

Accommodationism's Illusion of Solving Biblical Problems

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In his *PSCF* letter, "Concordism's Illusion That It Is Upholding the Historicity of Genesis 1-11",¹ Paul Seely claims that God accommodated his revelation to ancient cultural concepts which contradict historical / scientific facts. He even claims that "Jesus showed that he believed Scripture is sometimes accommodated to ingrained cultural concepts which are not merely scientifically defective, but which are morally defective (Matt. 19:8 / Mark 10:5)."

Seely charges creation science with "rejecting the overwhelming consensus of the best-trained scientists in the relevant sciences and substituting in its place private interpretations of the scientific data." In this I fully agree with him. But then he parallels that with charging "concordism... [with] rejecting the overwhelming consensus of the best-trained Old Testament scholars and substituting in its place private interpretations of the biblical data." Here he leaves objectivity behind.

He calls "concordists" those who try to understand the biblical texts in a way which concords with reality, respecting scientific facts and biblical texts as they stand, being hesitant to jump to conclusions of contradictions. Seely bases his unproven assumption of accommodation on his conviction that a biblical text allows for only one correct interpretation. He appeals to the authority of the majority (90 % in his argument) of "commentaries on Genesis by qualified Old Testament biblical scholars." Science no longer appeals to authorities, but discusses problems explicitly, until there is unanimity.

One commentary Seely recommended is Alexander Rofé's 1999 "Introduction to the Composition of the Pentateuch".² Rofé's approach is typical of source criticism, dissecting the texts into many fragments and completely rewriting Israel's history. Early Genesis chapters are claimed to be late copies of Mesopotamian myths. But making myths - even theologically refined - out of apparently historical narrative does not solve problems of interpretation, but sidesteps them. Many Old Testament scholars disagree with this approach.

We know ancient Hebrew from virtually nothing but the biblical texts themselves. A Hebrew concordance allows an inspection of all known usages of a given expression in all available contexts. But with rare expressions, it may become difficult to be sure about a "correct" interpretation, no matter how many commentaries agree. We may have to remain undecided between several possible interpretations - and they may not even be mutually exclusive.

This openness is what characterizes the harmonizing approach - vilified as "concordism". In fact it "allows both the Bible and the scientific data to freely say what they say" - a praise Seely bestows on his accommodationism only. Are Rofé and other source critics, in the tradition of Wellhausen, Bultmann etc., really allowing the Bible to freely say what it says? Are they not often pressing the text into the Procrustean bed of their own preconceptions?

Seely's caricature of "concordism" incorrectly assumes that the Bible is made to "teach science", even "modern science". But the only claim that is in fact made is the feasibility of an interpretation compatible with reality - although a text may allow other interpretations, as well. Why should a theory of biblical inspiration not allow for the possibility of God gently directing his prophets' thinking to choose formulations he - not they - knew are compatible with reality? Even if this reality covers scientific facts unknown to the prophets, the resulting texts would not explicitly teach such unknowables - or any science at all. It is not claimed, either, that the Bible provides accurate history in the modern sense, since its indications are manifestly incomplete. Compatibility with reality is sufficient. I agree with Seely that God delegated the discovery of science and history to humankind.

God gave the Bible for all times and all cultures, and he may have had his reasons for preventing avoidable offenses for later readers. This expectation of harmony cannot be proved, but it seems significant that no unambiguous case of explicit incompatibility with known facts has been documented. Accommodationism leads to unnecessary or even destructive offenses, particularly if moral accommodation is included. There is sufficient unavoidable offense in the cross of Christ.

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¹ Seely, P.H., *PSCF* 56 (March 2004), 75.

² Rofé, A., "Introduction to the Composition of the Pentateuch" (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999, ISBN 1-85075-992-8); personal communication by P.H.Seely. For my commentary on Rofé's book see my post of 25 Nov 2002 on "The Pentateuch dissected and revised" to the ASA internet discussion group, archived under <http://www.calvin.edu/cgi-bin/archive>.