

BIBLICAL STUDIES

CORRELATIONS WITH PROVIDENCE IN GENESIS 1

VERN S. POYTHRESS

I propose that correlations between creation and providence help us to understand the meaning of details in Gen 1.

I. Difficulties for Modern Readers

On one level, Gen 1 is not hard. It says that God created the world and everything in it, and that he is the sole creator and sovereign. But it has become hard for modern people to deal with some of the details of Gen 1. I believe that a good deal of the difficulty comes from the interference of modern science in the back of our minds. Many people come to Gen 1 expecting that it will address the same kinds of questions about details of physical composition and details of causal processes that are common in modern science. Then they are disappointed. Or they may see in Gen 1 a kind of technical precision characteristic of science. Instead, Gen 1 uses nontechnical language, such as is suitable to address everyone, including ancient Israelites and isolated present-day cultures with no exposure to science.

In answer to these difficulties, I examined in a previous article three modern myths that interfere with interpreting Gen 1.¹ (1) The myth of scientific metaphysics says that science gives us the most ultimate metaphysical analysis of the world and that it offers “reality” as opposed to the “unreality” of appearances. (2) The myth of progress says that the growth of scientific knowledge and technological gadgets makes us superior in our knowledge of the universe to “primitive” cultures. (3) The myth of understanding cultures from facts says that if we accumulate enough facts about another culture we can understand it. In this article I shall presuppose the results of the previous article. They serve to clear out the underbrush, namely, the accumulation of distorted assumptions and distorted interpretive strategies, in order to prepare fresh space for examining Gen 1.

Vern S. Poythress is Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Westminster Theological Seminary.

¹ Vern S. Poythress, “Three Modern Myths in Interpreting Genesis 1,” *WTJ* 76 (2014): 321-50.

II. *Interpretive Principles for Genesis 1*

In addition to this clearing of the underbrush, I will use a number of interpretive principles that positively guide the reading of Gen 1. These principles cannot be defended without a long exposition, which I cannot supply here.

1. Genesis has God as the divine author, who guided the human author. As a result, Genesis is the written word of God, God's own speech in written form.

2. Genesis is completely true, as a whole and in its details, because God is true and trustworthy.

3. The human author desired to convey the word of God, so he intended to say what God intended. As a result, we can focus on God's intention; we do not need to know a lot of personal detail about the human author.

4. Genesis comes substantially from the time of Moses, with a few possible editorial notes and explanations added later under divine inspiration.² God addressed the ancient Israelites of that time.

(However, it turns out in practice that the exact time at which Genesis was written does not affect interpretation much, due partly to the fact that it is a part of the canon and is intended to address subsequent generations, not merely the first generation in which it was written down.)

5. God had Genesis written as one book of a growing canon, which serves as the official covenant document in God's relationship to his people. Consequently, in Genesis God addresses subsequent generations of his people as well, including us who live today. His communication to us includes later canonical books, which throw more light on Genesis. What he says to *us* through Genesis builds on what he said to the ancient Israelites.

6. Genesis and other canonical books teach about God partly through recounting God's deeds in history. Consequently, historical accounts are both history and theology, according to God's design. Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph are real people who lived long ago and to whom God showed his grace in time and space. At the same time, God writes about what happened to them in a way that instructs us (Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:6, 11).

7. Genesis as a whole has the structure of a "genealogical history," where new sections are characteristically introduced by the expression, "These are the

² Edward J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 45.

generations of.” This structure shows that the early chapters of Genesis, like the later chapters, describe events that happened in space and time.

8. Close examination of the sections of genealogical history shows chronological “backtracking” at points. Not everything is written in chronological order. This observation opens the possibility of considering whether Gen 1:1–2:3 or Gen 2:4–25 has some back-and-forth movement in chronology.

9. The language of Genesis describing the world of nature is characteristically “phenomenal language,” language describing how things appear to ordinary people.

10. The language of Genesis is sparse.³ It is more like a sketch than a minutely detailed photograph. Everything it says is true, but it is not pedantically precise. We have many questions about the past that it simply does not answer.

11. The language of Genesis is “*non-postulational with reference to natural things*.”⁴ That is, it does not postulate any particular scientific cosmology. It lacks “*theorizing*.”⁵ For example, the Bible does not “theorize” about what the sun is made of or how far away it is. It describes the sun as “the greater light” (Gen 1:16), which gives light and functions to mark out “days and years” (1:14). This description does not go beyond what a human being in any culture could observe for himself.

12. Genesis 1 proclaims that God is the only sovereign Lord and the Creator of all. By so doing, it polemicalizes against all forms of polytheism and pantheistic confusion, which identify or mix gods with nature. But its polemic is *indirect*. Other passages in the Bible directly criticize polytheism and idolatry (e.g., Deut 4:15–39; Isa 44:9–20). Genesis 1 sets forth positive teaching about God; it does not directly criticize false religion but nevertheless implies such a criticism. The ancient Near East offers examples of polytheistic accounts of the origin of the cosmos, while Gen 1 offers a monotheistic alternative.

13. As a result of principle 12, comparisons between Gen 1 and ancient Near Eastern polytheistic myths have value, but their value is limited. At times Gen 1 discusses the same subjects as some of the myths. But the contrasts are strong between the sole sovereignty of God in Genesis and the gross polytheism of the extrabiblical literature. The contrasts underline the uniqueness of Gen 1. At

³ See Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels: A God-Centered Approach to the Challenges of Harmonization* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), chs. 7–10.

⁴ Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 69, italics original.

⁵ *Ibid.*, italics original.

the same time, the lack of direct polemics in Gen 1 invites us not to focus on the contrasts as such, but on what Gen 1 is saying positively.

14. Genesis 1 shows how God's acts of creation have a relation to humanity. God creates a suitable home for mankind, and his acts should evoke our praise. (The same goes for Gen 2 as well.)

III. *Basic Hypotheses for Genesis 1*

Now we suggest two additional guiding principles as hypotheses. These principles are more tentative and of lesser status than the preceding ones, because they have to do with assessing Gen 1 in greater detail.

15. Genesis 1 shows interest not only in the events of creation but in their later effects.

For example, Gen 1:11-12 describes the origin of vegetation, but also talks about a general pattern of growth, in which seeds play a part. For example, apple trees produce apples that have apple seeds, and the apple seeds can produce more apple trees in the next generation. Genesis 1:11-12 indicates that God has ordained this general pattern: "trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind" (v. 12).⁶

Genesis 1:14 indicates that the lights of heaven will "be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years," indicating their permanent function. This function continues from the time of creation onward until today. Genesis 1:28 sets forth the human task of fruitfulness, multiplication, and dominion, which continues during this present age (see Gen 9:1-3, 7).

These connections between creation and later effects contribute to showing how God cares for mankind (principle 14). The lights in the heavens enable mankind to enjoy cycles of days, months, seasons, and years. The productivity of seeds and fruits leads to food for mankind (1:29) and lies behind the creation of the Garden of Eden (2:9). Psalm 104 further elaborates on the benefits.

The language of finishing and rest in Gen 2:1-3 indicates that the six days of creation are set off and distinguished from God's subsequent activities in providentially governing the world. Such providential governance of the world is described in many passages, such as Heb 1:3, "he upholds the universe by the word of his power," and Ps 103:19, "his kingdom rules over all."

Providence is distinct from the work of creation, but the two are closely related. The one leads to the other. God's works of creation establish patterns that he maintains by providence. We can see this point illustrated at some length in Ps 104. Psalm 104 reflects on creation, but contains a good deal that meditates on the providential governance of God subsequent to the completion of the

⁶ Scriptural quotations are from the English Standard Version.

six days of creation. One verse, v. 30, even uses the word “created” in a context that refers to the fact that God brings to life the next generation of animals:

When you send forth your Spirit, they [animals] are created,
and you renew the face of the ground.

Genesis 1 has as its climax the creation of man, and Gen 2:4-25 also focuses on the creation of man and woman. It is clear from Gen 1-2 that God’s works of creation have produced a home suitable for mankind, and that God had such a purpose in mind from the beginning (principle 14).⁷ The resulting creation order *continues* to be a suitable home for mankind, by providing light, dry land, fruits, seasons, and animals for human use in subsequent generations (though the suitability is marred by the fall, Gen 3:17-19).

16. God’s description of his creative works in Gen 1 instructs Israelites through analogies with providence.⁸

We can illustrate the use of analogy by considering Ps 104:30. God providentially brings new animals into existence, and this work of God is described by saying that animals are “created” (the same Hebrew word **בָּרָא** as in Gen 1:1). They are “created” by analogy with the original creation of new things in Gen 1. But the relationship between the passages involves an analogy, not an identity, since Gen 1 discusses the origin of the different *kinds* of animals, while Ps 104:30 discusses the continuation of the kinds that already exist.

The use of analogies between creation and providence also makes sense because the ordinary experiences of Israelites and other people involve interaction with God’s providential activities in the world around them. Therefore, their experience of providence offers a natural starting point for virtually any ordinary human understanding of creation.

The Bible also provides theological reasons for expecting that God may have set in place many analogies between creation and providence. (1) The works of creation and the works of providence come from the hand of the same God, who exercises the same wisdom in both cases (Ps 104:24; Prov 8:27-31). (2) God plans that creation should form the foundation for later providential developments. (3) God’s plan for the whole of history has inner unity, and this unity includes a fundamental unity of purpose with respect to creation and providence together. (4) God reflects his own character in the works within

⁷ C. John Collins, *Genesis 1-4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2006), 78-80.

⁸ Averbeck comes close to this view when he says that “both the Bible and the Baal myth [are] reflecting the same underlying cosmological pattern common to both *the observable world* and the cultural world in which both were written” (Richard Averbeck, “A Literary Day, Inter-Textual, and Contextual Reading of Genesis 1-2,” in *Reading Genesis 1-2: An Evangelical Conversation* [ed. J. Daryl Charles; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2013], 15, italics mine). Interested readers can fruitfully compare my approach with the five interpretations offered in the volume *Reading Genesis 1-2*.

the created world, and this reflection includes a pattern in which God reflects (“images”) some specific aspects of his character in the things that he has made.⁹ Since this pattern of reflecting God’s character extends to both creation and providence, the two spheres show common patterns.

IV. *Interpretation of Genesis 1:1–2:3*

With these principles in place, we are ready to begin reading Gen 1. For the sake of brevity, we will not cover all the aspects of interpretation normally addressed in commentaries¹⁰ or biblical-theological reflections,¹¹ but will concentrate narrowly on how the passage builds on analogies between creation and providence.

1. *Genesis 1:1-2 (Introduction)*

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. (v. 1)

“In the beginning” denotes an absolute beginning point in time, by analogy with small beginnings that take place when God brings to life new creatures and brings about new events in providence.¹² The word “God” denotes the same God who rules in providence (Ps 103:19). The word “created” indicates an absolute newness, by analogy with the relative newness that arises when God creates a new generation of animals, as in Ps 104:30. The expression “the heavens and the earth” is a compound expression that denotes the entirety of what God created.¹³ It functions by analogy with present providential experience, where people experience what is below and around them (earth) and what is above them (heaven). Together, these constitute the whole. The sparse language leaves in the background those aspects that are invisible, but such aspects are included by implication.

Since the expression “the heavens and the earth” operates by analogy, it can denote an initial, early situation, rather than the completed heavens and earth

⁹ See especially Rom 1:19-20; Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980); Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), chs. 18 and 20.

¹⁰ Collins, *Genesis 1–4*, may serve as a primary resource.

¹¹ For example, see G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 31-45, 60-66. In the larger context of the Bible, creation and re-creation belong together, as many have observed. So there are many biblical themes that link the creation account in Gen 1–2 to redemptive re-creation. We may also point to the theological theme of chaos and order, and the relation between the creation of light in Gen 1:3 and the theme of light in the Gospel of John. Many such relations exist; we leave them aside in order to focus on the relation between creation and providence.

¹² The exact implications of Gen 1:1 are disputed. Some interpreters do not think that it describes a creation out of nothing. But see Collins, *Genesis 1–4*, 50-55. Col 1:16 and other verses of the Bible contribute to an overall picture of creation in which God is completely sovereign. There is no matter or other stuff that is co-eternal with him.

¹³ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC 1; Waco: Word, 1987), 15; Collins, *Genesis 1–4*, 55.

mentioned in Gen 2:1 and experienced now providentially.

I agree with those interpreters who think that v. 1 is not merely a title for the rest of Gen 1, but describes the initial act of creation.¹⁴ The result of the initial act is that there are “heavens,” whose condition is not further described, and “earth,” whose condition is described in v. 2. If, on the other hand, v. 1 is a title,¹⁵ it makes little difference in interpreting the rest of Gen 1.

The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep.
And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. (v. 2)

The earth was unstructured and empty, by analogy with a desert place with no inhabitants (compare Isa 34:10; Jer 4:23-26). This situation contrasts with the structure introduced in the rest of the chapter. By the time we come to 2:1, the earth is formed (“finished”) and filled (“all the host of them”). The transition from early formlessness to the completed creation in Gen 2:1 is analogous to a providential situation where human beings come into a desolate place and begin to grow crops, herd animals, and erect tents or permanent houses.

The transition from emptiness to fullness implies practical benefits for human beings (principle 14). Human beings cannot live in a completely chaotic, unformed place. We should praise God for his provision, which he gives us in the structured, filled world in which we now live.

The darkness in v. 2 is analogous to a dark night or a dark cave or the darkness inside a house at night. Within God’s providential order, darkness makes it impossible to see structures or furnishings, so that in darkness human visual experience is of emptiness, analogous to the emptiness of the early situation on earth.

The deep in v. 2 is a large mass analogous to the seas that we experience providentially. The end of v. 2 mentions “waters,” indicating that the deep has a watery surface. The sparse, non-postulational account does not say whether this material is H₂O, according to a modern chemical analysis.¹⁶ It is *analogous* to a sea, but the account does not go into details as to what are all the points of analogy. The obvious prominent point of analogy between creation and providential experience is that water in general and lakes and seas in particular are somewhat “formless.”

The Spirit of God is present and active (“hovering”), by analogy with his presence in creating the animals in Ps 104:30 and creating human life in Job 33:4.

¹⁴ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 11-16, esp. 13; Collins, *Genesis 1–4*, 50-55.

¹⁵ E.g., Bruce Waltke, with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 58; Bruce Waltke, “The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3, Part 3: The Initial Chaos Theory and the Precreation Chaos Theory,” *BibSac* 135 (1975): 216-28.

¹⁶ Strictly speaking, the Pacific Ocean is not wholly H₂O either. It contains dissolved salts—sodium ions, chloride ions, potassium ions, iodide ions, etc.—as well as algae, plankton, and discarded plastic bottles, to name a few non-H₂O items. The complicated analysis illustrates again the difference between being sparse (“waters”) and being detailed and precise.

2. *Day One*

And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. (v. 3)

God speaks commands. Providentially, human beings made in the image of God issue their own commands in imitation of God. Human beings understand what it means for God to issue commands by analogy with human commands.

In this connection, and elsewhere in Gen 1 as well, we should reckon with two complementary principles. First, God has designed analogies between himself and man. The analogies are real, and they are one aspect of the nature of the created order in its relation to God. Second, an asymmetric relation exists between the two parties. God is the originator and the archetype, while man is the imitator. Human actions are derivative. Man imitates not only in his actions, but in his very constitution. Theologians say that the Bible describes God “anthropomorphically,” that is, by analogy with human nature and human activities. That is true. But the analogy works because God first of all made man “theomorphically,” in the image of God.¹⁷

The analogies between God and man are not an afterthought, nor are they merely invented by human beings, as if to “patch up” a glaring deficiency in language. God designed the analogies from the beginning, and intended that they would serve as one means by which we come to know him and think about his character. At the same time, God, not man, is the standard for knowledge. Our knowledge of God is derivative and incomplete, in comparison with his knowledge of himself. The analogies give us real knowledge of God, but not exhaustive knowledge.

These principles hold when we consider God’s commands, as in Gen 1:3. God’s commands are the original commands, while human commands are imitative of God’s authority and his speaking ability.

The appearance of light in creation is analogous to the providential experience of seeing light beginning to dawn after the night. Thus, we might translate “light” as “daylight.” Genesis 1:3 is not discussing light in a technical scientific way—for example, as electromagnetic radiation. It is saying that the coming of light on the first day is like the coming of daylight that we experience within God’s providential order at the beginning of a new day.

Within the larger context of the Bible as a whole, Gen 1:3 implies that God is the Creator who has brought about all the aspects of light that we can experience. For example, on the fourth day God created “the two great *lights*” and “the stars” (v. 16), which are also classified as “lights” (v. 14). In the tabernacle, the lampstand with seven lamps is made “so as to give *light* on the space in front of it” (Exod 25:37). So we can say that the artificial light from lamps is imitative of the original creation of light by God. Artificial light is possible only because God has ordained a complex order within which human beings can make lamps, harvest olives, and make olive oil to burn in the lamps (Lev 24:1-4). God

¹⁷ I remember hearing this point orally from J. I. Packer.

also governs the processes involved in fire and burning, so that the Israelites can depend on the process by which olive oil produces light as it burns.

So, as a further implication within a modern social context with scientific interests, we can say that God ordains all the technical scientific aspects of light. But Gen 1:3 is not directly speaking about such aspects. It is speaking in ordinary ways, in order to address people in ancient Israel and in all cultures. God's original creation of daylight now serves as a blessing to mankind, and a stimulus for praising him, because light continues to exist and to serve God's purposes in providence.

And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. (v. 4)

The text says that God saw that the light was good. He evaluated it. God as the sovereign has the divine authority to evaluate everything. Man derivatively, as a creature made in the image of God, makes derivative evaluations. When the morning begins to dawn, human beings may experience the goodness of God and respond by thinking or saying that the light is good. Their experience within the context of God's providential control is analogous to what it means for God to evaluate the light as good.

God "separated the light." This original act of separation, on the first day of creation, is analogous to a providential process of separation. In providence, light gradually separates from darkness as morning keeps coming. When light first begins to dawn in the early morning, human surroundings include both light and darkness, and the two are not cleanly "separated." There is relative darkness on one side of the sky, a little light on the other side, and a gradation in between. Gradually, the light that originally was only dimly present at the horizon comes to fill the sky. Once it has filled the sky, it is "separated" from the darkness, which remains only in caves and other dark holes.

By analogy, God accomplished the original, archetypal division, in his sovereign distinguishing between light and darkness and the distinct roles that the two will play throughout history. By implication, God ordains the conceptual differentiation between light and darkness, as opposites. The text illustrates this more abstract idea by the physical process of separation. God also ordains the temporal succession of light and darkness that we see in the cycle of daytime and nighttime. The daytime is temporally "separate" from the nighttime. These "separations" are a blessing for human life.

God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. (v. 5)

God gives verbal names to the two distinct things. By analogy, human beings use names already given to them by the languages God has given. And sometimes they invent new names, by imitation of God (Gen 2:19-20). God exhibits his authority and control through naming, and by analogy human beings also

exercise a kind of derivative control as they engage in naming and conceptualizing in their providential actions.

The evening and morning are obviously analogous to the evening and morning of one human day. We will discuss the structure of the days after going through Gen 1 as a whole.

3. *A Second Day*

And God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." (v. 6)

God's command shows analogies once again with human commands.

And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. (v. 7)

When we take into account the picture of waters in Gen 1:2, the description as a whole, up until this point, has been analogous to a situation within God's providential order where a human being observes the sea or a large body of water. Looking out over the sea, a human being may sometimes see clouds traveling toward the land. In phenomenal terms—appearance—a cloud starts a long way off, not clearly separated from the sea. It rises (1 Kgs 18:44; Luke 12:54) as it approaches, and there is an increasing separation between the cloud above and the sea beneath. In between the cloud and the sea is a horizontal line that grows into a space.

This visual experience is analogous to what God did in an original act of separation when he made the expanse. Once again, we have a correlation between providential experience with clouds and the original acts of creation during the six days. The "waters that were under the expanse" in Gen 1:7 correspond to the sea, which we observe today within God's providential order. The "waters above the expanse" correspond to the waters in the clouds that God providentially controls. The term for "the expanse" is sparse. It denotes what separates the sea and clouds. The focus might be either on the line separating sea and cloud when the cloud is far away at sea, or the entire area separating sea and cloud as the cloud rises, or the bottom side of the cloud, once it is overhead.

The expanse is designated "Heaven" (v. 8, שמים). This term is flexible. It can denote the sky, in which are the heavenly lights (Gen 1:14, 15). It can be used to include the bottom side of clouds: "And in a little while the *heavens* grew *black* with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain" (1 Kgs 18:45). In fact, the term can denote in a general way the whole area above: rain comes from "heaven" (Deut 11:11; 2 Chron 7:13; Ps 68:8; Isa 55:10; Jas 5:18; etc.).

We must also reckon with the providential experience with mist. On the one hand, God makes mist rise (Jer 10:13; 51:16). On the other hand, rain water comes down:

For he [God] draws up the drops of water;
 they distill his mist in *rain*,
 which *the skies pour down*
 and *drop* on mankind abundantly. (Job 36:27-28)

The rising of mist represents a providential analogue to the original separation of waters from waters. The down-pouring of rain from the skies presupposes that the water was up in the skies first. These are the “waters above the expanse.”

And God called the expanse Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day. (v. 8)

When there are no clouds, the most obvious visible denotation for “Heaven” is the visible sky, in which are the sun and the moon, as well as blue areas in the day and black areas at night. Because appearances are a concern in Gen 1, we must expect that there will be less sense of focus on the space separating the earth from clouds, sun, and moon. However, the birds “fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens,” and these birds are called “the birds of the heavens” (v. 28; cf. v. 30). In a sparse use of language, the term “heaven(s)” is flexible, and can encompass all the area above us.

(In a sequel article, we will discuss the modern theory of a “heavenly sea.”)

4. *A Third Day*

And God said, “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. (v. 9)

Providentially, human experience includes experiences of heavy rains (1 Kgs 18:45) and floods. After a rain or a flood, the water drains off the land. That is, it “gathers together into one place”—a sea or a lake or a river. The dry land appears as the water disappears off it. This providential experience, given by God, offers an analogue to his original act of making dry land appear.

God’s provisions for water serve mankind. Dry land functions as a basis for human habitation. The waters above provide rain for crops. There must be enough water, but not too much, and not everywhere at once (1:2).

God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. (v. 10)

God’s naming and evaluation are similar to Gen 1:5. We commented earlier on how mankind imitates God’s acts in these respects.

And God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth.” And it was so. (v. 11)

As we indicated earlier, vv. 11 and 12 describe God’s original creation of vegetation on land, but in addition indicate that he establishes a general pattern of reproducing “according to their kinds.” Ordinary observers can see the

providential continuation of reproduction in plants today. Plants are obviously a blessing to mankind, which implies that we should bless God both for his providential provision and for the initial creative acts that brought plants into being in the first place.

The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. (v. 12)

The earth brings forth vegetation providentially when new grass, bushes, and trees spring up, beginning with shoots coming out of the ground (“the earth”). This providential growth is analogous to the original growth described in v. 12.

And there was evening and there was morning, the third day. (v. 13)

We will comment on the structure of the days at the end of this study.

5. *A Fourth Day*

And God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, . . .” (v. 14)

God specifies the location of the lights—“in the expanse of the heavens.” Providentially, they are still in the sky today. God also specifies some of their functions. They “separate the day from the night.” In agreement with our interpretation of v. 4, this separation has a temporal aspect. With respect to time, the daytime is separate from the night. The daytime is present when the sun is in the sky, while the night comes when the sun sinks below the horizon. The position of the sun functions to separate the two phenomena, day and night.

God also specifies that the lights will be “for signs and for seasons, and for days and years.” This specification constitutes a sparse reference to the fact that relative positions of the sun, moon, and stars keep track of months (which are related to the position of the moon relative to the sun) and years (which are related to the points on the horizon where the sun rises and sets and the position of the stars during the night). The year also has within it a cycle of seasons. The specifications from God in Gen 1:14 put in place a general pattern that is here today according to the providential rule of God.

“and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth.”
And it was so. (v. 15)

Providentially, the lights still shine “light upon the earth.”

And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. (v. 16)

“The greater light” is the bright disk in the sky. God’s act of originally making the disk in the sky is analogous to its continuing to be in the sky by God’s sustaining power. It “rules” the day in the sense that it is the source of light that makes the daytime what it is in appearance.

“The lesser light” is the pale white disk that appears at some times of the month in the night. It is not always a complete disk, but sometimes a crescent or a gibbous shape, depending on the time of the month. It supplies some dim light by which one can see the night-time appearance of the earth.

The stars are the small pricks of light in the night sky.

All three kinds of heavenly lights are designated according to phenomenal description, as they appear to the human eye. The description confirms the principle that biblical language is “non-postulational.” There is no “theorizing” about whether these lights are just lights, or whether the light originates in material objects, or how far away and how big these material objects might “really” be.

And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, . . . (v. 17)

God put them in the heavens initially by analogy to the fact that by his providential rule he puts the sun in the sky each morning and the moon and stars in the sky each night (Ps 104:20; cf. Ps 19:4-6).

to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness.
And God saw that it was good. (v. 18)

This language repeats the functions that God intended the lights to have, as given in vv. 14-16. The events in time and space fulfill the purpose that God specified in his words of command.

And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day. (v. 19)

We will consider these refrains later.

6. *A Fifth Day*

And God said, “Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens.” (v. 20)

God issues his command, in analogy with human commands by his image-bearers.

So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. (v. 21)

God’s initial acts in creating sea creatures and birds are analogous to his creating new generations of sea creatures and birds through his providential rule (Ps 104:12, 25).

And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” (v. 22)

God’s blessing continues to produce providential effects. By his providential governance, sea creatures multiply and fill the seas, and birds multiply on the earth in producing the next generation.

And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

As noted above, we will consider the refrains later.

7. *The Sixth Day*

And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.” And it was so. (v. 24)

God issues his command in a way analogous to human commands. The earth “brings forth” the living creatures. The expression “the earth” may in sparse usage be referring inclusively to the surface of the earth and everything on the surface. So the text describes the fact that living creatures appear within this region. Or, more narrowly, the text could suggest an analogy with the providential observation that animals come out of the earth when they come out of their holes and dens.

And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the livestock according to their kinds, and everything that creeps on the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. (v. 25)

God originally created the kinds of animals. By analogy, providentially he continues to create new generations of animals, according to Ps 104:30.

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” (v. 26)

God speaks his plan, in a way analogous to human discussion of human plans. In this case, the plural “us” is special. Its exact significance is debated. Without entering into the full debate, we may suggest that it is self-consultation. This “consultation” has partial parallels: (a) God’s use of wisdom in Prov 8:30, (b) the reflection on God’s not having need of counsel outside his Spirit (Isa 40:13-14), and (c) the picture of a king consulting his counselors, as in 1 Kgs 22:5-22. This self-consultation adumbrates the NT doctrine of the Trinity.¹⁸

¹⁸ Collins, *Genesis 1–4*, 59-61.

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them. (v. 27)

The poetic parallelism in v. 27 sets this verse apart as the climax of the narrative. Mankind is indeed central in God's plan for creation, and then in the providential order that later follows. God's original creation of man is analogous to his providential creation of each human individual, who is created in the image of God (Job 33:4; Ps 139:13-16; 1 Cor 11:7; Jas 3:9).

And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (v. 28)

God's instructions in the original created situation extend in their implications to all mankind today. Mankind continues to be fruitful and multiply, through God's providential rule in human reproduction. Mankind continues to exercise dominion (Gen 9:1-3).

Unfortunately, the entrance of sin means that dominion can be twisted into cruelty and exploitation. So it is worthwhile saying that the original dominion is a delegated authority, under God's rule. Man is a steward of God's property, rather than an absolute owner, and in this respect the mandate from creation is analogous to a situation in which a manager or chief servant works under the direction of a human owner, and works for the benefit of the owner and his property. Human dominion according to God's intention should be thoughtful and caring, rather than exploitive or selfish.

And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food." (v. 29)

Human beings eat plant food today, in a providential continuation of God's original gift.

And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. (v. 30)

In accord with God's original specification in creation, the pattern continues in providence. According to God's providential order, animals eat plants for food.¹⁹

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. (v. 31)

¹⁹ In accord with the sparseness of the account, nothing is said about animals eating other animals as prey. Some people have postulated that all animals were vegetarian before the fall, but the text does not say so. Its silence should not be used to draw a confident conclusion. Cf. Ps 104:21; Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, 120-22; Robert R. Gonzales, Jr., "Predation and Creation: Animal Death Before the Fall?" (paper presented at the Southeast Regional Meeting of the ETS, Anderson, S.C., March 23, 2013).

The expression, “behold, it was very good,” obviously forms a culmination and capstone for the previous evaluations, where God “saw that it was good.” We will discuss the refrains after considering Gen 2:1-3.

8. *The Seventh Day*

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. (2:1)

Verse 2:1 marks the end of the narrative of the works of creation. God has finished the works that create various regions and various creatures filling them. God continues his providential work of ruling over the creation that he has made, and he moves it forward to its destiny according to his plan. The difference between initiation and continuation means that, though the relations between the two are sometimes close, they are at many points analogous rather than merely identical.

And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. (2:2)

As part of the book of Genesis, this verse is addressed to Israel and to subsequent generations as well. The Sabbath institution is explained in Exod 20:8-11. God commands Israelites not to work on the Sabbath. All their work is to be done on six days. Their pattern of work and rest obviously imitates God’s pattern:

Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work. . . . *For* in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. (Exod 20:9-11)

God’s pattern of work and rest is clearly analogous to Israel’s pattern. It is analogous, but not identical, because God does not grow physically tired like a human being. Genesis 2:2 says he rested, which means that he ceased to work. More specifically, Gen 2:3 says that he “rested from all his work that he had done *in creation*.” Reflection on providence shows that God continues to accomplish his works of providence, while he continues to rest from his works of creation, which have analogies to providence but are not identical to providence.

So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation. (2:3)

Making the seventh day holy celebrates God’s rest and his completion of his work. In response, we should honor and praise God for his completed work, and for the greatness and beneficence that he displays in his work. The text does not specifically say whether the blessing rests on the Sabbath day celebrated by human beings, or on the original day when God rests. It takes its start with God’s rest, which offers the original pattern after which man’s rest is supposed to be modeled. So the text probably implies both notions: blessing

starts with blessing the time of God's rest, and then by implication extends to the Sabbath days on earth when man is enjoined not to work.

Mankind has a temporary rest on the seventh day of the week. But then he goes back to work. By contrast, God's work of creation is permanently finished. He does not go back to work and do more works of creation, because the work of creation is "finished" (Gen 2:1). Using other, later Scripture as a supplement, we can confirm the hint in Gen 1:28 that man's work of multiplying and subduing will eventually be finished, and mankind will enter into a consummation, in which he rests from his former work of multiplying and subduing. The weekly Sabbath is an emblem and a foretaste of that final rest (Heb 4:1-11).

Thus, Gen 1:1-2:3 invites us to see analogies between the six-one pattern in God's work and rest, which is the original pattern, and the six-one pattern in man's work and rest, which is imitative, and which issues finally in consummate rest for mankind.

9. *Surveying the Whole*

All in all, the narrative in Gen 1:1-2:3 makes good sense when we read it with attention to the analogies between creation and providence. Everything is simple for ordinary people to understand. There is no sign of speculation or "theorizing" in a manner similar to modern science. Genesis 1 is not in principle antagonistic to the practice of science, but neither does it put forth any piece of technical science. In particular, it does not contain any faulty piece from an alleged ancient materialistic cosmology.²⁰ It remains on a level of simplicity, in order to address Israelites and peoples from all cultures concerning what God did when he created the world.

V. "Functional" Orientation

Readers familiar with competing interpretations may wonder about the relation of my interpretation to an interpretation that emphasizes the practical "functions" of what God made, and the "functional" character of the description of God's creative acts.²¹ It depends on what the word *functional* means. In a broad sense, every object and every action that has a purpose is "functional" by serving that purpose. Principle 14 (given above) expresses the idea of functionality: God has purposes in creation. Everything that God made, he made with a purpose in view. In fact he has multiple purposes. God has a unified plan, but within this unity everything he created has multiple purposes. The plants,

²⁰ Israelite readers may or may not have had some false ideas in their minds about the composition and structure of the cosmos. Gen 1 does not endorse such ideas merely by referring to what anyone can observe. See the caution about a mental-picture theory of truth in Poythress, "Three Modern Myths," 327 n. 16.

²¹ E.g., John H. Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 24; John H. Walton, "Reading Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology," in *Reading Genesis 1-2*, 141-69.

for instance, serve as food for animals and for mankind. In addition, some are beautiful, and they exemplify God's care (Matt 6:28-30). God also cares for them when no one sees them (Job 38:26-27).

Since in Gen 1 God addresses human beings, he displays prominently some aspects of creation that are of interest to human beings and that have benefits for human beings. By describing these aspects, God also leads human beings to praise him, and his name is glorified. These results come about in accord with God's purposes, and so they too are among the "functions" of creation. In a broad sense of the word, the whole description in Gen 1 is "functionally" oriented; that is, it is oriented to showing functions that the creation order has for the benefit and enjoyment of mankind, and for the glory of God.

These principles are fully consistent with the inclusion within Gen 1 of observational descriptions of visible changes in the environment. In v. 3, light came where it was not before. In v. 7 God made an expanse where there was not an expanse before. In v. 9 the dry land appeared, whereas it had not appeared before. And so on. The orientation to "functionality" in Gen 1 includes attention to those changes that lead to the final functions being in place. Genesis 1 invites us to praise God not only that we now live in an environment suitable for human living, but that he had a plan to produce a world of that kind. God brought his plan progressively into action to bring the earth from an uninhabitable state (v. 2) to a habitable state (v. 31), so that we could now enjoy the resulting blessings. God's purposes include plans for the far future as well, when the creation will be made new (the new heavens and the new earth of Rev 21:1). The goal of consummation is among the purposes of the original creation.

As usual, we can illustrate using an analogy with human experience in providence. Consider the making of the tabernacle. God's directions to Israel start out with overall direction:

And let them *make* me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall *make* it. (Exod 25:8)

Once the tabernacle is made it functions as the dwelling place of God, according to Exod 25:8, as confirmed in Exod 40:34-35. Technically, in a narrow sense of the word *functional*, the tabernacle as a whole is not "functional" until God's presence comes and the cloud of glory settles on it. God's presence is the culminating act, which makes the completed structure not merely a physical tent, but a sanctuary where God dwells. But the final act of God's presence is not the only act of "making."

Bezalel is filled with "the Spirit of God," and his associates are given ability (Exod 31:3, 6). They are supposed to "make [Hebrew עָשָׂה] all that I [God] have commanded you" (Exod 31:6). The narrative in Exod 36-39 then continues in detail, describing the *making* of the tabernacle curtains, the loops, the clasps, the frames, and so on. These things are made and then put together, which involves physical restructuring. In a broad sense, all the actions performed by

Bezalel and the workmen are “functional.” They all have purpose, and they all function to lead forward to the final assembling of the tabernacle as a complete whole, followed by the coming of the cloud of glory. The word *make* (הָעָשָׂה) is used in describing the earlier stages. It is *not* used to describe the final consecration in Exod 40:34-35 (though presumably it could have been).

After the tabernacle is completed and consecrated, God has still further purposes. The tabernacle as a symbolical dwelling of God points forward to the final dwelling of God in Rev 21:3.

Now consider how the providential acts of “making” in Exod 36–39 have correlations with God’s original acts of making in Gen 1. In Gen 1:1–2:3, the end product of the acts of making is the completed heavens and earth in 1:31–2:1. In an indirect sense God “consecrates” the completed whole by the celebration of the Sabbath and declaring it “holy” in Gen 2:3—though what is declared “holy” is not the world but the seventh day, the Sabbath.

In some respects, the world as a whole is like a cosmic temple, filled with the presence of God.²² Genesis 1 describes the acts of making and restructuring that lead up to the endpoint. Genesis proclaims the endpoint, but it *also* teaches us about the acts of God leading to the endpoint. In this way, it is analogous to Exod 36–40. Exodus 36–40 joins the endpoint (a completed tabernacle) to the earlier acts of human beings—and the acts of God empowering those human beings—all the way through the process. In both Gen 1 and Exod 36–40, God’s purposes include both the particular acts of making and the completed whole. His purposes also extend beyond the initial achievement; that is, they extend beyond the completed heavens and earth in Gen 2:1 and beyond the completed tabernacle in Exod 40:33.

The tabernacle has distinct spaces: the court, the holy place, and the most holy place. In these distinct spaces Moses places distinct furnishings, such as the bronze altar, the laver or bronze basin, the table of the bread of the presence, the lampstand, and the ark (Exod 40:16-33). In an analogous manner, when God makes the heavens and the earth, he creates distinct spaces, namely, heaven, sea, and dry land, and makes furnishings for each of them.

The parallel between creation and the tabernacle is strengthened by the fact that the tabernacle is a kind of image of God’s dwelling place in heaven. God’s presence fills all things (Jer 23:24; Isa 66:1), but he is especially, intensively present in heaven (1 Kgs 8:27, 30, 34, 36, 39). It therefore makes sense that the tabernacle and later the temple of Solomon would have images of heaven and of the world as a whole as the dwelling place of God.²³ The functions as well as the correlations that are found in creation and in the tabernacle all take place according to God’s design.

²² See Beale, *Temple*, 60-66; C. John Collins, “Reading Genesis 1–2 with the Grain: Analogical Days,” in *Reading Genesis 1–2*, 91; cf. 180-81.

²³ Beale, *Temple*, 60-66; Collins, “Reading Genesis 1–2,” 91; Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 35-42.

By contrast, modern readers influenced by materialism are not used to thinking in terms of purpose. Materialism understands scientific laws as impersonal. Within such a framework, Gen 1 either does not make sense, or has to be interpreted as adding an additional layer of purpose *on top of* a purposeless structure of scientific law. But such a picture misconstrues both the nature of God's purposes and the nature of scientific law. The real law is God's personal word, which is personal and therefore also full of purposes.²⁴

VI. *Correlations with Ancient Near Eastern Myths*

Modern students of the ancient Near East have raised questions about Gen 1 because some of its details have fascinating similarities to details in mythic material from the ancient Near East. Since some of the ancient Near Eastern material has a date of origin earlier than the Book of Genesis, do we infer that Gen 1 borrowed ideas? Did it thereby incorporate some elements of a false cosmology? We have addressed some aspects of this question in the previous article.²⁵

We can make some additional observations about ancient Near Eastern myths. First, students who are struck by similarities in detail might sit down and read from beginning to end (if they can stomach the blasphemies) some of the major mythic accounts in the ancient Near East, such as *Enuma Elish*, the Atrahasis Epic, and the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. The amount of polytheistic wildness in these documents completely overwhelms the details here and there that suggest similarities.

On this basis, one might wonder whether the parallels between Genesis and the myths are purely accidental, the product of a hit-or-miss relationship. Most of the time we get misses. But by perusing enough material, we can gradually accumulate random "hits." Does such a hit-or-miss accumulation explain the similarities? I do not think this is the most plausible explanation. Rather, similarities arise for three main reasons.

First, Gen 1 is providing for Israelites an alternative to the myths within their environment. It is natural that it should address at least some of the same subjects.

Second, the thinking of the ancient Near East tended to correlate present-day patterns with origins.²⁶ That is, it correlated providence with creation.

²⁴ Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, ch. 1.

²⁵ Poythress, "Three Modern Myths."

²⁶ For example, Tobin hypothesizes that the Egyptian symbol of Nun for the primeval waters "derived at an early (probably prehistoric) date from the flooding of the Nile; the primeval mound reflects the emergence of the isolated hillocks that appeared as the waters subsided" (Vincent Ariehe Tobin, "Myths: An Overview," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* [ed. Donald B. Redford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001], 2:464). See also the discussion of the annual and daily cycles in J. Gwyn Griffiths, "Myths: Solar Cycle," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, 2:476-80. In general, myths have their sources in "the natural world, which humans perceived and interpreted by personalizing the natural forces so as to relate to them," and in "historical individuals and incidents,

When people wondered about present-day patterns, they sometimes went on to speculate about how the patterns must have come into existence through originating events. But polytheism distorted and confused the understanding of both providence and creation. In particular, it distorted the truth about the wise relationship that God ordained between providence and creation.

Third, because of cross-cultural communication in the ancient Near East, distinct cultures and subcultures may have shared some stock images, analogies, and themes, such as analogies between the cosmos and a house or between the cosmos and a tent, or the thematic contrast between chaos and order or between darkness and light.

How, then, do we conceptualize the derivation of ancient Near Eastern myths and their relation to Gen 1? The actual order of derivation would be as follows: (1) From all eternity God had a plan for creation and providence, involving unity and analogies between the two; (2) God brought his plan into execution by the actual events of creation and providence; (3) ancient Near Eastern polytheists observed providence, and inferred analogues in their mythic accounts of origins; (4) God spoke in Gen 1 to instruct the Israelites on creation, using an account that draws on analogical correlations between creation and providence, and that offers an alternative to polytheistic accounts. Both the mythic accounts and Gen 1 have ties with providential patterns. Similarities should be expected between Gen 1 and creation myths all over the world, because both have analogical ties to providence.

In addition, God providentially ruled all the cultures of the ancient Near East, so that they shared some themes concerning the cosmos. God drew on these similarities when he gave us Gen 1. He thereby affirms whatever fragments of truth people have grasped in the midst of false religion. People do not escape the truth about God, even though false religion suppresses the clear testimony to God that he continually provides in providence (Rom 1:18-23; cf. Acts 14:17). In Gen 1 God proclaims that he is the universal God, who created the world and still governs it providentially. His instruction leads people out of the darkness of all the false religions of the world, including the religions of the ancient Near East, and into the light of truth. The process may be gradual, because much confusion must be overcome.²⁷ But God designed his word in purity (Ps 12:6) to accomplish his purpose.

In fact, we might be surprised that we do not find *more* similarities in detail between Gen 1 and the ancient Near Eastern mythic accounts. The only way I can find to account for the meagerness of similarities is that the darkness of polytheism has interfered with appreciation for the patterns evident in

which were idealized" (Tobin, "Myths: An Overview," 2:464; see also 2:467). "Each natural principle has a specific function in the creation analogous to that of daily life" (James P. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt: The Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creation Accounts* [Yale Egyptological Studies 2; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988], 12). See also Averbeck, "A Literary Day," 15.

²⁷ See Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), ch. 10.

providence. These patterns testify unambiguously to the Creator (Rom 1:18-23) and provide numerous analogies for understanding God's work as Creator.

In short, the similarities that do appear in the two kinds of literature (Gen 1 and myths) come about for several reasons. (1) God offers in Gen 1 an alternative to the confused polytheistic stories of the ancient Near East, and more broadly to the confused myths in cultures throughout the world. (2) All people have common access to providential patterns.²⁸ (3) God has permanently established correlations between creation and providence. (4) God highlights these correlations as he calls people out of darkness into light. (5) God addresses themes that he has already planted in the cultures of the ancient Near East.

VII. *The Days of Creation*

It now remains to ask ourselves what kind of analogy exists between God's work and rest on the one hand and man's work and rest on the other, as it pertains to understanding the days of creation. This is a vexed question, about which there are several interpretive options. There are many arguments for and against the options. We cannot consider them all. We must confine ourselves to a few highlights, leaving the details to other books.²⁹

1. *The Length of the Days of Creation*

First, it appears to me that, since Gen 2:1-3 defines God's rest as a rest from his activities in creating, and not a rest from providential governance, his rest goes on forever. It is analogous but not identical to the day of rest that Israelites were supposed to observe on their Sabbath. The seventh day is consecrated because of God's rest (v. 3). The tight correlation between the rest and the day suggests that God's *day* of rest is everlasting.³⁰

Second, the narrative describing God's creation of the Garden of Eden in Gen 2:8-9 has analogies with the human work of planting and tending gardens. But the two kinds of works are analogous, not identical. God is absolute creator. Man is an imitator, and operates on the limited level that he enjoys as a creature. The time periods for God's gardening and for man's gardening need not match one-to-one. It would take years for a man to plant trees and have them grow to maturity. God may do it, if he pleases, in a moment. The analogy between the two kinds of gardening, God's and man's, includes analogy with respect to the time period in which the work is done. The time at God's level of work need not be the same as at man's level of work.

²⁸ Some conservative scholars have suggested that creation myths arose from garbling authentic traditions about creation that go back to the time of Noah. This is possible. But in view of the connections that arise through God's general revelation in providence, such access to special revelation is not necessary to account for the similarities.

²⁹ For an introduction to the arguments, see Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, chs. 4-10.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

Third, Gen 1 does not mention the sun until the fourth day. A simple reading of the first three days in Gen 1:3-13 reveals no obvious way for measuring lengths of time numerically by means of some obvious standard, like the movement of the sun. Consequently, the text invites readers to consider the times with respect to the significant events that happen, and the personal activities involved, rather than in terms of some mechanistic measuring tool. Prior to the invention of mechanical clocks, most cultures of the world thought in terms of “social time” or “interactive time” rather than “clock time.”³¹ This kind of thinking fits the first three days of Gen 1, as well as the cultures to which Gen 1 was originally addressed.

The upshot is that Gen 1, as a sparse account, does not give us information about the clock time for each individual day. We do know that the seventh day goes on forever. The six days are God’s “work days,” the times of his personal activity. They are analogous to man’s work days. They are presented in terms of personal activity—interactive time—not in terms of clock time.

This situation leaves open the question of how we harmonize Gen 1 with technico-scientific measurements of time. That is to say, Gen 1 leaves open the question of clock time. Suppose that we do scientific investigation, using a time measurement determined by modern scientific clocks, and extrapolating backward in time towards the origin. Would the days described in Gen 1 turn out to be twenty-four hours or some other length? Genesis 1 does not say, because it is sparse. It sets forth periods of personal work (“interactive time”), not ticking clocks (“clock time”).

What about the refrain, “And there was evening and there was morning”? C. John Collins has pointed out that within God’s providential order, the period between evening and the next morning is the period when human beings rest for the night:

Man goes out to his work
and to his labor *until the evening*. (Ps 104:23)³²

By analogy, God’s work days in creation have times of initiation and times of completion, with rest before and after. The movement from rest to activity to rest constitutes an analogy between God’s work days and man’s.

2. *The Question of Chronological Order*

Does Gen 1 indicate that the activities on the six days occur completely in chronological order? Or is the order merely a topical order? As we observed earlier, later parts of the Book of Genesis are not all arranged in strict chronological order, though there is a gradual progression in time, with some back-tracking,

³¹ *Ibid.*, 140-43.

³² Collins, *Genesis 1-4*, 77.

as we proceed through the Book of Genesis. Moreover, the order in Gen 2:4-25 appears to be largely an order of narration that focuses on *purpose*. The creation of man is mentioned early in the narrative, and then other events come in to show how God arranges a suitable environment for the man whom he has created.

So what about Gen 1? An ordinary ancient reader of Gen 1 can observe a natural order in quite a few of the events. (1) The narrative introduces the earth at an early point. If Gen 1:1 describes early events, as I think it does, and is not merely a title, the earth in v. 2 is not necessarily the very first thing to be created in chronological order. The narrative starts there at an early point because it intends to provide an explanation for ordinary people, and this explanation will use analogies from providence. In providence human beings must have a place from which to observe. The story of creation, as analogous to providence, provides for the earth at an early point. As a sparse account, it leaves out details concerning events that may have occurred prior to the creation of the earth.

(2) Light comes next, because in providence light is necessary if a human observer is to appreciate any of the rest of the events. Likewise, in creation, as analogous to providence, light is introduced early. The narrative as a sparse account passes over any details about events that occurred in darkness.

(3) Next comes the division of waters, vertically (day 2) and horizontally (day 3). The description presupposes that the light is present so that the process can be seen. Both of the two divisions into major regions offer an important framework for the more specific forms of order that will come to exist within the regions. The analogies with providence include the annual flooding of the Nile and the occasional flooding elsewhere from strong rainstorms.

Logically, which might we expect to come first, the vertical division between waters above and below, or the horizontal division between sea and dry land? In one way, the presence of water in the heavens has a more fundamental function in the providential order, since it is possible in principle to have such water present all through an annual cycle of floods, rains, and dry spells. Moreover, heavenly water is presupposed as the source of flooding in lands where rainstorms can bring floods.

According to our normal principle, we look for analogies between creation and providence. In this case, the more fundamental providential role for the waters in the heavens suggests a similar fundamental role that they may play in the creation. If so, the vertical separation of waters above from waters below could be expected to occur earlier in the order of creation. Later we would see the separation of sea from dry land. Moreover, in God's providential order, the separation between heaven and earth holds true both over the dry land and over the sea. This broad scope for the vertical separation again suggests that the vertical separation might suitably come earlier in order in the works of creation.³³

(4) Plants can appear on land (last part of day 3) only after there is land (first part of day 3).

³³ Cf. Edward J. Young, *Studies in Genesis One* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1964), 91.

(5) Lights can appear in the expanse (day 4) only after there is an expanse (day 2).

(6) Creatures appear in the sea (day 5) only after there is a sea (day 3). Creatures appear in the heavens (birds, day 5) only after there are heavens (day 2). Animals appear on the land (day 6) only after there is land (day 3) and plants for the animals to eat (day 3; see Gen 1:30).

The sense of progress through the events narrated on successive days counts against a “pure” framework approach that says that the order of days is purely a literary device.³⁴ The framework approach in reply might point to the relationship between the appearing of light on day 1 and the appearing of the heavenly lights on day 4. It is sometimes claimed that the descriptions on these two days are really describing the same events from two points of view. But our reading undermines this kind of argument. Ordinary analogies from providence show that we can have a consistent interpretation of day 1 and day 4 such that the two do not collapse into one another. Light can appear without the disks of heavenly light, in the form of diffuse light, such as the light of dawn before the sun disk comes above the horizon, and the light from the clouds on an overcast day. The assumption that light *must* come from light-bearing *bodies* comes from modern scientific knowledge, not from ordinary observation of providence. That assumption interferes with a perceptive reading of Gen 1, days 1 and 4.

Another interfering assumption can arise from a modern reader thinking that “the greater light” is the sun and “the lesser light” is the moon, where the terms *sun* and *moon* mean the sun and moon according to our modern scientific conceptions. The language in Gen 1:14-16 is, as usual, phenomenal. The phenomena do not exist, are not “made” by God, until they actually *appear* in the sky with essentially the same kind of appearance that they have today. Of course Gen 1, as a theological document, implies that God created whatever unknown and invisible “things” are behind the appearances. But the focus is on God’s making the appearances. To think otherwise may involve falling partial victim to the myth of scientific metaphysics, and treating the language of the Bible in violation of its “non-postulational” character.

Thus, I suggest that Gen 1 does include a sense of progression and some chronological order. But that does not mean that it cannot also, as a sparse account, stick to the main points and group together created objects of one kind for topical simplicity.

Building on earlier work, Bruce Waltke points to the specific wording for the days given in the Hebrew text. A more literal translation would have: “one day,” “a second day,” “a third day,” “a fourth day,” “a fifth day,” and “*the* sixth day,” the last with the definite article. Waltke suggests that this terminology allows

³⁴ For further discussion of the “framework hypothesis,” see *ibid.*, 43-76; Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, 143-47, 341-45; Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: InterVarsity, 1967), 54-55.

a shuffling of chronology.³⁵ The evidence here is subtle, and it is a matter of some subtlety to assess its meaning. Waltke may be right. But uncertainty about the significance of this variation makes me reluctant to put a lot of weight on it. And even if these details *allow* a shuffling of chronology, they do not positively indicate any such shuffling.

Thus, there are grounds for thinking that the events come basically in chronological order. But the account sticks to high points rather than pretending to be exhaustive. Accordingly, all kinds of plants could be included in the creative activities of day 3, in order to include them under a single comprehensive heading, even though the creation of some kinds of plants might be spread over a large amount of clock time.

After considering an approach that treats the days as a literary device, Derek Kidner sums up his view of the message of Gen 1:

Yet to the present writer the march of the days is too majestic a progress to carry no implication of ordered sequence; it also seems over-subtle to adopt a view of the passage which discounts one of the primary impressions it makes on the ordinary reader. It is a story, not only a statement. As with all narrating, it demanded a choice of standpoint, of material to include, and of method in the telling. In each of these, simplicity has been a dominant concern. The language is that of every day, describing things by their appearance; the outlines of the story are bold, free of distracting exceptions and qualifications, free also to group together matters that belong together (so that trees, for example, anticipate their chronological place in order to be classified with vegetation), to achieve a grand design in which the demands now of time-sequence, now of subject-matter, control the presentation, and the whole reveals the Creator and His preparing a place for us.

The view that the chapter is intended to reveal the general sequence of creation as it affected this earth, is based on the apparent character of the writing. But it is reinforced, one may think, by the remarkable degree of correspondence that can be found between this sequence and the one implied by current science. This has often been pointed out, and not always by those who set any store on the factual accuracy of Scripture.³⁶

I agree with Kidner: the account gives us a narrative progression, not just a list of topics. But it is sparse, in order to stress “a grand design.”

VIII. *Doing a Correlation with Scientific Accounts*

Genesis 1 needs to be interpreted first of all in a manner independent of modern scientific knowledge, lest we fall victim to the myth of scientific

³⁵ Waltke, *Genesis*, 62, citing Mark A. Throntveit, “Are the Events in the Genesis Account Set Forth in Chronological Order? No,” in *The Genesis Debate* (ed. R. F. Youngblood; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986), 53; and David A. Sterchi, “Does Genesis 1 Provide a Chronological Sequence?,” *JETS* 39 (1996): 529-36.

³⁶ Kidner, *Genesis*, 55.

metaphysics in our interpretation. If we are victims, we may arrive at an approach that artificially imports misinterpretations because of prior expectations influenced by science. We should first attempt to interpret Gen 1 with careful attention to its own terms.³⁷

But afterwards we may raise other kinds of questions. We may ask how a reasonable interpretation of Gen 1 could go together or fail to go together with a modern scientific account. When we approach this question, we should acknowledge that we are no longer simply interpreting the text of Gen 1 on its own terms. We are no longer focusing on the primary purpose of Gen 1, in instructing ancient Israelites and peoples of every culture. Rather, we are asking about its relation to modern scientific descriptions. When we explore these relationships, we may find correlations between Gen 1 and science. If we find correlations, we are not saying that Gen 1 by itself directly and obviously “means” everything that we find in the correlations. We are only seeking to understand Gen 1 in relation to other things that people have found out in our own day. In all this, we must understand the tentative character and fallibility of science, as well as the fallibility of our interpretation of Gen 1. On the other hand, because God reveals to us in the Bible that he is the author of nature as well as the author of the Bible, it is legitimate for us to explore how the two fit together within his comprehensive plan.

Granted all these qualifications, a tentative correlation between a scientific account and Gen 1 is not that hard, once we allow each side to tell its story in its own way. The whole scientific account of the history of the universe up until the creation of the earth corresponds to Gen 1:1. Light in day 1 could correspond to the time when the condensing sun begins to give off light because of heating through gravitational contraction. Or, more likely, it could correspond to the initial penetration of light to the surface of the new earth, after an earlier period in which the earth was covered with an opaque atmosphere, encircled by interplanetary debris.³⁸

The separation in day 2 could correspond to the establishment of a weather cycle involving the rising of clouds and the coming of rain. Day 3 corresponds to the origins of continents and earlier forms of life. Day 4 corresponds to the oxygenization and clearing of the atmosphere (oxygenization presupposes plant life), so that from earth the heavenly bodies are visible and take on the same appearance that they have at present. Day 5 corresponds to the origin of larger sea animals (fish), and day 6 corresponds to the origin of land animals and mankind. These events are in the same order in Genesis and in a current scientific chronology.

Modern science is, of course, tentative and subject to correction. But the suggestive correlations with science show the problematic character of modern

³⁷ “Though historical and scientific questions may be uppermost in our minds as we approach the text, it is doubtful whether they were in the writer’s mind, and we should therefore be cautious about looking for answers to questions he was not concerned with” (Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, liii).

³⁸ I owe this idea to a prepublication manuscript from Hugh Ross.

critical attacks based on alleged similarities between Gen 1 and ancient myths. For example, critics may allege the mention of waters in Gen 1:2 shows that Genesis is simply borrowing from ancient Near Eastern mythic material that depicts order emerging out of primeval waters of chaos.³⁹ To the modern mind, such depictions show a false, primitive substitute for a modern scientific account. But the pattern of order from chaos actually took place every year with the annual flooding of the Nile, which began the Egyptian agricultural cycle. When the waters subsided, plants began to grow up, and the animals flourished by feeding on the plants. This series of events is providence, not myth. (But ancient Near Eastern myths could take such observations from providence and “mythologize” them into a polytheistic account.) Similar works of God took place in the original creation of the earth, which, according to current science, was in a desolate and unformed state when it first condensed from the disk of debris encircling the condensing body of the sun.

Similarity with a myth does not make Gen 1:2 untrue. Confronted with the possibility that Gen 1:2 represents truth, the skeptic may reply that it is true only by accident. But that response shows that he thinks that Gen 1:2 is merely a human product from human beings who could not know about the actual origins of the earth. If, on the other hand, Gen 1:2 is divine discourse as well as human, God is free to use the analogies that he himself has providentially put in place, such as the analogy between the flooding of the Nile and his original work of creation.

IX. *Meanings in Analogies*

Consider another example. Within God’s providential order, the dry land appears after a heavy rainstorm or a flood. In creation, the continents appeared after an earlier period when water covered the earth. God uses the providential events of flooding as a present-day analogy to help ordinary people understand his work of creation.

The modern scientifically educated person may not be impressed. He may point out that continent building depends on complex geophysical processes in the earth’s mantle and crust, while flooding depends on the movement of water. Physically, the two are very different. “So,” he says, “the analogy is superficial.”

How we view the analogy depends on how we assess what is “superficial,” versus what is “basic” and what is “real.” Scientific metaphysics says that the physical causation within geophysical processes and in the movement of water is basic. By contrast, visible appearances are “superficial.” But God ordained the one kind of structure just as much as he ordained the other. God planned beforehand every analogy that we later discover, as well as every physical law that we discover.

Moreover, the world of appearances, including the world of more poetic

³⁹ E.g., Vincent Arieh Tobin, “Myths: Creation Myths,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, 2:469.

analogies, is in some respects closer to human living and personal concerns for human significance. In relation to highly personal meanings, we might even reverse the order and say that the analogy between continents and receding flood waters is weighty, while the details of physical causation are superficial. The former analogy affects human nature at the level of existential concern, since human beings cannot live in a watery environment, the environment either of a flood or of a watery surface covering the earth. The pictures of water also contain symbolic dimensions, concerning the distinction between chaos and order and the transition from one to the other. Under God's control, the earth makes a transition from watery formlessness to separate regions of sea and dry land. The dry land has the capability for sustaining plant and animal life, and for being useful for human living.

In his sovereign plan, God has ordained not only the structure of physicalistic regularities we see in geophysics, but the structure of analogies, including poetic analogies. Included among the analogies is an analogy between continent building and recovery from a flood. Both processes involve a movement from spread-out water to bounded (separated) water, from formlessness to form, and from a situation inhospitable to humanity to one that is hospitable. By these and other analogies God has linked creation and providence. And some of the links are very meaningful for the human appreciation of life. The scientifically oriented person may sneer at such an idea. But the problem is his. Through the apparent simplicity and naïveté of the account in Gen 1:9, God "catches the wise in their craftiness" (1 Cor 3:19).