

BEING GOD'S IMAGE

WHY CREATION STILL MATTERS



CARMEN JOY IMES



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Being God's Image* by Carmen Joy Imes.

Copyright © 2023 by Carmen Joy Imes.

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com.

PATTERN OF CREATION



THE BATTLEGROUND

It's dangerous to start a book by talking about Genesis 1. The first chapter of the Bible has become a battleground for strongly held convictions about what God did or did not do and how long it took him to do it. It's likely that I won't say exactly what you are hoping I'll say. If you're especially offended, you may even burn this book. I feel the same tension every semester when I teach Old Testament History and Literature. Why does the Bible have to begin with Genesis 1? Why can't we come to it later, after we've come to know and trust each other?

Of course, it's first for a reason. How could anything come before creation? We can't very well explore what it means to be human without it.

And so here we are, you and I, with our long histories and commitments and suspicions. We're sitting here awkwardly, and you're waiting for me to make the first move because, well, I am the one writing the book. But to be honest, that doesn't feel exactly fair. If we were in the same room, I would first ask where you're

coming from. I would be able to read your body language, and that would certainly affect the way I approach this issue. But we aren't, and I can't, so we're left with the unfortunate plunge I must take into the darkness. I have to take a risk. Hopefully you aren't the book-burning type.

Let me begin with my own story. I grew up attending church, and I took the Bible seriously, but it wasn't until I went to Bible college that I first learned about genre. The Bible is composed of three main types of literature, Professor Ray Lubeck told us: narrative, poetry, and discourse. Each has its own conventions; each has its own aims. A narrative involves the interaction of characters, setting, and plot. Poetry is a rhythmic composition, which in the Bible involves short pairs of lines packed with imagery. Discourse, also known as prose, includes instructions, speeches, and blocks of teaching logically arranged.

I was enthused. This was a new set of lenses for me, and I was eager to try them out. Since genre influences the set of expectations we bring to the text about the types of claims it is making, I decided I would reread the entire Bible and color the margins in one of three colors to indicate whether I was reading narrative, poetry, or discourse.

I turned to Genesis 1 and instantly hit a brick wall. I could find only one character, God, and no plot conflict as far as I could tell. The text seemed almost rhythmic, but it didn't fall into neat pairs of lines the way Hebrew poetry does. Even English translators seemed to have trouble deciding how to categorize it. Genesis 1 lacks normal paragraphs. Take a look in your Bible. I'll wait. . . . See what I mean? I was baffled.

Genesis 1 had never been anything to me other than a straightforward historical report of how God made the world. I expected to find a narrative. What I found was a hybrid genre—the platypus of

biblical literature—neither narrative nor poetry nor discourse. What could this mean?

I carried that question with me into seminary, where I read an illuminating book by Henri Blocher titled *In the Beginning*. Blocher (pronounced blow-*shay*, because he's French) showed me artistry in Genesis 1 that I had flat-out missed, even in Bible college.

Now, to call a text artistic does not make it unhistorical. One could portray a historical event in any number of ways, poetically, abstractly, emotionally, or straightforwardly, and that portrayal does not change whether the event occurred in real time. However, the way an event is depicted clearly impacts our perception of that event. It conveys what the author wants us to see about it. (The converse is also true: just because a text seems straightforward doesn't make it historical. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* or *Ramona Quimby, Age 8* seem plausible enough, but they are both quite fictional.) To complicate matters, the truth value of a particular text does not rest solely on its connection to actual events. The Chronicles of Narnia are in no sense historical, but they powerfully convey truth about the way things really are.

So back to Genesis 1. Blocher convinced me that Genesis 1 was highly sophisticated literature. Here's another thing I realized: the debate over *how* creation happened often eclipses the theological question—*why* it happened. Why did God make the world and everything in it? Why is the act of creation portrayed in this way? Why does it matter? Ironically, in spite of vigorous disagreements over the *method* of creation, the *purpose* of creation is clear to those who read carefully.

In spite of vigorous disagreements over the *method* of creation, the *purpose* of creation is clear to those who read carefully.

Bible-believing Christians land across the spectrum on *how* God made the world. I have Christian friends who are fervent defenders of six-day, young earth creation (the view that God made the earth in six days around 4000 BCE), and other Christian friends who embrace theistic evolution (the view that evolution is the method God used to create all things). Others stand between these two poles. These friends all hold one thing in common: they believe in the authority and inspiration of the Word of God. Where they differ is on the question of genre.

My goal is not to change your mind on this issue but instead to invite you to set aside your conviction about *how* God made everything long enough for us to consider *why*. This will matter for the question of human identity and purpose.

A TEMPLATE

One way to minimize the risk of importing our own ideas into the Bible is to pay attention to how the author uses patterns to create emphasis. Blocher helped me see that Genesis 1 is a carefully crafted work of art that conveys the symmetry and order of God's design. Against the backdrop of the "formless and empty" world in Genesis 1:2, where the deep seas churn in darkness, in six days God brings order to creation. The first three days depict God's ordering of habitable space, while the last three depict God's creation of residents to dwell in those spaces. To put it another way, God takes the "formless and empty" world and gives it "form and filling."

Here's what I mean: On day one, God creates light and separates it from the dark. We're not told the source of the light or how it is regulated. "Evening" and "morning" mark off the first day. But it's not until day four that God creates the sun, moon, and stars. This is the day in which the domains of light and darkness are populated

with residents. Although the heavenly bodies are not living, they are appointed “to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness” (Genesis 1:18). They also “mark sacred times, and days and years” (Genesis 1:14). That is, they designate festivals and cycles of time. Day four is far more than the origin story of the sun, moon, and stars. It unveils their purpose. Days one and four together celebrate the origins of the calendar and the basis for human culture. Although the lights are embedded in the heavens, their purpose is to illuminate the earth. Here is our first clue that Genesis 1 is something more than a historical report. The heavenly bodies that mark “days” are not yet present for “days” one, two, and three. The days of creation must be a way of framing the creation event (see fig. 1.1).¹

DAYS OF CREATION		PURPOSE
DOMAINS	RESIDENTS	
DAY 1 Light (separated from darkness)	DAY 4 Sun, Moon, and Stars	TIME (Festival Calendar)
DAY 2 Skies (separated from water)	DAY 5 Birds and Fish	AIR (Ordered Space)
DAY 3 Dry Land (separated from water) Vegetation	DAY 6 Land Animals Humans	LAND and FOOD (Habitable Space)
DAY 7 Blessing of the Seventh Day (to separate it from the other days)		REST

Figure 1.1. The symmetry of God’s creation in Genesis 1

The symmetry continues with days two and five. On day two, God separates the waters above from the waters below, opening up the skies between them. Ancient people imagined a dome that held back the waters of the sky, resulting in open air. (They knew the sky held back water because sometimes it leaked out and watered the earth).² On day five, God populates the domains of sky and water with birds and fish. God blesses these first living creatures with the mandate to multiply and fill the waters and the air (Genesis 1:22). Again, we have both form and filling, resolving the “formless and empty” problem from Genesis 1:2.

Days three and six are special, each containing a double creation event. On day three, God separates the waters and the dry land. Then he creates vegetation with fruit and seeds. That is, he makes food, though no one is present to eat it yet. All of this is preparation for day six, during which God makes land animals and then humans to populate the dry ground.

God gives humans a special status as his “image.” According to Genesis 1:26, our human identity as God’s image entails a responsibility to “rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over the beasts, and over all the earth, and over all the creeping things that creep upon the earth” (my translation). Like the sun,

Genesis 1 insists that humans are the climax of God’s creative work and the crown of creation.

moon, and stars, humans have a governing role in creation. While the heavenly bodies bring order to the calendar, humans bring

order to all other living things and their habitats. As with the fish and birds on day five, God blesses humans with a mandate to multiply and indicates that the food source for both humans and animals is the vegetation provided on day five.

Understanding days one through three as domains and days four through six as residents helped to solve certain conundrums that

had puzzled me. (How is there light with no sun on days one through three? How do plants survive without the sun? Why do fish and birds get their own day apart from the other animals? How are some animals already domesticated before humans exist?) To tell the story of creation as unfolding over six days is a way of organizing the cosmos into habitable spaces and their inhabitants, gradually bringing order to disorder through separation (light from dark, sky from water, dry land from seas).

Blocher also demonstrates how the rhythmic feel of Genesis 1 was achieved by the repetition of certain words and phrases in sets of what he calls “symbolic numbers.”³

- “God said” occurs 3x for humans and 7x for everything else (=10x).
- “Let there be” occurs 3x for heavens and 7x for the earth (=10x).
- “To make” occurs 10x.
- “According to their kind” occurs 10x.
- “Blessed” occurs 3x.
- “Create” occurs in three places in Genesis 1, and the last occurrence is triple.
- “And it was so” occurs 7x.
- “God saw that it was good” occurs 7x.

Blocher points out that none of these sevens corresponds precisely to the seven days. He concludes, “Here we have no ordinary history, such as might be written in response to a simple request to be told what happened. Here we have the work of a Master whose thought is profound and expansive.”⁴ Why would someone go to all this trouble to consciously arrange creation as a week? Blocher suggests that the week of creation is meant to be the “archetype of human

work” providing a “theology of the sabbath.”⁵ This message is clear whether you read Genesis 1 as a historical account of how God made the world or as a liturgical celebration of God’s purpose in creation. Either way, the week is a template for humans.

Perhaps your head is spinning now. Mine was, too, when I first discovered all this. It has helped me to realize that the Bible was not written to answer *my* questions. It often does, of course. But the Bible addresses ancient people in an ancient culture using a language that is not my own. The Bible was inspired by God to address *their* questions and concerns in language that made sense to them. It is only after attempting to read it with these concerns in mind that I can begin to consider its relevance for contemporary debates.

Ancient people were apparently unconcerned about the origin of physical matter.⁶ Their creation myths relate to purpose rather than process. This is not to suggest that the methods of creation don’t matter, only that ancient people weren’t wondering about it. What they cared about was fruitfulness. If food didn’t grow, they could not survive. We’ll return to this idea in a moment.

SCIENCE AND THE CHRISTIAN

The relationship between Christianity and science is complex. Some Christians consider it a virtue to cast doubt on scientific theories. Scientists, like anyone else, can be guilty of allowing pre-commitments and presumptions to skew their assessment of the data, preventing them from reaching accurate conclusions. But is it also possible that Christians have dismissed scientific theories prematurely because they hastily presume a conflict with biblical teaching? The adversarial relationship between some forms of Christian teaching and science seems unnecessary. In fact, most of the founders of modern science were Christians.^a



A further layer of complication arises when we consider that we have to reckon not only with modern science but with ancient science too. Biblical authors communicated in ways that made sense in their own contexts. God does not seem concerned about flawed scientific theories of ancient times. God does not correct their science.

For example, Genesis 1 does not bother to teach us that the moon does not produce its own light but rather reflects the light of the sun. It does not classify the sun as a star. It assumes the conventional ancient view of how the cosmos is arranged, with a “vault” or expanse studded with stars to hold up the waters above the sky (Genesis 1:6; see fig. 1.2). Genesis 1 does not distinguish between the thirty-five phyla of the animal kingdom that we learned in school. Sea creatures of various kinds are all called “fish,” and flying things are all called “birds”; land animals fall into only three categories: wild animals, livestock, and “creatures that move along the ground” (Genesis 1:26).

This is not to say that God is content with our false ideas of reality. The Bible corrects these at every turn. Genesis 1 is a striking correction of the ancient idea that the world was birthed in a great conflict between the gods, and that the gods created humans to do their dirty work. Genesis 1 also provides guardrails for ideas associated with modern science. Whatever we conclude about how the world came to be, if we take Scripture seriously, we cannot conclude that humans are merely a product of time and chance. Genesis 1 insists that humans are the climax of God’s creative work and the crown of creation.

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/being-god-s-image