

The Biblical Creation in its Ancient Near Eastern Context

BY JOSEPH LAM¹

Introduction

Perhaps due to the influence of the Bible in Western culture, people assume that ancient Israel was a significant nation during its history. Even as the cultural relevance of the Bible and Christianity has diminished (a situation referred to by some as “post-Christendom”), the *perception* of the Bible as a central and authoritative text has remained, which makes it easy to overlook the fact that the Bible, historically, did *not* arise out of a context of cultural superiority.

What ancient Israel lacked in political influence, however, it more than made up for in its conception of a communal identity before God, a view embodied in the books we now call the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. As scholars have observed, “[Israel’s] genius in religion, ethics, literature, and historiography [eventually] gave it an importance out of all proportion to its small population and land.”² Herein lay the genius of the biblical writers. Despite their relatively marginal status in the ancient world, the writers of the Hebrew Scriptures were nonetheless able to articulate a religious conception – a vision of history and reality – that had real staying power, transcending its origins in the particular literary tradition of one specific ancient Near Eastern people, and subsequently taking its place among the primary shaping factors in Western civilization.

The story of creation in Genesis 1:1-2:3 serves as an interesting case of this dynamic at work. Since the 19th century, it has been known that the primeval account in the early part of Genesis does not represent the only account of cosmic origins from the ancient Near East. For it was around this time, when more extensive archaeological excavations were being conducted in the region, that scholars began discovering other “creation accounts” coming out of Mesopotamia and Egypt — stories and/or descriptions which not only showed striking similarities to the biblical text, but which were also older than the Bible (at least in some if not all cases).³ For many Christians, both then and now, this has been perceived as problematic, because the authority of the Bible was and is thought to derive from its status as a *unique* revelation from God, giving us information not accessible by other means. If the creation in Genesis 1 is in fact one among many similar ancient accounts, how can we justifiably assert its truth over against the others?

However, when we recognize that Genesis 1 (as with the rest of the Bible) came out of cultural matrix characterized by competing ideologies and worldviews, the presence of other creation stories does not have to be seen as an intellectual obstacle, but can in fact provide new perspectives for interpretation. For in light of these other texts, it appears that that what we have in Genesis 1 is not merely another independent account of creation, but a deliberate *retelling* of the story of creation, in a mode characteristic of ancient Near Eastern accounts of origins in general, but from a distinctively Israelite perspective. While Genesis 1 shares with these other stories a common set of symbols for talking about origins, the biblical account presents an entirely different reality by means of those symbols, showing a conscious awareness of alternative accounts but asserting particular truth-claims over and against them. In short, Genesis 1 was the Israelite answer to the competing worldview claims of its time.

What I want to do in this paper is to look briefly at Genesis 1 with this interpretive framework in mind, highlighting three points of “worldview” that emerge from the story in light of its ancient Near Eastern background. My contention is that, by looking at Genesis 1 in this way, we come closer to the actual truth-claims of the text, claims rooted in a particular theological (rather than scientific) conception of the world. In the context of this brief presentation, I will only be able to sketch the outlines of such an

approach in broad strokes, but I nonetheless offer these observations in the hope that they would prompt further theological reflection on this powerful and captivating text.

God is the supreme Creator

The first point of worldview we can observe from Genesis 1 is that God is the supreme Creator, the sole force behind creation. In contrast to some ancient Near Eastern creation stories, particularly Babylonian accounts, in which the world is perceived as coming into existence through a clash of cosmic forces, the notion of conflict is almost entirely absent from the biblical description. Neither does the biblical text speak of a world that is self-generating, as described in the Egyptian Pyramid Texts, which speak of creation via the picture of a hill springing up spontaneously out of the void.⁴ In the biblical view, behind the creation is a Creator – personal, supreme, and in control from the beginning to end.

In particular, Genesis 1 portrays creation as being brought into existence solely by the power of God’s spoken word. “And God said, ‘let there be light,’ and there was light” (Genesis 1:3).⁵ That is, creation was accomplished by his initiative, by his decision alone. There were no other authorities that he needed to consult, no other forces that he had to contend with. Whatever hints there might have been to potentially inimical forces are quite subdued, and even such hints can be viewed as deliberate attempts to relativize these other mythological powers.

For instance, in Genesis 1:2 we read, “the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” The waters, in ancient Near Eastern thought, represented a hostile power; they were the preeminent symbol of chaos, a force that had to be restrained to protect life. Here in Genesis, the waters are there, but tamed. The Spirit of God hovers above, with implicit authority over them, ready to set creation in motion. Similarly, in Genesis 1:21 we read, “God created the great sea creatures (Hebrew *tannînim*).” This was essentially a reference to a sea monster or dragon that is found in other mythological traditions such as Ugaritic literature, and the point is that, in the biblical account, it is just one creature among all the others, not a foe to be defeated. All of this reinforces the supremacy of the God in the Hebrew conception. The biblical God of creation is not in a struggle for mastery; he is simply sovereign and brings forth the creation by his authoritative word.

Creation is intrinsically good

The second point follows logically upon the first, and it is this: that creation, in the biblical view, is intrinsically good. It is good because God created it good. In Genesis 1:4 we read: “And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness.” This phrase “God saw that (it) was good” is of course a refrain throughout Genesis 1, culminating in the declaration that “it was very good” in Genesis 1:31. The concept of the “goodness” of creation, though it might sound obvious to us, is not to be taken for granted, especially in the context of the creation stories of Israel’s neighbors.

In particular, views coming out of Mesopotamia show a conspicuous absence of the kind of stability that an objectively good creation provides. In the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, one of the most extensive creation accounts that we possess, the world originated this way: first there was a mixing of the primeval fresh and salt waters (called Apsu and Tiamat) to produce the gods, then came a second generation of gods, whose noise disturbed Apsu and Tiamat. When a plan was hatched to destroy the gods, Ea, the god of wisdom, intervened, only to provoke Tiamat to want to attack them further. The other gods, however, turned to the god Marduk, who subsequently defeated Tiamat the sea-monster and with the carcass

created the two halves of heaven and earth. So while there is certainly a process, perhaps even a sense of order coming into being, the idea of a good and stable creation in the biblical sense is conspicuously absent.

The scholar Nahum Sarna summarizes this idea as follows:

The nature of the [Mesopotamian] gods could give no feeling of certainty and security in the cosmos... . Man always found himself confronted by the tremendous forces of nature, and nature, especially in Mesopotamia, showed itself to be cruel, indiscriminate, [and] unpredictable. Since the gods were immanent in nature, they too shared these same harsh attributes. To aggravate the situation still further, there was always that inscrutable, primordial power beyond the realm of the gods to which man and gods were (sic) both subject. Evil, then, was a permanent necessity and there was nothing essentially good in the pagan universe.⁶

In contrast to this, we have a God in Genesis who calls his creation good. On the one hand, he is a God who is not indifferent to valuation judgments, but a God who discriminates, makes distinctions and separations. He speaks light into existence, sees that it is good, and separates the light from the darkness. Darkness, like the waters, throughout the Bible, symbolizes what is hostile to God, what is inimical to human life. So the act of separation is a natural outflow of a moral God. So on the one hand, Genesis reveals to us a God who is not indifferent to judgments about relative goodness. On the other hand, the creation that God brings into existence by his spoken word is good, indeed, “very good” (Genesis 1:31). His creation in aggregate is not random and intrinsically hostile; it is purposeful, part of the divine plan – to borrow a term from modern scientific discourse, the universe is “fine-tuned,” suitable for life. For Israel’s neighbors, such a view was by no means a given. However, the idea of a good creation lies at the heart of the biblical understanding.

The heavens and the earth are God's temple, and human beings are God's image

The third point itself consists of two parts. The first part is that the earth in Genesis 1 is portrayed as God’s temple-abode. The second part relates to the purpose of human beings in this temple-abode, that of serving as God's image in the world. These two observations require some elaboration. The connection between creation and temple is found throughout ancient Near Eastern thought. For one thing, in the ancient Near East, temples were understood as a sort of microcosm of the world, and so were built and decorated as such. Think, for instance, of the decorations for Solomon’s temple – the palm trees, the open flowers, the pomegranates, the bronze Sea in the courtyard, and such. The Temple of Solomon was like other ancient temples in that it was meant to depict that which is the realm of the god.

Moreover, in ancient Near Eastern origin accounts, we sometimes find the building of a palace or temple as the culminating act of creation. So in *Enuma Elish*, to which we have already referred, after the god Marduk defeats the monster Tiamat, he then creates humans as servants to the gods, and subsequently builds a temple – the temple Esagila in Babylon. This is actually part of a more general motif, that after a king defeats his foes, the process of securing that dominion involves building a palace (and a “temple” is really the god's “palace” or “house,” because these derive from the same root metaphor in many ancient Near Eastern languages – the “house” of the king is the model for conceptualizing the “house” of the god).

Coming back to Genesis 1, however, we again see a reconfiguration of the temple motif in relation

to creation. In Genesis 1, the creation is not the prelude to the building of a temple. Rather, the creation itself, in its entirety, *is* God's temple; the heavens and the earth *are* the domain of God's sovereign rule. In fact, this concept is particularly clear in another famous verse from the book of Isaiah (Isaiah 66:1): "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest?" So then, Genesis 1 portrays the entirety of creation as God's temple, the realm of his rulership. This idea is reinforced in the culmination of the story on the seventh day, in which God "rests" from his work – again, a point which makes sense along the lines of creation as the abode out of which his rulership emanates.

What then, about part two of this point, the place of human beings in the creation? Day 6 in particular speaks directly to the place of humankind in creation. Genesis 1:26-27 read thus: "Let us make man (i.e., humankind – Hebrew *'ādām*) in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So God created man (*'ādām*) in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."

"In the image of God" – this is yet another place where the Near Eastern context is essential for understanding the text. The Hebrew word for "image" is *šelem*, which is one of the words in the Bible used to refer to physical images or idols of gods – those idols which were made of gold, silver, some other kind of metal, or even wood, and used in the context of worship. In the ancient Near Eastern world, every place had its own unique local manifestation of deity, and in turn, idols representing these deities were common. Modern archaeologists have unearthed a number of these. Moreover, one of the central characteristics of Near Eastern temple religion in general was something called the "care and feeding of the gods."⁷ That is, the idea of worship was that you wanted to serve the god, to take care of it. We have ample evidence of this. In Egypt, for instance, as part of a daily ritual in some temples, they would clothe the god, feed the god, wash and bathe it, anoint it with oil, put makeup on it. Very elaborate recurring rituals were involved in caring for the physical image, the idol, because it was believed to be the true manifestation of the god in the midst of the people.

In contrast to its neighbors, ancient Israel had a strict ban on the use of images in worship. For one thing, Israel's affirmation of one god made it unthinkable to worship the idol of another deity. But even when it came to Yahweh, the God of Israel, images were banned. The second commandment makes this clear: "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Exodus 20:4). The idea was that the essence of the true God could not be reduced to an image made from human hands. It's notable, then, that both in the Israelite Tabernacle in the wilderness and in Solomon's Temple, there was no idol. There were no images of God. There was only the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies — that box, with winged creatures called cherubim on each side. Based on comparisons with iconography from the ancient Near East, the ark was probably intended to represent God's footstool, the idea being that God's presence would be above the ark, as if God were seated in an invisible throne with his feet touching the footstool. But in keeping with Israel's understanding about idols, there was no actual *image* of God in the Tabernacle or the Temple.

When we come back to Genesis 1, then, the point should be clear, right? In the context of the heavens and the earth as being God's temple, *human beings* are the image of God. The Israelite Tabernacle and the Solomonic Temple were without hand-crafted images of God, but every time a person walked into

it, there was God's image. In other words, human beings are not only made *in* the image of God, but we are made *as* the image of God. In fact, it is possible to argue grammatically for the validity of the translation "as the image of God" as opposed to "in the image of God." Prepositions are notoriously difficult to translate precisely from one language to another, and the Hebrew preposition here (the preposition *be*) has quite a large sphere of meaning, but includes the sense of "as, or in the function of."⁸ To put it another way, the Hebrew phraseology here denotes not so much the *manner* of the creation of the human being (i.e., the "mold" out of which humans are created), but rather the intended *function* of the human being in the world. It is best to understand the statement in Genesis 1:26 as meaning that human beings are fashioned in order *to function as* God's image in the world. Humans aren't just made in God's image; they are called to be his image in the world.

Genesis 1:27 also explicitly says: "male and female he created them" — male *and* female. This would also have been a radical thought in the ancient world. In the ancient Near East, essentially, if anyone was called the image of God it would have been the king.⁹ For male and female — that is, everyone — to be the image of God, was a radical departure from conventional ways of thinking. In fact, the mention of male and female takes the idea further than that — there's a sense of interdependence, interconnectedness in terms of our capacity as human beings for reflecting the image of God. I think this speaks not only to the distinctive characteristics of men vs. women per se, but really to the communal aspect of what it means to reflect God's character. In the biblical conception, there is a sense in which the community of human beings reflects God's character, God's glory, in a way that no single individual is capable of doing.

Conclusion

In conclusion: it is clear that the biblical account of creation, on the one hand, shows an awareness of the various literary motifs and symbols prevalent in other ancient accounts of ultimate origins. At the same time, Genesis 1 is its own creation (pardon the pun). By reconfiguring those motifs and symbols, by putting them together in different ways, emphasizing certain points and making others less prominent, the author of this story was able to put together a powerful theological statement about ultimate origins. In my observations today, I have only been able to articulate very broadly the kind of interpretation of Genesis 1 that I think takes seriously its situatedness in an ancient Near Eastern context. However, I also hope that I have been able to illustrate a broader interpretive principle, that situatedness in a cultural environment does not imply an unimaginative adoption of its conventionalized ideas. From time to time, biblical scholars and theologians speak of the Bible "borrowing" motifs and themes from this or the other ancient Near Eastern literature. While there are instances in which such a description is accurate, I think to use "borrowing" as a default understanding of this dynamic relationship fails to do justice to the creativity and brilliance of the biblical writers. What we find in the Bible in general, and in Genesis 1 in particular, is literary sophistication of the highest order, evidenced at times by the conscious re-shaping of prevenient cultural ideas for uniquely theological purposes, and as Christians we would do well to attend to this aspect of the biblical text in our attempt to discern its message.

Notes

1. An earlier version of these remarks was presented as part of the Text and Truth lecture series held at the University of Chicago, February 16, 2010.
2. Cyrus H. Gordon and Gary A. Rendsburg, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, 4th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 17.2.
3. Perhaps the most conservative view of the composition of Genesis 1 (which I am not necessarily espousing) would attribute it to the hand of Moses sometime in the middle of the second millennium B.C., which would still put it later than a number of other ancient Near Eastern accounts which extend back either to the early second millennium or even the third millennium. For a brief discussion of this point, see Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 23.
4. John Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 57.
5. All biblical quotations are from the ESV unless otherwise indicated.
6. Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The World of the Bible in the Light of History* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 17.
7. For a general introduction to this idea, see A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, rev. ed. completed by Erica Reiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 183-198.
8. This is a somewhat nuanced argument based on Hebrew grammar, and to offer a detailed defense of it would take us beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice it to say that this interpretive point is not particularly new or unique; see, e.g., Ian Hart, "Genesis 1:1-2:3 as a Prologue to the Book of Genesis," *Tyndale Bulletin* 46 (1995): 320 (esp. note 19).
9. See Waltke, *Genesis*, 66. 9.