

INTERPRETATION OF GENESIS

G. VAN GRONINGEN, PH.D.*

The interpretation of Genesis can be said to be difficult for various reasons. It presents the story of creation. It deals with materials concerning the most ancient times. It is in the form of historical narrative rather than theological explanations and instruction. However difficult it may be considered to be, general hermeneutical principles, rules and exegetical tools must be applied diligently and without exception. It is not necessary to review these; they can be found in various books which are accessible to the readers.¹

For the proper interpretation of Genesis, one must seek to come to a clear understanding of who the author was, his circumstances, times, intent and method of presentation. We have dealt with specifically selected aspects of these elsewhere.²

THE STARTING POINT

Where does one begin when he sets out to interpret the book of Genesis? It is well known that a general knowledge of the materials of the book, gained by careful readings of it, is the very necessary first step. These readings should be in various languages. If at all possible the Hebrew text should be mastered. Having read the text, the next very important question is: from which position should one approach the book as he seeks to uncover the message and its relevance. As stated before, one's basic presuppositions usually determines one's approach. We will briefly review a number of approaches. As we do so, and as we criticize them, it must be remembered that we are dealing with them as *approaches*, not as subordinate *means* to illumine the study of the text. For, as is well known, various studies, such as that of ancient history, anthropology, early forms of literature, can be of valuable assistance in interpreting the Genesis material.

1. THE SCIENTIFIC APPROACH

It should be clearly understood that any interpretative study of Genesis should be scientific in the sense that it is done systematically according to interpretative principles, rules and methods. The term

*Professor of Old Testament, Reformed Theological College, Geelong, Victoria. Ph.D. from the University of Melbourne.

1. Berkhof, L., *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids, 1950. A. B. Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*. Grand Rapids, 1963.

2. Cf. Chap. I in *Interpreting God's Word Today*, edited by S. Kistemaker. Baker Book House, 1970.

scientific however does have other meanings. Two of these are often employed when speaking of the interpretation of Genesis.

First of all, we refer to the modern scientific method, which is in many respects the application of the principle of D. Hume, the Scottish philosopher. He taught that all our knowledge is limited to actual experience. Of that what is above or beyond our experience, we can gain no knowledge. This principle has deeply affected the study of Genesis (as well as of all supernatural elements in religion). If one follows this principle, no actual knowledge of creation is possible, nor are miracles acceptable. The modern emphasis on the need for objective control and explanation of Biblical givens stems directly from this "scientific-philosophic" principle of Hume.

In the second place, "scientific" often is used to refer to the study of the natural sciences. Hume's principle has governed much of the study of these natural sciences. Since men say that numerous elements in them can be controlled, experienced and therefore verified, a good starting point from which to commence ones interpretation of Genesis is from the natural sciences, particularly those which are directly related to the material of Genesis, e.g., cosmology, geology, biology and palentology.

This approach is very wrong. First of all, implied in the approach is that Genesis must be treated as a mere human production and only that. Secondly, it places natural science as prior to, basic to an understanding of a religious message. Furthermore, this approach basically looks upon Genesis as a sort of science text book—and of course a very erroneous one. As wrong as it is for a Bible believing scholar to treat Genesis as a text book for natural sciences, so it is equally wrong to approach Genesis in a manner that is totally contrary to its nature and intent.

Many scholars are aware of the problems involved in the natural science approach to the interpretation of Genesis. We find that other approaches are adopted, either on their own or in conjunction with one or more others. The point to realize, however, is that these other approaches also, on the whole, are controlled, or at the very least, deeply influenced by the principle of Hume.

2. THE MYTHOLOGICAL APPROACH

The mythological approach owes much to the presence of the ancient Greek and Roman myths which have been available in written form for millennia. In recent years archaeologists working in the Near East have uncovered many tablets on which near Eastern religious myths had been inscribed. This latter fact has given the mythological approach increasing stature. Men who adopt the mythological approach often place the Genesis material on a par with, and/or subsequent to the pagan myths, in keeping with the popular developmental patterns seen in

ancient life. Not only have the creation, fall, and flood narratives been approached from this pagan mythological viewpoint, various elements from the patriarchal narratives have also. Other scholars as Bowie (I.B. 463), have stressed that the mythological narratives must be first studied for these myths were employed as vehicles of truth.

This approach is totally unacceptable for various reasons. It assumes that we must look to ancient primitive man for an entrance into and explanation of Genesis. It assumes that mythological accounts are reliably recorded, in preference to the Genesis account, that these accounts have certain basic elements that are true and can serve suitably as source material, vehicles and criteria for Biblical truths. To sum up we can say that the mythological approach is rooted in anthropology, a study of man. It is thoroughly humanistic.

3. THE FORM CRITICAL APPROACH

Closely allied to the mythological approach is the Form Critical approach. It must be clearly understood first of all that Form Criticism deals primarily with literary forms which existed before the time of writing and which men find (or supposedly find) in Scripture. However, it is said, these forms arose from, were developed and employed in specific settings. Some noted Form Critical scholars look particularly to the religious worshipping community as the original setting for the forms in which the Genesis material is presented. This means that the approach is again definitely anthropological. Man's worship, the way he worshipped (cult), the means employed, i.e., songs, poems, legends, etc., are considered as main starting points. As in the case of mythology, the scientifically inclined scholars are of the opinion that these songs, poems, legends can, to an extent at least, be controlled, checked, proven or disproven as authentic. The Form Critical approach is wrong, for it also reflects a strictly human approach. It begins with human forms of speech, human worship and ritual. It implies that Genesis can be understood only if it is first of all considered a human production.

4. THE THEOLOGICAL APPROACH

Again it can be said that this approach is closely related to the preceding ones discussed. The theological approach is usually combined with the Form Critical, of which we know Von Rad to be an outstanding example. The theological approach differs from the Form Critical in that it stresses the religious ideas themselves more than the forms and settings of these ideas. Now it may be thought that this approach to the interpretation of Genesis is indeed the correct one—and indeed, many have adopted it in some form or to some extent. But, this approach is as erroneous as the others, in spite of appearances. The emphasis is on the religious ideas which men gave rise to, developed and believed. We do not wish to imply that men in ancient days did not have personal ideas or convictions, or specifically, that Moses did not have personal ideas

and strong religious convictions. Of course men had them. The point is, however, we are not to approach Genesis as a record of these human religious, theological ideas. As stated before, Genesis is not a type of a systematic theology book or an early form of a dogmatic treatise.

This theological approach is basically as anthropologically oriented as the former approaches we have discussed. Men's ideas, be they referred to as religious ideas, or faith concepts, are still merely human. Genesis, as said before, is not to be approached as a mere human record of religion. The Scriptural claim for Genesis is totally different.

5. THE HISTORICAL APPROACH

The historical approach is assumed to some degree by most scholars. Some concentrate on it, others employ it to the extent it is considered helpful. Simply stated, those who adopt the historical approach take their starting point in man's origin, development and cultural achievements. One of the first questions is: what has happened? The question rather should be: "What has God said and done?" This second part of the question ("and done") indicates that history does play a crucial role in one's interpretation of Genesis. By all means, let it be understood that the historical aspect of the interpretation of Genesis is vitally important. The point however is that it is not to be the starting point and Genesis is not merely a record of early man's origin, development and achievement. We take serious issue with Simpson therefore, when he states that the historical approach to Genesis is basic because we must learn to know what the initial response of Israel's sons was to "divine manifestations" and how this response grew. We equally reject Simpson's emphasis on the Genesis writer's use of Abraham to gain for and present historical concreteness to Israel's life and religion—as if the writer was attempting to give an historical character to the material.³ By taking the scientific historical approach, the interpreter is said to be able to sift actual historical material, i.e., what actually happened, as determined by modern scientific methods, from what did not actually take place. In this way the historian is placed as judge above the materials of Genesis and the interpreter can only interpret in agreement with the historian's conclusions.

Archaeology is closely related to the historical aspect of the study of Genesis. But it too, as history, may only be employed as an aid to the interpretation of Genesis. Neither archaeology nor history provide the key to Genesis.

We have omitted the specific literary approach to Genesis. As is well known, it has been coordinated with the historical approach in the past. The uses and misuses of this approach is widely known and referred to repeatedly in the discussion on the formation of Genesis. Suffice it to stress here that the proper approach to Genesis is not via the path the

3. *Interpreters Bible*, (I.B.) Vol. I, p. 440.

literary specialist has laid out for basically the same reasons that we cannot adopt the other scientific approaches.

6. THE NEW HERMENEUTIC APPROACH

The new hermeneutic approach is that of approaching the Scriptures through the function of language. This approach has been particularly worked out in detail in regard to the New Testament.⁴ However, attempts to apply it to the Old Testament are being made. The approach of the new hermeneutic is basically related to the language gap between Biblical languages and the modern tongues. The point is: can we today know what the words in Genesis once meant and do they still signify the same today? Beyond a doubt, this is a very important consideration and must be dealt with in exegesis. But again, we are not to begin with an analysis of the function of the ancient and modern languages of their terms, concepts and symbols. The function and meaning of human languages do not provide the proper key to Genesis. These too are specifically and only human factors. This approach indicates a basic humanistic conception of Scripture.

7. THE REVELATIONAL APPROACH

Genesis is part of the Self revelation of God in Christ Jesus. This is to be our basic approach. Koole is certainly correct to stress that Genesis 1 (and all other materials) is revelation from God to man.⁵ The supernatural, the divine aspect of Genesis, is to be considered basic, primary and the initial consideration of any interpreter of Genesis. This approach is an absolute alternative to the approaches briefly discussed above. God took the initiative in the formation of Genesis, not man. God called and employed Moses to be His spokesman-writer. We do not therefore first of all consider the people for whom Genesis was written, their conditions, history, language, opinions, myths. Nor are we to consider the writer, his literary techniques, his personal abilities and characteristics first of all. To do so, is to take a strictly human approach in our interpretation. However, if we take the claim of Scripture seriously that Genesis, as all Scripture, is part of the revelation of God in Christ, then we have the proper key. It is this basic concept that places all the recorded facts in their proper perspective. It also clearly indicates the subordinate role of all the various human factors which are of great assistance in our understanding of Genesis and in our contemporary application of the message.

RECENT EVANGELICAL EMPHASES IN INTERPRETATION

1. THE HUMAN CHARACTER OF GENESIS

In this section of our essay we will pay attention to some recent

4. Scharleman, M. H., "Hermeneutic(s)" *Concordia Theological Monthly*, vol. xxxix, No. 9, Oct. 1968. The essay includes a useful bibliography on recent Hermeneutics.
5. Koole, J. H., *Verhaal en Feit in Het Oude Testament*. Kampen, 1967.

emphases in the interpretation particularly of Genesis 1-11 by Biblical scholars, who insist they adhere to the Old Testament as the written Word of God and which presents an authoritative message. The divine revelatory character is accepted and/or assumed. However, a reviewer of W. H. Gispen's book, *Schepping en Paradijs*, has written, "the humanness of the Holy Scripture, now and again, cuts deeply into our sensitivities." This indeed is the point to be noticed. When one stresses that the approach to Genesis must always be that we have before us God's revelation, it must be added, and this revelation is given to us via human instruments. The *Divine Word*, the Living Christ through whom God reveals Himself in Scripture comes to us through the media of human words. God did not prepare a special language for the writing of Genesis. He employed a human being who spoke/wrote in the setting of his daily life, using the language of his day, employing the symbols, metaphors, thought patterns, grammatical structures as well as the simple every day concrete and descriptive words of his times.

In view of this human element in the writing of Genesis, it certainly becomes obvious that it is very important to know about human conditions prevailing in the time that Genesis was written. What were the historical, political, economic circumstances? What were the geographical and climatic features surrounding the writer? What were the social, international and religious circumstances? Were the terms used in those times suitable and meaningful so that a man could express himself clearly, concretely, pointedly, emphatically when he attempted to convey deeply spiritual truths as well as simple direct statements of faith? What thought habits and patterns of expression were used predominantly to describe natural and spiritual realities and experiences? Did men use poems? legends? mythological symbols and metaphors? prose? Were men able to use a direct narrative style to relate concrete historical events?

The problem confronting the interpreter of Genesis is: how does he proceed? Having read the text, having adopted the revelational approach, what is to be the next step? Does he first of all join the scientists (historians and natural science specialists, linguists, archaeologists, students of comparative religions and others in their search for an understanding of the human elements involved in the writing of Genesis millennia ago, and those involved in the reading, interpreting and application of the message today? To do so is to give priority to and initial credence to human sciences in the understanding of the Self revelation of God given us in Genesis. The only way to permit God's Word to speak properly to us is to listen to that Word as it comes to us via the human words employed in Genesis. These human words are *human* just as much as the readers words today are *human*. This is not to deny that there is no *time* gap between ancient and modern languages. But a *time* gap does not mean that there are no connections and relationships at all. There are many. A study of the various related subjects, referred to

above, certainly does indicate that. The proper procedure, then, in the study and interpretation of Genesis is study the text of Genesis itself first. Bowie, the expositor of Genesis,⁶ is very correct when he says that the language of Genesis is simple, direct, clear. The stories say clearly that the characters lived, they present a living actual historical setting for these characters.

We have stressed repeatedly above that all students of Genesis are impressed with the fact that all of Genesis is presented in the form of a clear, definite historical narrative. In spite of attempts by literary specialists and mythologists to prove the contrary, Genesis does not have the thought forms nor the patterns of expression that one finds in the ancient mythologies. The latter have divinized humans or humanized deities as gods. The origin of, the feats performed by, and the conduct of the gods in the mythologies are completely unrealistic. Though the mythologies give the impression "it happened once upon a time," the actual form of presentation is most obviously not that of the historical narrative. Rather, the epic poem style with symbols and metaphors, used to express imagination and fantasy, is commonly used. And we repeat, in spite of continued endeavors to ascribe to Genesis 1 (also Genesis 2-3) these characteristics, the actual text of Genesis will not submit to such treatment. Too often the interpreters' vision is colored by his presuppositions or he is suffering from blind spots in his range of sight due to his personal predilections.

The procedure to follow then is to adopt the revelational approach, to accept the text in its historical narrative form before us. We are not to permit the various subordinate, though very helpful, disciplines to lead us to decide apriorily what the text of Genesis could or could not be, what it could or could not say, what it could or could not mean, how it could or could not be applied in modern times. As stated before, we are to employ and apply the basic hermeneutical principles and rules and exegetical tools which are in harmony and consistent with the revelation of God in Genesis given to us in human words.

J. W. Montgomery, dealing with the approach of "The New Shape Roman Catholicism," as exemplified by McKenzie and Koch,⁷ has set forth some basic hermeneutic implications of the evangelical view of Biblical authority (thereby preserving it from the death of a thousand qualifications). We quote, (in part):⁸

"A passage of Holy Writ must be taken as veracious in its natural sense (*sensus literalis*) unless the context of the passage itself dictates

6. I.B., Vol. I, p. 459.

7. Cf. *I.G.W.T.*, pp. 29, 30.

8. Montgomery, J. W., "The Approach of New Shape Roman Catholicism to Scriptural Inerrancy: A Case Study for Evangelicals." *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 1967, pp. 209-225. Hereafter written as E.T.S. Bull.

otherwise, or unless an article of faith established elsewhere in Scripture requires a broader understanding of the text.

“The prime article of faith applicable to the hermeneutic task is the attitude of Christ and His Apostles toward the Scriptures: their utter trust in Scripture—in all it teaches or touches—must govern the exegete’s practice. . .

Harmonization of scriptural difficulties should be pursued within reasonable limits, and when harmonization would pass beyond such bounds, the exegete must leave the problem open. . .

Extra-biblical linguistic and cultural considerations must be employed ministerially, never magisterially, in the interpretation of a text, and any use of extra-biblical material to arrive at an interpretation inconsistent with the veracity of the scriptural passage is to be regarded as magisterial and therefore illegitimate. Extra-biblical data can and should put questions to a text, but only Scripture itself can in the last analysis legitimately answer questions about itself.

Not all literary forms are consistent with scriptural revelation. . .

The exegete should employ all scholarly research tools that do not involve rationalistic commitments. Rationalistic methodologies are identifiable by their presuppositions, which either do violence to articles of faith, or (like the ‘circularity principle’ of the so-called ‘New Hermeneutic’) give to the sinful cultural milieu, past and present, a constitutive role in the formulation of biblical teaching. These and other rationalistic techniques are to be scrupulously avoided in carrying out the hermeneutic task.”

2. INSTANCES OF EVANGELICAL ATTEMPTS

In view of what has been discussed above it is of great interest and value to take specific note of what actually has been done and/or suggested by various bodies and individuals in various areas.

a. The decisions of the Synod of Lunteren, 1968, of the Gereformeerde Kerken. The materials dealing with the decisions of the Synod of the Gereformeerde Kerken has become quite voluminous. The official documents, the commentaries on these, and later evaluations and reactions are widely available. To have these brought together in an Anthology would be of much value and would serve well as supplementary reading to this chapter.

The historical setting of the decisions of the Synod of Lunteren must be understood clearly if one is to acquire a clear insight into the entire problem. Briefly reviewed, the setting is this: Dr. Geelkerken, a Gereformeerde minister, in the early 20’s asked to have the liberty to interpret four factors in Genesis 2 and 3 as non-historical in the literal sense: 1)

the tree of knowledge of good and evil; 2) the tree of life; 3) the serpent; 4) the speaking of the serpent. The Synod of Assen 1926, firmly convinced that it should: 1) maintain and do its utmost to support the historicity of the fall into sin and 2) do its utmost to prevent any capricious or subjective interpretation of Scripture, decided that Genesis 2 and 3 had to be accepted as a literal, historical account, particularly emphasizing the literal historical reality of the four questioned factors.

This decision, particularly after the second world war, presented an increasing number of problems to some scholars and students in the Gereformeerde Kerken. In the early 1960's a university student chaplain inquired of Synod if the 1926 decision regarding Genesis 2 and 3 are still binding. His query was motivated by the fact that the decision did not "function" anymore. He meant that men did not accept it as a valid decision and therefore did not take it seriously but were offering different interpretations of Genesis 2 and 3. After seven years of committee work, including some intervening synodical actions, the Synod of Lunteren decided to give a greater freedom and a wider latitude to the interpreters of Genesis 2 and 3 by declaring the specific decisions of Assen to be no longer valid. The Assen decision reads as follows:

"that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the serpent and its speaking and the tree of life, according to the obvious intention of Genesis 2 and 3 are to be understood in a *real or literal sense* and thus as sensuously perceptible realities: and that therefore the opinion of Dr. Geelkerken, that one could render disputable whether these matters or facts were sensuously perceptible realities without coming in conflict with what is confessed in Articles 4 and 5 of the Belgic Confession, must be rejected"

The Synod of Lunteren declared, in addition to the specific decision regarding Assen:

"that it shares fully the concern of the Synod of Assen 1926 that the authority of Holy Scripture must be respected by the church.

that it does not consider itself competent to form a judgment concerning the specific nature of the scriptural story in Genesis 2 and 3 that would be sufficiently well established to continue to follow the exclusive way in which the Synod of Assen 1926 expressed itself on the obvious meaning of specific details of this story.

that at the same time, that which is articulated verbally in the Confession of the church concerning the origin of sin and the effects of the fall into sin (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 3 and 4 and Belgic Confession (Articles 14 and 15) clearly expresses the *fundamental meaning which the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament (i.e., Romans 5) attribute to this history* and therefore should be maintained by the church as being of essential importance for the proclamation of the gospel."

It has been repeatedly stressed in the discussion before, during and after the 1968 Lunteren decisions that the intent was not to deny the

actual historical character of Genesis 2 and 3. Rather, the intent was to provide the possibility for a wider latitude in the study and interpretation of Genesis 2 and 3. It clearly means that men are not required to begin their exegetical work of Genesis 2 and 3 with the assurance that the account before them is a factual record of historical events, both divine and human, given in the common language of the writer of Genesis. What was before assumed, upon the basis of the obvious testimony of Scripture itself, is now allowed to be questioned and to be decided upon a non-exegetical basis.

As stated before, there is much material available for study on this specific instance. We cannot review it, nor even briefly summarize it. However, some questions and comments, based on a study of the majority and minority reports submitted to the Synod of Lunteren are in order.⁹

First of all, we refer to what an acute observer (in personal correspondence) wrote: If one is to understand, to properly evaluate, and to have meaningful dialogue with those who called for the Lunteren decision, he must inquire about and evaluate the basic trends and socio-cultural movements, etc., in the entire setting of contemporary evangelical exegetical and theological activities. This observation indeed leads one to ask (having studied the report): are evangelical scholars today, as they seek to understand and evaluate major forces and trends in thought, religion and life influenced to various degrees by these forces and trends? E.g., various scholars in recent years have attempted to indicate that in the last 2500 years there has been a movement from the basic religious orientation of all of life to the philosophic, and from the philosophic to the scientific. Today, we are told, we are in the midst of the scientific orientation. This scientific orientation calls for a rejection of the metaphysical, the abstract, the non-material. This means that Hume's principle is coming to full expression. Logical positivism, the philosophic name for this emphasis today, has effected the study of history. Only sequential facts, if thus related, are said to be understood and therefore historical. These sequential facts must also somehow be observable, experienced, and verifiable. Some stress that only what can be understood in terms of today's technological and crassly materialistic world can be considered factually historical. We ask: has and is this philosophy indeed making an impact in some way or other?

Related to the philosophical position mentioned above is the conception that we must think and speak in terms of the *function* of reality today, not in terms of the *essence* of reality as men did formerly. The latter led to an emphasis which is termed *staticism*. Scholars today consider anyone progressive if he thinks functionally, dynamically. Does this emphasis on function come to the fore in the recent conceptions of the

9. "Rapport Leeruitspraak Assen 1926, meerderheids en minderheids report Generale Synode" Gereformeerde Kerken Synode, 1967-68. A. K. B. Utrecht.

formation of the Scriptures in which the entire community functions in a vital dynamic manner? And does the objection against Assen's decision, that it did not function, somehow reflect this contemporary revival of the concept of flux, movement, change, which had its heyday in earlier centuries?

Are we, in addition to the above, to see the modern trends emphasizing communal cultural activities; socialism in government, industry and commerce; ecumenism in ecclesiastical affairs as underlying motivations? And then there is the problem of historical relativism which impels us to ask: are there no objective unchanging truths? standards? givens in life? Must all factors be judged in terms of a given time and its characteristics? We hear much about situation ethics. Are we asked to surrender to situation exegesis also? Does a given truth mean one thing in one century, another thing in another era of time?

Finally, we live in a time of revolution. The spirit of our contemporary times calls for change. Some know why changes are called for. Do all men, especially students? Revolution can be called for, worked for and participated in simply for the sake of change, of revolution itself.

To ask if the trends of contemporary life, the scientific technological, philosophical, cultural, social, religious, really effect evangelical Biblical study and exegesis is not to say that they do. However, one certainly does gain the impression that the trends have been reflected, some more than others, in recent conservative Protestant thought. It is to be well understood that if one is to be relevant, speak meaningfully to his contemporaries, he must know the factors involved in modern life. That however, does not mean the factors should operate in a magisterial manner. The interpreter of God's Word must at all times be mastered by the Word of God, and having understood his times, speak the unchanging Word of God to the men and women of his day.

We have spoken concerning possible influential contemporary trends reflected in the Lunteren study report. We should not omit to point out four specific factors in this report on which the Lunteren decision is based:

1) Regarding the formation of the Scriptures. It is assumed, in fact dogmatically stated, in spite of much evidence to the contrary¹⁰ that various given portions of Scripture, and Genesis is singled out, were formed over a period of time. It is stated that before the final redaction appeared, there had been transmissions from oral to written notes, later supplements taken from actual preaching were added and separate and differing traditions, which can still be discovered in the text, were joined together. This so-called Protestant evangelical view is enunciated much as the Roman Catholic view. However, the Synod of Lunteren did not

10. Cf. Chap. I, *I.G.W.T.* especially pp. 43ff.

appeal to the church as the Roman Catholics do as the final source of authority.

It is interesting to note that some evangelical scholars spoke in the same assured manner years ago when the documentary hypothesis, in forms few hold to today, had gained widespread popular acceptance. Undoubtedly, future scholarly activities will reveal the untenability of the contemporary popular view of the gradual formation of the Scriptures from within the living worshipping community. What will men then say concerning the dogmatic character of phrases such as "these undeniable facts which Biblical research places before us" when referring to "facts" that are based on *present day* cultural, historical, archaeological and religious sociological studies?¹¹ Beyond a doubt, in various ways, the view concerning the formation of Scripture reflects various contemporary—and very likely—transitory trends.

2) Regarding the influence of the natural sciences. The authors of the study report are frank in expressing their concern to recognize the important developments that have occurred in recent years in the natural sciences. Specifically it is stated that the "wellnigh established" conclusions in the fields of the natural sciences may not on themselves be taken as the *ground* (basis) for the acceptance or rejection of a specific exegesis of a passage. But it may be asked if the traditional exegesis is correct. Such a statement is correct indeed! However, the report is very vague and ambiguous about how to apply this. It seems quite obvious that the questions asked on the basis of the wellnigh assured conclusions of natural science become the basis for rejecting the exegesis of Genesis 1-3. Appeal, e.g., is made to the half million years supposedly existing between the appearance of the first human like being and the beginning of agricultural activities. (It should be remembered that no fool-proof system of dating, no sure method of interpreting the mute lines found in rocks, has yet been found.)

In this connection, J. R. Van de Fliert offers us a clear example. In his article on "Geology and Fundamentalism,"¹² he rightly protests against what he calls the Fundamentalists' attempt to tie up Science to the Bible. He rightly speaks of science as a fallible human attempt. The Bible is too great, of a genre incomparably greater than a work of science, than that science should be tied to the Bible. To do so is to make the Bible too small. However, when he as a geologist begins to work with his human finite tools, considers the geologists' conclusions concerning the age of the earth, its formation, the possibility of a world wide flood, the Bible is tied to science! The Bible is made to say what that small human effort, called natural science, has produced. In spite of legitimate criticisms of other men's attempts; in spite of stating the limitations of his

11. Cf. "Rapport," p. 5.

12. Van de Fliert, J. R., "Fundamentalism and Fundamentals of Geology," I.A.R.F.A. No. 32, 33, Jan.-April, pp. 5-27.

own scientific discipline, the final outcome is that natural science is given a magisterial voice.

Let it be clearly understood that we in no sense wish to intimate that we are to remain oblivious or unconcerned about the work and suggested conclusions of the natural scientists. It is very evident that it is very difficult to give various non-Scriptural disciplines their proper place in relation to and allow them their proper influence upon exegesis. We do insist however, that the exegesis of the text of all Scripture must be determined first of all by Scriptural principles and evidences and is not to be dictated to in any way by any factor external to Scripture.

3) The material-form schema. We have discussed various aspects concerning material and formal authority and about the possibility of distinguishing between historical facts and events.¹³ We found it to be unscriptural to distinguish between the fact presented and the event in which it took place or to which it is directly related. The report blandly proceeds as if this is a very acceptable way of dealing with Scripture. Scriptural evidences to the contrary, as pointed out, the authors of the report single out Genesis 3 as a unique example of presenting an historic fact in the form of a non-historic event. It is apodictically stated that the writer of Genesis reached for a contemporary cultural form, the serpent story or motif. The fact we should stress is that this cannot, and is not, said on the basis of the exegesis of the text. The idea of a non-authoritative form, the event model, is not suggested by Scripture, Genesis 3, or any parallel message at all. Magisterially it is introduced for the purpose of serving the non-Biblical distinction between historical fact and historical event.

4) The report, and decision based on it, seeks to give freedom and wider latitude to the interpreter of Genesis 1-11. Beyond a doubt, Ridderbos¹⁴ is correct to speak about the "elbow room" ("speelruimte") of the Spirit. This must be allowed for because Genesis as a book is a human means to present the Word of God to man. However, Genesis is *first of all the Word of God*, coming to us in a human form, in a document written by a man in the midst of daily life. The question before us is: where is this "elbow room" to be found when interpreting Genesis? Somewhere between the Divine and human element? To answer with a general "yes" to this is to give quite a meaningless answer, simply because the two are so closely interwoven. Or are we to consider the "elbow room" (latitude) to exist in such a way that human sciences can dictate how an obvious historical narrative form must be read as a model story? Would this then not allow the "elbow room" of the Spirit to include natural science, and various other types of related Biblical research projects, equal authority with the text of Scripture itself?

Where is this "elbow room" to be found? Are we not to find it in

13. Cf. Chap. I. *I.G.W.T.*, pp. 37ff.

14. *I.A.R.F.A. Bulletin*, No. 32, 33, 1968, pp. 33ff.

areas designated by Scripture itself? Granted it is more confined than many scholars wish it to be. The fact of the matter is that the "elbow room" is within, not above or outside, the historical narrative form which presents the actual events and historical facts to us. This means that *within* the historical pattern laid down we have latitude to apply the tentative conclusions of the natural sciences. Does this not allow for students of Genesis 1-11 to carefully study the actual historical events related to see if they have been properly understood, seen in their proper perspective and interrelationships? Does this not allow the interpreter of Genesis 1-11 to ask questions about chronology, sequence, etc.? After all an historical narrative form does not imply a strict chronological account in all instances.

We must conclude that the report and the decisions made by Lunteren do not take the Biblical principles of interpretation as seriously as one would have expected. The report and the decision indicate an ecclesiastical pronouncement following, giving a type of sanction to be unwarranted freedom in exegesis which was taken before the Synod's advice was asked. In other words, the church committee and court was following, approving post eventum, not advising, assisting the individual Biblical scholars as they commenced and progressed in their studies.

b. Recent evangelicalism

In this paragraph we refer to emphases and endeavors by men and groups of men in various countries, other than The Netherlands, who have been wrestling with the divine-human combination in Genesis 1-11. Some individual scholars have followed quite closely the course laid out by the Dutch scholars. Others have not gone as far, or have taken slightly other approaches. Space will permit only brief references to four instances.

The American Scientific Affiliation, an organization of Christian scholars in various fields of natural science, have attempted to make their discoveries and conclusions meaningful and applicable to modern Biblical research. In various cases we find that the natural sciences are permitted to exert undue influence upon the interpreters of Scripture. The human element in Scripture is allowed too much importance and the Divine Word is molded and worked to fit and harmonize with it. This means that non-Scriptural principles, approaches or tools are employed as equal to or above the Scriptural. As stated before, they should be kept subordinate and subservient to them.

The recent Tyndale publication by Kidner, a short commentary on Genesis, beside some vague references to authorship, includes some suggestions about how to harmonize the supposed great age of man with the Scriptural givens. Kidner accepts the historical narrative form and style as indicative of an account of historical events. He, as suggested above, works in the area of the "elbow room" within the historical frame-

work of Genesis. Positing great eras of time between certain events that are recorded, he suggests that these were the times when pre-Adamite, human like beings existed and developed. Kidner is formally correct, remaining within the historical pattern of Genesis. However, it is to be seriously questioned if the entire Scripture will support the idea of pre-Adamite human beings.

The Creation Research Society,¹⁵ of recent origin, and enjoying increasing support, is devoted to the maintaining of the historical Scriptural accounts as found in Genesis 1-11. Serious scientific studies are conducted in various areas. The serious attempts and purposes are most laudable indeed. However, the danger of linking too closely a contemporary theory or conclusion from natural science to the Biblical account is constant and should be seriously avoided. Since all scientific endeavors in the natural science fields are not static, but progression is constantly expected in every aspect, too close a tie would necessitate constant reapplications. Even more so, the temptation to adapt the ever changing conclusions of science to the Scriptures could eventually result in the very opposite from the initial intention to maintain the Scriptural testimony unchanged and relevant. This factor bears out how the subordinate place and influence of all non-Scriptural aids must remain flexible.

Finally, we refer to the theological approach, as worked out by Von Rad and others, in connection with the cultic setting and form critical literary motifs, as also being unduly employed in some instances by evangelical scholars. There is no specific group or church body to refer to as specific examples. However, essays appearing in various religious and theological journals do indicate that the idea that the Bible is a record of Israel's theological ideas, is employed as an acceptable starting point for the exegesis of Genesis. This approach is quite readily discerned when a writer speaks of the early credos, festal recitations of faith and priestly sermons detected in the Scriptures. A major problem confronting the adherents to this approach is to explain how the human idea, concept, word, with which they begin, becomes the Word of God. Attempts to explain by calling upon the doctrine of inspiration have signally failed because either the full community from which the ideas arose is said to be inspired, or else there is but an inspired redactor who pieced together, who added some connecting links, etc. The Biblical teaching concerning inspiration certainly emphasizes individual authors—not communal, not mere final technical editors—men who actually presented in their own writing, not only their own characteristics but above all, the Word of God.

GUIDELINES FOR CONTINUED STUDY

A study on the formation and interpretation of Genesis certainly

15. Creation Research Society issues 3 Quarterly issues and one Annual each year in which a wide range of scientific studies are presented.

brings two important facts to the foreground. *Continued* diligent, careful, prayerful, Spirit illumined study is very necessary. Secondly, the adopting and following of proper Scriptural procedures in our study of Scripture, and Genesis in particular, are no less necessary. In this final section of this essay we wish to point out some important factors for this study and its procedure. In various journals, introductions to commentaries, and introductory studies a fuller discussion of these can be found.

1. THE BASIC APRIORI PRESUPPOSITION

The basic apriori presupposition with which one must begin, to which one must constantly submit, is that Genesis is part of the authoritative infallible Self-revelation of God. The triune God has revealed Himself in Genesis in and through Christ, the Word of Power, as the Creator, Sustainer and Restorer of man and the cosmos in which he is placed.

Included in the basic apriori presupposition is that God revealed Himself to man whom He had created in His own image good, sinless, capable of God-honoring service. This man fell into sin. However, to sinful man, and by means of this same sinful man, God revealed Himself as the One who promises to and does redeem fallen mankind. This revelation to man through sinful man is reliably revealed because of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The student of Genesis approaches Genesis therefore as inspired revelation which he can confidently accept as a fully trustworthy message from God. It is presented in such a way, that in spite of the sinful author who wrote Genesis, the message is clear. No shadow or doubts are to be cast upon the message, God's Word, because it comes to us in human words.

2. OTHER ESSENTIAL APRIORI CONSIDERATIONS

There are a number of additional important considerations which must be reckoned with apriorily before one begins his basic and conclusive interpretation of Genesis.

a. New Testament orientation

The New Testament Scriptures are a continuation of, an explanation of, and a fulfillment of the Old Testament. The New is in the Old contained. Genesis contains the truths of the New Testament in germinal form. Genesis presents the seed, the initial sprouts and also the first fruits of the tree of progressive revelation of God in Christ. Adam and Eve, Noah and Abraham had the way of redemption revealed to them as did Moses, David, Isaiah and Zechariah. This way of salvation is most fully revealed in the New Testament account of Jesus Christ's birth, suffering, death, resurrection, ascension and church gathering by His Word and Spirit. In no way is the initial revelation to be separated from

the further and final revelation. Hence, our study of Genesis must always be oriented to the New Testament message.

The New Testament not only gives the necessary material orientation, it also gives a basic orientation for the method of interpretation. The inspired New Testament writers give us clues, suggestions, indications and sometimes outright examples of how to interpret Genesis. It certainly is true that *if* the New Testament writers are properly considered as inspired writers, as they indeed are, their consideration of Genesis as revelation of historic events as well as facts, must be accepted and followed.

The author of the minority report submitted to the Synod of Lunteren gives good evidence of a basic New Testament orientation and indicates that the New Testament is his guide. In fact, the authors of the majority report seem to want to show how it is possible to avoid the New Testament witness and direction. The fact of the matter is that the New Testament repeatedly, directly or indirectly refers to Genesis material. A check in Genesis in a cross-reference study Bible,¹⁶ will indicate how many times New Testament writers refer to, build on, expound upon the materials found in Genesis 1-3. A thorough interpretation of Genesis should indeed be most definitely and closely oriented to the New Testament witness.

A word of caution may be necessary at this juncture. If we accept a New Testament orientation for the interpretation of Genesis we will be Christocentric. Christ will be given the central place in our interpretation of Genesis. E.g., creation was not only by and through the Son, the eternal living Word (John 1:1-3), but creation is revealed to us as the setting for the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. This Christocentric approach to Genesis may never be confused with a *Christological* interpretation of Genesis. E. Brunner is an outstanding example of how a Christological approach, with a New Testament orientation, can be employed to relegate most of Genesis 1-11 to the realm of myths.¹⁷ The idea of creation is interpreted in the sense of God calling forth and preparing a people for Himself. In other words, Brunner explains creation as a part of the doctrine of the person and work of Christ as redeemer. For Brunner, creation is basically the same as, or a part of, the act of redemption. The New Testament certainly does not give any reason for such interpretation of Genesis.

b. Old Testament reliability

The approach one has to the entire Old Testament is a basic consideration also in the interpretation of Genesis. The New Testament indicates a full acceptance of the reliability of the Old Testament—reliable

16. *Holman Study Bible*, RSV. Philadelphia, 1962, pp. 1-3.

17. Brunner, E., *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*. Dogmatics vol. II trans. O. Wyon. Philadelphia, 1952. Cf. especially pp. 3-35.

in message, reliable in presentation and reliable in the *details* of the message and presentation also.

The general reliability of the Old Testament is important because, as the New Testament presupposes, refers back to, develops ideas and concepts presented in Genesis, so the Old Testament does likewise. The Exodus account relies upon the patriarchal part. Moses in Deuteronomy refers to creation as presented in Genesis. So do the Psalms and various prophets. Characters introduced in Genesis: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are referred to as authentic living persons. Thus, the repeated and consistent reference in the Old Testament as a whole to Genesis indicates the unity of the entire Old Testament. This unity is an added basic element in the reliability of the whole. If one part of the unit is reliable, the entire body is.

c. Old Testament historicity

In interpreting Genesis the first question that we must answer concerning the historicity of the Old Testament is whether or not it is a book of, belonging to, an historical people. Now no one would really question this. Israel was an historical nation and as such it "produced" and possessed the Old Testament. However, the Old Testament is not a history book of an historical people, *only* setting forth the history of its religion, or the history of its faith response and development of theological ideas. Indeed, Israel's faith response is indicated in the Old Testament. It progresses, it regresses at various times in various ways, but this faith response and its growth is not the central element in Old Testament history. The Old Testament furthermore does present certain historical events and moments in the history of Israel and of its ancestors. However, the Old Testament is not primarily concerned with these either.

The Old Testament presents a reliable historical record of what God has said and done in the history of mankind in general and specifically with Israel as a servant elected to serve in His plan of redemption. Thus, to single out one or two aspects of the history presented in the Old Testament as they pertain to Israel as a nation is to do serious injustice to the historicity of the Old Testament as a whole.

Furthermore, when speaking of the historicity of the Old Testament, one must include the Scriptural conception of the events presented as well as the facts, the message, that is presented. We sum up stressing that a full, inclusive conception of Old Testament historicity is necessary for a proper approach to Genesis. Thus historicity gives the Biblical setting to Genesis and Genesis in turn provides the introduction to this historicity.

d. Hermeneutical guidance

We have stated before that our interpretation of Genesis should be according to Biblical hermeneutical principles and rules. These principles

should be guides, assistants, not dictators. In the same manner, exegetical tools and aids must fully assist but not finally control the interpreter of Genesis. This is a point we have repeatedly stressed in various parts of the essay. Archaeological, sociological and literary facts and insights must be used to enable the interpreter to understand the text, not dictate what the text of Genesis could or should say. The various supplementary studies have and can offer much valuable help in the interpretation of Genesis, and because of this fact, they can be given undue prominence.

We also wish to repeat our stress on the importance of inquiring into the *sitz in leben* of the writer as well as of the first recipients of the written message. We must all be grateful to the numerous critical students who have stressed and illumined this point. However, an over-stress on the human situation, at the expense of the Divine Word and deed in the situation, should be avoided in the interpretation of Genesis.

3. EXEGETICAL METHODOLOGY

The details in the method one follows in the actual work of exegesis can vary. However, the method must always be in basic harmony with the *a priori* considerations mentioned above.

The exegetical method, subordinate to Scripture, must be the means to bring out the meaning of the text before us.

The authors of the majority report for the Lunteren Synod spoke of the docetic and Nestorian error confronting the exegetes of Genesis. They were correct in stressing these dangers. However, one of the greatest sources of error and misinterpretation of Scripture in the past was the Alexandrian school's allegorical method of exegesis. One is constrained to ask if the contemporary methods of exegesis which call for "model stories," "symbolic presentations" are not types of an allegorical exegesis. If not strictly allegorical, is it possible that they are nevertheless types of exegesis not unrelated to some of the Alexandrian attempts to find special meanings which the text did not obviously and clearly state? It does seem to us that the attempts to exegetically draw from Genesis 1-11 theological facts (facts which were derived from a former proper exegesis of the text) from a non-factually historical text, is a type of inverted allegorical exegesis. Allegorical exegesis drew out various "deep" "spiritual" truths from historic events. Contemporary exegetes attempt to draw historic facts from symbolic, mythical, religious stories which have been drawn from various deeply religious pagan sources.

The proper exegetical method to be adopted for any exegete of Genesis is to adopt the historically tried and proven grammatical, historical and theological exegetical method.¹⁸ The exegete, before he listens to various specialists in related fields, must deal grammatically

18. Cf. Berkhof, chap. 1. Cf. also Allan A. MacRae, "The Principles of Interpreting Genesis 1 and 2." *E.T.S. Bull.*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1959.

with the text before him. The terms employed, the phrases used, the syntactical structure of the sentences must be dealt with first. In this way, the text is allowed to speak for itself first of all. The grammatical is to be followed by the historical, and in no way should these first two be separated. And the exegesis is not complete until the theological interpretation has been completed. Indeed, this is the method of exegesis that does full justice to the Biblical text. Following this exegetical method in the interpretation of Genesis, one will hear the message of God coming through the medium of human words.

CONCLUSION

The proper understanding of the message of Genesis calls for a clear understanding of how the book was formed. In addition, the proper approach to, the methods followed in exegesis, the assistance received from supplementary studies are all vitally important in the proper understanding of Genesis.

As stated in the introduction, Genesis means beginning. A proper understanding of the beginning is crucially important for the entire Bible. It is true that one who has adopted an erroneous interpretation of Genesis because of improper exegesis, may nevertheless, by proper exegesis, hold to a correct interpretation of other parts of the Bible. However, the message concerning the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ will be much enhanced by a proper understanding of the Biblical message of Genesis. God has given us a full revelation of Himself. Epitomized in the crucified and resurrected Christ, this revelation is opened up to us in the Genesis account of the Christ, who is maker, sustainer and Lord of all. None other than the Sovereign Creator Lord is the One who was crucified on behalf of the rebels introduced in Genesis 1-3. The wonder of redemption, the glory of our Lord, the full duty of man is made the more clear to us by the interpretation of Genesis which sets forth great historic facts in the form of historical events.