

The Erosion of Biblical Inerrancy, or Toward a More Biblical View of the Inerrant Word of God?

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THE EROSION OF INERRANCY IN EVANGELICALISM: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority by G. K. Beale. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008. 304 pages. Paperback; \$20.00. ISBN: 9781433502033.

In his latest book, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (2008), G. K. Beale contends that the doctrine of inerrancy is under attack in the most surprising place—the evangelical world itself. He argues that there is an emerging generation of scholars, whom he terms “so-called evangelicals,” and their work is a threat to the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, which he views as “the benchmark for an evangelical view of the inspiration of Scripture.”¹

Beale is well positioned to enter this discussion. He is a leading professor of New Testament at Wheaton College, one of America’s most important evangelical schools; and he is a past president of the Evangelical Theological Society (2004). During the academic years 2009–2012, he will be a visiting professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, “long considered to be a bastion of evangelical orthodoxy.”²

The first part of Beale’s book is a blunt critique of Peter Enns’ *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament*.³ Notably, in 2008 Enns “resigned” from Westminster Theological Seminary, despite fourteen years

of stellar teaching and the fact that the majority of his colleagues deem his views on biblical inspiration to be within the contours of evangelicalism.⁴ Beale’s attack is aimed primarily at Enns’ belief that the Holy Spirit employed myth in the revelatory process, particularly throughout the opening chapters of the Bible. Of course, the term “myth” is volatile in evangelical circles, and Beale exploits this word and the associated emotion to pit his readers against Enns (e.g., his recurrent use of the phrase that Scripture is “shot through with myth”).⁵ This polemical strategy might work with those outside the literary and theological academies, but it only irritates those of us within, because myth is a well-known genre of literature.⁶ According to Beale, the use of myth in Scripture “give[s] way too much ground to pagan myth.”⁷

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Unsurprisingly, a concordist assumption applied to the early chapters of the Bible is the driving force behind the arguments. Beale repeatedly appeals to the category of “essential history/historicity,” which he defines as the notion “that [biblical] writers record events that correspond with real past events.”⁸ He recognizes that Enns affirms the development of a “historical consciousness” during Israel’s monarchic period (about 1000 BC), and that Enns extends some essential historicity to “the core of the patriarchal narratives.”⁹ But the perennial evangelical battlefield is the historicity of the creation accounts. In an attempt to establish a historical element, Beale offers “several *possible* well-known interpretations of Genesis 1 that can be quite consistent with the notion of ‘essential historicity.’”¹⁰ These include (1) “a literal creation” in six days, (2) “a literal creation” with the days representing extensive periods of time, and (3) Wheaton College professor John Walton’s view that Genesis 1 reflects temple imagery and does not deal with material origins.¹¹ It is here that my confidence in Beale was irreparably fractured. Is young earth creation a “possible” interpretation in the twenty-first century? So too the day-age hermeneutic of progressive creation. Does Beale not realize that the creative events in Genesis 1 do not align with the cosmological and geological records?¹²

The second part of Beale’s book focuses on Genesis 1 and the cosmology in Scripture. His position is clearly stated: “[T]he Old Testament’s view of the cosmos does not pose problems for the modern-day Christian’s trust in the divine authority of the Old Testament.”¹³ Beale’s agenda is to avoid any conflict or contradiction between the Bible and science, thus protecting his mechanical understanding of biblical inerrancy. In this way, he claims that Genesis 1 does not have any “essential history,” and consequently it can never clash with the discoveries of modern science. This nonconcordist hermeneutic may seem surprising for one who argues throughout his book for the necessity of “real past events” in Scripture. Of course, essential historicity, for Beale, must begin in Genesis 2, as reflected in the Wheaton College Statement of Faith (“WE BELIEVE that God directly created Adam and Eve, the historical parents of the entire human race”).¹⁴ That is, instead of demarking the beginning of actual history roughly around Genesis 12, as many conservative scholars do, Beale needs to draw the line between Genesis 1 and 2.¹⁵

Beale’s central argument is that Genesis 1 does not deal with origins *per se*, but rather, it is a symbolic representation of a gigantic cosmic temple. He contends,

Since Israel’s temple was viewed as a small model of the cosmos, then the cosmos itself was likely seen as a massive temple ... [Consequently,] the architectural depictions of a massive temple-house [in Genesis 1] are to be taken *figuratively*.¹⁶

To defend his position, Beale aligns the three main parts of the temple with the physical world: (1) the outer court represents the habitable world, (2) the Holy Place corresponds with the visible heavens and celestial lights, and (3) the Holy of Holies depicts “the invisible dimension of the cosmos, where God and his heavenly hosts dwell.”¹⁷ However, many problems arise with this interpretive approach. Let me mention a few.

First, Beale presents a temple that reflects a two-tier universe when, in fact, ancient Near Eastern peoples and the Bible embraced a three-tier cosmos—the heavens, the earth, and the underworld.¹⁸ Beale is actually aware of the existence of the “netherworld,”¹⁹ and Scripture often refers to this region using the Hebrew *she’ol* (sixty-five times) and the Greek *hādes* (twenty times) and *katachthoniōn* (once as the chthonic realm). In particular, the New Testament refers to this place as “under the earth” (Phil. 2:10; Rev. 5:3, 13; see also Eph. 4:9–10). If Israel’s temple is supposed to be a model of the cosmos, then where is the underworld depicted?

Second, Beale argues that the seven lamps on the lampstands in the Holy Place represent seven heavenly light sources—the sun, moon, and the five planets visible to the naked eye. However, Genesis 1 does not differentiate the five “wandering stars,” and the seven lamps of equal size do not distinguish the “two great lights” from the stars (Gen. 1:16). Moreover, there were ten lampstands in the Holy Place. Does this mean that there were ten suns, ten moons, and so forth?

Third, the walls in both the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies featured garden imagery with “palm trees and open flowers” (1 Kings 6:29). This is not expected if the Holy Place is supposed to represent the visible heavens. In attempting to resolve this problem, Beale claims that the Holy Place “was also

intended to mimic the garden of Eden.”²⁰ Yet there is garden imagery in the Holy of Holies as well. Is God’s dwelling place “also intended to mimic the garden of Eden”? I am not convinced by this ad hoc line of argumentation.

The sandy foundation upon which Beale’s cosmic temple rests is further seen with his biblical justification for his thesis. He claims,

One of the most explicit texts affirming the design of Israel’s temple as a small model of the cosmos is Psalm 78:69: “He built his sanctuary like the heights, like the earth which he founded *forever* [or from eternity].” The psalmist is saying that, in some way, God designed Israel’s earthly temple to be comparable to the heavens and to the earth.²¹

Beale later states that Ps. 78:69 is “the *most explicit* Old Testament” passage.²² However, if this is the best biblical support for his thesis, most will agree that it is, indeed, sparse. Moreover, the context of this verse is not about the architecture of the temple. In a cursory review of a dozen commentaries on the Psalms, I did not find a scholar who uses this verse to argue for a cosmic temple. Rather, the comparison in Ps. 78:69 is qualitative. Israel’s temple is glorious like the heights of heaven, and stable like the immovable earth (note the ancient astronomy). And Beale knows he lacks biblical support for his thesis. He even confesses, “[W]hy there are not more Old Testament descriptions of the cosmos as a temple is not so clear.”²³ It seems clear to me that the Genesis 1 cosmic temple thesis is unbiblical and an alien intrusion upon Holy Scripture.

In a second strategic move to alleviate tension between the Bible and modern science, Beale recycles the phenomenological language argument, a popular approach often heard in evangelical circles. He contends,

[A]ncient and modern peoples share strikingly similar phenomenological portrayals of the cosmos. Our common reference to the sun rising or setting is one that was also common in the ancient world of the Old Testament ... [These] are descriptions of the way things appeared to the unaided eye.²⁴

There is, however, a fundamental error in this argument. It fails to distinguish the *ancient* phenomeno-

logical perspective embraced by ancient peoples from our *modern* phenomenological perspective. What the biblical writers saw with their eyes, they believed to be real, like the literal rising and setting of the sun. In fact, the belief that the sun actually crossed the sky every day was held by nearly everyone right up until the seventeenth century. Historical proof for this comes from the Galileo affair—the central issue was whether or not the sun moved.²⁵ Today scientific instruments, like telescopes, have broadened our view of the universe. As a result, when we see the sun “rising” and “setting,” we know that it is only an appearance or visual effect caused by the rotation of the earth. Thus it is crucial that the ancient and modern phenomenological viewpoints of nature not be confused and conflated as Beale presents them.²⁶

Yet, despite his arguments for interpreting Genesis 1 figuratively as a giant temple and for viewing statements about nature in Scripture phenomenologically, Beale slips back to a concordist hermeneutic in his understanding of the firmament (Hebrew *rāqîa’*) and waters above in Gen. 1:6–8. He writes,

I have no problem in viewing the waters “above the expanse [firmament]” to be literal atmospheric waters from which rain comes. Part of this “expanse” was certainly understood even by the ancients to contain water that was separated from the waters “below” on earth, as, for example, the hydraulic cycle described in Job 36:27–39 makes clear (evaporation of water from earth forms clouds from which rains upon the earth come). Thus, many would have viewed the *rāqîa’* to have various layers (first air, then multiple levels of clouds filled with water with a further uppermost air space above). This multiple-level view of the “expanse” is still consistent with the notion of Gen. 1:7, that the “expanse” separated earthly waters from heavenly waters, though technically the upper atmosphere waters *were really a part* of the “expanse” itself.²⁷

Beale’s interpretation is another example of the failure of concordism.²⁸ First, Scripture clearly states that the firmament (expanse) was *under* the waters above, not *in* them or *part* of them. Second, if the writer of Genesis 1 had intended the waters above to mean clouds, vapor, or mist “from which rain comes,” then there were three well-known Hebrew words (*’ānān*, *’ēd*, *nāsî’*; Gen. 9:13, Jer. 10:13, Gen. 2:6, respectively)

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that he could have used. But the inspired author never did. Instead, he employed the common term for water (*mayim*) five times in Gen. 1:6–8. Third, Beale seems to forget that the sun, moon, and stars are placed *in* (Hebrew *b*) the firmament on the fourth day of creation. Following his model of the universe's structure, these astronomical bodies should be in the earth's atmosphere! Finally, Beale disregards (1) the biblical contexts in which *rāqîa'* and its cognates appear (e.g., "Can you join God in spreading out [*rāqîa'*] the skies, *hard* as a mirror of *cast bronze*?" Job 37:18; my italics),²⁹ (2) the translation of this word in Bibles over time (Greek Septuagint: *stereōma* based on *stereos* which means "firm/hard"; Latin Vulgate: *firmamentum* based on *firmus* which means "firm/hard"; King James Version: firmament), and (3) the traditional interpretation of this word for 1,500 years of church history, meaning a hard and solid structure above the earth.³⁰ In this light, it is evident (and ironic) that Beale does not embrace the traditional, conservative, and biblical understanding of the meaning of the firmament and the waters above in Genesis 1.³¹

Beale's hermeneutic is a unique (and conflicting) blend of concordism, symbolism, and phenomenological language. This brings us back to his perceived problem with myth. Ancient Near Eastern creation myths outside Israel feature a pagan theology cast within an ancient origins account. The account of origins can judiciously be seen as an ancient view of science and an ancient understanding of the beginning of human history. Beale conflates the ancient account of creation with the paganism. Consequently, he assumes that the pagan ideology corrupts the ancient ideas about origins. This is fallacious, however, in the same way that it would be for anyone to presume that a pagan physician corrupts standard medical protocols.

A more parsimonious approach to the biblical creation accounts is to suggest, with Enns, that under the inspiring guidance of the Holy Spirit, the science and history of the day were employed as incidental vessels to reveal inerrant messages of faith regarding origins. Of course, such an approach would indicate that God accommodated to the level of ancient humans in the revelatory process. Yet, according to Beale, the hermeneutical principle of accommodation undermines biblical revelation and inerrancy.³² However, a corollary of divine revelation is that God *has* to accommodate. He is the holy, infinite Creator,

and we are the sinful, finite creatures. It is by necessity (and grace) that he descends to our level in the revelatory process. In fact, the greatest act of revelation is Jesus Christ—God in human flesh. As Phil. 2:7–8 states, God "humbled himself" and "made himself nothing" in order to reveal himself to us.³³

Finally, a few comments are in order regarding the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, which Beale places as an appendix in his book. It is a balanced and reasonable document for its time. The formulators wisely cautioned that they "do not propose that this Statement be given creedal weight."³⁴ With humility and openness, they also recognized the tentative nature of their work and saw the prospect of further development on the issue of inerrancy: "We invite response to this Statement from any who see reason to amend its affirmations about Scripture by the light of Scripture itself, under whose infallible authority we stand as we speak."³⁵ Three passages are relevant to our discussion:

Article VIII

We affirm that God in His work of inspiration utilized the distinctive personalities and *literary styles* of the writers whom He had chosen and prepared.

Article XVIII

We affirm that the text of Scripture is to be interpreted by grammatico-historical exegesis, taking into account its *literary forms* and devices, and that Scripture is to interpret Scripture.

So history must be treated as history, poetry as poetry, hyperbole and metaphor as hyperbole and metaphor, generalization and approximation as what they are, and so forth. Differences between *literary conventions* in Bible times and in ours must also be observed: since, for instance, nonchronological narration and imprecise citation were conventional and acceptable and violated no expectation in those days, we must not regard these things as faults when we find them in Bible writers. When total precision of a particular kind was not expected nor aimed at, it is no error not to have achieved it. Scripture is inerrant, not in the sense of being absolutely precise by modern standards, but in the sense of making good its claims and achieving that measure of focused truth at which its authors aimed.³⁶

The category that connects these three passages is the notion of literary genre. The 1978 Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy underlines that we must respect the genre of biblical passages, and have it direct our interpretations. Stated more incisively, literary genre *dictates* biblical interpretation.³⁷ This is exactly the foundational principle in the work of Enns. He respects Holy Scripture and submits his scholarship to “the light of Scripture itself.” He treats the ancient science as ancient science, and the ancient understanding of human history as an ancient understanding of human history. It is Enns who embraces the spirit and central tenet of the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, not Beale. It is Enns who defends a more biblical view of the inerrant Word of God.

In sum, though I am quite critical of *The Erosion of Inerrancy*, I highly recommend that this book be read. Beale is a leading theologian within the evangelical community and his contribution is an important one. However, his book must be read alongside Enns’ *Inspiration and Incarnation*. Look past Beale’s polemic, and you will be able to appreciate a shift that is indeed happening within evangelical scholarly circles toward a more scriptural understanding of God’s Word. □

Acknowledgment

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Notes

¹G. K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 23. Hereafter cited as *Erosion*.

²Ibid.

³Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

⁴See public statements by Westminster Theological Seminary: www.wts.edu/stayinformed/view.html?id=104 and www.wts.edu/stayinformed/view.html?id=187.

⁵Beale, *Erosion*, 53, 64, 75. In a personal communication 16 August 2009, Enns informs me that he never said this. Ironically, Beale accuses Enns of using “emotive language” and righteously calls him to employ “more diplomatic terms in order to allow for more dialogue.” Ibid., 49–50.

⁶For an excellent summary of ancient Near Eastern myths, see Kenton L. Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 305–43. For my approach, see “Is Genesis 1–11 Myth?” in Denis O. Lamoureux, *Evolutionary Creation: A Christian Approach to Evolution* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 259–61. Hereafter cited as *Evolutionary Creation*.

⁷Beale, *Erosion*, 33.

⁸Ibid., 70. See also pp. 29, 31, 36, 38, 71, 74, 75.

⁹Ibid., 72.

¹⁰Ibid., 74. My italics.

¹¹Actually, Walton’s approach to Genesis 1 is a nonconcordist hermeneutic and, consequently, cannot include essential history. See John Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis 1* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

¹²See the appendix “Fossil Pattern Predictions of the Christian Origins Position” in Lamoureux, *Evolutionary Creation*, 418–21.

¹³Beale, *Erosion*, 218.

¹⁴See www.wheaton.edu/welcome/aboutus_mission.html. Capitalization in the original. Also see the dismissal of anthropology professor Alex Bolyanatz in 2000 from Wheaton College as presented by Beth McMurtie, “Do Professors Lose Academic Freedom by Signing Statements of Faith?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (24 May 2002): 12–5.

¹⁵For example, Iain W. Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003).

¹⁶Beale, *Erosion*, 163–4. My italics.

¹⁷Ibid., 165. See endnote 27 below regarding Beale’s “invisible dimension of the cosmos.”

¹⁸See standard works: Luis I. J. Stadelmann, *The Hebrew Conception of the World* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1970); Paul H. Seely, *Inerrant Wisdom: Science and Inerrancy in Biblical Perspective* (Portland, OR: Evangelical Reformed, 1989), 28–37; Stanley Jaki, *Genesis 1 through the Ages* (New York: Thomas More Press, 1992), 1, 275–9; Lloyd R. Bailey, “The Cosmology of the Ancient Semites,” in his *Genesis, Creation and Creationism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 172–85; John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 165–78; Denis O. Lamoureux, *I Love Jesus and I Accept Evolution* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 43–70; Lamoureux, *Evolutionary Creation*, 105–76.

¹⁹In fact, Beale states, “The universe was commonly understood as a composition of three tiers: the heavens, the earth, and the netherworld” (*Erosion*, 162).

²⁰Ibid., 180.

²¹Ibid., 164. Beale’s italics and bracket inclusion.

²²Ibid., 176. My italics.

²³Ibid., 215.

²⁴Ibid., 76, 213.

²⁵For an introduction, see Charles Hummel, *The Galileo Connection: Resolving Conflicts between Science and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986).

²⁶Regarding this popular categorical error, see Lamoureux, *Evolutionary Creation*, 108–10.

²⁷Beale, *Erosion*, 204. My italics. There is more to Beale’s model. He connects the firmament “sparkling like crystal” in Ezek. 1:22 to the “sea of glass like crystal” in Rev. 4:6. Accordingly, the firmament is fluid and it “separates the visible creation of the sky and starry heavens from the invisible dimension of God’s heavenly temple dwelling.” Ibid., 197. My italics. Also pp. 202–3. My 11-year-old niece informs me that the separation of different dimensions by a fluid crystal barrier appears in the science-fiction series *Star Gate*.

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²⁸For a list of biblical features that reveal the failure of concordism, see Lamoureux, *Evolutionary Creation*, 150.

²⁹The root of the noun *rāqia'* is the verb *rāqa'* which means "to flatten," "spread out," and "hammer out." Exodus 39:3 and Isa. 40:19 use *rāqa'* for pounding metals into thin plates, and Num. 16:38 employs *riqqūa'* (broad plate) in a similar context. Notably, Beale fails to deal directly with these biblical cognates.

³⁰For example, Augustine in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor (New York: Newman Press, 1982 [415]) argued,

Bear in mind that the term "firmament" does not compel us to imagine a stationary heaven: we may understand this name as given to indicate not that it is motionless but that it is solid and that it constitutes an impassable boundary between the waters above and the waters below. (P. I:61)

Similarly, in *Luther's Works: Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 1–5*, ed. J. Pelikan (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1958), Protestant reformer Martin Luther stated,

Scripture ... simply says that the moon, the sun, and the stars were placed in the firmament of the heaven (below and above which are the waters) ... The bodies of the stars, like that of the sun, are round, and they are fastened to the firmament like globes of fire ... (Pp. 42–3)

We Christians must be different from the philosophers in the way we think about the causes of things. And if some are beyond our comprehension like those before us concerning the waters above the heavens, we must believe them rather than wickedly deny them or presumptuously interpret them in conformity with our understanding. (P. 30)

³¹One last comment is in order regarding the structure of the universe according to Beale. He takes Paul Seely and me to task with regard to the firmament. After reading Beale's critique a number of times, I am sorry to say that he selectively misrepresents my views and sets up a strawman that he then attempts to destroy with his tortuous line of argumentation. Similarly, in a personal communication 27 October 2009, Seely states, "Beale misrepresented my arguments several times, apparently so he could have a strawman he could more easily refute. At one point, he even put quotation marks around words I have not said." I will let the readers make their own decision regarding Beale's logic and methodology. See Beale, *Erosion*, 197–205; Paul H. Seely, "The Firmament and the Water Above. Part I: The Meaning of *rāqia'* in Gen. 1:6–8," *Westminster Theological Journal* 53 (1991): 227–40; Denis O. Lamoureux, "Lessons from the Heavens: On Scripture, Science, and Inerrancy," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 60 (2008): 4–15.

³²Beale, *Erosion*, 17, 27–8, 125, 143–5.

³³For an excellent examination of the notion of accommodation, see Kenton L. Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005). See also Lamoureux, *Evolutionary Creation*, 166–7, 172–3.

³⁴Norman L. Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1980), 493.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid., 495, 497, 500–1. Italics added.

³⁷Regarding creation myths (accounts), Sparks concludes, "[F]or the ancients, their cosmological myths also reflected their scientific ideas about the cosmos ... Often, they viewed their myths as history" (*Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible*, 337).

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