

June 27, 2021  
Adams Center Baptist Church  
The Literary Framework Interpretation

We've been looking at Genesis 1 and 2, and last time I presented to you what has been called the Literal Interpretation or the 24-hour day interpretation. We talked about Genre, Author's Intent, and Scripture interpreting Scripture. There's a bunch of stuff I didn't cover like the fact that the sun isn't created until Day 4, but the text says it was specifically created to mark the days. So, how can you have a literal day in Days 1 through 3 if there's no sun?

Listen. This isn't easy work. I'm asking you to exercise your brain muscles a bit more than you usually do on a Sunday morning. The Bible says "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."

We're going to conclude our series on this topic this week. I'm not going to go through all the various interpretations of Genesis 1 like I planned. What I am going to do is give you what I think is a better interpretation of Genesis 1 than the literal interpretation. It's really an interpretation that is a combination of both the Literary Framework Interpretation and the Mytho-Historical Interpretation. This is the first time I've been able to publicly present this. I've invited other local pastors to debate this idea with me, but they're all chicken.

I've been studying this since 1990, so about 31 years! I was first introduced to the idea that Genesis 1 and 2 should in fact be interpreted non-literally by one of my professors in seminary, Dr. Meredith Kline. There are several OT scholars who hold variations of this view like Dr. Gordon Wenham, Dr. Henri Blocher, Dr. Bruce Walte, and Dr. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.

To start, as I was preparing, I came across this illustration that should help us. In his article, author Ted Davis, explains that after attending an academic conference in a major city, he was driving through the rural countryside on his way to an historic house that wasn't well marked. As he got closer to where he thought he might start seeing some signs directing him to the house, he noticed a fair-sized hotel, restaurant, and bar off to one side of the road. What really caught his attention was a sign, prominently displayed at the start of the driveway, warning off a certain clientele. The sign said: NO FOOTBALL COACHES.

So, what is this all about? Why would somebody put a sign like this outside a place? Any ideas? Well, we might first ask: Where did this take place? Was it maybe in England, where football means soccer and coach means bus? Give that student an A, I say. It was England, on a highway running between York and Manchester. Now, who can fill in the blanks? Soccer fans in England can be pretty rambunctious, and that a busload of them might not make the best impression on the rest of the clientele at a respectable country inn and pub. Therefore, the manager would rather not have their business.

The take-away message, of course, is that there is always a context in which the meaning of a text is embedded. Unless you know something about the time and place in which a text is

composed, you aren't going to understand what it actually says. The same is true for any part of the Bible, including the opening verses of Genesis. That's the bottom line for the Framework View and the Mytho-Historical View: if you don't know anything about literature and culture in the Ancient Near East, you won't understand what Genesis is really saying.

We've been trying to answer objections that people have to Christianity, and sometimes our inadequate interpretations of Scripture get us into trouble with people unnecessarily. And as we've been answering the objection "Has Science Disproved Christianity?" I think we've created a false choice for future generations, the young people that attend our churches. The testimony of many students who are raised in conservative churches, but who surrender their faith in college is because it seems they have to choose between science and Scripture. Maybe, that isn't really the choice at all. Maybe, the choice is between science and a misinterpretation of Scripture. What I'm going to suggest this morning is that the writer of Genesis 1 is not addressing the question of the relation between science and Biblical faith.

The writer of Genesis is dealing with a context where the nations surrounding Israel had their own creation accounts. Israel was constantly dealing with pagan ideas and practices. They were continually dealing with false ideas about God, about man, about worship, justice, kingship, fertility just to name a few. What the writer of Genesis is concerned about is showing that God is the Creator, He has a purpose in creating all things, and He has an important role for man to play in His creation.

From its early beginning, Israel was prone to wander as the hymn says. They were tempted again and again to worship and serve the pagan gods of their neighbors.

So, we have to read the Biblical creation account in light of Israel's constant conflict with other religious cultures. When you see that the writer is battling against pagan gods, you then start to see how the writer of Genesis uses structure, concepts and language taken from the creation accounts of the nations surrounding Israel. It's a similar approach to what Paul did when preached in Athens. Remember, he borrowed an inscription on an altar to the "unknown god." Paul also used language from Athenian poets, and he declared the Biblical God.

Now, when we come to Genesis 1, verses 1 and 2, we see that Israel and her surrounding nations share this deep conviction that all life has its origin in divine activity. The Near Eastern societies were all deeply religious. Existence apart from God or gods was unimaginable. What the writer of Genesis does is he sets Israel apart from all her neighbors in declaring that all that exists comes from the eternally existent God who has revealed Himself to and through His people. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

There is a problem here. Either the beginning mentioned in verse 1 is the absolute beginning or we have a beginning in which matter already exists. In verse 2 and in the second day of creation, the existence of some stuff (namely water) is assumed to already be there. Read verse 2 and verses 6 and 7. We said a few weeks ago, that the Biblical writers don't think about God sharing eternity with other stuff. Remember, God created everything ex nihilo (out of

nothing). So, I see verse 1 as a summary statement of the entire creation account. Remember, we said before that there is no Hebrew word for the whole of the universe. There was no Hebrew word for the totality of physical reality, so the phrase “the heavens and the earth” is a way of saying everything that exists. God created the heavens and the earth — all that exists!

Verse 2 tells us that the world was uninhabitable — it was formless and empty. What this shows is that God had a plan for the world. His plan is to fill the earth, and He’s going to place men and women in that earth with the task of filling and ordering the earth.

Verse 2 also tells us that “darkness was over the surface of the deep.” The reference here to the deep is not to the oceans. The “deep” here is the water that covers the earth. Here’s an interesting thing: both the Babylonian and the Egyptian creation myths have this idea of a primeval sea.

In the ancient religion of Babylon, the word for seas is ti’amtum. And in the Babylonian creation myth, known as the Enuma Elish, Ti’amat is the sea goddess who creates heaven and earth by her death. So, right away, the writer of Genesis makes clear that the sea is NOT a god. The deep has no power to shape or fill the earth — it just lies there, it’s lifeless, and it’s subject to God’s control.

Darkness in verse 2 is not a force for evil. We often fear darkness, but the Bible says that God dwells in darkness and speaks his mysteries from thick darkness. In Gen 1:2 "darkness" covers the world. In verse 3, we see that God created light and "separated the light from the darkness." In Gen 1:5 God "called the darkness night."

By naming darkness, God shows his control over it. The OT emphasizes that darkness is under God's control. This reference to “darkness” could be a challenge to the Egyptian concept of the sun-god Re. The sun-god Re’s words are quoted and explained in the “Book of the Dead.”

It says, “I am Atum when I was alone in Nun (the primeval waters). I am Re in his first appearance when he began to rule that which he had made.” What does that mean? — This “Re when he began to rule that which he had made” means that Re began to appear as a king . . . “

The sun-god, Re, is said to be within the primeval waters (Nun). If darkness covers the deep, Re, the sun-god isn’t there. The writer of Genesis is making clear that Re has no role in creation.

Verse 2 also tells us that “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” It’s very clear that God is in complete control over all of creation. There is no sign here of a cosmic battle like in the Babylonian creation myth. God is the undisputed sovereign ruler over all of nature. There are no other gods competing for control.

There are many, many other parallels between the Biblical account of creation and the creation myths of Babylon, Egypt and Canaan. That's why many evangelical, Bible-believing scholars believe that Genesis should be seen as a type of Mytho-Historical genre. It relates history, God actually did create the heavens and the earth and everything in them, but that history is told in the form or the genre of a myth. If this is true, and I think it is, then the purpose of Genesis is not to relate scientific information about the origins of the universe, but it is coming against the pagan religions of Israel's neighbors. It was not written to provide a scientific account of the creation. It is a thematic and theological account.

This is why the Sun and Moon are not even named until on the fourth day: they were worshipped as divine beings by many people in the ANE, and the author of Genesis intentionally omits their names as an act of defiance against worshippers of those two false gods. Furthermore, the stars are mentioned simply as an afterthought, at the end of verse 16: "And God made the two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also." This was done deliberately, as a way of belittling the Babylonians and others who worshipped the stars. Indeed, the whole creation account stands in the face of polytheism, the worship of many gods, by affirming that the one true, invisible God has actually created all visible things, including the heavenly bodies. Nothing we see in nature is divine: this is the essence of monotheism, the worship of One God, stated bluntly and boldly.

Now, we come to the six days of creation. Folks who hold to a literal view of Genesis 1 say, "no, no, no. Day One starts in verse one." But, I think you have to look at the symmetry of the phrase "And God said," along with the phrase "And there was evening, and there was morning — the first day, the second day . . ." These phrases really seem to set off the "Days." So, I see the beginning of Day One starting with this phrase "And God said" in verse 3. Now, once you see this, I think you'll see that Genesis 1 through the first part of Genesis 2 is carefully designed using the Days of A Week and the repetition of words and phrases as a Literary Framework, a literary tool to set forth God as the Creator King of the Universe.

Go through slides.

What you see here is that the first three days describe spheres or realms of the world, and the second three days record the creation of the kings, the rulers, over those spheres. God is forming in the first three days — addressing the fact that the earth is "formless." And He is filling in the second triad of days answering the fact that the earth is "void." This is why Genesis describes the sun and the moon this way — "the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night." Mankind is said to "rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

Three times names are given (verse 5, verse 8, and verse 10). Three blessings are given (Verse 22, 28, and 2:3). There are three kinds of plants (vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit). There are three kinds of animals (livestock, creeping things, and beast of the earth). And, three times the word bara (create) is used of the creation of man.

One of the key elements here is the fourth day: the Sun was not made until the fourth day, yet it was expressly given the task of producing the day and the night and we've had "evening and morning" since the first day. What's going on here? How can this be taken "literally"? Once you see the symmetry and these parallel triads, you see the solution.

This is not just a police report — just the facts ma'am. This is a carefully crafted piece of literature. The "days" in Genesis have less to do with historical time; they are literary devices, employed by God in order to communicate the story of the creation in terms that we can understand and in terms the ancient Israelites could understand.

So, if I'm right about all of this, then our interpretation of Genesis 1 is about who we understand God to be, and how we understand our role in God's creation. It's not about science. When we try to put science into the text we fall into the error of concordism. That's the idea we talked about before — we are putting something into the text that doesn't necessarily belong. The Earth and the universe can be as "young" or "old" as anyone wants it to be, because the literary form of early Genesis leaves this an open question. When we force people to accept only the literal interpretation, we are like the Catholic Church who reprimanded Galileo for supposedly favoring the idea that the earth revolved around the Sun. Has Science Disproved Christianity? I say, the answer is "No, because the Bible isn't trying to be a science textbook."

The creation history is figuratively presented as an ordinary week in which the divine craftsman goes about His creative toil for six days and finally rests from and in His completed work on the seventh. To insist on taking this picture literally is to miss the profound theological point—that the creation is not an end in itself but was created with the built-in eschatological or end-time goal of entering the eternal Sabbath rest of God Himself in glory.

There is no God like our God!