

Interpreting the Bible's Creation Narratives

Tim Mackie, Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible and Semitic languages from University of Wisconsin-Madison and Teaching Pastor at Blackhawk Church.

I. Scripture, communication, language and culture

- a. The Bible is an ancient text, but we don't treat it like one.
- b. Any act of communication only has meaning within a particular language and historical/cultural context.

Effective communication requires a body of agreed-upon words, terms, and ideas, a common ground of understanding. For the speaker this often requires accommodation to the audience by using words and ideas they will understand. For the audience, if they are not native to the language and cultural matrix of the speaker, this means reaching common ground may require seeking out additional information or explanation. In other words, the audience has to adapt to a new and unfamiliar culture. John Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Baker Books, 2006), 19-20.

- c. Reading the Bible is a cross-cultural experience: We have to step into a different cultural worldview to understand it.
 - i. This determines *the meaning of words*:
 1. "earth" in Genesis 1:1 means "land" not "globe"
 2. the *raqia* in Genesis 1:6 means "solid dome above the keeps the rain waters elevated"
 3. cosmic geography in the Bible = 3-tiered universe
 - ii. This determines *the types of literature* (= "genre") the biblical authors chose.

The Bible belonged to the ancient world in which it was produced. It was not an abstract, otherworldly book, dropped down out of heaven. It was connected to and therefore spoke to people in that ancient culture. The encultured qualities of the Bible, therefore, are not extra elements we can discard to get the real point, the timeless truths. Rather, precisely because Christianity is a historical religion, God's word reflects the various historical moments in which it was written. As we learn more about this history, we should gladly address the implications of that history for how we view the Bible and what we should expect to hear from it. Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Baker Books, 2005), 17-18

The framers of creation in the Bible inherited a treasure trove of venerable traditions from their cultural neighbors. Instead of creating their accounts ex nihilo, the composers of Scripture developed their traditions in dialogue with some of the great religious traditions of the surrounding cultures, particularly those originating from Mesopotamia and Egypt, as well as those of their more immediate Canaanite neighbors. William Brown, *Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

- d. Key Point: The Bible's creation narratives...
 - ... are not in dialogue with modern scientific ideas about world origins.
 - ... are in dialogue with Egyptian, Babylonian, and Canaanite cosmologies.
- e. In that dialogue Genesis 1-3 shows many *similarities* with other Ancient Near Eastern cosmologies, but also many *key differences*.

- f. What is an “Ancient Near Eastern Cosmology”? --
 - i. These types of narratives do not have as their primary purpose to give a scientific account of world origins.
 - ii. They *do* have as their primary purpose to address basic worldview issues: who are we, where are we, why are we here, who are the gods?

II. A Thesis Statement:

The early chapters of Genesis accurately present two accounts of cosmic and human origins in the language and ideas of the ancient Hebrews. These texts should not be removed from their ancient context and read as if they speak literally about the universe or humans in 21st century scientific terms. They speak in terms of an Ancient Near Eastern perception of the world, and should be interpreted within that setting. When we discern the meaning of the texts in their ancient context, we find that they constitute a worldview statement about God and his relationship to the world, and about humans and their relation to God and the world. This basic worldview statement transcends its ancient cultural setting, and commands the attention of God’s people in all places and all times.

Adapted from Richard Carlson and Tremper Longman, *Science, Creation, and the Bible. Reconciling Rival Theories of World Origins* (InterVarsity Press, 2010).

III. Interpreting Genesis 1-3 as Ancient Israelite Cosmology

- a. Genesis 1:1-3 — Order out of chaos
 - “beginning” (*reshit*) = “an unspecified period of time in the past”
 - “heavens and earth” (*shamayim vaeretz*) = sky and land
 - “formless and void” (*tohu vavohu*) = ‘wild and waste’; these are words that refer to a desolate, desert wasteland (used in Deuteronomy 32:10)
 - “darkness, waters” = chaos, disorder
 - “light” = period of daytime, not “photon”
- b. Genesis 1:1-3 and ancient *Theomachy* (‘battle of the gods’)
 - i. A common motif in Babylonian (*Enuma Elish*) and Canaanite (*Baal Epic*) cosmologies is that creation is the result of a great battle of the gods:
 1. Babylon: Marduk vs. Tiamat (‘the Sea’)
 2. Canaan: Baal vs. Yam (‘the Sea’)
 - ii. Genesis 1:1-3 is a response to ancient cosmological *theomachy*:
 1. Israel’s God has no rivals, and simply speaks reality into being.
 2. Israel’s God is depicted as a royal artist, not a bloodthirsty warlord.
 - iii. We have evidence that ancient Israelites elsewhere adopted the *theomachy* motif to describe Yahweh’s power over creation
 - **Psalm 74:12-17** ¹²Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the earth. ¹³You divided the sea [*yam*] by your might; you broke the heads of the dragons in the

waters. ¹⁴You **crushed the heads of Leviathan**; you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. ¹⁵You cut openings for springs and torrents; you dried up ever-flowing streams. ¹⁶Yours is the day, yours also the night; you established the luminaries and the sun. ¹⁷You have fixed all the boundaries of the earth; you made summer and winter.

- **Isaiah 27:1** On that day the LORD with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the **fleeing serpent**, Leviathan the **twisting serpent**, and **he will kill the dragon** that is in the sea.

c. The seven days of Genesis 1

- i. The debate over the word 'day' is motivated by an assumption called "Concordism" — that there must be agreement between the narrative of Genesis 1 and the account of world origins offered by science. That assumption violates the basic principles of human communication.
- ii. In its ancient context, the seven day structure communicated to the Israelite readers that *the world is a cosmic temple from which the Creator rules over all creation*.
- iii. The seven days are part of a literary-artistic design: God brings order and symmetry out of chaos (vv.1-2).

Cosmic Domains	Inhabitants
1. Time (vv. 3-5)	4. Luminaries (vv. 14-19)
2. Dome Ceiling (vv. 6-8) - Sky (vv. 6-7a) - Seas (v. 7b)	5. Inhabitants (vv.20-23) - Fish in the Seas - Birds in the Sky
3. Dry Land (vv. 9-10) Vegetation (vv. 11-12)	6. Land Animals (vv. 24-25) Humans (vv. 26-31)
7. God's "Rest" = 'beginning to rule'	

- iv. Seven days was the duration of temple inauguration ceremonies in ancient Israel and Canaan, and Israel's Sabbath cycle commemorated that story.

*The seven days are not given as the period of time over which the material cosmos came into existence, but the period of time devoted to the inauguration of the cosmic temple. It is this inauguration and entrance of the presence of God to take up his rest that creates the temple. If the seven days refer to a cosmic temple inauguration, then Genesis 1 as a whole has nothing to contribute to the discussion of the age of the earth. This is not a conclusion designed to accommodate science— it was drawn from an analysis and interpretation of Genesis in its ancient environment. The point is not that the biblical text therefore supports the view of an old earth, but simply that there is no biblical position on the age of the earth. Viewing Genesis 1 in this way does not suggest or imply that God was uninvolved in the material origins of the universe— it only contends that Genesis 1 is not that story. John Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis 1: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (InterVarsity Press, 2009), 92, 95-96.*

d. Human origins in Genesis 1 and 2

- Each chapter offers a distinct statement about the nature and purpose of humanity. Neither chapter aims to offer a literal, scientifically oriented account of human origins.

i. The relationship of Genesis 1 and 2: Different chronological schemes
 Genesis 1 - seven day framework: land → plants → animals → humanity
 Genesis 2 - one day framework: man → plants → animals → woman

ii. Humanity in Genesis 1 (1:26-28)

1. Made on 6th day = pinnacle of creation
2. *Adam* is a title which includes male and female (1:27)
3. Made in the *image of God* = royal status.

*It is the claim of Genesis 1 that God granted a royal-priestly identity as imago Dei to all humanity. 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 applied only to a privileged elite. Rather, all human beings, male and female, are created as God's royal stewards, entrusted with the privileged task of ruling on God's behalf. This democratizing of the imago Dei in Genesis 1 constitutes an implicit critique of the entire royal and priestly structure of ancient Mesopotamian society. J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Brazos Press, 2005), 204.*

iii. Humanity in Genesis 2 (2:7, 15-25)

1. Made on the same 'day' as all plants and creatures.
2. *Adam* is a title and name of a single male character.
3. "formed" from dirt (2:7) and animated with the divine breath, a common ancient creation motif.
 - a. In Babylonian accounts of human origins, humans are made from the dirt to be slaves for the gods.
 - b. In the Israelite account humans are made from dirt and called to a dignified vocation of tending the garden.

e. The Bible and Human origins: The Main Views:

- i. *The Archetypal View*: A&E are literary and archetypal symbols for all humanity. The story is about every human's experience of temptation and moral failure.
- ii. *The Literal View*: A&E were a real, historical couple. The story explains how sin and spiritual death entered into the world.
- iii. *The Metaphorical View*: The story describes a real event about the moral failure of the earliest humans, but it does so in a non-literal way, with motifs and imagery common to ancient Israelite culture.
 1. A&E represent a large group of the first *homo sapiens* (this view is known as *polygenism*)

2. A&E were the first *homo sapiens* to have evolved from earlier homonids (this view is known as *monogenism*; BTW: this was C.S. Lewis' view, see *The Problem of Pain*, ch.5).

Resources for the Study of Genesis Narratives

- William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and Ecological Wonder* (2010).
- Richard F. Carlson and Tremper Longman III, *Science, Creation, and the Bible: Reconciling Rival Theories of Origins* (2010).
- J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (2005).
- John Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (2009).
- John Walton, *Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary* (2001).

Resources for Ancient Near Eastern Background

- John Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (2006)
- Kenton L. Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background* (2005).

Resources for the Discussion of Adam and Eve, Human Evolution, and Christian Theology **[all online essays free to download]**

- Timothy Keller, "Creation, Evolution, and Christian Laypeople."
www.biologos.org/uploads/projects/Keller_white_paper.pdf
- Daniel C. Harlow, "After Adam: Reading Genesis in an Age of Evolutionary Science"
www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2010/PSCF9-10Harlow.pdf
- John R. Schneider, "Recent Genetic Science and Christian Theology on Human Origins"
www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2010/PSCF9-10Schneider.pdf
- C. John Collins, "Adam and Eve as Historical People, and Why It Matters."
www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2010/PSCF9-10Collins.pdf