

Genesis 1-2

Different literary styles

A fourth of eight reasons commonly proposed by *theistic evolutionists* or *evolutionary creationists* for handling Genesis 1 and 2 as “two distinct stories” that “are not meant to be harmonized or read sequentially” is that the two chapters “are not written in the same literary style”¹. Roughly stated, it is claimed that Genesis 1 is *poetic-like*, emphasising “*patterns* rather than *plot*”, while Genesis 2 is more like *narrative*. It is not uncommon for this distinction to be heavily caveated along at least two lines²:

- First that the distinction between *poetry* and *narrative* is more blurred than the rough statement of the difference would seem to indicate.
- Secondly that neither style should be taken as implying greater historicity over the other.

In fact, this reason is sometimes found to be so heavily caveated that the *theistic evolutionist* comes close himself to dismantling this point completely. But at the heart of this reason is the argument that different literary styles employed about something that is ostensibly the same subject matter implies *two distinct stories* that *are not meant to be harmonized or read sequentially*. Is this argument sustainable about scripture?

literary styles

Even a cursory review of the Hebrew scriptures yields multiple instances of shifts of literary styles, however such styles might be classified, indicating that such things are a common feature of scripture:

- Jacob’s prophetic poem recorded in Genesis 49 is clearly distinct in a literary sense from the narrative before and after it and yet it manifestly harmoniously connects with the narrative of Jacob’s final words introduced at Genesis 48:20.
- The song of Moses and of the sons of Israel we find in Exodus 15 is obviously a different literary style from the narrative before and after it and yet it sits neatly as a celebration of the victory narrative, presented in the earlier record, of the destruction of the Egyptians.
- Moses’ narration of Israel’s wilderness journey and his summary of various laws are certainly stylistically different from his song in Deuteronomy 32 and his blessing of the tribes in Deuteronomy 33; yet they certainly befit the kind of final message a leader such as this would wish to leave before his death, as recorded in Deuteronomy 34.
- Likewise, Hannah’s poetic prayer in 1 Samuel 2 is a beautiful and holy expression of her joy at the privilege of having borne a child who she now lent to the Lord; a perfect fit with the previous narrative.
- Finally, though recognising this list is not exhaustive, David’s psalm which he appointed to Asaph to thank the Lord is an entirely suitable record embedded within the narrative history of the ark’s ascent into Zion (1 Ch 16).

Here are at least five significant shifts in literary style without a hint in any of them that we’re dealing with *stories* that are *not meant to be harmonised or read sequentially*; rather, quite the opposite is seen to be true. Furthermore, it is clear that most of the poetic aspects of the foregoing list repeat in poetic form some of the history we find elsewhere in the narrative which renders these examples to be very close to Genesis 1 and 2’s recording of some of the same history; those that do this and are worth specifically mentioning are Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy and 1 Samuel.

¹ For example, <http://biologos.org/blogs/archive/israels-two-creation-stories-part-2> [referenced Dec 28, 2015].

² *ibid.*

Whatever one thinks of *source criticism*³, it is clear that in the foregoing examples outside Genesis 1-2, the different literary styles juxtaposed in the scriptures as received are intended to work together harmoniously and to be taken as a single, while multi-faceted, record of the relevant history. Consequently, the *theistic evolutionary* assertion we summarised at the outset is found to be without substance. No evidence has been provided to establish the argument linking *different literary styles* with a conclusion about *distinct stories*. Rather, the foregoing list argues otherwise, and increases the burden of proof that the *theistic evolutionist* must present.

an apostolic example

We have an apostolic example that both clearly draws on Genesis and exhibits the same transition from a kind of poetic style to something closer to narrative whilst simultaneously being scripture that is an internally harmonious record of Jesus Christ's ministry.

The prologue in John 1:1-5 plainly is distinct from the closer to narrative style that begins with the historical record of John the baptist being sent from God to bear witness about the light of the world, about the Lord Jesus Christ (Jn 1:6ff). This prologue also clearly draws on Genesis 1 by quoting the opening expression of Genesis 1:1 in its own opening expression; and there is also reinforcement of this reference to Genesis 1 with statements about *all things being made* (Jn 1:3; cf Ge 1:31) and the contrast of *light* and *darkness* (Jn 1:4-5; cf Ge 1:3-5).

And yet, notwithstanding the distinctive style of John's prologue compared to the remainder of his gospel, it is clearly of one story with the rest of the gospel. This is easily and quickly demonstrated by noting how key words and themes mentioned in the prologue are taken up and expanded in the subsequent gospel as the following samples show:

- *the word*: John 1:1,14
- *life*: John 1:4; 3:15; 6:68; 17:3
- *light*: John 1:4,5; 3:19; 8:12; 12:46
- *darkness*: John 1:5; 8:12; 12:35,46

Furthermore, as the record proceeds, it becomes clear that the description of "the word" in the prologue is a summary description of the one who "became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14) as portrayed in the remainder of the gospel. Seeing the way John's gospel is modelled on Genesis confirms the earlier conclusion: *stylistic differences* are not evidence of *distinct stories* that *are not meant to be harmonized or read sequentially*.

purposeful scripture

But the fact we now have evidence of at least two books following the same pattern of transitioning from a near-poetic style to narrative demonstrates more than this. The commonality of stylistic structure we see across Genesis and John shows that we are not dealing with an accident of redaction process when moving from one style to another but with purposeful scripture. The commonality of transition we see in both Genesis and John shows it is evidently a feature of certain kinds of scripture to be structured this way⁴; what is scripture's purpose in this?

³ "Source criticism, as the term is used in biblical criticism, refers to the attempt to establish the sources used by the author and/or redactor of the final text"

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Source_criticism#Source_criticism_in_biblical_studies [cited Jan 4, 2016]. I mention this here because assumptions about *source criticism* frequently lie behind *theistic evolutionary* readings of scripture and this certainly is the case where *distinct literary styles* are taken as *distinct stories*. I do not object to the methodologies of *source criticism* here, only to the application and conclusions.

⁴ Another example can be seen in Matthew's opening chapter. The gospel's *patterning* of Jesus' genealogy around three times fourteen generations renders it susceptible to Peter Enns' description of Genesis 1 as emphasising "*patterns rather than plot*" (<http://biologos.org/blogs/archive/israels-two-creation-stories-part-2> [cited Dec 28, 2015]). And yet the way the remainder of the gospel takes up the themes of Jesus being the promised king, the seed of Abraham shows that Matthew 1 is of one story with the rest of the gospel.

An answer to this question can be arrived at by considering thematic commonalities between Genesis and John. It is clear that both Genesis 1 and John's prologue present majestic and exalted portrayals of God's purpose; what do the commonality of transitions tell us about this?

Anticipating light thrown on reading Genesis 1 by John's prologue, a particular *pattern* which is emphasised in Genesis 1 is that of *God speaking*; "and God said" (Ge 1:3,6,9,11,14,20,24,26) is a *pattern* that frames all that is created and it is an expression that is presented as that which performs the creative work. As the psalmist says: "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made... he spoke, and it came to be" (Ps 33:6,9). And once Genesis transitions to narrative we see God continuing *to speak* through commandment, promise and dream to further his purpose of creating man in his image. Indeed, for that matter, this is what God proceeds to do in the rest of scripture, showing that this *pattern* in Genesis 1 is preparatory not just for Genesis but for the rest of scripture and for God's purpose with man.

Likewise, yet in a transformative fashion, John's prologue introduces the means of God's new creation. It is transformative because God's word now is the man, not only the means by which he comes into being. This man was so much in God's *image*, full of grace and truth, that he was *God's word*, of which it could be said "and the Word was God" (Jn 1:1). And once John's gospel transitions to narrative we see Jesus *speaking as God* because such authority had been given to God's only son (cf Jn 3:34; 1:18). So much was this the case that Jesus could declare the words he spoke "are spirit and life" (Jn 6:63).

Thus we see scripture's purpose in opening with near-poetry before transitioning to narrative and it is diametrically opposed to the *theistic evolutionary* claim that such stylistic changes are evidence of there being two (or more) stories:

- The near-poetic opening sets the scene for seeing God in the subsequent narrative, in John's gospel through Christ, working out the purpose he declares in his opening. The scene that is set is that God works out his purpose through *speaking* to man. As the writer to the Hebrews summarises this: "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (He 1:1-2).
- The two styles reinforce that Genesis 1 and 2 are one story about *God speaking* to create *heavens and earth* that will be filled with his glory.

conclusion

In fact, we have now witnessed that the majesty of the new creation in Christ portrayed in John's gospel rests on the historicity of the creation record in Genesis 1 and its preparatory function for understanding the purpose of *God speaking* through a variety of means in the narrative that follows. From our perspective looking back at God's dealings with man and the way *God speaks* to fulfil his creative purpose it could seem redundant to make this point since the truth of it appears to so axiomatic. Yet the literary styles we witness in Genesis 1 and John's prologue have this very purpose. So much so that one has to question how such a fundamental feature of the way God deals with man, communicated so purposely from the beginning, can be squared with a *theistic evolutionary* reading of Genesis 1 and 2; if *God speaking* in Genesis 1 is not a realistic portrayal of the history of creation then how realistic are subsequent and copious scriptural descriptions of *God speaking* to men and women? Indeed, the psalmist to which we have already referred teaches us that we can trust the uprightness of the Lord's word and the faithfulness of his work in righteousness, justice and steadfast love because it was the same word by which the heavens were made (Ps 33:4-6). The basis of our trust in the uprightness of the Lord's word is that the same word made the *heavens and the earth* "and all the host of them" (Ge 2:1).