

BIBLICAL CHRONOLOGY

Vol. III, No. 6

James B. Jordan, 1991

June, 1991

THE FRAMEWORK HYPOTHESIS

by James B. Jordan

Throughout history, the Christian Church has had to guard against the heresy of **gnosticism**. Gnosticism is not an ordinary heresy, because it does not manifest itself as a set of defined beliefs. Rather, Gnosticism is a tendency, a tendency to replace the historic facts of Christianity with philosophical ideas. Gnosticism is the tendency to dehistoricize the Christian religion. Gnosticism transforms history into ideology and facts into philosophy. Gnosticism tends to see religion as men's reflections about God and reality, instead of as God's revelation of Himself and His Word to men.

The great anti-gnostic creed of the Christian faith is the Apostles' Creed. The core of the Apostles' Creed is a rehearsal of historical events: "born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. The third day He rose again from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty." The reason the Creed recites these events is that the gnostic movements in the early Church tended to downplay or even to reject them. "It does not really matter if these things happened," said the gnostics. "What matters is the meaning, the truths, the great ideas we get from meditating on these things."

The gnostic tendency to convert historical events into mere ideas is very much alive in the evangelical Christian world today, and in my opinion is manifest in the so-called "framework hypothesis" interpretation of Genesis 1. The Framework Hypothesis converts the six days of Genesis 1 into Six Big Ideas. According to the Framework Hypothesis, the events recounted in Genesis 1 never happened; rather, Genesis 1 is simply describing the cosmic order using the literary device of six "days." Perhaps the most influential advocate of the Framework Hypothesis in theological circles is Meredith G. Kline.

The attractiveness of the Framework Hypothesis is plain to see: It enables us to have our cake and eat it too as regards modern science. Modern science says that the universe is much older than 8000 years, and that it came into being through "evolutionary processes" that do not resemble the events set out in Genesis 1. There is absolutely no evidence whatsoever for the modern scientific view. There cannot be, because the only possible evidence for an historical event is an eyewitness report. The modern scientific myth is based exclusively on a supposition, to wit: the way things seem to be right now is the way they have always been. It is an extrapolation based on questionable assumptions about present "processes." (For a discussion of "process" and "natural law" from a Biblical perspective,

positions of modern science, but to point to the dear meaning of Genesis 1. There is no way we can add to the Framework Hypothesis of Genesis 1 and still have an inerrant Bible.

It is interesting to note that the Framework Hypothesis has been thoroughly refuted over and over again, and yet it has more adherents today than ever before. G. C. Aalders of the Free University of Amsterdam pointed out in 1932 that (1) in the text of Genesis 1 there is not a single allusion to suggest that the days are to be regarded as a merely stylistic device, and that (2) Exodus 20:11 presents God's activity as a pattern for man, and this fact presupposes that there was a reality in the activity of God that man is to copy. As E. J. Young of Westminster Theological Seminary pointed out in his book *Studies in Genesis One* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Pres. & Ref. Pub. Co., 1984), no one bothered to answer Aalders. Young himself went on for fifty pages refuting the Framework Hypothesis, and to my knowledge nobody has tried to refute Young.

Recently, Kenneth Gentry has summarized the exegetical arguments against the Framework Hypothesis as follows: "(1) 'Day' is qualified by 'evening and morning' (Gen. 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31), which specifically limits the time-frame. (2) The very same word 'day' is used on the fourth day to define a time period that is governed by the sun, which must be a regular day (Gen. 1:14). (3) In the 119 instances of the Hebrew word 'day' (*yore*) standing in conjunction with a numerical adjective (first, second, etc.) in the writings of Moses, it never means anything other than a literal day. Consistency would require that this structure must so function in Genesis 1. (4) Exodus 20:9-11 patterns man's work week after God's original work week, which suggests the literality of the creation week. (5) In Exodus 20:11 the plural for the 'days' of creation is used. In the 702 instances of the plural 'days' in the Old Testament, it never means anything other than literal days." (Kenneth Gentry, *The Greatness of the Great Commission* [Tyler, TX: ICE, 1991], p. 9.)

We can add two other arguments to Gentry's. First, there are several other places in the books of Moses where we have seven "panels" of things. These seven-step passages cover the same seven aspects of creation as the seven days of creation, but without using the word "day." For instance, in Exodus 25-31, we find seven speeches of the Lord, telling Moses how to build the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle is an architectural model of the world. Each of God's seven speeches is introduced with the phrase "Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying," or some variant of this for

cle, corresponding to Day 3 in Genesis 1. The sixth speech (Ex. 31:1-11) appoints the man who will build the Tabernacle, corresponding to Day 6 when man was created. The seventh speech (Ex. 31:12-17) concerns the sabbath, which was Day 7. (For a full discussion of this and several other seven-section passages, see my paper, "The Tabernacle: A New Creation" [Tyler, TX: Biblical Horizons, Box 132011, Tyler, TX 75713; 1933], and also my book *Covenant Sequence in Leviticus and Deuteronomy* [Tyler, TX: ICE, 1989].)

Now, what is important for our purposes is that the book of Exodus does not say that God made these seven speeches to Moses on seven consecutive days. Moreover, there is no "literary device" of "days" employed in Exodus 25-31, or in any of a half-dozen similar passages, even though the same seven "cosmic features" are discussed. Clearly, if Moses had wanted to, he could have written Genesis 1 without saying anything about "days." The contrast between Genesis 1 and Exodus 25-31 shows that the "days" are *not* a mere literary device.

Second, the Framework Hypothesis has to hold that the events recounted in Genesis 1 never happened. Quite apart from the matter of "days," Genesis 1 makes a whole series of claims that the Framework Hypothesis says are false.

Let's be clear about this: We are discussing what the text claims happened. Genesis 1:7 says that an event happened in which God made a "firmament" and separated waters above the firmament from those below. The Framework Hypothesis says that this event never happened. According to it, all Genesis 1:7 means is that this configuration came into being as a result of the evolutionary process of God.

Genesis 1:9 says that God gathered all the waters on the earth into one place, and that the dry land appeared. The Framework Hypothesis says that as an event, this never happened.

Repeatedly throughout the chapter, the text claims that God said things. These are events. We might interpret Genesis 1 and suppose that since human beings were not on the scene, God did not "speak in audible tones. We might even say that these phrases mean that He "put forth His Word," and thus refer to the work of the Second Person of the Trinity. The point, however, is that the text claims that God did these things, *said* these things, as discrete actions. The Framework Hypothesis says that God never did these things, that no such individual acts ever occurred. According to the Framework Hypothesis, all Genesis 1 means is that God's Word (or "wordness") lies behind everything that came into being over the course of who knows how long a time. The Framework Hypothesis denies that

there be light," and another, different event in history when God said, "Let the waters teem."

To put it simply, Genesis 1 clearly claims that certain events took place, and the Framework Hypothesis says that those events simply did not take place. The Framework Hypothesis denies the specific claims of the text: The text as it stands is in error; these things never actually happened. All we are supposed to learn from the text, according to the Framework Hypothesis, is the idea that God made everything, and ordered it.

This is a very interesting way to read the Bible! Let's apply it to John 20. John 20 says that Jesus' body was not physically in the tomb on resurrection morning, and that He physically rose from the grave. But we "know" from modern science that dead people don't rise! Maybe John 20 doesn't really have to be taken with "wooden literalism." Notice, for instance, in verse 12 that two angels sat in the tomb, one at one end of the slab and one at the other. What this means is that the death of Jesus is the mercy seat where God meets with men, for in the Tabernacle two cherubim stood on either end of the mercy seat. Now that we have the idea from this verse, we no longer have to believe that it ever really happened, according to the interpretive methodology of the Frameworkers.

Or consider John 20:15. Mary Magdalene saw Jesus and thought He was the gardener, for the tomb was in a garden. Well, here is the new Eve, restored from her sin, encountering the New Adam in the new garden of the new covenant. That's the idea. But did she really see and touch the physical body of Jesus? Who knows, and who cares, asks the Frameworker. The point of the resurrection narratives is not to tell us about historical events, but to make us understand God's word to us, which is: "Don't worry; be happy!"

Now, I don't know any evangelical Frameworkers who would want to apply their methodology to John 20, but what is to stop someone else from doing so? Evangelical Frameworkers want to have both the events of John 20 as well as the theology. In fact, most of them would see that the theology of John 20 depends on whether the events really happened: If Christ did not really rise from the tomb, then His death cannot be our mercy seat, and He cannot offer Himself as our new Gardener-Husband. When it comes to Genesis 1, however, they want the ideas without the events.

Genesis 1 makes claims about historical events just as surely as does John 20. If the claims of Genesis 1 are in error, then there is no reason to think the claims of John 20 are true. If the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, then what it claims happened really happened, and that is just as true for the creation as it is for the resurrection.