

Title Page

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Abstract

This essay attempts to answer the question about the purpose of the creation accounts in Genesis through a relatively detailed grammatical exegesis of several key moments in Genesis 1:1-2:3/2:4a and Genesis 2:4/4b-25, particularly the first sentence (Genesis 1:1), the creation of humanity in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27) and the creation of Adam as an archetype of humanity in the image of God (Genesis 2:4-8) with reference to the original language and the literary form of the text. The argument then proceeds according to an assumption of the unity of the literary structure of Genesis in two sections—Genesis 1-11 (the ‘Primeval Histories’) and Genesis 12-50 (the ‘Patriarchal Narratives’)—which links God’s intentions and purposes in the creation accounts with the Abrahamic Covenant, which addresses the problem of sin and death recorded in the Primeval Histories following creation.

Essay

The author of Genesis included the creation accounts of Genesis 1:1-2:3/2:4a and 2:4/4b-25 in order to introduce the Genesis 1-11 Primeval Histories which exemplify the problem of sin and evil in the world and provide the context for the Abrahamic Covenant and its blessings. The Covenant is the foundation of the Genesis 12-50 Patriarchal Narratives and these narratives inform our understanding of Israel's unique purpose in the world as God's chosen instrument through which to deal with the problem of sin and evil and restore divine order and blessing to the world.

The Hebrew title of Genesis, *Bereshit*, communicates the major theme of the text, which is the beginning of the Pentateuch. However, the grammar of the first sentence provides the principle subject of the Pentateuch, which is God himself.¹ Yet the documentary hypothesis places Genesis 1:1-2:3/2:4a and 2:4/4b-25 in both chronologically and hermeneutically reverse order and therefore possibly challenges this assumption. For the principle subject of Genesis 2:4 is neither God (*Elohim*) nor the LORD God (*YHWH Elohim*) but 'the heavens and the earth,' which is creation as a whole.² However there are at least three reasons to think that God (or the LORD God) remains the principle subject of the Pentateuch even under this reversal. First, the chiasm in Genesis 2:4 implies that creation as a subject itself or as an object created by the LORD God is conceptually indistinguishable from God as its creator.³ Second, Davidic Psalms conceive of God as the first cause of creation and

¹ All major and authoritative translations of Gen. 1:1 in English present God as the subject: "In the beginning, God created..."

² Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook of the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (Baker Publishing Group: 2005), 24, explains the documentary hypothesis as follows: Gen. 1:1-2:3/4a has its source in a Priestly Source *P* from the Babylonian Exile period (c. 6th century BC) but Gen. 2:4/4b-25 has its origin in a Yahwist Source *J* from the Davidic-Solomonic era (c. 10th century BC). Furthermore, it is possible that both *P* and *J* were synthesised by a Post-Exilic Scholarly Redactor *R* who synthesised both *P* and *J* into a single narrative, which retained elements of both *P* and *J*. This theory for the textual history of Genesis influences one's interpretation of the beginning of Genesis in the following regard: it places Gen. 2:4/4b-25 chronologically prior to Gen. 1:1-2:3/4a which gives the former hermeneutical primacy over the latter.

³ J. P. Fokkerman, 'Genesis' in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Eds.), *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: 1987), 46, explains that the repetition of sounds, words, clauses, stories and

therefore as conceptually prior to it (Psa. 8). Thirdly, throughout Genesis 1:1-2:3/2:4a and Genesis 2:4/4b-25, God is the primary subject creating the world and issuing decrees and commands. Therefore, we may still infer that God is the principle subject of the creation accounts despite any hypothetical chronological and hermeneutical primacy Genesis 2:4/4b-25 may hold over Genesis 1:1-2:3/2:4a.

As God is the principle subject of the creation accounts, we should expect them to tell us about God. It is therefore appropriate to begin with Genesis 1:1. William J. Dumbrell comments that Genesis 1:1 is a title for the book as a whole.⁴ R. R. Reno notes that the Greek Septuagint utilises a verbal formula also present in John 1:1 which emphasises creation as being “absolute and foundational.”⁵ Claus Westermann argues that Genesis 1:1 is unique in the ancient world. For the first time, people conceived of the origin of both humanity and the world as a whole under the ordered guidance of a single God.⁶ Accordingly, creation itself in Genesis 1 proceeds under a clear, ordered structure. After beginning with an introductory statement in 1:1 about the principle subject followed by a brief description of the material state of the earth as a lifeless desolation in Genesis 1:2 (cf. Jer. 4:23), the text presents six days of creation ordered in two groups of three with the Sabbath day at the summit.⁷

Fokkelman considers the two-by-three structure of creation as postulating a duality between heaven and earth.⁸ Westermann explains that the irregular rhythmic pattern of the

groups of stories in the bible is a powerful literary technique which asks the reader to consider the differences and similarities between the two parts and their relation to each other—and chiasm is a form of literary repetition.

⁴ William J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel: A Theological Survey of the Old Testament* (Baker Academic: 2002), 19.

⁵ R. R. Reno, *Genesis: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Brazos Press: 2010), 37.

⁶ Claus Westermann, John J. Scullion S. J. (Trans. Ed.), *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Augsburg Publishing House: 1984), 602. In Contrast, the *Enuma Elish* epic depicts the creation of mankind and the world as the chaotic product of divine conflict. The author of Genesis is nestled within ANE culture, but seems to be intentionally contradicting ANE theology. See Speiser (Trans.), ‘Akkadian Myths and Epics’ in Pritchard (Ed.), *The Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton University Press: 1969).

⁷ Hamilton (2005), 22; Reno (2010), 40, thinks Gen. 1:2 presents us with a primeval chaos by virtue of the reference to water. However, the fact that it is God’s Spirit (ESV, NIV, KJV, NASB) or wind (NRSV) which churns the waters presents us with quite a different picture of the water as a powerful force but under God’s control.

⁸ Fokkelman in Alter and Kermode (Eds.), (1987), 40.

text reinforces, “the unique union of disparate elements.”⁹ Each act of creation is governed by a strict formula: God said, “Let there be *x*,” and there was *x*, God separated the *x* from the *y* and God called the *x* so-and-so and the *y* such-and-such. This is then followed by divine praise and a time-sequence.¹⁰ There are three major features here. Firstly, creation occurs by the word of God (“God said”). Secondly, creation consists of distinction in unity (Creator/Creation, Day/Night, Heaven/Earth, Land/Sea, Animal/Human, Male/Female). Thirdly, creation has a purpose (for example, the Sun, Moon and Stars govern time). Creation therefore informs our understanding of divine qualities that God is a holy, ordered and purposeful being whose world expresses his holiness, order and purpose.

Blessing is also a major feature of creation. On creation days 4-6, God blesses all animate creatures of the sea, the air and the land with the ability to reproduce life (Gen. 1:22, Gen. 1:28). Humanity (*adam*) is created in the image of God in this context (Gen. 1:26-27) and is given the special task of exercising dominion and authority under God over every living creature in order to subdue creation and bring divine blessing and thereby to establish divine order to it.¹¹ Human rule under God is a major feature of the image of God. Ancient Near Eastern texts show that the terms ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ are resemblance-language.¹² Therefore, humanity resembles God but is not an exact copy of God.¹³

Furthermore, the Hebrew term translated ‘subdue’ (*kabash*) presents in what way humanity is to resemble God. It is written in the second person plural imperative grammatical

⁹ Westermann (1984), 91.

¹⁰ Ibid. 84; cf. Hamilton (2005), 23-24.

¹¹ Westermann (1984), 603-604, suggests that humanity corporately and as a whole—and not humans as individuals—are the image of God, having been designed to be in community with each other and to work together for the global good.

¹² Speiser (Trans.) in Pritchard (Ed.) (1969), 67, *Enuma Elish* Tablet V.1-2, says of Marduk, “He constructed stations for the great gods, / Fixing their astral likenesses as the Images.” This is probably a reference to ancient Babylonian astrology, according to which the constellations of the stars bear the gods’ image and likeness. This seems to mean that the stars represent the gods, such that a person can see the face and will of the gods by properly interpreting the astral signs. One wonders if the author of Genesis picked up on this motif but instead transferred the image and likeness of the gods from the stars to humanity as a whole.

¹³ Dumbrell (2002), 25.

form, from which we may infer that God commands humanity to subdue the world, thereby retaining his own ultimate authority over humanity and the world even as he delegates authority to humanity in the world.¹⁴ The term seems to refer to the act of shaping, moulding, dominating or overpowering something for one's purposes.¹⁵ The purposes of God in Genesis is blessing, and the object of blessing is creation. Therefore, humanity's purposes it to bring God's blessing to all creation.

The man, Adam, who is created in Genesis 2:7, exemplifies the purpose of humanity. The wordplay between the terms 'mankind' (*adam*) and 'the man' (*et'ha'adam*) in Genesis 1:26 and Genesis 2:7 respectively link Adam's task specifically with humanity's task in general.¹⁶ Adam is therefore an archetype of what bearing the image of God properly ought to entail. Adam was created "to work the ground" (Gen. 2:5) in "the east" (Gen. 2:8) in order to begin his work in subduing creation to divine blessing (Gen. 2:15).¹⁷ However, it is here, in the account of Adam and his wife (Gen. 2:18, Gen. 2:21-22) that the divinely-ordained task of bringing order and blessing is abdicated when Adam and his wife are deceived by the Serpent chaos-creature and fall under a curse in Genesis 3 which introduces death and separation from God and the work of Eden.

Hamilton's passing comment on the brevity of the creation accounts prior to the fall into sin is instructive.¹⁸ The author of the text seems to hold creation in high esteem but does not seem interested in creation per se and for its own sake. This suggests that the creation

¹⁴ *The Lexham Hebrew Bible* (Lexham Press: 2012), Genesis 1:28.

¹⁵ F. Brown, S. R. Driver and C. A. Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Clarendon Press: 1977), 461, mentions interesting Aramaic and Arabic cognates, which give the overall sense of making something do what you want it to do.

¹⁶ In Genesis 1:26, there is neither a direct object particle (*et*) nor a definite article (*ha*) which implies that the object of creation is unspecific in 1:26 but more specific in 2:27. There is the direct object particle and deviate article in Genesis 1:27, but 1:27 seems to be qualified by the previous verse in 1:26 whereas there is no such immediate qualification for 2:7.

¹⁷ I suspect that the author is an Israelite scribe writing in the Wilderness of Paran or in the Land of Canaan, which therefore places the location of Eden somewhere in Mesopotamia, which is made all the clearer with reference to the two great Mesopotamian rivers—the Tigris and the Euphrates—which flow through the Garden (2:14).

¹⁸ Hamilton (2005), 22.

accounts are really an introduction to the problem of sin and death which conflicts with God's purposes in creation to bring divine order and blessing to the whole world. This is then the context for the *toledot* structure of Genesis. *Toledot* a literary motif in Genesis linking the generations of the heavens and the earth to Adam, to Abraham and to the rest of the Pentateuch. If we follow the *toledot* instances from the heavens and the earth (Gen. 2:4), Adam (Gen. 5:1-6:8), Noah (Gen. 6:9-9:29), Noah's sons (Gen. 10:1-11:9), Shem (Gen. 11:10-26), Terah (Abraham) (Gen. 11:27-25:11), Ishmael (Gen. 25:12-18), Isaac (Jacob) (Gen. 25:19-35:29), Esau (Gen. 36:1-8), Esau's family (Gen. 36:9-37:1) and Jacob (Joseph) (Gen. 37:2-50:26), we can discern a thematic conflict between divine order and blessing which reproduces life and the awkward and intrusive presence of sin and death for individuals, families and cities across Genesis 3-11.¹⁹

It is therefore significant that the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis 12:1-3 is filled with the language of blessing and multiplication.²⁰ The Covenant seeks to address the problem of sin and death which conflicts with God's purposes in creation. Abraham is the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of the Twelve Tribes which constitute the nation of Israel. Westermann's comments seem decisive for understanding the function of the creation accounts as providing a context for the story of Israel throughout the Pentateuch, "The God who delivered Israel out of Egypt, whom Israel encountered in its history, is at the same time the God who created heaven and earth and humankind. So Israel's experience of the saving God is put into a broad, comprehensive perspective."²¹ Provided we understand the relationship between the Pentateuch and the Former Prophets and therefore the Old

¹⁹ Kenneth A. Matthews, *The New American Commentary: Genesis 1-11:26* (Vol. 1A) (Broadman and Holman Publishers: 1996) pp.27-28; cf. Dumbrell (2002), 19: Gen. 2:4, 6:9, 11:27, 25:19, 37:2, 5:1, 10:1, 11:10, 25:12 and 36:1.

²⁰ Matthews (1996), 48.

²¹ Westermann (1984), 605.

Testament as a whole, we can therefore detect that the creation accounts of Genesis are foundational in exemplifying the problem which the Old Testament addresses.

In this light, the creation accounts should not be taken as merely factual historical statements about the past which tell us about what God has done, but they should also inform our understanding of the unique place that Israel plays in God's purposes across the Pentateuch as the vessel through which God plans to restore divine order and blessing which was lost in Adam's abdication of his ministry. The creation accounts reveal God's nature and character as an ordered and purposeful being who creates humanity in his image to subdue creation and bring divine order and blessing to it. But they also contextualise the disaster of sin in Eden and contextualise the Abrahamic Covenant, which begins to address the problems sin and death in the present. Creation is therefore the foundation for the story of redemption across the whole Pentateuch.

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