

THE EFFECTS OF POETIC AND LITERARY STYLE ON THE INTERPRETATION OF THE EARLY CHAPTERS OF GENESIS

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The Problem

In the continuing attempts to understand science, the early Genesis chapters and the relationship of the one to the other, one of the factors that might be significant is that of the Semitic poetry and literary style in which Genesis is written. Specifically, if the early chapters of Genesis are couched in poetic style, what could this mean for understanding the accounts? Because it is poetry, can we "interpret" the language of Genesis in such a way as to bring it more into line with the present conclusions of science, as some evangelicals are doing? Or, can we be sure enough of what Genesis means that we can say to science, categorically, this or that conclusion of yours is unacceptable because as an item of natural revelation it is not in conformity with the written revelation?

I. IMPORTANT FEATURES OF SEMITIC POETRY

Several important features of Western poetry are missing from pre-Arabic Semitic poetry. It has no meter, neither accentual or syllabic. It does not use rhyme. It has no stylistic regularity that can be named, at any level. It manifests no regularity in the manner in which stichs (lines) may be combined to form sentences, that is, complete thought units. It manifests no regularity in the sequence of similarly combined stichs. Variation is the norm, not the exception. These poets felt under no constraint to abide by strict poetic codes.

One feature is important to Semitic poetry. It is the phenomenon of the repetition of thought in parallel stichs. Even here the norm is irregularity. The poet tells his story ornamented with a liberal, scattered sprinkling of paralleled thoughts. It is this recurring pattern of repetition of thoughts which gives the composition the character of poetry.

The poet has his form specialties. He uses acrostics. He inverts the words which are parallel to create a chiasmic effect. He "balances" a shorter line with a synonym of greater length, often called a ballast variant. He makes some use, a minor feature, of epistrophic and strophic structure. But none of these is basic or essential. Only thought paralleling is basic.

II. IS EARLY GENESIS POETRY?

The test is not the slight evidence of strophic structure with the repetition of the seven days. The test is not the mildly epic style. The only sure test is thought repetition in adjoining stichs. By this test the early chapters of Genesis do not qualify for the classification of poetry. True, some scattered verses are in this style, but not the majority. For this reason some have suggested a poetic substratum, and that this present version is composed from an earlier poem. Thus some of the poetry peeks through here and there, they say.

We cannot therefore solve our problem by saying that since this is poetry we are justified in interpreting it figuratively and can thus readily make it conform to a pronouncement of science that seems to be in conflict with it.

But this is not all. Early Semitic poetry does not use figures of speech for ornaments as extensively as we do in our western poetry. Our poetry is illuminated, made brilliant, by suggestive figures. Their poetry is for the most part in epic style, and epics tell plain stories about famous events or persons. The stories may be imaginative, but that which makes them imaginative is in the story and not in the figures

of speech with which the story is told. The ornamenting of the story is not by figures of speech, but by the clever selection of synonyms with which to repeat the thoughts in the parallels. The translator arrives at the meaning with the same lexicon he uses for prose. No list of figures is needed for the interpretation of this literature.

In the light of this, one would need specific evidence that a particular element in this account is a literary figure. This evidence should be of a philologic character. One can not assume the existence of a figure here or there merely to resolve a problem raised by some other discipline. Because it conveys theologic meaning is not sufficient reason for treating the words in some figurative sense only. One is not justified, as some are trying, in using the evidence of science as the basis for insisting that some of the language of early Genesis is figurative. This is most apt to be eisegesis, and eisegesis with material that itself awaits absolute verification.

The better way is to admit frankly to the problems. We should be content to await additional evidence for their solution rather than to read a solution into the text from another discipline. This latter course may put us in the unfavorable position of making the Bible say this today and that tomorrow.