

## THEISTIC EVOLUTION AND THE HEBREW OF GENESIS 1-2

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Evangelicalism has a double stake in Genesis 1-2: concerning the "what," and also the "how," of creation. About the former, the "what," it need simply be stated without further elaboration that Christianity is committed to the reality of divine creation: "For by Him [Christ] were all things created, that are in heaven and that are in earth" (Col. 1:16; cf our Lord's own commitment to creation in Mt. 19:4), as opposed to theories of naturalistic evolution. About the latter, the "how," Christians have, until recently, been content to reaffirm the facticity of Genesis 1-2, as God Himself summarized it at Sinai, "For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is" (Ex. 20:11). Today, however, two trends to the contrary have manifested themselves, even in conservative circles. Both of these would assert the truth of divine creation, while resisting a commitment to the traditionally accepted method of creation.<sup>1</sup> The result is to render legitimate the position of theistic evolution,<sup>2</sup> herein defined as accepting, as a naturally explainable development, the bodily (though not spiritual) evolution of mankind.<sup>3</sup> The more extreme trend would deny to Genesis 1-2 the literary character of historical narrative, thus bypassing the entire question of whether it conveys knowledge of the physical processes of creation. Such methods of interpretation, however, whether designated as "mythical," "parabolic," or "figurative,"<sup>4</sup> stand self-condemned in the light, both of the known literary form of Genesis itself, and of the analogy of the rest of Scripture, which assumes throughout its literal historicity. The Evangelical Theological Society recently devoted an entire issue of its *Bulletin* to this subject,<sup>5</sup> which it is not the purpose of the present paper to repeat.<sup>6</sup> The less

1. As stated by J. Frank Cassel, following Davie Napier, Scripture presents "the eternal plan of God in operation from the beginning of time — creation, sin, grace, redemption. What more do you ask of the first chapters of Genesis — in essence?" "The Origin of Man and the Bible," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, 12:2 (June, 1960), 15.
2. "I am not averse to considering the evolutionary hypothesis as a tentative working hypothesis," Wilbur L. Bullock, *JASA*, 11:4 (Dec., 1959), 26.
3. Cf. J. D. Conway, "A Roman Catholic Statement on Evolution," *JASA*, 15:3 (Sept., 1963), 79-82.
4. Cf. Walter R. Hearn, *JASA*, 15:3 (Sept., 1963), 99-100.
5. 2:4 (Fall, 1959).
6. In the light, however, of the admission, even by liberal scholars (cf. Ludwig Koehler, *Old Testament Theology*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957, pp. 175, 177) of the historical intent of the Genesis writer, one cannot but regret statements such as the following: "Personally, I tend to take the story of the creation rather literally . . . However, we must be very cautious and indeed quite charitable with those who take this [figurative] point of view," H. Harold Hartzler, *JASA*, 12:2 (June, 1960), 17.

extreme trend would question whether the Hebrew text of Genesis does indeed present concrete data on the "how" of creation.<sup>7</sup> It is the purpose of this paper, then, to investigate those portions of the Hebrew text of Genesis 1-2 that have been seriously proposed as pertinent to the processes of creation, specifically those that concern the forming of man. The evidence is presented in two parts: that which is felt to be inconclusive, and that which appears to be determinative.

### I. Inconclusive Evidence

The proponents, both of theistic evolution and of creationism, have adduced certain sets of Hebrew terms from Genesis 1-2 that are claimed to support their respective positions. Careful analysis, however, seems to indicate that neither set of terms as outlined in this first part is conclusive.

1. *For Theistic Evolution.* *B'reshith*, of Genesis 1:1, is the term that underlies the familiar rendering, "In the beginning [God created]." Grammatically, however, it would not be incorrect to express Genesis 1:1 as a subordinate clause,<sup>8</sup> namely, that "When God began to create . . . then the earth was without form," or, "When God began to create . . . and the earth was without form . . . then He said . . ." which would thus allow, or suggest,<sup>9</sup> the eternity of matter, vs. creationism of all types, including human. But such an interpretation of *b'reshith* is, at the least, unnecessary; so that as evidence against creationism it remains inconclusive. On the other hand Walther Eichrodt, among a number of leading Old Testament scholars, continues to insist that the traditional rendering is "the truly pertinent translation;"<sup>10</sup> cf. a similar construction of a preposition with the anarthrous *reshith* for an absolute adverbial phrase in Isaiah 46:10.

*Way-yiser*, Genesis 2:7, means, "And [God] formed [man]." This same term is used of animals, 2:19; and, while animals are said to be made by God, 1:25, these latter need not in fact have been created by the immediate act of God but may have been "brought forth," 1:24, mediately, by the earth (cf. 1:11, 20).<sup>11</sup> Instead, therefore, of implying creation, this

7. "Genesis 1:27 and 2:7 affirm that man is a creation of God . . . But we can form no picture of this action. The creation of man must remain a concept about which we can form no pictures," Bernard Ramm, "Theological Reactions to the Theory of Evolution," *JASA*, 15:3 (Sept., 1963), 76. By way of general principle, however, Paul Woolley does well to insist, "A great many statements in the realm of natural science are to be found in the Bible and they are true statements," "The Relevance of Scripture," Westminster Theological Seminary faculty symposium, *The Infallible Word* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Guardian, 1946), p. 190.
8. *RSV* mg.
9. E. A. Speiser even insists upon this conclusion, *The Anchor Bible, Genesis* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), pp. 12-13.
10. "In the Beginning," chap. 1 in Bernhard W. Anderson and Walter Harrelson, eds., *Israel's Prophetic Heritage* (New York: Harper, 1962), p. 10; cf. Alexander Heidel's defence of the absolute adverbial translation, "in the beginning," in *The Babylonian Genesis* (2nd ed.; Univ. of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 89-95.
11. Cf. Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), pp. 263-265.

verb for "form" might rather suggest, by analogy, a non-immediate origin for man as well. But while the term *way-yisér* thus does not necessarily deny man's evolution, neither does it affirm it. Indeed, the context elsewhere differentiates man's creation from that of the animals in that, negatively, it intimates no such mediate process for man and, positively, this same verse, Genesis 2:7, goes on to add in its later portions clauses that do describe the "how" of creation (see below, part II).

*Yom*, in Genesis 1:5, etc., is the Hebrew word for "day." Some, then, have concluded that if Scripture teaches creation in six consecutive days, its creationism becomes unacceptable. But the literal text reads, "one day" (1:5), "a second day" (1:8), etc.;<sup>12</sup> so the days need not be taken consecutively but may be understood as separated by long ages. Each day would then indicate a normal, twenty-four hour period, by the time of the arrival of which, the major phenomena which God had been creating since the previously mentioned day, had at length come into being; cf. the corresponding rendering of Exodus 20:11, "For in reference to six days, the LORD made heaven and earth."<sup>13</sup>

A final term often invoked to render illegitimate the creationist teaching of Genesis 1-2 is the noun *ma'or*, Genesis 1:14 ff, "[Let there be] light [s . . . for signs . . .]" If sunlight were indeed created subsequent to the developing of plants and trees (v. 11), Bible believers would be faced with a serious difficulty. But the literal meaning of *ma'or* is "Luminary, light-bearer;"<sup>14</sup> it is not the same word for light that is used in 1:3, the time of light's original creation. The emphasis of verse 14 falls rather on the heavenly bodies as visible "season dividers."<sup>15</sup>

2. *For Creationism.* Yet the advocates of evolution are not alone in utilizing inconclusive linguistic evidence from Genesis 1-2. A prime example of a term improperly adduced to support the doctrine of creation is *bara*, Genesis 1:27, "[God] created[man]." It is true that in Scripture this form of the verb is used only with God as its subject, but it does not in itself describe the "how" of a given divine creation: whether by direct act, as in the case of Eve (Gen. 5:2), or not, as in the case of the prophet Malachi and his contemporaries — "Hath not one God created us? Why do we deal

12. J. B. Payne, *Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), p. 136.
13. No preposition in the Hebrew. Another approach would document the use of *yom* for a long period, as in Gen. 2:4; cf. the Mosaic Psalm, 90:4.
14. Ludwig Koehler, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden: Brill, 1953), p. 489b.
15. Edwin Walhout, "Sequence in the Days of Genesis One," *JASA* 11:2 (June, 1959), 6-8; William F. Tanner, "Geology and the Days of Genesis," *ibid.*, 16:3 (Sept., 1964), 82-85: "These items fall into a chronological sequence — when viewed from the earth's surface."

treacherously? (Mal. 2:10) — and whether of preexisting materials,<sup>16</sup> as in the case of Adam (Gen. 1:27; cf. 2:7), or not, as in the case of heaven and earth (Gen. 1:1; cf. Heb. 11:3).

The noun *min* appears ten times in Genesis 1, e.g., 1:11, “[tree yielding fruit after his] kind,” or 1:21, “[God created fowl after his] kind,” etc. While it is true that in Genesis 1 this noun identifies groups down to and including the subdivisions of zoological orders (such as cattle, rodents, and canivores of the class Mammalia, Gen. 1:24), namely “families,” and, elsewhere in Scripture, down to and including the subdivisions of genera (such as locusts and grasshoppers of the family Acridiidae, order Orthoptera, Lev. 11:22), namely “species,”<sup>17</sup> the verses in Genesis say only that “kinds,” once they are created by God, produce their own kinds. How God initially forms each species (whether by evolution or by direct act), or even what changes He might subsequently see fit to introduce, is not stated.

## II. Determinative Evidence

There remain, however, two other categories of Hebrew terms, occurring in Genesis 1-2, that play decisive roles in the debate over theistic evolution.

1. *Against Theistic Evolution: a theory improbable in the light of Scripture.* The material element employed in the Biblical record for man's creation is *'afar*, Genesis 2:7, “dust.” Theoretically, indeed, this term might describe man as formed of complex “living dust,” or as the climax of an evolutionary process that began with lifeless dust but then passed through many intermediate stages. The creation context, however, seems to require simple dust<sup>18</sup> and man's connection with this dust as a direct one: Genesis 3:14 speaks of the serpent in the dust, presumably lifeless ground; and man's return to the dust, at death (Gen. 3:19), could hardly be by a process of devolution through intermediate living stages.

*Way-yivén*, Genesis 2:23, “And [God] made [a woman],” reads literally, “And He built.” The New Testament, moreover, requires Eve's “building” to be understood realistically: “the woman [is] of the man” (I Cor. 11:9). Analogy therefore suggests a similarly direct creation of Adam. Conceivably, one who believed the Bible in reference to Eve might still hold to the evolution of Adam's body, but its inconsistency is patent. Furthermore, what remains of the theistic evolutionist's basic principle that all physical phenomena must be explainable by natural development? Its goal of providing a solution on man's origin that could be acceptable to the naturalistically oriented mind is automatically forfeited, and the whole enterprise loses its significance.

16. Cf. its use in parallelism with *'asa* (1:26-27) and *yasar* (Amos 4:13; Isa. 43-1; 45:18), to “make” and to “form.”
17. J. B. Payne, “The Concept of ‘Kinds’ in Scripture,” *JASA* 10:2 (June, 1958), 17-20.
18. Speiser, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

2. *Against Theistic Evolution: a theory prohibited by Scripture.* *Nefesh haiya*, Genesis 2:7, is rendered by the *AV*, “[man became] a living soul.” The phrase, however, means literally, “a being, a living one” (adjective);<sup>19</sup> or, less likely, “a being of life” (noun);<sup>20</sup> the connotation is, in either event, the same: “a living being.”<sup>21</sup> The corresponding phrase appears in 1:20, 21, 24; 2:19; 9:10, 12, 15, and is rendered, “creature that hath life, living creature,” *AV*, and designates animals. It signifies, not man’s soul, meaning his higher immaterial nature or spirit (which is drawn from Gen. 1:26’s reference to the divine image), but his vitality.<sup>22</sup> This statement is a most important one on the “how” of man’s creation: it indicates that Adam did not become alive until God breathed life into His already “formed” man; he could not have been a continuation of some form of previously existing organic life. Such a view is prohibited by Scripture.

A final word then remains to be said, on the attitude that lies incumbent upon evangelicals to assume toward theistic evolution. Since Scripture opposes it, the committed Christian cannot be open-minded toward it.<sup>23</sup> One is reminded of Gleason Archer’s attitude toward the Deutero-Isaiah hypothesis, after observing that John 12:38-41 quotes from both halves of the book, both chapters 6 and 53, as coming from the one prophet Isaiah. He says:

If it was not the same author who compiled both chapter 6 and chapter 53, then the inspired apostle himself must have been in error. It therefore follows that advocates of the two-Isaiah theory must by implication concede the existence of errors in the New Testament.<sup>24</sup>

Yet firm conviction in such cases, including that against evolution, is becoming increasingly anathema. The national scholarly organization of Phi Beta Kappa, for example, has committed itself to “the disinterested pursuit of truth, [including] . . . the impartial analysis and evaluation of any and all . . . scientific tenets as well as . . . religious tenets.”<sup>25</sup> In a

19. Koehler, *Lexicon*, p. 291b.

20. Aubrey R. Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual in the Thought of Ancient Israel* (Cardiff: Univ. of Wales Press, 1949), p. 23.

21. Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Harper, 1958), p. 159.

22. A. B. Davidson, *The Theology of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1904), p. 194.

23. In contrast, “I, an evangelical Christian, can accept the basic concepts of evolution. Although not exclusively demanded by the data involved, it is certainly allowed.” J. Frank Cassel, “The Evolution of Evangelical Thinking on Evolution,” *JASA*, 11:4 (Dec., 1959), 26.

24. *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), p. 336.

25. “Statement of Policy on Freedom of Teaching and Inquiry,” as reaffirmed by the Council of Phi Beta Kappa, 1958.

sense, it is being true to its motto, *Philosophía Bíou Kubernetes*; for if life's helmsman is simply a love for knowledge, then anything that would impede one's free attachment to human ideas might be considered subversive. But if a Christian is true to the pledge of *theología bíou kubernetes*, then all ideas must be subordinated to Scripture, for the word of God is the ultimate wisdom and the only finally legitimate helmsman of life.

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