

A Response to the Open Letter

By Shane Scott

For over a year I have been under attack by some brethren regarding the interpretation of the creation account revealed in Genesis. For the most part I have chosen not to respond. An article is now being circulated as an “Open Letter” addressed to me and several other brethren. Due to the nature of the charges made in this letter, and the publicity it has received, I feel that I must refute its allegations.

The letter makes this claim: "An advance copy of this article has been provided to brethren Colly Caldwell, Ferrell Jenkins, and Shane Scott..." The fact is that before I received this letter, the letter was sent to at least 61 other preachers, since that's how many signed it. And since there were others who received the letter but refused to sign it, who knows how many brethren all together obtained this letter before me. And that is "advance notice"? "Advance notice" would have been to send this letter **to me before anyone else was asked to sign it**. Did those asked to sign the letter do so under the impression that I had already received it?

Though the writers of the Open Letter lumped many targets together, I intend to respond only to the comments made about me. It is not my intention to speak for anyone else, including Colly Caldwell, Ferrell Jenkins, or Hill Roberts. Indeed, brother Robert's approach and my approach are distinct. Much of his writing has focused on harmonizing Scripture with science,¹ whereas my approach has been to harmonize Scripture with Scripture.

Some Background

These criticisms stem from an article I wrote in *Sentry Magazine* in which I argued that the best biblical interpretation of the days of Genesis 1 was that they were ages. Many comments have been made about this article by critics who do not know all of the facts about the article in question. Here are some pertinent facts:

- 1) It was written over five years ago.
- 2) It was written at the request of Ken Chumbley, who was editing a small section on evidences.
- 3) It was written as part of a point-counterpoint exchange in which I was asked to give my opinion.
- 4) A counterpoint article was written and printed on the page beside my article.
- 5) The counterpoint article was written by Greg Gwin, whom I suggested Chumbley should contact.
- 6) As I have stated on other occasions, I would not have written the article without the opposing view represented.²

No one who objectively reads that article could logically and justifiably draw any of the following conclusions:

- 1) **I employed some kind of unscriptural hermeneutical method.** I used the biblical principle of interpreting Scripture with Scripture.

- 2) **I was trying to reconcile Genesis with scientific theory.** I made no effort to introduce scientific evidence in my article. My focus was harmonizing Scripture with Scripture, not Scripture with science.
- 3) **I doubted God's power to create the world in six literal days.** God is omnipotent and could create the universe in one second, if He chose to. Not one syllable in my article questioned God's power.
- 4) **I attempted to compromise creation and evolution.** The very first paragraph of my article repudiated naturalistic and theistic evolution.

In my article I said the "days cannot be literal" and that they "must be ages." Some critics have latched on those phrases as out of line. But I believe that in the context of a point-counterpoint discussion, it is perfectly appropriate to argue a position forcefully from the force of the logical implications of what has been said. What I meant by this is that these conclusions are the logical consequence of the factors I raised in the article. Those statements should not be interpreted to mean that I think I have all the answers about this topic, or that I think my position is flawless, or that I believe anyone who disagrees with me is a heretic. In fact, I no longer feel the "day-age" interpretation is the best view, though I still believe there are many biblical problems with the literal day interpretation. Further, at the end of my article I allowed that the literal day view may be correct, though in my opinion it is not the best interpretation.³ I would not have written the article in *Sentry* unless I knew a "counterpoint" article would have been presented as well.

One writer has also brought out other statements I made nearly six years ago in study sessions where discussions took place on controversial subjects (Markslit). The purpose of Markslit, developed by Mark Copeland, was to provide a forum in which brethren could bounce ideas off of each other without fear of recrimination, or being written up. To confirm this you may email Mark Copeland at Mcopeland@AOL.com. It is a breach of confidence and ethical conduct to use statements from that setting against any participant, all of whom understood that such was not to be done.

A Parallel for the Principle Writers

There was once a time in which brethren could present alternative views of Bible topics without being identified as false teachers. In 1982, Dan King (the very first signatory in the Open Letter) debated Melvin Curry in the pages of *Truth Magazine* on the question of the meaning of *almah* ("virgin") in Isaiah 7:14. King took the view that this word did not have to be translated *virgin*, and should be translated *young maiden*. This view was certainly not the one held traditionally by brethren. In fact, many brethren considered such a view rank heresy. Editor Mike Willis clearly stated that the controversy surrounding Isaiah 7:14 had been somewhat of a watershed to divide modernists from conservatives.

And yet in that discussion Melvin Curry displayed the gracious spirit of brotherly love when he wrote: "**Dan is a promising young conservative scholar, and those who have not read a representative selection of his articles should be careful not to react too hastily to his remarks**" (*GOT* Nov. 4, 1982, p. 15). Brother Curry was kind enough to point out that just because brother King took a view on one passage different from the

traditional view, that he should not be rejected as a heretic. Such a spirit is missing from the Open Letter.

Further, when Mike Willis introduced the debate, he offered this hope: **"I would also like to commend these two brethren for their wholesome respect for each other and the high plain upon which the discussion was conducted. Theirs is an example which commends itself for all future controversy."** It was that example which I followed in the *Sentry* article, but brother Willis' wish for that discussion to be a model has been shattered by the spirit of this Open Letter.

It is only fair to ask brother Osborne and the other co-signers of the Open Letter if they agree with brother King that Isaiah 7:14 is not a direct prophecy of the virgin birth of Christ. Do they believe that brother King's view presents the most literal and reasonable understanding of Matthew 1:21-23? Are they tolerating error by having fellowship with brother King? Is it acceptable to join him in teaching on the subject of creation while disagreeing with him on a view that could lead to modernism? His views have been known since November 1982, and he continues as a staff writer for *Truth Magazine*. On what basis do these brethren logically and consistently criticize me, and President Caldwell for allowing me to work at FC, in the pages of *Truth Magazine* while not criticizing Mike Willis, Harry Osborne, Connie Adams, and James P. Needham for their continued association with Dan King?

The Premise of Instantaneous Miracles

The argument of the letter begins with the account of the healing of the paralytic (Mark 2). The implication drawn from this passage was **"that the miracle was (a) instantaneous, and (b) could not be explained by natural law. Brethren, if that reply is proper with regard to the miracle of Mark 2, the same principles must apply with respect to every miracle."** The next step in the argument is that God's work in creation must also follow the same pattern of instantaneous action unexplainable by natural law.

This extreme position is seriously flawed from a number of biblical perspectives. God could have created the entire universe and all that is in it in one moment, but He did not. Even those who take the literal day view must acknowledge that it occurred over a span of **six days, or 144 hours**. That is not instantaneous.

Second, in Genesis 2, the record indicates that the trees God made in chapter 1 were made over time, because the record says He "caused to grow every tree" (2:9). That is a process, not an instantaneous event.

Third, the definition of miracles as instantaneous, which the letter writers say **"must apply with respect to every miracle,"** does not apply to many Bible miracles. Does that definition apply to the flood? God could have deluged the world instantaneously, but He chose to flood the earth with rain for a period of 40 days and nights (Gen. 7:4). Or, consider the healing of the blind man in Mark 8:22-26. After Jesus initially laid hands on the man, he was not completely healed. He said, "I see men, for I am seeing them like

truss, walking about" (8:24). Then Jesus laid hands a second time, and the man "began to see everything clearly" (8:25).

Was the flood any less miraculous because God used 40 days of rain? Was the healing of the blind man in Mark 8 any less miraculous because it took place in stages? Would it be fair for me to allege that the signers of the Open Letter deny these events are miracles, since they do not meet the criteria that they insisted "**must apply with respect to every miracle?**" Brethren, we must never allow our zeal to join others in some cause lead us to take unsupported positions in defending our faith. I do not deny that most of God's miracles occurred instantaneously. But I do not understand how so many men signed their name to extreme statements that are not supported by sound scriptural hermeneutics.

My Work at Florida College

The letter also raises the issue of how I have dealt with this issue in my work at Florida College. The impression is left in the letter that I have actively promoted my particular views of Genesis in my classes. The charge that I stated the non-literal view as the preferred view in my class **is only half-true**. Only one of the men signing the letter has talked with me about how I have dealt with this in class, and for some reason, my clear explanation was distorted to cast me in a negative light.

Here are the facts. In my one lecture I present at FC on Genesis 1, I present four basic interpretations and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each. This is exactly how I was taught when I was at FC. **I only tell the students which view I prefer if I am directly asked**. So far out of four classes, only two have asked. If, on occasion, students ask me about these issues outside of the classroom, I endeavor to maintain impartiality, and I encourage them to study these issues for themselves.⁴ I have never "bombarded" others with my views, whether in the classroom, pulpit, or personal conversation.

Another charge is that since I mention Hugh Ross in a syllabus, and since Hugh Ross is a theistic evolutionist, "is this the same material recommended for students in Shane's classes?" This insinuation ignores the use of such bibliographies, not to mention my clear denunciation of theistic evolution. A syllabus may or may not contain a bibliography. I include one in all of my syllabi. In a bibliography, there will be many sources with which I disagree partially or completely. I cannot think of any source with which I concur totally except for the Bible. Many of the men who signed the letter have researched and written articles and books in which they include bibliographies. Are we to assume that they agree with every position of every source listed?

In addition to the "Open Letter," rumors have recently been circulated about how I deal with this topic on my exams. Some have charged that I ask my students to identify which view I take of Genesis 1. This is incorrect.⁵ On the exam in which I test the students over the material in Genesis 1, the questions I ask is this: "Choose one of the four interpretations of Genesis 1 and defend it." I do not ask my students what view I take, and I do not test my students over things I don't present in class. Further, they are not graded on the basis of which view they choose. They are graded on their ability to defend their own view.

A Lesson From History

W. W. Otey (1867-1961) was a gospel preacher who had a reputation as a great contender for the faith. Otey lived during the years of the initial publication of Darwin's theory, and was among the first brethren to criticize evolution. A staunch opponent of evolution, whether naturalistic or theistic, Otey nevertheless remained open to various possible interpretations of Genesis 1. Consider these statements:

From *Creation or Evolution* (Austin, TX: Firm Foundation, 1930)

"Then there is not the semblance of a contradiction between the Bible account of creation recorded in Genesis, and the fossils found in the racks [sic; rocks?]. The Bible account begins with the present order of plant and animal life now on earth. **Were it proved that the earth was peopled with plant and animal life millions of years before the appearance of the present order, it would in no way conflict with the record in Genesis.**" (58-59)

"And if it be argued that the progenitors of the present order of plant and animal life now on earth **were created a long period before men**, I would not waste time controverting the contention. That man has no ancestors such as fishes, reptiles and apes, is the vital question at issue." (104)

From *The Origin and Destiny of Man* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1938)

"The mode or process employed in forming the plants and bodies of animals is not stated. It matters not whether it was by a simple word of command or otherwise. The fact that the progenitors were fundamentally like their offspring to the present day, is the idea involved. **And if it be argued that the progenitors of the present order of plants and animal life now on earth were created a long period before man, the author would not waste time controverting the contention.** That man has no ancestors such as fish, reptiles and apes, is the vital question at issue." (123)

"If it were proven that the earth was peopled with plants and animals millions of years before the present order, **it would not in the least affect the Bible account of the creation of man.**" (124-125)

"They [evolutionists] emphatically deny the following fundamentals held by all creationists:

1. The inspiration of the Bible.
2. The creation of man in the moral image of God.
3. That man sinned and fell.
4. That Jesus was miraculously born of a virgin.
5. That his death in any way atoned for sin.
6. That he was raised from the dead.

7. That he will come again and raise all the dead.
8. That there will be any general judgment when the righteous will be rewarded." (169)⁶

From these statements it is clear that Otey did not believe that biblical orthodoxy demanded the literal day interpretation or a young earth.⁷ Lest Otey be accused of liberalism, I would encourage you to read a biography of Otey by Cecil Willis.⁸ According to Willis, Otey's book on evolution was commended as a volume that would "equip the young and inexperienced to defend their ground and give a reason for their belief and hope in God" (p. 258-259). When the biography was published, James P. Needham said of Otey in the introduction: "One cannot read this work [the biography of Otey] without observing very clearly the footprints of dedication, courage and a boundless love for God's truth and men's souls which W.W.Otey made upon the sands of time."⁹

Further evidence of Otey's conservatism was his opposition to the Revised Standard Version's translation of *almah* in Isaiah 7:14. In fact, Otey was so outraged by it that he wrote a book in 1953 called *Christ or Modernism*. Notice these comments by Otey:

"The prophecy [Isaiah 7:14], its fulfillment and the inspired record unite in declaring the virgin birth of Jesus. To deny it is to deny divine inspiration and all miracles, and to affirm that the Bible is of no higher authority than man." (8-9)

"Did the Holy Spirit speak through Isaiah when he made the prophecy, and did the Holy Spirit speak through Matthew when he recorded its fulfillment? Here the battle line is drawn. And there will be no truce sent or received and no armistice declared till Christ Jesus conquers the last foe." (34)

"None but God can know their motive [the motive of the RSV translators for their rendition of Isaiah 7:14]. But it is plain in regard to its effects on many readers. By implication it denies the inspiration of the Bible, and casts doubt on the virgin birth of Jesus, and gives support to their claims that Jesus was born of a natural father." (34)

"The immediate proof that the word 'almah' means virgin is the inspired declaration of the apostle Matthew (Matt. 1:23). To deny this is to assail instantly the inspiration of Matthew and the truth and veracity of his record." (128)¹⁰

These comments by Otey make it clear that it is possible to be a genuine conservative without insisting on the literal day view of Genesis.¹¹ Further, Otey's beliefs about the creation account represent what was the most widespread opinion of creationists generally,¹² and brethren particularly. Steve Wolfgang has documented this historical reality among brethren in his recent doctoral dissertation on creationism and scientific

issues in the Restoration Movement. This information is also available in his contribution to *A Tribute to Melvin Curry*, as well as tapes of his presentations at the 2000 Florida College Lectures.¹³

In view of these facts, it is hard to understand the hysterical nature of the attacks of certain critics in recent months. But their actions were actually predicted nearly 30 years ago. David Koltenbah was for many years a professor of physics and astronomy at Ball State University. He also contributed to *Truth Magazine*. In that paper, in November of 1970, he issued this warning about the views of the Creation Research Society which had been popularized in the book, *The Genesis Flood*:

"My purpose in writing, therefore, is to express a vague, and I hope groundless, fear that brethren by unqualified endorsement of the Creation Research Society may lead some younger writers and preachers to hold that orthodoxy requires acceptance of a particular view of geology which has in fact doubtful scientific validity and no particular Scriptural endorsement, at least in this writer's view. Worse still, if this occurs there may arise a tendency to tag any brethren who do not subscribe to a particular scientific theory about earth history with some name suggesting they are less than entirely faithful to Scripture." (p. 6)

"A trickle of dogmatism can grow to a tide of dogma in which are drowned true Christian liberty and the noble spirit of the Restoration Movement which 'speaks where the Bible speaks and remains silent where the Bible is silent.'" (p. 7)

Sadly, some preachers have fallen prey to the very mentality about which Koltenbah warned in *Truth Magazine* thirty years ago.

Conclusion

I believe that brethren have the right to question one another's teaching, but that they must do so as brethren. I do not believe the Open Letter reflects that spirit. It has more in common with the partisan world of politics than it does with the fellowship of those in the bond of peace. Further, I believe it displays the ever present danger of creedalistic thinking, which those who are truly committed to New Testament Christianity must shun.

Endnotes

¹ Dan King has just proposed his views of harmonizing the creation account with science in the July 6 issue of *Truth Magazine*.

² It is quite the opposite of my original intent for my article to be put into so many hands who might be influenced by it without the benefit of Greg's article as well.

³ Some have criticized me for including my article on my own website. In response to this criticism I would point out that I only put my article up after I began to be attacked. Many false rumors were being circulated about what I actually wrote, and I wanted

people to be able to see what I really said, along with Greg Gwin's review. Any other insinuations about why I posted my article are false.

⁴ I can only think of three times when students have come to me outside of class to ask about these issues, and in two of those cases the students were not even in my classes. They had heard about some of the attacks against me, and wanted to know what I believed.

⁵ In refuting this charge I am in no way impeaching the integrity of any of my students who may have remembered otherwise. The two students I know of who have incorrectly stated what was on the exam are both fine young people. I am sure it is simply a matter of remembering things incorrectly. I would be glad to send anyone a copy of the question on the exam to personally verify what I have said.

⁶ Notice that in Otey's list of fundamentals held by all creationists there is no mention of an interpretation of Genesis 1 or the age of the earth.

⁷ Ironically, one of the entries of support for the "Open Letter" on the *Watchman Magazine* website begins by touting Otey as a great defender of the truth against error.

⁸ W.W. Otey, *Contender for the Faith* (1964).

⁹ Needham signed the Open Letter attacking me for expressing views similar to Otey, whom he regards as a great man. For a recent example of Needham's views of Otey, see *Gospel Truths*, June 2000, p. 12.

¹⁰ In his debate with Melvin Curry in 1982, Dan King defended the very position that Otey assailed in *Christ or Modernism*.

¹¹ When I explained these kinds of facts to Harry Osborne, his response was that our faith is in God's word, not men. Yet Harry does not hesitate to use men who agree with him as authorities. In his published letter to Colly Caldwell, he said: "Out with faithful students and preachers of the Word like Connie W. Adams, James Hahn, Bill Reeves, Wayne Partain, Maurice Barnett and Bobby Witherington - in with the advocates of a new hermeneutic guided by scientific theories of the day." Could I not also say: "Out with venerable men like W. W. Otey, and in with new theories of insistence on only one interpretation of Genesis 1"? Similarly, Dan King recently used historical data to deny that his position on *almah* in Isaiah 7:13 is modernistic ("the charge that my view is a 'modernistic view' is ridiculous, given the fact that I believe exactly the same thing as Albert Barnes presented in his 1838 commentary on Isaiah.")

¹² For verification, see Ronald Numbers, *The Creationists*.

¹³ Here is Wolfgang's summary from his dissertation: "One item of personal curiosity for me before beginning this study emerged as a contrast to the diversity mentioned above. I speak of the nearly unanimous views of Restoration preachers and scientists who declined to demand or accept a 'young-earth' view of creation. Indeed, the list of those willing to tolerate, if not stipulate an earth millions of years old reads like a virtual Restoration 'Who's Who.' ... Thus, it would appear that any attempt by twentieth-century creationists within the Restoration Movement to achieve a young-earth orthodoxy will succeed only at the cost of declaring many of the movement's earlier leaders heretical on the question." *Science and Religion Issues in the American Restoration Movement*, p. 243.