
Literal or Literary?

A review article of

In the Beginning by Henri Blocher

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This is a most valuable and important book. It is a scholarly and spiritual treatment of Genesis 1—3. Full of able discussion both of general and detailed matters which are bound up with a study of these chapters, this book is quite simply a **must** for all serious students of the Bible. IVP is to be congratulated for making the book available and Dr. David Preston for his very readable translation of the French original. Most of all, Professor Blocher has placed the evangelical world in great debt by this study.

Here the reader will find a thorough exegetical and theological study of these chapters. By omitting those sections printed in smaller type and also the footnotes, one can avoid much technical discussion without the flow of the remainder being impaired. To do this, however, would be to deprive oneself of a volume of information. These pieces include references to other scholarly views and writings, discussions of general matters such as the proper place of the sciences in the interpretation of the Bible and particular subjects such as the interpretations of the image of God, the location of the garden of Eden, the meaning of “waste and void” and “good and evil”. The book is an education. The appendix entitled “Scientific hypotheses and the beginning of Genesis” is most useful. There is almost certainly a misprint at the top of page 69 where “test” should read “text”.

The bulk of the book is given over to a study of the content of Genesis 1—3. Dr. Preston tells us that Blocher’s aim was “to establish the original meaning” of the text (p.7). This is presented in seven chapters successively entitled “Being, order and life”; “The image of God”; “Man and woman”; “The covenant in Eden”; “The breaking of the covenant”; “The wages of sin” and “The aftermath and the promise”. This material is to be read either with the content of Genesis 1—3 in our minds or with the passage open before us. In this way, more benefit will be derived from the rich content of these chapters. They are full of penetrating insights, memorizably expressed.

In the reviewer’s judgment, of particular help were the discussions of the significances of order, the image of God, the relation between male and female, the two trees, the nature of sin, its connection with death and its consequences for man and woman, in themselves, with regard to each other, but particularly before God. There are also illuminating comments on liberty, fear, shame, nakedness and guilt. There is so much of value in this book that it is very cheap at this price.

This review, however, will pass over the abundance of exegetical and theological wisdom in this book to consider in detail Blocher's view of the form of language represented by these chapters. It is the hermeneutical crux of his whole approach and it raises inevitable questions for those who regard the literalness of every detail of the text as being necessarily bound up with an orthodox doctrine of Scripture.

The fact of the matter is that Blocher does not adopt these views either because he has a heretical or defective view of the nature and status of Holy Scripture or because he capitulates to unbiblical theological, philosophical or scientific thought in his exegesis. He comes to these conclusions as a result of a strenuous attempt to treat Holy Scripture as it requires, both because of its divine inspired-ness, but also its undoubted human-ness.

There is, therefore, to this reviewer, no difference between Blocher and E.J. Young (with whose writings on Genesis 1 and 3¹ this work will doubtless be compared and to whom Blocher refers more than to any other author) in their views on the nature and status of Holy Scripture and of Genesis 1—3 in particular. Both believe Moses to be its author, but more importantly, they agree that God is its author in the sense that He breathed it out and hence it has His authority. The disagreement between them is not about inspiration, but about interpretation.

To narrow down the area of difference as has just been done does not mean ~~that the matter at issue between Young and Blocher is of no importance~~. All it amounts to is a recognition of the situation, together with a plea that the difference should not be widened to become one which on the one hand supports and on the other hand opposes an orthodox view of the Bible. Having said that, the difference does need to be gauged in its true dimensions, both for the sake of understanding Scripture and any consequences which it may have for the doctrine of Scripture.

Expressed in general terms, the difference between Young and Blocher concerns the nature of Genesis 1—3 as **literature**, which it is, and which to both means the form in which the revelation of God is conveyed. Both reject the categories (genres) of myth and poetry as suitable descriptions of its literary form. Young regards it as fundamentally prose, but with certain symbolic and figurative elements. Blocher regards the genre of prose as being inadequate for it. He sees it as being more than prose — its genre is "composite", "akin to the hymn", whether "a strophic hymn in prose or a hymn which is a unique blend of prose and poetry" (p.32).

In spite of this difference (which is not as minimal as might appear) neither Young nor Blocher would want the hermeneutical (or literary) question concerning Genesis 1—3 to be framed as follows — "It is figurative or factual?" This is because **both** would say that what is factual is capable of being figuratively expressed. Though Blocher treats Genesis 1—3 in a literary and not in a literal manner, he writes: "The use of figurative language by no means determines the main question, that of the connection of the narrative with events that are located and dated from the beginning. The acknowledgment

of symbolic elements hardly weighs at all in favour of a symbolic interpretation of the whole. Conversely, those who favour the literal historicity of the content have no reason to demand the same literalness of the language” (p.37).

It will have been perceived that we have entered into a discussion of the hermeneutics of Genesis 1—3. In defence of, or rather by way of justification for this are the twin considerations that exegesis apart from hermeneutics is impossible and that hermeneutics affects, not to say at times governs, exegesis. Nowhere is this more important with regard to a section of Scripture than with Genesis 1—3. One’s view of the type of literature with which one is dealing is bound to influence to **some degree at least** what one will teach from it. While there is substantial agreement between Young and Blocher on major doctrines found in Genesis 1—3, they do not agree on other things. Taking the literary view, Blocher regards the days, the trees, the rib, the snake as being non-literal. Taking the literal view (and this is not the same as literalistic), Young sees them as being actual. The **validity** of one’s general view, therefore, depends on supporting evidence in the text and in the rest of Scripture — the analogy of faith. Both Young and Blocher claim such support for their views. As it is Blocher’s book which is under consideration, it is his position and its substantiation which we present.

In Chapter 2 which Blocher entitles “The week of Creation”, he presents and examines four approaches by way of formulating a general reply to the question “How are we to understand Genesis when it enumerates the days of the divine handiwork?” He sets aside the views that the days were days of revelation to the author or days of reconstruction after chaos. He rejects the gap theory as decisively as Young does. He also sets aside the view that the days were geological eras. For him the choice is between “the literal” and “the literary” interpretations. Of the former he says “one must be sure that the text **demands**” it. Of the latter he says “whether or not one opts for a literal interpretation depends finally on possible indications of non-literal language” (p.49). As he favours the literary view, the question which arises is “what are these indications?” The indications in the text which Blocher presents as favouring the literary view come in the category of philology and concern the related matters of Language and Structure. Both come to a focus with regard to the Days of Genesis 1.

The main question to be faced in connection with Language concerns the presence of figures of speech or tropes. All will know that such exist in the Bible and that it is important to recognise them in order to treat them properly. Blocher does not see these as being merely individual expressions scattered here and there and being obviously what they are. In addition, he sees an intimate connection between figurative language and literary genre so that they become expressions for one and the same thing. It, therefore, becomes possible to regard a unit as large as Genesis 1—3 as “figurative” (remember that this does not mean “non-factual”).

He proposes two rules for discovering whether language is figurative or not. These are presented by him without any actual reference to Scripture or support in Scripture, but they are declared to be relevant to it as to other books

“because of its humanity” (p.19). In other words, canons of general literary appreciation are applied to Scripture. They may be relevant, or even at first sight unexceptionable, but their suitability or effect must be studied.

The first of these rules is “the more an author works at the form, the more possible it is that he is stepping away from the zero point”. By “zero point” is meant the ordinary meaning of plain prose. It would seem to follow from this that evidence of literary craftsmanship and plain prose as a literary category are incompatible. Given the former, one must not think of words having their plain meaning. Are there not bound to be consequences of this position for the long-term maintenance and proper interpretation of Holy Scripture? Are ideas about the study of language becoming too influential at this point? Are they even improper to the particular kind of literature which the Word of God is?

The second is “the more a trope or genre is commonplace or stereotyped in the author’s historical setting, the easier it is for him to leave the ordinary mode of expression (i.e. the zero point)”. Blocher expands this by saying that an author can depart from the zero point **without appearing to do so in the text** (emphasis mine) if he is confident that his readers will understand his language in the same way as that in which he is using it. If he were to decide to innovate then he could not do so without leaving some signposts in the text so that his readers might be able to follow him.

This rule depends for its strength on the element of contemporaneity, i.e. it applies only to an author and his first readership or at least sharers of his universe of discourse. Given this factor, does not a question arise which touches on the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture, i.e. its general intelligibility to believers in all ages and cultures? Is there not in this position the inherent possibility that an author did not indicate in his writing something essential for its understanding because he knew his contemporaries would not need it? What then of twentieth century Western believers who would need it and need it desperately in order to keep them on the right track? Such an unclosed possibility reflects adversely on the inspired-ness, not to mention the inspirer, of Scripture. Leave may therefore be taken at least to wonder whether these rules are all that helpful or even fitting when applied to **Scripture** for all their usefulness with regard to other literature because Scripture is not just human, but also divine.

It is Blocher’s contention that this “stylistic variation”, i.e. moving away from the zero point, can be fairly easily deduced. In this, “knowledge of the historical situation and the cultural setting play a decisive part” (p.19). This means that a biblical text must be located in its extra-biblical context to identify those features in the former which are also found in the latter. While this is an important task, it is also a difficult one from which as Blocher admits “one rarely obtains formal proof”. However, even when there is coincidence of material, e.g. the six days plus one pattern which is found in ancient Near Eastern literature (p.53), one has to face the problem of relative dating to see who borrowed from whom and also whether the terms mean the same in the various texts or inscriptions. In addition, the mention of culture immerses us in

a rapidly expanding area of contemporary theological study in which there is real danger of what is not cultural being regarded as such and dismissed as having no real bearing on our situation.

With regard to structural analysis of Genesis 1—3, Blocher points to the existence of two tablets (1:1-2:3 and 2:4-3:24), the seven day pattern of the first and the seven paragraphed format of the second. Narrowing down his focus, he refers to “a careful construction which uses symbolic numbers: 10, 3 and 7”, i.e. the numbers of times in which various expressions and words are used, e.g. “and God said”, “Let there be”, “and it was so”, “and God saw that it was good”. Even the number of words in a verse are counted or in each half of the first tablet. On this basis, he writes: “Beyond any doubt here we have no ordinary history such as might be written in response to a simple request to be told what happened” (p.33).

As has been mentioned, what brings the literary-literal debate to a focus is the nature of the days of Genesis 1. Blocher’s view of the whole of Genesis 1 disposes him to consider these as “an artistic arrangement”, logically and not chronologically ordered. While he grants the possibility of there being a broad coincidence between the data of Genesis 1 and the facts of cosmogony, he regards this as immaterial to Moses whose intention was to present certain theological truths — and therefore to be immaterial to us. He finds support for this in the text in terms of the Framework hypothesis which posits a relation between Days 1 and 4, 2 and 5, 3 and 6 and their respective works. This relation Blocher describes as “spaces demarcated by divine acts of separation”, i.e. Days 1, 2 and 3 and “their corresponding peopling”, i.e. Days 4, 5 and 6. The first three days amount to a structuring of the TÓHŪ, i.e. the formless and the second three to a filling of the BÓHŪ, i.e. the void referred to in verse 2 — an interesting suggestion.

Leaving aside a detailed discussion of the ease or otherwise with which the works of these days can be correlated (cf. footnote 41 on page 51 and Young’s critique and its source referred to there), the fact of an exceeding skilful arrangement does not preclude all possibility that the Genesis 1 presentation is constructed on a chronological base. Blocher recognises this and asks:

“But could this extremely careful construction of the narrative not coincide with the chronological reality of the divine work, as certain literalists attempt to plead?” (p.53)

He responds with the comment:

“You can always **imagine** anything” (emphasis original).

Is this really fair? Is it only imagination? Blocher regards the mode of inspiration used in the production of Genesis 1—3 as that which lay behind Wisdom literature. This amounts to a process of active but Spirit-controlled reflection on the works of God by Moses. Given such ability on the part of Moses (Deut. 34:9; Acts 7:22), is it impossible or only imagination that such a skilful literary product should be composed? What of the acrostic arrangement used in the composition of Lamentations 1—4, especially chapter 3, together with Psalm 119? And these are poetry not prose!

There is one final area to consider. It is the use made of Genesis 1—3 elsewhere in the Bible. Blocher is too committed to the integral unity of Scripture to overlook this. It is one of the strengths of this book that whenever Blocher regards the New Testament as speaking definitively on a matter which falls within the Genesis 1—3 corpus that settles the exegesis of the Genesis passage for him, e.g. his treatment of man and woman on page 104.

He faces up, therefore, to Ex. 20:11, Matt. 19:4 and II Peter 3:5 in the course of dealing with the literal view. He claims that Matt. 19:4 and II Peter 3:5 are beside the point because they do not refer “to the days and the week whose meaning we are trying to determine” (p.47). While this has to be admitted, two things need to be borne in mind. The first is that the references harmonise with the factual content of the Genesis narrative which though not questioned by Blocher is also supportive more naturally of the chronological view. The second is that the Petrine refers to the state of things at the end of Day 3 as a result of the works of Days 2 and 3 specifically. That is also supportive of a chronological view.

Exodus 20:11 is a text which cannot be regarded as figurative language because it is part of the Decalogue. This Blocher asserts, but, in spite of the *prima facie* sense (and force) of the verse, he raises the question “Does Exodus inevitably demand the literal reading?” (p.47). Because he thinks the verse “makes no commentary on Genesis and does not ask questions about its interpretation”, he concludes “it sends us back to the first ‘tablet’ ... and leaves us to face the task of interpreting”. One may wonder whether Exodus 20:11 could have endorsed the chronological nature of Genesis 1:1-2:3 more clearly, if it tried.

Blocher associates Exodus 20:11 with 31:17 and Deut. 5:12 + 15. From these other texts, he supports his view of Exodus 20:11 in the following ways. As Exodus 31:17 contains a clear anthropomorphism viz. “God was refreshed”, he regards the rest of the verse which speaks of the six days as being figurative too. Strictly speaking, an anthropomorphism can only be applied to God and not to everything in a passage where such an expression occurs. Young’s treatment of Genesis 2:7 is more discriminating. While recognising that “God breathed” is an anthropomorphism, he says of the rest of the verse “The man was real, the dust was real, the ground was real as was also the breath of life.”² With regard to Deut. 5:12 + 15 in which the reason for keeping the sabbath is expressly grounded in redemption from Egypt rather than creation, it is not strictly accurate to speak as Blocher does of redemption as a “substitution” for creation because the text does refer to the earlier form of the legislation in verses 12-14. It is better to speak of an additional motive rather than a different or alternative one. Does not redemption increase certain creational obligations or arrangements?

Blocher’s treatment of the trees, the use of Adam’s rib and the speaking snake demand just a brief notice. He sees these in the light of his general perspective on the text, but he also faces up to the New Testament references to these matters.

On the basis of the references in Proverbs and Revelation to the tree of life which are not to be construed in a literal manner, Blocher concludes that the Genesis reference is not literal either and the same must, therefore, apply to the tree of knowledge of good and evil. But the literary character of the Proverbs passage is poetry and personification is used in it while the character of the Apocalypse is full of prophetic imagery. That makes a difference.

While I Cor. 11:8 and 12 speak of the woman being “from” (the) man, this, Blocher maintains, does not **have** to be understood in terms of a literal reading of Genesis 2 concerning the creation. The preposition *ek* can just mean that man was the prototype. But *ek* can also mean “out of”. It, therefore, supports a literal though not literalistic view of the Genesis passage.

The snake is viewed as being non-literal because otherwise, Blocher maintains, Genesis 3:1 would carry us into the realm of magic which is so alien to the theology of the author of Genesis. Regarding it as a figure of Satan is borne out by references such as Rev. 12:9 and II Cor. 11:3. It also avoids the theological difficulty just mentioned. But is it not significant that the context of II Cor. 11:3 demands the use of the more historico-factual reference whereas Revelation 12 which is prophetic employs the full range of theological symbolism and imagery?

Though this attentiveness to the literary genre of Scripture is a serious attempt to treat it properly as the Word of God in human form, there is a **possibility** that in this book linguistic study is carried too far and that too much weight is given to it. An interesting comparison can throw some light on this. In a footnote (p.32), Blocher refers to an article by Allan MacRae on the interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2 which appeared in the Bulletin of Evangelical Theological Studies in 1959. In that issue there are several articles on this subject and in them attention is paid to questions of language and style. In these articles the work on language is nowhere near as detailed as in this book or the sources which Blocher quotes, most of which are post 1960. Something happened about this time in evangelical scholarly study and presentation of the nature of Scripture and its interpretation.

It occurred by way of response to a fresh challenge to re-state the doctrine of inspiration and infallibility in the face of, or in the context of an emphasis on the human-ness of the Bible and to grapple with the problem and characteristics of human language in its interpretation. These contemporary pressures form the broad background for this interpretative study.

In pointing this out, no charge is being made that Blocher denies or even loses sight of the divine character of the Bible nor that something illegitimate is being done in being attentive to its language. An attempt is being made in this article to inquire as to why two scholars, i.e. Young and Blocher, can differ significantly in their study of the text. The suggested answer is that there is a difference in evaluation of the contemporary pressures referred to which in turn colours the evaluation of data in the text. Most of the works Blocher cites in his select bibliography are post 1960.

Blocher takes the literary view because he finds “convergent pointers, of

significance in their context” accumulating in its favour (p.19). The debate will continue on the validity of these **and it should** because it is over the understanding of the Word of God and not its inspiration — at least as far as Blocher is concerned. But will all evangelical scholars (the question can at least be put) who adopt the literary view be always as devotedly committed to Scripture as Blocher is? There are signs already that this is not the case, e.g. the male and female debate. However, while exegesis must not be regulated by the fear which lies at the heart of a domino theory, it must be restricted by the dogmatic construction of the nature and status of Scripture as Blocher’s is. The debate must continue **in that framework** and may this great book be a stimulus to the production of a genuinely contemporary, but biblical and evangelical theology of creation.

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References

1. GENESIS 3, E.J. Young, Banner of Truth, 1966
IN THE BEGINNING, E.J. Young, Banner of Truth, 1976
STUDIES IN GENESIS ONE, E.J. Young, Presbyterian & Reformed, 1964
 2. STUDIES IN GENESIS ONE, p.57
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If there is a body of truth revealed in the Scriptures which is one and absolute, but which the various Christian communities interpret in say, twenty different ways, it is clear that their twenty divergent versions of it cannot all be correct. The alternatives are (a) that one interpretation is right and all the other nineteen are wrong, or (b) that each of the twenty interpretations contains varying proportions of truth and error. Will any man outside Rome have the hardihood to claim that the religious assembly to which he belongs is alone infallible? The very fact that there are divergences should inculcate humility. The utmost that any can say is that his creed is a statement of Scriptural truth as he sees it, and, therefore, binding on his own conscience. To attempt to make it binding on that of his brethren, and to exclude them from communion because their interpretation of “the one faith” is different from his, is to claim for an exegesis of Scripture the infallibility of Scripture itself.

E.J. Poole-Connor
Evangelical Unity, p.191-2
