

BaptistWay Press® Premium Commentary

By Dr. Ron Lyles

Pastor, South Main Baptist Church
Pasadena, Texas

Studies in Power & Purpose: God Unveils the Universe (Genesis 1-11)

Lesson One

Creation by God's Word: Forming

Focal Text

Genesis 1:1-13

Background

Genesis 1:1-13

Main Idea

God revealed his power as he created the universe and formed the earth.

Question to Explore

What does the Creation account reveal about God's power?

Quick Read

God is all-powerful, and he channels his power toward us for our good. We take comfort in knowing the creation of the universe and the forming of the earth reveal his limitless power.

Introduction

The Book of Genesis is technically anonymous (sharing that feature with a number of other books in the Bible). It is one of five books in the Hebrew Torah or in our English category, "Books of Law." These five books have been traditionally associated with Moses, who is certainly the dominant human figure in four of them. (Moses does not dominate the Book of Genesis because the last events recorded in it happened 400 years before the life of Moses.) It is true that God commanded Moses to write down certain things (Exodus 17:14; 24:4). It is also true that New Testament passages speak about "the

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Law of Moses” (Luke 24:44) or something Moses wrote (Mark 10:4-5; John 5:46-47). Many, therefore, believe Moses was responsible for writing all of the material in these first five books.

Other interpreters of Scripture believe the language “of Moses” in the phrase “the Books of Moses” was a Jewish way of declaring authority rather than authorship. It meant that this material was authorized or stood under the authority of God’s servant, Moses. A significant number of contemporary Old Testament commentators believe the books of Torah (including Genesis) were compiled over a period of time through the work of several groups or individuals within the Israelite community of faith.

While we cannot be completely certain whether Moses wrote all of Genesis, or it came to its final form centuries after the death of Moses, I believe the most important affirmation we can make is that God is the ultimate source who “authored” this material through the inspiration of his Spirit. That affirmation is more important than who the human instrument was.

This book is predominantly outlined into two parts. Genesis 1-11 has the world as its focus. With the universal context provided by these chapters, Genesis 12-50 relates the beginning of the story of God’s salvation initiated through a promise made to Abram, the ancestral father of the Israelites. John Walton sees the basic theme of this book as “The Purpose of God.” It relates the need for a covenant (1-11) and the formation of a covenant (12-50) to accomplish God’s purpose.

Claus Westermann has identified two primary types of literary forms in Genesis. He designated them as *numerative* and *narrative*. The numerative type is carefully arranged material presented in a schematic and orderly way. It is poetic, rhythmic, and repetitive in nature. This type includes the genealogical lists. The narrative material communicates things in story form. It describes persons and their relationships with others. These interactions happen sometimes in quite a messy and unpredictable way rather than in an orderly manner.

Commentary

The young father was dreading it, but he had prepared for it. He was ready for the day when his son surfaced the issue precipitating “the talk” about human sexuality and the biological process from conception through childbirth. The dad may have been too ready. When his seven-year-old son bounded through the front door and exclaimed, “Dad, where did I come from?” he sprang into action.

He never thought it would be this soon, but he sat the boy down and began the informative lecture he had prepared. His seven-year-old was stunned and speechless, but he listened carefully. At the conclusion of the full revelation about the expression of male and female sexuality that resulted in the birth of a baby, the father asked his son about

why he had asked the question that day. His son replied, “The boy in the new family that just moved in across the street said that he came from Arkansas, and so I wondered where I came from.”

How would you explain to a fourth grader how electricity works? How would you define for him the electrons of an atom and distinguish between static (not moving) electricity and current (moving) electricity? How would you explain the reality about circuits that carry electricity and describe the properties in materials that make them conductors of electricity rather than insulators? You would need to try to describe the meaning of the two types of current (direct and alternating) and to give information about voltage. However you explained the working of electricity to a child, it would be different from the way an electrical engineering professor at the university would teach it to her students. Both would be teaching truth, but the parent would be presenting truth in a greatly simplified form.

Let's face it. It is very difficult to explain complicated subjects to children. It is also quite difficult to explain some complex realities to adults. Almost 2,000 books have now been published in the “For Dummies” series. Each is an attempt to provide introductory information about a complex subject through easily understood concepts.

It seems to me that this is the circumstance God faced when he chose to communicate the complex nature of how he created his vast and complicated universe of space-time, matter, and energy. He had to “dummy it down” for humanity or communicate it in a simplified way. He wanted the ancient, non-literate, and pre-scientific shepherd to understand. He wanted each generation of humanity who would be ever expanding the horizon of knowledge of the physical world to understand. He wanted to reach even the modern, most scientifically trained academic.

I believe this is the rationale for the best explanation and understanding of the nature of the material found in Genesis 1-11. Some commentators consider this material to be straightforward historical writing. It must be said, however, that it is not history in the modern sense of that term, as it does not seek to present objective information based on researched evidence. Some commentators want to dismiss the information as mythical in nature because this was the literary vehicle that ancient writers used to explain the reality of how things were in the world and how they came to be. It must be said, however, that a substantial difference exists between the Genesis material and the classical mythological literature of the Sumerians and the Babylonians.

Other commentators interpret this material as theological story or inspired faith proclamation. These “family stories” contain the inspired faith claims of the community of faith called Israel and detail how their God created the world and was at work in his world.

It is part of the intelligent genius of our God to inspire an account of the origin of the world and humanity that would be relevant and meaningful to every generation. God's strategy was to focus on the truths that he created everything that exists and that he did so for the purpose of establishing a relationship with his human creation. He chose not to focus on the almost incomprehensible details of the creative process.

The Powerful Word and Work of God (1:1-2)

These verses provide the overview or summary statement for the seven-day creation account. They also provide the beginning of Holy Scripture. The Bible contains the story of God's purpose and plan for humanity, the crown of his creation. It is appropriate, then, that God is the subject of the Bible's first sentence. "God" (1:1) translates *Elohim*, a word found more than 2,750 times in the Old Testament. Plural in form, it could refer to pagan gods, spiritual beings, or to the one God of Israel. "Elohim," rather than "Yahweh," the personal name of Israel's God, is the one exclusively used in Genesis 1:1—2:3.

The first sentence in this creation account illustrates the sharp contrast between the biblical account of creation and the creation myths of Mesopotamia. The creation of the world in those myths happened as a result of a conflict or war between the older gods and the younger gods. In the biblical account the world came into existence not through conflict, but through the powerful and purposeful word and work of the one living God.

"Created" (1:1) translates the Hebrew verb *bara*'. God is the only subject ever used with this verb in the Old Testament. This word denoted the specialized work of God in making something new. He alone has the power to bring into being something that did not exist before. This verb occurs six times in this creation account (1:1, 21, 27 [three times]; 2:3). It also is a major verb in Isaiah 40-66 where it occurs twenty times.

We can draw three significant implications from this important first verse of Scripture. First, God has every right to control his world because he created it all. Secondly, God, the Creator is in a category by himself in that he is the only being who exists apart from time and space. He is separate from creation. On the other hand, the final implication is that the Creator God has committed himself to his creation. Although he is separate from creation, he chooses not to remain apart from the world and the persons he created. He is irrevocably linked to his creation.

Verse two describes the context of God's powerful creative work through three parallel clauses. Although they are usually rendered as adjectives, "formless and empty" are really nouns. They depict a wasteland or an unproductive desert. This nonproductive emptiness was resolved by the work of creating the vegetation on Day 3. It is true that in the Bible, "darkness" frequently symbolizes evil; however, here we should understand it in its natural sense (see Isaiah 45:7). This darkened circumstance is resolved by the creation of light on Day 1.

The sense of “hovering” describes a wind that moves or sweeps across an area with a constantly changing velocity and direction. It is the signal of God’s presence to do his work. The moving or the organizing of the waters by the wind or the Spirit of God is the work of Days 2 and 3.

The Powerful Word and Work of Day 1—Light (1:3-5)

This biblical account of creation is quite schematic and perfectly symmetrical in nature. The six days of creative words and acts are presented in three corresponding pairs.

- Days 1 and 4—Light and the heavenly bodies that give/reflect light
- Days 2 and 5—Water and sky and then populating them (fish and birds)
- Days 3 and 6—Dry land and then populating the earth with animals and humans

This account is also symmetrical in the way each day is presented. These elements are a spoken declaration of God, the implementation or carrying out of the divine word, the positive evaluation by God, and the assertion about time.

As to the spoken declaration by God, “said” (1:3) is one of the most frequently occurring verbs in this chapter. The word of God possesses the power of God to bring to reality what he personally desires. The narrator has put the words of God in a form known as “jussive.” It is not a strong command for someone else to do something; rather, it is a permissive command (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 20, 24). “And there was light” (1:3) articulates the implementation or execution of the divine word. God said what he wanted to happen and had the power within himself to make it happen.

The divine evaluation is always a positive one. The word “good” occurs seven times in this sequence (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). It conveys the thought of good, happy, beneficial, beautiful, preferable, or of superior value.

The final element is the word about time that concludes each day. Why does the evening precede the morning? That could be a reflection of the fact that the Jewish day begins at dusk (evening first) and not at midnight (as in the Western world). It could also simply be the marker of vacant time between the various creative acts.

No consensus has been reached regarding how to interpret the meaning or value of the term “day.” It may be difficult to understand it to mean a 24-hour solar day since the sun itself was not created until Day 4. In an attempt to harmonize this account with scientific observations about the age of the universe and the very long periods of developing life, some interpreters assert that each day represents a long period of time (called the Day-Age Theory). Others believe the language of “day” is a part of the presentation or the literary form in which the material has been conveyed. It denotes a particular chronology of events. The truth is that the duration of creation remains a mystery to us.

God spoke light into existence. He then “separated” (1:4) the light from the darkness. This does not mean he pulled these two entities apart; rather, it means God made the assignment to each entity of its place in his world. This work was unique to creation as this verb occurs five times in this chapter and nowhere else in Genesis.

God named the light and the darkness (1:5). The Hebrew people believed that a name was so strongly connected to one's being that it was impossible to exist without a name. When God called things certain names, he authenticated their existence and defined their purpose. The privilege to give a name to something also had the connotation of exercising authority over what you named.

The Powerful Word and Work of Day 2—Sky (1:6-8)

The focus of the second day of creation, like that of the first day, involved a work of separation. This separation of waters was for the purpose of forming an “expanse” (1:6). The Hebrew verb underlying this word has no parallel in other ancient languages similar to Hebrew. In the regular verb form it described the stomping of one's feet (Ezekiel 6:11; 25:6). In the intensive verb form (called the “Piel”), it described the stretching out of a tent (Isa. 40:22; Psalm 104:2) and the hammering out or flattening of metal (Isa. 40:19).

The noun, therefore, refers to something that has been stretched or beaten out. It can denote a tent, the vault of a bell, a canopy, or a dome-like reality. The ancients described their world in phenomenological language, that is, words that expressed vividly how they saw and perceived their world. If you can, walk outside and look up at the sky and then gaze at the place where the sky meets the earth, the horizon. It seemed to them that God had stretched the sky like one does a tent, and it was connected at the places where the sky touched the earth. The expanse was not solid, however, because the waters from above the expanse came through it and fell to the earth as rain.

God named the expanse “sky,” (1:8), the same Hebrew word translated earlier as “heavens” (1:1). The conclusion reasonably drawn from the language is that they believed the entire universe consisted of the surface of the earth covered by this stretched out “roof.” It is obvious this word does not refer to an eternal dwelling place, the meaning of “heaven” in the New Testament.

“Made” (1:7) makes its first of five appearances in Genesis 1 (1:7, 16, 25, 26, 31). It is a synonym of the verb rendered “create,” but it is different in one respect. While “created” is something only God could do, “made” is a general term describing divine and human work.

The Powerful Word and Work of Day 3—Land (1:9-13)

Day 3 concludes the first of the two cycles in this schematic account. On this day three new aspects or features are introduced. This is one of two days in the sequence that involves two specific acts of God's creative power. On this day God created dry land and then the vegetation growing on the land. The other one that has two acts of God is the

corresponding day to this one in the second pair, Day 6. Again, the reader is impressed with the patterned arrangement.

A second new feature that occurs on Day 3 is conveyed through the phrases that invited the land to produce vegetation (1:11-12). For the first time God welcomed the participatory cooperation of a creation partner, the land itself.

The third new feature on this day is the first appearance of something that can continue God's creative work through the process of reproduction. We see two kinds of vegetation. These include plants that produce seeds, and trees that bear fruit that produce seeds. Even as God determined the boundaries for light and darkness and for the waters, he announced the boundaries for these reproducing plants and trees. They both will cooperate in God's creation "according to their kinds" (1:12). The term "kinds" refers to broad categories of plant life and animal life (species, genus, or family-type categories of horticulture and animal husbandry). It is never used with reference to human beings.

God's work in these three days has prepared the earth for human habitation. It has provided the foundational things necessary for human existence in what physicists call space-time. God created the alternation of time (1:4-5), and he created the two dimensions of space, vertical (1:6-7) and horizontal (1:9-10).

Conclusion

The Israelites believed in the power of a spoken word to accomplish what it said. That is certainly true with regard to a word spoken by God. God's words declare his purpose and possess his power to carry out his stated purpose. This account of creation declares that God created the universe through the spoken word. He arranged the features of the world and organized the complex processes of the world.

The truth that God has the power to create order and purpose out of emptiness and chaos is a strengthening assertion. Many persons go through periods when circumstances seem pretty chaotic. Life at home or at work or at church is spinning out of control. One may experience something of a spiritual drought or a non-productive, non-growing period in one's relationship with Christ. Our God has the power to create positive direction and orderly purpose for us. He has the power to speak new words into our lives and to create the context in which we can grow again.

Meet the Writer: Dr. Ron Lyles

Ron Lyles has been the pastor of the South Main Baptist Church in Pasadena, Texas for more than thirty years. He has also been writing Bible study material for most of that time. Dr. Lyles is a graduate of Dallas Baptist University and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (M.Div., Ph.D.). He has served Texas Baptists in a variety of roles and also enjoys teaching adjunctively for Logsdon Seminary at their Corpus Christi location.

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