

LESSON 13: CREATION (2)

Memory work

27. Q. What do you understand by the providence of God?

A. God's providence is

*His almighty and ever present power,
whereby, as with His hand,
He still upholds
heaven and earth and all creatures,
and so governs them that
leaf and blade,
rain and drought,
fruitful and barren years,
food and drink,
health and sickness,
riches and poverty,
indeed, all things,
come to us not by chance but
by His fatherly hand.*

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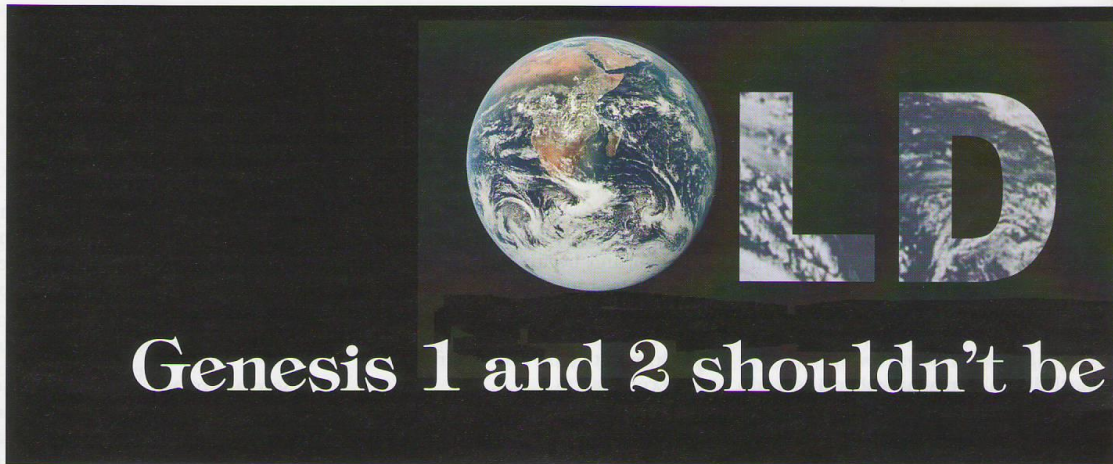
Homework

Reformed Perspective is a bi-monthly magazine published in Canadian Reformed circles. It is a social-political magazine. Among others, it pays much attention to Christian science. Attached to this homework sheet is a centre-spread article entitled "Old Earth". Read it, then answer the following questions.

1. Look up "framework hypothesis" on Wikipedia. Describe in brief what this hypothesis teaches.

2. In brief, what does the *Reformed Perspective* article argue?

3. Did you find it helpful? Convincing? _____



by Ben Merkle

Creation/evolution debates within the church over the last decade or so have shifted away from typical six-day creationist arguments to a much more exegetically focused debate. Taking a cue from Meredith Kline's Framework Hypothesis, much of the current debate takes no interest in discussions about the reliability of radiometric dating or the significant gaps in the fossil record, and instead focuses primarily on the exegesis of the biblical text. The question asked is: does this text present itself as something which should be taken as a literal narrative?

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Surely, insofar as the question about the exegesis of Genesis 1-2 has truly become the focus of the argument (as opposed to the question of whether science or Scripture has more authority on this question), this development signals a step forward in the debate as both sides start with a common and ultimately biblical allegiance.

An exegetical non sequitur

Though this shift away from pitting science against Scripture is a helpful step forward, somewhere in this transition an unhelpful presupposition has snuck in. In particular, questions about how Genesis 1-2 are intended to be taken seem to push in one of two directions – the passage is either “literal” or “poetic.”

Clearly, this is a false dichotomy and, if accepted, leads to an overly simplistic reading of the text regardless of which answer was given.

B.B. Warfield's essay on the antiquity of man gives a sad example of what happens when such a simplistic hermeneutic is forced onto the biblical text. In this essay, Warfield discusses the chronologies of Genesis 5 and 11. Warfield notes that if the author had intended these passages to be used for the calculation of a chronology, the only information that would have been necessary would have been the age of each father at the birth of his eldest son. Yet, he points out, the text supplies so much more information than just that. The text tells us how many years each man lived after the birth of each son (Genesis 5 even adds the total years lived by each man). The reader is told that each man went on to have other sons and daughters after having had that first son. Since these extra bits of biographical data are thrown into the narrative, Warfield argues, it is clear that a chronology was not the sole purpose of the author. Since Warfield presupposes that the author could have only one simple purpose in writing the text, he then concludes (follow this closely) that the text is actually not intended to give a chronology at all, but rather to impress upon the reader the grandeur and greatness of those early men. The highly poetic structure of the early chapters of Genesis compels Warfield to conclude that until chapter 12, the calling of Abram, Genesis is describing a mythical history.

The poetic plagues

If the early chapters of Genesis can't be taken as historical on these grounds, one wonders what this sort of hermeneutic would do for our interpretation of other Old Testament historical prose. For instance, how do we take the description of Israel's deliverance from Egypt, as described in Exodus 1-12?

To speak foolishly for a moment, let's try this one on for size. In this text, God's wrath against Egypt and His favor for Israel are poetically revealed through a series of

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understood as poetry or history

highly repetitive and stylized “plague” motifs. Clearly, a chronology structured around the highly symbolic number “ten” (suspiciously preceding the giving of the Ten Commandments) should cause us to immediately realize that this text is not about “history.” And considering that the role of the Exodus narrative in the canon was to provide a story of “origins,” it is not surprising that God’s initial favor for Israel and His providential care for this special nation at its very inception would be expressed through myth. Thus, in taking this text as poetic and not literal, we are in no way capitulating to the serious Egyptologists who give no credence to the Israelite sojourn in Egypt as described in the book of Exodus. My agreement with unbelieving scholarship is merely coincidentally convenient. But enough foolishness.

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It is particularly disappointing to see Calvinists such as Warfield succumb to a suspicion of a history that unfolds in a highly poetic structure. If we really believe that God has sovereignly decreed all that comes to pass, why would we be surprised to see a literary structure impressed upon the history which God has foreordained?

And yet the Reformed have a significant legacy of being quick to deny the historicity of the early chapters of Genesis. Perhaps there is a tendency in the Reformed heritage to prefer abstractions over narratives? Perhaps Reformed theology’s tendency to go hand in hand with more advanced scholar-

ship has caused it to be more significantly affected by the fads of academia? I’m not entirely certain. But I am certain that the Reformed position, with its understanding of God’s sovereignty over history, is more equipped than any other theology to take at face value the historicity of a poetically structured prose text.

Same mistake, this time from Young Earth folk

Unfortunately, the reaction against Old Earth attempts to explain away Genesis 1 and 2 is often equally suspicious of taking poetically structured texts as historical. Defenders of the Young Earth position often base their defense on a purely literal/historical reading of the text which is skeptical of any interpretation of the passage which calls attention to anything other than the chronology of the first creation week. But it is important to notice that this position suffers from the same unhelpful presupposition that pushed the Old Earthers to deny the historicity of the creation narrative – namely, they struggle with reconciling poetry and history.

The truth is, insofar as the history of this earth has been shaped by the sovereign Triune God, we should expect this history to be structured by parallels, types, antitypes, figures, chiasms, lists of three, lists of four, lists of seven, lists of ten, lists of twelve, puns on names, recapitulations, foreshadowings, repetitions with variation, repetitions without variations, polemical motivations, doxological motivations, and even an occasional joke. If the appearance of any of these ingredients in a narrative pushes one to question the historicity of the passage, then one’s presuppositions about God’s relationship to history need to be examined more closely.

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