

SHIFTING PARADIGMS FOR INTERPRETING GENESIS 1-11

by

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Did Thomas Kuhn (1922-1996) realize at the time of writing *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) how much of a cultural revolution his book would create? Unfortunately, because of his untimely death we are not able to ask him that question. However, his book was one of the pivotal works in the shift from the modern to the post-modern age. Kuhn, as an historian of science, noted that “some accepted examples of actual scientific practice—law, theory, application, and instrumentation together—provide models from which spring particular coherent traditions of scientific research” (10). These “coherent traditions” which he labeled “paradigms” are perpetuated by being taught to succeeding generations of students. The paradigms provide the students and practicing scientists with the understanding of the procedures of science, even to the point of what outcomes to expect in their experiments.

The practice of science also at times produces anomalies which a reigning paradigm cannot incorporate adequately (52-53). Eventually, the anomalies accumulate to the extent that a new theory is propounded, usually by a younger member of the scientific society, to incorporate the data. By such means a paradigm shift takes place and the criteria for “determining the legitimacy both of problems and of proposed solutions” changes (108). Kuhn found that paradigms not only provided the practical and intellectual environment with which to practice science, but they also prejudiced the outcome of what scientists were expecting in experiments. This finding, along with the admission that theories are “simply man-

made interpretations" (125), helped to shatter modernity's image of the objective scientific observer.

Kuhn was aware that paradigm shifts, or scientific revolutions, have social, political and even theological ramifications. We will examine perhaps the most famous paradigm shift, the Copernican theory of the universe, to see how it impacted our understanding of the Bible, if not theology. The mechanics of scientific revolutions, as Kuhn identified them, are peculiar to science itself, but other fields also develop paradigms, sometimes called worldviews. The paradigms of other fields, like in science, are supported by a mass of factual details, accepted theories, and essential presuppositions. Educational institutions guide the students into acceptable practices and procedures of their chosen disciplines, and thus perpetuate the paradigms to succeeding generations. When either "anomalies" within the discipline or "pressures" from outside demonstrate the inadequacies of the paradigms, new paradigms arise.

I propose that such paradigm shifts also occur in biblical studies. It is not my purpose to propose a new shift, but to recognize that one has already occurred in our understanding of Genesis 1-11. The first part of the paper will briefly examine some aspects of the theological/biblical conflict produced by the Copernican scientific revolution as an example of a paradigm shift caused by outside influences. Then it will describe a paradigm which has proved inadequate for the interpretation of Genesis 1-11 and what influences have forced a change. Finally, it will take a look at how the new paradigm fits with the traditional Wesleyan approach to biblical inspiration.

The Copernican Shift

On March 5, 1616, the Congregation of the Index condemned "the Pythagorean doctrine concerning the mobility of the earth and the immobility of the sun, which Nicolas Copernicus, *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* . . . taught, and which is false and altogether incompatible with divine Scripture. . . ; therefore, in order that an opinion ruinous to Catholic truth not creep further in this manner, the Sacred Congregation decrees that the said Nicolas Copernicus, *De revolutionibus orbium* . . . be suspended until corrected . . . (Westfall 1988, 1). The moving hand behind the ruling was that of Roberto Bellarmino (1542-1621) who sent to Galileo a warning that same spring about his teaching as fact that the earth moved. It would not be until 1633 that Galileo would be con-

demned. The conflict was not so much about the facts of science as between an “unproven” theory and the authority of the Church and Scripture. The Copernican theory was accepted by many, but not because it could be proven. It was not until 1830 that the scientific evidence of the “annual parallax” became available. It had been accepted earlier “because of the coherent, integrated view it provided” (Gingerich 1993, 9). Belarmino argued that, since the Holy Spirit inspired the Scriptures, they could not be false; and since the Church is not an institution of men, but of God, it cannot err in its teaching (Westfall 1988, 5-6). Thus, since both Scripture (Ps. 93:1) and the Church taught that the earth does not move, the Copernican theory is false.

What is often overlooked in this debate is that the concept of the universe popular in the seventeenth century was not based on biblical descriptions, but on the theory of Claudius Ptolemy (c. AD 100-170) which placed the earth at the center of the universe and around which the moon, sun, planets, and stars rotated. In the biblical/Mesopotamian view, earth is a ball with water above and below it. A solid dome (Gen. 1:6, 7, 8, 14, 15, 17; Ps. 19:2; Dan. 12:3) above separates the waters and on it is hung the sun, moon and stars (see illustration, Varughese, et al 2003, 65). Ultimately, the clash was over two worldviews or paradigms. At least the biblical description of the physical universe was proven false. This is not to say that there have not been others in the history of the Church who have interpreted the Scriptures in other ways, but that during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a view of the universe was supported by a paradigm drawn from the Scriptures and the teachings of the Church, a paradigm that had to shift due to information drawn from an outside source, astronomy.

In the modern era, interpretations of Genesis 1-11, and particularly the first three chapters, have become the focal point of debate, not only among scholars, but also in the public arenas of the press and politics. The paradigm out of which many interpret these chapters is that of history; that is, the chapters give us an accurate account of what actually happened. This is not necessarily a modern phenomenon. Josephus recounted the chapters as history, adding many details from oral traditions or his own suppositions (Josephus, *Ant.* 1:2-75). Jean Calvin also considered them as historically accurate. His discussion on creation he titled “The History of the Creation of the World.” The accuracy of the accounts was guaranteed when Moses wrote down “facts which the fathers had

delivered as from hand to hand, through a long succession of years, to their children." One might ask; how were these facts known since creation occurred before Adam was formed? Calvin asserted, "No sane person doubts that Adam was well-instructed (by God?) respecting them all" (1948, 1:57-59). This paradigmatic framework is very much with us today.

We need to recognize that the term "history" has various connotations and has been used with different meanings at different times. While the modern historian relies on objective records and multiple sources to reconstruct a reliable history, such procedural understandings cannot always be attributed to a writer who lived prior to the modern age. The term is often used to mean events which actually occurred or persons who actually lived, whether or not we have sufficient modern evidence to prove their existence. Fretheim recognizes this distinction when he writes, "While it is not possible to determine whether the women and men of Genesis were actual historical persons, it seems reasonable to claim that the narratives carry some authentic memories of Israel's pre-exodus heritage" (194, 327).

The movement generally identified as "scientific creationism" has tried to enlist a type of science to combat the theory of evolution. Van Till criticizes the scientific analysis by those committed to scientific creationism as functioning "to diminish the demand for both craft competence and professional integrity and to disable the generally accepted epistemic value system" (1988, 45). What is driving those committed to scientific creationism is not science, but the belief that the account of creation in Genesis is history. Henry Morris, a primary force behind creation science wrote that "the creation chapters of Genesis are marvelous and accurate accounts of the actual events of the primeval history of the universe" (1974, 203). How were these "accurate accounts" preserved for posterity?

In accord with the common practice of ancient times, records and narratives were written down on tables of stone and then handed down from family to family, perhaps finally, to be placed in a library or public storehouse of some sort. It seems most reasonable to believe that the original records of Genesis were written down by eyewitnesses and handed down through the line of patriarchs, from Adam through Noah and Abraham and finally to Moses. (1974, 205)

Bert Thompson is another representative of the creation science movement who maintains the historicity of the Genesis narrative: "It is

our contention that the material in Genesis 1-11 is historically true, and that it represents believable, literal history that is 'correct in substance' " (1995, 96). He goes on to attack the theory of evolution, stating that "science has not proven evolution true. Nor will it ever, for such a task falls far beyond the scope of the scientific method" (1995, 102). What undergirds the arguments of both Morris and Thompson is the modernist acceptance that historicity equals truth, and since the Scripture is inspired, and thus true, the accounts of Genesis must be historical. Divine inspiration is the guarantor of its historicity. There is, of course, a flaw in the logic. A literary narrative, even an inspired one, may be true, but not historical—e.g., a parable.

It should be noted that not all persons who maintain the historicity of Genesis 1-11 are part of the creation science movement. Many from various fields of study accept the essential historicity of these chapters. The outstanding astronomer Owen Gingerich suggests that the theory of the "Big Bang" beginning of the universe posits "some mysterious prior state that can be traced back to within a split second of an apparent time zero." Since our universe apparently had a beginning, and thus a history, "this view is surprisingly consonant with the Biblical narrative, which is fundamentally a historical vision of the world" (1993, 17). However, regardless of whether one is part of the scientific creation movement, or just accepts that Genesis 1-11 is a historical account, what is being accepted is a paradigm that is basically in conflict with science and what has become known in the last one hundred fifty years about the cultural background of Israel in general and Genesis 1-11 specifically.

Impact of the Advance of Our Knowledge

The continuing advance of knowledge in the disciplines of geology (Young 1982), biology (Colling 2004), genetics (Falk 2004), and astronomy (Van Till 1990, 83-125), and in our understanding of the Bible's cultural backgrounds as a result of the findings of archaeology, make the interpretive paradigm of history no longer tenable.

While Gen 1-11 has been read as history, the ancient Near East (ANE) accounts of creation and theogony fall into the literary category of mythology. The Exodus event, however, so impacted the Israelite way of conceptualizing their relationship with God that they rejected mythological approaches. Dennis Bratcher notes, "... the two opposing categories for Israel (to use a more modern mode of thought) are not 'history' and

'fiction' (history being that which can be verified by data and fiction that which does not correspond to verifiable data and therefore is historically untrue) but rather 'history' and 'myth.' " Israel told its stories in the form of "existential human experience" rather than cosmic clashes among the gods, "in historical terms of human actions and interactions with God within human existence." The story tellers drew upon the ANE mythological imagery, but "historicized those images into a narrative about human experience" (private communication).

When George Smith published in 1876 *The Chaldean Account of Genesis*, he began a paradigm shift in our understanding of Genesis 1-11. As more texts from the ANE have become available, more parallels between them and biblical accounts have become obvious. Some interpreters emphasized the similarities in the materials, and others the differences. Simon Parker gives a more mature stance when he writes, "A just comparison gives due weight to both commonalities and differences and seeks to explain both—as respectively part of the common culture Israel shared with its neighbors and antecedents, or as part of the particular culture or sub-culture of the individual work—or indeed of the creativity of its author(s)" (1994, 234).

Note some of the Mesopotamian cultural backgrounds of Gen 1-11, specifically the creation account of Gen 1, the Garden incident (2-3), the genealogy of chapter 5, and the flood narrative (6-9). These comparisons are not new and can be found in many works. See, for example, the recent article of Kenton L. Sparks in which he argues "that the Priestly Writer was an avid student of ancient texts and that his anthology of Israelite tradition was deliberately shaped to follow patterns and motifs found in Mesopotamian literature" (2007, 626). By reviewing the literary parallels it will become apparent that we should read Gen 1-11 for theological insight, not historical facts. The comparisons noted here will be necessarily brief. I will follow the methods adopted by JoAnn Scurlock in her study of sacrificial practices in ANE in presenting "a broad survey of ancient Israelite and ancient Mesopotamian practices across the spectrum," and not attempt to demonstrate direct literary dependence or copying (2002, 16). Indeed, caution must always be taken when making literary comparisons. The exuberant mistakes of early scholars who tried to show literary dependence between biblical accounts and Mesopotamian documents are all too familiar.

The theological independence of Israel is certainly evident in the creation narrative of Gen 1. There is only one God, who is separate from and not part of the created order, and the elements are demythologized; e.g., the sun (shemesh) is referred to as the "greater light" (v 16) lest the reader think of the sun god Shamash (Hasel 1974, 89). However, the structure of the universe with its solid dome holding back the waters above, the flat earth, and the sun, moon, stars and planets all occupying the underside of dome, corresponds to the ANE cosmic geography (Walton 2006, 165-178). Speiser notes seven items in Gen 1 which are in identical sequence with *Enuma Elish*: existence of primeval chaos, creation of light, then the firmament, the dry land, the luminaries, humanity, and finally the gods/God rests (1964, 10). The odds of two documents coming up independently with seven items in the exact same order are 5040 to 1. Although Sparks wants to argue that the Priestly writer drew directly from *Enuma Elish* (2007, 631), most scholars suggest that the writer rather drew from the common cultural pattern of creation (Walton 1989, 37; see also his conclusion comparing Gen 1 with Atrahasis, 40).

The early history of humanity was viewed in antiquity as a golden age when humans lived in an idyllic setting, had special relationships with deities, and lived extremely long lives. The biblical account conforms to this general pattern. Adam and Eve lived in a garden paradise where God met with them. The life spans of early humans are reduced in four stages: prior to the flood the longest lives; after the flood a general reduction from 600 years for Shem to 148 for Nahor; from Abraham to Moses a range from 200 to 100 years, and after Moses life spans typical of present day norms (Miller and Hayes 1986, 58-60). This view of a descent of humanity from paradise to present day struggles conflicts with scientific views of ascent from simple forms of life to more complex. The stories of Genesis 2-11 probably originated separately, each having its own motif but drawing on the general ANE culture when created and told by tribal story tellers. Through a complex process, the stories were brought together to make a unified narrative to describe the ancient "history" of the world and Israel. This helps explain the awkwardness of some of the stories that produce those common questions of students: Where did Cain get his wife?; If Cain and Abel were the first children of Adam and Eve, whom did Cain have to be afraid of when God cursed him (Sarna 1974, 29)? This compiling of disparate stores into a longer account has a parallel in the origin of the *Gilgamish Epic*. Eight independent

Sumarian stories were compiled by a Babylonian author/editor in the early second millennium to make a coherent narrative (Stone 1987, 173-187).

There are several accounts of the creation of humanity in the ANE and it is clear that the Israelite accounts (1:26-23; 2:4-3:24) are distinctive when compared to Mesopotamian stories; e.g., in Genesis humanity is monogenesis rather than polygenesis; humanity is the pinnacle of creation rather than an afterthought; humanity is created to rule instead of to serve (Walton 1989, 27-30). In the garden story, a secondary theme intrudes at the beginning and end (2:9; 3:22)—the quest for eternal life, or to put it negatively, why do we have to die? There is no indication in the text that humanity was created immortal; rather, the couple had access to the tree of life which conveyed immortality. They were cast out of the garden lest after sinning they might eat of the tree and gain immortality. The quest for immortality was also a theme in ANE myth and ritual, for example in both the *Gilgamesh Epic* and the *Adapa Story* (Sarna 1974, 25). In the biblical story it forms part of the backdrop waiting to come to the fore at the appropriate point. The various accounts, both biblical and non-biblical, are consistent at this point; immortality is removed from humanity's grasp. Death awaits all.

Science has placed a dark cloud of doubt over the historicity of the Adam and Eve narrative. Anthropological and genetic studies place the origin of our species much earlier than previously thought. Sometime between 150,000 to 50,000 years ago our ancestors appeared in Africa (private communication from Richard Colling). About 45,000 years ago we developed spoken language ("Linguists Seek a Time When We Spoke as One," *Christian Science Monitor*, 19 July 2007). Such extended time periods make it difficult to accept the story of an idyllic setting situated in the recent past and inhabited by an original couple from whom all humanity descended.

In Gen. 5 we have the genealogical record of ten generations that stretches from Adam to Noah. The list has often been compared to the Sumerian King list which records the reigns of eight kings from five cities who ruled for a total of 241,200 years prior to the flood. The longest reigns were by Alalgar of Eridu, 36,000 years, and En-mem-gal-Anna of Bad-tibira, 43,200 years. Even granting that the scribes used a base 6 system of counting, the numbers are unbelievably high. After the flood the numbers continue to decrease to normal lengths (ANET 1969, 265-266).

Westermann carefully reviews the theories of direct dependence of one document on the other, and rejects them. He does conclude that, "Both however are a reference to the generally widespread view that the life-span of the primeval ancestors was longer than the present life-span. . . . This may well have been a generally known motif" (1974, 1:353; Walton's adjusting both the number of persons in the biblical list and the total of the years to get a correspondence between the two accounts is too artificial [1989, 127-131]).

Finally, the similarities and differences between the flood narrative (6:1-9:17) and the flood accounts in the *Gilgamish Epic* and *Atrahasis Epic* are well known. Eugene Fisher notes that there is no direct dependence of the Hebrew account of the flood upon the Mesopotamian stories and that each is unique. The theological sophistication of the Genesis account that weaves together human culpability, divine justice executed by one God, and covenantal promise argues for a development later than its ANE counterparts. There is, however, a "material identity of the tale in the two versions." Fisher lists twenty-four points of comparison between the two versions (1970, 392-403). The story line, even to the detail of sending forth the birds, argues for an awareness of cultural influence, stories told and retold over the centuries until adapted by a writer as a vehicle for Israelite theology.

The attempt to prove from the biblical account that there was a universal flood within recent history, a flood that was responsible for laying down the fossil records, is impossible to sustain. The sedimentary rock record has been proven by radiometric dating methods to have a high antiquity. Although these methods have been assailed by Creationists, they have proven to be scientifically valid (Young 1982, 93-116). There is no geological record of a world-wide flood, and no archaeologist has reported evidence of a more localized one that would float a boat to the top of mountains (Gen. 7:19-8:4). The historicity of such a flood must be given up. At the conclusion of his book, which discusses the various interpretations of the biblical flood account, geologist Davis Young argues that "the extra-biblical data pertaining to the flood have been pushing the church to develop a better approach to the flood story, and indeed to all the early chapters of Genesis." The extra-biblical evidence includes: (1) "the failure after several centuries of effort to locate physical remnants of the biblical deluge;" (2) the evidence that the geological structures of the earth have been laid down over extensive periods of time; (3) the view

that the flood's effects were confined only to the globe's surface features cannot be sustained; and (4) "a variety of biogeographical evidence" which "counts conclusively against such an event," such as the lack of evidence "to indicate that human or animal populations were ever disrupted by a catastrophic global flood at any point in the past." Davis states bluntly, "I submit that there is something inherently flawed in any hermeneutic that prevents us from reading God's handiwork properly and that repeatedly puts us at odds with the established conclusions of a scientific community that is composed, not just of opponents of Christianity, but also of confessing Christians" (1995, 310-313).

While a segment of the church still clings to inadequate hermeneutical approaches to interpreting Gen. 1-11, I suggest that the discipline of biblical studies as a whole has already understood the implications of the readings of the ANE culture and the findings of the scientific community, and a paradigm shift has already taken place. While a few scholars may suggest some historical background to the narratives, such as a local flood forming the basis of what grew as the storytellers embellished the tale to be the account of a worldwide catastrophe, none would argue that the narratives are history, in the modern sense of that term. Rather, they would see the biblical materials as the product of Israelite theologians utilizing cultural materials as vehicles for distinctive theological insights into the nature of God, his governance of the world, and his movements toward judgment and redemption.

A Wesleyan Approach to Biblical Inspiration

It would be difficult to find a Wesleyan biblical scholar, let alone a theologian, working prior to the mid-twentieth century who would support such an hermeneutical approach as maintained here. However, many of us who were educated during the last half of the twentieth century, and who have tried to maintain currency in our discipline, are very much aware of the dissidence that exists between us and our predecessors, even our mentors. While the approach is now different, we ask whether the new is inconsistent with a Wesleyan understanding of biblical inspiration. It is recognized that theological positions based on an historical reading of the opening chapters of Genesis will have to be reevaluated, but fundamental to Wesleyan theology is the belief that the Scriptures have been inspired by God and thus are foundational for theology. What should be asked now is, what has been our historic understanding of inspiration, and

is it flexible enough to incorporate new approaches to interpreting Genesis?

W. B. Pope (1822-1903), a British Methodist writing in the 1870s, produced a three-volume systematic theology. He maintained a dynamical theory of inspiration, explaining that the Spirit "acted upon and through the faculties of the inspired person." He identified the Scriptures as "a Divine-human collection of documents: the precise relation of the human to the Divine is a problem which has engaged much attention, and has not yet been, though it may yet be, adequately solved." As to authority, he stated, "Its plenary inspiration makes Holy Scripture the absolute and final authority, all-sufficient as the supreme Standard of Faith, Directory of Morals, and Charter of Privileges to the Church of God. Of course, the Book of Divine revelations cannot contain anything untrue, but its infallibility is by itself especially connected with religious truth" (1880, 1:174-175). As to infallibility, Pope also noted, "Sometimes they [the biblical writers] have to register facts, or supposed facts, which they gather from public records, sometimes to record traditions, legends, current opinions, or uninspired predictions handed down by tradition: in these cases they are only witness of what they found" (1880, 1:172). As to creation, Pope allowed for an interpretation of "day" to be an extended period of time for the creation of the physical universe (1880, 1:398), but rejected the concept of Darwinian evolution as contrary to Scripture (1880, 1:403ff.).

John Miley (1813-1895), who taught at the newly established Methodist school of Drew University, in an appendix to his two-volume work on theology, also maintained the dynamical view of inspiration in which God used human instrumentality in recording "divine truth," but did not override their consciousness or personalities. This accounts for variations, "of which there are many, [but which] are quite indifferent to a real and sufficient inspiration" (1894, 2:485-487). He argued that Moses gave an historical account of creation, but was sensitive to the problems that geology had raised about the age of the earth. He gave several options for correlating the two, opting finally for an interpretation given by Augustine and Aquinas—that the first three days of creation were extended periods of time (1892, 1:298-308).

A. M. Hills (1848-1935), the first president of Olivet Nazarene University, also accepted the dynamical view of inspiration, rejecting both the plenary and verbal theories (1931, 1:123-127). His view of inspiration

was wide enough to recognize that Scripture contains error and is not infallible in every aspect. He wrote, "Those who maintain that we must accept every statement of Scripture, or none of it, should consider that no doctrine more surely makes skeptics." And again, "in spite of all discrepancies, and disagreements, and errors, and minor inaccuracies, the Bible still remains God's inspired and infallible book." But *infallible for what?* "It infallibly guides all honest, and willing and seeking souls, to Christ, to holiness, and to heaven" (1931, 1:134). Hills adopted an expanded time sequence in Gen. 1 to accommodate the findings of geology, and was even willing to accept a theory of theistic evolution, but rejected biological evolution as espoused by Darwin, whom he considered the author of "fascinating fiction" (1931, 262-272).

Russell R. Byrum (1889-1980), instructor at the Anderson Bible School and Seminary, today known as Anderson University, understood inspiration as involving "both the human and the divine element in the production of the Bible," which he identified as "the dynamical or verbal-inspiration theory." He appears to have been influenced by both A. H. Strong and Charles Hodge in the formation of his ideas, even to accepting that the original manuscripts (the autographs) were infallible as they were "fully and divinely inspired." However, he was willing to consider that the Bible contained errors, but limited them to "its references to history and science," but not to "its moral and religious teaching." The errors might pertain to secular matters, but "the inspiration of its religious message would not necessarily be affected" (1925, 169-176). Byrum appears to have wanted to maintain the absolute infallibility of the Bible, particularly in the autographs, but recognized the possibilities of error and so was willing to limit infallibility to its religious teachings.

Concerning creation, Byrum held that the Mosaic account of Gen. 1 is an accurate history (1925, 235), but also that the "days" may be interpreted as extended periods of time to correlate with the findings of geology. He notes that, "It is a distinct advantage to religion to show, if it can be done, that the Bible narrative is not inconsistent with the claims of science. It is improper to debar the student of science from faith in the inspired record by hedging it around with human interpretations that are not required by internal facts of the Bible. And it is never right so to interpret the Bible that it contradicts certainly known facts of nature (1925, 237). As to evolution, after a lengthy discussion of various theories, including theistic evolution, Byrum repudiated "every form of evolution as the method of divine creation" (1925, 253).

In 1982, a revised edition of Byrum's work appeared. It has eliminated out-dated material, but upholds essentially the same positions Byrum originally laid out. Concerning errors in Scripture, a brief section has been added to explain that what some might consider moral errors are more appropriately identified as a lack of understanding the differences between Western and Oriental cultures (1982, 133). Of greater note is a toning down of the position that the Genesis record is accurate history. Only once does the section refer to "the historic nature of the record" (1982, 189). Byrum's original rejection of all forms of evolution is retained.

Gilbert W. Stafford (1938-2008) joins Byrum in representing the Church of God movement (Anderson). He takes a more community approach to the understanding of the inspiration of the Bible. The Scriptures are those that are "experienced by the church at large as being inspired by God;" "accepted by the church at large as being sacred writings." Their purpose is primarily "instructive for salvation," and they are useful for "instructing, judging, aligning, and shaping the people of God" (1996, 52). Stafford takes a more irenic approach by seeing the similarities in views of inspiration rather than their differences (1996, 46-49).

H. Orton Wiley, in agreement with Pope and Miley, maintained a dynamical theory of inspiration in which the "the Bible becomes the infallible Word of God, the authoritative rule of faith and practice in the Church" (1941, 1:171, 176-177). S. S. White also accepted the dynamic theory of inspiration and viewed the Bible as "an infallible rule of faith and practice" (1942, 92).

H. Ray Dunning accepts the dynamical theory of inspiration, but sees the inspiration residing in the writer, not the text. Such a theory "implies the historical character of the biblical language." Dunning means not that the Bible is strictly history, but that words "are historically conditioned by the writer's intellectual, cultural, and societal milieu." Dunning takes into account the discoveries of archaeology and recognizes that the writers were influenced by the surrounding cultures. For example, while Israel maintained its distinctive theological presuppositions, it borrowed worship and ritual forms from the Canaanite culture. This leads Dunning to restrict the authority of the Bible to its "soteriological aspects" (1988, 70-76).

J. Kenneth Grider also accepted the dynamic theory of inspiration and maintained that "Scripture is inerrant on doctrine and practice." He

allowed that “it might contain errors in the areas of mathematics, science, of such like,” yet maintained “the doctrine of a racial fall through a historical Adam” (1994, 65-75).

To summarize, Wesleyan theologians have maintained a dynamical/dynamic view of inspiration that incorporates both the Spirit’s guidance and human limitations, including cultural perspectives. Absolute infallibility or inerrancy has been rejected. Some theologians readily admit that the Bible contains errors in the areas of history, science, and mathematics. The Scriptures, however, are viewed as infallible in the areas of salvation, or faith and practice. By acknowledging that the Bible is incarnational, being both Divine and human, this leaves room to acknowledge the impact that the ANE culture had upon the writers. The Bible is accepted as a book of theology/religion which contains many types of literature and is highly accurate in many of its details, but that its authority is limited to its message of redemption, to matters of “faith and practice.”

Concluding Remarks

A paradigm shift has occurred concerning our understanding of Genesis 1-11. In biblical studies this is now a given. The Israelite writers were inheritors of the Mesopotamian cultural understanding of the “origins” of the world and the early “history” of humanity. They used that cultural background as a vehicle for their distinctive theological understanding of God’s creative activities and humanity’s theological privilege and corruption. This perspective requires an adjustment in our interpretation of the biblical material, giving up an historical approach for one that is literary and theological. Such an approach is not contrary to a Wesleyan understanding of inspiration, which takes into account the cultural background and human limitations of the writers of Scripture. It allows for science to speak about nearly unlimited time spans and complex processes of development without being in conflict with the message of Scripture, which is infallible in its teachings on faith (what we are to believe) and practice (how we are to live).

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