Genesis 1 in context

There is more than one way of reading the first chapter of the Bible. One can look at it with a view to the claims of modern science and with the intent of clarifying the relationship between "faith and reason" in this particular case. This is a valid approach, but it is also a limited one, which tells us little about the theological meaning of Genesis 1. The theological meaning, however, is paramount. It has often been said but it bears repeating that the Bible, and therefore also its prologue, Genesis 1, does not offer us a scientific treatise. It presents itself as history, namely as the history of God's dealings with his people and with the world, and it must be read first of all from that perspective.

One way of doing so is to place the chapter within its original context. This is the way we will try to follow in this article. It means that we will consider the apparent intent of the author, the times in which he wrote, and the manner in which his primary audience will have received the message. By stressing original context I do not of course suggest that there is no message for present-day readers. On the contrary. We read the Bible to learn not only what God told the Israelites, but also and especially what He tells us in our time and situation. But as I hope will become clear, we gain a fuller understanding of the text if we begin by trying to get as close as possible to the sense it had for its first hearers and readers.

- Before I proceed, three preliminary remarks. Firstly, Genesis 1 does not offer us allegory but gives a factual, historical account. It is true that creation took place at the absolute beginning of time, before man had made his appearance. The account was therefore not the result (as is normally the case when we talk of history) of independent human research. We are dealing with events that occurred when God alone was present, and which He subsequently revealed to us. It is by faith that *"we understand that the world was created by the word of God"* (Hebrews 11:3). But our faith in the historical truth of creation is well founded. The Bible makes it clear, in Genesis 1 and elsewhere, that the creation account speaks of events which took place in time and space - more specifically, *"in the time and space of our common experience"* (K. Schilder).
- At the same time – and this in the second place – we must realize that Genesis 1 gives us concentrated history. The description of creation is far from providing us with every possible detail we might like to have. This applies not only to the how of creation, but also to the what. Not nearly every kind of celestial body, plant, or animal, for example, is mentioned. As Reformed theologians used to say, the account is in that sense "inadequate." There are unexplained aspects and mysteries in Genesis 1, as in all God's revelation.[1] For that very reason the faith of Hebrews 11 remains necessary if we wish to understand.
- And lastly, it must be kept in mind that the descriptions given us in Genesis 1 are not theoretical but phenomenal, which means that they describe the world as it appears to the senses, and not as scientists explain it. The phenomenal approach here is of course a good thing, for scientific theories are not only hard to understand, they are also constantly being replaced. The way people see things, however, remains largely the same. And therefore we do not need to explain the biblical description of, for example, the sky as a "dome" or a "tent" as evidence of Israel's "primitive world picture," nor do we have to use that explanation in the case of Joshua 10 (where Joshua asked the sun and not the earth to stand still). For again, it was not the author's intent to give scientific information. The Bible, and therefore also Genesis 1, is (as John Calvin already taught us) written in a manner comprehensible to people of all times and cultures and levels of education.[2]

Author and audience

Believing Jews and Christians have traditionally held that the primary human author of Genesis and of the entire Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), was Moses, who probably died just

before 1400 B.C.[3] In what follows we will adhere to this Mosaic tradition, while admitting the presence of later editorial work.[4] We are not told how Moses got his information, but it was probably both by direct revelation and by means of oral and written accounts. Like the oral records, the written ones also can have been quite ancient, for the art of writing had been invented long before the time of the exodus. Abraham already came from a literate society, and so did Moses himself, who was brought up in Pharaoh's household and was, we read in Acts 7:22, *"instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians."* We may assume that he was well acquainted with the religions of Egypt, Babylonia, and other Near-Eastern nations and that, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he made use of this knowledge in writing his books.

The original recipients of Moses' message were the people of Israel. This young nation had just been led out of Egyptian slavery and was preparing to enter the land of Canaan, a land that Yahweh, their covenant God, had promised to their ancestors. The Pentateuch was written in the first instance to make Yahweh known to the people of Israel. The books of Moses reminded the Israelites that God had chosen them, they taught them how they were to live as God's covenant people, and so they prepared them for their task with respect to the rest of the world. For Israel had been made the custodian of God's revelation not just for its own sake, but for the sake of all humanity: the promise to Abraham was that in him all the nations of the world would be blessed. This work of instructing and preparing Israel begins with the account of creation, and that is what one would expect. As the introduction to the entire Bible, Genesis 1 is connected with all that follows: with mankind's sojourn in paradise, its fall into sin, the flood, the calling of Abraham and Israel, and then at last the coming of the promised Messiah, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the preaching of the Gospel to all the earth.

The gods of the nations

Genesis 1 proclaims that Israel's God and Redeemer, the One who delivered his people from Egypt, is also the all-powerful Creator of the universe. That message is given right at the beginning. The very first verse of the Bible reveals God as the omnipotent maker of heaven and earth, thereby teaching his people to trust in Him alone and to ignore the gods of the surrounding nations. These gods are in focus, however. As will become apparent, there is a strong, although indirect, polemical element in Genesis 1. And that is not surprising. The cultures of Egypt and Babylonia were older and higher than that of Israel and had always affected the Israelites. In addition there would now be the direct influence of the Canaanites, also the possessors of an advanced culture. These various peoples, all of them believers in polytheism, had creator-gods of their own. Proclaiming Yahweh as the one and only, transcendent, and all-powerful Creator, Genesis 1 warned the Israelites not to turn to the gods of the surrounding peoples. It showed them at the same time the foolishness of serving these gods, since they could not compare with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The polemical element in Genesis 1 does not leap to the eye, at least not if we read the account without reference to its cultural and historical background. Its presence becomes clear, however, if we give attention to the world in which the Israelites lived and to the religious traditions of the nations that surrounded them. Of special importance in the present context are the myths of these nations that refer to the world's beginnings. Best known among these is the Babylonian one, the so-called *Enuma elish*. The narrative as we now have it is of a later date than Moses and the exodus, but the story incorporates much older traditions, which can be traced to a period well before 2000 B.C. Some of the traditions had been inherited from the Sumerians, the first civilized inhabitants of Mesopotamia, whose culture had influenced Babylonia, its northern neighbour Assyria, and other nations in the region, including Canaan.

How does the Babylonian myth explain the origins of the universe? And how does it compare with the account of Genesis 1? For one thing, the myth, unlike the Bible, does not speak of an absolute beginning but assumes an eternally existing material from which not only the world and men, but also the gods were made. This material consisted of sweet and salt water, called Apsu and Tiamat respectively. Apsu was the male element and Tiamat, who personified the oceans and was often portrayed as an immense dragon, the female. From the union of this couple the first generation of gods came into being. In course of time, Apsu was killed by his offspring, and Tiamat, with the help

of an array of gruesome monsters that she had produced for the purpose, set out to revenge him. In the ensuing battle the young god Marduk, a fourth- or fifth-generation deity, was victorious. Having defeated and killed Tiamat, he dismembered and divided her body, using one half of it to make the firmament, and probably forming the earth from the other half, although the myth does not make that altogether clear. The concern of the Babylonian myth was not so much with the earth and man as with the establishment of the firmament with its heavenly bodies. In Babylonia these luminaries – stars, sun, and moon – were seen as gods. As we learn also from the Bible, astral worship, astronomy and astrology enjoyed great popularity among the Babylonians.

The Babylonian story, then, is about the origin of the gods, the rise of Marduk as Babylonia's chief deity, and the establishment of an orderly world. As the personification of the wild, dark, and inaccessible oceans, Tiamat with her monstrous companions represented the forces of chaos, and Marduk's great accomplishment was to replace chaos with cosmos or order. That, however, was the extent of his achievements. Rather than truly creating the earth, he fashioned it, as we saw, from pre-existing material. Moreover, his work was impermanent. The religion of Babylonia was a pantheistic nature religion, and Marduk's act of creation depicted not only his struggle against a primeval chaos, it was also modelled on the progression of the seasons. As such it celebrated Marduk's victory over the storms and floods and darkness of winter and his inauguration of spring and summer. Because of its cyclical nature, this work needed to be constantly repeated. Order was always threatened by chaos, and each spring Marduk had to take up the battle again.

The same applied to the creator-gods of the other pantheistic nature religions of the ancient East. The *Enuma elish* is one of many stories about the origins of the world, and it departs from other myths in a number of respects. It has been shown, for example, that the Babylonian account of a titanic struggle at the time of creation is not found in several other versions, some of which are more ancient than the Babylonian one.[5] But whether or not the creator-god was forced to wage a battle with hostile powers at the very beginning, he and his fellow-deities had to contend with these powers throughout the world's subsequent history. And as in Babylonia, the forces of chaos were almost everywhere presented as storms and darkness, hostile waters and aquatic monsters.

The waters of the deep

The creation account of Genesis 1 contradicts the Babylonian epic on practically every count. It begins by stating, *"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."*[6] In Genesis 1 God's existence is not explained, it is taken for granted. God was simply there, He existed before all else; He, and He alone, was eternal. And He created, as the Genesis account clearly implies, out of nothing and effortlessly, simply by the power of His word.

Rather than being part and product of nature, as the pantheistic religions of paganism portrayed their deities, God is shown to be the origin of the natural world and to transcend that world. When He created the heavens and the earth there was no pre-existing matter, nor were there hostile powers which He had to defeat in battle before He could establish an ordered universe.

This last point is underlined in verse 2, which states that when first created, the earth was *"without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters."* It is true, when we look at the first part of this description, we note similarities with the Babylonian myth. Nor, I should add here, have critical scholars ignored these parallels. When the *Enuma elish* was first discovered in the later nineteenth century, biblical critics used it to support the theory that the creation account of Genesis 1 – and indeed the entire Old Testament religion – was derived from Babylonian traditions. The authors of Genesis 1, they theorized, had taken the Babylonian account and rewritten it in such a way that not Marduk but Yahweh emerged as the most powerful god. They had forgotten, however, to remove the reference to the original darkness and the primeval waters. Or perhaps they had been so convinced of the reality of Tiamat and her monsters that they had not even thought of leaving it out. In any event, Genesis 1:2 suggested to them that for Yahweh also it had been necessary to confront and defeat the forces of chaos before he could establish cosmos.

What are we to think of such a theory? Accepting Genesis 1 as God's revelation of a historical event, we reject the idea that it was based on pagan traditions. This is not to deny that similarities exist. But considering the fact that all humanity had its origin in one family, the presence of similarities is not surprising. As Aalders writes,

> *"It must be assumed that from the beginning God gave man a basic revelation about the origin of the world. The memory of this original revelation, in spite of the astounding distortions which obviously corrupted it, was preserved to some extent among all peoples."*[7]

In short, we can expect to find some "elements of truth" in the pagan myths of origin, just as we can find some "elements of truth" in pagan religions in general.[8]

The omnipresence of the primeval waters (or of a primeval watery mass) finds echoes not only in Genesis 1 but also in other places of Scripture,[9] and the reference to formlessness, emptiness, and darkness in verse 2 suggests that also according to the Bible the earth upon its first appearance was inhospitable, even terrifying. There is much biblical evidence that Israel continued to consider the waters of rivers, seas, and oceans as hostile and threatening. The Israelites knew that the first world had been destroyed by the waters of the flood. When leaving Egypt and entering Canaan, they faced the obstacle of the Red Sea and the Jordan respectively and needed God's special intervention to help them cross these waters. Later psalmists and prophets would recall these events and speak of the waters as forces which God had subdued for the sake of Israel's redemption. Often, like the Babylonians, they referred to the waters as dragons and other monsters, although at times hostile nations were described in similar terms. To repeat what I wrote on a previous occasion:

> In Isaiah 51:9-10 we read how God cut Rahab to pieces, pierced the dragon, dried up the sea, and made *"the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over."* Since Rahab and the dragon can represent seas and oceans (and their monstrous inhabitants) as well as a hostile nation like Egypt, the *"cutting up of Rahab"* in Isaiah 51 no doubt refers to the Exodus events of both the dividing of the waters of the Red Sea and the destruction of Pharaoh's army. In various other places we read of God's crushing of the power of Rahab, of the Leviathan, the serpent, and *"the dragon that is in the sea"* on behalf of his people. (See, e.g., Psalm 74:13-15, Psalm 89:9-10, Isaiah 27:1, Ezekiel 29:1-6 and 32:1-8.)[10]

The belief that control over the turbulent waters required divine power is evident also in the New Testament, particularly in the account of Jesus' authority over storms and seas. In few instances were the disciples more impressed by Jesus' might than when He walked on the water, stilled the storm, and calmed the raging waves. As Luke tells us (and the accounts in Matthew and Mark are similar) the disciples were afraid and marveled, and said to each other,

> *"Who then is this, that he commands even winds and water, and they obey him?"*
>
> (Luke 8:25)

The memory of the threatening aspect of seas and oceans is also reflected in the description of the new heaven and the new earth in the Book of Revelation, a description which contains the statement that *"the sea was no more"* (Revelation 21:1). The frightening elements of the old creation will not be present in the new.

If seas and oceans filled the Hebrew mind with terror, so did darkness. We can think of the ninth plague visited on the Egyptians, of the three hours of darkness when Christ suffered on the cross, and of the general message conveyed by both the Old and the New Testament that darkness means chaos and death and God-forsakenness. Like the fear of the waters, that of the darkness also is reflected in the last book of the Bible, namely in the statement that there will be no night in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:25). The story of Tiamat, then, symbolized this ancient horror of stormy waters and darkness, not only for the Babylonians but also for the Hebrews, who, after all, sprang from the ancient Semitic-Asiatic world. They could not help being influenced by the traditions of their neighbours, traditions that were so similar to their own.

God's control of the deep

For this very reason, however, they had to learn that the waters and the darkness did not exist as independent powers but were subject to Yahweh. The creation account does precisely that. The

first verses of Genesis 1 tell Israel that everything, including the primordial waters, was God's creation and therefore under his control. And verse 2 does not stop with the statement that in the beginning all was flood and darkness, but adds that God Himself was present there and showed his care for the newly created world: His Spirit moved (or hovered) over the face of the water. God's control is again confirmed in verses 3-5, which state that on the first day of creation He made the light, assigning to the darkness its limited but also its necessary and indeed benevolent place; and in verses 6-10, which speak of God's setting boundaries to the waters above and below the expanse and to those below the sky, so that dry land could appear. The message that God rules clouds and seas and oceans is repeated throughout the Bible. It is God who gives and withholds rain. It was God who cut Rahab to pieces, pierced the dragon, and dried up the sea. And in the New Testament it was Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, who rebuked and stilled the stormy waters.

Another message we receive in Genesis is that the establishment of order was permanent. God finished his work of creation in six days and rested on the seventh *"from all his work which he had done"* (Genesis 2:2). Here again the Genesis account goes against the pagan nature myths with their message of eternal recurrence, of an everlasting rotation of the wheel of time. In the words of one commentator:

> *"...The cyclical and repetitious nature of creation mythology is contradicted by the placing of the creation accounts of Genesis 1-3 at the beginning of a linear history with a non-repeatable period of creative time that closed with the seventh day."*[11]

One of the reasons why Genesis 1 places so much stress on the six days, I believe, is to make clear that creation was indeed a once-for-all affair; that unlike Marduk, God completed what his hands had begun.

The "days of creation"

Discussions among Christians about the scientific implications of Genesis 1 usually focus on the nature and extent of the days of creation. Some hold that the days were ordinary ones, exactly 24 hours in length, while others believe that Scripture does not force us to follow this interpretation; that the days of Genesis 1 may well have been longer or shorter than our days, or even that they have only a symbolic meaning. As I suggested before, debates like these are necessary and valuable, but they do not help us much when we try to get to the theological meaning of the creation account. The message of Genesis 1 was directed in the first place to ancient Israel, and by concentrating on modern-scientific issues we introduce elements that do not belong to the original context. That tends to obscure things. If we want to find out what was meant by the days, we must begin by asking what their meaning or meanings may have been for ancient Israel.

A partial answer to that question was proposed before. There I suggested that one of the messages conveyed by the days is that God *finished* the work of making the heavens and the earth, and so to counter the pagan belief in ever-repeated acts of creation. The message that creation had been completed, that no repetition was necessary, was an important one. It showed that the forces of disorder, emptiness, and darkness had indeed been overcome. Israel could rest secure in the protection of a God who had majestically and effortlessly – simply by speaking his word of power – proclaimed his lordship and sovereign control over the forces of nature. It is true that if man turned away from God these forces could be unleashed again, as in fact they were at the time of the flood. But the account of Genesis 6-8 makes clear that rather than being God's rivals, the waters of the flood were his servants and did his bidding. It was God who called them into service and who, after they had accomplished the task He had assigned them, returned them to their proper place. God's control is confirmed in other places in the Old Testament, for example in the well-known passage of Job 38:8-11, where we read,

> *Or who shut in the sea with doors, when it burst forth from the womb; when I made clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, "Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed?"*

(See also Psalm 104:6-9, and Jeremiah 5:22)

The days, then, conveyed the message that God had completed the work of creation. There are other possible meanings. The concept of the days will also have shown that with the creation of heaven and earth God inaugurated time and history – that is, history as a linear, progressive, goal-directed process. Pagans did not know of history in this sense. Like their accounts of creation, their view of history also was modelled on nature with its ever-repeating and essentially hopeless cycle of birth, growth, decay, and death. The gods themselves were subject to this cycle: they died with the arrival of winter and came back to life with the coming of summer, or they died at the end of every day and were reborn every morning. Unlike the believers in these nature religions, the people of Israel knew that their God was always there; that He neither slumbered nor slept; that his providence was everlasting.

Yet another meaning the days will have had for Israel is that they suggest order and a plan. The creation events led to the preparation of a habitable earth, one that would offer a secure place for humanity, which was, after all, the crown of God's creation. The division of creation into six days, together with the contents of these days, showed that this preparation was done with care. God began by making light and by separating the waters both vertically and horizontally, allowing the dry earth to appear. Out of this earth sprang forth trees and plants which would serve as food for the creatures that would appear in subsequent days. God proceeded to fill the water with fish and other marine animals and the sky with winged creatures. It was only when all this was ready on the sixth day that He made the land animals and man.

The orderliness can be illustrated by the so-called structure of "forming and filling."[12] The structure can be visualized as follows:

Days of forming	**Days of filling**
1. "light" (v. 3)	4. "lights" (v. 14)
2. "water under the expanse … water above it" (v.7)	5. "every living and moving thing with which the water teems … every winged bird" (v. 21)
3a."dry ground" (v.9)	6a (i) "livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals"(v. 24)
	6a (ii) "man" (v. 26)
3b. "vegetation" (v. 11)	6b. "every green plant for food" (v. 30)

The orderliness of God's creation, too, is stressed elsewhere in Scripture. We draw attention to the statement in Isaiah 45:

> *For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it a chaos. he formed it to be inhabited!): "I am the LORD, and there is no other..."*
>
> (Isaiah 45:18)

The number seven

The idea that creation was perfect, complete, and non-repeatable will have been conveyed to Israel not only by the sequence and contents of the days, but also by their number. Various numbers had a symbolic meaning, both in Israel and in surrounding countries. Among them was the number seven (with its multiples), which occurs often in the Bible and signifies completeness. To mention a few examples out of many, and starting with the Book of Genesis itself: in the original Hebrew the first verse of Genesis 1 consists of exactly seven words, the second of exactly 14; there is the seven-day week of creation; there are seven names in the genealogy of chapter 4; various sevens occur in the story of the flood; 70 descendants of Noah's sons are mentioned (chapter 10); Abram receives a sevenfold promise (Genesis 12:2-3); there are seven years of abundance and then seven of famine in Egypt (chapter 41); and there are 70 descendants of Jacob (chapter 46).[13] Additional examples can be found throughout the Old Testament, and again

in the New – from Matthew's division of the genealogy of Jesus into three sections of 14 names each, to the sevenfold Spirit, the seven lamp stands, the seven stars and the seven churches in Revelation 1 to 3, and the seven seals, trumpets, thunders, and golden bowls in Revelation 6, 8, 10, and 16 respectively. It can hardly have seemed accidental to Israel that the creation account incorporates the number of perfection and completeness.

A related function of the number seven is, as commentators have pointed out over the centuries, that it teaches the importance of the Sabbath. In this respect the account of Genesis 1 is again unique. Seven-day schemes were not unknown among the surrounding nations, but nowhere is a statement to be found in pagan myths that the creator-god rested on the seventh day. God's resting on the seventh day, however, is emphasized in the Genesis account, and it once again symbolizes the completeness and once-for-all nature of creation. A primary message for man, as we learn from Exodus 20:8-11, is that he is to follow God in hallowing the seventh day and so to glorify Him. Moreover, by pointing to the blessings of the weekly day of rest, the six days also point to the eternal Sabbath. *"...There remains a sabbath rest for the people of God"* (Hebrews 4:9).[14]

The principle of separation

The first part of Genesis 1 states on five occasions that God made a separation or division. He separated light from darkness (verse 4), announced the formation of a firmament to separate waters from waters (verse 6), separated the waters above the firmament from those below it (verse 7), separated day from night (verses 14-15), and commanded the sun and moon to separate the light from the darkness (verse 18). What is the meaning of this word "separate," which the author introduces seven times in the verses 4 to 18, always using the same Hebrew term?[15]

In what follows I refer to two theories, namely those of G.F. Hasel and N.H. Ridderbos. Hasel, who here as elsewhere stresses the anti-mythical tendencies in the Genesis account, believes that with the emphasis on separation in Genesis 1 we have an indirect reference to pagan stories about origins, which also speak of the making of heaven and earth as an act of separating. In the Babylonian story Marduk cuts up and divides Tiamat's body to make the heavens and (probably) the earth; in a Hurrian myth a cutting tool is used as well; Phoenician traditions speak of creation as the splitting of the world egg; and in Egyptian mythology heaven and earth come into existence when the air god pushes up the sky goddess from the earth god, with whom she was embraced. In short, Hasel concludes, there are analogies between the Genesis account and pagan traditions, and these analogies serve once again to bring out Yahweh's omnipotence. The waters which God separates are completely powerless, inanimate, inert, and their separation is simply a matter of God's *fiat* or decree. Notions of opposition, of combat and struggle, which predominate in the Babylonian story, are altogether absent in the account of Genesis 1. The biblical author therefore does not, as biblical critics assumed, *"reflect in this act of creation the contemporary worldview, rather he overcomes it."*[16]

In various places Ridderbos, like Hasel, draws attention to the anti-mythical element in Genesis 1, but he does not do so in connection with the principle of separation and division. He sees that principle as an indication of the orderliness of God's creation. Paul's statement that *"God is not a God of disorder but of peace"* (1 Corinthians 14:33 – *NIV*), has, he writes, deep roots in the Old Testament. The assurance that God is a God of order was not just a theoretical matter for the Israelites, a statement that happened to be part of their religious doctrine but could be ignored in practice. Like the people of the surrounding nations, they knew of the threat of disorder. What the creation account told them was that the orderliness and security they enjoyed were the work of God, and that among the means which God used to accomplish and preserve this work was the act of "separating," that is, of setting boundaries or limits, and of safeguarding them. Disorder, Israel had to learn, was a result of man's crossing of the boundaries God had established, his transgressing of the laws that God had instituted. It was in the keeping of God's laws that Israel would find its prosperity and peace.[17]

God's setting of boundaries and his establishing of order made possible the physical life of plant and animal and man. But Ridderbos reminds us that the principle of separation had implications also for Israel's cultic and religious life. God made a separation not only between light and

darkness, between waters and waters, between earth and sea and day and night, He established a boundary also between clean and unclean, holy and unholy, good and evil. The physical and moral world orders were often seen in the same perspective. We note this, for example, in Psalm 82:5, which states that because of the injustices of ruler and judges *"all the foundations of the earth are shaken."*[18]

In addition to these physical and moral and cultic boundaries, there were the separations between and among living creatures. Genesis 1 tells us that God created plants and animals *"according to their kinds,"* and later the differences between animals and man are made clear as well. Ridderbos rejects the idea that the statement about the different "kinds" among plants and animals conveys scientific information about genera and species. It serves, he believes, to underline once again that God establishes distinctions and wants them to be observed. Genesis 1 teaches us, in short, that *"human life is lived within a network of created limits which cannot be transgressed without courting disaster."*[19]

We continue with our historical reading of Genesis 1. The historical approach requires, as we saw, that we give attention to the original context of the document in question, namely to the apparent intent of the author, the times in which he wrote, and the situation of the primary readers or hearers. We applied these criteria to the first ten verses of Genesis 1, up to and including God's act of gathering the waters on the earth into one place, thereby allowing dry land to appear. This happened on the third day. We now turn to day four.

Sun, moon, and stars

God created light on the first day but did not form the heavenly bodies until the fourth. Commentators have tried to explain the order of these two events in various ways. Some use it as proof that Genesis 1 does not demand our adherence to the given sequence of the days and events of creation. Others have suggested that the material of the luminaries existed before the fourth day and that the message of Genesis 1:14-18 is simply that God placed them in the firmament on that day. Attention has also been drawn to the obvious fact that the sun is not the only source of light. The Hebrew scholar Cassuto believes that during the first three days God gave light to the earth from an alternative source and that on the fourth day He simply handed the function of separating day and night over to the luminaries. This also answers the question, Cassuto points out, how plants could grow on the third day, before the sun spread its light and warmth.[20] A related explanation is that the order of day one and day four conveys the message of God's sovereign power over all that exists. Nature depends on God, not God on nature. As John Calvin wrote,

> *To nothing are we more prone than to tie down the power of God to those instruments, the agency of which he employs. The sun and moon supply us with light: and, according to our notions, we so include this power to give light in them, that if they were taken away from the world, it would seem impossible for any light to remain. Therefore the Lord, by the very order of his creation, bears witness that he holds in his hand the light, which he is able to impart to us without the sun and the moon*.[21]

This is a truth that the Bible affirms elsewhere, for example in Isaiah 60:19, 20, and again in the description of the new heaven and the new earth (Revelation 21:23 and 22:5).[22]

The order of the creation of light and light-bearers showed not only that God, and He alone, rules nature, it also proclaimed once again his superiority over the gods of foreign nations. Babylonia had a variety of sun-, moon-, and star gods, who appear to have existed before Marduk defeated Tiamat. Their origin, in any event, is not mentioned in the Babylonian myth, the *Enuma elish*; we are told there only that Marduk caused the moon *"to shine"* and that he assigned to *"the great gods ... the stars"* their places in the newly established firmament.[23] It is of interest in this connection that the order of the luminaries in the Babylonian account is stars-sun-moon, rather than the more common order of sun-moon-stars. This order was probably chosen by the author(s) of the *Enuma elish "because of the great significance of the stars in the lives of the astronomically and astrologically minded Babylonians."*[24]

In contrast to the Babylonian story, Genesis 1:14-18 teaches that the heavenly bodies, rather than possessing divinity, are physical entities, altogether without personality and will, and also that they are God's creatures, which receive from Him both their place and their task. Worship of the luminaries is therefore out of the question. The warning that is implied in Genesis 1:14-18 is made explicit in Deuteronomy 4:19, where Israel is told:

> *"...Beware lest you lift up your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and worship them and serve them, things which the LORD your God has allotted to all the people under the whole heaven."*

Job, a non-Israelite, knew of the prohibition. When justifying himself before his friends, he listed among the sins he had avoided that of secretly worshiping sun and moon (Job 31:26, 27). In the course of their history Israelites, on the other hand, did succumb to the temptation (see, for example, 2 Kings 23:11, Ezekiel 8:16).

Genesis further differs from the *Enuma elish* in that it withholds priority from the stars, the "great gods" of the Babylonian pantheon. The message of their formation comes after that of sun and moon and takes the form of a brief appendage (verse 16). The important luminaries in Genesis 1 are not the stars but the sun and the moon. These are indeed made rulers, but their rule is one of service: they are appointed to give light upon the earth, to separate the day from the night, and to serve as signs for the seasons and as a measurement for days and years. In the performance of all these functions they benefit nature and mankind. It is also noteworthy that Genesis 1 does not mention the sun and the moon by name but simply refers to them as "lights." This may well have been done because in the ancient world the names for sun and moon were almost always the names of deities.

The creatures of the deep

The implied rejection of pagan traditions in the Genesis account of the making of sun, moon, and stars on day four is again to be noted in that of the creation of the marine animals on day five. We read in verse 21 that on this day *"God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds..."* We come here to a topic that I already wrote about, namely that of the parallels between the Babylonian account of a primordial oceanic dragon on the one hand and the biblical references to hostile waters and threatening aquatic monsters on the other.

When first they became acquainted with the myth of Marduk and his battle against Tiamat, biblical critics believed that the Babylonian account was the source of references to aquatic monsters in the Old Testament. In the course of the twentieth century, however, when various records of Canaanite religious myths were discovered, it appeared that these provided even closer parallels with Old Testament references. Gerhard F. Hasel refers to Canaanite records which speak of the role that sea monsters played in the religion of Baal and his fellow deities. According to one of these records, Baal's sister Anath boasted that she had slain, annihilated, or muzzled Baal's enemies and rivals, namely the Sea, the River, the Dragon, and the Crooked Serpent (Lotan, Leviathan), "the foul-fanged with Seven Heads."[25]

All these monsters – Sea and River, Dragon, Crooked or Twisting Serpent and Many-headed Leviathan (together with the biblical Rahab, which at times also personifies a hostile sea or sea creature) – appear in the Old Testament.[26] The Israelites, in other words, knew about them, and the danger was real that they would follow the Canaanites in assigning to these monsters divine powers, making them, in fact, the independent enemies and rivals of God. It therefore had to be impressed upon them that Yahweh ruled and controlled the monsters of the sea just as He ruled and controlled the darkness and the deep, the light and the light-bearing bodies. That message is conveyed in verses 21 and 22, which state that it was God who called the monsters of the deep into being, and which add that He saw also this work of creation as good. Together with the other creatures, the large aquatic animals received God's blessing.

That the monsters of the deep are mere creatures is confirmed elsewhere in the Old Testament. When they are mentioned as hostile forces, it is practically always with the message that God has pierced, crushed, cut into pieces, or otherwise annihilated them for the sake of his redeemed. In Noordtzij's words, Old Testament poets and prophets made use of pagan mythological concepts *"in order to show the surpassing greatness of Israel's God who without the least effort did what other peoples saw as the fruit of a terrible struggle by their gods."*[27] At times, overtones of hostility and danger are altogether absent and the monsters simply represent huge animals like the crocodile, the hippopotamus, the water buffalo, and perhaps the whale. All of these, we read, are creatures in which God rejoices, for which He cares (Psalm 104:24-30), and which, together with sun, moon, stars and all the rest of creation are called upon to praise Him (Psalm 148).[28]

The creation of man

The account of the sixth day relates two separate acts of creation, namely that of the land animals and that of man. There are many similarities between the animal and the human being. Both man and beast were made from the dust of the earth and received from God the breath of life; both will return to the earth from which they were taken; and both seem to have been made, anatomically and physiologically, according to a similar blueprint or plan.

Genesis 1 does not deny these similarities, but it brings out the distinctiveness of man and his superiority over the animals as well. With respect to the latter, we read that God said, *"Let the earth bring forth..."* With respect to man we receive the impression that God is more directly, more personally involved. He begins by announcing his intention: *"Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion..."* And so, the passage continues,

> *"God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'."*

Instead of being part of the animal world, man is appointed its ruler. He is especially distinguished from the animal in that he is made in God's image, after his likeness. What do these words mean? The Heidelberg Catechism (Lord's Day 3) explains the terms as referring to man's original righteousness and holiness, which he lost with the fall. Genesis 1 makes clear, however, that the image was connected with the special mandate and office given to man, namely that he was to rule creation as God's representative. To fulfil that *mandate* and *office*, certain characteristics or qualities were given to him (and to him alone among creatures), such as his intelligence and power of language, as a result of which he could listen to God and respond to Him. These gifts of intelligence and language continue: man did not turn into an animal but remained man after the fall. The original *mandate* also remains, even though mankind no longer fulfils it to honour God: man is still the head of creation. Does the image itself remain as well, although in corrupted form? Texts like Genesis 9:6, Psalm 8, Acts 17:28, 1 Corinthians 11:7, and James 3:9 would seem to suggest it. At the very least they convey the message that man's being created in God's image has consequences also after the fall.[29] In any event, the statements that man is made in God's image *and* that he is to have dominion over creation are connected in Genesis 1:26. As Aalders writes:

> *"From this high position, which the Creator gives to humanity by creating them in his own image, it follows that humanity is given dominion over the whole earth and over all living creatures, fish, birds, and land animals."*[30]

Man's special position comes into even greater relief when once again we compare the Genesis account with the Babylonian one. In the *Enuma elish* the making of human beings came more or less as an afterthought. The occasion was the complaint of some of the lesser gods, who had been charged with the work necessary for the wellbeing of the entire pantheon and felt they were too heavily burdened. When Marduk heard about the complaint, he resolved to create man, which he (or another deity) made by mixing the blood of a defeated god, one of Tiamat's former allies, with clay. The new being was charged with the service of the gods, so that these might be "at ease."

The reference to the divine blood shows that there is in Babylonia a link between man and the gods. This is to be expected in a pantheistic system. When everything is god, man necessarily partakes of the divine, as do the animals and the rest of nature. Noordtzij points out that it is this pantheistic background which explains why in pagan mythology the difference between god and man, and also between man and animal, is so easily erased, so that we meet beings that are part god and part man, as well as beings that mix human and animal forms and characteristics.[31] Even gods can take animal form, as they do, for example, in Egypt.

In any case, the divine element in man according to the Babylonian myth does not imply that he is made in the image of the gods and serves as their representative on earth. Nor does he have a specific task with respect to the development of creation. The earth belongs not to him but to the gods; it is they who introduce technology and art and every other aspect of civilization. Any statement that man is to rule and guard and develop the earth – any indication that he is to fulfil a "cultural mandate" – is absent in the Babylonian epic.[32] According to Babylonian mythology, man was appointed a slave. According to the Bible, he was appointed God's representative and viceroy, made *"little less than God,"* and crowned with glory and honour (Psalm 8). The task he received was not a burden, but a means to develop his God-given potential and so to glorify his Creator.[33]

Conclusion

The Israelites of Moses' time and later learned from Genesis 1 about God as the Origin of all that exists. They learned that He was the omnipotent and transcendent Creator, that his creation was good, that He rejoiced in all He had made, and that He gave a very special place and function to man, the crown of his creation.

Genesis 1 taught the Israelites not only about God the Creator, but also about God the Redeemer. Israel knew of both the need and the reality of redemption. The first chapter of the Bible was written after the events of Genesis 3, the calling of Abraham, and the delivery from Egyptian slavery, and just before Israel was to embark upon the conquest of Canaan. For those who trusted in Him, God's power of creation was the guarantee of his power of providence and redemption. The confession of Psalm 121, *"My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth,"* finds echoes in various other parts of the Old Testament.[34]

Creation, the Bible teaches, is connected to recreation. This becomes especially clear in the New Testament, which reveals that all things were created through and for Christ (Colossians 1:16), that Christ continues to uphold the universe by his word of power (Hebrews 1:3), and that, in the fullness of time, He came to earth to redeem mankind, giving to those who believe in Him the power to become children of God (John 1:1-13). We can therefore indeed say, as Aalders does, that the Book of Genesis is a revelation of Jesus Christ. Biblical history, to which Genesis 1 is the prologue, is the history of redemption. It is the revelation of *"the unfathomable mercies of God who through Jesus Christ seeks to deliver fallen humanity out of the misery into which they have cast themselves by their own sin and guilt."*[35]

And by delivering humanity God also accomplishes the delivery of the world of nature, a world that has been cursed because of human sin. Rightly objecting to an excessively man-centred understanding of the biblical message, Claus Westermann writes,

> *"The simple fact that the first page of the Bible speaks about heaven and earth, the sun, moon and stars, about plants and trees, about birds, fish and animals, is a certain sign that the God whom we acknowledge in the Creed as the Father of Jesus Christ is concerned with all these creatures, and not merely with humans. A God who is understood only as the god of humankind is no longer the God of the Bible."*[36] And later: *"...God's work does not come to an end with the saving action by which Christ redeemed humankind. The Bible is speaking of a definitive event which concerns not only humankind but the whole of creation."*[37]

Indeed, just as nature suffered the consequences of man's fall, so, in the wisdom of God, will it share in man's redemption. As we read in the Letter to the Romans, *"...the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God"* (Romans 8:21).

The power of God as the Creator guarantees his power as the Redeemer of man and the rest of creation. This was the primary message of Genesis 1 to the people of Israel. It continues to be the primary message for believers today.

Response of C Van Dam

Creation and questions related to faith and science have been featured the last while in *Clarion* by Dr. F.G. Oosterhoff.[38] She has stimulated the thinking of readers of Clarion by giving a historical overview of different approaches used in dealing with science and Scripture. In her most recent series, "Genesis 1 in Context," she has rightly stressed the importance of coming to grips with the context of Scripture in trying to understand its meaning. I would, however, like to take this opportunity to respond to this most recent series. A number of issues are raised that deserve to be discussed, be it of necessity, briefly. In this response, page numbers given in brackets refer to Oosterhoff's articles on Genesis 1 as published in the August 2003 issues of *Clarion*.

Oosterhoff sets the tone for her most recent series by stating that the theological meaning of Genesis 1 is paramount and that *"the Bible, and therefore also its prologue, Genesis 1, does not offer us a scientific treatise. It presents itself as history, namely as the history of God's dealings with his people and with the world, and it must be read first of all from that perspective"* (378). Further on, she explains that *"it was not the author's intent to give scientific information"* (378).

Now it is of course a truism that the Bible is not a scientific textbook. I am not aware of anyone who calls the Bible such. The underlying question is however of what historical and scientific value are the statements that the Bible makes. Does, for example, the fact that the Bible is not a scientific textbook mean that the Bible gives only religious facts, such as "God's dealings with his people" and that therefore science does not have to reckon with the data given in Scripture? What is the value of what Scripture relates? What kind of history does Scripture, and now especially Genesis 1, give?

Does Genesis 1 relate history?

Oosterhoff states very clearly that *"Genesis 1 gives a factual, historical account,"* be it in the form of a concentrated history and from the perspective of a human being and his senses (378). However, this clear statement of the factuality of Genesis 1 is somewhat compromised by her subsequent assertion that *"it was not the author's intent to give us scientific information"* (378). It is immediately granted that the Bible does not, for example, give any scientific chemical formulas on the process of creation. However, is the historical reality of a six day creation not a scientific fact of utmost importance? Is this not a fact that science has to reckon with when, for example, dealing with the problem of dating the present world?

By stressing only the theological message of Genesis 1 and saying that this is of paramount importance (378), Oosterhoff introduces a false dilemma. She implies that the plain and obvious meaning of the creation account in 6 days is not really that important (cf. p. 401). Genesis 1 gives predominantly theological facts. In this one-sided emphasis, the historicity of this chapter is in danger of being compromised. For example, we are told that the number 7, as in 7 days of creation, has symbolic value. Oosterhoff writes: *"It can hardly have seemed accidental to Israel that the creation account incorporates the number of perfection and completeness"* (402). But putting the matter this way raises an important question. Was the number 7 in Genesis 1 simply used to give the idea of completeness and perfection to Israel or did the creation of heaven and earth really did take place in 7 days?

That speaking of incorporating the number seven into the creation account puts into question its historicity is also evident when Oosterhoff refers to Umberto Cassuto's ideas with apparent approval. She writes: *"Cassuto mentions various other places where the number seven occurs in the creation account and shows that the number is not only fundamental to the account's main theme but that it serves to* ***determine*** *many of its details as well"* (my emphasis, 403, n. 2). If the number serves to determine many of the details of the creation account, then obviously historical accuracy has not determined their usage but a need to include the number 7. I do agree that the

number 7 is an important one in the Bible. Its importance however derives from the fact that creation actually took place in the space of a week. *For that reason* the number seven subsequently became the number of perfection and completeness.

The historicity of Genesis 1 can also be put into question by an undue emphasis on how the Genesis creation account meets certain human needs, specifically those of Israel leaving Egypt. For example, to say that Genesis 1 mentions water and darkness as being subject to the Lord in order to allay Israel's fear of water and darkness (both of which figured prominently in the Exodus) does little to enhance the historicity of this chapter. After speaking of Israel's fear of water and darkness Oosterhoff writes:

> ***For this very reason**, however, they (the Israelites) had to learn that the waters and the darkness did not exist as independent powers but were subject to Yahweh. The creation account does precisely that. The first verses of Genesis 1 tell Israel that everything, including the primordial waters, was God's creation and therefore under his control. And verse 2 does not stop with the statement that in the beginning all was flood and darkness but adds that God Himself was present there...* (381, my emphasis)

But surely, the water, the darkness, and God's presence are mentioned in Genesis 1, not in the first place to allay Israel's fears, but because they are the result of God's creating the world and all that is in it. The creation account included these details because this is what actually happened. Now each generation, including our own, can take all manner of comfort and encouragement from Genesis 1. But we can do that because we know that this is what happened according to the Word which God himself gave us.

By her great emphasis on what appears to be a tailor-made account for Israel fresh out of Egypt, Oosterhoff seems to suppose that prior to this time there was no knowledge of creation. But, the creation event took place as described before any Israelite existed and we may assume that God's people such as Enoch and Abraham knew of this great act of God. The knowledge of this historical event predated Israel and later the liberated descendants of Jacob received this revelation from God as we now have it. There is no reason to believe that previous generations of believers did not know that the Lord had made heaven and earth in six days. After all, the Sabbath as a creation ordinance of rest had been given to Israel *before* Israel received the fourth commandment at the Sinai (cf. Exodus 16:23-30; cf. 20:8). To know the fourth commandment and its rationale was to know of creation in six days followed by a day of rest. That commandment, as well as the others, was clearly not new for Israel (cf. Genesis 26:5). What happened at the Sinai was a covenant renewal. The Lord graciously reaffirmed the Abrahamic covenant of old and claimed Abraham's seed as his special and holy nation (Exodus 8-19:6).

The historicity of Genesis 1

We need to maintain the historical character of Genesis 1 in its plain and obvious meaning. Otherwise, there is no basis for theological truth relating to this chapter. Oosterhoff has made good use of the work of the late Gerhard F. Hasel in bringing out some of the theological importance of what we find in Genesis 1.[39] But Hasel also understood very clearly that it was essential to maintain the historicity of the events narrated in their obvious and plain sense. He therefore prepared an excellent study entitled *"The 'Days' of Creation in Genesis 1: Literal 'Days' or Figurative 'Periods/Epochs' of Time?"* which was published in *Origins*.[40] After considering all the arguments, his conclusion is as follows:

> *The cumulative evidence, based on comparative, literary, linguistic and other considerations, converges on every level, leading to the singular conclusion that the designation yôm, "day," in Genesis 1 means consistently a literal 24-hour day.*
>
> *The author of Genesis 1 could not have produced more comprehensive and all-inclusive ways to express the idea of a literal "day" than the ones that were chosen. There is a complete lack of indicators from prepositions, qualifying expressions, construct phrases, semantic-syntactical connections, and so on, on the basis of which the designation "day" in the creation week could be taken to be anything different than a regular 24-hour day. The*

> *combinations of the factors of particular usage, singular gender, semantic-syntactical constructions, time boundaries, and so on, corroborated by the divine promulgations in such Pentateuchal passages as Exodus 20:8-11 and Exodus 31:12-17, suggest uniquely and consistently that the creation "day" is meant to be literal, sequential, and chronological in nature.*[41]

This conclusion is not unusual in Old Testament scholarship. The attempt to make Genesis 1 somehow fit current scientific theories has largely been given up by mainstream critical scholars. They generally admit that the text of Genesis 1 clearly intends to inform the reader that the world was formed in six time periods we know as days. Critical scholars may relegate this account to myth and not history but the message given is unmistakable.[42] It is often conservative scholars wishing to harmonize Genesis 1 with current science who will try to find room in the days of Genesis 1 for large periods of time in one form or another. This tendency is also evident in our own Dutch tradition and Oosterhoff has listed several "big" names that went in this direction.[43] However, exegesis of Scripture must be determinative, and as Hasel's work makes clear, there is no exegetical basis for making the days of Genesis 1 refer to anything but what we understand by "day." This is also how the days of Genesis 1 would have been understood by ancient Israel. This meaning of "day" is *part of its original context* (cf. 401) which Oosterhoff seeks to recover.

In summary, a careful comparing of Scripture with Scripture has to determine the meaning of the biblical text, taking all relevant factors into consideration, and not an outside agenda such as science or the desire to "make things fit" with current scientific theory.[44]

One history

There is a larger concern that lies behind this response to the article on Genesis 1. It is this. We need to maintain the unity of history as revealed in Scripture. In scholarship that does not take seriously the Bible as God's infallible Word, a distinction is often made between history which is affirmed by faith (called *Geschichte*) and real, verifiable history (called *Historie*). In the former, the theological meaning is paramount, but the latter is all we really have to worry about in taking seriously the historical data of Scripture. We should make every effort to avoid falling into this false dilemma. It is a dilemma introduced by modern critical scholarship. History has shown that it is a very small step from making artificial distinctions such as the theological and historical (or scientific) significance of a passage to dismissing the historical all together.

Of course, Scripture's chief focus is the account of how the Lord our God had mercy on a fallen creation and brought about salvation in Christ. But in revealing this to us, the Lord also relates true and real history that can and should be reckoned with, also in scientific endeavours. The creation account is not only part of that history but is even its opening chapter. There is only one history and not two. Just as the great redemptive acts of God, including the salvation in Christ, are only great and redemptive because they truly happened, so also the awesome creation acts of God are great and important for us because they truly happened as God has related this to us.

One final point of clarification. By writing the above, I do not say that Dr. Oosterhoff adheres to this dualism brought on by critical scholarship. In discussing the matter with her, I know that she rejects it out of hand. I fully accept her statement that she considers Genesis 1 to give factual history and do not call into question her integrity as a Reformed scholar. But, as I have tried to show, her subsequent writing in these articles compromises her positive assertion. This probably happened unwittingly and in all innocence. But, let us be careful not to create an implicit contrast between the theological meaning of Genesis 1 which is to be considered paramount (378) and the history that is actually recounted there. There would be no worthwhile theology if it was not rooted in actual history.

Response to Dr. C. Van Dam by F.C. Oosterhoff

I am grateful to Dr. C. Van Dam for responding to my articles and for providing information that is of interest to me and, no doubt, to our readers. I also appreciate the fact that the editor has allowed

me to come with a reply. Because I have been told to be as brief as possible, I will stick to what I believe are the main points.

Genesis 1 and science

I agree with Dr. Van Dam that scriptural data are of relevance to scientists. To restrict ourselves to Genesis 1, scientists must learn here that God created, that He did so at the beginning of time, that He declared his work to be good, and so on (see my article, and especially the conclusion). I also agree that the question of the days is important, and I think that Dr. Van Dam is absolutely right in underlining this point. On at least two occasions I myself wrote that the discussion on that issue is valid and unavoidable. But I wrote further that by single-mindedly concentrating on that topic (and who can deny that this happens all too often among us?) we may miss something in the first chapter of the Bible that is of paramount or overriding importance – the fact, namely, that Genesis 1 gives us the history of redemption. That was my focus, and in order to avoid all confusion, I consciously ignored the question of the days. Wrongly so? Perhaps, but I had to limit myself.

Under the present heading I must also comment briefly on Dr. Van Dam's statement that the days must be interpreted in their *"obvious and plain sense,"* namely as 24-hour days. I know that this is his opinion and I respect it, but he must not ask of me to deal with this complex issue within the context of my specific study. I am not even sure that I can cast a deciding vote here under any circumstances. Various Reformed theologians of standing have questioned this interpretation, or at least argued that there are other exegetically-permissible ones. Names like Kuyper, Bavinck, Schilder, and several of their colleagues and of their present-day disciples come to mind; I have written about some of them before. On the other hand, there are those who take Dr. Van Dam's position. How shall I decide between these different views? All I can say is that the Bible is infallible, but our Reformed exegesis obviously is not. (Nor has Reformed theology ever said that it is.)

A minor point: I realize that no one *calls* the Bible a scientific treatise. My concern is that we are perhaps tempted to treat it as one.

Genesis 1 relates history

I am convinced that Genesis 1 gives a factual, historical account and made that clear at the beginning. I do not believe that, as Dr. Van Dam suggests, my article cast doubt on this statement, but if there is any danger of leaving such an impression, I am more than willing to make corrections. If, for example, my quotation from Umberto Cassuto's work about the role of the number seven in the creation account causes confusion, I am quite prepared to withdraw it. But drawing attention to the importance of the number seven as such does not at all, as far as I can see, jeopardize my confession of the historicity of Genesis 1. (Dr. Van Dam's statement that the value of the number seven derives first of all from the seven-day creation message I found interesting and enlightening.)

Dr. Van Dam goes on to suggest that by showing how the creation account met the needs of the ancient Israelites I am once again in danger of casting doubt on the chapter's historicity. But I fail to see the connection. Reformed exegesis has always given attention to original context (*interna*l, but also *external* context – i.e., cultural-historical environment), and that was what I was doing. It does not at all imply that the message is non-historical. Nor does it imply that it has no relevance for later readers; quite the contrary. I make that point more than once; see especially the introduction and the conclusion of the article.

I agree with Dr. Van Dam that knowledge of creation existed before the Exodus; that men like Enoch and Abraham and others will have known that the Lord Yahweh created the heavens and the earth. It did not become part of the written Word, the canonical Scriptures, however, until Moses' days. The ancient Israelites were the first readers of the account as it appeared in Scripture. I have no trouble believing that, guided by the Holy Spirit, Moses recounted the events in such a way that they were clearly seen as relevant – that they even seemed "tailor-made" – for the Israelites in their specific situation (and *thereby* also for us in our specific situation). The fact that I

bring out this relevance does not at all imply a low view of the historicity of Genesis 1. Why should relevance for Israel and for us imply non-historicity?

Two other points.

1. Dr. Van Dam quotes me as saying (on p.378) that *"it was not the author's intent to give scientific information."* The context makes clear that I am referring here to exact-theoretical scientific information (the quotation occurs in my statement that Genesis 1 describes the world as *it appears to the senses*).
2. He also states that I imply (on p. 401) that *"the plain and obvious meaning of the creation account in 6 days is not really that important."* Here again, the context should be kept in mind. The statement occurs in the section wherein I object to the intrusion of *modern-scientific issues* into our reading of Genesis 1, since (I argue) such intrusions tend to confuse the issue.

Critical scholarship and I

I concentrated on the salvation-historical (or redemptive-historical) message of Genesis 1, and called that the "theological meaning." The term "salvation-*historical*" should make clear that the term "theological" (which is used as a synonym!) does not imply "non-historical" in the modern-critical sense. I know of the distinction that is made between theological but non-historical *Geschichte* and historical-factual *Historie*, and for that reason I hesitated for a while to use the word theological, but in the end I concluded that the abuse of a term does not abolish its proper use. Even so, it is good that Dr. Van Dam draws attention to possible misunderstandings. Let me make clear, then, once and for all: my usage of the term *"theological meaning"* must not be interpreted to mean that I am captive to the views of Bible-critical scholars. At no time (I know I am repeating myself) did I in the least question the infallibility of the Bible or the historicity of Genesis 1. To Dr. Van Dam's concluding statement that *"There would be no worthwhile theology if it was not rooted in actual history,"* I respond with a heartfelt "Amen!" But at no point did I attack or deny this truth, either explicitly or implicitly.

Conclusion

Dr. Van Dam and I have discussed our differing views on matters that are dealt with in this exchange on more than one occasion. We have done so again before I sent this reply to the editor. We continue to differ on various points, but we recognize each other as Christian believers who want to submit to Scripture as the infallible Word of God and therefore the only rule of faith. Within this context, I believe, differences of opinion are possible, permissible, and often even profitable. Iron sharpens iron. It is our wish that our readers may benefit from the discussion and that the exchange contributes to a yet clearer understanding of Genesis 1.

FG Oosterhoff

[1] G. Ch. Aalders, *De Goddelijke openbaring in the eerste drie hoofdstukken van Genesis* (Kampen: Kok, 1932), pp. 163-8; W. H. Gispen, *Schepping en paradijs* (Kampen: Kok, 1966), p. 12; K. Schilder, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus* (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre), 1947, pp. 190f.

[2] Aalders, pp. 163-68, 171-200; Gispen, p. 11; Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), pp. 65-80, 96-102, and *passim*. For some of John Calvin's remarks on the topic, see my "Klaas Schilder on Creation and Flood," 1, *Clarion*, March 14, 2003, pp. 139, 140.

[3] Assuming that the widely accepted dates for the exodus (c. 1446-c.1406 B.C.) are correct. For the calculation of these dates, see the Introduction to Genesis, "Author and Date of Writing," *NIV Study Bible*.

[4] See on this point again the Introduction to Genesis in the *NIV Study Bible*. A broader treatment can be found in G. Ch. Aalders' well-known *Bible Student's Commentary*, Genesis, I (Zondervan/ Paideia, 1981), "Introduction to the Pentateuch," pp. 1-41.

[5] Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), pp. 30-33 and *passim.*

[6] Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations are from the *Revised Standard Version*.

[7] Aalders, *Bible Student's Commentary*, p. 77.

[8] See my article "Herman Bavinck on Old Testament Criticism," 2, *Clarion*, September 27, 2002, pp. 475f.

[9] See, e.g., Psalm 24:2, Psalm 104:6, Psalm 136:6, 2 Peter 3:5.

[10] "Herman Bavinck on Old Testament Criticism," 2, p. 475.

[11] Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology," *The Evangelical Quarterly*, April/May 1974, p. 102, note 130. See on this topic also p. 84 of the same article.

[12] For this structure, see the note on Genesis 1:11 in the *NIV Study Bible*. Note that here the given chronological order of the days is upheld. In this respect the *NIV* explanation differs from that of the so-called framework hypothesis, which uses a similar structure but rejects the idea that the days are given in chronological order.

[13] The examples are taken from the Introduction to Genesis, "Literary Features," in the *NIV Study Bible*. With respect to the role of the number seven in the creation account, see also U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, I, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1961), p. 12-15. Cassuto mentions various other places where the number seven occurs in the creation account and shows that the number is not only fundamental to the account's main theme but that it serves to determine many of its details as well (p. 12).

[14] It is especially the people of the so-called framework hypothesis who have stressed the relationship between the six days and the Sabbath. See, for example, A. Noordtzij's important work *God's Woord en der eeuwen getuigenis: Het Oude Testament in het licht der oostersche opgravingen*, 2nd ed. (Kampen: Kok, 1931), pp. 116-20. It was Noordtzij who pioneered the modern version of the framework hypothesis. Other adherents of that hypothesis include Nic. H. Ridderbos, *Beschouwingen over Genesis 1*, 2nd ed. (Kampen: Kok, 1963); Mark E. Ross, "The Framework Hypothesis: An Interpretation of Genesis 1:1-2:3" in Joseph A. Pipa, Jr. and David W. Hall, eds., *Did God Create in Six Days?* (Taylors, SC: Southern Presbyterian Press, 1999), pp. 113-130; and Lee Irons with Meredith G. Kline, "The Framework View" in David G. Hagopian, ed., *The Genesis Debate* (Mission Viejo, Cal.: Crux Press, 2001), pp. 217-56, 279-303.

[15] Ridderbos, p. 96, n12.

[16] Hasel, "The Polemic Nature of Genesis 1," pp. 87f.

[17] Ridderbos, pp. 87-90. See on this topic also Al Wolters, "Creation as Separation: A Proposed Link between Bible and Theory" in Jitse van der Meer, ed., *Facets of Faith & Science*, 4 (Pascal Centre/ University Press of America, 1996), pp. 347-52.

[18] See also Psalm 75:2, 3, 95:1, 5, 96:10.

[19] Wolters, p. 349.

[20] Cassuto, *Commentary on Genesis 1*, p. 44

[21] John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis*, John King, trans. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p. 76.

[22] Ridderbos, *Beschouwingen over Genesis* 1, pp. 90f.

[23] Hasel, "The Polemic Nature of Genesis 1," pp. 88f.

[24] *Ibid*., p. 89.

[25] *Ibid*., p. 86.

[26] See, for example, Job 3:8, Job 9:13, Job 26:12-13, Psalm 74:13-14, Psalm 77:16, Psalm 89:9-10, Psalm 93:3-4, Isaiah 27:1, Isaiah 51:9-10, Jeremiah 5:22, Ezekiel 29:2-5, Ezekiel 32:2, Amos 9:3.

[27] Noordtzij, *God's Woord en der eeuwen getuigenis*, p. 134.

[28] See on this topic my article "Herman Bavinck on Old Testament Criticism," 2, *Clarion*, September 27, 2002.

[29] On the nature of the divine image and the question of its retention after the fall, see J. Faber, "Imago Dei in Calvin: Calvin's Doctrine of Man as the Image of God by Virtue of Creation" and "Imago Dei in Calvin: Calvin's Doctrine of Man as the Image of God in Connection with Sin and Restoration," in his *Essays in Reformed Doctrine* (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1990), pp. 227-250 and 251-281 respectively. Among those who stressed the office-like character of the image was K. Schilder; see his *Heidelbergsche Catechismus*, I, Lord's Day 3, Q/A 6 (pp. 186-312). I thank Dr. Faber for drawing my attention to Schilder's work.

[30] Aalders, *Bible Student's Commentary*, p. 71.

[31] Noordtzij, p. 139.

[32] Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, p. 61; Noordtzij, p. 141.

[33] *Ibid*.

[34] Some examples: Psalm 33, Psalm 90:1-2, Isaiah 40:21-31, Isaiah 44:24, Isaiah 45: 17-18, Isaiah 51:12-13; Jeremiah 10:16

[35] Aalders, *Bible Student's Commentary*, p. 49.

[36] Westermann, p. 176.

[37] *Ibid*., p. 177.

[38] F.G. Oosterhoff, "Faith and Science in the Reformed Tradition" *Clarion* 51 (2002) 62-64, 84-87, 105-108, 134-137; "Klaas Schilder on Creation and Flood," *Clarion* 52 (2003) 137-140, 161-164; and "Genesis 1 in Context" 52 (2003) 378-381, 401-403, 422-424.

[39] Namely his article "The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 46 (1974) 81-102.

[40] *Origins* 21:1 (1994) 5-38; see also n. 77 on p. 36.

[41] G.F. Hasel, "The 'Days' of Creation in Genesis 1", *Origins* 21:1 (1994) 30-31.

[42] See, e.g., J. Skinner, *Genesis* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1930), 4-5, 20-21 and G. von Rad, *Genesis* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 63. Also see the discussion in James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM, 1977) 40-42.

[43] See her "Klaas Schilder on Creation and the Flood" *Clarion* 52 (2003) 137-140, 161-164. She acknowledges her debt to the work of Max Rogland, "Ad litteram: Some Dutch Reformed Theologians on the Creation Days," *Westminster Theological Journal* 63 (2001) 211-233. On the other hand, there are conservative scholars today who are "mainstream" and maintain the obvious reading of the text. See, e.g., G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (WBC; Waco, Texas: Word, 1987) 19, 39-40.

[44] See also on this point my articles: "The First Verse," *Clarion* 37 (1988) 486-487; "Is There a Time Gap Between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2?" *Clarion* 37 (1988) 516-517, 38 (1989) 4-5; "Bible and Science: Some Basic Factors," *Clarion* 38 (1989) 54-55; "The First Day," *Clarion* 38 (1989) 74-75; "What Did the Days of the 'Creation Week' Consist of?" *Clarion* 38 (1989) 94-95; "Science, Scripture and the Age of the Earth," *Clarion* 38 (1989) 146-147. Also see my "Creation and Confession," *Clarion* 49 (2000) 218-220.