

# The Literary Genre of the Creation Narrative in Genesis 1

by  
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## I. WHAT IS A LITERARY GENRE AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT WHEN WE READ GENESIS 1?

*Genre* is the literary term for a type or kind of writing. A literary approach to understanding the Bible is based on an awareness that the literature itself is a genre. The Bible is an anthology of separate works, it contains a mixture of genres. Leland Ryken lists several different kinds of genre found in the Bible.

The main *literary* genres in the Bible are narrative or story, poetry (especially lyric poetry), proverb, and visionary writing (including both prophesy and apocalypse). Literary genres that appear less often include satire, epic, tragedy, epithalamion (wedding poem), elegy (funeral poem), drama, and encomium ( a work that praises a quality or character type).<sup>1</sup>

Each genre has its distinctive features and its own “rules” or principles of operation. As readers, we need to approach passages in the Bible with the right set of expectations. Our awareness of genre programs our encounter with a biblical text, telling us what to look for and how to interpret what we see.

Today we value straight factual writing, especially when we are talking about things that are scientific. We want to get right to the point. We want to know all about a particular event or phenomena. But as we read Genesis 1 we can see that the writer has a different value. It is not his concern to answer most of the questions about science that we bring to the text. If we bring to the Genesis text our value of scientific straight factual writing, and ask of the text questions that the author was not intending to answer, we will get the wrong answers. If we ask the wrong questions we will get the wrong answers.

## II. A BRIEF DISCUSSION OF THE LITERARY GENRE OF GENESIS 1

### *Some Initial Literary Observations of the Text*

1. Notice how brief the account is. What questions does this raise?
2. Notice the words that repeat. “Said,” “separated”, “called,” “saw,” “good.”
3. Notice the creation follows a pattern of *announcement, commandment, separation, report, naming, evaluation, and chronological framework.*

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<sup>1</sup>Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight, a Literary Introduction to the Bible*, Baker Book House, p. 16.

Each day begins with an *announcement*: “And God said.” Much of the detail of the account is given framed in narration, but God is the main actor. He is the soloist. He is the hero of creation. Each event occurs according to His expressed will and thru the agency of His word.<sup>2</sup>

*Announcement* is followed by *commandment*: “Let there be” (or its equivalent). His word in conjunction with his Spirit is irresistible and creative and so overcomes chaos and emptiness.

His powerful words bring *separation*, dividing day and night, waters and land, fish and birds. Boundaries are important in both creation and social orders. When everything keeps to its allotted place and does not transgress its limits, there is order, not chaos.

The narrator’s subsequent *report*, “And so God made” (or its equivalent), affirms that everything exists by God’s expressed will, purpose, and word. God displays his sovereignty on the first three days in *naming* the elements (“And he called”). *Naming*, and indiction of dominion, reveals God as the supreme ruler.

Of each piece of handiwork, God offers his *evaluation* (“And saw it was good”). Everything, including the bounded darkness and sea, satisfies his purpose. Accompanying the evaluation of the living creatures is God’s “blessing”. Beginning with the fish and birds, God blesses each creature with procreativity.

All of the acts of creation follow a *chronological framework*. God does not create in time, but with time. The week becomes the basic unit of time; six days of work and one of rest. The careful use of numbers throughout the text attests to God’s logical and timely shaping of creation. The structure affirms the consonance and symmetry, the harmony and balance in God’s world.

### *The Determination of the Genre of Genesis 1*

Generally Genesis is slotted into one of four categories: myth, science, history, or theology. A careful textual analysis reveals that firm assignment to any of these categories is problematic.

#### *Is it Myth?*

That question is complicated by the many definitions of the word *myth*. If by the word *myth* one means a story that explains a phenomena and experience, an ideology that explains the cosmos, then, yes, the account is myth. In this sense, myth addresses those metaphysical concerns that cannot be known by science. However, most commonly the word *myth* is understood to

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<sup>2</sup>Many of the insights in this paper are from the unpublished notes of Dr. Bruce Waltke. Zondervan is scheduled to release his commentary on Genesis soon. For a detailed examination of these questions see Bruce Waltke, “The Literary Genre of Genesis 1,” *Crux* 27 (December 1991): 2-10.

represent things that are fanciful and untrue. In this case, the word *myth* does not accurately describe the Genesis account and does an injustice to the integrity of the narrator and undermines sound theology.

### *Is it Science?*

The language of Genesis and the language of science is entirely different. The creation account is formed in everyday language, non-theoretical terminology, rather than mathematics and technical terminology. Genesis is concerned with ultimate cause, who and why, not how, what and when. The intent of the creation account is not to specify the geologic or genetic methods of creation but to definitely establish that creation is a result of the creative acts of God.

When the Psalmist says, “You created me in my mother’s womb” (Ps. 139:13) he is not intending to comment on genetics and sexual reproduction. To suggest that is to distort the text. The Psalmist is commenting on a theological truth, God is the ultimate cause, not a scientific truth of how embryonic development takes place. This is a clear example of why scientific and theological accounts should not be pitted against one another. So in Genesis, the narrator only tells us that God commanded the earth to bring forth life. He does not explain how that came about. That is not his purpose.

### *Is it History?*

Genesis 1 certainly has historical elements. It is factual in the sense that it occurred, and the genealogies which trace the history of Israel back to Adam and Eve speak to the narrator’s concern with historicity. However, Genesis bears little resemblance to modern conceptions of history. It is not straightforward history.

The creation account is unlike any other history. History is generally humanity recounting its experiences. The Genesis 1 account is not a record of human history, since no humans are present for these acts.

Even in modern history, there is a certain amount of tension between the historical referent (the event) and authorial creativity in reporting the event. In the Genesis account there are some clues that may help us see that the narrator uses a great deal of creativity in presenting the data. He feels license to dischronologize the events. Certain “difficulties” in the order of the days seem clearly to represent a dischronologization. On the first day (1:5) God creates the evening and the morning, but he does not create the luminaries to divide them until the fourth day (1:14). Are we really to conclude that the division occurred without the dividers? It seems reasonable to conclude that the writer has presented the events in this way to make a theological point. God is not dependent on the luminaries. The narrator’s concern is not scientific or historical, but theological and is indirectly a polemic against pagan mythologies. We are not the first ones to notice this dischronologization. It has for centuries pointed to a God who is superior to any other created thing.

The metaphorical language is also an indicator that this is unlike any other history. As soon as

we talk about a God in heaven, we are in a realm that can only be represented by earthly figures. The narrator must use metaphor and anthropomorphic language so that the reader can comprehend what he is talking about. When the text says that God said, commanded, and saw, are we to assume that God has vocal cords, lips, and eyes? Obviously this is language that is anthropomorphic, representing the truth that God created. If the descriptions of God are anthropomorphic, might not the days and other aspects be anthropomorphic too? Anthropomorphic language allows us to identify with the creation account.

### *Is it Theological?*

Genesis 1 is theological in that it is concerned with divine matters and with teaching the covenant community important truths about God and his relationship with his world. But the narrator does not present systematic truths about the divine creator; rather he tells us a story about the Creator and his creation. It is a theological literary representation of creation intended to fortify the covenant with God. It represents the world as coming into being through God's proclamation so that the world depends on his will, purpose and presence.<sup>3</sup>

But the narrator does not answer all of our theological questions. He does not choose to explain the origins of what we call the planet earth or evil. Where did the earth come from? Where do surd-evil (physical conditions hostile to physical life) and moral evil (volitional beings hostile to social order) come from? The narrator does not answer these questions. Other scriptures clearly state that only God is eternal - he made everything (e.g. Neh. 9:6; Job 41;11; Ps. 102:25; Heb. 11:3; Rev. 1:8). Here the narrator is only concerned with the relative beginning of creation. He wishes to establish the creative power of God and his relationship to the covenant community.

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<sup>3</sup>For similar views see, Mark Throntveit, "Are the Events in the Genesis Account Set Forth in Chronological Order? No," *The Genesis Debate*, ed. R. Youngblood (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986), 36-55; and D.A. Sterchi, "Does Genesis 1 Provide Chronological Sequence?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39/4 (December, 1996): 529-536.

Perhaps most importantly the narrator establishes what is essential for understanding our destiny and relationship to God. Without revelation man is confused and depreciates himself. Emil Brunner wrote, “The most powerful of all spiritual forces is man’s view of himself, the way in which he understands his nature and his destiny, indeed it is the one force which determines all the others which influence human life.”<sup>4</sup> Our being and function comes from God’s image. As representatives mirroring God and breathing God’s life, we may live in relationship with God and exercise dominion over all the earth. This gives ultimate meaning to the arts and sciences.

### III. HOW DOES GENESIS 1 FIT WITH GENESIS 2?

Genesis 2 is not a rival creation story that contradicts Genesis 1. It makes no attempt to cover the same territory. Genesis 1 could be correctly titled, “The Creation of the Word.” Genesis 2 could be correctly titled “Life in Paradise.” Genesis 2 is a companion story with Genesis 1. They are not different versions of the same story, but different stories. The single focus of Genesis 1 on the role of God as the creator expands to include also God’s role as the one who provides for the human race, who communicates with people, who establishes the conditions of reality for humankind. Even the actions of God are more humanlike, as he *forms* man, *planted* a garden, *took the man and put him in the garden*, *brought* Eve to Adam, and so forth.<sup>5</sup>

### IV. HOW DOES GENESIS 1 FIT WITH OTHER ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN CREATION ACCOUNTS?

Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) literature knows of only four methods of creation: by speech, by action, by sexual activity, or by combat with forces of evil. In the *Enuma Elish*, for example, Marduk, a younger god, slays and separates the water deity and genetrix Tiamat into heaven and earth. In Egypt, Heaven and Earth are the fertile female-male pair Nut and Geb. Nut functions to separate the heavenly ocean from that below.<sup>6</sup>

Against this background Genesis 1 stands out like a diamond in the rough. Israel’s God is the exclusive creator of the heavens and earth. There is an absence of divine beings and combat. The great creatures of the sea (1:21) are not divine monsters, but merely creatures made to thrive in the sea. They are good (1:21). The sun and moon are named by ANE people as deities, but are created only on the fourth day and not even mentioned by name (1:16). Thus the creation narrative in Genesis 1 forms a polemic against the popular creation accounts of the ancient world.

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<sup>4</sup>Emil Brunner, “The Christian Understanding of Man” in *The Christian Understanding of Man*, ed. by T.E. Jessop (London: Allen & Unwin, 1938) 146.

<sup>5</sup>Ryken, 96-97.

<sup>6</sup>Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “bara” in the *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 1:729.