

C. John Collins, *Genesis 1-4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary*. P&R, 2006. 318 pages.

Today most of the attacks on Christianity are made in the name of science, and most modern apologetic works therefore deal with the relation between faith and science. The interpretation of the book of Genesis often looms large in these works. A central issue here is the conflict between the biblical account of creation and the neo-Darwinist theory of evolution, but historical-critical attacks on the reliability of the Bible play an important role as well. In his book on the first four chapters of Genesis (which is addressed primarily to students of theology) Collins deals with these issues. He has also written a less technical work on the topic, entitled *Science and Faith: Friends or Foes?* (Crossway, 2003, 448 pages).

Collins has the academic qualifications to write on the relation between the Genesis account and the opposing scientific and Bible-critical theories. He has studied science and theology, possesses a master's degree in both electrical engineering and divinity and a Ph.D. in Hebrew linguistics, and has devoted much study to the first chapters of Genesis. At present he is professor of Old Testament at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, where besides teaching Old Testament subjects he gives a course entitled "Christian Faith in an Age of Science."

A theologian in the Reformed tradition who professes the infallibility of Scripture, Collins concerns himself not only with the secular attacks, but also with the controversies that exist among conservative Christians about the interpretation of Genesis 1 – specifically about matters such as the age of the earth and the length of the creation days. These controversies and in-house conflicts, he says, cause believers to miss the real focus of the biblical account. They are also unnecessary, since they are to a large extent the result of a misreading of the Hebrew text. He proposes a method that will guide the student, he promises, to a clearer understanding of that text – one that gives attention to differences in genre, to linguistic and literary details, and to the larger context of a passage. That same method he applies to the matter of the Darwinist challenges and to historical-critical attacks. I begin with the latter category.

Conflicting creation accounts?

Collins uses his methodology to good effect in dealing with what biblical critics call conflicting creation accounts – one in Genesis 1:1 – 2:3, another in the rest of Genesis 2. He shows that the latter pericope, which records the creation of Adam and later of Eve and their stationing in the garden, is not a separate creation story but simply an elaboration or "close-up" of Genesis 1:27. He also explains the differences in the name of God in these two sections, with the first pericope speaking of "God" (Elohim) and the following ones (Genesis 2, 3) using the composite name, "the LORD God" (Yahweh Elohim). This is another point used by critics to question the historicity of the creation account and to claim that the author or editor used conflicting sources. Collins rejects that theory, showing that the change in the divine name is intentional and altogether relevant. In the first pericope, he points out, God presents himself "in his majesty, power, transcendence, and ownership with respect to the creation," whereas in Genesis 2 and 3 he reveals himself as the God who establishes a relationship with his creatures – indeed, as the God of the covenant. The use of the two

names “makes it clear that the God who has yoked himself by promises to the patriarchs and their offspring (and hence to the first audience) is the transcendent Creator of heaven and earth.”

Authorship and sources

Also of interest are Collins’ conclusions about the sources and authorship of Genesis. Having discussed some versions of the documentary hypothesis, he gives a wealth of evidence to show that Genesis originated in the time of Moses (rather than in the period of the kings or even later, as modern scholars often suggest), and that Moses is the primary author of Genesis, and indeed of the entire Pentateuch – the first five books of the Bible. He further devotes a chapter to the communicative purposes of Genesis 1-4, drawing attention, among other things, to the possible relation between ancient-near-eastern stories of origins and the account of Genesis. He agrees with Gerhard Hasel’s well-known thesis that the Genesis account is in part a polemic against (or at least an alternative to and correction of) the Babylonian creation story. (For that interpretation see my series “Genesis 1 in Context,” *Clarion*, August 1, 15, and 29, 2003.)

World picture and worldview

Much has been written about the fact that the world picture of Genesis, and of the Old Testament as a whole, appears “primitive” compared to the one we get from modern science. We read, for example, of a moving sun and a non-moving earth, of the moon as a lamp instead of a reflector of light, of the sky as a “firmament,” and so on. According to critics this again poses a serious challenge to the Bible’s truth claims. Collins’ answer is twofold. Firstly, he reminds us that the Bible describes things not “scientifically” but as they appear to our eyes. In other words, it uses *phenomenological* language. We do the same. Even modern scientists will talk of a rising and setting sun, although they don’t believe for a moment that the sun moves around the earth. Another example of phenomenological description is the Hebrew word in Genesis 1:6-8 that is often translated as “firmament.” That word suggests that the sky is a hard canopy or vault, which is indeed what it can look like. Perhaps the first readers held that view, but that does not prove anything against the Bible’s truth value. The ancient world picture, including the ancient idea of physical cosmology, is not necessarily a part of the *message* being communicated.

Collins tells us – and this is the second part of his answer – to distinguish between world picture and worldview. The term world picture refers to a community’s shared experiences and to what people imagine the physical shape of the earth and the universe to be. A worldview, on the other hand, deals with questions of ultimate concern, such as those about the origin of the world, the existence of God, the nature and destiny of man. A world picture must be taken into account in order to communicate but is culture-bound and therefore temporary; a worldview does not have to be. It is quite possible, Collins remarks, that biblical statements reflect a *world picture* that is foreign to us – for example with respect to the shape and position of the earth or the nature of the moon or the sky – while at the same time communicating a *worldview* to which we still subscribe.

Length of the days and age of the earth

This issue divides not only secularists and Christians but is also a source of disagreement among believers themselves. Collins' main concern, as suggested, is to bridge the latter divide. I found this part of his work somewhat disappointing. An advocate of an "older" earth, he does not come with insights that are really new, and it is doubtful that he will convince people on either extreme of the controversy – that is, young-earth creationists on the one hand and theistic evolutionists on the other. That by itself does not of course disqualify his interpretation. Although he by no means answers every question, I can agree with much of what he says. But the expectation that his new methodology would open surprisingly new vistas in this particular area remains unfulfilled.

Collins positions himself as an adherent of the "analogical days approach," which, as he points out, was already held by earlier Reformed scholars, including the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck. According to this position the days are to be seen not as calendar days but as "God's workdays," whose length is not specified but which were probably much longer than the normal 24-hour day. As arguments against the "normal day" interpretation the author mentions, among other things, the "crowded" nature of the sixth day (as described in both Genesis 1 and 2) and the fact that the seventh day lacks the refrain that ends each of the previous ones ("and there was evening and there was morning, the nth day"). If the seventh day is not an ordinary day, he concludes, we may assume the same for the previous six.

He also comments on the genre of Genesis 1, which he describes as an "exalted prose narrative" rather than a scientific account. Referring to the refrain concluding each of the six days, he observes that God is presented here as a workman who goes through his workweek, takes his daily rest (the night between the evening and the morning) and enjoys his Sabbath rest. "To speak this way is to speak analogically about God's activity; that is, we understand what he did by analogy with what we do; and in turn, that analogy provides guidance for man in the proper way to carry on his own work and rest." Our following of God in his work and rest "anticipates one of the ways in which the Bible views the process of human moral formation: as imitating God." As so often in Scripture, God is described here *anthropomorphically* (that is, human characteristics are ascribed to him). Also elsewhere in the creation account God is presented in anthropomorphic language – namely in the verses that describe him as a potter or sculptor, forming man out of the dust of the earth, and in the statement that he "rested."

Other comments

Collins offers comments on various other aspects of the Genesis account. They include notes on the appearance of the heavenly lights on the fourth day, on man's being made in the image of God, on the meaning of the two trees in Genesis 2, on the way in which the woman's "desire" will be for (or against?) her husband, on the question whether animals were carnivorous (flesh-eating) before the fall (Collins thinks so, giving what I believe to be convincing reasons), and on the related question whether there was animal death before the fall. He also comments on the meaning of the phrase "according to their kinds" in the creation account, questions the idea that the word "kind" is the equivalent of the more technical term "species," and rejects the suggestion that the text, as young-earth creationism tends to assume, necessarily opposes the notion of new species developing from old ones.

Conclusion

Collins' book is well-written and not overly difficult, even for the non-theologian (although the other book I mentioned is indeed more accessible). Collins' chief contribution to the topic under discussion in the present series is his attempt to base his conclusions on biblical exegesis. True, he does pay attention to the claims of modern science, but that is not in itself objectionable. New scientific data can and do affect orthodox biblical interpretation – think, for example, of the case of Galileo (who came with scientific arguments to show that the earth moves around the sun, a theory that at first raised objections among many Christians but that we now accept). The danger to be guarded against, and which Collins does keep in mind, is to allow science to *dictate* biblical interpretation.

All this is not to claim that the book gives us the last word on every issue, or that it will satisfy every reader. I already questioned the novelty of the analogical view the author promotes and its universal acceptability among Christians. Objections can no doubt be raised against other aspects of his exegesis. Questions may also be asked about his advocacy of Intelligent Design, tentative though that advocacy remains. But then, to refer once again to Herman Bavinck's words of close to a century ago, the problems arising from modern science are such that not even a generation or an age may be able to resolve them. Collins' book has brought us a few steps further in a number of areas and for that reason deserves our attention.