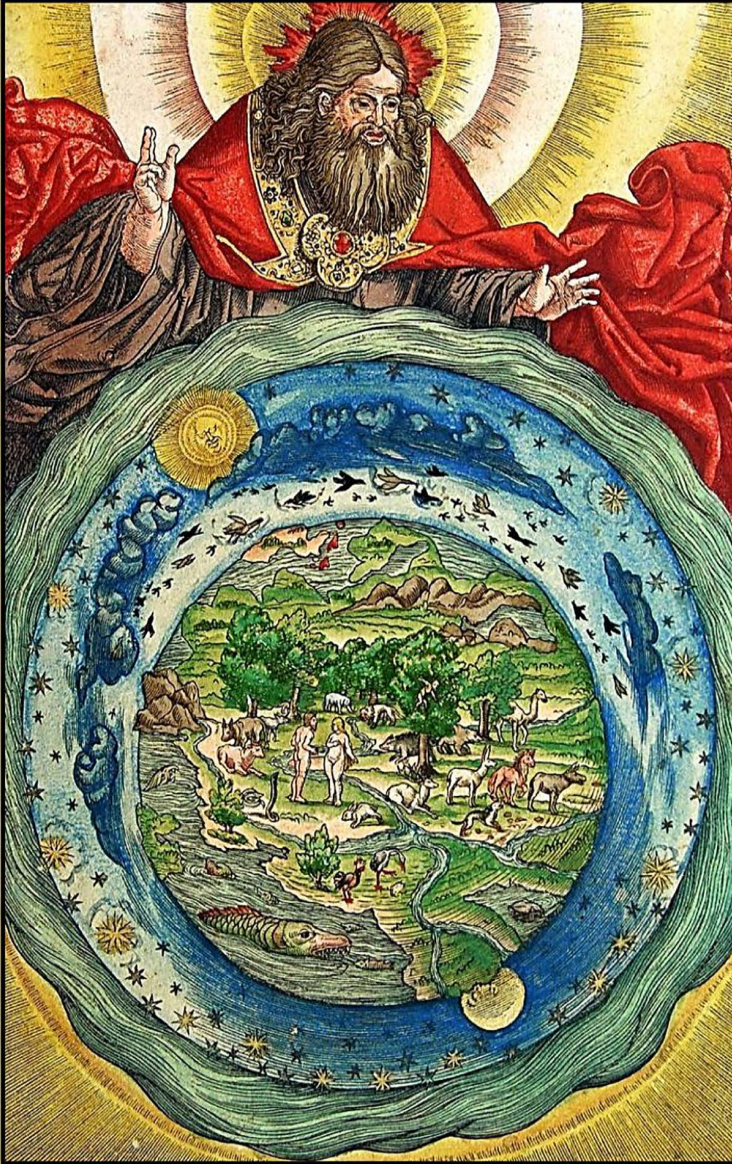


# The Bible & Ancient Science

Principles of Interpretation



**Denis O. Lamoureux**

PhD Theology & PhD Biology

## About the Cover

The image comes from Martin Luther’s 1534 translation of the Bible, and it appears across from the first chapter of Holy Scripture—Genesis 1 and the creation of the world. Scientists at that time believed that the earth was spherical, immovable, and located in the center of the entire universe. This ancient understanding of astronomy is known as “geocentrism” (Greek word *gē* means “earth”). Heaven included a solid outer sphere termed the “firmament.” One geocentric theory claimed that the sun, moon, and stars were placed in the firmament, and its daily rotation caused day and night on earth.

In his 1536 *Lectures on Genesis*, Luther attempted to align the Bible with this ancient understanding of the structure and operation of the world. This approach to interpreting Scripture is called “scientific concordism” (or simply “concordism”). In commenting on the second day of creation in Genesis 1:6-8, Luther argues that God made the firmament so that “it should extend itself outward in the manner of a sphere.” He adds, “Scripture . . . simply says that the moon, the sun, and the stars were placed in the firmament of the heaven . . . The bodies of the stars, like that of the sun, are round, and they are fastened to the firmament like globes of fire.”

Martin Luther demonstrates the problem with scientific concordism and attempts to align Scripture with the science-of-the-day. As science advances, new facts about the natural world are discovered, and concordist interpretations are then proven to be incorrect. For example, no one today accepts Luther’s ancient astronomy and his geocentric view of the universe. Moreover, should any Christian cling to scientific concordism and make it an essential component of their faith, new scientific discoveries may damage their belief in both God and the Bible. In this book, we will examine a way to move beyond concordism that honors Scripture as the Holy Spirit-inspired Word of God.

## **Dedicated to my Mom**

By God's grace, she prayed me into the Kingdom,  
instilled a burning desire for the Word of God, and  
through her life I experienced the unconditional love  
of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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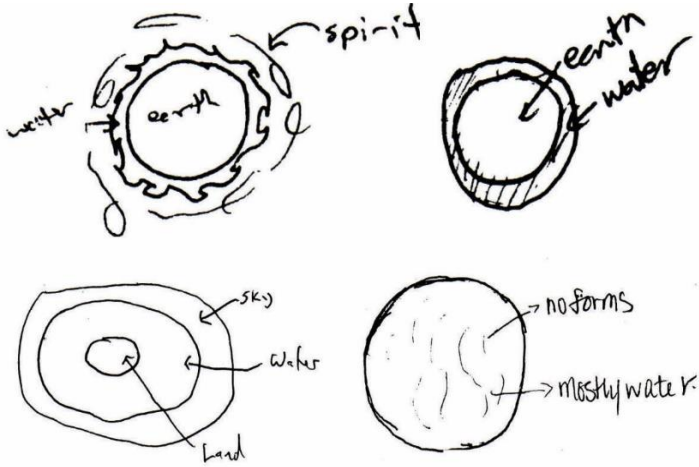
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## Eisegesis vs. Exegesis

During the first day of my college course on the relationship between science and religion, I have students read the first three verses of the Bible. “<sup>1</sup>In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. <sup>2</sup>Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. <sup>3</sup>And God said, ‘Let there be light’ and there was light.” I then ask them to draw a diagram of the scene that they envision in Genesis 1:2.

Nearly 90% of the students sketch a water-covered *spherical* earth. Some examples of their drawings appear in Figure 4-1. When reading the word “earth,” they automatically picture a globe. Yet when I ask them if they have ever heard that ancient people believed in a *flat* earth, they sheepishly say “yes” and admit that they never made the connection between the Bible and this ancient understanding of the structure of the world. I encourage them that this is one of the reasons we need to learn hermeneutical principles. They make us more aware of how to read a book written in ancient times, like the Word of God.

The interpretive error that most of my students make in picturing Genesis 1:2 as a spherical planet is known as “eisegesis.” The Greek preposition *eis* means “in, into,” and *ēgeomai* is the verb “to guide.” Eisegesis refers to reading our own ideas or agendas *into* a passage or book. This is a common error that all of us have made at one time, and it often occurs in biblical interpretation. This is the mistake most people make by forcing the modern scientific notion of a spherical earth into the Bible when reading the word “earth” in Genesis 1:2. Many years ago, I committed this eisegetical error when I first read the Bible as a new Christian.



**Figure 4-1. Student Diagrams of Genesis 1:2**

Let's turn to another biblical passage and begin to introduce evidence that Scripture has an ancient understanding of the structure of the world. Philippians 2:5-11 is called the “Kenotic Hymn” and it is one of the most important passages in the Bible. The Greek verb *kenōō* means “to empty.” This hymn reveals a foundational belief of the Christian faith—God emptied himself and became a man in the person of Jesus in order to die for our sins. The apostle Paul writes,

<sup>5</sup> In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: <sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage, <sup>7</sup> rather, he made himself nothing [*kenōō*], by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! <sup>9</sup> Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, [1] in heaven and [2] on earth and [3] under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Most Christians do not notice the reference to the ancient understanding of the structure of the universe in verse 10. This is known as the “3-tier universe.” According to this ancient science, the world has three levels: heaven overhead, the surface of a flat earth in the middle, and a lower region inside the earth.

For years I enjoyed singing the Kenotic Hymn during the praise and worship service in my church, but never once did I recognize this ancient understanding of the cosmos. It was only when I began to study biblical hermeneutics in seminary that I became aware of this ancient science in Scripture.\*

It was also during my training in theology that I learned ancient Greek, the language used by the apostle Paul in Philippians 2:5-11. To my surprise, I discovered that the English translation “under the earth” was not completely accurate.

The actual Greek word that appears in verse 10 is *katachthoniōn*.<sup>1</sup> It is made up of the preposition *kata* which means “down,” and the noun *chthonios* that refers to the “underworld” or “subterranean world.” Therefore, a more precise translation of Philippians 2:10 would be:

At the name of Jesus every knee should bow,

[1] in heaven

[2] on earth and

[3] down in the underworld.

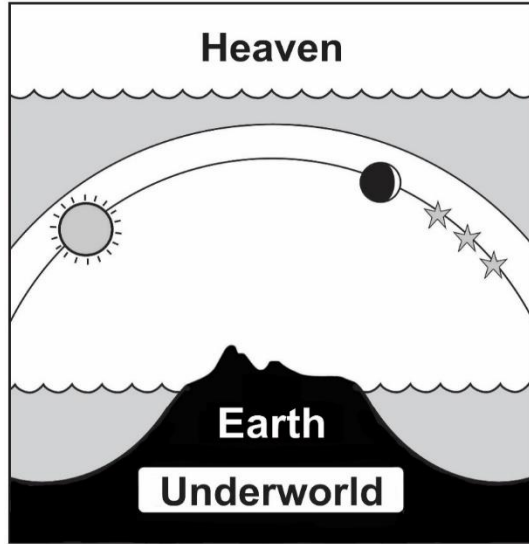
In other words, Paul is referring to a 3-tier universe in this passage as shown in Figure 4-2.

I believe everyone will agree that the goal of reading any passage is to draw out the author’s intended meaning from it. This is termed “exegesis.” The Greek preposition *ek* means “out, out of,” and as we have noted, *ēgeomai* is the verb “to guide.” Even if we may disagree with an

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\* We will examine in more detail the many biblical passages that describe a 3-tier universe in Hermeneutical Principles 15-17.





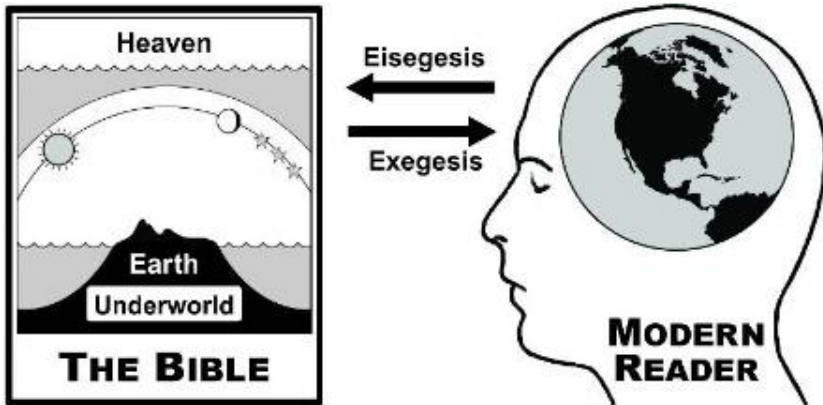
**Figure 4-2. The 3-Tier Universe**

author's point of view or understanding of the natural world, we must always respect his or her original intention for writing a passage. Otherwise, we could make a passage mean whatever we wish for our own purposes.

To be sure, reading ancient texts like the Bible can be challenging and even surprising, as we have seen with verses like Genesis 1:2 and Philippians 2:10. The older a book is, the more difficult it will be for us to understand. This is because there is a greater conceptual distance between the intellectual context of ancient texts and that of modern readers.

These conceptual contexts are often called “hermeneutical horizons.” The challenge for us as twenty-first century readers, being steeped in twenty-first century science, is to suspend our modern scientific ideas, and not to eisegetically force them into the Word of God. Therefore,

*we need to read Scripture through ancient eyes  
and with an ancient mindset.*



**Figure 4-3. Hermeneutical Horizons & the Structure of the World**

Figure 4-3 presents the hermeneutical horizons of the Bible and the modern reader with regard to the structure of the earth. This diagram also distinguishes between eisegesis and exegesis. For ancient people like the biblical writers, the universe was made up of three tiers with a flat earth. But for us today, we know the earth is spherical. Therefore, when we read the word “earth” in Scripture, there is a natural tendency for us to picture a sphere or globe. But that is eisegesis. Instead, we need to *recognize* and *respect* the ancient science in the Bible, even though we disagree with it. And we must practice exegesis and draw out from the Word of God the inspired writer’s intended meaning.

### **Biblical Creation Accounts**

To further illustrate the hermeneutical concepts of eisegesis and exegesis, let’s look at how Martin Luther interpreted the structure of the heavens and the earth in Genesis 1. The cover of this book has a diagram of the universe found in his 1534 German translation of the Bible. It appears across from this first chapter of Scripture and the account of God creating the world in six days.

During Luther’s generation the science-of-the-day was geocentrism. The Greek noun *gē* means “earth.” This theory claimed that the earth is spherical and positioned at the center of the entire universe. It also as-

serted that the earth does not move. A sphere, termed the “firmament,” enclosed the world and separated God and the heavenly realm from the rest of creation. Luther believed that the sun, moon, and stars were attached to the firmament, and the daily rotation of this heavenly sphere caused the sun to move around the earth, creating day and night.

Luther’s sixteenth-century astronomy also appears in his 1536 biblical commentary *Lectures on Genesis*. With regard to the origin of heavenly bodies on the fourth day of creation, he writes, “Indeed, it is more likely that the bodies of the stars, like that of the sun, are round, and that they are fastened to the firmament like globes of fire.”<sup>22</sup> In defending geocentrism and the immovability of the earth, Luther appeals to Joshua 10:12-13 and the miraculous stopping of the sun. This passage records, “Joshua said to the Lord in the presence of Israel: ‘Sun, stand still over Gibeon’ . . . The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day.” Luther argues, “I believe the Holy Scriptures, for Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, and not the earth.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, Luther assumed the sun literally moved around the earth, and that it was the sun that was miraculously stopped by God in Joshua 10.

Now I am sure that you have identified two hermeneutical mistakes with Luther’s interpretation of Scripture. First, the illustration of the universe in his 1534 translation of the Bible is eisegetical. Like most of my students who draw a sphere when picturing the earth in Genesis 1:2 (Fig. 4-1, p. 33), Luther forces his geocentric view of the world into Scripture. Second, Luther is a scientific concordist. He uses the Bible like a book of science. In attempting to argue that the sun actually moves across the sky, Luther reads Joshua 10:12-13 as a literal scientific statement to support the motion of the sun.

There are valuable lessons to be learned from Luther’s hermeneutical mistakes (as well as our own!). I doubt there are many Christians today who believe in his geocentric understanding of the structure of the universe. And most of us do not think that the sun literally moves around the earth each day. Martin Luther demonstrates the problem with scientific concordism—Scripture cannot be aligned with science.

Another problem with concordism is that science changes over time. If one generation eisegetically forces their science into the Bible, then a later generation might discover these earlier scientific views are incorrect. And this is exactly what happened with Luther's geocentric interpretation of Scripture. No one today believes that the earth is at the center of the universe or that the sun is attached to a spherical firmament that rotates, moving the sun around the earth every day.

But there is a more serious problem with scientific concordism. Take for example the Christians who read Genesis 1 in Luther's Bible and saw the diagram of a geocentric universe across from this chapter. When it was later discovered that the earth moved around the sun, did these Christians lose their trust in Scripture? Or worse, did they lose their faith in the God of the Bible? Martin Luther's interpretive mistakes should serve as a warning to all of us that the Word of God should not be used as a book of science. Instead, the Bible reveals life-changing spiritual truths for developing a personal relationship with the God who inspired Holy Scripture.

# The Message-Incident Principle

Let me now introduce the most important interpretive principle in this book on hermeneutics—the Message-Incident Principle as shown in Figure 6-1. It will help us understand passages in the Bible that refer to the physical world. I want to emphasize that this hermeneutical principle has a limited application. It is restricted to statements in Scripture that deal with nature, and it is in no way a concept that can be applied to every passage in the Bible. For example, this interpretive concept cannot be used with biblical texts dealing with the attributes of God such as his holiness (Rev. 4:8), Jesus’ two great commandments (Matt. 22:37-40), or practices within the church like communion (1 Cor. 11:23-26).

I am convinced that most Christians already accept the basic idea behind the Message-Incident Principle in some implicit way. For instance, we all believe that the main purpose of the Bible is to reveal messages of faith and life-changing spiritual truths. I doubt that there are many Chris-



Figure 6-1. The Message-Incident Principle

tians who go to Scripture primarily to discover scientific facts about the natural world. Does anyone use Ecclesiastes 1:5, Psalm 19:4-6, or the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:45 as evidence that the sun literally moves across the sky and that every day it actually rises and sets?

First and foremost, the Message-Incident Principle asserts that spiritual truths in the Bible are *inerrant* because they are totally and absolutely true. The word “inerrant” means “to be completely free from error.” Throughout history these messages of faith have consistently impacted the lives of men and women. They have assisted us in developing our personal relationship with the Lord and have provided joy, comfort, and purpose. The inerrant truths in Scripture are the foundational beliefs of the Christian faith. To use Genesis 1, the central messages of faith include: God is the Creator of the universe and life (v. 1), only men and women have been created in the Image of God (v. 26-27), and the marvellous world that God has made is very good (v. 31).

This fundamental hermeneutical principle also recognizes that statements in Scripture regarding the physical world feature an *ancient science*. More specifically, the inspired biblical writers and their readers understood nature from an ancient phenomenological perspective. They did not enjoy sophisticated scientific instruments like telescopes and microscopes as we do today. Their view of the creation was limited to their natural senses, such as observation through the naked eye. Nevertheless, Scripture features the best science-of-the-day in the ancient world of the biblical peoples. Had we lived at that time, we would have embraced their ancient scientific ideas, like the literal movement of the sun across the sky every day.

The Message-Incident Principle states that the ancient science in Scripture is *incidental* because God’s central purpose in the Bible is to reveal messages of faith, and not scientific facts about his creation. The word “incidental” has the meaning of “that which happens to be alongside” and “happening in connection with something more important.” In this way, the ancient science in Scripture is found “alongside” the

“more important” inerrant spiritual truths revealed by the Holy Spirit to the biblical writers.

Though the ancient science in the Bible is ultimately incidental to the messages of faith, it plays a *critical role* in delivering these spiritual truths. The ancient scientific ideas are similar to a cup that holds water. Does it really matter whether a cup is made of glass, plastic, or metal? No. The material that it is made of is incidental. What matters is that a vessel is needed to bring water to a thirsty person. Similarly, the incidental ancient science in Scripture is like a cup that delivers the life-giving spiritual messages to our thirsty souls.

Let’s apply the Message-Incident Principle to Philippians 2:9-11. As we noted, a more precise translation of these verses by the apostle Paul states, “Therefore God exalted him [Jesus] to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, [1] in heaven and [2] on earth and [3] down in the underworld, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” The inerrant spiritual truth in Philippians 2:9-11 is clear: Jesus is the Lord over the entire creation. In order to reveal this message of faith to Paul and his ancient readers, God allowed the incidental ancient science of the 3-tier universe to be used as a vessel to deliver it.

Now I suspect there are some of you who are probably asking the question, “Did God lie in the Bible?” My answer to this question is an emphatic “NO!” In fact, Scripture states quite clearly in Titus 1:2 that God “does not lie,” and Hebrews 6:18 asserts that “it is impossible for God to lie.” Lying requires an individual to be deceptive, and the God of the Bible is certainly *not* a God of deception.

The God of Christianity is a God of truth and love. To reveal himself to an ancient people, he graciously came down to their intellectual level to communicate his life-changing spiritual truths. In Philippians 2:9-11, the Holy Spirit allowed the apostle Paul to use the ancient notion of the 3-tier universe as an incidental vessel to deliver an inerrant mes-

sage of faith. As a result, Paul and his readers would have fully comprehended that Jesus is the Lord of the whole world, because from their ancient phenomenological perspective, the 3-tier universe was understood to be the entire universe.

Of course, God could have revealed to Paul modern scientific concepts like spiral galaxies, solar systems, and neutron stars, etc. But do you think that this apostle and his readers would have understood what these astronomical structures were? I doubt it. They did not have powerful telescopes as we do today. Such a revelation would have been confusing to ancient people and most likely a stumbling block that would have stopped them from embracing the inerrant spiritual truth of Jesus' lordship over the entire creation. Therefore, God did *not* lie in Philippians 2:9-11. Instead the Holy Spirit graciously accommodated and descended to the level of ancient men and women in the process of inspiring the Bible.

The Message-Incident Principle also assists us to separate the inerrant spiritual truth in Philippians 2:9-11 from its ancient science, and then to recast this message for our twenty-first century generation by using modern science as an incidental vessel. For example, as Christians today we can proclaim that Jesus is the Lord of our massive 13.8-billion-year-old universe with its approximately 100 billion galaxies featuring about 100 billion stars in each galaxy! As science advances, every amazing discovery in nature can be viewed in the light of God's lordship over his creation.

Finally, the Message-Incident Principle sheds light on a problem that appears regularly within our churches. Most Christians are not aware that the Bible has an ancient understanding of science. They assume that statements about nature in Scripture align with physical reality. By embracing scientific concordism, they often conflate the inerrant spiritual truths in the Bible with the incidental ancient science. The term "conflate" refers to "the careless blending or mixing of distinct ideas." In this way, many Christians believe that statements about nature in Scripture are inerrant truths. To correct this situation, the Message-Incident Prin-



ciple helps us to *separate* the inerrant messages of faith from the incidental ancient science, and to not *conflate* the two together.

### **Biblical Creation Accounts**

In a manner similar to Philippians 2:9-11 presented above, we can apply the Message-Incident Principle to the creation accounts in Scripture. As we noted in the previous hermeneutical principle, the biblical authors and their readers were very logical in believing that plants and animals were immutable. It was also quite reasonable for them to think that God had created living organisms *de novo* (quick and complete) “according to their/its kinds,” as stated ten times in Genesis 1.

Therefore, the message of faith in this biblical creation account is that the God of the Bible is the Creator of every plant and every animal. In order to deliver this inerrant spiritual truth, the Holy Spirit descended to the level of the biblical writers and allowed their incidental ancient science of *de novo* creation to be used as a vehicle to transport this foundational belief to the ancient readers of this first chapter in Scripture.

Of course, many Christians today believe that God’s *de novo* creative acts in Genesis 1 are a record of actual historical events in the origin of living organisms. Young earth creationists contend that plants were created rapidly and fully formed on the third day of creation, birds and sea creatures on the fifth day, and land animals and humans on the sixth. And each of these days were 24-hour periods. Progressive creationists also believe that the Creator made living creatures quickly and completely. They claim that these miraculous *de novo* creative events occurred at different times during the 4.6-billion-year history of the earth. According to this view of origins, the days of Genesis 1 are periods that are millions of years long (See Appendix 1).

I am certain that you have identified the problem with these two Christian anti-evolutionary views of origins. Young earth creation and progressive creation are scientific concordist positions that conflate the ancient science of *de novo* creation with the inerrant message of faith that God created all living organisms. This would be no different than to take

the spiritual truth in Philippians 2:9-10—Jesus is the Lord of the entire universe—and to conflate it with the ancient science of the 3-tier universe, and then to claim that we must accept this ancient understanding of the structure of the world. I doubt that any Christian today would embrace such a position.

The Message-Incident Principle underlines that we must not conflate the inerrant spiritual truths in Scripture with the incidental ancient science that transports them. Instead, we need to separate the two in order to focus on God’s intended messages of faith for us. It is worth noting that biblical interpreters throughout history have often conflated ancient concepts of nature in Scripture with God’s messages of faith without being aware of it. The reason for this is that the identification of ancient science in Scripture can only occur *after* the discovery of modern scientific concepts.

For example, it was only after Galileo’s work in astronomy during the seventeenth century that Christians realized biblical passages referring to the sun’s movement across the sky were based on an ancient phenomenological perspective. This historical episode is one of the reasons why we as Christians must keep up to date with the latest scientific discoveries—it allows us to be better interpreters of the Word of God.

## Excursus

### **Are the Messages of Faith Merely Ancient Human Beliefs?**

When I introduce the Message-Incident Principle to my science and religion students, they are quick to challenge me with several questions. If the science in the Bible is an ancient human understanding of nature, then is this also the case with the spiritual truths in Scripture? Since no one today accepts ancient science like the 3-tier universe in Philippians 2:9-11, why should we believe the message of faith in this passage that Jesus is Lord of the entire cosmos? And are we not being inconsistent if we reject the ancient phenomenological perspective of the world in the Bible but accept the spiritual truths? I suspect that many of you are probably asking the same important questions.

My response to my students is simple and rather obvious. I say to them: The fact that you are sitting here in a class on Christian theology two thousand years after the Bible was composed is proof of the power and eternal truthfulness of the messages of faith. The ancient science in Scripture such as the 3-tier universe is not the reason you are in my course. For that matter, before you entered my classroom, most of you were not aware that the Word of God includes this ancient understanding of the structure of the world.

Instead, it is inerrant messages of faith, such as the divine revelation in Philippians 2:9-11 that Jesus is the Lord of the whole universe, that have led you to become a Christian. In fact, it is the power of the spiritual truths in Scripture that has caused men and women throughout history to be born-again and to change their lives in dramatic ways. This reality of the impact of Scripture on humans is clearly stated in Hebrews 4:12. "For the Word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." And this indeed is my personal experience when reading the Bible.

If the messages of faith in Scripture were merely ancient human ideas about spirituality similar to those in other ancient religions, then they should have died away like most of these religions a long time ago. Take for example some of the religious beliefs in ancient Mesopotamia.<sup>1</sup> In one creation account, a god murders a goddess and then splits her body in half to make heaven and earth. The reason humans are created in many of these stories is to relieve the gods of their work. One justification for a worldwide flood in some Mesopotamian accounts is that humans were too noisy and the gods could not sleep. During the flood the gods suffer from hunger because there are no humans to feed them sacrifices. I think everyone will agree that the gods in these Mesopotamian stories are quite pathetic and the spiritual truths just as sorrowful. It is not surprising that these religious beliefs passed away and have had no influence on later generations.

In sharp contrast, the God of the Bible is a majestic, powerful, and holy God. He is in complete control of the universe with no other gods in existence to challenge him. The Lord does not require men and women to meet his needs. As Acts 17:25 states, God “is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything.” The Lord values humans and creates us in his likeness and image (Gen. 1:26-27). Amazingly, the Creator of the entire universe is in a personal relationship with us. And human sin is the reason for divine judgment. The attributes of the God of Scripture—such as holiness, love, and truthfulness (Rev. 4:8; 1 Jn. 4:8; Heb. 6:18)—are so far above and beyond the attributes of the pagan gods of nations that surrounded ancient Israel and the earlier Christians. In fact, there is no comparison between our God and their gods.

Moreover, what is quite remarkable about the Bible is that God began to reveal himself to humanity through a small and insignificant tribal nation like Israel, and not a major civilization such as the Mesopotamians. Jesus then used twelve mostly uneducated men as disciples to preach the gospel that he died for the sins of men and women. The Lord did not employ the powerful Romans or Greeks. If the biblical messages of faith were merely ancient human ideas of irrelevant and inconsequential ancient people, then they should have disappeared along with these small communities and never gained prominence around the world. However, the spiritual truths in the Bible are “alive and active” (Heb. 4:12), and they have deeply struck human souls throughout history and continue to do so today.

Proof that the messages of faith in Scripture are not just ancient human beliefs about religion is demonstrated by the fact that you are reading a book on biblical hermeneutics. For me, this means that the Bible has impacted you in a very profound way and that you want to improve your interpretation of the Word of God. It is not the ancient scientific idea of a 3-tier universe that has led you to a personal relationship with Jesus. Rather, it is the eternal and inerrant spiritual truth that Jesus is Lord of the entire world that has powerfully changed your life. Do you agree?

# Literary Criticism

Literary criticism analyzes the various characteristics found in literature, including the Word of God. First and foremost, it focusses on the genre of a written work. As we noted in Hermeneutical Principle 2, the Bible has many types of literature such as parables, poetry, allegories, stories, historical accounts, etc. Determining the genre *dictates* interpretation. Literary criticism also examines the themes and plots in a text that together communicate the main message intended by an author. This analysis investigates the use of language, stylistic techniques, and special terminology. And literary criticism identifies the structures and arrangements of words and sentences within a written text.

In this hermeneutical principle, we will analyze the literary features of the two main accounts of origins in the Bible—the six days of creation and day of rest in Genesis 1:1 to 2:3, and the creation of Adam and Eve and the events in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2:4 to 3:24.

## **Ancient Poetry & Genesis 1**

The popular definition of the word “poetry” refers to literature that has figurative language and fanciful ideas. As a result, many Christians assume that statements about nature in poetic passages in Scripture do not align with physical reality. They contend that these passages are not to be understood literally and can be written-off as mere figures of speech. In many Sunday schools, this is commonly known as the “poetic language argument.”

For example, the Book of Psalms has highly structured poetic hymns and prayers. As noted previously, Psalm 148:3-4 records, “Praise

him [the Lord], sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars. Praise him, you highest heavens and you waters above the skies.” Some modern Christians might be tempted to write-off the reference to “waters above the skies” (i.e., the heavenly sea) as merely “poetic” and “figurative.” But to be consistent, they should also dismiss the physical reality of the sun, moon, and stars. I doubt any Christian would do so.

The correct and most basic definition of the term “poetry” simply means “structured writing.” As Figure 20-1 reveals, the Genesis 1 creation account is structured on a pair of parallel panels. This ancient poetic framework is arranged to highlight God’s creative acts in dealing with the pre-creative state described in Genesis 1:2. The earth in this verse is described using the Hebrew adjectives *tōhû* and *bōhû*, meaning “formless” and “empty,” respectively. These rhyming words would have caught the attention of the Hebrew readers and listeners. In the first three days of creation, the Creator responds to the formlessness by set-

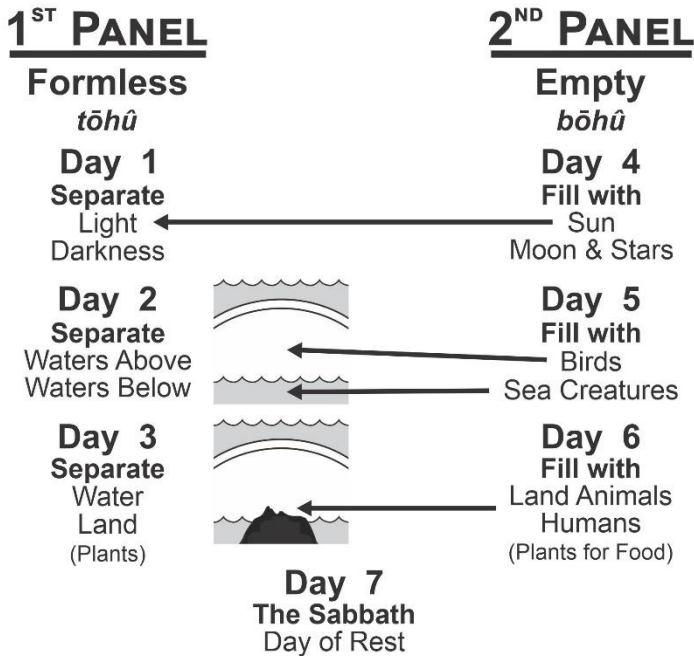


Figure 20-1. Parallel Panels of Genesis 1

ting up the boundaries of the universe. During the last three creation days, he resolves the emptiness through filling the world with heavenly bodies and living creatures.<sup>1</sup>

Obvious parallels exist between the two panels in Genesis 1. On the first day of creation, God creates light in alignment with the fourth day's creation of the sun, moon, and stars. Use of the firmament to separate the heavenly "waters above" from the earthly "waters below" on the second creation day forms an air space for flying creatures and a body of water for marine creatures, which are both made on the fifth day. And during the third creation day, the Creator commands dry land to appear out of the sea and then the earth to produce plants and fruit-bearing trees. These creative events match up with the sixth day of creation and the origin of land animals and humans, as well as meeting their need for food.

Another poetic feature appears in the descriptions of each day of creation in Genesis 1. There is a structured and repetitive formula that basically follows the pattern:

- (1) Introduction: "And God said, ' . . .'"
- (2) Divine command: "Let there be . . ." or "Let the . . ."
- (3) Statement of completion: "And it was so."
- (4) Divine evaluation: "And God saw it was good."<sup>2</sup>
- (5) Time reference: "And there was evening, and there was morning."

In addition, Genesis 1 uses repeatedly the stylistic number 7 and its multiples. This number in the ancient Near East was considered special and carried a sense of completion, fulfillment, and perfection.<sup>3</sup> For example, the Hebrew divine name *'Ēlohîm* that is translated as "God" appears 35 times (7 X 5). The total number of words in this account of creation is 490 (7 X 70). The word "earth" is found 21 times (7 X 3) and "heaven/firmament" 21 times (7 X 3). Genesis 1:1 has 7 Hebrew words and Genesis 1:2 has 14 words, making a total of 21 (7 X 3). The 7<sup>th</sup> day of the week for the people of Israel was the Sabbath. It was a holy day and the day of rest. The 7<sup>th</sup> day is mentioned 3 times in Genesis 2:2-3 and each time in a sentence with 7 words, adding up to 21 words (7 X 3).

Most prominently, Genesis 1 occurs over 7 days and emphasizes the 7<sup>th</sup> day, the day God rested from this creative activity.

If we recognize and respect the ancient parallel panels in Genesis 1, then we can easily address the so-called “contradiction” often launched at Christians by anti-religious people. These critics argue that Scripture cannot be true because it is not possible for light to exist on the first day of creation three days before the creation of the sun on the fourth day. However, the reason light is created on the first day is because the first panel in Genesis 1 deals with the Creator setting up the boundaries of the world. In this case, the separation of light from darkness. The filling of the world with objects like the sun only begins in the second panel on the fourth day of creation. This arrangement of God’s creative acts reflects the ancient poetic framework of parallel panels.

And I might add, are anti-religious critics of Scripture and Christianity so naïve and short-sighted that they truly think ancient people did not know that there was a connection between the sun and the appearance of light? This fact of nature was well within the scope of cognitive competence of the biblical writer of Genesis 1 and his generation. Therefore, the alleged “contradiction” of light being created before the sun is solid evidence of *poetic license* or *literary freedom* on the part of the biblical writer. It clearly indicates that this creation account is not a strict literal record of actual events in origins. In other words, the Holy Spirit-inspired author of Genesis 1 never intended to offer a list of the divine creative acts in a chronological sequence.

A comment also needs to be made regarding the word “day” in Genesis 1. The Hebrew noun *yōm* can refer to a 24-hour day and also to a period of time including many days. About ninety-five percent of the times the singular form of this word appears in the Old Testament, the context indicates that it refers to a regular day. Progressive creationists (or day-age creationists) claim the six days of creation represent six periods of time that are millions of years long. However, when the Hebrew word *yōm* appears in the Old Testament with a number, as it does in Genesis 1, it refers to a 24-hour day. In addition, Genesis 1 defines each



creation day with a time reference: “And there was evening, and there was morning—the first [second, third, etc.] day.”

The interpretation of the days of Genesis 1 as 24-hour days is further supported by the fact that Genesis 1 is also structured on the Hebrew work week and Sabbath. By having the Creator make the world in the first six days and then rest on the seventh day, the biblical author is affirming the Fourth Commandment that we must take a day to rest and honor God. Obviously, the Sabbath day is a regular 24-hour day and not a period that is millions of years in length. In addition, if progressive creationists want to claim that Genesis 1 is a record of God’s creative acts over great periods of time, then plants created during the third “day” or age will not have sunlight to survive because the sun only appears millions of years later in the fourth “day”/age. Using the Bible as a book of science always fails. In sum, the days of Genesis 1 are 24-hour days.

Young earth creationists are quick to use the Sabbath Commandment to defend their literal and scientific concordist interpretation of Genesis 1. In Exodus 20:8 and 11, God orders the people of Israel, “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy . . . For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” To be sure, this seems to be a powerful argument for young earth creation, because the Fourth Commandment appeals to a literal and concordist reading of the Genesis 1 creation account in order to support the Sabbath and the practice of taking a day of rest.

However, there is a subtle and fatal problem with this argument. It fails to identify the ancient science in the Sabbath Commandment. When Exodus 20:8 and 11 point back to Genesis 1 and the creation of “the heavens and the earth, the sea,” it was referring to the *de novo* creation of a 3-tier universe. Similarly, the creation of “all that is in them” includes the *de novo* creation of plants, animals, and humans. But as we have seen, quick and complete creation is an ancient understanding of origins and it does not align with physical reality. Therefore, the Fourth Commandment in Exodus 20 and the appeal to Genesis 1 must be understood in



**Figure 20-2. Exodus 20 & the Message-Incident Principle**

light of the Message-Incident Principle, as depicted in Figure 20-2. The *de novo* creation of the cosmos and living organisms is incidental, and it must be separated from, and not conflated with, the inerrant spiritual truths that God is the Creator and we must honor the Sabbath.

To conclude, the Genesis 1 account of creation features ancient poetry. This chapter is framed on a pair of parallel panels with each creation day following a structured and repetitive formulation. But as everyone knows, actual events in the past do not unfold in such a patterned and artificial manner. Poetic license and stylistic numbers also point away from this creation account being a scientific record of the origin of the universe and life. To be sure, the author of Genesis 1 certainly believed that God created the world *de novo*, but his literary freedom allowed him to place these creative acts in a poetic order that ultimately affirms the Sabbath Commandment.

### **Parable-Like Story & Genesis 2-3**

Throughout the history of the church, most Christians have firmly believed that the creation of Adam and Eve and the events described in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2-3 actually happened during the past. In particular, Genesis 2 is often seen as an elaboration of the brief description of human origins on the sixth day of creation in Genesis 1. Clearly, this traditional interpretation is deeply rooted in scientific concordism. According to young earth creation and progressive creation, these open-

ing chapters in Scripture are biblical proof against human evolution. However, there is a critical question that needs to be answered before accepting this anti-evolutionist interpretation. What is the literary genre of Genesis 2-3? And there is a related question. Are there literary features in these two chapters that give us clues as to their correct interpretation?

To begin answering these questions, let me propose a thought experiment. Assume for a moment that the Bible did not include the account of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. And let's also presuppose that you have just discovered an ancient document with an account of origins and the following features:

- *de novo* creation of a garden paradise without suffering and death
- *de novo* creation of one man and one woman
- a man made from the earth and a woman from his side
- word play with a man named “earthling” and a woman named “life” or “mother of life”<sup>4</sup>
- all people on earth descend from this original pair of humans
- *de novo* creation of birds and land animals made from the earth
- a mystical tree with fruit that imparts knowledge of good and evil
- a mystical tree with fruit that imparts eternal life
- a fast-talking snake that tempts a woman to disobey the one and only command of God
- suffering and death enter the world for the first time because God judges one man and one woman for disobeying his one and only command
- mystical creatures with wings, the body of a lion, and a human head (these are the “cherubim” and they are like the Sphinx in Egypt)
- a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the mystical tree with fruit that imparts eternal life

After reading this account of origins, would you immediately conclude that it is a historical record of actual events from the past? Would you then go to the history department at a university to claim that you have discovered a document that needs to be added to textbooks on the history of humanity? Or would you say that all these features indicate this account is a story with spiritual lessons that includes ancient science and allegorical characteristics? If we can suspend our belief in the exist-

ence of Genesis 2-3, then I think that most people would say your newly discovered ancient account of origins is a made-up story somewhat like a parable, but not real history.

Of course, you know that these features above appear in Genesis 2-3 with the creation of Adam and Eve and the events in the Garden of Eden. I believe that if we look beyond traditional literal and concordist interpretations of these chapters, and focus instead on these literary characteristics, they become clues in determining the genre of this biblical account. For me, Genesis 2-3 is a Holy Spirit-inspired story with features that are to some extent similar to the parables of Jesus. Most importantly, these chapters offer life-changing inerrant spiritual truths. But in being a story with numerous allegorical characteristics, this indicates that the events in Genesis 2-3 never actually happened in the past.

To be sure, my view shocks most Christians. And I apologize if this offends you. But I'll ask for your patience, please. If you will recall Hermeneutical Principle 1, I presented evidence that literal passages in the Bible are not more important or holier than non-literal passages. Jesus' use of stories, parables, and figurative language is proof that God has employed non-literal forms of literature in Scripture. In fact, about one third of the Lord's teachings are parables. These are stories in which the events that are mentioned never really happened (e.g., parable of the Good Samaritan). With this being the case, it leads us to consider the possibility that the Holy Spirit inspired some human authors of the Bible to employ made-up stories in order to reveal inerrant spiritual truths. Let me offer two examples.

The Book of Job is the famed biblical book that deals with the problem of suffering. Most Christians assume that there really was a man named "Job" and that events recorded in this book really happened. However, the events described in the opening two chapters raise some serious questions. First, are we to believe that Satan can just appear in heaven and bait God to prove a point? In particular, would the Lord allow Satan to murder Job's ten children and his servants in order to test Satan's assumption that Job would curse God for these events? Does

this sound like something God would permit? Satan is then allowed to inflict Job with a dreadful disease with the same intention of inciting him to curse the Lord. Would Jesus let Satan do this?

Or is the Book of Job a masterfully crafted Holy Spirit-inspired story that was made up to reveal spiritual truths about the challenging issue of human suffering? From chapters 3 to 37, Job and his three friends attempt to justify his suffering by using various misguided assumptions and arguments. But in chapters 38 to 41, God speaks directly to Job. Notably, he does not give Job an explicit reason for his suffering. Instead, the Creator simply points to his marvellous and intelligently designed world. The creation humbles Job and he repents, “Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know” (Job 42:3). The powerful revelation in nature discloses that God is in complete control of the world, including our suffering, even though we may not fully comprehend why at times we experience dreadful pain and heartache (I am writing this sentence during the Covid-19 pandemic). Instead of the horrid events at the beginning of the Book of Job having actually happened, they are part of the literary genre of a story, a made-up account that is a brilliantly effective instrument in delivering these spiritual truths.

The Book of Jonah is another well-known book in Scripture. God called Jonah to preach in the city of Nineveh, but instead he sailed away on a ship to the ends of the known world. During the voyage a violent storm arose. Being aware that Jonah was disobeying God, his shipmates threw him overboard in order to stop the storm. Then “the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights” (Jon. 1:17). How could Jonah have survived that long in the belly of a fish without air and engulfed in stomach acid?

Nearly every Christian knows about Jonah’s three days in a fish. This demonstrates the effectiveness of stories that feature astonishing events. They are easy to remember, including their main messages. This is similar to Jesus using hyperbole in the Sermon on the Mount (e.g., plucking out our eyes when we lust). It is also the technique employed in

the Book of Job, when Satan murders Job's children and servants, and inflicts Job with horrid physical conditions. But more importantly, it is the spiritual message delivered by the incredulous account of Jonah being swallowed by a fish. Jonah's story is the story of many people. And I know this personally. We run from God and his calling on our life, yet he graciously saves us from our foolish disobedience and even offers us other opportunities to follow his will.

Great stories like those in the Books of Job and Jonah are archetypal. The Greek noun *archē* means "beginning," "origin," and "the first cause;" and *typos* refers to "type," "pattern," and "model." An archetype is a first or original person, thing, or event that represents other members of a group. The stories of Job and Jonah typify different aspects of the human spiritual condition. They resonate deeply with our life experiences, and we personally identify with the people and events described in these stories. Has any Christian who has endured suffering not seen him or herself as Job? Or, who has not disobeyed God like Jonah and ran away from the Lord's will and calling for their life?

Similar to Job and Jonah, Adam and Eve are archetypes. The first man and first woman in the Bible embody a central aspect of our spiritual essence—we are all sinners. The Garden of Eden story, with its allegorical elements, is a perfect picture of human rebellion against the Creator. God creates a garden paradise for humans. He gives Adam just one commandment: do not eat fruit from the mystical tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But tempted by a talking snake, Eve eats the fruit of this tree and Adam does as well. God then calls them both to accountability. They attempt to rationalize their disobedience. The woman blames the snake. The man blames the woman, and he even subtly blames the Lord for putting her in the garden with him! They are then banished from the garden.

Remarkably, in just two short biblical chapters, the story of Adam and Eve deals with many central spiritual truths of the Christian faith—divine command, temptation, disobedience, accountability, rationalization, and alienation. Like the parables of Jesus, the Garden of Eden story powerfully impacts us by revealing who we really are, even though the

events in Genesis 2-3 never really happened. The Lord gives us the gift of life, yet we disobey his commands. And then we try to rationalize our sins by playing “the blame game.” If we cannot see ourselves as Adam and Eve, then we need to re-read Genesis 2-3 until we recognize that they represent each and every one of us.

### **The Interpretive Key for Creation Accounts**

For more than forty years, I immersed myself in hundreds of creation accounts from throughout the ancient world, especially those of ancient Near Eastern countries surrounding ancient Israel.<sup>5</sup> I am embarrassed to say that it is only in the last couple of years that I have come to appreciate the key to their interpretation. And here is what I finally understood: *Ancient authors in their accounts of origins featured parable-like stories that they made up.*

To be sure, *de novo* creation is the view of origins in most of these ancient accounts. The God or gods made the universe and living organisms quickly and completely into their mature forms. This was the science-of-the-day in the ancient world. But more importantly, these creation accounts focus on made-up stories that are similar to parables, and these stories deliver the most cherished religious and philosophical beliefs of the community or civilization. Ancient authors were skillful storytellers and the messages they told through their well-crafted stories were critical in holding their people together in order to function as a society. For example, the ancient Hebrew community was bound together by the powerful belief in a Creator who was a holy God.

Of course, most of us as Christians have failed to identify the story component in the opening chapters of the Bible, especially the account of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2-3. And worse, we have turned the made-up and parable-like story of the Garden of Eden into a scientific and historical account of events that really happened in the past. This is no different than taking the story of Jack and the Bean Stalk and claiming it is part of human history. I doubt anyone would do this today. As twenty-first century Christians, we tend to overlook the Holy Spirit-inspired stories in Genesis 1-3. Why is this the case?

I think there are three main reasons. First, most conservative Christians embrace scientific concordism because this has been a longstanding tradition throughout church history. As most of you know, this hermeneutical approach is taught within churches and Sunday schools. Second, we are a scientific society and we very much value scientific facts and discoveries. We then assume that since the Bible is the Word of God, it must be in alignment with modern science in some sort of way. Third, and closely related to the previous point of science dominating the modern mindset, stories are devalued in our culture. They are often viewed to be merely for our entertainment, like novels and movies. Others see stories as nothing but cute tales for children with a moral lesson. In other words, made-up stories with parable-like features are not taken seriously.

And I might add a fourth reason, which is personal. Scientists who study origins today never include made-up stories in their scientific publications. In my dozen or so scientific papers on dental development and evolution, my co-authors and I have never incorporated stories with philosophical or religious messages.<sup>6</sup> Science is limited to exploring the physical world, and the physical world only. Therefore, as a modern culture we do not have examples of modern scientific accounts with made-up and parable-like stories revealing our beliefs and worldview. This is a literary genre that simply does not appear in our culture today. It is understandable, therefore, why modern Christians, like me for so many years, fail to identify the stories in the opening chapters of the Bible. Most of us are not aware these chapters are a distinctive *ancient literary genre*.

To summarize, the Holy Spirit-inspired authors of Genesis 1-3 certainly believed in the *de novo* creation of the universe and living organisms, including a first man and a first woman. Yet as masterful storytellers, they had the literary freedom to make up an account of events in order to reveal as effectively as possible inerrant spiritual truths. Therefore, our goal as twenty-first century readers of the Word of God is to separate the parable-like stories and the ancient



science of origins in the biblical creation accounts from the life-changing messages of faith, and not to conflate these three components together.

### **Adam & the Apostle Paul**

Of course, I suspect most of you are asking, “What about the apostle Paul? Did he believe that Adam was a real person from the past? Or did he understand that Genesis 2-3 was a made-up story and not historical?” As we have noted previously, Paul accepted the 3-tier universe as seen in Philippians 2:10—“that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, [1] in heaven and [2] on earth and [3] down in the underworld.” Since Paul embraced ancient geography and ancient astronomy, it is only consistent that he also accepted ancient biology and the *de novo* creation of humans. This was the science-of-the-day.

Now, there is another important aspect that we need to appreciate regarding Paul’s views in order to understand his interpretation of Genesis 2-3. During the intertestamental period (from the completion of the Old Testament around 400 BC to the New Testament in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD), Jewish literature reveals that biblical interpretation firmly accepted scientific concordism and the historicity of Adam. For example, the Book of Tobit (about 200 BC) states, “You [God] made Adam, and for him you made his wife Eve as a helper and support. From the two of them the human race has sprung.”<sup>77</sup> A concordist hermeneutic also appears in the Book of Sirach (after 200 BC). “The Lord created human beings out of earth, and makes them return to it again . . . From a woman sin had its beginning, and because of her we all die.”<sup>78</sup> Wisdom of Solomon (about 150 BC) records, “For God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil’s envy, death entered the world.”<sup>79</sup> And a contemporary of Paul, the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (37-100 AD), wrote a history of Israel in his *Antiquities of the Jews*. In the preface of his book, he clearly indicates that his authorial intention is to write “our history” and begins with basically a paraphrase of the opening chapters of Genesis and all humanity descending from Adam.

Therefore, concordism was the hermeneutics-of-the-day in the Jewish community just prior to and around the time that Christianity arose.<sup>10</sup> As a consequence, Paul undoubtedly believed that Adam was a historical person and that the events in Genesis 2-3 really happened. However, it must be emphasized that Paul's belief in the reality of Adam and the events in the Garden of Eden does not necessarily mean they are historical. Remember he accepted the 3-tier universe. Does Paul's belief indicate that the structure of the world actually has three levels—the heaven, the earth, and the underworld? I doubt any Christian today would use this argument. This logic also applies to Adam and the events in Genesis 2-3. Paul's belief in their historicity does not mean they really existed.

But more importantly, Paul uses Adam as an archetype to deliver spiritual truths. In Romans 5:14, he states that Adam “is a pattern of the one to come [i.e., Jesus].” The Greek noun translated as “pattern” is *typos* and also means “type.”<sup>11</sup> Paul further explains in 1 Corinthians 15:45, 47, and 49. “So it is written, ‘The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam [Jesus], a life-giving spirit . . . The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven . . . And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.’” In other words, the “first man Adam” is the archetype of the human sinner, while the “last Adam” Jesus is the archetype whose likeness men and women, by grace, will become.

## Excursus

### Jesus, Adam & Genesis 1-2

In Hermeneutical Principle 1, I introduced one of the most challenging passages in the Bible to interpret. Matthew 19:1-12 records an encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees regarding divorce. They asked him in verse 3, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” The Lord responds in verses 4-5 by appealing to the creation of humans in Genesis 1 and 2. “Haven't you read,” he [Jesus] replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’ [Gen. 1:27],

and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh [Gen. 2:24]?’”

On the surface, it does seem like Jesus is affirming historical reality of the *de novo* creation of humans in Genesis 1, and in particular the existence of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2. However, the authorial intention of Jesus in this passage is not to affirm whether or not people were actually made quickly and completely, or whether or not Adam and Eve really existed. This encounter with the Pharisees was not a debate about origins. Instead, the issue that was being discussed was divorce.

To defend his position on divorce, Jesus employs two arguments. First, he accommodates by employing the ancient science of the *de novo* creation of “male and female” in Genesis 1:27. In this way, Jesus emphasizes the inerrant spiritual truth that God created human beings, and since God is the Creator of men and women, he is also the Lord of our life. Consequently, we are accountable to him regarding how we live, including the relationship between a husband and a wife. Second, Jesus uses the story of Adam and Eve as an archetype to affirm God’s plan that a healthy marriage is a lifetime commitment between one man and one woman. As the wonderful metaphor in Genesis 2:24 states, through marriage a husband and wife “become one flesh.”

Figure 20-3 applies the Message-Incident Principle to Matthew 19:1-12. This passage is not a scientific revelation concerning how God actually made humans. Again, it is not a debate about origins. Instead,



**Figure 20-3. Matthew 19 & the Message-Incident Principle**

Jesus was responding to frivolous excuses justifying divorce. By appealing to Genesis 1:27 and 2:24, he argues that divorce was never God's intention for a husband and wife. And concluding his argument in Matthew 19:6, the Lord commands, "What God has joined together, let no one separate." Indeed, this is an inerrant spiritual truth that needs to be heard and obeyed in our culture today.