

CAN WE EASILY DETERMINE THE "PLAIN, LITERAL SENSE" OF ALL PARTS OF GENESIS ONE?

By Dan Wonderly, May 1990

I am very aware of the dangers of allegorizing parts of the creation account, and of proposing various kinds of literary interpretations which are in effect a refusal to properly respect the Biblical text. We must accept the first chapters of Genesis as an accurate historical account of real events, in much the same way that we accept the other chapters of the Pentateuch. The reasons for not regarding the first chapters as poetical have been spelled out by many evangelical Bible scholars who possess a thorough knowledge of the Hebrew language. (For example, Edward J. Young, in Studies in Genesis One: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1964, p. 82-86 and 105.)

On the other hand, no Christian or other person has any grounds for saying that his understanding of either the first chapter of Genesis or of any other chapter of the Bible is absolutely perfect. So, knowing exactly what the "plain, literal sense" is, is not something which either the most accomplished Bible scholars or untrained laymen can agree upon. Even the first sentence of the Book of Genesis, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," conveys different ideas to different people, according to the specific meaning of "the beginning" which they think of, and according to what sense of time they have. And everyone should admit that he/she possesses no actual, innate way of perfectly understanding this sentence, since the succeeding sentences do not plainly state when the beginning was, and since some of the most sincere, informed Christians have disagreed upon it. Of course there are certain grammatical restrictions which reveal unmistakable meanings of parts of this sentence and of sentences which follow. For example, the subject-verb combination, "God created," tells us definitely who created, and asserts the fact that He did create. Similarly, in Genesis 1:12, the statement, "The earth (land) brought forth vegetation," is restrictive at least in showing us that it was the land, rather than the sky, which brought forth vegetation. So, we are not saying that all statements of this chapter can be interpreted in different ways. (That is a claim which only careless unbelievers make regarding the Bible.)

It is my conviction that a brief examination of how Christians understand and accept other parts of the Bible should help each of us to realize that there are definite limits on our ability to know what "the plain sense" of every part of Genesis one is. For example, when we see how poorly we do at understanding and obeying some of the commands of Jesus Christ we should realize that perhaps we are also doing poorly at understanding some parts of the creation account and of other parts of the Bible. Some examples are given below. The great majority of evangelicals, including young-earth creationists, do not accept and practice the "plain sense" of the following commands of Christ:

Matt. 6:19-21 "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven...."

Matt. 8:22 "Follow me and leave the dead to bury their own dead." (There have been various explanations of what Christ meant by this statement, but so far as I know, none of them recommend that we accept it in its literal meaning.)

Matt. 18:8-9 "If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better to enter life maimed or lame than with two hands or feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it from you; it is better...."

Matt. 23:9-10 "Call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ."

Luke 3:11 "He that has two coats let him impart ($\mu\epsilon\tau\alpha\delta\acute{\epsilon}\tau\omega$, aor, imperative, active of $\mu\epsilon\tau\alpha\delta\acute{\epsilon}\sigma\omega\mu\iota$) to him that has none." (It is interesting that several recent translators have been so disturbed about this that they have "watered down" the meaning of $\mu\epsilon\tau\alpha\delta\acute{\epsilon}\sigma\omega\mu\iota$ to merely mean "to share.")