
CONFRONTING OLD TESTAMENT CONTROVERSIES

Pressing Questions about
EVOLUTION, SEXUALITY,
HISTORY, and VIOLENCE

TREMPER LONGMAN III



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Longman, Tremper, author.

Title: Confronting Old Testament controversies : pressing questions about evolution, sexuality, history, and violence / Tremper Longman III.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2019]

Identifiers: LCCN 2018026904 | ISBN 9780801019111 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Old Testament—Socio-rhetorical criticism.

Classification: LCC BS1182.5 .L66 2019 | DDC 221.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018026904>

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Contents

Acknowledgments xi

Introduction xiii

1. Creation and Evolution: Are the Bible and Science in Conflict? 1

How Do We Interpret the Bible? 4

What Is Genesis 1–3 Teaching Us? 25

EXCURSUS: *Creation from Nothing?* 48

EXCURSUS: *Does Genesis 1:29–30 Undermine Evolution?* 54

Evolution and the Historical Adam and Eve 60

EXCURSUS: *Critiquing a Last-Gasp Effort to Undo*

Evolutionary Creationism 73

Conclusion 76

2. History: Did the Exodus and Conquest Happen, and Does It Matter? 79

The Controversy 80

The Question of Genre and History 90

The Historicity of the Exodus and Conquest 92

EXCURSUS: *The Dates of the Exodus and the Conquest* 103

Conclusion 117

EXCURSUS: *Levite Origins of the Exodus?* 120

3. Divine Violence: Does God Kill?	123
<i>God's Violence</i>	125
<i>Silencing a God of Judgment</i>	144
EXCURSUS: <i>The Walton Thesis: Conquest as an Imposition of Order out of Disorder</i>	172
<i>God's Strategy for Defeating Human and Spiritual Evil</i>	176
<i>Concluding Reflections</i>	195
4. Sexuality: Is Homosexual Practice Affirmed?	207
<i>The Biblical Theology of Sexuality</i>	210
<i>Homosexuality and the Bible</i>	219
EXCURSUS: <i>Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:16–19:29) and the Levite and His Concubine (Judges 19)</i>	235
EXCURSUS: <i>David and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:26)</i>	237
<i>Responding to Objections</i>	244
<i>Now What?</i>	251
<i>Conclusion</i>	263
Final Word	267
Bibliography	271
Author Index	285
Scripture Index	288
Subject Index	293

Acknowledgments

I entered the field of Old Testament studies about forty years ago for a number of reasons, but two stand out to me at this moment. First, I was deeply intrigued by these books that were written so long ago by a people who were chronologically and culturally foreign to us. I had a sense that there were theological riches to be discovered in these pages, and I was right. Second, I knew that most Christians—like myself up to that point—did not know what to do with the Old Testament. I wanted to dedicate myself to the study of this part of God’s Word for my own spiritual growth and also to help others see that they could hear the voice of God in the Old Testament.

Now, toward the end of my career, I know that many Christians continue to struggle with the Old Testament. Part of the reason for this is that some of its teaching seems at odds with our thinking and even our values. Thus, I decided to write a book on what I perceive to be the four most controversial topics that face Christians today as they read the Old Testament: evolution, history, violence, and sexuality.

I want to thank in particular Jack Kuhatschek, formerly of Baker Books, for encouraging me to tackle these topics. I also want to

Acknowledgments

thank Brian Vos and James Korsmo of Baker, as well as copyeditor Ryan Davis, for helping me express my ideas as clearly as possible. Of course, I remain responsible for any errors or infelicities in the final product.

I have many others to thank as well, particularly my friends whom I asked to read the manuscript and offer feedback. Let me be clear, though, especially since this is a book about controversial topics. Few of them read the whole book, and none of them agree with me totally. I did not always accept their advice. These friends include Reed Jolley, Timothy Keller, John Ortberg, Peter James, Paul Copan, Bruce Fisk, and Dan Allender. I in particular want to thank Peter Enns for reading this, since, as the reader will soon see, I am critical of some of his recent ideas. He remains a good friend whom I deeply respect and whose ideas I always find stimulating and sometimes even persuasive.

I also want to express my gratitude for two anonymous donors who provided me significant funds to work on this project. I am greatly encouraged by their support for my work—for past projects, this book, and two future projects.

I also want to thank my students at Regent College in Vancouver whom I taught on the topics of this book in the summer of 2017 and at Knox Seminary in Fort Lauderdale whom I taught in January 2018. Our interchange deepened my understanding and gave me new ideas.

Finally, and most importantly, I want to thank my wife, Alice. From our meeting in 1970 and our marriage in 1973 up to the present day, she has encouraged my work and my spiritual life. I dedicate this book to her.

Introduction

I became a Christian during the “Jesus Revolution” of the late 1960s and early ’70s. Those of us who were teenagers or young adults at the time remember the period as turbulent, occasionally frightening, but also exciting. God used the social unrest of the moment to attract many of us to the message of the gospel.

I had grown up in a rather liberal church that was interested in the social gospel but not so much in encouraging members to cultivate a personal relationship with God through Jesus. The Bible was read during services, but there was no real encouragement to study it or to treat it as the Word of God. Thus, with my newfound faith came a new deep interest in the Bible.

In my sophomore year in college I decided to be a religion major, thinking that studying the Bible and theology in college would deepen my faith. And it did, but perhaps not in the way that I had imagined. My religion professors did their best to undermine my fledgling faith as well as that of my friends. They thought we were naive, and in many ways we certainly were. But they were more interested in questioning our faith than helping us build a more mature faith.

Readers today have their choices in Bibles (the New International Version, the New Living Translation, *The Message*, the English Standard Version, and on and on) and a plethora of books written by committed Christian scholars. But younger readers may not realize that this wealth of resources is a recent phenomenon. Back in the early 1970s we had only the Revised Standard Version (a high-style translation that for various reasons, good and bad, was not acceptable to the evangelical church), the King James Version (a seventeenth-century translation), or the Living Bible (a paraphrase).

In terms of evangelical scholarly material on the Bible and theology, there wasn't much. Our college fellowship did not have any real support from local churches either. They were either not evangelical and, like our professors, frowned on our passionate yet to-them-naive faith. Or they were conservative and did not support us because we were hippies. Looking back, it is hard to believe today, but when our college fellowship approached one pastor about our going to his church, he refused to let us in. He said that if we showed up with our long hair, he would be fired the next day!

Though support was hard to find, we did have help from a new college ministry in the area called the Coalition for Christian Outreach, a ministry that is still going strong in western Pennsylvania and Ohio. About once a month we got a visit from a young theologian named R. C. Sproul, who came from his home base in Ligonier, Pennsylvania.

Don't get me wrong. Some other resources were available to us from authors like Francis Schaeffer, Watchman Nee, and a young theologian named J. I. Packer, who was just starting to write. And there were others writing for a more scholarly audience, but I would not be exposed to them until I got to seminary.

I mention all this only to indicate why I decided to pursue an academic and writing career. I wanted to help provide the resources that would benefit people like me who wanted to learn more about the Bible. At this point I wasn't sure what field I would go into, and

I needed to start with a general master of divinity degree anyway, so I decided to make the decision about what specialty I would pursue while I was in seminary.

Early in my seminary career I took classes on the Old Testament with a young professor of the Old Testament named Ray Dillard, and I was hooked. Ray had the ability to open up the biblical text in ways that not only illuminated the ancient meaning but also demonstrated the ancient text's continuing relevance for Christian life today. Through his influence, I decided to get a doctorate in ancient Near Eastern languages and literature and pursue a teaching and writing career in Old Testament.

Ray not only inspired me; he also hired me even before I finished my degree. We worked together at Westminster Theological Seminary from 1980 until his untimely death from a heart attack in 1993. I continued to teach at the seminary until 1998, when I accepted the Gundry Chair at Westmont College, from which I retired in 2017. As Distinguished Scholar and Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies, I continue to write and lecture.

I share this brief and selective life story with you to tell you how much I love the Old Testament and value its continuing significance for my life today. One of the reasons I went into the field was that I knew that Christians struggled with the Old Testament both in interpretation and in application. Our attention is naturally drawn to the New Testament because of its explicit focus on Jesus. Some Christians wrongly believe that that renders the Old Testament secondary, but the truth is that it is an integral part of the canon of Scripture (the standard of our faith and practice). Truth be told, we can't understand the New Testament without the Old Testament.

The present book, the first written after my retirement from full-time teaching, intends to help Christians appreciate the continuing relevance of the Old Testament in the light of current controversies over its teaching. All of these controversies have been around for a long time. The reason I am writing now is that they

have a new dimension: some within the evangelical scholarly community are arguing for nontraditional interpretations of the text, and these new interpretations need evaluation.

Let me begin by saying that this book is written for the church and not the broader culture. I say this because at least some of these controversies have been taken up by some outside the church, notably the so-called New Atheists, in order to discredit the biblical text. This book does not “take them on” but rather addresses these issues among those who take the Bible as the Word of God. There is a place and there are resources for countering the attacks of people like Richard Dawkins, perhaps the best-known New Atheist,¹ but this book has a different purpose. It evaluates attempts from within the evangelical church to reinterpret texts in a way that is more culturally acceptable. We will look at what I consider to be the four most controversial issues in the Old Testament.

Creation and Evolution. Darwin published his theory of evolution in the mid-nineteenth century, so the issue of the relationship between the biblical teaching on creation and the scientific theory of evolution has been around a long time. That acknowledged, the past twenty years have brought powerful new evidence in favor of evolution, primarily in the field of genetics. Thus, many evangelical scholars, including myself, have suggested recently that the Bible is not in conflict with science, not even with the growing evidence that human beings go back to an original population of some thousands of individuals, not an original couple named Adam and Eve. I will make this case in the first chapter of the book.

Historicity. Non-evangelical scholars have questioned the historical veracity of the patriarchal narratives, the exodus, and the conquest since the early nineteenth century. In the past three decades, a group known collectively as “the minimalists” have argued

1. Though I don't agree with everything Paul Copan says, as will become clear later, one of the best resources for interacting with the ideas of Dawkins and others is his book *Is God a Moral Monster?* I also recommend the incisive comments found in Strawn, *Old Testament Is Dying*, 83–102.

that the entire history of the Old Testament from start to finish is largely fictional. What is new in the past decade is that some evangelical scholars have taken a position very similar to minimalism. Is it important that events like the exodus and conquest are historical? Or is the message of the story sufficient to establish its theological significance? In this section, I will argue that when the Bible intends the reader to understand an event as historical, the event's theological contribution depends on its being so.

Divine Violence. Divine violence in the Bible became a widespread matter of controversy after 9/11. When Islamic terrorists supported their violence with language that seemed to echo Old Testament warfare theology, people not surprisingly began to question the trustworthiness, relevance, and even the morality of the Old Testament. Some evangelical scholars have recently revisited the Old Testament texts to see if they can mitigate or even do away with the idea that God brings physical harm against his enemies. Here, I will make the case that such attempts are wrong-minded even if well intentioned.

Sexuality. Perhaps the most controversial issue of all has to do with sexuality, in particular homosexuality. Until the past few decades, the Bible was pretty much universally understood to prohibit homosexual activity, and even today the vast majority of the global church holds that view. However, some evangelical scholars in the Western church have reconsidered their opinion. Civil society recognizes same-sex marriages, and many churches, typically non-evangelical churches, welcome openly gay people into membership and even the clergy. What is new and what is addressed in this book are recent evangelical arguments that go along with the non-evangelical viewpoint and support affirmation of this new cultural trend. I will defend the long-standing and widely held traditional view. But I won't stop there; instead, I will go on to ask how we might show our love toward same-sex-attracted men and women.

At this point, let me say that there is absolutely nothing wrong with reconsidering traditional interpretations in the light of new cultural questions. As I will explain in more detail in chapter 1, while the Bible is faithful and true (inerrant, if you prefer), our interpretations are not as certain.

Indeed, when it comes to traditional interpretations of creation, I am in large agreement with the view that creation and evolution can be compatible. But I will differ from those who want to do away with any sense of historical background to Genesis 1–3, particularly those who deny a historical fall and deny that there is anything like what we call “original sin.” That said, I will explain and critically engage attempts to reinterpret the biblical text in a way that denies the historicity of events presented as historical, divine violence, and traditional understandings of sexuality.

I desire and intend to be irenic in my critique of those with whom I disagree. There is way too much bombast in these inter-Christian debates. Labels like “heretic” or “fundamentalist” are used to stifle honest questions and discussion. Sometimes our theological discussions sound like the worst of political rhetoric these days, trying to ridicule and belittle opponents rather than grappling with their ideas and presenting our own.

I may be able to be irenic more than many because I personally know most of the people I critique. Indeed, Peter Enns, one of the people I critique in these pages, is one of my closest friends. He’s a former student and colleague and a frequent drinking companion (maybe that is another controversial issue—no, the Bible is clear about that!). I know his heart and his love for Jesus and the gospel. I don’t see people and scholars like Peter on a mission to undermine truth. Like me, they are trying to discover the truth in the Scriptures.² I hope that attitude comes through in my writing.

2. For those of you who do not know Pete personally, I recommend you read his book *The Sin of Certainty* to appreciate along with me how he shares his story

But still, as well intentioned and godly as these dialogue partners are, their ideas require a thoughtful response. This book is written for a broad audience and in a rather familiar style. The footnotes go a bit further in engaging the scholarly issues, and I hope they give the sense that I have reflected long and hard on these subjects.

Finally, at the heart of these controversies is the nature of the Bible and, related to this, the interpretive approach we adopt to read the Bible. I will address these issues throughout the book, but I will do so particularly in the first chapter as we consider the topic of creation and evolution.

to build up the faith of others. The charge made by some of his critics that he is trying to undermine the faith is ridiculous unless we are talking about an overly confident faith that needs maturing.

1

Creation and Evolution

Are the Bible and Science in Conflict?

After teaching all day at a church retreat in the fall of 2009, I was tired. Don't get me wrong. I was enjoying my weekend assignment to open up the grand narrative of the Bible to a group of bright young professionals from the San Francisco area, and the setting at a resort on Lake Tahoe was amazing. But still, I was hoping to get away that evening and fallow my mind by watching some football.

In a moment of weakness, however, I agreed to allow one of the attendees, a professional filmmaker, to ask me questions on film. I didn't know what he would ask or what he was doing with the film. But once we started, I enjoyed the time. He asked a number of questions about the Old Testament, and then came the one that ended up affecting my research and thinking agenda for the next decade. "Is it necessary that Adam be a historical individual for the early chapters of Genesis to be theologically important and true?"

I'll be honest. At this stage I didn't know that evolutionary biology provided overwhelming evidence that humanity did not emerge from its primate past through a single couple but rather

through a population of some thousands of individuals. I didn't even know that in some circles the question of the historical Adam was already a raging controversy. I was just thinking of the nature of Genesis 1–11 when I replied that, because of the highly figurative nature of the description of actual events in this first portion of Genesis, it was not necessary that Adam be a historical individual.

I didn't think much about this filming, and I went off and watched some football. About five days later, I got a call from an administrator of a seminary where I was going to teach a course in two weeks. While the following is not a verbatim recounting of our conversation, it is my best remembrance.

The administrator, a friend, said, "Tremper, our school has become aware of the clip that you did on Adam on YouTube."¹

"What's YouTube?" (Remember it was 2009, and I am technologically challenged.)

"Do you really believe what you said about Adam on that video clip?"

"Of course, or I wouldn't have said it."

"If that is what you believe," he said, "you can't teach at our school. We have an unwritten policy, based on our understanding of the Westminster Confession of Faith, that people who hold that opinion can't teach for us."

"Really? I did not know that. Well, then, I'll teach this class and we'll part ways."

"No, you can't even teach that class."

"I have twenty-five students in that class who are expecting me to teach them!"

"Sorry, my hands are tied."

"Well, you are going to have to fire me, because I don't want you walking into class to tell them I resigned."

1. Tremper Longman III, "Is There a Historical Adam - Part 12," YouTube video, 1:37, September 16, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8Pk1vXL1WE>.

“Sorry, Tremper. It’s not my decision. But because of the position of our seminary, I have to fire you.”

I had violated an unwritten policy. Though my class had nothing to do with Adam, creation, or the book of Genesis, I was out.

I’m not looking for pity here. Though I enjoyed the job, I was being fired from a part-time adjunct teaching position. My day job (as the Robert H. Gundry Professor of Biblical Studies at Westmont College) was quite secure, and I had a lot more adjunct opportunities as well. Indeed, as word got out, I got even more speaking opportunities. Also, I want to be clear that I maintain my friendship with the administrator and also appreciate the school that fired me (though they have a blind spot here). I am telling this story to highlight how I discovered just how controversial the issue we are about to discuss is. Passions flare on all sides.

Let’s dive in. The issue of creation and evolution has to do with the nature of the biblical witness, the relationship between science and faith, the theological impact of certain contemporary scientific theories, and much, much more. As I said, this issue evokes a lot of passion. Particularly in the present political atmosphere, there is a tendency on the part of both sides to demonize others. “What a fundamentalist!” or “Are you even a Christian?” are not arguments but rather attempts to silence what is an important discussion.

Recent surveys show that an alarming number of young people are abandoning the faith because they feel that they must make a decision between what they learn in their science class and what they hear in church.² Others decide not to go into the science field

2. A 2011 Barna survey on American Christianity discovered the six primary reasons why young adults leave church. Reason number three is that “churches come across as antagonistic to science,” counting 23 percent of young adults polled as saying that they had been put off by the creation and evolution debate. And 29 percent of the Christian youth polled complained that “churches are out of step with the scientific world we live in.” See “Six Reasons Young Adults Leave Church,” Barna Group, September 27, 2011, <https://www.barna.com/research/six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church/>.

even though they find it intriguing. I believe that we must learn from science but that it is more important that we maintain our fidelity to God and Scripture than to what scientists may be telling us at any given time. But does the Bible actually teach that God created two humans from a nonorganic past?

How Do We Interpret the Bible?

Before we talk directly about creation/evolution, historicity, divine violence, and sexuality, we need to begin with a subject that will be important throughout all four topics: how we interpret the Bible. Everyone has a strategy for reading the Bible, even if it is just to pick it up and read it as if it were written yesterday, looking for what is relevant to one's life. God can use that type of reading in our lives, to be sure, but our desire should be to adopt the best possible interpretive approach to hear God's voice speaking to us from his Word rather than imposing our own meaning on the text.

This attention is particularly important as we discuss controversial issues, as I do in this book. With these issues especially, it is essential that we pay attention not only to what the Bible says but also to how we are arriving at our understanding of it. In each of the four areas we are investigating here, people who hold to the authority of the Bible and agree about what the Bible says still have widely divergent views about what the Bible means, so it is important to look clearly at how we interpret the Bible.

Hermeneutics is the technical term for the science of interpretation, which sounds a little sterile. But everyone who reads the Bible has a hermeneutic, even if they don't know it. Perhaps it will be clearer if we simply think of hermeneutics as principles of interpretation that lead to a strategy for reading the Bible.³

3. Of course, the topic of hermeneutics is relevant for reading anything written (or even listening to something oral), but we here focus on the interpretation of the Bible.

This book is not the place to do a full hermeneutics,⁴ but I will focus on those issues that are particularly important to the questions of cosmic and human origins, historicity, divine violence, and sexuality. In this chapter I will look at the nature of the Word of God (canonicity, inerrancy, and clarity), the nature and goal of interpretation (how we find meaning in texts), and the role that genre plays in how we read—issues that are important for all four of the topics in this book. I will then look at the relationship of science and the interpretation of Scripture, an issue that has special bearing on the question of creation and evolution. In each subsequent chapter I will likewise bring in additional principles of hermeneutics that are relevant.

The Nature of the Word of God

As we begin our strategy for reading the Bible, we start by asking, Why do we, as Christians, care what the Bible says about these subjects? We care because the Bible is the Word of God, and that means we, the church, treat it as canon and believe that it tells us the truth.

CANONICITY

The church has recognized the Old and New Testaments as its standard of faith and practice from the very earliest times. But we must be careful not to confuse the church's long-standing recognition of the canonicity of the books of the Old and New Testaments with the *reason* they are canonical (the ground of canonicity).⁵ The church does not define the canon; the canon defines the church. God reveals himself through the Scriptures; the Holy Spirit speaks to the church through these books; and the Spirit that dwells in the church hears and recognizes that authoritative voice.

4. For a fuller overview of my approach to the subject, see Longman, *Reading the Bible*.

5. For this distinction, see Ridderbos, *Redemptive History*.

In short, by saying that the Old and New Testaments are canonical, we mean that the church looks to the Scriptures as the source of authoritative teaching about God (doctrine) as well as for guidance for how we should live our lives (praxis). Though people can point to the occasional question about whether this or that book should have been included or excluded, the church's recognition of a stable canon through the centuries is remarkable. (One notable exception to this is Marcion, who questioned the canonical status of the Old Testament, and eventually much of the New Testament as well. Since his objections were specifically tied to the issue of divine violence, we will take up this example in more detail in chap. 3.)

Two important comments need to be made concerning the Old Testament canon. First, we acknowledge the difference that exists between the three great Christian traditions on the extent of the canon. Protestants affirm a narrow canon that does not include the apocryphal books recognized as canonical by Catholic and (with differences) Orthodox communities. But what is remarkable is that these three communities all recognize the same core books (those included in the narrower, Protestant canon). In addition, we should realize that recognition of the so-called apocryphal books does not result in significant doctrinal differences—and, most important for our purposes, no difference on the subjects on hand (creation/evolution, historicity, divine violence, and sexuality). Doctrinal differences, of course, do exist between these communities, but they are not the result of the differences of the scope of the canon.

Second, as a Protestant I recognize only the narrow canon as authoritative and, in keeping with Protestant beliefs, treat the apocryphal books as edifying, helpful books, though not canonical. We inherit our Old Testament from the Jewish community, in particular from the Pharisees. As Roger Beckwith thoroughly documents, Jesus disagrees with the Pharisees about a lot of things, but not

about the extent of the canon.⁶ But let me emphasize again the fact that, particularly as concerns the four topics we are covering in this book, even if one accepts the Apocrypha as canonical, it will not change the perspectives advocated here.

INERRANCY

By saying the Scriptures are the Word of God and therefore canonical, we are also making a statement about their reliability and veracity. After all, if we hear the voice of God in Scripture, then we can be assured that these words will not mislead us but, on the contrary, will be truthful, despite the fact that God used human beings to speak and write his words on his behalf. On this basis, evangelical Protestant scholars have generally used the term *inerrancy* to refer to the idea that Scripture is “without error.” Here is a classic definition of inerrancy taken from the oft-cited Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy: “We affirm that Scripture, having been given by divine inspiration, is infallible, so that, far from misleading us, it is true and reliable in all the matters it addresses.”

The term *inerrancy*, however, has been much abused in recent years, both by people who want to make it claim more than it does and by those who believe it claims too much or does so crudely. Those who want to make it claim too much confuse hermeneutics and inerrancy. In other words, they assert not only that Scripture is true but also that their interpretation of Scripture is true. Thus, if someone disagrees with their interpretation of Scripture, then that person must be denying the truth of Scripture. This difference

6. Beckwith, *Old Testament Canon*. It is true that the early Christians (and most Jews at the time) were using the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament), and it is also true that the earliest full manuscripts of the Septuagint that have survived to the present day contain the Apocrypha, but these are from the fourth century AD and do not directly bear on the contents of the Septuagint that would have been used by Jewish or Christian readers in the first century AD.

between inerrancy of Scripture and inerrancy of interpretation is extremely important for our study of controversial issues, which by nature will involve interpretive decisions. Thus, discussion of inerrancy also necessitates discussion of the clarity of Scripture, which we will take up below.

While some claim too much with inerrancy, others object to the word and even the very concept of inerrancy. This perspective has been growing in recent years, and I will be interacting with evangelical Protestant scholars who adopt this criticism of inerrancy in a way that affects their treatment of the issues of creation/evolution, historicity, divine violence, and human sexuality.

Let's first of all admit that *inerrancy* is not a perfect term. It has its liabilities. It is a term that focuses in on propositions: Is a proposition true or false? But the Bible is not all about propositions.

Take the Song of Songs, an anthology of love poems. How is a love poem true or false? Certainly not by way of propositions. We could perhaps think that these love poems rightly express the emotions and desires for physical intimacy that reflect God's intention for human flourishing. More could be said, but my point is that the term *inerrancy* has its awkwardness, though if it is understood as saying that the Scriptures as the Word of God are true in all that they intend to teach or affirm, then the word still has utility.

But there are those who think that more than the simple word *inerrancy* is misleading. We will observe this in the writings of Gregory Boyd, Peter Enns, and Eric Seibert, for instance, who argue that the God depicted in parts of the Bible is not the actual God (and thus there are parts of the Bible that are wrong, even on so central a thing as what God is like). We will note this particularly in the chapter on divine violence and interact with their ideas in a more detailed fashion there, but for now let me just say that such a view raises important theological issues, most significantly how we can tell the actual God from the depicted God.

CLARITY

Even as we recognize that God's Word is inerrant, we must also recognize that not everything in Scripture is clear. This admission does not infringe on the so-called doctrine of the clarity (or perspicuity) of Scripture. The Protestant church has always taught that the information and ideas that are essential for our salvation are clearly taught in the Bible but that this clarity does not extend to disputed issues such as the nature of the days of Genesis 1. We should pay attention to what the Westminster Confession of Faith, an influential Reformed creed from the seventeenth century, says on the matter: "All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them."

The bottom line is that when it comes to the important main message of the Bible ("those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation"), there is clarity. OK, the Hebrew and Greek (and a smattering of Aramaic) still have to be translated, but as the confession says, these things "are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other" that it would take a really bad translator to mess it up. All the translations typically used by evangelicals (NIV, NLT, NKJV, KJV, ESV, Message, CEB, NRSV) do a more than adequate job communicating the central message that is clearly taught by the Bible.

But what is necessary to know for salvation? Well, that would be "I am a sinner and I need help. Jesus died and was raised to save me from sin and death, and I must put my faith in him." Yes, that's pretty basic, and it is so clearly taught in Scripture that one must work really, really hard to miss the point.

This is the gospel, and it fits in with the big story of the Bible, which I think is also clear:

creation—fall (into sin)—redemption—consummation

This is the basic plot of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. In Genesis 1–2, God creates all things, including human beings, whom he creates morally innocent. In Genesis 3, humans choose to rebel against God, thus explaining the presence of sin and death. In the bulk of the Bible, Genesis 4 through Revelation 20, God then pursues reconciliation by redeeming his human creatures from their sin. Finally, in Revelation 21–22, the biblical account ends with a description of the future consummation.

This big picture presented by the Bible is clear. But notice also how the statement in the Westminster Confession begins: “All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all.” Not all things are clear in Scripture. We need to remember this when we interact with people with different opinions than ours on subjects that are not essential for our salvation.

When someone says that “the gospel is at stake” if one does not take the days of Genesis 1 as literal twenty-four-hour days, or believe that there was a global flood, or take a complementarian view of the relationship between the genders, or hold a particular position on any other matter that is not central to the big story of salvation, they misunderstand the nature of Scripture (or they are simply trying to win their point by dramatic overstatement).

I am emphasizing this point at the beginning of this book for a reason. The controversial topics that we will discuss are really, really important, but they are not “necessary for salvation.” There is room for discussion among believers, and discussion only happens when we refrain from demonization. And that is true on both sides. I can’t tell you how many times I have been told I am not a Christian or called a mindless fundamentalist for holding a particular view—and sometimes on the same issue (by different

people of course). So we should enter the following discussion with the attitude that these are important issues but not issues that decide whether or not you are a Christian or whether or not you believe the Bible is God's Word.

In summary, as I approach the questions of creation/evolution, historicity, divine violence, and sexuality, I do so on the basis of my affirmation that the Bible is our standard of faith and practice (canonical) and that it is true in everything that it intends to teach (inerrant). I believe that the Scriptures are clear on the matters important for our salvation (perspicuous) but open to debate on many other topics.

Written for Us but Not to Us: The Goal of Interpretation

WHERE IS THE MESSAGE FOUND?

Interpretation seeks to discover the message of the biblical text that we are reading. But where is that message located? A written text—any text, including the biblical text—is composed by an author to readers. Stated this way, the goal of interpretation is clear. Readers want to know the intended message of the author.

This seems simple enough until we realize that, particularly with ancient texts like the books of the Bible, we have no independent access to the authors. We cannot interview Moses, David, Jeremiah, or Paul to ask, “What did you mean by that?” And truth be told, even if we did, it might not solve our problem. Authors don't always remember years later what they meant (and we have no reason to think God gave Paul infallible memory), or perhaps they themselves don't understand the full import of their words (especially for the Bible; see below concerning divine intention). But we don't even have the possibility of talking to the human authors of biblical texts, since they are all long dead. Thus, while the author's intended meaning may be our goal, our only recourse to discover that meaning is through a close study of the text itself.

The implication of this is that when we say the interpretation of a certain biblical text is such and such, we are making a hypothesis based on our reading of the text.⁷ To read the text well, I will argue below, we have to be aware of the literary conventions that the author used to communicate their message, including most notably the genre of the text we are studying. Thus, to reach our goal of proper interpretation of a biblical text, we will need to become familiar with the writing practices of ancient authors.

In summary, the goal of interpretation is to discover the intended meaning of the author. We can only do this by doing a close reading of the text itself, since we have no independent access to the author. Thus, we need to be knowledgeable of the conventions of writing through which authors send signals to readers about “how to take” their words.

IT’S MORE COMPLICATED THAN THAT

So far we have given a rather straightforward and simple account of the model of literary communication: an author writes a text to communicate with readers, and the reader interprets the text in order to reach the intended message of the author.

We have already acknowledged some complications with this process. My view is that interpretation (discovering the author’s intended message) is not untroubled or even perfectly achievable, but that recognition does not and should not paralyze us. While interpretation is not perfect, it can lead us to an adequate understanding of the message of the text, one that does indeed represent the intended communication. Literary communication is possible.⁸ My confidence in getting at the message of the Bible is not diminished even as I recognize that, particularly when it comes to the Bible, the process of communication is more complicated, especially for those of us who affirm that God is the ultimate author of Scripture.

7. Strickland, *Structuralism or Criticism?*

8. The view that I take has been called “critical realism.”

Let's start with the author, the one whose intention in writing we seek to discover. There are two complications here. The first is that—now restricting our comments to the Old Testament—the books typically have a history of composition. That is, the biblical books as we have them were not written by one person in one sitting. Rather, they were written over a period of time by more than one composer. A good introduction to the Old Testament will give the full story of composition, and there are differences among scholars regarding how certain biblical texts were written.⁹ But most scholars agree that the Old Testament books came to their final form over a period of time. It is that final form that is considered canonical for the church.¹⁰

Sometimes the book itself reveals that it was written over time. The book of Jeremiah provides such a case, though all the details are far from clear. Here's what we can say with a considerable level of confidence. God called Jeremiah to preach his message of judgment starting in 626 BC (Jer. 1:1–10). A little over twenty years later, God told Jeremiah to write down these prophecies and read them in the temple precincts (Jer. 36:1, the fourth year of Jehoiakim, 605/604 BC). Jeremiah dictates his sermons to Baruch, who reads them in the temple precinct. Some of the king's men take the scroll to the king, and he doesn't like what he reads, so he cuts up the scroll and throws it page by page into the fire.

What is interesting for our present topic is that the narrator tells us that “Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to the scribe Baruch son of Neriah, and as Jeremiah dictated, Baruch wrote on it all the words of the scroll that Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire. And many similar words were added to them”

9. For beginning students, see Longman, *Introducing the Old Testament*, and for more advanced students, Longman and Dillard, *Introduction to the Old Testament*.

10. Of course, debates will continue over the exact shape of the final form of many Old Testament books, but these debates do not prevent us from having an adequate understanding of the different biblical books.

(Jer. 36:32). The result? A second, longer version of the book of Jeremiah is written. And that was just the beginning, since we know that there are materials in Jeremiah that belong to at least the early exilic period, which begins in 586 BC. In addition, most scholars believe that there are materials added by disciples of Jeremiah, including Baruch, about Jeremiah. Indeed, we cannot be absolutely certain about when the final form of the book came into being.

Even though the case of the book of Jeremiah is complicated, the book gives us some concrete dates to go on. Often we cannot tell precisely when a book was written. Take the book of Daniel. Even granting (as I do)¹¹ the traditional view that the book contains reliable portraits of a historical Daniel living in the Babylonian and Persian courts (chaps. 1–6) and apocalyptic visions that came to him at that time, the book itself does not tell us when it was written or by whom. The stories are about Daniel, and a narrator reports the visions. Is the narrator Daniel himself? We have no reason to think so.

We need to acknowledge the fact that, often, we simply cannot precisely date the moment when the final form of a biblical book took shape, nor can we name all the people involved in the book's production. Yet our goal to discover the "author's intended meaning" remains intact, even though we can now see that the author is often an anonymous final shaper of a book. After all, we are not looking to interview the author. We are closely reading the text itself to discover the author's message.

But there is a second complication to our understanding of the author of a biblical book. This one is unique to those of us who believe the Bible is the Word of God. And that complication emerges from the fact that ultimately the author of the Bible is God.

Perhaps one of the best-known passages in the New Testament refers to the divine origin of the Old Testament, here referred to as

11. Longman, *Daniel*.

“Scripture”: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17). This passage and others (Gal. 1:12; 2 Pet. 1:20–21) remind us that the ultimate author of biblical books is God himself, raising the question of whether passages in the Bible have a “deeper meaning” (*sensus plenior*) than the human authors would have been aware of. I believe the answer is clearly yes. And though he is not a biblical author, John the Baptist provides a good example of how a prophet speaks words whose meaning surpasses his or her understanding of their import.

In the wilderness, John baptized those who accepted his message of repentance. He announced the coming of one who was more powerful than he was. This one would cut down the rotten wood and throw it into a fire and would separate the chaff from the wheat and burn the chaff with “unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:10–12). When Jesus appeared at the Jordan River, John recognized him as the expected one and baptized him. After the baptism, Jesus began his ministry, and John was later put in prison. In prison John received what he took as disturbing reports. Rather than burning the rotten wood and the chaff, Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead, and proclaimed the good news to the poor (Matt. 11:4–6). John sent two disciples to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Matt. 11:3). Jesus was not acting in accordance with John’s prophetic expectation.

But John, our example of a human author of a divine word, did not have full understanding of what he was saying. In this case, he did not realize that Jesus was coming not just once but twice. The book of Revelation, as well as other apocalyptic portions of the New Testament, makes it clear that Jesus will return to render judgment against those who resist him.

John provides a good example of an instance where the human spokesperson does not fully understand the importance of the

words spoken (or written) on behalf of God. In spite of rather tortuous attempts to say otherwise,¹² the unexpected ways New Testament authors often use Old Testament passages (in ways that their original authors could never have anticipated) also illustrate our point.

Thus, in the Bible we have human authors speaking the divine message, and this complicates the picture of discerning a biblical author's intended meaning. That said, we must admit we can see beyond the human author's intention (and thereby presume that there is a meaning that transcends that intention) only if later Scripture itself brings out the deeper meaning. In other words, *sensus plenior* is not an excuse for assigning a meaning to a text that cannot otherwise be gained through normal interpretive method (the "ordinary means" of the Westminster Confession of Faith).

In terms of the text, we already mentioned above that no, or almost no, biblical books were written at one moment by one author. But we resolve this complexity by simply putting our focus on the final form of the text.

And that leaves the reader. The complication involved in the receiving end of the process of literary communication is quite simply that while the Bible was written *for* us, it was not written *to* us. In other words, it is absolutely imperative that we remember that the biblical books were written to a specific ancient audience and not to those of us who are reading them in the twenty-first century. Thus, it is critical that we recover what my friend John Walton calls the "cognitive environment" of any passage that we read.¹³

In this regard, I like to tell my students that they don't call the book of Romans "Romans" for nothing (yes, I occasionally use New Testament examples). Paul wrote this letter to a specific

12. For example, Beale and his "cognitive peripheral vision" (see Beale, "Cognitive Peripheral Vision").

13. Longman and Walton, *Lost World of the Flood*, 6–10.

church to address their particular issues. Reading a Pauline letter can be like listening to half a conversation—we occasionally wonder what issue or controversy he is explicitly addressing.

An Old Testament example is the history of Israel provided by the books of Kings and Chronicles. I like to use this example because these books recount comparable history but give us quite different takes on it. In a word, Chronicles gives a much more upbeat portrait of the history compared to Kings' emphasis on the sin of Israel and its leaders. To ask which is true misunderstands the purpose of these histories and does not recognize the importance of the first readers.

While neither Kings nor Chronicles explicitly mentions its original audience, we can identify their audiences by noting the last event narrated in each of their accounts. In Kings, the last event is the release of King Jehoiachin from house arrest in Babylon during the reign of King Evil-Merodach (known in Babylon as Amel-Marduk, the son of Nebuchadnezzar; 2 Kings 25:27–30). Amel-Marduk ruled a brief time (562–560 BC), but what is significant for us is that this event took place in the middle of the exile (586–539 BC). In other words, we can surmise that the author of Kings chose to point out the sin of Israel and Judah in order to explain to his exilic audience why they are in exile.

Chronicles, on the other hand, ends with the mention of the so-called Cyrus decree, which allowed the Jewish people to return to Judah. That means Chronicles comes from the postexilic period (after 539 BC). The Chronicler's audience is not interested in why they were in exile (because they aren't any longer) but rather in questions like What is our connection with the past? (thus so many genealogies!) and Now what do we do? (among other things, rebuild the temple, which explains why there is such an emphasis on the first temple).

Every biblical book had an original audience. In short, the biblical books are not addressed to us, and we need to remember that.

We are later readers living in a vastly different cultural context. To read the biblical books correctly, we must first of all read them as if we were living at the time of the original audience. Otherwise, we run the risk of imposing our meaning on the text.

And one more comment on readers. To read well, we have to remember that our reading is shaped by who we are as individuals. We are not blank slates who approach the text from a neutral perspective. Our reading is affected by who we are. I will take myself as an example. I am a male, getting up there in years (middle-aged would be too kind; I have four beautiful granddaughters after all). I am financially well-off (particularly if you buy my books). I am well educated (did I mention my Yale PhD?). I live in the twenty-first-century West (the United States, to be exact). And I could go on, but I have made my point. Who I am both helps me and limits me in my understanding of the text. But there is an easy solution to my limited perspective, though one not taken by many readers of the Bible: reading in community. I need to listen to a variety of voices (female and male, non-Western and Western, lay and clergy, poor and rich, young and old), especially of those who are different from me, as I interpret the text. These other voices can encourage or challenge my reading. They may correct my misapprehension, or I may conclude that they misunderstand the text.

Where do we hear these voices? They are readily available in commentaries, other writings, Bible study groups, sermons, and elsewhere. What keeps us from listening? Our pride. We need to be willing to listen to others (even those with whom we will eventually disagree) and question our own understanding if we are to grow in our interpretation. The Bible is inerrant, but our own interpretation is not. We need to be constantly open to changing our opinion.

GENRE TRIGGERS READING STRATEGY

Let's remember that our ultimate goal is to hear the author's message in a literary text. Similarly, an author's goal is to be under-

stood by readers. Thus, authors write in ways that are familiar to their readers, sending signals to the reader as to “how to take” their words.

A genre of literature is a group of writings that share features in terms of content, style, or form. The recognition of a genre raises expectations on the part of the reader, who then adopts an appropriate reading strategy. Let’s consider a well-known type of text that occurs outside the Bible. If a text begins with “once upon a time,” readers hear the author telling them that the text is a fairy tale. Fairy tale is a genre. If we recognize a text as a fairy tale, then we will not be surprised to encounter dwarves, dragons, witches, and elves and will “suspend our disbelief,” because we know that it is not the purpose of the author to recount actual events but rather to entertain us or perhaps to impart a moral lesson.

Let’s examine an example from the Bible to demonstrate how readers’ identification of the genre of a text shapes their interpretation.

While the king is on his couch
my nard gives off its scent.
My lover is to me a sachet of myrrh
lodging between my breasts. (Song 1:12–13)¹⁴

Here, near the opening of the Song of Songs, the woman describes the object of her affection as sitting on his couch. She then expresses her affection and desire for intimacy by depicting him as a sachet (a small bag of perfumed powder) between her breasts.

How has this passage been interpreted and why?

Most readers today (scholarly and lay) would see this as the expression of a woman’s desire for physical intimacy with a man, because we identify the genre of the Song of Songs as love poetry. After agreeing on the broad recognition of the Song of Songs as love poetry, there may be differences over a narrower genre identification that also triggers a certain reading strategy. Is the Song an

14. Translations from the Song of Songs come from Longman, *Song of Songs*.

anthology of love poems, which encourages the reader to unpack the metaphors and explore the emotional intensity of the speeches.¹⁵ If so, then in Song of Songs 1:12–13 the woman expresses her desire to be as physically intimate with him as a sachet of myrrh between her breasts. The sweet smell of myrrh and her lover’s touch are deeply pleasing to her. Or is the Song a narrative about the ups and downs of a couple’s relationship or even the story of the conflicts that emerge from a love triangle?¹⁶ If one believes the Song is a narrative rather than a collection of love poems, that shifts the goal of interpretation to focus on the discovery of a plot. Perhaps in this scenario Song of Songs 1:12–13 would be part of the courtship phase of the relationship between the man who might be identified as Solomon and the woman, perhaps the Shulammitte. Here we have an example of how differences in genre identification trigger reading strategies that lead to somewhat different interpretations.

But compare the even more radical difference presented by readings common in the early church era and the Middle Ages. Cyril of Alexandria (ca. 376–444) presents a quite different understanding of the simile in Song of Songs 1:13. He says that the sachet of myrrh is Christ and the breasts represent the Old and New Testaments. The verse thus proclaims that Jesus Christ spans both the Old and the New Testaments.

You might say that that makes absolutely no sense. I would agree, but we have to ask how Cyril came to such an incorrect interpretation and why. Put simply, he (and virtually all interpreters during the early church era and the Middle Ages) misidentified the genre of the Song. He saw it as an allegory of the relationship between Jesus and the church (just as contemporary Jewish interpreters saw it as an allegory of the relationship between God and Israel). Thus, rather than expressing human desire for physical intimacy, the woman (the church) expresses desire to be intimate

15. See, for instance, Longman, *Song of Songs*, and Exum, *Song of Songs*.

16. See Provan, *Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs*.

in her relationship with Jesus. Once the reader identifies the Song as an allegory, there is logic to Cyril's interpretation of verse 13.

That said, we can be certain that Cyril and similar commentators got it wrong. First, there is absolutely nothing in the Song that would give the impression that the author expected the reader to take the text as an allegory (that is, there are no genre signals that point to allegory). Second, analogous love poems from ancient Egypt and the modern Middle East lead us to conclude that the Song of Songs is a love poem, not an allegory. The sensuous and intimate language between the man and the woman are clear signs of the former. And then finally we can see the motivation that early interpreters had for avoiding a sexual interpretation. The church at this time was heavily influenced by Neoplatonic philosophy, which held that the spiritual life was at odds with the physical life, so that things that had to do with the body (particularly sex) had to be subdued for the spirit to grow. Thus, a book that excites sexual passions just has to say something different than what it seems to say on the surface.

No matter what your views on the interpretation of the Song may be, however, there is no doubt from this example that one's genre identification triggers interpretation. Get the genre wrong and you get the interpretation wrong. We will see that genre plays an important, even pivotal role, in our treatment of the controversial issues in this book.

Science and Faith: The Two Books

We now turn to the relationship between science and faith, a topic that bears on creation and evolution. Many Christians and non-Christians alike buy into the "conflict model" of the relationship between science and faith. On the science side, some believe that science disproves the existence of God. On the faith side, some argue that the Bible trumps and undermines the conclusions of science.

Historically, though, the church has offered what may be called a "two books" understanding of the relationship between the Bible

and nature (the object of study of science).¹⁷ Listen, for example, to the Belgic Confession, article 2:

We know Him by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to see clearly the invisible things of God, even His everlasting power and divinity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20. All which things are sufficient to convince men and leave them without excuse. Second, He makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word, that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to His glory and our salvation.

God reveals himself in Scripture and through nature. Both are “books” that involve interpretation. Hermeneutics provides interpretive principles that are applied to Scripture in order to exegete (bring the meaning out of) the biblical text. The philosophy of science yields the scientific method that provides the methodological principle to explore nature in order to support theories from nature.

God is the ultimate author of both Scripture and nature. When both are correctly interpreted, they will not conflict. Since God is the ultimate author of both Scripture and nature, both are true, though our interpretations of either may not be. To be open to a different interpretation than the one we hold is not to betray Scripture but to honor it. The same, of course, is true of our interpretation of nature.

Scripture does not trump nature, at least not in the way some people think.¹⁸ Some people are so certain of their interpretation of Scripture that when they hear a scientific theory that doesn't fit with their interpretation, even a theory like evolution that is

17. For the question of the relationship between science and faith and different perspectives on the topic, see W. Dembski, “Science and Theology (Dialogue View),” and J. Stump, “Science and Theology (Reconciliation View).” My own view is closer to that of Stump.

18. It is correct to say that Scripture gives a fuller revelation than nature, but the point that the two will not conflict when properly interpreted still stands.

overwhelmingly supported by not only the fossil record but also genetics and numerous other fields of research, they don't even blink an eye as they reject it as "anti-Bible."

We should learn a lesson from the "Galileo episode." I am referring, of course, to the seventeenth-century reaction to Galileo's arguments in support of a heliocentric solar system earlier presented by Copernicus. Legends have grown up around this story, including the misunderstanding that Galileo was tortured. Indeed, as Kerry Magruder has pointed out, Galileo had powerful supporters within the church (like evolutionary creationism has in the evangelical Protestant church today) and opponents among university physicists.¹⁹ Even so, Galileo's teaching was resisted by the church because some thought the results of his research threatened the Bible's teaching that the earth was the center of the cosmos and that the sun, moon, and stars revolved around the earth in a celestial sphere. After all, his church critics charged, the Bible says the sun rises and sets, and the Psalms proclaim that God "set the earth on its foundations; it can never be moved" (Ps. 104:5).

Today we "know better." The Bible is speaking phenomenologically (that is, from the perspective of how we perceive matters on the surface), not scientifically, about the rising and setting of the sun and metaphorically about the earth not being moved. We even use that language today. We are comfortable with the idea that the Bible is not teaching cosmology but rather assuming an ancient cosmology.

The Galileo episode should be an object lesson to the church as it responds to scientific theories that at first glance seem to conflict with the Bible. Christians should not automatically reject scientific conclusions that seem to contradict traditional interpretations of Scripture. As Calvin wisely pointed out in the sixteenth century: "If the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, dialectic, mathematics, and other like disciplines [we might imagine that today he would add biology], by the work and ministry of the ungodly,

19. Magruder, "Galilei, Galileo," 298–300.

let us use this assistance. For if we neglect God's gift freely offered in these arts, we ought to suffer just punishments for our sloths."²⁰ I have found Pope John Paul II's statement in the same vein about the relationship between science and faith wise and illuminating: "Science can purify religion from error and superstition; religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes."²¹

Truth be told, science can help us read the Bible better. In the case of cosmic and human origins, I suggest that science helps us see more clearly what is obvious. The Bible teaches us *that* God created everything but is not interested in telling us *how* he created the cosmos or humanity. Even further, as we will see later, science helps us see that the Bible does not claim that humanity goes back to a single originating couple. Indeed, reading the Bible in the light of modern science helps us understand the doctrine of original sin better.

Conclusion

In this section, we have discussed the importance of biblical interpretation. As Christians, we believe that we hear the voice of God in the Bible. Therefore, the church has recognized these books as authoritative, "canonical" to use the technical term, for our understanding of God (since it is his self-disclosure), ourselves, and our world. The Bible, including the Old Testament, is the standard of our faith and practice. We believe that the Bible, as God's Word, is true in all that it intends to teach us.

We then discussed the necessity of interpretation. Yes, as the Westminster Confession of Faith states, the big picture is clear (once the text is faithfully translated), but not everything is obvious, not even some matters of importance. Thus, we must interpret the

20. Calvin, *Institutes* 2.2.15, 1:275, quoted in Zachman, "Free Scientific Inquiry," 73.

21. John Paul II to Reverend George V. Coyne, SJ, Vatican, June 1, 1988, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_1988_0601_padre-coyne.html.

text. I suggested that the goal is to discover the author's intention (first that of the human author and then of the ultimate, divine author). As readers, we are finite and thus need to read in community. We must also recognize that the biblical books, while written for us, were not written to us. I also affirmed that our only access to the author's intended meaning is through a close reading of the text.

I also highlighted the importance of genre in order to get at the author's message. Genre triggers reading strategy. The author sends us signals as to how to take the words, raising expectations in the mind of the reader. To misidentify the genre, either formally or even unconsciously, will lead us to misunderstand what the author is trying to tell us.

Then we also considered the relationship between biblical interpretation and the interpretation of nature, which we study by way of science, by understanding that they are God's two books. When we interpret the Bible correctly, it will never conflict with science if science is correctly interpreting nature.

What Is Genesis 1–3 Teaching Us?

It is time to turn to the main text that talks about God's creation of the cosmos and human beings and provides the account of humanity's first rebellion against God. We do so in the light of all that we have said about interpretation in the previous section.

The Bible, including Genesis 1–3, is the Word of God and thus true in everything it intends to teach us. We hear the voice of God speaking to us through these chapters. Thus, it is critically important to ask what they teach, and to answer that question we have to ask what genre the author utilizes to communicate the message. In addition, we need to read this passage in the context of the original audience, since it was written to the original audience in a language (Hebrew) and cultural context (ancient Near East) that they understood. In the case of the question before us,