

Genesis 1:1–2:3

By Rev. J. Scott Lindsay

Pastor of South Baton Rouge Presbyterian Church (PCA),
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Imagine that you one day pick up a book on the history of baseball, and after settling into your favorite chair with your favorite latte, tea, or some other drink, you then open your book to page 1 and begin reading. After a few minutes, you flip a page, and then another, and then another, only to discover that at the top of the next new page, in bold letters, it says CHAPTER ONE. And then the opening line reads, "This is the story of how baseball began."

And at that you pause. You flip back through what you have already read and ask yourself, "Wait a minute. If this says it is chapter one, if this page is acting like it is the beginning — what were all these previous pages about, which were also saying a lot of introductory kinds of things about baseball? I didn't see anything that said 'Preface,' or 'Introduction,' or anything like that." And so you wonder how the pages you just read relate to the ones you are about to read.

That admittedly hypothetical experience is not that far removed from what happens when a person sits down to start reading through the book of Genesis. You begin reading in the opening chapter, a section that talks about all kinds of introductory things, and then in chapter 2 verse 4, you come across words that say, "This is the account of the heavens and earth when they were created."

And immediately, upon reading that, you have to ask yourself, "What have I been reading? If chapter 2 is the account of the creation of the heavens and earth, what is chapter 1?" Well, in much the same way that a preface functions in most books, so too does Genesis 1:1-2:3 function as a kind of "preface" or, as Bible scholars like to say, "prologue" to the rest of Genesis.

Now, I don't know about you, but when I was younger, in high school and college, and I was required to read certain books, I would almost never read things like prefaces and forwards and introductions. Instead, I'd skip straight to the first chapter. For me, the crucial aspect of reading a book was to read only what was required, and nothing more. And that meant reading the main pages and skipping all the other bits and pieces.

However, over the years, I have discovered that this approach to book reading was probably making things a lot more difficult for me than they needed to be. Because I can tell you now, after reading my fair share of books, that often the

most helpful thing I have done in reading a particular book is to read the introduction or forward. This is because, more often than not, in these opening sections the author gives the reader a certain framework or perspective on the rest of the book — or at least a helpful insider's tip on *how* to read the rest of the book. And often these things prove to be quite useful in making sense of the flow and argument, and how one chapter relates to the next, etc.

Well, while the parallels are not exact, the Genesis prologue bears some of the same characteristics as a preface, and serves some of the same purposes. It provides us with a true perspective and a helpful framework for understanding the rest of the Genesis account, and indeed the rest of the Bible. And so it is that we will be concentrating upon the opening section of the book of Genesis, specifically Genesis 1:1–2:3.

Now, as I've just said, one way of understanding this section is to see it as a kind of preface or prologue to the rest of Genesis. Another way to see this section is to view it from the perspective of an Artist who, before he paints, has to stretch and prepare a canvas upon which his art will be displayed. In a similar fashion, in these opening words, we see a description of God doing just that: preparing the canvas upon which he will paint a picture called "redemption," and through which he will demonstrate his glory and goodness and love.

One final metaphor may help: think of this opening section as perhaps the opening act in a great drama in which the scenery is laid out, the stage is set up, the main characters are introduced and take their places, and some basic facts are given. These details form the foundation for the story that God is about to unfold, which is the story of the world and its inhabitants in relation to their Creator.

All of these images — a preface, a prepared canvas, the opening scene and setting for a great drama — all of these provide some useful ways for thinking about and approaching these very important words from the Creator to the human beings who are the crown of his creation.

Now, as you are reading through this prologue, in English, and without any background info about Mesopotamian Culture, or Canaanite religions, etc., some of the important subtleties of this passage will not be apparent to you. For example, something that has been noted by a Jewish scholar named Cassuto is the way that the number seven, or perhaps we should say the *concept* of seven, figures into the Hebrew structure and content of this passage. Seven is important because it is the Hebrew number symbolizing completeness and perfection. So, by way of illustration, Cassuto notes that:

1. In Hebrew the passage contains seven paragraphs.
2. Certain words appear with great frequency, like "God," "earth" and "heaven," but the number of each one is a multiple of seven.

3. Certain phrases appear seven times throughout the passage, including the phrase "it was good," concluding with the qualified, "it was very good."
4. There are seven references to "light" in the fourth Hebrew paragraph, seven references to water in second and third paragraphs.
5. The first sentence in verse 1 has seven words in Hebrew. Similarly, the last/seventh paragraph consists of three sentences of seven words each, and in the middle of each of these seven-word sentences is the expression "the seventh day."

And there are many more of these sorts of things in the passage. So what does this tell us? Well, it's not saying that there is anything magical or deeply mysterious here about the number seven. But as Cassuto points out, the overwhelming presence of this "seven-based" structural element in the passage cannot possibly be a coincidence. It points to very deliberate structure, and indicate that we are looking at a highly stylized piece of literature. The symbolism attached to the number seven (perfection and completeness), and the overwhelming presence of that symbol within this passage, shows that one of the strong purposes of this section is to underscore the perfection and completeness of all that the Creator God has done. Further, this kind of structure and pattern lends itself to another purpose, which we'll see in a moment. But first, let us consider a couple other aspects of this passage.

A second element that may not be as evident to the reader is the manner in which the account seems quite deliberately to address all the main figures/elements associated with the religious beliefs of the pagan nations surrounding the people of Israel. Why is this important?

Well, imagine, for example, that a man wants to take his son camping, but his son has never been camping before. When he introduces the idea to his son, he is surprised to discover that, instead of being excited about the prospect of going camping, his son becomes nervous and worried. And so the father talks to him about it and discovers, after some discussion, the source of his son's nervousness. Apparently, the boy has been watching a great deal of *The Crocodile Hunter* and similar shows, and his active imagination has him convinced that if he ventures out into the woods, he may become the victim of the sorts of nasty beasts he has seen on the TV show each week, such as snakes, bears, and stinging bugs.

And so the father, aware of his son's concerns and doubts, proceeds to tell him the story of how one time he actually caught and killed a snake, or the story of how on another occasion he went on a camping trip and scared away a ferocious bear, or about the special spray that he has that keeps stinging bugs away. In short, the father demonstrates to his son that he/they are superior to anything that the

boy might be worried about, and so the boy's fears are alleviated and he begins to get excited about the trip.

In a similar fashion, the prologue to Genesis systematically presents the Creator God in a similar light, but in an even more dramatic fashion. That is, the Genesis prologue does not show God as being superior over against a pantheon of lesser gods, it shows him, in actual fact, as the *only* God. Further, it shows this one and only God over against all those beings/forces which the pagans all around considered to be gods, but which the prologue reveals quite clearly to be creatures made by the one and only God. They have no power over God, and are completely under the authority and rule of the Creator.

And so, when you look at Canaanite, Babylonian, Mesopotamian and other pagan religious systems, you find such divinities as the sun, the moon, the stars, the oceans, sea creatures, light, darkness, various beasts and birds, and even Chaos. In short, you find all the elements which appear in the creation account, and which God is clearly sovereign over.

This may explain, for example, why Moses does not call the sun and moon by their names, but simply refers to them as "greater lights" and "lesser lights." He wants so much to show the superiority of God and the corresponding nothingness of these pagan deities, that he refuses even to use their names. In a related fashion, this is probably why verse 21 speaks of the unnamed "great sea creatures," which played such a prominent role in pagan religion.

And again, why would this be important? You have to keep in mind the context, and in particular the people who first received these written accounts. Who were they? They were the people of God who stood poised on the edge of the Promised Land. Moses was urging them to trust God and to enter the Land in faith, and not to fear the peoples before them or their so-called "gods." For those people at that time, receiving this creation account would have reminded them again of the strength and power of their God, and of the nothingness of those around them.

A third characteristic of this opening prologue is the highly structured and highly repetitive nature of the whole thing. For example, there is the sequence of days. Just the presence of a sequence — any sequence, whether it is "A – B – C" or "1 – 2 – 3," makes a thing more memorable and impacting. Here you have a sequence of a week — a creation week — that gives a memorable shape to the account.

Then there is the repetition of phrases like "and God said," "morning and evening," "the [ordinal] day," etc. And of course, there is the phrase, as we have already seen, "and God saw that it was good." These appear with great regularity.

Beyond this, there is the overall structure of the passage built upon the opening two adjectives, which describe the initially created-but-not-yet-refined earth as both “formless” and “void.” Following that description of the setting, the rest of the account is showing how, over the first three days, the problem of the earth's formlessness is solved as God shapes the creation, and how, over the next three days (and perhaps beginning on the third day, if you count the plants), the earth's emptiness is replaced by the various created things that God places in the newly shaped regions.

Another way of seeing this same thing is to look at the relationship between the days and the obvious structuring taking place there. For example, the first day corresponds to the fourth day, the second day corresponds to fifth day, and the third day corresponds to sixth day. On day one you have the creation of the entities of light and darkness, and then on day four the creation of heavenly bodies like the sun and moon that relate directly to that. On day two you have the creation of the sky and seas, and on day five the population of the skies and seas with fish and birds. On day three you have the creation of dry land, and on day six you see the creation of the animals and the people that will inhabit the dry land.

The seventh day is a day of rest from all this creative activity. But it too adds to the overall structured nature of the account. It also makes it clear that, among other things, Israel's Sabbatarian practices were grounded on the very order of creation itself. We'll look more closely at that later.

But the thing to see at this point is simply the highly structured nature of the form and content of this prologue, including the high degree of repetition of key words and phrases throughout. This is history, but it's not typical history. It's not a “Just the facts, ma'am” kind of history.

So, again, when you look at the prologue as a whole and ask, “What is it that we have here, and how does it relate to that which follows?” what you see is that it is an account that accomplishes a number of purposes all at once:

1. It shows the power and superiority of Israel's Creator God over all other alleged pagan gods.
2. It shows a great deal of literary structuring, including a strong element of linguistic features based upon the number seven. In so doing, it sends the strong message of the perfection of God's creative work, and makes the section more memorable.
3. It shows a lot of structure just in terms of its ideas and content, and arranges these in a way that facilitates the remembering and retention of the things written here.

And all of this leads me to conclude that one of the main features of this account, and one of the reasons it has been so highly structured, is to make it a

fairly memorable and "transferable" or "portable" story. Having a format which made the creation story — and the *message* of the creation story — more memorable and portable was important precisely because of the crucial, foundational significance of this account. It would be a highly useful thing for the people of Israel, especially at this point in their history.

I remember a rhyme my mother taught me years ago, which I cannot recall all of, but enough of it has always stayed with me to fulfill its purpose. It goes something like this:

"Thirty days hath September, April, June and November. All the rest have 31 except ... February, and it's a silly month anyway..."

Now, the purpose of that little rhyme was to help me to remember the number of days in the different months. And in order for the device to work, in order to make it rhyme and thus more easily memorized, it actually presents the months out of sequence. To put it another way, it dischronologizes them — not to mislead me, but to serve its intended purpose, to function as a memorable device for recalling the number of days in the months. But if I had taken my mother's rhyme and tried to use it as the basis for ordering the months on a calendar, then I would have been misusing my mother's rhyme. I would have been reading it wrongly, and using it for a purpose other than that for which it was intended.

In a similar fashion, if the purpose of the Genesis prologue was to communicate the perfection and fullness of God's creation, the superiority and uniqueness of God over against other false gods, and the wisdom and orderliness and breadth of his creation — and not to provide a scientific or chronological portrait — then we misuse and misread the prologue when we force it into that mold.

Even further, when we do these sorts of things, we create a perspective that does not easily mesh with Genesis 2:5-17. In that section, you have an account that explains how and why things did or did not happen when they did according to providence. And, along with that, you have a different sequence of events in several places. Now, admittedly, there are ways to interpret these texts that harmonize the two sequences. There is a scholar named John Currid who handles this fairly well. But even allowing for the possibility of these interpretations (which are not convincing in my estimation), these interpretations do not deal with the *providential* explanation that underlies the account, and that Meredith Kline has discussed so well.

Let me illustrate what I am getting at. Genesis 2:5-7 re-describes the creation of man, and provides more detail than we saw in chapter 1. In setting the scene for this creation of man, the passage says that this happened at a time when "no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet

sprung up.” Now, on the surface, this seems to contradict what happened on day three in the prologue where God caused the earth to sprout plants and fruit trees to cover the earth with vegetation.

In an attempt to reconcile these two passages, some scholars suggest that the plants that were created in Genesis 1 were *wild* plants and trees that reproduce on their own. They argue that Genesis 1 describes plants and trees that spread their own seed without any outside help. By contrast, the plants described in chapter 2 do not spring up by themselves. Rather, they are *crops*, like corn and wheat, plants that require special care and outside help, and which do not as easily or naturally reproduce themselves.

Now, that is, admittedly, a clever explanation, but it ignores one essential fact: the explanation that chapter 2 provides for these plants not yet appearing in the field at the time before the man was created. That explanation is found in Genesis 2:5: “for the Lord God had not caused it to rain.”

If Genesis 1 is only talking about certain kinds of plants, and Genesis 2 is talking about entirely different kinds of plants, then the reason given in Genesis 2:5 doesn’t make sense. Because if the reason there were no *crops* is because there was no rain, then that fact would also have prevented their being *any other* plants. Do you see what I’m saying? The distinction between the kinds of plants being created may solve one problem, but it ignores another and more significant one: the providential foundation that lies behind Genesis 2.

And so, at the end of the day, you have something of a conundrum, trying to reconcile and harmonize two passages that, on the surface at least, do not easily go together. However, this reality highlights perhaps the most significant fact *about* these passages, which can, in spite of its significance, be easily missed: These two passages appear side-by-side, back-to-back.

Now, this may seem fairly unimportant, but as I’ve already suggested, it may be the most important fact of all. In other words, we have here two accounts of the creation, from different perspectives and with differing emphases. And yet the author, who certainly understood these stories better than we do, placed them together. He apparently saw no contradictions between them, no reason to edit one account or the other, and no reason to smooth over the two into a more blended whole. He kept them as they are, and this fact speaks volumes. It forces us to wrestle with these texts until we see through the author’s eyes, understanding how these two accounts work together.

At present there are two main options within the Reformed camp, and this is what we have been discussing here. The one view sees both accounts as being the same with regard to their literality and purpose, with both intending to show the

proper ordering and sequence of the creation. It assumes that we are meant to look for all kinds of historical and scientific detail in our reading.

The other main view is that the two passages are not the same. Yes, they are talking about the same things. They are both factual; they both convey true history. But the primary concern is not found in the details of sequencing and order. Instead it is found in the overall message and structure. The author did not intend to teach his original audience about the sequence of creation. Instead, in the opening account he subjugated some of the chronological details in order to create a more poetic structure that made the account memorable, portable, transferable, and (dare I say?) *catechetical*. This served a vital pedagogical function. And pedagogy was imminently practical in ancient times. After all, the Hebrew people at large had to remember everything — they had no pocket Old Testaments to consult.

And so, again, let me be clear: This opening account of the creation is a true accounting of God, who did create the world, who did so in a wise, magnificent, supernatural and natural, orderly fashion, who then populated that world with creatures. Further this same God in the course of that creation made two people — Adam and Eve — and placed them in a real garden and gave them a real commission and a real prohibition to live by. As such, Genesis is certainly a true accounting; it is not some sort of myth, or flight of fancy, or fiction.

The prologue to Genesis is a historical account, but it is a poetically historical account whose impact is not to be felt so much in the individual sequence of its days but in the overall message of the creation week. And the message of the week, as a whole, is this: At the center of God's purposeful, all-powerful, creative work are two people who are privileged to be, and commissioned to live, as Images of God, filling the creation with others who bear God's likeness and managing God's creation on his behalf and for his glory.