

# **Genesis**

# **Revisited**

## **Dedication**

Dedicated to my son, Peter, with fond recollection of many philosophical conversations.

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Acknowledgement with grateful thanks is made of the World English Bible (<http://ebible.org/web/>) whose text has been incorporated as permitted. The American English spellings have been retained throughout.

The Wikipedia online encyclopedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)) has been used for various short citations.

## Introduction

The trouble with communication is that we have to use words.

It is obvious that words need to be translated from one language to another, and this gets doubly difficult if the original language is no longer a currently spoken language.

Within these pages I am going to try to understand the opening chapters of Genesis in the light of modern science. I am even going to do a risky thing. I am going to try to retell those stories as if they were a communication intended for the 21st century, and not the several millenia ago when they were first read.

This will not be a translation, nor even a paraphrase, simply a retelling using the benefit of modern knowledge. It will sound awkward and will have lost all the familiarity of the original, which had a lot of poetry built into it. If it has any merit it will be because it might be a better understanding in 21st century terms of what the original communication intended.

This treatment will only be applied to the early chapters. When we move from them to what are obviously family chronicles, these will be presented with comments, using a modern translation. The overall intention is to give the reader the chance to view the whole book of Genesis, hopefully with a good appreciation of its value to us today.

This is not a scholarly work. I am not qualified to deliver that. But I have read widely, both of

scientific books and those written by defenders of a 'creationist' viewpoint. My chief premise is that there is a lot for us to learn from the book of Genesis, whatever our starting point, and this is what I hope to explore.

There are no footnotes detailing sources. Where there are statements of opinion, they are simply my own. Supporting citations will be incorporated in the text itself, with the hope that this will make the whole narrative flow more easily.

The English Bible translation used is the World English Bible, a widely published modern translation that has been made available in the public domain. The only modification will be to omit chapter and verse numbers, and the footnotes, for improved readability. Chapter divisions and verse numbers were never part of the original, in any case. A different font will indicate this incorporated text.

## What is a myth?

We call the opening chapters of Genesis myths quite rightly, because we cannot regard them as literal history, and it can be argued that they were never intended to be seen as such. This is the first step we must make so as to understand them better. The problem arises because they were included in a book called the Bible, and many Christians thought that this meant they were inerrant. Actually the Bible is a collection of many types of writing: genealogies, court chronicles (with the inevitable spin such things have), poetry, proverbs, prophetic utterances and visions, biography, history, and letters. Each type needs to be read in the context of what type it is. Poetry is bound to have imagery, for instance. A myth can be a 'true' myth, in the sense that its meaning is true. And these Genesis myths were a communication given in terms of the potential understanding of those who would first read them. Our task is to interpret them in the light of all the other communications from the same source. A myth is a story with a meaning; it is the meaning we must attempt to fathom out.

In recent times we have begun to discover how old the universe is, how old the planet we live on is, how long ago there is evidence of the first beings we might call human, and how much evidence there is that life on earth has evolved. We bring all this knowledge with us, and must not discard it, or - worse - create a false dichotomy between religion and science. Both should be seen as the means of enlightening the other.

The myths of Genesis are no less a source of truth because they talk of creation in six 'days', and if you do lots of sums on the genealogies in Genesis you can arrive at a ridiculous date for creation as 4004 B.C., as famously Bishop Ussher did in the seventeenth century. This was a mistake on several levels. The genealogies of the Bible are not necessarily complete, and the word translated 'day' in Genesis chapter 1 can just as easily be translated as age, epoch, or era.

## God's name

With any ancient text, when dealing with names, there are two main options: one can either preserve the original name (transposing the alphabet letters if need be) or one can attempt simply to translate. Adam, for instance, is either a name or the Hebrew word meaning man. The word 'God' can mean so many things to so many people; from a bearded old gentleman sitting on a throne upwards. It will mean something different to an atheist, an agnostic, a Christian, or a member of a non-monotheistic religion. When we speak of God we cannot avoid being anthropomorphic in our visualisation, of carrying some human qualities and attributes into our mental picture, which are totally contradictory of a being not limited by time, place, or shape.

To side-step this problem I shall initially use the original Hebrew word, as a name without translation, in my retelling, and also the passive voice extensively in the creation myth so as to avoid repeating an unfamiliar word.

So what was the original name given for 'God' in the texts we are looking at? And what is a 'name' even? If a name is a description we need to start with this passage in Exodus chapter 3. Moses has been given the task of leading his captive people out of Egypt by God, and so asks what name he should use to identify God to the people.

*Moses said to God, "Behold, when I come to the children of Israel, and tell them, 'The God of your*

*fathers has sent me to you;' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' What should I tell them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM," and he said, "You shall tell the children of Israel this: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God said moreover to Moses, "You shall tell the children of Israel this, 'Yahweh, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and this is my memorial to all generations.*

The description of God is simply 'I AM'. In other words to describe God in any other way would be to diminish Him, to limit His attributes to those included in any more specific name. It was for this reason that the Jewish nation gave up saying God's name. It was simply too holy to be said. The most frequent word used instead was a tetragrammaton, a four letter word, with the letters YHWH. As religiously observant Jews are forbidden to say or write the Tetragrammaton in full, when reading the Torah they use the word Adonai, which means 'lord'. The word YHWH itself is derived from 'to be'. English translations have often used 'the LORD' (with capitals to show a special usage), or else a mistaken rendering 'Jehovah' (King James Version), or the probably more accurate and now widely accepted 'Yahweh', as here in the World English Bible.

The other Hebrew word used for 'God' is 'Elohim'. It is the plural of El, though usually followed by a singular verb or adjective. To understand this better we may consider this commentary: "The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to those, You want to know my name? I am called according to my actions. When I judge the creatures I am Elohim, and when I have mercy with My world, I am named YHWH (Yahweh)."

A further insight which may help us appreciate

who 'Yahweh' is comes in the fourth gospel, where Jesus uses a phrase 'I am ... ' several times. One particularly notable instance comes in this passage:

*Jesus answered, "...Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day. He saw it, and was glad." The Jews therefore said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Most certainly, I tell you, before Abraham came into existence, I AM." [John 8:54-58]*

We can see how significant this saying was because the immediate reaction was to treat this as blasphemy, and there was an unsuccessful attempt to hand out instant retribution by stoning, but Jesus managed to escape.

So it is clear that when the Bible uses the name 'Yahweh' it is indicating that the eternal 'I AM' is manifesting His presence on this planet in such a way as to be interactive with people. It is in this context that we can understand the passages we are going to look at soon, where the 'I AM' converses with Adam, Eve, and others.

## Cosmic origins (1)

Genesis begins with these words:

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*

The word 'beginning' suggests time. This is how time began. Before there had not been time. Time itself is not an easy concept, and modern thinkers can spend a lot of energy trying to explain it. But it is a useful word, nonetheless.

Apart from the word I am not going to use the next two nouns in this sentence are 'heaven' and 'earth'. And this is where we need to look at the broader picture, because both words are often used in the books that follow Genesis. We need to interpret both in this wider context.

Heaven is used in three ways in the Bible: the atmosphere (where the birds of the heaven fly), space (where the stars of heaven are), and there is the phrase 'the third heaven' used by a writer in the first century AD as being somewhere he went 'whether in the body or out of it, I do not know' and saw things he could not find words to describe.

When people pray that God's will be done 'on earth as it is in heaven' they are thinking of two realms: the physical, the cosmos as we know it, and where God is in a manner non-physical, or spiritual. The contrasts can be restated as the material and the non-material, the seen and the unseen, the physical and the spiritual. So they are contrasted, and they are

linked too: we are apparently promised a 'new heaven and a new earth' as the final cure of the spoilt universe we live in.

So our first sentence is simply saying:

**"Time began when Elohim willed the material and the non-material into being."**

The key part of the message here is that both modes of being, the physical and the spiritual, were brought into being. This is where we need to be critical of some scientists who propose that the only things that can possibly exist are those things that can be examined scientifically, measured by physical observation. This act of faith is theological rather than scientific, as, being purely negative, it does not allow either validation or refutation. One is tempted to call it the science delusion.

And the further message of the first sentence of Genesis is that they were not an accident: they were willed into being. This implies a being with a will, and this seems to me a possible way to avoid the use of a word that may create images in the mind of an old man on a throne. This is the real dichotomy. Is everything there is a result of a chain of accidents, or the outcome of a will that it be so? The materialist believes (as an act of faith) the first option. Those who have experienced the spiritual dimension in their lives believe (also as an act of faith) otherwise.

How easy is the 'it is all a sequence of pure accidents' theory? Well some mathematicians have calculated the chances of getting the universe we have got by accident as one chance in 10 to the power 55 (1 followed by 55 noughts). Here are some of the dependencies even for there to be the possibility of life on our planet: if the strong nuclear force were just a few percent stronger, the sun would have burnt up all

its hydrogen fuel in less than a second; our earth is just the right distance from our sun to allow water to exist in liquid form, which is vital for life to exist; our sun is one of very few suns that have a relatively stable heat production, essential for life; and the origin of the complex DNA code of life, which is acknowledged to be the best of more than a billion possible codes, so the chances of this arising purely by accident are astronomical. There are many more dependencies than those just listed, and if any single one were missing this planet could not sustain life.

The mathematical dimension of the 'it is all a sequence of pure accidents' is just one aspect of the difficulties that those who follow this hypothesis face. There is an even more fundamental problem. For the total atheist there is the question: how could something (which has a measurable beginning) come from nothing?

## Cosmic origins (2)

The next verse says:

*The earth was formless and empty. Darkness was on the surface of the deep and God's Spirit was hovering over the surface of the waters.*

Taking 'the earth' as shorthand for the material universe we can see that there is a clear indication that the beginning of time was also the beginning of a progression from 'formless' to shaped. This is extremely important, in the attempt which is being made here to align scientific observation with a revelation of purpose.

To believe that the Genesis stories are actually useful does not make anyone need to contradict what scientific cosmologists are pretty sure about. The creation myth contains no dates, and there is no need to interpret 'days' as periods of time. So we can read this myth as having reference only to progression and purpose, and not to any particular span of time.

There are three elements in the verse just quoted. Lack of form, darkness, and water. The issue of darkness, the absence of light, is dealt with next. And it is assumed by biologists that water is an essential to the life of flora and fauna.

That these three elements should be presented as the initial building blocks of the material universe is an insight that, given the antiquity of this pre-scientific myth, should at least make us begin to sit up and take notice. How could something that is certainly

older than the speculations of the classical Greek philosophers like Aristotle be so insightful?

We note also the antithesis between 'the Spirit of God' and the material 'earth'. The spiritual, by definition the unseen, brings shape to the physical, the seen. Another insight that is significant.

So here is a proposed restating of the meaning of verse 2:

***"Initially everything material, especially the liquid, was at a primitive stage of development, with no light even, and the spiritual was set to mold the physical."***

## Light

The next passage is:

*God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw the light, and saw that it was good. God divided the light from the darkness. God called the light "day", and the darkness he called "night". There was evening and there was morning, the first day.*

Ask a physicist what light is and you will get a lot of humming and hating. It can be thought of as a wave, and as particles. It is a sort of energy: if you light a candle you get light and heat as a result. For greater clarity here is the Wikipedia definition:

"Visible light (commonly referred to simply as light) is electromagnetic radiation that is visible to the human eye, and is responsible for the sense of sight. Visible light is usually defined as having a wavelength in the range of 400 nanometres (nm), or  $400 \times 10^{-9}$  m, to 700 nanometres - between the infrared, with longer wavelengths and the ultraviolet, with shorter wavelengths. ... In common with all types of EMR, visible light is emitted and absorbed in tiny 'packets' called photons, and exhibits properties of both waves and particles. This property is referred to as the wave-particle duality. The study of light, known as optics, is an important research area in modern physics."

The definition brings into focus electricity, magnetism, and radiation. These are the very foundation of our modern understanding of what everything material is made of, in atomic terms.

I find it amazing that a myth of such great antiquity could have had the insight to express the very elements that make up all matter as the first stage of the progression of the material universe. So here is a 21st century restatement of the quoted verses:

***"The first stage of the progression of the material universe was the bringing into existence of light as electricity, magnetism, and radiation. This was given independent existence, in contrast to the absence of light; it was just the right beginning."***

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