

Making Sense of Genesis 1

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Interpreting Genesis 1 continues to be a controversial issue—and for all sorts of people. This is hardly surprising for at least two reasons. On one level, how one reads Genesis 1 has in some circles become a litmus test of Christian orthodoxy, whether conservative or liberal. Hold the "wrong" view and one is either a dupe of secular critical theory or a troglodyte literalist. This hardly bodes well for the unity of that new humanity that God is forming in Christ. On another level, the importance of stories of origins cannot be overestimated. They define us. They tell us who we are and what it means to be human. In terms of our topic, whatever the technical merits or otherwise of Darwin's theory of biological evolution, its widespread acceptance has gone a long way toward discrediting a "literal" reading of Genesis 1 and with it the standing of Christianity and its vision of humanity. Consequently, and rather more provocatively, it is hard to imagine the modern North-American trade in aborted baby body parts or the horrors of Holocaust and Gulag were it not for the stark materialism of, and the eugenic theory inherent in, the more imperialist and triumphalist forms of twentieth-century Darwinism. However, it must be recognized that it will be difficult if not impossible to reverse these trends if resistance is not undergirded by a more convincing and coherent alternative view of human origins than Darwinism can offer. And this in terms of both the objective—what happened—and the subjective—what it means. For Christians such an alternative must include Genesis 1 and that necessarily involves the question of how it is to be read. If in the end we find that Genesis 1 ought to be read "literally", then so be it. On the other hand, the more work I do on the world out of which this account emerged, the more I am led to question *whether the "literalist" reading is in fact truly faithful to the text.*

In my experience most Christians and readers of the Bible come to Genesis 1 with many of their beliefs already in hand. This is not to be dismissed as a typical example of blind private faith versus well-attested public fact, as Bertrand Russell so gloriously misconstrued things. It is an inescapable part of being human. Michael Polanyi reminded us that taking a great many things on trust is the essential first step to knowledge, even and perhaps especially in that highest and holiest of all modern callings, science. All of us, Christians and scientists together, simply have to take a great deal on trust, to assume much, if we are ever to get started on the path to knowing. The saying is sure, without assuming something no one shall know anything. But having said that, it is important regularly to reassess those assumptions in the light of our growing knowledge and in doing so to recognize that truth in this kind of historical and literary endeavour is much more a matter of coherence than of certainty. Bernard Lonergan rightly understood that the first step in knowing was to pay attention to all of the data, then to apply our intelligence in seeking to understand, and finally to use our reason to judge between hypotheses. This is the advice, which, to the best of my ability, I intend to take here.

Reading Ancient Documents

Our problems begin in that most of us read Genesis 1 in our mother tongue, and that tongue is not Hebrew. This is both helpful and potentially misleading. The help is obvious, the potential harm less so. The fact remains that this story was originally written in another language, a very long time ago, and in a culture whose world, while not totally other than ours, was both different and very differently understood. In one sense they no doubt looked out on the same physically constituted landscape, but as Lonergan also reminded us: seeing is not the same as knowing. The assumptions that they once brought and we now bring to the text—Gadamer's horizons—are very likely to be rather different. That this is so can hardly be contested as the divergent interpretations of Genesis 1 even in our own day bear witness. The same ink spots generate some very different understandings. The upshot is that if we are not attentive, the fact that Genesis 1 is in our own language can lull us into assuming that familiar words and phrases are intended to invoke the understandings and assumptions of our twenty-first-century world. This is, of course, just as much a mistake as reading Shakespeare as though he was writing in twenty-first-century Vancouver or Hong Kong. Not surprisingly, the less we "modernize" Shakespeare the more foreign he appears and the less likely the error of anachronism. It is useful, then, to remember that Genesis 1 was originally written in Hebrew, and even better to read it in the same.

The question arises: but even so, whose understanding is correct? Do not our individual perspectives mire us in a hopeless relativism? Not at all. These ink spots are not merely signs. They are particular signs in a particular order. They are the readers' "marching orders," designed by the writer to communicate what he intended to the competent reader. The terms of those marching orders are indicated by the genre, the contract made between writer and reader as to how the signs are to be read. This is really nothing new since we all get along very well every day on this basis, almost unconsciously using genre to distinguish between the truth claims of Peanuts (no, there is not in fact a canine whose philosophizing rivals Plato) and *The Vancouver Sun* (but how we wish that some of our politicians were more like Snoopy!).

The trick is to do as much work as we can in determining the genre and in seeking to understand the worldview out of which Genesis 1 emerged. This will involve not only looking at Genesis 1 in detail but also paying attention to similar stories elsewhere in order to get a feel for the kinds of issues with which the ancients were concerned and the language they used in dealing with them. The last sentence might generate some anxiety. There is no need. When a good preacher or exegete does word studies he or she is not confined only to the biblical texts as though they were written in an hermetically sealed environment. They also consider how the language functioned in the broader cultural context of the day. The same surely applies here. But bear in mind the distinction: we are not talking about borrowing or dependence but rather about the use of common motifs and ideas to deal with common concerns. The central truth claims of Genesis 1 can be very different from the origins stories of the surrounding cultures even if it uses, as we would expect it to, the language and imagery of the day.

Genre as Reading Contract: Form and Content

Literary genre is communicated to the reader through form and content. Consider "The Simpsons." First, we notice the form. It is a cartoon, replete with exaggerated colour and character features. The Simpson family seems to be suffering from a very serious kidney or liver problem, while Marg's blue haystack is beyond wonder. Second, the content. Ned Flanders can hardly be real, can he? Is anyone's life really this crazy and dysfunctional? Further, we have seen other such cartoons and know that they are not "real." The form and content together combine to inform us, as competent viewers, that this is not to be taken as an accurate historical account. But does this mean that "The Simpsons" is not true? Of course not. One of the reasons for its on-going popularity is its caustic wit and perceptive social satire.

William Blake's famous couplet, "Tiger, tiger, burning bright, in the forests of the night," is another case in point. It is true? Not if one reads it "literally" as a description of the propensity of feral cats to ignite spontaneously during their nocturnal wanderings. And protesting with increasingly agitated vigor "Blake says it, I believe it, and that settles it" does not help much. What Blake actually says is a matter of genre, that is, of form and content. We recognize the form: poetry. That means we need to be alert to metaphor, image, and poetic license, whether simplification or hyperbole. It would be folly, if not downright and culpable stupidity, to demand technical precision from poetry. We also consider the content. Tigers do not in our experience habitually explode whilst wandering in dark forests. These two considerations—form and content—help us understand what it is that Blake is trying to say. So is his description true? In one very real sense, yes. Ask yourself, what gives a better understanding of the essence of tigerness: Blake's simple and stylized couplet or a fifty-five-volume DNA map of tiger genes?

Two important considerations emerge. First, in our scientific world it is easy to forget that there are ways of telling the truth other than algebraic formulae or Western-style history. Furthermore, some of the most important and meaningful things in our lives are best shared using metaphor and poetic image. Listen to the top 40 and see how often lyrics such as $E=mc^2$ dominate the charts. The same applies to the biblical text, large slabs of which are not in plodding prose. Most of the prophets preferred poetry. This does not mean that what they say is not true. But in order to make their message more memorable and compelling, they use a genre best suited to that task. Now, I am not attempting to stack the deck for a particular reading of Genesis 1. I am only trying to establish the fact that some of us have a subconscious suspicion of anything other than one particular kind of truth-telling genre to which certain parts of our culture or our upbringing have accustomed us.

In my experience this immediately gives rise to a second question: but if we read Genesis 1 like this, where will it all end? What is to prevent everything solid from wilting into some kind of metaphorical jelly? The answer is again genre. Take, for instance, Jesus' walking on the water. Bultmann, like Schweitzer before him, regarded these stories as myths, largely on the grounds that people do not do this kind of thing. And they are, in part, right. We have never seen such things and we ought to be amazed and sceptical. But

remember, content is only half the story. There is also form. Although there is some debate, it seems clear to me that the form of the gospels will not allow myth, fairy tale, novel, or legend as viable genre options. At this point, form overrides the content consideration. Whatever else the gospel writers were trying to do, to the best of our present knowledge the form of their stories indicates that they are convinced that these things really happened.

So with all this in view, what can we say about the genre and consequently the truth claims of Genesis 1?

Genesis 1: Form and Content

Turning first to the form, even a cursory reading of Genesis 1 reveals a great deal of repetition: "and God said" (vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 28, 29), "let there be" (or some form thereof; vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26), "and it was so" (vv. 3, 7, 9, 11, 15, 24, 30), "and God made" (or similar action; vv. 4, 7, 12, 16, 21, 25, 27), "and God saw that 'x' was good" (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31), some form of naming or blessing (vv. 5, 8, 10, 22, 28), "there was evening and there was morning" (vv. 5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31), and then a designation of the day as first, second, etc. (vv. 5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31; 2.2), with most of these occurring seven times. Usually we associate this kind of repetition with poetry. But we have examples of ancient Hebrew poetry (e.g., Exod 15; Num 23-24; Deut 33; Judg 5), and Genesis 1 is clearly not the same thing. But equally, if not more so, neither is this repetition characteristic of straight narrative, as a quick glance at even Genesis 2 or 1 Samuel will reveal. That modern translators and the vast majority of commentators recognize the poetic *character* of Genesis 1 is indicated by the printed format used in nearly all modern versions of the Bible.

There are other indications that this text is highly stylized. In ancient writing it is not uncommon to find the opening sentences offering clues to the structure of what follows—something like their version of a table of contents. Genesis 1:2 tells us that the earth was without structure (formless) and empty. With this in mind, it has long been recognized that days 1-3 and 4-6 are correlated with days 1 and 4, 2 and 5, and 3 and 6 concerning the same elements of creation:

Day	Structuring	Filling	Day
3	water / land	land animals / humans	6
2	waters above (sky) / waters below	birds / fish	5
1	day / night	sun / moon and stars	4

Entirely in keeping with Genesis 1:2, we have two sets of three days: the first concerning giving form to or structuring what was formless and the second concerning filling the newly created but empty forms. Furthermore, in both sets there is a progression from heaven to earth, with the preparation of the land and the formation of humanity respectively as the climactic moment. This progression is further highlighted by the nature of Yahweh's creative acts. Days 1 and 4 have a single act, days 2 and 5 one creative act of two parts, and finally days 3 and 6 consist of two creative acts. It seems to me that unless we have a previous agenda this kind of detailed and highly stylized literary patterning strongly cautions against taking this account too concretely. This is not to say it is not true, *only that its truth claims may not be of the kind we associate with "literal" reading.*

So much for formal indications. What about the content? The first thing we note is the twenty-four hour period—or, to be more precise, a working period of twelve hours from morning to evening (the day ending with evening and the following announcement of morning indicating the beginning of a new day). While it is true that "day" (*yom*) can elsewhere mean a longer period (e.g., Ps 90:4), it seems to me that the use of evening/morning terminology and Yahweh's rest on the seventh day (in the light of the Sabbath commandment, Exod 20:11; more on this below) makes it all but undeniable that twenty-four hour periods are in view. We also note that there is no mention of any ending of the seventh day. This is probably because the narrative has arrived at Yahweh's rest in his completed creation, and there is no need to go further.

More to the point perhaps is the question: why did the various creative acts of the six days take the same amount of time? One would have thought that creating the sun, moon, and stars with all their mind-numbing extent throughout our vast universe would require considerably more time than creating birds and fish. And why would separating the waters above and below take as long as creating all of the land-dwelling creatures? Even the notion of a firmament in which the heavenly bodies are placed is hardly in keeping with what we now understand. And why exactly twelve hours and not two or forty-seven and a quarter? Why should it take God any time to do anything? Why should he work only in daylight hours? Surely he does not need to rest at night, and the idea that it was too dark for him to see is ludicrous. And what about the flightless land birds and the amphibians which seem not to fit any of the categories? Then we notice that Genesis 2:4-7 suggests that the creation of plants was delayed until apparently the creation of humanity to work the fields. But in Genesis 1 plants are created several days beforehand. It is hard to understand how three days without tillage could be such a problem. None of this is intended to be taking cheap shots. It is, however, intended to suggest something about the genre, and thus about the kind of truth communicated in Genesis 1. When we ask questions and get answers like these, our customary response is to recognize that whatever the truth claims of the account might be, it is not what we normally call "literal" history. Strangely, some readers of Genesis at this point suddenly decide to ignore the genre contract between writer and reader which they customarily and everywhere else observe. One cannot help but wonder if there is some other agenda at work.

Based at this point solely on the text itself and applying the same standards we use everywhere else for assessing genre, that is, to consider form and content, it appears that Genesis 1 is not intended to be read "literally," at least in the popular usage where it usually means "concretely" or strictly and without the possibility of metaphor, hyperbole, or symbol. This does not mean Genesis 1 is not true. It does, however, mean that its truth claims are of a different nature.

Genesis 1 in Its Ancient Near Eastern Environment

How then are we to approach our reading of Genesis 1? As in the reading of any document, it helps to have some familiarity with comparable materials, in this case other ancient creation stories. What we are after, in dealing with the ancients' view of origins, is some idea of the kinds of questions they asked and how they answered them. Again, this is not to assume that Genesis 1 is identical to, or of the same genre as, these other stories or has borrowed from them. We are simply interested in trying to understand what issues a second-millennium B.C. culture might have been interested in. I am, however, assuming that they were not trying to do modern science nor attempting to show that Darwin was wrong—hardly likely since neither was around at the time. It is impossible here to carry out a thorough comparison of ancient creation stories, but a cursory overview will be helpful in giving us a feel for the kinds of concerns that the first audience of Genesis 1 might have brought to the text.

(1) *Sumerian* — We have very little from the Sumerians of the third millennium B.C. They have no epic origins poem, and instead all we have are some brief indications in introductions legitimating their social order. One story describes a very early division between heaven and earth where Enlil, god of the air, separates An and Ki (heaven and earth). Another begins with Nammu, a watery goddess, who then becomes mother of heaven and earth and all the gods. As increasing order emerges from an amorphous whole, humans, who had previously been animals, become a special kind of creature.

(2) *"Babylonian"* — Although often regarded as "Babylonian," the *Atrahasis* and *Enuma Elish* myths are probably of more complex origins. Not only had Babylonian culture inherited materials from the Sumerians, but it was also influenced by a mid-third-millennium incursion of Semites and a late-third-millennium takeover by the Amorites. Although most of our sources derive from the Assyrian or Neo-Babylonian period, the traditions themselves are probably more ancient.

The *Atrahasis* myth, whose earlier form is found in the Sumerian account of *Enki and Ninmakh*, was probably the standard Babylonian version of the creation of humanity. At first the gods and humans were not differentiated. The weaker gods, the *Igigi*, performed irrigation and drainage, but growing tired, they threatened rebellion. Humans were then created, by mixing clay with the blood of a god, to take over these tasks.

Our earliest records of the *Enuma Elish* have been dated from the 1300s, although they too are probably derived from earlier sources. More recently this account has been regarded as a late and sectarian story concerned with the localized elevation of Babylon

and her god Marduk as both rose to prominence around 1500 B.C. In any case, Tiamat, the seawater, and her husband, Apsu, the fresh groundwaters, are the first to rise from primeval chaos, and their intermingling engenders other generations of gods. Apsu, seeking rest in his maturity, becomes agitated at the increasing activity and noise of the younger deities and plots their extermination. He is thwarted, however, by Ea, the god of the heavens, who casts a sleeping spell upon him, murders him, and builds his palace upon Apsu's water-corpse. Ea and his wife, Damkina, have their first son, the precocious Marduk, who is twice as strong, wise, and glorious as any other god.

In time, the younger deities seek to avenge Apsu's murder, and Kingu, new consort of Tiamat, is chosen as their leader. The other gods, terrified, choose Marduk, son of the usurper Ea. As battle is joined, Kingu is cowed by Marduk's magnificent appearance, but Tiamat with an accompanying host of serpent monsters is undeterred. However, with the help of the mighty north wind that distends Tiamat's watery body, Marduk shoots an arrow down her gullet. He celebrates his victory by dividing her watery carcass in two, creating heaven and earth, then the stars, plants, and other living things. After the battle, Kingu and his host are reduced to servitude but soon complain that this role is not fit for deities. Kingu is slain and his blood mixed with earth to create humans who are now to perform forced labour for the gods. They are particularly to provide for Marduk in his Temple at Babylon, which is then established. There is no mention of humans being made in the image of the deities, although the reference to the Lamga gods may imply some sense of humans reflecting divine statuary.

It should be noted, however, that this story is not primarily an explanation of creation, but is rather an aetiology to elevate Marduk, the chief god of the Babylonian pantheon, showing how he attained his supremacy in cosmological terms and to explain why Babylon (with its Temple) is the chief city. Some fifty names celebrate Marduk as the sustainer of life on earth and in heaven. His glorification undergirds and legitimates both divine and human institutions of governance, namely, the Temple and the kingship, which are the *sine qua non* of great Babylon's existence.

(3) *Egyptian* – Surprisingly, although Israel had just spent 400 years in Egypt, relatively little attention has been given to Egyptian creation accounts which one might otherwise expect to provide the dominant background against which Genesis 1 was heard or read. And considering that Genesis is traditionally described as one of the books of Moses, from a literary standpoint it seems right to read it in the light of Israel's exodus. At the outset, it should be noted that there is no unitary or common Egyptian creation story but rather a range of variations depending on which deity is in view. Egyptians apparently accepted a variety of myths and rejected none with the result that the often meagre data derives from a range of diverse texts. Nevertheless, some characteristic themes emerge.

Unlike the Mesopotamians who believed in a number of creator gods, the Egyptians held only one deity responsible for their universe—referred to as "heaven and earth"—whether in the New Kingdom or in Memphite theology. The act of creation is described in various ways. In the Pyramid texts (c. 2350-2176 B.C.) there is a sudden emergence of a primordial mound(s) or hillock(s) (which the Pyramids symbolized) out of the watery

void of Nun, upon which Atum materialized in an act of self-creation. These became the sites—the Holy Places of creation—upon which Temples were built. Atum then creates the lesser gods, all of whom are personifications of various elements of the natural world. In the Memphite texts (Old Kingdom, c. 2500-2200 B.C.) which polemicize against Atum theology, Ptah not only creates all, he is also the primeval waters that begat Atum.

In the little known stela of Ptah and Sekhmet we find the idea of creation through lordly speech where Ptah's tongue commands what his mind thinks—"One says in his mind (heart) 'Look, may they come into being'"—no preexistent material is used (cf. Ps 33:6). This idea of creation by fiat is also found in a Coffin Text, where life is created "according to the word of Nun in Nu..." and Atum creates animal life through his command. Similarly, Genesis 1 is thoroughly, even characteristically, permeated by the idea of Yahweh speaking creation into being.

Creation emerges from the deep, the darkness, the formlessness and emptiness, and the wind. The Coffin texts mention the Hermopolitan Ogdoad (also known as the Ooctad, see below) who are eight primordial beings—four pairs of cosmic forces and their consorts with the four males being toads and the four females snakes—who inhabited the primeval slime from which creation emerges. There is some debate over their identification. On one view, Nun is a formless deep, Keku is darkness, Amun is a breath, and Hehu (the least clear) is some kind of illimitable chaos. On another reading, these eight consist of Nun and Naunet, representing primordial matter and space, Kuk and Kauket, the idea of the illimitable and the boundless, Huh and Hauhet, for darkness and obscurity, and Amon and Amaunet, representing the hidden and concealed. In Memphite theology these arise from Ptah, and out of them emerges the sun. Interestingly, the biblical record begins with Elohim and then speaks of a formlessness and emptiness, a deep, a darkness, and a hovering wind (Gen 1:1-2).

In terms of the order of creation, the god Re first creates light out of darkness, and only after this the sun-god. This resembles Genesis 1 where Elohim creates light before the creation of the sun. Separation is also a key idea with Ptah separating earth and sky and Atum separating Geb (earth-god) from Nut (sky-goddess). In the Hermopolitan story the primordial hill becomes the firmament which divides the upper and lower waters. Given that the biblical idea of the "firmament" has connotations of beaten metal, it is interesting that another Egyptian tradition describes the resurrected king as taking possession of the sky and then splitting or separating its metal.

In the Hymn to Khnum, we are told that the god "made plants in the field, he dotted shores with flowers; he made fruit trees bear their fruit," and this apparently precedes the creation of human beings. A similar sequence is found in the Great Hymn to Amon, who puts the stars in his path, and creates fish to live in the rivers and birds to live in the sky, while Atum forms the Nile and calls it "the lord of fish and rich in birds." One notes here the similar sequence of Genesis 1, beginning with the sun, moon, stars, and then fish and birds, with the latter together in the one set and even in the same order (Gen 1:20-21). The fashioning of the animals and humanity is also linked in the Egyptian accounts, as it is in day six in Genesis 1:24-26.

Unlike the Babylonian traditions, the Egyptians grant a special role to humans. According to the Great Hymn to Atum, the god "created mankind and distinguished their nature and made their life." We also find the making of man from clay with either Khnum being seen as a potter molding humanity on his wheel (Great Hymn to Khnum) or Ptah molding humanity with his hands. In the Instruction of Amenemope, "Man is clay and straw, and God is his potter" and in a few texts there is even the idea that humanity is made in the image of the god, as per the Instruction of King Merikare: "They are his [Re] own images proceeding from his flesh." The Egyptian word used here (*snnw*) is often written with a determinative in the shape of a statue. This is similar to Genesis 1's notion of humanity being made from the dust of the earth in Elohim's image (*tselem*), a word which initially meant a piece cut from an object and which would be entirely appropriate for a piece of clay cut for a sculpture.

As far as I can ascertain there is no notion in Mesopotamian stories of humanity being imparted breath by the gods. But in the Instruction of King Merikare—" [A]nd he (Re) made the air to give life to their (men) nostrils"—the impartation of life occurs through the breath of the creator-deity. On the other hand, the reason for the creation of humanity is unclear, though it seems a possibility that it was to carry out the creator-god's purposes.

Finally, the idea of the deity as craftsman is implied by the use of words that describe the metal worker who hammers and casts, or the master potter who molds, which would fit with the concept of a hammered firmament and with humans being fashioned from the earth.

Comparisons between Genesis 1 and Ancient Near Eastern Creation Myths

Some significant contours should be evident. For the ancients the very order and coherence of the natural world implied some kind of personal agency. There is not a hint of the idea that the ordered world emerged from chaos by purely natural means. My point here is that no one wrote these texts to argue for the existence of the gods. That much was simply assumed. On this basis, Genesis 1 is unlikely to offer much succour for those who want to argue against Darwin. It was never designed to do so. More probably it was designed to answer the question: *which* god/s ordered and filled the heavens and the earth?

Whereas for moderns the process of creation is thoroughly materialistic with the earth emerging merely as part of a larger solar system and life, if discussed at all, being considered in only the most primitive form, for the ancients the primary concern is with the earth as the setting for the appearance of a fully formed human community and culture. In terms of the starting points, the motifs of water/watery deep, wind/storm, and formlessness are common, and, in the Egyptian Coffin Texts, one also finds the primeval darkness. Thus most stories, including in part Genesis 1, begin with either an amorphous mass or primeval chaos, out of which through increasing differentiation heaven and earth are separated and ultimately a particularly social order emerges. Genesis 1 is unusual in

that although it begins with the same basic elements it is more universal and seems less interested in legitimating a specifically Israelite social order, though in the larger context of the Torah one might perhaps be expected to understand as much. Certainly Yahweh's lordship is assumed as the fundamental datum of all existence. In contrast to modern origins stories which utterly reject any psychologizing of what is seen as a purely "objective" materialist account, ancient stories—with the notable exception of Genesis—simply assumed a continuity between personified "nature" and the appearance of humanity. If one might be permitted the aside: it seems that the Genesis account manages to hold together the tension between nature and personhood in ways that neither the ancients nor modern materialism can.

The idea of warfare, though absent from Egyptian or Sumerian accounts, is prominent in the "Babylonian" stories, and particularly in the defeat of the chaos-storm-monster (cf. the allusions in Job 26:12; Ps 89:10; Isa. 51:9). Here cosmogony was essentially a conflict of wills from which one party emerged victorious (so Ea/Apsu; Marduk/Tiamat; cf. Baal and Yam/Mot). Babylonian stories also involved the use of magic on the part of the deities. In the Egyptian stories, however, there is only one creator god who creates and this by fiat through divine speech. But even so, their stories are still theogonic, that is, concerned with the emergence of the gods as personifications of aspects of nature. Apart from the single creator and creation by speech alone, none of these features is found in Genesis 1.

In the Babylonian materials humans are created to undertake menial labour for Babylon's gods who are now free to take their ease. The Egyptian sources by way of contrast are unclear as to humanity's purpose. The notion of humans bearing the deity's image is found only in Egypt and Genesis 1. In the latter, all humanity, not just a single individual, act as Elohim's vice regents superintending his creation. Apart from Genesis 1 there appears to be no concern with duration or a literary framework wherein time is broken into a series of consecutive days. Only in the Baal palace-building story—and again there is debate over whether this is a creation narrative (fn. 11)—is there mention of a seven-day program to build Baal's palace-temple (cf. seven years for Solomon's temple; 1 Kgs 6:37-38).

Before considering this temple connection further, it is worth recalling Israel's exodus experience. They had just seen Yahweh, the god of the Fathers, uncreate Egypt by overturning the rule of Pharaoh, son of Amon-re, with the ten plagues that effectively dissolved the boundaries that gave the land of Egypt its order and form. And then at the Reed Sea (Exod 14:19-31) they had witnessed Yahweh cause light to shine in the darkness and a divine wind to drive back the deep of the *Yam Suph* (a sea that the Egyptians also regarded as the being at the edge of the world and the abode of Apophis the chaos serpent) and so to reveal dry land.

Not only so, but Pharaoh's crown carried a Urea, an enraged female cobra, which functioned both as a symbol and the actual repository of Egypt's power. Pharaoh's "father," the sun-god Re, after traveling through the heavens, would descend into the watery underworld of the dead, the sea of reeds. Escorted by two fire-breathing cobras he

would do battle with Apophis the chaos serpent and emerge victorious each morning to bring life to Egypt. Like father like son, Pharaoh was to bring order and justice to Egypt by restraining the chaos of lawlessness. One can understand why Pharaoh, as Amon-Re's son, thought he too could send his armies into the watery deep of the *Yam Suph* and emerge victorious. But as with Moses' first sign—the transformation of his judicial staff and symbol of his authority into a serpent that swallows those of Pharaoh's magicians—so too with the last, when Pharaoh's Urea-led armies are engulfed by the unrestrained sea, and that at Yahweh's command. It is hardly surprising, then, that the sight of the Egyptians' dead bodies on the shore of the *Yam Suph* (cf. the Sea of Reeds and Pool of the Dead) had a considerable impact on Israel (Exod 15). It is, therefore, probably not by accident that one can hear echoes of light in the darkness, the wind over the deep, and the appearance of dry land in Genesis 1: they had seen Yahweh do this when he delivered them at the *Yam Suph*.

This considerable similarity with the Egyptian accounts raises a very interesting question. It is sometimes suggested that the other ancient creation stories are distorted echoes of the original creation story, namely Genesis 1. This is always a possibility. But then one is left with a strange fact. How does one explain that it happens to be Egyptian stories, the place where Israel has just spent 400 years and which stories antedate considerably Israel's stay in Egypt, whose scattered details on the whole bear a greater resemblance to Genesis 1 than those, for example, of Mesopotamia? Might not a better explanation be the exact opposite? Namely, that it was the details of the varied Egyptian accounts that have influenced the language of Israel's creation story precisely to make it all the more effective against the gods of Egypt? Might it not be that Genesis 1 was written with a particular concern to declare that it was Israel's god, Yahweh, and not Ptah, Atum, or any other of Egypt's failed deities, who was alone responsible for the good and perfect order of creation?

It might also be that the clear literary art and architectonic patterning of Genesis 1 is a deliberate artistic device intended to underline the good order and patterning of Yahweh's creational activity. If so, what do we do with the order of the parallel three days? It seems to me that they are designed to reflect the same emergence of increasing order—form and fullness—we have seen elsewhere in the ancient world and particularly Egypt, but now at Yahweh's command. But why "three" days? I suggest it comes from the ancients' perception of the basic structures of their reality. The fundamental given of human existence is the experience of night and day, no matter whether one is above or below, or on sea or land. The next level of complexity is above and below, and then finally, on the below, the division between land and sea. These three days together delineate the fundamental structure of the ancient world as the ancients experienced it. But the structure was not created to remain void or empty, and so on the second set of three days Yahweh fills each of the realms with, as it were, their rulers (cf. Gen 1:16) up through finally the appearance of the image-bearer (Gen 1:26-27; see below).

To return to the temple motif noted earlier, a key feature in a number of the stories is that the gods, having defeated the chaos monster, construct their palace-temples. (In Hebrew "palace" and "temple" are represented by the same word, which in certain circumstances

is synonymous with "house"—e.g., house of Yahweh—the idea going back to the Sumerians, where the word for temple is "big house"). As Arvid Kapelrud has argued, when one has defeated one's foes, be one human or divine, and has established one's realm, one builds a palace or temple.

Creation as God's Palace-Temple

I want to pick up for a moment on the palace-temple image. If we ask how ancient peoples might have conceptualized their world, the answer seems to be as a palace-temple, such that creation becomes an act of palace-temple building. Egyptian sources contain hints of this, with several traditions mentioning some poles that lift the heaven over the earth and which are oriented toward the cardinal points. This might also explain the Egyptian practice of building Temples at various sites associated with the Holy Place/s of creation. At the same time, the Egyptian cultic complex of the exodus period was a model of cosmic origins, with its lake of reeds and stately temple.

In the "Babylonian" *Enuma Elish*, the outcome of Ea's victory over the watery god Apsu is not creation but the building of a palace-temple on the body of his foe. Likewise, after Marduk's defeat of Tiamat he divides her corpse and stretches out one half like a roof to form the heavens, apparently forming the earth from the remainder, though the text is unclear at this point. Similarly in the Canaanite story of Baal's victory over Yam, after Baal gains dominion, a house (temple) is constructed for him (as already noted opinions are divided over whether this is an account of creation but my interest here is the form of conceptualization). However, if Baal's temple is a microcosm as it seems to be, then this act of temple-building could perhaps correspond to creation such that creation, kingship, and temple-building all belong together. Interestingly Baal's temple is created in seven days and Yahweh's Jerusalem Temple, itself a microcosm, in seven years (1 Kgs 6:37-38).

The "creation as temple-palace" metaphor is hardly surprising if one reflects for a moment on the realities of the ancient world. If the biggest threat to a settled agricultural existence was chaos, usually through war, lawlessness, or flood, then who was it that established order and security? Naturally, it was the great king who defeated the enemy, who promulgated and upheld the law (his word), and who supervised and orchestrated the building of dykes, etc., to restrain the devastating floods. Having established his realm he would then build his palace. If kings do this on a micro scale, then surely the gods do it at a cosmic one. In fact, it is in recognition of this connection that victorious kings, having entered into their rest, built temples for their deities.

But is there any evidence of this notion in the Bible? The data is overwhelming. In Psalm 104:2-3 we are told that Yahweh "wraps himself in light as with a garment; he stretches out the heavens like a tent and lays the beams of his upper chambers on their waters." Isaiah 24:18 declares that "the windows of heaven are opened, and the foundations of the land tremble." One notes especially Job 38:4ff:

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?

Who marked off its dimensions?

Surely you know!

Who stretched a measuring line across it?

On what were its footings set,

or who laid its cornerstone

Who shut up the sea behind doors

When I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place

Have you entered the storehouses of the snow

Or seen the storehouses of the hail?

In fact, the Hebrew Bible is awash with architectural imagery when describing creation. It speaks of the foundations of the earth (Ps 18:15; 82:5; 102:25; 104:5; Prov 8:29; Isa 51:13,16; 2 Sam 22:8,16; Zech 12:1; cf. 2 Sam 22:8), the pillars of the earth and of the heavens (1 Sam 2:8; Job 9:6; Ps 75:3; Job 26:11), the heavens' windows (Gen 7:11; 8:2; Isa 24:18; Mal 3:10; 2 Kgs 7:2; Ps 104:2), the stretching out of the heavens like a canopy/tent (Isa 40:12,22; 42:5; 44:24; 45:12; 48:13; 51:13; Jer 10:12; 31:37; 32:17; 51:15; Amos 9:6; Zech 12:1; Job 9:8; Ps 102:25), and storehouses (Deut 28:12; Jer 10:13; 50:25; 51:16; cf. Ps 33:7; 135:7; Job 38:22).

But what kind of building is this? As Isaiah 66:1 makes clear, "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be?" Where does one find a throne and a footstool if not in a palace, and what is the palace of Yahweh if not a temple? And note too the image of resting in his house (= Temple) in the light of Yahweh's resting in his completed abode on the seventh day of Genesis 1. In this sense, the whole of creation is seen as Yahweh's palace-temple, and hence the reason for his Jerusalem temple itself being a microcosm, a mini universe: it serves to remind Israel that the whole world is Yahweh's. Granted, Genesis 1 does not explicitly describe Yahweh as actually rolling up his sleeves and "building"—why should it when a truly Lordly Yahweh would merely have to give the word? But given the rather widespread Ancient Near Eastern notion linking creation, defeat-of-chaos, and temple-building, and the thorough-going architectural imagery which characterizes the biblical conceptualizing of creation, it would be very odd if Genesis 1 were not to be understood along the lines of cosmic palace-temple building. As the Great King, Elohim naturally creates realms for the lesser rulers (cf. Gen 1:16) as he forms his palace-temple out of the deep and gives order to and fills it. And as the Great King, having ordered his realm, he now rules over all in "Sabbath" rest (see Exod 20), sitting in the great pavilion of his cosmos-palace-temple (cf. Ps 93).

This might also explain some elements of John's Revelation where he describes the New Jerusalem as coming down out of the heavens to earth (Rev 21). One striking feature is the absence of any Temple (Rev 21:22). The odd cube shape of the city might explain this. The only other biblical objects in a similar setting that are cube-shaped are the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle (10 cubits, probably) and Solomon's temple (20 cubits; 1 Kgs 6:20; 2 Chr 3:8; cf. the Holy Place in Ezekiel's temple, 500 cubits square, Ezek 42:16-20; 45:2). If so, then this suggests that the reason there is no temple in the New Jerusalem is because the city itself has become, not just the Temple, but the very Holy of Holies (cf. also Ezek 45:2-3). But what about the surprising size of the city: 12,000 stadia (approximately 1,500 miles) along each axis? The significance of these dimensions might lie in the observation that the size of the city corresponds to that of the then-known Greek world, while the height emphasizes the co-mingling of heaven and earth. In other words, the climax of the new creation is not the abandonment of the earth, but instead the coming of Yahweh himself to the earth to dwell among us. Here, then, is the climax of Genesis 1's six-fold affirmation of the goodness of creation with its progression in both sets of days from heaven to earth. The final goal is not the destruction of creation, but rather the unification of heaven and earth such that the renewed earth itself now becomes Yahweh's very throne room.

Further support for this palace-temple conceptualization is found in the final act of creation: the forming of humanity, male and female, in the image of Elohim. Long the subject of debate, the image of God language makes a great deal of sense within the palace-temple context. After all, what is the last thing placed inside the deity's house, if not his image? So here in Genesis 1 on the last creative day, Yahweh fashions his own image and places it in his palace-temple. At the same time, as Shelley's poem *Ozymandias* so evocatively describes, ancient kings frequently placed images of themselves throughout their realms as signs of their power and sovereign authority. It is highly likely that in the biblical account humanity serves the same function. Thus, both Israel (Exod 4:22) and her king (Ps 2:8) are called to be God's son in the sense of being faithful bearers of his image, that is, to reflect his character and act as his vice-regents as they live in his palace-temple.

From this perspective, Genesis 1 is a "poetic" account in which Yahweh, Israel's god, is proclaimed the builder of creation, his palace-temple. It is he who by the fiat of his kingly command provided the fundamental structures of ancient human experience and who filled these sub-realms with their rulers, over all of which he has placed humanity, his image-bearer, as his vice regent.

Conclusions

What might we conclude about the truth claims and significance of Genesis 1? Given its genre—a highly stylized form and unrealistic content—I would suggest that it is not to be taken "literally" in the popular modern Western sense as a blow-by-blow, chronologically accurate, account of creation. No one in the ancient world, apart from the isolated account of the time taken to build Baal's palace, seems particularly concerned with these kinds of questions. Our chronos-fixated age measures things in nanoseconds and

smaller—but not theirs. Rather, the pattern of days probably derives from the ancients' understanding of the structure of their world—day/night, above/below, and land/sea—this being conceptualized in terms of the deity's construction of his palace-temple as he gives it form and fills it. The fundamental issue is that it is Yahweh, Israel's God, a God who cares for slaves, non-entities, and even non-Israelites (cf. the mixed multitude who are also delivered from Pharaoh's genocidal proclivities; Exod 12:38), who brought order to the world, not the failed deities of oppressive Egypt nor, to a lesser degree, those of Canaan or Mesopotamia. And in doing so, it uses the language and imagery to which that world, and particularly Egypt, was accustomed. This is hardly surprising.

On this reading the twenty-four hour periods, or more accurately dawn-to-dusk days, probably reflect the notion of the customary daily periods of work. Yahweh is the builder, and each day he speaks and thus by divine fiat builds or fills a discrete part of his realm. Consequently, the injunction to keep Sabbath is less intent on imitating six literal twenty-four-hour days of creation than it is a summons for Israel to live out her creation story—structured as it is in the nature of the case by six days with a seventh to rest—and so to declare herself to be Yahweh's "son," imitating him in continuing his creation work of bringing order with the ultimate goal of Sabbath rest.

So in what sense is this true? If this kind of metaphor, symbol, or antiquated way of seeing the world is all that is intended, how does it translate into our modern world? In what sense can this be meaningful for us? The answer is surprisingly modern. We recall that for the ancients the fundamental concern of their stories was the emergence of humanity, society, and culture. It was the same for Israel. Yahweh has designed this palace-temple, this pavilion, to be the habitation of his image-bearer, namely, humanity. This, it seems to me, is nothing other than the ancient version of the recently formulated Anthropic Principle, which in its various forms reflects the fact that the fundamental structures of this world, the observed values of its cosmological and physical quantities, appear to have been fine-tuned with human existence in view. To observers both then and now there are strong hints that this creation was designed for us. And Genesis 1's answer, it seems to me, is not so much concerned with the "how" in the technical or mechanical sense as it is with the "who," namely, Yahweh. It is Israel's God who has created this world, and humanity will never truly know what it means to be human until we learn to reflect his image. There is truth here, but it is more like the pungent and memorable truth of Blake's "Tiger, Tiger" than the serried ranks of mathematically precise gene maps.

Two final observations. If this creation is Yahweh's palace-temple, then we had best take good care of it. Far too many of us treat our homes far better than we treat this creation. We would never tolerate toxic waste or unbridled pollution in our living rooms, and yet we seem happy to do so when it comes to God's palace-temple. While some have mistakenly read the apocalyptic language of purging fire as a carte blanche to do whatever they will to this present earth, we might do well to remember the warning in Revelation 11:18: God will destroy those who destroy his earth. Given that it is his palace-temple, and that far from people going to heaven, heaven is coming here (at least if Revelation 21 is to be believed), God's anger against violators of the earth is perfectly

understandable. It is his palace-temple they are defiling, whereas he is committed to renewing it.

Second, if humans are made in God's image, then the repercussions are serious indeed. In the ancient world, to deface the image of the king or deity was tantamount to high treason. If one did not want to live in his realm or under his kingship, that could be arranged, either by exile or death. If we take the Genesis 1 account seriously, namely, that every human being is made in God's image, then we need to know that any act of abuse against another human being is an act of high treason against the God whose image we bear and to whose kingship and sovereignty we therefore inherently bear witness. With this in mind, it is not hard to comprehend why Jews and Christians have historically put such a high value on human life, whether women, slaves, gladiators, newly born, or even unborn children.

It seems to me that this kind of reading of Genesis not only makes good sense of the text within its cultural horizons, but puts the emphasis back where it belongs. Perhaps it is time to stop warring, for example, over the length of the days and instead to recall what Genesis 1 is more likely about. This world is God's temple-palace and he has not abandoned it. If we are truly to bear his image, then neither should we. Not only so, but every human being is made in God's image. From this perspective, it makes a great deal of sense for Jesus as God's son among us not only to cleanse Israel's microcosmic temple, but also to restore our image—opening blind eyes, deaf ears, raising the dead, etc. Little wonder Paul speaks of a new creation. With these truths firmly in mind and heart, it would be difficult for Christians not to change the world.

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