

Vocation: Labor and Leisure in Christian Perspective
Beverly Heights Presbyterian Church
Dr. T. David Gordon

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Interpreting the Historical Books of the Bible
(Including Genesis)
T. David Gordon

I. Disproportion between years and pages.

Historians frequently explain, in a preface or introduction, why they have selected to spend more time with some individuals or events than with others; such authors know that their readership expects “even coverage,” to a degree, so the authors defend/explain why their emphases are as they are.

Biblical authors ordinarily attempt no such explanation or defense. Their narratives speak for themselves, as it were, and if they expend more time and pages with some events rather than others, they assume this is self-explanatory, because some events and characters are more *important* than others. The Scriptures are very *selective*, including and excluding in terms of their purposes: “Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25)

“...Genesis 2:4, the heading for a survey of prediluvian history, views that whole age under the horizon of its great founding event, the original creation, and thus classifies that whole time as belonging to ‘the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens.’...”

It would indeed appear that by far the largest part of the many millennia of all human history is covered in the brief record contained in roughly chapters 2 through 6 of the Book of Genesis (or through chapter 8, if we include the Deluge episode). And, measuring again simply in terms of the passage of time, considerably more than half of the history from the Flood to the present is dealt with in Genesis 9 through 11.

The reader of Genesis may fail to appreciate the vastness of this historical span from Adam to Abraham because it is presented in such an extremely condensed form, while all the rest of the Bible from Genesis 12 on to the end is devoted to the relatively short span of about two thousand years from Abraham to Christ. But both the brevity of the biblical account of the long pre-Abrahamic ages and the extended treatment given to the subsequent era introduced by the patriarchs are explained by the particular purpose and nature of the Scriptures. The Old and New Testaments are designed to serve as constitutions respectively for the kingdom of Israel and for the church of the new covenant....

...the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11 must be understood as a selective listing of only the more significant (presumably) names, which allows for indefinitely lengthy gaps here and there between the individuals who are selected for inclusion in the list. The selective interpretation is not only completely compatible with the idiom of the genealogical genre, but it is clearly signaled by the symmetrical composition of the two genealogies with their pattern of conventional numbers...

An intimation of the true dimensions of the times so briefly surveyed in Genesis 4 through 6 is given in 1 Peter 3:5-7. There, all of man’s history on earth is divided in two at the Flood,...as a separate world history by themselves, the history of another world that preceded the present world. The apostle speaks of “the world that then was,” the original heavens and earth created by the word of God, a world that perished in the judgment of the Flood, and he sets that prediluvian world over against the present heaven and earth, the world produced at the Flood, which is also moving toward a destiny of divine judgment.” (Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 1989, pp. 7-9)

II. The Structure of Genesis

A. FIRST PART—Original creation of the material order of “heaven and earth.”

Gen. 1:1 In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. 2 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.

B. SECOND PART—Six-part series of creative acts of “God *said*/God *saw*”/“*evening and morning*”

Gen. 1:3 And God *said*, “Let there be light,... And God *saw* that the light was good...And *there was evening and there was morning*, the first day.

Gen. 1:6 And God *said*, “Let there be an expanse...And *there was evening and there was morning*, the second day.

Gen. 1:9 And God *said*, “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together ... And God *saw* that it was good. And God *said*, “Let the earth sprout vegetation...And God *saw* that it was good. And *there was evening and there was morning*, the third day.

Gen. 1:14 And God *said*, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. ... And God *saw* that it was good. And *there was evening and there was morning*, the fourth day.

Gen. 1:20 And God *said*, “Let the waters...And God *saw* that it was good. ...And *there was evening and there was morning*, the fifth day.

Gen. 1:24 And God *said*, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures ... And God *saw* that it was good. ...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.”... 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. Gen. 2:1 Thus the heavens and the earth were *finished*, and all the host of them. 2 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*. 3 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*.

C. THIRD PART —“These are the generations” from Adam to the patriarchs, in ten sections (with a significant difference between the Flood and the post-Flood, as per 2 Peter 3:5 For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, 6 and that by means of these *the world that then existed* was deluged with water and perished. 7 But by the same word *the heavens and earth that now exist* are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.)

Gen. 2:4 These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.

Gen. 5:1 This is the book of the generations of Adam...

Gen. 6:9 These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God.

Gen. 10:1 These are the generations of the sons of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Sons were born to them after the flood.

Gen. 11:10 These are the generations of Shem. When Shem was 100 years old, he fathered Arpachshad two years after the flood.

Gen. 11:27 Now these are the generations of Terah. Terah fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot.

Gen. 25:12 These are the generations of Ishmael, Abraham’s son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah’s servant, bore to Abraham.

Gen. 25:19 These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham’s son: Abraham fathered Isaac,

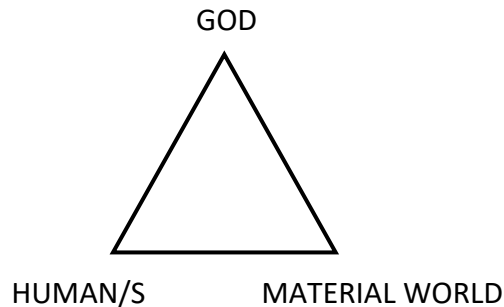
Gen. 36:1 These are the generations of Esau (that is, Edom)...9 These are the generations of Esau the father of the Edomites in the hill country of Seir.

Gen. 37:2 These are the generations of Jacob.

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I. Introduction and Definitions

A. Genesis 1 and 2 present two views of the same triadic reality: the relation of God, the humans, and the material order, just as our two eyes look at the same reality, and, together, add depth to height and width.



The emphases of the two chapters are slightly different; chapter one describes us as the “image” and “likeness” of God, whereas chapter two emphasizes our relation to the material order, an order that is literally fruitless apart from the human: “...When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and *there was no man to work the ground...*” (Gen. 2:5), and the human is ordered to “serve” and “guard” the garden.

B. “Calling” or “Vocation” first appear in the creation narratives of Genesis 1 and 2.

What God “calls” (Hebrew *qara*, 9 times) a thing names its purpose in his creational order. The human’s entire life exists under God’s creational calling. Whatever peculiar or individual “callings” we pursue, we all pursue our calling as humans, to be and to do what God “called” us to do in creation: to cultivate the image of God within and the garden of God without [English “vocation” derives from the Latin verb *voco*, and/or the Latin noun *vox*. The Vulgate employs either term for the Hebrew *qara*: *appello* or *voco*]

C. Interpreting Genesis 1 and 2 (emphasis on “call”)¹

These chapters are masterfully crafted; to assume that they are literarily or theologically primitive is an enormous interpretive mistake that has led to many errors. Everything is carefully selected, as is the case with the Hebrew poetry in the Psalms. Repetition, apposition, synonymity, metonymy, and other traits and devices of poetry appear frequently.

1. The verb “create” (בָּרָא) in 1:1, for instance, appears seven times in the narrative, while the verb “to be” (as in “Let there *be* light,” and there *was* light.”) appears 33 times, and the verb “make” (עָשָׂה as in “And God *made* the expanse... fruit trees *bearing* fruit”) appears 12 times, and even “bring forth” (צָמַח, as in “earth brought forth vegetation”) appears 3 times. This

¹ The early chapters of Genesis are widely recognized as establishing the foundation upon which all subsequent biblical truth is based. Cf. Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (1989, Wipf and Stock, 2006); J. Daryl Charles, *Reading Genesis 1-2: An Evangelical Perspective* (Hendrickson, 2013); C. John Collins, *Genesis 1-4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (2005); *Reading Genesis Well: Navigating History, Poetry, Science, and Truth in Genesis 1-11* (Zondervan, 2018); Vern S. Poythress, *Interpreting Eden: A Guide to Faithfully Reading and Understanding Genesis 1-3* (Wheaton, Crossway, 2019).

combination of both repetition *and* variety is undoubtedly intentional and skillful, perhaps partly designed for a mnemonic purpose (which may suggest an oral original, since oral cultures were highly mnemonic).

2. Similarly, note the repetition/escalation/inversion in “God saw that it was *good* (*tov*)...God saw everything that he had made and it was *very good* (*tov m^e’ōd*)—*not good* (*lō’ tov*) for the man to be alone” (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31, 2:18).

3. Note how, after “the heavens and the earth” were made originally, that the “earth” or “ground” later became the mediate source of other creatures:

-1:12 the earth brought forth vegetation...

-1:24 Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds...

-2:7 then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature

4. The entire cosmos emerged from divine *speech*: “And God *said*...” (occurring nine times in Genesis 1, anticipating Psalm 33:6, “By the *word* of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host”). *Amar* occurs 14 times, and *qara* occurs 9 times in Gen. 1 and 2.

5. God orders by separating the realms from each other:

1:4, 6-7, 14, 18 And God *separated* (וַיַּבְדֵּל) the light from the darkness.

And God said, “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it *separate* (מַבְדִּיל) the waters from the waters.” And God made the expanse and *separated* (וַיַּבְדֵּל) the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse.... “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to *separate* (לְהַבְדִּיל) the day from the night.... And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to *separate* (לְהַבְדִּיל) the light from the darkness.

6. God orders by making orderly seasons:

14 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*...”

7. God rules by fiat:

And God *said*, “Let there be...light...an expanse...Let the waters...Let the earth sprout vegetation...”

8. God rules by naming/calling

God *called* the light Day, and the darkness he *called* Night... And God *called* the expanse Heaven... God *called* the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he *called* Seas...

9. God rules by distinguishing species or kinds

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 (לְמִינֵהוּ) on the earth.” And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds (לְמִינֵהוּ), and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind (לְמִינֵהוּ).

10. God rules by appointing sub-rulers

And God made the two great lights—the greater light *to rule* (לְמַשְׁלֹת) the day and the lesser light *to rule* (לְמַשְׁלֹת) the night—and the stars. And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, *to rule* (וּלְמַשֵּׁל) over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness.... 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.... 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.