

## WHAT KIND OF LITERATURE IS GENESIS 1-3?

It is widely recognised that Genesis 1-3 contains two distinct accounts of creation. Some see these as contradictory, but they are more naturally understood as complementary. The first account (1:1-2:3) focuses on God as awesome, omnipotent creator of the entire cosmos and of all life. The second account (2:4-3:24) has a sociological focus presenting God as the creator and friend of humanity. The panoramic sweep of the first account is followed by a 'close up' in the second featuring personal relations between God, Adam and Eve, and the snake. The change of perspective is underlined by the shift in God's title from *Elohim* (the generic term for God; its etymological parallels are found in Semitic languages) to *Yahweh Elohim*.<sup>1</sup> *Yahweh* is God's personal Hebrew name reflecting his special relationship with his people. The eleven-fold use of *Yahweh Elohim* in 2:4-3:24 reflects a relational context in contrast to the universal setting of 1:1-2:3.

The two creation accounts also differ in their literary genre. Genesis 1:1-2:3 is rendered in stylised prose with a poetic touch, while 2:4-3:24 is narrative. Both accounts employ highly figurative language, although, as we shall see, they do so in different ways. In both cases the narrator(s), in crafting the text, employ particular linguistic and structural tools to clarify for the reader / hearer the meaning they intend to convey.<sup>2</sup>

### First Account

The stylised prose of 1:1-2:3 is evident in a 'beautifully choreographed' text<sup>3</sup> meticulously patterned into a literary work of art containing the following features:

- A chiasmic linkage<sup>4</sup> exists between the opening verse (v 1) and the closing verses (2:1-3). V 1, lit: *In the beginning created [A] God [B], heavens and earth [C]* – terms which appear in reverse order in 2:1-3, providing 'a tightly symmetrical envelope structure, the end returning to the beginning.'<sup>5</sup>
- In the Hebrew text of both 1:1-2 and 2:1-3 – there are multiples of seven words: 1:1 – seven words; 1:2 – fourteen (7 x 2) words; 2:1-3 – thirty-five (7 x 5) words.
- Other key terms also occur in multiples of seven: *God* – thirty-five times; both *earth* and *heaven* – twenty-one times; the summary clauses *and it was so* and *God saw that it was good* – occur exactly seven times.
- Eight works of creation take place in six days with twice as many works on days three and six as on other days. The narrative structure further highlights day 3 and day 6 in that they contain a double announcement of the phrase 'And God said' (vv 9, 11, 24, 26) and also of the approval formula 'God saw that it was good.'
- In addition there is a correspondence in the content of these days. Day 3 describes the creation of land and plants, while day 6 depicts the creatures living on the land (animals and man) whom God authorises to eat the plants for food.
- There are similar associations between days 1 and 4 and between days 2 and 5. The creation of light in day 1 corresponds with the creation of the light-producing bodies on day 4, while the

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<sup>1</sup> Rendered 'LORD God' in most English versions.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this feature of Hebrew narrative see *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, by Meir Sternberg, Bloomington, IN, 1985: 9.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, New York, 1981: 142.

<sup>4</sup> A chiasm is a sequence of textual elements repeated in inverted order. Chiasm is a literary device common in biblical poetry and also in prose (mainly at the concept level). *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, T. Longman & P Enns, eds., Downers Grove / Nottingham, 2008: 54.

<sup>5</sup> Alter, *op cit*: 143

division of the waters by the creation of the sky on day 2 corresponds to the creation on day 5 of birds to fly across the vault of the sky and the creation of sea creatures.

- Day seven (2:1-3) stands apart and reflects the unique status of the Sabbath by repeating ‘the seventh day’ three times, on each occasion in a sentence of seven Hebrew words.

In ancient Hebrew thought seven was the divine number, the number of perfection. Its pervasiveness in the text not only shapes the first account; it also underscores the divine origin of the universe. The ubiquity of the number seven, together with the parallelism between days 1 and 4, between days 2 and 5, and between days 3 and 6 are evidence of symbolism built into the text. A further indicator of a figurative text is that the first three days, with evening and morning, occur before the sun and moon are created on day 4. This, plus the sophisticated stylistic features highlighted in the bullets above strongly suggest that the narrator presents the creation week as an extended metaphor which, like all metaphors, conveys more than what is said. The literary framework of the first account employs the basic human week time structure in order to demonstrate the orderly nature of God’s creation. In addition, John Walton and N T Wright argue that the narrator’s description of creation likens it to the construction of a tabernacle or temple implying that heaven and earth are the space where God intends to dwell. Genesis 1:1-2:3 serves as a prologue to the second account in 2:4-3:24.

## Second Account

Here the focus is on the creation of humanity and the entrance of evil into human history. The second account has a narrative structure with a story set within time. As in the first account, compositional tools are used to clarify and reinforce the impact of the narrative. Puns abound and the whole story reverberates with allusions to the names of Adam and Eve. Adam (*‘adam*) resembles ground (*‘adamah*), and the terms for life and living (*hayyim* and *hayyah*) audibly resemble the name of Eve (*hawwah*). In addition there is a word-play in the Hebrew text between the word for pain of childbirth and the word for tree (cf ‘trauma’ and ‘tree’ in English). Similarly, the Hebrew words for ‘naked’, ‘crafty’ and ‘curse’ sound very alike.

The narrative employs word-pictures rather than prosaic story telling. The narrator borrows the figures of sacred trees, an archetypal river, and a talking serpent from the literature of the ancient Near East, but these loan ideas do not mean that Genesis 2 and 3 is a mythical account.<sup>6</sup> Like Jotham’s fable (Judg 9:7-15), Nathan’s parable (2 Sam 12) and Ezekiel’s visual aids (Ezek 4-5), the second creation account, although highly figurative, appears to reference real events. The phrase in the title – ‘this is the account of’ (2:4) – suggests the narrator (or editor) understood their story to be about real people.<sup>7</sup> The figurative story-form of Genesis 2:4-3:24 makes more vivid the account of the creation of Adam and Eve, of the institution of marriage, and of the entry of sin and its consequences, than presenting a series of propositional statements would have done. One example of how we might interpret this figurative account is S R Driver’s assumption that Genesis 3 reflects the fact that the human race or its separate branches had at a critical point been faced with a moral choice that would affect its future.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, in the second account the narrative has a supra-

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<sup>6</sup> According to Sternberg the suppression of myth is a feature of the Hebrew worldview (*op cit* p 46).

<sup>7</sup> There are ten other ‘accounts’ in Genesis each introducing a genealogy or a family history – 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1; 36:9; and 37:2. There are also ‘accounts’ in Num 3:1 and Ruth 4:18. The genealogies of Adam (Gen 5:1), of Terah (Gen 11:27), of Aaron and Moses (Num 3:1), and of David (Ruth 4:18) record respectively the foundation of the primal, the patriarchal, the national, and royal history of Israel. A plain reading of the genealogies of Abraham (1 Chron 1:1-27) and of Jesus (Luke 3:23-38), both of which originate in Adam, would presume that real people are in view.

<sup>8</sup> S R Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, London, 1904: p 57)

historical dimension in that Adam and Eve represent every man and every woman (Gen 2:24; 3:16-19; cf Matt 19:4-6; 1 Cor 15:21-22, 45-49; Rom 5:12-21).

The narrative of the second account has been analysed in a variety of ways. For example, Wenham views it as composed of seven symmetrical scenes as follows:

*Scene*

1	2:5-17	Narrative	God the sole actor: man present but passive
2	2:18-25	Narrative	God main actor, man minor role, woman & animals passive
3	3:1-5	Dialogue	Snake and woman
4	3:6-8	Narrative	Man and woman
5	3:9-13	Dialogue	God, man and woman
6	3:14-21	Narrative	God main actor, man minor role, woman & snake passive
7	3:22-24	Narrative	God sole actor, man passive

The literary symmetry is seen in that scene 1 matches scene 7; scene 2, scene 6; scene 3, scene 5; while scene 4 forms the core of the narrative where the couple consume the forbidden fruit.<sup>9</sup>

Wenham's overall assessment is as follows: 'In this the first story in the Bible, Hebrew narrative art is seen at its highest. The exquisite charm with which the tale unfolds serves only to deepen the tragedy that is related, while the apparent naïveté of the style disguises a richness of theological reflection that philosophers and theologians have not exhausted.'<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand Waltke sees the narrative unfolding as a three-act drama which continues to the end of the 'account' at the close of chapter 4. Each act opens with a setting and concludes with a poem underlining the theme of the act, followed by an epilogue:

- Act One – 2:4b-17
  - Scene 1 – 2:4b-17
  - Scene 2 – 2:18-23
  - Epilogue 2 – 24-25
- Act Two – 3:1-24
  - Scene 1 – 3:1-7
  - Scene 2 – 3:8-19
  - Epilogue – 3:20-24
- Act Three – 4:1-25
  - Scene 1 – 4:1-16
  - Scene 2 – 4:17-24
  - Epilogue – 4:25-26<sup>11</sup>

Waltke's identification of a chiasm linking the first two acts points to the second account, like the first, having been artistically constructed.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Wenham's analysis follows Walsh (*JBL* 96 [1971]: 161-177 as refined by Aufret (*La Sagasse* 25-67).

<sup>10</sup> *Genesis 1-15: Word Biblical Commentary* by G J Wenham, Waco, 1987: 86.

<sup>11</sup> *Genesis: A Commentary*, by B J Waltke, Grand Rapids, 2001: 79-80.

## The creation accounts and science

Reading and understanding the ancient creation accounts of Genesis in terms of their own internal literary genre make clear that it is inappropriate and unreasonable to expect them to use the categories of modern science.<sup>13</sup> They are better read on the narrator's terms, and analysed and interpreted in the light of both their Ancient Near East setting and the penchant of the Hebrew Bible to employ powerful metaphors to communicate facts as well as truths. Therefore, the fact that the scientific consensus today on material and human origins is that paleontology, embryology, fossils, and DNA, support the theory of evolution, need not essentially clash with Genesis. While the recent shift in science with genetic data becoming the backbone of biology and medicine has strengthened the evidence for evolution, this has not deterred many scientists from affirming divine creation.

Modern science provides insights which enrich our understanding of ancient biblical texts so that in a sense 'Science can help us read the Bible better.'<sup>14</sup> For example, genomic theory has raised questions regarding whether Adam and Eve could have been the bio-genetic progenitors of the entire human race (as many Christians have traditionally thought). For it suggests that the human population was never less than ten thousand individuals.<sup>15</sup> This has prompted N T Wright and others to postulate that God, in creating humankind as we know it today, might have chosen one pair from the rest of early hominids to be representatives of the entire human race and to take the lead in fulfilling his purpose to make the creation a place of delight and joy.<sup>16</sup> Sadly Adam and Eve failed to fulfil this responsibility and their failure, as our representatives, plunged humanity into rebellion against God and destructive mutual discord. Denis Alexander understands the consistent use of the definite article before Adam in the Hebrew text of 2:4-3:24 to indicate 'the representative man

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<sup>12</sup> **A** Creation of the man: his happy relationship with the earth and his home in the garden, where he has freely growing food and access to the tree of life (2:3-17)

**B** Creation of the woman: her happy relationship with the man (2:18-25)

**C** Conversation of serpent with woman; his tempting her (3:1-5)

**X** The sin and God's uncovering of it (3:6-13)

**C'** Punishment of serpent: its spoiled relationship with woman (3:14-15)

**B'** Punishment of the woman: her spoiled relationship with the man (3:16)

**A'** Punishment of the man: his spoiled relationship with the earth and expulsion from the garden; he now has to toil to secure food and no longer has access to the tree of life (3:17-24)

(Waltke, *op cit*: 81. Watke is following D A Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi*, Grand Rapids, 1999: 50).

<sup>13</sup> 'The Genesis creation account does not affirm a position on modern scientific questions and so does not speak to the expected scientific issues directly' (J V Miller and J M Soden, *In The Beginning ... We Misunderstood God: Interpreting Genesis 1 in Its Original Context*, Grand Rapids, 2012, cited in <http://henry.tiu.edu/2017/07/science-theology-charitable-discussion-a-symposium-recap/>).

<sup>14</sup> Old Testament scholar Tremper Longman addressing the Biologos Conference 'Christ and Creation', March, 2017. Longman quotes Pope John Paul II's statement: 'Science can purify our religion. Religion can purify science from idolatry.'

<sup>15</sup> This calculation is questioned by some geneticists (Swamidaas, *op cit*)

<sup>16</sup> N T Wright, *Surprised by Scripture: Engaging Contemporary Issues*, New York, 2014: 37.

perhaps of all other men.<sup>17</sup> Certainly, such an archetypal role for Adam was envisaged in both old era Jewish thinking<sup>18</sup> and in first century Christian theology<sup>19</sup>

Another example, concerns the nature of the death threatened in Genesis 3:3. This was traditionally assumed to include physical death, but fossil evidence and hominid remains point to the existence of death in creation long before the appearance of *homo sapiens* in the evolutionary chronology.<sup>20</sup> These scientific discoveries have prompted many Christians to read the biblical text with greater care, noting that, in fact, the death imposed on Adam and Eve was spiritual, not physical – expulsion, not expiration. Adam continued to live for many years after eviction from Eden (Gen 5:5).

As already noted, the current scientific consensus on material and human origins supports the theory of evolution. But, this does not contradict Genesis when understood in its own context. There are many mainline scientists who affirm divine creation on the basis of the Genesis narratives as well as their own experience of science. One of these scientists offers this observation: ‘Genomes are transforming our understanding of everything, and they convince most Christians in science that evolution is the way God designed us.’<sup>21</sup>

Although there are many variations in how Christians affirm both divine creation and Holy Scripture, there is an underlying consensus affirming that there is no ultimate distinction between the natural world rightly interpreted and Scripture rightly understood.

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<sup>17</sup> *Creation or Evolution: Do We Have to Choose?* by D R Alexander, Oxford / Grand Rapids, 2008 :194.

<sup>18</sup> 4 Ezra 7:118; Sirach 49:16; 2 Baruch 54:15.

<sup>19</sup> 1 Cor 15:21-22, 45-49; Rom 5:12-21. Cf C K Barrett’s comment on 1 Cor 15:45-49: ‘Neither of the two men he [Paul] has mentioned was simply a private individual. Each was an *Adam*, a representative man, what each was, others became.’ (*First Epistle to the Corinthians*: 376-377, London, 1971). Barrett notes that Paul assumes the historicity of Adam, although Barret himself suggests Paul may have been mistaken in this. Scot McKnight in *Adam and the Genome* (by D R Venema and S McKnight, Grand Rapids, 2017) thinks Paul’s reference to Adam is literary rather than historical.

<sup>20</sup> Cf Wright, *op cit*: 38.

<sup>21</sup> S. Joshua Swamidaas, Washington University (St Louis) - <http://henry.tiu.edu/2017/06/a/genealogical-adam-and-eve-in-evolution/>)