

“The authors of this book contend that while it is sometimes helpful to explore competing views on a particular topic, there is also value in appreciating complementary models to gain an appreciation of a variety of productive vantage points. They serve readers well by presenting a collaboration of perspectives that together unpack an understanding of Genesis One that is more robust than any single approach can achieve. Their clear writing and their literary, cultural, and theological sensitivity provide a multidimensional expansion of interpretative insights that not only enrich our view of the creation narrative but suggest ways that we can finally move beyond some of the persistent squabbles that have divided Christians.”

—John Walton,
Professor of Old Testament, Wheaton College,
author of *The Lost World of Genesis One*

“In *The Manifold Beauty of Genesis One*, Davidson and Turner persuasively describe the literary beauty and rich theological message of the opening chapter of the Bible. Genesis One proclaims that God created everything, but its message goes much deeper and further in scope. Davidson and Turner masterfully unpack Genesis One to reveal seven interlacing and complementary layers of meaning. This book is a must-read for everyone who wants to know Scripture, and therefore God, better.”

—Tremper Longman, III,
Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies,
Westmont College

“In *The Manifold Beauty of Genesis One*, Gregg Davidson and Kenneth Turner attempt what rarely occurs in biblical studies. Instead of devoting their energies to debunking interpretations of Genesis One with which they disagree, and then triumphantly claiming the higher ground, they seek to capitalize on the strengths of divergent points of view to create a more colorful, variegated, and nuanced understanding. Approaching the biblical creation account from a thoroughly orthodox and evangelical perspective, they offer guidance in both substance and tone for pastors and lay readers. Some may not agree with some of their interpretations, but all should welcome this invitation to conversation and reflection on a rich text that has engaged scholars and ordinary people for thousands of years.”

—Daniel Block,
Professor Emeritus of Old Testament, Wheaton College

“What a friendly and helpful book Gregg Davidson and Kenneth Turner have given us! With a clear commitment to Scripture, solid knowledge of their subject, and a gentle manner, they have offered us many ways to enrich our understanding of Genesis One and to quell our fears of its ‘conflict with science.’ They handle objections thoughtfully and persuasively, and they even provide discussion questions after each chapter. This should serve the church well.”

—C. John Collins,
Professor of Old Testament,
Covenant Theological Seminary

“Gregg Davidson and Kenneth Turner have written a superb book devoted to understanding the riches and beauty of Genesis One and its wide-ranging implications. They show how this opening and foundational chapter to Scripture is richly textured, multi-layered, and theologically robust. It is a feast for mind and heart!”

—Paul Copan,
Professor of Philosophy and Ethics (Pledger Family Chair),
Palm Beach Atlantic University

“This work is an undertaking of monumental implication. This multi-layered approach to interpreting the Bible’s creation narrative challenges the reader by painting a picture of God’s creative communication that is greater than merely the sum of existing views, which so often examine only limited aspects of Scripture. *The Manifold Beauty of Genesis One* offers a fuller appreciation for the God who desires to capture his image-bearers’ attention and invite them into a deeper devotion. The hopeful result is both a renewed sense of awe for the believer and a more irenic disposition to conversations over science and faith.”

—Steve Douglas,
Pastor of Groups and Adult Ministries,
The Grove Church, MN

“Davidson and Turner have accomplished their aim of demonstrating to the general Christian reader—in a clearly written way—the rich tapestry of different meanings inherent in Genesis One. But they have done more. By including many possible understandings, ‘none widely departing from the rule of faith’ (in Augustine’s words), they encourage readers to weigh the biblical evidence for themselves as responsible vessels of the Holy Spirit. Along the way, they show how disagreement on interpretation need be no barrier to fellowship in the truth. Furthermore, by setting the creation story in the context of a messianic biblical theology, their book serves as an introduction to understanding the whole Bible message. All in all, this is a significant achievement, and highly recommended for every serious Christian.”

—Jon Garvey,
author of *God’s Good Earth* and *The Generations of Heaven and Earth*

“In theological and seminary circles, the creation account of Genesis has been presented and interpreted throughout history in a multitude of ways, each side with their own pros and cons. But what if instead of choosing a side, there existed a rarely acknowledged harmony to those well-published views? The authors of *The Manifold Beauty of Genesis One* provide a worthwhile volume to scholars and laypeople alike as they engage in such an essential and multifaceted aspect to the Christian faith.”

—Foster Gullett,
missionary, MTW—Italy

“*The Manifold Beauty of Genesis One* gives the reader a concise presentation of where evangelical scholarship is now concerning the opening chapter of the Bible. It presents seven different approaches to interpreting the creation account. This one feature makes the book a worthy purchase. However, Davidson and Turner go beyond merely surveying current interpretations. They show that—like overlapping tiles of a roof—these approaches collectively serve as complementary themes, which in turn reinforce the unified message of Genesis One.”

—Ken Keathley,
Senior Professor of Theology,
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“With so many polemical books about the Genesis creation account, the grace you will find in this one is refreshing! Jesus promised that the Spirit would teach the church as a community (John 16:13; the ‘you’ in that verse is plural). This book models confidence in that promise, bringing together various insights from differing exegetes who share a high view of Scripture. The result is a book that genuinely advances the conversation. But more importantly, it sets a Christlike tone of fraternity that is too often missing from creation debates. May God use this work to enrich the church, as a communion of saints, in their worship of the Creator!”

—Michael LeFebvre,
pastor, author of *The Liturgy of Creation*

“As a pastor and church planter, many of my conversations with both Christians and non-Christians inevitably turn to the Genesis creation story. With so many perspectives and interpretations, it can be difficult to know which is the ‘right’ one. Davidson and Turner free us from this narrow way of thinking, and provide a better way forward. They help us to see that the different perspectives on the Genesis story aren’t competing with each other, rather they are part of a rich multi-layered understanding of God and his creation. This book is an invaluable tool for pastors and ministry professionals. It helps us to better understand the Genesis story, and explain it to others. Comprehensive and illuminating, this book belongs in every pastor’s and church’s library.”

—Mario Russo,
pastor, church planter in Germany

“In contrast to singular and contentious readings of the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2, here is a book that explores multiple levels of meaning in these inexhaustible texts. Drawing on ancient Christian commentary and more recent exegetical studies, Davidson and Turner exhibit the theological richness of Genesis 1 and 2. In the process they illustrate the deep connection between creation and the entire drama of Scripture, while inspiring the reader to celebrate the one God who is both Creator and Redeemer.”

—J. Richard Middleton,
Professor of Biblical Worldview and Exegesis,
Northeastern Seminary

“If Scripture is authoritative and inerrant in all that it teaches, how do we make sense of the many conflicting ways that Genesis is understood? Which one of the many readings of Genesis One is correct? To this false choice, Davidson and Turner respond that Genesis is an ancient text, rich with manifold layers of beauty. Many interpretations are, in fact, correct at the same time, each one resonating with a different layer of meaning. Turning from the cacophony of falsely conflicted interpretations, we are invited to worship in a symphony of many interpretations true and held together. The book samples the melodies of seven layers, but we should wonder about and search for layers in Genesis beyond just these. Disagree with the particulars if you must, but—in calling the church to recover the multifaceted beauty of Scripture—this book rightly affirms the diversity of many faithful readings. In reading Genesis together, we find that our diversity is a strength, not a weakness. As declares the Lausanne Covenant, our diversity ‘[discloses] to the whole Church ever more of the many-colored wisdom of God.’”

—S. Joshua Swamidass,

Associate Professor of Laboratory and Genomic Medicine, Washington University,
and author of *The Genealogical Adam and Eve*

“Davidson and Turner have managed to pull together a most helpful combination of approaches to the reading of Genesis One. They have shown how these approaches collectively contribute to a fuller understanding of its meaning. This approach to the reading of the first chapter of the Bible has tremendous potential for helping us in the ongoing discussion over the relationship between the first chapter of the Bible and modern science. The authors help us see that we can and must allow the Bible its own concerns as we bring it to bear on our concerns about God, people, and the world of science.”

—Richard Averbeck,

Professor of Old Testament and Semitic Languages,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“The effect of our modern society is to obscure Genesis 1 in clouds and storm, leaving a mountain few dare to climb. Happily, Gregg Davidson and Kenneth Turner have braved its heights, and returned with some of the most helpful biblical insights that I have seen. They present a rich, multidimensional perspective that remains entirely faithful to Scripture. Anyone seeking to understand the biblical account of creation should adventure into *The Manifold Beauty of Genesis One*. A compelling read for the expositor and novice alike.”

—Fletch Matlack

Senior Pastor,
Immanuel Baptist Church, NY

“*The Manifold Beauty of Genesis One* is a deep, patient, reverent unfolding of Scripture that relates to the creation event. This is a book that thoughtful students of Scripture will not only learn from, but rejoice over. I wish I had it years ago to give to people who asked me about Genesis! I thank God it is available to thinking Christians now, and look forward to giving away many copies.”

—Paul Lundquist,
former Wycliffe linguist,
missionary, pastor

“*The Manifold Beauty of Genesis One* is a fantastic resource for anyone teaching on Genesis chapter 1 or for anyone who has simply struggled with Genesis One and wants a richer understanding of this very important text. This book is very well written, it is a nice balance of theology and research, and yet it is accessible for the average person. *The Manifold Beauty of Genesis One* and its seven-layer approach is a very interesting read. I love the tone of the book. It is gracious, open, and inviting. I appreciate that the authors anticipate objections and address them openly and fairly. I was also impressed with the abundant footnotes and references. I highly recommend this book to believer and skeptic alike.”

—Brad Bertelsen, former Area Director,
InterVarsity Christian Fellowship

“By avoiding the scientific debates over the age of the earth and instead focusing on *The Manifold Beauty of Genesis One*, Davidson and Turner, have provided a helpful tool to reading, studying, and meditating upon the first chapter of the Bible. They share thoughtful approaches to the text used by faithful believers over the centuries that illumine the biblical creation story while maintaining a commitment to the divine inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. This would be a great study for churches, small groups, and anyone desiring to gain a deeper understanding of the beauty, depth, and power of one of the foundational passages of our faith.”

—Joel Woodruff,
President,
C. S. Lewis Institute

“Fundamentally, biblical scholarship is simple. Ideas and positions are pitted against others to identify deficiencies. In many cases, this is also done to see which will reign supreme. Yet, when it comes to Genesis One, the hostile side of scholarship is revealed. Not only is the discussion often about exposing weaknesses of other positions or promoting one position as superior, but it also seems to be about embarrassing the opposition by exposing their fallacies and showing how they fail to engage the Bible with the reverence that it deserves. However, in *The Manifold Beauty of Genesis One*, Davidson and Turner offer a work that cuts against these trends. By discussing seven different ways to understand Genesis One as complementary (not competing) positions, they not only introduce the reader to major interpretive camps of the Bible’s inaugural chapter, but they also display the intricacies of biblical hermeneutics. But most excitingly, by shedding light on the depth and richness of Genesis One in the manner they do, they just may begin to facilitate irenic debate among the interpretive tribes of Genesis One that otherwise look skeptically upon each other. This work is most welcome. It displays how embracing different—but legitimate—interpretations of the biblical text can bolster one’s appreciation for the beauty of God’s Word.”

—David Schreiner,
Associate Dean & Associate Professor of Old Testament,
Wesley Biblical Seminary

The
MANIFOLD
BEAUTY
of
GENESIS
ONE

A Multi-Layered Approach

Gregg Davidson & Kenneth J. Turner



The Manifold Beauty of Genesis One: A Multi-Layered Approach

© 2021 by Gregg Davidson and Kenneth J. Turner

Published by Kregel Academic, an imprint of Kregel Publications, 2450 Oak Industrial Dr. NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49505-6020.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without written permission of the publisher, except for brief quotations in printed reviews.

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. May not copy or download more than 500 consecutive verses of the ESV Bible or more than one half of any book of the ESV Bible.

The Hebrew font, NewJerusalemU, is available from www.linguistsoftware.com/lgku.htm, +1-425-775-1130.

The illustration on page 53 is under Creative Commons licensing, and is in public domain.

ISBN 978-0-8254-4544-6

Printed in the United States of America

21 22 23 24 25 / 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	1
Introduction: The Many Layers of Genesis 1	3
A Model Approach: What Can Be Learned from a Genealogy?	15
Layer 1: Song	27
Layer 2: Analogy	41
Layer 3: Polemic	55
Layer 4: Covenant	77
Layer 5: Temple	99
Layer 6: Calendar	121
Layer 7: Land	143
Conclusion	167
Appendix 1: An Unbroken Covenant with Nature	179
Appendix 2: Excerpts from Ancient Near East Origin Myths	183
Bibliography	187
Author Index	197
Subject Index	200
Scripture Index	205

INTRODUCTION

The Many Layers of Genesis 1

The opening chapter of the Bible tells an amazing story. It draws on the oldest of stories, likely repeated in various forms across generations by ancient orators before being recorded for the fledgling nation of Israel. Though ancient in origin, its message has spread across the globe and permeated the consciousness of even the most technologically advanced cultures. It touches on the deepest of human questions about where we came from, how we are related to others from distant times and lands, the nature and character of the material world, and, most importantly, who is responsible for bringing the world into existence.

In modern times, however, the richness and beauty of this story is too often overwhelmed by acrimony, with verbal wars fought over the appropriate interpretation of the text. The conflict would be easier to understand if the battles were principally between those who believe in the inspiration of the Bible and those who do not, but it isn't that simple. The discord runs deep within the ranks of those who hold to the authority and divine inspiration of the Scriptures. Even among those who self-identify as biblical inerrantists, views can radically differ, with fortified theological trenches dug to separate Christian from Christian. Churches have split and friendships have been lost over disagreements on how this singular text should be understood.¹

It is our belief that much of this conflict derives from a failure to fully embrace what the church has long affirmed about the nature of the Bible as a

1. A personal friend even experienced a divorce driven by a shift in understanding of Gen. 1.

whole. When reading beyond Genesis, many Christians have recognized the Bible is not a one-dimensional script, but often contains layers to its message—layers that will sometimes be apprehended only after the third or tenth or hundredth visit. Gregory the Great, an early pope and theologian, captured this sense well in his study of Job, describing the Bible as “a river in which a lamb could walk and an elephant could swim.”² He recognized some themes in Job that were obvious from a superficial reading, and some that could only be plumbed by careful study, approaching it from multiple perspectives.³

Few Christians would disagree with Gregory’s assessment of Job or of the Bible in general.⁴ Yet when it comes to Genesis, the discussion suddenly changes. If listening in on a typical conversation over the proper understanding of the creation story, one may come away with the impression that there is *one and only one* way to understand it. Moreover, there is often an accompanying sense of urgency, that to get it wrong on Genesis 1 is to get it wrong on all of Scripture.⁵ To truly believe the Bible means to betroth oneself to the one true meaning, forsaking all others. Borrowing from Tolkien, the faithful seek to find the One Interpretation to Rule Them All.⁶

But what if we approached Genesis 1 with the same search for *richness*—that it too may contain *layers* of truth, each complementing and expanding on the others? Is it possible that more than one angle or emphasis or theme could be simultaneously valid? We are not suggesting something mystical or some sort of free-for-all in which a passage can mean something different for every reader. On any biblical subject, there will never be a shortage of interpretations that are simply wrong, whether because of logical inconsistencies or human bias overprinted on a biblical text. So what exactly do we mean by layers of truth?

As an illustration, consider this example from God’s creation. Suppose that we explore a mineshaft and come across a beautiful mineral formation.

2. Gregory the Great, *Moral Reflections on the Book of Job*, 1:53.

3. It was common in medieval times to consider Scripture from four perspectives or senses: historical sense, allegorical sense, moral sense, and anagogical sense (pertaining to the afterlife or ultimate things). Wikipedia, s.v., “Allegory in the Middle Ages,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allegory_in_the_Middle_Ages.

4. The evangelical Lausanne Covenant affirms that the Holy Spirit “illuminates the minds of God’s people in every culture to perceive its truth freshly through their own eyes and thus discloses to the whole Church ever more of *the many-colored wisdom of God*” (emphasis added). Section 2: “The Authority and Power of the Bible” (cf. Eph. 3:10).

5. The seven days of creation extend a few verses into Gen. 2. As we will note later, we use “Genesis 1” as shorthand for Gen. 1:1–2:3.

6. *Interpretation* is used in the common sense here as a single thread of understanding or meaning. More explanation follows later in the Introduction.

Upon examination, we find that it is composed chiefly of the elements calcium and fluorine, with pinkish crystals taking the shape of interconnected cubes. A scratch test demonstrates that it is harder than calcite and softer than apatite. All this contributes to identifying the mineral as fluorite. This characterization represents one layer of truth—one that excludes competing options such as misidentifying it as quartz, or errant claims that it is made of lead and silicon.

But something surprising happens when we consider this sample in a different light. Not metaphorically speaking, but literally—a different *light*. If held under shortwave ultraviolet light (invisible to the human eye), the pink crystal suddenly glows blue! The mineral is phosphorescent, absorbing ultraviolet light and emitting it back as a visible shade of blue. Our previous identification does not suddenly become false because of this new discovery. It is still true that it is made of calcium and fluorine. It is still shaped in cubes. And it is still genuinely pink under normal light. It is still fluorite. But under the new light, another layer of truth about this mineral becomes evident. It is an understanding we would never have discovered without looking for it. The example could be extended even further, for varieties of fluorite exhibit even more colors under *longwave* ultraviolet light, and may even display yet another color when heated (thermoluminescence). Each represents a different layer of truth that expands our understanding and appreciation of this mineral.

LAYERED TRUTH IN SCRIPTURE

A critical aspect of our mineral example is the *complementary* nature of each discovery. Blue coloration under one light does not challenge or negate pink coloration under another frequency of light. If asked whether our fluorite crystal is pink or blue, we might playfully answer *Yes!*

We find an analogous principle at work in Scripture. Two examples follow—one looking forward to a promised messiah and one looking back to events from Israel's history.

Example 1: Isaiah's Messiah

Early in the book of Isaiah, the prophet speaks of a messiah who will come as a conquering king. A child will be born who will sit on the throne of David, establishing his kingdom forever (Isa. 9:1–7). The description of this coming king includes breaking the rod of the oppressor, burning up opposing armies as fuel for a divine fire, and dividing the spoil. Such words were likely the reason why many of the Jews expected Jesus—if he was truly the Messiah—to

take up the sword against Rome, and why the mother of James and John asked that her sons be seated to Jesus's right and left in his coming kingdom.

The misunderstanding of the true ministry of Jesus came, in part, from focusing on only one of the messianic layers in Isaiah. Reading ahead, the same prophet speaks of a gentle servant who will not raise his voice in the street, or snuff out a smoldering wick until justice is established on earth; a man who will be a light to the Gentiles, opening eyes that are blind and freeing captives from prison (Isa. 42:1–9). And still another layer is revealed in the well-known “suffering servant” passage of Isaiah 52:13–53:12. Here we find a description of the Messiah lacking physical beauty, despised and rejected, a man who would know suffering and pain, who would be crushed by God for our iniquities and cut off from the land of the living.

Isaiah was not confused whether the Messiah would come as conquering king, gentle healer, or propitiatory sacrifice. All are true, each representing a different layer of understanding, leading to a deeper, richer understanding of how the Messiah did and will yet come.

Example 2: Sarah and Hagar, history and analogy

A second example draws attention to different perspectives from different biblical authors on the same set of characters and events: Sarah and her maid-servant Hagar. In Genesis, God promises a son to Abraham, but his wife Sarah is barren.⁷ Not trusting things to change, especially given her advanced age, Sarah gives Hagar to Abraham to produce a son on her behalf (Gen. 16). Years later, Sarah herself conceives and gives birth to her own son (Gen. 21). At one level (one layer), this is a simple narration of historical events and interactions with God in Israel's past. At another level, it provides a moral lesson that God is faithful and sufficient to fulfill his promises, even when it seems impossible to us. Still another layer is God's intention of setting a people apart for himself, starting with the intentional selection of Abraham and Sarah.

But what if someone were to suggest that while this story is indeed historical, we can also now understand it *allegorically*? You might protest that it cannot be both, until being reminded that the “someone” we speak of is the apostle Paul (Gal. 4:21–31). Without denying the historical nature of the text, Paul nonetheless ascribes a deeper, symbolic meaning to the story, saying “this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants”

7. Abraham and Sarah's names were still Abram and Sarai at this point in the story (Gen. 16).

(Gal. 4:24).⁸ Hagar (the slave woman) represents the old covenant, and her son represents children born according to the flesh (the present Jerusalem). Sarah (the free woman) represents the new covenant, and her son represents the children born of promise (the Jerusalem above). Thus, the same story conveys different layers of truth: historical, moral, *and* symbolic. Each layer of understanding adds to the richness of the text.

With all this in mind, we will explore a series of possible layers of truth derived from the opening chapter of Genesis. No layer will be presented in competition with the others, as is commonly found in books with titles like *Four Views on [insert theological issue]*. Rather, they are presented as *complementary* perspectives. One might think of these layers like overlapping tiles on a roof. In one sense, each tile is independent of the others. A single tile exists on its own as something real and genuine. But one tile does a poor job of shedding rain. When joined with others, the entire structure beneath is sheltered from the storm. The image of overlapping tiles serves as an apt metaphor for a second reason. While each layer will draw out something unique from the creation story, the textual or archaeological support for one layer will sometimes also serve to support another. Arguments used to defend each layer will overlap.

We said *possible* layers above, for we will not suggest or argue with certainty that *every* detail of *every* layer we describe was intended by the original writer or by the ultimate Author. You may find as you read that some of the layers or their parts resonate with your understanding of God's character and written Word, while finding others less convincing. Our primary thesis, that Genesis 1 contains layers of truth, is not dependent on all of our proposed layers being accepted, or that every element within each layer be affirmed. It is not an all-or-nothing proposition. The manifold beauty of the text should be apparent even if only a subset of the layers is embraced. In a similar vein, we make no claim that the layers we present exhaust all possibilities.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

A common theme through each layer in this book will be to understand the text through the eyes of the original audience.⁹ One of the surest ways to misinterpret

8. Biblical scholars disagree whether Paul's use of the word *allegoreo* in Gal. 4:24 fits the technical sense of allegory, typology, or something else. The point we make of multiple layers of understanding is not dependent on resolving this question.

9. The original audience when Genesis was written was the nation of Israel, beginning at the time of the exodus and Mount Sinai. Some parts of the Pentateuch are clearly post-

Scripture is to assume its writers were guided by cultural norms equivalent to our own. If this does not strike you as intuitively obvious, consider for a moment the expected result of spending a month in a foreign land, assuming that everyone you encounter will conform to the cultural nuances of your home country. New and lasting friendships with the locals will not be a likely outcome!

The culture into which the Old Testament was written was part of the ancient Near East (abbreviated to ANE throughout this book). The language of the Bible embraces the time and place of its writing, with no attempt to normalize wording for distant lands or future civilizations. In the pages of Scripture, angels armed for battle do not arrive in mechanized vehicles with automatic rifles, but ride in chariots and carry swords (e.g., 2 Kings 6:17; Num. 22:23). A business transaction does not end with a handshake or a signature, but with a sandal removed and exchanged (Ruth 4:7–8). A young widow with no children is not encouraged to remarry and start again, but to move in with her brother-in-law to raise up children in her departed husband’s name (Gen. 38:6–11).

In short, the Bible does not bend itself to match the sensitivities and nuances of *our* culture. God spoke to his people in the context of their own time and their own place.¹⁰ If we wish our understanding of Scripture to grow, the onus is on us to put ourselves into the mindset and worldview of that original audience, recognizing that there will be times when modern, culturally infused standards forced on the Bible simply do not work.

ADDRESSING CONCERNS

The preceding paragraphs may raise some concerns for cautious readers regarding our assumptions and motivations. We have an appreciation and respect for these concerns, as we also wish to honor the inspired authority of the biblical text. The most common concerns are identified by category below, with our explanations and assurances.

For all times and peoples?

When we stress the importance of understanding the Bible from the perspective of the original audience, are we suggesting the Bible was not written for all

Mosaic (such as Moses’s obituary), with some scholars arguing for updates extending into the period of exile. Our references to the “original audience” are largely the same for the people of Israel at the time of Moses and up through the exile.

10. A common expression to this point, popularized by OT scholar John Walton, is that the Bible was written *for* us, but not *to* us.

times and all peoples? What about the *perspicuity* of Scripture—the doctrine that says the central message of the Bible is clear for all readers at all times? To answer, the doctrine of perspicuity, or clarity, of the Bible pertains to the fundamental message of salvation.¹¹ The need for and path to God’s forgiveness and redemption is not occluded in cryptic language or the nuances of an ancient culture. It is clearly expressed for all who read with an open heart. The doctrine makes no claim, however, about the clarity or ease of understanding of the Bible as a whole. If the intention of every passage of Scripture leapt from the page upon the first reading, there would be no point to seminary degrees or even personal Bible study. Scripture is simple to understand in some places and more difficult in others. More to the point of this book, it may be that one layer of understanding is indeed easily apprehended from a cursory reading of a text, but a sense of the richness and depth of the same text may come only after years of study.

Dependence on archaeology

Much of what we know about ancient Near Eastern culture has come from archaeological discoveries in the last two hundred years. If we draw on those discoveries, will we be inferring that a true understanding of Genesis was lost to most of the history of the church until the discovery of the ruins of ancient libraries? At a broad level, we can answer that none of the presented layers are entirely new. While the development or details of some layers came to fruition only in recent times, the underlying premise of each finds ancient support in the history of Jewish and Christian interpretation. Regarding the more recent developments, we return to the subject of perspicuity. Aspects of Genesis critical to our understanding of God’s sovereignty, our sinful condition and need of redemption, and God’s continued interest in his creation are evident even from a superficial reading. A greater knowledge of ancient Near Eastern culture does not *replace* all previous understandings of the text, but it does serve to refine and *enhance* understanding. In some respects, this can be compared to a traveler to the Holy Land who returns with a greater appreciation of the biblical stories, now able to place events in the context of a landscape visibly seen. The trip was not essential to understand the basic

11. Westminster Confession 1.7: “All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.”

truths of Scripture, but perspective may be enhanced by a physical visit to the land.

Influence of surrounding nations

There are some who argue that the stories and laws of the Bible are borrowed adaptations of older stories and laws from the dominant cultures surrounding Israel. Is that where this book is leading? The answer is no. At no point will we argue that Israel simply borrowed ideas from their neighbors. We will periodically take note of *shared* cultural experiences that can in turn help us see things that were likely obvious to the original audience but are easily missed by a modern reader. We will revisit this subject with repeated reminders of our approach and intention.

Inerrancy and interpretation

The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, article 18, affirms that “the text of Scripture is to be interpreted by grammatico-historical exegesis, taking account of its literary forms and devices, and that Scripture is to interpret Scripture.”¹² While not an inspired document, the Chicago Statement is nonetheless viewed by many evangelicals as a standard for assessing the legitimacy of a biblical interpretation. It is thus understandable that some will ask where we stand on this statement. The short answer is that both authors concur with this statement, even affirming it annually as part of the membership requirements for the Evangelical Theological Society.

A longer answer is warranted, however, to understand what the statement means. It is helpful to see how this article is explained later in the same document. Under the heading “Infallibility, Inerrancy, Interpretation,” the writers explain, “Scripture is inerrant, not in the sense of being absolutely precise by modern standards, but in the sense of making good its claims and achieving that measure of focused truth at which its authors aimed.” In other words, Scripture is without error in all it intends to teach. The biblical authors were free to use literary devices and contemporary methods of accounting that may run contrary to modern expectations, without charge of error.

The later Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics, article 15, adds “the necessity of interpreting the Bible according to its literal, or normal,

12. International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy,” art. 18.

sense.”¹³ The definition of *literal* is then defined: “The literal sense is the grammatical-historical sense, that is, the meaning which the writer expressed. Interpretation according to the literal sense will take account of all figures of speech and literary forms found in the text.”¹⁴ In this context, *literal* is understood more as *literary*, rather than its common *literalistic* use, where a text simply means what the words say.¹⁵ The writers of both statements affirm that when considering literary genre, poetic or rhetorical devices, figures of speech or historical context, the proper interpretation may mean something very different (and more correct) than a superficial reading of the words.¹⁶ Each layer we present in this book is consistent with and conforms to this understanding of biblical inerrancy.

Another point of potential confusion arises over the use of seemingly straightforward terms such as biblical *interpretation* and *meaning*. Among evangelical theologians, a biblical passage is understood to have one primary intended interpretation or meaning, with multiple themes, motifs, nuances, or layers possible that combine in support of the unified message.¹⁷ Christian laity, however, frequently use *interpretation* (or *meaning*) interchangeably with terms like *themes* or *layers*. More than one “interpretation” may thus contribute to the overall intended message. These conflicting definitions present a challenge for a book aimed at a broad Christian audience. In short, we affirm there is an intended, unified message to Scripture, both in its parts and as a whole. The layers in this book are not presented as competing interpretations. They are presented as complementary themes that contribute to and reinforce the unified message of Genesis 1. Wherever we refer to nuanced meaning or interpretation, the intention is consistent with this affirmation.

13. International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, “Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics,” art. 15. The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics is not as widely affirmed among evangelical theologians as the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.

14. International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, “Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics,” art. 15.

15. Under “Formal Rules of Biblical Interpretation,” part B, the exposition goes on to say, “that is, by asking what is the linguistically natural way to understand the text in its historical setting.” International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, “Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics.”

16. As a lighthearted example, shouting, “Heads up!” anywhere in the United States results in most people ducking their heads *down* in order to avoid being struck by an approaching airborne object.

17. International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, “Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics,” art. 18.

Motivation

A final anticipated concern relates to the perceived motivation of the authors. Is this book really just a clever ploy to dismiss the historical veracity of the Bible or to make the creation story palatable for those looking to merge the Bible with modern scientific theories of origins? To the best of our ability to answer truthfully and honestly, the answer is no. While each of us has written elsewhere on the intersection of science and the Bible, this book approaches Genesis free of any obligations or deference to science. There are no scientific arguments or assumptions in these pages. Examples from nature may be called on for illustrations, such as our fluorite mineral above, but we will not draw on any scientific evidence to aid our understanding of the Bible.

There will be some who will nonetheless object, insisting the various perspectives presented would never have been considered if we had not given attention to the prevailing scientific theories of the day. To this we readily acknowledge that observations in God's natural creation have raised questions that drive us to look more deeply at God's written Word. The richness discovered, however, is contained within the Bible itself, independent of the truth or falsehood of any scientific theories. Ultimately, consistent with the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, the defense of each layer relies on Scripture to understand Scripture.

OUR HOPE

Our hope for this book is twofold. The first is that it will contribute to your appreciation of the grandeur and beauty of the creation story. The second, by virtue of recognizing that the proper understanding is not limited to a single perspective, is that the church will experience greater unity, dropping unhealthy squabbles that undermine its mission. Our hope is that Christians will spend more time in discussions about their *favorite* layers (plural) and less time bickering over which view (singular) should kick all the others out of the theological nest.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think about a biblical text containing more than one layer in its interpretation? Where is this helpful? How might it be dangerous or wrongheaded?
2. What do you know about current Christian debates about creation? Have you found these more helpful or hurtful to the mission of the church?
3. What other concerns come to mind as you approach this book? How do you hope those concerns will be addressed?

A MODEL APPROACH

What Can Be Learned from a Genealogy?

Genesis 1 is history. This may seem like a straightforward statement, but it turns out not to be easily defined or constrained. In our Western mindset, “history” has a narrow definition, equated with a journalistic rendering of events in sequential order. But Israel, standing at Mount Sinai thousands of years ago, was not part of nor bound by Western culture. More importantly, *God* is not part of or bound by the literary standards of the postindustrial age. If we want to genuinely understand Scripture, it is imperative that we draw our assessment of what it means to be historical *from* the Bible, rather than bringing a set of predetermined rules to the biblical text.

The purpose of this chapter is to show how a passage of Scripture—one that may seem to be a plain and straightforward documentation of history—can be rich in literary devices and theological nuance. We will take what some might think of as the most straightforward of all possible biblical texts—genealogies—as our example. More space will be given to this subject than one might initially think necessary, as it will serve as a model for our subsequent approach to the creation story.

There is no shortage of genealogies in Genesis or the Old Testament that could be tapped, but the parallel genealogies of Jesus recorded in Matthew and Luke provide a unique opportunity to recognize literary devices at work that would not be as obvious in a single reported lineage. It is particularly fitting to start with the genealogy in Matthew. A deeper look at the opening of the New Testament sets the stage for an investigation of the opening of the Old Testament.

We will start by first drawing attention to well-known peculiarities within and between the two genealogies. This is not to suggest there are any unresolvable errors, but the peculiarities act as an impetus for looking at the text more closely for what lies underneath. From there, we will look at how these genealogies have been intentionally structured to assist with memory, harness important symbols, and challenge theological misconceptions.

PECULIARITIES

Matthew 1: Missing names and inconsistent counting

The book of Matthew starts with the genealogy of Jesus, affirming fulfillment of prophecies that that Messiah would come from the offspring of Abraham, through the line of Judah, and laying claim to the promise to David that his son would sit forever on the throne. At first glance, nothing may seem particularly odd. The list includes forty-one names, starting with Abraham and ending with Jesus. The genealogy closes with verse 17: “So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.”

If expecting a straightforward historical listing, free of literary devices or liberties taken with the bare facts, problems arise when counting names and when comparing the list to the Old Testament account. First, three groups of fourteen should add up to forty-two, not forty-one. From Abraham to David, fourteen names are listed. From David to the deportation (Jeconiah), fourteen more names are given. From the deportation to Jesus, only *thirteen* additional names are listed. A second problem is discovered by going back into the Old Testament to find the same lineage. Matthew’s genealogy from David to the deportation is missing four of the generations identified in the Old Testament.

Each name in Matthew’s list is identified as the father of the next name. Traditional explanations will note that “the father of” (*gennaō*) can also mean “the ancestor of,” so generations may be skipped without error.¹ The word for “generation” (*genea*) likewise is used elsewhere in Scripture to refer to broadly grouped individuals as well as to parent-child relationships. These explanations are not sufficient by themselves, however, because Matthew is explicit about the total number of generations. He does not just identify lineage; he states a specific *number* of generations. It is a number that undercounts the actual list of ancestors.

1. Russell, “Genealogy of Jesus Christ”; France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 27.

Luke 3: Two dads and a lot more names

The genealogy of Jesus in Luke goes all the way back to Adam, passing through Abraham and David in accord with Matthew 1. But after David, the lineage diverges. Rather than going through Solomon as it does in Matthew 1, it goes through David's son Nathan. The two genealogies converge again at Joseph, the adopted father of Jesus.

A traditional resolution of the mismatch is that Matthew's lineage is through Joseph and Luke's is through Mary. If the text is straightforward history, however, devoid of literary license or liberties, problems remain. The first problem is not the father of Jesus per se, for there are appropriate "wiggle words" used to get around the question of Jesus's immediate predecessor. In Matthew, Joseph is not identified as the father of Jesus but as "the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born" (Matt. 1:16). Likewise, in Luke, Jesus is "the son (as was supposed) of Joseph" (Luke 3:23). The problem arises with the father of Joseph. Matthew says the father of Joseph was Jacob (Matt. 1:15); Luke says the father of Joseph was Heli (Luke 3:23). Two dads!

An additional difficulty is in the number of generations. From David to Jesus, Luke's list has a lot more names than Matthew—50 percent more. While this *could* be literally true, it requires a low-probability scenario in which all the names in Luke's list were born to young fathers, allowing for more generations, and all the names in Matthew's list were born to old fathers, resulting in fewer generations over the same period of time.² Something odd is afoot.

A DEEPER LOOK

Claims that such peculiarities represent historical errors are not defensible. The high importance that Jews placed on genealogies would have ensured that actual mistakes were quickly corrected. The records are written intentionally and with purpose. We will explore three layers of that intentionality.

Literary devices: structured for memory

Without frequent reminders of God's providence, faithfulness, mercy, and justice, we become easily consumed by daily cares, distracted by imagined threats (and shiny objects), and myopic in our view of life—thinking only in terms of our own struggles and immediate needs. God, mindful of our

2. To fit 50 percent more names into the same period of time, a literal reading requires that the men in Matthew's genealogy were 50 percent older, on average, when siring their sons relative to the fathers in Luke's genealogy.

frailties, helps us to remember in innumerable ways.³ The pages of Scripture are filled with tools and instructions designed for this purpose. Some are explicit in recalling past events, such as the annual observance of Passover or the more frequent celebration of Communion. Songs are likewise overt in their creation to aid lasting memory. The Song of Moses (Exod. 15) and the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5) are poetic renditions of real events, fashioned and sung through generations to ensure that the children of Israel, and Christians today, would not forget the marvelous things God accomplished for his people. The Psalms were also written as songs, with a large number labeled “for the choir director” and some including instruction on the type of musical instruments that should accompany the lyrics.⁴

Subtler methods of aiding memory are found in the structure of narratives, making use of rhyme, wordplay, and poetic sequences that state and then revisit themes in parallel or reverse order (called a chiasm), or historical summaries interspersed in later stories. Highlighting just one of these methods, a wordplay may take two words that sound nearly the same but have very different meanings to draw attention to a point. In Jeremiah 1:11–12, God told the prophet he had planted an almond tree (*shaqed*) as a symbol that God was watching (*shoqed*) to ensure his word would be fulfilled. The word association (in the original language) makes the intended point easier to remember.

We find the use of memory devices even in a biblical list of ancestors.⁵ Consider how the names in Matthew 1 are divided and numbered. A long list is easier to remember if divided up into equal blocks, with easily recalled categories for each grouping or readily recognized linkages leading from one to the next. In Matthew, the list is divided into three groups of equal size with hinges between them representing pivotal names or events in Israel’s history: King David and the exile (the deportation). To maintain equal numbers on either side of those hinges, four names were left out of the middle set, with David used both to end the first set and begin the second set to yield a consistent fourteen.⁶ This may seem awkward to modern readers, but with

3. A study of “remember” (or “do not forget”) in Deuteronomy alone would show the importance of this concept (e.g., Deut. 4:9, 23; 5:15; 6:12; 7:18; 8:2, 11, 14, 18; 9:7; 15:15; 16:3, 12; 24:9, 18, 22; 32:7).

4. Stringed instruments (Pss. 4; 6; 54; 55; 61; 67); flute (Ps. 5).

5. Russell, “Genealogy of Jesus Christ.”

6. Alternately, Jeconiah may be counted twice to end the second set and start the third set. Some commentators note David’s name appearing twice in Matt. 1:17 as support for counting David twice rather than Jeconiah; e.g., Russell, “Genealogy of Jesus Christ.”

repetition, even young children can memorize a list using these tools with barely a notice of inconsistency in double counting a name at only one hinge.

As clever as the construction may be, it still makes many Christian readers uneasy to see anything identified within a biblical historical account that isn't strictly literal. If the writer claims there are fourteen generations between each historical hinge, and there are actually more than fourteen in one group and less than fourteen in another, does that not represent a technical error—an *untruth*? The question may be understandable, but it reflects a superficial understanding of inerrancy.

The fundamental principle of inerrancy is more nuanced than just a belief that the Bible is true and free of error. It requires wrestling with what defines *error*. For example, consider the use of metaphor, hyperbole, symbolism, and dreams. Each makes use of words or descriptions that are not true in a literalistic sense. Few Christians would argue that Solomon's lover had teeth that actually looked like a herd of sheep (simile: Song 4:2), that there are as many descendants of Abraham as sand on the seashore (hyperbole: Gen. 22:17), or that cows actually ate each other in Egypt (symbolism and dreams: Gen. 41:4). Yet we believe these verses are nonetheless true. As we noted in the Introduction, what we really mean when we say the Bible is inerrant is that it is free of error in its *message*—in all it intends to teach. The writers of Scripture were free to use literary devices without a reasonable charge of error.

In Matthew's genealogy, the message—its *purpose*—is communicating the genuine ancestry of Jesus, starting from Abraham and running through Judah and through David. Jesus is truly the offspring of Abraham through whom “all the nations of the earth [shall] be blessed” (Gen. 22:18; cf. 12:3). Jesus is an actual descendent of Judah, to whom Abraham prophetically declared, “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet” (Gen. 49:10). And Jesus is of the kingly line of David, through Solomon, to whom God promised, “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam. 7:16). The latter is particularly important, because, from a material perspective, there was a time when it seemed as if God's promise had failed. The line of kings appeared to end with Jeconiah and the deportation. But Jesus was coming—the *eternal* king!

Accommodating cultural norms, challenging theological error

Most Christians know of the promise God made to David mentioned above. David would always have a son to sit on the throne. Jesus is the ultimate

fulfillment of that promise with a pedigree documented in Matthew 1. Fewer are aware of the apparent conundrum of the curse of Jehoiakim. After many generations of wicked and unfaithful kings, the Davidic line of kings was cut off. Two declarations, both made by Jeremiah, seem at odds:

For thus says Yahweh: David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel. (Jer. 33:17)

Therefore thus says Yahweh concerning Jehoiakim king of Judah [descendant of David]: He shall have none to sit on the throne of David. (Jer. 36:30)

The apparent tension may be resolved in the juxtaposition of the two genealogies.⁷ Jesus traced his biological lineage through Mary back to David's son Nathan. This ancestry is not subject to the curse of Jehoiakim, whose biological lineage on the throne was cut off.⁸ Yet through *adoption*, Jesus also traced his lineage from Joseph back through the kingly line to Solomon and David. The power of adoption underlies the entire gospel message, whereby non-Jews may be grafted into the family of God and granted full rights and privileges of children of the King (Rom. 8:12–9:13; Gal. 4:1–7).

For those who concur with the artistry in resolving blessing and curse, it may nonetheless seem puzzling that Luke did not just record Mary's name instead of Joseph's. Why create an apparent error with two genealogies claiming different fathers for Joseph? The answer follows the oft-repeated reminder that the Bible was written *for us* but not *to us*.⁹ The Gospels were written *to* the people of first-century Judea and the larger Roman Empire. Luke accommodates the common custom of that age of associating a person's genealogy with the father even if then tracing the *maternal* grandfather's lineage, with no sense of error.¹⁰

This is an important recognition, for it reminds us that the truth claims of the Bible should not be measured against the literary norms of a culture two thousand years removed. In modern historical accounts, if a statement is not

7. Walvoord and Zuck, *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1176.

8. Alternately (or additionally), others have noted God's ability to redeem from a curse. Jeremiah 22:24–30 speaks of Jehoiakim's son as a signet ring torn from God's hand. Generations later, Hag. 2:20–23 uses similar language to say God will make Zerubbabel (a decedent of Jehoiakim) like a signet ring. Schreiner, "Zerubbabel, Persia, and Inner-biblical Exegesis."

9. For example, Miglio et al., *For Us, but Not to Us*.

10. A related OT example is found where Jair is called the "son of Manasseh" (Num. 32:41; 1 Kings 4:13), but is actually the son of Manasseh's granddaughter (1 Chron. 2:21–23; 7:14).

literally accurate, the truth of the whole account is suspect. Using that rubric, neither genealogy would be considered true. Yet God inspired each account to be written in accordance with and even embracing the cultural norms of the day.

The message of the Bible never attempts to step out of the culture into which its message was delivered, with the critical exception of when a *cultural* norm conflicts with a *theological* truth. An example may be found, conveniently, within the context of the same genealogies. While both Matthew and Luke follow the convention of naming the father in their genealogies, Matthew's list breaks with convention in naming not only five women but women with tainted histories. Tamar posed as a prostitute with her father-in-law. Rahab was a Canaanite prostitute. Bathsheba was the subject of David's adultery. Ruth was a foreigner from the hated nation of Moab. And Mary was pregnant out of wedlock. Inclusion of these names challenged the theological foundations of three different cultural norms: only men were significant in God's kingdom, only the noble or morally pure were worthy of mention, and God's grace extended only to Jews.

Symbolic use of numbers: meaning that supersedes arithmetic value

In Western culture, we are not used to numbers having a particular symbolic meaning. In the ancient Near East, the symbolic use of numbers was ubiquitous and carried over into New Testament times. We find an explicit reference to numerical symbolism in Revelation 13:18, where "the number of a man" is stated as 666. Six represented something that does not reach perfection. Seven represented perfection. Critically, the symbolic meaning of a number may supersede its arithmetic value.

The genealogies of Jesus make rich use of the number seven. Matthew's list consists of three groups of fourteen (2×7) from Abraham to Jesus. Luke records a continuous list from God to Jesus with a total of seventy-seven names (10×7), and two sets of twenty-one names (3×7) for the sequence that departs from Matthew's record. The presentation in multiples of seven, coupled with the imbalance in the number of names from David to Jesus in the two accounts, and with names known to be missing from Matthew's list, all contribute to tell us that the intention was not a simple identification of all members in the lineage of Jesus. The intention was richer and deeper.

IMPLICATIONS

The ancestry of Jesus through David and Abraham is real. It is historical. It is *true*. At the same time, the records freely employ literary devices and

accommodate or challenge cultural norms in ways that may run counter to modern literary expectations. Old Testament scholar Sandra Richter notes that while the genealogies were derived from archival records, “they have been placed into a narrative context, and, therefore, have been overlaid with theological and narrative functions as well.”¹¹ These functions communicate truths that would be missed if we stopped short at the literal meaning of words and ignored the culture into which the message was delivered.

Given what theologians have observed in the opening pages of the New Testament, it should come as little surprise if we find similar literary devices and cultural structures at work in the opening of the Old Testament. There is no theological requirement for such a parallel to exist, but it would be remarkably poetic.

In the genealogies, we started with the observation that they contained peculiarities if we expected straightforward, numerically focused records of Jesus’s ancestry—oddities that drive the curious reader to deeper study. We can do the same with Genesis 1, looking to see if something more than a straightforward (literalistic) reading is intended.

EXAMPLES IN GENESIS 1

We don’t need an exhaustive analysis of Genesis 1 at this stage. A few examples of peculiarities can be sufficient to indicate the intention is more than communicating a sequence of events. We have picked out three to briefly elucidate.

Separation of light and dark—twice

In Genesis 1:14–18, the sun, moon and stars are created in day 4 for the express purpose of governing the day and night, and “to separate the light from the darkness.” But 1:3–5 states that light and dark were already separated back in day 1. It may be argued that the separation occurred in day 1 followed by the creation of celestial bodies in day 4 to *govern* that separation, but this requires a departure from the “plain” or “literal” reading. The actual wording of 1:14–18 says the celestial bodies *brought about* the separation of light, making day 4 seemingly redundant.

Separation of light from the absence of light?

There is great spiritual significance to God’s separation of light from darkness. Light illuminates. Darkness obscures. The English expression “to bring to light”

11. Richter, *Epic of Eden*, 50.

captures the idea well. Thievery, lying, slander, oppression, murder, and other manifestations of evil cannot survive when all is fully revealed and brought to attention—that is, when it is brought into the light. But what about a literalist understanding with a *physical* separation? This proves more problematic, because it actually has no physical meaning. Light has a physical existence made of energetic photons that can be identified and measured.¹² Darkness is not a substance, or entity, or even a force that can be isolated. It is simply the *absence* of light.

By analogy, consider a jar of beans set before you. They are poured out onto the table and you are given a simple instruction: separate beans from the absence of beans. You object, “That has no meaning; the absence of something is not an independent ‘something’!” Which is exactly the point. Something wonderful is expressed when God separates light from darkness—something much deeper than a physical act.

Evenings and mornings on a sphere

The long-recognized problem of three evenings and mornings with no sun is not just the absence of a light source.¹³ The earth is a sphere. When it is day on one side of the planet, it is simultaneously night on the opposite side—perpetually. A rotating planet is half day and half night at the same time. The experience of transition from evening to morning is only possible if standing at a particular location as the planet rotates relative to a fixed light source. For the first three days, no human or animal had yet been created anywhere on the planet, and there was no designated light source. The answer that God was the light does not work, as it requires that (1) he was *not* light before day 1, (2) he was not omnipresent thereafter, isolating his brilliance in one spot, and (3) he simultaneously served as the sole observer from a fixed spot on the earth while placing his light off to one side where the sun would eventually be. The suggestion that the first three evenings and mornings are figurative expressions of literal twenty-four-hour days is equally untenable as it requires a figurative interpretation to defend a literal interpretation.

THE INTRIGUE GROWS

The list above could continue, but it doesn’t need to.¹⁴ It only takes a few “peculiarities” to suggest that there may be an underlying richness to the text that

12. Photons are simultaneously particles and energy waves.

13. Wrestling with the meaning of days prior to the presence of a sun goes back long before scientific challenges (e.g., Augustine, *Literal Meaning of Genesis*).

14. Internal conflicts that arise from a literalistic reading are described in more detail in Davidson, *Friend of Science, Friend of Faith*, 57–67.

is more than just a journalistic record. A quick look at what Hebrew scholars have discovered with the use of the number seven adds to our intrigue.¹⁵

- The days of creation are seven ($6 + 1$).
- The initial declaration (Gen. 1:1) consists of seven Hebrew words.
- The second declaration (Gen. 1:2) of being formless and void and God's spirit hovering consists of fourteen words (2×7).
- Phrases through the days of creation occur in multiples of seven:
 - "it was so" and "it was good" (7 times each)
 - firmament/heaven and earth (21 times each; 3×7)
 - God (35 times; 5×7)
- The summary statement of God's work creating the heavens and the earth and the blessing of the seventh day (Gen. 2:1–3) is made in thirty-five words (5×7).

Something fascinating and wonderful is at work in this text. Just as we learned that the Bible is full of riches even in something as seemingly mundane as a genealogy, so we have reason to expect that a seemingly straightforward list of a series of days may also contain wisdom and beauty that goes deeper than a simple sequence of events. It is a beauty we can only expect to see with study and an openness to God's Spirit.

NUTS AND BOLTS

As we get ready to dive into Genesis, a few "nuts-and-bolts" notes are warranted to avoid confusion. First, the creation story of Genesis 1 spills over a few verses into the second chapter. Repeated use of the full verse reference becomes unwieldy. We will henceforth refer to Genesis 1 as shorthand for Genesis 1:1–2:3.¹⁶

Second, readers will find some variability in whether a layer is limited to Genesis 1 or expands into the second story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2–3. The focus of this book is on Genesis 1, but some layers require the expanded view to fully flesh out the perspective.

15. Davis, *Biblical Numerology*, 103–24, 136–37; Godfrey, *God's Pattern for Creation*, 32–33; Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 12–17; Hill, "Making Sense of the Numbers of Genesis"; Hyers, "Narrative Form of Genesis 1," 208–15.

16. Some theologians argue that Gen. 2:4 (or 2.4a) is the end of the first story rather than the beginning of the second. Our shorthand of Gen. 1 may be considered to apply to either option.

Third, we have chosen to retain the divine name of God (Yahweh) where found in biblical quotations.¹⁷ Most English Bibles substitute “LORD,” using small caps, in place of Yahweh. This is not the same word translated as “Lord” (*Adonai*). The subtle difference in representation (LORD vs. Lord), with a much bigger difference in meaning, is missed by most readers.

Last, we need to describe how we have addressed the work of others who have advocated for the views represented in each layer. In a typical *Four Views of . . .* book, each chapter would strive to fully describe a position, with elements in conflict with other views identified and defended. In this book, each layer is presented as *complementary* with all the others—no conflict to identify or defend. To accomplish this, we have drawn on the perspectives of various advocates, expanding on some themes and stripping out elements deemed nonessential that create conflict with the others. Each layer may thus be said to be “inspired by” or “derived from” the work of one or more advocates, rather than fully representing the position they defend.

With these notes out of the way, we are ready to launch. In keeping with the biblical significance of the number seven, we humbly present the manifold beauty of Genesis 1—in seven layers.

17. The proper name of God is often written as YHWH (יהוה), reflecting the fact that the vowels guiding pronunciation are missing in the original Hebrew. “Yahweh” is the most common full rendering.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Does use of literary devices and cultural accommodations invalidate the historicity of the genealogies?
2. Why would the Bible accommodate cultural norms that God knew could be misunderstood by future generations?
3. What does biblical inerrancy mean? Does everyone use the same definition? How does inerrancy address the oddities observed in the genealogies of Jesus?