

## **Is Creation Science Reformed?**

**By Tony Jelsma Ph.D.<sup>1</sup>**

Growing up in the Canadian Reformed denomination, I too assumed the default position that the literal six day/twenty-four hour interpretation of Genesis 1 was the only correct interpretation. As I pursued a career in the biological sciences I was aware that my views would be challenged, but I knew that evolution was wrong, God's Word is true and I had confidence that any new findings I had would simply confirm my view. After thirty years of biology research and teaching I have indeed been challenged in my views. These challenges have taken me back to Scripture, to Reformed principles of hermeneutics, to the philosophy of science and to the scientific evidence itself. It has not been easy and I still have many unresolved questions. I am still convinced, for both theological and scientific reasons, that the grand evolutionary scenario is incorrect. The mechanisms of Darwinian evolution are simply insufficient to account for the complexity and diversity of the creation around us. I also cannot reconcile human evolution with the Scriptural account of the creation and fall of man. However, in addition I am convinced, for theological and scientific reasons (some of which are outlined below), that the literal six day/twenty-four hour interpretation of Genesis 1 is also incorrect. This change in my views came only after a personal struggle over a period of years, a struggle in which I was mostly alone, with few resources to turn to. I'm sure there are many in conservative Reformed churches who are undergoing the same struggle and possibly even a crisis of faith. They don't feel competent to challenge the naturalistic philosophy that masquerades as science and they certainly don't wish to throw out portions of Scripture simply because "science" says they're not

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true. The conflict model of religion versus science is all too prominent in our society and even in our churches. Conservative Reformed ministers by and large are also not well-equipped to address the scientific issues. Consequently, many people facing these struggles may choose simply to ignore the problem altogether by not seeking a career in the sciences, which universally assume an old universe<sup>2</sup>. That would be a shame. The alternative is to obtain one's information from Creation Science organizations such as Answers in Genesis or the Institute for Creation Research. These organizations hold the Bible in high regard and seek to carry out science which is consistent with Scripture. But is theirs the correct approach to Scripture? This article is an attempt to show that Creation Science is not consistent with Reformed principles of interpretation, nor is it consistent with what we see in the world around us.

Creation Science as a movement has its roots in the dispensationalist theology of the Seventh Day Adventists and their prophet Ellen White in the nineteenth century but has experienced a rebirth through the work of people like Henry Morris and more recently Ken Ham. The basic tenets of Creation Science are straightforward – a literal interpretation of Genesis 1 as a scientifically accurate “historical” account and a worldwide cataclysmic flood which produced the rock layers and buried all living things in the fossil record. But are these ideas true and consistent with Scripture?

### **Does Genesis 1 Teach Science?**

Too often these debates focus on the meaning of the days of creation, whether they were literal days, long periods of time or “God’s days.” I readily concede that the context certainly looks like ordinary days – they certainly can’t be interpreted as long periods of time – but I want

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<sup>2</sup> This doesn't mean that young earth proponents cannot do science, but it would be more difficult, just as it is more difficult to work in the biological sciences and not accept Darwinian evolution.

to take a step back and ask whether Genesis 1 is a scientifically accurate account. To answer this, let's ask what God created on the second day of creation. In verse six we read that God created an expanse to separate the waters from the waters. What is this expanse? The KJV has the more accurate but obscure word "firmament" which Job 37:18 describes as being like a hard cast metal mirror. Further, we read in verse seventeen that on the fourth day of creation God placed the sun, moon and stars in this expanse to give light on the earth. Thus the cosmology described in Genesis 1 is that of our earth, with a hard shell above it, into which the sun, moon and stars are placed, and above that are more waters. Such a scenario does not describe what we know about our solar system and outer space but it certainly does reflect the cosmology of the time. Archeologists have discovered Egyptian pictures depicting just such an arrangement.

Calvin in his commentary on Genesis 1 recognizes the problem with the second day, to which he responded, "He who would learn astronomy, and other recondite arts, let him go elsewhere."<sup>3</sup> In other words, don't look to Scripture for scientific explanations. We would do well to follow his advice, but that's exactly what Creation Science does with Genesis 1.

### **Inspiration of Scripture**

This apparent contradiction between Genesis 1 and modern science immediately raises questions for the Reformed believer who holds to the infallibility of Scripture. If Genesis 1 is speaking the very words of God, how can they be wrong? To address this we need to understand the Reformed view of the inspiration of Scripture. There are three models for the Holy Spirit's mode of inspiration of Scripture, as described by PY DeJong in his commentary on the Belgic

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<sup>3</sup> Commentary on Genesis 1:6, available at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.vii.i.html>

Confession<sup>4</sup>. The *mechanical* view describes the human authors as merely writing what the Holy Spirit dictates to them, possibly without even understanding what they are writing. The different character of the books of Scripture shows this view to be faulty. The second view is the *dynamic* model, where the Holy Spirit loosely inspires the author but what is written may have errors. This view is prevalent in the neo-orthodoxy of theologians like Karl Barth. The third view, which is held by the Reformed tradition, is an *organic* inspiration. In this view the Holy Spirit directly guides the authors of Scripture, so that what is written is infallible in what it intends to communicate, yet retains the author's personality, context and even limited knowledge. Thus when we read statements like cobras stopping their ears (Psalm 58:4), we are not concerned by the fact that cobras don't have ears, since that passage is not teaching science. Nor are we concerned when Genesis 1 appears to teach a cosmology which we know to be incorrect, since that is not the message that is being conveyed. Conversely, when we read statements which assert that since God was the only one present at creation, we should simply accept it the way God describes it, this is the *mechanical* approach and ignores the human author, namely Moses.

If Genesis 1 is not teaching science, then what is its purpose? To address this question we need to understand the context of Genesis 1 as written by Moses for the Israelites in the desert as they prepared to enter Canaan. What would be the point of a scientific explanation of the creation of the world for the Israelites? The real purpose of Genesis 1 is revealed in Deuteronomy 4 – remember the Reformed principle of interpreting Scripture with Scripture. Recall from Deuteronomy 1:1 that the contents of this book were spoken to the Israelites as they were about to enter Canaan. Moses was giving his final address to the people. What was the most important message that they (and we) needed to hear? That God is the only God and we

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<sup>4</sup> DeJong, PY.(1960) The Church's Witness to the World. [Paideia Press](#), pp100-102.

must keep his commandments. Sadly, that message didn't stick very long but it was emphasized by Moses time and again in Deuteronomy. This message is the thrust of Genesis 1 as well. In Deuteronomy 4:15ff, we read God's warning the people not to make an image or to serve any part of the creation. Verse 19 warns against worshiping the heavenly beings. How does Genesis 1 support this message? By showing that all these things are part of the creation, they were made by God and are not to be worshiped. Genesis 1 is a striking contrast to the other ancient near Eastern cosmologies, all of which worshiped parts of the creation as deities<sup>5</sup>. In Genesis 1 God is saying, "Do you see all these things, the lights in the heavens, the sea monsters, the trees etc? They are not gods because I made them!" Of course Genesis 1 says much more than this but to insist that it teaches science ignores the context and genre of the text.

### **Calvin's Principle of Accommodation**

But doesn't the suggestion that Scripture is scientifically inaccurate detract from its truthfulness? Not at all and here we turn again to Calvin's use of Scripture. He describes the principle of accommodation, where God dumbs down, so to speak, his revelation to us in terms that we can understand, "For who is so devoid of intellect as not to understand that God, in so speaking, lisps with us as nurses are wont to do with little children? Such modes of expression, therefore ... accommodate the knowledge of him to our feebleness. In doing so, he must of course stoop far below his proper height."<sup>6</sup> But the reader may respond in saying, "But God will not lie to us, will he?" Certainly not, but God will accommodate his revelation in ways in which we can understand, even if our understanding is mistaken. In another context, speaking about God's repentance, Calvin says, "For because our weakness does not attain to his exalted state,

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<sup>5</sup> Hasel G., "The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology" *The Evangelical Quarterly* April/May 1974, pp81-102.

<sup>6</sup> Institutes 1.13.1

the description of him that is given to us must be accommodated to our capacity so that we may understand it. *Now the mode of accommodation is for him to represent himself to us not as he is in himself, but as he seems to us.* Although he is beyond all disturbance of mind, yet he testifies that he is angry toward sinners. Therefore whenever we hear that God is angered, we ought not to imagine any emotion in him, but rather to consider that this expression has been taken from our own human experience.”<sup>7</sup> To apply this concept to the second day of creation, God knew very well that there is no such thing as a hard firmament holding up waters but he inspired Moses to write Genesis in this way because that was the cosmological understanding at the time. Saying anything different would only have confused the Israelites.

### **Death Before the Fall**

Now let's turn to the Flood and examine Scriptural support for a global flood. I recall as a child reading the Lutheran pastor Alfred Rehwinkel's book The Flood and being enthralled by its imaginative pictures. No doubt many a Reformed believer's view of the Flood was similarly shaped by this book, but is it true to Scripture? The logic for a global flood is as follows. According to the Creation Science view there was no death of any kind before the Fall. We see evidence of death in the fossil record so that must have happened after the Fall, during a global cataclysmic flood. What is the exegetical support for the contention that there was no death of any kind before the Fall? Two passages are commonly used, Romans 5:12 and Genesis 1:29, 30. An examination of the context surrounding Romans 5:12 demonstrates that Paul is speaking of human death, not animal death, so that leaves us with the Genesis passage. In these verses it states that God gave every green plant as food, not just for humans but animals as well. As to

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<sup>7</sup> Institutes 1.17.13, italics mine

whether these verses preclude eating meat, even Calvin in his commentary on the Genesis passage isn't sure, saying, "I think it will be better for us to assert nothing concerning this matter."<sup>8</sup>

To study the effects of the Fall, we first need to look at the account of the Fall in Genesis 3. Nowhere do we read of a massive ecological upheaval at the Fall, when formerly herbivorous animals became carnivores. What we do read is that the relationships in creation were marred by Adam's sin – the relationship between man and God, between man and woman and between man and the ground. Was the creation now physically defective as part of the curse on the ground (v17)? I don't think so but it would certainly suffer and be recalcitrant to man's sinful attempts to exploit it.

Does Scripture view carnivory as an effect of the Fall? I don't believe so, in fact we read in Psalm 104:21 that the lions receive their prey from God. Similarly, in the last chapters of Job when God describes his acts of creation, God's depiction of the behavior of the ostrich, eagle, Behemoth and Leviathan in chapters 39-41 does not suggest anything sinful about such fierce behavior. Carnivory is not sinful, in fact it's a marvelously designed system to maintain the stability of ecosystems.

Was there animal death before the Fall? Of course, Adam and Eve could hardly have walked in the garden without stepping on a bug at some point. Creation Science projects human qualities onto animals when it talks of suffering and death, but this is more consistent with atheistic animal rights organizations than of Bible-believing Christians.

## **Global Versus Local Flood**

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<sup>8</sup> Commentary on Genesis 1:30, available at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.vii.i.html>

What does Scripture say on the question of a global flood? Several passages strongly indicate that the Flood was local, not global. In Genesis 2:10ff Moses describes four rivers flowing out of Eden. Two of these rivers (the Tigris and Euphrates) are still in existence, and the other two have been identified by archeologists<sup>9</sup>. If the Flood was truly catastrophic and formed all the rock layers, as Creation Science claims, then how could these rivers still be identified, *on top of six miles of sedimentary rock*, rock which supposedly was laid down during the Flood?<sup>10</sup> That would require the Flood to have been deeper than Mount Everest is high – an impossibility without invoking *ad hoc* miracles.

Moses continues in these verses to describe the land of Havilah, where gold, bdellium and onyx are found. Moses speaks of this land in the present because he knew that land *still existed*. Because of his royal upbringing in Pharaoh's house, Moses undoubtedly knew about this land but one can only speculate on why he would include these details. Regardless, if the Flood was as cataclysmic as Creation Science claims, this detail in Scripture is again impossible to reconcile with the Creation Science scenario.

We read further in Genesis 6:4 where Moses mentions the Nephilim that were there in those days, *and afterward*. We do read about the Nephilim after the Flood in Numbers 13:32 where they are described as the sons of Anak. During the conquest of Canaan they were driven from the hill country and only remained in Philistia (Joshua 11:21, 22). Even Goliath was an

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<sup>9</sup> Hill, CA., (2000) "The Garden of Eden: A Modern Landscape," Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith 52:31-46.

<sup>10</sup> When I pose this question to Creation Science proponents, their response is that the present day Tigris and Euphrates rivers are not the same rivers but were named after the originals. This is clearly an *ad hoc* response.

Anakite, descended from the Nephilim. If the Flood was global, the Nephilim would not have existed afterward<sup>11</sup>.

Lastly, after the Flood, Abraham, who was born 400 years after Shem, or roughly 300 years after the Flood, migrated westward from Ur, where he had grown up. Abraham eventually ended up in Egypt, roughly a thousand miles away, where there was a complete civilization! It would be difficult to imagine how such a civilization could have arisen so soon after the Flood and so far away from Ur, unless the Flood was local and the Egyptians had never been wiped out.

By now the reader will be saying, Yes, but the story of the Flood clearly indicates that all mankind was wiped out by the Flood, save Noah and his family (see also 1 Peter 3:20, 2 Peter 2:5, 3:6). I concede this is the weakest part of my argument and an aspect with which I have struggled and am still not comfortable, but allow me to make a few observations.

We read in Genesis 6:7 that the reason for the Flood was because God was grieved over the wickedness of mankind. But the Flood did not (and could not) remove wickedness from the earth. Problems sprang up again right afterward. However, the context of Genesis 6 is that of the previous chapters. The line of Cain is dealt with in Genesis 4, after which Moses describes the covenant people, the line of Seth. It is this covenant line which is punished, nearly wiped out, for their disobedience in intermarrying with the line of Cain and falling away.

A frequent argument for a global flood is the universal language that is used (6:13, 17, 7:4, 19-23). Yet similar universal language is also found in Genesis 41:57, describing the extent of the famine in Joseph's time, "Moreover, *all the earth* came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over *all the earth*." In Acts 2:5 during the feast of Pentecost we

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<sup>11</sup> It might be argued that Nephilim is a generic term for giants and does not imply genetic continuity, but this is not suggested by the text.

read, “Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men *from every nation under heaven*.” In neither of these examples do we assume that the entire globe was meant so the same could apply to the Flood.

Thirdly, a global flood raises some difficult questions about the animal inhabitants of the ark. Clearly all the world’s species could not fit on the ark so it is suggested by Creation Science that merely two of each kind were aboard the ark and they later diversified to form the different varieties we see today. That raises more problems than it answers because such diversification requires a vastly higher rate of evolutionary change than the evolutionist claim! Presuming that penguins were not aboard the ark, the number of evolutionary changes required for them to adapt to their present cold environment is staggering.

There are many scientific arguments against a global flood<sup>12</sup> but the biggest question is where all that water came from and went to. To date there is no satisfactory answer to that question despite several models (including canopy theory and catastrophic plate tectonics) put forward by the Creation Science community.

To close out this section I would like the reader to view an image on Google maps. In eastern Quebec, near the Labrador border, there is an almost perfect circular annular (ring) lake

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<sup>12</sup> For example see Hill, CA (2002) “The Noachian Flood: Universal or Local?” Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith 54:170-183

which is 75 kilometers in diameter<sup>13</sup>.



This is called the Manicouagan reservoir and has been made visible from space because it has been dammed for hydroelectric power, thus filling up the lake. A lake with a shape like this can be nothing other than an impact crater for a large meteor. Indeed, an impact this size would have been caused by a rock more than 5 kilometers wide<sup>14</sup> and would have released energy one hundred times greater than if the world's entire nuclear arsenal were detonated simultaneously<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Image obtained from

[http://www.geog.ucsb.edu/~jeff/wallpaper2/canada\\_manicouagan\\_impact\\_structure\\_diam100km\\_jun2001\\_misrwall.jpg](http://www.geog.ucsb.edu/~jeff/wallpaper2/canada_manicouagan_impact_structure_diam100km_jun2001_misrwall.jpg). A pair of smaller impacts exists nearer the eastern shore of Hudson Bay.

<sup>14</sup> <http://news.scotsman.com/topstories/Aberdeen-team-unearth-asteroid-crash.2378142.jp>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.jyi.org/volumes/volume5/issue7/features/weinreb.html>

Since this impact crater is still present (a similar one is present in Iowa not far from where I live but is buried underneath the soil), according to the global flood model of Creation Science it must have occurred after the Flood, which is impossible given the amount of global destruction such an impact would have caused. This giant impact crater is simply incompatible with the global flood model that Creation Science holds to.

### **Theological Implications**

After all this, the reader may wonder, So what? Is it all that bad if we draw unwarranted conclusions from an overzealous interpretation of Scripture? Does it matter if we view the nonhuman creation as physically defective because of the Fall? Certainly that has implications for our concern for the environment. But more importantly, the Creation Science interpretation of the Fall leads to a heretical understanding of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In his article “Creation and the Virgin Birth,<sup>16</sup>” Henry Morris claims that Jesus was not born of the flesh and blood of the virgin Mary, the very heresy (Docetism) denounced in Belgic Confession Article 18. His logic is as follows: With the Fall, all things became corrupted, including our physical makeup. Humans began to accumulate genetic mutations as evidence of this corruption (a common Creation Science claim). Jesus, however, was perfect, the second Adam, so he could not have had these mutations, even though Mary’s genes would have been corrupted. Therefore Jesus could not have descended genetically from Mary but was instead a new creation, implanted by the Holy Spirit into Mary’s womb, nourished by her as he grew.

As a Biology professor, I am irked when students get their science wrong, but I can live with that. As a Reformed Christian, I am frightened when other Reformed Christians uncritically

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.icr.org/article/76/>

absorb bad theology like this from Creation Science organizations. Much more is at stake than simply passing a course or getting a degree. I am genuinely alarmed at the influence that Creation Science has in the conservative Reformed community. We did not inherit this view from our spiritual forefathers in the Netherlands, indeed nonliteral interpretations of Genesis 1 were held by Reformed leaders such as Bavinck, Kuyper and Schilder<sup>17</sup>. As Reformed Christians we have the responsibility to get both our science and theology right. God's Word and God's world deserve no less.

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<sup>17</sup> Rogland M. (2001) "*Ad litteram*: Some Dutch Reformed theologians on the creation days" Westminster Theological Journal 63:211-233.