

# Proceedings of the ISFM 2004 Meeting: Insider Movements The Most Precarious Mission Frontier

by Ralph D. Winter

**T**he most precarious frontier facing us today is that of a profoundly larger, and startlingly new understanding of our mission, startling in more than one way. Let's begin with a brief recapitulation, tracing, among other things, eight "Precarious Perspectives" on which this frontier of mission is built (see list on page 172).

## *The Plain Facts*

The story of God's work on this planet (and in the whole universe) is apparently a long story. But certain things are becoming fascinating interpretations—at least to some of us who are over 70 and have had extra time to think about it!

Astounding beauty and symmetry is evident in all creation. But there is also violence and cruelty, pain and suffering throughout all of nature. *Evidence is mounting that life has been developing on this planet over a very long time.*

We don't have to accept that idea but we may do best to consider it—call it **Precarious Perspective #1.**

Furthermore, what evidence we have (which is growing to be monumental) indicates that after most of the smaller and intricate developments of life took place, *suddenly in the Cambrian Period we find in the world of animals the first appearance of predatory life forms.* From that point on we see nothing but life against life. Few forms of life die a natural death. Something has gone terribly wrong. The average believer does not stop to think whether God would have created originally vicious animals, or if Satan has had any great influence on all life forms. This is **Precarious Perspective #2.** Listen to Bruce McLaughlin, a science professor with a doctorate from MIT. McLaughlin is also a pastor with an apologetics web site (*see [www.christianapologetic.org](http://www.christianapologetic.org)*), who is protesting the view of another fine professor/pastor, David Snoke, whose article makes God the author of the violence and suffering in nature:

According to Scripture, the universe was originally good and the glory of God is still evident in it (Rom. 1:20). But something else—something frightfully wicked—is evident in it as well. Of their own free will, Satan and other spiritual beings rebelled against God in the primordial past and now abuse their God-given authority over certain aspects of creation. Satan, who holds the power of death (Heb. 2:14), exercises a pervasive, structural, diabolic influence to the point that the entire creation is in bondage to decay. The pain-ridden, bloodthirsty, sinister and hostile character of nature should be attributed to Satan and his army, not to God. Jesus' earthly ministry reflected the belief that the world had been seized by a hostile, sinister lord. Jesus came to take it back.<sup>1</sup>

---

*Ralph D. Winter is a senior mission thinker who has been actively involved from the beginning of the massive mission transition from simply thinking in terms of countries or individuals to thinking in terms of peoples. He is founder of the U.S. Center for World Mission, and is currently chancellor of William Carey International University.*

At the same reference, another Evangelical scientist, Moorad Alexander, protests the same thing:

Animals were either already affected by the Fall of Lucifer or else the Fall of Man affected animals ... Hence it is more logical to attribute animal pain and death to Satan and not to an omnipotent God. The millennium reign of the Messiah will be characterized by the restoration of the harmony in the whole of creation (Isa. 11:6-9) that was broken not by the sin of Adam but by Satan (Rom. 8:18-22) ... Snoke's analysis may be partially successful in casting doubt that the Fall of Man gave rise to the viciousness and death in the animal kingdom. However, Snoke does not even mention the [earlier] fall of Lucifer (Isa. 12:14) and so his inference that such features of the animal world were created by God leaves much to be desired.<sup>1</sup>

Tony Campolo, a professor of sociology at Eastern College, PA gives us one of the most eloquent cases for Satanic distortion of creation (long before Adam) in his book, *How to Rescue the Earth Without Worshipping Nature: A Christian's Call to Save Creation*.

There Campolo refers to Eastern Orthodox theology (which was not affected by Augustinian thinking as much as ours has been) in these words,

Since Satan's fall, he and his followers have been at work perverting and polluting all that God created. Before Adam and Eve were ever created, Satan worked to create havoc throughout creation.<sup>2</sup>

Is this **Precarious Perspective #3**, *that nature has been pervasively distorted into violence by Satan*? And that suddenly at the time of the Cambrian Period (See Figure 1) predatory life appeared for the first time, long before Genesis?

The Bible, in any case, is the one book that recognizes both the beauty and the distortion of creation. Then, early in its pages it reveals a global plan to push back the darkness and evil, to restore the original glory and reconcile all peoples back into an eternal fellowship with God.

### *Where We Have Been*

That is the "Original Good News"—the reconquering of evil in all the earth, the restoration of God's glory and His

glorification by all peoples. But this is not quite the same as what we usually talk about. I am reminded of what Nancy Pearcey has said,

The Christian message does not begin with "Accept Christ as your Savior;" it begins with "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."<sup>3</sup>

At my church we hear all about the wonderful grace of God in our salvation and what He has done for us. We are exposed to marvelous works of man—music and worship—but little during a year about the latest breakthroughs in science which for centuries have portrayed incredible new insights into His glory. *This is what both Jews and Christians have usually taken faith to mean, namely, human pardon and salvation. But, in addition, they have not emphasized, as clearly as the Bible does, God's glorification (that is, the re-establishment, the restoration of that glory).* Is this **Precarious Perspective #4**?

During the 2,000 years before Christ, the Jews and their forefathers did in many ways manifest the glory of God. We got our Bible from them. It tells how they both succeeded and failed. Even before Christ, they were scattered all over the Roman empire and beyond, and, as James said, "Moses has been preached in every city" (Acts 15:21).

For 100 years before Christ they even sent missionaries out, as Jesus put it, "traversing land and sea to make a single convert." Greeks and Romans were sitting in the backs of synagogues listening intently to readings from the Jewish Bible. Such people were called in Acts, "devout persons" or "God-fearers," like Cornelius, the centurion.

However, an artificial barrier had been erected. The assumption was that people who were not Jews could not know God's glory and glorify Him in their lives and join His eternal family unless they first became Jews. That is, they had to adopt Jewish foods and holidays, and Jewish circumcision (which was a fearful, dangerous and sometimes fatal procedure, especially for adults). Some of the Greeks and Romans had actually gone that far because they were so attracted to the Bible and the people of the book. But such proselytes or "converts" did not represent what God had in mind, and were far fewer than the God-fearers.

### *A New Beginning*

One intense, dedicated Jewish leader, however, after being struck down on a journey, saw the simple, electrifying truth that a change of heart, not behavior alone, was what counted, whether that behavior was Jewish or Greek. This startling discovery took him three years to fully assimilate, but then it gradually began to swing the door open to multitudes of otherwise disenfranchised people.

The statistics in his day are roughly these:

- 100 million in the Roman empire
- 10 million being Jews
- 1 million non-Jews attracted to the back seats of synagogues, called "God-fearers" or "devout persons" (the equivalent for speakers of Semitic languages such as Aramaic, Syriac or Arabic may have been "Muslim").
- 100,000 Greek and Roman "converts" to Jewish culture, called proselytes.

Paul went to the God-fearers, the million that knew a lot of the Bible but had not decided to become Jewish. He set them free, by the thousands, from the thought that they had to become Jews to be acceptable to God. Many were already reconciled to God; they needed to be "saved" from Jewish legalism. *The idea that Paul was a missionary primarily to people who had heard a great deal of the Bible—is that Precarious Perspective #5?*

Paul was not often in contact with what we call *unreached peoples*. The people he dealt with were somewhat like Muslims today. Muslims have peeked into our Bibles. Many of them have devoutly accepted what they have understood. They took over the word for God used for five hundred years by Arabic Christians, *Allah*—a word used by 30 million Christians today. They took over the idea of praying five times a day from those same Christians. They elaborated a worship service that is entirely borrowed from Christian, Samaritan and Jewish wording.

The Christians with whom they were in contact did not have the whole Bible in their language, thus all Bible

quotations in the Qur'an come either from the Torah, the Psalms or the Gospels. We would object as much as Muhammad did to the "tri-theistic" concept of the Trinity he found among those Christians.

But Christians down through history have treated them as total pagans. They have, by contrast, often treated Christians and Jews as "people of the book," and reserved for all others the word "infidel." For much of Evangelical history we have considered all others, Catholics, Orthodox, Muslims, Hindus, etc. as infidels. Is a different approach necessary? Is this **Precarious Perspective #6**?

### Let's Go Further

This is just background. Today we are blessed by greater access to the meaning of the Bible and Christian history than any previous generation. Today our understanding of God's creation is monumentally and magnificently greater. Because of that, to be able to begin with God and His creation is more powerful evangelistically than ever. Many of the peoples of the world, like those of the Judaic religions (Jewish, Christian, Muslim), are people for whom our Protestant gospel, a corrective to Catholicism, is quite intelligible and cogent. They can at least lean back on a vague cultural background to the Old Testament. This is also true today for hundreds of other peoples who have had contact with the Bible of the Christians. But all the rest of the world (the most difficult cross-cultural challenge) are people with whom we cannot just jump into the New Testament. We must begin with God and His Creation. Even Jesus cannot be fully understood without that foundation.

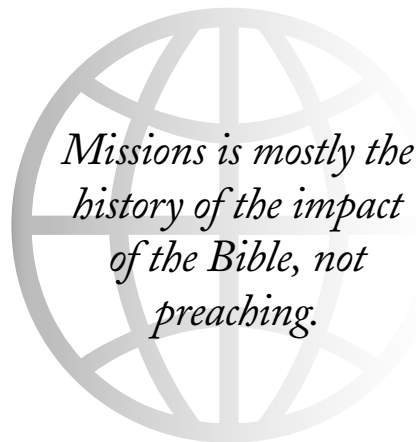
Nancy Pearcey effectively employs a three stage picture. She speaks of Creation, Fall, and Redemption.<sup>4</sup>

I would like to add two more stages that will give it even greater value.

I feel it would help her case to speak of 1) Creation, 2) Fall of Satan, 3) Re-Creation, 4) Fall of Adam, 5) Redemption (Restoration). One reason for the two additional stages I suggest is to try to make sense out of the apparent age of the earth. Note, however that this perspective has lately

been seriously challenged by much of the homeschool movement's materials.

In our Evangelical past—from the time ancient bones were being discovered early in the 1800s—we notably accepted the apparent age of the earth. A whole new vista on creation took place as old, very large, very strange



bones began to be unearthed. The apparently lengthy age of the earth, and lengthy development of mainly strange earlier life forms was then stuffed either into the days of Genesis 1, or (as with the Scofield Study Bible) was inserted between 1:1 and 1:2 (right in the middle of a Hebrew sentence). However, all that great age could have preceded Genesis 1:1 if we had not all assumed that an ancient, Spirit-moved author had written of things no one had ever seen. Yet, as "holy men of God were moved by the Spirit" wrote what they did, they mainly wrote what was intelligible to themselves and to their hearers. This is **Precarious Perspective #7**, the idea that the "old earth" preceded the "young earth," indeed, preceded Genesis 1:1.

Thus, it is a fact that Genesis 1:1 could also be interpreted to read, "When God began to (re)create things, everything was formless and void (the Hebrew phrase used for the aftermath of a war)." This thought became possible and much more understandable, curiously, when we landed on the moon, discovered that the many *volcanic* craters were actually *impact* craters resulting from asteroid collisions, and, then, turned around to look more closely for evidence of similar collisions on our weather-eroded earth. In fact

this discovery set off a global search movement! Different teams, now that they knew what to look for, found evidence of thousands of impacts. Dozens of them involved rocks larger than *three miles* in diameter, travelling faster than a rifle bullet causing 1) craters 15 to 135 miles across, plus 2) "formless and void" destruction over a much larger area, and in many cases 3) dust that darkened the entire earth.

To humans outside of the destroyed area, darkness was thus the first indication of an asteroidal collision. (Of course, those in the destroyed area did not live to record the aftermath.) As the global canopy of dust settled, a glow of light would begin to be seen half of the day. Still later the sun and moon would be identifiable as sources of light, and actual rays of light would come through. But life *in the area of physical devastation* would have been entirely extinguished. The largest impact yet discovered may have killed off 90% of all life forms (around 240 million years ago). Still later (65 million years ago), a slightly smaller asteroid killed off all forms of dinosaur life. The events of Genesis are then more recent still. This, surely, is another uncommon view, **Precarious Perspective #8**!

### But what does all this have to do with missions, frontier missions? Why go into it anyway?

First, *to defend the Bible*. It establishes the credibility of the Bible. Without a credible Bible, missions is worth very little. Missions is mostly the history of the impact of the Bible, not preaching. However, note that both Calvin and Luther seriously undermined the authority of the Bible for many believers in their day by insisting that the Bible actually opposed the Copernican exposition of a heliocentric solar system.

Note well that by interpreting the Bible to say something it may not be saying does not establish the credibility of the Bible, it tears it down. Today many serious Evangelicals, who continue to accept the old age of the earth, are profoundly disturbed by the artificiality of making Genesis incorporate that lengthy previous period. And, Wheaton College, for over fifty years, has allowed its professors to teach that

# Impacts, Eruptions and Major Mass Extinctions

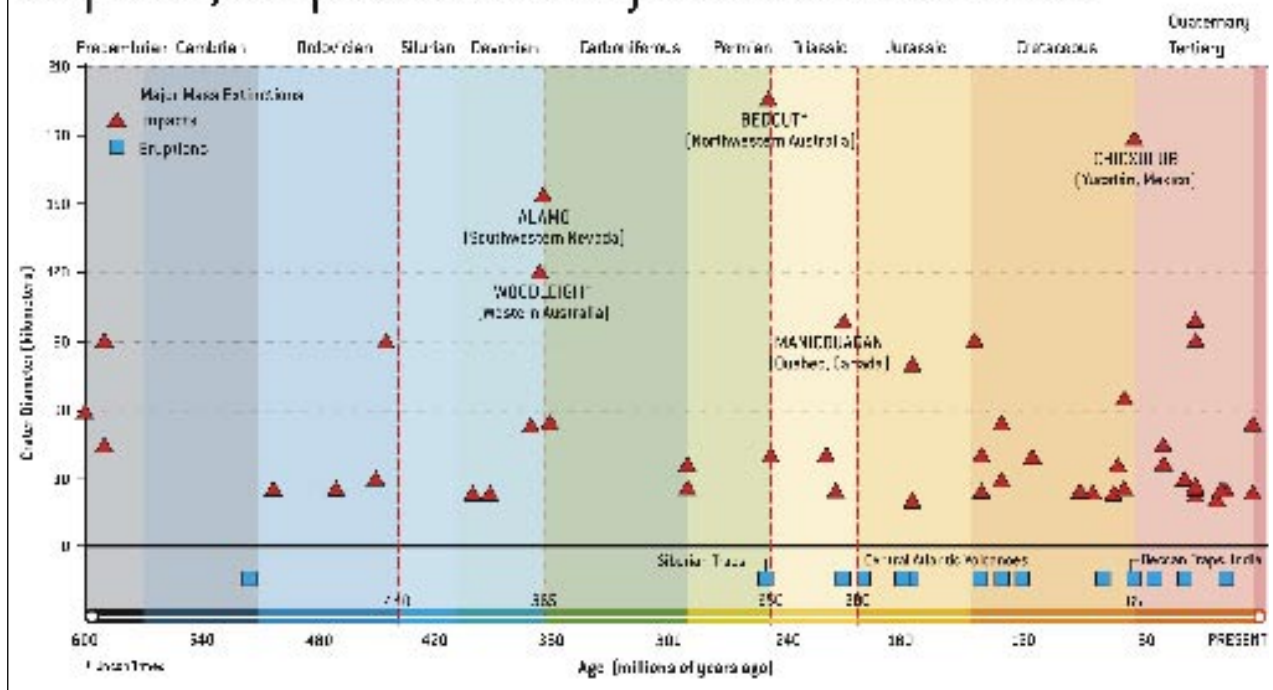


Figure 1

In this diagram, taken from the March 2002 issue of *Scientific American*<sup>1</sup>, the 45 small dark triangles represent collisions that have been detected in various parts of the earth from huge rocks from outer space.

These shown only represent rocks large enough to be *three miles or more in diameter*, leaving remnant craters 15 or more miles across, mostly larger. Thousands of smaller impacts, unrecorded here, have taken place, which are much harder to trace. The Arizona meteor crater is plain to see, however, and it is only a mile wide.

The vertical placement of these triangles represents the size of the craters, those at the top of the chart being larger than those lower down.

The largest one, which eliminated 90% of all life forms, took place 250 million years ago, and is here shown just to the right of center. More recently, the collision extinction of the dinosaurs, only 65 million years ago, hit Mexico's Yucatan peninsula, leaving clear evidences of a crater 110 miles in diameter, estimated to have been caused by an object 30 miles in diameter.

*What is the meaning of all this? This is the period in which predatory forms of life first appeared. This is the evidence of the emergence of evil prior to Adam. Was it when Satan fell?*

(Incidentally, it would appear that life has again and again been wiped out or nearly wiped out. Is this parallel to the phenomenon of the biblical flood closer to our time?)

Many of the dinosaurs were really atrocious, ferocious (God-designed?) creatures. All were destroyed by the major Chicxulub collision 65 million years ago. Since then, mammals have come into their own.

Homo Sapiens appeared so late in this picture that the length of the period would be represented at the far right by less than the thickness of a piece of paper (actually 3 ten-thousands of an inch).

It would appear that at the present time we are in the middle of a 22,000-year "interglacial" period. Also, that the enormous collision in the middle of the past 500 million years, was related to the breakup of the continents and the plate

tectonic drift which allowed the location of the continents today.

At 1.5 ten-thousandths of an inch the asteroid that carved out the chaos described in Genesis 1:1 may have hit, providing the opportunity for an "Edenic" sphere. In this sphere, then, a new variety of human created "in God's image" first appeared along with many animals *none of which were carnivorous* (1:29,30) as was also apparently the case prior to the Cambrian Period.

Ominously, the last-minute appearance and gradual domination of this planet by fallen humans displays an unnerving violence of human against human which is not characteristic of any other form of life. War, plus pestilence, held down world population for a long time before Christ. Now, relatively suddenly, the opposite problem of overpopulation presents itself, as both war and disease have been partially conquered.

<sup>1</sup> Luann Becker, *Scientific American*, March 2002, "Repeated Blows," p. 79. Figure 1 is by Aaron Firth (based on graphic by Michael Paine). Used by permission.

the flood was local. It is time for some wholesale reconsideration of various views. We know a great deal more about this planet and outer space now than we knew even fifty years ago.

Second, *to expand our mission vision*. It crucially enlarges our understanding of the devastation of Satan's ongoing activities in distorting creation and thus tearing down God's glory. It therefore requires a larger presentation of the Gospel to unreached peoples which lack prior contact with the Old Testament. It defines a larger mission of not just getting people out of this world safely into heaven, but that of getting redeemed people to turn around and fight along with Him against "the works of the Devil." (1 Jn. 3:8: "The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the Devil.")

In missions we look dumbly on while many of our most strategic workers, trained and experienced for years, die off like flies from diseases we treat but do not attempt to eradicate. Some have thought that we must not exterminate dangerous pathogens because they must be the work of God. This was the thinking of pastors in Massachusetts in Jonathan Edwards' day who on those grounds spoke against employing vaccines against small pox which was annually decimating his Indian charges at Stockbridge. They actually founded an "Anti-Vaccination Society" to thwart his efforts. But it shouldn't take a genius like Edwards. Apparently all it takes is a Jimmy Carter with a layman's theological intuition to set out to exterminate guinea worm and river blindness.

3. Finally, *to empower evangelism by glorifying God*. We have a much-empowered Gospel if we accept our mandate to restore creation and restore His glory by objecting to the widespread teaching that all this violence is of God—which is what the Intelligent Design movement tacitly does by not addressing the overwhelming evidence for Intelligent Evil Design.

What if alternative theories about Genesis being the beginning of everything, not just a new beginning late in the planetary story, are wrong? Does this not discredit the Bible in the same way Calvin did by opposing Copernicus?

The overwhelming majority of scientifically trained Evangelicals hold to the traditional Evangelical acceptance of an old earth. Does it matter that the concept of an exclusively young earth created 6,000 years ago has only fairly recently been associated with Evangelicals (gradually since the thirties, and before that an exclusively Seventh-Day Adventist doctrine)? Have those recently accepting young earth theories gone wrong in the attempt to shore up the reliability of the Bible?

A while ago I asked the dean of graduate studies at one of the most outstanding Christian colleges where the professors stood on the old earth/young earth dichotomy. He said that the graduate faculty is mainly old earth, the undergraduate faculty is mainly young earth. What a deal! According to my analysis here we can believe in both an old earth (before Genesis 1:1) and a young "recreated" earth (Genesis 1:1). Why not? Are the shifts too precarious, is this analysis built on too many precarious perspectives?

Neither interpretation of Scripture implies a rejection of the Bible's inerrancy. Belief in inerrancy does not mean inerrancy of interpretation. Either view could be wrong. But, meanwhile thousands, hundreds of thousands of keen scientists and educated mission-field believers around the world feel forced to doubt the Bible and the Christian faith because a recent interpretation of the book of Genesis seems to deny the facts.

### ***Conclusion: Painful Change***

Does all of this add up to a very crucial and "Precarious Frontier"? In conclusion, let's think for a moment about how long-standing positions and perspectives get changed. It is fascinating to see this happen to other people; it is hard for us to face this for ourselves. For example, it is ridiculously easy to fault some defenders of unaided evolution for their emotionally or politically biased points, their evident anti-theistic assumptions. As one Chinese paleontologist pointed out:

In China we can criticize Darwin but not the government. In America you can criticize the government, but not Darwin.<sup>5</sup>

However, in all honesty we need to realize there are emotionally biased people who oppose unaided evolution. They, too, are human and may be subject to the trauma of giving up other long-standing assumptions.

So, let's glance at a few historic examples of theory-collapse in order to warm up to what we ourselves may have to give up.

1. Some intelligent ancients before Christ gave up the thought that the earth was flat when they saw its shadow on the moon as curved; the insight did not quickly catch on.
2. Much later people were slow to accept the heliocentric solar system idea. Even Martin Luther and John Calvin opposed it on the basis of biblical misinterpretation—and thus discredited the Bible.
3. A huge change of perspective had to take place when germs were discovered and were known to bring disease. This was long contested and is little believed around the world even today.
4. When very large and strange bones were discovered that belonged to species long gone, people had to digest this new perspective. In that case, Evangelicals and other Christians had little disagreement for at least a century.
5. A second "Copernican Revolution" took place when Hubble, in the 1920s, determined that our galaxy was only one of many, and that our own star (the Sun) was merely a tiny speck within our local galaxy. He also discovered that the universe is expanding at an incredible speed. People don't seem to have trouble with these theories.
- 6,7. Currently, however, two major scientific theories are in danger. First evolution (as hinted at in the book review section this time). Second, the idea that much of the lengthy DNA molecule is "junk DNA." The latter theory, if discredited, confronts scientists with an unimaginably more complex DNA to decipher.

Neither of these two scientific theories will fall easily. For the scientist,

evolution is energized and protected by prejudices that are desperately held, and its fall will be a huge disappointment to those who have been delighted to wish God away.

Just as scientists confront two theories that are about to collapse, we Evangelicals confront two concepts: young and old earth. I mention the potential fall in the belief in junk DNA primarily because the collapse of this theory is so beautifully described and predicted by John S. Mattick (the very Australian scientist whose research tends to fault the idea of junk DNA). As you read his words, reflect on our problem in case some of our religious orthodoxies need to change:

Assumptions can be dangerous, especially in science. They usually start as the most plausible or comfortable interpretation of the available facts. But when their truth cannot be immediately tested and their flaws are not obvious, assumptions often graduate to articles of faith, and new observations are forced to fit them. Eventually, if the volume of troublesome information becomes unsustainable, the orthodoxy must collapse.<sup>6</sup>

The painful disengagement of many scientists from a settled theory, which Mattick describes, is not unique to either science or religion. It is human, sociological, psychological. It's as difficult as it has been for Seventh-Day Adventists to give up their repeated end-of-the-world predictions. It would be as difficult as Evangelicals giving up their (gradually and recently inherited) Seventh-Day Adventist concept of instant creation.

The head of the department of the history of science at the University of Wisconsin, Ronald Numbers, is the son of an Adventist pastor who for many years earnestly preached the six-day creation of the earth. Numbers wrote a thick book<sup>7</sup> on the development of "Creation Science" which is very kind to all sides, very appreciative, but lays out in great detail the gradual stages of acceptance of that originally Adventist concept by mainstream Evangelicals. The book is a real treasure, telling with compassion and understanding how earnest believers arrived at conflicting perspectives over a period of many decades.

Whether we take one side or another in the many cases of sincere attempts to understand the Bible is not utterly crucial. Believing the Bible is inerrant does not obligate us to believe that Bible interpretations will always be inerrant.

But, if we insist the Bible says something it was not intended to say—as did Luther and Calvin regarding an earth moving around the sun—we may unintentionally tear down confidence in the Bible.

The discovery not much over a hundred years ago of tiny very dangerous germs, for example, instantly validated the wisdom of many Old Testament rules for handling materials we now know to be suspected of carrying dangerous germs. This does not mean that the Biblical writers were aware of the valid technical reasons for their precautionary rules—any more than when we speak of the "sunrise" we are conscious of the technical details behind that statement.

Let's try to be very sure of what the Bible says before assuming that a given interpretation is the only possibility. What I have sketched here is only conjecture. It does not question the truth of the Bible. But, granted, if valid, it does build on a series of perspectives that I have termed precarious because they involve changes of settled positions. Here they are summarized:

1. Evidence is now virtually overpowering that life has been developing on this planet over a very long period of time.
2. In the Cambrian Period, in the world of animals, *predatory* life forms first appear.
3. Nature began at that point to be pervasively distorted into violence by Satan. And that predatory life appeared for the first time, long before Genesis. And, in Figure 1, these violent forms of life are again and again blotted out by devastations.
4. Evangelicals rightly stress a reconciliation-of-man aspect and a promise of heaven. This is what both Jews and Christians have usually taken faith to mean, namely, human pardon and salvation. But, in addition, they have not emphasized, as clearly as the Bible does, God's glorification

(that is, the re-establishment, the restoration of that glory).

5. The idea that Paul was a missionary primarily to people who had already heard a great deal of the Bible: He set them free, by the thousands, from the thought that they had to become Jews to be acceptable to God. Many were already reconciled to God; they needed to be "saved" from Jewish legalism.
6. Muslims have, by contrast, often treated Christians and Jews as "people of the book," and reserved for all others the word "infidel." For much of Evangelical history we have considered all others, Catholics, Orthodox, Muslims, Hindus, etc., as infidels. Is a different approach necessary?
7. The idea that the "old earth" preceded the "young earth" and preceded Genesis 1:1.
8. That the events of Genesis, the asteroidal devastation described in 1:1, and the flood mentioned later, are devastations and new beginnings, re-creation, replenishment.

All of these perspectives relate to a new and larger understanding of our mission in this life. If that were not the case, the particular issues would be merely oddities to be taken lightly.

**IJFM**

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Perspectives on Science and the Christian Faith*, Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation, Volume 56, Number 3, September 2004, page 237.

<sup>2</sup> Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992, p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004) p. 45, see review on page 179.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, page 45.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted by Phillip Johnson in an August 16, 1999 *Wall Street Journal* article entitled, "The Church of Darwin."

<sup>6</sup> John S. Mattick, *Scientific American*, October 2004, "The Hidden Genetic Program of Complex Organisms," p. 61.

<sup>7</sup> Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992).