

## **GENESIS ONE IS HISTORY**

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We can sympathise with anyone who does not believe that Genesis 1 records a historical creation. It is hard to believe something, which is generally derided by the scientific establishment, by teachers, the intelligentsia and the media. The prevailing orthodoxy is Evolutionary: young-earth creationism seems like a form of flat-earthism.

However, though many evangelicals cannot believe that Genesis is historical, they nevertheless believe that the Bible is true. So how do they manage to believe both the Bible and the theory of evolution?

### **I THE EVANGELICAL EVOLUTIONIST'S ARGUMENT:**

#### ***Genesis is a statement of belief, not history***

Walter Brueggemann says, [1] 'This text is...not a scientific description.'<sup>1</sup> He means that Genesis 1 is not a historical account of creation. We cannot draw scientific inferences from it. So what is it? [2] It is 'theological affirmation.'<sup>1</sup> *It is an assertion of the belief that God created the world somehow*, though not in six days.

Prof. Gordon Wenham, an evangelical scholar, also rejects the historical view. He thinks it 'unfortunate that the one device, which our narrative uses to express the coherence and purposiveness of the creator's work, namely the distribution of the various creation acts over six days has been...interpreted over-literally.'<sup>2</sup> Agreeing with Brueggemann he says that 'the far-reaching affirmations of Genesis 1' have become the 'presuppositions of the rest of the sacred story.'<sup>3</sup>

Roger Forster, the charismatic leader, and Paul Marston say, 'the doctrine of 'Creation'' - in Genesis 1— 'is a statement about person and purpose' - not a record of what actually happened. 'In this context 'evolution' describes a natural physical process, whilst 'creation' speaks of the purpose behind it.'<sup>4</sup> The historical *facts* are neo-Darwinian.

So evangelical evolutionists think that Genesis 1 is not a *history* but a *theology* of origins. If they are correct, the Bible nowhere tells us that God actually created the world. It tells us only that Biblical writers *believe* that he did.

#### ***Genesis is poetic, not historical writing***

Clearly, they say, Genesis is not to be interpreted historically [i.e. literally] because it is written in poetic language. It is not evolutionary science which drives them to reject young-earth creationism, but the nature of the literature.

Now we may as well admit that Genesis *is* poetic. Dr Lucas writes, 'It is often said that Genesis 1 is not poetry. That is true in a strict sense. However neither is it simple prose. It has some of the features of Hebrew poetry, such as repetition of phrases, parallelism and carefully balanced phraseology.'<sup>5</sup> Gordon Wenham notes the recurrence of the number 7 (in the Hebrew text): ver.1 has 7 words; ver.2 has 7 x 2 words; vers.1-3 has 7 x 5 words, &c. The expressions 'And it was so', 'God saw that it was good' and 'God made' occur 7 times each.<sup>6</sup> Even the late E.J.Young—a young-earth creationist—conceded that the language of Genesis 1 is 'semi-poetical.'<sup>7</sup> (He also said that for *real* poetry one should read Psalm 104!) So while we may argue that Genesis is not strictly poetry, we may concede that it is poetic in some degree.

Does this mean that the creation-account cannot be historical?

## II A YOUNG-EARTH CREATION-RESPONSE

### *Can poetry not deal with real events?*

Poetry is the language of reflection and emotion and—as in the case of a novel— apparent history may be fiction. Yet poetry and history are not mutually exclusive.

#### Narrative

The following lines come from Homer's *Odyssey* Book VII and describe Princess Nausicaa bringing home the washing:

The two strong mules brought the Princess into the city.  
When she came to her father's palace, she drew up at the gate,  
And her god-like brothers crowded round her, unharnessed  
The mules from the wagon, and carried the clothes inside.  
Then she too went into her room where a fire was kindled  
For her by the chambermaid Eurymedusa, an old woman....<sup>8</sup>

Poetry may be unadorned, unreflective narrative.

#### Literal

The Roman poet Virgil wrote the *Georgics*, poems which teach farming and—in the opinion of Cecil Day Lewis, the translator—are 'charming, didactic and passionate'.

....Now to business:  
As soon as the first months of the year begin, your strong bulls  
Should turn the fertile loam and leave the clods lying  
For the full suns of summer to bake into a fine dust:  
But if the land's not heavy, you'll find it enough at the North Star's  
Rising to ridge it out in shallow furrows....<sup>9</sup>

Even 'charming' and 'passionate' poetry may be *literal* and 'didactic'.

#### Historical

The following lines from Andrew Marvell's *Horatian Ode* (1650) relate the execution of Charles I in 1649:

....Charles himself might chase  
To Carisbrooke's narrow case  
That thence the royal actor borne  
The tragic scaffold might adorn  
While round the armed bands  
Did clap their bloody hands.  
He nothing common did or mean  
Upon that memorable scene.<sup>10</sup>

Poetry can handle real historical events.

#### Biblical poetry

But you don't have to look far in the Bible for history written as poetry. In Gen.49:3-4 Jacob refers to Reuben's misdemeanour reported in Gen.35:22:

Reuben, you are my firstborn....  
 ...you will no longer stand out,  
 for he went up on to his father's bed  
 on to my couch and defiled it.

The *Song of Moses* in Exodus 15:4-6 celebrates the destruction of Pharaoh's army:

The best of Pharaoh's officers  
 Are drowned in the Red Sea.  
 The deep waters have covered them...  
 The enemy boasted,  
 'I will pursue, I will overtake them.  
 I will gorge myself on them  
 And my hand shall destroy them.

A further example is found in the *Song of Deborah* in Judges 5:25-27:

He [Sisera] asked for water and she [Jael] gave him milk...  
 Her right hand reached for the tent peg,  
 Her right hand for the workman's hammer.  
 She struck Sisera, she crushed his head...  
 At her feet he sank.

If poetry, including OT poetry, can relate history, why should a not-entirely poetic Genesis 1 not relate the history of creation?

### **III THE NATURE OF METAPHOR**

But it is argued that Genesis 1 is metaphor, *not* to be interpreted literally and historically.<sup>11</sup> Is it true that a metaphorical Genesis 1 could not be historical?

#### ***Principle 1: history may be metaphorical***

In defining metaphor Furniss and Bath, say nothing more than this: 'We know that a word or...statement is figurative when it cannot be taken literally'<sup>12</sup> A metaphor is a representation of something in terms of something which cannot be the case. But when we hear that 'John flew down the road', we know that, although he did not *fly*, as a matter of historical fact he did *run* very quickly!

Philip Guedalla, in his biography of the Duke of Wellington, describes Napoleon's mood early on the 16th July 1815 (at Waterloo): 'The Emperor sailed before gusts of optimism that morning'<sup>13</sup>—a non-literal statement, if ever there was one, but perfectly historical! Yet he was miles from the sea, not on board ship, and 'gusts of optimism' never propelled anyone or anything. Earlier 'Ney flung four thousand men away'<sup>14</sup> (at Quatre Bras) - though he certainly could not lift 4 men, let alone *fling away* 4000! Yet Guedalla is writing *history*, not fantasy!

The Bible too is addicted to metaphorical language: God is a 'shield' (Ps.3:3), a 'rock' (Ps.62:2) and 'sun' (Ps.84:11) - none of which is literally possible. When the psalmist asks God to take up 'shield and buckler' (Ps.35:2) or claims that 'He lifted me out of the slimy pit' (Ps.40:2) or even that He is 'seated on His holy throne' (Ps.47:8), he speaks of things that are literally impossible but factually true.

A metaphorical Genesis is not necessarily unhistorical.

***Principle 2: Metaphors refer to real things and actions***

Furniss and Bath say, ‘In reading a metaphor we should not lose sight of the fact that the metaphor is a way of talking about something literal’<sup>15</sup> ‘England murdered the West Indies’ refers to a real event (a test match)—though not to murder!

So what are the realities to which the metaphors of Genesis refer?

***Principle 3: Metaphor is condensed simile***

A simile says that X is *like* Y: a metaphor says that X *is* Y. For instance, Christ is like a gateway to a sheep-pen, but in John 10:7 He says, ‘I am (Gk. *eimi*) the gate for the sheep’. The ‘Name of the LORD’ is like a strong, defensive tower, but Proverbs 18:10 says, ‘The Name of the LORD *is* a strong tower’ (though there is no verb, ‘is’ in the Hebrew). It is important to appreciate that the two components of a metaphor (a condensed simile) have some essential similarity.<sup>16</sup> For instance, ‘John blew his top’ means literally that his head exploded. In fact, he ‘lost his temper’ (another metaphor) but the violence of his rage was comparable to the violence of an explosion. ‘My heart sank’ compares discouragement to the physical sensation of collapse.

Some similarity then should exist between the ‘metaphors’ of Genesis 1 and either supernatural creation or evolution via natural processes—if the passage is true.

***Principle 4: Metaphor is the only way to speak about God***

C. S. Lewis wrote, ‘All language about things other than physical objects is necessarily metaphorical.’<sup>16</sup> Furniss and Bath says, that metaphor ‘enables us to talk about intangible or abstract things in concrete ways.’<sup>17</sup> For example, Jesus Christ is ‘the bread of life’, ‘the light of the world’, ‘the good shepherd’, ‘the door of the sheep’ &c.

If we can relate the NT metaphors to the historical work of salvation, why is it so difficult to relate the metaphors of Genesis to a historical creation?

## **IV THE METAPHORS OF GENESIS**

***Introductory: A controlling fact***

Genesis 1:1 is crucial to the understanding of the passage, since it summarizes the entire creative work of God: ‘In the beginning God created (originated) the heavens and the earth.’ Though *creatio ex nihilo* is not explicit, the psalmist evidently understood that it is implied in Genesis 1:1, ‘For He spoke and it came to be; He commanded and it stood firm’ (Psalm 33:9). *Creatio ex nihilo* is also implied in John 1:1—a text which mirrors Genesis 1:1: ‘In the beginning was—not matter but—the Word....Through Him all things came into being and without Him nothing came to be which did come to be.’ F. F. Bruce had no doubt that Hebrews 11:3 implies *creatio ex nihilo* for ‘the universe was formed at God’s command so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.’<sup>18</sup>

If Genesis 1:1 is literally true, there is nothing in the metaphors of the creation-account which is historically impossible. If it is not literally true, the question hardly arises!

***The nouns of Genesis 1***

Despite the ‘poetic’ context, most of the nouns (‘light’, ‘darkness’, ‘day’, ‘night’, ‘waters’, ‘land’, ‘sea’, ‘sky’, ‘sun’, ‘moon’ &c) are literal in meaning since they elaborate

the meaning of ‘heavens and earth’. Professor J. A. Thompson (who is no young-earth creationist) notes the ‘phenomenological nature’ of Genesis 1, since it deals with ‘those elements of the world which were visible to the naked eye.’<sup>19</sup>

Since Genesis 1 deals with the real world, could it be real history?

### *The verbs of Genesis 1*

If Genesis 1 is metaphorical, it must be largely on account of the verbs which have God for their subject: ‘created’, ‘said’, ‘saw’, ‘separated’, ‘made’, ‘named’, ‘make’, ‘set’, ‘blessed’ and ‘gave’? God is said to perform (on the whole) human actions, which are literally impossible for Him. But remember that metaphors are about real things and real events (Principle 2) and that the realities of God can only be expressed metaphorically (Principle 4).

Since metaphors cannot be a reason in principle for regarding Genesis 1 as unhistorical, we should examine some verbs in Genesis 1.

### *God said*

To be sure, literal speech (Gen.1:3, ‘God said, ‘Let there be light!’) is impossible for God since He is Spirit (John 4:24) and has no lungs, vocal chords and aural cavity, &c. Nor was there originally an atmosphere—which is essential to human speech. Nevertheless the rhetorical questions of Psalm 94:9 are apposite:

‘Shall He who implanted the ear not hear?  
Does He who formed the eye not see?’

And we might justly add:

‘Can He who created the mouth not speak?’

Of course, He can and does! It is historical fact that Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Peter and Paul, &c heard Him. If this is not so, the whole of Christianity is founded upon nonsense. Jesus Christ Himself is ‘the Word of God’. Moreover, when He created the biochemical constituents of mature wine in an instant (John 2) or gave sight to a man born blind (John 9) He demonstrated the same creative power that the psalmist referred to (Ps.33:6, 9).

This metaphor represents unimaginable, indescribable creative power. What is literally impossible on one level represents what is literally the case on another—unless our theology of God is alien to the Bible!

### *God saw*

Similarly though God has no eyes, no retina, no rods and cones or optic nerve, &c and could not literally see what He had made (Gen.1:4), nevertheless He knew what He was doing! His knowledge is infinitely superior to that of man: ‘The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart’ (1 Sam.16:7); ‘God will judge the secrets of men through Jesus Christ’ (Rom.2:16); He says, ‘I make known the end from the beginning’ (Isa.46:10).

Not only is the metaphorical statement in Gen.1:4 about something literally and historically true (Principle 2): it tells us something essential to the Biblical idea of God.

### ***God made***

Nor does Gen.1:7 express a mere theistic idea: 'And God made the expanse'. Like God's 'saying' and 'seeing' it is but a faint symbol of God's creative act. Obviously He who created human creativity can Himself make anything. This metaphor therefore signals His infinitely wise, intelligent, powerful and purposive work in creation. Prof. R. J. Berry supposes that creation from existing materials (cf. Gen.2:7) implies natural processes<sup>20</sup>. But I think he has misconceived the metaphor. The similarity between man making things and God making things lies not in any similarity of the processes employed but in the fact that intelligence, design and purpose are common to both. Clearly the 'making' of the 'expanse', is as little a natural process as the 'making' of a table (cf. Ex.25:23, same Hebrew word).

Like the other metaphors in Genesis 1 the words 'God made' glimpse stupendous miracle. Far from being an impediment to the historical interpretation of the creation-account, metaphor requires us to appreciate that the actual history is beyond the power of language adequately to describe.

### ***Gross Understatements!***

Although metaphors are often impossibilities (e.g. 'my heart sank', 'it was raining cats and dogs') or literal untruths ('England slaughtered the West Indies', 'he was hopping mad'), *when used to express the attributes or actions of the omnipotent Creator metaphors are absolutely gross understatements!* For example, God is 'shepherd' (Ps.23:1), 'shield' (Ps.3:3) and 'watchman' (Ps.121:3-4), who 'turns His face towards Israel' (Num.6:26), 'hears prayer' (Ps.65:2) and 'rides on the clouds (to help His people, Ps.68:4) - all of which are in a sense absurd and pitifully inadequate comparisons!

The literal impossibility of God performing the actions ascribed to Him in Genesis 1 is not so striking as the inadequacy of human actions in representing Divine actions.

## **V THE FRAMEWORK HYPOTHESIS**

The most serious (alleged) metaphor in the creation-account is the creation-week itself. This is known as the 'Framework Hypothesis'. On this view the entire chapter is a metaphor! Gordon Wenham says that the creation-week is simply an 'artistic arrangement, a sober anthropomorphism, which need not be taken literally.'<sup>21</sup> It is a mere 'literary device' expressive of the coherence and purposiveness of the creator's work'<sup>22</sup> Wenham's reasons for holding to the 'Framework hypothesis' are:

### ***The two triads of days are parallel;*<sup>23</sup>**

<i>Separation (Form)</i>	<i>Adornment (Fulness)</i>
Day 1 Light	Day 4 Sun, moon and stars.
Day 2 Sky	Day 5 Creatures of the sky (and fish)
Day 3 Land	Day 6 Animals and Man

***Genesis 1 is 'outside the main historical outline of Genesis,'*<sup>24</sup> each section of which begins, 'This is the family history of....'**

***The first three days cannot be solar days,*<sup>25</sup> since the sun is not created until Day 4.**

***'All language about God is analogical'*<sup>26</sup>**

Therefore 'in speaking of His creating the world in six days, we do not identify His mode of creation with human creativity, nor need we assume that His week's work was necessarily accomplished in 144 hours.'

**VI CRITICISM OF THE FRAMEWORK HYPOTHESIS**

***The two 'triads' of days***

It will be noticed that the 'artistic arrangement' of the two triads is unsatisfactory.

First, why are fish included with flying creatures on Day 5? Why not on Day 3 when 'the waters were 'gathered together' (Gen.1:9)?

Second, whereas the relationship of Days 2-3 and Days 5-6 is that of environment to inhabitants, the relationship of Day 1 ('Let there be light!') to Day 4 is that of one source of light to other sources. But artistic consistency would surely demand similar correspondences. The sun, moon and stars would then belong to Day 5. The imbalance of Genesis 1—shown below—represents a lapse in artistic arrangement!

Day 1 Light	Day 4
Day 2 Sky	Day 5 Luminaries (v14), birds.
Day 3 Land/sea	Day 6 Marine life (v20) animals, Man.

Perhaps the unconvincing arrangement is less poetic than historical?

***Genesis is history***

Prof. E. J. Young wrote: 'Genesis one is the prelude to a...severely historical book...the first chapter stands in an intimate relationship with what follows. By its usage of the phrase...('This is the family history of the heavens and the earth', whose creation has just been related)...Gen.2:4a connects the prelude, Gen.1:1-2:3, with the genealogical section of the book...Furthermore chapter two assumes the creation of the earth, the heavens and the sea, the account of which are given in chapter one.'<sup>27</sup>

Other Biblical writers regard Genesis as history.<sup>28</sup> For Moses the creation-week was the foundation of the 4th commandment; Hezekiah considered the creation of the world to be God's chief recommendation, when he desperately needed help (2 Kings 19:15), and the Levites in Nehemiah 9:6 believed that their creation-history was just as historical as Israelite history in general.

While Dr Wenham's assertion is not incontrovertible, on his view the history of Gen.2:4ff is *the sequel of what never happened*. Like ancient Greek history it rests on myth.

***Days 1-3***

Though the sun was not created until Day 4, the first three days are described in exactly the same terms as Days 4-6. They may not be 'solar days' in the sense that they are determined by the sun, yet the sun's absence, the fact that the light-source was not the sun, is a mere technicality. The phenomena of light, darkness, day and night are repeated: 'evening' is the end of the 'light'/'day' and the beginning of 'darkness'/'night', while 'morning' is the end of 'darkness'/'night' and the beginning of 'light'/'day'. This suggests that the earth was rotating at approximately its present speed from Day 1. Exodus 20:8-11 supports this view of the first three days.

What then about the light-source before the creation of the sun? Gen.1:3 says, 'God

said, 'Let there be light'. And there was light.' The fact that this light-source is not identified does not make it incredible. The God who can create matter and energy *ex nihilo* does absolutely as He pleases! Incidentally, that the first three days were (like solar days) 24-hour days must be inferred from their description.

Genesis 1:16-18 does not say that the creation of the sun inaugurated the cycle of day and night, only that it provided a new means of regulating it.

### ***Analogical Days?***

#### **1. No. Real Days.**

Dr Wenham is, of course, correct to say that 'all language about God is analogical'<sup>28</sup> but that does *not* mean that the days on which He created were not 24-hour days. Creation was the beginning of time. The 7th day of the creation-week is identical with the Jewish Sabbath (Ex.20:8). Jesus Christ was its Lord (Mark 2:28). It was the seventh day which God had blessed and made holy (or special) for man (Gen.2:3).

Moreover just as the work of the Creator took place in real time so did the work of the Saviour.

#### **2. Unique creation not strictly analogical.**

Moreover the creation of the universe in a week hardly 'identifies' God's mode of creation with human creativity (as Wenham suggests) except in the most superficial sense. C. S. Lewis—an extremely 'creative' man—alleges that in comparison with the creative work of God, man does not 'create' at all. He certainly does not create *ex nihilo*! He merely re-arranges what God has already created.<sup>29</sup> Handel's composition of the Messiah in twenty-two days is justly regarded as an exhibition of superlative genius, yet it is infinitely inferior to the creation of the universe in six days.

A six-day historical creation reveals the omnipotence, the sovereignty and greatness of God as no mere 'literary device' ever could—however 'theological'!

### ***Two other objections to the Framework Hypothesis***

#### **1. Lack of correspondence.**

If Genesis 1 were one big metaphor, it would correspond to the actual work of 'creation' (Principle 3), that is, it would in some degree correspond to Big Bang and the evolutionary process. In fact there is no similarity whatever between Genesis 1 and these processes. It is for this reason that evolutionists regard the creation-account as myth or philosophical theology. But if there is no similarity—if the metaphor cannot be regarded as a condensed simile (X is like Y = X is Y, cf. Principle 3) - how can Genesis 1 be a metaphor? Big Bang is violent: Genesis is calmly deliberate. Evolution is a natural process: creation is supernatural ('God said', 'God saw', 'God made', &c). At the very heart of evolution lies purposeless genetic error acted upon by natural selection: creation by contrast is the result of thought ('Let us make man in our own image'). In Genesis light comes before the sun, life on land before marine life: according to evolutionary beliefs the order was the reverse.

The Genesis metaphors are peculiarly inept unless they represent historical creation.

#### **2. The inadequacy of 'theological affirmation'**

If the creation-account is not historical, the author's 'theological affirmation' is groundless, for on what did the author base his belief in the 'coherence' and 'purposiveness' of creation? Let me illustrate. Suppose Jones affirms his belief to the England-selectors that Smith is a brilliant batsman. When asked for details he cites a record of centuries here and double centuries there—all 'metaphors' of Smith's alleged ability. But

it emerges that Jones has never seen Smith bat! Consequently his ‘affirmations’ only persuade people that he is a liar. It seems not to occur to evangelical evolutionists that ‘theological affirmations’ of things not *known* to have happened are worthless. Would such ‘affirmations’ be regarded as evidence in a court of law?

## VII CONCLUSION

Genesis 1 is history. Therefore the ‘coherence’ and ‘purposiveness’ of creation speak for themselves. While the ‘Framework Hypothesis’ treats Genesis as theistic philosophy, Biblical faith regards it as revealed history. Similarly it regards the saving work of Jesus Christ, not simply as pseudo-historical fact, invented by ‘faith’, but as genuine historical fact upon which true faith is based. Creation and salvation are of a piece. It is our view as evangelical young-earth creationists that the defence of Old Testament and New Testament history is the defence of Christianity.

Sauce for goose, sauce for gander!

### Notes

1. Quoted in Forster & Marston, *Reason, Science and Faith*, Monarch 1999 p266
2. Prof. G. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Words 1987 p39. Wenham makes a strange statement. How literalistically should Genesis 1 be interpreted?
3. Ibid.
4. Op. cit. p276
5. Forster & Marston op. cit. p266
6. Wenham op. cit. p6
7. Quoted in Forster & Marston op.cit. p266
8. Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. E. V. Rieu, Penguin 1960 p105
9. Cecil Day-Lewis, *Georgics: Virgil* Readers Union 1943 p17
10. *New Oxford Book of English Verse* ed. Helen Gardner, OUP 1972 p331
11. See Forster & Marston, op.cit. chapter 8
12. Furniss & Bath, *Reading Poetry: An Introduction* Prentice Hall 1996 p334
13. Philip Guedalla *The Duke* Wordsworth 1997 p273
14. Guedalla, Op.cit. p271
15. Op. cit. p212. It seems to me that they mean that a metaphor refers to a real thing or event which may be otherwise described in purely literal terms.
16. C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Proposes a Toast* Collins 1965 p54.
17. Furniss & Bath op. cit.p115
18. F. F. Bruce, *Hebrews*, Marshall Morgan Scott 1964 p281fn. Others also believe that Scripture teaches *creation ex nihilo*, see for example Wenham op.cit. p14; Meredith Kline, *IVP New Bible Commentary*, ed. Guthrie, Motyer 1970 p82. Even Von Rad (no evangelical) agreed that Gen.1:1 teaches it, *Genesis* SCM 1972 p49.
19. J. A Thompson, Art. ‘Creation’ *Illustrated Bible Dictionary* IVP 1980 vol.1 p333
20. Prof. R. J. Berry, *God and the Biologist* Apollos-IVP 1996 p44
21. Wenham op. cit. p39. It is worth noting that Wenham also says, ‘The arrangement of 1:1-2:3 is...highly problematical’ (op.cit. p6).
22. Wenham op.cit. p6
23. ibid. p7
24. Ibid. p40
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. E.J.Young *Studies in Genesis One* P&R 1964 p83
28. The reader is recommended to study Old and New Testament references to Genesis 1-2. For NT references (which include Gen.1-2) see Henry Morris, *The Genesis Record*, Baker 1976 pp677-681.
29. Wenham, op. cit. p40
30. C. S. Lewis in *Mind Awake: an anthology of C. S. Lewis* ed. Kilby, Bles 1968 p63