

INTERPRETING GENESIS 1—3 IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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ONE PROBLEM ABOUT INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY IS THAT PEOPLE COME TO IT WITH A PRECONCEIVED IDEA OF WHAT KIND OF LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE THEY WILL BE READING.

Howard Van Till points this out: 'Twentieth-century Western culture seems to me particularly inept at understanding and using figurative or symbolic literature. We are so accustomed to straightforward, matter-of-fact descriptive prose that we expect nearly all writing to be of that form ... scientific writing has made an illegitimate claim of superiority over artistic literature.'¹

This assumption that scientific writing is the only reliable way of expressing truth leads some Christians to insist that Genesis 1—3 must be read as a scientific account of creation. This then makes them reject vast areas of modern science. Ironically, a few atheistic scientists share this 'modernist' stance towards interpreting these chapters and therefore reject these chapters as 'disproved' by modern science.

These views rest on a mishandling of the Hebrew narratives that fails to use standard methods of biblical interpretation which have been well established since the early Christian centuries. The protagonists ignore some basic considerations that should be applied when trying to understand any text. These involve questions such as the following:

- What kind of language is being used?
- What kind of literature is it?
- What is the expected audience?
- What is the purpose of the text?
- What relevant extra-textual knowledge is there?

While these questions are appropriate when seeking to understand any text, they are particularly appropriate with regard to the Bible because they cohere with the biblical doctrine of God. The first three are related to the fact that the God of the Bible is the God of the Incarnation. Christians claim that God has been revealed most fully in a particular person who lived at a particular time in a particular culture. This was the culmination of God's method of self-revelation recorded in the Hebrew Bible, in which God's Word comes to us clothed in the words of particular people, using particular languages and particular forms of literature, all rooted in the history and culture of a particular nation. Hence, the need to ask the first three questions about everything we read in the Bible.

Many literary scholars today consider the fourth question problematic because they reject of the concept of 'authorial intent'. I agree with those scholars who argue that

it is a valid question because I think there are often clues given by such things as the literary genre, the structure of the text, the kind of language used, and so on, which do make it an answerable question.²

The God of the Bible is the God of both creation and revelation. Moreover, humans are made in the image and likeness of God, and are therefore able to understand the truth to be found in the created order. This belief was an important one for the founders of modern science in late medieval Europe.³ In the light of it, we would expect that what we learn by studying the created order will relate in some way to what we learn through the Bible. Indeed, sometimes it will require us to revise our traditional understanding of the Bible. Failure to realise this led the Roman Catholic Church to condemn Copernicanism in the seventeenth century rather than revise the traditional interpretation of a handful of biblical texts, such as, ‘He has established the world; it shall never be moved’ (Ps 93.1, NRSV).

WHAT KIND OF LANGUAGE?

Early Christian scholars did not have the ‘modernist’ bias of today’s ‘creationists’. They read Genesis 1—3 as a literary text, looking for clues in the text itself to tell them what kind of language was being used. In the early fifth century St Augustine of Hippo said, ‘Perhaps Sacred Scripture in its customary style is speaking with the limitations of human language in addressing men of limited understanding.’⁴ With regard to Genesis 1 he comments, ‘The narrative of the inspired writer brings the matter down to the capacity of children.’⁵ John Calvin develops this recognition that God ‘accommodates’ his way of speaking to the understanding of those addressed.⁶ When discussing Genesis 1.6–8 he says, ‘For, to my mind, this is a certain principle, that nothing is here treated of but the visible form of the world. He who would learn astronomy and other recondite arts, let him go elsewhere. Here the Spirit of God would teach all men without exception and therefore ... the history of the creation ... is the book of the unlearned.’

When speaking of the material world the Bible describes things as people see them, using ‘the language of appearance’. So, Calvin had no problem with the statement that ‘God made the two great lights’ (Gen 1.16, ESV). He accepted that if taken literally this is scientifically incorrect because astronomers had shown convincingly that Saturn is bigger than the Moon. We could also say it is scientifically incorrect since it states that the Moon is a self-luminous body like the Sun, whereas it is merely a reflector of light. If intended to be anywhere near scientifically true this verse should say that God created a great light and a great mirror!

WHAT KIND OF LITERATURE?

This, too, is a question that can only be answered by looking for clues in the text itself. Writing in the early third century Origen suggested that Genesis 1—3 is figurative literature: ‘What person of intelligence, I ask, will consider as a reasonable statement that the first and the second and the third day, in which there are said to be both morning and evening, existed without sun and moon and stars, while the first day was even without a heaven? ... Who could be found so silly to believe that God, after the manner of a farmer “planted trees in a paradise eastward of Eden” ... And when God is said to “walk in the paradise in the evening” ... I do not think anyone will doubt that these are figurative expressions which indicate certain mysteries through a semblance of history.’⁷

Down the centuries a number of scholars have concluded that Genesis 1.1—2.4 is

an extended 'figure of speech' in which God is depicted as a worker doing a carefully planned week's work. The earth is brought into being initially in a state described as 'shapeless and empty'. In the first three days, God shapes it through acts of separation, creating empty spaces. In the second three days, God creates things to fill the spaces. The acts on day four correspond to the spaces created on day one, those on day five to the spaces created on day two and those on day six to the spaces created on day three. At the end of each day, God surveys his work and declares it 'a good job'. At the end of day six, he sees that what he has created is 'very good'. He rests on the seventh day. This is not an historical and scientific account of creation from which we can gain answers to our twenty-first century scientific questions. It is a theological account that asserts important theological truths.

WHAT KIND OF AUDIENCE?

Genesis 1—3 was written for ancient Hebrews who worshipped the God of Israel. Scholars differ over the date of the text. The exact date does not matter for our purpose because if, as I shall argue, it interacts with ideas about creation that were around in the ancient Near East, the basic nature of these did not change much in the period between the exodus and the return from exile.⁸ Given this original audience, we ought, at least initially, to read the text through their eyes rather than our twenty-first-century eyes.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE TEXT?

As our knowledge of the religions of the ancient Near East has increased, biblical scholars have come to see the creation story as a piece of theological polemic.⁹ It sets out the Hebrew understanding of creation over against the ideas prevalent in the religions of the peoples among whom the Hebrews lived.

An obvious example of this for the modern reader, aware of the prevalent polytheism of the ancient world, is the story's monotheism. The other stories from the ancient Near East begin with 'theogony', the origin of the gods. One of these gods then brings the cosmos into being, using pre-existing 'matter' of some kind. In the Hebrew story there is only one God, the Creator of all else that exists. It is a 'cosmogony', an account of the origin of the cosmos. God's existence is simply assumed.

Other examples are not so obvious to readers not attuned to the ideas that were prevalent in the ancient Near East. Why are the sun and moon referred to simply as 'lights'? Attentive readers ought to ponder this, since there are perfectly good, common Hebrew words for sun and moon. The answer is that in the Semitic languages the words 'sun' and 'moon' are also the names of gods. The peoples around the Hebrews worshipped the heavenly bodies. The Hebrews were tempted to follow their example (note the prohibitions in, e.g. Deut 4.19; 17.2ff.). Genesis 1.14–19 is an attack on all such worship. The heavenly bodies are simply 'lights' (like big oil lamps!) created by the God of Israel. Moreover, humans do not exist to serve these 'gods', rather the 'lights' serve humans, as sources of light and as calendar-markers. Hebrew theologians debunked the ideas that led to modern astrology, rather than astronomy, at least 2,500 years ago!

The way the Hebrew verb *bara* ('create') is used in the story is significant. In the Hebrew Bible this verb, in its active form, is only ever used of God's creative activity. It occurs in only three places in Genesis 1. In the other places, God is said to 'make' things, using a verb that is used of various kinds of human 'making'

activity. The use of *bara* in verse 1, the programmatic statement of God's creative activity, is understandable. So, too, is the three-fold use of it with reference to the final act of creation, the creation of humans (v. 27). Why is it used in verse 21 of the creation of the sea monsters? The only convincing answer concerns the significance of sea monsters in the main Mesopotamian creation story.¹⁰ Here the creator god has to battle with and subdue the forces of chaos, depicted as sea monsters in raging waters, before he can create the heavens and the earth.¹¹ Genesis rejects this by stressing that the sea monsters are just part of the world created by the God of Israel. God did not have to fight and subdue them; he made them!

In the Mesopotamian creation stories humans are made of clay mixed with the blood of a god, somewhat similar to Adam being made of 'the dust of the earth' and the divine breath of life. They are simply the gods' slaves, created to avoid the gods having to do any work, by building houses (temples) for them and providing them with food and drink (sacrifices). As we have seen, the importance of human beings is emphasised in various ways in Genesis 1. They are not created as God's slaves, but as God's representatives on Earth with responsibility to care for the rest of creation. We cannot pursue what it means that humans were created in the 'image' and 'likeness' of God. It is arguable that, in part, the western concept of human rights has its roots in this statement.¹²

A major question in Mesopotamian religion is why humans do not have wisdom and immortality (echoes of the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life in Gen 3). In *The Gilgamesh Epic*¹³ Gilgamesh goes searching for immortality. He finds 'the plant of life' but as he travels home is robbed of it by a snake (more echoes of Gen 3). A major difference between this story and Genesis 3 is the lack of any moral dimension. In Genesis 3 human pride, the desire 'to be like God', leads to rebellion against the Creator's command and results in death. It is only *human* death that is attributed to sin, and more than simply physical death is implied. Adam and Eve did not die physically as soon as they ate the fruit, although God had said, 'In the day you eat of it you shall die.' What did happen was that their relationship with their Creator, the source of physical and spiritual life, was broken. 'Spiritual death' seems to have been the primary punishment. If Genesis 2—3 is a figurative narrative using motifs from the ancient Near East in a polemical way, it is inappropriate to try to get from it scientific information about human origins, especially since the biblical 'definition' of a human being is a creature made in God's 'image'. This is a spiritual quality (Jn 4.24), whereas scientists can only define *Homo Sapiens* in physical terms.

CONCLUSION

Reading Genesis 1—3 as the theological text it is, instead of 'mining' it for scientific information, shows that it is as relevant in the twenty-first century as it was to the ancient Hebrews, and has been to generations of Jews and Christians in between. Because it addresses fundamental questions about the meaning and purpose of life, Genesis 1—3 has the capacity to speak to each generation. Its message for the twenty-first century includes the following points:

- There is one God, the Creator of all else that exists, who alone is to be worshipped. This stands over against 'new age' spiritualities that seek meaning through astrology, the worship of 'Mother Earth', etc.
- On Earth only humans are made in God's image. This offers the resources from which later ideas of 'human rights' emerge.

- Humans are intended to worship their Creator.
- The material creation is 'good'.
- Humans, as God's representatives on earth, should care for the rest of God's creation, preserving and developing its 'goodness' and not abusing it.
- The fact that we live in a planned and ordered creation, and are made in God's image, provides a basis for the scientific enterprise.
- We are sinful, and therefore need salvation and restoration, which God has provided in Jesus, the long-awaited 'offspring' of Eve (Gen 3.15).

NOTES

1. HJ Van Til, *The Fourth Day: What the Bible and the Heavens Are Telling Us about the Creation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 11.
2. EC Lucas, 'A statue, a fiery furnace and a dismal swamp: A reflection on some issues in biblical hermeneutics', *Evangelical Quarterly* 77.4 (2005), pp. 291–307.
3. EC Lucas, 'A Biblical Basis for the Scientific Enterprise' in D Alexander, *Can we be sure about anything?* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2005), pp. 49–68.
4. Augustine. *De Genesi ad litteram*, 1.14.28. English translation by JH Taylor, *St. Augustine: The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (New York: Newman Press, 1982).
5. Augustine. *De Genesi ad litteram*, 2.6.13.
6. J Calvin, *A Commentary on Genesis* (trans. J King; London: Banner of Truth, 1967).
7. Origen. *First Principles* (trans. G Butterworth; London: SPCK, 1936), Bk. 4, ch. 3.
8. S Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 228–30.
9. See, for example, G Hasel, 'The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology', *Evangelical Quarterly* 46 (1974), pp. 81–102.
10. A Heidel. *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).
11. Job 9.13–14; 26.12–13; Ps 89.9–12; Isa 27.1; 51.9–10 show that the Hebrew poets were aware of this story in some form or other and use its imagery to assert that Yahweh is the Creator God.
12. G Stassen, 'Human Rights and the Helsinki Accords Are Our Baptist Heritage', in HW Pipkin (ed.), *Seek Peace and Pursue It* (Rüschlikon: Institute for Baptist and Anabaptist Studies, 1989), pp. 103–13.

13. A Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

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