Creation According to Genesis: Literary Genre, Cultural Context, Theological Truth

By Daniel C. Harlow

Introduction

The early chapters of Genesis provide a key biblical foundation for how Christians view the very nature of reality, including the ultimate purpose and goal of human life on earth. It is sad but not all that surprising that debate over the meaning of these texts so central to our faith has engendered such great division among us. Genesis has been a bone of contention throughout the course of Christian history. In the second and third centuries, Church fathers like Irenaeus and Tertullian battled Gnostic-Christian and Marcionite-Christian readings of Genesis. At the dawn of the modern age, the devout Christian Galileo ran afoul of the Roman Catholic magisterium for daring to assert as fact the new Copernican cosmology. In our day creationists of various persuasions (special, progressive, and evolutionary) denounce atheistic evolutionism, while evolutionists of different stripes (atheistic, agnostic, theistic, and pantheistic) ridicule young-earth creationism. Advocates of intelligent design seek to dismantle "Darwin's dangerous idea" even as paleontologists announce the discovery of yet another transitional form in the fossil record and geneticists another confirming insight from molecular biology. And Christians continue to go to court over the science curriculum in our schools.

A lot is at stake. Religious and philosophical worldviews influence cultural values, which in turn shape both political policies and social behaviors. The value we place on human beings; the way we treat both the unborn and the born; the dignity we grant the elderly, the infirm, and the disabled; the stand we take against racism and sexism and other forms of social injustice; the steps we take to preserve endangered species and otherwise protect the environment; the positions we hold

In this essay, **Daniel C. Harlow** brings the theological principles of divine accommodation and progressive revelation to bear on a genre-sensitive reading of Genesis 1 and 2 in their ancient Near Eastern context. He questions also whether the Bible teaches that physical death was a consequence of original sin and whether biblical genealogies offer a guide to the age of the cosmos. The essay opposes concordist attempts to harmonize Genesis with the findings of modern science but asserts that the book's message is compatible with a Christian construal of an evolving creation. Mr. Harlow is Associate Professor of Religion at Calvin College.

on stem-cell research, genetic engineering, and cloning—all these issues and others besides are connected deeply with how we think at the most basic theological level about the creation and the place of the human creature within it. In every generation it is our duty to confront the God-denying ideologies of our age with Christian construals of the evidences of science and the arguments of philosophy. To do so adequately we must be guided by the divinely revealed truth of Scripture. But we have our work cut out for us. With so many conflicting claims to truth and with debate taking place on so many different levels, often it is hard to know what to think.

It would be nice, to say the least, if Christians could present a united front. After all, we do agree on the most crucial matters. We all worship God, "the creator of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen." We all put faith in the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and share in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. We all revere the Bible as the divinely inspired word of God. We all detest the errors of atheism. Yet we also disagree about a lot of things. Fundamental to our disagreements is how we understand the nature of the Bible's divine inspiration and the scope of its authority. Our assumptions concerning these two issues both shape and take shape from how we read the Bible. Many of us assume that God dispensed a timeless revelation to the author of Genesis. Others of us presume that God communicated his truth in ways that were, in some respects, time-bound relative to the author's ancient culture. Likewise, many of us believe that the Bible is an infallible authority on matters that relate not only to faith and salvation but also to history, to geography, and to issues that fall under the scrutiny of the sciences; whereas others of us beg to differ, convinced that scientific questions such as the age and size of the universe or the emergence and development of life on earth fall outside the Bible's interest, intent, and competence.

In this essay, I do not pretend to break any new ground by presenting a particularly original piece of biblical exegesis.[1] Instead, I intend to offer a kind of primer or teaching document for Christian academics and their students who may not be well acquainted with or, as the case may be, who are uncomfortable with the results of mainstream biblical scholarship, or who have never considered that many of those results need not militate against a high view of Scripture's divine inspiration and authority. Beyond this, I intend also to touch on the propriety of concordist attempts to harmonize Genesis with the findings of modern science.

At the outset, I should make clear the position that I develop and support in the following pages: Genesis intends primarily to teach theological truths about

[1]This essay began as an invited lecture before a lay audience at the Origins Symposium, an event that took place on the Calvin College campus on March 13–14, 2006. I presented the paper a week earlier, in a kind of dress rehearsal, before a meeting of the Calvin science division's Christian Perspectives in Science seminar. In revising this paper, I have received many helpful criticisms and suggestions from various people. I would especially like to thank my colleague, friend, and dear brother in Christ, J. Richard Middleton of Roberts Wesleyan College and Northeastern Seminary in Rochester, New York.

God, the world, and the human race. It attests solemnly that God created everything there is, that everything God has created is good, and that humanity represents the pinnacle of God's creation. To adopt a popular epigram, it tells us the *that* and the *why* of creation, but not the *how* of creation; that is, it does not seek to convey physical facts about creation that every generation is obligated to accept as scientifically true. Further, the book of Genesis contains two very different narrative depictions of God's work in creation. The framework in Genesis 1, six days of divine labor plus a seventh day of divine rest, does not represent a factual sequence telling us how long God actually took to create and in what order he created. Rather, it represents an analogical framework derived from the seven-day week, which the author adopted to depict the forming and filling of the three realms of the cosmos as the Israelites perceived it. In so doing, Genesis 1 does not presume to reveal a cosmology, but it does assume one. Its cosmology, however, is ancient and obsolete, not timelessly valid but culturally relative. The timeless truth of Genesis lies rather in its theological affirmations concerning the sovereignty of God, the goodness of creation, and the dignity of humanity. The account in Genesis 2, though intended to complement Genesis 1, offers nevertheless a distinct perspective on creation; that it differs in its presentation of the duration, method, and sequence of God's activity suggests that neither account intends to present a factual report on creation.

Foundational Assumptions and Guiding Principles

Before engaging the text of Genesis 1–2, it will help to uncover some of the foundational assumptions and guiding principles that inform this study. I deem it worthwhile to unfold this at some length, because most disagreements over how to interpret Genesis appear to lie at the level not of exegesis but of hermeneutics.

My first assumption is that in what it intends to teach, Genesis tells us the absolute truth about the creation, but it does not tell us the complete truth. It gives us, we might say, "The truth and nothing but the truth" but not "the whole truth." Genesis cannot tell us the whole truth for the simple reason that it does not exhaust everything there is to know about creation. We have other sources of information, including other sources of divine revelation. We have, for instance, passages in the New Testament that tell us of Christ's mediation or agency in creation (John 1:1–4; Heb. 1:1–4; Col. 1:15–20), of which Genesis says nothing. We also have, in addition to God's special revelation in Scripture, God's general revelation in creation itself, the "book" of nature. One of the major documents in the Reformed tradition to which I belong, the Belgic Confession, declares that the "universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book, in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder God" (Article 2; cf. Rom. 1:20). Both general and special revelations are important sources of truth, and what we learn from one should definitely influence how we think about the other. But I would also insist that they are two distinct kinds of sources that should be accorded their own integrity and not be

collapsed into one another.

My second assumption is that there are different kinds of truth and that God is the ultimate source of all truth, wherever and whenever we find it. This is something Christian educators in every field seek to open up for their students; we want them to value but also distinguish logical and others sorts of philosophical truth, mathematical truth, factual truth and historical truth, scientific truth, moral truth, theological or spiritual truth, and aesthetic truth. These different types or orders of truth may, of course, overlap. So, for example, something that is factually or historically true also may communicate a profound theological or spiritual truth and vice versa. Indeed, some theological truths and spiritual realities would not be what they are apart from their factuality or historicity. The incarnation, atonement, and resurrection of Christ constitute only the most important case in point. The early chapters of Genesis convey truth, but it is crucial to identify what sort of truth they convey.

My third foundational principle is that in the Bible we have different genres of literature that call for different types of interpretation. The Bible is full of theological truth, but its truth comes to us in many different literary forms, all of them divinely inspired. On the broadest level, we have poetry and prose. The hallmark feature of Hebrew poetry is parallelism, the repetition or enlargement of a statement in successive lines that are alternately synonymous, antithetical, or synthetic in relation to the first line. We find poetry in the Psalms, in the oracles of the Prophets, in Wisdom sayings, and in passages nestled within prose narratives. Prose itself takes many different forms in the Bible, the most prominent one being narrative, but there are many different kinds of narratives.[2] Some narratives, such as the Gospels or the books of Samuel and Kings, are historical; that is, they intend to give a more or less factual account of events in the past. Other narratives, though, such as Jesus' parables, are fictional. Still others, such as the books of Ruth and Esther, appear to be works of historical fiction—Israelite novellas or short stories. Even narratives that intend to recount real events of the past, such as the Patriarchal narratives in Genesis 12–50 or the narratives about David in 1 and 2 Samuel, can manifest a complex blend of history, legend, and lore along with a considerable degree of authorial shaping. There are also cases in which an event of the past can be recounted in both a historical genre and a nonhistorical one. So, for example, we have a prose account of the crossing of the Red Sea (or Sea of Reeds) in Exodus 13:17–14:30 followed by a mythic poem recounting the same event in Exodus 15. All sorts of genres become vehicles of divine revelation in the Bible. Genre recognition is essential to interpreting biblical texts; genre confusion is disastrous. Genesis 1 and 2 are prose narratives; one of the key tasks in studying them is to ascertain what type of narratives they are.

[2]Narrative genres include epic, saga, tale, novella, legend, history, biography, report, anecdote, fable, etiology, and myth. See George W. Coates, "Genesis with an Introduction to Narrative Literature" in *Forms of Old Testament Literature,* vol. 1, eds. R. P. Knierim and G. M. Tucker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 5–10.

Next come two key theological principles that have a bearing on the interpretation of Genesis. Both of them have been very important in the Reformed tradition. The first one is the notion of divine accommodation. This principle holds that God condescends to reveal himself in ways that human beings can understand. He adapts his message to our limited human capacities, not only in Scripture but in creation itself. In the case of the biblical writers, this means that God did not yank them out of their ancient worldviews or conceptualities but inspired them within their culture-specific frameworks of understanding, meeting them where they were. The second principle is progressive revelation, which states that God's self-disclosure is ongoing and has unfolded in stages. When used of the Bible, this principle affirms that God did not vouchsafe everything to the biblical authors at one time but gradually. For instance, God allowed many of the Old Testament authors to retain their belief that other gods besides Yahweh existed and to write as if this were so and even to depict God stating as much (for example, Exod. 12:12; 15:11; 20:2–3; Deut. 32:8–9; Ps. 82; Ps. 89:6–10), before revealing to later biblical authors that Yahweh is in fact the only god there is (for example, Isa. 43:10–11; 44:6; 46:1–13). The principle of progressive revelation affirms also that later stages of God's disclosure should issue in a revised appreciation of earlier stages. So, for instance, at a very broad level we should say that New Testament revelation clarifies and completes Old Testament revelation.

These two theological principles have some hermeneutical corollaries. To begin with, if we value the historical particularity of God's revelation to the ancient biblical authors—and I think that any Christian who takes the incarnation seriously must value the particular times and ways in which God has chosen to reveal himself—then we should attend to the ancient cultural contexts of their writings. To do justice to Genesis, we must read it in light of ancient Israelite history and religion, and alongside other ancient Near Eastern accounts of creation.[3] God did not write Genesis. He inspired ancient Israelites to write it, and they did not do so in a cultural vacuum. Following from this, if we take divine accommodation seriously, then Genesis must not be made to say anything that would have been unintelligible or irrelevant to the ancient author and his audience. Modern concerns and concepts must not be foisted anachronistically onto the biblical text. Genesis is God's word to us, but it was not written to us.

Further, if we take progressive revelation seriously, then we must be willing to distinguish what the text of Genesis meant to its original readers (or hearers) from

[3]The most relevant texts are the following: from Mesopotamia—the *Atrahasis Epic*, the *Enuma Elish*, the *Gilgamesh Epic*, and the *Adapa Myth;* from Canaan—the Ugaritic cycle of cosmogonic myths associated with Ba`al and Anat, and the cosmogonies preserved in Philo of Byblos; from Egypt—the cosmogonies of Memphis *(Memphite Creation Theology)* and Heliopolis *(Pyramid Texts, Coffin Texts, Book of the Dead).* For the best current overview, see Richard J. Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Near East and in the Bible* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 1994). For an accessible anthology of the texts, see Victor H. Hamilton and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*, 3rd ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 2007).

what it came to mean in later Jewish and Christian tradition and, most important of all, from what it means for us today. Now when I use the phrase "what the text means," I am not talking about what the text says but about what status and significance the text has in our contemporary context. We have a different cultural context and a different worldview than the original Israelite readership of Genesis did. It would be foolish for us to ignore this fact. We moderns should try our best to ascertain what Genesis meant to its ancient audience. We should also do our best to identify its essential and enduring theological message. But if Genesis presumes an ancient Near Eastern picture of the world, then we are not obligated to accept that picture as an indispensable part of the book's religious truth. Why? Well, for starters, because God's ongoing general revelation in creation has been apprehended more fully and more clearly than it was in the time when God inspired the writing of Genesis. We must face it: we know more about the actual workings of creation than the author of Genesis 1 did, even though he was divinely inspired while we are not. We know more about the physical makeup of the universe than he did, not because we are smarter than he was but simply because we have grasped more of God's general revelation. The heavens have been declaring the glory of God (Ps. 19:1), and they have never been silent.

The First Creation Account (Genesis 1:1–2:3)

Genesis 1 and Pentateuchal Origins

Most scholars assign the first creation account to the priestly tradents or editors of the Pentateuch, who worked during and after the exile of the people of Judah in Babylon during the 6th-5th centuries B.C.E. In Jewish and Christian tradition, of course, Moses is the attributed or honorary author of the Pentateuch, even though the Pentateuch itself makes no such claim. There are good reasons why Moses became associated with its composition; after all, he is the main figure in these books, the great lawgiver to whom some writing activity is ascribed (Exod. 17:4; 24:4; 34:27–28; Num. 33:2; Deut. 31:9, 19, 22).

Yet there are several features of the Pentateuch itself that make it impossible for Moses to have written it. I will mention just two. First, the Pentateuch is written in Classical Hebrew, a form of the language that did not even exist in the time of Moses, who lived around 1350–1250 B.C.E.[4] The Hebrew of the Pentateuch developed centuries later, in the period 800–600 B.C.E. We do not know exactly what language Moses spoke or wrote, but it would have been some form of proto-He-

[4]On the prehistory of the Hebrew language, see C. Rabin, "The Emergence of Classical Hebrew," in *The Age of the Monarchies: Culture and Society,* ed. A. Malamat, vol. 4, part 2 of *The World History of the Jewish People* (Jerusalem: Massada, 1979), 71, 293; Gene M. Schramm and Philip C. Schmitz, "Languages (Hebrew)," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary,* vol. 4, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday: 1992), 205; Angel Sáenz-Badillos, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 52–53.

brew, since in his day Hebrew was only beginning to emerge as a language distinct from earlier Northwest Semitic languages. A few archaic poetic passages in the Old Testament (for example, Exodus 15; Judges 5) may go as far back as 1200 B.C.E., but the earliest prose narratives in the Pentateuch were not written until the 9th or 8th centuries B.C.E. or even later—around half a millennium *after* Moses. Second, several statements in the Pentateuch suggest that it was written long after Moses' time. For example, anachronistic notices such as "at that time there were Canaanites in the land" (Gen. 12:6; 13:7) and passing references to conditions in the land of Canaan "before any king reigned over the Israelites" (Gen. 36:31) point to a time of composition when the Canaanites were no longer in the land and when kings did in fact reign in Israel. The Bible itself tells us that these conditions *began* only some 300 years after Moses.

So when we meet in the New Testament with phrases like "Moses commanded" (for example, Matt. 8:4; 19:7–8; Mark 1:44; 10:3–4), "Moses said" (for example, Mark 7:10; Acts 3:22) or "Moses wrote" (for example, Mark 12:19), we should not mistake these for literary-critical assertions about authorship. They are statements of tradition in which the name Moses is a metonym for the books of the Torah (see Luke 16:29; 24:27, "Moses and the Prophets"; 2 Cor. 3:15, "whenever Moses is read").

In its striking variations of style and theological outlook, and in its many repetitions, doublets, and inconsistencies, the Pentateuch shows itself to be comprised of materials that were composed over the course of several centuries, to have incorporated several streams of both oral and written tradition, and to have been the object of editorial activity.[5] As a Christian, I firmly believe that God superintended this long, complex process and that the Pentateuch is no less divinely inspired or authoritative for being the work of more than one hand. I believe also that the end product, which probably achieved its definitive shape sometime in the postexilic or Persian period (ca. 550–450 B.C.E.), manifests a profound literary artistry and overarching theological unity.

Literary Genre and Affiliations

The first creation account begins in 1:1 and ends at 2:3. Genesis 2:4a, which reads, "These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created," is a heading that introduces the cycle of narratives in chapters 2–4. We meet with similar headings—scholars call them *tôlēdôt* formulas, after the Hebrew

[5]See further Richard Elliott Freedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1987); idem, "Torah (Pentateuch)," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary,* vol. 6, ed. David N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 605–22; Joseph A. Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1992); R. Norman Whybray, *Introduction to the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); David M. Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996); William M. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 81–84, 118–38.

word for "generations"—at various points in Genesis, where they function to preface a new round of narratives (6:9; 11:27; 37:2) or else a genealogy (5:1; 10:1, 27; 25:12; 36:1, 9). Despite occasional claims to the contrary, these *tôlēdôt* formulas are not genre labels but transitional links, and their mere presence in Genesis does not vouch for the historicity of the material they introduce. Issues of genre and historicity must be decided on other grounds.

The literary genre of Genesis 1 may be classified broadly as prose narrative. (Even the label narrative is potentially misleading, though, since Genesis 1 has no plot and no character development.) It is not written in Hebrew poetry, since it lacks parallelism, but it is not composed in typical Hebrew prose, either. Its syntax or sentence construction is different in degree if not in kind from what we find in normal narrative prose. It is marked by formulaic repetitions, tight symmetries, and an elevated style. There is nothing quite like it anywhere in the Hebrew Bible, certainly not among Old Testament historical narratives. In its literary compactness, exalted tone and solemn contents, it most resembles passages such as Psalm 104, Job 38, and Proverbs 8—all of which are in Hebrew poetry.

Genesis 1 shows no direct literary dependence on any ancient Near Eastern cosmogony and no marked influence from any single text. Instead it appears to be an eclectic work that borrows conceptions and motifs from a wide range of cosmogonies even as it transforms what it borrows, refuting both the theology and theological anthropology of its oriental background. It accomplishes its task, moreover, with a consummate narrative artistry and theological sophistication that far outstrip anything in the literature of the ancient Near East.

Reading the Text in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context

Genesis 1 begins, appropriately enough, in the beginning. Often the very first verse is translated as an independent clause: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (for example, KJV, RSV, NIV, REB). Translated this way, the verse serves as a kind of summary of what is to follow in the rest of the chapter. However, the verse is translated just as often and just as properly as a dependent, temporal clause: "At the beginning of God's creating the heavens and the earth . . ." or "When God began to create the heavens and the earth . . ." (for example, NEB, NAB, NRSV, JPS). The difference in translation owes to the fact that the particular grammatical construction of the opening clause is unique in the Hebrew Bible, and to the fact that the vowel pointing in the traditional Hebrew text is not original but was added long after the book was written—in the Middle Ages.[6] Some interpret-

[6]The phrase *bĕrêʾšît* ("At/in the beginning") lacks a definite article and so is evidently in the construct state (that is, it is the first element in a possessive compound) instead of the absolute state. The verb *br'* (vocalized in the Masoretic Text as a past tense, finite verb *bārāʾ*, "created") if vocalized differently would be an infinitive *(bĕrôʾ)*. This suggestion goes as far back as the medieval Jewish commentators Rashi (Rabbi Solomon son of Isaac) and Abraham Ibn Ezra, as noted in U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part I, From Adam to*

ers insist on the former rendering because they think that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* or creation out of nothing depends upon it. The truth of the matter, though, is that neither translation clearly affirms or denies that God created everything out of nothing. That doctrine is stated forthrightly elsewhere in Scripture (for example, Heb. 11:3) but not here. Instead, Genesis 1 begins *in media res* by depicting God imposing order on formless matter. Verse 2 describes the primordial state: "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters" (NRSV).

The Hebrew word rendered as "wind" in the NRSV is the word *ruaḥ*, which can also mean "breath" or "spirit," depending on the context. *Wind* seems appropriate in this context and is perhaps better suited to the participle "hovering, sweeping" (see also Deut. 32:11). Even so, the image of a mighty wind sweeping over the watery abyss may be intended as a vivid metaphor for the presence of God's Spirit at the dawn of creation, as God waits to "breathe" his creative word (see Psalm 33).

This primordial state of dark, watery chaos is not at all unique to Genesis but typical of ancient Near Eastern creation accounts—the *Enuma Elish,* the *Chaldean Cosmology*, and the Memphite cosmogonic traditions, for example. What is distinctive about Genesis 1 is not its cosmology but its theology. Over and against pagan creation accounts, the most striking thing about the first verse of Genesis is the singularity and simplicity of its subject and verb: "God created." The one God—not many gods—created all there is. The verb rendered "created" is the verb *bārā'*, which in the Hebrew Bible is used exclusively of God's creative activity, though of course other verbs can be called into service as well. In itself the verb *bārā'* says nothing about whether God created *ex nihilo* or not. Still, to speak of God creating the heavens and the earth in the beginning is to imply that nothing has existed forever; everything had a starting point and is therefore not divine but creaturely.

In asserting this, Genesis denies not only the polytheism of ancient Near Eastern paganism but also the pagan notion that the visible universe is eternal and, *a fortiori,* divine. Genesis 1 also rejects implicitly the notion of generative beginnings–theogony (birth of the gods) and cosmogony (birth of the cosmos). Conrad Hyers has explained the pagan context of Genesis 1 well:

> Much of the cosmogonic material of other ancient peoples was literally cosmogonic: a birthing of the cosmos. For in polytheism the origins of the main elements of the universe were commonly understood in terms of the births of gods and goddesses and their subsequent power struggles, jealousies, and conflicts. All the regions of what we today call nature were understood as supernatural. The forces of chaos (darkness, earth, water) were gods and goddesses. There were gods and goddesses of light, sky, and vegetation; sun, moon, and stars were divine; and pharaohs and kings were often counted as sons of gods.[7]

Noah, Genesis I–VI 8 (Jerusalem: Magness, 1961), 19–20. As E. A. Speiser explains, the normal way of saying "At the beginning of the creating by God . . ." would be *běrê'šît běrô' 'ĕlôhîm,* with an infinitive in second position (as in Gen. 2:4b), but Hebrew usage does allow a finite verb (in this case *bārā')* in second position, as in Hosea 1:2. See E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Anchor Bible; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), 12.

[7]Conrad Hyers, "Comparing Biblical and Scientific Maps of Origins," in *Perspectives on an*

The Babylonian creation epic *Enuma Elish,* to which Genesis 1 is often compared, may serve to illustrate the tendencies of these Eastern cosmogonies. This work from the early second millennium B.C.E. depicts creation via theomachy or war among the gods. It opens with the god Apsu, who represents fresh water, and his consort the goddess Tiamat, who represents salt water, giving birth to the couple Anshar and Kishar, who represent the horizon; they in turn bring forth Anu, the sky god, and Ea, the earth goddess. A war then breaks out among the gods. Apsu is killed, Tiamat seeks vengeance, and the other gods try to subdue her but fail. The gods eventually choose as their champion the god Marduk, who slays Tiamat and splits her carcass in two, using one half to form the sky and the other to form the earth.

All of this pagan theology is refuted indirectly (but nonetheless forcefully) in the very first verse of Genesis 1, and the point bears emphasizing. Readers of the Bible should also be aware, however, that the Old Testament as a whole does not fully reject all aspects of ancient Near Eastern creation mythology but in places adapts and "baptizes" certain images and ideas from it. This is the case in a handful of Old Testament texts that describe God creating the world by subduing the cosmic forces of primordial chaos. Various passages in the Psalms, Wisdom books, and Prophets picture God slaying a sea monster, serpent, or dragon—mythic personifications of chaos variously called Yam (Sea), Leviathan, Rahab, or Tannin (Serpent/Dragon). Job 26:12–13, for instance, depicts this cosmic combat when it says of God, "By his power he stilled the Sea; by his understanding he struck down Rahab; by his breath the heavens were made fair; his hand pierced the fleeing Serpent." Psalm 74:12–13 says of God, "You divided the Sea by your might; you broke the heads of the Dragons in the water; you crushed the heads of Leviathan" (see also Job 38:4–11 [no combat]; Ps. 89:9–10; Isa. 27:1 [at the eschaton]; Isa. 51:9–11 [the return from exile as a new exodus and new creation]). Together these passages represent the Israelite counterpart to pagan texts depicting Marduk slaying the sea goddess Tiamat, the Egyptian creator god Re killing the dragon Apophis, and the Canaanite god Ba`al Haddu piercing the serpent Lotan.

The appearance of these chaos critters in so many Old Testament passages goes to show that God divinely inspired—and the biblical authors evidently valued—the use of mythological language when talking about creation.[8] When read alongside Genesis 1, these passages also highlight the striking plurality of religious understanding that was countenanced in ancient Israel and canonized in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Genesis 1, however, prefers to demythologize this sort of language. God (*'Ĕlōhîm,* the generic Semitic term for deity) does not have to do battle with any other gods or with any chaos monsters. He has no competition. When in Gen. 1:21

Evolving Creation, ed. Keith B. Miller (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 30.

[8]On this subject, the book to read is Bernard F. Batto, *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992).

the great "sea monsters" *(tannînîm)* make their appearance, they are depicted as ordinary aquatic creatures (in contrast to their mythic character in such passages as Ps. 148:7; Isa. 27:1; 59:1; Ps. 74:13; Job 7:12).

Starting in verse 3 the narrative unfolds in a meaningful, intelligible sequence that depicts God forming, with utmost ease, the three realms of the Israelite cosmos—the heavens above, the earth beneath, and the waters under the earth[9] —and then filling those realms with their corresponding life forms. The following table outlines the six-day schema.

Table 1. The Created Order in Genesis 1[10]

Problem	**Preparation**	**Population**
	opus divisionis	***opus ornatus***
darkness	1. light (non-solar)	4. sky-lights (sun, moon, stars)
watery abyss	2. sky-dome	5. sea and sky creatures (to separate waters)
formless *(tōhû)* **and void** *(bōhû)*	3. (a) dry land (b) plants	6. (a) land animals (b) humanity
	***Tōhû* is formed**	***Bōhû* is filled**

Several features are worth noting here. To begin with, in this schema the items created on days 1–3 find their parallel in the created items of days 4–6. This symmetrical arrangement has been obvious to Christian interpreters at least since Augustine. In the medieval scholastic tradition, days 1–3 came to be treated under the heading *opus divisionis / distinctionis* or "work of division / distinction" and days 4–6 under the rubric *opus ornatus* or "work of decoration."[11] So what God prepares on days 1–3 he populates on days 4–6.

Another thing to note is that each pair of symmetrical days takes care of one of the "problems" of primordial chaos confronting God. Recall that verse 2 says, "the earth was formless *(tōhû)* and void *(bōhû)* and darkness covered the face of the deep." Days 1 and 4 address the issue of darkness; days 2 and 5 handle the problem of the deep, watery abyss; and days 3 and 6 complete the process of dealing with a formless and void earth.

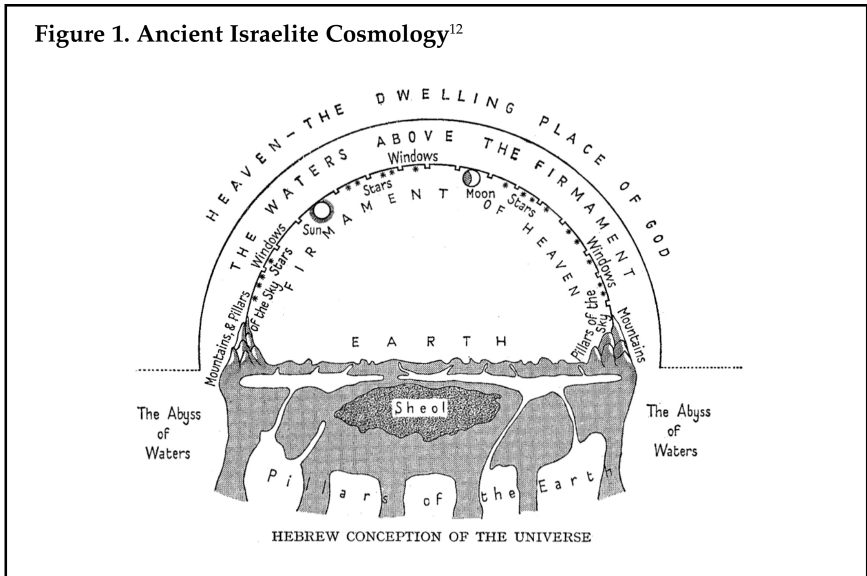
[9]Exodus 20:4, the second of the Ten Commandments, says, "You shall not make for yourselves an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."

[10]I have adapted this table, with some modifications, from Conrad Hyers, *The Meaning of Creation: Genesis and Modern Science* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1984), 69. See also Hyers, "Comparing Biblical and Scientific Maps of Origins," 30.

A further thing to note is that there is a double creation on day 3 (dry land; plants) and day 6 (land animals; humans). Less obvious but also worth noting is that the second set of three days brings creatures—heavenly bodies, fish and fowl, land animals and man—that not only move but move with progressively greater freedom. More on that in a moment.

A final thing to note is that the sky is depicted in verses 6–8 as solid. The Hebrew word translated in our English versions alternately as *dome, vault, firmament,* or *expanse* is a noun *(raqia`)* related to a verb *(rq`)* that means "to stamp or spread by hammering" (Ezek. 6:11; Exod. 39:3; Isa. 42:5; Job 37:18). Etymology aside, the solid character of the sky in this context is clear from the depiction of its intended function: to separate the waters above the earth from the waters below the earth. Only something solid can separate water from water. On day 4, moreover, the heavenly lights are said to be "set" in this solid sky-dome (1:14, 15, 17). What this means is that Genesis 1 conceives of the sun, moon, and stars as being no more distant from the surface of the earth than the upper limit of the sky—not millions of miles away as we have come to learn. Although this description does not accord with our modern conception of the earth's atmosphere and of cosmic space, it fits easily within the widespread cosmology of ancient Near Eastern peoples, the essential elements of which are illustrated in the following figure.

Figure 1. Ancient Israelite Cosmology[12]



[11]See Stanley L. Jaki, *Genesis 1 through the Ages*, 2nd ed. (Royal Oak, MI: Real View Books, 1998), 5, 115–122, *et passim*.

[12]The diagram is from S. H. Hooke, *In the Beginning,* The Clarendon Bible, Old Testament, vol. 6 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1947), 20 © 1947 by Oxford University Press and used by permission.

The Hebrew cosmology depicted in the figure represents a composite reconstruction based on various Old Testament passages. The diagram pictures a flat earth, probably to be thought of as a circular disc (Isa. 40:22; see also Job 26:10; Prov. 8:27). Although by the 4th century B.C.E. the Greeks had come to understand that the earth is shaped like a sphere, the people of Israel and their older ancient Near Eastern neighbors did not know this.[13]

Above the earth is the solid sky-dome or firmament of heaven (for example, Gen. 1:6–8; Prov. 8:28; Job 37:18 describes it as "hard as a molten mirror"), here pictured resting on mountains at "the ends of the earth" (see Job 26:11, "the pillars of heaven"). Evidently, ancient Near Easterners conceived of the sky as a transparent, glass-like shell. The sky-dome has set within it the sun, moon, and other heavenly bodies. The dome also has windows or casements cut into it (for example, Gen. 7:11; 8:2; Isa. 24:18; Mal. 3:10) through which come rain, snow, hail, and wind, elements that have their own storehouses above the sky (Job 38:22; Ps. 135:7; Jer. 10:13; 51:16).

Above the sky-dome is a vast ocean of water (for example, Ps. 148:4; see also 2 Esdras 4:7). Just why ancient people thought that there is a lot of water above and below the earth is unclear. Perhaps the blue color of the sky led them to imagine a huge quantity of water pressing up against its outer edge. Or maybe they simply speculated that both rain and water from underground springs must have their source in a giant reservoir. Under the earth are its foundations or pillars (for example, 1 Sam. 2:8; 2 Sam. 22:16; Ps. 75:3; Ps. 104: 5; Job 9:4; Job 38:4; Zech. 12:1) and the subterranean waters of the abyss or "fountains of the deep" (Gen. 1:2; 7:11; 8:2; 49:25; 2 Sam. 1:12; and so forth). In the "bowels of the earth" is the realm of the dead or *she'ol* (for example, Gen. 37:35; Deut. 32:22; Isa. 14:9; Job 26:6).

Although the majority of the references given above come from poetic sections of the Old Testament, a few derive from prose narratives such as Deuteronomy and the books of Samuel. To cite an example from later in the book of Genesis itself: in the flood story we are told that the great deluge resulted from an unplugging of the cosmos; Gen. 7:11 says that on the day the flood began "all the fountains of the deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened." So even though Old Testament descriptions of the physical cosmos occur mainly in poetic passages, they seem to be more than just figurative language. Of course we must take them as such, but they probably represent how the ancient Israelites actually conceived the physical make-up of the world.

These, then, are the essential elements of ancient Israelite cosmology, which the author of Genesis and other Old Testament writers more or less shared with other Near Eastern peoples. Obviously, nothing of this cosmology agrees with what we have come to know about the physical constitution of the earth and the universe. And, to reiterate, the ancient biblical universe was also much smaller in conception than we know it to be. It was really not much larger than the earth

[13]See, for example, M. R. Wright, *Cosmology in Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1995).

itself. It ended at the upper limit of the waters thought to be above the sky-dome; beyond that was the "heaven of heavens" or the highest heaven, the abode of God. When, for instance, ancient Israelite authors of the Bible looked at the sun, they had no idea that this luminary is actually a star, that it is a giant ball of gas, that it is more than 100 times larger than the earth, that it is 93 million miles away from our planet (the "third rock from the sun"), and that its light takes eight minutes to reach us. Nor had they any inkling that the nearest star to earth after the sun is more than 200,000 times farther away from us than the sun is. If we were to insist that the Bible gives an accurate picture of the physical cosmos, then to do so with integrity, we would have to believe that the earth is flat, immobile, and resting on pillars; that the sky is solid and has windows in it; that the sun, moon, and stars are set in the sky and move along it like light bulbs along a track; that the sun literally rises, moves, and sets; that there is an ocean of water surrounding the earth; and that beyond the waters above the sky is the very heaven of God. That's what the Bible says.

Now how is God depicted creating here in Genesis 1? Most obviously by speaking everything into existence: "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" and so forth. There is some precedent in Egyptian mythology for creation by performative thought and speech; in the *Memphite Theology of Creation,* the god Ptah, the divine patron of Memphis, gives birth to all things, including the gods, by the "thoughts of his heart" and "words of his tongue."[14] Be that as it may, even the most casual reader of Genesis 1 cannot fail to note that there are several recurring formulaic expressions related to God's speech in this account. What is perhaps not so obvious is that there are exactly seven of these formulas and that all but the first two occur exactly seven times. (1) The announcement formula "And God said" appears ten times. (2) The command formula "Let there be" occurs eight times. (3) The fulfillment formula "And it was so" appears seven times. (4) The execution formula "And God made" is used seven times. (5) The divine approval formula "And God saw that it was good" comes seven times. (6) The note of divine naming or blessing is sounded seven times. And (7) mention of the day is made seven times. Clearly the number seven, which symbolizes completeness or perfection, plays an important role in Genesis 1.

The number seven surfaces in other ways as well. There are seven words in the Hebrew of verse 1 and fourteen words in verse 2. Further, key words in the account occur in multiples of seven. The word "God," for instance, appears thirty-five times; the words "heaven" and "earth" are found twenty-one times each; the word "water" occurs seven times (1:6–8, 9–10); and the word "living" is used seven times (1:22–23, 24–30). The impression these numerical patterns give is that we are dealing with a very stylized account, one that uses numbers numerologically or

[14]The extant form of this text dates to circa 700 B.C.E., but it derives from an original written during the period of the Old Kingdom (2575–2134 B.C.E.). For a translation, see James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts,* 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 4–5.

symbolically.

Besides God speaking, the main creative procedures depicted in Genesis 1 are separation and the provision of place. The adage "A place for everything, and everything in its place" may be applied very aptly to Genesis 1. The most important creative procedure attributed to God appears to be separation, and in fact the verb "to separate" appears five times in Genesis 1. The narrative pictures God bringing order out of disorder—cosmos out of chaos—via acts of separation, division, and distinction. Thus God separates light from darkness (1:4), upper waters from lower waters (1:6–7), and day from night (1:14, 18). On days 1–3 God prepares spheres of life with appropriate limits and boundaries and then on days 4–6 populates those spheres with appropriate life forms (including heavenly bodies), each one "according to its kind." And for that matter, God's very act of naming implies the making of distinctions.

All this proceeds in an orderly and symmetrical schema of six days followed by a seventh day of divine rest.[15] Now the days pictured in Genesis 1 are regular, twenty-four-hour periods of time. It simply will not do to suggest that they are "really" long geological epochs, as in the so-called day-age theory. Nor will it do to posit a gap of billions of years between verse 1 and verse 2 or verse 3, as in the so-called gap theory, in order to harmonize Genesis 1 with our modern knowledge that the earth is billions of years old. The ancient Israelite author and his audience had no notion of geological ages, which is a distinctly modern concept, and not a clue that the universe is as old as mainstream science has shown it to be, some 13.7 billion years by the latest reckoning. More pertinently, though, the repeated phrase "evening and morning" indicates clearly that these are normal, twenty-four-hour days. That is how the text pictures them. But what are we to make of this picture? Are we to take it as a factual representation of how long God actually took to create everything?

The text itself contains a clue to answer this question. If Genesis 1 were intended by God—that is to say, by the author in the creative authorial freedom granted him by God—to provide a timelessly factual and scientifically valid depiction of creation, we should expect it to describe the world in a way that agrees with the way nature actually works. Yet Genesis 1 defies a central fact of nature: over the course of its first three days, it depicts light without the sun, morning and evening without the sun, and earth and vegetation without the sun. The sun is not created until day 4, and even then it is not named with the usual Hebrew word for sun *(šemeš)* but is instead called "the greater light." For almost two thousand years Jewish and Christian interpreters have puzzled over these two peculiarities. How are we to account for them? The most common answer given strikes me as the correct one: Genesis 1 intends to demote the status of the sun in order to refute the

[15]Note that other ancient Near Eastern texts have a seven-fold creative process (for example, *Dunnu Theogony; Enuma Elish)* and the gods resting at the end of the creation process (for example, *Enuma Elish).*

widespread pagan belief in the ancient world that the sun is divine. In Genesis the sun is a created object, not a deity. God does not "need" the light of the sun to see what he is doing; therefore, the text pictures him providing and working by his own light. The sun, moon, and stars are not gods and goddesses whose movements determine the fate and fortunes of human beings but mere timekeepers.

This striking demotion of the sun and of the other heavenly bodies jumps out of the text when read in its ancient cultural context. It suggests that Genesis 1 intends to offer something other than a factual framework or temporal sequence for creation. The order of creation it lays out is therefore best regarded as an analogical order that is also a hierarchical one. To begin with, the order comes by way of analogy with the six-day workweek of the ancient Israelites. Evidently, the author wanted to emphasize the sanctity of the Israelite Sabbath by depicting God resting on a seventh day after six days of work—even though, of course, God never works or rests literally. Quite apart from the six-day workweek, there is another very sensible reason for the author to have chosen the number six: it is twice the number of the three realms of the Israelite cosmos. How simple and elegant for the author to depict God forming these three realms in three successive steps, and then filling each of the realms in another three steps. If we ask, "But why did the author choose to depict these six steps as six *days?*" the answer most ready to hand is that the image of light shining in darkness (1:3–4) prompted the schema of days and nights or, more precisely, evenings and mornings (since the Israelite-Jewish day began at sundown). And the image of nonsolar light being created first may itself be present on analogy with an architect or builder lighting his workplace before getting on with the job. In any case, all this is recognized best as analogical language.

The order of creation in Genesis 1 is also a hierarchical order. Living and moving creatures (animals and humans) come after nonliving creatures (sun, moon and stars). What is more, living creatures have an increasingly greater freedom of movement and an ever higher ontological status, the highest of all living creatures being humanity, who alone is said to be made "in the image and likeness of God." (The terms "hierarchical" and "ontological" would be more at home in a Greek context than a Hebrew one, but they are appropriate here nevertheless.) This hierarchical ordering goes against the grain of ancient Near Eastern theology, which regarded the cosmos as divine—malevolently so—and humanity as a kind of afterthought created in order to perform slave labor for the gods. So for example, in the *Enuma Elish* the god Marduk announces to the goddess Ea,

Blood I will mass and cause bones to be.
I will establish a savage, "man" shall be his name.
Verily, savage-man I will create.
He shall be charged with the service of the gods that they might be at ease![16]

[16]Trans. E. A. Speiser in Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts,* 68.

Another example comes in the *Atrahasis Epic* (composed circa 1600 B.C.E.), where the high gods create a cadre of lesser gods, the Igigi, to bear the burden of providing their food and other needs. When the Igigi revolt, the divine assembly fixes on a solution; the gods Enki and Nintu kill the ringleader of the Igigi and mix his blood with clay to fashion primitive humankind (*lullû* or *lullû-awīlu*), a race of seven males and females made to feed and provision the gods. Genesis 1 stands this sort of scenario on its head by insisting on a cosmos that is not divine but also not evil, and on a godlike humanity given dominion over a world prepared expressly for it. Richard J. Clifford has helped clarify this polemical purpose:

> The universe that arises in Genesis 1 is a system, a network in which the elements are arranged hierarchically and assigned value . . . . In comparison with Mesopotamian systems, the universe of Genesis 1 stands out in its complexity and coherence, and in not being completely oriented toward the care and feeding of Elohim, God . . . . In the Genesis system the human race is the center of a harmonious universe, spanning and uniting it and bringing it before God. Because God is not needy like the gods of comparable cosmogonies, the Genesis system is designed less immediately to provide essential services for the divine world. God does not make things primarily for the divine world (e.g., marshes as sources of the bricks and reeds of the temple, animals for its sacrifices, and human beings to build it), but rather to enable the human race to play its role in the world. In the course of the week, the world is made increasingly fit for *human* habitation . . . .[17]

It is easy for us moderns to miss the message of Genesis 1, because we do not live in a pagan environment in which people typically worship natural forces and heavenly bodies. But if you have ever lived for a time in a non-Western culture, Genesis has a better chance of hitting home. Let me give an example. I have a colleague at Calvin College, Jim Bradley, who recently sent me an email describing his first serious encounter with Genesis 1. Here is what he wrote to me:

> I was raised in a nominally Roman Catholic family, pre–Vatican II. I never read the Bible as a child, nor did I attend Sunday school. After graduating from college, I joined the Peace Corps and spent two years teaching high school in India. I was assigned to teach in a school run by Hindu monks, so I was largely with devout Hindus for much of that time. I heard a great deal about their beliefs. At the age of 23, when I read the Bible for the first time, I was quite struck by Genesis 1. It seemed to me to be quite intentional about speaking to a monotheistic people surrounded by polytheistic cultures. That is, it seemed to me to be systematically going through a list of each of the things I saw my polytheistic friends worshiping, and saying to them, "That's not God. That's a created thing." To me, it was electrifying. In one short chapter, Genesis 1 swept away all of the religious confusion I had been surrounded by. So I've always been somewhat bemused by these discussions of Genesis 1 and science. It doesn't seem to me that the folks who spend their energy trying to reconcile the chapter with science understand what it's actually about.

But now let us look a little more closely at the creation of humanity. In verse 26 we are told, "Then God said, 'Let us make humanity (*'ādām)* in our image, according to our likeness.'" (The word *'ādām*, incidentally, is the generic (genderless) Hebrew term for human being.) To whom is God speaking? Christian interpreters

[17]Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible*, 143–44.

through the ages have seen here a reference to the Trinity, which though very deep and suggestive as a symbolic or spiritual reading—part of what the church fathers called the *sensus plenior* or "fuller sense" of Scripture—cannot have been what the author intended. The principles of divine accommodation and progressive revelation forbid us to think that the ancient Israelite author of Genesis had any inkling of the triune nature of the one God. The truth of God's triune nature is simply not part of Old Testament revelation but belongs to the Christian dispensation. Instead of the Trinity, then, what we have here is probably a depiction of God consulting with other, lesser celestial beings who are members of his heavenly council or court—a widespread ancient Near Eastern notion reflected in various Old Testament passages (for example, Gen. 11:1; 1 Kings 22:10; Ps. 82:1; Job 1:6; Jer. 23:18, 22)—and informing them of his resolve to create humanity. In later Jewish and Christian tradition, these divine beings came to be identified with angels.

The next verse, verse 27, is a poetic triplet arranged in a chiasm:

> So God created *'ādām* in his image,
> in the image of God he created him;
> male and female he created them.

Strictly speaking, we are not told how many human beings God made, but the verse seems to imply that both males and females were created at the same time, on day 6. This poses quite a contrast to the account of creation in Genesis 2. Nor are we told what exactly is meant by "the image of God," although from the context it seems that, at the very least, we must include within the *imago Dei* the human dominion over the rest of the creation, which is mentioned in the very next verse (1:28).[18] Thus in Genesis 1 it is all human beings, not simply the king, who are created in the divine image and have the status of royal figures. This detail is highly significant, for as Clifford observes,

> When Mesopotamian accounts include a king, he is created separately in order to oversee the human race's service of the gods . . . . Genesis 1 portrays man (who with the woman stands for the race) as a king, and the human task as far broader than temple maintenance. The God of Genesis does not require human servants in the manner of other gods; the human race consequently has a different relation to the world.[19]

The Genre and Truth of Genesis 1

At this point it is time to sum up the thrust of Genesis 1. What we have in this first creation account is a compact but comprehensive credo setting out the fundamentals of Israelite faith. There is one God who alone from the start created all there is with the utmost ease, with no competition or struggle and out of no need

[18]For a recent comprehensive treatment of the subject, see J. Richard Middleton, *Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005).
[19]Clifford, 143.

or necessity. Everything that exists depends absolutely upon God for its very existence. In his sovereign freedom God created a well-ordered world, and at the pinnacle of his creation, he made human beings in his own image to be in relation to him and to have dominion over the rest of creation. Genesis 1 is the Israelite Declaration of Dependence—the absolute dependence of all life upon God.

What type of literature is Genesis 1, and what type of truth does it intend to impart? As I have already noted, Genesis 1 is written in prose, albeit prose of an exalted, almost hymnic character, one marked by a high concentration of repetitions and symmetries and strophic structures not typical of ordinary, pedestrian prose. It is a narrative, but one without a plot (and hence no tension or resolution) or character development. When taken on its own terms and read in its own context, it shows itself *not* to be a historical narrative and certainly not a scientific one. On the one hand, Genesis 1 is too stylized, too repetitious, and too systematic to be historical writing. If we look for comparable passages elsewhere in the Bible, we will not find them in the historical narratives of the Old or New Testament but in the Psalms and in a passage like the prologue to the Gospel of John. On the other hand, Genesis 1 is too lapidary, too restricted to the bare essentials, and too contrary to empirical reality to be scientific writing. And, after all, it was written in a nonscientific age by a nonscientific author for a nonscientific audience. The theological principles of divine accommodation and progressive revelation should serve constantly to recall us to this fact. I cannot think of any one label that characterizes the literary genre of Genesis 1 best. Just above I used the word *credo*. Other labels such as *edict* or *proclamation* or *manifesto* would be suitable.[20] Genesis 1 tells us nothing factual about the age or size of the universe, about the physical processes by which either the earth or life on earth developed, or about the order in which different forms of life emerged on our planet. Instead, it affirms the sovereignty of God, the goodness of creation, and the dignity of humanity. These theological truths are timeless and normative for us, but the ancient cosmology that serves as their vehicle is not.

Narratives in the Bible about beginnings and endings, about prehistory and posthistory, about first things and last things, about the old creation and the new creation—in other words, the narratives we have in the first eleven chapters of Genesis before we get to Abraham and in the final book of the Bible, Revelation—appear to be fundamentally different from narratives about events in "regular" history. This is not to say that the early chapters of Genesis have nothing at all historical about them. At the very least, they have a historical interest: to represent

[20]Worth noting is the characterization of Genesis 1 offered by John H. Stek, "What Says the Scripture," in Howard J. Van Till, Robert E. Snow, John H. Stek, and Davis A. Young, *Portraits of Creation: Biblical and Scientific Perspectives on the World's Formation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 241: "Consistent with its theme . . . its form (an unadorned 'objective' account of 'dated' events, using formulaic language) suggests that of a 'record,' recounting what transpired in God's royal council chambers. It reads like a daybook kept by a recorder of royal executive actions."

cosmic and human beginnings, which are indeed realities of the remote past, in a way that communicates theological truths about the world and the human condition. Nevertheless, they appear to do so in a highly stylized way, with characters and sequences and events that look more typological than "real" figures and events in "normal" history. This is a literary judgment, not a negative criticism or "doubting" of the Bible.

Genesis 1 does not purport to teach "special creation" as opposed to "evolutionary creation" (or vice versa, of course). If read aright, though, it is completely compatible with a Christian view of an evolving creation, for which there is overwhelming evidence. The notion that God ordained mechanisms and processes to allow life to emerge and develop on our planet in no way contradicts the intended message of Genesis.[21] It is not evolutionary theory as such that contradicts biblical truth, but atheistic construals of evolution founded on metaphysical naturalism and philosophical materialism.[22] This is true, I think, even though nothing in Genesis 1 bears directly on whether God created exclusively through "natural" causes (à la theistic evolutionism) or intervened actively at certain points so as to supplement the effects of natural causes (à la various forms of old-earth creationism and intelligent design).

The Second Creation Account (Genesis 2:4b–25)

A second, distinct creation account begins in 2:4b and continues in chapter 3 with the story of Adam, Eve, and the Serpent. The recognition of a separate account here is not just a modern realization but a very ancient one, going back almost 2,000 years to the first-century Jewish exegete Philo of Alexandria.[23] This second account may have stood originally at the very beginning of Genesis, in an earlier edition of the book, before the later account in Genesis 1 was added. This idea, too, goes back a long way, to the fourth-century Syrian church father Ephrem.[24]

[21]On the compatibility of Christian theism and evolution, see for example Deborah B. Haarsma and Loren D. Haarsma, *Origins: A Reformed Look at Creation, Design, and Evolution* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2007); Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006); Keith B. Miller, ed., *Perspectives on an Evolving Creation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Michael Ruse, *Can a Darwinian be a Christian? The Relationship between Science and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Kenneth R. Miller, *Finding Darwin's God: A Scientist's Search for Common Ground between God and Evolution* (New York: Cliff Street Books/HarperCollins, 1999), esp. 220–92.

[22]See, for example, Alister McGrath, *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), who subjects the atheism of evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins to a devastating critique.

[23]The two relevant treatises of Philo are his *De Opificio Mundi* (On the Creation of the World) and *Quaestiones et Solutiones in Genesin* (Questions and Answers in Genesis). The Greek text and translation of these two writings are available in the Loeb Classical Library edition of Philo's works (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press).

[24]In the prologue to his *Commentary on Genesis,* Ephrem says that the six-day story of creation

For several reasons, modern scholars have typically assigned the story in chapter 2 to Israel's older, epic tradition. It is probably much older than the account in Genesis 1, though how much older is hard to say. In its present context, the second account is intended to complement the first one by offering a different perspective on creation with a different focus: anthropogony instead of cosmogony. Yet even in its complementarity, it still manifests several obvious contrasts with chapter 1, as the following table shows.

Table 2. Two Distinct Accounts of Creation

	Genesis 1:2–2:3	**Genesis 2:4b–25**
	agricultural/urban	*pastoral/nomadic*
Duration of Creation	six days	one day implied (*bĕyôm*, 2:4b)
Primordial Scenario	dark, watery chaos	desert-like oasis
Sequence of Creation	light sky dome dry land plants sky lights sea and sky creatures land animals humans	man garden with trees and river land animals and birds woman
Method of Creation	God speaks, separates, names, and blesses	God forms, breathes, plants, puts to sleep, builds
Portrait of God	transcendent sovereign over creation some anthropomorphism	immanent actively involved in creation lots of anthropomorphism
Portrait of Humanity	unspecified number of male and females created simultaneously royals created in divine image, given dominion over the earth	one (male) *ʾādām* from the *ʾădāmâ;* then one woman (*ʾîššâ)* from the man *(ʾîš)* in two separate acts servants made caretakers of a garden

Whereas Genesis 1 has an explicit framework of six days, Genesis 2 has no explicit temporal framework but implies instead that creation took place in one day. Verse 2:4b begins with the words, "On the day (*bĕyôm*) Yahweh Elohim made the earth and the heavens." Some English versions, such as the NIV, translate the phrase *bĕyôm* with the temporal adverb "When," which is certainly an acceptable rendering. But in fact the Hebrew uses the preposition *be*, "in, on" followed by its object, the noun *yôm*, "day." The Hebrew phrase works just like its English equivalent and can refer to a specific day; for example, Exod. 6:28 says, "On the day the LORD spoke to Moses in the land of Egypt"; similarly Num. 9:15, "On the day the tabernacle was set up." So without making much ado at all of the duration of God's creative activity, Genesis 2 implies nevertheless that God created everything in a single day.

Primordial Scenario

This account begins, like the first one, *in media res*, with the earth already there, but the scenario depicted is virtually the opposite of that depicted in Genesis 1: instead of dark, watery chaos we have a desert-like oasis; instead of too much water, there is too little water. The earth is so dry that (contrary to 1:11–13) there are no plants in the ground: "no plant of the field was yet *(ṭerem)* in the earth and no herb of the field had yet *(ṭerem)* sprouted because YHWH God had not made it rain *(himṭîr)* upon the earth" (2:5). Yet there is an underground river or stream to irrigate the ground (2:6).

Content and Sequence of Creation

The content and sequence of God's creative activity are also depicted differently. Nothing is said of any nonsolar light, and the sky-dome goes unmentioned. Instead, God's first creative work is to fashion *(yaṣar)* a human being out of the dust of the ground. Verse 7 tells us, with a play on words in a kind of folk etymology, that God formed the *ʾādām* out of the dust of the *ʾădāmâ*—the "earthling from the earth" or "the human from the humus"—and "breathed the breath of life *(nišmât ḥayyim)*" into the human's nostrils so that it became a living being or *nepheš ḥayyâ* (2:7). We are not told yet whether this *ʾādām* is a male or female. (Recall that the word *ʾādām* is the generic Hebrew term for human being.) After creating this single

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may have been added after the writing of the account that begins with the words "This is the book of the generations of heaven and earth" (Gen. 2:4a). For the text in translation, see Edward G. Mathews, Jr. and Joseph P. Amar, trans., *St. Ephrem the Syrian Selected Prose Works*, ed. Kathleen McVey (Fathers of the Church vol. 91; Washington, D.C., 1994), 69. Of course for Ephrem, Moses was the author and editor of Genesis.

'ādām, God plants a garden, puts the *'ādām* in it, and then proceeds to cause a variety of trees to grow in the garden, including the tree of life and the portentous "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (2:8–9). Some English versions of the Bible, the NIV for instance, use an English pluperfect in 2:8 to suggest that God "*had* planted" the garden *before* creating the human. Although this translation is possible, it is not the best rendering of the converted imperfect verb (*wayyiṭa')* but a rather forced attempt to harmonize the two creation accounts.[25] Instead of taking 2:8, with a backward glance at 1:11–13, to mean that God *had* planted a garden on day 3 when he created plants—according to 2:5 there are no plants yet!—a more sensible reading would recognize the garden to have been created *after* and *for* the *'ādām,* on the only day of creation envisioned in Genesis 2.

The story of the first human's creation in Genesis 2 invites comparison with the portrait given in the Babylonian *Atrahasis Epic.*[26] As noted above, *Atrahasis* depicts humanity being made from clay, but the clay is mixed with the flesh and blood of a slain god. Here in Genesis 2, by contrast, it is the divine breath that animates the first human. And whereas in *Atrahasis* primitive humans are created in order to perform hard agricultural labor for the gods, in Genesis 2 the human being is charged with the relatively easy task of tending the garden, evidently for his own needs and delight.

Verses 10–14 form a kind of digression describing four rivers that diverge from a river flowing out of Eden. These rivers are not said to have been created after the garden but are described as part of the topography surrounding Eden, the land of "delight" in which the garden is situated. The third and fourth rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, are of course well known. The identity of the first two, the Pishon and the Gihon, is uncertain. The mention of the gold, bdellium and onyx found in the land of Havilah (location unknown), which the Pishon is said to surround, may suggest a location for that river in the Arabian Peninsula. Gihon is the name of the principal spring that flows from Mount Zion in Jerusalem, but here it is associated with the land of Cush, a region usually identified with either Ethiopia or western Iran. Accordingly, some commentators identify the Gihon with the Nile, others with one of the rivers or canals of Mesopotamia. Perhaps readers of Genesis are to imagine the Garden of Eden as being located somewhere near the head of the Persian Gulf, or else somewhere in Armenia near the sources of the Tigris and Euphrates. The long and the short of the matter, though, is that the geographical

[25]Hebrew has no pluperfect tense as such; the perfect and converted imperfect tense forms are used to express it; it is only the context that determines if a pluperfect sense is intended. See for example, E. Kautzsch, ed., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar,* 2d English ed., rev. A. E. Cowley (Oxford; Clarendon, 1910; rpt. 1983), 310–11. As Gordon Wenham, following Claus Westermann, notes, "the establishment of a garden for man more closely parallels the provision of food for him in 1:29 than the creation of plants in 1:12–13" (Wenham, *Genesis 1–15,* 61).

[26]For the text, see Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts,* 104–6. For a detailed study, see W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atrahasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969).

location of Eden is not made clear—probably intentionally so, as a way of suggesting its inaccessibility.

The Garden of Eden has a precedent in the land of Dilmun of Mesopotamian mythology. In the Sumerian myth of *Enki and Ninḫursag,*[27] Dilmun is a well-watered paradise associated with immortality, a "pure, clean, and bright land" in which "the raven uttered no cries . . . the lion killed not [and] the wolf snatched not the lamb" and in which the sick and the aged were unknown. At one point in the story, Uttu, the goddess of plants, is impregnated by the water-god Enki and brings forth eight different plants, which Enki proceeds to eat, whereupon the goddess Ninḫursag curses him. Ninḫursag, though, is persuaded to remove the effects of her curse and does so by creating a deity for each of Enki's pains, which are specific to eight different parts of his body, including his rib, the seventh part. The deity created to remove pain from his rib is the goddess Ninti, whose name means "lady of life" and "lady of the rib." In this last detail some scholars have seen a remote source for the creation of Eve from Adam's rib in Gen. 2:21–22.

Several other motifs in Genesis 2–3 have parallels in various ancient Near Eastern texts. In fact, just about every discrete element in the story has a parallel of one sort or another in older sources: a river watering paradise (for example, *Hymn to Hadad),* humans created out of clay (for example, *Enki and Ninmah),* humans made to cultivate the land (*Atrahasis),* creation through a process of trial and error (*Atrahasis),* the tree of life and the serpent (the plant and snake in the *Gilgamesh Epic;* the huluppu tree and the serpent in *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Underworld),* nakedness as a symbol of primitive life and clothing as a symbol of civilized life (Enkidu in the *Gilgamesh Epic),* immortality as something not meant for humans *(Adapa; Gilgamesh Epic).* Only the tree of the knowledge of good and evil seems to have no precedent. As Evangelical commentator Gordon Wenham has noted, "In all these cases, there is no evidence of simple borrowing by the Hebrew writer"; instead, "he has borrowed various familiar mythological motifs, transformed them, and integrated them into a fresh and original story."[28] And we need not suppose that these motifs came to the author by way of written source material; more probably, they were sufficiently widespread in the oral culture of the day to have been available to him in a less direct way.

Let me pause briefly to reflect on what these literary parallels and their adaptation in Genesis might be taken to imply about the nature of divine inspiration. The biblical text encourages us, I believe, to think of God inspiring the author not by dropping divine revelation straight down from heaven into his mind, as if he

[27]For the text, see Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts,* 37–41. For discussion, see Samuel Noah Kramer and John Maier, *Myths of Enki, the Crafty God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 12–13, 22–30.

[28]Wenham, *Genesis 1–15,* 53. For an extremely helpful and much needed discussion that reconciles a high view of biblical inspiration and authority with, *inter alia,* the Old Testament's ancient cosmology and use of ancient Near Eastern materials, see Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

were only a passive recipient taking dictation, but by stirring his creative literary and theological imagination, using it as a vehicle for the disclosure of divine truth. The truth's ultimate origin is God, but its proximate origin is the encultured humanity of the author. Indeed, we may say that the authors of both Genesis 1 and 2, as creatures bearing the divine image of their sovereign Creator, acted in a manner analogous to that in which they depict God himself acting in their respective accounts: taking materials already at hand and fashioning them into something new and qualitatively different. Just as Elohim imposes order on the unformed earth and primeval waters in Genesis 1, and just as Yahweh Elohim forms the first *'ādām* out of the *'ădāmâ* in Genesis 2, so the Israelite authors took widespread images, motifs, and conceptions available to them from the ambient culture they inhabited and used them to fashion something totally new and different. Thinking of the biblical authors as active subcreators instead of passive receptors not only does justice to the literary features of Genesis viewed against their ancient Near Eastern backdrop, it also takes with utter seriousness the theological affirmation of Genesis that human beings bear the image of God.

After the digression in 2:10–14, the narrative resumes in verse 15. Once Yahweh Elohim has created the first human and put him in a garden, telling him that he may eat of every tree except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:15–17), the LORD God realizes that the *'ādām* is in need of "an enabler *('êzer)* alongside him *(kenegdô)*" (2:18). As in the *Atrahasis Epic,* so here God is depicted as an improvising creator who proceeds by trial and error until he gets things right. Thus God forms out of the *'ădāmâ* all sorts of land animals and birds and brings them to the *'ādām* to be named (2:19–20). Once again, in order to harmonize Genesis 2 with Genesis 1, the NIV resorts to the English pluperfect tense, when it translates 2:19 "Now the LORD God *had* formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field." The NRSV rendering, "So the LORD God *formed,*" gives a more straightforward translation of the Hebrew verb form (a converted imperfect, *wayyiṣer).* Notice, by the way, that among the animals fish are not mentioned. This omission should occasion no surprise when we consider the setting: a desert oasis with a garden. Next, because none of the animals makes a suitable mate for the *'ādām,* Yahweh God puts the earth creature to sleep and "builds" *(bānâ)* a woman (*îššâ*) from the *'ādām*'s rib or side (2:21–22). So now at last, with the creation of a woman, we discover that the first *'ādām* is a male.

Method of Creating

Genesis 2 also differs from Genesis 1 in its depiction of God's *modus operandi*. As Table 2 above highlights, Genesis 2 indulges in a much greater degree of anthropomorphism than Genesis 1 does. So although in Genesis 1 God speaks, separates, names, and blesses, God is depicted nevertheless in rather remote or transcendent terms. In Genesis 2, by contrast, God is portrayed as being more immanent, more actively involved in the hands-on work of creation. He "fashions" the

first *ʾādām* like a potter molding clay. He "breathes" with his mouth like someone performing CPR. He "plants" like a landscape gardener. He acts like an anesthesiologist when he puts the *ʾādām* to sleep and like a plastic surgeon when he "builds" a woman. And instead of creating an unspecified number of male and female human beings simultaneously as he does in Genesis 1, Yahweh God creates one man and one woman in two separate acts.

Portrait of Humanity

The humans themselves are characterized rather differently, too. In Genesis 1 human beings are expressly said to be made in the "the image and likeness of God" and are given a global sovereignty over the rest of creation, or at least over the earth and its animals. In Genesis 2, by contrast, the man and woman are created as humble caretakers of a garden, and they are not said to be created in the divine image and likeness. Instead, the idea of godlikeness comes later in the garden story, in Genesis 3, where it is introduced not by God but by the serpent! Further, the humans of Genesis 1 are silent, whereas the first spoken words from the *ʾādām* of chapter 2 are love lyrics in a poetic triplet (2:23). This is followed by an etiology of how it is that "man" and "wo-man"—*îš* and *îššâ*—become "one flesh" in marriage (2:24) and then a description of the couple's childlike innocence in being naked but unashamed (2:25).

Complementary, not Contradictory

The first two chapters of Genesis contradict one another only if they are taken as factual, historical accounts. If that is what they are and were intended by God to be, then we would have a real problem—conflicting texts compelling us to choose one over the other. But if we recognize that the early chapters of Genesis intend to teach neither history nor science but theology and theological anthropology, then we are not forced to choose between them. Some interpreters have noted that Genesis 1 draws chiefly upon agricultural and urban imagery; its depiction of the primordial state as dark, watery chaos speaks to "the concerns of farmers and city dwellers who inhabited river basins prone to flooding."[29] Genesis 2, by contrast, employs primarily pastoral and nomadic imagery; its portrayal of the primordial state as a desert-like oasis reflects "the experience of shepherds, goat-herders, and camel-drivers who lived on semi-arid fringes of the fertile plains, around and between wells and oases."[30] When taken as complementary portraits of creation, Genesis 1 and 2 point up key truths about God and humanity. God is both transcendent (Gen. 1) and immanent (Gen. 2), both sovereign over creation (Gen. 1) and actively involved within it (Gen. 2). God has endowed the created order with

[29]Hyers, "Comparing Biblical and Scientific Maps," 22–23.
[30]Ibid., 23.

structure and stability but also with dynamism and robustness (Gen. 1). God has assigned all creatures limits but also granted them a certain amount of freedom (Gen. 1 and 2). And God has created in the divine image human beings (Gen. 1) who are nevertheless creatures made from the dust (Gen. 2).

Sin and Death in God's Good Creation

Does Genesis picture humanity being created immortal, never to die? This is an important question, especially since many Christians object to an old earth and to evolution on the grounds that both require death before the fall (conceived as a specific episode at the dawn of human history) and therefore contradict biblical teaching. Genesis itself, however, does not propound a doctrine of the fall or original sin; the doctrine was formulated only in Christian tradition, beginning especially with Augustine's interpretation of Genesis and Romans. Nor does Genesis show itself to be an authority on matters investigated in modern anthropology. Nevertheless, we may still ask if Genesis teaches that natural death disturbed God's design for creation. More specifically, we may ask whether Genesis teaches that human beings were created to live forever and that it was only as a consequence of their sin that they became mortal or subject to death. An attentive reading suggests not.

In Gen. 3:22–23 we read,

> Then the LORD God said, "See, the *'ādām* has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and live forever"—therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden . . . .

Evidently, then, God does not want the *'ādām* to live forever, so he exiles him from the garden. From these verses it seems that mortality is regarded as part of humanity's original creaturely finitude. Indeed, the story presumes that the man and woman were created mortal; otherwise, the presence of the tree of life would be superfluous. The notion that physical death entered the world only because of human sin seems therefore a mistaken notion, one based in part on a misguided interpretation of Gen. 2:17 and Rom. 5:12.

In Gen. 2:17 God tells the *'ādām* that he will die "on the day" he eats of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God cannot be talking about physical death *simpliciter* here, unless we are to conclude that he is lying, since in fact the *'ādām* does not die on the day he eats of the forbidden tree but proceeds to live to the ripe old age of 930 (Gen. 5:5). Death in this context must mean not the end of biological life but estrangement from God, including "expulsion from the garden of God and alienation from the soil and from bodily ease."[31] The point would still hold even if we take the phrase "on the day" to mean "at some point" or "eventually," for when God pronounces judgment on the *'ādām* in 3:17–19, he does not list death as

[31]Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Near East and in the Bible*, 148.

a punishment for transgression but announces instead that the ground is cursed and that the *'ādām* will have to work it by the sweat of his brow "until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return." If physical death *per se* were a punishment for the man's transgression, the threat of it would not be buried in a prepositional phrase. The point of the statement is not that the *'ādām* will die but that he will have to eke out a difficult existence until he dies.[32]

Although this reading of Genesis 3 goes against the Augustinian interpretation to which both Protestants and Catholics are heir, it is not incompatible with other early Christian ways of reading Genesis 3. In Syrian Christian tradition going back to Theophilus of Antioch in the 2nd century, for instance, Adam and Eve were created neither mortal nor immortal but with the potential to attain either destiny. Had they remained obedient, God would have allowed them to eat of the tree of life.[33]

What of Paul's statement that death entered the world through sin? In Rom. 5:12 the apostle says, "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all sinned . . . ." He makes a similar statement in 1 Cor. 15:21-22, "For since by a man (came) death, so also through a man (came) resurrection from the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." In neither of these passages is Paul thinking of death simply as the cessation of biological life, any more than he thinks that the resurrection of Christ and the eternal life made possible in him involve merely the revival of biological life. For Paul death, like sin, is a cosmic force or power that alienates people from God, whereas eternal life is a qualitatively different mode of existence than mere biological life.[34] Christ's resurrection, and the resurrection that

[32]Similarly Terence E. Fretheim, *God and the World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 76–77: "Is death one of the effects of the sin of Adam and Eve? The traditional interpretation closely links sin and death . . . . Most scholars now conclude that the text makes no such claim . . . . In 3:14-19, there is no referral back to the prohibition and no forthright statement that death shall now be their lot, no sense of death as enemy or threat—only a proverbial saying in verse 19 that the man (not the woman) shall have difficulty farming until he returns to the dust out of which he was created. This saying is followed by exclusion from the tree of life (3:22), implying that even though they had sinned they could still live forever by eating of the tree. I would speak of death in two ways, as the experience of death within life and as realized mortality. If human beings were created immortal, the tree of life would have been irrelevant. *Death per se was a natural part of God's created world*. Yet the tree of life was a potential vehicle for receiving some form of ongoing life. Now, even in sin, this remains a possibility (3:22). So God makes a further move beyond death within life, namely, exclusion from the tree, so that mortality is realized. The upshot of this interpretation is that Paul's understanding of sin and death in Rom. 5:12-21, while developing these themes beyond the scope of the story, is right to read the story in terms of an etiology of *the full reality of death,* if not mortality per se" (emphasis his).

[33]Theophilus, *To Autolycus* 2.24; 2.27; see Robert M. Grant, *Ad Autolycum Theophilus of Antioch: Text and Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 67, 69-70.

[34]Along these lines, note the comment on Rom. 5:12 by Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 320: "But what does Paul mean by death here? He

awaits all those who belong to him, is not a matter of resuscitation but of transformation (1 Cor. 15:35-58).

What of animal death before the fall? Genesis 1:30 envisions a primeval vegetarianism, with plants as the sole source of food for both animals and humans. After the flood, as a concession to the evil inclination of the human heart (8:21), God allows meat-eating for humanity (9:2–3, with no mention of animal carnivorousness), the only restriction being meat with the life-blood still in it (9:4–6). All this seems to represent a utopian ideal of the sort we see in *Enki and Ninḫursag.* If that conclusion seems arbitrary, consider that other passages in Scripture envision predation among animals as part of God's original design for creation. Thus Psalm 104: "The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God" (104:21, NRSV). Similarly Job 38: "Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions, when they crouch in their dens, or lie in wait in their covert? Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food?" (38:39–40, NRSV). Both of these passages emphasize God's providential care for the present creation, but there is no hint in them that animal predation is part of the fall-out of the fall.

To accept death by divine design is not, of course, to deny that an old earth and evolution, taken either separately or together, pose the issue of theodicy in an acute way. The facts of nature confront us not only with a lot of waste and a lot of dead ends but a lot of violence. As the fossil record shows, animal species have always preyed upon one another. Competition, predation, parasitism, death, extinction—all appear to be intrinsic, even necessary, aspects of life on this planet. The question of why God would create a "good" and even "very good" creation with suffering, death, and dying woven into its very fabric admits of no easy answer. Yet for all we know, this kind of world may be the only kind of world capable of allowing for genuine free will and real moral development in rational creatures like us. We must be careful not to assume that suffering and death are necessarily unmitigated evils. Jesus said, "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground, it cannot bear fruit" (John 12:24). He uttered this parabolic statement in reference to his own death: I have to die in order to make life—eternal life—possible. If suffering and death are part of God's plan for bringing about a new creation, perhaps we need to accept that they are and always have been part of this old creation. We confess that God works all circumstances together for good (Rom. 8:28); we must trust that the

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may refer to physical death only, since 'death' in v. 14 seems to have this meaning. But the passage goes on to contrast death with eternal life (v. 21). Moreover, in vv. 16 and 18 Paul uses 'condemnation' in the same way that he uses death here. These points suggest that Paul may refer here to 'spiritual' death: the estrangement from God that is a result of sin and that, if not healed through Christ, will lead to 'eternal' death. In fact, however, we are not forced to make a choice between these options. Paul frequently uses 'death' and related words to designate a 'physico-spiritual entity' — 'total death,' the penalty incurred for sin. Here, then, Paul may focus on physical death as the evidence, the outward manifestation of this total death; or, better, he may simply have in mind this death in both its physical and spiritual aspects."

same is true of God's work in nature itself, both now and in the future. He is the God of the living and the dead, who in mysterious sovereignty brings life in and through and out of death. On this side of eternity we will never understand God's providential ways and purposes fully. The goodness of God's creation, which to us appears so obscured and even contravened by the facts of nature, may require eschatological verification—or perhaps realization.[35]

The Genesis Genealogies and the Age of the Earth

Before I conclude, I must say a few words about the genealogies in the early chapters of Genesis. This section is a bit of a sidetrack, but I consider it important because the genealogies have played such a major role in debates concerning the age of the earth.[36] As is well known, the first eleven chapters of Genesis have lists containing the names and fantastically long life spans of people who lived before the great flood (prediluvian or antediluvian) and after it (postdiluvian). Genesis 4 has a list of Cain's descendants in seven generations (4:17–26); Genesis 5 gives an alternate list, with ten generations from Adam down to Noah (5:1–32); Genesis 10 presents an ethnographic table of seventy nations descended from Noah's sons Shem, Ham, and Japhet (10:1–32); and Genesis 11 offers a genealogy of the descendents of Shem down to Abraham (11:10–26).

Readers of Genesis have been tempted for centuries to take the life spans of these primordial figures, crunch the numbers, and come up with a date for the creation of the earth and, indeed, of the universe. The first person to do this in a way that became widely influential in Western culture was Archbishop James Ussher, the primate of Ireland, who lived 1581–1656. He proposed that the first day of creation was Sunday, October 23, 4004 B.C.E., a date which would make the universe about 6,000 years old. A contemporary of Ussher's, John Lightfoot of Cambridge, evidently considered this reckoning much too sloppy and therefore narrowed the moment of creation even further, to 9:00 a.m. on the same date.

Up until modern scientific discoveries—and the modern archaeological discovery of other ancient Near Eastern chronologies, such as the Sumerian King Lists, which depict antediluvian rulers in Mesopotamia living for not hundreds but tens of thousands of years—this tendency was understandable and certainly forgivable. But in our day it has become increasingly difficult to read the primeval gene-

[35]Three very helpful essays in the recent collection *Perspectives on an Evolving Creation*, edited by Keith B. Miller, deal with the question of theodicy in relation to suffering and death in an evolving world: Robert John Russell, "Special Providence and Genetic Mutation: A New Defense of Theistic Evolution" (335–69); George L. Murphy, "Christology, Evolution, and the Cross" (370–89); and John C. Mundy, "Animal Pain: Beyond the Threshold?" (435–68).

[36]For survey articles with accompanying bibliography, see Robert R. Wilson, "Genealogy, Genealogies," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2, 929–32; and Andrew E. Hill, "Genealogy," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 242–46. See further Robert B. Robinson, "Literary Functions of the Genealogies of Genesis," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 48 (1986): 595–608.

alogies in the early chapters of Genesis as factual records concerning historical figures. It may be best to read them as literary constructs that use numbers symbolically.[37] Among other purposes they intend to emphasize humanity's fulfillment of the divine mandate to "increase and multiply and fill the earth." They also serve to underscore both the movement and stability of the creation amid the messy contingencies of human life. And they function to ground God's election and blessing of Israel in creation by making Israel's chief patriarch, Abraham, their climax. For that reason they should not be used to calculate the age of the earth or the universe. They were crafted to provide theological information, not to dispense geological or cosmological data.

That the genealogies in early Genesis are stylized literary inventions and not factual, historical reports seems indicated by the fact that the ages given for the people named in them are not distributed randomly, as we would expect from lists giving the actual ages of historical figures. To find chronological notices in the Bible that do look historical, we may turn to the numbers given in the books of Kings and Chronicles for the monarchs in Israel and Judah; the ages and regnal years of the kings are completely random, falling into no predictable pattern. By contrast, the vast majority of the life spans in early Genesis fit into an artificially contrived numerical scheme.

As the following table illustrates, the pattern evident in the ten prediluvian life spans of Genesis 5 shows a preference for multiples of the number sixty (five years being equal to sixty months). This preference bears the influence of the Mesopotamian mathematical system, which was a base-sixty (or sexigesimal) system. The ages of a few of the antediluvian figures were contrived by the further addition of either the number seven (symbolic of completeness) or the number 120 or its multiples (an ideal in Egyptian numerology).

[37]Quite apart from numerology and extrabiblical parallels, and even accepting the historicity of Genesis 1–11, the condensed character of the genealogies in Genesis must factor into any assessment of them. That biblical genealogies often omit names and skip generations has been noted even by conservative scholars in the Evangelical and Reformed traditions, some of whom have therefore argued that they cannot be used to establish the age of the earth. For example, this was the position of William Henry Green already in 1863, developed more fully in his article "Primeval Chronology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 47 (April 1890): 285–303, reprinted in *Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation,* ed. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 13–27. Green's conclusions were accepted by other inerrantists, notably his Old Princeton colleagues B. B. Warfield and Charles Hodge (both of whom were evolutionists!).

Table 3. The Antediluvian Genealogy in Genesis 5[38]

Abbreviations

MT = Masoretic Text: the standard Hebrew text of the Old Testament

LXX = Septuagint: the major Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible

SP = Samaritan Pentateuch: the Hebrew text of the Torah adopted by the Samaritans

Name	Years		Equivalent
Adam	930 years	=	60 x 15 years + 360 months
Seth	912 years	=	60 x 15 years + 60 months + 7 years
Enosh	905 years	=	60 x 15 years + 60 months
Kenan	910 years	=	60 x 15 years + 120 months
Mahalalel	895 years	=	60 x 14 years + 660 months
Jared	962 years (MT)	=	60+60+60+6+6 x 60 months – 60 months + 7 years
	962 years (LXX)		
	847 years (SP)	=	60 x 14 years + 7 years
Enoch	365 years	=	60 x 6 years + 60 months
Methusalah	969 years (MT)	=	60+60+60+6+6) x 60 months – 60 months + 7 years + 7 years
	969 years (LXX)		
	720 years (SP)	=	60 x 12 years
Lamech	777 years (MT)	=	gematria value of letters in name
	753 years (LXX)		
	653 years (SP)		
Noah	950 years	=	60 x 15 years + 600 months

Other, more subtle numerological principles were evidently put to work as well.[39] The technique of gematria—adding up the numerical value of the letters in

[38]Much fuller presentations of the data may be found in Lloyd R. Bailey, *Genesis, Creation, and Creationism* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), 53–89; and Carol A. Hill, "Making Sense of Numbers in Genesis," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith,"* 55.2 (Dec. 2003): 239–52.

[39]See B. Barnouin, "Recherches numériques sur la généalogie de Gen 5," *Revue Biblique* 77 (1970): 347–65, who suggests that the synodic periods of the planets (the length of time it

a person's name—was applied to Lamech, along with the symbolic value of the number seven. Thus, in the (Yahwist) genealogy listing Cain's descendants in Gen. 4:17–26, Lamech stands in the seventh generation from Adam, and in a speech to his wives, he promises a seventy-seven-fold vengeance on anyone who dares to strike him (Gen. 4:24). Then, in the (Priestly) genealogy of Genesis 5 he is assigned a lifespan of 777 years, which is the sum of the numerical value of the letters in his name. Taken together, Lamech's position in the genealogy, his blood lust, and his age all depict him as a perfect terror.

At least one more numerological principle was called into play in the Priestly genealogy of Genesis 5. In this case, it is a principle derived from the calendar followed in ancient Israel: the solar cycle of 365 days was applied to yield a lifespan of 365 years for Enoch, who stands in the seventh generation from Adam (Gen. 5:21–24). Enoch appears to be modeled on the Mesopotamian sage-king Enmeduranki, who falls in the Sumerian King Lists in the seventh generation from creation. In Mesopotamian lore, Enmeduranki was associated with the solar deity Šamaš (cf. the Hebrew word for "sun," *šemeš),* just as we find Enoch being associated later with the solar calendar.[40]

Significantly, not only do the life spans of the prediluvian figures fall within a pattern of base-sixty, so too do their ages at the birth of their first child and the number of their remaining years until death. The last figure in the list, Noah, is a prime case in point. Noah becomes a father at age 500, exactly half a millennium. The number 500 also happens to be 60 x 8 years + 240 [or 60 x 4] months. Noah then lives another 450 years until his death, which is 60 x 7 years + 360 [or 60 x 6] months.

What are we to make of all these remarkable coincidences? Lloyd R. Bailey concludes,

> That a sequence of ten historical generations might produce first-born [children] at ages that are multiples of five years (multiples of sixty months) is quite unlikely. That their remaining years should fall within the same scheme, and this just "happen" to agree with a literary convention of the Ancient Near East, strains credulity to the breaking point. There is little doubt, then, that the entire list of ages has been crafted with the ideal (base-60) in mind. [The] intent [of these genealogies], their kind of "truth," lies in some other realm than biology and chronology in the modern sense of those terms.[41]

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takes for a planet to return to the same point in the sky) were used to come up with the lifespan of certain individuals. For another approach, see D. W. Young, "On the Application of Numbers from Babylonian Mathematics to Biblical Life Spans and Epochs," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 100 (1988): 331–61, who suggests that principles of Babylonian algebra were used to derive the ages of figures in Genesis.

[40]See further James C. VanderKam, *Enoch and the Growth of an Apocalyptic Tradition* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1984); and Helge S. Kvanvig, *The Roots of Apocalyptic: The Mesopotamian Background of the Enoch Figure and of the Son of Man* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1988).

[41]Bailey, *Genesis, Creation, and Creationism*, 61.

 Similarly, Carol A. Hill remarks,

> Note that for the 30 numbers listed for the antediluvian patriarchs up to the Flood (from Adam to Noah), all of the ages end in 0, 5, 7, 2 (5 + 7 = 12), or 9 (5 + 7 + 7 = 19)—*a chance probability of one in a billion!* For the entire 60-number list (antediluvian and postdiluvian), none of the ages end in 1 or 6—a chance probability of one in about one-half million. Surely, if the ages of the patriarchs in Genesis are random numbers, as would be expected for real ages, this could not be the case. *It is inconceivable that all of this should be accidental!*[42]

To read the genealogies in Genesis as a factual guide to the age of the cosmos, then, is to misread them. There is therefore absolutely no biblical reason for Christians to think that the earth is only 6,000 years old instead of the 4.5 billion years it shows itself to be.

Conclusion

Christians may be confident that when the Bible addresses matters falling within its intended purview, it speaks with an infallible authority. But we neither honor God nor revere the Bible when we mistake its scope and purpose. 2 Timothy 3:15 speaks of Scripture's inspiration as its ability to "instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ." 2 Timothy 3:16b goes on to declare that Scripture is "useful for teaching, reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." The Belgic Confession identifies the reach of the Bible's authority rightly when it affirms, "We believe that this Holy Scripture contains the will of God completely and that everything one must believe to be saved is sufficiently taught in it" (Article 7).

Even to look to the Bible for scientific sorts of information is to look in the wrong place. God did not grant the biblical authors special insight into biology, geology, or cosmology. He had no reason to. He accommodated his revelation to the limits of their ancient cultural understanding so that his truth could be conveyed in terms that were meaningful and relevant to them and their audiences. And evidently he allowed them considerable freedom in their modes of expression, including "natural" processes of storytelling that involved the adaptation of both oral tradition and older written materials. The book of Genesis must be allowed its own integrity. It must be permitted to reveal its own truth in its own way and not be forced to speak directly to all our modern questions or concerns. Before becoming God's word to us, it was first of all God's word to them—the ancient Israelites.

To assume otherwise—to assume that the Bible in general or Genesis in particular propounds unmediated, uncultured truth—is to have a docetic view of Scripture. Docetism is the label for the ancient Christian heresy that denied Jesus' full and genuine humanity. Docetists believed that Jesus' human nature was only

[42]Hill, "Making Sense of Numbers in Genesis," 244; emphasis hers.

apparent and not real. (The term itself comes from the Greek word *dōkeō,* "to appear, to seem.") In their view, Jesus only appeared to have a physical body and only seemed to suffer and die. Now it is one thing to value Jesus' divinity; it is quite another to value it in such a way as to deny his humanity. The same is true, by analogy, with the Bible. To value its ultimate divine origin is right and good, but to devalue its human character does it no honor. To read Genesis as if it only seems to assume an ancient cosmology and to make use of ancient Near Eastern motifs is to deny the very nature of God's revelation in Scripture.[43]

Many Christians would object at this point and insist that the rest of the Bible assumes a plain, historical sense for Genesis 1 and 2. They would note, for instance, that Exod. 20:11 says, "For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day." And of course, they are right. They would observe also that several passages in the New Testament either quote or refer to the contents of Genesis 1–11 in a plain, matter-of-fact manner. And of course, they are right. But, I would suggest, it does not follow from this that *we* must take these chapters as factual, historical, and scientifically valid accounts, even if (as I doubt) the Israelite authors intended them as such.

Why? Because none of these statements intends to make a scholarly pronouncement on either the literary genre or historical factuality of early Genesis. To think otherwise is to indulge in a gross anachronism. A verse like Exod. 20:11, then, should be recognized for what it is—a traditional theological affirmation current in ancient Israel, not a scholarly critical assertion directed at modern believers. Likewise, when in the Gospels Jesus refers to events or figures in early Genesis (for example, Matt. 24:37–38; Mark 10:2–9) or when in his epistles Paul speaks of Adam (Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 5:21–23, 45–49), we are gravely mistaken if we assume that our Lord and his apostle were intending to dispense literary-critical or historical-critical dicta. They were not. As first-century Jewish preachers and teachers, their primary interest in Genesis was theological, and they treated the book as a product of sacred tradition, not as a history or science textbook. The New Testament authors no doubt assumed the historicity of Adam and Eve, but they never argued the point. Instead, they were interested in Adam and Eve as figures representing primordial humanity.[44] They had little reason not to think of them as historical

[43]Of course, the opposite error is also possible and doubtless more frequent: to take an "Arian" or "Nestorian" approach and deny the Bible's (ultimate) divine origin and authority. On this see, for example, Mary Healy, "Behind, in Front of . . . or Through the Text? The Christological Analogy and the Lost World of Biblical Truth," in *"Behind the Text": History and Biblical Interpretation,* ed. Craig Bartholomew et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 190–93.

[44]Consider the comment on Paul's Adam-Christ typology in Rom. 5:12–21 in James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (Dallas: Word, 1988), 289: "In particular, it would not be true to say that Paul's theological point here depends on Adam's being a 'historical' individual or on his disobedience being a historical event as such. Such an implication does not necessarily follow from the fact that a parallel is drawn with Christ's single act: an act in mythic history can be paralleled to an act in living history without the point of comparison being lost. So long as the story of Adam as the initiator of a sad tale of human failure was well known, which we

figures, whereas we have many reasons—literary, historical, and scientific reasons—to regard them as representative, symbolic figures.[45]

If we value God's acts of divine accommodation and progressive revelation, we will not insist on turning any of the Bible's statements regarding creation or primordial humanity into authoritative pronouncements of factual historicity or scientific validity. And we will greet with skepticism any attempts to force the teachings of Genesis to agree with the findings of modern science. Concordism has an abysmal track record.[46] It has discredited itself every time a paradigm shift in scientific understanding has come about, as, for example, when the Ptolemaic cosmology held by the church fathers and medieval scholastics had to give way in the early modern period to the Copernican and, later, the Newtonian cosmology.

Instead, we will reckon with the culturally relative status of the Bible's ancient cosmology. We will appreciate the stylized literary qualities of its portrait of creation and primeval times. And we will gladly admit that the tools God has put at our disposal—historical research, literary analysis, and scientific investigation—clarify the character of the claim that Genesis 1–11 has on us today.

The theological truths that Genesis reveals are both timeless and vital, both normative and eminently useful. Every age has its pantheisms, its dualisms, its materialisms, and its gnosticisms. And to all these vain imaginings, Genesis issues a clarion call. It declares that God is transcendent, sovereign, and free; that God created with intentional purpose a world that is intelligible and meaningful; that the physical world is neither illusory nor evil nor ultimate but patently real and good yet finite; that all of reality is contingent, radically dependent on God not only for its once-upon-a-time creation but for its ongoing existence; and, finally, that human beings are made in the image of God and meant to be in relation with God. There is an old saying from the Latin Christian tradition that deserves to be retrieved today: *Nihil pulchrius Genesi, nihil utilius*—"Nothing more beautiful than Genesis, nothing more useful."[47]

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may assume . . . such a comparison was meaningful . . . . the effect of the comparison between the two epochal figures, Adam and Christ, is not so much to historicize the individual Adam as to bring out the more than individual significance of the historic Christ."

[45]The doctrines of creation and fall (and, consequently, of redemption) are always deserving of reformulation in light of our growing understanding of God's work in the creation. For attempts to rethink the doctrine of original sin within an evolutionary framework that does not regard Adam and Eve as actual, historical figures, see, for example, C. S. Lewis, "The Fall of Man," chapter 5 of *The Problem of Pain* (New York: MacMillan, 1962); more recently, Jerry D. Korsmeyer, *Evolution and Eden: Balancing Original Sin and Contemporary Science* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1998); Patricia A. Williams, *Doing without Adam and Eve: Sociobiology and Original Sin* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001); Robin Collins, "Evolution and Original Sin," in *Perspectives on an Evolving Creation,* ed. Keith B. Miller, 469–501; and Daryl P. Domning, *Original Selfishness: Original Sin and Evil in Light of Evolution* (Aldershot, Hampshire, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006).

[46]For a sobering indictment of concordist approaches to Genesis in the history of Christian interpretation, see Jaki, *Genesis 1 through the Ages.*

[47]Cited by Stanley L. Jaki, "Genesis 1: A Cosmogenesis?" *Homiletical & Pastoral Review,* vol. 93, nos. 11–12 (August–September 1993), available at http://www.ignatius.com / Magazines/hprweb/jaki_genesis.htm.