



C. Van Dam

Dr. C. Van Dam is professor of Old Testament at the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches in Hamilton, Ontario
cvandam@canrc.org

Is Genesis 1 Real History?

Genesis presents itself as recording events that occurred in the past

A topic that regularly surfaces for discussion and that is currently talked and written about again is whether the first chapter of the Bible (that is Genesis 1:1-2:3) is truly historical. For many today the answer is obvious. Of course not! There was no human perception of what happened and should something not be experienced by people for it to be considered history? And so many disqualify Genesis 1 as being truly historical for no human witnessed the creation of heaven and earth. Furthermore, how could God create light before the light bearers? It makes no sense. Also, look at what all happened on the sixth day. Obviously it cannot be taken literally. Furthermore, science says that the world is billions of years old. But according to the Bible it is only thousands of years old. What do we do with these kinds of questions?

Conservative reactions

Liberal, critical scholars often dismiss Genesis 1 as a myth, similar to other ancient cosmogonies, whose purpose was to explain the present world, an explanation lacking historical credibility. Conservative scholars have reacted in several ways. Let me mention two of them. A favourite response is to consider the narrative of Genesis 1 to be a beautiful literary construction which is not intended to convey a series of actual events. This approach is usually called a framework hypothesis. There are many variations of this, but the essence of this theory is that the days are not given in historical order; rather the sequence is topical. Evidence for this is seen in the fact that the results of creation in days one (light), two (separation of waters above and below), and three (dry land, vegetation) seem to be parallel to days four (light bearers), five (fish and birds), and six (animals and man). However, it is

difficult to square this interpretation with a simple reading of Genesis 1 which clearly indicates a chronological order of days, detailing the historical events of God calling creation into being. It is not surprising that for many scholars the framework hypothesis is basically an attempt to make Genesis 1 fit with current scientific understanding, especially concerning the age of the earth.

Another common interpretation is that the days are to be understood as representing long periods of time. They are not to be taken literally. However, the text of Genesis 1 makes it very clear that days with an evening and morning are referred to (Genesis 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31). The matter could not have been stated more clearly and unambiguously. Even liberal scholars who deny the historicity of Genesis 1 and consider it to be a myth acknowledge that the author had in view real days.

If these most popular conservative reactions are not satisfying, what do we do with Genesis 1? How do we understand it?

The context and genre of Genesis 1-2:3

A basic rule of interpreting Scripture is to consider the context. Genesis 1 is the beginning of the book of Genesis which narrates the history of the earliest events recorded in the Bible. At the same time, Genesis is also the history of God's self-revelation. Let us consider each of these two points.

First, Genesis is history writing. No reader of Scripture and no scholar will deny that Genesis presents itself as recording events that occurred in the past. In this book we find the account of creation, the fall into sin, the great Noachan flood, the history of Abraham and his offspring, and the touching account of Joseph and his brothers. If one reads Genesis from

beginning to end, there is no indication anywhere that we are changing from myth to history writing. Genesis is one grand historical narrative. The beginning of Genesis is a splendid opening chapter, beautifully structured, and coming to the beautiful climax of a perfect creation called into being by the Creator with man, male and female, as its crown. This opening chapter is prose or narrative and like the rest of the book conveys historical events.

It is true that no humans witnessed the creation events described for us and wrote down their impressions of God calling this world into being. However, this does not take anything away from it actually having happened. God was there and He is the one who is speaking in Genesis 1. He tells us what happened at the beginning of time and in so doing, He identifies Himself as the Creator and Lord of all. Even though the topic is beyond our comprehension, we witness here the miracle of revelation. God Himself tells us how the world came into existence.

God's accommodation in revealing his creation

When Almighty God, Creator and Sustainer of all things, addresses human beings, then He must make Himself understood and must therefore accommodate Himself to human understanding. This reality is often used to suggest that Genesis 1 does not really mean what it says. The subject of creation is too difficult and so God put it in this form, but it does not really reflect what actually happened. However, two things should be noted. God always accommodates Himself to human understanding whenever He reveals Himself. This is true of all of Scripture and takes nothing away from the reality of what is recorded. Second, God is pleased to use language that we can comprehend. When God uses our language to reveal Himself and his works then what He says is true to the reality which is being conveyed. "God is not a man, that he should lie" (Num 23:19; cf. 2 Sam 7:28; Titus 1:2). With respect to the creation account this means that we can accept this account as true and factual because God has told us so in his Word. As Christ acknowledged to the Father: "Your Word is truth" (John 17:17).

God does not make untrue statements and deceive us even as He accommodates Himself to our limited human capacity to comprehend. An interpreter of Scripture must go by what is written and by the

Church News

The consistory of the Redeemer Canadian Reformed Church of Winnipeg declares that

Rev. T.G. Van Raalte,

currently on extended study leave per Article 14 of the Church Order, is available for call in the churches with a view to taking up pastoral ministry once again in September 2009.

His contact information is

T.G. Van Raalte

1650 Hiawatha Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, MI, USA.

Zip 49506. Call 616-802-0337 or 616-308-6089

Email: tvanraalte@gmail.com (preferred) or tvraalt8@calvinseminary.edu.

Examined by Classis Ontario West on March 11, 2009, and received consent to speak an edifying word in the churches effective May 22, 2009, upon successful completion of the academic year (C.O. Art. 21):

Student A. Roukema

Student T. Sikkema

Student S. Wagenaar

Student A. Witten

Examined by Classis Central Ontario on March 13, 2009, and received consent to speak an edifying word in the churches upon successful completion of the academic year (C.O. Art. 21):

Student R. Kampen

context in which it is given. We have historical narrative of a very lofty and beautiful style with clear chronological indicators of days of creation. God used words which we can understand. Creation took place in six days and on the seventh day God rested. That's what God told us. And not just in Genesis. In the fourth commandment God repeated these basic historical facts by justifying the Sabbath rest with the words: "For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy" (Exod 20:11; similarly Exod 31:17). There is no way anyone can get around these words which convey the historical events of creation, events even engraved in stone by the finger of God (Exod 31:18). We either accept them or reject them.

All discussion on Genesis 1 comes down to whether we accept the Word or not

Now the clarity of the revelation of Genesis 1 does not mean that we can now claim to fully or exhaustively comprehend God's work of calling creation into existence. We cannot. We can only repeat what God has told us, but we cannot unpack the full meaning of this revelation. Who can truly understand, for example, what it means that "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Gen 1:3; 1 Cor 4:6)? What laws of physics would have had to be called into being for created light to exist? Scientists are still discovering new things about light. Clearly what Genesis tells us about the creation of light is not exhaustive but it is a true statement of what happened. The same can be said of all the other creation acts of God. We cannot fathom them (cf. Isa 40:25-26), but we may accept God's record of them to be true because God has told us so, not just in Genesis, but also elsewhere in Scripture (e.g., Ps 8:3; 33:6, 9; Heb 11:3; 2 Pet 3:5).

The bottom line

Ultimately all discussion on Genesis 1 comes down to whether we accept the Word or not; whether we think we are wiser than God or not. Genesis 1 is part of God's revelation of Himself. We can trust that his revelation is true to the reality He reveals to us. As man's scientific knowledge increases, faith in the simple declaration of Scripture apparently becomes more difficult for many. It is then good to remember that blessed are those who accept the Scriptures as the Word of Father above. In other words we need to

have a child-like faith (cf. Mark 10:15). I do not mention this to squelch scientific discussion on the implications of Genesis 1 for science. To the contrary. A child is full of wonder at the work of Father and will be motivated to explore it more. Christians have historically been at the forefront of scientific investigations. But, a child of God will seek to explore God's handiwork, also as a scientist, with the full recognition of the truthfulness of the Word of God.

"By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command" (Heb 11:3). God invites us to search out the wonders of his creation, but we are best equipped to do so if we do it in the light of his Word and revelation. That includes accepting Genesis 1 as it presents itself – a historical account of God's work of creation at the beginning of time, a work completed in six days, followed by a day of rest. By God's grace, our life rhythm of work and rest is still based on God's creating activity at the beginning of time (cf. Exod 20:8-11).

