

Interpreting Genesis One*†

CHARLES E. HUMMEL
Director of Faculty Ministries
Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship

Like other parts of Scripture, Genesis 1 must be interpreted in terms of its historical and literary context. This creation account was given to the Israelites in the wilderness, after the exodus from Egypt but before the conquest of Canaan. What the message meant then to the original hearers must govern the application of what it means now to us today. The historico-artistic interpretation of Genesis 1 does justice to its literary structure and to the general biblical perspective on natural events.

From time immemorial people have speculated about how the world began. Many fascinating myths and legends date from the dawn of civilization in the Middle East. Reflecting polytheistic religion, they feature violent struggles by a variety of deities for supremacy over the world.

For example, Sumerian tablets around 2500 B.C. present a pantheon of four prominent gods, among them Enki who leads a host of the gods against Nammu, the primeval sea. In one Egyptian myth the sun god Re emerges from the deep to create all other things. The best known of the creation myths is the Babylonian national epic Enuma Elish, which was composed primarily to glorify the god Marduk and the city of Babylon. Amid such a mythological environment Israel fled from Egypt, wandered in the wilderness and took possession of Canaan.

The biblical creation accounts in Genesis have some similarities with those of Israel's pagan neighbors as well as several radical differences. The relative importance of those elements has been a focal point of theological controversy for more than a century. Some issues have been resolved, but considerable confusion persists over the nature and purpose of Genesis 1.

Genesis is a book of beginnings: the origin of the universe, birth of the human race and founding of the Hebrew family. Yet the book is more than an account of origins. It provides a foundation for many themes prominent throughout the Old and New Testaments.

Here one learns about God, humanity and nature in their mutual relationships. The Creator and Controller of the universe reveals himself as the Lord and judge of history, which has both a purpose and goal. Such great doctrines as creation, sin and salvation trace their beginnings to this remarkable book. Concepts of covenant, grace, election and redemption permeate God's saving activity to overcome the consequences of evil and sin. It should not surprise us that Genesis, more than any other part of the Bible, has been a scene of historical, literary, theological and scientific battles. Some of those battles have made their way out of church and seminary into the schools and courts.

*Paper presented at the conference "Christian Faith and Science in Society," a Joint Meeting of the ASA/CSCA and the Research Scientists' Christian Fellowship, on July 26-29, 1985, at St. Catherine's College in Oxford, England.

† This article is taken from chapter 10, "Genesis One: Origin of the Universe," of the book *The Galileo Connection*, recently released by InterVarsity Press (Downers Grove, Ill.: 1986, 296 pp., paper, \$8.95).

Much of the controversy arises from a misunderstanding of what the Genesis account of creation intends to teach. What message was it meant to convey to ancient Israelites in their struggle against the pagan mythologies of the surrounding countries? How does that meaning apply in a post-Christian culture whose gods and values infiltrate even the church?

Approach to Genesis

An interpretation of Genesis 1 must deal with three elements: historical context, literary genre and textual content. Many commentaries skip lightly over the first two in an eagerness to grasp the meaning for today. As a result their interpretations at critical points would hardly have been intelligible to ancient Israel, much less equip God's people to resist the influence of pagan mythologies. Therefore, we will adhere to the following principle: What the author meant then determines what the message means now.

Historical Context

What was the situation of the Israelites who received the message of Genesis, especially their cultural and religious environment? The answer to that question depends to a large extent on certain assumptions about the authorship and date of the document. Two main approaches have dominated the interpretation of Genesis during the last century.

One position rejects the Mosaic authorship and early date of the Pentateuch along with its divine inspiration and trustworthiness. The developmental view of the nineteenth century treated those five books as the culmination of a long process of social growth. It assumed that, culturally and religiously, humankind has moved through evolving states from savagery to civilization. But, as new data provided by archeology tended to discredit that view, the comparative religion model became increasingly popular. It holds Genesis 1-11 to be a Jewish borrowing and adaptation of the religions of neighboring nations. Both views consider the Pentateuch to be writing of unknown authors or redactors (editors) long after Moses, probably late in the period of the Hebrew monarchy.

A contrasting position holds that Moses wrote most of the Pentateuch (though he may have used earlier sources) and that some editing took place after his death. The *historical-cultural* model used in this paper assumes that the Genesis creation narratives were given to the Israelites in the wilderness, after the exodus from Egypt but before the conquest of Canaan. This view considers the Pentateuch to be a revelation from God, through his prophet Moses, to Israel en route to the Promised Land. An understanding of the historical context and primary purpose of that revelation lays the foundation for our interpretation.

For more than four hundred years the Hebrews had languished in Egypt far from the land promised to Abraham. Those centuries took a spiritual as well as physical toll. The people had no Scriptures, only a few oral traditions of the patriarchs. Devotion to the God of their forefather Joseph had largely been, supplanted by worship of the gods of other nations. The incident of the golden calf suggests that fertility cults may have been part of Hebrew religious life in Egypt (Ex. 32:1-6). Even though they were miraculously delivered from slavery and led toward Canaan, many of the people may have had a minimal understanding of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

When the wanderers arrived at Horeb, their world view and lifestyle differed little from that of the surrounding nations. Their culture was essentially pagan. Now God was calling them to keep his covenant, to become "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6). Although the people responded, their yes was just the beginning of a long, painful process by which God would create a new culture.

Although trained by God in Pharaoh's house and then in the hills forty years, Moses faced a formidable

task. His people needed a radically different theology for a knowledge of God and his purposes; a new cosmogony to restructure their attitudes toward the created order; a new religious institution to guide their worship; a new anthropology to understand the human of condition; and a different lifestyle for moral and ethical living. The five books of Moses were designed to make his the Hebrews a people of God through a divinely instituted culture.

The location of God's people at that point is significant. In each pagan nation the gods, of which there were hundreds, permeated and dominated every aspect of life. A people and their gods formed an organic whole with their land. Religion existed for the welfare of society, not primarily for the individual. Religious change was not possible; it occurred only when one nation conquered another. Even then the defeated gods were usually absorbed into the victorious pantheon. In Egypt, for example, only Egyptian gods were worshiped. Hence Moses had initially asked Pharaoh to permit the Hebrews to go three days' journey into the wilderness to worship their God; there the Egyptian gods had no power and need not be feared. Now God had created for the Hebrews a religious crisis that opened them to the new order he desired to institute. The events of Sinai could never have taken place in Goshen.

Although Israel had left Egypt behind, they still retained its world-view. Paganism is more than polytheism; it is a way of looking at the whole of life. So a complete break with Israel's past required the strong antipagan teaching provided in the Pentateuch, beginning with Genesis.

Literary Genre

What kind of literature are we dealing with? Is it prose or poetry, history or parable? Only after that question is answered can the appropriate interpretive guidelines be applied.

The style of Genesis 1 is remarkable for its simplicity, its economy of language. Yet to ask whether it is prose or poetry is a serious oversimplification. Although we do not find here the synonymous parallelism and

rhythms of Hebrew, poetry, the passage has a number of alliterations. The prominence of repetition and of its corollary, silence, brings the writing close to poetry; its movement toward, a climax places it in the order of prose. Sometimes called a "hymn," it appears to be a unique blend of prose and poetry.¹

Although it has no trace of rhetoric, the passage does use figurative language for describing God's activity: anthropomorphisms which represent God as if he were a human being-speaking and seeing, working and resting. Yet a conclusion that Genesis 1 is semipoetic and has figurative language by no means determines the main question--the connection of the narrative with actual events.

Once for all we need to get rid of the deep-seated feeling that figurative speech is inferior to literal language, as if it were somewhat less worthy of God. The Hebrew language is rich in figures of speech. Scripture abounds with symbols and metaphors which the Holy Spirit has used to convey powerfully and clearly the message he intended. What would be left of Psalm 23, for example, if it were stripped of its figurative language? Further, we must give up the false antithesis that prose is fact while poetry is fiction (prose = literal = fact, and poetry = figurative = fiction). Indeed, prose writing often has figures of speech and can recount a legend or parable as well as history; by the same token, poetry may have little if any figurative language and narrate actual events. The prophets, for example, recalled past facts and predicted future events with a welter of symbols and images as well as literal description. (See Ezekiel 16 and 22 for two versions of the same events.) Jesus summarized centuries of Hebrew history in his parable of the wicked tenants (Mt. 21:33-41). Good biblical interpretation recognizes and appreciates this marvelous and effective variety of literary expression.

Genesis 1 appears to be a narrative of past events, an account of God's creative words and acts. Its figurative language is largely limited to anthropomorphisms. (For a highly imaginative and figurative account of creation, read Job 38:4-11.) The text does not have the earmarks of a parable, a short allegorical story designed to teach a truth or moral lesson. That genre generally deals with human events and often starts with a formula like "There was a man who had two sons" in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son (Lk. 15:11-31). Genesis 1 is "historical" in the sense of relating events that actually occurred. Modern historians distinguish between "history," which began with the invention of writing or the advent of city life, and "prehistory."²

According to that definition, the events in Genesis 1 are prehistorical. Nevertheless the writing can be called historical narrative, or primeval history, to distinguish it from legend or myth, in which ideas are simply expressed in the form of a story.

Our interpretation of a passage should also be guided by its structure. Narrators have the freedom to tell a story in their own way, including its perspective, purpose, development and relevant content. The importance of this principle comes to focus in the Genesis 1 treatment of time. The dominating concepts and concerns of our century are dramatically different from those of ancient Israel. For example, our scientific approach to the natural world seeks to quantify and measure, calculate and theorize, about the mechanism of those events. For us time is as important a dimension as space, so we automatically tend to assume that a historical account must present a strict chronological sequence. But the biblical writers are not bound by such concerns and constrictions. Even within an overall chronological development they have freedom to cluster certain events by topic. For example, Matthew's Gospel has alternating sections of narrative and teaching grouped according to subject matter, a sort of literary club sandwich. Since Matthew did not intend to provide a strict chronological sequence for the events in Jesus' ministry, to search for it there would be futile.

By the same token our approach to Genesis 1 should not assume that the events are necessarily in strict chronological order. An examination of the phrases used by the author reveals his emphasis on the creative word: "And God said" appears eight times, in each case to begin a four-line poem (figure 1).³ These poems form the basic structure of the narrative. (The third and seventh poems do not have the final line, "And there was evening, and there was morning," since they are combined with the fourth and eighth creative words, respectively, to link with the third and sixth days.) Although the eight poems vary in length and minor details, they have the same basic format.

It also becomes evident that the *eight words* are linked with the six days in an overall symmetrical structure (figure 2). The second half of the week (fourth to sixth days) parallels the first half. Augustine noted this literary framework early in the church's

history. He believed that everything had been created at once and that the structure of the days is intended to teach the "order" in creation. Two centuries ago J. G. von Herder recognized the powerful symmetry between the two triads of days. The two have been contrasted in several ways: creation of spaces and then their inhabitants forming of the world followed by its filling.⁴ Such a sequence is indicated by the conclusion

Word	Day	Poem	Verse
1	1	(a) And God said, "Let. . . "	3
		(b) and there was ...	
		(c) God saw that ... was good.	4
		(d) And there was evening, and there was morning--the first day.	5
2	2	(a) And God said, "Let. . . "	6
		(b) And it was so.	7
		(c)	
		(d) And there was evening, and there was morning--the second day.	8
3	3	(a) And God said. "Let. . . "	9
		(b) And it was so.	
		(c) And God saw that it was good.	10
		(d)	
4		(a) Then God said, "Let . . . "	11
		(b) And it was so.	
		(c) And God saw that it was good.	12
		(d) And there was evening, and there was morning--the third day.	13
5	4	(a) Then God said, "Let. . . "	14
		(b) And it was so.	15
		(c) And God saw that it was good.	18
		(d) And there was evening, and there was morning--the fourth day.	19
6	5	(a) Then God said, "Let . . . "	20
		(b)	
		(c) And God saw that it was good.	21
		(d) And there was evening, and there was morning--the fifth day.	23

		Interpreting Genesis One	178c
7	6	(a) Then God said, "Let. . ."	24
		(b) And it was so.	
		(c) And God saw that it was good.	25
		(d)	
8		(a) Then God said, "Let . . ."	26
		(b) And it was so.	
		(c) God saw ... it was very good.	31
		(d) And there was evening, and there was morning--the sixth day.	

Figure 1. Eight Poems of Genesis 1

Creative			Creative		
Words	Day	Elements	Words	Day	Elements
1 (verse 3)	1	light	5 (verse 14)	4	luminaries
2 (verse 6)	2	firmament	6 (verse 20)	5	birds
3 (verse 9)	3	seas	7 (verse 24)	6	fishes
4 (verse 11)		land & vegetation	8 (verse 26)		animals & humankind

Figure 2. Literary Structure of Genesis 1

of the narrative in Genesis 2:1 (RSV): "Thus the heavens and the earth were completed [days 1-3] and all the host of them [the crowds of living organisms, days 4-6]."

The writer's use of the significant numbers 3, 7 and 10 also highlights the careful construction of the creation account. It starts with three problem elements (formless earth, darkness and watery deep) which are dealt with in two sets of three days; the verb "create" is used at three points in the narrative, the third time thrice. Both the completion formula, "and it was so," and the divine approval, "God saw that it was good," appear seven times. The phrase "God said," the verb "make" and the formula "according to its/their kind" appear ten times.

In both its overall structure and use of numbers the writer paid as much attention to the form as to the content of the narrative, a fact which suggests mature meditation. The historico-artistic interpretation of Genesis 1 does justice to its literary craftsmanship, the general biblical perspective on natural events and the view of creation expressed by other writers in both Old and New Testaments.

Interpretation of Genesis 1

The third step, after determining the historical context and literary genre, is to discover what this account of creation means to the first readers. Although a thorough exegesis cannot be done in a few pages, we can note the narrative's development and the meaning of several key words.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (v. 1)

God is not only the subject of the first sentence, he is central to the entire narrative. It mentions him thirty-four times. The phrase "God created" can also be translated "When God began to create," but the latter translation is linguistically cumbersome; it also seems to connote a dualism incompatible with the rest of the chapter."

The meaning of the word "create" (*bara*) in this context is determined in the light of its meanings elsewhere in the Old Testament. Its subject is always God; its object may be things (Is. 40:26) or situations (Is.

45:7-8). The specific context determines whether the creation is an initial bringing into existence (Is. 48:3, 7) or a process leading to completion (Gen. 2:1-4; Is. 65:18).

The Bible's opening statement may be taken as either the beginning of God's creative activity or a summary of the account that follows. Either way, the "beginning" includes not only the material universe but also time itself. Since all of our thought and action occurs within a time scale of past/present/future, we find it difficult if not impossible to conceive of timelessness. Yet as Augustine observed many centuries ago, God created not in time but with time.⁶

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep. (v. 2)

The writer expands on his initial statement, making the earth his vantage point (compare Ps. 115:16). He uses two rhyming words, *tohu* and *bohu*,⁷ to describe a somber scene: a trackless waste, formless and empty in the utter darkness. Those two words signifying a lack of form and content provide a key to the chapter's literary structure.

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light And there was evening, and there was morning-the first day. (vv. 3-5)

Here is the first of eight creative commands distributed over six days. A major focus of the narrative is the word of God: God "speaks" and it is done. The Hebrew *amar* has a variety of meanings.⁸ Its use in Genesis 1 emphasizes God's creative command, his pledge to sustain the creation and his revelation as the Creator (this theme is echoed in Psalm 148:5 and Hebrews 11:3). The words leave no room for the divine emanation and struggle so prominent in pagan religions. Nevertheless there has been too much emphasis on God's creating simply by command. Only verses 3 and 9 report creation by word alone; the other six occurrences include both a word and an act of some kind, indicated by verbs such as *make*, *separate* and *set*.

The creation of light marks the first step from primeval formlessness to order. "God saw that the light was good" (v. 4). There is no hint of ethical dualism, good and evil coexisting from eternity. To some of the pagans day and night were warring powers. Not so here. The Creator assigns to everything its value (4a), place (4b) and meaning (5a).

And God said, "Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water." .. And there was evening, and there was morning-the second day. (vv. 6-8)

An expanse or firmament separates the waters below (the seas and underground springs) from those above in the clouds which provide rain. Unlike the first day, the creative command here is followed by an action: "So God made the expanse and separated the water under the expanse from the water above it. And it was so" (v. 7). That combination of word and act also occurs on the fourth day: "God made two great lights ... *made* the stars ... set them in the expanse of the sky" (vv. 16-17); and on the fifth day, "God created the great creatures of the sea ... "(v. 21). The wording for the sixth day is unusual in that God commands himself, so to speak, and then does it: "Then God said, 'Let us make man'. .. So God created- man. .. "(vv. 26-27). This variety of wording for the eight creative events/ processes should caution against an attempt to formulate one basic procedure or mechanism for the creation.

And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear."

And it was so. (vv. 9-10)

Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees." . . . And it was so . . . And there was evening, and there was morning-the third day. (vv. 11-13)

Two events are linked to the third day. In the first, a creative command continues to give form to the world through differentiation, the land from the sea. In the second, a procreative action of the land, empowered by God, brings forth vegetation in an orderly fashion "according to their various kinds." That phrase, also used for the reproduction of animals (v. 24), would be especially meaningful to the Hebrews, since pagan

mythologies featured grotesque human-beast hybrids. (The concept fixity of species, often read into this phrase, would have been unintelligible to the original hearers.) Here God commands the earth to produce something, and it does so.

The emphasis has begun to shift from *form* toward *fulness*, which becomes prominent in the remaining creative words. Originally formless and empty, the earth is now structured (through the division of light from darkness, upper from lower waters, dry land from the seas) and clothed with green, ready for its inhabitants. What God has formed he now fills. The second half of the week generally parallels the events of the first.

And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night." . . . God made two great lights ... to govern the day and ... the night. .. And there was evening, and there was morning--the fourth day. (vv. 14-19)

The expanse of the, sky is now filled with the stars, sun and moon "to give light on the earth." (Our problem of how the earth could be lighted [v. 4] before the sun appeared comes when we require the narrative to be a strict chronological account.) It is significant that the sun and moon are not mentioned by name--because those common Semitic terms were also the names of deities. This description may be seen as a protest against every kind of astral worship, so prevalent in the surrounding nations.⁹ Here the heavenly bodies do not, reign as gods but serve as signs (see Ps. 121:6). They "govern" (vv. 16, 18) only as bearers of light, not as wielders of power. These few sentences undercut a superstition as old as Egypt and as modern as today's newspaper horoscope.

And God said, "Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky." . . . And there was evening, and there was morning--the fifth day. (vv. 20-23)

The sea and sky are now filled with their inhabitants. The word for birds literally means "flying things" and includes insects (compare Dent 14:19-20). The special reference to great creatures (*tanninim*, "sea monsters") also serves a polemic purpose. To the Canaanites the

word was an ominous term for the powers of chaos confronting the god Baal in the beginning. In the Old Testament the word appears without any mythological overtones; it is simply a generic term for a large water animal.

And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds." . . . And it was so. God made the wild animals according to their kinds. (vv. 24-25)

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness." . . . So God created man in his own image, . . . male and female he created them God saw all that he had made and it was

very good. And there was evening, and there was morning--the sixth day. (vv. 26-31)

The seventh and eighth creative acts are linked to the sixth day. The former populates the land with three representative groups of animals: "livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals." The creative action here parallels that in verse 20-23, but is unique in one respect: God commands the earth to do something, yet he himself makes it. Here as elsewhere in the Bible, what we call "natural" reproduction and God's creative activity are two sides of the same coin.

The eighth act produces man and woman both in nature and over it. They share the sixth day with other land creatures, and also God's blessing to be fruitful and increase; yet their superiority is evident in the words Let us make (instead of "Let the land produce") and in the mandate to "fill the earth and subdue it." Human uniqueness lies in the relationship to God: "Let us make man in our image"--that of a rational, morally responsible and social being. The words male and female at this juncture have profound implications. To define humanity as bisexual makes the partners complementary and anticipates the New Testament teaching of their equality ("There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"--Gal. 3:28).

The culmination of creation in man and woman who are to rule over the earth and its inhabitants is especially significant to Israel. In pagan mythology the creation of mankind was an afterthought to provide the gods with food and satisfy other physical needs. But in Genesis 1 the situation is reversed. The plants and trees are a divine provision for human need (v. 29). From start to finish the creation narrative challenges and opposes the essential tenets of the pagan religions of Egypt, where the Hebrews stayed so long, and of Canaan, where they would soon be living.

At each stage of creation, six times, God has pronounced his work to be good. "Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array" (Gen. 2:1). The creation narrative then concludes with a seventh day.

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done. (vv. 2:2-3)

The word rested means "ceased" (from *sabat*, the root of "sabbath"). It is a rest of achievement or pleasure, not of weariness or inactivity, since God constantly nurtures what he has created. Nature is not self-existent but is constantly upheld by his providential power.

This part of the narrative has an immediate application embodied in the Ten Commandments. The seven-day format is given as a model for Israel's work week and sabbath rest:

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God.... For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. (Ex. 20:8-11)

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created. (v. 2:4a)

The narrative finally ends with a "colophon," a statement that identifies a document's contents, which we generally put at the beginning of a book.

The Creation Days

Much controversy over the interpretation of Genesis focuses on the meaning of the word *day*. Many commentaries waded into that question first and soon bogged down in a hermeneutical quagmire. First one's perspective on the chapter should be defined. Since no one is completely objective, it is not a question of *whether* we have an interpretive model but *which one* we are using.

The *comparative religion* approach views Genesis 1 as the work of an unknown author long after Moses, and considers its creation account as being similar to the primitive stories in other Semitic religions. The concordist model assumes a harmony between the Genesis 1 and scientific accounts of creation, and seeks to demonstrate the Bible's scientific accuracy. The historical-cultural approach views the narrative as given by Moses to Israel in the wilderness, and tries to discover

what the message meant then without any attempt to harmonize it with either past or present scientific theories.

Throughout the Old Testament the word "day" (*yom*) is used in a variety of ways. Usually meaning a "day" of the week, the word can also mean "time" (Gen. 4:3), a specific "period" or "era" (Is. 2:12; 4:2), or a "season" (Josh. 24:7). We have already noted the literary symmetry of eight creative words linked to six days, which occur in two parallel sets of three. The six days mark the development from a dark, formless, empty and lifeless earth to one that is lighted, shaped and filled with teeming varieties of life, culminating in the creation of man and woman.

The author's purpose--teaching about God and his creation in order to counteract the pagan myths of neighboring countries--has become clear in our exposition of Genesis 1. Israel's God is the all-powerful Creator of heaven and earth. His world is orderly and

consistent. Man and woman are the culmination of creation, made in the image of God, to enjoy and be responsible for their stewardship of the earth.

The literary genre is a semipoetic narrative cast in a historico-artistic framework consisting of two parallel triads. On this interpretation, it is no problem that the creation of the sun, necessary for an earth clothed with vegetation on the third day, should be linked with the fourth day. Instead of turning hermeneutical handsprings to explain that supposed difficulty, we simply note that in view of the author's purpose the question is irrelevant. The account does not follow the chronological sequence assumed by concordist views.¹⁰

The meaning of the word day must be determined (like any other word with several meanings) by the context and usage of the author. A plain reading of the text, with its recurring phrase of evening and morning, indicates a solar day of twenty-four hours. That would have been clear to Moses and his first readers. The context gives no connotation of an era or geological age. Creation is pictured in six familiar periods followed by a seventh for rest, corresponding to the days of the week as Israel knew them. But the question still remains whether the format is figurative or literal, that is, an analogy of God's creative activity or a chronological account of how many hours He worked.

God is a spirit whom no one can see, whose thoughts and ways are higher than ours. So (apart from the Incarnation) we can know him only through analogy, "a partial similarity between like features of two things, on which a comparison may be based."¹¹ In the Bible the human person is the central model used to reveal God's relationship and actions in history. God is pictured as seeing, speaking and hearing like a person even though he doesn't have eyes, lips or ears. Those figures of speech (anthropomorphisms) assure us that God is at least personal and can be known in an intimate relationship. (Science also uses analogies; for example, a billiard-ball model in physics helps us understand the behavior of gas molecules which we cannot see.)

The human model appears throughout Genesis 1, The writer also links God's creative activity to six days, marked by evening and morning, and followed by a day of rest. In the light of the other analogies, why

should it be considered necessary to take this part of the account literally, as if God actually worked for six days (or epochs) and then rested? Biblical interpretation should not suddenly change hermeneutical horses in the middle of the exegetical stream.

A stringent literalism disregards the analogical medium of revelation about preation, raising meaningless questions about God's working schedule. For example, did he labor around the clock or intermittently on twelve-hour days? If God created light instantaneously, was the first day then mostly one of rest like the seventh? How did the plant and animal reproductive processes he constituted on succeeding days fit so neatly into that schedule?

The fact that the text speaks of twenty-four-hour days does not require that they be considered the actual duration of God's creative activity. Even on a human level, when we report the significant achievements of someone in a position of power, the length of the working day is generally irrelevant. For example, a historian might write, "President Roosevelt decided to build the atomic bomb and President Truman ordered its use to destroy Hiroshima and Nagasaki to end the war with Japan. Two days radically changed the entire character of modern warfare." The exact details of how and when the commands were implemented over years or weeks are unimportant to the main concern of who and why, and what resulted.

Preoccupation with *how long* it took God to create the world, in days or epochs, deflects attention from the main point of Genesis 1. Such "scientific" concerns run interpretation onto a siding, away from the main track of God's revelation. Once we get past arguments over the length of the days, we can see the intended meaning of these days for Israel. First, their significance lies not in identity, a one-to-one correlation with God's creative activity, but in an analogy that provides a model for human work. The pattern of six plus one, work plus rest on the seventh day, highlights the sabbath. In doing so, it emphasizes the uniqueness of humanity. Made in the image of God, and given rule over the world, man and woman are the crown of creation. They rest from their labor on the sabbath, which is grounded in the creation (Gen. 2:2, Ex 20:11).

metaphor uses the commonplace (or commonly understood, if you wish) meaning of a word in a figurative manner. When, for example, Jesus calls Herod "that fox" (Lk. 13:32), the word does not refer vaguely to any animal but to that one whose characteristics are well known; yet Jesus doesn't mean that Herod is literally a fox. Likewise, when David in Psalm 23 says, "The Lord is my shepherd," he refers not to just any kind of animal keeper but to one who cares for sheep. It is the commonplace meaning of fox and shepherd that makes the metaphor understandable. So the fact that the day in Genesis 1 has its ordinary work-a-day meaning, and does not refer to an epoch of some kind, makes possible the metaphor of God's creative activity as a model for human work of six days followed by sabbath rest.

Linking God's creative activity to days of the week serves as another element in the antipagan polemic.

"By stretching the creation events over the course of a series of days the sharpest possible line has been drawn between this account and every form of mythical thinking. It is history that is here reported--once for all and of irrevocable finality in its results."¹² Genesis 1 contrasts sharply with the cyclical, recurring creations described by Israel's pagan neighbors.

Two other interpretations of the days have been advanced. P. J. Wiseman considers them days of revelation with the narrative given over a period of six days, each on its own tablet.¹³ He notes a precedent for that literary form in other ancient literature. It has also been suggested that Genesis 1 was used liturgically somewhat like the narratives in other religions.¹⁴ Whatever the merits of those views, they at least use the historical-cultural model to focus on what the narrative could have meant to the first hearers.

The Significance of Genesis 1

During the last century, Genesis 1 has suffered much from Western interpreters. Liberal literary criticism removes the divine authority of its message through Moses; conservative concentration on implications for science misses its intended meaning. Scholars from the theological left, armed with scissors and paste, have rearranged supposed authors and dates into a variety of configurations. Commentators from the right, scientific

texts in hand, have repeatedly adjusted their interpretations to harmonize with the latest theories. In the process, the message of Genesis 1 has been so muffled that the average reader wonders what it means and whether it can be trusted. Hence we conclude by summarizing the significance of its account for ancient Israel, biblical theology, modern science and the church's life today.

Israel at Mount Sinai

Genesis 1 achieves a radical and comprehensive affirmation of monotheism versus every kind of false religion (polytheism, idolatry, animism, pantheism and syncretism); superstition (astrology and magic); and philosophy (materialism, ethical dualism, naturalism and nihilism). That is a remarkable achievement for so short an account (about 900 words) written in everyday language and understood by people in a variety of cultures for more than three thousand years. Each day of creation aims at two kinds of gods in the pantheons of the time: gods of light and darkness; sky and sea; earth and vegetation; sun, moon and stars; creatures in sea and air; domestic and wild animals; and finally human rulers. Though no human beings are divine, all--from pharaohs to slaves--are made in the image of God and share in the commission to be stewards of the earth.

For Israel those were life-and-death issues of daily existence. God's people do not need to know the how of creation; but they desperately need to know the Creator. Their God, who has brought them into covenant relationship with himself, is no less than the Creator and Controller of the world. He is not like the many pagan gods who must struggle for a period of time in their creative activity. He is stronger than all the powers that stand between his people and the Promised Land, the only One worthy of their worship and total commitment. Creation is the ground of Israel's hope for preservation as God's chosen people. For them the doctrine of creation is not so much a cosmogony as a confession of faith repeatedly expressed in psalms and prophecies throughout the Old Testament.

Biblical Theology

Both Old and New Testaments connect God's creative power with his redeeming love.

Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord his God,
the Maker of heaven and earth,
the sea, and everything in them-
the Lord, who remains faithful forever.

(Ps. 146:5-6)

In last days he has spoken to us by his Son ... through whom he made the universe.... sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

(Heb. 1:2-3)

God the Creator of the universe is the Lord and judge of history who comes in Jesus Christ to demonstrate his saving love and power. Three great creeds emerging from the church's early theological controversies--the Apostles', Nicene and Chalcedonian--affirm that fundamental connection. It has provided the basis for creativity and meaning in human life, and for Christian confidence in ultimate victory over all forms of evil. Thus creation is also closely connected with eschatology, the doctrine of the end-times in which God ultimately vindicates his own creativity.

Eschatology is more than futurology, despite prevalent fascination about time tables of future events. It deals with the fulfillment of what God initiated in creation. God creates through his eternal Word; he also redeems and brings to completion through the incarnation and glorification of the same Word in Jesus of Nazareth. "Creation, as the going forth from God, is simultaneously the first step of the return to God; and the return is the completion of the journey begun in creation. God creates for a purpose which becomes known as the future of the world in the resurrection of Jesus, the Christ."¹⁵ Even though creation has scientific and philosophical implications, its central significance is theological.

The Scientific Enterprise

The positive contribution of biblical teaching about God and the world to the development of modern science has been well documented. Yet a certain kind of modern theology has considered the biblical description of nature a liability, requiring "demythologizing" to make it acceptable to a scientific age. Actually, Genesis 1 prepared the way for our age by its own program of demythologizing. By purging the cosmic order of all gods and goddesses, the Genesis creation account "de-divinized" nature. The universe has no divine regions or beings who need to be feared or placated. Israel's intensely monotheistic faith thor-

oughly demythologized the natural world, making way for a science that can probe and study every part of the universe without fearing either trespass or retribution. That does not mean that nature is secular and no longer sacred. It is still God's creation, declared to be good, preserved by his power and intended for his glory. The disappearance of mythical scenes and polytheistic intrigues clears the stage for the great drama of redemption and the new creation in Christ.

The Contemporary Church

Meanwhile, the doctrine of creation has profound implications for contemporary Christian thought and life. Study of Genesis 1 illuminates two major questions that should concern Christians in modern culture. First, what false gods command a following in our society and even in our churches? Although they differ radically from the false deities of ancient Israel's neighbors, their worship can produce similar results. In order to escape the influence of current unbiblical philosophies, religious ideas and superstitions, the message of Genesis 1 is urgently needed.

Second, in a day of increasing environmental concerns, what actions should Christians take as stewards of the earth? Environmental problems have scientific and technological, political and economic, social and legal aspects. Important moral and ethical concerns derive from the biblical doctrines of creation and human responsibility for the earth. Basic to such concerns is our understanding of nature. Most other religions view the world as spiritual in itself or as irrelevant to spiritual concerns. But in the biblical view, the natural world is created, material and significant in God's purposes. From that teaching come basic principles which are belatedly receiving attention from Christian writers." Surely the church needs a solid contemporary theology of creation to help define our human relationship to the natural world.

The doctrine of creation is foundational for God's providential care of his creation, for his redemption of humanity and for his re-creation of a new heaven and earth. Its teaching of God's transcendent sovereignty

and power is embodied in a hymn in the last book of the Bible:

You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being.

(Rev. 4:11)

APPENDIX

Before 1750 it was generally held that God created the world in six twenty-four-hour days, although some early church fathers like Augustine viewed them allegorically.¹⁷ Archbishop Ussher around 1650 even calculated the date of creation to be 4004 B.C. But as the science of geology matured in the 1800' s, many were shocked to discover that the earth was millions of years old. Since modern science had gained so much prestige, many interpreters strove to retain credibility for the Bible by attempting to demonstrate its scientific accuracy. Therefore, a variety of concordistic (harmonizing) views were proposed to correlate biblical teaching with current scientific theories.

For example, "flood geology" attempted to account for fossil discoveries through the catastrophe of a universal flood.¹⁸ When new geological discoveries questioned that view, it was replaced by the "restitution" or "gap" theory popularized by a Scottish clergyman, Thomas Chalmers, in 1804. According to that view a catastrophe occurred between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 to allow the necessary time for the geological formations to develop. Eventually it became necessary to assume a series of catastrophies or floods to account for newer scientific findings.

Although such theories accounted for the time that science required, they could not explain the sequence of the geological record. The "day-age" interpretation considered the Genesis days to be metaphorical for geological ages. That view was advocated by influential North American geologists J. W. Dawson and James Dana as well as many theologians. The Genesis days were then correlated, more or less accurately, with the proposed epochs. Another version retained literal twenty-four-hour days of creative activity, but separated them by geological epochs.

The above views, with varying degrees of credibility, have in common three major problems. First, they attempt to find answers to questions the text does not address, about the how or the mechanism of natural forces. (To see how inappropriate such an approach is, consider its opposite: suppose one tried to derive information about the meaning and purpose of life from a technical treatise on astronomy in which the author had no intention of revealing his philosophy.) The biblical accounts of creation do not provide scientific data or descriptions. John Calvin emphasized that point: "The Holy

Spirit had no intention to teach astronomy.... He made use by Moses and the other prophets of the popular language that none might shelter himself under the pretext of obscurity."¹⁹ Adapting Calvin's principle to the present we can affirm, "The Holy Spirit had no intention of teaching geology and biology."

Second, not only do the concordistic views strain Genesis by importing concepts foreign to the text, but any apparent success in harmonizing the message with "modern science" guarantees a failure when current scientific theory is revised or discarded. During the last two centuries, that pattern has been evident in the continual efforts of harmonizers to keep abreast of rapidly changing scientific views. The credibility of the Bible is not enhanced by thrusting it into the scramble of catch-up in a game it was never intended to play. What is the point of trying to correlate the ultimate truths of Scripture with the ever-changing theories of science? No wonder that when those theories go out of date, in the minds of many people the Bible joins them in gathering dust on the shelf.

Third, any extent to which Genesis teaches modern scientific concepts would have made its message unintelligible to its first readers, and to most of the people who have lived during the last three thousand years. Even in our own century, what per cent of the people understand the abstract language of science? And of those who do, how many use it in the communications of daily life with which the biblical writers are primarily concerned?

REFERENCES

- 1 Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984), pp. 31-33.
- 2 N. H. Ridderbos, *Is There a Conflict between Genesis I and Natural Science?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1957), p.10.
- 3 Adrio Konig, *New and Greater Things: A Believer's Reflection*, part 3, "On Creation," trans. D. Ray Briggs, unpublished ms., pp. 14-18.
- 4 Conrad Hyers, *The Meaning of Creation: Genesis and Modern Science* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), "The Plan of Genesis 1," pp. 67-71. The author identified three fundamental problems confronting the establishment of an orderly cosmos: darkness, watery abyss and formless earth, which find their solutions on days one to three, respectively, of preparation followed by days four to six of population.
- 5 Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), p.46.
- 6 Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1982), p.78.
- 7 Compare Deuteronomy 32:10; Job 6:18; 26:7, Isaiah 24:10; 34:11; 45:18.

- 8 See *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, ed. G. J. Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 328-45.
- 9 Gerhard Hasel, "The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 46 (1974), pp. 78-80. The author lists six characteristics of this passage as an antipagan polemic.
- 10 J. D. Douglas, ed., *The New Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), p. 271.
- 11 Laurence Urdang, ed., *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, college ed. (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 48.
- 12 Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 57.
- 13 P. J. Wiseman, *Creation Revealed in Six Days* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1948), pp. 33-37.
- 14 D. F. Payne, *Genesis One Reconsidered* (London: Tyndale Press, 1964), pp. 18-19.
- 15 Langdon Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth: The Christian Doctrine of Creation in the Light of Modern Knowledge* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), p. 178.
- 16 Richard H. Bube, *The Human Quest: A New Look at Science and the Christian Faith* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1971), pp. 230-33.
- 17 Davis A. Young, *Christianity and the Age of the Earth* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982). Part One, pp. 1-67, traces the history of thought regarding the age of the earth from the early Greeks through church history to the twentieth century.
- 18 Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1955), chap. 4, pp. 171-179, presents a detailed historical account and critique of each theory.
- 19 Calvin, *Commentary on Psalms*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), vo 15, pp. 184-85.

Charles E. Hummel graduated from Yale University, and received an M.S. in chemical engineering from M.I.T. While working for Inter-Varsity, from 1956 to 1965, he received an M.A. in biblical literature from Wheaton and an L.H.D. from Geneva College. From 1965-74, the author served as president of Barrington College in Rhode Island, and since 1975 as director of faculty ministries for Inter-Varsity. He has a special interest in the history and philosophy of science, as reflected in his latest book, *The Galileo Connection: Resolving Conflicts between Science and the Bible*.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

ASA
 P.O. Box 668
 Ipswich, MA 01938
<http://www.asa3.org/>

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu