

EXEGETICAL NOTES

GENESIS 1:1-2:4a

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Introduction

These Exegetical Notes do not aim at a detailed verse-by-verse explanation. Their purpose rather is to look at the first chapter of Genesis from a wider perspective the perspective of the whole of the Pentateuch. A secondary purpose of these Notes is to explore in a general way the broader question of the meaning of biblical narrative texts. How do we go about finding what the biblical writers were teaching in their carefully wrought narratives? In light of this second purpose, the Notes will be presented in the form of a general description of biblical narrative and the comments on Gen 1:1-2:4a will serve as examples. It will be assumed that what is said may be applied generally to all biblical narratives in the same way that it is here applied to Genesis one.

Historical narrative is the re-presentation of past events for the purpose of instruction. Two dimensions are always at work in shaping such narrative: 1) the course of the historical event itself and 2) the viewpoint of the author who recounts the event. This dual aspect of historical narrative means that one must not only look at the course of the event in its historical setting but one must also look for the purpose and intention of the author in recounting the event.

The ideas of looking beyond the historical event to the author's version of it does not imply that the author's version is different than the event as it actually happened. Rather, in historical narrative what is given is the inspired author's evaluation of the meaning and significance of the event. In historical narrative we may be told less than all that happened; but we are also told much more than simply that the event happened--although we are always being told at least that. We are also being told the purpose and significance of the event within the broader context of God's revelation in his word.

In what follows, we will outline briefly some general principles on how to go about the task of finding the author's intent and purpose in recounting the events in historical narrative.

Assessing the Structure of the Narrative Account

The most influential yet subtle feature of an author's work in relating historical events is the overall framework within which he arranges his account. Some would call this the literary context. Perhaps a more usable term would be the structure of the passage. What this means is that there is always an internal relationship of each segment of a narrative to the other segments of the narrative and to the narrative viewed as a whole. When we speak of structure, then, we are speaking of "the total set of relationships within a given narrative unit."

General structural elements to look for in every historical narrative are simple, but nonetheless important. They include an introduction, a conclusion, sequence, disjuncture, repetition, deletion, description and dialogue. These elements combine to form the building blocks or segments of the larger narrative units.

For example, Gen 1:1-2:4a is clearly recognizable as a unit of historical narrative. It has an introduction (1:1), a body (1:2-2:3) and a conclusion (2:4a). With these three segments a unit is formed. Within this unit several structural elements combine to tie this passage (Gen 1:1-2:4a) together and give it a specific meaning. One of the more obvious elements is the repetition of the phrase "evening and morning" which divides the passage into a 7-day scheme. Creation forms a period of one work week concluding with a rest day. Already in this simple structural framework there is the tilting of the account that betrays the interests of the author creation is viewed in terms of *man's* own work week.

Another, more subtle, structural element tying the passage together is the tight sentence pattern (or sequence) within which the events of creation are recorded. This is apparent in the almost monotonous string of "ands" in the English Versions of chapter one. In contrast to this smooth sequence, however, there is an abrupt disjuncture at 1:2, in effect, shoving this verse outside the regular sequence of the chapter. A study of the author's style in Genesis shows that when he wants to begin a specific topic much narrower than the preceding subject matter, he uses such a technique of disjuncture (see Gen 3:1). Here, then, at the beginning of the account the structure reveals the aim of the author: to narrow the scope of his narrative from the universe (1:1) to that of the land (1:2ff.). This is quite a remarkable turning point in the account of creation and should not be overlooked by anyone attempting to follow the author's intent in this chapter.

Structure, then, implies *purpose* and that in turn suggests a central concern or integration point which gives a passage its meaning and direction. In the two examples just cited, the central concern of Gen 1 focuses on *man* and the *land*. Certainly we need more than these two examples to be convinced that this is the central concern, but the cumulative effect of further observations confirms that this is the direction or purpose behind the framework of the account.

When we have observed the internal structure of a passage, as we have briefly done with Gen 1:1-2:4a, we have not completed the task of assessing the total structural relationship of the passage to the broader

context within which it is found. There may indeed be a whole series of further structural ties between the passage and its literary environment.

Here we are faced with the problem of where to fix the outside limits to a passage within an historical narrative. It is very often the case in the Old Testament narrative sections that the division of the narrative into "books" cuts across very tightly constructed units (e.g. Gen 1-Exod 1:7 is a structurally complete unit not recognized by those who divided the Pentateuch into five parts). Beyond these *literary units* there lie, as well, the larger borders of the Old Testament canon and the subsequent canon of the Old and New Testaments. These borders must be respected as well if we desire to go beyond exegesis to biblical theology.

In working with Gen 1:1-2:4a, we can safely set our perimeters around the Pentateuch (Gen--Deut) as the largest meaningful unit (literarily). Since it comes first, it also seems safe to say that Gen 1:1-2:4a is to be considered an *introduction* to the Pentateuch.

Once the largest unit of historical narrative has been drawn, a two-fold task remains: 1) to determine the central concern of this unit and 2) to develop the contribution of the smaller unit (Gen 1:1-2:4a) to the concern of the whole.

The central concern of the large narrative unit is not always immediately apparent but usually becomes clearer with a trial and error effort to relate the parts to the whole. This amounts, in practice, to reading through the entire unit and formulating a general statement of the overall theme. This theme is then checked against further readings of the text. Each reading should produce a clearer idea of the whole, which in turn should cast more light on the parts or segments.

Since we have drawn the Pentateuch as the largest unit with a meaningful structural relationship to Gen 1:1-2:4a, the question we should now ask is whether there is a center to the Pentateuch. From our study we would suggest that the central concern of the Pentateuch should be described in the following way.

First, it should be pointed out that the most prominent event and the most far-reaching theme in the Pentateuch, viewed entirely 'on its own, is the covenant between Yahweh and Israel established at Mount Sinai. The meaning of this event as it is described in the Pentateuch can be summarized in the following cluster of themes:

- 1) God comes to dwell with Israel
- 2) Israel is a chosen people
- 3) God gives Israel the land
- 4) Israel must obey God's will
- 5) Salvation or judgment is contingent on Israel's obedience

If we leave these ideas in their original dress, we find that they are clothed in the metaphor of the ancient Near Eastern monarch: God, the Great King, grants to his obedient vassal-prince the right to dwell in his land and promises protection from their enemies. Somewhat more generally, this cluster of ideas goes by the name theocracy or the kingdom of God. However we may state it, this rule of God among his people Israel is the central concern of the Pentateuch.

There is, however, more to be said about the intention of the author of the Pentateuch. We need to say, secondly, something about what the author of the Pentateuch is telling his readers *about* the covenant at Sinai. This can be summarized in the following three points:

1) The author of the Pentateuch wants to draw a connecting link between God's original plan of blessing for mankind and his establishment of the covenant with Israel at Sinai. Put simply, the author sees the covenant at Sinai as God's plan to restore his blessing to mankind through the descendants of Abraham (Gen 12:1-3; Exod 2:24).

2) The author of the Pentateuch wants to show that the Covenant at Sinai failed to restore God's blessing to mankind because Israel failed to trust God and obey his will.

3) The author of the Pentateuch wants to show that God's promise to restore the blessing would ultimately succeed because God himself would one day give to Israel a heart to trust and obey God (Deut 30:1-10).

The outlook of the Pentateuch, then, might be described as "eschatological," in that it looks to the future as the time when God's faithful promise (blessing) will be fulfilled. The past, Mount Sinai, has ended in failure from the author's (Moses') perspective. The message of the Pentateuch, however, is *hope*: God's people should trust and obey God and, like Abraham, have faith in his promises.

The primary *subject matter* of the Pentateuch, then, is the Sinai Covenant. The author sees God's election of Israel and the establishment of a covenant at Sinai as a central religious and theological problem. The Pentateuch is his answer to the problem raised by the covenant in the same way that Gal is the Apostle Paul's answer to the same problem. It is his explanation of the place Sinai occupies in God's plan and his explication of the lessons to be drawn from the experience.

It is of great importance to see that while the Pentateuch is *about the Sinai Covenant*, it is *not the document of that covenant*. The Pentateuch contains documents of the Sinai Covenant, e.g., the ten commandments, the covenant code, tabernacle instruction and laws of sacrifice, but the Pentateuch, as a literary document, is fundamentally different from a document of the Sinai covenant. What this means is that the Pentateuch is a document that looks at the Sinai covenant as an *object under investigation*. It is attempting to evaluate the Sinai covenant from a perspective that is not the same as that of the covenant itself. Like the other historical books of the Old Testament, the Prophets and the New Testament, the Pentateuch represents a look back at the failure of Sinai and a look forward to a time of fulfillment (Deut 30).

It now remains to develop the contribution of the smaller narrative unit (Gen 1:1-2:4a) to the central concern of the whole (Pentateuch). In other words, if we are right in saying Genesis 1 is an introduction to the Pentateuch, then we should ask what it introduces about the central concern of the Pentateuch: the covenant at Sinai.

The following principles are intended to show how a segment of historical narrative can contribute to the central concern of the larger narrative of which it is a part.

The Principle of Selectivity

No historical narrative is a complete account of all that occurred in a given event or series of events. The author must select those events that most effectively relate not only what happened but also the meaning and significance of what happened.

We can formulate a working description of this principle of selection in this way: The author selects and arranges those features of an historical event that most characteristically portray the meaning of the event as conceived by the author.

A close study of Gen 1:1-2:4a shows that a careful and purposeful selection has been made in the composition of the creation account and that the features selected do, in fact, provide an introduction to the Sinai covenant--that is, the creation account tells the reader information that makes the author's view of the Sinai covenant understandable.

One way to ferret out this selection is to ask: What general features of creation (the subject matter) would I expect to find in Gen 1:1-2:4a, but which I don't find? Where, for example, is the account of the creation of the angels? Where, for that matter, is the account of the creation of the stars and the galaxies? Certainly the creation of these bodies is stated as a brute fact in v 1 and is editorially alluded to in v 16; but relative to the detail of the rest of the account in chap. 1, we could almost say the author has passed them by. He has chosen rather to concentrate on the creation and preparation of the land. If we judge from the topics selected in Gen 1:1-2:4a, we can say the author has only three preferred subjects in his account of creation: God, man and the land.

Having said there is little mention of the creation of the rest of the universe, we should note that the creation of the sun and moon is given considerable attention. But we should be quick to note, as well, that neither of these celestial bodies is mentioned in its own right. Rather, their creation is recounted in terms of the role they play in the affairs of men *on the land*: "to divide the day and night and be for signs for the seasons and for days and years." (1:14ff.).

At this point we need to show how the two principles of Structure and *selectivity* work together to give a narrative passage its meaning.

First, we have already noted that an internal structural element has defined the scope of the Gen 1:1-2:4a creation account. That is, the disjuncture at v 2 is employed by the author to focus his creation account upon the *land*. This is consistent with what our analysis of the selection showed: one of the author's three preferential topics is the *land*.

Now we can turn to the external structural relationship of Gen 1:1-2:4a to the Pentateuch and ask: What does the *land* as a subject have to do with the Sinai covenant? Or, more precisely stated: How does what Gen 1:1-2:4a records about the land serve as an introduction to the author's view of the covenant at Sinai? When Gen 1:1-2:4a speaks of God's creation and preparation of the land we are, in fact, introduced to one of the central elements of the Sinai Covenant: the promise of God to give the *land* to Israel: "If you harken to my voice

and keep my covenant you will be to me a prize possession among all the nations because all the *land* is mine" (Exod 19:5; cf. Jer 27:5). What, then, does Gen 1:1-2:4a tell us about the land? It tells us that God is its owner. He created it and prepared it, and he can give it to whomever he chooses (Jer 27:5). In the ancient world, and our own, the right to own land and grant it to others formed the basis of an ordered society. The author of the Pentateuch, then, is quick to point out that the *promise of the land to Israel*, made effective in the Sinai covenant, was in every way a right justly belonging to God.

Another example of the interrelationship between structure and selection can be seen in the view of God in Gen 1:1-2:4a. When viewed as an introduction (structure) to the covenant at Sinai, we can see that Gen I presents a very important view of the covenant God: he is the Creator of the universe (Gen 1:1) Because Israel had come to know God through the covenant in a close and personal way, a certain theological pressure existed which, if left unchecked could, and at times did, erode a proper view of God. This pressure was the tendency to localize and nationalize God as the God of Israel alone (Mic 3:11)--a God who exists solely for Israel and for their blessing. Over against this lesser view of God, however, stands the message of Gen 1 with its clear introduction to the God who created the universe and who has blessed *all mankind*. From the point of view of the author of the Pentateuch, the God of the Covenant is the Creator of the universe; and he has a plan of blessing for all men. Here lies the theological foundation of all subsequent missionary statements in the Bible.

We can conclude this section with a summary of Gen 1:1-2:4a. The author of the Pentateuch intends his creation account to relate to his readers that God, the Creator of the universe, has prepared the land as a home for his special creature, man, and has a plan of blessing for all his creatures.

The Discourse Principles of Theme and Rheme

An historical narrative is a form of discourse between the author and his audience. The author must always write with his audience in view and he must assume certain common knowledge and shared experiences with this audience. On its most basic level this means that the author has to use a language that his audience will understand. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew not simply because that was the writer's language but more importantly because that was the language of those to whom the books were written.

At a level of interpretation, however, this idea of an audience means the author can and must assume that he can use certain terms which are already known on the basis of his common experience with his audience. It also means, in the case of literature, that the author can use terms which will take on *specific sense* in the course of the literary work itself. We should expect, then, to come across two different kinds of terms in any given narrative unit: those terms which the author assumes his reader will already know or will subsequently come to more fully understand in the work itself (*theme*) and those terms which the author must elaborate himself in the passage at hand (*rheme*).

Since the author will develop the meaning of rheme terms in the passage at hand, there is little difficulty in dealing with them in narrative. All that is really necessary is a sensitivity to the author's help in developing the meaning of these terms for his reader.

When the author assumes that his readers already have an understanding of a term he uses (*theme*) the question at once faces the modern reader: Where does one look for the meaning of a term that is not explained by the ancient writer? We may have to go outside the text altogether for a general understanding of the term and then attempt to fit this within the specific text at hand. Usually, however, there is a safer approach.

As a working guide we might suggest that in searching for the meaning of a term not explained in a given passage (*theme*), we follow the external structural relationships back to a passage where the term in question is in fact developed (if such a passage does exist). An example from Gen 1:1-2:4a may help to clarify this point.

The author of Gen. 1:1-2:4a uses several terms with the full expectation that his audience will comprehend them without explanation: "the deep," "the expanse," *tohu wahohu* ("formless and void"), "signs," "seasons," "the great sea monsters," and so on. How do we find the meaning intended by the author for these terms? If we follow the structural ties already delineated above, being careful to remain within the boundaries of the Pentateuch (structure), the meaning of these terms, as used by the author, is close at hand.

The term "signs," for example, calls to mind many things to a modern reader; most recently, to many, the terms may recall the signs of the zodiac. Could this have been the meaning intended by the author when he recounted that the sun and moon are put in the heavens as "signs"? If we look at the use of this term in the broader structural context (Pentateuch), we can readily see that such a meaning would have been completely inappropriate to the author and his original audience. The term "signs" has been given special attention by the author elsewhere in the Pentateuch. For example, the so-called "plagues" of Egypt are, in fact, called "signs" by the author of the Pentateuch (e.g., Deut 29:2-3). The meaning given this term in the Exod account (here the term is *rheme*, not *theme*) is that the acts of God in the bringing of disorder upon the Egyptians were "signs" that God was more powerful and majestic than the Egyptians' gods. This sense of the term "signs" fits well in Gen 1:14. The author says that not only are the sun and moon to give light upon the land but they are to be visual reminders of the power and majesty of God. They are "signs" of who the God of the covenant is. They are "telling of the glory of God," as the psalmist puts it (Ps 19:1). Not only does the term "signs" serve as a reminder of the greatness and glory of God for the author of the Pentateuch, "signs" are also a frequent reminder in the Pentateuch of his grace and mercy (Gen 4, 9, 17).

Another example of a theme term in Gen 1:1-2:4a is the term "seasons." Here our English word "season" suggests something like "winter, fall, etc.," but again, the broader context of the Pentateuch gives a

more precise meaning. In Lev, in fact, there is an entire chapter devoted to the term "seasons." This is not easy to see in some English versions because the term is rendered "feasts" in Lev. Strictly speaking the term means "appointments." These appointments were the annual days when all Israel was to come together and worship the God of the covenant and celebrate the covenant relationship (Lev 23). If this is the meaning of the term in Gen 1, we see that the author had something very specific in his mind when he wrote of the creation of the sun and moon. They were not mere lights or reminders of God's glory, they were, as well, calendars for the celebration of the covenant. The world is made for the covenant. Already at creation, the land was being prepared for the covenant. Israel's covenant is at home in the world.

In Gen 1:1--2:4a there is also the development of new terms (*rheme*) in the narrative. In fact, the concept of man's creation in the "image" of God finds its only explanation in this narrative. The explanation of the term comes from the way in which the author selects two features in man's creation: the deliberation of God before creating man and God's blessing of man after his creation. Both features have an important bearing on the author's view of the Sinai covenant.

First, God's deliberation shows that he has decided to create man differently from any of the other creatures--in his image and likeness. God and man share a likeness that is not shared by other creatures. This apparently means that a relationship of close fellowship can exist between God and man that is unlike the relationship of God with the rest of his creation. What more important fact about God and man would be necessary if the covenant at Sinai were, in fact, to be a real relationship? Remove this and the covenant is unthinkable.

Secondly, in Gen 1, man, the image bearer, is the object of God's blessing. According to the account of creation in Gen 1, the chief purpose of God in creating man is to bless him. The impact of this point on the remainder of the Pentateuch and the author's view of Sinai is clear: through Abraham, Israel and the covenant this blessing is to be restored to all mankind.

The Principle of Contemporization

Often in the writing of historical narrative, events of the past find new meaning and significance in relation to certain issues and ideas present in the author's own day. Thus the author views past events with a certain eye to the present, and he would assume his narrative would be read in that way. From this fact a principle emerges: look for thematic development of ideas and issues current during the author's own time. This presupposes that we have some indication of when the narrative was written and that we know something of the historical-cultural setting of the narrative's composition. If we do not know when or to whom a book is written, it may mean that the book has been intentionally generalized as well as contemporized so that it may speak to many succeeding audiences in many different contexts.

This principle can be detected in Gen 1 by the way in which the author of the Pentateuch uses terms in unusual contexts. For example,

he calls the global ocean (the "deep") in 1:2 a "desert." This is not apparent in the English translation "formless," but the NASB notes it in the margin as a "wasteland." If we again use the notion of *theme* terms and search for the meaning of this word within the Pentateuch itself, we can see its typological significance. Moses uses this term (Deut 32:10) to describe the desert wasteland where Israel wandered for forty years. Why call an ocean a desert? What better way to teach the people that the God who will lead them out of the *wilderness* and give them the promised *land* is the same God who once prepared the *land* for them by dividing the *waters* and producing the "dry land"? The God of the Pentateuch is One who leads his people from the wasteland to the promised land.

Summary

We close with one further example of the role of structure and selection in determining the meaning of a unit of historical narrative like Gen 1:1-2:4a. This example should serve also as a summary of the approach taken in this paper.

We have already seen that the overall purpose of the author of the Pentateuch seems to be to show that the Sinai covenant failed for lack of an obedient heart on the part of God's people Israel. We have also seen that his intention in writing the Pentateuch is not to look back in despair at the failure of man but to point in hope to the faithfulness of God. The hope of the writer of the Pentateuch is clearly focused on what God will do to bring his covenant promises to fulfillment. Nowhere is he more clear on this than at the (structural) conclusion to his work: Deut 30:1-10, where Moses tells the people of Israel that they will fail and that they will be cursed, but God's work with them will not end there. The Lord will again bring them into the land, gathering them from all the lands where they have been exiled. But this time, things will be different. Israel is going to obey God. God is going to give them a heart that will obey, a heart that will love the Lord and keep his commandments. It is on this high note that the Pentateuch finally draws to a close.

If we go beyond the Pentateuch to the other historical books, the Prophets and finally to the New Testament, the fulfillment of Moses' hope is made certain. It is also clear in these later books how God is going to give his people a new heart: "I will give you a new heart, a new Spirit I will put within you; I will turn away the heart of stone from your flesh and I will give you a heart of flesh. My Spirit I will put within you and I will make you walk in my statutes and my judgments you will keep" (Ezek 36:26, 27). *It is by means of God's Spirit that his people are able to do his will.* No one is clearer on this point than the apostle Paul (Rom 8:4). What is often overlooked, however, is that we needn't go beyond the Pentateuch itself for exactly the same conclusion. The author of the Pentateuch has as one of his central purposes to show that God's work must always be done in God's way: *by means of the Spirit of God.* To show the centrality of this idea in the Pentateuch we need only compare the author's description of God's own

carrying out of his will (Gen 1:2b) with that of man's obedience to God's will (Exod 31:1-5).

Viewed on its own, the description of the Spirit of God in Gen 1:2 has often been only remotely related to the rest of the chapter. Some interpreters have even chosen to eliminate this reference to God's Spirit altogether and render the passage simply as "a mighty wind was blowing over the surface of the waters." When viewed as structurally related to Exod 31, however, this brief notice regarding the Spirit of God takes on a whole new importance for the meaning of the Pentateuch.

In Exod 31:1-5, God has chosen Bezalel to do the work of building the tabernacle. What God has commanded Moses, Bezalel is to perform. In order to insure his accomplishment of the work, the author of the Pentateuch tells us, the Lord filled Bezalel with the Spirit of God "to do all of the work . . . which I have commanded you." For the author of the Pentateuch, to do the work of God successfully (with wisdom), one must be filled with the Spirit of God. We may recall what Moses says to Joshua when he complains that someone "unofficial" may have received the Spirit of the Lord: "Would that the Lord would put his Spirit upon all of them [his people]" (Nurn 11:29).

If this is one point that the author of the Pentateuch is intending to make throughout this major biblical book, then his comment at the beginning (Gen 1:2b) makes perfectly good sense. Even God the Creator, when he does his work of creating, does so by means of the Spirit of God. How much more then should his people do his will by means of his Spirit.

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