

## DIVINE ACCOMMODATION AND BIBLICAL CREATION: CALVIN VS. MCGRATH

PETER M. VAN BEMMELEN  
Andrews University

In two recent publications, Alister McGrath cites John Calvin in support of divine accommodation in a theory of origins. In order to evaluate the validity of McGrath's use of Calvin, it is necessary, first, to look briefly at the concept of divine accommodation and its use as a hermeneutical tool.<sup>1</sup>

Other publications have drawn attention to the prominent role that the concept of divine accommodation has played in the history of biblical interpretation.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere I have argued that, while accommodation is found in all of God's dealings with the human race,<sup>3</sup> it is important to distinguish between true and false applications of this concept in biblical hermeneutics.<sup>4</sup> This article will focus on the use of accommodation as a hermeneutical tool for interpreting the account of the Creation of the world in six days as recorded in Gen 1.

In a historical survey of interpretations of the six days of creation, Jack Lewis has shown that from at least the first century A.D., Bible students have been divided concerning the nature of the days of Genesis.<sup>5</sup> The well-known first-century Jewish writers, Philo and Josephus, already exemplified this diversity; the latter understood the days of Creation to be literal days, while the former rejected a literal interpretation. According to Philo,

it is quite foolish to think that the world was created in six days or in a space of time at all. Why? Because every period of time is a series of days and nights, and these can only be made such by the movement of

<sup>1</sup>Alister E. McGrath, *Foundations of Dialogue in Science and Religion* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 125; idem, *Science and Religion: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 11.

<sup>2</sup>The most significant historical survey is found in Stephen D. Benin, *Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup>See Peter M. van Bemmelen, "Revelation and Inspiration," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 33.

<sup>4</sup>Peter M. van Bemmelen, "Divine Accommodation in Revelation and Scripture," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 9 (1998): 221-229.

<sup>5</sup>Jack P. Lewis, "The Days of Creation: An Historical Survey of Interpretation," *JETS* 32 (1989): 433-455.

the sun as it goes over and under the earth: but the sun is a part of heaven, so that time is confessedly more recent than the world. It would therefore be correct to say that the world was not made in time, but that time was formed by means of the world, for it was heaven's movement that was the index of the nature of time.<sup>6</sup>

God did not need six days to create the world; rather, Philo posits: "We must think of God as doing all things simultaneously."<sup>7</sup> The idea that God created all things at once, rather than in a period of six days, can also be found in the writings of early Christian writers, such as Origen (c. 185-c. 254) and Augustine (354-430). One reason why they opted for some form of nonliteral interpretation was the scorn and criticism heaped by opponents of Christianity upon the idea that God would use six literal days to create the world. Celsus (2d century A.D.), a pagan philosopher and author of the oldest literary attack on Christianity, entitled *On the True Doctrine*, sarcastically observed:

Look further at the creation story credited among them, where we have read that God banishes man from the garden made specifically to contain him. Silly as that may be, sillier still is the way the world is supposed to have come about. They allot certain days to creation, before days existed. For when heaven had not been made, or the earth fixed or the sun set in the heavens, how could days exist? Isn't it absurd to think that the greatest God pieced out his work like a bricklayer, saying, "Today I shall do this, tomorrow that," and so on, so that he did this on the third, that on the fourth, and something else on the fifth and sixth days! We are thus not surprised to find, that like a common workman, this God wears himself down and so needs a holiday after six days. Need I comment that a god who gets tired, works with his hands, and gives orders like a foreman is not acting very much like a god?<sup>8</sup>

Augustine, before his conversion to Christianity, had been a Manichaean for nine years. The Manichaeans rejected the OT, including the Creation of the world in six days. Augustine, even after his conversion, was never able to adopt a fully literal interpretation of the six-day Creation, although he struggled all his life to find a literal interpretation of Genesis that would answer the objections of the Manichaeans.<sup>9</sup> His major work on the subject, *The Literal Meaning of*

<sup>6</sup>Philo, *Legum Allegoriae* 1.2 cited in Lewis, 434-435.

<sup>7</sup>Philo, *De Opificio Mundi* 13 cited in Lewis, 435.

<sup>8</sup>Celsus, *On The True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians*, trans. R. Joseph Hoffmann (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 102-103.

<sup>9</sup>See, e.g., Roland J. Teske, "Introduction," in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 84, *Saint Augustine on Genesis*, trans. Roland J. Teske (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 3-4.

*Genesis*, is an exhaustive commentary on Gen 1 to 3. John Hammond Taylor, who provided a modern English translation with annotations of this work, makes an interesting observation on the title Augustine chose for his commentary:

A reader unfamiliar with Augustine's thought cannot progress very far in this work without being puzzled by the fact that he has called it a literal commentary. The days of creation, he suggests, are not periods of time but rather categories in which creatures are arranged by the author for didactic reasons to describe all the works of creation, which in reality were created simultaneously.<sup>10</sup>

Augustine, like Philo and others before him, was convinced that God created all things simultaneously. One of the arguments he presented in favor of this idea was a text in the apocryphal book Sirach, which in the Latin version reads: "He who lives forever created all things together" (Sir 18:1<sup>a</sup>).<sup>11</sup> Augustine was apparently not aware that the Latin was incorrectly translated here.<sup>12</sup> The ambiguity in the writings of Augustine and other Church Fathers can also be found in the writings of certain medieval scholars. On one hand, the idea was put forth that the world was created in six days; on the other, that everything had been created all at once.<sup>13</sup>

With the Protestant Reformers came a renewed emphasis on the interpretation of Scripture in its literal, grammatical, and historical sense. Martin Luther (1483-1546) stressed that "the literal sense of Scripture alone is the whole essence of faith and of Christian theology."<sup>14</sup> In this he was followed by other Reformers, including John Calvin (1509-1564). For this study it is of special interest to examine Calvin's view of the six days of Creation. In his comments on the expression "the first day" in Gen 1:5, Calvin rejects the idea that God created all things at once and that the six days of Gen 1 are a didactic device, as Augustine and others had taught. He states:

Here the error of those is manifestly refuted, who maintain that the world was made in a moment. For it is too violent a cavil to contend that Moses distributes the work which God perfected at once into six days, for the mere purpose of conveying instruction. Let us rather

<sup>10</sup>John Hammond Taylor, "Introduction," in *Ancient Christian Writers*, vols. 41-42, *St. Augustine: The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 2 vols., trans. John Hammond Taylor (New York: Newman, 1982), 1:9.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:150, 168, and *passim*.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 254, n. 69.

<sup>13</sup>Lewis, 449.

<sup>14</sup>Cited in Frederic W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, Bampton Lectures 1885 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1961), 327. See also Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 70.

conclude that God himself took the space of six days, for the purpose of accommodating his works to the capacity of men.<sup>15</sup>

Calvin does not deny that God could have created all things at once,<sup>16</sup> but he concludes that God deliberately created the world in six days “for the purpose of accommodating his works to the capacity of men.” Here Calvin uses the concept of divine accommodation to human capacity to explain the reason why God created the world in six days rather than all at once. Further, he explains that God “distributed the creation of the world into successive portions, that he might fix our attention, and compel us, as if he had laid his hand upon us, to pause and to reflect.”<sup>17</sup> He elaborates this point in his comments on the phrase “and God blessed the seventh day” (Gen 2:3). Here he explains that God rested on the seventh day, then blessed and sanctified that day for the same reason that he created the world in six days. Calvin writes:

I have said above, that six days were employed in the formation of the world; not that God, to whom one moment is as a thousand years, had need of this succession of time, but that he might engage us in the consideration of his works. He had the same end in view in the appointment of his own *rest*, for he set apart a day selected out of the remainder for this special use. Wherefore, that benediction is nothing else than a solemn consecration, by which God claims for himself the meditations and employments of men on the seventh day [emphasis original].<sup>18</sup>

Calvin sees the Sabbath rest following creation to be an accommodation on God’s part, who in this manner set an example for all humanity: “For God cannot either more gently allure, or more effectually incite us to obedience, than by inviting and exhorting us to the imitation of himself. Besides, we must know, that this is to be the common employment not of one age or people only, but of the whole human race.”<sup>19</sup>

It is, therefore, surprising that Alister McGrath, in his recent book *The Foundations of Dialogue in Science and Religion*, suggests that for

<sup>15</sup>John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2 vols., trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 1:78.

<sup>16</sup>Calvin is aware of the appeal by Augustine and others to the text in Sir 18:1, and points out that the “passage from Ecclesiasticus is unskillfully cited. ‘He who liveth for ever created all things at once,’ (Eccles. 18:1). For the Greek adverb *κουρή*, which the writer uses, means no such thing, nor does it refer to time, but to all things universally” (Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:78).

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 1:105.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 1:106.

Calvin “the biblical stories of creation (Genesis 1-2) are accommodated to the abilities and horizons of a relatively simple and unsophisticated people; they are not intended to be taken as literal representations of reality.”<sup>20</sup> This suggestion is repeated in his book *Science and Religion: An Introduction*, where he asserts that, for Calvin, “the phrase ‘six days of creation’ does not designate six periods of twenty-four hours, but is simply an accommodation to human ways of thinking to designate an extended period of time.”<sup>21</sup>

In view of what Calvin actually wrote in his commentary on Genesis, McGrath’s assertion must be judged a serious misreading of Calvin’s words. Nowhere does Calvin say that the six days of Creation in Gen 1 are an accommodation to designate an extended period of time. On the contrary, Calvin holds that God created the world in six days as an example for humans and rested on the seventh day as an example for the whole human race, thus accommodating himself to the capacity of his creatures. McGrath does not share Calvin’s concern, which was to refute the claim of the philosophers and Church Fathers that God created all things at once, i.e., Augustine. McGrath is, rather, concerned about the continuing dominance of “conflict” models in science and religion. We will now briefly consider this point.

McGrath’s books, *Foundations of Dialogue in Science and Religion* and *Science and Religion: An Introduction*, form the first installments of a larger project “envisaged as a series of works which aim to explore the relationship of the natural sciences and religions from a variety of standpoints—historical, philosophical, scientific, and theological.”<sup>22</sup> With this project McGrath intends to move beyond the still influential metaphor of a warfare or conflict between science and religion to a more productive climate of dialogue between the two. Obviously, the question of how the biblical account of Creation should be interpreted will occupy a prominent place in such a project. It is not possible, however, to discuss here the many facets of creation discussed by McGrath. The present discussion is limited to his emphasis on the significance of John Calvin and his use of accommodation in interpreting the Creation account of Gen 1 and 2.

In *Foundations of Dialogue in Science and Religion*, McGrath identifies three broad methods of biblical interpretation that emerged during the Patristic period and were developed and refined in the following centuries: (1) a *literal* approach, which argues that the passage in question is to be taken at

<sup>20</sup>McGrath, *Foundations*, 125.

<sup>21</sup>McGrath, *Science and Religion: An Introduction*, 11.

<sup>22</sup>McGrath, *Foundations*, 1.

its face value; (2) an *allegorical* approach, which stresses that certain sections of the Bible are written in a style that is not appropriate for a literal interpretation; and (3) an approach based on the idea of *accommodation*, which argues that revelation takes place in culturally and anthropologically conditioned manners and forms, with the result that the revelation needs to be appropriately interpreted. According to McGrath, the third approach “has been by far the most important approach in relation to the interaction of biblical interpretation and the natural sciences.”<sup>23</sup>

Not only does McGrath identify these three hermeneutical approaches, but he also gives a brief description of how each affects interpretations of the six days of Creation: “A literal interpretation of the first chapter of Genesis would argue that creation took place in six periods of twenty-four hours.” In his opinion this is a minority view in the history of the church. The allegorical approach, which was especially prominent in the Middle Ages, “regards the opening chapters of Genesis as poetic or allegorical accounts, from which theological and ethical principles can be derived; it does *not* treat them as literal historical accounts of the origins of the earth” (emphasis original).<sup>24</sup> The accommodation approach, although influential in the Patristic period, found its mature development in the sixteenth century. This approach argues “that the opening chapters of Genesis use language and imagery appropriate to the cultural conditions of its original audience; it is not to be taken ‘literally,’ but is to be interpreted to a contemporary readership by extracting the key ideas which have been expressed in forms and terms which are specifically adapted or ‘accommodated’ to the original audience.”<sup>25</sup> It is evident that McGrath considers the third approach most useful for interpreting the biblical account of Creation.

However, it is necessary to question McGrath’s description of the accommodation approach—especially in view of his appeal to Calvin’s use of this approach. While McGrath argues that, according to the accommodation approach, the language and imagery of the early chapters of Genesis are not to be taken literally, but adapted or accommodated to the cultural conditions of the original audience, Calvin argues that the six days are to be taken as six real days and that God created the world in this way as an accommodation to humanity. The difference is obvious. McGrath’s understanding of accommodation turns the imagery and language of Gen 1 into a teaching device for the original audience,

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 121.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 122.

something that Calvin had strongly rejected in the hermeneutical approach of Augustine and others.<sup>26</sup> We must, therefore, call into question the validity of McGrath's application of accommodation as a hermeneutical key to interpreting the six days of Creation as nonliteral.

While there is accommodation in the way God reveals himself to humanity and in the way he speaks to us in the Scriptures, this does not necessarily mean that the language of Genesis is not to be understood in a literal sense. Calvin believed that God did create the world in six days not because he could not have done it otherwise, but as an accommodation to his creatures. Calvin uses accommodation as a hermeneutical key not to deny the literal sense of a Creation in six days, but rather to affirm the literal sense of the Creation account.

In the final edition of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin reiterates his view, developing more fully the reason why God created in six days rather than simultaneously. He contrasts the biblical accounts of Creation with "the monstrous fables that formerly were in vogue in Egypt and in other regions of the earth," and refutes the

impious scoff . . . that it is a wonder how it did not enter God's mind sooner to found heaven and earth, but that he idly permitted an immeasurable time to pass away, since he could have made it very many millenniums earlier, albeit the duration of the world, now declining to its ultimate end, has not yet attained six thousand years.<sup>27</sup>

Calvin did not believe that the world had existed for millions of years; rather, he posited its age was actually less than six thousand years (this was prior to Bishop Ussher's similar calculation of the age of Earth). The idea that God could or should have created the universe innumerable ages before is nothing but idle curiosity to Calvin: "Through Moses God gave us a definite history of Creation in six days, 'for by this circumstance we are drawn away from all fictions to the one God who distributed his work into six days that we might not find it irksome to occupy our whole life in contemplating it.'<sup>28</sup> All of this is evidence of "God's fatherly love toward mankind, in that he did not create Adam until he had lavished upon the universe all manner of good things."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup>See the quotation from John Calvin referenced in n. 15 above.

<sup>27</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1:14:1; LCC 20:160. Quotations from the *Institutes* are taken from idem, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics, vols. 20, 21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).

<sup>28</sup>*Institutes* 1:14:2; LCC 20:161.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*; LCC 20:161-162.

It seems likely that Calvin would protest McGrath's use of accommodation to nullify the literal sense of the Creation story. Accommodation is a legitimate hermeneutical key, but it must be used in harmony with other principles of biblical interpretation.