

LITERATURE REVIEWS

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A SCIENTIST'S ATTEMPT TO PLAY THEOLOGIAN

IN THE BEGINNING... 1981. Isaac Asimov. NY: Crown Publishers, Inc. 234 p.

Reviewed by Jerry Bergman, Montpelier, Ohio

Isaac Asimov, probably the best-known science fiction writer today, has produced over 300 fiction and non-fiction books on almost every area of science and literature. Asimov's writing talents are legend, running the topical gamut from *Still More Lecherous Limericks* (for sale only to adults over 21) to *Guide to the Bible* (2 volumes). In addition to being prodigious, his writings are engaging and concise.

In the Beginning was written for the high-school or undergraduate-level reader. It is readable and flowing, although at times somewhat condescending to religious persons. *In the Beginning* is a verse-by-verse commentary of Genesis and, although it contains much good information, it is unfortunately rather superficial. No references or bibliography are given.

Asimov accepts uncritically the assumptions and conclusions of liberal scholars as, for example, the idea that the Pentateuch is a scissors-and-paste job of materials from four separate sources. He presents this "JEPD theory" without ever acknowledging the many criticisms against it. For example, the Religion section of *Time* (December 7, 1981) reported that a five-year computer study found that Genesis is more likely the work of a single writer and that the JEPD theory, which has hardened into liberal orthodoxy, must be "rejected or at best thoroughly revised." This conclusion came from Yehuda Radday of Haifa's Israel Institute of Technology who, according to *Time*, earned wide acclaim for his computer analysis of other books of the Bible — Judges, Zechariah, and Isaiah. Asimov should acknowledge such studies.

The tone of Asimov's book is set on the first page with such statements as "Against these strong, unwavering and undeviating beliefs [referring to those who accept the Bible as God's Word], the slowly developing views of scientists have always had to fight." This superficial oversimplification

evidences little knowledge of the history of science. Sometimes Asimov is misleading. In his introduction he describes the purpose of his book:

[It] does not argue one way or the other. It offers no polemics. It merely considers the verses of the Bible, line by line and, indeed, word by word, discusses the content and meaning, and compares them with the scientific view that pertains to the passage (p 1-2).

As Asimov later admits, however, his book does no such thing. Rather than being objective and unbiased as the above statement promises, his purpose seems clearly to be persuasion of his readers that, though having historical value, the Bible merely reflects the unscientific beliefs of the ancient Hebrews.

Yet, Asimov praises the Genesis account:

... the Biblical writers ... labored to produce something that was as reasonable and as useful as possible. In doing so, they succeeded wonderfully. There is no version of primeval history, preceding the discoveries of modern science, that is as rational and as inspiring as that of the first eleven chapters of the Book of Genesis (p 3).

One interesting comparison Asimov notes is that the Scriptures teach that the earth was at one time “without form and void” (disordered) which corresponds, interestingly, with the modern theory that the solar system was formed from a vast cloud of dust and gas. As another example: whereas most scientists formerly believed that the universe has always existed, Asimov points out that most scientists now believe that the universe had a definite beginning as the Bible states. He immediately dismisses this point of agreement as being superficial and trivial, given the discrepancy in attitudes towards the age of the earth (p 10).

He acknowledges that while religionists have had their squabbles over interpretation of the Bible and religious points, likewise science too has seen its share of arguments, disputes and polemics. A difference, Asimov insists, is that scientific opinion eventually swings one way or the other according to the “*compelling evidence*” (p 8), but religious opinion does not. This claim is simply not true. Right or wrong, some large religious denominations have moved radically away from their original emphasis. Many people of science would also beg to differ with his differentiation; we are still arguing some old “scientific” controversies (as anyone who has spent much time in science is well aware) and many religious controversies have been settled long ago. Paul, Peter and the apostles settled many of these centuries ago — how many Christians today argue about whether

circumcision is a condition of salvation? Asimov's statements may be more true in physics and chemistry, but are by no means true for the other sciences. According to Kline (1981), in some sciences there are more debates today than ever before.

Other reviewers have also noted Asimov's evident lack of biblical knowledge. Gordon Stein (1981), writing in *The American Rationalist* 26(3):47, states:

Asimov brings a broad breadth of scientific knowledge to his examination of Genesis. How great his biblical knowledge is, one never can be quite sure. He does seem quite positive about many of his interpretations of the biblical text, even when theologians have been arguing among themselves over the meaning for years.

Asimov recounts how the view that outside intervention was needed to account for the universe has been slowly discarded in science:

Scientists grew increasingly reluctant to suppose that the workings of the laws of nature were ever interfered with.... In short, the scientific view sees the Universe as following its own rules blindly, without either interference or direction (p 11).

He adds the rather sweeping and highly debatable conclusion that "So far, scientists have not uncovered any evidence that would hint that the workings of the universe require the action of a divine being." He admits, though, that "On the other hand, scientists have uncovered no evidence that indicates that a divine being does not exist" (p 11-12).

Asimov also rehashes some of the old debates, i.e., God as the answer to where the universe came from causes him to ask, "Who made God?" Asimov does accurately describe the chief conflict between creationists and the evolutionists, namely:

The Bible describes a Universe created by God, maintained by him, and intimately and constantly directed by him, while science describes a Universe in which it is not necessary to postulate the existence of God at all (p 13).

Asimov is rather dogmatic in many of his interpretations of *both* Scripture and science. For example, he is sure that "the heavens" (Genesis 1:11) refer to "the vault of the sky and the permanent objects within it" (p 14) and, further, that this vault is a solid, semi-circular dome covering the Earth. One might wonder how he could be so sure about this interpre-

tation, especially in view of the fact that many Bible scholars have come to other conclusions.

He also indulges in much fanciful speculation. He describes a scenario in which the cosmic egg (a single body of matter, often described as about the size of a pin head that existed in the “beginning” and from which all that exists came from):

... explodes in the largest conceivable explosion (the ‘big bang’), and its fragments are at first entirely too hot for matter, as we know it, to exist. Initially, the products formed in the explosion are energy. In tiny fractions of a second, the temperature dropped precipitously, and the Universe became cool enough to form certain fundamental particles of matter. Today, however, the Universe is too cool to allow these particles to exist.

A full second after the big bang, the temperature of the Universe had dropped to ten billion degrees, about what it is at the center of the largest stars, and the ordinary subatomic particles we know today came into existence. Later, ordinary atoms formed (p 23).

This information, although presented as factual science, is pure speculation based on our current limited knowledge, much assumption and also, some might add, extremely fanciful speculation. There is nothing wrong with speculation. It serves an important part of doing science, but it should be clearly labeled as such. Asimov fails to do this. He is also evidently unaware of the difficulties of arriving at “truth” from the scientific method (Robbins 1978, Bergman 1983).

LITERATURE CITED

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