

Genesis 1 as Temple Text in the Context of Ancient Cosmology
Summary Description
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If we are to reach an understanding of an ancient text such as Genesis 1, we have to be able to think about the issues the way they would have. A foundational issue is the way people think about existence. In the ancient world they believed that something existed when it had a role and a function in an ordered system. This is in stark contrast to our way of thinking, that something exists when it has material properties. In our world, to cause something to exist (i.e., to create), involves giving something material properties. In the ancient world, to cause something to exist involves giving it a function and a role. In Hebrew, the word translated “create” (*bara*’) expresses this very idea. So, “In the beginning period (the Hebrew expresses a period, not a point, referring to the seven day period), God created (gave functions to) the cosmos. Thus in Gen. 1:2 the narrative starts with no functions (not with no matter), and assigns functions by separating and naming.

On day 1, verses 4 and 5 make it clear that a *period* of light is being separated from a *period* of darkness and each period is being named. Thus on day 1 God created not light, but a period of light, i.e., the basis for time. On day two God sets up the basis for weather, and on day 3, the basis for growing food. After the major functions of human existence are established, he assigns functionaries to their various spheres. All of the functions are relative to human existence and they are declared good as they are put in place to function on behalf of humans.

The cosmos is portrayed in the ancient world and in the Bible as a temple, and temples are designed to be micro-models of the cosmos. Temples are built in the ancient world for the gods to rest in, which does not refer to relaxing, but to enjoying and maintaining security and order. With the mention of God’s rest on day seven, we can see that Genesis 1 is also thinking about the cosmos as a temple. God is creating his dwelling place, putting people into it as his images (representatives), and taking up his place at the helm to maintain the order he has established.

In the ancient world temple dedications were often seven days in duration. During those seven days, the functions of the temple would be proclaimed, the furniture and functionaries installed, the priests would take up their role and at the end, the deity would enter and take up his rest. If the cosmos is being viewed as a temple, Genesis 1 can be understood as presenting creation of the cosmos in terms of a temple dedication. There is no reason to think of the seven days as anything but normal days. Since the text is not discussing the material creation of the cosmos, the days of Gen. 1 offer no information about the age of the material cosmos. Genesis 1 is about the work God did (a *bara*’ work), not about the things God made.

The theology of the text presents God as the one who is the founder and CEO of the cosmos. He has brought order, established functions, and maintains the cosmos moment by moment. The insistence on his purposes and his engagement are the polar opposite of a naturalistic view of creation, which has no room for purpose or divine engagement. The theology also speaks to the real issue of creation: who is in charge.

Concordism says the Bible is OK because its statements really are scientifically accurate as far as they go. The above position says the Bible is OK because its observational perspective is adequate as a framework for communicating the functional and theological truths.

Evidences for Function over Structure

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Biblical

1. Understanding of Hebrew *bara* (“create”)
2. Story begins with “functionless” condition (“Formless and void”)
3. Day One: Light to be understood as “period of light” = time
4. Day Two: “Expanse” does not equate to any structure
5. Day Three: nothing made; two elements functionally related
6. Day Four: functions clearly the focus
7. Day Six: emphasis on functions of people
8. Day Seven: Rest and the Temple
9. “It was good” as an assessment of functioning (cf. “it was not good”)
10. Reconstitution of functions after the flood (8:22; time, climate and fecundity as in Gen 1)

Ancient Near East

1. Nothing is made in Babylonian Creation Epic, but the cosmos is organized
2. Decrees of the gods for the function of the cosmos are much more important than material things
3. Connections between temple, cosmos and rest
4. Pictures are functional not structural (Egypt)
5. Papyrus Insinger lists 18 “creations”—clear functional orientation (birth, sleep, remedies, dreams, summer/winter, succession of generations, etc.)
6. Babylonian Creation Epic V:39-46, time; 47-52, weather; 53-58, water sources and dirt. This is the same sequence of time, weather and agriculture.
7. Temple dedication ceremonies of seven days
8. Temple dedications include proclaiming functions and installing functionaries
9. Existence is defined in terms of having a name and a function
10. Function is a consequence of purpose (of the gods) rather than as a consequence of structure (which was largely indiscernible).

The Greeks persuaded people that the material structure of the cosmos was discernible. The Enlightenment persuaded people that the material structure of the cosmos was most important. The post-Darwin era persuaded people that material structure was all there was to the cosmos.

“First the world was denuded of transcendence, then the Scriptures were rendered irrelevant, and finally humankind was made nothing more than matter.”

--Ravi Zacharias, *Deliver Us From Evil* (Dallas: Word, 1996), 52.

Passages evidencing “Old World” Science

Genesis 1:6-8. firmament. In a similar way the expanse (sometimes called the firmament) set up in day two is the regulator of climate. The ancient Near Eastern cultures viewed the cosmos as featuring a 3-tiered structure, the heavens, the earth, and the underworld. Climate originated from the heavens and the expanse was seen as the mechanism that regulated moisture and sunlight. Though in the ancient world the expanse was generally viewed as more solid than we would understand it today, it is not the physical composition that is important, it is the function. In the Babylonian Creation Epic, *Enuma Elish*, the goddess representing this cosmic ocean, Tiamat, is divided in half by Marduk to make the waters above and the waters below.

Job 36:27. water cycle. Though some modern interpreters have attempted to read this verse as a scientific description of the condensation-evaporation cycle, the context is clearly operating from a different perspective (see v. 32, where God fills his hands with lightning bolts that he throws like spears). The two verbs in this verse speak of a process of drawing out or refining (as precious metals would be drawn out in the refining process). It was believed in the ancient Near East that raindrops came from a heavenly stream or ocean, a great body of water that enveloped the earth, and from subterranean waters. Thus, there were waters above and below the earth. It was these waters from which God is seen as drawing out raindrops.

Isaiah 40:22. circle of the earth. The picture of the universe described here is the common cosmological view of the ancient Near East. The sky was a dome that arched over the disk of the earth, which sat on top of a primeval ocean. Under the ocean was the netherworld, virtually a mirror image of the space above the earth. Thus, the entire universe was an enormous sphere, cut in the center by the earth. Nevertheless, here it is the earth itself that is described as circular. In Babylonian literature, Shamash is praised as the one who suspends from the heavens the circle of the lands. Likewise, in a prayer to Shamash and Adad, Adad causes it to rain on the circle of the earth. The circle simply reflects the curvature of the horizon (thus, disk-shaped) rather than a sphere (for which Hebrew uses another word). In the ancient world, the earth was consistently regarded as being circular.

Exodus 24:10. sapphire pavement. Some first millennium Mesopotamian texts whose traditions are thought to go back to the Kassite period speak of three heavens. Each level of heaven is described as having a particular type of stone as its pavement. The middle heavens are said to be paved with *saggilmud*-stone, which has the appearance of lapis-lazuli. This was believed to give the sky its blue color. The middle heavens were where most of the gods had their residence.

Jeremiah 31:33. Heart/Mind. When God wants to talk about the human intellect, he does not take time to inform his inspired authors that the true organ of thought was the brain. There is no Hebrew word for brain, and neither the Israelites nor any of the other ancient peoples knew what the brain was for. The Egyptian priests who mummified bodies carefully preserved all of the important internal organs in canopic jars, but they pulled the brain out with a hook through the nostrils and discarded it as so much trash. For the ancients, the representation of the heart as the seat of intellect and emotions was not simply figurative speech as it is for us. They knew of no other reality.

Evolution and Christianity: Pie or Cake?

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Evolution has traditionally been seen as a threat because the issue of origins is viewed as a pie that must be divided between “natural” processes and “supernatural” processes. Both scientists and people of faith have viewed the issue in this way. Theists have seen evolution as encroaching on what is attributed to God. Indeed, Theistic evolutionists and progressive evolutionists have given God certain pieces of the pie and assigned the rest of the pie to natural processes. Fiat creationists have been committed to “giving the whole pie to God” and viewed any position that gave any space to evolution as a compromise.

Alternatively, the origins issue should be viewed as a layer cake with the natural processes as one layer (say chocolate) and the supernatural processes as a second layer (say, angel food). This is a truer representation of the biblical worldview (which did not dichotomize natural and supernatural as has been characteristic of western culture since the Enlightenment) and incorporates a strong view of Providence that has typically been part of the Christian worldview in most other areas (e.g., weather, history, embryology). The Bible looks at this origins cake from the top with no statements to make about the bottom layer; scientists explore the cake from the bottom having no methods that give them access to the top layer. In this way, evolutionary aspects, or any other natural explanations, being concerned with only the bottom layer, need not detract from the amount of activity attributed to God.

Certainly there are events in history that require that there is no underlying chocolate layer, but that the angel food goes straight through, such as the incarnation and the resurrection. Even in the origins cake moments such as the initiation of the Big Bang or the initiation of life from non-life could arguably be placed in this category (and maybe even some of the irreducible complexities identified by ID). This is not just plugging God into the gaps left by science, for God’s activity is represented in the entire top layer.

