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# THE LOST WORLD OF GENESIS ONE

Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate

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*Evangelically Rooted. Critically Engaged.*

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## Prologue

ONE OF THE PRINCIPAL ATTRIBUTES OF GOD affirmed by Christians is that he is Creator. That conviction is foundational as we integrate our theology into our worldview. What all is entailed in viewing God as Creator? What does that affirmation imply for how we view ourselves and the world around us? These significant questions explain why discussions of theology and science so often intersect. Given the ways that both have developed in Western culture, especially in America, these questions also explain why the two often collide.

The first chapter of Genesis lies at the heart of our understanding of what the Bible communicates about God as Creator. Though simple in the majesty of its expression and the power of its scope, the chapter is anything but transparent. It is regrettable that an account of such beauty has become such a bloodied battleground, but that is indeed the case.

In this book I have proposed a reading of Genesis that I believe to be faithful to the context of the original audience and author, and one that preserves and enhances the theological vitality of this text. Along the way is opportunity to dis-

cuss numerous areas of controversy for Christians, including relating Genesis to modern science, especially evolution. Intelligent Design and creationism will be considered in light of the proposal, and I make some comments about the debate concerning public education.

The case is laid out in eighteen propositions, each presented succinctly and plainly so that those not trained in the technical fields involved can understand and use the information presented here. Whether the reader is an educated layperson who wants to know more, a pastor or youth pastor in a church, or a science teacher in public schools, he or she should find some stimulating ideas for thinking about the Bible, theology, faith and science.

## Introduction

WE LIKE TO THINK OF THE BIBLE POSSESSIVELY—*my* Bible, a rare heritage, a holy treasure, a spiritual heirloom. And well we should. The Bible is fresh and speaks to each of us as God's revelation of himself in a confusing world. It is ours and at times feels quite personal.

But we cannot afford to let this idea run away with us. The Old Testament *does* communicate to us and it was written for us, and for all humankind. But it was not written *to* us. It was written to Israel. It is God's revelation of himself to Israel and secondarily through Israel to everyone else. As obvious as this is, we must be aware of the implications of that simple statement. Since it was written to Israel, it is in a language that most of us do not understand, and therefore it requires translation. But the language is not the only aspect that needs to be translated. Language assumes a culture, operates in a culture, serves a culture, and is designed to communicate into the framework of a culture. Consequently, when we read a text written in another language and addressed to another culture, we must translate the culture as well as the language if we hope to understand the text fully.

As complicated as translating a foreign language can be, translating a foreign culture is infinitely more difficult. The problem lies in the act of translating. Translation involves lifting the ideas from their native context and relocating them in our own context. In some ways this is an imperialistic act and bound to create some distortion as we seek to organize information in the categories that are familiar to us. It is far too easy to let our own ideas creep in and subtly (or at times not so subtly) bend or twist the material to fit our own context.

On the level of words, for example, there are Hebrew words that simply do not have matching words in English. The Hebrew word *hesed* is a good example. The translators of the New American Standard Bible decided to adopt the combination word “lovingkindness” to render it. Other translations use a wide variety of words: loyalty, love, kindness and so on. The meaning of the word cannot easily be expressed in English, so using any word unavoidably distorts the text. English readers unaware of this could easily begin working from the English word and derive an interpretation of the text based on what that English word means to them, and thus risk bringing something to the text that was not there. Nevertheless translators have little choice but to take the word out of its linguistic context and try to squeeze it into ours—to clothe its meaning in English words that are inadequate to express the full meaning of the text.

When we move to the level of culture, the same type of problem occurs. The very act of trying to *translate* the culture requires taking it out of its context and fitting it into ours. What does the text mean when it describes Sarah as “beautiful”? One not only has to know the meaning of the word, but also must have some idea of what defines beauty in the ancient world. When the Bible speaks of something as elemental as marriage, we are not wrong to think of it as the establishment of a socially and legally recog-

nized relationship between a man and a woman. But marriage carries a lot more social nuance than that in our culture and not necessarily similar at all to the social nuances in the ancient culture. When marriages are arranged and represent alliances between families and exchange of wealth, the institution fills a far different place in the culture than what we know when feelings of love predominate. In that light the word *marriage* means something vastly different in ancient culture, even though the word is translated properly. We would seriously distort the text and interpret it incorrectly if we imposed all of the aspects of marriage in our culture into the text and culture of the Bible. The minute anyone (professional or amateur) attempts to *translate* the culture, we run the risk of making the text communicate something it never intended.

Rather than translating the culture, then, we need to try to enter the culture. When people want to study the Bible seriously, one of the steps they take is to learn the language. As I teach language students, I am still always faced with the challenge of persuading them that they will not succeed simply by learning enough of the language to engage in translation. Truly learning the language requires leaving English behind, entering the world of the text and understanding the language in its Hebrew context without creating English words in their minds. They must understand the Hebrew as Hebrew text. This is the same with culture. We must make every attempt to set our English categories aside, to leave our cultural ideas behind, and try our best (as limited as the attempt might be) to understand the material in its cultural context without translating it.

How do we do this? How can we recover the way that an ancient culture thought and what categories and ideas and concepts were important to them? We have already noted that language is keyed to culture, and we may then also recognize that literature is

a window to the culture that produced it. We can begin to understand the culture by becoming familiar with its literature. Undoubtedly this sounds like a circular argument: We can't interpret the literature without understanding the culture, and we can't understand the culture without interpreting the literature. If we were dealing only with the Bible, it would indeed be circular, because we have already adjusted it to our own cultural ways of thinking in our long familiarity with it. The key then is to be found in the literature from the rest of the ancient world. Here we will discover many insights into ancient categories, concepts and perspectives. Not only do we expect to find linkages, we do in fact find many such linkages that enhance our understanding of the Bible.

To compare the Old Testament to the literature of the ancient world is not to assume that we expect or find similarity at every point; but neither should we assume or expect differences at every point. We believe the nature of the Bible to be very different from anything else that was available in the ancient world. The very fact that we accept the Old Testament as God's revelation of himself distinguishes it from the literature of Mesopotamia or Egypt. For that matter, Egyptian literature was very different from Mesopotamian literature, and within Mesopotamia, Assyrian literature and Babylonian literature were far from homogeneous. To press the point further, Babylonian literature of the second millennium must be viewed as distinct from Babylonian literature of the first millennium. Finally we must recognize that in any given time period in any given culture in any given city, some people would have had different ideas than others. Having said all of this, we recognize at the same time that there is some common ground. Despite all the distinctions that existed across the ancient world, any given ancient culture was more similar to other ancient cultures than any of them are to Western American or European culture. Comparing the ancient cultures to one an-

other will help us to see those common threads even as we become aware of the distinctions that separated them from one another. As we identify those common threads, we will begin to comprehend how the ancient world differed from our modern (or postmodern) world.

So to return to the illustration of marriage: we will understand the Israelite ideas of marriage much more accurately by becoming informed about marriage in Babylon or Egypt than we will by thinking of marriage in modern terms. Yet we will also find evidence to suggest that Babylonian customs and ideas were not always exactly like Israelite ones. The texts serve as sources of information for us to formulate the shape of each culture's ways of thinking. In most areas there is more similarity between Israel and its neighbors than there is between Israel and our twenty-first-century Western world. As another example, even though today we believe in one God, the God of Israel, and therefore share with them this basic element of faith, the views of deity in the ancient world served as the context for Israel's understanding of deity. It is true that the God of the Bible is far different from the gods of the ancient cultures. But Israel understood its God in reference to what others around them believed. As the Bible indicates, Israelites were continually drawn into the thinking of the cultures around them, whether they were adopting the gods and practices of those around them or whether they were struggling to see their God as distinct.

As a result, we are not looking at ancient literature to try to decide whether Israel borrowed from some of the literature that was known to them. It is to be expected that the Israelites held many concepts and perspectives in common with the rest of the ancient world. This is far different from suggesting literature was borrowed or copied. This is not even a case of Israel being influenced by the peoples around them. Rather we simply recognize

the common conceptual worldview that existed in ancient times. We should therefore not speak of Israel being influenced by that world—they were part of that world.

To illustrate the idea, we must think of ways in which we are products of our own culture. For example, we do not borrow the idea of consumerism, nor are we influenced by it. We *are* consumers because we live in a capitalist society that is built on consumerism. We don't have to think about it or read about it. Even if we wanted to reject its principles we would find it difficult to identify all its different aspects and devise different ways of thinking. One could make similar observations about Aristotelian, Cartesian or Baconian forms of thought. We could speak of capitalism and the value of liberty. We could consider self-determinism and individualism. We could analyze our sense of personal rights and the nature of democracy. These are ideas and ways of thinking that make us who we are in the United States. Where did we learn the principles of naturalism or the nature of the universe? They are simply absorbed through the culture in which we live. One can find all of this in our literature, but we didn't learn it from our literature—it is simply part of our culture that we absorb, often with no alternatives even considered.

By recognizing the importance of the literatures of the ancient world for informing us about its cultures, we need not be concerned that the Bible must consequently be understood as just another piece of ancient mythology. We may well consider some of the literatures of Babylonia and Egypt as mythological, but that very mythology helps us to see the world as they saw it. The Canaanites or the Assyrians did not consider their myths to be made up works of the imagination. Mythology by its nature seeks to explain how the world works and how it came to work that way, and therefore includes a culture's "theory of origins." We sometimes label certain literature as "myth" because we do not believe

that the world works that way. The label is a way of holding it at arm's length so as to clarify that we do not share that belief—particularly as it refers to involvement and activities of the gods. But for the people to whom that mythology belonged, it was a real description of deep beliefs. Their “mythology” expressed their beliefs concerning what made the world what it was; it expressed their theories of origins and of how their world worked.

By this definition, our modern mythology is represented by science—our own theories of origins and operations. Science provides what is generally viewed as the consensus concerning what the world is, how it works and how it came to be. Today, science makes no room for deity (though neither does it disprove deity), in contrast to the ancient explanations, which were filled with deity. For the Israelites, Genesis 1 offered explanations of their view of origins and operations, in the same way that mythologies served in the rest of the ancient world and that science serves our Western culture. It represents what the Israelites truly believed about how the world got to be how it is and how it works, though it is not presented as their own ideas, but as revelation from God. The fact that many people today share that biblical belief makes the term *mythology* unpalatable, but it should nevertheless be recognized that Genesis 1 serves the similar function of offering an explanation of origins and how the world operated, not only for Israel, but for people today who put their faith in the Bible.

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## PROPOSITION I

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### 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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,<sup>4</sup> 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.”<sup>5</sup> 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.

*Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006.

*Genesis*. New International Version Application Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001.

“Interpreting the Bible as an Ancient Near Eastern Document.” In *Israel: Ancient Kingdom or Late Invention*, edited by Daniel I. Block, pp. 298-327. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2008.