

SERMON SERIES ON GENRES OF THE BIBLE

A Hymn of Praise to the Creator (Genesis 1)Jerry Truex; May 25, 2008

A. The genre and origin of Genesis 1**1. Genre**

Today, we continue our series on the different genres of the Bible. A genre refers to a type of literature or a type of writing. There are many kinds of genre in the Bible: laws, poetry, songs, letters, parables, oracles, prophecy, apocalyptic, history, a creation poem, a creation narrative, genealogies, wisdom literature, myths, legends, and Gospels to name some.

Readers bring different expectations to different kinds of literature

- newspaper editorial vs. newspaper article
- science fiction vs. science textbook
- historical accounts vs. romance novels

The point is: The expectations we bring to the Bible will affect the way we read them. When it comes to Genesis 1, it is difficult to determine what kind of literature it is. Is Genesis 1 a modern scientific report? Is it geological history? Should we take it literally or metaphorically? Is it poetry or hymn?

Surely, if we think Genesis 1 is poetry we will have different expectations than if we think it is geological history. If it is history, we will evaluate it according to what we know about geological and cosmological history. If it is poetry, we will evaluate it according to whether it is able to evoke certain responses or communicate certain values. And so on.

2. Origin

Foundational to reading the Bible is a decision about its origin. I am convinced that the Bible is a human product. That does not deny the reality of God. Rather, I see the Bible as a *human response* to God.¹

¹ Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001) 21.

Thus the Bible contains Israel's "stories of God, their perceptions of God's will and characters, their prayers to and praises of God, their perceptions of the human condition and the paths of deliverance, their religious and ethical practices, and their understanding of what faithfulness to God involves.... The Bible thus tells us about how they saw things, not about how God sees things."²

If we see the Bible as a human product, then we can read Genesis 1, not as God's account of creation, but as one of ancient Israel's accounts of creation. Like other ancient cultures, Israel produced accounts of creation. As an ancient account, we must read it as an ancient account and not as a modern scientific or historical account.

B. Literary structure

1. Six stanzas

Let's look at Genesis 1 and make a few observations that can help us in this matter. We can see that Genesis 1 is a carefully crafted work, comprised of six stanzas, six days of creation, each of which follows the same pattern with slight variations for each day:

<i>Announcement:</i>	"And God said..."
<i>Command:</i>	"Let there be..."
<i>Fulfillment:</i>	"And it was so ..." or "And God made..."
<i>Evaluation:</i>	"And God saw it was good ..."
<i>Time Frame:</i>	"And there was evening and morning the n th day..."

See the "days of creation" chart supplied in the appendices. The five-fold pattern repeats for the first six days of creation; however, the "evaluation" statement is missing for the 2nd day and the pattern is (more-or-less) doubled for the 3rd and 6th days.

2. Literary framework

The beginning expresses a problem: The earth was formless [*tohu*] and empty [*bohu*] ... (2:2)

The end tells us that the problem was solved: the heavens and the earth were finished (2:1)

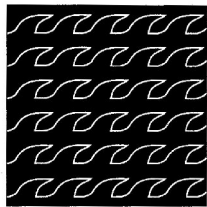
Begins	1:1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,
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² Borg, *Reading the Bible Again*, 22-23.

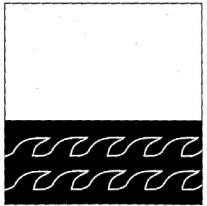
	1:2 <u>the earth was a formless void</u> and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.
Ends	2:1 Thus <u>the heavens and the earth were finished</u> , and all their multitude. 2:2 And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. 2:3 So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

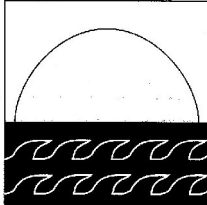
C. The Days of Creation (Gen 1:1 – 2:3)

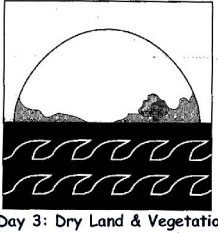
[Walk thru the text. Point out the five-fold pattern. Notice where the pattern breaks. Ask the congregation to help fill in the blanks.]

 <p>Day 0: Waters of Chaos</p>	<p>Gen 2:2 Now the earth was formless [<i>tohu</i>] and empty [<i>bohu</i>] ...</p>
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Days 1-3: Forming

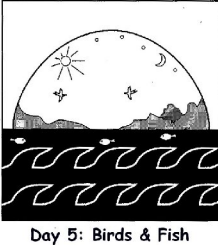
 <p>Day 1: Light</p>	<p>Announcement: "And God said ..."</p> <p>Command: "Let there be light ..."</p> <p>Fulfillment: "And it was so ... "</p> <p>Evaluation: "And God saw that it was good..."</p> <p>Time Frame: "And there was evening and morning the 1st day"</p>
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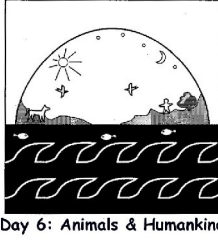
 <p>Day 2: Water Barrier/Dome</p>	<p>Announcement:</p> <p>Command:</p> <p>Fulfillment:</p> <p>Evaluation:</p> <p>Time Frame:</p>
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 <p>Day 3: Dry Land & Vegetation</p>	<p>Announcement:</p> <p>Command:</p> <p>Fulfillment:</p> <p>Evaluation:</p>	<p>Announcement:</p> <p>Command:</p> <p>Fulfillment:</p> <p>Evaluation:</p> <p>Time Frame:</p>
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Days 4-6: Filling or Populating

 <p>Day 4: Sun, Moon, & Stars</p>	<p>Announcement:</p> <p>Command:</p> <p>Fulfillment:</p> <p>Evaluation:</p> <p>Time Frame:</p>
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 <p>Day 5: Birds & Fish</p>	<p>Announcement:</p> <p>Command:</p> <p>Fulfillment:</p> <p>Evaluation:</p> <p>Time Frame:</p>
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 <p>Day 6: Animals & Humankind</p>	<p>Announcement:</p> <p>Command:</p> <p>Fulfillment:</p> <p>Evaluation:</p>	<p>Announcement:</p> <p>Command:</p> <p>Fulfillment:</p> <p>Evaluation:</p> <p>Time:</p>
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The *first three days* are reflected in the *second three days*.

- The first three days are days for *forming* (or preparation)
- The second three days are days of *filling* (or populating).

Forming (Preparing)		Filling (Populating)	
Day 1	Light →	Sun, Moon, Stars	Day 4
Day 2	Water Dome	Birds Fish	Day 5
Day 3	Dry Land Vegetation →	Animals Humans	Day 6

D. Hebrew poetry and hymn

The structure itself suggests what kind of genre Genesis 1 is:

- The structure is symmetrical and balanced
- The account moves in a topical, but not a chronological, sequence
- The structure itself is a comment on the harmony, order, and design of the cosmos as created by God

With this in mind, Genesis 1 looks like Hebrew poetry and hymn

- Like Hebrew poetry, Genesis 1 presents a repetition of parallel thought (not rhyme)³
- Like Hebrew hymns or psalms, Genesis 1 is composed of stanzas; e.g., Psalm 119 is based on letters of the Hebrew alphabet each with eight-verse segments
- Like Hebrew poetry and hymn, Genesis 1 has symmetry and balance

This suggests that Genesis 1 was “sung or chanted, perhaps antiphonally with a cantor and one or more choirs.”⁴ The recognition that Genesis 1 is Hebrew poetry or hymn has an immediate implication: We should not expect factual information.⁵

³ Sanford Calvin Yoder, *Poetry of the Old Testament* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1948) 8-15.

⁴ Borg, *Reading the Bible Again*, 68.

⁵ Borg writes: “If we ask, ‘What are the chances that ancient Israel’s stories of creation contain scientifically accurate information?’ the answer would be, ‘About zero.’ And if they did, it would be sheer coincidence. Having said that, though, let me add that I think Israel’s creation stories are profoundly true—but true as metaphorical or symbolic narrative, not as literally factual accounts.” *Reading the Bible Again*, 24.

The literary beauty and symmetry of Genesis 1 stresses that God's creation is orderly, harmonious, beautiful, purposeful, etc. It is the language of poetry and hymn in order to invoke commitment and worship, awe and praise.

E. Historical context

We must understand Genesis 1 in the context of its own world and not ours. Genesis 1 must be seen against the backdrop of ancient Babylon.

1. Ancient Babylon

Most scholars believe that Genesis 1 was written during the 6th century B.C. At that time, the Babylonians dominated the A.N.E. In 587 B.C., the Babylonians swept into Judah and captured Jerusalem and destroying the first Temple. They thoroughly subjugated the Israelites. Thousands Israelites fled as refugees. And many more were put in slavery and taken back to Babylon to serve their new masters.

It was in this context that the Pentateuch was written. The traditions we now have in the Pentateuch—including Genesis 1—were collected, edited, and reached their final form during the Babylonian captivity (P traditions). So many of the traditions in the Pentateuch, including Genesis 1, address questions concerning how and why Israel came to suffer in Babylon and what future hope they might have.

2. Other creation stories ⁶

When the Israelites were in Babylon, they came across other creation accounts, including the popular Enuma Elish and the Atrahasis stories.

a. Enuma Elish

- Content: Seven tablet Akkadian story describes creation and the rise of Marduk as the head of the Babylonian pantheon
- Parallel: Genesis 1-2
- Date of composition: 12th century B.C.
- Earliest surviving copies: Four small fragments from 10th century B.C.

⁶ See John H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) 20-22.

<i>Tablet One:</i>	Two gods, Father Apsu (sweet water) and Mother Tiamat (salt water), become one and create a pantheon of gods, bringing order out of chaos. Eventually, the noise of the younger gods disturb Father Apsu who then plans to destroy them. However, Father Apsu is killed by one of the gods and Mother Tiamat creates monsters to defeat the rebel gods.
<i>Tablet Two:</i>	Among the rebel gods, Marduk offers to fight the monsters only if he is made their leader.
<i>Tablet Three:</i>	The gods accept Marduk's proposal.
<i>Tablet Four:</i>	Marduk kills Tiamat.
<i>Tablet Five:</i>	Marduk splits Tiamat's body in two; half for the upper watery heavens and half for the earth. Then, Marduk places thirty-six stars/gods into the sky to regulate the seasons, along with the moon and sun to govern night and day.
<i>Tablet Six:</i>	Humans are made by kneading the blood from one of the gods with bone. Humans work for the gods, setting the gods free from their labors. The city of Babylon is constructed as the first city.
<i>Tablet Seven:</i>	An exhortation to praise Marduk.

b. Atrahasis Epic

- Content: Akkadian story depicting creation, early human history, and a flood
- Parallel: Genesis 1-9
- Date of composition: 18th or 19th century B.C.
- Earliest surviving copies: 17th century B.C. on three tablets

Summary: The story begins with a world only populated by the gods. Eventually, the younger and less important gods refuse to do their work of keeping the world running. So the gods decide to create humans who will work for the gods in caring for the world. Different versions of the Atrahasis Story offer different ways in which humans are created. After humans are created, they overpopulate the earth and disturb the gods with too much noise. The gods reduce the human population with plagues, famines, and droughts, and finally they send a flood. Atrahasis, the human hero of the story, is warned of the flood. He builds a barge and fills it with all sorts of animals. Then he gathers his family on board and for seven days and seven nights the flood covers the earth. The text breaks at this point.

3. Polytheism

If the Enuma Elish and Atrahasis creation stories indicate how ancient people thought about cosmology, then the modern debate over creation and evolution would have seemed very strange to them.

The issue for the Jews who wrote and read Genesis 1 was polytheism. Every nation surrounding Israel was polytheistic. The Atrahasis and Enuma Elish stories confirm this. For most people in the Ancient Near East:

- All of the regions of nature were divine
- There were sky gods, earth gods, water gods, gods of vegetation & fertility
- The sun, moon, and stars were all gods
- And the Israelites were not to worship these (Deut. 4:19).

It is likely that Genesis 1 is making a radical affirmation of monotheism over against polytheism and idolatry. Notice how each day of creation takes on two categories of divinity and smashes another set of idols:

- First day: the gods of light and darkness are dismissed
- Second day: the gods of sky and sea
- Third day: earth gods and gods of vegetation
- Fourth day: sun, moon, and star gods
- Fifth and sixth days: animals and human kings are dismissed as gods

In this reading of Genesis 1, the issue for the writers/readers of Genesis was:

- Idolatry, not scientific accuracy
- Syncretism, not natural history
- Theology, not an abstract statement about the origin of the universe
- Affirmation of one transcendent God, not scientific theories of origin

F. Implications

To discover the *implications*, we ask: What questions is Genesis 1 designed to answer?

- God is the Creator of all that is; God has no rivals

- Nothing is outside God's power and influence
- God creates perfectly and in progression
- God's creation exhibits order and harmony and balance
- The seven-day week is inscribed into the nature of reality
- Rest on the seventh day is linked to the rhythms of life
- Humans are the highest of the created order (not an afterthought)
- Humans were created to reflect God and share in co-creation (procreation)
- Humans share in the creative labor of God, not to liberate the "gods" from their work

G. Reflections

1. The first concerns *the goodness of creation*. The world is intrinsically good. You and I are intrinsically good. God made it so. Despite apparent evil, despite the fact that we often harm ourselves and others, Genesis 1 summons us—in fact, demands of us—to look for that good in ourselves; to look for the good in each other and in the created order.

2. The second concerns *loyalty to God*. Genesis 1 is not modern cosmology, not geological science, and not about evolutionary biology. Rather, Genesis 1 is poetic account of creation, striking a blow against the polytheism and idolatry (Gen 1:14-19; Deut 4:19). In this way, Genesis 1 summons human beings to worship One God, Elohim, as the Divine Source of All Reality. Worship of, and attachment to, anything other than God is delusional and brings suffering.

3. The third concerns *oneness with God*. God's Word—God's creative energy—extends to all creation. All creation expresses the living Word of God. The Word as creative energy manifests itself in every creature. This means that we share in the one flow, one divine energy, one divine word, one creative energy flowing through all things, all time, all space.