

REFLECTIONS ON "PRIMEVAL HISTORY"
AND VAN TILL'S HERMENEUTICS*

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Since the nineteenth century, German commentaries on Genesis have used the title *Urgeschichte* to cover chapters 1-11 as the first major sub-division of the book.¹ Biblical scholars have adapted this widespread usage to other languages, so that we see these chapters referred to as *urhistorie* in Danish,² *oergeschiedenis* in Dutch,³ and *oerskiedenis* in Frisian.⁴ In the case of English, the German term is usually represented as "primeval history,"⁵ although we also find the renderings

*Readers should be alert to the fact that this article pursues one narrowly focused element in the so-called "creation-science debate," and therefore should not be read as constituting Mid-America Reformed Seminary's institutional judgment regarding this debate.

¹See for example K. Budde, *Die biblische Urgeschichte* (Gen. 1-12,5) (1883); W. Zimmerli, *Die Urgeschichte, 1. Mose 1-11* (Zürcher Bibelkommentar; Zurich: Zwingli, 1943); D. Arenhoevel, *Ur-Geschichte: Genesis 1-11* (Stuttgart: KBW Verlag, 1970); and Cüsemann, "Die Eigenständigkeit der Urgeschichte: Ein Beitrag zur Diskussion um den 'Jahwisten,'" *Die Botschaft und die Boten. Festschrift für Hans Walter Wolff zum 70. Geburtstag* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981) 11-29; as well as the standard German commentaries on Genesis. The term *Urgeschichte* was used in connection with the early chapters of Genesis already in J.G. Eichhorn, *Urgeschichte* (1793), but referred there only to Gen. 1-3, not Gen. 1-11; see H.J. Kraus, *Geschichte der historischkritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments von Reformation bis zur Gegenwart* (Neukirchen: Verlag der Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins, 1956), 136-140.

²See C. Skovgaard-Petersen, *I Vaarbruddets Tegn* (Copenhagen: Lohse, 1938), 67.

³The Dutch term was already used in the circles of the Free University in the early part of the twentieth century; see "Een episode uit het leven van een oriëntalist en oudtestamenticus aan de Vrije Universiteit," in *In Rapport met de Tijd: 100 Jaar Theologie aan de Vrije Universiteit* (Kampen: Kok, 1980), 81. See also G.C. Berkouwer, *De Heilige Schrift II* (Kampen: Kok, 1967), 303, 305, and *Groot Nieuws Bijbel: Vertaling in omgangstaal* (Haarlem: Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap, 1983), 5.

⁴See for example the introduction to the Pentateuch in the recent Frisian translation of the Bible, *Bibel, út de oarspronklike talen op 'e nij yn it Frysk oerset* (Amsterdam/Boxtel: Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap, 1978) 13: "de hst. 1-11 behannelje de oerskiedenis."

⁵So already in J. Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1910), xxxiii, 1.

"primal history,"⁶ "primordial history,"⁷ and "primitive history."⁸ The term gives a handy capsule formulation of the content of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, which do indeed describe the earliest history of the world and mankind, before the focus narrows to the history of Abraham and the chosen people.

Things are not quite as straightforward and innocent as they appear, however. Since the German word *Geschichte* can mean both "history" and "story," it is not clear whether *Urgeschichte* refers to fact or fiction. Indeed, for most German biblical scholars the *Urgeschichte* of Genesis 1-11 is more "story" than "history." Accordingly, the English translation of Claus Westermann's great German commentary on Genesis appropriately renders *Urgeschichte* as "primeval story"⁹ "story of primeval events."¹⁰ It is against this background that we must understand Ludwig Koehler's remark about the account of the Fall in Genesis 3, namely that it "is intended as history, not *Urgeschichte*,"¹¹ to which he adds this explanation:

The so-called theological concept *Urgeschichte* conceals only the one simple fact that something is regarded no longer as historical event but, contrary to the intention of the Bible, as merely psychological truth.¹²

It is therefore hardly surprising that German-speaking biblical scholars of conservative persuasion have been suspicious of the term *Urgeschichte*, since it is often associated with the denial of the historicity of Genesis 1-11.¹³

⁶E.g., C. Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary* (Text and Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 1-3.

⁷E.g., the introduction to the Pentateuch in *The Jerusalem Bible: Genesis sets the history of the ancestors in a background of primordial history.*

⁸E.g., Alexa Suelzer, *The Pentateuch: A Study in Salvation History* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), 24: "The primitive history of Gen. 1-11 stands at the head of the Pentateuch."

⁹C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11* (tr. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), ix, 3, 63.

¹⁰C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 1, 2, 6.

¹¹L. Koehler, *Old Testament Theology* (tr. A.S. Todd; London: Lutterworth, 1957), 177.

¹²Koehler, *Old Testament Theology*, 250 (note 144).

¹³See K. Cramer, *Genesis 1-11: Urgeschichte?* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1959). Cramer points out that the first section of Genesis is often regarded as a fable, and adds: "Als solche bekommt sie den suspekten Namen 'Urgeschichte'" (60).

The situation is different, however, with the English term "primeval history" and its variants. Though it is a translation of the German *Urgeschichte*, it does not have the same ambiguity as the German original. Instead of allowing for the meaning "story," the English term speaks unambiguously of "history." Primeval history is *history*, and is therefore a term that is widely used by conservative biblical scholars. This point is amply illustrated in the works of such scholars as Derek Kidner,¹⁴ R.K. Harrison,¹⁵ Merrill Unger,¹⁶ Gordon Wenham,¹⁷ Henry Morris,¹⁸ and Victor P. Hamilton,¹⁹ as well as the NIV Study Bible.²⁰ In the context of English-speaking biblical scholarship, there is little reason to question the propriety of the term "primeval history" to designate the first eleven chapters of Genesis.

Against this background it may at first glance appear puzzling that within the Christian Reformed Church it has become controversial in recent years to refer to Genesis 1-11 as "primeval history."²¹ The reason is not far to seek, however, since "primeval history" was an important concept in the controversial book by Calvin College professor Howard Van Till entitled *The Fourth Day*.²² Consequently, it will be useful to take a closer look at how "primeval history" functions in his argument.

¹⁴D. Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentary; London: Tyndale, 1967), 42-43.

¹⁵R.K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 496.

¹⁶M.F. Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Handbook*. Revised by Gary N. Larson (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 29.

¹⁷G. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (WBC 1; Waco TX: Word, 1987), xxii, xxxiii, xxxix, xli, xlii, xlv, etc.

¹⁸H. M. Morris, *Remarkable Record of Job. Ancient Wisdom and Scientific Accuracy of the Amazing Book* (Santee, CA: Master Books, 1988), 23.

¹⁹Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-19* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 103.

²⁰*The NIV Study Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1985), 2: "The first five sections [of Genesis] can be grouped together and . . . can be appropriately called 'primeval history' (1:1-11-26), sketching the period from Adam to Abraham."

²¹See for example the *Agenda of Synod 1988* of the Christian Reformed Church, in which numerous overtures raise the question of "primeval history" (e.g., Overtures 34, 38, 46-48, 53, 58, 60-61).

²²Howard J. Van Till, *The Fourth Day: What the Bible and the Heavens are Telling Us about the Creation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

As we have seen, it is common in the world of biblical scholarship to designate Genesis 1-11 as "primeval history." Van Till borrows this usage, but appears to give it an interpretation which is quite idiosyncratic. It is important to note that for him "primeval history" is a *genre* designation. He writes that the Bible "employs such genres as poetry, parable, allegory, story of origins, and primal history," and adds in a note: "The terms 'primal history' and 'primeval history' are commonly used to identify the genre of Genesis 1-11" (65). It should be pointed out here that these statements are rather misleading. The study of the genres or literary forms of the Bible (commonly known as "form criticism") is a highly developed sub-discipline which recognizes a wide range of different genres, but "poetry" and "primeval history" are not among them.²³ When biblical scholars speak of "primeval history," they generally use this as a title or heading to describe the *contents* of Genesis 1-11; Van Till uses it to refer to the literary *form* of these chapters.

It should also be noted that for Van Till all the material contained in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, specifically including the creation account of Genesis 1, belongs to this putative genre "primeval history." Consequently, he states that "an interpretation that fails to recognize that the genre of Genesis 1 is primeval history will fail to respect the diversity of Scripture's literary forms, each requiring its own unique interpretive methodology" (92). It is ironic that Van Till should make such a claim, for it would seem that he himself, by treating all of Genesis 1-11 as a single literary genre, is not respecting the diversity of Scripture's literary forms. Commentaries generally agree, for example, that God's curses in Genesis 3:14-19, Lamech's song in Genesis 4:23-24, and the Table of Nations in Genesis 10 each represent a different literary genre. As for the genre of the creation account in Genesis 1, there is a great diversity of opinion among commentators on this question (proposals include "history," "myth," "legend," "saga," "report," etc.), but "primeval history" has not been suggested before. By employing "primeval history" as a form-criticism category which applies to all of Genesis 1-11, Van Till seems to be redefining the commonly accepted meaning of both "primeval history" and "genre."

²³See for example Gene M. Tucker, *Form Criticism of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), and John H. Hayes, ed., *Old Testament Form Criticism* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1974).

In order to appreciate fully how the concept of "primeval history" functions in Van Till's argument, it is necessary to put it in the context of his "vehicle model of the Bible" (14), which distinguishes "vehicle," "packaging" and "contents," and equates "genre" with "vehicle." Using the analogy of a package sent from one person to another by means of a vehicle (such as a truck), Van Till explains that the message or teaching of a particular portion of the Bible is like the contents of the package. This is to be sharply distinguished from the vehicle and packaging. The vehicle corresponds to the literary genre (for example "expository discourse" or "poetry"). As for the packaging, its equivalent in literature is what Van Till describes as follows:

the specific story or account of an event; the particular symbolism used in a poem; the specific culture patterns that form the context of commentary or instruction or description (15).

Other phrases used to describe packaging are "specific story, symbols, etc." (15), and "the specific event, account, or story as it has been conveyed to us by a particular literary genre, such as chronicle, epic, or parable" (18).

Now biblical interpretation, according to Van Till, consists of two operations: first we must distinguish the above-mentioned three categories, and then we must "extract the contents from both the vehicle and the packaging" (18). The latter is the crucial procedure, also described as "separating the contents (the trustworthy teachings of God) from the vehicle and the packaging" (15).

Since distinguishing and separating the three categories is so crucial in Van Till's hermeneutics, it is unfortunate that his distinctions are not as clear as they might be. It is probably safe to say that "contents" and "vehicle" correspond to *what* is said as opposed to *how* it is said (the traditional distinction between content and form), but the "packaging" category seems to straddle this conventional division, since symbolism would normally be classified with form, and "specific event, account or story" would normally fall under content, at least in the case of chronicle or epic. Moreover, it is not clear what is meant by the contextual "cultural patterns," or how they are to be understood as part of the same "packaging" category.

Our best guide to what Van Till means by his categories are the exegetical examples which he gives. In the case of Psalm 23, the contents or message is God's love and care for us, the vehicle is "lyric poetry," and the packaging is its "pastoral language—the metaphor of

a benevolent shepherd caring for his sheep" (15). Leaving aside the question of whether Psalm 23 is properly called lyric poetry,²⁴ we may wonder why a distinction is made here between that poetry and the imagery or symbolism which it uses. Both would seem to belong to the literary form of the psalm. The example of Psalm 23 thus does little to remove the ambiguity of Van Till's basic hermeneutical categories.

The ambiguous status of the category "packaging" is also evident when we see it applied to the first eleven chapters of Genesis. The "contents" here is the message concerning the "qualities of God, humanity and nature" (82), also expressed as "their identity, their character and their relationship" (82). The vehicle as we have seen, is the newly-coined genre of "primeval history," and the packaging consists of narrative, that is the stories which it contains (82). Van Till puts it all in a nutshell when he writes: "The stories serve as the 'packaging' that contains the message content conveyed by the vehicle of primeval history" (82). These stories of Genesis 1-11, "stories of events and actions carried out by God, humanity and nature" (82), are meant to be taken as illustrative, they illustrate truths, "eternal verities," about God and the world. We miss the point if we insist on knowing "whether the events actually happened just as they are reported in the narratives" (82).

One effect of placing the stories of Genesis 1-11 in the category "packaging" is therefore to separate them from the religious message or teaching of these chapters, and to class them with literary forms (vehicle) and symbolism (also packaging) as elements of the biblical material from which the contents must be extracted. Since in one formulation Van Till also includes "event" among the elements of the packaging (18: "the specific event, account of story"), the question arises whether he also makes a clear separation between the theological point (message, teaching) of the "stories" of Genesis 1-11 and their event-character or historicity.

On the one hand Van Till treats the concern for the event character of these primeval stories as a typically western concern which misses the point of the Hebrew narrative (82), and argues that these stories are similar to parables (83). He also repeatedly contrasts the "primeval narrative" with "actual history," and states that primeval history "is

²⁴In any case, poetry is not a genre designation. Since Gunkel, most form critics have identified the genre of Psalm 23 as a "psalm of confidence" (*Vertrauenspsalm*). See H. Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction* (tr. T.M. Horner; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 35, and Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (WBC 19; Waco TX: Word, 1983), 204.

not to be taken literally" (83). On the other hand, he writes that primeval history is unlike parable in that it "does refer to a historical past with a character essentially the same as that illustrated by the narratives" (83).

This last statement, which looks as though it might be a qualification of Van Till's overall tendency to downplay the historicity of the "primeval narratives," is unfortunately rather obscure. Primeval history does "refer to a historical past," but this is qualified by the phrase "with a character essentially the same as that illustrated by the narrative." This crucial qualifier is grammatically ambiguous, because it is not clear whether the antecedent of "that" is "historical past" or "character." On either reading, however, the phrase does little to affirm the historicity of the past to which primeval history refers, since Van Till has just told us that what is "illustrated of the narrative" is not what happened, but "eternal verities" about God, man and the world. Within the context of Van Till's argument in *The Fourth Day*, it is anything but clear that he is affirming the event-character of the stories of primeval history.²⁵

In the light of the foregoing it comes as no surprise that in Van Till's view the creation account of Genesis 1, which is the biblical passage of greatest interest to him in his overall discussion of the relation of astrophysics to the Bible, really says nothing about how the world began. The specific details of the creation account, such as the pattern of six days, and their chronology, belong to the packaging (84) and have nothing to do with the teaching of this chapter, which is simply that God is the Creator and the world is His creation. This basic content is kept separate from the details of the packaging and from the vehicle of the putative genre of "primeval history."

The conclusion to draw from all of this is twofold. In the first place, it is necessary to make a clear distinction between "primeval history" as used by biblical scholars, and as used by Van Till in *The Fourth Day*. There is nothing suspect or objectionable about the term itself, and Van Till's unusual use of this expression is something of an aberration. In the second place, "primeval history" as used by Van Till is not only idiosyncratic but also obscure and ambiguous, especially on

²⁵In subsequent statements Van Till has made it clear that he does affirm the event-character of the early chapters of Genesis. Our analysis does not mean to call that affirmation into question, but rather to show that it does not clearly follow from Van Till's argument in *The Fourth Day*.

the crucial point of the historicity of Genesis 1-11. Since so much depends on this point, it is best to reject firmly Van Till's argument with respect to "primeval history."