



Reading Modern Science into Scripture

Paul Seely

Ross has rightly seen that we have differing views of Scripture. However, it is misleading to say I question the total truthfulness of Scripture (and by implication the total truthfulness of God). Let me make it clear that I agree with Ross that God has spoken to humanity through both the words of the Bible and the world of nature. And, certainly God by his nature, does not lie, deceive,¹ or contradict.² Neither do I see any possibility for contradiction between what God *reveals* in the Bible and what he reveals in nature's record. However, there is good evidence that God has sometimes made gracious accommodations to the prior beliefs of the Israelites, and since these are not revelations, there is no reason to expect them to be absolutely true.

Ross does not realize that his view of Scripture as totally inerrant rests upon a view of God derived ultimately from human reason, not from Scripture. It is reasonable to assume that God would not say anything that was not absolutely true. To turn this natural assumption into a necessary dogma, rationalistic Christians argue that since God cannot lie, deceive, or err, the only option he has left is to tell the absolute (non-contradictable) truth. Hence the Bible, being God's words, will necessarily be inerrant, not only for faith and morals, but also for history and science. This conclusion, however, does not logically follow from the premises. It commits the fallacy of the excluded middle because according to Scripture, God has other options besides those which rationalistic Christians have allowed him.

We can see from Scripture that the most important of these options is that of accommodating his revelation to the prior beliefs of the Israelites, as Jesus implied God had

sometimes done (Matt. 19:8), and Calvin recognized in various parts of Scripture.³ Because accommodations are not revelations, there is no reason to expect them to be inerrant.

Unfortunately, rationalistic Christians try to protect the Bible's authority by lifting it up into an extra-biblical, rationalistic philosophy similar to Platonism.⁴ Like an idealistic philosophy, it demands absolute logical coherency and hence absolute biblical inerrancy. Although this philosophy is a priori, resting upon human reason rather than revelation, the validity of its *absolutely* inerrant Bible is regularly rationalized by appealing to biblical proof-texts which few seem to notice have all been taken out of context.⁵

Having thus convinced themselves that their rationalistic philosophy of the Bible is really biblical, rationalistic Christians feel justified in excluding the possibility of divine accommodation, not because divine accommodation is not biblical, but because it would bring merely human ideas into the Bible and thus destroy the absolute coherency and validity of their rationalistic philosophy. As a result, when God's accommodations conflict with modern science, rationalistic Christians only have two ways to save the coherency of their rationalistic philosophy: either force the scientific data to conform to Scripture or force the biblical data to conform to science. Creation science mostly follows the first path. Concordism mostly follows the second. Both rationalize away relevant data, leaving the believer in a world that is logically consistent but neither biblically nor empirically valid.

Reply to Response 1: Ross says I distorted the facts by claiming there was a virtually

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Dialogue: Reply

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unanimous agreement among qualified Old Testament scholars that the sun was created on the fourth day, not just made to appear. I cited seven evangelical scholars as documentation. Ross apparently did not read the endnote as he ignored four of the scholars, and of the three he consulted, he failed to see that not just Wenham but Hamilton and Waltke also agree with me. Had he read the pages I cited, he would have found that Hamilton explicitly says the author of Genesis 1 “affirms the existence of light (and a day for that matter) without the existence of the sun.” The comments of Waltke are not as explicit but he does say that “Let there be” with regard to the creation of light on Day One means to “bring into existence what was not.” If light was not in existence before Day One, then Waltke is agreeing with the others that the sun was not created before Day One and hence not at the time of Gen. 1:1, but on the fourth day.

Allen Ross said that it was *possible* to understand the fourth day as saying the sun *appeared* rather than was created, but he made no commitment to this interpretation, and he took a firm stand against interpreting the days of Genesis as ages. In a book not intended to expound the meaning of the author of Genesis, Archer accepted the Day-Age theory in order to save the “conservative” philosophy of an absolutely inerrant Bible. The purpose of Geisler and Howe’s book is the same, and they are not qualified Old Testament scholars.

Nevertheless, just as there is a minority of qualified evangelical geologists and astronomers who agree the earth is not more than ~6000 years old, there is a minority of qualified Old Testament scholars who support concordism. So, Ross is right: my statement of “a virtually unanimous agreement among qualified Old Testament scholars” is not accurate. It is only the majority who agree with me. The fact that my view is the majority view and also the historic view of the Church is, however, evidence that it arises naturally from the text, and reading in the Day-Age theory distorts the text.

Reply to Response 4: Although with a little stretching, the words, “worked the earth” and “shepherd,” might be able to be interpreted as Paleolithic, the words, “God planted a garden” (Gen. 2:8), strongly suggest

fully domesticated crops and fruit trees. And even though Adam leaves the garden, there is no indication he had to start over with wild plants. On the contrary, Gen. 3:19 says he will eat the “herb of the field,” which refers to domesticated plants (Exod. 9:22, 25), and Gen. 2:5 may very well show that it refers to domesticated plants *as opposed to wild ones*.⁶ The most natural interpretation of the biblical data is that the culture of Adam was Neolithic.

Cain’s city also testifies that the culture of that time was Neolithic. Ross says it was Paleolithic but that all evidence of Cain’s city has disappeared. Possibly so, but given Cain’s city and later generations remembering him (Gen. 4:24), it seems unlikely that no one in the next 20,000 years thought of building a city. Or must we believe later cities also disappeared?

Reply to Response 5: Ross wants to date the “cutting instruments of bronze and iron” (Gen. 4:22) ~30,000 BP even though there is no evidence of metallurgy until ~9000 BP. Ross’s answer again is that all evidence of such technology disappeared. Maybe so, but repeated appeal to evidence disappearing suggests special pleading.

Reply to Response 6: There is not room to answer all of Ross’s response. I have, however, in a previous paper given all of the biblical reasons for saying Scripture describes the Flood as covering the entire Near East.⁷ The strongest reason for saying the Flood is not described as local is that it involved the reversal of the second day of creation, thus sending the earth virtually back to its condition in Gen 1:2.⁸ (The pages cited must be read.)

The reason the statement that the ocean waters will “not return to cover the earth” (Ps. 104:9b) does not exclude a universal flood is because it is a rhetorical statement as I fully explain in my article, “Creation Science takes Psalm 104:6–9 Out of Context.”⁹

Ross is technically correct that Gen. 8:6 [Noah opening a window in the ark] “explicitly refutes Seely’s assertion ‘Noah did not see outside the ark until the surface of the ground was completely dried up.’” However, as Wenham notes, the window was probably in the roof of the ark, giving Noah a view only of the sky.

Reply to Response 7: Ross's answer to the fact that buildings made of baked brick using asphalt for mortar do not show up in the archaeological record before c. 3500 BC is that they disappeared. Dating the tower of Babel ~30,000 BP, however, is so far out of sync with the archaeological record—which shows a natural progression from hunting and gathering in northern Mesopotamia to city building, which did not reach the area of Babylon until 5000 BC—that Ross's suggested dating can only be considered improbable speculation. I doubt that his dating would fare any better with consensual archaeology and anthropology than creation science does with consensual geology and astronomy. Four evangelical scholars besides myself have dated the Tower of Babel, and they all dated it after 3500 BC.¹⁰

Reply to Response 9: Ross does not seem to understand the connection between Genesis and the Babylonian traditions. The fact that all scholars emphasize the contrast between the biblical and Babylonian *theologies* and reject a *direct* dependence upon any *particular* extant Babylonian text does not change the fact that there is evidence the Bible used pre-scientific Mesopotamian concepts, motifs, and traditions in areas other than theological.¹¹

Regarding 2 Peter 1:21, the verse specifically refers to "prophecy," the messages which biblical prophets received directly from God by revelation. The inspired writers of biblical history, however, never claim to have received their historical facts directly from God by revelation, so 2 Peter 1:21 does not apply to them. Also, Peter is talking about Messianic prophecy (faith and morals), not science, thus his statement does not apply to science. Finally, even a direct revelation from God (e.g., Deut. 24:1-4) can incorporate divine accommodation (Matt. 19:8). Therefore, 2 Peter 1:21 does not prove absolute biblical inerrancy. So, far from being inerrant, the science in the Bible evidences being the science of the times.¹²

Concordists have two basic ways to make the Bible agree with modern science: (1) take the words of the Bible out of context and redefine them¹³ or, (2) read modern science into the biblical words as a second meaning unknown to the human author. To justify the latter approach, they often appeal to 1 Peter 1:10-12. These verses, however, do not support the concordist approach. Peter, as scholarly commentaries agree, was saying the prophets were searching to find out *under what circumstances* and *when* the things they had *foretold* would come to pass. This is not at all the same thing as supposing that the words of the prophets have a second meaning beyond the one the author intended.

Reply to Response 10: It is true that the biblical accounts of creation are more easily coordinated with modern science than the accounts in other "holy" books, but the reason for this is because of the theological differences: one tran-

scendent sovereign God vs. mythological warring nature-gods. Lacking the background to read the biblical accounts within their historical context, Ross missed the fact that their science qua science is the science of the times.¹⁴ He naturally read them through the grid of modern Western science and unknowingly read that modern science into them.

God used a partial mistranslation in the King James version of the Bible to bring me to the Lord, but that does not justify the mistranslation. I do not doubt God used Ross's misinterpretations to bring him to the Lord, but that does not justify his misinterpretations. Supposed meanings of Scripture based on words interpreted out of context are not equivalent to "what the Bible says."

I enjoyed Ross's book, *The Fingerprint of God*, and believe the Big Bang is a majestic testimony to the God of the Bible. The testimony of the Big Bang, however, stands on its own two feet. It bears a tremendous witness to the Creator completely apart from supposedly being revealed in the Bible. The three cosmic features of the Big Bang, which Ross sees as revelations of modern science long before their time, are found in the Bible only because Ross reads them in from modern science. Let us look at them.

Ross sees "a single cosmic beginning, including the beginning of space and time" in verses saying that God created the heavens and the earth, e.g., Gen. 1:1 (*The Creator and the Cosmos*, 24). Genesis 1:1 is legitimately *applied* to the Big Bang, but interpreted in context, the "heavens" are a solid sky-dome with a literal ocean above it,¹⁵ so it is *not a revelation* of the Big Bang. One could just as easily read the Big Bang into the earlier Mesopotamian text, "When An, Enlil, and Ea, the great gods, had created heaven and earth ..."¹⁶

Ross also sees "fixed physical laws." It is not clear to me which verses he sees these in, but the ancient Sumerians, long before the Bible, had the idea that their gods "guide and control the cosmos in accordance with well-laid plans and duly prescribed laws."¹⁷ One could, therefore, just as easily read the concept of fixed physical laws into the Sumerian literature.

Ross sees the continuous expansion of the universe in verses which speak of God "stretching out the heavens," e.g., Isa. 42:5. Seven of these verses seem particularly apposite because their verb is a Qal active participle, which supports the idea of "continual or ongoing stretching" (*The Creator and the Cosmos*, 24). According to E. J. Young, who was a master of the Hebrew language, the participle in Isa. 42:5 expresses "not only the original act of creation but also the creative power of God as exercised in the continual existence of his works."¹⁸ Isaiah 42:5, like the similar verses Ross cites, means God is continually upholding the stretched out heavens, not that he is physically increasing their size year by year. Ross is reading



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modern science into the account. It is not there. He might just as well have argued that the Qal active participle used in the following phrase, he “spreads out the earth,” means the Bible is saying that the spreading out of the earth is “continual and ongoing.” But the earth is not literally increasing in size year by year, so Ross does not see this as a revelation of modern science before its time—although the grammar and context are the same! It could scarcely be clearer that Ross is picking and choosing according to what modern science dictates.

Epilogue

Concordists think they are exalting and saving the Bible. In reality, they are suppressing it in order to save the coherency of an a priori rationalistic philosophy of the Bible. It is all so unnecessary. The revelations of the nature of the true God, creation, sin, judgment, grace, and relationships which God gave to Israel in Genesis 1–11, though graciously adapted to *their* ways of viewing history and science, are perfectly clear to us. Though not meeting every demand of an autonomous human reason, Scripture bears eternal witness to God’s condescending grace and inerrant wisdom. *

Notes

PreNote: If anyone is interested in serious dialogue, the literature cited must be read.

- ¹Humans’ sinfulness, however, may require inspired deception (1 Sam. 16:1–5). Cf. Josh. 2:4.
- ²However, the superseding of the Old Covenant involves negating “not’s” and hence by definition involves logical contradictions, e.g., cannot eat unclean foods becomes can eat unclean foods.
- ³David F. Wright, “Calvin’s Pentateuchal Criticism: Equity, Hardness of Heart, and Divine Accommodation in the Mosaic Harmony Commentary” *Calvin Theological Journal* 21 (1986): 33–50; D. F. Wright, “Accommodation and Barbarity in John Calvin’s OT Commentaries” in *Understanding Poets and Prophets*, ed. A. Graeme Auld (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1993), 413–27. For more discussion of Calvin’s concept of accommodation, see the latter part of my paper, “The Date of the Tower of Babel and Some Theological Implications,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 63 (2001): 25, note 52. www.occasioncameras.com/creationdays/pdf/seely.babel.wtj.2001.pdf
- ⁴Cf. the Platonic definition of biblical inerrancy given in Norman L. Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), 294. Note its “when all facts are known” and “original autographs,” both of which are unattainable in this world.
- ⁵James D. G. Dunn, “The Authority of Scripture According to Scripture,” *Churchman* 96 (1982):

104–22 and 201–25; Paul H. Seely, *Inerrant Wisdom** (Portland, OR: Evangelical Reform, 1989). See 2 Peter 1:21 in Reply 9 as an example.

⁶Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 57–8; Umberto Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis 1* (1961, reprint, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1972), 101–2.

⁷Paul H. Seely, “Noah’s Flood: Its Date, Extent, and Divine Accommodation,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 66 (2004): 291–311.

⁸Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1–17* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 291; Kenneth Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 351; cf. 376; John Walton, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 331; Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 139; Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 181. Even Allen Ross (*Creation and Blessing* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997], 190) and Gleason Archer (*Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001], 82) agree that the Flood was not local.

⁹Paul Seely, “Creation Science Takes Psalm 104:6–9 Out of Context,” *PSCF* 51, no. 3 (1999): 172–3. See www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/1999/PSCF9-99Seely.html about two-thirds of the way down the document.

¹⁰See Seely, “The Date of the Tower of Babel and Some Theological Implications.”

¹¹See Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 53–6; Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, xli; W. G. Lambert, “A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 16 (1965): 287–300.

¹²John Walton, “Ancient Near Eastern Background Studies,” *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. K. I. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 41; My book, *Inerrant Wisdom**, gives examples of the New Testament using the science of the times.

¹³Paul H. Seely, “The First Four Days of Genesis in Concordist Theory and in Biblical Context,” *PSCF* 49, no. 2 (June 1997): 85–95, also available at www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/1997/PSCF6-97Seely.html

¹⁴Paul H. Seely, “The Firmament and the Water Above, Part I: The Meaning of Raqia’ in Gen. 1:6–8,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 53 (1991): 227–40; “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; “The Geographical Meaning of ‘Earth’ and ‘Seas’ in Gen. 1:10,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 59 (1997): 231–55. See also notes 10 and 11.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Richard J. Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible* (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association, c1994), 68.

¹⁷Samuel Noah Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 78, cf. 80. These plans and laws were called “me’s,” often translated “decrees.”

¹⁸Edward J. Young, *Commentary on Isaiah 3* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972) 117.

*Copies of *Inerrant Wisdom* are available from Evangelical Reform, 1544 SE 34th Avenue, Portland, OR 97214 for a donation of any size.