

The Interpretation of Genesis Chapter One
Faculty and Staff Christian Fellowship, 19 April 2006

I. Early attempts to frame a hermeneutic for Genesis One

- A. The patristic belief in God's two books of revelation: general (nature) and special (Scripture) (see Psalm 19)
- B. Augustine (354-430), On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis
 - 1. His attempt to reconcile Greek natural philosophy (science) with Genesis 1
 - 2. His hermeneutical approach in cases of apparent conflict: If natural philosophers are not agreed on a controversial point of science, then Scripture should be accepted literally; if they are agreed, and appear to controvert Scripture, then Scripture ought to be interpreted figuratively.
- C. Galileo (1564-1642), Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina
 - 1. Geocentricity: the interpretation of scriptural passages that seem to require a belief that Earth is the centre of the universe
 - 2. 'The Bible teaches us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go' (i.e., Scripture should never be cited as an authority in science).
- D. John Calvin (1509-64)
 - 1. The principle of accommodation: God condescends in divine revelation to human understanding by using phenomenological language of nature.
 - 2. In Genesis 1 Moses provides a popular (i.e., non-scientific) picture of Creation

II. Debate over the age of the earth

- A. Physico-theology (theories of the earth that joined science and biblical chronology)
- B. Geological history in the 17th-18th c: diluvialism, catastrophism
- C. The challenge to a young Earth in the 18th and 19th centuries
 - 1. Biodiversity of exploration: It becomes hard to fit all animal species in the ark.
 - 2. Charles Lyell and the theory of uniformitarian geology (1830-33)
 - 3. The rapid acceptance of uniformitarianism and the little Christian opposition (with the exception of scriptural or Mosaic geologists)
 - 4. The Flood, confined to a local area, ceased to be an organising principle.

III. Current issues

- A. Distinction between primary (supernatural) and secondary (natural) causation. Does Genesis 1 intend to teach science or theology?
- B. Does Scripture always require a literal interpretation? Dispensationalism (yes); historic Protestantism (no). Emphasis given to accommodation is crucial here.
- C. To what extent does Genesis 1 need to be harmonised with modern science?
 - 1. Examples of the gap theory; the day-age theory; the revelatory-day theory
 - 2. Concordism (the framework hypothesis): parallels in the order of Creation
 - 3. Genesis 1 as a metaphorical account written for popular understanding that teaches theology, not science, and does not require harmonising with science.
- D. Retrieving the Augustinian formula among evangelicals
 - 1. Do we permit scientific theories some check on biblical interpretation?
Augustine believed that doing so prevented the Bible from falling into disrepute when it appeared to contradict a scientifically-demonstrated proposition (since God's two books of revelation must be in harmony).
 - 2. Protestant exegetes have since the 17th c. granted scientists the freedom to study nature without condemning their views as biblically unacceptable, which has encouraged scientific investigation (James Moore).