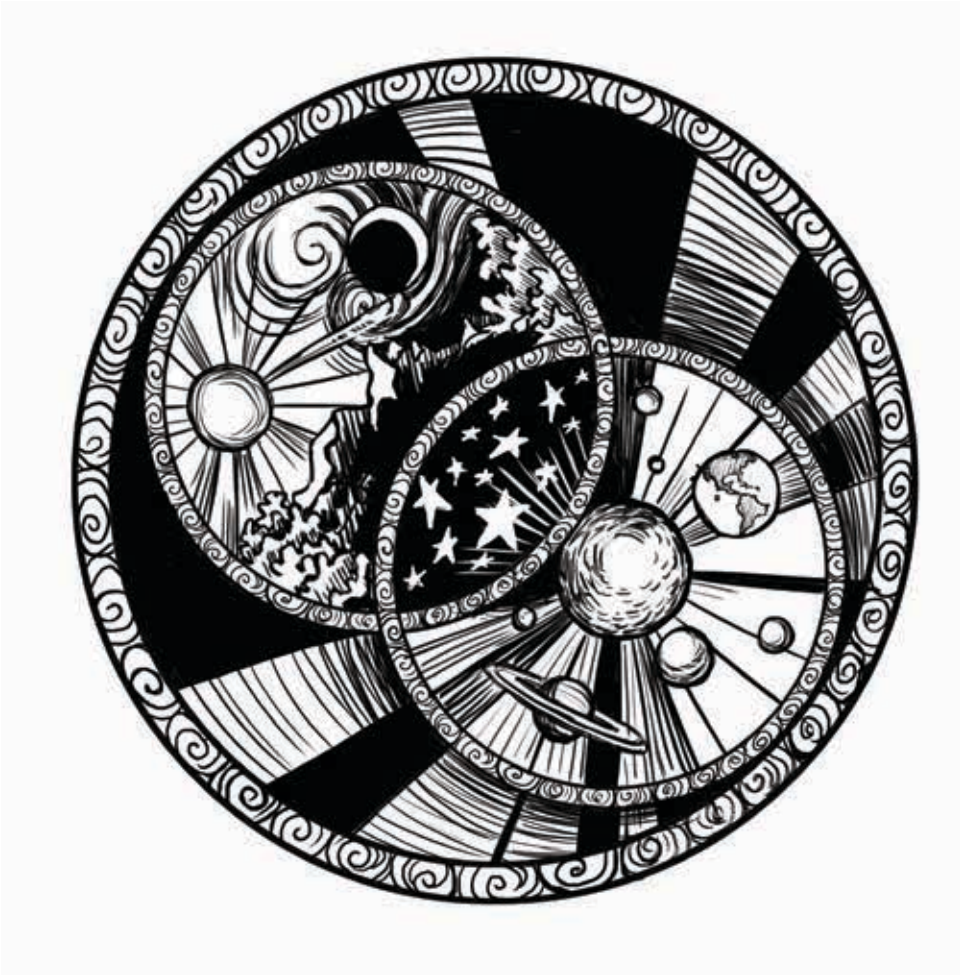
KEYWORDS: original hearers, retro-translation, a theology of creation, human moral agents

GOD, THE MISREADING OF GENESIS, *and the* SURPRISINGLY GOOD NEWS



BY BRIAN BULL AND FRITZ GUY

Probably nowhere has the Bible been more consistently misread—by translators, scholars, serious Christians, and casual readers alike—than in the first few chapters of Genesis. This unfortunate misreading of the text has resulted in a wholly unnecessary expenditure of time, effort, and resources in trying to make sense of the ancient text (as if it were a modern one) in the twenty-first-century world. The good news is that the misperception need not continue, and that the necessary correction is simple and straightforward. But it will take determined and persistent effort to overcome the influence of long-standing assumptions about the nature of the Genesis text.

Imaginary but Useful Narrative Assistants

In our efforts to understand Genesis 1–11 better—and in the process needing to move back and forth between two very different conceptual realms that are separated by time, space, and culture—we need all the help we can get. Accordingly, we employ a couple of imaginary and symbolic figures.

The first one is Moshe He'eb, who represents the ancient Hebrews but is himself only middle-aged and in good health. He is bearded, and he carries a rough-hewn staff as he walks the rugged and dusty paths of various lands of the ancient world. We find him often enough in the Promised Land, but he is by no means limited to that locale. Moshe personifies the original hearers of the Biblical text and those who found its narratives, exhortations, prophecies, and other material useful in their quest to understand God and themselves more fully. Finding such material valuable, they recorded it for posterity. Moshe's contemporaries listened to the inspired authors of Genesis. They constituted its Original Hearers.

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Our second figure, less strange but equally imaginary and symbolic, is Moshe's modern counterpart—a college-educated, intellectually curious young man named Ian Michael O'Dern. He is clean-shaven and casually dressed, a paradigmatic twenty-first-century Christian. He is a serious reader of the Bible; but since he does not know Hebrew, he has to rely on one or more modern translations. He represents almost all of us; and if his initials "I. M." are pronounced rapidly together with his surname "O'Dern," the result sounds (not coincidentally) like "I'm modern."[1]

We hope that these two imaginary figures, representing times, cultures, and worldviews separated by close to 3,000 years, will help to clarify their drastically different interpretations of the same Biblical text. To assist in this venture, a version of Genesis that employs only the information and conceptualizations that were available to Moshe will be employed. We have termed the process of producing such a version "retro-translation" and have identified the result as an Original Hearer's Version (OHV). It will seem "otherworldly," but it will go far to explaining why the Hebrew text was read and understood so differently *then* (by Moshe) from the way it is usually read and understood *now* (by Ian Michael—and, of course, by us).

Who and Why Rather Than When and How

Moshe and Ian Michael are each anticipating answers to fundamental—but fundamentally different—questions. Moshe's questions were essentially theological: Why does the world—everything we see around us or know about—exist? Is anyone responsible for it being here? Does human life *mean* anything? By contrast, Ian Michael's questions are historical and scientific: When and how did Planet Earth come into existence?" Did humans and dinosaurs ever coexist, and if so, when?

Inevitably, these very different questions have very different answers. To Moshe's theological questions "Who?" and "Why?" the answer, more than 3,000 years ago, was simple and direct: it was our God of love, who chose to create human reality in the divine image and thus to actualize God's generous will on the land.

Ian Michael, of course, is in an entirely different place. He has read that Creation began with water and darkness everywhere (Gen. 1:2), but he knows that could not have been literally the case because he has seen his home planet, a cloud-swathed blue sphere hanging in empty space—certainly not in water and darkness. Since Genesis (as he understands it) promises to inform him "when" and "how" heaven and earth came into existence, he expects at least background information about the origin of his Planet Earth, the star (which he knows as "the sun") around which it travels, the greater solar system, and perhaps the Milky Way galaxy. He may even be expecting answers about how the space-time continuum began. These two sets of questions and their expected answers

could hardly be more different, and no single narrative can simultaneously satisfy both. Any conceivable account of beginnings cannot simultaneously satisfy the expectations of both Moshe and Ian Michael. This, then, is the challenge in reading and interpreting Genesis.

Consider the sentence with which the English Bible begins. Genesis 1:1 is commonly translated "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." When retrotranslated (see the section "Retro-translation" below) this familiar language becomes "To begin with, God created the sky and the land." This is the beginning of a very different narrative, and we propose to follow where this retrotranslated narrative would lead Ian Michael were he to encounter it now in the twenty-first-century. We think he should encounter it. Further, we attempt to explain how the Creation narrative with which he comes face-to-face when he reads Genesis is so profoundly mistaken. Why should it now be necessary to go through Ian Michael's Genesis narrative word-by-word to remove material that would have been unintelligible to the original audience—Moshe and his kin?

Theology Is Not Pre-Science or Proto-Science

A useful approach to resolving this conundrum is to recognize Genesis 1–11 for what it is—*theology*—not for what to many readers it has appeared to be—*science*. Genesis 1–11 consists of language about divine intention, action, and accomplishment. This was certainly the way the narratives were understood in Moshe's world, where the operation of nature had not yet been distinguished as a separate reality from God's direct action. Thus, it was what we would call *theology*—certainly not *science* (or proto-science) or *history*. Although theology was not then an explicit category, it is our best term for Moshe's broader category—a much larger "tent" than Ian Michael understands it to be, living as he now does in the postmodern, scientific, and predominantly secular world.

For Moshe, 3,000 years ago, everything and every occurrence that could not be explained as the result of human action was understood to be the result of divine action. If it rained, the explanation was that God brought the rain.[1] If a woman became pregnant, the explanation was that God opened her womb.[2] Thus, the perception that "God acted" served as an all-encompassing explanatory concept. For Ian Michael, reading Genesis today, thought and language about natural occurrences and the "laws of nature" fall into the very different category he knows as science.

Moshe's "Greater Light" Was Not Even Close to Ian Michael's "Sun"

It was to Moshe that Genesis was addressed. He understood that after God made "dry ground" (*yabbashah*) possible by confining the "deep" (*tehom*) above the dome-of-the-sky (*raqia'*) and limiting the surface water to "seas," God filled the dry ground with growing plants. He further understood that God next created a "greater light," a "lesser light," and "the stars" (Gen. 1:16). For Moshe's environment to be productive—for plants to grow and for Moshe himself to survive on the land created for him by God—there had to be sunlight. For this very purpose God had created the "greater light." It was placed (the Hebrew word meant "firmly emplaced" or "set") in the *raqia'*. This "greater light" was the essential timekeeper of Moshe's world, created by God to inform him of the special times for religious celebrations, as well as to mark off the passage of days and years (Gen. 1:14). In every sense that Moshe could understand, the "greater light," having been brought into existence by a benevolent God, was placed in precisely that location for Moshe's benefit. It travelled over Moshe's land every day to enable him to tend his fields and/or flocks and herds. It was there to serve him and what was his. A gracious God had created a world defined by the sky above and land beneath, all benignly overseen by the "greater light"

For Ian Michael, the situation is entirely different. He is fully aware that Moshe's "greater light" was the sun, but Ian Michael's own sun is not in any sense confined to a specific place in in the *raqia'*. Ian Michael's sun is an enormous astronomical body that, at some time in the cosmic past, pulled Planet Earth into orbit around it and has kept Earth there for billions of years. Ian Michael cannot even imagine the sun orbiting the planet he knows as Earth—the sun's gravity is so vastly greater than that of the Earth that his mind will simply not permit it. To him, a mental image of that sort is inconceivable.

"Retro-translation" and "Close Reading" Are Useful Tools for Understanding Genesis

"Retro-translation" is our word for the process of taking the modern reader *back* ("retro") to the conceptual world in which an ancient document originated, in order

to recognize the document's original (and thus authentic) meaning, unprejudiced by modern (and much later) understandings. A retrotranslated Creation narrative does not assume that something existed unless and until it has been introduced into the narrative, and does assume that it continues to exist. For example, "darkness" (*hodesh*) and "the deep" (*tehom*) were described as already in existence when the process of Creation began (Gen. 1:2). Both are therefore to be understood (in a retrotranslated Genesis) as pre-Creation realities. Both were radically relativized during the ensuing Creation week—darkness by the creation of light on Day One, and "the deep" by the creation of the "vault" or "dome" (*raqia'*) on Day Two. Neither, however, was included in what was *brought into existence during the Creation week*. Thus, according to a "close reading" of the narrative, neither originated in the Creation process itself as described in Genesis 1.

Further, retro-translation assumes that when Genesis 1 defines something, that is how, going forward, that part of created reality is to be understood. Here we encounter an interesting but rarely noted implication of the generally accepted principle that "Scripture is its own interpreter." When Scripture says that something existed, we know that that entity existed and continued for as long as the Scripture account indicated that it existed—for more often than not Scripture is our only source of information on the subject. And when Scripture defines a specific reality, that is its proper definition in that context. An example is the definition of the Hebrew word *yom* ("day"). The text carefully specifies that "God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night" (Gen. 1:5). There is no getting around this Scriptural definition: The Genesis "day" was the daylight portion of a light-dark cycle, and the dark portion was "night." So, a Genesis "day" was as long as daylight lasted; it was *not twenty-four hours long*.

This idea that a "day" in Genesis was not twenty-four hours long seems strange indeed to Ian Michael. He takes it for granted that, strictly speaking, a day is (and always has been) twenty-four hours long. (The English word "day" is of course sometimes used adjectivally to signify a shorter period of time, as in "a day's work" or "a day's drive"; but even then it refers to a shorter period of time that occurs within a twenty-four-hour period.) A "close reading" of a retrotranslated Genesis, however, requires that a "day" was just as long as Scripture says it was, neither more nor less.

The Imaginary "Disconnect" Between Science and Religion

In the Foreword to the present book (as well as the Foreword to *God, Sky, and Land*) we wrote, somewhat wistfully, "We wish it were otherwise, but there is no getting around the fact that there is a profound disconnect between science as commonly understood and Genesis as usually read—a disconnect that has existed since the scientific revolution began in the sixteenth century." Often this "disconnect" still exists in Ian Michael's mind as he reads Genesis 1–11 in the twenty-first century, mistakenly assuming that the ancient text is describing his own scientific (and heliocentric) world. When he reads of "the earth" being created in "the beginning," he typically (and understandably) assumes that what is being described is the origin of his home planet Earth. He thinks he is reading a pre-scientific (or proto-scientific) *cosmogony*. He takes it for granted that the creation of "the earth" is an integral part of the birth-process of a heliocentric system that includes the Planet Earth—a process that may well reach back to the birth-process of our Milky Way Galaxy and possibly even the whole universe.

Ever since the earliest Hebrew-to-English translations were produced, the Hebrew word *'erets* has been translated as "earth" in the Creation narratives. As late as William Tyndale's time (1533), the most plausible meaning of "earth" was "dirt" or "rich, dark soil" or "land," although it could also have meant the eternally fixed sphere-at-the-center-of-reality. By the next century, however, when the King James Version appeared (1611), "earth" had acquired the additional meaning of *a planet*. From that time on, the translators whose home planet was Earth seem to have pictured "planet Earth" whenever they encountered *'erets* in the Creation story (although later in Genesis and in the rest of the Hebrew canon is has usually been translated as "land"). To them, the Genesis narratives of Creation seemed to be describing the coming-into-being of their cosmos, their sun, moon, and stars (and sometimes even their universe), along with their home planet Earth. And so, *'erets* uniformly became "earth" rather than "land" in Genesis 1–11 wherever it was linguistically possible.

Thus, Ian Michael's Genesis now seems to reflect a modern cosmology that he (as a college-educated Christian) knows to be more-or-less accurate. The idea of "Earth" understood as "planet" appears to support a

heliocentric arrangement with the sun as the gravitational center around which Earth revolves. Ian Michael is therefore understandably nonplussed when the first Creation story (Gen. 1:1–2:4a) is so problematic scientifically. Combined with James Ussher's chronology, a Creation account read in this way indicates a very brief history for the Earth and for life upon it. It also indicates that all life forms—dinosaurs, mammals and man—came into existence within a one-or-two-day period (Gen. 1:20–33) a few thousand years ago. To Ian Michael this makes no sense.

If, however, Ian Michael reads something like, "To begin with, God created the sky and the land," he may recognize that the Creation narrative is not, has never been, and could not possibly be a description of the origin of the universe known to modern science. Initially intended for Moshe, the narrative was about the purpose and meaning of Moshe's world as a generous gift from God, and it was expressed in language that he could understand (for the obvious reason that "revelation" that is not understood is not revelation at all).

A useful approach to resolving this conundrum is to recognize Genesis 1–11 for what it is—theology—not for what to many readers it has appeared to be—science.

"Sky" and "land" encompassed everything Moshe knew about and everything he could conceive. In his world, the sun really did go westward over the land during the day (as he saw with his own eyes) and back eastward under the land at night (which was the only available explanation). It was a geocentric earth-sun arrangement which, given the time, place, and cultural context of the narrative, could not have been otherwise. Understanding—as he reads about Moshe's sky and Moshe's land—that he is being transported back to Moshe's world, Ian Michael is not at all surprised by the rest of the Creation narrative, which *affirms the ultimate source and meaning* of that world.

That was what Moshe most needed to hear, and that was what the divinely inspired narrative gave to him and his posterity. And that is why the Creation narrative must be read not as pre- (or proto-) scientific history (as it is often misread) but as a "theological anthropology," an interpretation of human reality in relation to Ultimate Reality. Once Ian Michael orients himself to Moshe's time, space, and existential situation—with Moshe's sky above and Moshe's land beneath his feet, he can enter Moshe's existential world as well.

Moshe had only two explanatory categories, and natural science was not one of them. Ian Michael can realize that what he reads in Genesis is not and never was pre- or proto-science at all, but theological anthropology through and through; it is about how created reality is related to the generous Creator God. Our own understanding, along with Ian Michael's, is of course immensely enriched by the revelation of God incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. That is a revelation that Moshe did not have.

The Surprisingly Good News for Ian Michael

Having sojourned briefly in Moshe's world of "sky" and "land" with a protecting *raqia'* overhead and the worrisome *tehom* safely confined to its proper place, Ian Michael, returning to his twenty-first-century world, can now breathe a sigh of relief. The disturbing tension in his psyche between what he learned in his science courses and what he reads in Genesis has vanished. Understanding that the Creation story is theology, not divinely revealed proto-science, a perceptive Ian Michael is now aware that there could not be a discrepancy between the Genesis narrative and science any more than there could be a discrepancy between Franz Schubert's "Ave Maria" and the physics of sound, or between Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* and the chemistry of oil paint—or between prayer for healing and scientific medicine. Surprising as it may be, this is surely good news.

Furthermore, Ian Michael now recognizes that the Creation narrative never was in conflict with the relatively recent intellectual project called "science." The Creation story answered Moshe's *existential* questions about his own reality and accounted for the existence of his whole (geocentric) world. It explained *why* the sun went westward over the land in the daytime and returned eastward under the land at night. It explained that all the blessings of sky and land and sun, as well as his own existence, were the result

of God acting creatively for Moshe's own benefit. It confirmed that he existed because an infinitely generous and loving God willed him to be. That this is how the Creation narratives were understood by Moshe. Given the time and place of the communication between God, Moshe, and Moshe's kin, it could not have been otherwise. And that is surprisingly good news for Ian Michael, and for us.

Why then has the so-called science/religion disconnect, that started with the rise of science in the sixteenth century, continued into the present, so that it proves so perplexing to Ian Michael as he reads a modern translation of Genesis? The answer to this question—and the cause of this long-running misunderstanding—lies in three contrary-to-fact assumptions that are still too often stuck in Ian Michael's head:

1. That *'erets* in the Creation narratives referred to Planet Earth, rather than to Moshe's beloved "land"—this despite the fact that *'erets* almost always means "land" or "ground" in the rest of the Hebrew Bible. When Moshe first heard of the divine Creation, Earth-as-planet was still 2,500 years in the future. The Creation narrative was addressed to Moshe, and its subject was (and is) far more important than any kind of science ("pre," "proto," "modern," or "post-modern").

2. That the first Creation narrative described the coming-into-being of a heliocentric solar system. It did not, and therefore does not. It described the sun traveling across Moshe's sky by day and under his "land" (or through that "land's" nether regions) by night—a necessarily geocentric arrangement, the daylight part of which Moshe could plainly see. Instead, Ian Michael usually assumes (erroneously) that the Creation narrative described the origin of his solar system in which a relatively small earth orbits a gigantic sun.

3. That the *raqia'* and the *tehom* can be safely ignored because they were insignificant players in the Creation drama—despite the fact that they appear early and prominently in the narrative. (The *raqia'* and the *tehom* occupy all of Creation Day Two.) As the story was told, one of these entities, the *tehom*, impeded the Creation process until God, by creating and deploying the *raqia'*, enabled the "sky" and "land" to become the home where Moshe could flourish.

If, however, Ian Michael reads something like, "To begin with, God created the sky and the land," he may recognize that the Creation narrative is not, has never been, and could not possibly be a description of the origin of the universe known to modern science.

These three mistaken assumptions have been the (usually unrecognized) intellectual heritage of every English translator since Wycliffe's Bible. They have certainly been the unexamined intellectual heritage of Bible readers in the last 400 years—almost all of whom have failed to question why the very same text that affirmed Moshe's geocentric cosmology is now almost always read by Ian Michael (and us) as the divine establishment of a heliocentric one.

Anticipating a Theology of Creation

If, as we have insisted throughout the trilogy which this book completes, the Genesis narratives are not science but theology, serious readers of the Bible (as well as professional scholars) on re-entering Moshe's world can *read the narratives literally*—as Moshe did. In the course of that literal reading it becomes clear that there is not (and cannot be) a conflict between a theological explanation of the meaning and significance of "first things" and a scientific account of when and how they came to be—and what they consist of.

When they are read not as science but as theology, the Genesis narratives will achieve in the twenty-first-century the purpose for which they were written close to 3,000 years ago. That purpose was to convey theological understandings—understandings of humanness in relation to God—that proved so filled with meaning that they started the Hebrews on a centuries-long quest to achieve

ever-clearer insights into God's being, God's intentions, and God's actions. In time, records of that quest came to make up the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament. Genesis begins that Bible and, more than any other book, provides the grounds for a theology of Creation.

Finite reality is best understood as the gift of a loving God concerned that all created reality—especially human reality—should thrive. Existence itself is a gift for which profound and continuing gratitude in both feeling and action is the only appropriate response. Significantly, feelings of gratitude increase human happiness (and thus human flourishing), Furthermore, divine generosity motivates a human sense of responsibility and generosity in return.

All created reality—material, vegetable, animal, and human—is valuable and deserves proper recognition as the product of divine creativity. Thus, a theology of Creation involves respect and concern for every person without regard to gender, race, or status, as well as untiring efforts to protect and promote human health and to develop and improve human intelligence and understanding. This, in turn, requires alleviation of homelessness and poverty and ongoing concern for the preservation and improvement of the quality of air and water as vital parts of the Creation provided for us by the Creator.

In order for human beings to thrive, this awareness of our creatureliness needs to be constantly reinforced. To that end, the Sabbath, the capstone of the Genesis narratives of Creation, is a weekly reminder and resource. If our days are to be "long in the land," our existence requires continuing reminders, not only that we are creatures but also that we are creatures in the presence *and loving care* of our Creator.

The Creation of human moral agents entailed enormous risk for God, the planet Earth, and humanity itself. But God took the risk, saying, "Let us make humanity [Heb. *adam*] in our image, according to our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). Creation was (and still is) a huge divine gamble, a gamble that eventually resulted in enormous cost to God—incarnation, rejection, and death. Perhaps most stunning of all is the realization that the ultimate outcome of God's risk, whether God finally wins or loses the gamble, is to a large extent up to us human moral agents.

A logically inevitable implication of *creatio imago Dei* is social inclusiveness. "So God created humanity in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). This is a clear affirmation of gender equality as well as cultural inclusiveness. It is obvious that God believes in both human variety and human oneness.

As for the Hebrews' centuries-long quest to achieve ever-clearer insights into who God is, God is the divine actualization and personification of infinite, unconditional, unending love. What God does is to express this love in continuing activity for the benefit of created reality. What God wants for human reality is its flourishing—the fulfillment of its potential for love, happiness, and satisfaction.

This is, in part, what a theology of Creation could look like—and a theology of Creation is, after all, the point of the Creation narratives in Genesis.

Endnotes

1. We recognize that both of these figures are male. Since (1) the English language is conventionally gendered and (2) contemporary anthropologists tell us that all known cultures are patriarchal, it seems the less misleading course for us to follow the custom of referring to humanity in general with masculine pronouns. For these reasons, our imaginary figures are both male. We regret that this may annoy some readers, but to make one male and the other female would imply differences more far-reaching than we intend (and more distracting!).

2. For heavy rain, geshem, see Lev. 26:4; 1 Kgs. 17:14; Ps. 105:32; Joel 2:23; Amos 4:7, Zech. 10:1. For normal rainfall, matar, see Deut. 11:14; 28:12, 24; I Sam. 12:17–18; 1 Kgs. 8:36; 18:1; 2 Chron. 6:37; 7:13; Job 5:10; 28:26; 36:27; 37:6; 38:28; Ps. 135:7; 147:8; Isa. 5:6; 30:23; Jer. 10:13; 51:16; Zech. 10:1.

3. See Gen. 20:18; 29:31; 30:22; 1 Sam. 1:5–6.

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