

Resource Guides on Genesis 1–2 and Science: Kevin L. Spawn

2. Reading the Creation Accounts in Genesis 1–2

This resource guide consists of a summarization of a recent dialogue of various evangelical interpretations of the Creation Accounts in Genesis 1–2. Each interpretation is briefly related to contemporary scientific inquiry.

In [*Reading Genesis 1–2: An Evangelical Conversation*](#) (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2013), J. Daryl Charles edited a collection of essays by the following OT scholars: Todd Beall, Richard Averbeck, C. John Collins, Tremper Longman III and John Walton. Each author presents one perspective on the spectrum of evangelical readings of Gen 1–2. Literal, literary, analogical and theological readings of these accounts are summarized below.

Todd Beall, Reading Genesis 1–2: A Literal Approach

The young-earth, literal interpretation of Gen 1–2 proposed by Beall is based on two central issues. First, he denies that Gen 1–11 consists of a different kind of literature (primeval history) than the patriarch history in chapters 12–50. According to Beall, the distribution of the genealogical formulas (“these are the generations of,” *’eleh toledoth*) in both parts of the book of Genesis (2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1; 37:2, excluding 36:9) demonstrates that all of these chapters were intended to be read as the same kind of historical narrative. Based on this view of the genre of Gen 1–11, the book of Genesis constitutes one “consecutive history.” A second reason to read Gen 1–11 literally follows from the understanding of the New Testament authors, who, in 24 passages (e.g., Matt 19:4–6; Mark 10:6–8), appear to comprehend Gen 1–11 in this way. Consequently, according to Beall, Gen 1–2 should not be interpreted in light of other ANE creation narratives or evolutionary and geological theories.

Richard Averbeck, A Literary Day, Inter-Textual, and Contextual Reading of Genesis 1–2

According to Averbeck, the six days of creation in Gen 1 consist of two sets of three days (days 1-3: the forming of the cosmos; days 4-6: the filling of the cosmos) to facilitate “effective telling.” The pattern of the framework of days above is analogous to the workweek in Israel. Consequently, it does not offer the reader details about the processes of creation or the age of the earth. In Gen 2, Averbeck stresses the “historical markers” of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers (Gen 2:14) to ground his view of Adam and Eve as historical individuals (e.g., Gen 5:1-3). God addressed all ANE people in the revelation of Gen 1–2, which does not restrict the scientific examination of the mysteries of origins before God.

C. John Collins, Reading Genesis 1–2 with the Grain: Analogical Days

Genesis 1–2 is best read in the context of both the book of Genesis (e.g., the *toledoth* formulas above) and the parallels of Gen 1–11 with the earliest histories of humanity among Israel’s

neighbors. According to Collins, just as the Mesopotamian accounts present the earliest period of human existence as “prehistory”, the author of Gen 1–11 wrote about this era with the same kind of literature. Consequently, “undue literalism” is an inappropriate approach to a prehistory like Gen 1–11. Genesis 1 is comprised of six “analogical days” that both model Israel’s workweek and lead to the Sabbath rest of day 7. Genesis 1 celebrates God’s creative work of the earth and humanity, while Gen 2 expands upon God’s blessed relationship with humankind. In his [Science and Faith](#), Collins charts the way ahead for a Christian engagement with science that affirms the truth of both realms of knowledge.

Tremper Longman III, What Genesis 1–2 Teaches (and What It Doesn’t)

The content of the accounts of Gen 1–2 and their interplay with alternative creation narratives of Israel’s neighbors indicate that the book does not begin with a literal account of the events of creation. The authors’ intent was to proclaim that Israel’s God, and no other deity(s), is the Creator of the cosmos. Consequently, it is best to view this entire book as a theological history. Although “a historical impulse” runs throughout it (e.g., the *toledoth* formulas), “a higher degree of literary specificity” characterizes Gen 12–50 than the primeval history of chapters 1–11. As theological history, the biblical creation accounts in Gen 1–2 instruct its readers about the nature of God, humanity and world, but not about the process of creation itself. Interpreters of Scripture should not ignore the exploration of origins by science, particularly after the mapping of the human genome. According to Longman, a high view of Scripture does not require a historical Adam. Consequently, Scripture and evolution are not at odds with each other.

John Walton, Reading Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology

Walton argues that Gen 1 should not be read as a material, but as a functional account of creation culminating in the inauguration of a cosmic temple. Before the seven days, functionless material existed in Gen 1:2 (“formless and void [*tohu wabohu*]”). Genesis 1:2–2:2 proceeds from a functionless to functional, well-ordered cosmos. Based upon Israel’s cognitive environment, something existed when it was *distinguished* from other things and given a role or name. Walton also observes two sets of three days in Gen 1, but he does so in a novel way (creation of functions on days 1–3; creation of functionaries on days 4–6).

<u>Functions</u>	<u>Functionaries</u>
Day 1 Time	Day 4 Lights
Day 2 Weather	Day 5 Functional Creatures swarming in the air and water
Day 3 Fruitfulness, Food	Day 6 Functional Creatures brought forth from the earth
Day 7 Temple as Cosmos (rest)	

The inauguration of the cosmic temple as sacred space on day 7 initiates the functions of creation in days 1–6. “The cosmos was his [God’s] dwelling place, and he has made it function for people whom he has installed as his vice-regents and equipped with his own image” (162). To account for his functional reading of Gen 1, he proposes a new translation of the Hebrew term *bara*’:

“God created ...” in 1:1 is now rendered “God brought into functional [not material] existence.” Since Gen 1–2 is best described as a functional cosmology, according to Walton, Gen 1 does not restrict the inquiry into the material origins of modern science.