

The Garden Story Never Happened. The Garden Story Always Happens.

Section 1: Multiple Creation Stories in Genesis

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Section 3: Seven Potential Indications the Creation Accounts are Figurative

[1] If we must take the days of creation as completely literal what are we then to make of Exod. 31:16–17: “¹⁶Therefore the Israelites shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant. ¹⁷It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, **and was refreshed.**” Does god really need to rest? Must we literally believe that our omnipotent creator grew tired after creating things? Miller and Soden write:

“The verb “refreshed” is used three times in the Scriptures, including Exodus 23:12 (“Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your servant woman, and the alien, may be refreshed”) and 2 Samuel 16:14 (“And the king, and all the people who were with him, arrived weary at the Jordan. And there he refreshed himself”). The latter verse makes it clear that it is weariness that requires refreshment. But was God literally weary? Had he become spent during the week of creation? No, but he was describing his figurative workweek in a way that corresponded with human experience, so that mankind would also rest even as God had “rested.” God is drawing an analogy here rather than an equation. If we do not understand God’s “rest” and “refreshment” to be the same as man’s, should we expect God’s “days” to be the same?”¹

The framing of the creation week appears theological as it partly establishes the reasoning for the Sabbath. Caution is warranted by this in how literally we take some of the details of creation. Not to mention Deut 5:12-15 (RSV, ESV) appears to attribute keeping the sabbath to the Exodus from Egypt.

¹ Johnny V. Miller and John M. Soden, *In the beginning We Misunderstood*.

[2] There is a literary structure to the first creation story. On day 1 light is separated from darkness and on day four the sun and moon are created. On day two the water above is separated from the water below and day five naturally brings two things corresponding to that, fish and birds. On day three dry land appears and on day six land creatures are created. The chart shown here (fig 2.) is from Miller and Soden who point out this has little to do with scientific chronology, “Rather, the structure makes the point that both order and substance in the world originate with the purpose and plan of God.”² Arnold writes:

Figure 2. A Comparison of Days 1–3 and 4–6

God speaks productivity into the desolation		God populates the void with life	
Day	Forming by Separating	Day	Filling with Life
1	Light from dark	4	The luminaries
2	Sky from terrestrial waters below	5	Fish and birds
3	Dry land from water	6	Land creatures
	Vegetation added		Humankind

“These verses on the creation of “light” (*lo^or*) are not a deeply philosophical treatise on the nature of physics, on which some interpreters rave about light as the first-fruits of creation, the sublimest element, and the finest of all elementary powers. Instead, this author intends to describe creation in a six-day pattern, moving inexorably to an all-important seventh. For this reason, the creation of light is first and fundamental to the rest, because it makes possible the first separations and divisions of creation; that is, light from darkness, day from night, and therefore the alternating sequence of days. What God has created in vv. 3–5 is *time*, which is more important than space for this chapter.⁴¹ Only through this orderly progression through the six days will God now bring order to the cosmos, and this prepares for the importance of the seventh day (2:1–3), which is paramount for this author.”³

There is a theological order to the first creation story. We know God alone ordered the world and this is meant to explain its observed regularity (e.g., repeating patterns such as seasons, sunrise, etc.). In fact, the themes mentioned on the first three days which are about establishing “time, weather and food production”⁴ occurring just as we see in many comparative mythologies.

[3] Genesis lists there being morning and evening three whole days before the sun is created. Would evening and morning not have been understood as relating to sunrise and sunset by ancient authors? I suppose other explanations for this could exist but furthermore, plants and trees come before the sun is created. Surely this order is not meant to be chronologically accurate from a modern scientific perspective?

[4] The two accounts in Genesis are mutually exclusive in some details if taken literally in a modernistic sense. One describes a creative week and the other the day in which things were made. One describes what appears to be the simultaneous creation of men and women while the other has a gap between the first man and woman. In the first creation account humans are created last, after the animals as the climax of God’s creative week before He rests. In the

² Johnny V. Miller and John M. Soden, *In the beginning We Misunderstood*

³ Bill Arnold, *Genesis New Cambridge Commentary*, pg 39.

⁴ John Walton, *Genesis as Ancient Cosmology*, see pp. 162-165.

second one, Adam is created before the animals and Eve is created after them. Karen Armstrong writes: “By giving us two contradictory accounts of the creation, the biblical editors were indicating that both J and P were writing fiction. They offered timeless truths that could not be rendered obsolete by new cosmological discoveries. If P wanted to show us how to regard the universe in relation to the divine, J was more interested in humanity. He turned the spotlight from God in his heaven to *adam* in the garden. Above all he was concerned with the distance that seemed to separate God from humanity. How could human beings, who were sustained by the divine breath, feel that God was so remote?”⁵

[5] God’s behavior is comically naïve and perplexing if the account is not figurative when it comes to finding Adam a mate or companion. Armstrong writes, “When God had finished creating the animal kingdom, he paraded them all before Adam. . . . God’s purpose was . . . to find a mate for Adam from among “all cattle,” “the birds of the air,” and “every animal of the field” (2:20). It is a comic picture. Like an eager matchmaker, God presented the inexperienced Adam with one animal after another. Bison? Elephant? Kangaroo? We are not surprised to hear that at the end of the day, “for the man there was not found a helper as his partner” (2:20). How could God have imagined for one moment that Adam would find a mate in this way? The God who appeared to be so omnipotent and omniscient in Chapter 1 was now unable to fathom the desires and needs of his creature.”⁶ Likewise, even moving forward in Genesis we see a talking snake, a magical tree granting eternal life and humans who do not know good and evil and the shame of nakedness, yet they are nonetheless given a command they are somehow expected to obey. In Genesis 1 we are created in the *imago dei*, in Genesis 3 we may have become more like God and the heavenly host only by sinning and disobeying God. Anthropomorphically, in the second creation account, God asks where Adam is, what he had done and is concerned he might eat of the tree of life and live forever. Many of these themes are common in ancient near east mythology and admittedly, talking snakes and a magical fruit tree granting eternal life resemble fiction.

[6] It is possible the seventh day might not have ended in the first creation narrative as there is no “and there was evening and there was morning” to be found. If this day is not a literal 24 hour period then the rest of the days are not required to be so either. Miller and Soden write, “It is this concept of God’s unending rest that informs Jesus’ argument with some hostile Jews when he had miraculously healed on the Sabbath in violation of their tradition. Jesus said, “My Father is working until now, and I am working” (John 5:17). The point is that while God’s Sabbath never ended, he still continued to uphold the world and especially to do good: if the Father worked on his Sabbath, the Son could work on the Sabbath. Hebrews 3 and 4 refer to that unending rest in its eschatological significance: “So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest” (Heb. 4:9–11).”⁷

[7] Finally, a knowledge of surrounding ancient near east mythology will show that the Bible is heavily dependent upon it and it present a radically different and superior version of God. The

⁵ Karen Armstrong, *In the Beginning*

⁶ Armstrong, *ibid.*

⁷ Johnny V. Miller and John M. Soden, *In the beginning We Misunderstood*

parallels between the Biblical accounts and other religious mythologies are extensive and cast doubt on understanding the purpose of Genesis 1-2 as literal history. In fact, the primary points the two creation narratives make are entirely independent of whether or not the text is a literal description of the cosmos and history. To be clear, let me affirm without equivocation that Genesis is part of our Sacred Scripture and it teaches whatever truth God intended it to. In that capacity it is absolutely true and accurate. When we laser in from that zoomed out perspective, the question of what it is teaching becomes a bit more complicated and some of it really comes down to individual hermeneutics, models of inspiration and possibly even Christology. Any answer to this question will be highly nuanced. For *some*, if history didn't happen and the world wasn't created exactly as a modern-literalistic interpretation of Genesis would require, the entire Bible including the Gospel is compromised. For *others*, since the original context and purpose of Genesis 1-2 was **not** to address modern concerns, we are imposing the wrong questions on Scripture when holding it up to the light of modern science. Genesis serves as a statement teaching God's superiority and lack of rivals, amongst other things. It is absolutely true and cuts through a jungle of polytheistic tape that ensnared our ancestors. Granted what I see as the intended purpose of Genesis, I have no qualms with affirming it as true. Since its details are not meant to be accurate and precise scientific statements by modern standards, I will not judge its accuracy and merit by that standard. If you tell me a joke, I will not judge its comedic value based on its historical reliability. I won't ask you, "Who walked into the bar? What bar? Did bars actually exist at the time? Why were they there?" Walton writes:

"In class, when I make a cultural allusion, its significance is lost if the class is not familiar with the movie, song or video game to which I am alluding. The line becomes a source of confusion to them because they are unaware of the connection I am referencing. Likewise, if Genesis is making allusions to the literary world of the ancient Near East (as observable in literature such as the *Gilgamesh Epic*) and we as readers have no knowledge of that literary world, we will miss the significance of the allusion."⁸

Walton also brilliantly uses the analogy of the Hubble Space telescope and Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Night* painting.⁹ One should no more try to do astronomy with the painting than one should seek scientific understandings of the universe from Genesis. Getting the genre and historical context of Genesis correct is crucial to interpreting it accurately. Once we situate Genesis in its proper context, the issue of "Did it happen like this?" becomes meaningless. Admittedly, we have restricted the reasoning in our seven indicators mainly to the Hebrew Scriptures. A valid question to ask is, "Does the New Testament presuppose and/or necessitate historical creation accounts and a literal garden story?" We will turn to that very important issue in section six but for now we will look at what can astonishingly be considered a third type of creation narrative found sprinkled in scripture.

⁸ John Walton with NT Wright, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate*, pg 111.

⁹ He also speaks of not using the Star Spangled Banner to reconstruct the bombing of Fort McHenry!