

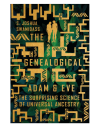


Reading Creation in the Bible in Light of Science Today

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It is a privilege to participate in this review panel for Joshua Swamidass's book *The Genealogical Adam and Eve*.¹ Earlier this year *Sapientia*, the online journal for the Henry Center Creation Project at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, sponsored and published a symposium on this book in which some of us took part. It was published this past August. My paper for this panel draws from that symposium, but also extends beyond it to other considerations.

Swamidass has a passion for "peaceful science" in place of the contentious nature of the discussion between biblical creation and evolutionary science that has so often dominated the engagement among us and between us. He is convinced of the validity of both the biblical creation accounts and the basic results of the Genome Project, but not some of the implications that some draw from them. He is an Associate Professor of Laboratory and Genomic Medicine at Washington University in St. Louis. He is a computational biologist who knows the Lord and believes the Bible. I am a biblical scholar who knows the Lord, believes the Bible, and also likes science. I am thankful for the many good benefits of science, but not convinced of some of the implications genetic scientists have been drawing from their work when they turn to the Bible, especially issue of the historical Adam and Eve. Perhaps one could say that he works from science to the Bible and I work from the Bible to science.

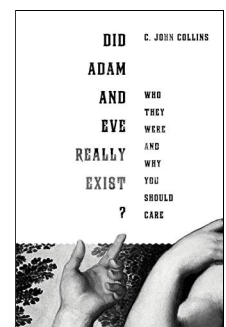
Early in my career I studied under top proponents of young earth creationism (YEC), and was convinced of this position. On the one hand, I taught it for some years, and would still be glad to find, in the end, that the young earth position is correct. On the other hand, I understand the frustrations of those in the fields of science who see YEC science as "bad science" that also reads the Bible poorly. As for their reading of the Bible, even thirty years ago when I was holding the young earth position I had a rising sense that some elements of the biblical text may not point in that direction. Here I am thinking of the 6/7 literary pattern which was very well known in the Bible and the ancient Near East (ANE) as a literary device for lending structure to stories and other sayings. Moreover, even in those days, the "canopy theory" seemed unlike to me to be the true intent of day two in Genesis 1 (i.e., the waters above and below), but that theory was important for maintaining some of the arguments for recent creationist science. More recently, they have been coming around to admitting this. It seems that the their own science is now telling them that the atmosphere could not have supported such a canopy, and if it had been there the temperature on the surface of the earth would have been far too high to support life.² My point is that this way of

reading the text was flawed in the first place, and we did not need the science to tell us that.

For me, the shift away from the YEC understanding of Genesis 1 and other creation passages in the Bible had nothing to do with pressure from the standard scientific arguments for evolution and an old earth, but derived from reading the biblical text itself. In fact, I remain unconvinced that Bible intends to teach anything about the age of the earth to begin with, young or old. In any case, scientific issues simply were not determinative one way or the other, and, for me, the same is true today. This is not to say that I ignore what scientists are saying, whether young or old earth scientists, evolutionary or anti-evolutionary, or anything in between. No. I find the discussion fascinating, although this has not always been the case.

For some time I stopped engaging in the Bible and science discussion because it seemed to me to be going nowhere fast. People were talking past each other without really engaging in serious and intellectually honest engagement over the issues. The whole discussion shed a lot more heat than light on the topic. It was highly charged, at least in circles where people cared about it one way or the other. No matter what one said about it, they were in a lot of trouble with a lot of people on one side or the other, or both. Unfortunately, sometimes the same is true today.

Over the last fifteen years, however, I have been urged to rejoin the discussion at the invitation of people on various sides of the discussion, especially people from Answers in Genesis and BioLogos, major young earth and evolutionary creationist organizations. I went on the Grand Canyon trip led by people in Answers of Genesis, and joined in the development and management of the creation study section at ETS, along with Terry Mortensen from Answers in Genesis and others. Daryl Charles invited me into a symposium of five evangelical OT scholars held in Chattanooga, Tennessee, under the auspices of Bryan College. The publication that arose from this occasion is entitled *Reading Genesis 1-2: An Evangelical Conversation*, published in 2012.³



1. Joshua Swamidass, *The Genealogical Adam & Eve: The Surprising Science of Universal Ancestry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019).

2. See now the discussion in Andrew A. Snelling, *Earth's Catastrophic Past: Geology, Creation, and the Flood* (2 volumes; Dallas, TX: Institute for Creation Research, 2009), 661-67.

3. Daryl Charles, ed., *Reading Genesis 1-2: An Evangelical Conversation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013). Five scholars were involved as the main presenters at the conference: Todd Beal, C. John Collins, Tremper Longman III, John Walton,

I also attended several BioLogos conferences. Michael Murray, who was then a top administrator at the John Templeton Foundation, invited me into a discussion with other evangelical OT scholars, and then another that also included NT and theological scholars. This eventually led to the harboring of The Creation Project in the Henry Center for Theological Understanding at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School where I serve as an OT professor. I became a part of the team, participating in The Creation Project since it started and continuing up to the present day.

All through this process and the various engagements with other biblical and ANE scholars as well as accomplished scientist of various kinds, theologians, and philosophers, it has been my goal to keep the serious study of the Hebrew Bible in its ANE context at the center of the discussion. My own contributions have been in this area. This is still my main concern, and causes me to keep investigating the text exegetically, contextually, theologically, and especially prayerfully. This has involved reworking over and over again the details of particular passages (in Genesis 1-11 and elsewhere in the Bible) and the whole interpretation of the text in the light of these engagements in The Creation Project events, at ETS, and in other contexts.

Joshua Swamidass and *The Genealogical Adam and Eve*

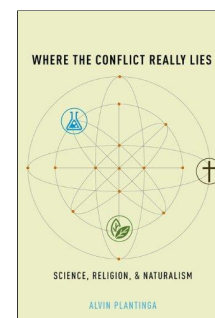
Joshua Swamidass joined in with The Creation Project and eventually presented his then developing view of the genealogical Adam and Eve at one of our major conferences. As part of writing the book he held some consultations with other scientists, biblical scholars, theologians, philosophers, and church leaders. I joined in one of these.

This is a fascinating and helpful book, important in our day. I am thankful for it. It is not a perfect book, of course. There is only one of those! I cannot agree with everything Joshua Swamidass writes. In fact, that would not be possible because he allows for so many mutually exclusive options for reading various parts of the Genesis story and other passages in the Bible. His goal is not to be definitive but suggestive, leading to a “peaceful” engagement between the Bible and evolutionary science on various matters, especially the historical Adam and Eve.

As for myself, the main way this book and the discussion it has generated is helpful is in its “push back” against the common overreach of evolutionary science against the possibility of an historical Adam and Eve at the headwaters of humanity.⁴ His genealogical versus genetic approach to human descent opens a door of fresh air into the discussion of an important topic in the Bible that some unbelieving and believing evolutionary scientists have tried to smother. The shift he proposes from genetics to genealogy makes good biblical sense. Genesis 1–11 develops genealogical descent, not genetics, and this runs through the entire Bible. 1 Chronicles 1–9 contains an extensive genealogy that runs all the way from Adam to post-exilic Israel. The New Testament begins with a genealogy that

runs from Abraham (Genesis 12) to Jesus, and Luke 3:23–37 has one that extends from Jesus all the way back to Adam, “the son of God.”

Nothing I write in this short essay intends to express rejection or reaction against science or scientists. Their work, however, calls for careful evaluation and critique from within the scientific world. It also requires that those of us who are not scientists understand the limits of what scientists can legitimately conclude from their work.⁵ The same is true for the work of biblical and theological scholars. On the one hand, the history of these disciplines shows clearly that there are important passages and concepts in the Bible that are open for significant discussion, debate, and reinvestigation. On the other hand, we need to remember Meir Sternberg’s important dictum about the Bible as a “foolproof composition.” As he puts it, the Bible “is difficult to read, easy to underread and overread and even misread, but virtually impossible to, so to speak, counterread, unless one intentionally reads it in ‘bad faith,’ as some are determined to do in the academy or other places where the agenda is brought to the text rather than gained from it. The essentials are made transparent to all comers: the story line, the world order, the value system.”⁶ In other words, the Bible is essentially clear in what it says and means; that is, if one is willing to let it speak for itself and mean what it says.



Reading the Bible Well

In the study of the Bible, we need to do what is sometimes referred to as “close reading” of the biblical text. The goal is to allow the particular passage to drive the reader detail by detail to its meaning in its context. No one does this perfectly, since we are all under the inescapable influence of our own experience and outside forces on our minds and lives. Nevertheless, the goal remains intact. This means that the reader works to gear his or her thinking to the particular passage in its world context. Of course, the larger context of any passage includes the larger biblical canon as a whole, but each passage within it must have its say. Other passages may clarify it or expand upon it, but do not override the meaning of the passage currently under consideration. This is the only way I know to maintain a reading of the Bible in which the Bible is in control rather than previous exegetical and theological commitments of the one reading it.

Swamidass is not against this kind of reading of the Bible. It is just not what he is trying to do in this book. Instead, he is trying to open up options for different readers to read it according to what they see in the text, including its relationship to what he thinks are the assured results of evolutionary science. He is inviting people to a more irenic discussion of what the text is actually intending to say, and how that relates to the evolutionary science he affirms throughout his book. He consistently argues that evolution may have fractured the story of Adam and Eve, but as he puts it in one place, “we can recover it now. From a scientific point of view, all that is required is people outside

and myself. We each wrote our own position and interacted with the views of the others.

4. See, e.g., the argument in Dennis R. Venema and Scot McKnight, *Adam and the Genome: Reading Scripture after Genetic Science* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2017).

5. See the very helpful discussion in Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011).

6. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 50-51.

the Garden, with whom Adam and Eve's offspring eventually interbreed" (p. 173).

The Question of People outside the Garden

For his proposal to work, these people outside the Garden before the creation of Adam and Eve are non-negotiable. For there to be peace between the Bible and the evolutionary science to which he is committed, they must have been there. Swamidass believes that the Bible is not really concerned with these people who lived outside the Garden of Eden, but he makes note of some supposed biblical "hints" of the existence of them, and argues for their suggestive value. According to his view, for there to be peace between the Bible and evolutionary science to which he is committed, they must have been there (see the full discussion on pp. 111–50 and esp. the biblical passages on pp. 135–36 and 140–50). Some biblical scholars see them as valid. Others do not. Still others are undecided. The discussion is a quagmire of speculation and debate. There is a lot to be unsure about here.⁷

Who was Cain afraid would kill him (Gen 4:14), and where did he get his wife (v. 17)? The traditional Rabbinic and Christian answer derives from Genesis 5:4, "Adam...had other sons and daughters" (cf. vv. 7, 10, and following).⁸ This suggests Adam and Eve also had other sons and daughters before Seth, not just Cain and Abel. It is not likely that Adam and Eve waited to have other children until after Cain and Abel had grown up enough for them to engage in the conflict treated in Gen 4:1–16. The text does not tell us how old Cain was when he killed Abel. The population could well have expanded quite extensively by that time, so Cain could have feared the potential vengeance of the rest of the population, especially in light of the regular ancient cultural pattern of family vengeance (see even later in Israel, Num 35:9–15). He would have obtained his wife from among them as well (sibling marriage was not a problem in this early time, but later it was prohibited, Leviticus 18). God's marking Cain with a sign would suggest the same thing, along with his curse, "anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over" (Gen 4:15). Swamidass suggests that the best answer is to posit people outside the garden as the source for both Cain's wife and his fear of those who might exercise vengeance against him.

Another supposed "hint" at earlier humans outside the garden is the reference to the Nephilim in Gen 6:4, "The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went to the daughters of humans and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown" (NIV). The relationship between v. 4 and the previous account of the sons of God and daughters of humans (vv. 1–3) is a subject of debate among scholars. The whole passage has fascinated and confused readers and writers since ancient days. Some traditions and scholars take the Nephilim to be the offspring of this union. 1 Enoch 6–12 develops a full-fledged demonology from the Genesis 6 story, and includes the birth of four hundred foot tall giants from the union.⁹ This is purely legendary, of

course. 2 Peter 2:4–6 and Jude 6–7 support the understanding that the Gen 6:1–2 incident involves angels somehow taking up union with human women, but they do not connect this to the Nephilim in any way.

Some scholars, therefore, take the Nephilim to be a separate population, not the offspring of the union in Gen 6:1–2.¹⁰ They constituted another factor in the pre-flood world that promoted extreme violence, which, in turn, motivated God to bring the flood upon the earth (Gen 6:5–17). In my view, the Hebrew grammar of v. 4 supports this reading. It suggests that the Nephilim were already there when the incident of vv. 1–2 took place: "The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men..." (v. 4a). If this is correct, the question for us here is who were they? Were they descendants of people who lived outside the garden before Adam and Eve?

Numbers 13:33 makes reference to "Nephilim" in the negative report of the spies that spied out the land: "We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them" (NIV). Who were these later "Nephilim" that the spies saw in the Promised Land? According to the biblical storyline, the flood would have eliminated all the Nephilim referred to in Genesis 6:4. This makes me cautious about seeing the pre-flood Nephilim as descendants of early humans outside the garden before the creation of Adam and Eve. Some have concluded that "...the label is not ethnic," suggesting, "...they are heroic figures perhaps of the sort exemplified by Gilgamesh." The Gilgamesh epic describes him as an ancient king of Uruk: "two-thirds of him god but a third of him is human....He goes [about] in the sheepfold of Uruk, lording it like a wild bull, [head] held high. He has not any equal" (Gilgamesh Tablet I column i lines 48, 63–65).¹¹

In both Gen 6:4 and Num 13:33 the LXX renders the term as *hoi gigantes* "the giants." Numbers 13:33 adds, "the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim" (lit. 'the sons of Anak are from the Nephilim'; cf. Num 13:22, 28; Deut 1:28; 2:10, 11, 21; 9:1–3 they were "strong and tall"; Josh 11:21–22; 14:12, 15; 15:14; 21:11; Judg 1:20). Ezekiel 32:17–27 may support this interpretation. The passage is describing the fate of fallen Egyptian warriors. The Hebrew verb *nāfal* "to fall" appears numerous times in Ezekiel 32:20–27 (vv. 20, 22, 23, 24, 27), referring to fallen warriors. According to v. 27, for example, "But they do not lie with the fallen warriors of old, who went down to the realm of the dead with their weapons of war—their swords placed under their heads and their shields resting on their bones..." (NIV). The word "fallen" is Hebrew *nōf' lîm*, using the same

7. See the full historical review of this discussion and the debates that developed around it in David N. Livingston, *Adam's Ancestors: Race, Religion and the Politics of Human Origins* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

8. See, e.g., U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part I, From Adam to Noah, Genesis I–VI 8*, transl. by Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1961), 229 and Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 109.

9. James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983–85), 1.6–12. See also Sirach 16:7 in the Apocrypha and the Qumran sectarian scrolls Damascus Document 2:14–3:13 and 4Q Ages of Creation. See also Cassuto, *Commentary on Genesis I–VI 8*, 298–300 and Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*, transl. by John J. Scullion S.J. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 378–83 with connections to ancient traditions about giants, such as the semi-divine Titans in Greek mythology.

10. See, e.g., the full and careful discussion in Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, NAC 1A (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 335–39, and Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis 1–17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 269–71.

11. Cited from A. R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition, and Cuneiform Texts*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 540–43.

consonants as Nephilim (*nēfilīm*), but with different vowels. As is well known, the Hebrew Bible originally wrote only consonants, except in places where a few consonants could sometimes indicate certain vowels. One can imagine how easy it would be to identify the one with the other, especially since both Gen 6:4 and Ezek32:27 also use the same word for “warriors, heroes.”¹² This makes me cautious about seeing the Nephilim as descendants of earlier people outside the garden.

Some good evangelical scholars, however, have allowed for this possibility of earlier hominins outside the garden, whether or not they would associate them with the wife of Cain and his potential enemies or Nephilim.¹³ I am willing to reconsider all this in the future, but, as of now, it seems to me the term Nephilim refers to exceptionally big and strong warrior peoples that became famous in the ancient days, and the traditional explanation for Cain’s wife and his enemies is more likely. The Nephilim arose from time to time, like Goliath in 1 Samuel 7:4–17. I am also willing to patiently wait and see if other options arise from the science that keeps changing, although my evolutionary creationist friends tell me that this part of the science will not change. That is, according to them, there must have been a pool of ten thousand or so people at the headwaters of our genetic makeup.

Biblical scholars who are early adopters of a scientific consensus can find themselves “hanging in thin air,” so to speak, as Swamidass’s book shows, if he is correct. In the meantime, his discussion has influenced me to take more careful note of the fact that Genesis 1 presents humans as “pastoralists,” so to speak, occupied with animals. The account of the creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2, on the other hand, pictures them as agriculturalists, cultivating the ground and caring for the orchard in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:15–17; cf. also v. 5b). According to Genesis 1:11–13, God designed the earth itself to bring forth plant life with no help from people, and the plants come back into view at the end of the chapter as the nurturing environment from which man and animal readily get their food (vv. 29–30).

I wonder if this might suggest that we should see the creation of humanity in Genesis 1 more broadly, and Genesis 2 as a sequential account of the later special creation of the model man and woman, Adam and Eve, something similar to what Joshua Swamidass suggests (pp. 173–83). On the other hand, could it be that all we should see here is the distinction between Genesis 1 as forming and filling the cosmos as a whole, and Genesis 2 as a further explanation of the development of human life on the earth?

As for myself, I suspect that the whole discussion will keep coming back around again, and then again, as scientists do better science leading in good conscience to better conclusions and implications. Similarly, as scholars and readers of the Bible we need to remain open to reading the Bible better too, with an open mind, not ignoring useful information that might further our understanding of its

immense and eternal treasures. We need humility on all sides of this discussion: scientific, biblical, theological, and philosophical. The Copernican Revolution should be a good lesson to us. In that day, scientists and biblical theological scholars alike were convinced that the earth was the center of the universe and the sun revolved around the earth.¹⁴ They were wrong. This turned into a macro-revolution, with the whole universe in view. Due to the recent findings in genetic science, perhaps we are now working our way through a micro-revolution, focusing on the world of the microscope rather than the telescope.

The Observable World

Joshua Swamidass has written an important and helpful book in more than one way. First, as noted above, he pushes back from a scientific point of view against genetic scientific overreach in its attempt to smother the biblical teaching about the historical Adam and Eve. I am not convinced of his whole argument, especially since his particular theory requires a relatively large population of humans on the earth before the creation of Adam and Eve. See the discussion above. It must be noted, however, that his argument does not require that the Bible recognize the existence of these earlier hominins outside the garden. They are not the subject of what the Bible is really talking about anyway.

This brings us to the second point of special interest in the argument that Swamidass makes in his book. He points out that the Bible is talking about genealogical descent from Adam and Eve, not genetics. These are two very different things. For example, it does not take very many generations before our earlier ancestors become “genetic ghosts,” showing no scientifically discernible connection back to them.¹⁵ This is not the case the genealogical descent. The following discussion builds off this second major point in the argument that Swamidass makes, develops it more fully in application to the creation accounts, and engages from time to time with specific points that Swamidass makes in his discussion.

The Bible develops genealogical descent from Adam and Eve. This was an observable emphasis in the world of ancient Israel and they observed it regularly as the core of biblical history and historiography (see Genesis 4-5, 11, through the patriarchal narratives, 1 Chronicles 1-9, and on into the NT in Matthew 1 and Luke 3, noted above). If there are no people born, there is not history. They were very much focused on family and clan life, as is clear from the patriarchal narratives and forward through the history of Israel, and even into the NT.¹⁶

14. See the helpful discussion by Kirsten Birkett, “Science and Scripture,” in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 948-86.

15. See Swamidass, *The Genealogical Adam & Eve*, 50-54, 84-85, 88-89, 196-97.

16. See a substantial discussion of this matter in Richard E. Averbeck, “Factors in Reading the Patriarchal Narratives: Literary, Historical, and Theological Dimensions,” in *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts* (Essays in Honor of Eugene H. Merrill), ed. David M. Howard, r. and Michael A. Grisanti (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003), 115-137, and most recently, idem, “Reading the Torah in a Better Way: Unity and Diversity in Text, Genre, and Compositional History,” Matthias Armgardt; Benjamin Kilchör; Markus Zehnder (eds.), *Paradigm Change in Pentateuchal Research*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für Altorientalische und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte 22 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2019), 21-43.

12. See the related remarks in Cassuto, *Commentary on Genesis I-VI* 8, 298-301 and Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 378.

13. For example, Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967), 26-31 cautiously suggested this as a possibility. See C. John Collins, *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist? Who they Were and Why You Should Care* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 105-31 and other lit. cited there, for a clear summary and evaluation of the discussion among evangelicals. Collins is cautious, and careful to maintain a clear commitment to biblical priorities along the way.

The point is that when we impose genetic science on the biblical text we force an illegitimate mismatch between the Bible and the genetic science. The Bible simply is not talking about that, and God was not intending to deal with it when he inspired the writing of the Bible. Instead, he was concerned about what the ancient Israelites could readily observe day by day, with the naked eye. Family and clan descent and their life together was a core issue in their lives. God's revelation about his creation work (and also his redemptive work for that matter) is "observational." In my view, we need to apply this "observational" perspective more fully and pervasively to our reading of the creation texts.

Some have used the term "phenomenological" for this, but this can bring unintended philosophical associations into the discussion. Phenomenological philosophy, for example, stands opposed to metaphysics and epistemology. It also creates other kinds of conceptual entanglements that do not apply to God's observational revelation of his creation work. In Genesis 1-4 and other creation texts in the Bible, God is intending to communicate on an observational level to common people both ancient and modern. He is speaking in a simple way, while not being simplistic. God is revealing truth about what people can observe with the naked eye when they observe the realities of the natural world order and how things work between people in family, clan, and society. In approaching these observable realities he reveals what they tell us about him, the true God, in a way that can help us to live well in the world.

The point here is that if we try to work between the Bible and science without recognizing first of all and above all the common naked eye observational nature of God's revelation about creation, we will be seeing mismatches between the Bible and science that do not really exist. God created the world, but in his revelation about it he is talking about it on the level of what the common readers or hearers of the story, both ancient and modern, could readily observe. The limitations of this short paper will not allow a detailed development of this point, but it is not hard to see that this is the focus of the text as it stands.

For example, we can see from Genesis 1 and Psalm 104 that the creation is described as a three level (or three tiered) cosmos.¹⁷ There is what is above us, what is below us, and where we live in between what is above us and below. I will say more about this in the next section below in remarks on the ANE background. It is no surprise that the ANE traditions suggest the same three tiers. Think about it. This is a reality of how all people who have ever lived in the world even up to today have observed and experienced the natural world around us. Basically, the first set of three days in Genesis 1 establish the framework of this three tiered cosmos, and the second set of three days recounts God's filling of the three tiers.

Similarly, in Genesis 2 the forming of the man from the dust of the ground (Gen 2:7) corresponds to the observational reality that when we die our body decomposes into dust: "dust you are and to dust you will return" (Gen 3:19b). See also, for example, Psalm 103:14, God "knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust." The ancient Israelites reused their family tombs by pushing the left over

bones aside and laying the next corpse in the same place. They knew that the flesh decomposed into "dust."

Again, the relationship between the man and the woman is treated on a level that was readily observable. Men need a female companion, and God designed it so a man would be attracted to a woman and want to live his life with her as "one flesh." This is a good thing—part of God's design—and it is readily observable and experiential. Genesis 3 is also observational. As we go through life we ourselves experience our own corruption through deception, doubt, and illegitimate desire, and we violate God's design for us because of it—we sin. Thus, we feel shame and are afraid of being seen in our shame, so we scramble about trying to handle it in our own ways, thus multiplying our sin against God and those around us. We not only do this in our own lives, but we see it going on around us and experience the wreckage of it when the corruption of others does damage to us. No one escapes these realities in this world. It ravages everything. This was readily observable to them.¹⁸

Of course, much more could and should be said about all this, but the overall point is that, in his revelation to us, God engaged directly with these matters that we observe and experience in our lives. He explains and illustrates where it comes from and how it works in a way that we can understand and actually learn from. This is the kind of theology God was interested in when he inspired the account of his creation design its corruption. It is simple, but not simplistic. Moreover, Genesis 4 concludes with the only real answer ever given to the dilemma we all face in this world: "At that time people began to call on the name of the Lord" (Gen 4:26). This is the conclusion to the unit that runs from Genesis 2:4-4:26 and it opens up on the whole rest of the Bible as a regular emphasis through the entire canon (see, e.g., Gen 12:7-8; 26:5; 1 Kings 18:24; Psalms 55:16, 56:9, 80:18, 86:5, 99:6, and esp. 116:2, 4, 13, 17; and the link from Joel 2:32 to Acts 2:21 and from there forward to Rom 10:13 etc.).

The Ancient Near Eastern World of the Hebrew Bible

Given the readily observable focus in God's revelation of creation and its corruption to all people ancient and modern, it is also true that God gave his revelation of it in the first instance to the ancient Israelites in their ANE world context. Swamidass recognizes this at points in his discussion, but, understandably, does not engage with it to any significant degree. The reality of this ANE background does not obscure the basic observational realities to readers of any other age or culture, but it does put them in a certain kind of way from within and in relation to an ANE cultural backdrop. This is the background for the readily apparent observational reality that stands revealed in the foreground. Unfortunately, some scholars become so fascinated with the ANE background of the text that they essentially move the background to the foreground, and either lose track of, or minimize, the significance of the foreground by their attraction to the background. They lose focus and end up running rough shod over what God is basically going for in his revelation.

Everyone who reads the creation accounts in the Bible today with any understanding, knows that these are very ancient stories written in a

17. See the details in Richard E. Averbeck, "A Literary Day, Inter-Textual, and Contextual Reading of Genesis 1 and 2," in *Reading Genesis 1-2: An Evangelical Conversation*, ed. Daryl Charles (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013), 12-18.

18. See the full discussion in Richard E. Averbeck, "Creation and Corruption, Redemption and Wisdom: A Biblical Theology Foundation for Counseling Psychology," in *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 25:2 (2006): 111-126.

different cultural world and in a different part of the world (unless they live in the Middle East today). This is a fact that no one should deny or overlook. It is not surprising that he revealed it in ways that would be more readily recognizable and especially powerful and understandable to the first readers or hearers of the text, the ancient Israelites. The ancient Israelites were ANE people. This does not mean, however, that what we have in the Genesis 1 is basically ANE cosmology. It has some of the same basic human observational features (e.g., the three level cosmos, see above and more on this below), but does not just go along with it with only adjustments to the theology. There is more to it than that.

There has been much written on the ANE cultural background of Genesis 1-11. A few examples will have to suffice for our purposes here. In the previous section, we noted the three tiered cosmos in Genesis 1 and the correspondence to this also in Psalm 104, and that this was a common part of the ANE world. We know that Akkadian language was the *lingua franca* of the whole ANE from about 2000 BC down into the first millennium BC. Much of its literature and culture, therefore, spread far and wide through the scribal schools. This went a long way toward developing common cultural foundations across the ANE world, some of which we can reconstruct from the Akkadian “cuneiform” (i.e., from Latin, referring to “wedged shaped” writing on clay) texts recovered through archaeological excavations.

What God is doing in Genesis 1 is revealing the origin and nature of the observable three level cosmos, and how we fit into it. In the ancient Mesopotamian context, for example, the three levels are managed by three gods: An (= “heaven”), the god of the heavens above, Enlil (= “Lord Wind”), the god of the atmosphere, and Enki (= “the lord of the earth”), the god of the ground and underground waters (= Ea in Akkadian).¹⁹ The reality God reveals in Genesis 1 is that there are no such gods in charge of these three levels, but they are simply a result of his creative work, and under his control alone.

The Mesopotamian texts sometimes multiply these levels so that there are two levels of heaven, atmosphere, and ground (including both the earth and the underworld, for example), thus yielding six levels. There are also other variations. Genesis 1 does not multiply the levels in the same way the Akkadian texts do, but gives two cycles of revelation about them: one forming (days 1-3) and one filling (days 4-6). This yields six days of creation followed by the seventh day, on which God stopped creating because all was very good and complete (Gen 1:31-2:3). The six/seven pattern is a common literary pattern in biblical and ANE literature of all kinds and, in this case, serves as a good way to shape the story to reinforce the observance of the weekly Sabbath in Israel (Exod 20:8-11). The six days are six snapshots of the three level observable cosmos. God is saying, “Do you see this? I made it!”—six times. This and other features of the chapter suggest that the account has been schematized. The story has been given this literary shape for the effective telling of it in ancient Israel.

In the Baal myth from Ugarit (ca. 1300 BC) Baal, the god of fertility and prosperity, has three daughters: Pidray, daughter of light (‘ar = Heb. ‘ôr ‘light’); Tāllay (= Heb. ṭal ‘dew’), daughter of rains (rbb =

Heb. *rēbībīm* ‘rain showers’); and Arṣay (‘Earthy’ = Heb. ‘ereṣ ‘earth’), daughter of the wide world(?). The rendering of the last epithet is in dispute, but there is no question of the meaning of her name. The myth speculates analogically on the larger ecological framework of the world, which is based on the three elements and their spheres; namely, light, rain, and earth or ground, respectively. All three are necessary for vegetation, animals, and people. For Baal (and therefore the natural world) to function effectively, all three features of the ecological framework to which the daughters are analogous must work together in concert.

The first set of three days in Genesis 1 corresponds to the names of Baal’s three daughters who, in turn, correspond to the three fundamental structures or elements of the ecological system: light, sky/rain, earth. The second set of three days (days 4 through 6) elaborate on the first three days, taking the creation story beyond the basic underlying framework of the natural world to that which occupies it. The point is that the Genesis 1 six day sequence is intentionally built off this widely distributed ANE three level structure of the cosmos to begin with. Of course, many have noticed the parallels between the two sets of three days.

The point is that there is a good deal of ANE contextual background for six day creation pattern in Genesis 1. This adds useful nuance to the reading of the text, but does not in any way undermine the textual clarity about the fact that, observationally, we live in a three tier cosmos. This is clear for all people of all ages and cultures to observe. It speaks to how we are situated within the cosmos that God created, and provides the framework within which he reveals who we are, how we got here, and why he created us. We are landed creatures along with the land animals. We breathe the atmospheric air, but we stand on the ground under our feet and depend on the light from the heavens above.

This brings us to the creation of humanity on the sixth day, a topic into which Swamidass wades in an important part of his book (pp. 97-150, esp. pp. 105-117). He includes a discussion on the “the error of polygenesis” (pp. 118-132), and all that it has brought with it in terms of racism, eugenics, and such. As he labors to show, the Bible teaches monogenesis from one human couple (p. 123), and modern science teaches monogenesis from the point of view that we are all of the same kind, biologically (p. 127). As argued above, this brings Swamidass face to face in the next chapter with the question of people outside the garden before the creation of Adam and Eve, which is an unresolved pressure point in the discussion from a biblical point of view.

Genesis 1 focuses our attention on God creating humanity in his own image and likeness. This has been the subject of much debate and confusion in biblical and theological discussions, but, in my view, the text is actually quite clear on what it is intended to say, again, in way that is observable to all people of all times:

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image (*ṣelem*) as (or, ‘according to’) our likeness (*dēmūt*), that they may rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, all the (wild animals of the) earth, and all the crawling animals that crawl on the earth.”

²⁷ So God created humankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

19. See, e.g., the Babylonian Creation Epic in W. W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr., eds., *The Context of Scripture*, vol. 1 (abbrev. COS; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 399 tablet iv line 46. (COS I, p. 399 Tablet IV line 146) and multiple other references in this and other texts. For a full discussion of all these texts see Wayne Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1998).

²⁸ And God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living creatures that creep on the ground.”

From a syntactical and rhetorical point of view vv. 26-28 divide naturally into two cycles. First, v. 26 is the initial decree of the creation of humanity in God’s image and likeness.²⁰ Second, vv. 27-28 report the action God took to fulfill the initial proclamation in v. 26. First comes the poetic description of the creative act itself in v. 27, with one especially important further elaboration: “male and female he created them” (v. 27c; note the rendering above with v. 27 indented as poetry). This leads immediately to God’s pronouncement of blessing on male and female to “be fruitful and multiply...” in v. 28, which makes sense in light of the fact that it takes both male and female to comply with this mandate.

Multiple ANE texts, images, and monuments can help us stay focused on the clear meaning in Genesis 1:26-28, but one particular inscription stands out among them all. It is the bilingual (Aramaic and Akkadian) ninth century BC Tell Fekheriye inscription from northern Mesopotamia/Upper Syria. The reason this text is so important is that the Aramaic version uses the same two words for image and likeness as Genesis 1:26-27, and it uses them interchangeably to refer to the “statue” of the king on which the inscription is inscribed:

(1) The image (*dmwt*) of Hadad-yith`i which he has set up before Hadad of Sikan,... (12) The statue (*šlm*) of Hadad-yith`i, king of Guzan and of Sikan and of Azran, for exalting and continuing his throne,...(15-16) this image (*dmwt*) he made better than before. In the presence of Hadad who dwells in Sikan, the lord of Habur, he has set up his statue (*šlmh*)....²¹

The statue itself functioned to represent the king before his god in the place where the statue was set up. The implications are obvious. True, we are not just an inanimate statue. The biblical text is using figurative language. Nevertheless, the evidence is clear: we are the “statue” of a king too, the divine king. And we have been set up in the midst of God’s creation to represent him and his interests. The inscription offers us much more important information about this and other matters, but just the use of this terminology for “image” and “likeness” helps us to see what Gen 1:26-28 is already saying on its own.

We need to focus on the Hebrew lexicography. The expression “in our image” uses a common word in the OT for a physical statue. Combined with “as (or ‘according to’) our likeness,” the expression as a whole means that we are like a physical statue of God, standing here in his physical world to represent him physically in accordance with his own nature and design. No, we are not just a dead stone or

carved wood made into a statue. It is figurative. We are a living “statue” of God in the world, individually and corporately. This is what the *imago dei* is all about.

It is not that we look like God physically, but that we are physical beings who stand within the material creation as God’s stewards to manage it physically according to his nature, his likeness as it is found in us. We stand before God to serve as his authoritative representatives on this earth “in his image as his likeness.” We have been put in charge and made responsible for how things go here. This is stated clearly in the passage (v. 26): “Let us make humankind in our image as our likeness, **that they may rule** over the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky,...” Our understanding of our image and likeness needs to be seen in direct connection with our purpose, which is to rule over all the earth on God’s behalf (i.e., as God’s “image”) in a way that is somehow similar to the way God rules over all of everything (i.e., we do it as, or according to, God’s “likeness”). This understanding of v. 26 is confirmed by vv. 27-28.

The text clearly focuses on our vocation or function within the rest of creation at the beginning of the passage (v. 26b) and comes back around to it again at the end (v. 28b). The plural verb “that **they** may rule” in v. 26 indicates that “humanity” as a whole is intended here, not just one man. The grammatical syntax of the Hebrew clause indicates that this is a purpose clause, “**that** they may rule.” Verse 28 reiterates this same purpose for God making us male and female in v. 27. We need to multiply and occupy the earth so that we can fulfill our function of ruling over (i.e., managing) all the animals.

On the one hand, we are animals too; that is, we are “living beings,” animate creatures (see the same Hebrew expression *nephesh hayah* NIV “living creatures” or “living things” for sea, sky, and land animals in Gen 1:20-21, 24 as for the man as a “living being” in Gen 2:7). On the other hand, we are the only ones created in God’s image and likeness. There is no mention here of the special characteristics God gave us as humans to function in his image and according to his likeness. He clearly gave us plenty of them, but does not develop them here in these verses. As the image and likeness of God, we are a living statue of him, here to represent him, his authority, and his intentions for his creation. This is what the whole thing is about and it provides the anchor for the discussion of the *imago dei* in theology.

It is unfortunate that the theological discussion often loses its anchor, which sometimes leads to a hopeless confused theological discussion. I have witnessed times in discussions with highly intelligent theologians, philosophers, and biblical scholars combined, wherein the conclusion reached is that no one really knows what the expression means at all. This is precisely because the anchor has come loose in the discussion and the boat is floating out to sea. I have seen the same in print. No. We know exactly what it means *in nuce*.

If we want to go further than this, expounding on the *imago dei*, we have plenty of room to do so without cutting loose from the anchor. The text tells us a lot about the God who created us in his own image, according to his likeness, not only in Genesis 1, but through the whole Bible. Of course, we are not God and we are not divine, but he has given us plenty of likeness to him. For example, we have certain of his capacities. We are spiritual beings, we are rational beings who have purpose. We do not just exist and live by instincts. We are relational beings and have the ability to organize for common purposes.

20. In my view, the most likely explanation for the plural “us” and “our” here is that God is calling out this creative proclamation within his heavenly council (for other references to God’s heavenly council see, e.g., Psalm 89:6-7; Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6; Isaiah 6; 1 Kings 22:19-23). See, e.g., Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary*, with Cathi J. Fredricks (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 64-65.

21. Aramaic is a Semitic language closely related to Hebrew. “Image” *šlm* = Hebrew *šelem*; and “likeness” *dmwt* = Hebrew *dmut* (the vowels were left out in those early days). See Ali Abou-Assaf, Pierre Bordreuil, and Alan R. Millard, *Le Statue de Tell Fekheriye* (Paris: Editions Recherche sur les civilisations, 1982), p. 23 and plates XIII-XIV. The translation is from Alan Millard in *The Context of Scripture*, vol. II, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr. (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 153-154.

In addition to such capacities, he also created us originally with certain character qualities that correspond to his own. According to Col. 3:9-10, he addresses the Colossian believers as those who have “taken off your old self with its practices”¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.” The whole passage is about how they and we live, putting off the compromised character qualities of our corrupt nature and putting on the ones that conform to those of our creator. The problem, of course, is that the fall into sin in Genesis 3 compromised God’s character qualities in us. Moreover, without God’s character we corrupt our employment of the capacities he has put within us. Our image and likeness is all one package and we misuse all of it. We are called to something else, and that something else is what Gen 1:26-28 (along with 2:7-24) is talking about.

I am not sure how all this applies to monogenesis, but it is not just biological. We were all created with the same purpose. If there were people outside the garden before the creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2, I suppose they would have had the same purpose too, at least in the long run. God would have had his hand on this too, perhaps in a different kind of way. Swamidass may be right about this, but it is hard to know, at least from where I stand in the discussion. I wonder how he might articulate God’s purpose for them in accordance with God’s purpose for all of humanity according to Gen 1:26-28.

There is no space here to deal with all the other ANE texts that also speak meaningfully into the reading of the text. I can only summarize a few points here. First, ANE texts often refer to the making of humans from a combination of clay from the ground and some divine element. For example, according to Atrahasis, Nintu (= “lady who gives birth”) made people by mixing the flesh of a slaughtered god with purified clay, so “from the flesh of the god the spirit remained.”²² There are similarities and differences here with Gen 2:7, “Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (NIV).²³ It is not surprising to me that the Lord used similar motifs as found in the ANE, but also varied from them. Moreover, the fact of the matter is that, as noted above, our bodies do indeed decompose into dust, and this has always been readily observable to all people of all ages. Furthermore, the fact that people have a special relationship to the divine more than any other part of creation was also observed in both the Bible and the ANE.

Similarly, the Genesis 3 corruption account, the engagement of the cosmic battle between God and the forces of evil, and how it affects us, also finds analogical material in the ANE context.²⁴ Genesis 3:15b would have been a “proto-evangelion” even to the ancient Israelites.

They knew this was not just a snake story. The serpent, also known as Leviathan in the OT (see, e.g., Ps 74:13-17 and Isa 27:1), sparked a cosmic battle between the Lord and the progenitor of evil. It has close parallels with the Ugaritic Baal myth in which Baal, the good god, did battle with the evil serpent, Leviathan. This all provided backdrop for the ancient Israelites to recognize what the Lord was telling them in the account of the catastrophe in the garden.

The cosmic battle began in history and the Lord will end it in history when the seed of the woman crushes the head of the serpent. On one level, that has already happened at the cross, but there is more coming. The territory under dispute in this cosmic fray is us, those whom God created in his image and likeness. The serpent’s temptation was an attack upon God himself and all his good purposes in the world. This theme runs through the rest of the Bible and surfaces again in Revelation 12-20. Revelation 12 is actually a Midrash on the story in the Garden of Eden running through Mary to Jesus, leading to the culmination of the battle in the last days. The point I am making here is that this would have been clear even to the first readers or hearers of the text in ancient Israel, *in nuce*, in “seed” form. They knew there was a battle in heavenly places, as Paul later puts it in Ephesians 2, and that they needed to put on the needed armor (Ephesians 6). People die in battles, and this is one is heated and intense.

God does not flesh this all out in Genesis 3. In this, as in many other cases, less is more because it does not set ANE cultural limits on the application of the story to life. Nevertheless, he keeps coming back to it through the Bible and in history in ways that unpack what the Israelites would have already discerned from the way he told the story originally in their cultural context. Through the progress of revelation we see it in ever more detail and clarity, and its implications keep on coming. We see how he stays engaged in the battle on our behalf, how he has fought and won the battle in Christ, how he has given us the Holy Spirit to guide and protect us while we are in the midst of the battle here and now, all showing his overwhelming love for us and drawing us to the grace he has made available to us. We shows how us to live for him in the midst of it, and reach out to others who are in peril for their lives, eternally!

Conclusion

The main point I am laboring to make here is that if we read the creation story the way God intends us to read it, we will see that what he is teaching is directly related to what is observable in the natural and social world in which we live, whether we live today or any other time. God has kept it simple and to the point. We are the ones who have made it complicated. It is focused on what is observable to the naked eye and in the personal and relational experience of all people in all times. The ANE cultural contextual embedding of the text was a resource God used to communicate this and its implications to the ANE Israelites in a way that was powerful for them in the way that both compared and contrasted with ideas in their own world. Knowing some of this background today can help us to see further what God was saying to them. It does not hinder us from seeing what God is revealing to all people of all time in the way he told the story of his creation work. It engages on realities that are observable to all us.

We need to keep this in mind when we come back to the text for engagement with modern scientific discovery. Modern science has

22. See COS 1, 451.

23. For a more complete treatment of Gen 2:7 and 21-22 see Richard E. Averbeck, “Review Article of John Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve* (IVP 2015),” *Themelios* 40:2 (August, 2015): 228 and 236.

24. See the full discussion in Richard E Averbeck, “Ancient Near Eastern Mythography as it relates to Historiography in the Hebrew Bible: Genesis 3 and the Cosmic Battle,” in *The Future of Biblical Archaeology: Reassessing Methodologies and Assumptions*, ed. James K. Hoffmeier and Alan R. Millard (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 328-356, and idem, “The Three ‘Daughters’ of Baal and Transformations of Chaoskampf in the Early Chapters of Genesis,” in *Creation and Chaos: A Reconsideration of Hermann Gunkel’s Chaoskampf Hypothesis*, ed. JoAnn Scurlock and Richard Beal (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 237-56.

increased our powers of observation far beyond those of the naked eye. This is true on both the macro and the micro level and in other ways with the telescope, the microscope, and in other ways (e.g., chemical experimentation, etc.). We can see more of how the natural world works. God never intended to engage directly with this level of observation in the Bible. He gave us stories that carry the truth of what all people can engage with in regular daily life, and with it he intended (and still intends) to call us to fulfill his design for us and our world as his vice regents here. He does not “accommodate” to our misunderstandings and falsehoods.²⁵ He tells the truth about what is going on for us in the natural and social world. Moreover, when he employs creation passages throughout the Bible he uses the stories the way he told them with the same truth intent that he built into them from the start—all of it continually observable in our lives for those who have eyes to see, ears to hear, hands to touch, tongues to taste, and a will engaged. I have no doubt there is much more to the stories than he has chosen to reveal to us, but we are called to live by what he has revealed. I suspect that if God told us the whole truth, we would not “get it” anyway—none of us!

We need to take the creation stories and other related passages literally, with literary sensitivity and conventions in mind. The Israelites would have known about these things instinctively and immediately, just as we instinctively know the difference between reading a love letter as opposed to a philosophical treatise. It is important to read the creation narratives for what they intend to reveal and let them have their intended impact on our lives. They are powerful stories. They are an important part of the overall metanarrative of scripture that makes sense of all our personal narratives—the kind of sense that God wants us to live according to in ever more pervasive ways as we grow in our relationship with him through life. In fact, all us whether we know the Lord or not are still a part of God’s continuing story whether we know it or not and whether we like it or not. Those who walk with him have his revelation to help us live well as his adopted children here and now.

In the engagement between the Bible and modern science we have created whole cadres of problems by trying to make the text say more and different things than God intended to reveal. We do this in many

ways and on various levels. The genetics versus genealogical discussion that the first part of this paper reviews and evaluates is a good example of this. We should thank Joshua Swamidass for his help in seeing what is actually happening in this discussion. His scientific expertise is a gift to the church, even if we are not sure that we should accept every point in his book, and struggle with some of the tensions.

We cannot do without the creation stories as they are told in the Bible and must not compromise their ongoing significance. They carry God’s intent for creation through the whole Bible. This includes the story of the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, which has sustained application to our lives and our situation in the world. It culminates in what God has done and will do about all of this in Jesus Christ (Matthew 4, 19, Romans 5, 1 Corinthians 15, Revelation 12, etc.). The text in Genesis 2 puts the original man and woman in a locatable place in the world of the ANE, somewhere in the Mesopotamian valley. From there it continues with the genealogical descent of all humanity from Adam and Eve. Our story today is a continuation of theirs.

The biblical text gives us anchor points in our engagement with modern science even though it does not focus on a lot of the concerns that modern scientists have in their work. God has other primary concerns that modern science does not have the capacity to adjudicate in spite of how some scientists might try. We need to take the anchor points that the Bible gives us and live with them as we walk with God. They are solid and powerful, and our God “has our back” in all of this. He wants us to know this. He wants us to know this whether we are scientists, biblical theological scholars, philosophers, or common people who just read the Bible for daily life.

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25. There are good forms of “accommodation,” but here I am concerned with the Socinian form of the doctrine that argues for errors in the text because of accommodation by God and/or the human writers to the ignorance and superstition of the ancient readers. See the discussion in John D. Woodbridge, “Forward,” in *Do Historical Matters Matter for Faith: A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Post Modern Approaches to the Bible*, ed. James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2012), 13-18.

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