

Session 3: The Song of Creation; Ancient Near-Eastern Cosmology

Key text: Genesis 1:1-2:3

“In the Christian story, the material world came into existence at the point of speech, and that speech was *ex nihilo*, from nothing. God did not look around for some cosmic goo to sculpt, or another god to dice and recycle. He sang a song, composed a poem, began a novel so enormous that even the Russians are dwarfed by its heaped up pages. You are spoken. I am spoken. We stand on a spoken stage. The spinning kind. The round kind. The moist kind. The kind of stage with beetles and laughter and babies and dirt and snow and fresh-cut cedar. You are made of cells. I am made of cells. My cells are built on molecules. My molecules make use of atoms. My atoms are mostly space, but the bits that aren’t are called quarks. My quarks are standing because they’re obedient. They’ve been told to by a Voice they cannot disobey. For Berkeley and Buddhists and most breeds of Hindu, this world is illusory, sleight of hand. It seems material, the way the smoke plays with the mirrors, but it isn’t. The world is Vegas magic. Pick a card. Kick a stone. There are no tricks here. There are no props, no prefabbed white rabbits. The magic is real, and I stand blinking on the stage because of it. I’m real. I’m heavy. I’m matter. Cut me and I’ll bleed. But I’m not made out of anything, and if the Magician, the Poet, the Word, if the Singer were to stop His voice, I would simply cease to be. – N.D. Wilson, *Notes from the Tilt-A-Whirl*, 24.

Audience and Purpose of the Creation Narrative

The Audience: Israel in the Wilderness

The Purpose: To Reestablish the One True God As the *Only* True God

What Genesis 1 is undertaking and accomplishing [is] a radical and sweeping affirmation of monotheism vis-à-vis polytheism, syncretism, and idolatry. Each day of creation...dismisses an additional cluster of deities.... On the first day, the gods of light and darkness are dismissed. On the second day, the gods of sky and sea. On the third day, earth gods and gods of vegetation. On the fourth day, sun, moon and star gods. The fifth and sixth days take away any associations with divinity from the animal kingdom. And finally human existence, too, is emptied of any intrinsic divinity—while at the same time *all* human beings, from the greatest to the least, and not just pharaohs, kings, and heroes, are granted a divine likeness and mediation.⁵

The Shape of Genesis 1:1-2:3

The Prologue and Summary (1:1)

⁵ H. Conrad Hyer, “Biblical Literalism: Constricting the Cosmic Dance,” in *Is God a Creationist? The Religious Case Against Creation Science*, ed. Roland Mushat Frye (New York: Scribner, 1983), 101.

The Negative State of the Earth Before the Creative Act (1:2)

Creation by Word: Form and Fill (1:3-31)

Day	Form (<i>tohu</i> ="formless")	Day	Fill (<i>vohu</i> ="void/empty")
1	Light (vv. 3-5)	4	Lights (vv. 14-19)
2	Firmament (vv. 6-8) —Sky —Seas	5	Inhabitants (vv. 20-23) —Fish —Birds
3	Dry Land (vv. 9-10) Vegetation (vv. 11-12)	6	Land Animals (vv. 24-26) Humanity (vv. 27-31)

Summary Statement/Inclusio (2:1)

Epilogue: Sabbath Rest (2:2-3)

The Genre of Genesis 1:1-2:3

- A. Is it a hymn?
- B. Is it myth?
- C. It is theology?
- D. Is it science?
- E. Is it history?

F. Ancient Near Eastern Cosmogony

Man-o-logue: *What are the implications of the Creation Narrative for us personally and for the world we live in? What do we learn from the Creation Narrative? (If you get stuck, refer to Kirk Wellum and Todd Miles's sections in the SBJT article, pp. 81-87.)*

Suggested reading for next week's seminar discussion

Scripture to study: Genesis 2

Dictionary entry on "The Hexaemeron" and "The Protohistory" in class notes

Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary*, pp. 79-90

David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1-11*, pp. 52-99

Worship: *How Great Thou Art* Stuart K.Hine

O Lord my God, When I in awesome wonder,
Consider all the worlds Thy Hands have made;
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,
Thy power throughout the universe displayed.

Then sings my soul, My Saviour God, to Thee,
How great Thou art, How great Thou art.
Then sings my soul, My Saviour God, to Thee,
How great Thou art, How great Thou art!

And when I think, that God, His Son not sparing;
Sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in;
That on the Cross, my burden gladly bearing,
He bled and died to take away my sin.

When Christ shall come, with shout of acclamation,
And take me home, what joy shall fill my heart.
Then I shall bow, in humble adoration,
And then proclaim: "My God, how great Thou art!"

A Sampling of the Early Church Fathers' Views on the Six Days of Genesis 1:1-2:3

Indicating that the Days are *not* literal, 24-hour days:

That, then, we may be taught that the world was originated, and not suppose that God made it in time, prophecy adds: "This is the book of the generation: also of the things in them, when they were created in the day that God made heaven and earth." For the expression "when they were created" intimates an indefinite and dateless production. But the expression "in the day that God made," that is, in and by which God made "all things," and "without which not even one thing was made," points out the activity exerted by the Son. As David says, "This is the day which the Lord hath made; let us be glad and rejoice in it; " that is, in consequence of the knowledge imparted by Him, let us celebrate the divine festival; for the Word that throws light on things hidden, and by whom each created thing came into life and being, is called day.

(Clement of Alexandra, *Miscellanies* 6.16 [208 AD])

We answered to the best of our ability this objection to God's "commanding this first, second, and third thing to be created," when we quoted the words, "He said, and it was done; He commanded, and all things stood fast;" remarking that the immediate Creator, and, as it were, very Maker of the world was the Word, the Son of God; while the Father of the Word, by commanding His own Son--the Word—to create the world, is primarily Creator. And with regard to the creation of the light upon the first day, and of the firmament upon the second, and of the gathering together of the waters that are under the heaven into their several reservoirs on the third (the earth thus causing to sprout forth those (fruits) which are under the control of nature alone, and of the (great) lights and stars upon the fourth, and of aquatic animals upon the fifth, and of land animals and man upon the sixth, we have treated to the best of our ability in our notes upon Genesis, as well as in the foregoing pages, when we found fault with those who, taking the words in their apparent signification, said that the time of six days was occupied in the creation of the world, and quoted the words: "These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens."

(Origen, *Against Celsus* 6:60 [AD 248])

"For who that has understanding will suppose that the first, and second, and third day, and the evening and the morning, existed without a sun, and moon, and stars? And that the first day was, as it were, also without a sky? And who is so foolish as to suppose that God, after the manner of a husbandman, planted a paradise in Eden, towards the east, and placed in it a tree of life, visible and palpable, so that one tasting of the fruit by the bodily teeth obtained life? And again, that one was a partaker of good and evil by masticating what was taken from the tree? And if God is said to walk in the paradise in the evening, and Adam to hide himself under a tree, I do not suppose that anyone doubts that these things figuratively indicate certain mysteries, the history having taken place in appearance, and not literally." (Origen, *De Principiis* IV, 16)

For as Adam was told that in the [d]ay [h]e ate of the tree he would die, we know that he did not complete a thousand years. We have perceived, moreover, that the expression, 'The day of the Lord is as a thousand years,' is connected with this subject.

(Justin Martyr, *Dialog with Typho the Jew* chapter 81 [AD 155])

And there are some, again, who relegate the death of Adam to the thousandth year; for since "a day of the Lord is as a thousand years," he did not overstep the thousand years, but died within them, thus bearing out the sentence of his sin.

(Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 5:23 [AD 189])

As the first seven days in the divine arrangement containing seven thousand of years, as the seven spirits and seven angels which stand and go in and out before the face of God, and the seven-

branched lamp in the tabernacle of witness, and the seven golden candlesticks in the Apocalypse, and the seven columns in Solomon upon which Wisdom built her house I so here also the number seven of the brethren, embracing, in the quantity of their number, the seven churches, as likewise in the first book of Kings we read that the barren hath borne seven.

(Cyprian of Carthage, *Treatises* 11:11 [AD 250])

“The first seven days in the divine arrangement contain seven thousand years” (Lactantius, *Treatises* 11:11 [A.D. 250]).

Indicating that the Days are literal, 24-hour days:

To me, as I meditate and consider in my mind concerning the creation of this world in which we are kept enclosed, even such is the rapidity of that creation; as is contained in the book of Moses, which he wrote about its creation, and which is called Genesis. God produced that entire mass for the adornment of His majesty in six days; on the seventh to which He consecrated it . . . with a blessing. For this reason, therefore, because in the septenary number of days both heavenly and earthly things are ordered, in place of the beginning I will consider of this seventh day after the principle of all matters pertaining to the number of seven; and as far as I shall be able, I will endeavour to portray the day of the divine power to that consummation.

(Victorinus, *On the Creation of the World*)

“Therefore let the philosophers, who enumerate thousands of ages from the beginning of the world, know that the six-thousandth year is not yet complete. . . . Therefore, since all the works of God were completed in six days, the world must continue in its present state through six ages, that is, six thousand years. For the great day of God is limited by a circle of a thousand years, as the prophet shows, who says, ‘In thy sight, O Lord, a thousand years are as one day [Ps. 90:4]’” (Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 7:14 [A.D. 307]).

“‘And there was evening and morning, one day.’ Why did he say ‘one’ and not ‘first’? . . . He said ‘one’ because he was defining the measure of day and night . . . since twenty-four hours fill up the interval of one day” (Basil the Great, *The Six Days Work* 1:1–2 [A.D. 370]).

Indicating an uncertainty about the length of the Days:

But simultaneously with time the world was made, if in the world’s creation change and motion were created, as seems evident from the order of the first six or seven days. For in these days the morning and evening are counted, until, on the sixth day, all things which God then made were finished, and on the seventh the rest of God was mysteriously and sublimely signaled. What kind of days these were it is extremely difficult, or perhaps impossible for us to conceive, and how much more to say!

(St. Augustine, *City of God* 11:6 [AD 419])

“It not infrequently happens that something about the earth, about the sky, about other elements of this world, about the motion and rotation or even the magnitude and distances of the stars, about definite eclipses of the sun and moon, about the passage of years and seasons, about the nature of animals, of fruits, of stones, and of other such things, may be known with the greatest certainty by reasoning or by experience, even by one who is not a Christian. It is too disgraceful and ruinous, though, and greatly to be avoided, that he [the non-Christian] should hear a Christian speaking so idiotically on these matters, and as if in accord with Christian writings, that he might say that he could scarcely keep from laughing when he saw how totally in error they are. In view of this and in keeping it in mind constantly while dealing with the book of Genesis, I have, insofar as I was able, explained in detail and set forth for consideration the meanings of obscure passages, taking care not

to affirm rashly some one meaning to the prejudice of another and perhaps better explanation.” (St. Augustine, *The Literal Interpretation of Genesis 1:19–20*, Chap. 19 [AD 408])

“All the years from the creation of the world [to Theophilus’s day] amount to a total of 5,698 years and the odd months and days. . . . [I]f even a chronological error has been committed by us, for example, of 50 or 100 or even 200 years, yet [there have] not [been] the thousands and tens of thousands, as Plato and Apollonius and other mendacious authors have hitherto written. And perhaps our knowledge of the whole number of the years is not quite accurate, because the odd months and days are not set down in the sacred books” (Cyprian of Carthage, *Treatises* 3:28–29 [AD 250]).

“Scripture established a law that twenty-four hours, including both day and night, should be given the name of day only, as if one were to say the length of one day is twenty-four hours in extent. . . . The nights in this reckoning are considered to be component parts of the days that are counted. Therefore, just as there is a single revolution of time, so there is but one day. There are many who call even a week one day, because it returns to itself, just as one day does, and one might say seven times revolves back on itself” (Ambrose of Milan, *Hexaemeron* [A.D. 393]).