

How Do We Interpret Genesis 1¹?

I have a student with the last name “Bond.” During one class I attempted a joke and said, “the name’s Bond. James Bond” except I substituted the student’s first name in place of “James.” The 9th graders under my care looked at me as if I had two heads. One girl said with a perplexed face, “What are you talking about?” I’ve learned I can no longer reference a movie like Terminator 2 or even the Lord of the Rings trilogy and expect my students to understand what I am talking about. In the case of the former, I sometimes forget the film came out almost 35 years ago and is over twice their age. I might as well be my grandparents referencing a black and white film from the 40s to me. As for the latter, clearly my students are a few hobbits short a Shire when it comes to understanding my cultural references. NT Wright said the following:

"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." [NT Wright in John Walton’s, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate*, pg. 111]

If we do not read Genesis 1 in its ancient Mesopotamian context, we are going to miss all its rich cultural allusions. Some interpreters take Genesis 1 as a factual account of exactly how God created the universe. In this view, it teaches us scientific truths about how and in what order things were created. I think that is entirely incorrect, and to use an analogy by John Walton, it is akin to doing astronomy using Vincent van Gogh’s famous *Starry Night* painting. Science answers scientific questions and the Bible is concerned with theological ones in a pre-scientific era.

It makes little sense to me to argue over the meaning of Hebrew word “*yom*” and the length of the “days” in Genesis 1. The account partially serves as an etiology for the Sabbath, so I personally have little reason to suppose regular “days” are not what the author had in mind. The more interesting question is why so many Christians no longer honor the Sabbath when Genesis 1 ties it into the created order. A significant part of the first chapter of the Bible is doing something some scholars might call “rearranging Mesopotamian furniture.” When we read the contents of Genesis 1 in the context of surrounding mythology and other creation stories, its theological richness becomes greatly magnified. The interpretation which looks

¹ The first creation story actually goes to 2:3 with a conclusion and introduction to the next section) occurring in verse 4 as will be explained below.

at Genesis as a factual account of creation is quite banal in comparison. My mind was blown when I first learned of these connections and let Genesis 1 speak to me in its own voice. But I had to read *Atrahasis*, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and several other ancient epics and creation myths before I could understand Genesis in its own cultural context. Before digging into this, it may be helpful to discuss a few reasons why it isn't necessary to view Genesis in competition with science.

There Are Many Reasons to Suspect Genesis 1-2:4a Is Not Literal History

While I am focusing mostly on the first chapter of Genesis, let me preface this section by saying that I do generally believe Adam and Eve were a historical couple and that the Genesis flood did occur. I have written about that [here](#). However, nothing requires me to believe the primeval history cannot contain historical kernels embedded within mythological elements or that Genesis cannot teach theological truths through accommodated ancient, near-eastern cosmologies. This is a question of genre and hermeneutics. Much of the reasoning below applies to all of Genesis 1-11 and to be honest, to other parts of the Bible as well. Here are some reasons why we don't necessarily need to treat Genesis 1 as a play-by-play account of our material origins.

[1] Many Scholars Think There are Two Creation Accounts in Genesis

Genesis 1 and 2 appear roughly divided into two distinct accounts with the first one ending at verse 2:4a. Notice how (1:1) starts with, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" but in verse 2:4b we have, "In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens." It appears to start a new creation account and 2:4a is the first of many toledoths ("These are the generations . . .") or concluding summaries in Genesis that mark transition points. This alone might not amount to much, but the case becomes much more robust when we compare the material before and after the toledoth. The evidence for two distinct creation accounts edited together is as follows: (1) In the first account God—who is mentioned many times—is referred to as Elohim but in the second as Yahweh-Elohim. These two divine names often occur in places throughout the Pentateuch where we seem to have different versions of the same story. This is certainly not random. (2) The order of creation differs in the two accounts. In the first one humans come last on day six after the animals. In the second account God makes the animals after Adam (but before Eve) since it is not good for man to be alone. (3) In the first account, creation is described as six days of work and one of rest whereas the second account says, "In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens." (4) When reading the first account, God creates by mere word (*bar'a*) but in the second account he creates (*yatsar*) things more intimately. (5) Humans are meant to be stewards (rulers) in the first account but in the second their purpose is to tend God's garden. (6) The conditions of the primordial earth are described differently. In

the first account there is a dark, deep, formless void with waters (chaos to order) and in the second dry land with vegetation is turned into a garden paradise (desert to oasis). (7) The first account also seems to envision a much more transcendent image of God than the second one but more on that later. In putting these two narratives together, the editor of the Pentateuch clearly wants them read sequentially. This is true from a canonical perspective but differences between them are the first indication to me that I should not be treating both accounts as exactly what a film crew would have recorded happening when God created. This section could be expanded by highlighting more doublets in the Pentateuch and even in the primeval history itself. Genesis often seems to feature two different versions of the same story (notice that Noah is told to board the ark twice by God and does so).

[2] Genesis 1 is at Odds with Science

Apologists have devised creative attempts to fit the Genesis 1 chronology into the wider context of modern science. The days are treated as long epochs and the account is given from the perspective of a terrestrial observer. Instead of the sun (and stars) inaccurately being created after the earth on day 4, they simply appeared in the sky as the atmosphere went from “opaque to transparent.” This reading does not place plants before the sun either since it was created all along, just obscured by a heavy, opaque atmosphere. A lot of the scientific difficulties are resolved when this is done but I am skeptical of such interpretations which seem more like *ad hoc* harmonization attempts than sound exegetical readings. As Walton once said, “Word meanings cannot be chosen as if we were in a cafeteria taking whatever we like.” But even if we grant such an interpretation, the account gets the order of life’s appearance or evolution incorrect. It also mentions God creating a solid slab (firmament, vault or dome) in the sky and that that is not reconcilable with modern science. We can reject science here or simply let it inform how we understand this Biblical narrative. After all, science is simply the study of God’s world and how He normally runs and sustains creation. Maybe it is not science --the best material understanding of God’s handiwork-- that is wrong, but rather the literal interpretation of Genesis 1? Why should we trust science over the Bible here? That is the wrong question and not what I just asked. Why should we trust science over requiring a literal interpretation Genesis 1 is the better question and it is answered in the following paragraph.

The Bible does not appear to possess any supernatural knowledge when it comes to science. Jacob describes a dream about climbing a ladder to heaven (Gen 28), the same place the tower of Babel was apparently going to reach (Gen 11). This reflects the three-tiered cosmos of the time. There seems to be a bit of incorrect scientific background

knowledge scattered throughout the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Parts of the Bible refer to the four corners of the earth (Is. 11:12), think thoughts come from our kidneys (Psalm 16:7), believe there is a solid firmament or metal dome in the sky (Gen 1:6, Job 37:18), identify the moon as a light like the sun (Gen 1:16), proclaim the earth is immutable and does not move (1 Chron 16:30, Ps 93:1, 96:10, 104:5; Is 45:8), consider the earth flat (Mt 4:8, Dan 4:10-11), thinks stars are small and close enough to the earth they can fall from the sky and land on it (Rev 6:13-16, 8:10; Mt 2:10, 24:29; Dan 8:10), rain and snow are kept in heavenly storehouses (Job 38:22, Ps 135:7), heaven and hell/Sheol are up and down in the earth (Isaiah 66:1, Psalm 33:14, Mt 12:40, Eph 4:9). These examples could be multiplied. As we look at the rest of the Bible, it is quite clear that God has accommodated his message and spoke through ancient cosmologies. Why would Genesis 1 be an exception? It seems more likely that God is going to teach us theological truths through the pre-scientific background knowledge of the time. This means that if Genesis intends to teach us that God created all things, we can take this as a theological truth even if the account does not give us an accurate sequence or scientific accounting of how everything came to be.

[3] Forming and Filling

The six days of creation seems to have a clear literary structure. The events of days 1-3 (forming) correspond sequentially to the events of days 4-6 (filling). On day 1 light is separated from darkness and on day four the sun and moon are created. On day two the water above (sky) is separated from the water below and day five naturally brings two things corresponding to that, fish and birds. On day three dry land and vegetation appears and on day six land creatures are created. The table below breaks it down.

Day	Forming	Day	Filling
One	Light Separated From Darkness	Four	Luminaries (sun and moon)
Two	Sky Separated From Waters Below	Five	Birds and Fish
Three	Dry Ground Separated From Water	Six	Land Animals

Rather than reading it as a scientific description of reality, some exegetes prefer to view the account as suggesting the form and function of the world, and also the order and substance of everything originate with God. The account describes something formless

and void turning into an ordered world that is inhabited. I don't think this pattern is perfect as it seems plants are created on day three but the split generally works and the pattern certainly did not come about by chance. There are good reasons for seeing the account as being as much interested in function as material origins. As an example, God is described as separating light and darkness but if we view these as material objects, this becomes troubling. Croutons and tomatoes on a salad can be separated. Light and darkness cannot coexist and be separated. What does that even mean? One is generally understood as the **absence** of the other. In the account, light is called "day" and darkness is called "night." But both day and night are *periods of time*. The creation of light in Genesis is not about photons or electromagnetic radiation then, it is not about God nonsensically separating light from darkness, but about God creating time. I think Walton is convincing that "on day one God created the basis for time; day two the basis for weather; and day three the basis for food. These three great functions—time, weather and food—are the foundation of life." [The Lost World of Genesis 1] Note that the firmament or solid slab in the sky created on day two functions to control and regulate the waters above (e.g. rain) and is essential to controlling our weather.

I wouldn't go as far as Walton and suggest the account has nothing to do with material origins, but I would say he has certainly demonstrated it is very much interested in form and function. Since we are far more interested in material origins than Genesis 1, we need to do a bit of "unlearning" when we approach the narrative if we want to fully appreciate what it teaches. While day two may be about weather, it is difficult for me to not see it as *also* incorrectly describing the material creation of a solid slab in the sky. Even on day one, it is hard for me to understand ancient audiences as not thinking something dark turned into something light even if it intends to describe the creation of time. I think Walton's interpretation, which sees the account **solely** from a functional perspective is incorrect. The Biblical account in total is not describing God as **only** molding pre-existing material, I would say it also describes Him as the creator of things. The trees certainly grew did they not? I see efficient causation written all over the narrative. If God does not create things then I am not sure how the forming/filling distinction holds since there would be no *filling* whatsoever. It would be six days of forming. Bill Arnold writes:

"To the question whether God used preexistent material to create the universe or rather he created it "out of nothing" (the early Jewish-Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, first explicitly occurring in 2 Macc 7:28; and see Rom 4:17; Heb 11:3), it must be admitted that Gen 1 neither precludes nor defends the possibility, and we must look elsewhere for data to decide the issue. However, such a concept is not false to the intent of Gen 1. Indeed, had we an opportunity to pose the question to

the author of this text, we may assume with Westermann and others that he would “certainly have decided in favor of creation *ex nihilo*.”

With no introduction and little fanfare, the text announces with utmost simplicity that it was God – and God alone – who created the cosmos. The Semitic merism “the heavens and the earth” (v. 1) emphasizes that God is responsible for all observable cosmic phenomena, the universe, for which there is no separate word in Biblical Hebrew. The use of “heaven” and “earth” in the rest of the account will have a much more restricted meaning, heaven being the domed sky created in vv. 6–7 and earth being the land inhabited by the humans and animals, and created in vv. 9–10.” [New Cambridge Bible Commentary]

I believe Genesis, in its own pre-scientific way, is trying to describe what we would later on come to call creation *ex nihilo*. The forming and filling literary structure of the six days of creation is a construct centered around “three great functions—time, weather and food—are the foundation of life.” I do not see why I would be expected to think such a construct intends to give us an accurate account of material origins in chronological order. Genesis teaches God is responsible for the form and function of the cosmos and its material origins. It teaches these theological truths through pre-scientific ideas and important cultural concepts that we would now deem material falsehoods.

[4] The Account Uses a Pattern of Sevens

Numbers are important in the Bible with *seven* possibly being the most significant of them all. It signifies order and completion and shows up frequently in the Bible. While this is common knowledge, what many don’t know is the pattern of sevens Genesis 1:1-2:3 uses in the original Hebrew (note that verse 2.4a is a transitory phrase). Ben Stanhope writes:

“Most Bible readers are aware that the Old Testament frequently uses the number seven as a symbol for completion and sacred order. However, you may not have noticed before that Genesis 1 has the number seven woven into the structure of creation through literary patterns beyond just its divisions of days. Many important words and phrases in Genesis 1 repetitively turn up in sequences of seven when counted up in the original Hebrew. Jeff Morrow at Seton Hall University summarizes these patterns that have long been marveled at by biblical scholars:

In Hebrew, Gen 1:1 contains seven words; 1:2 has fourteen words (2×7), and “God” occurs thirty-five times (5×7) in the seven-day account. The term “earth” occurs twenty-one times (3×7); “heavens/firmament” twenty-one times (3×7); the phrase “and it was so” appears seven times, as well as the phrase, “God saw it was good.”

The important words “light” and “day” are found seven times in the first natural paragraph, and there are seven references to light in the fourth paragraph. In the section dealing with the creation of animals, the Hebrew word for “living beings” occurs seven times. In the seventh paragraph, which deals with the seventh day, there occur three consecutive sentences that each contains seven words and the phrase “seventh day” in the center. Moreover, the Hebrew words in the seventh paragraph total thirty-five (5×7).”

This list goes on beyond these examples. In fact, Genesis 1 breaks its literary patterns for the sake of contriving these sets of seven. For example, the phrase “it was good” is missing in verses 6-8. Verse 9 omits the formulaic description of its creative act, and verse 20 doesn’t conclude with the phrase, “and it was so” as one would expect. [(Mis)interpreting Genesis]

This is a carefully crafted literary work. Wenham suggests “It seems to imply that poetic demands are at least as important as historical considerations in the composition of this chapter.” [Rethinking Genesis 1-11] I don’t think this goes far enough as the quote above indicates Genesis 1 will break its own literary patterns to include them. Along with the forming and filling seen earlier, the consistent pattern of sevens doesn’t inspire confidence I am reading a fact-literal description of exactly how God created the world. Many scholars believe it is showing the earth is God’s temple. When we date a text to does matter for interpretation as well. The traditions in Genesis are certainly ancient but if its final form occurred during the Exile then this becomes a much-needed message for Isreal as their temple was just destroyed! Likewise, the story of Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden will take on a specific meaning for a displaced Israel during the Babylonian exile. But it is also quite possible Genesis as a whole was largely put together much earlier and that at least some of the material comes from Moses. I mention this only to point out that without knowing exactly when a text was written and by who, we might not be privy to all its nuance and we might want to remain humble in our interpretations.

[5] Mythological Elements in Genesis 1-11

There are several highly anthropomorphic descriptions of God found in the Biblical text, and it seems that when reading the primeval history (Genesis 1-11), several elements strike one as mythical or non-literal. For example, does God resting on day seven seem literal or is it meant to teach us something? Exod. 31:16–17 really elevates this point: “16 Therefore the Israelites shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant. 17 It 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**.

God was **refreshed**. Did God really need to rest? Must we literally believe that our omnipotent creator grew tired after creating things? Did God even rest at all from his creative work? Four things suggest to me this detail is non-literal and God didn't actually rest. First, Jesus said, "My Father has been working until now" (John 5:17). Second, scripture tells us God/Jesus sustains the universe and that "in him all things hold together" (1 Col 1:17). Third, the cosmological argument for God's existence in the tradition of Aristotle (prime mover) and Aquinas (unmoved mover) clearly suggests to me that God is being itself and is the first cause in a hierarchical, vertical or *per se* sense. This essentially is the metaphysical version of what 1 Col 1:17 tells us. If God truly rested, material objects would cease to exist. Fourth, as we will see below, the idea of resting can generally be understood as ruling from His temple, not taking a nap.

In chapter 2, after making Adam and placing him in a garden, God says it is not good for man to be alone and this prompts him to make "every animal of the field and every bird of the air." God's goal is to find a suitable mate for Adam. Karen 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." [Karen Armstrong, *In the Beginning*]

Things do not look pre-planned here and God doesn't always appear to understand what is happening or going on in some strands of thought. We all know what God decided to do next. Eve was created from Adam's side. This entire scene might reflect a subtle agricultural joke or at least is entrenched in the agricultural wisdom of the day. People lived off of what they grew and the ground is ultimately what sustained them. Once kicked from Eden, Adam's problem is partly with the ground ("cursed is the ground because of you") as he turns from a gardener into a farmer. After failing to find a suitable mate for Adam in attempt after attempt with new creations, "God's Yahweh then tries a second way, the way of the gardener, and performs the world's first clone. If you really want a second plant in every way comparable to the first, the best way is to use part of the one you

have, it works the same with humans: like from like!” [Thomas Thompson, *The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel*, p. 84]

There are many elements in Genesis 1-11 leading us to question it as a historical account. The man and the woman do not know good and evil, yet they are given a command they are expected to follow. There is a garden containing not only a tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but also a tree of life which is hard for me not to associate with a similar fountain of youth. Along comes a walking, talking, dragon-like serpent that will lose its legs before the story is done. Where this individual came from, or why he was allowed to tempt Eve, is left unsaid.

Finally, after walking in the garden, calling out to find Adam, and asking what he has done, God expresses concern that the couple might eat from the tree of life "and become like one of us." Naturally, he stations an angel with a flaming sword to stand guard over the garden and tree.

In Genesis 6—unless we adopt a Sethite interpretation—we see genderless angels, beings of pure spirit, presumably lacking genitalia, who become so enamored with and lustful of only the women on Earth (sorry, guys) they leave heaven to assume human form and copulate with them. In the same passage, God now limits mortals to 120 years (remember Adam lived to 930). After repenting that He made humans and grieving in His heart, God sends a flood that destroys all life except for Noah and two of every animal. A 500-plus-year-old masterful engineer builds a gigantic wooden vessel that not only doesn't buckle under its own weight but withstands being tossed around during the massive waves during a global deluge. One naturally wonders why a 500 year old man only has three children or why Noah, who found favor with the Lord, was not being fruitful and multiplying before he turned 500 (Gen 5:32). One wonders how the penguins got there, how they got home, and what the lions and other carnivores were expected to eat afterward.

These sorts of problems lead to the humorous meme on the right that shows an extremely obese



lion standing outside Noah's Ark complaining about a lousy cruise where it rained every day but satisfied by the wonderful food selection. Of course, the lion wouldn't even be the apex predator granted many Christians believe there were dinosaurs on the ark. They must have been babies. God put them into a slumber. God fed them manna from heaven afterwards. He transported the animals to and from the ark. And just like that, one miraculous flood turns into ten-thousand *ad hoc* miracles needed to sustain it.

After the flood waters abate, Noah honors God with a sacrifice and He is pleased by the pleasant aroma of roasting animal flesh and promises never to do what He just did again. Did God unjustly drown all the humans and animals? If God justly drowned all these sinful humans, why did He promise never to do what is “just” again? For those who subscribe to a local flood, this promise also doesn’t make sense; there have certainly been massive floods throughout history that may have taken more lives than a localized Genesis flood (e.g., the 1931 Yangtze River flood in China). The necessity of an ark and two of each animal also makes little sense in a localized flood. Repopulation is hardly necessary (two of each animal?) and migration would certainly spare the need for a boat. You can rationalize these away but that does exegetical violence to the narrative. The boat is needed because there is no dry ground and two (or seven) of each animal were needed to repopulate the world since the rest died.

God then tells the survivors that animals will now view humans with "fear and dread" (something new) and ends vegetarianism, granting them permission to eat meat. Just as he gave them the plants before, now every moving thing that lives is a source of food. Changes in the relationship between humans and animals, the cursing of the ground, changes to pains in child-baring, limiting human ages, and so on—these are all large-scale shifts in the very way the world works.

I am not saying explanations are impossible for some of these things. God could have known exactly where Adam was and still asked questions in a pastoral or fatherly role. The walking, talking, dragon-like serpent could have been possessed by Satan as the book of Revelation suggests. The difficulty lies in the sheer number of apparent mythological elements in the text and highly anthropomorphic conceptions of God in such close proximity. **The density of them in this section of the Bible is overwhelming.** Not to mention, punishing snakes (do modern snakes even know?) because the devil possessed one seems far-fetched. The punishment for Adam and Eve—a couple who did not yet know good and evil—also seems overdone in a literalistic formulation. It is clear to me that there are extremely strong reasons not to view the primeval history in Genesis as an account of exactly what happened in the past and this certainly includes Genesis 1.

I admit I can be accused of a bit of anachronism here, but I think the two creation accounts may serve as a mirror for our understanding of God. Genesis 1 presents an all-powerful and transcendent God, a maximal being well beyond our reach. Yet Genesis 2 depicts an immanent God, one who is intimately accessible and reachable by us. The two creation accounts starting off the Bible wonderfully encapsulate how we view God as Christians. From a metaphysical perspective I would say God has both intrinsic and essential properties but also extrinsic and relational properties. We see Biblical authors engaged in

both of these understandings of God throughout the Bible but I digress. With a host of preliminary questions out of the way, we can finally take a deeper look at what I feel Genesis 1 is all about.

What is Genesis 1 teaching us?

1) Genesis 1 is Primarily about God

Derek Kidner writes:

“The main point of Genesis 1 is about God. It is no accident that God is the subject of the first sentence of the Bible, for this word dominates the whole chapter and catches the eye at every point of the page: it is used some thirty-five times in as many verses of the story. The passage, indeed the Book, is about him first of all; to read it with any other primary interest (which is all too possible) is to misread it.”
[*Genesis and Introduction and Commentary*]

2) God is Our Creator

This was addressed above where we talked about forming and filling as the overall framework of the first creation story. I believe Genesis 1 clearly teaches the form and function of the cosmos is due to God alone. I disagree with Walton and do believe the text attributes material creation to God as well. In other words, the account teaches that God is the creator of the heavens and the earth. This is a merism for everything.

3) An etiology for the Sabbath

If nothing else, Genesis is a clear etiology for the sabbath. It considers it so important God’s creative work is cast in the framework of a seven-day week with one day of rest. I am not going to argue what this does or doesn’t mean for Christians today, only state that Genesis 1-2:3 considers the sabbath so important, it ties it into the framework used to express how God created the world. This is repeated in Exodus and keeping the Sabbath is a part of the ten commandments:

Exodus 20:8-11: 8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. 9 For six days you shall labour and do all your work. 10 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. **11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.**

It is undeniable that a central teaching of the first creation account is the sanctity and importance of maintaining the sabbath. Even God “rested” on the Sabbath. This is one of the reasons Christians arguing over the meaning of the word “yom” might be missing the forest for the trees. Genesis is interested in other things and even though Jesus informs us the sabbath was made for man, in the first creation account, humans are not the climax of the story. The sabbath is:

“While the creation of man is dramatic, it is not the climax of the account of creation in Genesis 1. All things culminate on the seventh day, the Sabbath: the day of divine “rest”, the fundamental day of worship in Israel’s later liturgical calendar. This suggests all creation was ordered to the divine rest and worship of the Sabbath.”
[John Bergma, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The Old Testament*]

4) The Cosmos is God’s temple

It was also shown above that there is a very deliberate pattern of sevens all throughout Genesis 1:2-3. These signify perfection or completion and are often believed to demonstrate the account describes creation as God’s temple. Walton tells us:

“The role of the temple in the ancient world is not primarily a place for people to gather in worship like modern churches. It is a place for the deity—sacred space. It is his home, but more importantly his headquarters—the control room. When the deity rests in the temple it means that he is taking command, that he is mounting to his throne to assume his rightful place and his proper role. In ancient Near Eastern literature this concept appears early and often.” [The Lost World of Genesis 1]

It was noted earlier that without understanding the cultural allusions or context of the account, we would miss many important features of the narrative; this is true with Genesis 1 describing God as creating Himself a cosmic temple to dwell in. In other myths, creation is ended with a temple the gods live in or rule from. This helps explain why God “rested.” It is clear to virtually any Christian that God does not need to rest, refresh or improve his stamina. Both Isaiah 66 and Psalm 132:7-8 make the temple connection for us and consider the cosmos the resting place of God. In the ancient near east, this would make it His temple. Middleton has written the following about Isaiah 66:

“In the Old Testament, perhaps the most important text for our purposes is the oracle recorded in Isaiah 66:1– 2. Attributed by many scholars to Third Isaiah, this oracle calls into question the postexilic attempts of pious Jews to rebuild the Jerusalem temple (which had been destroyed by the Babylonians):

‘Thus says YHWH: Heaven is my throne and earth is my footstool. Where could you build a house for me? What place could serve as my dwelling? All this was made by my hand, And thus it all came into being —declares YHWH.’

The text does not say that God has no need for a temple, merely no need for a humanly constructed one, since God has already (by his own “hand”) built a cosmic sanctuary, and that should be sufficient. And this sanctuary in which God dwells is also portrayed as God’s palace, from which God reigns— hence the language of throne and footstool. The cosmic temple, in other words, is clearly equivalent to God’s kingdom.” [J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image*]

5) God Has always been In Power

Sometimes what an account does not narrate is just as important as what it does narrate. Genesis 1 lacks the conflict mythology that we find in many other creation myths from the time. God appears creating things. Who is this God? How did He come to power? Who gave him the authority to create? These are questions some ancient readers would naturally wonder. We have to remember that polytheism was the norm in antiquity and even before Judaism became largely monotheistic, it could aptly be described as a monolatry. A survey of some well-known mythology from the region is illustrative:

The **Enuma Elish** is an ancient creation epic that attempted to establish Marduk as the chief Babylonian god. Before any other gods were formed, the primordial waters Apsu (sweet sea) and Tiamat (salt sea) comingled together. They create the younger gods but war develops with them and Apsu is slain. The younger gods fear the older goddess Tiamat and they choose eventually Marduk to battle her. He defeats and kills Tiamat who is personified with the sea. After the battle she is split into two and he makes the sky with her and other parts of creation with different body parts. Subsequently, the creation of humans occurs from the blood of Tiamat’s champion and consort Qingu. This Babylonian work was popular enough to be poached by an Assyrian editor that changed the details to honor the God Ashur in place of Marduk.

We also have **Anzu**, which Ballentine writes, “relates Ninurta’s victory over Anzu, a bird-like composite figure who stole the Tablet of Destinies (šimātu) from Enlil. After several other deities refuse to challenge Anzu, Ninurta is chosen to fight him. As a reward for his victory the gods grant him kingship. This story survives in two versions, an Old Babylonian version (ca. 1850–1500 BCe) and a Standard Babylonian version (ca. 1500–600 BCe).” [Debra Scoggins Ballentine, *The Conflict Myth and the Biblical Tradition*] A listing of mythical foes Ninurta has defeated appear in his exploits (dragon, mermaid, Gypsum et al).

The Ugaritic **Ba’lu Cycle** features the Canaanite god Ba’al Hadad being repeatedly challenged by other characters and succeeding over and against them. In the first part he overcomes Yam, the Canaanite god of the sea, and his grand plan to become the most

powerful of all. Eventually he gains dominion but after he dies a successor must be chosen and something interesting happens. Ballentine (ibib) writes:

“’Ilu tells ’Aṭiratu to choose one of her sons for ’Ilu to make king (KTU 1.6 I 43–46). She chooses Yd’-ylḥn, but ’Ilu objects that he is too weak to match Ba’lu’s physical capabilities (KTU 1.6 I 50–52). ’Aṭiratu then chooses ’Aṭtaru, who ascends to Ba’lu’s throne, but, “His feet do not reach the footstool, his head does not reach its top.” ’Aṭtaru admits that he can-not be king on Mount Ṣapanu, so he descends from Ba’lu’s throne, but still reigns over the earth (KTU 1.6 I 53–65). These alternative kings pale in comparison to Ba’lu and are unable to serve as adequate substitutes. This emphasizes Ba’lu’s “rightful” position as king. Thematically, the feature of characterizing a series of alternative kings as inadequate when compared to Ba’lu is parallel to the series of divine warriors who are inadequate in comparison to Ninurta or Marduk (Anzu SB I 89–157; EE III, 111–112). By emphasizing the relative lack among even the best of potential alternatives, the narrative asserts that Ba’lu’s kingship is legitimate.”

Surrounding creation myths tend to depict bickering and warring gods battling for supremacy. It's hard to tell who is really in charge. But not when we read Genesis 1 which plainly tells us God has no rivals, no prior lineage and there is a monopoly on power. All of these things are deemed impossible by the way creation unfolds in the account. Unlike surrounding creation narratives, there is no conflict mythology in Genesis because the author is telling us God cannot gain what he never lacked and there has never been a challenger worthy of Him. A rise in power is not possible for one who has never not been in power. Bill Arnold writes of Genesis 1:

“. . . we have overemphasized the similarities between Gen 1 and the other ancient cosmogonies without fully appreciating the differences. This text soars above them in such a way as to deny implicitly any possibility of the theologies expressed in the Egyptian or Mesopotamian accounts. If we consider it an ideological polemic, we must admit it is not specifically so and only indirectly. It contains no theomachy, or cosmic conflict among the gods, or victory enthronement motif. Both are excluded by “in the beginning when God created . . . ”! Israel’s God has no rivals. There can be no struggle with forces opposed to his actions or corresponding to his power. There can be no victory enthronement motif because God’s victory was never in doubt; rather, God has never not been enthroned. There can be no enthronement portrait here because God has not become sovereign; he has simply never been less than sovereign.” [*New Cambridge Bible Commentary on Genesis*]

Karen Armstrong writes:

“. . . the omnipotent, transcendent, and benevolent God of classical theism. The world that he created has pattern and meaning. It is also hierarchically arranged, with God at the apex of the pyramid and human beings as his deputies on earth . . .

Yet many of P's first readers would have found the first chapter of Genesis rather a shock. In the ancient Near East, this vision of the creation was radically new. God appears in the very first sentence without any introduction. P uses the formal divine title "Elohim," a term that sums up everything that the divine can mean for humanity. In a world where there were many deities, a reader would be likely to ask, "Which god are we talking about?" or "What is Elohim?" Most of the Near Eastern deities had parents and complex biographies that distinguished them from one another, but P introduces his Elohim without telling us anything about his origins or past history in primordial time. The pagan world found the timeless world of the gods a source of inspiration and spirituality. Not so P, who ignores God's prior existence. As far as he is concerned, his God's first significant act is to create the universe. Again, the very notion of a wholly omnipotent deity was a new departure. All gods in the Near East had to contend with other divine rivals. None had a monopoly of power." [In the Beginning]

Knight and Venema write:

McKnight and Venema describe Genesis similarly, "Most notable perhaps about the Bible's presentation is that the God of Genesis is not like the gods of the Mesopotamian accounts. In fact, the God of the Bible is the one and only God, as stated in Deuteronomy 6:4–9, which will become the Jewish creed, the Shema. There are many gods in the Mesopotamian stories: Marduk, Tiamat, Enlil, and others. The Bible's own most important parallel to Genesis 1 is Isaiah 40–48, because what is implicit in Genesis is explicit in Isaiah: the God of Israel is all-powerful, while the gods of the pagans, especially the Babylonians, are powerless and, not to put too fine a point on it, nonexistent. Genesis 1, then, is a claim that "our God is the one and only true God." . . . There is a notable difference not only regarding God but also regarding creation itself. The gods go back and forth and get in tangles with one another while working the earth. Those deities are irritable, worn down by working, in need of help—and not entirely able to resolve their own problem without permission from the higher-up gods, who seem at the same time to be at odds with themselves. No one seems to be totally in control. The God of Genesis 1–2 is different: this God, like Michelangelo's creator God with the all-powerful, creative finger, controls the whole lot. God creates by a word deriving from God's own sovereign choice. The fundamental event of Genesis 1 is God saying, "Let there be," and there is. The waters may be primal chaos, but the waters are easily and simply subdued by God's own command. The swirl of the *tohu va-bohu*, translated "formless and empty," is untangled into orchestrated order, function, and purpose. This God is transcendent and exceedingly powerful, exalted above creation and responsible for all of creation; this God, then, is not part of the created order but outside and over the created order. All of the gods of the ancient Near East are eliminated in the theology of Genesis 1, and one supreme God, YHWH, is left standing." [Adam and the Genome]

To be sure, parts of Genesis 1 certainly find parallels in other ancient mythology. The simplicity and lack of conflict mythology in Genesis is telling, however. Without understanding the ancient world and surrounding mythology it is embedded in, we would miss all of this completely.

6) The Great Sea Monsters are Just Fish to God

As we have just seen, Genesis 1 serves as a sort of polemic against surrounding mythology. The account doesn't read like a direct response to any specific narrative but it certainly is aware of many cultural themes and mythological views that it turns on their head. In Genesis 1:21 God creates the great sea monsters (leviathan). Put this story in its ancient context. Walton writes:

“In the ancient world the cosmic seas were populated with creatures that operated against the ordered system. Whether antithesis or enemy, they were viewed as threats to order, as they inhabited the region that was itself outside of the ordered system. This is the very reason why the author of Genesis would single them out for comment. Since there is no cosmic warfare or conquest in Genesis as is sometimes part of the ancient Near Eastern picture, the text indicates that these creatures are simply part of the ordered system, not enemies that had to be defeated and kept in check. In Genesis these creatures are fully under God's control.”

Accounts of battles with sea creatures are quite popular in the ancient near east and while conflict mythology does surface in some parts of the Bible it is not usually in the context of creation. Middleton writes:

“This motif of the conquest of watery enemies is rarely, however, used in Scripture to denote God's creation of the world. More usually, the mythological waters allude either to historical enemies whom God has vanquished or will vanquish (as in Psalm 18: 15-17 [MT 18 : 16-18]; 65:7 [MT 65:8]; 144:7; Isaiah 17:12-13) or to the Red Sea through which the Israelites passed at the exodus (as in Psalm 77: 16-20 [MT 77:17-21]; 106:9; 114:3, 5; Isaiah 51:10; Habakkuk 3:8). Indeed, the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15) contains an interesting twist on this motif, in that God does not battle the waters at all, but uses them as his instrument against a historical opponent, the Egyptian army led by pharaoh.

. . . Besides battling the sea/waters in some texts, God is also depicted in the Old Testament as engaged in conflict with various beasts or monsters, usually associated with water, some with specific names such as Leviathan or Rahab. Thus we find Isaiah 27: 1 describing Leviathan . . . as a serpent that God will one day vanquish. This beast is mentioned (not always in the context of a combat myth) also in Psalm 74:14; 104:26; Job 3:8; 41 :1-34 (MT 40:25-4 1:26) and is usually understood by biblical scholars as the Hebrew version of the seven-headed water serpent known from the Baal myths as *ltn* . . .”

Job 41 centers on the leviathan as God uses the well-known creature to asks Job a series of questions. I suggest reading the entire chapter but here are a few highlights of things God speaks to Job:

- Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook or press down its tongue with a cord?
- Will you play with it as with a bird or put it on a leash for your young women?
- Who can stand before it? Who can confront it and be safe?
—under the whole heaven, who?
- From its mouth go flaming torches; sparks of fire leap out.
- When it raises itself up the gods are afraid; at the crashing they are beside themselves.

Ballentine writes,

“The rhetorical force of boasting about Leviathan’s greatness, however, is to draw out the implications of Yahweh taming and binding this tremendous creature. Leviathan frightens the gods, disturbs Sea/Deep, and has no equal on earth, yet Yahweh can make him his plaything and servant.”

This is the tact taken by Genesis 1 which simply describes the great sea monsters as big fish (Genesis 1:21)--another part of God's good creation and completely under his control.

Derek Kidner writes:

“The sea monsters (tannînîm) (RV, RSV; whales, AV) are specially noteworthy, since to the Canaanites this was an ominous word, standing for the powers of chaos confronting Baal in the beginning. Here they are just magnificent creatures (like Leviathan in Ps. 104:26; Job 41), enjoying God’s blessing with the rest (22). Although in some scriptures these names will symbolize God’s enemies (e.g. Isa. 27:1), taunted in the very terms in which Baal exults over them, no doubt is left by this chapter that the most fearsome of creatures were from God’s good hand. There may be rebels in his kingdom, but no rivals. To the Canaanites, however, Baal’s adversaries were gods like himself, or demons to be propitiated; and to the Babylonians the chaos-monster Tiamat pre-existed the gods.”

7) All Humans Are Made in God’s Image

In the ancient near east, those with power, rulers and kings were considered to be created in God’s image. Genesis is quite subversive and turns this ideology on its head. All humans are created in God’s image and are deemed stewards or rulers over creation. J Richard Middleton writes:

“But whereas power in the Babylonian and Assyrian empires was concentrated in the hands of a few, power in Genesis 1 is diffused or shared. No longer is the image of God or its associated royal language ("rule" or "subdue") applied to only some privileged elite. Rather, all human beings, male and female, are created as God's royal stewards in the world, entrusted with the privileged task of ruling on God's behalf (1 :26-28). The democratization of the imago Dei in Genesis 1 thus constitutes an implicit delegitimation of the entire ruling and priestly structure of Mesopotamian society (and especially the absolute power of the king). In the Genesis vision, it is ordinary humans (and not some elite class) who are understood to be significant historical actors in the arena of earthly life.”

The purpose humans serve is also very different in the Biblical story of creation. Humans were not created to do manual labor after the lesser gods rebelled against the higher gods over arduous work. Humans were not made to feed the gods. We are not their field laborers. In fact, vegetation was made for us. We are not an afterthought. We have a much higher station in Genesis. We are to rule creation in God's stead (“subdue it and have dominion”). Even in the second account, Adam and Eve were tasked with tending a garden or sacred space specially created for them by God.

8) Astral Deities are Just Lamps to God

Genesis ascribes the creation of the luminaries to God on day four. But think about what these heavenly bodies represented in antiquity. What does this say about the astral deities many people worshipped at the time? Ra is well known as the supreme Egyptian deity and sun god. Genesis 1 doesn't even use the names for the sun and moon because these the Hebrew words for them were associated with pagan deities. It refers them as a “greater light” and “lesser light.” These powerful deities some worshipped are reduced to lamp that lights up God's sky and keep track of time and demarcated the season. Genesis is a strong statement of God's sovereignty in a polytheistic world.

Conclusion

I would no more attempt to align Genesis 1 with modern science than I would demand a theological treatise from a telescope. Requiring from scripture something it never intended to provide will inevitably yield disappointing results. When read in its ancient context as an accommodated text -- allowed to speak with its own voice and on its own terms -- a scientifically problematic work is transformed into a theological masterpiece. We do ourselves a tremendous disservice when we reduce Genesis 1 to a chronological ledger of material origins; we become like my students missing the 'James Bond' reference because we do not understand its cultural allusions. Without this ancient background, interpreting the first creation story is like eating a meal without tastebuds—we miss all the flavor. Genesis 1 teaches us several profound truths: God is absolutely powerful, God is the creator of the heavens and the earth, the sabbath is sacred and holy, and every human possesses intrinsic value and dignity as an image-bearer of God.