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Carmichael, Calum M.

The Story of Creation: Its Origin and Its Interpretation in Philo and the Fourth Gospel

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With this erudite and stimulating little book the author, well known for his monographs on the origins of Law in the Hebrew Bible, has partly moved into a new field. In the first and longest chapter he argues that the Priestly creation account in Genesis 1 was written as a response to the account of the making of the golden calf in Exodus 32. This is shown, *inter alia*, by the way that it climaxes in the institution of the Sabbath. Whereas Pharaoh had disallowed the children of Israel a festival, Aaron gave them a festival, but it was of the wrong kind. A need was thus felt to set out a creation account that honored the right God and instituted the right festival, Shabbat.

The remainder of the book, however, moves to the NT. Carmichael argues that our understanding of the first five chapters of John's Gospel will be deepened if we recognize that its author presents them as a reinterpretation of the seven days of creation in Genesis 1. In his second chapter he outlines the principles of John's understanding of Scripture that lead him to portray the first stages of Jesus' life in these terms. He posits, citing C. H. Dodd in support, that we can understand John's method by comparing the way that Philo of Alexandria undertakes his allegorical exegesis. John may not have known about Philo, but he certainly knew Jewish thought that proceeded along similar lines. The remaining seven chapters examine seven pericopes of the Gospel, from 1:15 to 5:47. In each it is argued that we will understand the contents better if we realize that John is molding his material to fit into a scheme of the seven days of creation. For example, the miracle that takes place on Cana is to be read in terms of the creation on the third day. In both cases water and fertility are central themes. "In the first five chapters of his Gospel, Johannine historical reporting is an allegorization of the creation story, just as Philo's interpretations of Genesis 1 are primarily allegorical" (p. 37).

As so often in scholarly work, method is all. First there is the mixture of literal and allegorical method attributed to John just outlined. Equally important, however, is the method used by the modern scholar himself, which proceeds as follows. The text is first problematized. This is hardly difficult to do in the case of such a difficult, partly symbolic, partly literal narrative such as John's Gospel. It is then shown how acceptance

of the hypothesis, that is, a reading in terms of the days of creation, allows the problems that have been raised to be resolved. A remarkable coherence of disparate details ensues. Everything falls into place.

If this study were intended as a post-modernist interpretation of the Gospel in terms of a theory of intertextuality, Carmichael's chapters would make fascinating reading. But this is not his claim. He postulates hitherto unrecognized influence of the creation account on the way that John records and structures his account of Jesus' life and ministry. The claim is thus, as far as I can see, ultimately about authorial intent. The key is recognition of the evangelist's method as practiced in its first-century context (see the last sentence of the book, p. 124). This is the basis for the many links that our modern scholar perceives between Genesis and the Gospel in the text that we read.

I do not think that the thesis put forward is a priori impossible. After all, John's prologue clearly points to the Genesis account (but falls outside Carmichael's scheme). The proof of this pudding, therefore, is above all in the eating. In spite of my admiration for the author's considerable learning and ingenuity, I found myself unconvinced that the subtext in terms of the seven days in Genesis as hypothesized helps us to understand the Gospel text better. My chief reason for reaching this conclusion has again to do with method, both on the part of the ancient writer and the modern scholar. In the case of the former, we should recognize that if John wished to interpret the events of Jesus' life as he saw them in terms of a predetermined scheme (e.g., the creation story), he also as an author had a duty to make sure that scheme was conveyed to his readers. In my view, the associations that Carmichael recognizes in the text can be read *into* it, but they do not emerge clearly enough *from* the text to allow the reader consistently to draw them. An example will make this clear. When John the Baptist speaks of himself as the "friend of the bridegroom" who rejoices greatly in John 3:29, Carmichael argues that this has to be read against the background of the fifth day of creation, on which the fish and birds are created and commanded to be fruitful and multiply. According to our author, reproduction is also the main point of John the Baptist's self-description just mentioned. How can we deduce this? Because, we read, the context mentions baptism, which has to do with new birth. The reference to Jesus' increasing and the Baptist's own decreasing (v. 30) also suggests prospective offspring for the newly-wed couple. My objection is that these clues are simply not strong enough and clear enough to indicate to the reader that the background of the fifth day of creation is assumed. As for my problem with the modern scholar's method, this can be summarized as follows. Others may disagree, but in my view it is not sufficient merely to outline the evidence that fits one's own interpretation. It is also necessary to adopt a wider perspective and show how the interpretation put forward makes better sense of the work in its entirety. Carmichael's interpretation is a relentless piling up of details that corroborate his thesis. But the reader gets no idea of how this reading coheres with the intent of the Gospel as a whole. This would require a longer and more comprehensive book, but a book that might ultimately become more convincing.

I conclude with a brief word about the use of Philo to understand John. The reference to the Alexandrian exegete and philosopher in the title of the book is rather misleading. Philo plays but a minor role in the argument as a whole. Carmichael regularly points to parallels in the way that Philo reads the creation story, and these are meant to strengthen his argument on the method of the evangelist. To my mind, however, the resemblances are mostly superficial. Philo and John are doing very different things. John is not an exegete and philosopher like Philo but is trying to make sense of a life, the events of which revealed the true light that enlightens everyone. A truer comparison would be with Philo's lives of the patriarchs and Moses. In actual fact, strange as it may seem, Philo scarcely allegorizes the account of Genesis 1 (it is excluded from his two series of allegorical commentaries). In *De opificio mundi*, to which Carmichael refers most, there is a considerable amount of number symbolism, but no allegorical interpretation involving the life of the soul. Finally I am puzzled by the interpretation of one passage which is repeated no less than four times (pp. 62, 94, 97, 119). At *Opif.* 15 Philo writes: "To each of the days he distributed some of the sections of the universe." I take this to mean that the writer spread the creation of the various parts of the cosmos out over the five days of creation (excluding the first). Philo takes this to be a literary device. Carmichael interprets the sentence to mean that on each of the days features of the creations on the other days are present. I do not see how the text can bear this meaning.