

Introduction



1. The Purpose and Parameters of This Book

The Genesis creation story does much more than just commence the Bible. It is at once the sacred story of God's wondrous creation and an important cultural icon that has inspired readers for centuries. The Bible's first story continues to fascinate readers, laypeople and scholars alike. The sweep of this narrative and its imagery do more than keep the readers' rapt attention. It leads them to consider and contemplate the profound realities of creation as they unfold in the story. The beautiful and highly literate structure of its narrative, with its deep symbolism and masterfully sparse rhetoric, offers its readers more than just an inspiring vision of creation. It also gives them a first grand look at the nature of the one God who through just a few spoken words brings about creation.

This opening account runs from Genesis 1:1—2:3, which, for the sake of simplicity, I will call Genesis 1 from now on. How Genesis 1 expresses its priestly vision is what I want to explore in this book. Building on the work of many scholars, this book studies the first creation story from a number of perspectives in five chapters and an appendix. The titles of the first four chapters capture four basic aspects of this study. First of all, Genesis 1 is one of many biblical passages that discuss creation. Different creation texts reflect differing concerns and worldviews. Comparing and contrasting these passages with Genesis 1 will help us see its particular emphasis.

Second, the nature of the specific perspective of Genesis 1 is priestly, which refers to the priesthood responsible for the Jerusalem temple and its sanctity, its sacrificial regimen, and calendar. The priestly perspective of Genesis 1 is deeply informed by the religious ritual of the Jerusalem

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Temple.¹ This priesthood wrote and passed down texts reflecting their concern for order and holiness. This includes Genesis 1. An examination of priestly expressions and concepts in this account will open up the world of priestly literature more broadly in the Bible and illuminate the priestly vision of Genesis 1 in particular.

Third, Genesis 1 uses expressions that compare closely with prior traditions and texts. Its choice of words and phrases sometimes shows the author's response to these literary forerunners. By looking closely at these terms, we will see how Genesis 1 offers a sort of implicit, narrative "commentary" on other sources.

Fourth and finally, the placement of Genesis 1 at the very beginning of the Bible stakes a claim, asserting the primary status of its account over and above other biblical versions of creation. Thanks to this placement, it inevitably looms over other creation accounts and allusions to creation found thereafter in the Bible. I will describe how its priestly vision took its place within the larger context of Genesis. As a result, we will come to understand better how, in the minds of many readers, Genesis 1 has come to be the creation account *par excellence* in the Bible.

2. The Plan of This Book

The chapters of this work look closely in turn at each of these points. I would like to explain how. Chapter 1 opens the work with a broad discussion of creation in the Hebrew Bible. It pays special attention to many creation texts of the Bible, thereby showing that ancient Israel never really knew a single version. In fact, we can identify different ideas about creation in the Bible. In its various models of creation, the process of creation might be characterized as a product of divine conflict, divine wisdom, and divine presence. Genesis 1 drew on all these different models. By looking at them in some detail in chapter 1, we can get a better sense of the traditional material and ideas that the composer of Genesis 1 knew and used. Indeed, these essential, traditional themes represented the basic templates on which the author relied in composing Genesis 1. In illustrating these commonalities, chapter 1 serves as a prelude to the next two chapters.

Part 1, consisting of chapters 2 and 3, focuses on the specific priestly vision of Genesis 1. This approach has engaged biblical scholars for over a century. Scholarly study of the first five books of the Bible, (the Pentateuch, or in Jewish tradition, the Torah), has devoted intense energy to what has come to be known as the Documentary Hypothesis or the Four Source Theory. This theory holds that the Pentateuch is constituted from four separate written sources brought together over

the course of several centuries, beginning during the monarchy and essentially completed in the Persian period. In this analysis, Genesis 1 came to be assigned to the priestly source (often called “P” for short). While other aspects of the Documentary Hypothesis have eroded in the past quarter century, the view of a priestly source, or at least priestly material, has stood the test of time. In chapters 2 and 3, I am not terribly concerned with the specific arguments over source theory or over the question of whether the priestly material in the Pentateuch really constitutes a single source or tradition. (These issues are addressed in the appendix.) Instead, these chapters are devoted to exploring the priestly vision of reality in Genesis 1.

Scholars have long recognized the priestly character of Genesis 1. But what is specifically meant by this? What is the priestly vision of God, humanity, and the world, and how do the various actions in Genesis 1 express this vision? For the priestly composer, what is conveyed by divine speech and light on day one and by divine blessing and Sabbath on day seven? To answer these questions, we will look into priestly texts especially in the Pentateuch/Torah and Ezekiel in order to understand the priestly worldview that informed Genesis 1. These parts of the Bible, as well as other texts from that time, show Genesis 1 participating in a dialogue over these questions about reality in the face of the crises of the sixth century BCE. Genesis 1 offers its response to these questions in the form of a priestly vision of reality. This vision was designed to inspire a sense of hope grounded in an order, specifically labeled as “good.” In turn, this good order provided a sense of the ultimate connection between the transcendent Creator and the immanent creation.

Chapter 2 addresses a number of questions about creation raised by the description of the first day in Genesis 1:1-5. Several are commonly asked questions. The answers to them can help us to understand the outlook of the priestly composer. In addition, this chapter looks closely at the words and phrases of this passage, with particular attention paid to the association of divine speech with “light” on the first day. The light on the first day of creation has fascinated commentators since antiquity. Unlike most modern commentators, many ancient writers argued that the light of the first day was not “created” as such, but represented the very light of God. I will take up this argument and show why this view has merit. The implications of this reading for understanding Genesis 1 are immense and point to its powerful, perhaps even mystical, vision of reality.

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Chapter 3 explores major priestly features evident in the rest of the first week. Most of these are well known, such as the allusion to the Sabbath on the seventh day. Others have attracted less attention. The nuances of all these priestly features are worth probing. This chapter will help us to see Genesis 1 within the larger context of priestly thinking. In its vision of reality, the universe is presented in terms of a cosmic temple. God is not only its builder, but also its priest who offers blessing to the world.

The next two chapters, which form part 2 of this work, turn to broader issues involving the interpretation of Genesis 1 and its placement at the head of the Bible. Chapter 4 studies the significance of Genesis 1's position at the very head of the Bible. To grasp the matter of the placement of Genesis 1, we will look at how the priestly tradition came to write out its rituals and stories. I will describe the emergence of priestly literature and then broadly situate the priestly placement of Genesis 1 within the context of this tradition of priestly literature. The purpose of Genesis 1 as the Bible's initial chapter will also be considered by comparing it with what has sometimes been called the "second creation story," namely Genesis 2:4b–24. (For the sake of convenience, I will sometimes refer to this second creation account as Genesis 2.) We will look at the points of contact between these two creation narratives as well as their literary design as a larger, single narrative. The first creation story of Genesis 1:1—2:3 was not meant to stand as a separate narrative, but to serve as a preface or prologue to the second creation story of Genesis 2:4b and following. The first creation story was designed to be read with the second creation story as a single whole. The final achievement of creation in the first account is the emergence of humanity, the very act of creation that begins the second creation story. We might say that the first leaves off where the second begins. In this way, the two stories were meant to dovetail with one another and be taken as a larger whole.

Working with this view, I further suggest in chapter 4 that specific expressions in Genesis 1 serve to balance, modify, and comment on some of the views expressed in the second creation account in Genesis 2. In this respect, one may view Genesis 1 as an implicit form of "commentary" on Genesis 2. To be sure, this is not commentary in the usual sense of this word, namely an explicit exposition or explication of a biblical text. Instead, Genesis 1 offers an implicit sort of commentary conveyed through its narrative form.

In this interpretation of Genesis 1–2, Genesis 1 serves a dual role as both prologue to and implicit commentary on Genesis 2. It offers a cosmic vision of God, humanity, and the world to balance and complement

the earthly perspective of Genesis 2. Separately, the two accounts would stand ostensibly in opposition: the first favors a heavenly or cosmic perspective, while the second emphasizes a more concrete perspective, one that is literally more “down to earth.” Placed together in their present order, they offer a fuller perspective, with priority of order given first to the creations of the heavens and then with greater focus on the earth. The net effect of having the first account before the second is not simply to offer balance, but also to orchestrate a narrative movement from God the Creator at the very beginning to the world of humanity on earth.

In chapter 5 I will take a look at an issue that has been central to the scholarly study of Genesis 1 for decades. Readers since the Enlightenment have asked whether Genesis 1 is a myth or not. This issue became particularly critical in light of texts that came to light from archaeological excavations in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq). These narratives raised questions about how we are to understand Genesis 1 in a broader, ancient Near Eastern context. The Mesopotamian creation stories that we will discuss in chapter 1 show important resemblances with Genesis 1. These similarities lead to questions about just how unique Genesis 1 really is, and therefore whether it represents a unique, divine revelation about creation. It would seem clear that Genesis 1, in the broader cultural milieu, is not the beginning of creation narratives. Rather, it is another variation on long standing ancient traditions. In light of this, one may well raise the question whether Genesis 1 itself might be better regarded as a myth like Mesopotamian creation stories.

Chapter 5 compares Genesis 1 with extrabiblical stories commonly regarded as myths and addresses the question whether or not it is to be considered a myth compared to them. As we will see, the answer is yes and no. Although Genesis 1 in its content conforms to most definitions of myth, its position makes a further statement about it. As part of the larger construction of the Pentateuch, Genesis 1 has the effect of making other creation accounts and allusions in books such as Psalms, Job, or Proverbs recede from view. Due to its placement at the very beginning of the Bible, Genesis 1 becomes—at least in biblical terms—*the* account that begins it all. It is not regarded as only one of a number of creation stories, but as the creation story that looms over all others. By placing the story of Genesis 1 as the very beginning of the Bible, its author makes a claim to its authority and a claim about the nature of reality; in this respect, it is unlike what scholars have otherwise regarded as myths. Standing at the head of the longer narrative of the Bible, Genesis 1, despite its older mythic material, is not simply a myth.

The appendix at the end of this book offers a discussion of modern scholarly approaches to the Bible in general and to Genesis 1 in particular. Readers interested in knowing about these scholarly approaches may wish to consult this appendix. This can be a bit daunting for people unfamiliar with biblical studies, since it often involves terms and ideas used by biblical scholars. Still, I would encourage those of you who may be interested to wade into the appendix, as it provides an opportunity for you to think about how and why you read and study the Bible.

Before I conclude these comments, I want to briefly mention two other matters. First, this study does not work through each day of creation. While many biblical and ancient Near Eastern parallels are noted,² this book is hardly a comprehensive study of all aspects of Genesis 1, especially where the priestly imprint is less marked. Second, this study draws heavily on the work of other scholars. To my mind, biblical scholarship has a great deal to offer to interested readers. It is my hope that this effort to understand Genesis 1, drawing as it does on the best, modern scholarship available, will interest a wider readership.

3. The Format of This Book

This is the general plan of the book. Before we move to chapter 1, it may be helpful to offer comments about this book's format, which is designed for readers with an interest in the Bible and in ancient Israel, but who are not specialists in the field of biblical studies.

Spelling of Hebrew Words

To make for a less taxing reading, I generally spell out the names of biblical books instead of using abbreviations. I also use simplified spellings of Hebrew words in English (called transliterations by scholars); they usually appear in parentheses following their English equivalent. In my transliterations of Hebrew words, I do not indicate the lengths of vowels, as is the common practice for scholarly publications. I have also simplified the spellings for a number of Hebrew consonants. The spelling "sh" is used for the letter *shin* and "h" for both of the Hebrew letters, *he* and *het* (sometimes spelled *chet*). I also employ "s" not only for the letters *samekh* and *sin*, but also for the letter *sade*. Hebrew readers will be able to tell which letter is transliterated by consulting a Hebrew Bible. Occasionally I put an asterisk before a Hebrew word to indicate the "consonantal root," or the base form of the word. In other words, I show the word without the prepositional prefixes or pronoun suffixes often affixed to Hebrew words. An very important example for this study

is *bere'shit*, the first word in the Bible, which consists of the preposition *be*, “in,” plus *re'shit*, “beginning (of).”

Endnotes

The main text is aimed for a broader readership; it is not necessary to consult the notes in order to understand this book. I have placed these notes at the end of the book so that they won't distract readers who are not interested in scholarly technicalities. On the other hand, readers who do wish to know the underlying basis for claims made in the main text will find documentation and scholarly references in these notes. The notes aim for a representative citation of scholarly literature; they are hardly exhaustive. I would mention in passing that there is some occasional duplication of material; this is to avoid interruption in reading through the book.

Translations Used

Readers may find it helpful to know the main translations used for this book. For translations of passages from the Bible, I often use my own translations, which tend toward the more literal in order to bring out the flavor of the original Hebrew. I also cite the important translations of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)³ and the New Jewish Publication Society version (NJPS).⁴ I also sometimes use the New American Bible (NAB). Where the verse numbers differ in the Hebrew text and the English translation of the NRSV or NAB, I follow the convention of using the Hebrew numbering with the NRSV numbering added in parenthesis, preceded by the word “English” or “E.” Occasionally I note the versification of the traditional Hebrew text (Masoretic Text) by adding MT.

For Mesopotamian texts, I have used the fine translation by Yale professor Benjamin Foster.⁵ I often cite as well the accessible and handy translation of Mesopotamian literary texts produced by Stephanie Dalley of Oxford University.⁶ For Ugaritic literature, I have mainly cited the collection edited by the late Simon B. Parker (formerly professor at Boston University).⁷ This edition has the advantage of having the English translation on facing pages with the Ugaritic text spelled out in English letters. This translation allows readers with some basic knowledge of Hebrew to gain some sense of the Ugaritic words involved. Interested readers are encouraged also to consult the translations of Dennis Pardee, professor at the University of Chicago and today the world's leading scholar of Ugaritic studies.⁸ For the Ugaritic rituals cited in this study, Pardee has also provided a handy edition,⁹ and

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curious readers may wish to look further into his massive two-volume edition of these texts.¹⁰

At this point, we are ready to address different models of creation in the Bible. Sketching out these models will help us see the general contours of creation traditions in ancient Israel and provide a framework for exploring the specific character of Genesis 1 that we will examine in chapters 2 and 3. Now we may start with chapter 1 and its survey of the models of creation in the Bible.