

[*MJTM* 13 (2011–2012) 155–88]

CREATION, PROGRESS, AND CALLING:
GENESIS 1–11 AS SOCIAL COMMENTARY*

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“Against the whole rushing stream of contemporary life,
the individual feels himself rather powerless.”

— James Truslow Adams (1931)

“Science Finds, Industry Applies, Man Conforms.”

— Motto of the 1933 World’s Fair

Introduction

The two quotations that begin this essay, though both dating to around 80 years ago, could read as if they were written recently. Adams’s words could easily express the feelings of one living in the twenty-first century and the motto of the 1933 World’s Fair could many times describe the way technology is applied in our modern context. Is there nothing new under the sun? Genesis is an ancient book. However, it is also a surprisingly modern book in many ways. The interpretation of Genesis 1–11 continues to be a controversial issue for all sorts of people. Whether one is a theological “liberal” or “conservative,” how one reads these chapters of the Bible is often viewed as a *shibboleth* of orthodoxy.¹ Among the controversies surrounding the interpretation

* An earlier version of this essay was presented in McMaster University’s Albert Lager Lecture Series (McMaster Alumni Association), Hamilton, ON, May 11, 2011. As well, much of its content was delivered in the form of a sermon in the Nathaniel H. Parker Chapel of McMaster Divinity College on September 21, 2011.

1. As Watts, “Making Sense,” 2, aptly puts it, “hold the ‘wrong’ view and one is either a dupe of secular critical theory or a troglodyte literalist.”

of Genesis 1–11, questions of its relation to the conclusions of modern science are significant. Was the world created in seven literal days? What was the process of creation? Was there a global flood? The descriptions of the first human couple and the pronouncements rendered against them subsequent to their disobedience in the garden continue to be controversial. What are the implications for relationships between the genders? What do these narratives say about the establishment of so-called patriarchy? The early chapters of Genesis have also been the crucible for source criticism and the theories that different documentary sources were combined to form the book of Genesis and the entire Pentateuch. Often it is in these first chapters of Genesis where the isolation of putative sources appears most compelling (specifically identifying sources based on choice of a “divine name” used in each passage).²

Despite these well-known issues, this article is not meant to focus specifically on scientific or gender issues, nor will it offer a fresh source critical analysis of any kind. In my opinion such controversial issues have sometimes distracted readers from vital aspects of the theological message of these foundational chapters in the Bible. Therefore, in this essay I intend to examine these chapters “as is,” in their final form, taking into account their current literary context (as part of the book of Genesis) and their ancient historical context (as a creation story among many in the ancient Near East). My aim here is to discern how Genesis 1–11 functioned as social commentary in its day, and to uncover its continued relevance for today.

2. As is well known, some of the earliest source critical delineations were based on whether a passage used “Elohim” or “Yahweh,” as it was thought that the exclusive use of one or the other in a passage was evidence for a source being used that preferred one divine name (or only knew of the one divine name). The literature on such source critical question in the Pentateuch is voluminous and discussions can be found in any handbook on Old Testament criticism or Old Testament introduction. Cf. Blenkinsopp, *Pentateuch*, and Alexander, *Paradise*.

Genesis 1–11 as a Literary Unit

Literarily, Genesis 1–11 can be understood as a distinct literary unit within the book of Genesis. Commentators usually divide the book into two distinct sections, chapters 1–11 and 12–50. The first section focuses on world history and covers a span of thousands of years, while the second section focuses only on the history of Israel (particularly a few men from whom Israel descends) and covers only a couple of hundred years. Furthermore, Genesis 1–11 has a clear focus on “firsts” and contains many etiological narratives—explaining the origins of things. The origins of worship, cities, technology, population, wine making, and empire building, are all referred to in its chapters.³ Further setting it off from what follows is the radical decline in ages in the Patriarchal narratives that follow these chapters. While in Genesis 1–11 several people live to over nine hundred years (with Methuselah living to 969) and many live for over six centuries, even the central characters in the following narratives live brief lives by comparison (Abraham lives to only 175 years of age). Finally, the stories in Genesis 1–11 often have characters and places with symbolic names. The first man is named Adam, which is the Hebrew word for “humankind”; his wife is named Havvah (Eve) or “lifer” (i.e., the life giving one); they give birth to a son named “Habel” (Abel), which is Hebrew for “vanity,” or “vapor” (and Abel’s life is brief and disappears like a vapor); Eden is a pun on the Hebrew word for “pleasure” or “delight”;⁴ the name of Noah’s son, Shem, is identical to the Hebrew word for “name,” and Abraham, the one whose name (*shem*) God makes great (Gen 12:2), is a descendent of the line of Shem.

In sum, all of these considerations provide a compelling rationale for viewing Genesis 1–11 as a distinct literary unit. Therefore, in what follows I will focus on the opening eleven chapters of the book, though not ignoring their context in the book of Genesis as a whole.

3. Blenkinsopp, *Creation*, 2.

4. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 210; Blenkinsopp, *Creation*, 62.

Reading Genesis 1–11 in Its Cultural Context

Noting the cultural context of a piece of literature aids in interpretation. Only in this way can one know what the contemporary issues were at the time a piece of literature was written. Though Genesis is Holy Scripture, good interpretation needs to take into account its cultural context in order to hear the Word more clearly. This brings us to the issue of ancient Near Eastern parallel texts that were prevalent in Genesis's cultural context.

Ancient Near Eastern Parallels

In order to better discern the original message of Genesis 1–11 is important to read it in the context of its ancient Near Eastern environment. As is well known, in the 1800s cuneiform tablets from ancient Mesopotamia were discovered and deciphered and it quickly became clear that these ancient Near Eastern texts had many significant parallels with Genesis. For example, the poem of Gilgamesh, the Epic of Atrahasis, and the Sumerian flood tablet all show remarkable similarities to Genesis, particularly to the Flood narrative in chapters 6–9.⁵ Some of the most important parallels are as follows:

- Divine decision to destroy humankind
- Warning to the flood hero
- Command to build the ark
- The hero's obedience
- Command to enter
- Entry into the ark
- Closing the door of the ark
- Description of the flood
- Destruction of life
- End of rain
- Ark grounding on mountain
- The hero opens a window
- Birds' reconnaissance
- Exit from the Ark

5. For English translations of these texts, see Dalley, *Myths*.

Sacrifices offered after leaving the ark
Divine smelling of sacrifice
Blessing on the flood hero⁶

Due to these and other striking parallels most scholars began to assume that the author of Genesis was familiar with Mesopotamian mythological traditions very similar to the form in which we know them. In fact, since the discovery of these ancient Near Eastern parallels, many scholars have suggested that Genesis actually directly borrowed from these ancient Near Eastern texts.⁷ Others have suggested that the plot of Genesis 1–11 as a whole was taken over from one or more of these ancient texts.⁸ What is more, these ancient Mesopotamian texts date to the third millennium BC—before the time of Moses.⁹

Of course, there were many occasions in Israel’s history when Israel could have learned of these myths. Abraham is said to come from Mesopotamia (Genesis 11), Israel was an ally of Babylon in the days of Hezekiah (2 Kings 20), and of course Judah itself was exiled to Babylon for a generation.¹⁰

However, despite the similarities, the differences between the Genesis text and these ancient Near Eastern texts are significant. In fact, it could be argued that they are too different to conclude that Genesis borrowed directly from these texts. Of course, it is possible that both the biblical and non-biblical texts reflect reliance on a common tradition. But whether Genesis borrowed from these texts or drew on a common tradition, it seems clear that Genesis made use of textual or oral traditions prevalent in the culture in which its author lived. As Blenkinsopp writes, the author did “what all competent authors do, namely, incorporating

6. This list is slightly paraphrased from Wenham’s list of common elements between biblical and non-biblical flood accounts. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 163–64.

7. Heidel, *Babylonian Genesis*, 82.

8. So Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*.

9. This is so no matter which date for the Exodus is chosen, a fifteenth century date (ca. 1446 BC) or a thirteenth century date (ca. 1266 BC).

10. If Genesis was completed during this time of exile in Babylon (as scholarly orthodoxy asserts) the author’s knowledge of Mesopotamian traditions is easily explained.

ideas, traditions, motifs from the great store present in the cultural memory of the society of which he was a part.”¹¹ As a believer in the full inspiration of Scripture, I would add that the author did so as guided by the Spirit.

In light of the existence of other ancient stories of the creation and flood etc. that were part of the cultural heritage of the ancient Near East, it is important for the reader of Genesis to gain some familiarity with them in order to get a sense of the issues that were current in that ancient culture and see how they talked about such things.¹² As Watts asserts, “we are not talking about borrowing or dependence but rather about the use of common motifs and ideas to deal with common concerns.”¹³

Given that these Genesis narratives purposefully drew on and responded to literary and oral traditions from their ancient cultural environment, we may read Genesis against their backdrop and compare and contrast them, in order to see how their views agreed or disagreed with their neighbors. As we will see, such a reading brings into relief several important themes that actually become “central affirmations of the Christian faith.”¹⁴

Themes in Genesis 1–11

God as Sole Creator

One of the consistent features of ancient Near Eastern creation stories is the depiction of the process of creation taking place only after the defeat of malevolent forces that resist creation. In *Enuma Elish*, the goddess Tiamat is a huge dragon of chaotic water that resists order.¹⁵ The hero-god Marduk, with the aid of some other gods, defeats her and uses her carcass to create the cosmos. Marduk uses half of her carcass for the firmament/the heavens to keep the waters above separate from below, and half her carcass to create the dry land where life can exist.

11. Blenkinsopp, *Creation*, 56.

12. Watts, “Making Sense,” 2.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 221.

15. Foster, “Epic of Creation.”

The name of the chaos dragon in Enuma Elish, “Tiamat,” is very similar to the Hebrew word for the deep/deep water (*tehôm*), which is used in Gen 1:2.¹⁶ Tiamat is a salt water deity and representative of the ocean, so the connection between Tiamat and the deep water is intriguing as both Tiamat and *tehôm* in Gen 2:1 refer to the “primeval” water. This is not to say that Genesis depends on Enuma Elish,¹⁷ but the use of the word *tehôm* in this context would have recalled to the ancient reader the widely known story/stories that contained the motif of a battle with the sea/sea dragon in the context of creation.¹⁸

As I mentioned, the goddess Tiamat is a dragon. In Hebrew, the word for dragon is *tannîn* (see. Isa 27:1; 51:9; Ps 74:13; Job 7:12). What is significant for our purposes is that the *tannîn* (dragon) also appears in Genesis 1. In Gen 1:21 we read:

And God created the great sea dragons (*tannîn*) and every living creature that creeps, of every kind, which the waters produced in swarms, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that this was good.¹⁹

In other words, Genesis 1, like those ancient Near Eastern parallel texts, mentions a dragon in the creation account.

16. Ever since Gunkel’s famous study, *Schöpfung*, many scholars have argued that the water dragon goddess Tiamat from Enuma Elish was the mythological background to the Hebrew *tehôm* (deep) in Gen 1:2. However, Tsumura, *Earth and the Waters*, 45–52, has convincingly shown that the Hebrew *tehôm* is not derived from Tiamat but that **tiham* was a common Semitic term referring to the ocean.

17. As Lambert, “A New Look,” 103, has argued, “the watery beginning of Genesis in itself is no evidence of Mesopotamian influence.”

18. Kapelrud, “Mythological Features,” 183, has suggested that *tehôm* is an allusion to Tiamat but that the intention of the writer of Genesis 1 was “not to use the Babylonian myth, but to indicate through his allusions that he knew it, and disregarded its content.”

19. All translations of Scripture in this essay are my own. Some translations translate *tannîn* in Gen 1:21 as “sea monsters” (e.g., NRSV, JPS, ASV). Other versions (e.g., CEB, NLT, NIV) translate this word as “sea creatures” or “sea animals” in Gen 1:21, despite the fact that these same translations render the word as either dragon, serpent, or monster elsewhere. Cf. Isa 27:1; 51:9; Ps 74:13; Job 7:12.

When we are armed with this knowledge of the ancient context of creation accounts, the purpose of Genesis 1 becomes clearer. In Gen 1:2, we see the deep (*tehôm*) in existence before creation is ordered. However, contrary to ancient Near Eastern myths, the deep is simply water—not an enemy god (Tiamat). There is no conflict necessary to create. There are no other gods for Yahweh to fight in order to create. The dragon (*tannîn*) is referenced, but in Genesis 1 it is not a malevolent deity but merely one of the creatures God made. In other words, in Genesis 1 monotheism is declared. Far from creation in the context of other gods, only one God is present. Further, instead of the context of a victorious battle, God creates by merely speaking.²⁰

This polemic against the prevailing polytheistic culture of the day can be seen further in the way Gen 1:16 refers to the sun and moon as simply the “greater light” and the “lesser light.”²¹ This reticence to explicitly mention the sun (*shamesh*) and moon (*yareah*) was likely because in Canaan and Mesopotamia, the name of the sun god was Shamesh and the name of the moon god was Yareah. In other words, the names of these gods were the same as the name of the heavenly bodies they represented.²² The worship of the sun and moon was ubiquitous in the ancient Near East, and Israel itself struggled with this vice.²³ Refusing to use their names in Gen 1:16 was due to the polemic against polytheism—they are not gods at all. Further denigrating the divine

20. In fact, as Tsumura, “Genesis and Ancient Near Eastern Stories,” 31, points out, this “creation by divine fiat in Genesis is unique in the ancient Near East.”

21. Unfortunately, the NLT uses the words “sun” and “moon” in its translation, even though they are not present in the original Hebrew text. This of course communicates what “lights” are referred to very clearly but it misses the intentional omission of their proper names that was intended to denigrate their commonly perceived status as gods.

22. Shamash (Akkadian *Šamaš*, “Sun”) was the name of the sun god in the Akkadian, Assyrian, and Babylonian pantheons. Similarly, Yareah is the Canaanite name of the moon god. He is mentioned in Ugaritic texts, though he is not as well known as Shamesh.

23. Even in Israel, the worship of the sun had to be fought against. See Josiah’s efforts in 2 Kgs 23–24. Cf. Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun*.

status of the sun, God creates light without the sun. Light is created on the first day, while the sun is not created until the fourth day.²⁴

In sum, the creation account in Genesis 1 does not borrow directly from other ancient Near Eastern creation accounts.²⁵ But it does appear to purposefully allude to them in order to refute their theology.²⁶ There is only one God and he created the universe by speaking it into existence, not by defeating the forces of divine evil or chaos. These assertions are primary theological grounds for the faith. God is God alone, there is no other. Creation is his doing and its existence owes to his creativity alone and not the exigency of malevolent forces out of which creation was made.²⁷ This brings up the issue of the nature of creation.

The Goodness of Creation

Far from being created from the carcass of a malevolent deity or sea-dragon, creation is viewed as good. There is no trace of residual evil owing to its origins in an evil divine cadaver. Seven times in Genesis 1 the Creator declares that creation is nothing less than good (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). In fact, on the final day he declares that it is “very good” (Gen 1:31). Genesis does not hold to a dualistic worldview with the notion of the “goodness” of the spiritual and the “evilness” of the physical. Genesis does not advocate a pie in the sky theology, but an earthy reality. The physical is not viewed as a temporary vice that must be tolerated until the goodness of the spirit is released from its physical prison. Genesis 1 states categorically that God

24. The light as the first thing created is unique in ancient Near Eastern texts. Cf. Tsumura, “Genesis and Ancient Near Eastern Stories,” 31.

25. As Lambert, “A New Look,” 105, has maintained, there is “no evidence of Hebrew borrowing from Babylon.” As Tsumura, “Genesis and Ancient Near Eastern Stories,” 32, concludes, “It is not correct to say that ‘Enuma Elish’ was adopted and adapted by the Israelites to produce the Genesis stories.”

26. So Hasel, “Polemic Nature.”

27. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 1, suggests that “Because as Christians we tend to assume these points in our theology, we often fail to recognize the striking originality of the message of Genesis 1–11 and concentrate on subsidiary points that may well be of less moment.”

created physical things “good.” This has implications regarding what kind of attitude toward creation we should have. That physical creation is deeply valued has environmental implications, which we will explore below.

However, as “good” as creation was at the beginning, it is not said to be “perfect.” The Hebrew word frequently translated as “perfect” (קַמַּץ) means “complete” or “full.”²⁸ Though God rested from his work on the seventh day (Gen 2:3), because his work was finished, creation was not at that point deemed “perfect” or “complete.” That is, creation is not described as in a flawless state that had no possibility of improvement or further development. According to Genesis, the pre-sin world was not a utopia with only ideal situations, and devoid of work and pain. Even in the pre-sin world, God stated that the first man’s situation was “not good” (Gen 2:18) until he was given a suitable partner in his wife.²⁹

Pain was a reality in the pre-sin world as is made clear by the pronouncement on the woman after the Fall, which speaks of an “increase” in pain due to sin, not the introduction of pain (Gen 3:16). As well, work was clearly in view as God placed the first man in the garden to “work” and “keep/guard” it (Gen 2:15). The fact that the original state of creation was not perfect leaves room for human technological development, as we will see below.

The necessity for the development of creation is clearly referenced in Gen 2:5 where it states that humans were needed to “work the earth” (לְעַבֵּד אֶת־הָאָדָמָה) in order for vegetation to grow. Clearly the earth had not reached its potential and in order to do so, it needed human involvement. This necessity for development can be further seen in God’s commission in Gen 1:28 for humans to “subdue” (כַּבֵּשׁ) the earth, suggesting that creation from the beginning was “wild,” and that some coercion on the part of humans was necessary. It further implies that this “subduing” would change and develop creation over time. Creation was not supposed to be a static reality, but was created with

28. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 1070.

29. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed*, 13.

potential for becoming much more than its original state. As Fretheim writes:

Genesis does not present the creation as a finished product, wrapped up with a big red bow and handed over to the creatures to keep it exactly as originally created. It is not a onetime production. Indeed, for the creation to stay just as God originally created it would constitute a failure of the divine design. From God's perspective, the world needs work; development and change are what God intends for it, and God enlists human beings (and other creatures) to that end.³⁰

To sum up, physical things matter (no pun intended). They are good. However, they are not perfect. God has ordained humanity to facilitate creation in developing its fullest possible potential.³¹

At this point it is necessary to consider the implications of the mandate in Genesis 1 for humanity to have “dominion” and “subdue” the earth. Lest some think that this command encourages the idea that humans have *carte blanche* when it comes to how they might treat creation, a deeper investigation of the two Hebrew words behind the terms “take dominion” (רָדָה) and “subdue” (כִּבְּשׁוּ) will be helpful.

This verb “take dominion” (רָדָה) is used twenty-two times in the Old Testament and in every instance outside of Genesis 1 it is used in the context of humans “ruling” over humans.³² Most significantly, when the verb is used, it is generally speaking about authority being exercised in a humane manner (e.g., Lev 25:43; Ezek 34:4).³³ Thus, the verb does not connote harshness or brutality in any way.³⁴

30. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed*, 14.

31. *Ibid.*, 13.

32. Only in Gen 1:26, 28 is it used of ruling non-human creatures or entities.

33. Blenkinsopp, *Creation*, 26.

34. When this is expressed in the Old Testament, descriptors are attached to the verb to indicate a harsh manner of “ruling.” E.g., Lev 25:46 speaks of a “ruthless” rule (לֹא־תִרְדֶּה בוֹ בַפֶּרֶךְ); Isa 14:6 speaks of a “rule in fury/anger” (רָדָה בְּאַף); and Ezek 34:4 of a “brutal/harsh” rule (וּבַפֶּרֶךְ אֲתֵם וּבַפֶּרֶךְ רָדִיתֶם).

The verb “subdue” (כַּבַּשׁ) is found fifteen times in the Old Testament and, like “take dominion” (רָדָה), it is used only in the context of humans “subduing” other humans.³⁵ However, the word is clearly used of coercive behavior that is not always in the best interest of the one “subdued.”³⁶ Even so, the literary context of the use of this verb must be taken into account before we can conclude that it has a negative connotation in Gen 1:28. Fretheim writes:

the verb [כַּבַּשׁ] is here used in a pre-sin context, before any negative effects that sin has brought, and apparently no enemies are in view. Given its use in a pre-sin context, one should be careful not simply to transfer the usage of the verb for post-sin human activity to an understanding of this word here.³⁷

In light of this literary context, the terms “take dominion” and “subdue” must be read in light of the role that humans play in God’s creation in a pre-sin environment. What exactly is the role of humankind?

The Role of Humankind

The role of humankind envisioned by Genesis 1 is most clearly appreciated if read in light of both its ancient cultural environment and its current literary context in the opening chapters of Genesis. In ancient Near Eastern creation texts, humans are actually created to be slave labor for the gods. In fact, this idea was widespread in that ancient culture.³⁸ For example, in the epic of Atrahasis, the gods created people to do the work of the lower gods (basically farm labor and the digging of canals) in order to feed the gods through sacrifices. Look at the following quotation from the beginning of the Atrahasis epic:

35. Though it is used of the “land” several times (e.g., Num 32:22, 29; Josh 18:1) the context makes clear that it is referring to the humans who control the land and not the land itself. Cf. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed*, 14 n. 12.

36. Cf. Esth 7:8; Neh 5:5.

37. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed*, 14.

38. As Bird, “Male and Female,” 345, has observed, the idea that humans were “created to relieve the gods of hard labour by supplying them with food and drink was standard among both Sumerians and Babylonians.”

Great indeed was the drudgery of the gods, the forced labor was heavy, the misery too much: The seven great Anunna-gods were burdening the Igigi-gods with forced labor.³⁹

The gods then created humans to remedy the situation. After this accomplishment one of the great high gods then boasted that by creating humans “I have done away with your heavy forced labor, I have imposed your drudgery on humans . . . bestowed clamor upon humankind.”⁴⁰

Read against this background, Genesis’s view of humanity is striking. Contrary to ancient Near Eastern texts, which state that humans were to provide food (sacrifices) for the gods, in Genesis God provides food for humans (Gen 1:29–30; 2:9, 15). What is more, not once does God speak of humans as being meant to function in any way to provide for God. In fact, God does not even speak of humans owing him service, allegiance, or a debt of any sort. True, there is one parameter set on them in Genesis 2—abstaining from eating from the tree of knowledge—but other than that it appears that they are given the freedom to work out for themselves what it is they will do. God does not even say “. . . but worship me.” This is striking in light of later conceptions of the meaning of life as to continually worship God, or to serve him more and more. As Moltmann writes, “God does not create merely by calling something into existence, or by setting something afoot. In a more profound sense he ‘creates’ by letting-be, by making room, and by withdrawing himself.”⁴¹

Strikingly, Genesis asserts that humans are created in God’s image. While there has been tremendous debate over what exactly this means, it is clearly a radical departure from the anthropology of the contemporary ancient Near Eastern cultural and philosophical environment. For example, in ancient Egypt, only kings are the image of God. In ancient Mesopotamia, the king is the god’s “icon, representative and viceregent.”⁴² Other than kings, only an idol is said to be the image of God. The idea

39. This is a slight paraphrase of Foster, “Atra-Hasis.”

40. Ibid.

41. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 88.

42. Blenkinsopp, *Creation*, 26.

that all men were in the image of God would have been counter-cultural. Of course, Genesis goes further than this. Genesis 1:27 makes it very clear that all *humans*—both men and women—are created in God’s image. It boldly states:

And God created humans in his image
in the image of God he created them
male and female he created them.⁴³

Given the common connection in the ancient Near East between kings and the image of God, Genesis referring to all humans as being in God’s image connotes the royalty of all.⁴⁴ In fact, when God says that humans are to “have dominion” (רָדוּ) over all the creatures of the earth (Gen 1:26, 28), this is royal language.⁴⁵ Kings and queens have dominion. However, as noted above, the dominion implied in Genesis 1 should not be quickly equated with the type of dominion exercised by monarchs in human history. Instead, in the pre-Fall context of Genesis 1, we should understand this dominion to be characterized by the dominion that God exercises. It is what the true king, God, does that should be the model for human regency over creation. The dominion of humankind over the earth should be expressed in nurturing, care, and protection—not exploitation (though the latter commonly has characterized the reign of human monarchs).⁴⁶

Furthermore, Gen 1:28 declares that all humans are God-blessed and they are told to “increase in number” and fill the earth. First, it is important to read this in light of the literary context where it is part of the blessing, not a chore or a burden

43. The claim that all humans are in God’s image was wildly radical as the ancient world was even more “patriarchal” or “andro-centric” than we are today. This concept was revolutionary with the potential to subvert the very structures on which the ancient societies were based.

44. As Clines, *Theme of the Pentateuch*, 80–85, has observed, in the ancient Near East the king is “the image of the god . . . [and] the image of the god is associated very closely with rulerhood.”

45. As Bird, “Male and Female,” 341, has asserted, the image of God in Genesis 1 is “a royal designation, the precondition or requisite for rule.”

46. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed*, 34.

placed on humans.⁴⁷ Second, reading it in light of the contemporary ancient Near Eastern culture again reveals the counter-cultural character of Genesis more clearly. In ancient Sumerian and Babylonian accounts of the flood, the reason the gods sent the flood to destroy life on the earth was because humans had increased in number and had become noisy. Again, a passage from Atrahasis makes this clear:

Twelve hundred years had not yet passed when . . . the peoples multiplied. The land was bellowing like a bull, the gods got disturbed with their uproar. Enlil [a god] heard their noise and addressed the great gods: The noise of humankind has become too intense for me, with their uproar I am deprived of sleep.⁴⁸

Clearly, the increasing population of humans is seen in a negative light. However, contrary to this perspective, Genesis sees procreation as part of the blessing. Furthermore, the literary context of Gen 1:27–28 suggests that it is an important aspect to being created in the image of God.⁴⁹ This is seen in Gen 5:3:

When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he called his name Seth.

Here Adam’s son, Seth, is said to be in the image of his father, who, of course, is in the image of God (Gen 5:1). Thus, the perpetuation of the image is accomplished through procreation. As

47. Based on translations of the word “increase” (רָבַח) as “multiply,” some have interpreted this as a command that must be religiously followed (in order for a couple to multiply, they must have at least four children). However, this interpretation is problematic. First, the imperatives here “be fruitful and increase” do not seem to function as “commands.” As Walton, *Genesis*, 375, has commented “not all imperative forms can or should be construed as commands (not much different from English in that regard).” When God told them to be fruitful and multiply, that was part of the blessing, not an obligation. Really what it is saying is “have sex”—a command that humans have continued to follow religiously to this day.

48. Arnold and Beyer, *Readings from the Ancient Near East*, 26.

49. Bird, “Male and Female,” 351, suggests that the command to “be fruitful and multiply,” intends a polemic against fertility cults because “the power of created life to replenish itself is a power given to each species at its creation . . . not dependent upon subsequent rites for its effect.”

Fretheim has concluded: “inasmuch as human beings are created in the image of a Creator God, they themselves must be understood as creators as well.”⁵⁰ Like God before them they can create new life.

Further emphasis on the importance of humanity can be seen in how human activity is presented as essential to the further development of God’s creation. As we have seen, Genesis 2 begins by noting that without humans, the Garden of Eden could not grow (Gen 2:5). Furthermore, the first human is enlisted to name God’s creatures (Gen 2:19–20), a role analogous to God’s actions in the naming of created things in Genesis 1 (cf. Gen 1:5, 8, 10). This is striking, as the naming of something created is part of the creative process, yet in Genesis 2 God shares this with humans. Furthermore, this naming seems to have ongoing significance and is not presented as simply a temporary experiment. Genesis 2:19 states, “whatever the man called a living creature, *that was its name.*” That is, the first human’s decision on what to name the animal mattered and had ongoing ramifications. As Fretheim asserts, “God has established a relationship with human beings such that their decisions about developments in creation truly count.”⁵¹

In sum, Genesis presents humans as the image of God, God’s vice-regents over the earth, who partner with God in creative acts (naming creatures), who are creators themselves (procreation), who are to exercise God-like royal dominion over the world, whose role is essential in the further development of creation and whose decisions truly count and have ongoing ramifications for creation itself.⁵²

Theological implications. A biblical anthropology must take this into account when reflecting on the role of Christians today. Clearly, human life is sacred. Genesis 9:6 forbids the murder of

50. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed*, 31–32.

51. *Ibid.*, 36.

52. As Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 343, writes, “The Old Testament . . . sees progress and development in the meaning of the commission that God gave his people to work on earth and bases it on the effectiveness of God’s blessing.”

humans explicitly on the basis that they are in God's image. Since the image of God is said to be in all people and in both genders, racism and sexism are necessarily barred on this ground as well.

A biblical cosmology must also be shaped by the perspectives of the creation accounts in Genesis 1–2. Obviously these perspectives are relevant to the realities of environmental concerns and the challenges facing humanity in the twenty-first century. The talk of humans having dominion clearly does not defend the right of humans to destroy God's good creation. God values his creation (it is "very good") and partners with it in many ways (the earth and seas participate in the bringing forth of other new creations).⁵³ Though humans have dominion over creation, this dominion is to be modeled on the dominion of God, who deeply values his creation and does not selfishly manipulate it for his own ends. As we have seen, creation is given freedom to be what it will be.

The fact that human decisions truly count speaks to both negative and positive effects of human decisions on the environment itself. Human actions can either aid or damage creation. This realization really is a biblical mandate for taking care of the environment. As Francis Watson writes, "Human acts which treat the nonhuman creation simply as the sphere of use-value or market-value, refusing the acknowledgment of its autonomous goodness, are acts of terrorism in direct opposition to the intention of the creator."⁵⁴ In sum, creation is good and it is humanity's responsibility to care for it. It is not something to be abused or destroyed. As God cares for his creation, we, the image of God, should follow suit.

53. E.g., even in Genesis 1, God partners with creation in creating new creatures. In Gen 1:11 the earth is called to "bring forth" plants and then in Gen 1:12 it says that "the earth brought vegetation." Clearly the earth is participating in bringing forth new creatures. (cf. similarly Gen 1:20, 24). As Fretheim, *Creation Untamed*, 28, writes, this "demonstrates the immense value of nonhuman creatures for God in that God involves them in the creation of still further creatures. Without the help of these nonhuman beings, God's creation would not live up to its potential of becoming."

54. Watson, *Text, Church*, 146–47.

On the other hand, the attitude that privileges the environment over humans themselves does not find grounding here. Creation is *not* divine. Neither are humans, but they are close—“a little less” than God (Ps 8:5). Humanity is central to God’s plan for creation. Contrary to ancient Near Eastern anthropology, “far from being a by-product of or a solution to problems in the world of the gods, a sort of afterthought, humanity is at the centre of things, blessed by God and declared to be really good.”⁵⁵ Creation is not above humanity. Further, environmental concerns should not be above humane concerns. Though creation must be cared for and not abused, humans do need to “subdue” it. There is a *wildness* to creation that humans must, at times, tame in order for creation to reach its fullest potential. Taming creation and improving quality of life leads to developments in technology, which we will discuss below. But first, this unbridled optimism of Genesis 1–2 is quickly tempered by developments in the very next chapter (Genesis 3).

The Existence of Evil: A World Gone Awry

Tempering the optimism of a creation declared good and humans said to be in the image of the divine, is the emphasis in Genesis that things have gone wrong. In fact, one of the main themes in Genesis 1–11 is how evil infiltrated this “very good” creation.⁵⁶ Throughout these chapters, several etiological narratives emphasize the spread of evil in the world. In the Garden story (Genesis 3) we see humans striving to be gods and disregarding divine commandments in the process. Another etiological narrative follows in Genesis 4, in the story of Cain and Abel and the first murder, where “sin” is mentioned for the first time.⁵⁷ Later in the same chapter, this violence is exacerbated as Lamech boasts that he has outdone the violence of Cain in murdering a

55. Blenkinsopp, *Creation*, 29.

56. *Ibid.*, 186, takes this to be one of the central themes of Genesis 1–11.

57. The plot of this narrative parallels the Garden story in many ways. Instead of the snake, “sin” is said to be crouching waiting to pounce on Cain. Just as the first humans were not put to death as promised, so Cain did not undergo the death threatened. Cf. Blenkinsopp, *Creation*, 94–95.

youth (4:23).⁵⁸ Far from the later principle of *lex talionis* (“an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”), calling for the punishment to fit the crime, Lamech claims to have slaughtered a youth for a mere bruise. Genesis 6 further explains the depraved state that humanity has devolved into with the short and ambiguous narrative concerning intermarriage between the sons of god and the daughters of men (Gen 6:1–4). Subsequently, God laments that all of humanity has become incorrigibly wicked with evil imaginations (Gen 6:5). The sinfulness of humanity is then met with judgment by God in the form of a devastating flood (Genesis 6–9). Speaking to its cultural environment, Genesis accents the evil of human violence and God’s radical condemnation of the same.

This pessimistic outlook of Genesis on the human condition as sinful and the presentation of God as a just and moral deity was countercultural in its day. Whereas, as we have seen, in ancient Near Eastern flood texts, the flood was sent due to the petty complaints of the gods, who were annoyed by the noise of a growing human population, in Genesis the flood was sent due to the violence and evil of humankind. This spread of violence and moral depravity is countered by the presentation of a God who opposes such iniquity and is a moral deity. While the flood hero in Mesopotamian texts only survives due to the trickery of one of the gods (and to the disappointment and chagrin of the most powerful god, Enlil) in Genesis Noah is saved due to God’s grace/mercy (יָרַח, Gen 6:8). Furthermore, Noah’s righteous character is emphasized (Gen 6:9).⁵⁹ The narrative ends with

58. The word translated “youth” (יָלֵד) usually is translated “child,” but in this instance it is parallel to “man” (אָדָם), so, it is probably not a child that is intended. The boast could be taken as referring to the killing of a man and a child, but the parallelism militates against this view. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 114, points out that יָלֵד covers a range of ages and includes young adults “as opposed to old men whose strength has declined.”

59. Contra Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, xlix, who asserts that “Noah was saved because he was righteous, a point demonstrated by his behavior throughout the flood.” Nowhere does God say he is saving Noah due to his righteousness, but instead states that “Noah found grace in the eyes of YHWH” (Gen 6:8). The next verse does accent Noah’s righteous character in contradistinction to the

God vowing never again to bring such a flood on the earth, covenanting with humans, and reaffirming the blessing, once again saying, “Be fruitful and increase, and fill the earth” (Gen 9:1). This promise is made in spite of God’s realization that humans remain in their utterly sinful state with the “intents of the human heart being evil from his youth” (Gen 8:21).

The spread of sin tempers the optimism of the creation accounts and, in turn, diminishes the capability for creation to reach its potential. However, as sin spreads, so does God’s mercy as each transgression is met with a mitigation of the punishment and grace.⁶⁰ But the myth of progress is given little credence. Genesis does not present human rationality and goodness as capable of conquering the violence and sin that has spread so rapidly in corrupting what was deemed “very good.” However, Genesis clearly presents a deity who cares deeply for his creation and continues to give his creatures second chances and reiterates his blessing on them despite continued wickedness (Gen 8:21).

The Rise of Technology

Even following the infiltration of evil into God’s good creation, the blessings continue to be worked out as humans “multiply” as noted in the genealogies of Genesis 4–5. Furthermore, humans begin to fulfill their role in developing the earth. Genesis 4 says that Cain worked the ground (one of the expressed purposes of humans in Genesis 2). Along these same lines, in the genealogy in Genesis 4, the descendents of Cain are presented as technological and cultural innovators.⁶¹ Seven of Cain’s descendents are credited with the origins of city building (4:17),⁶² the use of tents

contemporaneous generation, but it does not connect this with explaining God’s favor.

60. Clines, *Theme of the Pentateuch*, 70–80.

61. Blenkinsopp, *Creation*, 87.

62. There is some ambiguity regarding who builds the first city in Genesis 4—Cain or his son Enoch. The Hebrew could be read either way. Some scholars suggest it is Enoch who builds the city since it says he named it after his son (Gen 4:17). Enoch’s son is Irad, a name strikingly similar to the name Eridu, which is the name of the first city ever built according to many different ancient Mesopotamian sources.

(4:20), music (4:21) and metal-working (4:22). From a modern perspective, these technologies may not seem innovative, but at the time they were real advances that aided in the flourishing of human life. Furthermore, in the present literary context up to this point these innovative technologies are presented in a positive light.⁶³ Some interpreters have suggested that since they are part of the line of Cain the book of Genesis is probably viewing technology in a negative light from the outset.⁶⁴ However, it seems clear that these technologies are *not* suspect on their own. For example, in the Genesis narratives, Israel's patriarchs lived in tents, their eponymous ancestor, Jacob (Israel), is especially characterized as one who "stayed in tents" (Gen 25:27). Furthermore, in the book of Exodus, God himself instituted the Tent of Meeting. Genesis is not anti-technology.

However, it quickly becomes clear that Genesis was aware of both the potentials and dangers of technology as the otherwise positive portrayal of these technological advances (Gen 4:17–22) is darkened by the immediate subsequent narration of Lamech's murderous boasting (Gen 4:23–24). Lamech, the father of those who advanced ancient technology, boasts about killing a "youth" for "bruising him" (Gen 4:23). As Blenkinsopp has noted, "At this point technological achievement becomes suspect."⁶⁵ The positive contributions to humanity made by these technological innovators do not prevent the spread of violence and wickedness. Genesis here warns of technology separated from morality.⁶⁶

Modern implications. Following two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century, the myth of progress has been tempered considerably from the Enlightenment optimism that previously dominated the philosophical mindset of the West. However, progress continues to be an underlying current in contemporary

63. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 343, notes that at this point Genesis views technological development as "a function of the blessing God bestows on his creatures to enable the creatures themselves to make basic discoveries."

64. E.g., Gabriel, "Kainitengenealogie."

65. Blenkinsopp, *Creation*, 87.

66. *Ibid.*, 90.

thought. This is especially so in the area of technological progress. In the mind of many, the great advances in technology surely hold the potential for the improvement of life. In fact, the perceived salvific potential of science and technology continues to hold a position in the West that used to be reserved for God in the pre-critical era.⁶⁷ The ancient warnings in Genesis about technology divorced from morality seem very relevant even now in the twenty-first century.⁶⁸

The Rise of Religion

Returning to the text of Genesis 4, immediately following this genealogical aside concerned with the violence of Lamech, people are said to “invoke the name of the Lord” for the first time (4:26). To invoke a deity means “to offer worship by external acts.”⁶⁹ Therefore, this text may be referring to the origins of religious practice.⁷⁰ This notice of the beginnings of organized worship separated from the origins of technology is interesting in light of contemporary ancient Near Eastern literature. In ancient Phoenician texts, beginnings of both technologies and worship are mentioned together as part of the account of origins.⁷¹ However, Genesis contrasts the two and clearly asserts that advanced

67. Even in the postwar period, optimism showed itself in predictions that the workweek would be shorter due to technological advances. In the 1950s there were predictions that in the 1990s people would have “a twenty-two hour week, a six month workyear, or a standard retirement age of thirty-eight.” See, Schor, *Overworked American*, 4. Similarly, in Canada it was predicted that the workweek would be shortened significantly (which has obviously not happened). Cf. LaPlante, “Leisure in Canada by 1980,” 31.

68. On the other hand, Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 343–44, points out that a balance is necessary between religion and technology. He writes, “The question arises then whether the one-sided attitude of western theology in favor of intellectual pursuits and the ever-increasing alienation of theology from the natural sciences, technology, and the social sciences represents a false development that has contributed to the decline of the significance of theology today.” Though Genesis warns of technology devoid of religion, religion devoid of the reality of creation (as seen in the sciences etc.) is also lamentable and against God’s original ideal.

69. Blenkinsopp, *Creation*, 89.

70. *Ibid.*, 89.

71. Attridge and Oden, *Philo of Byblos*, 42–43.

technology (the seven innovators of Gen 4:17–22) does not lead to an enlightened civilization (e.g., Lamech’s murderous boasting). What is needed is religion—invoking the name of Yahweh (Gen 4:26). Genesis 1–11 is indeed skeptical about the idea of progress exclusive of religion. This suggests that the reason why the author included with his genealogy this aside regarding Lamech was to undermine the idea of progress. Technology cannot improve humans—only God can do that. Genesis purposefully sets the beginning of religion over against the development of technology.

Empire Building: Technology and False Religion Unite

The danger of technological advance divorced from true religion comes to the fore in the story of the builders of Babel in Genesis 11. As we have seen throughout Genesis 1–11, the critique of polytheistic culture was implicit, and is more clearly seen when read in comparison with ancient Near Eastern texts. However, in Genesis 11, with the story of the city and the tower at Babel, the critique becomes explicit, as “Babel” is the Hebrew word for Babylon (everywhere else in the Old Testament where the word is used, it is translated “Babylon”). Thus, the critique explicitly targets a known contemporary culture rather than implicitly critiquing ancient Near Eastern theology and cosmology generally.

The story is very well known, but some of the important details are often overlooked or taken to be simply historical notices that are not very relevant to the interpretation of the story.⁷² In order to understand the story, it is important to read it in the context of both its ancient Near Eastern environment and its immediate literary context in Genesis 1–11.

The City

First it is important to observe what is being built. Not just a tower, but “a city and a tower” (Gen 11:4). Though the tower

72. E.g., regarding the note on brick technology, Blenkinsopp *Creation*, 165, notes that this “looks like an explanation addressed to readers resident in Palestine where stone was plentiful and used for building.”

became the main focus of later interpretations, both the city and the tower deserve our attention. First, the attempt to build a city evinces a movement towards urbanization, which was a technological advance from tent dwelling.⁷³ Urban centers featured more “cooperative living,” which allowed “more people to live together in a defined region, as it would allow for large-scale irrigation and excess grain production.”⁷⁴ In light of this, the potential benefits to human existence are readily apparent.

In the ancient world, stories about the founding of cities were an important part of people’s traditions and heritage.⁷⁵ Furthermore, in ancient Near Eastern literature, stories about the founding of cities usually followed a fairly standard format and generally included three things:

- [1] a description of the natural resources which attracted the builder (water supply, grazing and crop land, natural defenses), [2] the special attributes of the builder (unusual strength and/or wisdom) and [3] the guidance of the patron god.⁷⁶

Since these elements were standard in such stories, it is instructive to notice what details Genesis 11 provides in this regard.

1. Reasons for Choosing the Site

The reasons for the choosing of this particular site are not elaborated in any detail in Genesis 11. We are told that they simply found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there (Gen 11:2).

2. Attributes of the Builders

We are told two important details regarding the characteristics of the builders of Babel: (a) they all had one language; and (b) they were technological innovators.

a. One language: The reference to the monolingual environment is significant given the present literary context of Genesis 11. Already the previous chapter (the so-called “Table of Nations”) refers to different languages spoken by various people

73. Walton and Matthews, *Bible Background*, 41.

74. *Ibid.*, 41.

75. *Ibid.*, 34. E.g., founding of Rome by Romulus and Remus.

76. *Ibid.*

groups who settle in their own territories (Gen 10:5, 20, 31).⁷⁷ Thus, the builders of Babel are presented as resisting both “linguistic differentiation” and the spread of humanity into different groups and territories.⁷⁸ Blenkinsopp suggests that the builders of Babel were aware that language is an “instrument of power, control and coercion.”⁷⁹ Their resistance to the way the world was developing shows some advanced thinking and the knowledge that maintaining linguistic identity may aid in preventing loss of identity and strengthen the unity and security of the group.

b. Technological innovators: The builders of Babel are also presented as creative visionaries who pioneer the use of kiln dried bricks in monumental architecture instead of stone.

And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar (Gen 11:3).

77. Of course some suggest that the story of Babel moves “back in time” since different languages were already referenced in Genesis 10. E.g., Walton, *Genesis*, 371. However, this is not clear from the literary context but is an assumption made due to modern concerns with chronology. There is no sign from the text that a backward temporal transition occurs, contra 2 Kings 20, which clearly occurs out of chronological order with the story of the Assyrian invasion of Hezekiah’s Judah. In this instance of purposeful chronological displacement the author signals this by noting God’s promise to “deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria; I will defend this city for my own sake and for my servant David’s sake” (2 Kgs 20:6), which clearly antedates the events of 2 Kings 18–19 and even quotes verbatim from 2 Kgs 19:34 (“For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David.”). Furthermore, the intent of the text may not be to suggest that “all the earth” in Gen 11:1 means the “entire planet” or “entire population” as a modern reader may understand the phrase. As Walton, *Genesis*, 371–72, writes, “The mention of ‘all the earth’ . . . gives the modern reader a universal feel to the passage, but that sense may be somewhat mitigated when we recall that the Hebrew word translated ‘earth’ also often means ‘land’ and is more narrowly defined. We cannot afford to jump to unwarranted conclusions about the universality of the references.”

78. Blenkinsopp, *Creation*, 168.

79. *Ibid.*, 168.

In ancient Israel stone was readily available; however, in Mesopotamia this was not the case. This new technology allowed for the building of monumental architecture in Mesopotamia without having to quarry stone from far away and transport it to the site.⁸⁰ In light of the fact that the special attributes of city founders are invariably highlighted in ancient accounts of city building, the portrayal of the builders of Babylon as technological innovators is likely a significant element in the story. Of course a focus on technological innovation should not be too surprising given the critique of innovative technology found in Genesis 4 (see above).

3. Divine Patronage

As mentioned above, ancient Near Eastern accounts of city building invariably refer to the guidance of the patron god in the founding of the city. However, in Genesis 11 no such role is given to the deity. In fact, far from being involved in the project, God must “come down” (Gen 11:5) to see the tower that humans are building.⁸¹ In other words, this project is pure human ambition representing the best (technological innovation) and the worst (the establishment of a self-serving pagan religion) of humanity.

The Tower

Key to understanding the sin of Babel is understanding what the text means by the “tower.” Unfortunately, the reference to the tower with its “head in the heavens” (11:4) has frequently been misunderstood. It has been popularly thought that the builders of Babel were attempting to build a tower so high that they would reach “heaven.” However, the ancients were not so obtuse as to think they could actually reach the top of the sky with a human-

80. This technology developed near the close of the fourth millennium BC and was quite effective. As Walton writes, “the resulting product, using bitumen as a mastic, proved waterproof and as sturdy as stone. Since it was an expensive process, it was used only for important public buildings” (Walton and Matthews, *Bible Background*, 41).

81. Which is humorous in light of their goal to make a tower with its “head in the heavens” (Gen 11:4).

made building. What is in view here is a ziggurat. This is clear from the description “head in the heavens” (Gen 11:4) which is found in Mesopotamian writings and used almost exclusively for ziggurats.⁸²

A ziggurat may look something like a pyramid but is nothing of the sort. It is filled entirely with dirt and has no burial chamber or passages of any kind inside. It did not even function as a temple (though a temple was usually adjacent to it and used for worship). Its main function was to carry a stairway that led to the top of the ziggurat. On the top of the stairway was a shrine to a god or gods. It was a hotel room of sorts for a god who was on a journey down to earth. The stairway represented a bridge between the realm of the gods and earth. At the top of the ziggurat the god could be refreshed with rest and food (which the priests would replenish regularly) and then come down the stairway to bless the people. The ziggurat functioned to provide for the needs of the god in order that the god would be obligated to return the favor and bless the people. In other words, the ziggurat was a mechanism for manipulating the deity.⁸³

In light of the builders’ resistance to the world as it had unfolded in Genesis 10 (resisting linguistic differentiation and resisting the spread of humanity), the project of the city and a tower represent the concentration of political power. Cutting edge technology made their impressive project possible and the creation of a potent religious symbol legitimated it. Because their project functioned as a means to manipulate the deity, the builders could be assured of divine support. The tyrannical twosome of self-sufficient technology and self-serving religion represents a human bid for self-achieved security. Herein lie the origins of Empire-building.

Considering the technological progress and oppressive religion that harnesses the power of the divine, one can understand God’s statement that “this is only the beginning of what they will

82. E.g., the description of a ziggurat by Warad-Sin, King of Larsa, states, “He made it as high as a mountain and made its head touch heaven” (Frayne, *Royal Inscriptions*, 208).

83. Walton, *Genesis*, 383.

do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them” (11:6). The twentieth century has shown what humans are capable of when armed with a combination of technological advancement and ideological propaganda. God’s statements concerning human potential ring true in light of the wars, ethnic cleansing, genocide, nuclear and biological weaponry, and ecological degradation that flourished in the previous century and continue to the present.⁸⁴ In light of this reality, Genesis 1–11 can be read as an admonition concerning the dangers and ambiguities of inexhaustible technological “progress,” especially when coupled with a powerful and persuasive ideology.⁸⁵

It is important to remember that in its day, Babylon was regarded as the religious, intellectual, and cultural capital of the world. It was the showpiece of civilization, synonymous with high culture and advanced technology. This makes the explicit criticism (i.e., Genesis names Babylon outright) all the more audacious. The name Babylon meant “gate of God.” However, Genesis confronts this potent ideology and undermines its foundations. According to Gen 11:9 Babel means “confusion” or “folly” (*balal* in Hebrew). While Babylon’s ambition and technology impressed the ancient world, God needed to “come down” (11:5) in order to see this tower that supposedly reached the divine realm.

Modern Implications

While our technologies are clearly more advanced than those of Babylon, is our wisdom any greater? Are we more conscious of our limitations or more aware of our capacity for immorality than they?⁸⁶ In 1992, Neil Postman suggested that the United States of America had become a technopoly, that is, a culture in which “all forms of cultural life” submit to “the sovereignty of technique and technology.”⁸⁷ For many, the authority of science

84. Blenkinsopp, *Creation*, 170.

85. *Ibid.*

86. *Ibid.*

87. Postman, *Technopoly*, 52.

and technology has replaced belief in the authority of God or religion. According to Postman, a characteristic feature of a technopoly is the systemic lack of a “transcendent sense of purpose or meaning.”⁸⁸ We can see this in many ways with the internet, which provides plenty of information, but not wisdom. Social media imparts hundreds of “friends,” but few real friends. According to Postman, too much information leads to information becoming “essentially meaningless.”⁸⁹ Scientific truth, though so powerful and enabling in many ways, fails in discerning the truth regarding the fundamental questions about life. Who are we? What is our purpose? How should we live? Genesis 1–11 sets out to point to where those answers might be found.

In the end, the goal of the entire narrative of Genesis 1–11 is to be found in God’s calling of Abraham and the covenant God makes with him.⁹⁰ Though God created the world “good,” the spread of evil corrupted it. Humans repeatedly attempt to make a name for themselves and to grasp at the divine through their misguided attempts at self-sufficiency.⁹¹ In Genesis 1–11, “things go wrong when humans take the initiatives; humankind tends to destroy what God has made good.”⁹² However, there is an observable pattern in Genesis 1–11 of the “spread of sin”

88. *Ibid.*, 63.

89. *Ibid.*, 77.

90. As Walton, *Genesis*, 382, suggests, “the purpose of Genesis 1–11 was to show the need for the covenant.” Similarly, Clines, *Theme of the Pentateuch*, 86, concludes that “To link the primaevial history with the patriarchal narrative specifies the thrust of the primaevial history . . . [it] is the prelude to the promises and their fulfilment.”

91. Throughout the narrative, there has been a striving by humans to be like God. In the Garden, the forbidden fruit was considered desirable because it would make one like God (Gen 3:5–6). In Genesis 6, we see what Wenham has called “grasping at immortality” with the intermarriage between the sons of God and the daughters of men, (Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 146). The Nephilim, mentioned in this passage, are said to be “men of the name” (Gen 6:4). Again, in the story of Babel, the builders sought to make a name for themselves (Gen 11:4).

92. Clines, *Theme of the Pentateuch*, 86.

followed by the “spread of grace.”⁹³ As humans sin, God responds with punishment, but also with grace. As Clines writes:

God not only punishes Adam and Eve, but also withholds the threatened penalty of death; he not only drives out Cain, but also puts his mark of protection upon him; not only sends the Flood, but saves the human race alive in preserving Noah and his family.⁹⁴

Despite the spread of evil in creation, God responds by continually mitigating the consequences and seeking out ways to bless his creation in spite of itself. Significantly, in the story of Babel, there is a punishment, but no corresponding ‘grace’ element until the calling of Abraham at the beginning of the next chapter (Gen 12). Finally God sets out to make Abraham’s “name great” and thereby bless “all the families of the earth” (Gen 12:3).

Conclusion

Though sometimes entertaining, Genesis 1–11 was not simply written to entertain. Though concerned with ancient history, these chapters were not primarily written to provide historical details. For the biblical authors, the Genesis stories were a vehicle for expressing truths about life—both corporate and individual life—and to reveal the truth about God.⁹⁵ Genesis addresses matters relevant for individuals in both ancient and modern societies and reflects on the human condition, challenging our modern self-understanding. Though no clear answer is given regarding the origins of evil, humans are presented as beings capable of choosing their own course of action, and are not inhibited from doing so by their Creator.⁹⁶ Furthermore, Genesis presents a God keenly interested in his creation, despite its faults.

This gracious and loving concern with his creation leads to God initiating a covenant with Abraham, which culminates in the

93. *Ibid.*, 70.

94. *Ibid.*

95. Blenkinsopp, *Creation*, 16.

96. *Ibid.*, 10.

work of God's Son who invites us into a transformative relationship with him that will impact our way of being in the world. Rather than making a name for ourselves, we must trust in the name that God has made great (Phil 2:9)—that of his Son, Jesus. For it is written, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to humans by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

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The book of Genesis is the foundation for the theology of work. Any discussion of work in biblical perspective eventually finds itself grounded on passages in this book. Instead, God perfects his kingdom on earth and calls into being the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God (Rev. 21:2). God's dwelling with humanity is here, in the renewed creation. See, the home of God is among mortals (Rev. 21:3). Yet creation is not identical with God. God gives his creation what Colin Gunton calls *Selbständigkeit* or a "proper independence." This is not the absolute independence imagined by the atheists or Deists, but rather the meaningful existence of the creation as distinct from God himself. This is best captured in the description of God's creation of the plants. *Creation, Un-creation, Re-creation: A discursive commentary on Genesis 1-11.* by Joseph Blenkinsopp. 4.18. Rating details. 11 ratings 2 reviews. Through the course of the commentary, presented in continuous discussion rather than in a rigid verse-by-verse form, Blenkinsopp takes into account pre-modern interpretations of the texts, especially in the Jewish interpretative tradition, as well as modern, historical-critical interpretations. Blenkinsopp works from the perspective of acknowledging the text's literary integrity as an "authored" work, rather than focusing simply on its background in various sources (whilst of course paying due attention to those sources). This enables Blenkinsopp's engaging discussion to focus on Genesis 1-11 as social commentary. Paul S. Evans. McMaster Divinity College. "Against the whole rushing stream of contemporary life, the individual feels himself rather powerless." James Truslow Adams (1931). "Science Finds, Industry Applies, Man Conforms." 68. of Genesis 1-11, questions of its relation to the conclusions of modern science are significant. Was the world created in seven literal days? What was the process of creation? Was there a global flood? *Genesis 1-11. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. OT Volume 1.* Genesis 1-11 opens up a treasure house of ancient wisdom--allowing these faithful witnesses, some appearing here in English translation for the first time, to speak with eloquence and intellectual acumen to the church today. **REVIEWS.** "All who are interested in the interpretation of the Bible will welcome the forthcoming multivolume series *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture.* By calling attention to the rich Christian heritage preceding the separations between East and West and between Protestant and Catholic, this series will perform a major service to the cause of ecumenism." Avery Dulles, S. J., Laurence J. McGinley Professor of Religion and Society, Fordham University. Genesis 1-11 should be accepted as a literal, historical account, and not be relegated to the status of a myth or "poem," for the following reasons. (1) The style of these early chapters of Genesis does not suggest a mythical, allegorical, or poetical approach. The same type of narrative is to be found in Genesis 1-11 as in Genesis 12-50. As Thomas H. Horne stated in his classical *Introduction to the Scriptures:* "The style of these chapters, as indeed, of the whole book of Genesis, is strictly historical, and betrays no vestige whatever of allegorical or figurative description; this is so evident to anyone that reads with attention, as to need no proof" (1970, 2:205). Many people have tried to explain away the record of this chapter by calling it an allegory, or hymn, or myth.