

## Genesis One: An Assignment

A class note and assignment from Prof. Elam

If one is honest when reading Genesis Chapter One, it must be allowed that it is firmly entrenched in an ancient mythical conception of the cosmos. More enlightened models of the physical universe existed at the time it was written, and perhaps they were known to the author. For whatever reason, the choice was made to have the origin of the world described in this stylistic manner. Some would argue that it had to be in this form because no other cosmogony would have been acceptable to the original readers. While that would be hard to prove, it is certainly true that modern cosmological concepts would not have been easily communicated to them. Ultimately, everyone must admit that any creation account written at a certain point in history must be nonliteral compared to later and presumably truer science. Therefore, it matters little which model of the cosmos is used as long as the intended message is effectively conveyed through it. The simplest model meeting this requirement would be the best; any details extraneous to the message tend to obscure its purpose. It would be up to succeeding generations of readers to understand this and not try to interpret it in light of their own science.

Nevertheless, it is disconcerting to literal-minded people that God told Moses an untruth. They have not paused to consider that today's scientific truth is tomorrow's quaint oversimplification. So

if we are to interpret Genesis One as it was meant to be read, we must look for its timeless message and not mind the vehicle. It would be a misuse of this scripture to bring it to bear on issues that pertain only to the vehicle and are peripheral to the message.

This points to a very useful principle of interpretation: try stripping away what is not timeless (trappings of a particular culture) and see what is left, if anything. Whatever is left might be the entire message—or at least one of the messages you can easily make use of. If you find that to be the case, you can put it back together and happily read it as literature while appreciating the message.

The timeless message in Genesis Chapter One is easy to extract, though it loses its beauty when not clothed in the original vehicle. Primarily it is that God originated earth, everything needed to support earthly life, and all life on the earth; and he did it in six days. There is no room given to agents: it was God alone who did it, though not a lone God, for the Spirit of God and the Word of God are mentioned.

A most prominent feature of this presentation is that it was done in six days and on the seventh day God rested. Nothing is emphasized more than the fact that the creation took place in six days after which a seventh day of rest was called for. What is timeless about that is the pattern of the seven-day week with its Sabbath-day rest and worship: it was ordained by God at the beginning. It is foundational to wholesome life on earth, and the fact that it has often been disregarded does not make it invalid. Currently we all live in seven-day weeks, and some of us observe a

version of the Sabbath.

Beyond this, the details are of lesser use to most of us; they could be filled in by anyone unless the arrangement of the activities on particular days is taken as being significant. Of course there would be some logical order to it. But there is no timeless *creation* message in that because it is not literally true now and perhaps was never meant to be a literal order of creation.

We can easily find other timeless elements such as order from chaos and seeing that all creation was good, but they follow directly from the main message that God did it all. The list of what he did is sketchy and incomplete because it was never intended to be literal. But was it intended to represent something else?

In summary, Genesis One conveys its main message in a vehicle that is not a scientific treatise; it is a literary thing with structure that perhaps belongs to something else but not to modern science. It is a beautiful poem about the Creator going to work and making man (and woman) and a habitat suitable for him<sup>1</sup> and in doing so setting the pattern that they will follow in their own work and rest. What else is in it? No doubt it has religious overtones, and identifying them is your assignment. Hint: Look for parallelism in the text and consider what other structure it might reflect that would have been Levitically significant to Moses, the author.

Secondarily, if we have nothing better to do, we could conduct

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<sup>1</sup> "She is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; let her be called Woman, for she was taken out of Man." (2:23) The Hebrew for Man (*ish*) and Woman (*ishshah*) in this verse are so close as to mean complimentary parts of one whole.

a comparative study of cosmologies to see if the text happens to line up with any of them as well as it does with the original vehicle. This is similar to the efforts of concordism but with a different goal in mind. The concordist is under an obligation to find agreement between the narrative of Genesis One and his favored cosmology. We are approaching it looking for one of those mysterious congruencies that appear in the Bible: if there does happen to be a concordance in that sense, it need not be taken to be more than a curiosity, and it need not to be ranked with the plain message of the text in its original context—unless it links with other plain messages that ride on the surface in other places.

So here are some assignments for extra credit:

1. See if you can find a chronicle of design in Genesis One.

As far as we humans know, design is a phase of creation. Traditionally, design comes first, and then construction takes place. However, another way to look at it is that the design is the creation: the construction is determined by the design. If an architect creates a house plan, any number of identical houses can be built from it. The architect's drawings are really the creation: the rest is rendering the creation in material form.

My son tells me that software developers are not always the best designers, and I have figured out that there is a reason for that: there is no construction phase. In other words, the design is the end product in a more literal sense than in the case of an architect designing for a builder. A computer program is simply

information (as is any design). But the program is also the end product. So the design is the creation, and there is no need to have a builder look at it and criticize it for bearing marks of sloppy design. If there is a critic in this case, it is the computer on which the software runs. The design is repeatedly verified and tested by the computer during the development process. From what I have observed, the computer is a tough critic but in a mindless way that is insensitive to tidiness and elegance.

If Genesis One can be rendered as a chronicle of design, we would not expect the time sequence to match the sequence of the development of the cosmos in cosmos time. The design sequence would be in another time frame entirely independent of the materialization of the design. When an architect designs a house, the order in which he does things and the period of time in which he does them need not have any relationship to the order of the steps taken in building the house.

2. What would be the time domain of the design; that is, when would the design of the cosmos take place? (If you are a strict materialist, as I am, you need not try to answer this question because it will lead you astray.)

3. Take a look at Genesis Chapter Two. You will find a working out of the design in what we would call our historical time frame. How does it differ from the sequence given in Chapter One?

4. This one is entirely optional. If you decide to tackle it, be

forewarned that it is a little scary. Could Chapter One have been written *primarily* and intentionally about a design process? In other words, does it work better as a design sequence than as a literal construction sequence? (I know the implications of this are staggering and could force you to become a believer in divine inspiration.) The deck seems to be stacked in favor of this.

5. If the cosmos we live in was designed in another time frame, describe how evolution would be apparent evolution and would not be incompatible with predetermination. Would free will be incompatible with predestination?

Questions for dorm-room discussion:

Could our cosmos be like a virtual-reality game for God?

Could the host of the virtual reality simulator be God himself?

Most specific phenomenon in virtual-reality simulators are not specifically programmed. Does that translate into free will for the simulated characters? Would such free will be an illusion?

Certain characters in virtual-reality games are programmed or controlled. Is there any evidence of that in our world?

Are other beings in heaven participating in this simulation as if it were a video game to them? If so, who would they be?

Could a simulation include an invisible realm populated by angels and demons?

Could angels in heaven be doing virtual reality sessions? Or would they be included in the simulation as programmed beings?

Could each of us have a player in heaven who is our real self?

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