

MOSES AND THE KING OF SIAM

RONALD YOUNGBLOOD*

"Mem, your Moses shall have been a fool!"

"But, Your Majesty—"

"I say," interrupted the King with asperity, "your Moses shall have been a fool." Tapping the Bible, he continued: "Here it stands written that God created the world in six days, and rested on the seventh. You know and I know and all scientists know it took many ages to create the world. Your Moses shall have been a fool to have written so!"¹

* * *

The King of Siam was so intent on being considered a western-oriented scientist that he forgot for a moment that as an easterner he occupied a favored position with respect to the Scriptures. He forgot that we must avoid the imposition of western concepts and western ideas on the Old Testament. He forgot that the Old Testament is an oriental book, a book that differs from occidental ways of thinking by thousands of years and thousands of miles. He forgot that it was to the ancient oriental, primarily, that the Old Testament was originally written. He forgot that only as we see the Old Testament through ancient oriental eyes will we be able to comprehend it in all of its fulness. He forgot that whatever else the Bible may be it is certainly a great masterpiece of literature, and that just because we believe the Bible to be far more than a mere literary masterpiece, our confidence in its revelatory value should not blind us to the fact that it *is* literature and as such operates within the framework of literary categories that have been developed by mankind in general and by ancient oriental mankind in particular.

Ancient people had a limited fund of abstractions in their vocabularies, and so they frequently resorted to figures of speech in order to express themselves, especially when discussing religion, cosmology, and the like. They were thus much less prosaic than we tend to be, and figures of speech abound in their writings. In fact, they made use of a veritable cornucopia of such figurative devices as simile, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, personification, euphemism, hyperbole, litotes/meiosis, epizeuxis, and so forth.² One such figure of speech that is related primarily

*Professor of Old Testament, Bethel Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota.

1. M. Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam* (New York: The John Day Company, 1944), p. 211.

2. For a convenient summary cf. A. B. Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), pp. 179-198.

to religious matters is known as anthropomorphism, which is simply an attribution of manlike characteristics and activities to God. We read, for example, in the early chapters of Genesis that God "formed" Man of dust/clay from the ground (2:7),³ that God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life (*ibid.*), that God walked with Man in a garden in the cool of the day (3:8), that God made clothes out of animal skins for Man (3:21). But how could God have literally done any of these things? God has no hands with which to sculpt or to sew, no feet with which to walk, no lungs with which to blow breath into a man. God is Spirit. Nevertheless God, in some sense, must have done these things because the inspired Scriptures tell us that He did so. In what sense, then?

God was like a potter in that He created Man; God was like a tailor in that He cared for Man's needs; God was like a welcome visitor in a garden in that He communed with Man. The graphic expressions that are used to emphasize these essentially theological ideas are anthropomorphisms.

Is it conceivable, then, that the word "day" in Genesis 1 could also be an anthropomorphism?⁴ Are literal days necessary constructs for a God who is all-powerful and always everywhere (Isaiah 57:15; Jeremiah 23:23 f.), who is incomparable (Isaiah 40:18-26; 46:5, 9) and inconceivable (Deuteronomy 4:15-19), whose decrees are unsearchable and whose ways are inscrutable (Romans 11:33), who, though invisible, is not unreal (I Timothy 1:17; 6:13-16; I John 4:12)—who, in short, is Spirit (John 4:24)? Let us assume then, for the sake of the argument, that the word "day" in the first chapter of Genesis is an anthropomorphism.

Another principle that characterized ancient writing was that it was not necessarily bound by chronological order. A good example is found in the Book of Jeremiah. Left in its present order, it introduces to us first Josiah (3:6), then Zedekiah (21:1), then Shallum son of Josiah (22:11), then Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim (22:24), then the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah (25:1), then the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah (26:1), then Zedekiah (28:1), then Jehoiakim son of Josiah (35:1), and so forth. It is obvious that if want to read Jeremiah chronologically, we have to rearrange his chapters.

New Testament examples exist also. The story of the temptations of Christ is found in the fourth chapter of Matthew and in the fourth chap-

3. Discussions of the date, process, and meaning of the creation of the first human beings constitute an immense literature. Traditional approaches to some of these questions are outlined by G. L. Archer, Jr., in *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), pp. 185-191. Less traditional but of heuristic value are L. Verduin, "Man, a Created Being: What of an Animal Ancestry?" in *Christianity Today* IX/17 (May 21, 1965), pp. 9-15 (cf. also the perceptive responses to Verduin's article on pp. 15f), and P. H. Seely, "Adam and Anthropology: A Proposed Solution," in *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 22/3 (September 1970), pp. 88-90.
4. So, e.g., N. H. Ridderbos, *Is There a Conflict Between Genesis 1 and Natural Science?* (tr. J. Vriend; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), pp. 30f., 54f. This little volume is still well worth reading in its entirety.

ter of Luke. The order of the temptations differs in these two passages. In each case we are told about the same three temptations, but the order of their telling is not the same. One must assume that either Matthew or Luke was indifferent to chronological order in relating the account. Similarly, if we insist that any one of the four Gospels is normative with respect to chronological order, the other three Gospels are then non-chronological.

Chronology was not always important when relating historical events. Other concerns were sometimes in the forefront. Let us assume, then, for the sake of the argument, that the events recorded in the first chapter of Genesis are not set down in chronological order.⁵ This would explain, for example, how light could appear on the first "day" although the light-bearing bodies were not made until the fourth "day."

A third characteristic of ancient literature was the frequent use of the number seven as a figure of speech symbolizing completion and the use of seven days as a literary framework to circumscribe the completion of a significant or catastrophic event. Examples of the figurative use of seven and its multiples in the literary structure of the early chapters of Genesis are not hard to find. To illustrate, we note that from 1:1-2:3 the word "God" is found 35 times; from 2:4-4:26a, the divine name ("God," "LORD God," "LORD") is found 35 times; from 1:1-4:26a, the divine name appears 70 times, distributed as follows: "God," 40 times; "LORD God," 20 times; "LORD," 10 times; and then 4:26b reads, "At that time men began to call upon the name of the LORD."⁶ All of this can hardly be coincidental, and other even more explicit examples could be adduced to illustrate the point being made, although perhaps these will suffice since an overly zealous search for the symbolic seven in Scripture can all too easily lead to skepticism even with respect to its legitimate attestations.

As to the seven-day literary framework previously mentioned, we now possess numerous examples from extra-biblical literature prior to the time of the compiling of the Book of Genesis. Like the Bible, the Babylonians had a flood story which related the fact that the boat carrying the one survivor along with his family landed on a mountain. The portion of the story that interests us runs as follows:

On Mount Nisir the ship came to a halt.

Mount Nisir held the ship fast,
Allowing no motion.

One day, a second day, Mount Nisir held the ship fast,
Allowing no motion.

A third day, a fourth day, Mount Nisir held the ship fast,
Allowing no motion.

5. For a brisk espousal of this position cf. M. G. Kline, "Because It Had Not Rained," in *Westminster Theological Journal* 20/2 (1958), pp. 146-157. Cf. also D. F. Payne, *Genesis One Reconsidered* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1964), pp. 17-19.
6. U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis (Part I: From Adam to Noah)* (tr. I. Abrahams; Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1961), p. 192.

A fifth, and a sixth (day), Mount Nisir held the ship fast,
Allowing no motion.

When the seventh day arrived,
I sent forth and set free a dove.⁷

Here is another example, this time from the literature of the Canaanites, describing the construction stages of a palace belonging to the Canaanite god Baal:

Fire is set to the house,
Flame to the palace.

Lo, a day and a second,
Fire feeds on the house,
Flame upon the palace:

A third, a fourth day,
Fire feeds on the house,
Flame upon the palace.

A fifth, a sixth day,
Fire feeds on the house,
Flame upon the palace.

There, on the seventh day,
The fire *dies down* in the house,
The flame in the palace.

The silver turns into blocks,
The gold is turned into bricks.⁸

These are just two of many such examples from ancient literature.⁹

The seven-day literary framework was used probably because a day is a convenient, and often figurative, unit of time and because seven is a convenient, and often figurative, number. The week, whether it be a week of settling on a mountain or a week in which a palace of a god was being built or a week during which creation took place, was a convenient period of time for describing such events.

No one really knew how long it took Baal to construct his palace. No one knew how long the Babylonian boat sat on top of the mountain before the window was opened. Likewise, no one knew how long it took to create the universe except, of course, God Himself. Ancient people did know, however, that seven days could be used as a literary framework to circumscribe the completion of any cataclysmic event. So it was that the revelation of creation came to them in these terms, as the following treatment of the creative week in the first chapter of Genesis seeks to demonstrate.

7. E. A. Speiser in J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (second edition; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 94.

8. H. L. Ginsberg in Pritchard, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 134.

9. For three additional examples cf. *ibid.*, pp. 144, 150.

A LITERARY OUTLINE OF GENESIS 1:1-2:3

I. Introduction (1:1, 2)

Tohu
("Unformed")

Bohu
("Unfilled")

II. Body (1:3-31)

- A. "DAY" one (1:3-5)
 1. Divine fiat (1:3-5a)
 (a) appearance of light (1:3)
 (b) division of light from darkness (1:4)
 (c) naming of day and night (1:5a)
 2. Summary phrase (1:5b)
- B. "DAY" two (1:6-8)
 1. Divine fiat (1:6-8a)
 (a) making of expanse (1:6-7a)
 (b) division of lower waters from upper (1:7b)
 (c) naming of heaven (1:8a)
 2. Summary phrase (1:8b)
- C. "DAY" three (1:9-13)
 1. Two divine fiats (1:9-12)
 (a) Fiat one (1:9f.)
 (1) division of lower waters from dry land (1:9)
 (2) naming of earth and seas (1:10)
 (b) Fiat two (1:11f.)
 (1) command to produce vegetation (1:11)
 (2) resultant production of vegetation (1:12)
 2. Summary phrase (1:13)
- D. "DAY" four (1:14-19)
 1. Divine fiat (1:14-18)
 (a) the command (1:14f.)
 (1) command that lights appear (1:14a)
 (2) their purposes stated (1:14b-15)
 (b) its execution (1:16-18)
 (1) making the lights (1:16)
 (2) their purposes fulfilled (1:17f.)
 2. Summary phrase (1:19)
- E. "DAY" five (1:20-23)
 1. Divine fiat (1:20-22)
 (a) command to produce fish and birds (1:20)
 (b) resultant creation of same (1:21)
 (c) blessing of same (1:22)
 2. Summary phrase (1:23)
- F. "DAY" six (1:24-31)
 1. Three divine fiats (1:24-30)
 (a) Fiat one (1:24f.)
 (1) command to produce earth-creatures (1:24)
 (2) resultant production of same (1:25)
 (b) Fiat two (1:26-30)
 (1) decision to make man (1:26)
 (2) resultant creation, thrice emphasized (1:27)
 (c) Fiat three: provision of vegetation as food (1:29f.)
 2. Summary phrase (1:31)

III. Conclusion: "DAY" seven (2:1-3)

Tohu wa-vohu, "without form and void" (Genesis 1:2), is a phrase with rhythmic euphony if there ever was one. *Tohu* means "without form," *bohu* means "void." Let us use the terms "unformed" and "unfilled" to try to preserve something of the euphony of this ancient Hebrew phrase. The "unformed" and "unfilled" character of the universe confronted the Lord

at the time of creation. What happened on the first "day"? God divided light from darkness. What happened on the second "day"? God divided the lower waters from the upper waters. What happened on the third "day"? God divided the lower waters from the dry land and also brought vegetation into being. There were thus three acts of division on the first three "days" of creation: separation of light from darkness, separation of the lower waters from the upper waters, and separation of the lower waters from the dry land. These were followed by a climactic event, the covering of the earth with a carpet of green, ending the third "day."

On the fourth "day," the light-bearing bodies were made: sun, moon, and stars. On the fifth "day," the lower waters were peopled with fish and the upper waters with birds. On the sixth "day," the dry land was filled with animals, the dry land was peopled with Man, and the vegetation was given to Man and to the animals for food. These fourth, fifth, and sixth "days" took care of the problem of emptiness as the first three "days" had taken care of the problem of chaos or formlessness. There were three acts of division to solve the problem posed by *tohu*, the fact that the universe was "unformed." There were then three acts of furnishing to solve the problem posed by *bohu*, the fact that the universe was "unfilled."¹⁰

Comparisons between the "days" can be made horizontally as well as vertically. Light is the key word or phrase on the first "day," light-bearing bodies on the fourth "day"; separation of lower waters from upper waters on the second "day," peopling of lower waters and upper waters on the fifth "day"; separation of lower waters from dry land on the third "day," peopling of dry land on the sixth "day" (the lower waters had already been furnished on the fifth "day"). Thus there are relationships not only between the first three "days" and between "days" four, five and six, but also between one and four, two and five, and three and six respectively.¹¹

10. I am indebted to W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Genesis: A Devotional Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), p. 29, for this suggestive observation.

11. In addition to Ridderbos, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-35; Kline, *art. cit.*, p. 154; Cassuto, *op. cit.*, p. 17; and Griffith Thomas, *loc. cit.*, the following commentators are representative of those who concur with the same or a similar analysis of the relationships between the six creative "days": L. Haines in *The Wesleyan Bible Commentary (Volume I, Part I: Genesis Through Deuteronomy)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), pp. 27f.; B. F. C. Atkinson in *The Pocket Commentary of the Bible (Genesis)* (Chicago: Moody, 1957), p. 17; D. Kidner in D. J. Wiseman, ed., *The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Genesis)* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), pp. 45f., 54-58; and C. F. Pfeiffer, *The Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1958), p. 16. The late E. J. Young, "The Days of Genesis," in *Westminster Theological Journal* 25 (November 1962 to May 1963), pp. 1-34, 143-171 (reprinted in Young, *Studies in Genesis One* [Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1964], pp. 43-105), challenged the validity of applying the framework hypothesis to the first chapter of Genesis. He did so by insisting, much in the manner of C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch (in *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament [The Pentateuch, Volume I; tr. J. Martin]* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans reprint, 1959], pp. 38f.), that proper application of the hypothesis demanded a more rigid and precise parallelism than the chapter in fact exhibits. But such an approach may well expose the exegete to the danger of viewing a unit of Scripture in a less than holistic way and of failing to recognize and appreciate its literary genre. Contrast M. Kline, *art. cit.*, pp. 155-157.

Similarly, the third “day” is a climactic day containing two divine fiat: the separation of the lower waters from the dry land, and the covering of the earth with a carpet of vegetation. On the sixth “day” there are three divine fiat: the creation of animals, the creation of man, and the provision of vegetation for both. We therefore have in the first chapter of Genesis a significant modification of the ancient extra-biblical literary approach that says: “One ‘day,’ a second ‘day,’ so and so happens; a third ‘day,’ a fourth ‘day,’ so and so occurs; a fifth ‘day,’ a sixth ‘day,’ such and such takes place; then on the seventh ‘day,’ the story is ended.” In Genesis 1 on the first, the second and the third “days” God gave form to the universe. On the fourth, the fifth and the sixth “days” God filled the universe. Then, behold, on the seventh “day” God rested from all His work.

Viewed against the backdrop of an ancient seven-day literary framework, however anthropomorphic and schematic, what hard data concerning the origins of everything that we are and have shines forth all the more brightly and brilliantly?

1. God (whose existence is assumed rather than argued) created the universe at the beginning of time. He is thus placed outside the universe and above it as its Creator. The revealed religion of the Hebrews was the only ancient religion that conceived of God in this way; the only modern religions that do so are Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, all of which sprang from the Hebrew religion. Every other major religion conceives of God (or gods) as part of creation. Genesis 1 is thus opposed to an entire phalanx of false philosophies: against materialism, which teaches that matter is everything and that it is eternal, Genesis 1 teaches that God is eternal, above matter, and the Creator of matter (which is therefore neither eternal nor everything); against pantheism, which teaches that everything is God (or gods), or that God is (or gods are) *in* everything, Genesis 1 teaches that God is separate from His creation and that He is *above* it; against dualism, which teaches that a struggle is taking place between two more or less equally matched gods or principles, one evil and the other good, Genesis 1 posits one good God who specifically declares several of His creative works “good” and concludes by stamping the entire creative “week” “very good”; against polytheism, which teaches that there is a plurality of gods who are often at each other’s throats, Genesis 1 declares that there is but one beneficent God. The first chapter of Genesis also remains the most effective antidote against such teachings as that of Epicureanism and its fortuitous concourse of atoms as reflected in modern scientism, Stoicism and its all-compelling fate as reflected in modern determinism, and the like.

2. God also brought into being all of the denizens of the universe. He not only formed it, He also filled it: “The earth is the LORD’s and the fulness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein” (Psalm 24:1). God made even His traditional enemies: the Babylonian *Ti’amat* (the lexical equivalent of Hebrew *tehom*) is denied divine status and equated

with the waters in Genesis 1:2, and the Canaanite *tannin* (the only specifically named creature in Genesis 1) is described as proceeding from God's creative hand in 1:21 and pronounced "good." God made also His celestial rivals who vied for human worship: the greater light and the lesser light (not even here referred to as "Sun" and "Moon," which might have been misunderstood as proper names), called prosaically "light-bearers" (1:14), and, almost as an afterthought, the stars (cf., significantly, II Kings 23:5). The animals, likewise, God created, not to be worshiped by Man as were the theriomorphic deities of paganism, but to be effectively controlled by him, as symbolized in his naming of them. Man, in fact, is described as totally distinct from the animals and was not to mate with them or relate himself to them in any other degrading way.¹²

3. Creation is unfolded in a beautiful and orderly pattern, for our God is a God of order and not of confusion. There is an unmistakable progression from simple to complex, from lower forms to higher, everything in its order being prepared for its eventual dominion by Man, who occupies a unique position over the rest of nature as the climax and crown of God's special creation and as the supreme object of His particular providence and care.

Does all of this mean that Genesis 1 is *non*-scientific? Hardly. It simply implies that it is *pre*-scientific. Ancient people knew very little about "science" in the modern sense of that term. But because the first chapter of Genesis is pre-scientific, it remains eternally relevant not only for today's college graduate but also for today's primitive tribesman. We should be grateful that God did not give the story of creation in terms of a modern scientific framework. Had He done so, believers who preceded us would have learned from Genesis 1 almost nothing about creation. We should be grateful that God gave the story of creation in terms of an ancient literary framework, in terms that ancient man could understand clearly, and that it has come down to us in this form.

* * *

Perhaps we have been a bit harsh with the King of Siam. After all, he lived in the nineteenth century and was therefore studying the Bible before the ancient Babylonian and Canaanite literary parallels had been excavated and properly interpreted. Had he known of them, maybe he would have softened his attack on Genesis and his triple condemnation of Moses.

12. With this section cf. the recent summary of G. L. Archer, Jr., in *Decision* 14/1 (January 1973), p. 5.