

THE
LOST
WORLD
OF
GENESIS
ONE

Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate

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PROPOSITION I

Genesis 1 Is Ancient Cosmology

SO WHAT ARE THE CULTURAL IDEAS BEHIND Genesis 1? Our first proposition is that Genesis 1 is ancient cosmology. That is, it does not attempt to describe cosmology in modern terms or address modern questions. The Israelites received no revelation to update or modify their “scientific” understanding of the cosmos. They did not know that stars were suns; they did not know that the earth was spherical and moving through space; they did not know that the sun was much further away than the moon, or even further than the birds flying in the air. They believed that the sky was material (not vaporous), solid enough to support the residence of deity as well as to hold back waters. In these ways, and many others, they thought about the cosmos in much the same way that anyone in the ancient world thought, and not at all like anyone thinks today.¹ And God did not think it important to revise their thinking.

Some Christians approach the text of Genesis as if it has modern science embedded in it or it dictates what modern science should look like. This approach to the text of Genesis 1 is called “concordism,” as it seeks to give a modern scientific explanation

for the details in the text. This represents one attempt to “translate” the culture and text for the modern reader. The problem is, we cannot translate their cosmology to our cosmology, nor should we. If we accept Genesis 1 as ancient cosmology, then we need to interpret it as ancient cosmology rather than translate it into modern cosmology. If we try to turn it into modern cosmology, we are making the text say something that it never said. It is not just a case of adding meaning (as more information has become available) it is a case of changing meaning. Since we view the text as authoritative, it is a dangerous thing to change the meaning of the text into something it never intended to say.

Another problem with concordism is that it assumes that the text should be understood in reference to current scientific consensus, which would mean that it would neither correspond to last century’s scientific consensus nor to that which may develop in the next century. If God were intent on making his revelation correspond to science, we have to ask which science. We are well aware that science is dynamic rather than static. By its very nature science is in a constant state of flux. If we were to say that God’s revelation corresponds to “true science” we adopt an idea contrary to the very nature of science. What is accepted as true today, may not be accepted as true tomorrow, because what science provides is the best explanation of the data at the time. This “best explanation” is accepted by consensus, and often with a few detractors. Science moves forward as ideas are tested and new ones replace old ones. So if God aligned revelation with one particular science, it would have been unintelligible to people who lived prior to the time of that science, and it would be obsolete to those who live after that time. We gain nothing by bringing God’s revelation into accordance with today’s science. In contrast, it makes perfect sense that God communicated his revelation to his immediate audience in terms they understood.

Since God did not deem it necessary to communicate a different way of imagining the world to Israel but was content for them to retain the native ancient cosmic geography, we can conclude that it was not God's purpose to reveal the details of cosmic geography (defined as the way one thinks about the shape of the cosmos). The shape of the earth, the nature of the sky, the locations of sun, moon and stars, are simply not of significance, and God could communicate what he desired regardless of one's cosmic geography. Concordism tries to figure out how there could have been waters above the sky (Gen 1:7), whereas the view proposed here maintains that this terminology is simply describing cosmic geography in Israelite terms to make a totally different point. (See the next proposition for details.)

If cosmic geography is culturally descriptive rather than revealed truth, it takes its place among many other biblical examples of culturally relative notions. For example, in the ancient world people believed that the seat of intelligence, emotion and personhood was in the internal organs, particularly the heart, but also the liver, kidneys and intestines. Many Bible translations use the English word "mind" when the Hebrew text refers to the entrails, showing the ways in which language and culture are interrelated. In modern language we still refer to the heart metaphorically as the seat of emotion. In the ancient world this was not metaphor, but physiology. Yet we must notice that when God wanted to talk to the Israelites about their intellect, emotions and will, he did not revise their ideas of physiology and feel compelled to reveal the function of the brain. Instead, he adopted the language of the culture to communicate in terms they understood. The idea that people think with their hearts describes physiology in ancient terms for the communication of other matters; it is not revelation concerning physiology. Consequently we need not try to come up with a physiology for our times that would explain how people

think with their entrails. But a serious concordist would have to do so to save the reputation of the Bible. Concordists believe the Bible must agree—be in concord with—all the findings of contemporary science.

Through the entire Bible, there is not a single instance in which God revealed to Israel a science beyond their own culture. No passage offers a scientific perspective that was not common to the Old World science of antiquity.²

Beyond the issue of cosmic geography, there are a number of other cultural and potentially scientific issues to consider concerning how people thought in the ancient world. Several questions might be considered:

- What is the level and nature of God's involvement in the world?
- What is God's relationship to the cosmos? Is he manifested within the cosmos? Is he controlling it from outside?
- Is there such a thing as a "natural" world?
- What *is* the cosmos? A collection of material objects that operate on the basis of laws? A machine? A kingdom? A company? A residence?
- Is the account of creation the description of a manufacturing process or the communication of a concept?

These and many other questions will be addressed throughout this book. The answers proposed will not be determined by what best supports what we would prefer to think or by what will eliminate the most problems. Instead we strive to identify, truly and accurately, the thinking in the ancient world, the thinking in the world of the Bible, and to take that where it leads us, whether toward solutions or into more problems.

Before we begin moving through the remainder of the proposi-

tions that make up this book, one of the issues raised in the list above should be addressed immediately. That is, there is no concept of a “natural” world in ancient Near Eastern thinking. The dichotomy between natural and supernatural is a relatively recent one.

Deity pervaded the ancient world. Nothing happened independently of deity. The gods did not “intervene” because that would assume that there was a world of events outside of them that they could step into and out of. The Israelites, along with everyone else in the ancient world, believed instead that every event was the act of deity—that every plant that grew, every baby born, every drop of rain and every climatic disaster was an act of God. No “natural” laws governed the cosmos; deity ran the cosmos or was inherent in it. There were no “miracles” (in the sense of events deviating from that which was “natural”), there were only signs of the deity’s activity (sometimes favorable, sometimes not). The idea that deity got things running then just stood back or engaged himself elsewhere (deism) would have been laughable in the ancient world because it was not even conceivable. As suggested by Richard Bube, if God were to unplug himself in that way from the cosmos, we and everything else in the cosmos would simply cease to exist.³ There is nothing “natural” about the world in biblical theology, nor should there be in ours. This does not suggest that God micro-manages the world,⁴ only that he is thoroughly involved in the operations and functions of the world.

As a result, we should not expect anything in the Bible or in the rest of the ancient Near East to engage in the discussion of how God’s level of creative activity relates to the “natural” world (i.e., what we call naturalistic process or the laws of nature). The categories of “natural” and “supernatural” have no meaning to them, let alone any interest (despite the fact that in our modern world such questions take center stage in the discussion). The ancients would never dream of addressing how things might have come

into being without God or what “natural” processes he might have used. Notice that even the biblical text merges these perspectives when Genesis 1:24 says, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures” but then follows up with the conclusion in the very next verse, “So God made the animals.”⁵ All of these issues are modern issues imposed on the text and not the issues in the culture of the ancient world. We cannot expect the text to address them, nor can we configure the information of the text to force it to comply with the questions we long to have answered. We must take the text on its own terms—it is not written to us. Much to our dismay then, we will find that the text is impervious to many of the questions that consume us in today’s dialogues. Though we long for the Bible to weigh in on these issues and give us biblical perspectives or answers, we dare not impose such an obligation on the text. God has chosen the agenda of the text, and we must be content with the wisdom of those choices. If we attempt to commandeer the text to address our issues, we distort it in the process.

As we begin our study of Genesis 1 then, we must be aware of the danger that lurks when we impose our own cultural ideas on the text without thinking. The Bible’s message must not be subjected to cultural imperialism. Its message transcends the culture in which it originated, but the form in which the message was imbedded was fully permeated by the ancient culture. This was God’s design and we ignore it at our peril. Sound interpretation proceeds from the belief that the divine and human authors were competent communicators and that we can therefore comprehend their communication. But to do so, we must respect the integrity of the author by refraining from replacing his message with our own. Though we cannot expect to be able to think like they thought, or read their minds, or penetrate very deeply into so much that is opaque to us in their culture, we can begin to see that there *are* other ways of thinking besides our own and begin to

identify some of the ways in which we have been presumptuously ethnocentric. Though our understanding of ancient culture will always be limited, ancient literature is the key to a proper interpretation of the text, and sufficient amounts of it are available to allow us to make progress in our understanding.

TECHNICAL SUPPORT

These are sources where I have dealt with these issues in more depth:

“Ancient Near Eastern Background Studies.” In *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al., pp. 40-45. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.

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