, it was the beginning of it all.

These references allow no room to wedge in any detail that may separate out the creation of man from the rest of God’s creative acts over eons of time or leave room for metaphorical usage. They are seen as one seamless historical event woven together into one very intense week of Genesis 1.

From an old earth viewpoint, any event that occurred in history prior to man could not possibly be in view here. It is not as though Jesus is referring to some pre-Cambrian extinction or the asteroid that supposedly impacted the earth and killed the dinosaurs. Of course, this phraseology makes sense if the whole of creation was only a handful of days old when man “began.”

And how should the young earth teaching of scripture affect our understanding of modern science? Dabney says it well:

Brethren, I hold that there is, and there can be, no proper collision between the most explicit and authoritative testimony and sound natural science. They cannot clash, because wherever, in traveling backwards, the domain of creative Omnipotence is met, there true natural science stops. Let us hold ground, and we have no need to debate any particular hypothesis as to the origin of organism, or to choose this rather than that...Neither have we any need to force a strained exegesis upon God’s record

of his own omnipotence in order to conciliate uncertain and fluctuating human sciences.³

Young and Stearley do not see it this way.

We are not asking you to abandon the undeniable biblical teaching that God made the entire cosmos and everything in it. We are simply asking that you reconsider your interpretation that God created the cosmos in six solar days a few thousand years ago in a series of instantaneous miracles devoid of any process, and to do that reconsideration in light of our ever-growing knowledge of ...Geological and astronomical discoveries.⁴

The scientific community within the Christian circles delineated by Young and Stearley has succumbed to a *dual revelation* theory, that nature is just as authoritative a revelation from God as Scripture. This is a half-truth. There are, in fact, two books of God’s revelation: The book of nature, or “general revelation” and the Bible, or “special revelation.” (Romans 1:18-20) But the fatal error is introduced when it is believed that both books are equally as authoritative and that when a conflict occurs between them, some kind of harmony must be sought.

These two books of God’s revelation are *not* equal in authority. Our understanding of the “book of nature” is flawed. Creation itself is flawed as a result of the fall of man. We are flawed because of the influence of sin as a result of the fall. We make flawed observations. Man’s knowledge of the creation around him is sufficient only to reveal enough about God for man to know that we are accountable to Him. (Romans 1)

Our Christian brothers who adopt a long age view of the age of the Earth will hold that the Bible is without error in all that it teaches. They would agree that if a teaching of modern science is in contradiction to the Bible, then it is modern science which must yield. They will hold that we must always keep in mind that scientific theories are always based on a partial set of facts. Author Mark Ross will maintain that:

A similar humility, however, is called for in Biblical interpretation. While Biblical teaching, objectively considered, is always true, our grasp or understanding of that teaching is not always clear.⁵

Is every teaching of Scripture equally clear? No. Who is up for a discussion of the book of Revelation? But the

³ *Ibid.*, 134

⁴ Young DA, Stearley RF (2008) 492-493

⁵ Ross ME (1999) The framework hypothesis: An interpretation of Genesis 1:1-2:3, *Did God Create in 6 Days?*, Tolle Lege Press, White Hall, WV, 115

church has long ago identified the areas in which good men disagree: Arminianism vs. Calvinism; Premillennial, postmillennial, amillennial. But there was never any real disagreement or misunderstanding about the creation account until the 1700s. We cannot allow a modern scientific framework to be pressed upon our understanding of Scripture when it undermines something that has been a settled matter for the entire history of revelation. The Bible is assumed to have the high ground, and only if it can be positively dislodged that we should ever yield.

The inroads of teaching exemplified by Young and Stearley are, sadly, not unique, nor are they new. What is important to note is that this is *not* about evolution but *is* about the unique authority of the Bible. A brief review of history will prove this point.

We are all familiar with *Origin of the Species* published in 1859, at which time the age of the earth was thought to be upwards of 96 million years.⁶ The not so familiar *The Theory of the Earth* was published in 1795 by Scotsman James Hutton, at which time the earth was thought to be 6,000–10,000 years old. From where did this change of thinking come in just over half a century?

Hutton represents the major shift in thinking. He received a medical degree, but his primary interest was in chemistry. As he began to observe the physical world around him, he came to the conclusion that the rocks and geological formations were of great antiquity. Hutton took the study of Earth history on the basis of continued *observation* of rocks and modern geologic processes. He constructed his theory *inductively* from the present-day behavior of nature and the characteristics of rocks and strata, reasoning from detailed facts to general principles. Hutton felt that it was unnecessary to invoke processes to explain rock strata other than ordinary, everyday processes like erosion and sedimentation. Hutton concluded that he *could see* in the course of nature “no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end.” Of course, Hutton had no interest in the Genesis account; he was a deist.

My point isn't to disparage or minimize the role of observation or reasoning in science, but to point out the entirely arbitrary nature of the process that ultimately lead to the complete abandonment of what Scripture teaches regarding creation.

The die had been cast. By 1856, Hugh Miller, Scottish Presbyterian and prolific author could be said to have:

...elegantly laid out a persuasive case on biblical and scientific grounds for an old Earth and a local-

ized Noachic Flood...The time was at hand, Miller maintained, when the history of the Earth unfolding through long geologic ages would be found more worthy of its Divine Author than that which would huddle the whole into a few literal days, and convert the incalculably ancient universe which we inhabit into a hastily run-up erection of yesterday.⁷

Note the progression in just over a half a century from a Scottish Deist to Scottish Churchman, observing much the same geology, from “a reach far back in time” to an outright denial of a literal, “young-earth” reading of Genesis *and* a denial of a universal flood. That covers nine chapters of the first book of the Bible and is almost 20% of the foundational book of Scripture.

As the nineteenth century passed into history...most Christian scholars had made peace with the idea of the Earth's great antiquity, persuading themselves that Genesis 1 can be interpreted in ways that are consistent with the concept that the universe was created in more than six literal days and more than only a few thousand years ago. They also became comfortable with the idea that the human race was considerably more than six thousand years old...⁸

I maintain that this is still a declaration of a dual revelation theory, dressed up in more acceptable garb. More important than refuting evolutionists and atheists, we must challenge those who, from within the church, are undermining the authority of the Bible. They are the ones allowing outside, non-biblical influences to alter their understanding of the Scripture! To hold that we cannot view the six days of creation as a “series of instantaneous miracles devoid of any process” is to deny the fundamental facts which we get from Scripture.

This indicates a more deeply rooted issue, the unique authority of the Bible. We are flawed, but we have an infallible guide in the Holy Spirit. We learn by His guidance, through the Scripture what and how to think about God, ourselves, and the world around us. It is the Bible that frames our knowledge of all things. Only God knows all, and He reveals to us that we can know and what we can know.

Francis Schaeffer said, “The Scriptures give the key to two kinds of knowledge—the knowledge of God, and the knowledge of men and nature...we do not have exhaustive truth, we have from the Bible what I term ‘true truth.’ In this way we know true truth about God, true truth about man, and something truly about na-

⁷ *Ibid.*, 20-1

⁸ *Ibid.*, 132

⁶ Young DA, Stearley RF (2008) 113

ture....we do not have exhaustive knowledge, we have true and unified knowledge.”⁹

Creation is not a matter of observation and experimentation. It is an article of faith, the ultimate miracle, “It is the first of those ‘things of God’ which it is the proper and direct object of revelation to teach authoritatively.”¹⁰

In conclusion, I can do no better than Dabney:

Admit in good faith the facts of an actual Creator, an almighty and omniscient agent, and an actual creation, anywhere in the past, and it will appear just as reasonable that God should have created the whole finished result, as a part.... It was just as easy for him to speak into existence a finished universe, with all its beautiful order, “by the word of his power,” as

to produce the incipient elements out of which “laws of nature” were slowly and laboriously to evolve as a result.¹¹ ❧

COMING EVENTS

Thursday, December 6, 7:00 pm, Providence Baptist Church, 6339 Glenwood Ave., Raleigh, Room 631

Sam Wall of the Discovery Institute (www.discovery.org), the flagship organization of the intelligent design movement, will present part 1 of the *The Magician’s Twin: C.S. Lewis and the Case Against Scientism* a new film on the the thoughts of C.S. Lewis on science and culture. He will also be answering your questions about the Discovery Institute and intelligent design.

⁹ Schaeffer FA (2006) *Escape from Reason*. InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 218

¹⁰ Dabney RL (1897) 97-8

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 112