



Interpreting Genesis in the 21st Century

Ernest Lucas

*'The context of Genesis 1 demands that the word "day" be a literal 24-hour period.'*¹

*'What person of intelligence, I ask, will consider as a reasonable statement that the first and the second and the third day, in which there are said to be both morning and evening, existed without sun and moon and stars, while the first day was even without a heaven? ... I do not think anyone will doubt that these are figurative expressions which indicate certain mysteries through a semblance of history.'*²

Summary

This paper suggests that the early chapters of Genesis should be read as a theological text expressed in symbolic stories addressed to ancient Hebrews, and not as a scientific text. When read in this way the narratives become highly relevant to us today. Far from being incompatible with the findings of modern science, Genesis provides us with a framework within which we can pursue our science and technology for the positive benefit of humankind and the rest of creation.

The rise of modernism during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was associated with two contrasting trends within Christian theology, both of which influenced the interpretation of the Bible. The dominant trend encouraged a more critical analysis of the biblical text in which it was handled 'scientifically' with respect to sources, authorship and dating. But the rise of modernism, with its assumption that scientific knowledge is the only reliable form of knowledge, also stimulated the interpretation of biblical texts as if they were making claims about scientific knowledge, contributing to the rise of creationism in the USA during the 1920s. Scientists and engineers, often with little theological training, began to use biblical passages as a source of scientific information about the age of the earth and the origins of biological diversity, a different way of understanding the Bible from that practised in mainstream theology. One result is that today about half the population of the USA, a world leader in science and technology, adopts this modernist stance in their interpretation of Genesis, leading to predictable conflicts with the scientific community. Ironically, some anti-religious scientists also share the creationists' modernist stance towards interpreting Genesis.

This paper argues that both sides in this sterile debate base their positions on a mishandling of the Hebrew narratives, failing to use standard methods of biblical interpretation which have been well established since the time of Augustine and the early Church Fathers. To illustrate the argument, the paper will focus on Genesis 1-11.

Genesis Chapters 1-11 – an Overview

Genesis 1-11 provides a prologue to the Bible, introducing themes and telling stories that are picked up throughout the rest of the biblical text. It is often not appreciated that the stories have been put together carefully to establish a pattern that can be summed up in the phrase 'the spread of sin, the spread of grace'. Adam and Eve's disobedience results in the spread of sin. Violence spreads. It begins with the verbal violence of Adam blaming Eve. Cain murders Abel. Lamech kills a man who strikes him. And so it goes on, until 'the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence' (Gen. 6:11). The desire to break down the divine/human divide, that led



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Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, also appears in other ways: in the intermarriage of 'the sons of God' and the 'daughters of men' (Gen. 6:1-4) and the attempt to build a tower up to heaven (Gen. 11:4). God responds to the sin with punishment: Adam and Eve are driven out of the Garden; Cain is driven from the tillable land; the Flood is sent to cleanse the earth; the language of the builders of the Tower of Babel is confused and they are scattered. However, each act of sin is met by an act of grace: God clothes Adam and Eve; Cain is marked to protect his life; Noah, his family and pairs of animals are saved from the Flood.

Where is the act of grace after Babel? Its absence shows the 'prologue' nature of Genesis 1-11. These chapters are incomplete on their own, preparing the way for something else. Shem's genealogy (Gen. 11:10-32) is important, linking Babel with the call of Abraham and the promise given to him. Here is the missing act of grace. The promise in Gen. 12:1-3 parallels what has been said in Gen. 1:26-28:

Genesis 1:26-28

Be fruitful increase in number
Fill the earth
God created man in his own
image

Genesis 12:1-3

I will make you into a great nation
Go to the land I will show you
I will bless you and make your
name great

1 MacIntosh, A. *Genesis for Today*, Epsom: Day One (2001), p. 38.

2 Origen *First Principles*, Butterworth, G. (trans.), London: SPCK (1936), Bk. 4, ch. 3.

The call appears narrow – God’s intention at creation now applies to one man and his descendants, but the promise shows that it is part of God’s purpose for ‘all the peoples on earth’. The story of the outworking of God’s plan of salvation begins with the call of Abraham, and it cannot be understood fully without Genesis 1-11.

Interpreting Genesis 1-11

The theological purpose of Genesis 1-11 usually gets ignored when these chapters become the centre of debate about ‘science and the Bible’. Both atheistic scientists and fundamentalist Christians simply assume that it is appropriate to read them as a scientific text that can be put alongside twenty-first century scientific ideas. That ignores some basic considerations that should be applied when trying to understand any text. These involve questions like the following:

- What kind of language is being used?
- What kind of literature is it?
- What is the expected audience?
- What is the purpose of the text?
- What relevant extra-textual knowledge is there?

While these questions are appropriate when seeking to understand any text, they are particularly appropriate with regard to the Bible because they cohere with the biblical doctrine of God. The first three are related to the fact that the God of the Bible is the God of the Incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth. Christians claim that God has been revealed most fully in a particular person who lived at a particular time in a particular culture. This was the culmination of God’s method of self-revelation recorded in the Hebrew Bible, in which God’s word comes to us clothed in the words of particular people, using particular languages and particular forms of literature, all rooted in the history and culture of a particular nation. Hence the need to ask the first three questions about everything we read in the Bible.

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Many literary scholars today consider the fourth question problematic because they reject the concept of ‘authorial intent’. But I agree with those scholars who argue that it *is* a valid question because I think there are often clues given by such things as the literary genre, the structure of the text, the kind of language used and so on, which do make it an answerable question³.

The God of the Bible is the God of both creation and revelation. Moreover, humans have been made in the image and likeness of God, and are therefore able to understand the truth to be found in the created order. This belief was an important one for the founders of modern science in late medieval Europe⁴. In the light of it we would expect that what we learn by studying the created order will relate in some way to what we learn through the Bible. Here we should heed something said by Prof. Donald MacKay⁵ about using scientific knowledge in understanding the Bible:

Obviously a surface meaning of many passages could be tested, for example, against archaeological discoveries, and the meaning of others can be enriched by scientific and historical knowledge. But I want to suggest that the primary function of scientific enquiry in such fields is neither to verify nor to add to the inspired picture, but to help us in eliminating improper ways of reading it. To pursue the metaphor, I think the scientific data God gives us can sometimes serve as his way of warning us when we are standing too close to the picture, or

at the wrong angle, or with the wrong expectations, to be able to see the inspired pattern he means it to convey to us.

Failure to realise this led the Roman Catholic Church to condemn Copernicanism for its heliocentric astronomy in the seventeenth century rather than revise the traditional interpretation of a handful of biblical texts, such as:

‘He has established the world; it shall never be moved;’
(Ps. 93:1, NRSV).

‘The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.’
(Ps. 96:10, NRSV)

What kind of Language?

One problem about interpretation of the Bible in the twenty-first century is that people come to it with a preconceived idea of what kind of language they will be reading. Van Till points this out⁶:

Twentieth-century Western culture seems to me particularly inept at understanding and using figurative or symbolic literature. We are so accustomed to straightforward, matter-of-fact descriptive prose that we expect nearly all writing to be of that form ... scientific writing has made an illegitimate claim of superiority over artistic literature.

Early Christian scholars did not have this bias. They read Genesis 1-11 as a literary text, looking for clues in it to tell them what kind of language was being used. In the early fifth century St Augustine of Hippo said, ‘Perhaps Sacred Scripture in its customary style is speaking with the limitations of human language in addressing men of limited understanding’⁷. With regard to Genesis 1 he comments, ‘The narrative of the inspired writer brings the matter down to the capacity of children’⁸. John Calvin⁹ develops this recognition that God ‘accommodates’ his way of speaking to the understanding of those addressed. When discussing Genesis. 1:6-8 he says,

For, to my mind, this is a certain principle, that nothing is here treated of but the visible form of the world. He who would learn astronomy and other recondite arts, let him go elsewhere. Here the Spirit of God would teach all men without exception and therefore ... the history of the creation ... is the book of the unlearned.

When speaking of the material world the Bible describes things as people see them, using ‘the language of appearance’. So, Calvin had no problem with the statement that ‘God made the two great lights’ (Gen. 1:16, ESV). He accepted that if taken literally this is scientifically incorrect because astronomers had shown convincingly that Saturn is bigger than the Moon. We could also say it is scientifically incorrect since it states that the Moon is a self-luminous body like the Sun, whereas it is merely a reflector of light. If intended to be anywhere near scientifically true this verse should say that God created a great light and a great mirror!

What kind of literature?

This, too, is a question that can only be answered by looking for clues in the text itself. Writing in the early third century Origen¹⁰ suggested that Genesis 1-3 is figurative literature. Down the centuries a number of scholars have concluded that Genesis 1:1-2:4 is an extended ‘figure of speech’ in which God is depicted as a worker doing a carefully planned week’s work. The earth is brought into being initially in a state described as ‘shapeless and empty’. In the first three days God shapes it through acts of separation, creating empty spaces. In the second three days God creates things to fill the spaces. The acts on day four correspond to the spaces created on

6 Van Till, H.J. *The Fourth Day*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (1986), p. 11.

7 St Augustine *De Genesi ad litteram*, 1.14.28. English translation by Taylor, J.H. *St Augustine: The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, New York: Newman Press (1982).

8 *ibid.*, 2.6.13.

9 Calvin, J.A. *A Commentary on Genesis*, King, J. (trans.), London: Banner of Truth (1967).

10 See the quotation at the start of this paper.

3 Lucas, E.C. ‘A statue, a fiery furnace and a dismal swamp: a reflection on some issues in biblical hermeneutics’, *Evangelical Quarterly*, (2005), 77(4), 291-307.

4 Lucas, E.C. ‘A Biblical Basis for the Scientific Enterprise’ in Alexander, D. R. (ed.) *Can we be sure about anything?* Leicester: IVP (2005), pp. 49-68.

5 MacKay, D.M. *The Open Mind*, Leicester: IVP (1988), pp. 151-152.

day one, those on day five to the spaces created on day two and those on day six to the spaces created on day three. At the end of each day God surveys his work and declares it 'a good job'. At the end of day six, he sees that what he has created is 'very good'. He rests on the seventh day. This is not a historical and scientific account of creation from which we can gain answers to our twenty-first century scientific questions. It is a theological account which asserts such truths as:

- there is one Creator God who made all things that exist apart from himself;
- we are here as a result of a planned and purposeful creation;
- the material creation is 'good';
- humans have a special place in this creation. The deliberation in verse 26, the three-fold use of the verb 'to create' in verse 27, and being created in God's 'image' all point to this;
- humans have the responsibility to care for and develop the creation;
- the blessing and making holy of the seventh day indicates that humans are intended to worship God.

'Humans are given dominion and told to subdue the earth because they are made in God's image.'

Some environmentalists argue that the words for 'dominion' and 'subdue' (Gen. 1:28) are strong words which encourage an aggressive and exploitative attitude to nature. This cannot be justified by any sound exegesis of Genesis 1. It is a basic rule of semantics that the meaning of words depends strongly on their context. The Hebrew words for 'dominion' and 'subdue' do not, on their own, refer to aggressive or exploitative action. Where they are used of such action it is the context which makes that clear. The context of Genesis 1 indicates a very different kind of action. Humans are given dominion and told to subdue the earth because they are made in God's image. This implies that we are to reflect the character of the Creator in the way we carry out these commands, doing it with wisdom, care, love and justice. Moreover, we only have dominion as God's representatives. We are answerable to our Creator for how we exercise this dominion. This should lead us to accept and respect God's evaluation of the creation as 'very good' (v31). In what we do we should seek to preserve and develop this 'goodness', not damage or destroy it.

Calvin's comment¹¹ shows that 'green theology' is not something new and can be derived quite naturally from the biblical creation story.

The earth was given to man with this condition, that he should occupy himself in its cultivation ... The custody of the garden was given in charge to Adam, to show that we possess the things that God has committed to our hands, on the condition, that being content with frugal and moderate use of them, we should take care of what shall remain ... Let everyone regard himself as the steward of God in all things which he possesses. Then will he neither conduct himself dissolutely, nor corrupt by abuse those things which God requires to be preserved.

What kind of audience?

Genesis 1-11 was written for ancient Hebrews who worshipped the God of Israel. Scholars differ over the date of the text. The exact date does not matter for our purpose because if, as I shall argue, it interacts with ideas about creation that were around in the ancient Near East, the basic nature of these did not change much in the period between the exodus and the return from exile¹².

Given this original audience we ought, at least initially, to read the text through their eyes rather than our twenty-first century ones. An example of the difference this makes is in understanding the genealogies. 'Young earth creationists' take the ages in them literally and are compelled to argue that the earth is only a few thousand years old. But is this how the ancient Hebrews would have read the ages? The ages in the Hebrew Bible are multiples of five with either seven or fourteen added occasionally. This is hardly accidental, and may indicate that the numbers are symbolic in some way now unclear to us.

There is a striking parallel to Genesis 1-11 in the 'king lists' from ancient Sumeria¹³, a culture which existed in southern Babylonia from about 3000-2300 BC.

<i>Sumerian king lists:</i>	<i>Genesis 1-11:</i>
Kingship created	People created
8 or 10 kings, each ruling between 43,000 and 18,600 years	10 patriarchs, each living between 969 and 365 years
The flood	The flood
More kings, each ruling between 1,500 and 100 years	More patriarchs, each living between 600 and 110 years

The overall pattern is identical. One of the later Sumerian kings, En-Mebaragisi, is said to have reigned for 900 years. Other evidence shows that he was a real person who reigned for a normal time¹⁴. Clearly the numbers are not intended literally, but have some symbolic meaning. The decline in the length of reigns/lifespans is probably meant to reflect a decline of some kind in the human race. In Genesis the 'spread of sin' theme presents this as a spiritual and moral decline.

What is the purpose of the text?

As our knowledge of the religions of the ancient Near East has increased, biblical scholars have come to see the creation story as a piece of theological polemic¹⁵. It sets out the Hebrew understanding of creation over against the ideas prevalent in the religions of the peoples among whom the Hebrews lived.

An obvious example of this for the modern reader, aware of the prevalent polytheism of the ancient world, is the story's monotheism. The other stories from the ancient Near East begin with 'theogony', the origin of the gods. One of these gods then brings the cosmos into being, using pre-existing 'matter' of some kind. In the Hebrew story there is only one God, the Creator of all else that exists. It is a 'cosmogony', an account of the origin of the cosmos. God's existence is simply assumed.

Other examples are not so obvious to readers not attuned to the ideas that were prevalent in the ancient Near East. Why are the Sun and Moon referred to simply as 'lights'? Attentive readers ought to ponder this, since there are perfectly good, common Hebrew words for Sun and Moon. The answer is that in the Semitic languages the words 'sun' and 'moon' are also the names of gods. The peoples around the Hebrews worshipped the heavenly bodies. The Hebrews were tempted to follow their example¹⁶. Genesis 1:14-19 is an attack on all such worship. The heavenly bodies are simply 'lights' (pictured as big oil lamps) created by the God of Israel. Moreover, humans do not exist to serve these 'gods', rather the 'lights' serve humans, as sources of light and as calendar-markers. The ideas that led to modern astrology, rather than astronomy, were debunked by Hebrew theologians at least 2,500 years ago!

The way the Hebrew verb *bārā* ('create') is used in the story is significant. In the Hebrew Bible this verb, in its active form, is only

13 Jacobsen, T. *The Sumerian King List*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1939).

14 Kitchen, K.A. *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, London: Tyndale Press (1966), p. 40.

15 See, for example, Hasel, G. 'The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology', *Evangelical Quarterly*, (1974) 46, 81-102.

16 NB the prohibitions against worship of 'the Sun and the Moon and the stars, all the host of heaven', for example: Deut. 4:19; 17:2ff.

11 Calvin, *op. cit.* [9], commenting on Gen. 2:15, about 450 years ago.

12 Dalley, S. *Myths from Mesopotamia*, Oxford: OUP (1991), pp. 228-230.

ever used of God's creative activity. It occurs in only three places in Genesis 1. In the other places God is said to 'make' things, using a verb that is used of various kinds of human 'making' activity. The use of *bārā* in verse 1, the programmatic statement of God's creative activity, is understandable. So, too, is the threefold use of it with reference to the final act of creation, the creation of humans (v27). Why is it used in verse 21 of the creation of the sea monsters? The only convincing answer concerns the significance of sea monsters in the main Mesopotamian creation story¹⁷. Here the creator god has to battle with and subdue the forces of chaos, depicted as sea monsters in raging waters, before he can create the heavens and the earth¹⁸. Genesis rejects this by stressing that the sea monsters are just part of the world created by the God of Israel. He did not have to fight and subdue them, he made them!

In the Mesopotamian creation stories humans are made of clay mixed with the blood of a god, somewhat similar to Adam's being made of 'the dust of the earth' and the divine breath of life. They are simply the gods' slaves, created to avoid the gods having to do any work, by building houses (temples) for them and providing them with food and drink (sacrifices). As we have seen, the importance of human beings is emphasised in various ways in Genesis 1. They are not created as God's slaves, but as God's representatives on Earth with responsibility to care for the rest of creation. We cannot pursue what it means that humans were created in the 'image' and 'likeness' of God. It is arguable that, in part, the western concept of human rights has its roots in this statement¹⁹. It is certainly the case that having lost this theological basis for the distinctiveness and dignity of humans, philosophers and ethicists are struggling to maintain the concept against pressures for widening it to include 'primate rights' or even simply 'sentient being rights'²⁰.

A major question in Mesopotamian religion is why humans do not have wisdom and immortality (resonating with the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life in Genesis 3). In *The Gilgamesh Epic*²¹ Gilgamesh goes searching for immortality. He finds 'the plant of life' but as he travels home is robbed of it by a snake (more echoes of Genesis 3). A major difference between this story and Genesis 3 is the lack of any moral dimension. In Genesis 3 human pride, the desire 'to be like God', leads to rebellion against the Creator's command and results in death. It is only *human* death that is attributed to sin, and more than simply physical death is implied. Adam and Eve did not die physically as soon as they ate the fruit, although God had said, 'When you eat of it you will surely die.'

17 Heidel, A. *The Babylonian Genesis*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1969).

18 Job 9:13-14; 26:12-13; Ps. 89:9-12; Isa. 27:1; 51:9-10 show that the Hebrew poets were aware of this story in some form or other and use its imagery to assert that Yahweh is the Creator God.

19 Stassen, G. 'Human Rights and the Helsinki Accords Are Our Baptist Heritage', in Pipkin, H.W. (ed.), *Seek Peace and Pursue It*, Rüschiikon: Institute for Baptist and Anabaptist Studies (1989), pp. 103-113.

20 See Alexander, D. *Rebuilding the Matrix*, Oxford: Lion (2001), pp. 462-472 for discussion of the views of Peter Singer.

21 Heidel, A. *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1970).

What did happen was that their relationship with their Creator, the source of physical and spiritual life, was broken. 'Spiritual death' seems to have been the primary punishment. If Genesis 2-3 is a symbolic story using motifs from the ancient Near East in a polemical way, it is inappropriate to try to extract from it scientific information about human origins, especially since the biblical 'definition' of a human being is a creature made in God's 'image'. This is a spiritual quality²², whereas scientists can only define *Homo Sapiens* in physical terms.

The Mesopotamian flood stories have striking similarities to the biblical story²³. They all refer to some cataclysmic flood in the ancient Near East. Calvin²⁴ comments that the details given of the location of Eden indicate that the flood did not cause a major change in the geography of the ancient Near East. The impression that the flood was universal arises largely because the Hebrew word *'erets* is usually translated as 'earth' (which is taken to imply the planet) when it could be translated as 'land' (implying a limited region). Again, the striking difference is the 'amoral' nature of the Mesopotamian stories. The chief god sends the flood because the land is overpopulated with noisy humans who disturb his sleep! In the Bible the flood is a moral judgement on human sinfulness, showing how seriously God takes sin and why humans are in need of salvation.

Conclusion

Reading Genesis 1-11 as the theological text it is, instead of 'mining' it for scientific information, shows that it is as relevant in the twenty-first century as it was to the ancient Hebrews, and has been to generations of Jews and Christians in between. Because it addresses fundamental questions about the meaning and purpose of life it has the capacity to speak to each generation. Its message for the twenty-first century includes the following points.

- There is one God, the Creator of all else that exists, who alone is to be worshipped. This stands over against 'new age' spiritualities that seek meaning through astrology, the worship of 'Mother Earth' and so on.
- On planet earth only humans are made in God's image. This is the basis for 'human rights'.
- Humans, as God's representatives on earth, should care for the rest of God's creation, preserving and developing its 'goodness' and not abusing it.
- The fact that we live in a planned and ordered creation, and are made in God's image, provides a basis for the scientific enterprise.
- We are sinful, and sin has marred God's good creation. We therefore need salvation and restoration, which God has provided in Jesus, the long-awaited 'offspring' of Eve²⁵.

22 'God is spirit' (Jn. 4:24).

23 Heidel, *op. cit.* [21], pp. 224-269.

24 Calvin, *op. cit.* [9], commenting on Gen. 2:10-14.

25 Gen. 3:15.

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