

A Third Alternative to Concordism and Divine Accommodation: The Worldview Approach

Carol A. Hill

The author offers a third alternative to the concordist and accommodation positions of Hugh Ross and Paul Seely, as presented in the March 2007 issue of PSCF: the worldview approach. The basic premise of the worldview approach is that the Bible in its original text accurately records historical events if considered from the worldview of the biblical authors.

This article is in response to Editor Roman Miller’s comment on page 2 of the March 2007 *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith (PSCF)* regarding the articles of Paul Seely and Hugh Ross: “Maybe some readers will want to continue this dialogue.” I do want to continue this dialogue, and in the same spirit of friendly interaction. I think most highly of Hugh Ross, whose ministry we have supported for years, and of Paul Seely, who has supplied me with reference material any time I have asked.

I would like to offer a third alternative to “concordism” (Ross’s position) and “divine accommodation” (Seely’s position). I call it the “worldview approach.” The basic premise of the worldview approach is that the Bible in its *original* text accurately records *historical* events if considered from the *world-*



Carol Hill hiking up to Bat Cave, Grand Canyon.

view of the biblical authors. By “historical” I mean not only history and pre-history in a traditional sense, but also the historical, time-related, scientific disciplines such as archeology, geology, and astronomy. If the Bible is to be trusted for its theology, then it must also be trusted for its historical accuracy.

By “original” I do not mean the King James version of the Bible nor do I necessarily mean the Hebrew Masoretic text, which is a later translation of more ancient texts. What I mean is that the archeological evidence from the time of the biblical authors must also be considered when evaluating the “original” meaning of the text.

By “worldview” I mean the basic way of interpreting things and events that pervades a culture so thoroughly that it becomes a culture’s concept of reality—what is good, what is important, what is sacred, what is real. Worldview is more than culture, even though the distinction between the two can sometimes be subtle. It extends to perceptions of time and space, of happiness and well-being. The beliefs, values, and behaviors of a culture stem directly from its worldview. Thus, to really understand the Bible (specifically in this discussion, Genesis), one must try and understand the mindset of the people who wrote it.

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Article

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The theological position of the worldview approach is that God has interacted with humans throughout *real history*, allowing them to write down his revelation according to their own literary style and from their own cultural and worldview perspective. That is, it considers that the pre-scientific knowledge base of the biblical authors is a prime factor to be considered when *literally* interpreting the Bible. This theological position does not deny the giving of divine inspiration or revelation to the biblical authors, nor does it exclude God's divine intervention into human history. Does this position make the Bible untrustworthy, in that it has incorporated the naive scientific views of the ancients? No, because these naive scientific views are part of *real history*. If the Bible does not conform to real history, it is not a historical document, and it is *then* that the stories of Genesis become mythological and thus untrustworthy.

Now, how does this position fit with those of "concordism" and "divine accommodation" (as Seely calls his accommodation hypothesis in other articles he has written)?¹ It means that our concepts of modern science are *not* contained in Genesis, and that we should not read our twenty-first century scientific worldview into the text. It means that when the Bible says that Abel and Cain were agriculturists and keepers of domestic livestock, and that Tubal-Cain was the "father of bronze," that these texts pinpoint these men in time to the Neolithic (<10,000 YBP). It also means that Noah could not have possibly built his ark with Paleolithic (50,000–20,000 YBP) scrapper tools, and that the stories of Adam and Noah could not have been passed down for tens of thousands of years before the advent of writing, etc.

This sounds like the position advocated by Seely. However, the worldview approach does *not* subscribe to Seely's "divine accommodation" interpretation either; i.e., that the Genesis text is an inspired version of an ancient myth. Does God, the Creator of the universe, accommodate us? Listen to the Lord interrogate Job (37:3–4) and put him in his place: *Gird up thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me. Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if thou hast understanding.* Clearly, God does not accommodate us—we accom-

modate God. Furthermore, if God actually teaches through fiction, cleverly disguised as factual history, how can we separate fact from myth when reading the Bible?² How can we trust God as a God of truth? If we cannot trust the historical accuracy of the Flood story, how can we trust the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Hebrews 11 traces the whole history of the Old Testament from Abel up to the time of Christ, all of which points to Jesus on the cross (Heb. 12:1–2). Did Jesus really rise from the dead, or is this story only an accommodation of God to a culturally-based belief in a prophesied Messiah?

The worldview approach essentially agrees with the methodology of archeologist Kenneth Kitchen in his book, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*.³ That is, it tries to establish the historical (cultural) facts, and then interprets the biblical stories in light of that evidence. Or, to quote Kitchen:

By and large, the ancients did not *invent* spurious history, but normally were content to *interpret* real history, in accord with their views ... Once detected, the viewpoint can be "peeled back" if need be and the basic history made clear (p. 63, italics in original).

In other words, when God speaks and acts, he does so within the human drama as it is being played out at a certain time and place, with all the cultural trappings that go with it.⁴ These "cultural trappings," or worldview, get incorporated into the text alongside God's revelation. Let's briefly discuss four of the hardest-to-interpret parts of Genesis from a worldview approach: Genesis 1, Adam, Noah's Flood, and the patriarchal ages.

Genesis 1

A concordist approach to Genesis 1 is that the sequence of events described in this chapter concurs with modern science. But does it? Putting aside the notorious "fourth day" problem of the sun being created after plants, let's examine the text of Genesis 1 from the viewpoint of geology (since I am a geologist). In Gen. 1:11–12 (Day 3), the text indicates that plants were formed (before the sun was visible), and one might assume that these must have been very early forms of plant life such as algae that existed in the Archean or Proterozoic Eras of geologic

time. But instead Gen. 1:11 continues: "... and the fruit tree yielding fruit after its kind, whose seed is in itself ..." According to the geologic record, seed-bearing fruit trees do not appear until the Cretaceous Period (~100 million years ago)—much, much later than simple plants and also long after fish appeared in the Ordovician Period (~480 million years ago). Yet, the Genesis text has fish appearing in Day 5 along with whales (Gen. 1:21). In addition, there is a reversed sequence in the appearance of birds and reptiles. According to the geologic record, primitive reptiles first appeared in the Mississippian (~340 million years ago), whereas birds did not appear until about the middle Jurassic (~155 million years ago). And whales are mammals that did not appear until much later in the Cenozoic Era (~50 million years ago). When the Genesis 1 "days" are carefully scrutinized with respect to the fossil record, the correlation is superficial at best.

Now let's look at the text from a worldview approach, or what has been termed the "literary view." This view is *not* new. The parallel construction of Genesis 1 has been noted by scholars for centuries, but it was not until the Mesopotamian cuneiform texts were found and deciphered in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that the significance of these texts to Genesis 1 became recognized. Table 1 shows the parallel construction of Genesis 1.

In the literary view, the "days" of Genesis 1 are figurative days, where the divine works of creation are narrated in *topical* order rather than in a strict *sequential* order. The narrative involves temporality (i.e., it starts "In the beginning" and works toward the creation of humans), but the narrative style is not constrained by a temporal sequence of events. The most important aspect of the literary view is that it maintains that Genesis 1 was written following the convention and style of literary works prevalent in the ancient Near East about 4,000 years ago. And that is where the worldview approach comes in because in order to correctly interpret Genesis 1, one must understand the mindset of the people who wrote the *original* Genesis text.

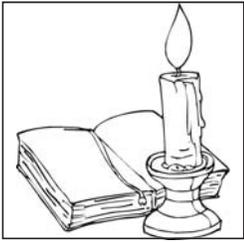
Here is the worldview approach to Genesis 1. The whole chapter of Genesis 1 is based on a system of numerical harmony.⁵ Not only is the number *seven* fundamental to its main theme (God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh), but it also serves to determine many of its details. To the Mesopotamians, seven was the number of fullness and perfection, and thus the basis of ordered arrangement; also, particular importance was

attached to it in the symbolism of numbers. It was considered a perfect period (unit of time) in which to develop an important work, the action lasting six days and reaching its conclusion and outcome on the seventh day. It was also customary to divide the six days of work into three pairs; i.e., into two parallel triads of days. So, a completely harmonious account of creation, in accord with other ancient examples of similar schemes in the literature of that time, and using the rules of style in ancient epic poetry and narrative prose of the ancient Near East, would be the parallel form of symmetry found in Genesis 1. In Genesis 1 the first set of three days represents a general account of creation, while the second triad is a more specific account of the first three days (refer to Table 1).

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Much debate has revolved around the Genesis 1 topics: (1) Are the days of Genesis long epochs of time or 24-hour periods? (2) How could the sun have been created on the fourth day after plants? (3) Does the phrase "after its kind" refer to the fixity of species and refute evolution? and (4) Is modern science in concordance or discordance with the "days" of Genesis 1? If taken in the proper and intended context of literature written in the ancient Near East of around 2000 BC, there is no conflict with any of these topics. The Genesis author was simply writing in the "politically-correct" cosmogenic and prose-narrative style of that day.⁶ Thus, the Genesis 1 text was not meant to represent a sequential order of creation or one that needs to fit with modern science. It was simply the literary way

Day 1. Light	Day 2. "Waters"; sea and heaven	Day 3. Earth or land; vegetation
Day 4. Light emanating from luminaries (sun, moon, stars)	Day 5. Fish (whales) and fowl	Day 6. Land creatures that eat vegetation; man
Day 7. Rest		



Article

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that writers of that day wrote down their narrative thoughts. In other words, God gave the revelation to the people mentioned in Genesis, but then the biblical authors wrote this revelation down in their own literary style.

Adam

The “divine accommodation” position of Seely would say that Adam was not a real person and that this story is just a myth that God accommodates into his Bible. The “concordist” position of Ross would say that Adam was a real person and the *biological* father of the whole human race, so to be in concord with science Adam had to live 50,000 years or so ago (or almost 200,000 years ago if one is talking about the first *Homo Sapiens* found in the fossil record). The worldview approach does not ascribe to either position. It would say that Adam lived in the Neolithic (because the Bible puts him there in real time) and that he was not a mythical person, but a real historical person whom God made the *spiritual* father of the whole human race.

If the people of Genesis are not real, then why does the Bible go to such great lengths to establish the genealogies of Genesis, Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Matthew, and Luke? First Chronicles begins with *nine* chapters of “begots.” If these genealogies are not real then where do the mythological people end and the real people begin? Do real people start with Abraham, which lineage Matthew 1 says leads to Christ? The so-called “critical scholars” would say no—Abraham and the patriarchs were *invented* by scribes during the Israelite monarchy or exile. What about Moses and the Exodus from Egypt? Archeology has found no evidence for this event, so was Moses also “invented”? Mark 9:4 has Elijah and Moses talking to Jesus, so were these people—if not historically real—only a figment of Jesus’ and the disciples’ imaginations? What about Solomon and David? Is the whole history of Israel to be denied—the history that Jesus attests to many times in the New Testament?

For Genesis to be historically accurate, as maintained by the worldview approach, the people, places, and events mentioned in it must be real. However, the *description* of these people, places, and events are neces-

sarily colored by the *worldview* of the authors who wrote the text. To “beget” someone necessitates a *physical* act—either it happened or it did not. But a description of an event is a *cultural* act that stems from a particular worldview—or as Kitchen terms it, the ancients *interpreted* real history in accord with their views. Therefore, the worldview approach considers Adam and Eve, the Garden of Eden, Noah and the Flood, Abraham, etc. to be real people, places, and events, but as stories told from the worldview perspective of the biblical authors. There must be a basic historical core that underlies the entire Bible, otherwise the integrity of the Bible is compromised.

Noah’s Flood

Following this same logic, the worldview approach considers Noah’s Flood to have been a *real* flood that occurred within the Mesopotamian hydrologic basin around 2900 BC; that is, it was a local flood, not a universal flood such as is the young earth creationism position but which is not supported by the science of geology. I will not elaborate on the historical and biblical justification for a local flood because I have already done so in three other articles I have written for *PSCF*: “A Time and Place for Noah,” “The Noachian Flood: Universal or Local?” and “Qualitative Hydrology of Noah’s Flood.”⁷ I just want to mention that other ancient Mesopotamian texts also attest to this same flood,⁸ with the Sumerian King List naming eight kings before the flood and other kings after the flood down to Sargon, who was known to be a real king in Mesopotamia ca. 2300 BC. From an accommodation view, are these stories also mythological, as supposed for the biblical flood? Or, from a concordist view, how does a flood that took place tens of thousands of years ago in the distant past relate to kings that are known to have lived in the third millennium BC?

The most amazing thing about taking a worldview approach to biblical interpretation is that, when applied to the Genesis text, these stories actually start to make sense. I will give one example from the Genesis flood account. If the “second month, seventeenth day of the month” of Gen. 7:11 is interpreted as denoting the season of the year when the flood started, rather than a month-day extension of Noah’s age,⁹ then the text is

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in remarkable accordance with the weather patterns that actually exist and have existed in the Mesopotamian (Iraq) area for millennia. If the ancient Mesopotamian sidereal calendar is coordinated with today's tropical calendar, then this puts the "second month, seventeenth day" in about the middle of March when meteorological conditions bring the most abundant rain to the Mesopotamian region. Genesis 7:12 implies that it was a "heavy" rain which fell upon the earth (land) for forty days and forty nights, and this is the type of continuous downpour that can result from the activity of maritime air masses characteristic of this season. The duration of rain (up until 150 days; Gen. 8:2) could have been caused by the stalling of a Mediterranean cyclonic front over the Mesopotamian area in combination with maritime air masses moving up from the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea/Indian Ocean. This stalled storm would have been associated with southerly winds (the sharqi and/or suhaili), not with the northwesterly shamal wind, and these could have been very intense winds both in strength and duration.

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Genesis 8:1 records that five months after the flood began—or about in the middle of August assuming a middle-of-March start-date for the Flood—a wind passed over the earth causing the waters to subside. This wind could correspond with the northwest shamal wind that blows almost continuously during the summer months down the plain of Iraq. In spring, the melting of snow and steady rain in the mountains of northern Iraq produces flooding in the valleys of the south. Then in summer, the wind howls southward along the narrow fertile strip between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, and the drying process begins. This anecdote on the Flood is but one example of the historical core of the Genesis text. The ancients were not inventing history, they were describing a real historical event.

But does a historical core preclude God's intervention or interaction with people in the Bible, such as with Noah in the Flood account? No, because God was performing what I call a "nature miracle." Noah's Flood was a miracle because God *intervened* into his physical laws. One does

not have to invoke the notion of the suspension or violation of natural laws in nature miracles. Divine action can simply be understood as higher-order laws (God's ultimate purpose) working seamlessly with lower-order laws (God's physical laws).¹⁰ Is it any less a miracle because it can be explained by natural processes? This is the nature of "nature miracles": to have the *timely* intervention of God into natural processes.¹¹

One of the best examples of a "nature miracle" that comes to mind is Jesus rebuking the winds and sea. In Matt. 8:23-26 the calming of the winds and sea could be explained by a sudden change of barometric pressure—which was probably the case. But it was God who caused this change to take place *exactly* when Christ commanded the waves and wind to be still. Another example is that of the Israelites crossing the Jordan River, where the stoppage of water lasted long enough for them to get across the river in the day (Josh. 3:1-4:18). That this type of blockage has happened historically is a well-known fact: in 1267, 1906, and 1927 landslides upstream from Jericho have dammed the river for up to 21 hours.¹² The miracle of the Jordan is that God caused the blockage to happen *exactly* when the Israelites needed to cross the river.

Patriarchal Ages

I have also covered this topic extensively in my *PSCF* article "Making Sense of the Numbers of Genesis,"¹³ and will not elaborate further except to try and show how the Mesopotamians' worldview of numbers can explain the incredibly long ages of the patriarchs mentioned in Genesis. From a worldview perspective, longevity was not due to a supernova explosion, as suggested by Ross as a possible explanation for the patriarchal ages in his *Genesis Question*,¹⁴ nor do these incredible ages demonstrate that the Genesis text is mythological, as from an accommodation viewpoint. The reason is because the Mesopotamians incorporated two concepts of numbers into their worldview: (1) numbers could have real values, and (2) numbers could be symbolic descriptions of the sacred. "Real" numbers were used in the everyday administrative and economic matters of accounting and commerce (receipts, loans, allotment of goods, weights and measures, etc.), construction (architecture), military affairs, and taxation. But certain numbers of the sexagesimal system, such as *ossos* (60), *neros* (600), and *saros* (3600), occupied a special place in Babylonian mathematics and astronomy, and these symbolic numbers were the ones used in sacred texts.

The Mesopotamians (and other ancient peoples in the Near East such as the Egyptians) had a totally different concept of numbers than we have today. To us a number is just a number, and one number is no better than another number. But to the ancients numbers had intrinsic meaning beyond their being numbers. Just as a name held a special significance to the ancients (e.g., Noah, Gen. 5:29),



Article

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a number could also have significance in and of itself. That is, the purpose of numbers in ancient religious texts could be *numerological* rather than *numerical*. Numerologically, a number's *symbolic* value was the basis and purpose for its use, not its secular value in a system of counting. One of the religious considerations of the ancients involved in numbers was to make certain that any numbering scheme worked out numerologically; i.e., that it used, and added up to, the right numbers symbolically. This is distinctively different from a secular use of numbers in which the overriding concern is that numbers add up to the correct total arithmetically. Another way of looking at it is that the sacred numbers used by the Mesopotamians had honorific value, which gave a type of religious dignity or respect to important persons or to a literary text. Thus Noah is said to have been 600 (60 x 10) when the Flood started. The numbers 60 and 10 are the basis for the Mesopotamians' combined sexagesimal-decimal numbering system and were considered to be "perfect," just like Noah was considered perfect (Gen. 6:9).

Let's Get Real

In conclusion I want to say—in the manner of Kitchen—that it is time to "get real" with respect to biblical interpretation. To try and extend Adam and Eve back into the Paleolithic is a position that can never be made to jive with the historical setting of the Bible. We also need to heed the words of Hugh Ross when he says: "God, by his nature, does not lie, deceive, or contradict" or I would add, "accommodate" us. The Bible is not mythological. It is a true story, but told from the viewpoint of the people who wrote it. This conclusion is especially applicable to young earth creationism, whose insistence on so-called "literalism" has made the Bible mythological to millions of people. The final question that I would like to pose is: Which is more literal, to interpret the Bible from our twenty-first century way of looking at things, or from the worldview of the original authors? Or, to paraphrase Conrad Hyers: To faithfully interpret Genesis is to be faithful to what it really means as it was originally written, not to what people living in a later time assume or desire it to be.¹⁵ ♦

Notes

- ¹For example, P. H. Seely, "Noah's Flood: Its Date, Extent, and Divine Accommodation," *Westminster Theological Journal* 66 (2004): 291–311.
- ²T. J. Godfrey, "On the Hills of Concordism and Creation Science," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 55, no. 4 (2003): 277.
- ³K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).
- ⁴P. Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 160–1.
- ⁵U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, pt. 1, translated from Hebrew by Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1972), 12–7.
- ⁶C. Hyers, "The Narrative Form of Genesis 1: Cosmogenic, Yes; Scientific, No," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 36, no. 4 (1984): 212.
- ⁷C. A. Hill, "A Time and Place for Noah," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 53, no. 1 (2001): 24–40; C. A. Hill, "The Noachian Flood: Universal or Local?" *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 54, no. 3 (2002): 170–83; C. A. Hill, "Qualitative Hydrology of Noah's Flood," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 58, no. 2 (2006): 120–9.
- ⁸For example, W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-Hasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 1–28.
- ⁹U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, pt. 2, 83–4.
- ¹⁰H. S. Choi, "Knowledge of the Unseen: A New Vision for Science and Religion Dialogue," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 53, no. 2 (2001): 100.
- ¹¹W. F. Tanner, "How Many Trees Did Noah Take on the Ark?" *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 47, no. 4 (1995): 262.
- ¹²K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 167.
- ¹³C. A. Hill, "Making Sense of the Numbers of Genesis," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 55, no. 4 (2003): 239–51.
- ¹⁴H. Ross, *The Genesis Question* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1998), 119.
- ¹⁵C. Hyers, "The Narrative Form of Genesis 1," 209.

Upcoming ASA Conferences

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