

## A distinctively Christian understanding of the doctrine of creation

The aim of this paper is to consider whether the Bible presents us with a distinctively Christian understanding of creation and, if so, to identify what it is. Additionally, this inquiry intends to offer a way of treating creation and origins that could be beneficial to the church in general, and specifically to young people as they deal with matters that intersect creation themes in school. This discussion will consider origins theologically, not from the paradigm of competing explanations, the story of Genesis contrasted with the results of the scientific method. The emphasis here will suggest how an overtly Christian reading would advance in contrast to a typically biblical approach taking Genesis as the starting point. To set forth a Christian emphasis attention to the pattern suggested by the New Testament writers is required. Examination of examples from the church fathers that treated creation is helpful. I have considered the published contributions on origins by Church of God theologians. I have attended to the impact of a Christian doctrine of creation or origins for theological study. Finally, I find myself confirming again and again what earlier readers had already discovered. Whether conscious of the benefits or not, we all owe a word of thanks to the chain of interpreters from centuries long past and our own forerunners from the Reformation movement who have opened the way before us. We all are aware that the concern for origins and creation continues to be a hot topic in America today, in school, in church, and even in court. This discussion is usually framed by the media as a debate between faith and reason, the Bible and science, or even the close-minded and the open-minded. Controversy sells books and newspapers. Disagreement attracts a TV audience. Conflict promotes a film. It then appears that most editors and directors tend to promote a “McLaughlin Report or Hardball” style and avoid calm reflection and reasoned investigation of crucial questions. To deepen understanding is a daunting request. This existential concern has been the subject of intellectual wrestling for centuries. Google identifies 192 million sites in response to the entry “creation,” and 63 million for “Genesis.” What can I say now that has not been said before? Truly I can empathize with the despairing seer who lamented,

That which has been is that which will be,  
And that which has been done is that which will be done.  
So there is nothing new under the sun. (Eccles. 1:9)

As part of my research I have watched nearly four hours of video discussion on the meaning of the creation account of Genesis that was hosted by John Ankerberg in 2006. The four participants included Dr. Walter Kaiser and Dr. Hugh Ross (representing an old-earth creationist view) opposite Dr. Jason Lisle and Ken Ham (defending a young-earth creationist view).<sup>1</sup> This series showed how challenging the consideration of the creation topic is in real conversation. The four debaters surveyed biblical data touching on assumptions, definitions, grammar, and limited scientific evidence. The sessions exposed substantial areas of disagreement. The nature of the disagreements was so foundational that fruitful sharing of ideas was hindered. Lack of listening was evident. Both sides appeared to speak past the presenter of the opposing view. Limiting the rhetoric is a choice.

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<sup>1</sup> The series, later entitled “The Great Debate,” is available in part online at <http://www.answersingenesis.org/video/ondemand/>.

The aim of this presentation directs us to the principle that we should understand creation ideas from a New Testament or Christian perspective. Taking this approach is not divergent or faithless. Such action constitutes the calling of disciples who follow Christ. It is my hope that we become more consistent and conscious of employing “New Testament eyes” when reading Old Testament texts on creation and all other topics as well. Recently I became aware through discussion with some Warner Southern students how such processes are already in a limited way common practice of current readers of Genesis one. Readers for the most part appear to be unaware of their own adaptive reading strategies, but readily will admit the influence of other information when they are asked interpretation questions. Let me offer this classroom example.

I read Genesis 2:2-3 to a group of new college students who all claimed to read Genesis one literally. “And by the seventh day God completed His work which He had done; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made” (NASB). In this account back to back sentences of the Genesis story plainly assert that God rested on the seventh day. Each student present, when asked if they literally understood that God rested on the seventh day, immediately rejected this concept. They all admitted that they recognized that other biblical texts held that God was not limited in this way. The students were even quite amused after this interpretation question to discover at that moment that they were not reading this account literally. I next asked this same group of students how they understood the depiction of the events of the first day. “Then God said, ‘Let there be light;’ and there was light” (Gen 1:3). The unanimous view of all the students present was that after God spoke the light instantly appeared. Now I must admit I did not follow up with the divine evaluation and the divine act to divide the light and darkness in verse 4. I must admit I do not know how to visualize separating the light from the darkness, and yes, I also do not know how long such a process may take. I next asked them what God did for the remaining 23 hours, 59 minutes, and 59 seconds? Again each one became quite amused and perplexed. One hesitatingly offered the suggestion that light was slower at the beginning. At the end of our session together the students all confessed that they were not literalists.

#### Identifying a New Testament stand

A conscious employment of “New Testament eyes” is to be chosen over an unconscious or accidental use. To effectively accomplish the goal of this paper we must identify a method that can produce a distinctively Christian reading. John Bright has suggested an approach that requires a Christian reading of all Old Testament teaching. He presented this method in the Gray Lectures at Duke University, later published as *The Authority of the Old Testament*. The rules for preaching from the Old Testament set forth by Bright offer wise guidance for the handling of all Old Testament texts and concepts.<sup>2</sup> His “verdict” method can be fruitfully applied to the subject of creation and origins. A parallel treatment by Emil Brunner on dogmatics titled *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption* also promoted constructing a New Testament formulation, except here Brunner actually asserted that such theological labor should start from the New

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<sup>2</sup> John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1967), 211-212, 213-251.

Testament.<sup>3</sup> Bright introduces his model by establishing a principle. For Christians, Old Testament texts do not stand on their own authority, “the preacher must---because he is a Christian and has received the Old Testament from the hands of Christ, who is its fulfillment---bring his text to the New Testament, as it were, for verdict.”<sup>4</sup> What Bright claims here is that concepts offered in the Old Testament canon cannot be received immediately and directly as they would be one who is a member of the synagogue community. The Old Testament was not written for the church; it was written for the synagogue. Other revelation criteria must be considered to determine if Old Testament concepts can be appropriately used within the church. Bright offers a series of questions for making this determination. “He must ask what the New Testament has done with this aspect of the Old Testament faith in the light of Christ. Does it announce its fulfillment? Does it ratify it and take it over intact? Does it modify it and give it a new significance? Or pass judgment upon it and abrogate it?”<sup>5</sup> John Bright would support the principle that everything contained within the pages of the Old Testament cannot be taken up within a Christian doctrine or application. For any concept to be received and used by the church it must pass the test of being fully Christian and be Christian oriented. Old Testament texts must be viewed from a Christian slant in the light of the more advanced and universal revelation of Christ given in the New Testament. To receive the Old Testament as a Christian, we must read it with “New Testament eyes.”

To comply with Bright we must determine what the New Testament writers did with the concepts of creation found in Genesis texts and elsewhere. The conclusion simply is the New Testament must guide and qualify any formulations to achieve a fully Christian understanding of any doctrine. By employing the “verdict” method we can establish a Christian approach or New Testament pattern for understanding the idea of creation and origins. This consciously Christian model will contrast with Old Testament forms and a commonly accepted view that presupposes that the biblical question of origins is primarily answered by reading and applying the first two chapters of Genesis independently of later revealed information. Additionally, the common Christian reading frequently ignores the influence of other texts and ideas that insert themselves even into so-called literal readings of the Genesis narratives. Brunner argues that Christian readers cannot ignore the input of the New Testament to achieve a Christian understanding:

Unfortunately the uniqueness of this Christian doctrine of Creation and the Creator is continually being obscured by the fact that theologians are so reluctant to begin their work with the New Testament; when they want to deal with the Creation they tend to begin with the Old Testament, although they never do this when they are speaking of the Redeemer. The emphasis on the story of Creation at the beginning of the Bible has constantly led theologians to forsake the rule which they would otherwise follow, namely, that the basis of *all* Christian articles of faith is the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ.

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<sup>3</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption, Dogmatics: Vol. II*, trans. Olive Wyon (London, Lutterworth Press, 1952, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press), 3-88.

<sup>4</sup> Bright, *Authority of the Old Testament*, 211.

<sup>5</sup> Bright, *Authority of the Old Testament*, 211-21.

So when we begin to study the subject of Creation in the Bible we ought to start with the first chapter of John, and some other passages of the *New Testament*, and not with the first chapter of Genesis.<sup>6</sup>

After establishing a Christian method and reading, the next step is: adapt to one's current context, within and for current understanding. Our own theologian Gilbert Stafford says, "A systematic theology offers a potential reference point for the thought and life of the church in the contemporary world."<sup>7</sup> Christian meaning that results from careful study must be conveyed within contemporary idiom. Stanley Grenz agrees:

Theology is a contextual discipline. Theologians do not merely amplify, refine, defend, and deliver to the next generation a timeless fixed orthodoxy. Rather, by speaking from within the community in, for, and to a specific historical and cultural context. ... From the vantage point of the Christian tradition, they seek to assist the church in bringing the confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ into the contemporary context.<sup>8</sup>

The constant accumulation of knowledge and changing conceptions require that theology or doctrine be continually renewed for each generation. This is particularly true to maintain relevance with respect to the abundance of scientific discovery. But here interpreters must be cautious in adopting or adapting scientific thought, as Russell Byrum warns:

And it is never right so to interpret the Bible that it contradicts certain known facts of nature. Truth is always consistent with itself. Truth in the Bible never contradicts truth in nature. God is the author of both. And as the man of science errs in advancing unproved theories that are opposed to the plain sense of the Scriptures, so also does the theologian err who refuses to regard the facts of science in interpreting the Scriptures, as has been too often done.<sup>9</sup>

#### The Witness of Early Creeds

There is no developed doctrine on creation presented by the New Testament writers even though the idea commonly appears within its pages. This element of faith was not central to the preaching of the early church, as shown by its absence from the kerygma recorded in the Book of Acts. Even in the following centuries precise articulation was lacking. Beliefs on origins were mentioned like the concerns for atonement and end times; specific expectations within creedal formulations were not addressed. The earliest ecumenical creedal forms show that there was no universally received approach. The wording generally affirms divine responsibility without detail. Creation is attributed solely to the Father alone in the received form of the Apostles'

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<sup>6</sup> Brunner, *Creation and Redemption*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Gilbert W. Stafford, *Theology for Disciples*, 2d ed. (Anderson, IN: Warner Press, 1996), 29.

<sup>8</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1994), 15.

<sup>9</sup> Russell R. Byrum, *Christian Theology* (Anderson, IN: Warner Press, 1925), 5<sup>th</sup> printing, 1976, 237.

Creed, though absent in several earlier versions: “I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. (*poiētēn ouranou kai gēs*)”<sup>10</sup> The Nicene Creed (A.D. 325) uses different phrasing for what was made by the Father and also adds attribution of creation to the Son. “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible (*pantōn horatōn te kai aoratōn poiētēn*).” This phrase extends the range to things invisible, possibly the spiritual realm and angels. The Nicene also adds regarding the Son, “by whom all things were made, both in the heaven and on the earth (*di hou ta panta egeneto, ta te en tō ouranō kai ta epi tēs gēs*).”<sup>11</sup> Its later revision, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (A.D. 381) inserts the heaven and earth phrase into the paragraph about the Father, “We believe in one God, The Father Almighty, Maker of *heaven and earth and of* all things visible and invisible (*poiētēn ouranou kai gēs, horatōn te pantōn kai aoratōn*).”<sup>12</sup> and shortens the phrase in the paragraph about the Son, “by whom all things were made (*di hou tap anta egeneto*).”<sup>13</sup> The limited precision of older forms substantially contrasts with the Westminster Confession Chapter IV, I (A.D. 1647) that presents clear references to recognition of the Spirit’s involvement, the creation of matter, and chronological concerns: “It pleased God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, for the manifestation of the glory of his eternal power, wisdom, and goodness, in the beginning, to create or make of nothing the world and all things therein, whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days and all very good.”<sup>14</sup> It is clear that this creedal form was a precursor to current dispute.

Therefore, based upon this brief look back at historical formulas we may conclude there is not one accepted doctrinaire way within historical Christianity to understand creation and origins. The absence of creedal dictates allows for diversity and creativity within the Christian communion. This diversity and creativity is already anticipated within the Bible itself. For the Bible does not present just one way to understand origins, but through its pages presents several options, particularly within the Old Testament canon. The most obvious is the finished creation approach that appears in Genesis. There is the example from the Book of Job, found in the Yahweh speeches, chapters 38 to 41. It is the theme of Psalm 104. There is the wisdom treatment given in Proverbs 8. There also is the seldom recognized “creation is still occurring” reading that appears within the Books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah, the Psalms and Job. This Old Testament reading shall be addressed later, see page 21 below. William Brown recognizes this substantial diversity of biblical treatment of creation:

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<sup>10</sup> Phillip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom With a History and Critical Notes*, 3 vols., 6th ed., rev. David S. Schaff (New York, Harper and Row, 1931, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1983, 1993), Vol. I, 21, Vol. II, 45.

<sup>11</sup> Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, I, 28, II, 60.

<sup>12</sup> Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, I, 28, II, 57.

<sup>13</sup> Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, I, 29, II, 57.

<sup>14</sup> Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, III, 611.

There are in fact, seven *ways* of creation featured in the Bible, that is, seven discrete traditions or cosmological portraits, each worthy of reflection, but each incomplete in isolation. As no single observer can ever gain complete information about the world on the quantum level (or on any level for that matter), so no one biblical tradition has the final word on the world.<sup>15</sup>

#### Contributions from Church of God tradition

To guide our thinking today, let us examine the efforts of three Church of God writers who explicitly address the topic of creation. Each has included one chapter in a published theology where the acts of creation are discussed. These theologians will be considered in chronological order since their works were published several decades apart.<sup>16</sup>

Russell R. Byrum (1889-1980) resigned from Anderson Bible Training School in 1929 after writing his *Christian Theology*. His work contains a chapter entitled “The Works of God.” Byrum recognizes that the function of Genesis teaching is commonly misread: “The supreme interest in the creation narrative is not scientific, but religious.”<sup>17</sup> This position is valid considering the overall function of the Bible as a whole (II Tim. 3:15-16). However this also applies to the historical setting; “It is true that it could not have been given otherwise than according to popular conceptions in that unscientific age, but a statement may be essentially true though not given in scientific terms.”<sup>18</sup> Though he promoted harmonizing the Bible with science, it is evident that Byrum opposes any reception of evolutionary approaches, including its naturalistic, semi-theistic (his Darwinian form), and theistic versions.<sup>19</sup> He is especially certain on the origin of humanity. “This text represents man, not as descended from the lower animals God had already created, but as an immediate divine creation from inanimate matter by a divine inbreathing.”<sup>20</sup> Byrum recognizes that sometimes problems were introduced by interpretation, not revelation itself. “It is a distinct advantage to religion to show, if it can be done, that the

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<sup>15</sup> William P. Brown, “*The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder*,” 5 (paper distributed in advance for Fuller Theological Seminary Old Testament Colloquium Presentation: “Creation Recycling Itself into Oblivion: Qoheleth Meets Stephen Weinberg After a Hard Day's Night” March 27, 2008) available from [http://www.fuller.edu/sot/faculty/goldingay/cp\\_content/homepage/homepage.htm](http://www.fuller.edu/sot/faculty/goldingay/cp_content/homepage/homepage.htm); Internet; accessed March 21, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Barry L. Callen, *Enriching the Spirit, A History of Higher Education in the Church of God (Anderson)* (Anderson, IN: Anderson University Press, 2007), 311, 317, 319. The dates mentioned for these theologians in this paper follow Callen.

<sup>17</sup> Byrum, *Christian Theology*, 236.

<sup>18</sup> Byrum, *Christian Theology*, 236.

<sup>19</sup> Byrum, *Christian Theology*, 245.

<sup>20</sup> Byrum, *Christian Theology*, 247.

Bible narrative is not inconsistent with the claims of science. It is improper to debar the student of science from faith in the inspired record by hedging it around with human interpretations that are not required by the internal facts of the Bible.”<sup>21</sup> He maintains that agreement with science should be acknowledged where possible. “It is certainly important that he [a theologian] take account of these claims to the degree that he will point out their agreement with the Scriptures if such is possible.”<sup>22</sup> When truth is established there can be no conflict. “With the proof that the Bible is the Word of God it is not incredible that it should harmonize with God’s works in nature. The Bible when properly interpreted has never been found to contradict the facts of science.”<sup>23</sup>

Albert F. Gray (1886-1969), while serving as president of Warner Pacific College, published a chapter, “The Creation of the Universe” in his own two-volume, *Christian Theology*. Like Byrum he also concluded that the Genesis stories are primarily theological accounts. “If one will observe that these two accounts were written for different purposes, and that neither is intended as a scientific statement of creation, the difficulty in harmonizing them will not be so great. Both accounts are essentially religious, and we should try not to miss the religious import.”<sup>24</sup> Recognizing this religious purpose does not make their contents unreliable. “The Genesis account is a most satisfactory statement of what actually happened, and we need not look elsewhere for the actual facts. . . . We do well to hold to the substantial historical accuracy of the early accounts of Genesis.”<sup>25</sup> Gray acknowledges that current scientific observation causes problems for earlier chronological calculations. “Now it is certain that a star 100,000 light years distant was created at least 100,000 years ago; otherwise its light would not have reached us yet. If the calculations of astronomers are correct, the creation of the material universe must have taken place long before 4004 B.C.”<sup>26</sup> Like Byrum, Gray also displays a willingness to harmonize with scientific discoveries. “The Bible must be interpreted in the light of established facts or found to be in error. We believe that science and the Bible can be reconciled.”<sup>27</sup> However, at the same time he also is skeptical about evolution. “There is no evidence of the gradual development of a new species. Not only is the link between man and beast missing, but there are many other missing links.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Byrum, *Christian Theology*, 237.

<sup>22</sup> Byrum, *Christian Theology*, 238.

<sup>23</sup> Byrum, *Christian Theology*, 243-44.

<sup>24</sup> Albert F. Gray, *Christian Theology*, 2 vols., 203-204 (Anderson, IN: Warner Press, 1944, 1946). The page references above refer to pages in volume I.

<sup>25</sup> Gray, *Christian Theology*, 205.

<sup>26</sup> Gray, *Christian Theology*, 206.

<sup>27</sup> Gray, *Christian Theology*, 207.

<sup>28</sup> Gray, *Christian Theology*, 211.

Kenneth E. Jones (1920-1999), following his retirement from Mid-America Bible College, adopted an explicitly Christian perspective on creation in a chapter titled, “The Works of God” in his *Theology of Holiness and Love*. This is evident even by his starting with John 1:1-3 and Colossians 1:15-16. “These two passages are clear statements that the Triune God created everything which exists which is not God. John began his story of the gospel of Jesus Christ with this record of his work in creation. And Paul, in order to make clear the transcendence of Christ, also pointed out his work in creation. So we see the importance of the Christian doctrine of creation.”<sup>29</sup> Jones follows the New Testament approach. The key question concerns who is responsible for creation, and not chronology. “It is not important when the creation of the universe took place, or how long ago. The age of the earth is of no theological significance, so that the Bible gives no hint of it. The universe was made before people, so no person was present to recognize the time.”<sup>30</sup> He warns against theology siding with scientific models and the potential problems that could arise: “It is sufficient for us to know that however the universe began, God did it.”<sup>31</sup> Like Byrum and Gray, Jones holds that the intent of scripture is theological. “Both accounts emphasize the supremacy of humanity over the rest of the whole creation. Neither record is given to satisfy our curiosity about when and how things began. Both are theological interpretations of God as supreme Creator of all that is. As soon as we see that their purpose is theological, we see that they are not contradictory in any way.”<sup>32</sup> Jones concludes that apparent conflicts between science and the Bible are only accidental. “All that scientists eventually prove to be facts will be capable of being reconciled with all that the Bible teaches. Facts do not contradict facts. Yet they may seem to do so, if we misunderstand either the facts, implications, or the Bible.”<sup>33</sup> He warns about arguing from science, “Creation is a theological concept, not open to scientific proof or disproof.”<sup>34</sup> On evolution, Jones displays nuance in his discussion since he accepted microevolution but rejected macroevolution. “If we argue that creation denies evolution, we must be sure that we mean naturalistic evolution, which denies anything supernatural. There are other meanings of the word “evolution,” and some of them are compatible with creation.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Kenneth E. Jones, *Theology of Holiness and Love* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc, 1995), 85.

<sup>30</sup> Jones, *Holiness and Love*, 86.

<sup>31</sup> Jones, *Holiness and Love*, 86.

<sup>32</sup> Jones, *Holiness and Love*, 88.

<sup>33</sup> Jones, *Holiness and Love*, 92.

<sup>34</sup> Jones, *Holiness and Love*, 92.

<sup>35</sup> Jones, *Holiness and Love*, 90.

## Insights from the Church Fathers

Research for how earlier centuries of Christians read the opening chapters of Genesis and treated creation concepts represents a helpful way for identifying trends within the Christian interpretation tradition. This survey reveals diverse readings and multiple cases for reading with “New Testament eyes.” I just want to mention a few examples. These examples will illustrate the attitude as well as care and methods of reading employed by these early Christians. These theologians will be considered in chronological sequence, following the order their writings appeared.<sup>36</sup>

Origen (A.D. 182-251) confirms the New Testament adoption of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation from nothing): “That there is one God, who created and arranged all things, and who, when nothing existed, called all things into being...”<sup>37</sup> He demonstrates that ancient readers were careful to read and explicate meaning. The problem of defining the “days of creation” is illustrated by his reasoned approach. “Now who is there, pray, possessed of understanding, that will regard the statement as appropriate, that the first day, and the second, and the third, in which also both evening and morning are mentioned, existed without sun, and moon, and stars — the first day even without a sky?”<sup>38</sup> Origen also shows awareness of interpretation with respect to the changing meaning for the word day that appears in Genesis 1:5 and 2:4.<sup>39</sup> We should follow his example of careful reading.

Basil (A.D. 330-379) commenting in his Hexaemeron demonstrates wrestling with the meaning of Genesis 1:1 and offers two ways to understand it. The text describes the first moment of creation, “Perhaps these words ‘In the beginning God created’ signify the rapid and imperceptible moment of creation. The beginning, in effect, is indivisible and instantaneous.” But later he suggests that the text points to the absolute completeness of the creative act: “Thus then, if it is said, ‘In the beginning God created,’ it is to teach us that at the will of God the world arose in less than an instant, and it is to convey this meaning more clearly that other interpreters have said: ‘God made summarily’ that is to say all at once and in a moment.”<sup>40</sup> He also admits

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<sup>36</sup> Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, 3d ed. rev. Robert T. Handy (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), 74, 116, 160, 170, 245. The dates mentioned for these church fathers in this paper follow Walker.

<sup>37</sup> Origen, “The Principles,” *The Anti-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, *Fathers of the Third Century*, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson in *The Master Christian Library*, version 8, (Rio, WI: AGES Software, Inc., 2000), 457 [CDROM].

<sup>38</sup> Origen, “The Principles,” 685.

<sup>39</sup> Origen, “Against Celsus,” 1181.

<sup>40</sup> Basil, “Hexaemeron,” *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Series 2, vol. 8, *St. Basil: Selected Works*, ed. Philip Schaff in *The Master Christian Library*, version 8, (Rio, WI: AGES Software, Inc., 2000), 216 [CDROM].

the apparent problem that “we are not told of the creation of water,” and that “if matter is uncreated, it has a claim to the same honors as God, since it must be of equal rank with Him.”<sup>41</sup>

Augustine (A.D. 354-430) recognizes that interpreting Genesis is difficult having written several times to address this need.<sup>42</sup> After these several attempts, he eventually concludes that the aim of the reader should be reading the literal meaning of the accounts.<sup>43</sup> The problems of the task led him to advance the idea that readers should maintain a willingness to change their views if and when other evidence becomes available.

In matters that are obscure and far beyond our vision, even in such as we find treated in Holy Scripture, different interpretations are sometimes possible without prejudice to the faith we have received. In such a case, we should not rush in headlong and so firmly take our stand on one side that, if further progress in the search for truth justly undermines this position, we too fall with it. That would be to battle not for the teaching of Holy Scripture but for our own, wishing its teaching to conform to ours, whereas we ought to wish ours to conform to that of Sacred Scripture.<sup>44</sup>

Augustine’s repeated study leads him to reject reading Genesis chapter one as chronological. “The days of creation, he suggests, are not periods of time but rather categories in which creatures are arranged by the author for didactic reasons to describe the works of creation, which in reality were created simultaneously.”<sup>45</sup> His sensitive reading also recognizes features of the narrative that conflicted with a literal reading. Augustine therefore questions, “But before the appearance of the sun, in what sort of cycle could three days and nights have passed in succession?”<sup>46</sup> He also questions apparent omissions within the account, “Why do we not read, ‘God said: ‘Let there be earth,’ and earth was made’; and ‘God said: ‘Let there be water,’ and water was made’?”<sup>47</sup> He is pastoral in recognizing that acrimonious debate concerning interpretation of scripture could become a barrier to advancing the gospel message. This concern of Augustine is so pertinent to the debate today about creation and origins, and the tendency to become argumentative that I have included his statement in full:

Usually, even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world, about the motion and orbit of the stars and even their size and relative positions, about the predictable eclipses of the sun and moon, the cycles of

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<sup>41</sup> Basil, “Hexaemeron,” 222.

<sup>42</sup> St. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. and annotated John Hammond Taylor, 2 vols. in *Ancient Christian Writers* (New York: Newman Press, 1982), 1-4 The page references above refer to pages in volume 1.

<sup>43</sup> St. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 7

<sup>44</sup> St. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 41.

<sup>45</sup> St. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 9.

<sup>46</sup> St. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 32

<sup>47</sup> St. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 35

the years and seasons, about the kinds of animals, shrubs, stones, and so forth, and this knowledge he holds to as being certain from reason and experience. Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics; and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn. The shame is not so much that an ignorant individual is derided, but that people outside the household of the faith think our sacred writers held such opinions, and, to the great loss of those for whose salvation we toil, the writers of our Scripture are criticized and rejected as unlearned men.... Reckless and incompetent expounders of Holy Scripture bring untold trouble and sorrow on their wiser brethren when they are caught in one of their mischievous false opinions and are taken to task by these who are not bound by the authority of our sacred books. For then, to defend their utterly foolish and obviously untrue statements, they will try to call upon Holy Scripture for proof and even recite from memory many passages which they think support their position, *although they understand neither what they say nor the things about which they make assertion.*<sup>48</sup>

Aquinas (1225-1274) recognizes a literary arrangement within the Genesis text that indicates three levels for the divine work of creation:

From the consideration of spiritual creatures we proceed to that of corporeal creatures, in the production of which, as Holy Scripture makes mention, three works are found, namely, the work of creation, as given in the words, “In the beginning God created heaven and earth”; the work of distinction as given in the words, “He divided the light from the darkness, and the waters that are above the firmament from the waters that are under the firmament”; and the work of adornment, expressed thus, “Let there be lights in the firmament.” First, then, we must consider the work of creation; secondly, the work of distinction; and thirdly, the work of adornment.<sup>49</sup>

Aquinas agrees with Augustine that authors of scripture accommodate to allow for the limits of human understanding<sup>50</sup> and he confirms Augustine’s guidelines for reading scripture.

The first is, to hold the truth of Scripture without wavering. The second is that since Holy Scripture can be explained in a multiplicity of senses, one should adhere to a particular explanation, only in such measure as to be ready to abandon it, if it be proved with certainty to be false; lest Holy Scripture be exposed to the ridicule of unbelievers, and obstacles be placed to their believing.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> St. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 41-42.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, vol. 1 *The First Part* in *The Master Christian Library*, version 8, (Rio, WI: AGES Software, Inc., 2000), 778 [CDROM].

<sup>50</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 791.

<sup>51</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 813.

## GRASPING THE MYSTERY

A doctrine of creation primarily influences two areas of dogmatics or systematic theology: theology, the doctrine of God, and anthropology, the doctrine of man. In each area New Testament perspectives on the teaching of creation clarify and adjust prior understandings that appeared within the Old Testament canon.

On God.

What is the New Testament “verdict” on creation teaching? Adjustment with new signification, Bright’s third option, would accurately describe the common approach. We can start with its more philosophical reading concerning the composition of origins. The New Testament’s plain and obvious declaration of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing), is an idea that was not explicitly stated within the opening verses of Genesis. Neither can this idea be conclusively substantiated within all the pages written on the definition of the Hebrew word *bara’* (create). This New Testament assertion (John 1:3, Rom. 4:17, Col. 1:16-17, Heb. 11:3) deepens our comprehension of God’s holiness and transcendence. God is holy, that is, set apart, separate, and distinct from the created universe. God is not part of, complement to, coexistent with, represented through, nor determined by matter of the created order. God is the wholly other, above and beyond the four dimensional space-time that comprises the known universe. God as to being is also before and existing prior to the created order. The universe in the totality of its parts, and its form and structure, owes its very existence to God’s act and care. Without God’s continuing creation or sustaining power the universe would dissolve into the very nothingness out of which it came. God by contrast is self-existent and free. The Creator does not depend upon or need what is created for continuing subsistence. It required many centuries for Israel to grasp the truth of this ontological gap between Creator and the created. The process of growth in theological understanding involved the total renunciation of all forms of primitive animism, pantheism, dualism, polytheism<sup>52</sup>, and Israel’s own Torah henotheism (the worship of one god before others) as reflected with the Decalogue (Exod. 20:3, Deut. 5:7). Only after such an incredible achievement of faith could God send the Son in the fullness of time. Finally, after God’s wholly otherness is completely recognized can we perceive the nature of incarnation to be the truly awesome wonder and paradox it really presents. An unveiling of the divine mystery appears in concentrated form in the prologue to the Fourth Gospel.

1. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

2. He was in the beginning with God. 3. All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.

14. And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1-3, 14, NASB)

The Godhead, though only the Father and Son are mentioned, already existed in relationship prior to the “beginning” as overtly noted later in the Gospel (John 17:5, 24). All creation without exception exists through the action of the divine Word. This Word who was the agent of all creation and maker of the world later became part of that same created universe. The Word became incarnate for the purpose of presenting a more complete revelation of the divine glory, grace, and truth and effecting redemption of the world (John 3:17).

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<sup>52</sup> Jones, *Christian Theology*, 8.

Using Bright's "verdict" test we find some New Testament texts confirm the Old Testament view that creation was the act of God (Acts 17:24, Eph. 3:9, Heb. 2:10, Rev. 4:11, 10:6, 14:7) and in two instances accomplished by the word (Heb. 11:3 *rhema*, II Pet. 3:5 *logos*). Other texts explicitly attribute the act of creation to the Son (John 1:10, I Cor. 8:6, Col. 1:16-17, Heb. 1:2, 10). These examples would indicate that at least three early Christian communities recognized Christ as creator. Whether attributed to the Father or the Son, all New Testament references give attention to the truth of creation, not to the method employed. Brunner observes: "It is characteristic of the New Testament statements about the Creator and the Creation that here the fact of Creation and the manner of Creation are stressed far less than the reason why the world was created and to what end; while the narrative of the Creation in Genesis says nothing about this at all"<sup>53</sup> The nearest any New Testament texts come to discussing how things came to be is the simple inclusion of the phrase "by the word." This qualification likely alludes to the frequent, "God said," occurring some ten times in Genesis one. The New Testament focus is on who did it. This concern would parallel the emphasis given in Genesis 1:1-2:3 where "God" appears thirty five times.<sup>54</sup> The New Testament offers no narrative. There is no list of separate words or acts. It offers no hint of time considerations. Throughout the stress is set on who is responsible for creation. Brunner strongly underscores this aim, citing Ephesians 1:10: "Indeed, He himself, Jesus Christ, as the personal manifestation of God, is the Goal of the world, for whom, in whom, and through whom the world has been created."<sup>55</sup> To achieve a distinctively Christian reading we must give attention to Christ. Brunner concluded: "It is only from this point of view that we can understand what the world is, as Creation; and this purpose is revealed in Jesus Christ. From Him alone---and not from the Old Testament story of Creation which knows nothing of Christ---can we understand what God's creation of the world really means."<sup>56</sup> Since it is evident that the New Testament writers limited their discussion a Christian understanding should adopt the emphases presented within the New Testament when reading Genesis. Reading with "New Testament eyes" will focus upon the Creator-God who acts and speaks.

We also recognize that the New Testament (Rom. 1:20) confirms the teaching, illustrated by Psalm 19, that the created order functions as a witness to God's creative power. Though this witness of general revelation to the existence of God is effective, the human race still needs the special revelation of scripture and the Gospel to bring humankind into a saving relationship with God (I Cor. 1:21, Rom. 10:17). The recognition of two sources of information about God gave rise to the longstanding classical tradition of the church fathers that God has two books, the book of scripture and the book of creation.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Brunner, *Creation and Redemption* 7.

<sup>54</sup> U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, Part I, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1961), 14.

<sup>55</sup> Brunner, *Creation and Redemption*, 14.

<sup>56</sup> Brunner, *Creation and Redemption*, 14.

<sup>57</sup> See the following articles for specific information. Peter M. J. Hess, "Nature and the Word of God" in *Inter-religious Dialogue* (2004), 1-8, available from <http://www.metanexus.net/conference2004/pdf/Hess.pdf>; Internet; accessed April 7, 2008, Peter 13 Christoph

Today, when believers refer to God's book of creation such expression is much more reserved in contrast to the medieval tradition. The frequent citation of the fourth century *Physiologus*, and its influence upon Middle Age "bestiaries" (books of animals and birds), provided church leaders a way to understand the created order, when aligned alongside scripture texts read allegorically, as the source for natural theology.<sup>58</sup> The revolution of theological method introduced by the Protestant Reformers in establishing the principle of *sola scriptura* (scripture alone) and its literal interpretation of scripture consequently led to a corresponding rejection of the spiritual and allegorical reading of scripture. Since for centuries nature was read like Scripture, this change also thus dramatically and negatively impacted the allegorical reading of nature and thereby its applicability to teach Christian theology.<sup>59</sup> Today, you will hardly find anyone who would dare claim that created things teach Christian theology, i.e., the triune nature of God or the two natures of Christ. Such theological discussion deduced from created things like birds and animals is no longer permitted.

On man.

The *imago dei* (image of God) is a crucial teaching of the Genesis creation song (1:26-27). This rare image-likeness construct (Gen. 5:1, 9:6) furthermore offers the key characteristic for how humankind is understood biblically. The literary shift in style draws attention to the significance of humanity in Genesis 1:27:

And God created man in His own image,  
in the image of God He created him;  
male and female He created them. (NASB)

U. Cassuto observes: "At this point the text assumes a more exalted tone and becomes poetic. ... The poetic structure of the sentence, its stately diction and its particular emotional quality attest to the special importance that the Torah attributes to the making of man---the noblest of creatures."<sup>60</sup> There has been considerable discussion through the centuries in the interpretation of the image. Several proposals have been offered for the meaning of this human trait. A common approach emphasizes the intellect of man in contrast to the animal kingdom. Arnold Rhodes identifies three implications for this theological concept: "man has a *relationship* to God," "man is the *representative* of God," and "man has a *responsibility* to God."<sup>61</sup> Attending to

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Harrison, "The Bible and the Emergence of Modern Science" in *Science & Christian Belief*, Vol 18, No. 2 (2006), p. 116 available from [http://epublications.bond.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1068&context=hss\\_pubs](http://epublications.bond.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1068&context=hss_pubs); Internet; accessed April 7, 2008, and G. Tanzella-Netti, "The Two Books Prior to the Scientific Revolution" in *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*, Vol 57, No. 3, Sept 2005, p. 235-245, available from <http://www.asa3.org/aSA/PSCF/2005/PSCF9-05Tanzella-Nitti.pdf>; Internet; accessed April 7, 2008.

<sup>58</sup> Harrison, "Modern Science," 120-121.

<sup>59</sup> Harrison, "Modern Science," 124.

<sup>60</sup> Cassuto, *Book of Genesis*, 57.

<sup>61</sup> Arnold Rhodes, *The Mighty Acts of God* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1964), 33.

the implications of Hebrew poetic parallelism has also provided a novel approach for understanding the meaning of the *Imago Dei* regarding the relationship found between man and woman. Paul Jewett observes, “According to this view, Genesis 1:27b (‘male and female made he them’) is an exposition of 1:27a (‘in the image of God created he him.’)”<sup>62</sup> This poetic structure suggests that “Man” (*adam*) was created to live in community or in partnership. Westermann explains: “A lone human being remains a complete human being in his lonesomeness. What is being said here is that a human being must be seen as one whose destiny it is to live in community; people have been created to live with each other.”<sup>63</sup> Understood socially the image presents glimpses of the divine nature. Human community reflects the community found within the triune Godhead. Thus the crucial element within the image consists of relationship; a human is a social being and incomplete in isolation.

A reader looking to the New Testament for “verdict” will find that the teaching of the New Testament both confirms and adds other concerns to the earlier Old Testament teaching. The idea is assumed as the basis for attending to conduct concerns. Paul apparently seems to limit the status to males, linking image and glory (I Cor. 11:7, Ps. 8:5, Heb. 2:7) while contrasting the service of men and women in worship. It appears in instruction against verbal abuse of humans (Jam. 3:9). These occurrences confirm the Genesis message by suggesting ideas of value and dignity, and also, as in Genesis (5:1, 9:6) that this status is never lost. Brunner observed: “In the Old Testament, the Bible describes this formal aspect of human nature by the concept of ‘being made in the image of God’. In the thought of the Old Testament the fact that man has been ‘made in the Image of God’ means something which man can never lose; even when he sins he cannot lose it.”<sup>64</sup> New Testament teaching also introduces a second application of the image of God, a new Christological focus. In three examples we find that Christ is the image explicitly (II Cor. 4:4, Col. 1:15) and obliquely (I Cor. 15:49). Because he is the image Christ constitutes the eschatological goal of redemption. Here Brunner writes: “The *Imago Dei* in the New Testament, “material” sense of the word, is identical with ‘being-in-the- Word’ of God.”<sup>65</sup> These distinct approaches should not be confused nor conflated. Humans as members of the human race are made in the image of God. Believers in Christ, as members of his body, are being recreated to bear the image of Christ (II Cor. 3:18) and will be transformed into this image (Rom. 8:29, Col. 3:10, I Cor. 15:49) and glory (Rom. 8:30, II Cor. 3:18, 4:4, Phil. 3:21). For disciples the image of Christ as our goal now takes priority, though at the same time there is continuing agreement with Genesis that humans in the image and likeness of God have worth and dignity. Brunner warns: “It is evident that our thought will become terribly muddled if the two ideas of the *Imago Dei*---

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<sup>62</sup> Paul Jewett, *Man as male and female* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), 33.

<sup>63</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11, A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (from the 2d German ed., 1976, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 160.

<sup>64</sup> Brunner, *Creation and Redemption*, 57.

<sup>65</sup> Brunner, *Creation and Redemption*, 58.

the “formal” and “structural” one of the Old Testament, and the “material” one of the New Testament---are either confused with one another, or treated as identical.”<sup>66</sup>

The Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 11:7 appears to have at least initially followed a devaluing evaluation of the status of women. While explaining the relationship of faith and Torah to the Christ forsaking Galatians he employs a line from the Genesis 1:27 *imago dei* text. The entry rite of baptism applies to all people who have faith in Christ (Gal. 3:26-27); human distinctions do not matter in the baptismal pool. This initiation ceremony does not discriminate. The sentence structure is significant. The form that Paul uses for his conclusion in Galatians 3:28 is revealing. The three denials in Greek that precede his revolutionary claim of Christian unity do not appear in the identical syntactical form. The evidence may be presented in a formula:

There is neither A nor B, there is neither C nor D, there is not E and F.  
The pertinent phrase, “there is not E and F,” diverges from the more grammatically appropriate contrasts of the first two pairings. The phrase, “male and female” (*arsen kai thelu*), that Paul employed here (E and F) appears in the same form in several LXX texts (Gen 1:27; 5:2), and probably should be considered as a frozen form. While it cannot be proven that Paul is alluding to Genesis 1:27, nevertheless, the identical LXX phrasing and subject matter strongly suggests that Paul was remembering the Genesis idea. In Christ, gender is not the “make or break” criteria for image bearing.

## READING WITH REVERENCE

Often we contemporary readers approach the Bible with an attitude of modern smugness. All real questions must be answered only through the scientific method. My response to myself and others is that a lot more humility is needed in respect to our assured results, as well as an attitude of reverence in the search for truth. As part of my task for this discussion of origins and creation I want to suggest a helpful approach for respectfully reading the Genesis account.

### The Creation Song (Gen. 1:1-2:4a)

I suggest that a reader read the passage to recognize the simple but profound message set forth within the repeating sonorous lines revealing a primal week, the six days plus one. There are phrases or refrains that appear again and again through the six days that suggest a sense of melody such that the seven day account has commonly been called a “creation hymn.” A careful reading of the seventh day will show that the seventh day is distinct and unique in form in the portrayal of the creation song’s message, and therefore should be kept separate from a discussion of creation or origins. There are several questions to keep in mind when reflecting upon the paragraphs treating the six days. What is emphasized? What is repeated? What matters receive more attention? What is omitted or ignored? Where does variation of form appear? To value such content concerns it is imperative to read the verses with increased sensitivity. Slow down and appreciate the song’s cadence and splendor. These lines convey a dignity and grandeur seldom grasped. The plain and clearly intended meaning of the narration is to extol and acknowledge the power of the God who speaks the universe into existence; and this God also happens to be the God of Israel, experienced as the One who saves and keeps covenant. The

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<sup>66</sup> Brunner, *Creation and Redemption*, 59.

intermingling of word and act, fiat and deed, throughout offers a poetic fullness in depicting the divine shaping of the created order.

The ancient storyteller paints a picture of divine speech and feats through which the world and the heavens are given form and content in an orderly process of two pairs of three days. This arrangement plainly intends to mirror a typical week of work. With all the pages written about the word *yom* (day), I must agree with Gerhard Hasel's last work,<sup>67</sup> where he argued that "day" actually meant a normal day for illustrating the divine creation acts of God. As long recognized, there is an explicit logical order to the presentation of the actions contained within the six days.

The actions of the initial three days obviously parallel the works of the following three days. The accounts for each of first three days narrate how God establishes a region or domain to be filled up or occupied by things designed for that area in the three days that follow. The first three days establish form or structures and the last three days supply contents. The first day presents the establishment of the domain of light and darkness, or day and night, while its fourth day pairing offers the creation of lights to occupy and rule the domains of day and night. The second day depicts God establishing the firmament-expanse-sky to divide the primordial waters resulting in a sea-sky region, while its fifth day companion identifies the creation of both sea creatures and sky creatures to move about the two areas within the domain separated out by the firmament-expanse-sky. The third day recounts the divine command that dry lands appear and the generation of plant life, while its sixth day pairing presents the creation of land species with a special focus upon humankind. The song writer aims throughout to display through literary art the wisdom and thoughtfulness of God in preparing the universe, and earth in particular, for life, especially humankind. The creation song evokes reverence and gratitude and beauty in acknowledging the powerful word that acts with logic and with loving care.

#### Reading The Seventh Day with "New Testament Eyes" (Correcting a view of the seventh day in the Fourth Gospel)

The fourth gospel that appears alongside and even later than the synoptic tradition contains "corrections" or "modifications" to traditional Old Testament teaching just like that seen in other gospel teaching, most obviously seen in the sermon on the mount ("you have heard but I say") in Matthew 5. This church community proclaims the principle of an obedient divine son who does what the Father does. There is unity in the godhead.

16. And for this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath. 17. But He answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working." ...19. Jesus therefore answered and was saying to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner (John 5:16-17, 19).

This reply of Jesus represents an obvious allusion to Genesis 2:2-3. The common reading was that God created (read worked) at one special time, but that since then God has ceased working,

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<sup>67</sup> Gerhard F. Hasel, "The 'Days' of Creation in Genesis 1: Literal 'Days' or Figurative 'Periods/Epochs' of Time?" *Origins* 21.1 (1994): 5-38; available from <http://www.grisda.org/origins/21005.htm>; Internet: accessed April 7, 2008.

he is resting. The words of Jesus contest this understanding, and Jesus' own work is explained as following the pattern established by the Father. This meaning for a Christian doctrine of creation is plainly suggested by the reply given. The Father is constantly working and likewise the son is constantly working. There is no ceasing, no resting for the Godhead. His retort is a repudiation of the common understanding. The form of this statement suggests that Jesus (and the community of John) rejected the assertion that humans should observe the Sabbath because God observed the Sabbath (Exod. 20: 11). This claim for Sabbath keeping would be invalid because God in fact did not rest. "It may be said then that when John was written there was a current exegesis of God's Sabbath rest sufficient to support the argument of the evangelist. God is essentially and unchangeably creative..."<sup>68</sup> The new view also had implications for understanding the divine nature. J. N. Sanders writes: "Jesus in effect repudiates any crudely anthropomorphic understanding of God's rest after his six days labour of creation, the aetiological myth which explained the command to rest from labour on the seventh day. That God is by his very nature continually active is a Greek philosophical commonplace, found at least as early as Aristotle, and adopted by ... Philo, who was well aware of its incompatibility with earlier ideas, as were also the rabbis."<sup>69</sup> That such a concept appears in Philo about the Sabbath in Genesis suggests that this approach would be adaptable to the understanding of much Old Testament teaching. "For God never ceases from making something or other; but, as it is the property of fire to burn, and of snow to chill, so also it is the property of God to be creating."<sup>70</sup>

#### Biblical origins and science

The common traditional reading creation narrative contained in the Book of Genesis is that the one God is responsible for creating and sustaining the universe. The universe therefore is not an accident; it does not represent a random event, but is the product of divine design. The Creator's own power called the universe into existence and established its laws and form.

The content of Genesis 1 was never intended to offer a scientific explanation of beginnings but offers a theological confession concerning the personal source, "the Who of creation." This is all the more clear when the form and order of the Genesis 1 account is compared to the ancient "Babylonian Genesis," *Enuma Elish*. The Genesis account overtly and defiantly denies creation claims made for Marduk, the god of Babylon. YHWH is the true creator not Marduk. This is a faith claim, not a scientific statement.

This understanding is further supported by the examination of the form and order of Genesis 1 and 2. The obvious differences suggest that the particulars of specific order and method, "the How of creation," cannot be taken as the intended aim of the accounts if read

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<sup>68</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978), 256. Also see also Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, in *The Anchor Bible*, vol. 29 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), 216-217.

<sup>69</sup> J. N. Sanders, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, ed. B. A. Maston (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968), 163-164.

<sup>70</sup> *The Works of Philo*, 2d ed., trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody, MS: Hendrikson Publishers, 1993), 25.

together since they present an uncompromising diversity. Finally, the teaching of the New Testament writers who constantly point to the Who and not the How of creation establishes this understanding as the approach for Christians. Therefore, the focus for our reading should always be on the Who of creation and not the How of creation.

If we should decide to ignore the intended focus and choose to read the Genesis materials in a way to derive information on the How question, we could employ the old method of comparing the details of Genesis one to the “finds” of modern science. Adopting this approach is a serious matter since it involves dangerous implications. Faith should never be connected, even less supported, by a select scientific worldview. The historical experience of Copernicus and Galileo and their conflicts with the Medieval church presents a warning to any too close association with the received results of modern science. Close association involves an implicit threat to faith. When a scientific model is rejected, we might just find scripture and faith being abandoned too. Recalling the warning of Russell Byrum, cautiously consider the following two examples from Genesis 1, and bear in mind, that interpretation may be playful.

### On light

Against the intended theological approach we could read the Genesis 1 account to find hints about the method of creation that shows some correspondence to the current scientific model of origins of the universe. Simply stated, the present “big bang” model easily parallels select mysterious details found in Genesis one concerning the origin of light. The first divine fiat, “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3), contextually is the very first “event” of creation described and assigned to Day one. This initial light must be recognized as distinct from the later lights assigned for the activity of Day four. The Genesis one account presents an order where the sun, moon, and stars are created later through the fifth divine fiat, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens...” (Gen. 1:14). This recognition of the appearance of two distinct times for the appearing of light conforms to current scientific study of origins. In this scenario first God starts the universe with the “big bang.” Then some 380,000 years after the beginning a divine fiat brings about the indescribably brilliant flash that ends the first age of darkness following the initial explosive expansion of matter and energy composing the whole the universe. Then eons later at another command of God, new stars are born in the fury of young galaxies following the second period of universal darkness.

### On life

Against the intended theological approach here again we could read the Genesis 1 story to find hints about the method of creation that could parallel the current scientific model for origins of life. The Genesis story boldly proclaims the fourth fiat to explain the origin of life on earth on Day three, “Let the earth sprout vegetation...” (Gen. 1: 11). The amazing follow-up narration of the effect (Gen. 1: 12) introduced by this divine fiat portrays a process whereby the lifeless produces life. These two sentences present a picture that certainly reads remarkably like what some who believe in Evolution might assert. There is one key difference. This development of life in Genesis is seen as the direct product of the divine command, not random chance.

The account even portrays the one God on Day five as commanding the waters (Gen. 1:20) to produce sea life and then on Day six the earth (Gen. 1: 24) to produce animal life. However, following the sixth and seventh fiats the account does not mention the response on the part of the waters and earth as found so clearly in verse twelve in producing plant life. Instead

the narrative mentions the phrases “And God created” and “And God made.” The Hebrews saw a difference between plant and animal life, so divine action is described as more closely connected to the production of animal life. Given the pattern of the overall Genesis 1 account, however, where the fiat is mentioned and its effect, the very mention of the commands to bring forth sea and animal life may allow the reader to still see parallels to the creation of plant life. God commands and inanimate matter responds to produce life. An idea something like this could have been in the mind of Charles Darwin. He did not offer a scientific description for the emergence of life itself in *The Origin of Species*. His theory of adaptation only applies to already living creatures and the adaptations that occur after the appearance of life. Darwin accounts for this by faith. The acknowledgement of the Creator’s work appears four times within the volume, most notably in the last pages of the body of his research:

To my mind it accords better with what we know of the laws impressed on matter by the Creator, that the production and extinction of the past and present inhabitants of the world should have been due to secondary causes, like those determining the birth and death of the individual. When I view all beings not as special creations, but as the lineal descendants of some few beings which lived long before the first bed of the Cambrian system was deposited, the larger and dominant groups within each class, which will ultimately prevail and procreate new and dominant species.<sup>71</sup>

Darwin acknowledges the wonder and wisdom displayed by the Creator in employing an evolutionary process. “There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone circling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved.”<sup>72</sup> Currently, I am not ashamed to still maintain a supernatural origin for life since the proposals presented so far cannot effectively explain the first appearance of a living cell even if such a stand might be declared a “god of the gaps” position. This crucial event still remains a mystery without satisfactory scientific explanation. Francis S. Collins, head of the Human Genome Project, admits:

But how did self-replicating organisms arise in the first place? It is fair to say that at the present time we simply do not know. No current hypothesis comes close to explaining how in the space of a mere 150 million years, the prebiotic environment that existed on planet Earth gave rise to life. That is not to say that reasonable hypotheses have not been put forward, but their statistical probability of accounting for the development of life still seems remote.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. 1872, 245 [book on-line] (Champaign, IL: Project Gutenberg Etext #2009 1999, accessed May25, 2007); available from <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/webbin/gutbook/lookup?num=2009>; Internet.

<sup>72</sup> Darwin, *Origin of Species*, 246.

<sup>73</sup> Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God, A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 90. For examples of discussion of such statistical results, see J. P. Moreland, ed., *The Creation Hypothesis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 272-277.

While relating the story of Abraham to Christian faith, the apostle Paul joins the activities of creation and giving life in Romans 4:17b: "...God who gives life to the dead, and calls into being that which does not exist" NASB (*to zōpoiountos tous nekrous kai kalountos ta mē onta hōs onta*). The phrase "gives life" and the word "calls" both translate Greek present participles. The grammar suggests that this divine activity is unceasing as already noted for John 5:17 above. God is the Creator and also the Life-maker, a crucial element of the divine creative activity. Perceived this way, creation is ongoing, unceasing, extending out to the future, and ultimately at the return of Christ, a remaking. We do not confess that God *was* the Creator and Life-maker. This belief concerns present reality, whether we are aware or not.

### On the expanding universe

Theology should speak to current understanding and that includes cosmology. The present acceptance by the scientific community of some form of "big bang" origins includes the observation of the resultant ongoing expansion of the universe. The expansion idea has connections with another biblical model. This creation model is seldom recognized and receives little attention. I previously mentioned it as the "creation is still occurring" approach that is scattered throughout the Old Testament. The verdict given by the New Testament (John 5:17 and Romans 4:17b) should be seen as ratifying this obscure point of view. The idea of present action appears in English translation only rarely (i.e., Isa. 40:22, 44:24, 45:7) and not consistently among and within English versions. The basis of this idea involves the use of the Hebrew participle. A. E. Cowley observed, "The *participle active* indicates a person or thing conceived as being in the continual uninterrupted *exercise* of an activity."<sup>74</sup> This Hebrew meaning is not consistently conveyed by English translations. The participle is commonly employed in passages that treat creation ideas as in the affirmation in the psalms, "Maker of heaven and earth" (Ps. 115:15, 121:2, 124:8, 134:3, 146:6).<sup>75</sup> In each case "maker" translates 'oseh the participial form of 'asah. The usual English rendering adopts a translation that suggests completed action, the very opposite of "continual uninterrupted exercise." This opposite rendering is clearly evident in the "who made" of the NRSV translators. Such a rendering might be considered harmonizing with the Genesis narratives where the finished creation approach plainly appears. Several Hebrew words relating to creative acts are employed using the participial form including 'asah (make), bara (create), yasad (establish), yatzar (form), and raqah (spread out). In several instances the phrase "stretching out the heavens" (Job 9:8, Ps. 104:2, Isa. 40:22, 44:24, 51:13, Zech. 12:1) appears, employing natah (stretch out) and also alongside bara (create) (Isa. 42:5). This metaphoric use of natah relates to the setting up of a tent, stretching it out for occupation. Appearing in the participial form, these examples express the continuing activity of God in creating the heavens. What is remarkable is how this metaphor is dramatically parallel to the modern understanding of the universe. This hypothesis is not widely understood as evidenced by the question, what is the cosmos expanding into? The expansion idea is commonly described as an extension of the universe into an already existing (infinite?) empty space. However a recent

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<sup>74</sup> E. Kautzsch, ed., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* 2d ed., rev. A. E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910, 1982), 356.

<sup>75</sup> The NRSV except for Ps. 134:3 uses "who made" for maker.

article in *Scientific American* corrects this notion. Since the cosmic expansion concept emerged out of Einstein's equations for general relativity, Davis and Lineweaver offer this clarification. "In this sense, the universe is self-contained. It needs neither a center to expand away from nor empty space on the outside (wherever that is) to expand into. When it expands, it does not claim previously unoccupied space from its surroundings."<sup>76</sup> Therefore one might observe that this expansion is continually "making" a larger universe. This continual process is like the stretching out of the Hebrew texts. The big bang hypothesis thus reflects continuous creation.

Grasping the mystery of the teaching about creation, and reading with reverence the texts of scripture that proclaim Christ's work will lead us to a place where we can see ourselves as the created who stand in relation to our Creator. This relation is vital to our continued existence as humans, as well as disciples. Such awareness moves us to express admiration and inspires adoration on our lips. Creation, when properly understood, should stir up praise.

## OFFERING PRAISE

### Psalm 8 (an adaptation)

1. Yahweh, our Lord,  
How glorious is your name in all the earth,  
Who shined your glory above the heavens!
2. From the mouth of children and nursing babes you have established strength,  
Because of your foes, to make the enemy and the vengeful cease.
3. When I observe your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
The moon and the stars, which you have established;

*When I muse about the revolving planets and swarming comets,  
Raging nuclear fires, coronal loops, and solar prominences,*

*Classifying blue giants, red super-giants, yellow suns,  
Brown and white dwarfs that you have named,*

*Listing planetoids, nebulae and molecular clouds,  
The cosmic background remnant and dark matter only you measure,*

*When I reflect upon fearful spinning magnetars and neutron stars,  
Stormy black holes of billion solar masses that only your eyes can see,*

*When I contemplate a hundred billion galaxies,  
An expansion so miraculous creating something out of nothingness,*

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<sup>76</sup> Charles H. Lineweaver and Tamar M. Davis, "Misconceptions about the Big Bang," *Scientific American*, March 2005, 39.

*Reaching distances so astronomical that only you can perceive them,  
But still by your thought alone they are all sustained, I inquire,*

4. What is mortal man, that you remember him?  
And the son of man, that you attend to him?
5. Yet you have made him just short of Elohim,  
And crowned him with glory and honor!
6. You make him to rule over the works of your hands;  
You have put all things under his feet,
7. All sheep and oxen,  
And also the beasts of the field,
8. The birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,  
Whatever passes through the paths of the seas.
9. Yahweh, our Lord,  
How glorious is your name in all the earth!

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