



Communication

Genesis 1–11 in the Light of Its Second Millennial Worldview: A Response to Carol Hill’s Worldview Alternative

Paul H. Seely



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Carol Hill has written some good articles on Genesis. I regard her “A Time and Place for Noah” as one of the best articles about origins ever to be printed in this journal. Her most recent paper, “A Third Alternative to Concordism and Divine Accommodation: The Worldview Approach,” (*PSCF* 59, no. 2 [2007]: 129–34) is a good contribution to the dialogue but is in need of some correction. She repeatedly presented Divine Accommodation in that article as the accommodation of myth. This characterization of Accommodation needs to be corrected. One of the main things accommodated in the Bible is the science of the times. It would be as inaccurate and unfair to characterize that science as a myth as calling the eighteenth-century theory of phlogiston a myth. Outdated and naive as it is, the science of the times was based on taking observations of the physical world at face value. It had an empirical basis and should not be equated with myth.

Also accommodated in Genesis 1–11 are Mesopotamian traditions. Some of them were scientific theorizing, like the idea that a giant ocean (“the Deep”) preceded the making of heaven and earth. Others, like the Flood were more historical. These traditions were originally presented in combination with mythical gods and goddesses, but they were demythologized in Genesis. So, the myth is not accommodated. Hence, neither the theorizing traditions nor the historical traditions deserve to be equated with myth. With

regard to the Flood, I specifically said in my Flood paper:

The Flood account is not trying to educate the Israelites scientifically but is accommodated to their prior scientific understanding. This does not mean that the story of the Flood is a myth. A comparison to the Mesopotamian accounts of the same flood shows that Genesis 6–9 is a- if not anti-mythological. Nor does it mean that the story is just fiction. There is good reason to believe that both the Mesopotamian and biblical accounts are based upon an actual flood that occurred c. 2900 BC, and both accounts agree upon other various particulars.¹

There may be some justification of the term myth in conjunction with some accommodated Mesopotamian motifs, but for the most part the writer of Genesis demythologized his sources. The story of Adam accommodates (with some revision) several Mesopotamian motifs such as “a lost opportunity to gain immortality,” but there was no ancient Near Eastern myth of a first man who sinned, so the story of Adam cannot be an accommodated myth.

Hill’s View

Although Hill builds her article on interpreting Genesis in the light of the second millennial Near Eastern worldview of the biblical author, she only appeals to this worldview selectively, namely, when it can be used to justify interpreting the biblical text in a way that is in concord with “real history.” Her “third alternative” to Accommodation and Concordism is an alternate form of concordism. As is the case with

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classical concordism, she is willing to take the biblical text out of its biblical context to make it agree with science and the historical facts. She is also willing to take it out of its historical context, interpreting it in a way that is contrary to the worldview of the biblical author in order to make it agree with science and the historical facts.

The topics in Genesis being dealt with in this dialogue are complicated, and a full answer to Hill's interpretations cannot be given here. So instead, let me simply show what happens if the biblical text is left in its historical context, that is, if the second millennial Near Eastern worldview of the biblical author is consistently rather than selectively applied to the biblical text.

With regard to Gen. 1:1, the second millennial worldview would make us realize that the author is not talking about a global planetary earth in the midst of a spacious heaven, but of a stationary, circular, flat earth covered with a solid dome of a sky—as all people in the ancient Near East believed.² In addition, above this solid dome, above the sun, moon, and stars was an ocean.³ This was the science of the day, and it is incorporated into the biblical text. Since this cosmology is not true to the scientific facts, it fits into Calvin's concept of accommodation.⁴ Calvin attributed similar accommodations to Moses, but since Moses would have believed in this cosmology just as much as the uneducated Israelites, I attribute the accommodation to God. It is a divinely inspired accommodation.

The next thing the second millennial worldview would tell us is that the "Deep" sea in Gen. 1:2 is following a Mesopotamian tradition, found in both Sumerian and Babylonian texts, that a deep sea (Nammu/engur in Sumerian; Tiamat in Babylonian) preceded the creation of heaven and earth.⁵ Regardless of whether or not the days in Gen. 1 are sequential, the biblical context and the second millennial worldview tell us that a primeval Deep sea preceded the creation of light on day one and all the following acts of creation. But modern geology and astronomy tell us there was no sea at all prior to the creation of light, the firmament, etc. Genesis 1:2, therefore, matches the science of the times, but is antithetical to modern science. Thus this is another example of divine accommodation, not "real history."

The next thing the second millennial worldview tells us is that the biblical account of the origin of the ocean follows very closely the account given in the Babylonian creation epic, *Enuma Elish*.⁶ Both accounts agree that the creation of the ocean occurred by means of splitting the primeval Deep into two parts, removing the upper half of the Deep's waters to above the firmament, and leaving the lower half to be the earth's ocean (Gen. 1:6-10). This is certainly not a view of the origin of the ocean that will be accepted by modern geologists. It is, accordingly, another divine accommodation. It is not "real history."

With regard to Adam, the second millennial worldview would emphasize the material nature of man, his being made from the dust of the earth, which follows an ancient Near Eastern tradition that shows up in various Mesopotamian texts.⁷ The idea that Adam is merely "the spiritual father" of humankind is in agreement with the later Greek worldview, but is scarcely an ancient Near Eastern view, much less a view that agrees with the biblical context (Gen. 2:5 and 3:20; cf. Acts 17:26).

In addition, the phrase in Gen. 2:5, "... no plant ... no herb ... not a man to till the ground," is typical of a second millennial worldview introduction to a creation story.⁸ In the light of the second millennial worldview, it is incredible that this phrase would be used to refer to a situation where numerous human beings already existed. Both the biblical context and the second millennial worldview tell us this story is about the first man created on earth. Since he is late Neolithic, all of the people who archaeologists say lived long before him were not real humans—if this is "real history." As noted earlier, the story of Adam is not an accommodated myth. It does employ some second millennial worldview motifs, but the specific features are unique to the Bible.

The second millennial worldview of the Flood, as seen in Mesopotamian traditions, is that it destroyed *every* human being except those on the boat.⁹ The biblical account is in full agreement with this as is seen not only in the various phrases which indicate universality (e.g., "all the high mountains under all the heavens"), but in the way Noah is addressed after the Flood as a second Adam.¹⁰ In real history, however, neither the flood of 2900 BC nor any other flood in Neolithic times destroyed all of humankind, even in Mesopotamia. If "all the earth" in the biblical account referred just to Mesopotamia, the flood should have at least destroyed all humans in Mesopotamia. None did. The Near Eastern archaeologist Mallowan said, "No flood was ever of sufficient magnitude to interrupt the continuity of Mesopotamian civilization."¹¹ The flood of 2900 BC did not even destroy all humans in southern Mesopotamia where it left its sedimentary deposits. In Kish, the most northerly city where the flood of 2900 BC left a deposit, the inhabitants came back soon after the flood, did a few minor repairs on their mud-brick houses, and moved back in.¹²

The biblical account of the Flood, as interpreted both by the biblical context and by the second millennial worldview does not match the findings of archaeology. Although there really was a flood and all accounts agree that a man was divinely warned to build a boat and escape, all the rest of humankind was not destroyed. The biblical Flood account is thus not accurate history. It is an accommodated Mesopotamian historical tradition revised to teach lessons of faith and morals.



A major problem with this modern view and its rejection of accommodation is that it is arbitrary. ... Another major problem ... is that it leads Christians down a path that is exactly opposite to that enjoined by Scripture. ... The Bible teaches us ... that claim[s] should be tested empirically before being accepted ...

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The “Conservative” Evangelical View of Scripture

The view of the Bible which drives Hill and other concordists to force the Bible into agreement with the findings of modern science and which also underlies “creation science” can be traced to the Reformed scholastic theologian Francis Turretin (1632–1687).¹³ In order to establish the Bible as a greater authority than the Roman Catholic Church, Turretin took his view of Scripture to an extreme. He forsook Calvin’s doctrine of accommodation, taught that every word in the Bible was dictated by the Holy Spirit including the Hebrew vowel points, and that the Bible was *absolutely* inerrant, that is, inerrant not only in the area of faith and morals but in the areas of history and science as well.¹⁴ Consistent with his absolutist definition of biblical inerrancy, he appealed to the biblical statements about the sun moving and the earth being stationary as proofs that Copernicus was wrong.¹⁵

Turretin’s view of Scripture was fundamentally adopted by Presbyterian theologians at old Princeton Seminary (c. 1840 to 1920). The inspiration of the Hebrew vowel points and dictation were formally rejected, but the inerrancy of the Bible in all of its “affirmations” (or “assertions”) including those of historical or scientific facts was retained.¹⁶ Calvin’s concept of accommodation was ignored, although inerrancy was occasionally said to be restricted to that which the human author taught.¹⁷ This view is now the modern “conservative” view of Scripture.¹⁸

A major problem with this modern view and its rejection of accommodation is that it is arbitrary. There is no biblical proof that God would not speak as a Father to his children in terms of their scientific understanding. This is not to mention that Jesus did not hold an absolutist view of the authority of Scripture but taught that the inspired permission given in Deut. 24:1–4 to divorce for any reason was an accommodation (Matt. 19:3–9).¹⁹

Another major problem with the absolutist view of Scripture besides the fact that it is arbitrary and sets the teaching of Jesus aside is that it leads Christians down a path that is

exactly opposite to that enjoined by Scripture. Christians who have adopted the view that the scientific and historical statements in the Bible are intended by the divine author to be accepted as infallible teachings naturally refuse to test them empirically. When empirical data seem to falsify any of those statements, the “creation science” folks throw out the science and the concordists find some way to make the Bible say it really agrees with the science. No one tests the claim that every historical and scientific statement in the Bible was intended by God to be accepted as an infallible teaching.

The Bible teaches us to employ the exact opposite course of action: If a claim is made that a statement is an infallible teaching from God, that claim should be tested empirically before being accepted (Deut. 18:21, 22). These verses in Deuteronomy speak specifically of prophetic statements telling what *will* happen, but they apply in principle just as much to historical statements telling what *did* happen. It makes no difference in principle whether a statement is about the future or the past. According to these verses, if a statement is falsified by empirical data, it is *not* an infallible teaching from God.

When the doctrine of the absolute inerrancy of Scripture makes the claim that God intended to teach as infallible truth that the creation of light was preceded by the existence of a giant ocean, that a late Neolithic man was the first human being, and that a flood ~2900 BC (or any other date in Neolithic times) destroyed all of humankind, Christians and especially evangelical scientists ought to point out that the empirical evidence is clear enough to conclude that all of these events are falsified by the empirical data, and therefore, according to Deut. 18:21, 22 (cf. 1 Thess. 5:20, 21), they are *not* infallible teachings from God, and hence the doctrine making this claim is not of God.

It is also important to recognize that the Princetonian theologians, who are most responsible for giving us the doctrine of the absolute inerrancy of Scripture, agreed that the truth of this doctrine could be and should be tested by empirical evidence.²⁰ By appealing to concordism and phenomenal language, they found agreement between science and Scripture, and they expected any future scientific discoveries to agree with the

biblical accounts.²¹ Given the immature state of the relevant sciences in their day, their sanguine optimism is perhaps excusable. There is, however, enough clear scientific data today to prove that science does not always agree with the Bible, and has, in fact, falsified the Turretin-Princetonian doctrine of the absolute inerrancy of Scripture.

Scripture never claims to be authoritative *except* in the area of faith and morals (2 Tim. 3:16). Any failure of Scripture to be scientifically or historically correct is irrelevant to the authority of Scripture because unlike the area of faith and morals, Scripture never claimed to be authoritative in these other areas.

God is a Father, not a rationalistic scholastic philosopher-theologian. He was willing to come down to the intellectual level of his children in order to communicate to them lessons of faith and morals. His employment of ancient history and science as if it were really true is a gracious accommodation to the Israelites' limited knowledge.

It is a distortion of his grace to call this accommodation a disguising of fiction as real history. The people of that time believed it was real history. God accommodated it as such for their sakes, and we read it over *their* shoulders. Since our knowledge falsifies this history, we should let it go and retain only the lessons of faith and morals it was designed to teach. The doctrine that pre-existing yet errant beliefs can be accommodated into Scripture is perfectly biblical (Matt. 19:7-9; Mark 10:5-9), and it is also in accord with Scripture that God could even use fiction disguised as real history in order to communicate a lesson of faith and morals (2 Sam. 12:1-12).

Where is the divinely intended normative teaching in Genesis 1-11? It is in the theology, not the history or science as such. Though the human author was inspired by God to accommodate the history and science of the day, the scientific and historical data came from human sources. The theology came by revelation, and the divine character of its source is seen in the fact that although the biblical writer accepts and employs the second millennial worldview for history and science, he rejects and opposes its theology. Contrary to the theology of the second millennial worldview, Genesis 1-11 says that God is one, not many. God created and has control over every part of nature including the awesome sea. God made the universe for humans, not humans for the universe. Humans are the main creation, not an afterthought. Humans are made to serve God, but as stewards not as mindless slaves. Humans should work six days, and rest the seventh. No other religion has inculcated a regularly recurring day of rest each week.

Ultimately, of course, our faith rests in knowing Jesus Christ, and apart from that faith we would be blind even to this light that shines out from the pages of Genesis 1-11.

But the divine source of this light is evidenced by its intrinsic excellence and its ability to rise above the theological traditions of its time found in the second millennial worldview. Let the Lord be praised. 

Notes

- ¹Paul H. Seely, "Noah's Flood: Its Date, Extent, and Divine Accommodation," *Westminster Theological Journal* 66 (2004): 311.
- ²Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 54, 55; John H. Walton, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 110-3.
- ³*Ibid.*; Paul H. Seely, "The Firmament and the Water Above, Part II: The Meaning of 'The Water above the Firmament' in Gen. 1:6-8," *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (1992): 31-46.
- ⁴Davis A. Young, *John Calvin and the Natural World* (New York: University Press of America, 2007), 161-88.
- ⁵Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961), 18, line 3 and p. 42, lines 135 ff (read the notes); also p. 62, line 10; John L. Hayes, *A Manual of Sumerian Grammar and Texts*, 2d ed. (Malibu: Undena, 2000), 35.
- ⁶W. G. Lambert, "A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis," *Journal of Theological Studies* 16 (1965): 293.
- ⁷Richard J. Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible* (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association, 1994), 41, 69, 79.
- ⁸Examples in Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, p. 18, lines 1, 2, 6-8 and p. 62, lines 1-9.
- ⁹Sumerian Flood account in W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-Hasis* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999) 157-8, 259; Atrahasis Flood account in Lambert and Millard, *Atra-Hasis*, 2:8:34; 3:3:37; 3:5:44; Gilgamesh Flood account in Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1946), 11:133, 173.
- ¹⁰These statements and more that indicate the universality of the Flood are fully expounded in my paper, "Noah's Flood," 291-311.
- ¹¹M. E. L. Mallowan, "Noah's Flood Reconsidered," *Iraq* 26 (1964): 81.
- ¹²Mallowan, "Noah's Flood Reconsidered," 78-9; Watelin and Langdon, *Excavations at Kish IV 1925-1930* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1934), 7-8.
- ¹³Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 172-9.
- ¹⁴Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* 1, trans. George M. Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992), 114-6.
- ¹⁵Francis Turretin, *Compendium Theologicae Didactico-Elencticae* (Amsterdam, 1695) in Edward Hitchcock, *The Religion of Geology* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, and Company, 1854), 11-13, available at www.geology.19thcenturyscience.org/books/1851-Hitchcock-Religion-Geology/htm/01.htm When you have the web page, use Find (control F) with the word Turretin to go to the correct pages.
- ¹⁶Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*, 279-89; 299-309; 344-8; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 1 (reprint, London: James Clarke & Co., 1960) section 2, F, p. 163; Archibald A. Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield, *Inspiration* (1881; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 8.
- ¹⁷Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 1, 165, 169, 170; Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Real Problem of Inspiration," in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1948), 197.
- ¹⁸Hodge and Warfield, *Inspiration*, 14.
- ¹⁹In order to show that Jesus believed in absolute inerrancy, "conservatives" have taken relevant Bible verses out of context and ignored verses to the contrary. See my *Inerrant Wisdom* (Portland, OR: Evangelical Reform, 1989), 46-136.
- ²⁰Hodge and Warfield, *Inspiration*, 26, 27; Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 1, 169.
- ²¹Hodge and Warfield, *Inspiration*, 31; Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 1, 170, 171.