

LITERATURE REVIEWS

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MUST CREATION-SCIENCE BE EITHER UNBIBLICAL OR UNSCIENTIFIC?

PORTRAITS OF CREATION: BIBLICAL AND SCIENTIFIC PERSPECTIVES ON THE WORLD'S FORMATION. 1990. Howard J. Van Till, Robert E. Snow, John H. Stek, & Davis A. Young. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 285 p. Paper, \$14.95.

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Portraits of Creation was evidently prepared to be a definitive treatment of the tension between science and theology over the origin and development of the physical universe. The treatment focuses on the evidence provided by geology, astronomy, and the first chapter of the book of Genesis, and includes intensive philosophical consideration of the nature of natural science and the nature of the Genesis account of creation. A critique of modern creation-science precedes the analysis of biblical considerations.

This book is skillfully written. Some parts are worth reading for their literary quality alone. Extensive footnotes, conveniently located on the page where noted, give clear definitions of technical terminology, elaboration of the authors' thoughts, and a generous bibliography for the reader who wishes to investigate a topic more extensively. The authors have achieved a high degree of excellence in serving the purposes for which the book was written.

After the introductory chapter there is an excellent brief treatment on the history of human thought concerning the nature of physical reality. The discerning reader will note that this material is skillfully presented to provide a foundation for lack of confidence in the first chapters of Genesis as a straightforward account of real events and historical sequence. Extraordinary skill toward this objective is demonstrated throughout the following chapters. The book will be welcomed by anyone who *wants* to be freed from a simplistic, literal understanding of the first eleven chapters of Genesis. It will provide convenient access to valuable insights and useful references for many individuals who are concerned for the establishment of faith in biblical testimony.

On p 24, “nature’s properties, behavior, and formative history” are implied as being equally discernible by means of experimental science, thus improperly transferring to speculations concerning the unobservable past the confidence generated from success in discovering properties and behavior subject to controlled experimentation. Only in the latter part of the book is there passing recognition of the need for placing speculative, experimentally unverifiable science in a category separate from hard science (conclusions concerning nature’s properties and behavior) that utilizes repeated and controlled observation. On p 25, in an evident allusion to some products of the modern creation-science movement, Robert Snow says:

... we need to take to heart Augustine’s caution that ‘it is deplorable and mischievous and a thing especially to be guarded against that [an unbeliever] should hear a Christian speaking of [scientific] matters in accordance with Christian writings and uttering such nonsense that, knowing him to be as wide of the mark as ... east is from west, the unbeliever can scarcely restrain himself from laughing.’

In Chapter 3 there is a review of some bizarre explanations that have been developed by creationists, both ancient and modern, in their attempts to account for geologic features. I must agree with Davis Young’s assessment that “no consensus has emerged about how the geological sequence of events is to be linked with the biblical sequence of events” (p 59); that “there are many *conflicting* concordisms, and not one of them does an adequate job of dealing with the diversity of questions raised by the evidence uncovered by biblical and scientific scholarship” (p 60). The examples in the latter part of this chapter are presented so as to give the reader the impression that the long-age uniformitarian model accounts for all geologic features with complete satisfaction. It is unfortunate that the reader is not given a balanced exposure to geologic features that are much better explained with a short-time-frame diluvial model. A fully satisfactory treatment of geologic features awaits a better understanding of geology and a broader perception of processes associated with the flood than are presently available.

Howard Van Till’s treatment of data provided by astronomy leads to a penetrating discussion of the creation *ex nihilo* concept that he concludes by saying: “A big-bang beginning and creation *ex nihilo* cannot be equated. In no way do they offer answers to the same question” (p 114).

What the authors are endeavoring to promote as the *standard model* comes to clear expression on p 118:

Finally, to say that the ordinary patterns for material behavior have been followed continuously throughout cosmic history is

to exclude from cosmological models the introduction of arbitrary discontinuities. It is becoming increasingly evident that the interpretation of the physical record of cosmic and terrestrial history does not require a reliance on any special events that interrupt or contravene the ordinary patterns of proximate causality.... That part of cosmic history accessible to scientific investigation appears to be composed of a continuous flow of phenomena that conform to the ordinary patterns for the behavior of physical systems.

In the first four pages of the chapter entitled “The Characteristics of Contemporary Natural Science,” Howard Van Till gives a clear statement of the difference between science and scientism, a distinction that is crucial to an understanding of science-versus-the-Bible issues. But the reader is prepared for unsound conclusions by the statement on the next page (p 130) that “*physical properties, physical behavior, and formative history...these three aspects of the physical universe are empirically accessible to us....*” Historical questions cannot be studied by repeated observation under controlled circumstances, and belong in a distinct category: Speculative Natural Science. Success in the discovery of physical properties and physical behavior is improperly used as an assurance that scientific speculations concerning history are correct.

According to my assessment, the creationist literature would be much more effective than it is today if all contributors had worked in accordance with the maxim expressed by Dr. Van Till on p 131: “both theists and non-theists...must resist the temptation to coerce science into warranting (in the sense of proving) their particular religious beliefs.” There can be a critical difference between presenting some scientific material as “proof” for a religion-derived viewpoint, or attempting to show how this material might be explained from that viewpoint. The discussion of the relationship between religious viewpoints and scientific evidence on p 147-151 provides a valuable perspective, but does not give recognition to the advantages that may be enjoyed in research conducted with insights obtained from reliable testimony such as the Bible.

Chapter 6 gives a description of modern creation-science as it appears to the members of the scientific and intellectual community who are not constrained by the biblical testimony. All individuals who are active in promoting creationism on a scientific basis should read this chapter. In concluding the chapter, Robert Snow says:

Without realizing what they have done, many of the leaders of the creation science movement have betrayed the trust placed

in them by their lay followers. The pervasive lack of critical judgment that characterizes the creation science literature is due to its role as a folk science intended primarily to offer ‘comfort and reassurance to believers’ rather than to make a contribution to our deeper understanding of the created world (p 202).

We must not allow criticism of the creation-science literature, however justified that criticism may be, to denigrate the sincerity and dedication of the contributors to this literature, or to determine our confidence in the Hebrew-Christian scriptures. There is need for recognition that much creation-science literature is of excellent scientific quality.

In Chapter 7, John Stek gives a summary of the textual criticism arguments against a straightforward literal reading of Genesis 1:1-2:3. He relies on anthropological and archaeological scholarship, in preference to the testimony of Genesis 1-11, for a reconstruction of human history, and considers the 7-day creation week account to be a metaphorical narration written for the *exclusively religious* (his italics) purpose of proclaiming knowledge of God, His manifestation in created works, and His relationship to mankind. Dr. Stek’s exhaustive treatment of the meanings of the Hebrew verbs associated with the “creation” concept should be welcome to any biblical creationist.

The characteristic thrust of this book is clearly stated on p 242:

To read Genesis 1:1-2.3 as a piece of divinely revealed ‘historiography’ disclosed to humanity’s first pair and transmitted by tradition to the author of Genesis will no longer do.... While Genesis 2:4 ff. [“ff.” presumably designating the entire remainder of the Bible] presents an account of God’s ways with humankind in the arena of human history, the grand overture that precedes [sic] it presents not historical or scientific data but the fundamental theological...context of that drama.

If Genesis 1 is to be treated in this manner, what about Chapters 7 and 8 (the flood account)? (In Chapter 3, entitled “The Discovery of Terrestrial History,” the authors treat Genesis 7 and 8 as legend/myth, rather than reliable historical data concerning a universal flood of brief duration.) What about Genesis 19 (the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah)? What about the events reported in the Gospels of the New Testament? Once one starts mythologizing portions of Scriptures that were endorsed by subsequent Bible writers, where does one stop?

Under the heading “The Creation as God’s Kingdom” (p 253-255), Dr. Stek concludes that the physical universe is a distinct, intelligible, integrated, composite system, separate from God, but pervasively contingent on

the free will of the Creator, yet subject to misconstrual and exploitation. This succinct statement gives a comprehensive base from which to evaluate any cosmology.

A statement on p 262 that was obviously directed toward creation-science can *just as well* apply to uniformitarian science:

... the creation contains no inner deceptions. Humans can misread the phenomena, misinterpret their experience of the world, introduce distortions in their gathering of data, pursue misguided research, and employ wrongheaded principles of explanation, but the creation itself does not mislead. As God's appointed stewards over God's creation, we can trust the integrity of compelling evidence to lead us into a valid understanding of the creation. The Creator is not a deceiver...

Yes, God is not a deceiver. He has given us the revelation of Genesis 1-11 to preserve us from incorrect conclusions; when we disregard His revelations we cannot claim divine assurance for the accuracy of our conclusion!

Another significant statement on p 262 is: "... human understanding of the Bible is as subject to fault as human understanding of the creation." Then why not have faith to search for an understanding of both the Bible and the natural world that does not degrade Genesis 1:1-2:3 as is so commonly done in modern Christendom? Why not work from an understanding of the creation account in Genesis 1:1-2:3 that is based on the definitions God has included in Genesis 1:8,10, rather than on concepts which have become attached to the terms "heaven" and "earth" over the last 3000 years? If we do this, the astronomical evidence does not compel the convoluted treatment of Genesis 1 featured in this book. (Since radioisotope age characteristics may be preserved, completely or partially, in a relocation by a geologic process, the same can be said concerning the nuclear isotope evidence which the authors give only passing reference.)

Portraits of Creation gives a good presentation of the pattern on which the Bible has been interpreted in conformity with modern uniformitarian science, and which provides a basis for a religion that is apparently Bible-based, yet places the generally accepted views among scientists in the position of ultimate authority. It gives no recognition to the possibilities for interpreting the observations in the various sciences in a manner that is both logically sound and consistent with the specifications in the Bible.