

Dinosaur Religion: On Interpreting and Misinterpreting the Creation Texts

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Resolution of science/religion conflicts is often thwarted by polarization into extreme viewpoints, such as "scientific creationism" and "scientific naturalism." Not only do the extremes attempt to dismiss each other; ironically, they often have much in common. They both place religious and scientific statements on the same level; they both try to draw religious and anti-religious conclusions from scientific data and theory; they both interpret religious texts, such as the creation accounts, in terms of scientific fact and model—either to defend the scientific truth of the Bible or to reject the Bible as primitive science. If one carefully distinguishes between the special literature and language of the Bible and that of modern science, resolution of apparent conflicts is possible.

One can hear all sorts of marvelous things over that relic of a pretelevision era, the wireless. The following is an excerpt from a radio sermon by a Tennessee country preacher, exhorting on the theme of evolution:

Friends, the work of the Devil is being carried on under many guises, right under our very noses. I was walking down the streets of one of our great cities, and I came upon this establishment, "The Museum of Natural History." There was a sign out in front of this edifice that said, "Come, see and hear about dinosaurs." I was curious about what went on in such places, so I walked in there, and there was this man, a tool of the Devil, preaching about monstrous creatures to all these little unsuspecting children from a school. He was holding in his hand, and reading from, a book called *Prehistoric Animals*.

Now, nothing prehistoric could possibly be Christian. So, I snatched the book from his hand. I was totally upset, in these perilous times, when the Anti-Christ in our government says, "No, you children can't have prayers in school, but you can have dinosaur religion taught every day." And here in this unholy temple of dinosaurs children are being preached to from false bibles and taught to worship idols that never existed. And in their minds belief in these creatures is taking the place of the knowledge of God and God's Word.

So, I cast the book down the steps, and stomped on it. And I tried then and there to plan how I might mount a crusade against this new Devil religion of dinosaur belief. Dinosaurs are the work of the Devil. They are the Devil's plaything. Such godless, communist dinosaur information must be destroyed before it carries us all to perdition.

Though this is naively phrased, there are some genuine problems being alluded to, however crudely and ignorantly put. Some scientists do have a kind of "dinosaur religion," first in the sense in which an evolutionary way of structuring history is seen as a substitute for biblical and theological ways of interpreting existence. Scientific explanations of phenomena are understood as supplanting religious interpretations by being superior and truer accounts of the same things. Some scientists also have a kind of dinosaur religion in the sense in which various alternative metaphysical conclusions—atheism, materialism, secular humanism—are drawn from evolutionary readings of data, even though they do not strictly follow from the data. Naturalistic explanations are seen as

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providing sufficient knowledge, without significant remainder, of the knowable—despite the fact that one would have to be able to stand outside and apart from the context of naturalistic explanation in order to make that judgement. Religious issues, which have been ushered out the front door as no longer acceptable or relevant, are then admitted through the back door on the assumption that they are the inevitable extensions of the scientific world-view.

When evolution is taught in the public school or college classroom as implying either of these propositions, it is "dinosaur religion." When certain scientists suggest that the religious accounts of creation are now outmoded and superseded by modern scientific accounts of things, this is "dinosaur religion." Or when scientists presume that evolutionary scenarios necessarily and logically lead to a rejection of religious belief as a superfluity, this is dinosaur religion. These additional steps are not directly within the province of science, should not be construed as science, or taught as science. They are, themselves, *scientific* superfluities. They involve a leap in the argument, a jump to metaphysical conclusions about immediate and ultimate causation, chance and design, determinism and divine freedom, the natural and the supernatural.

Scientific Imperialism

There seems to be a tendency in all fields of study, including the sciences, to be imperialistic. Whatever academic enterprise we represent, we tend to view all issues from that point of view, as if it were the true center of the universe and the one assured vantagepoint from which to survey all else. Our particular form of knowing and body of knowledge is seen as having the first and last word on the subject, with all other fields forced to bow the knee and pay tribute. It is our tower whose top reaches heaven, and our leading lights who have made a name for themselves. Instead of humbly acknowledging that all forms of human knowing are finite and limited, representing but one or another angle of vision, we make excessive claims for our particular angle and the knowledge it affords.

Psychologists are inclined to view everything psychologically; sociologists sociologically; economists economically; while biologists want to get to the biological basis of the matter. Linguists argue that it is fundamentally important to see any issue from the standpoint of different language

systems. Historians want to discuss everything in the framework of its historical development; anthropologists in the framework of cultural forms. Physicists tend to view the universe in terms of physical relations; chemists in terms of chemical relations; mathematicians in terms of mathematical relations. Philosophers consider themselves capable of philosophizing about anything, and have proceeded accordingly to multiply the subdivisions of their discipline into the philosophy of mind, art, literature, history, law, economics, language, science and religion. And there are religionists, as well, who have tried to argue, not only that theology is king or queen of the sciences, but that the Bible itself offers definitive statements in all these areas, and that all other fields must check the pages of Holy Writ for permissible paradigms, methodologies and conclusions.

One of the results of this kind of imperialism is a failure to appreciate the many different languages and concerns which the different disciplines represent. Language is an amazingly malleable instrument. It has been developed into a great number of different forms, none of which is reducible to any other: biography, homily, poetry, novel, allegory, legend, parable, fable, fairytale, saga, epic, satire, tragedy, comedy, proverb, riddle, joke—right down to instruction manuals, grocery lists, television commercials and subway graffiti. Anyone without training in law has only to try reading a legal document to be impressed with the remarkable plasticity of language in playing so many different language games, each with its own rules, goals and field of play. If one were to judge the merits of a legal contract by the canons of poetry, one could not help but conclude that it was abominable poetry, and unfit to convey poetic truth. If one were nevertheless to insist on defending the poetic character and value of this legal document, despite the overwhelming opinion of the literary community that the material was either unpoetic, or, if poetic, very bad poetry, one would do a great disservice to the document and the legal truths it intends to convey.

It is always of critical importance to know exactly with what type of linguistic usage one is dealing, and to apply the appropriate canons of interpretation. Philosophical language is not the same as biological language; a novelist's use of language is not the same as computer language; theological language is not the same as political language; etc. Each type of language has its own specialized vocabulary or jargon, its own mode of presentation, and its own objectives. Even when the same words are used, they are used in different ways, with



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different nuances and implications.

Some language uses, to be sure, are closer than others. A parable, for example, is closer to biographical writing than to a legal document. It is so close, in fact, that without being told in advance that one is dealing with a parable, or being given clear indications within the parable itself, one might think that one was reading a statement of biographical and historical fact. Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan begins: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. . ." (Luke 10:30). The parable of the Husbandman begins: "A man had two sons; and he went to the first and said. . ." (Matthew 21:28). All of Jesus' parables were, no doubt, "true" to the life of Palestinians in that time period. This "true to life" character allowed people to identify readily with the situations and characters depicted. The parables were not fables, fairytales or fantasies. But they *were* parables, which means that whether the story actually happened, or happened with precisely those details, is immaterial.

The purpose of Jesus' parables was not to convey historical or biographical information, or to discuss the social and political issues of the first century. Its purpose was to be a *parable* of the religious situation. In a parable, religious truth is not being made to conform to historical and biographical reporting. Rather, the reverse is the case: characters and situations are being used as vehicles of religious truth. Insisting that the parables are only "believable" if one can also believe, and perhaps even demonstrate, that they actually happened, and that every detail is historically and biographically true, is to be confused over what the parables are asking one to believe, and what they are aiming to communicate. Their truth is a *parabolic* truth. What they "literally" are is parables. And the only legitimate way of interpreting parables is *parabolically*.

A similar situation exists with respect to the biblical creation texts. They may have the appearance of narrative accounts, whose purpose is to convey information concerning natural history and the life and times of the first humans. Yet the narrative form can be used for a variety of types of literature, from strictly historical narrative to the "once upon a time there lived . . ." of the fable and fairytale. The narrative form itself does not indicate historicity or facticity. That can only be determined by a careful examination of the narrative and its context. It is easy to see, however, how a confusion over the exact linguistic usage could occur. Two types of language which are very close to one another in form are more easily mistaken for each other than those which are quite different. It is doubtful, for example, that it would ever occur to anyone to conclude that Genesis 1 is an *instruction manual* on how to create a universe. It does not have the look of "how to" literature; yet it does have the look of narrative literature. But of what sort?

When one surveys the history of science/religion controversies, one finds linguistic confusion to be a major source of misunderstanding and conflict. The problem is created, on the one side, by those of scientific orientation who, naturally, tend to look at biblical materials in terms of the narrative accounts of modern science and natural history. Having

placed the creation texts in that particular type of linguistic box, the next step is easily taken: to conclude that they represent pre-modern, pre-scientific explanations of things for which we now have better explanations. The creation texts are then seen as examples of ancient attempts at comprehending the world by means of the limited information and tools at their disposal. Since we are in possession of superior knowledge and instrumentation, we have gone beyond these earlier views, more or less as brick buildings have gone beyond straw huts or sheepskin tents. We not only have better explanations; we even have scientific explanations for why ancient peoples

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thought and believed in this curious manner. Thus, we venture to offer psychoanalytic, or sociological, or even sociobiological explanations for religious beliefs. The innermost secrets of these matters, presumably, are now to be found at long last in Freudian psychology, or structural anthropology, or perhaps French existentialism!

Of course, if by pre-scientific we mean only to suggest that the biblical accounts pre-date what we call modern science, then they may be said to be pre-scientific. But the tendency is to translate pre-scientific as un-scientific, or at best as preliminary to science, and therefore as rendered obsolete by more advanced understandings. Yet this would only be possible if one could first assume that biblical uses of language, and scientific uses of language, in dealing with a common theme such as origins, functioned on the same level and in the same way. The very phrasing of the issue in terms of "information" and "explanation" presupposes that the two languages share the same narrative form, ask the same kinds of questions, and deal with the same type of truth. If this is not so, then the whole line of argument is erroneous and irrelevant. It would be like trying to argue that a photograph is a truer and more advanced representation of a subject than a painting, or that Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* is superseded by Freud's analysis of the Oedipus complex, or that Michaelangelo's *Pieta* has been surpassed by NASA's moonlander.

Skeptics are not the only ones confused about this. There are also those who try to interpret the creation texts in relation to scientific statements, not in order to dismiss them as pre-scientific, but in order to defend them as scientifically true. Collisions between science and religion are, in large

part, the result of religious people insisting that the biblical texts function as scientific and historical reports, and that to interpret them otherwise would be unfaithful to them. To compound the confusion, this supposed scientific and historical meaning is said to be the *literal* meaning of the texts.

Given these assumptions, if there appears to be a conflict between biblical statements and scientific or historical statements, the latter must give in as misguided or misinformed. Biblical statements, it is argued, can only be said to be true, reliable, trustworthy and believable if they conform to these, largely modern and essentially secular, uses of language. Thus, quite ironically, those who would *dismiss* the Bible as pre-scientific, and those who would *defend* it as the true science, find themselves in agreement that these biblical texts are to be interpreted "literally"—that is, as intending to offer literal statements of scientific and historical fact.

"Creation Science"

The nomenclature currently used by various fundamentalist groups is itself revealing as to the extent of the linguistic confusion: Scientific Creationism, Creation Science, Creation Research, Bible Science. The resulting mix is neither good Bible nor good science. And the effect is to distort rather than uphold the fundamentals. To suggest that the first chapters of Genesis ought to be read in textbooks and classrooms as an alternative to evolutionary theories presupposes that these chapters are yielding something *comparable* to scientific theories and historical reconstructions of empirical data. But that is precisely what is in question. If they are not comparable, then such a position in seeking to be loyal to the Bible would be unfaithful to it, and while endeavoring to exalt the Bible would only bring dishonor upon it.

The central thesis of "creation science," in the words of a leading exponent, Henry Morris, is essentially this: "The biblical record, accepted in its natural and literal sense, gives the only scientific and satisfying account of the origins of all things. The creation account is clear, definite, sequential and matter-of-fact, giving every appearance of straightforward historical narrative."¹

These assumptions concerning the biblical texts cannot be asserted out of hand and are not given *a priori*. It is by no means self-evident that this material is a "record," or that it gives "every appearance of straightforward historical narrative," or that its "natural" sense is the "literal sense," or that by "literal" is meant "scientific," "sequential," or "matter-of-fact." This may indeed be the way things *appear* to certain modern interpreters, living in an age so dominated by scientific and historical modes of thought, and for whom modern science and historiography offer the criteria by which religious statements are to be judged true or false. But it is by no means obvious that this represents the literary form or religious concern of the Genesis writers. This is the interpretive issue, and it cannot be settled by dogmatic assertions, threats about creeping secularism, or attempts at associating alternative views with skepticism and infidelity. Nor can the issue be settled by marshaling scientific evidence for or against either evolution or creation, since it would first need to be demonstrated that the Genesis accounts are intending to offer scientific and historical statements.

Morris elsewhere states: "It is only in the Bible that we can possibly obtain any information about the methods of creation, the order of creation, the duration of creation, or any of the other details of creation."² Again this assumes, even presumes, that the intent of the biblical materials is to give "information," and that such "information" is concerned with the "method," "order," "duration," and "other details" of creation. Why such technological and chronological and factual information would be of pressing *religious* importance and *spiritual* significance is not at all apparent. And one can well imagine all sorts of "information" in a variety of areas that might have been vouchsafed to the human race had the Bible been in the business of dispensing this kind of knowledge.

When one carefully examines the argument, one discovers that the biblical view of creation is not being pitted against evolutionary theories, as is supposed. Rather, evolutionary theories are being juxtaposed with literalist theories of biblical interpretation. Even if evolution is only a scientific theory of interpretation posing as scientific fact, as the creationists argue, creationism is only a religious theory of biblical interpretation posing as biblical fact. And to add to the problem, it is a religious theory of biblical interpretation which is heavily influenced by modern scientific, historical and technological concerns. It is, therefore, essentially *modernistic*, even though attempting, and claiming, to be truly conservative. A genuine conservatism would, above all, seek to *conserve* the original conception and concern of the biblical materials—not measure and test it by contemporary canons.

One may observe this problem developing in the statement of belief which members of the Creation Research Society are required to sign. It begins:

The Bible is the written Word of God, and because we believe it to be inspired thruout, all of its assertions are historically and scientifically true in all of the original autographs. To the student of nature, this means that the account of origins in Genesis is a factual presentation of simple historical truths.³

There is a curious leap in the statement from the affirmation of the Bible as the inspired Word of God to the conclusion that, therefore, "all of its assertions are scientifically true in all of the original autographs," and furthermore that "this means that the account of origins in Genesis is a factual presentation of simple historical truths." There is a double *non-sequitur* in the statement, even though the conclusions drawn are offered as if logically and necessarily derived from the proposition: "because we believe it to be inspired thruout."

These leaps in the argument indicate the degree to which scientific and historical concerns have come to dominate the interpretation of biblical texts. The result is that the issue of inspiration is completely tied to the assumption of a particular type of statement which the modern world might understand, and be willing to accept, as scientific and historical "fact," "record," or "truth." But to affirm divine inspiration does not dictate only one possible type of literary form, or require God to play according to the rules of any particular linguistic usage. And certainly such demands must not be brought to the text as a prerequisite for "believing" them.

It may surely be said that the Genesis accounts of creation are not in conflict with scientific and historical knowledge. Yet this is not because they can be shown to be in conformity with this knowledge, but precisely because they have little to do with it. They belong to a different literary genre, type of knowledge, and kind of concern. To take an example from poetry, which is considerably closer to the character of the creation materials than scientific or historical prose: a poetic treatment of an autumn sunset is neither scientifically true nor untrue. It needs no harmonization with scientific theories, and requires no scientific confirmation. It is unrelated to that sort of truth; and it uses language in ways that are peculiar to itself.

For someone to endeavor to defend the integrity and worth of a particular poem by attempting to argue that its "assertions" were "scientifically true," and that it was reducible to a "factual presentation of simple historical truths"—in the original autograph copy—would be no defense at all. It would be a confusion of categories, like trying to defend a client being sued for divorce by introducing the evidence in a traffic court! Any defense of a poem based on such confusions, and any attack on other forms of literature which do not "agree" with the poem, no matter how well-meaning and heroic, would be the greatest possible disservice to the poem, the spirit of the words, the intentions of the poet, and poetry in general. In its anxiety to protect the poem from unappreciative critics, it would succeed in opening up the poem to even greater criticism and misunderstanding.

Similarly, a "literal" interpretation of the Genesis accounts is inappropriate, misleading and unworkable. It presupposes and insists upon a kind of literature and intention that is not there. In so doing it misses the symbolic richness and spiritual power of what is there. And it subjects the biblical materials, and the theology of creation, to a completely pointless and futile controversy. The first questions in interpreting any part of Scripture are always, what kind of literature is one dealing with, and what issues are being addressed? One cannot merely assume from the superficial look of the material, as it appears to modern eyes, that the material is of the same order as what we might call history or science. One must first provide strong evidence from within the passage itself, and from a careful study of the theological and cultural context of the passage, as to the specific literary form and religious concern involved. When one does this, the literalist assumptions turn out to be far afield, and to have been brought to the passage as a precondition for its acceptance.

The Context of Genesis 1

Since it is the 6-day creation account of Genesis 1 that is central to the "creation model," and most commonly compared with modern scientific accounts, we will focus on the issue of its interpretation. And we will concentrate on the historical context and literary form of the passage, since it is here that we find important clues as to the nature of the account. We cannot simply abstract scripture from its original context of meaning, as if the people to whom it was most immediately addressed were of no consequence. And, having created a vacuum of meaning, we cannot then arbitrarily substitute our own issues and literary assumptions. Certainly

the Bible is not restricted to the ancient world, and has relevance for the modern world. But too much haste in applying the Bible to our own situation, lifting its words out of context, may seriously misinterpret and misapply its message. No matter how well-intentioned, this would be like grabbing medicine bottles off the shelf and administering them to the sick without carefully reading the ingredients and directions provided on the labels.

These rules are especially critical in understanding Genesis. Even a cursory reading of the context in which, and to which, Genesis 1 was written would indicate that the alternative to its "creation model" was obviously not some burgeoning theory of evolution. All cultures surrounding Israel had their origin myths, some impressively developed in epic proportions and

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covering almost every aspect of the cosmos in great detail. Yet they were, from the standpoint of Jewish monotheism, hopelessly polytheistic.

In fact, if one looks at the cosmological alternatives that were prominent in the ancient world, one senses immediately that the current debate over creation and evolution would have seemed very strange, if not unintelligible, to the writers and readers of Genesis. Scientific and historical issues in their modern secular form were not issues in debate at all. Science and natural history as we know them simply did not exist, even though they owe a debt to the positive value given to the natural order by the biblical affirmation of creation, and to its monotheistic emptying nature of its many resident divinities. What did exist—what very much existed—and what pressed on Jewish faith from all sides, and even from within, were the religious problems of idolatry and syncretism.

The critical question in the creation account of Genesis 1 was polytheism versus monotheism. That was the burning issue of the day, not some issue which certain Americans 2,500 years later in the midst of a scientific age might imagine that it was. And one of the reasons for its being such a burning issue was that Jewish monotheism was such a unique and hard-won faith. The temptations of idolatry and syncretism were everywhere. Every nation surrounding Israel, both great and small, was polytheistic. And many Jews themselves held—as they always had held—similar inclinations. Hence the frequent prophetic diatribes against altars in high places, the Canaanite cult of Baal, and "whoring after other gods."

Read through the eyes of the people who heard it or recited it, Genesis 1 would seem very different from the way most people today would tend to read it—including both evolutionists who may dismiss it as a prescientific account of origins, and creationists who may try to defend it as the true science and literal history of origins. For most peoples in the ancient world all the various regions of nature were divine. Sun, moon and stars were *gods*. There were sky gods and earth gods and water gods. There were gods of light and darkness, rivers and vegetation, animals and fertility. Everywhere the ancients turned there were divinities to be taken into account, petitioned, appeased, pacified, solicited, avoided. Though for us nature has been “demythologized” and “naturalized”—in large part because of this very passage of Scripture—for ancient Jewish faith a divinized nature posed a fundamental religious problem.

In addition, pharaohs, kings and heroes were often seen as sons of gods, or at least as special mediators between the divine and human spheres. The greatness and vaunted power and glory of the successive waves of empires that impinged on or conquered Israel (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia) posed an analogous problem of idolatry in the human sphere.

In the light of this historical context it becomes clearer what Genesis 1 is undertaking and accomplishing: a radical and sweeping affirmation of monotheism vis-a-vis polytheism, syncretism and idolatry. Each day of creation takes on two principal categories of divinity in the pantheons of the day, and declares that these are not gods at all, but creatures—creations of the one true God who is the only one, without a second or third. Each day dismisses an additional cluster of deities, arranged in a cosmological and symmetrical order.

On the first day the gods of light and darkness are dismissed. On the second day, the gods of sky and sea. On the third day, earth gods and gods of vegetation. On the fourth day, sun, moon and star gods. The fifth and sixth days take away any associations with divinity from the animal kingdom. And finally human existence, too, is emptied of any intrinsic divinity—while at the same time *all* human beings, from the greatest to the least, and not just pharaohs, kings and heroes, are granted a divine likeness. And in that divine likeness, all human beings are given the royal prerogatives of dominion over the earth, and of mediation between heaven and earth.

On each day of creation another set of idols is smashed. These, O Israel, are no gods at all—even the great gods and rulers of conquering superpowers. They are the creations of that transcendent One who is not to be confused with any piece of the furniture of the universe of creaturely habitation. The creation is good, it is very good, but it is not divine.

We are then given a further clue concerning the polemical character of the passage when the final verse (2:4a) concludes: “These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.” Why the word “generations,” especially if what is being offered is a chronology of days of creation? Now to polytheist and monotheist alike the word “generations” at this point would immediately call one thing to mind.

If we should ask how these various divinities were related to one another in the pantheons of the day, the most common answer would be that they were related as members of a family tree. We would be given a genealogy, as in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, where the great tangle of Greek gods and goddesses were sorted out by generations. Ouranos begat Kronos; Kronos begat Zeus.

The Egyptians, Canaanites, Assyrians and Babylonians all had their “generations of the gods.” Thus the priestly account, which had begun with the majestic words, “In the

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beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” now concludes—over against all the impressive and colorful pantheons with their divine pedigrees—“These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were *created*.” It was a final pun on the concept of the divine family tree.

Creation versus Procreation

Other cosmologies operated, essentially, on an analogy with *procreation*. A cosmic egg is produced and hatches. A cosmic womb gives birth. Or a god and goddess mate and beget further gods and goddesses. In Genesis a radical shift has taken place from the imagery of *procreation* to that of *creation*, from a *genealogy* of the gods to a *genesis* of nature. When Hesiod entitled his monumental effort at systematizing the complicated web of relationships between the many Greek gods and goddesses a *theogony*, he was reflecting the fundamental character of such cosmologies. They were theogonies (birth of the gods) and theo-biographies as well. They depicted the origin, life and times of the various divinities. And they interpreted “nature” in terms of these divine relationships. Procreative, family, social and political relationships were used to describe the natural order, understood as divine beings and powers in their interaction.

Thus, the alternative to the “creation model” is the “procreation model.” If there is any sense in which the “creation model” of Genesis stands over against evolutionary models of natural history, it is only in the sense that *it self-consciously and decisively rejects any evolution of cosmic forces presented in terms of an evolution of the gods*. For that, by and large, was what polytheistic cosmologies were: the evolution of natural phenomena read as the emergence of new species

of divinity. And the interactions within nature—its ecology—were read as the interactions within and between various families, clans and armies of gods.

The fundamental question at stake, then, could not have been the scientific question of how things achieved their present form and by what processes, nor the historical question about time periods and chronological order. The issue was idolatry, not science; syncretism, not natural history; theology, not chronology; affirmation of faith in one transcendent God, not empirical or speculative theories of origin. Attempting to be loyal to the Bible by turning the creation accounts into a kind of science or history is like trying to be loyal to the teachings of Jesus by arguing that his parables are actual historical events, and only reliable and trustworthy when taken literally as such.

Even among interpreters who do not identify with the scientific literalism of the creationists, one often finds a sense of relief expressed in noting that the sequence of days in Genesis 1 is relatively “modern,” and offers a rough approximation to contemporary reconstructions of the evolution of matter and life. At best the days, read as epochs, provide a *very* rough approximation to recent scientific scenarios. The entire progression actually begins, not with a burst of light, but with watery chaos—as in both Egyptian and Babylonian mythologies—which hardly corresponds to any modern understanding of origins. The “formless earth” is also depicted as existing before the light of day one and the sun, moon and stars of day four. Vegetation, too, is created before the sun, moon and stars, on the third day, and surely would have wilted awaiting the next epoch. And no ingenious arguments about heavy cloud covers until the fourth epoch will work, since the text refers to the sun, moon and stars being “made” and “set in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth” on the fourth day.

Still, no matter how close the approximations to modern natural histories might be, the entire line of argument is a lapse into a form of literalism, with its assumption that this account is in some way comparable to a scientific, historical one. If there is a “modern” appearance to the account, it is not because it anticipates modern scientific constructions by presenting a similar sketch of a scientific order. It is rather because it anticipates them by preparing the way *for* them, in purging the cosmic order of all gods and goddesses. In Genesis the natural order, for the first time, becomes natural rather than supernatural. Nature has been radically demythologized and de-divinized.

What was formerly divine, or a divine region, is now

declared to be “creature.” Nature, in fact, could not become nature in the sense in which we have come to use the term until it was emptied of divinity by monotheistic faith. Nor could science and natural history become possibilities until nature was thoroughly demythologized. One may have half-way houses, such as astrology and alchemy, but only when nature is no longer divine can it be probed and studied and organized without fear of trespass and reprisal.

This does not mean that nature is secularized or desacralized; for it is still sacred by virtue of having been created by God, declared to be good, and placed under ultimate divine sovereignty. What it *does* mean is that to treat Genesis 1 as of the same order as later science is to confuse result and cause. Genesis 1 clears the cosmic stage of its mythical scenes and polytheistic dramas, making way for different scenes and dramas, both monotheistic and naturalistic. Thus, if there is a scientific look to the text, it is not because it is an early form of natural history, but because the cosmic order, in its totality, is now defined as nature.

Fortunately, the literalism of the skeptics who would dismiss Genesis as pre-scientific conjectures about origins, and the literalism of the scientific creationists who would insist that Genesis offers the only correct paradigm of origins, are not the only options. In fact, they are not legitimate options at all. What Genesis 1 is, literally, is a cosmogony. But it is a very unique cosmogony. It uses the cosmogonic form to reject in a decisive manner its familiar content, whether as *birth* of the cosmos or birth of the *gods*. And it fills this form with radically new content: the natural objects of divine creation and sovereignty.

For this one Creator-God no birthdate can be given, no cosmic region assigned, no biographical details offered. In contrast to the often lurid accounts of the lives of the gods and goddesses, their family quarrels, their jealousies and power struggles, their sexual exploits and insane rage, their cosmic battles, rape and plunder, there is no divine story to be told. The story of this God is not a personal biography, but the story of interaction with the world of his creation, and with human history. These are the issues being addressed. And these are the fundamentals of the doctrine of creation.

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- ²*Ibid.*, p. 16.
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