

The Genesis of Everything

An historical account of the Bible's opening chapter

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Abstract

The paper seeks to plot a path through the controversy surrounding the Bible's opening chapter by examining Genesis 1 in historical context. The author assumes and endorses no particular view of human origins but argues for a literal interpretation of the text, as opposed to what may be called 'literalistic'. The former reading gives due weight to both the literary genre of Genesis 1 and the cultural milieu of the original writer, whereas the latter gives sufficient attention to neither.

Various pre-scientific interpretations of Genesis 1 are described, including those of the first century Jewish intellectual Philo and the great Christian theologian Augustine. In particular, comparisons are drawn with the Babylonian creation epic, *Enuma Elish*, and it is suggested that Genesis 1 is a piece of 'subversive theology', making significant theological points in the light of contemporaneous creation ideas. The questions raised (and answered) by the Bible's opening chapter concern the nature of the Creator, the value of creation and the place of humanity within the creational scheme. Modern questions concerning the mechanics and chronology of creation may not be appropriately put to the ancient text.

Key words

Creation, Genesis 1, literary genre, number symbolism, Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, one God, coherent creation, place of men and women.

Introduction: a heated debate

It is obvious to anyone with even a cursory interest in the topic of 'origins' that the Bible's opening creation account (Gen. 1:1–2:3¹) has been the subject of a very heated debate in recent years between so-called 'six-day creationists' and those branded 'scientific materialists'. These labels are frequently used in a pejorative sense, so let me flag that my use of these epithets is one of convenience not criticism.

The six-day creationists insist, largely on the basis of Genesis 1, that the universe was created in just one week about 6000 years ago and that no other interpretation of the biblical material is possible for those seeking to be faithful to Scripture as divinely inspired. The scientific materialists retort, largely on the basis of the scientific data, that such a view is patently false and that the universe is close to 14 billion years old. Therefore, the Judeo-Christian account of our origins, they say, must be dismissed as irrelevant for our day. There are, of course, innumerable 'middle-positions' that are less relevant to the argument of this paper.

In what follows, I hope to demonstrate that both sides of the debate—as they typically present themselves—make a similar mistake. They form their conclusions about the biblical account of creation in isolation from the conclusions of many mainstream contemporary biblical historians. And it is *as a historian* that I wish to address this theme.

Six-day creationists and scientific materialists approach the opening chapter of the Bible in a 'literalistic' fashion. I use the word 'literalistic' deliberately, as I want to distinguish between literalistic and literal. A literalistic reading takes the words of a text at face value, interpreting them with minimal attention to literary genre and historical context. A literal reading such as my own, on the other hand, gives serious consideration to both the literary style and the historical setting of a text. It tries to understand not only what is said but what is meant—i.e. what the original author intended to convey. Sometimes in literature what is *meant* and what is *said* do not have a one to one correspondence. In metaphor, for example, what is meant is greater than what is said ('The Lord is my shepherd', Ps. 23:1). In hyperbole what is meant is less than what is said ('If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away', Mt. 5:30). One can read such literary devices literally—trying to discern what the literature intends to convey—without reading them literalistically.

Both six-day creationists and scientific materialists approach Genesis 1 as if the original author had intended to narrate the mechanics of creation in historical prose. I believe this is a mistaken, literalistic reading. For over a century now, a great many biblical historians have detected in the Bible's opening words a style other than simple prose and a purpose other than

¹ Genesis 1:1–2:3 is the literary unit under discussion, even though I will frequently refer to it as 'Genesis 1' or the 'opening chapter of the Bible'.

to explain how the universe was made. These two issues, genre and purpose, are critical for understanding this foundational portion of the Jewish and Christian Bible. In what follows, then, I want to unpack what many modern scholars are saying about these issues and demonstrate that, properly understood, Genesis 1 teaches nothing *scientifically* problematic for the modern enquirer. I emphasize the adverb 'scientifically', since there is plenty in Genesis 1 that is *theologically* and *existentially* confronting. That is the aim of the text, as I understand it.

But, first, an important clarification: I must emphasize that this paper assumes no particular view of human origins. The questions explored are literary and historical, not scientific. My rejection of the literalistic reading of Genesis 1 offers no direct support for old-earth, progressive creationism (or 'theistic evolution', as it is sometimes called), nor is it intended to do so. In fact, the case made below is consistent with virtually any scientific account of origins. To put it starkly but no less accurately, even if science ended up proving that the universe was created in six days around 6000 year ago, this happy correspondence between the scientific data and the *surface structure* of Genesis 1 would not affect my interpretation of the text at all. I would still insist that the opening chapter of the Bible does not aim to teach a particular cosmic chronology and that to suggest otherwise misconstrues the author's original intention.

An analogy may help. Suppose that some clear historical evidence were discovered that around AD 29 a certain fellow from Samaria was travelling along the Jerusalem-Jericho road and came upon a Jewish man stripped of his clothes and beaten half to death. The Samaritan promptly tended to his wounds and paid two *denarii* for his care at a nearby guesthouse. Would this chance discovery—perhaps in some passing report by Josephus or Philo—have any bearing on the actual *point* being made in Jesus' famous parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37) where precisely such details are narrated? The answer is 'No'. It would certainly be a happy coincidence if one of Jesus' didactic illustrations turned out *also* to be a true story, but it would not alter the fact that the 'parable' itself—a well-known literary device of Jewish antiquity—was never intended to be heard as a historical narrative. Parables are narrative constructs with a moral or spiritual message. Whether they correspond to events in time is of no consequence. The parable of the Good Samaritan, therefore, is (in theory) consistent with any view of the historicity of the story because *factuality* is not relevant to the genre. A person reading the text may, of course, believe that Jesus was telling a factual story—it may well be—but he or she could not argue that the story puts itself forward as such; it is obviously a parable (even though, interestingly, the story is not introduced as a parable in Luke's Gospel). The point here is not that Genesis 1 is also a parable. Not at all. I am simply emphasizing that some parts of Scripture, rightly interpreted, commit us to no particular view of the factuality of what is described. I do not believe that Genesis 1 *teaches* a six-day creation but this is neither an endorsement of theistic evolution nor a denial of six-day creationism. It is simply a literary and historical statement. I am happy to leave the science to the scientists.

1. Interpretation of Genesis 1 in the pre-scientific era

Before I give an account of what contemporary scholars are saying about the genre and purpose of Genesis, I want to establish for readers that a *non*-literalistic interpretation of Genesis 1 is by no means a recent phenomenon. Sceptical friends have often put it to me that my interpretation of Genesis 1 is really just an act of acquiescence to the troubling conclusions of modern science: 'It is now clear that life emerged over a period of billions of years', they say, 'so now you are trying to appear respectable by picking and choosing how you read the Bible.' Richard Dawkins has echoed this criticism with great flair recently (Dawkins 2006 pp. 237–238). Interestingly, six-day creationists say the same thing. They insist that the non-literalistic reading of Genesis 1 is the result of biblical scholars losing their nerve or being taken captive to the *Zeitgeist*.

It is never wise to second-guess the motives of scholars on such questions but, more significantly, it is important to realize that the precedents for a non-literalistic reading of Genesis 1 can be found in the very distant past. What follows is not intended as a proof or validation of my interpretation; it is simply a counter-argument to the above suggestion. Genesis 1 was being interpreted in a non-literalistic fashion long before modern science became a 'problem' for some Christians.

The Jewish scholar Philo

The prolific Jewish scholar, Philo, who lived and worked in Alexandria in the first century (10 BC – AD 50), wrote a treatise titled *On the Account of the World's Creation Given by Moses*. In this work, Philo says that God probably created everything simultaneously and that the reference to 'six days' in Genesis indicates not temporal sequence but divine orderliness (Philo 13, 28). In the introduction to the Loeb Classical Library edition of this work the translators, FH Colson and GH Whitaker summarize Philo's rather complex and subtle view of things:

By 'six days' Moses does not indicate a space of time in which the world was made, but the principles of *order* and *productivity* which governed its making [original emphasis].

Philo p. 2

It is perhaps important to note that Philo was not marginal. He was the leading intellectual of the largest Jewish community outside of Palestine.² How widespread his views were we do not know, but his discussion of the topic reveals no hint of controversy.

² For a concise history of the Jewish community of the intellectual centre of Alexandria (and Philo's place in it) see Binder 1999.

The Greek 'Fathers'

Philo is followed in this interpretation by the second century Christian theologian and evangelist, Clement of Alexandria (AD 150–215), for whom the six days are symbolic (*Stromata* VI, 16). A generation later, Origen (185–254), the most influential theologian of the third century—again, an Alexandrian—understood Days 2–6 of the Genesis account as days in time. However, he regarded Day 1 as a non-temporal day. He reasoned that without matter, which was created on the second day, there could be no time; hence, no true 'day'.³ What is interesting here is that a leading Christian scholar of antiquity was comfortable mixing concrete and metaphorical approaches to Genesis 1 (Origen in Heine 1982).

The Latin Fathers and beyond

Moving to Latin-speaking scholars, the fourth century Bishop of Milan, Saint Ambrose (AD 339–397), taught a fully symbolic understanding of Genesis 1.⁴ Moreover, his greatest convert, and perhaps history's most influential theologian, Saint Augustine, famously championed a quite sophisticated, non-literalistic reading of the text. Augustine understood the 'days' in Genesis 1 as successive epochs in which the substance of matter, which God had created in an instant in the distant past, was fashioned into the various forms we now recognise (Augustine 2002). Augustine's view was endorsed by some of the biggest names in the medieval church, including the Venerable Bede in the 8th century (*Hexaemeron* 1, 1), St Albert the Great (Commentary on the Sentence 12, B, I) and the incomparable Thomas Aquinas (II Sentences 12, 3, I) in the 13th century.⁵

It must be said that such views were not the majority position during this period. The literalistic reading appears to have been the dominant one from the 5th-century through to today. In her review of the interpretations of Genesis 1–2 offered by the ancient Fathers, Elizabeth Clark argues that this concrete approach to the text developed in the 5th-century partly as a response to the ascetic, anti-creation heresies of the period. Only a literalistic understanding of the Bible's creation account, it was thought, could preserve a truly biblical doctrine of the goodness of creation (Clark 1988 pp. 99–133).

³ In this, Origen echoes Philo who argued similarly about Day 1 in *On the creation* (Philo 15, 26–27, 34–35).

⁴ For a history of interpretation of these sections of Genesis see *Genesis 1–3 in the history of exegesis: intrigue in the garden* (Robbins 1988). A detailed account of patristic (both Greek and Latin) interpretations of Genesis 1 is also found in Appendix 7 of St Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* (Aquinas 1967 pp. 202–210).

⁵ For Aquinas' own careful and even comparison of Augustine's view of creation with other ancient Fathers see *Summa Theologiae* Ia. 74. (Aquinas 1967 pp. 1–3) Excellent articles on the interpretation of the 'Six Days' (*Hexaemeron*) among medieval theologians are found in Appendices 8 and 9 in St Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* (Aquinas 1967 pp. 211–224).

Be that as it may, the larger point I wish to make is that a non-literalistic interpretation of Genesis 1 is not necessarily a nervous, modern reaction to the rise of contemporary science. It is a viewpoint (even if a minority one) with a long and venerable history in both Jewish and Christian traditions.

Having said this, there are aspects of the modern interpretation of Genesis 1 that only became possible in the 16th–19th centuries, at precisely the time of the scientific revolution. This is no coincidence. The Renaissance and Enlightenment periods precipitated a literary revolution in parallel with the scientific one. This was a time of increasing sophistication in the historical-critical analysis of ancient texts in their original languages. Out of such analyses have come particular conclusions about the genre and purpose of Genesis chapter 1.

2. The Genre of Genesis 1

With the rise of literary criticism modern biblical scholars have begun to appreciate more fully the importance of genre for interpreting ancient texts. When you and I pick up the daily newspaper we have no problem moving from news-report, to editorial, to satire, to TV guide, to comics, and so on. We do not need side notes indicating the transitions. We all understand the literary forms and read the relevant pieces appropriately.

Ancient people operated in much the same way. Within the Bible alone we can discern not only poetry and prose but also legal formula, historical report, parable, aphorism, prophecy, hyperbole, creed, hymn, epistle, prophetic lament, homily and apocalyptic. All of these must be read differently and were so by ancient audiences. The notion that the ancients were simpletons who only knew how to operate in literalistic mode is as facile as it is false.

The example of 'apocalyptic' in Revelation

'Apocalyptic' offers a good parallel for the present discussion. In the book of Revelation, the closing text of the Bible, the writer narrates cosmic visions replete with symbols and codes involving numbers, colours and even animals (the famous '666' or 'mark of the Beast' comes from the book of Revelation).

A literalistic interpretation of, say, Revelation 19—to take just one example—would have us believe that Jesus will return to earth one day with eyes of fire, riding a white horse, wearing a blood-stained robe upon his back and multiple crowns upon his head.⁶ Some modern Christians may sincerely expect things to pan out this way, but such a concretization of the images would never have entered the minds of ancient believers.

⁶ Revelation 19:11-13: I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. ¹² His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. ¹³ He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God.

Scholars long ago pointed out that large sections of the book of Revelation correspond to the ancient literary device known as 'apocalyptic', in which numbers, colours, animals and so on, were employed with specific referents. The writer of Revelation would never have predicted that audiences one day might approach his work literalistically.

A similar situation pertains to the first book of the Bible. Genesis 1 is not written in apocalyptic, of course, but it is composed in a style quite unlike the 'historical narrative' of, say, the Gospels in their accounts of Jesus' resurrection. There is no getting around the fact that the Gospels writers were claiming to write history at that point—whether or not readers end up accepting what is reported. Genesis 1, on the other hand, is not written in the style we normally associate with historical report. It is difficult even to describe the passage as prose. The original Hebrew of this passage is marked by intricate structure, rhythm, parallelism, chiasmus, repetition and the lavish use of number symbolism. These features are not observed together in those parts of the Bible we recognize as historical prose.

This observation must be given some weight. While on literary grounds one cannot say that the world was not created in six days, one can safely conclude that the concerns of Genesis 1 lie elsewhere than providing a cosmic chronology. The genre of our text suggests that the author intended to convey his meaning through subtle and sophisticated means, not through the surface plot of the narrative (i.e. creation in six days).

Number symbolism in Genesis 1

A full account of all of the literary devices in Genesis would be inappropriate in this journal—and would certainly exceed the word limit—and they are well described in numerous technical studies and commentaries⁷. I will, however, draw attention to the number symbolism present in our passage. This provides a compelling example of the unusual nature of the text and of the way the author seeks to convey his message through means other than the surface-level plot.

It is well known that in Hebrew thought the number seven symbolises 'wholeness' as a characteristic of God's perfection. A well-known example is the seven-candle lamp stand⁸, or Menorah, which has long been a symbol of the Jewish faith and is the emblem of the modern State of Israel.

In Genesis 1, multiples of seven appear in extraordinary ways. For ancient readers, who were accustomed to taking notice of such things, these multiples of seven conveyed a powerful message. Seven was the divine number, the number of goodness and perfection. Its omnipresence in the

⁷ A good introduction to the literary characteristics of Genesis 1 (with ample bibliography) can be found in Wenham's *Genesis 1-15* (Wenham 1987 pp. 1-40).

⁸ In Revelation 1 in the New Testament Jesus is described as holding 'seven stars' and walking amidst 'seven lampstands'. These are images of his divine authority over the cosmos and the church.

opening chapter of the Bible makes an unmistakable point about the origin and nature of the universe itself. Consider the following:

- The first sentence of Genesis 1 consists of seven Hebrew words. Instantly, the ancient reader's attention is focused.
- The second sentence contains exactly fourteen words. A pattern is developing.
- The word 'earth'—one half of the created sphere—appears in the chapter 21 times.⁹
- The word 'heaven'—the other half of the created sphere—also appears 21 times.
- 'God', the lead actor, is mentioned exactly 35 times.
- The refrain 'and it was so', which concludes each creative act, occurs exactly seven times.
- The summary statement 'God saw that it was good' also occurs seven times.
- It hardly needs to be pointed out that the whole account is structured around seven scenes or seven days of the week.

The artistry of the chapter is stunning and, to ancient readers, unmistakable. It casts the creation as a work of art, sharing in the perfection of God and deriving from him. My point is obvious: short of including a prescript for the benefit of modern readers the original author could hardly have made it clearer that his message is being conveyed through literary rather than prosaic means. What we find in Genesis 1 is not exactly poetry of the type we find in the biblical book of Psalms but nor is it recognizable as simple prose. It is a rhythmic, symbolically-charged inventory of divine commands.

Literary style and the question of 'truth'

None of this should trouble modern Christians, as if truths expressed by literary device were somehow less true than those expressed in simple prose. We have already raised the examples of parable and apocalyptic. Outside of the Bible, we also recognize the capacity of images to convey truth. When Romeo says, 'What light through yonder window breaks? It is the East, and Juliet is the sun!' we all understand what is being said. The statement is no less real than if Romeo had said, 'Juliet is at the window

⁹ Please remember, I use the word 'chapter' loosely. It is commonly noted that the opening literary section of Genesis runs from 1:1 through to 2:3. Appropriately, the NIV places the heading for the second section at 2:4. For the details see Wenham (Wenham 1987 p. 6).

and she is pretty'. Only someone unacquainted with the English literary tradition would quibble over the ontological discrepancies between a woman and the sun.

Did God create 'light' on Day 1 of creation? He might have. But this is not the point of Genesis 1:3. The highly 'literary' presentation style of our passage makes it unlikely, in my opinion, that the author intended for us to link his surface plot of a seven-day week with a sequence of physical events in time. Again, the example of the book of Revelation comes to mind. It is universally agreed amongst scholars that the number of Jews present in Revelation's picture of the heavenly kingdom (144,000) is symbolic not actual. Being a multiple of 12 (the number of the tribes of Israel) the 144,000 figure conveys the idea of a complete number of Israelites. This is recognized even in popular circles, though I note that Jehovah's Witnesses interpret the number literalistically.

3. The Purpose of Genesis 1

But genre is only half of the matter. Equally important is an appreciation of the historical purpose of Genesis.

As citizens of a scientific age we assume that any document which mentions the origins of the world must be concerned with the mechanics of those origins, that is, with how the universe was made. But that is surely anachronistic. One of the first rules of historical enquiry is: thou shalt not read contemporary assumptions into ancient texts. In the case of Genesis we absolutely must remember that this text was composed two and half thousand years before the scientific era, at a time when intellectuals were not even asking questions about the mechanics of creation.

Paganism and biblical 'subversion'

So what is the purpose of this portion of Scripture, according to biblical historians? In a nutshell, the opening section of the Bible appears to have been written to provide a picture of physical and social reality that debunks the views held by pagan cultures of the time. In short, Genesis 1 is a piece of subversive theology.

To anyone familiar with the Old Testament this subversive, anti-pagan intent will come as no surprise. One of the golden threads of the Old Testament is its sustained critique of the pagan religions of Israel's neighbours—the Egyptians, Canaanites and Babylonians. The first two of the Ten Commandments, for instance, are all about shunning the pagan deities of the ancient world.¹⁰ Moreover, the book of Psalms—the hymn book of ancient Jews—regularly and explicitly declares that the creation owes its existence not to the pagan gods but to Yahweh, the God of

¹⁰ Exodus 20:3-5 You shall have no other gods before me. 4 You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them.

Israel.¹¹ In Jeremiah 50:2 the Babylonian creator god, Marduk, is explicitly named and denounced. Given the prominence of this motif in the Old Testament it would be surprising if the Old Testament's longest statement about creation did not take a swipe at pagan understandings of the universe.

We do not have to speculate about this. Through a stroke of very good fortune, scholars are now able to see just how the writer of Genesis went about his task of debunking his ancient rivals.

***Enuma elish*: a Babylonian Creation Myth**

Just as Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was about to be published (1858), archaeologists working in Mosul in Northwest Iraq (ancient Mesopotamia) in the early 1850s discovered tablets almost three thousand years old (Hess 1994 pp. 3–26). On these tablets was written in cuneiform an account of creation held sacred by Israel's near and dominant neighbours, the ancient Babylonians. Suddenly, we were in a position to compare Genesis 1 with a pagan creation tradition which, according to most scholars, predates the biblical account by several centuries.¹²

We now know that if you were raised in Babylonian culture of the second millennium BC your view of origins would have been based on a story that was as popular as our Santa Claus fable and as socially influential as Darwinism itself. The story came to be called *Enuma elish*, the opening words of the epic.¹³ To make a long, seven-tablet story short, *Enuma elish* narrates the violent adventures of the original family of the gods. Apsu and Tiamat, the father and mother of the gods, go to war against their offspring because of all the chaos the youngsters bring to their peaceful kingdom. Both divine parents are killed by the greatest of the junior warrior gods, Marduk, who goes on to fashion the universe out of the various bits and pieces of the vanquished gods.

As bizarre as all this sounds, stories like *Enuma elish* were critical expressions of ancient people's understanding of the purpose and significance of life. Indeed, *Enuma elish* was so important in Babylon it was publicly recited in the capital every New Year's day. It was their national mythic story. It was Christmas and ANZAC Day rolled into one.

The fascinating thing about all this is that Genesis 1 shares numerous thematic and stylistic features with the pagan myths scholars have

¹¹ Psalm 95 1 Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD ... 3 For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods. 4 In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. 5 The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. Psalm 96 4 ... great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. 5 For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens.

¹² For the dates of the documents and inscriptions in question see the relevant chapters in 'I Studied Inscriptions from Before the Flood' (Hess 1994).

¹³ The title comes from the opening words of the cuneiform text 'When on high (*enuma elish*) ...' The texts of various Mesopotamian myths, including *Enuma elish*, can be found in Dalley (Dalley 1992).

uncovered in the last 150 years. *Enuma elish* provides the simplest point of comparison:

- Both *Enuma elish* and Genesis begin in the first paragraph with a watery chaos at the dawn of time. Instantly, then, we know we are in similar thought-worlds.
- Both stories proceed in seven movements: seven days in Genesis 1 and seven scenes written on seven tablets in *Enuma elish*.
- The narratives even share the same order of creation, beginning with the heavens, then the sea, then the earth, and so on.
- Both accounts climax with the creation of men and women, which occurs in the sixth scene or day in both accounts.

After initial speculation that Genesis had perhaps plagiarized pagan creation motifs,¹⁴ it soon dawned on scholars that what we find in Genesis 1 is philosophically antithetical to the message of these other myths. Historians soon realized something that they should already have expected given the criticism of pagan creation motifs found elsewhere in the Old Testament: Genesis 1 is a polemic against pagan cosmology and theology. Genesis uses stylistic elements of its pagan equivalents in order very cleverly to debunk the view of the world expressed in those traditions. The parallels constitute not an emulation or endorsement of paganism but a parody or subversion of it. Genesis storms onto the ancient Middle Eastern stage with guns blazing, so to speak, making profoundly controversial claims about God, the environment and the purpose of human life.¹⁵

Exactly how Genesis achieves these subversive aims is the concern of the remainder of the paper.

4. The Solitary God

The most prominent theme in Genesis 1 will have struck ancient pagan readers as a perverse novelty. The creation of the universe, says Genesis, was a solo performance. Behind the entire cosmos, in all its intricacy and variation, there is just one God. To give it a modern philosophical tag, Genesis 1 proclaims an uncompromising 'monotheism'. It does this in a number of ways.

A striking introduction

Firstly, our text begins with a striking introduction: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' The writer does not bother to warm

¹⁴ Leading the charge with the theory that Genesis was deeply dependent on the Babylonian myths was Herman Gunkel's monograph of 1895 (Gunkel 1895). For an abridged English translation of the relevant parts of Gunkel's study see Anderson (Anderson 1984 pp. 25-52).

¹⁵ Standard introductions to this theme in scholarship are found in Sarna (Sarna 1970), Kapelrud (Kapelrud 1974) and Tsumura (Tsumura 1994 pp 3-26). A vigorous attempt to rebut the 'majority view' espoused above is found in Kaiser (Kaiser 1970 pp. 48-65).

up his readers to the notion of one Creator; he puts it on the table up front. A single God, says Genesis, created not just this particular mountain or that particular constellation but the 'the heavens and the earth', which is the ancient way of saying 'everything'.

A solo performance

Secondly, the chapter has just one performer. There is plenty of activity in the account—lots of speaking, making, seeing, separating, naming and so on—but only one actor. The second paragraph sets up the pattern well:

And God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light 'day', and the darkness he called 'night'. And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

Gen. 1:3–5

Compared with other creation accounts of the time, Genesis 1 is a conspicuously lonely affair.

The use of 'god' instead of 'Yahweh'

The third way the passage proclaims monotheism is subtle but highly effective, especially for ancient readers. It has to do with the use, or rather non-use, of God's personal name. Pagan creation myths always named their gods so that readers could know which god did what. In the Babylonian *Enuma elish* no fewer than nine separate deities are named in the first two paragraphs.¹⁶

The ancient Jews also had a personal name for their god: 'Yahweh', or the more anglicized, 'Jehovah',¹⁷ and it appears many times throughout the rest of Genesis. What is fascinating is that of the 35 references in this chapter to Israel's Lord not one employs the divine name. The author simply uses the noun 'God'—*elohim* in Hebrew.¹⁸ The effect of this is to undercut any suggestion that Yahweh was simply a Hebrew member of the pagan pantheon. 'There is not Yahweh and Apsu and Tiamat and so on', says the author of Genesis. 'There is just *God*.' And by repeating the noun 35 times the writer makes his point loud and clear.

¹⁶ Apsu, Tiamat, Lahmu, Lahamu, Ansar, Kisar, Anu, Nudimmud, and Mummu.

¹⁷ The name 'Yahweh' is represented in English Bibles by the word 'Lord', written in capital letters. This is rather unhelpful really because the word doesn't mean 'lord' at all; it's a personal name and was intended to be used as such.

¹⁸ Only in the introduction to the next section, in chapter 2:4, does the author name this Creator-God as *Yahweh elohim*, the God named Yahweh. This is such a striking feature of the text that some scholars have proposed that chapters one and two were written by different authors. The first they call the *elohist* because he preferred the generic word 'god' or *elohim*, and the second they call the *yahwist* because he preferred God's personal name. The phenomenon is far more easily explained, as above.

5. Coherence in Creation

A corollary of pagan polytheism was a belief in the essential incoherence or randomness of the universe. In *Enuma elish*, for example, the physical world is said to have been fashioned as an after-thought, out of the bloody carnage of the war of the gods. The creation, in this view, is 'haphazard' in origin and 'tainted' in character. This was the broad viewpoint of ancient societies.

By contrast, Genesis 1 insists upon the elegance and intention of creation, in other words, upon its coherence. The universe is not a mindless collection of unpredictable forces, but the ordered accomplishment of a single creative genius. Monotheism in the Creator, says Genesis, results in coherence in the creation. The theme is emphasized by the 1st-century Jewish intellectual Philo in his *On the Creation*. It is found at almost every point in the biblical chapter.

The number '7' and wholeness

I have already mentioned the artful use of multiples of seven throughout the chapter. In accordance with Hebrew literary conventions, this underlines the ordered perfection of creation. Philo devotes 15 pages to the brilliance of the number seven. He begins:

I doubt whether anyone could adequately celebrate the properties of the number 7, for they are beyond all words.

Philo 90¹⁹

The careful structure of the passage

A more obvious device is the careful literary structure of the passage. Each creative scene follows a deliberate four-fold pattern:

- a *creative command* ('let there be light', for example) followed by
- a *report of the fulfilment* of the command ('and there was light')
- an elaboration of *creative detail* ('he separated the light from the darkness') and, finally
- a concluding *day-formula* ('and there was evening, and there was morning—the first day').

This pattern carries on through the whole account. The effect of all this is to underline the order and coherence of creation.²⁰

Repetition of the word 'good'

The repeated affirmation of the 'goodness' of the creation serves the same point. Verses 4, 7, 12, 16, 21 and 25 tell us that what God made 'was

¹⁹ His extraordinary account of the number 7 is found in *On Creation* 89-128.

²⁰ This insight corresponds to that of the first century Jewish author, Philo, as mentioned at 1.1.

good'. The seventh and climactic reference in v.31 says that the creation 'was very good'. One gets the impression that the author is trying to counter the low view of creation present in just about every pagan culture of the time.

The demystification of the heavens

The final contribution to this theme of coherence is particularly subversive in an ancient context. Many ancient societies worshipped the sun and moon as gods in their own right.²¹ Genesis 1, however, describes these heavenly bodies simply as 'lights'—a big light for the day and a small one for the night:

And God said, 'Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years, and let them be lights in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth.' And it was so. God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night.

Gen. 1:14-16

The author in fact refuses to use the normal Hebrew words for sun and moon, *shamash* and *yarih*, which may have been construed as divine names corresponding to Amon-Re in Egyptian tradition. These lights, moreover, are said to have been given by God to serve the inhabitants of the earth, rather than to be served by them. Anyone familiar with paganism will not have failed to see the significance of such comments.

The number symbolism, the careful structure, the affirmation of the creation's 'goodness', and the demystification of the heavenly bodies, all combine to challenge pagan notions of the capricious nature of the physical world. The creation is not random or possessed by spiritual powers, says Genesis 1; it is the coherent masterpiece of a single creative genius.

6. The Place of Men and Women

The subversive intention of Genesis 1 reaches its climax in its description of the place given to men and women in the world by the Creator.

Man in *Enuma elish*

As I said earlier, *Enuma elish* essentially recounts a primeval war of the gods. The eventual victor is a young deity named Marduk. He and his armies destroy the patriarch and matriarch of the gods and out of the bloody remains create the various items of the universe. The gods who had supported these vanquished foes were sentenced to an eternity of servitude, collecting and preparing food for the victors.

²¹ In fact, in Egypt, Amon-Re, the Sun-god, was said to rule the entire Egyptian pantheon, a collection of no fewer than 2000 deities.

Here is where human beings come in. The defeated gods begin to complain about the sheer indignity of being used merely to fetch food for other gods. They petition Marduk to create some other creature better suited to a life of slavery. The idea pleases Marduk and so, out of the goodness of his heart and the pools of blood left over from the battle, he fashions a man, a being whose central task in life is to serve the gods with food offerings:

When Marduk heard the complaints of the gods, he said: 'I will establish a savage, 'man' shall be his name. He shall be charged with the service of the gods, that they might be at ease!' Out of Kinju's blood they fashioned mankind. Marduk imposed the service on mankind and let free the gods

Enuma elish, Tablet 6²²

The clear 'message' of the story is that humans ought to know their place at the bottom of the divine scheme of things. Their role is to serve the needs and pleasures of the gods.²³

It is against just such ancient views of humanity that our passage has something striking to say. According to Genesis 1, men and women lie at the centre of the Creator's intentions and affections for the world. The theme is conveyed in a number of ways.

Interruption of the rhythm

First is the deliberate interruption to the rhythmic structure of the chapter. I mentioned earlier that each creative scene follows a careful four-fold pattern: a creative command followed by a report of the fulfilment of the command, an elaboration of creative detail, and a concluding day-formula. What I did not say is that in the final scene this pattern breaks down. Verse 26, which describes the creation of humankind, is introduced not with a creative command but with a divine deliberation, a pause in the rhythm of the text which tells us that something special is about to happen. God does not say 'Let there be man' as we should expect from the pattern set up throughout the chapter. Rather, the Creator declares to himself: 'Let us make man in our image.' The break in the rhythm is obvious and flags to readers that they have arrived at something special, a climax in the message of the chapter. The contrast with *Enuma elish* is striking. Humans were last in the list of creative acts in *Enuma elish* because they were an afterthought. They are last in the list of creative acts in Genesis because they are the highpoint of the account. The same point was highlighted by Philo two thousand years ago (Philo 77-82).

²² This same basic story, though in more detail, is narrated in Tablet 1 of the Babylonian *Atra-Hasis Epic* which dates about the middle of the second millennium BC. On this see Millard (Millard 1994 pp. 114-128).

²³ The ancient practice of placating deities with food offerings derives from stories such as this.

Men and women in the 'image of God'

The contrast with paganism deepens in the elaboration of the act of human creation. In *Enuma elish* the first man, as we saw, was fashioned out of the blood of the vanquished god, Kinju. The man, in other words, was a product of the loser's left-overs, to put it crudely. In Genesis 1, however, we are told that men and women were created in the very image of God. Verse 27 makes the point emphatically:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Gen. 1:27

The phrase, 'the image of a god' was used in two related ways in antiquity.²⁴ Firstly, it was used of the many statues of deities set up throughout pagan cities. These were regarded as representatives, 'images', of the divine presence. The second use of the epithet was in relation to kings. Ancient cultures, particularly Egyptian and Babylonian, described their kings as divine 'images'. The idea was similar to that in connection with religious statues. Kings were considered divine representatives or ambassadors. They exercised the rule of the gods over the people. Genesis 1 appears to endorse this notion of the divine ambassador but it does so in a democratised fashion. According to the author, all people, not just kings, have been fashioned in the image of the one true God. Notice also that v.27 makes a point of including both male and female persons within the image of God.

Human beings are not the product of a defeated god's blood; they are divine representatives, created to exercise God's careful rule over the creation, to ensure that his interests are realized in the world.²⁵

The service of God

There is another striking point made in these paragraphs. I noted earlier that the purpose of humanity according to *Enuma elish* (and other pagan myths) was to serve the gods with food offerings. In light of this, Genesis 1:29 may well have sounded very odd to ancient ears. Having urged men and women to exercise the divine rule over the earth, God then offers food to them:

Then God said, 'I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth ... They will be yours for food.'

Gen. 1:29

²⁴ There are all sorts of philosophical suggestions about what it means to be made in the 'image of God'. Some take the phrase as a reference to our critical faculties, others to our moral perception; still others take it to mean we possess a spirit just as God is a spirit. The historical analysis above, however, offers a more cogent interpretation.

²⁵ It's precisely this logic that leads to the words added in v.26: 'let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air' and so on. The point is reiterated in v.28: 'God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground".'

God serves us. What a subversive thought this was in ancient times! It is a theme which reaches its climax in biblical tradition in the equally radical notion of Christ's offering of himself for the sins of the world. What Genesis conveys metaphorically, Jesus would embody historically. But, of course, that goes beyond the scope of this paper.

Conclusion: Genesis and the search for meaning

I have argued in this paper that the author of Genesis 1 would not have been aware of the assumptions that would be brought to his text years later by six-day creationists and scientific materialists. He was not concerned with how the universe originated. Rather, he sought to answer the more urgent questions of antiquity: (1) From whom did the creation originate?; (2) What is the nature of that creation?; and (3) What place do men and women occupy in the creation? I have frequently noted the exposition of Genesis 1 by the 1st-century Jewish intellectual Philo of Alexandria. In the conclusion to this work *On Creation* he lists the five things the author intended to teach us in the opening chapter of Scripture: (1) that God has existed eternally (against the atheists, Philo says); (2) that God is one (against the polytheists); (3) that the creation came into being and is not eternal; (4) that there is one created universe not many; (5) that God's good Providence originally fashioned and currently sustains and cares for the creation. The one who embraces these five truths, says Philo:

will lead a life of bliss and blessedness, because he has a character moulded by the truths that piety and holiness enforce

Philo 172

For Philo, in other words, Genesis 1 answers philosophical, existential and theological questions. It is not concerned with the physical mechanics of origins.

The French philosopher and Nobel Laureate, Albert Camus (1913-1960), once contrasted scientific truth with philosophical truth. The one was valuable, he said, but not worth dying for. The other was central and very much worth living and dying for: 'I therefore conclude,' he wrote, 'that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions (Camus 1960). I have argued above that Genesis 1 must be understood in just this context. In its highly literary form and against the backdrop of competing pagan claims the Bible's opening chapter declares not a scientific truth of moderate importance but a bold answer to this 'most urgent of questions'.

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