

What Does Genesis I Really Say?

by

William F. Tanner

2 October 1981

SOUTHERN BAPTIST
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY LIBRARY
2825 LEXINGTON ROAD LOUISVILLE, KY 40280

What Does Genesis I Really Say?

There have been many approaches to the interpretation of the first few chapters of Genesis.

Some have held that it is all beautiful poetry: the product of a true genius, who captured for us a series of very lofty thoughts, but there is no factual content. According to this interpretation, we are to read these chapters, and then feel inspired, but we do not learn anything, except in the most general sense.

Some have held that this account matches geology in detail, and they have spent a great deal of effort to show that the six days are six eras of geological time. However, only the last three eras have widely-accepted identities and names, just like the days of the week and the months of the year are time divisions having widely-accepted names. If we count backwards, using the months, we obtain the last three by saying "December, November, October." For the geological eras, we have: Cenozoic, Mesozoic, Paleozoic. If you are familiar with ancient languages, you recognize the parts of these words: Cenozoic (the youngest), Mesozoic, Paleozoic. There is essentially universal agreement on the duration of these eras, on their subdivisions into periods, on the materials accumu-

lated during their histories, and on the life forms which represent them. The oldest of the three, the Paleozoic, started roughly 600,000,000 years ago.

All of the vast expanse of time prior to the Paleozoic-- approximately 4×10^9 years -- is lumped in the term "Precambrian." Many simple fossils have been found in Precambrian rocks, but nothing like the millions of advanced forms known from the Paleozoic, Mesozoic and Cenozoic. Because Precambrian fossils are hard to find and to identify, there is no general agreement on the eras, if any, which are to be included in this very long stretch of time. Therefore the number of eras, within Precambrian time, is uncertain. Are there really three (to make a total of six)? Some people would have us think so, and have even provided names for them: Azoic, Cryptozoic, Archeozoic, Proterozoic, and others. But it is not true that one can take the names of established geological eras -- remember, there are only three -- and match them with the individual "days" of creation. Nor do the last three eras match the 4th, 5th, and 6th "days" of creation.

A third group has held that the Genesis account is really unintelligible, and that the best thing we can do is to leave it alone. I do not mind an honest confession of ignorance, but I am not yet persuaded that the creation account is nonsense.

A fourth group holds that the author of Genesis wrote

a well-abstracted summary of widely-disseminated legend and folklore, and that this summary provides an important landmark in the evolution of human thought. These people point out that, for example, flood legends appear in the folklore of many tribes, scattered across the face of the earth. Then they claim that the Genesis version is merely a "purified" account. But for them it is still legend, and part of our common heritage of fabricated and fanciful stories about the past.

I would like to insert a parenthesis here: floods are geologically common occurrences, wherever there is running water, and in some places which appear to have no water, and therefore flood legends tell us about a general process on the face of the planet, rather than a single event in the past.

A fifth group would label Genesis as merely "pro-God" propoganda, to be discounted, because it merely reflects the self-serving interests of the early priesthood.

The sixth idea is that the Genesis story is a compendium of some simple and important principles, but that we must not believe all of the details, which were inserted merely to illustrate the principles.

And the seventh, and last on my present list, is the idea that the early chapters of Genesis contain a straightforward, precise and reliable account of simple facts, which have no possible interpretation except the one which

the interpreter wishes to ascribe to them. This is the point of view of those who hold, more or less, that the Earth was created one Saturday morning in October 5985 years ago, and that each day of creation -- even the ones before there was any sun -- was precisely 24 modern hours in length.

Are any of these correct? Many sincere people believe them, but obviously at least some of them must be in error. Many Christians think they believe No. 7 -- a straightforward, precise and reliable account of simple facts. Personally, I reject all of them, as given here. I think the early chapters of Genesis are much too rich to be thrown into the category of a simple listing of obvious details. It is my purpose today to try to explore some of the ideas which I think transcend many, or all, of the seven interpretations I have listed earlier.

Before doing that, however, I would like to straighten out a widely-held misconception. This idea presumes that, because nature and the Bible both tell us about God, they must therefore tell us the same story. As a result, nature and the Bible must agree in every particular. This is patently not true. Genesis I is not a geology textbook, nor is it a summary of astronomical or biological knowledge. It is not a scientific treatise of any kind. This is not to say that it contains errors, but it is a recognition that a textbook writer, on one hand, and the author of Genesis, on the other hand, have

quite different purposes, and therefore make quite different selections from the inexhaustible quantity of material available. These two sources -- the Bible and a scientific textbook -- are built on two quite different bases. The textbook is limited (by and large) to what is replicable in a scientific sense. The textbook presents largely material which each reader can be assured of duplicating if he makes a mechanically correct effort, no matter how expensive or tedious. The Bible does not. There is no mechanical procedure taught there, which can give assured spiritual results merely because we invest enough time, effort and money, all of it done in mechanical fashion. Instead, the Bible condemns this perversion (Acts, Ch. 8).

The Bible deals with the realm of the spiritual, where algebra does not hold, where there are no numerical conversion factors, and where there is no table of weights and measures. All of the rest of the Bible is background. I do not wish to impute error; I merely wish to point out that a primarily spiritual account of a series of events is markedly different from a primarily chemical, or physical, account.

Therefore we do not learn fundamental chemistry, or physics, or meteorology, or geology, or astronomy, from the Bible.

I would also like to point out that there are two

creation accounts in Genesis. One of them, in the first chapter, is widely quoted, and the second, in the second chapter, tends to be ignored. If we are going to accept the Bible as any kind of record at all, we must accept both accounts. The second account tells us that the creation was carried out in a single day.

One other matter needs to be discussed at this point. The Genesis account of creation is an historical account. This is shown, I believe, by the sequence that is present, by the use of time words (e.g., "day"), and by the logical pattern in which one builds from an infrastructure to a superstructure. But a history always has a complication that we tend to forget: the eras into which we divide it are artifices, to help us in mentally retaining the facts pertinent to the real events. We almost always subdivide a history into "days" or other periods of time; sometimes we use the word "age" or the word "era". For example, in human history, we have the Stone Age, and the Bronze Age, and now the Atomic Age. The Industrial Revolution ushered in the Industrial Age. We certainly are in the Computer Age, today, not to mention the Space Age. How about the Age of Enlightenment (whatever that is)? Do you recognize the Age of Public Education? How about the Age of Female Emancipation? Or the age of instant coffee and Baco-bits? And there are many others. These ages, or eras, or "days," do not form a simple continuum.

Rather, they overlap, in various ways, and they are interwoven in complicated patterns. A history textbook might very well take them up in sequential order, but the ages themselves certainly did not evolve in the sequential order in which we would list them.

There is no particular reason for thinking that the "days" of Genesis are any more nearly simple, uniform, sequential, non-overlapping linear units of time, than are the "ages" of human history. It is, instead, almost as if the writer of Genesis was describing a three-ring circus; his account has to be sequential, regardless of how the acts in the different rings are coordinated.

Let me recount a little bit of my own history. I have gone through an "age" of being a U.S. Citizen. This started when I chose to be born in U.S. territory, rather than somewhere else, and it continues to this day. I have also gone through an "age" of being a pupil, or scholar, more-or-less seriously enrolled in a formal schooling program. This "age" started when I was about six years old, and covered roughly 30 years. I have also been through an "age" of being employed, at various jobs, including filling station attendant, movie projectionist, wholesale grocery company bookkeeper, lumberjack, road-building laborer, waiter and dish-washer, and several others. There has been an "age" in my life when I was a professor. For another "age" a husband. For a seventh

"age," a Christian. Some ages have been short, and some long. The professional dish-washing age lasted four months. But there is nothing sequential in this list, except in a very general way. It is a mistake to assign a fixed unit of time to each of these "ages," to string them together like a string of pearls (or, for most of us, paper-clips), and then to postulate that this rigid framework is a necessary piece of baggage for true believers.

Of course God is capable of doing things this way. But all of the detailed history in the Bible shows that he did not do things this way. Instead, ages, or eras, or "days" overlap, and have various lengths and various inter-relationships with each other. It is only when we look back into the distant past that we put things into rigid compartments.

My statement that the "days" of Genesis were overlapping and not necessarily sequential does not impute errors to the account. It merely recognizes that we must have a simple way of telling a complicated story, and therefore we organize and streamline and outline. But the record in nature tell us that it didn't happen quite this simple way.

Now, what do I learn from the Genesis accounts of creation? Let me number 10 items.

First, I learn that God is supreme. He is the creator. He designed and planned and invented everything that was necessary for the creation: the materials, the energy, and

the processes. He brought these designs and materials and energy supplies together so that the result was a system which functions correctly, in the mechanical, or scientific, sense. He did not merely rearrange things from a previous state of affairs which he inherited from someone else. Rather, he designed a system which did not exist before. That is, he was a creator, rather than a re-arranger; a designer, rather than a repairman; a planner, rather than a mender.

The system which he created is so vast, so complicated, so difficult to fathom, that there is no one else even remotely close to him. Therefore he is supreme. Genesis teaches this concept clearly.

Second, he runs a rational universe. There is a substrate of accountancy throughout the creation account. Time is divided into rational units. It does not matter that the day is not a constant unit; it is important that the day is a rational unit. It does not matter that the events ascribed to one day spilled over into other days; it is important that there was a logical sequence of days. It does not matter how long each day was; it is important that the work of each day was inspected in detail, and that the system was found to be functioning perfectly. Not capriciously, not randomly, not erratically, but perfectly. A rational universe: a universe which was the product of God's deep thoughts. A logical universe, a consistent universe.

The alternate is frightening. How would you like to wake up in the morning, not knowing how long the 24 hour day would be, not knowing whether Tuesday follows Thursday or Saturday, not knowing whether to walk on the floor or on the ceiling, not knowing whether to inhale or exhale under water, not knowing whether to put food in your mouth or your ear, not knowing whether English has been replaced overnight by Sanskrit or by Quechua, not knowing whether to put on an overcoat to get warm or to get cold, not knowing, not knowing...not knowing...? Such a life would be intolerable, and, in fact, no one of use would exist. We can be grateful for the fact that God runs a rational, orderly, mechanical universe. The Genesis account tells us that this rational system is specifically the design of God.

Science is one human reaction to the fact that we move in a rational universe. We place severe limits on our methods of reacting; if we stress replicability and verification, then we are working in the area of science, rather than art or music or some other field. The tremendous success of science is, in itself, a tribute to the rational nature of the universe.

Third, pantheism, in whatever manifestation, cannot be entertained. We do not worship the stars, either in tribal ritual, or in astronomy, or in astrology. We do not venerate nature, unless we venerate, much more, the God

who created nature. We do not believe that the universe has "always been there." We do not believe that it "just happened," and therefore is, in itself, the highest power. Pantheism can be dressed up in very fancy terminology, and may sound very logical. But if Genesis is part of God's inspired word, then pantheism, in all of its forms, must be rejected.

Fourth, we do not fear the forces of nature, either remote or close at hand, because God created them, and they are part of his system. It is hard to not be afraid of the glowing-hot lava which has trapped you and is about to engulf you. But every Christian must come to the end of his life on earth, and many lives will be terminated by natural forces: floods, hurricanes, landslides, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and others. God at no place promised to bend the orderly operation of nature (this includes what we call disasters) so that we would come through unharmed. Instead, he placed us within the natural setting, and promised to accompany us as natural forces develop around us. The result may very well be physical death. But Jesus told us that we are to fear only the source of spiritual death. Therefore we do not fear the stars (astrology), or portents, or "strange" natural events. God made them; he is not surprised by them; and he knows that we cannot always cope with them, physically.

Fifth, we are not to confuse creator and creation, such as in idolatry. Most of us will deny that we worship

idols; we are aware of the commandment that speaks against idol-worship; and we think that idols must be ugly carvings, something like totem poles, only smaller. But we have other idols regarding which we have not always been able to distinguish between respect and worship. Some of us worship the faces of Washington, Lincoln, Hamilton, Jackson and Grant, printed in black ink on a pale green background, but they are creatures, not creators. The Genesis account makes the distinction quite clearly, and we should maintain that distinction, just as clearly.

Sixth, man has an animal body, but he himself is a higher creation. The making of the universe was carried out on three levels: mechanical, biological and spiritual. Each of the first two formed the platform on which the rest were built. It is easy, in the first chapter of Genesis, to separate the three levels. Earth, moon, sun, stars, oceans and land constitute the mechanical part of the system. After it was established, and was functioning properly, the biological part could be undertaken; this included animals (plants didn't really count then). Only after the biological part was complete could God turn to the spiritual level, where man as a spiritual being was brought into existence.

If these levels cannot be distinguished, then the rest of the Bible is a farce, spiritual matters having no significance. If these cannot be distinguished, then

God, the pattern after which man was designed, is only a physical or biological being, and references to his spirit are meaningless. If these cannot be distinguished, then the death of Jesus on the cross was an empty symbol.

What do you think God created on the sixth day? Just another physical entity which overlaps, in its measurements, those of the large apes? Just another creature having four appendages, like chimpanzees and gorillas and baboons? In Gen. 1:26 and following, we are told that man was created in the image of God. This must be a statement about a spiritual origin, and has nothing to do with the procedure that God used to create the human body.

Seventh, as spiritual beings, we have the privilege of making choices. This is clearly taught in Genesis. If you are unable to find it in any of the earlier verses (and it is there), you surely can find it in the third chapter, where the story of the apple (as it is widely quoted) is recounted. Let us not get entangled in the argument over whether or not we can make "free" choices. We have the privilege of choosing, and this statement is not vitiated by the fact that sometimes we must choose between two good things, or between two bad things. Our ability to make choices is not cancelled by the fact that in some cases God is not really concerned that we make one choice instead of another (note carefully Adam's experience in naming animals).

It is true that animals can make certain choices, and in some instances they choose esthetic values over mundane things (such as the baboon which skips supper rather than miss a particularly beautiful sunset). But spirituality is not the same thing as esthetics. As I understand the "image of God" statement in Genesis, man has been given the ability to make choices having important spiritual and moral consequences. Even more, man has been given the ability to make his choices within, or outside of, the framework which we recognize when we choose to worship God.

Eighth, man has been appointed to a management function, and he is accountable for how he handles that function. He cannot be appointed, if he does not have a capacity for making reasoned choices. The appointment is stated in the first chapter of Genesis, where mankind has been instructed to "subdue" the earth. This cannot be a command to "exploit" (that is, to subdue in a destructive fashion), but rather must be a command to subdue in the sense that each person, no matter where he lives, is subject to a government of some kind. The word "subdue," and some of the substitutes that have been used, could be replaced by a word having more meaning for us, today: we have instructions to administer the earth. That is, we must run it properly, for the benefit of the authority who made the appointment in the first place. All administrators have

been designated to carry out their duties for the benefit of the owner. Only when we ourselves receive an appointment do we have the brass to argue that we have been given free rein to run things for our own immediate personal benefit.

Many an administrator has been fired, because he did not understand clearly the chain of command. God does not operate in that fashion; rather, he commonly lets us struggle with the wreckage which we have created, and to face the shortages and handicaps which we have brought on ourselves. All facets of this teaching are clearly given in the first few chapters of Genesis, where man was appointed as administrator, established as supervisor of agriculture, and then banished to a less important position because in making the choices that were available to him, he elected a course of action not in line with his position, and responsibility.

Science is one of the tools that we have developed for exploring and administering the earth. But let us not blame the scientist for our troubles any more than we blame the non-scientist. Any damaging discovery, made by scientists, is of no great concern, until it is exploited on a large scale by non-scientists, who find that they merely enjoy the exploitation. That is, as co-administrators, average people make choices, some of which constitute exploitation. For example, we have used up much more than half of our national supply of crude oil, and we

are now paying tens of billion of dollars per year to other nations to let us use up their supplies. We are exploiting farm land and forest, water supplies and air. The way we are doing it constitutes bad management, and I do not think that the owner is pleased.

Ninth, the Genesis account teaches very clearly the sacredness of the bi-polar family. We must not take the popular view, that in establishing mankind as male and female, God was creating sex. Rather, sex was created much earlier, certainly no later than the creation of other animal life (and, according to a biological point of view, at the time of creation of plant life). The creation of mankind as male and female establishes the bi-polar family. By "bi-polar" I mean: built around two different kinds of entities, each having characteristics that the other does not have, and each bringing attributes that the other does not possess. God did not merely create people: he created the family. The Christian marriage ceremony, today, is our recognition that God created something special, in the spiritual realm, which is not duplicated elsewhere. From this I infer that the family is primarily a spiritual creation, although certainly it is visible to us in terms of the two people who join together to nurture it.

Tenth, the Genesis account draws back the curtain from a very deep and difficult secret: God requires

obedience (Gen. 2:17). It is a popular fallacy, even among Christians, that God designed and assembled the universe, and set it in motion, as a platform on which we are to achieve our own fond desires. God has a purpose, and he has given us several: we should administer the planet, we should foster the family, and we should worship and serve him. Not a one of these involves the business of entertaining ourselves. I do not object to entertainment, but it must be relegated to a lower position in the pecking order, because it is not one of the primary purposes.

If we are to administer the planet, to recognize the creator, and to worship him, then we necessarily fit into the chain of command. This chain of command is very real. And one part of the chain extends from us, upward. That is, we are required to obey God. We do indeed have the option of refusing to obey, and that option carries certain consequences. The first three chapters of Genesis spell this requirement out in detail. It is spelled out in our administrative assignment (the administrator takes orders from above), and it is spelled out in the story about eating the apple, with the well-known results.

This would seem to be a rather clear and obvious idea, but it must be very difficult; I say this because most of us never learn it very well. It would seem to be almost superficial, but it must be very deep; I say

this because very few of us have explored it very well. Furthermore, it is difficult, and deep, because the fact of disobedience lies at the heart of the work that Jesus did on the cross. The work on the cross -- the solution to the puzzle -- is not given to us in Genesis; but the dilemma itself is stated as plainly as can be.

At the moment it appears that the universe is the product of a gigantic explosion, perhaps 20 billion years ago: the "Big Bang" which is supposed to have started everything. We find clues of many kinds, that bear on this question. For example, the universe is now expanding, and has been expanding for billions of year. Yet it is true that the Big Bang theory has not always been primary, and, in fact, scientists have vacillated among theories. Who is to say that we finally know all the important answers, and therefore will never have to modify our present understanding?

Suppose the Big Bang theory turns out, eventually, to really be correct. It does nothing more than describe a sequence of events that took place, in chain fashion, after the critical moment of explosion. It says nothing about the cause of the explosion, or what preceded it, or how the entire universe could have gotten jammed into one small package located somewhere in the middle of trackless space.

The Genesis account, on the other hand, is not concerned with any of the above. The actual duration of the history

is of no consequence. How God packed everything into a tiny bomb, and then set it off, does not matter. But if that theory is wrong, not a single teaching of Genesis will be threatened.

One starts with the rocks, or the stars, or the clouds, or the oceans, and then -- if he wishes -- he can reason backward to the Creator; and in the things of science one can find plenty of evidence to help in the worship of God.

I have spent a professional career, doing this. But the bottom line has to do with what this worship experience does to the way I live.

William F. Tanner

2 October 1981