

Father Ronald Ketteler serves as Director of Ecumenism and of Continuing Education of Priests, Episcopal Liaison to the diocesan newspaper, the Messenger. He is also former Chair of the Humanities Division at Thomas More College. These columns appeared originally in the Messenger.



A Catholic Perspective on Creation and Evolution in the Bible Part 1

Modern biblical studies have created awareness among Catholics that the Bible need not be viewed as a source of scientific knowledge or of history in the modern sense of the terms. The truth of the Bible is a matter of "saving truth," not necessarily scientific truth. Thus, the appropriate question concerning the inerrancy of the Bible should be phrased: "What kind of 'truth' is it?" rather than asking, "Is it true?"

A brief survey of interpretations of the creation narratives taken from representative Catholic scripture scholars and theologians exemplifies current mainstream theological approaches in the Catholic tradition.

There are numerous passages in the Old and the New Testaments that reflect the theme of divine creation. The particular controversy over evolution and belief tends to originate with conflicting interpretations of the creation stories in Chapters 1 and 2 in the Book of Genesis.

For instance, the following passage quoted from the writings of Father Roland E. Murphy, O.Carm. (d. 2002), illustrates the contrast in opinions on the meaning of the creation narratives in the light of the doctrine of creation. Father Murphy observed that "Creationism, and there are many forms of it, does not have such a relaxed attitude toward the doctrine of creation as the Bible presents. Genesis gives us two imaginative presentations, but creationism in its drive for literal understanding cannot be satisfied until it has snapped a picture of divine activity it claims to have described in the text. Basically, one can sum up the case (even if more arguments can be mounted) in two statements: (1) There is in the Bible no single portrayal of the creative activity of God. In fact, there are presentations in other books of the Bible that differ from the Genesis accounts (e.g., Ps 89: 5-11). (2) It follows from this that it is incumbent on the reader to shed previous convictions, if necessary, and to allow oneself to be drawn into the level

of the text, as simple but as complex as it is." [*Responses to 101 Questions on the Biblical Torah* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996): 14-15.]

Again, in reference to the Genesis accounts of creation, Father Leslie L. Hoppe, O.F.M., briefly highlights the biblical vision of divine creation according to contemporary Catholic biblical theology: "But these are not the only ways that the ancient Israelites imagined creation as occurring. There are indications elsewhere in the Old Testament that they imagined the world coming into existence in a far different way than described in Genesis." Father Hoppe cites Psalms 74 and 89 and the Book of Job, cc. 40-41 as examples. [*Priests, Prophets and Sages: Catholic Perspectives on the Old Testament* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2006): 98.]

From a historical perspective, by the 1940s an evolution in Catholic biblical studies was noticeable. *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, the 1943 encyclical of Pope Pius XII on the study of scripture, marked a major moment which had cleared the way for Catholic theologians to pursue the historical-critical methods of biblical studies. A few years later in 1948, a letter from the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) ushered in a new direction for Catholic biblical studies compatible within the context of Catholic doctrinal understanding.

In that directive, the secretary of Pontifical Commission had forwarded a letter to the late Cardinal Suhard of Paris which addressed the exegesis of first eleven chapters of the Book of Genesis.

That document from the PBC set forth a distinction between the fundamental truths necessary for salvation that are conveyed in the biblical texts and the time-conditioned scientific and cultural expressions of those foundational beliefs. It stated: "They relate in simple and figurative language, adapted to the understanding of a less developed

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people, the fundamental truths presupposed for the economy of salvation, as well as the popular description of the origin of the human race and of the chosen people.”

During the pioneering phase of the new biblical scholarship, fresh vistas of the religious and spiritual meaning of the Bible were opened by the new discoveries of the historical-critical methods of interpretation, of literary genres, and by a return to original languages and documents.

The late Father Bruce Vawter, C.M. (d. 1986) published *A Path Through Genesis* in 1954, a study of the Book of Genesis that made contemporary biblical scholarship available for a general educated readership.

After discussing the 1948 letter issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, Father Vawter explained those “fundamental truths of faith” on the origin of humankind, a foundation of Jewish and Christian revelations. He wrote: “There is one God, Creator of the universe by an act of his will, who created man in His image and likeness, raised him to a level above his created state and endowed him with gifts which he forfeited through sin, who promised man an eventual redemption from this sin.”

Father Vawter concluded: “These and other truths are taught in the poetic imagery of Genesis’ first three chapters, great songs of faith fashioned by the religious teachers of Israel.”

More than a decade later, Father Eugene H. Maly (d. 1980) contributed the article on the Book of Genesis in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1968). Father Maly, a noted biblical scholar on the faculty of Mt. St. Mary’s Seminary in Cincinnati, pointed out that “[n]o scholar today would hold that Gn [Genesis] presents history in the modern sense of that term. The sacred authors’ conception of history as a linear movement of events determined by divine interventions and tending to a divinely conceived goal militates against such a presentation.” In a word, the sacred authors “were interested in the ‘facts’ of history only inasmuch as they illustrated the divine plan.”

The “primitive history” that marks the first eleven chapters of Genesis communicates “truths based on historical facts.” Father Maly synthesized such core truths: “There was a creation by God in the beginning of time, a special divine intervention in the creation of man, the existence of the first man in a condition of friendship with God, a fall from that condition, an increasing separation between man and God brought about by man’s sins and a succession of natural catastrophes by

which man suffered the consequences of his sins.”

In accord with modern biblical theology, Father Maly noted that although these truths “are religious explanations that in most cases transcend the competence of modern science, they are at the same time historical in that they explain historical events.”

The developments within contemporary biblical scholarship were validated at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) with the promulgation of *Dei Verbum* (*the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 1965). In a seminal passage *Dei Verbum* states: “Seeing that, in Sacred Scripture, God speaks through men in human fashion, it follows that the interpreter of sacred Scriptures, if he is to ascertain what God has wished to communicate to us, should carefully search out the meaning which the sacred writers really had in mind, that meaning which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of their words.” [DV n.12] *Dei Verbum* then continues to unpack the meaning of Section 12 by explicating the principles grounding the interpretation of Scripture in the light of the various literary genres found in the Bible.

Consequently, the consensus that has been reached in Catholic biblical theology maintains that the creation stories in the Bible neither convey scientific information nor address the scientific question of evolution.

Today, without doubt, the first eleven chapters of Genesis are commonly viewed as “primeval history,” an introduction to the pivotal moments of salvation history—the Exodus and the Covenant. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, “Thus, the revelation of creation is inseparable from the revelation and forging of the covenant of the one God and his People. Creation is viewed as the first step toward this covenant, the first and universal witness to God’s all-powerful love.” (CCC n. 288)

In regard to biblical exegesis of the creation accounts in Genesis, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* draws up a succinct summary of those fundamental truths of salvation. The Catechism states that the first three chapters of Genesis express “the truths of creation --- its origin and its end in God, its order and goodness, the vocation of man, and finally the drama of sin and the hope of salvation.” (CCC n. 289)

In an address to members of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on October 3, 1981, Pope John Paul II had affirmed the distinctive nature of the “saving truth” of Scripture. Insofar as the origin of the universe is concerned, that address entitled “The Path of Scientific Discovery” stressed the

difference between religious truth and science in the Bible. The late Holy Father observed: “The Bible speaks to us of the origin of the universe and its makeup, not to provide us with a scientific treatise, but in order to state the correct relationships of man with God and with the universe.”

That 1981 address highlighted the substance of the theology of creation in the creation narratives in these words: “Sacred scripture wishes to simply to declare that the world was created by God, and in order to teach this truth it expresses itself in the terms of the cosmology in use at the time of the writer.”

After affirming that the Bible does not provide a scientific treatise on the origin of the universe, Pope John Paul II’s concluding comment was poignant: “Any other teaching about the origin and makeup of the universe is alien to the intentions of the Bible, which does not wish to teach us how heaven was made but how one goes to heaven.”

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