

truths about the world gathered from other spheres of inquiry and our own experience.⁴

At the same time, Genesis 1–2 is not a fully adequate statement for contemporary readers regarding creation. We have learned truths about the origins, development, and nature of the world from modern science of which the biblical authors never dreamed. We are confronted with issues that they never faced regarding, say, the environment and the role of women. In some ways these chapters have created more problems than solutions for any adequate consideration of such matters. While interpreters of these texts have often exacerbated the problems, we must not discount the long history of the negative effects of the texts themselves; these texts have in fact contributed to the environmental crisis and to a second-class citizenship for women in church and society. It will take generations for newer readings to overcome these effects and, even then, the biblical material will not finally stand beyond critique.⁵ In seeking finally to address contemporary issues in a responsible manner, we must go beyond the text and draw on insights from other biblical texts and from postbiblical learning and experiences in and through which God has been at work.

Basic Characteristics of Genesis 1–2

The book of Genesis is usually seen as a composite work, drawn from various sources and edited over the course of many centuries. The classical consensus spoke primarily of three interwoven sources (Yahwist [J], Elohist [E], Priestly [P]). These sources were gradually woven together by editors over five hundred years or more, from the United Monarchy (tenth century B.C.) to the postexilic era. This long-prevailing consensus regarding source divisions has come under sharp challenge from several perspectives over the last generation in particular. From within the source-critical perspective, the nature, scope, and dating of the sources have been regular subjects of debate. Few scholars doubt that Genesis consists of traditions from various historical periods, but little consensus exists regarding the way in which they were brought together in their present form. Moreover, newer literary approaches have called into question many of the assumptions and conclusions of the source-critical consensus. These strategies focus on issues of literary criticism rather than literary history, on the texts as they stand rather than their history prior

to their present shape. These newer approaches have contributed significantly to our understanding of these texts.⁶

Did Israel understand these texts (and Genesis 3–11) to be telling a story of an actual time in the past? It is likely that the answer to this question is both yes and no. While these stories often mirror human life in every age, the past and the present are not simply collapsed into each other.⁷ Taken as a whole, these texts do purport to tell a story of the past, yet they are not historical in any modern sense (“history-like” is a term sometimes used). A concern for the beginnings of things is evident in several ways, including the atypical aspects of some texts (e.g., the long-lived patriarchs belong to an irretrievable past, as does the reality of one language, 11:1) and the interest in genealogy and chronology (e.g., 8:13–14).⁸ On the other hand, that which is typical in human life may be reflected in matters such as the use of the word *‘adam*, which refers to generic humankind (1:26–27), the first man (2:7), or Adam (4:25).⁹

This interweaving of the typical and the atypical provides a richness and depth in the story and carries important *theological* implications. For example, Genesis 3 speaks both of a past, *subsequent* to the creation when sin and its evil effects emerged into the life of the world, and of a typical encounter with the reality of temptation. The tendency in recent scholarship has been to emphasize the latter.¹⁰ But, if the reader does not attend to the presentation of these materials as *past* and views them only as ever-present and typical, then any distinction between God’s creation and the entrance of sin into the world is collapsed and God is made directly responsible for sin, while human responsibility is significantly diminished. From such an angle, sin would be viewed not as a disruption of God’s good creation but as integral to God’s intentions for the world. Sin would then be more a divine problem than a human one.

For all the importance of historical and literary work on Genesis 1–2, interpreters should not forget that these texts are most basically the product of a community of faith engaged in theological reflection on creation: God is the primary subject in these accounts. This is true of both creation accounts in their own way, as we shall see.

Given the rhythmic cadences of Gen 1:1–2:3, this material has a doxological character and may have been honed in and through liturgical usage and the regular round of the community’s praise of God the Creator (see Job 38:7).¹¹ Worship interests also clearly appear in the links between these accounts and other texts associated with tabernacle, temple, sabbath, and religious festivals (developed in later chapters).¹² In its

present form, however, Gen 1:1-2:4a may be identified as a didactic account, shaped by liturgical interests. This liturgical character should be related to a probable textual interest in proclamation, even though the form of the text is not homiletical. Walter Brueggemann states that "Israel has no interest in bearing testimony to Yahweh as the one who creates, except as Yahweh can be linked to the practicalities of living faithfully in the world."¹³ As long as one understands that "living faithfully" includes theological reflection, this can be an important way of thinking through the text. Whether or not one can speak precisely of a "practical" context in Israel's history is unlikely, but Brueggemann shows how the text might have functioned for anxious and dispirited people of God in exile: "the intent and the effect of this liturgical narrative is to enact by its very utterance a well-ordered, fully reliable, generative world for Israelites who are exiles in Babylon."¹⁴ More generally, the narrator writes in view of the world within which he lives, understanding it in contrast with the original world as given by God, though not without significant continuities. Creation is seen as a gift by a God who knows what is good for God's own creatures and who grants these necessities for lives lived in flourishing ways.¹⁵

Genesis 2:4b-25, on the other hand, takes the form of an often told story and is much more focused on the human situation. Yet, its witness to God the Creator is just as profound in its own way. In the language of Odil Hannes Steck regarding this text, the world is depicted not as "a certain state of affairs, not a static object. . . . For [the Yahwist] the world is an event, a process."¹⁶ This understanding will be developed later in this chapter.

That creation is presented in two such different types of literature is theologically important. On the one hand, the first account, with its highly structured presentation, speaks of creation in terms of order and stability, of separations and boundaries. On the other hand, the second account in story form bespeaks creation in more open terms, with the story form qualifying the first account. Yet, not everything in the first account is as structured and static as might initially appear to be the case;¹⁷ readers may note the account's asymmetry or variability and conclude that, amid the structured presentation, God's creation does have a dynamic, open character. Moreover, the second account, for all the ambiguities the story presents, also speaks of boundaries (the law) and separations. Hence, the two accounts in their own way witness to the "ordered freedom" of the creation. Traditional understandings have tended to

view the lofty formulations and familiar cadences of the first chapter, emphasizing the sovereignty, unilateral action, and even remoteness of God, at the expense of the more "naive" story in 2:4b-25.¹⁸ In parallel fashion, the role of the creatures has been portrayed largely in passive and dependent terms. To the extent that interpretations have been attentive to the creaturely role, they have focused on the human being as created in the image of God, with the accompanying command to have dominion (Gen 1:26-28). These verses, however, have seldom been related theologically to other texts in these chapters that speak more fully of the status and responsibility of the creatures.¹⁹

Traditional theological interpretations of the creation accounts have commonly been reinforced by critical decisions. During the heyday of source criticism, Gen 1:1-2:4a was usually thought to be a Priestly (P) product worked out in independence from the earlier Yahwistic (J) version in Gen 2:4b-25. P and J were believed to have distinctive perspectives on creation. This separation of sources has often been accompanied by a subtle or not-so-subtle conviction that Genesis 1 is a more mature theological statement about the Creator and the creation and Genesis 2 a more primitive account. This critical perspective has often buttressed the traditional image of God as a radically transcendent Creator, operating in total independence, unilaterally speaking the world into being.²⁰

In more recent studies, however, P is often understood to be the redactor of Genesis 1-2, drawing upon J and other materials and putting them together essentially as we now have them.²¹ This would mean that, while chapter 1 is P's special contribution, it was shaped with a view to what is now present in 2:4b-25 and was never intended to stand by itself. From this perspective, the P understanding of creation is to be found *only* in Genesis 1-2 as a single whole.²² The often noted differences between Genesis 1 and 2 may then be understood as internal qualifications. A theologically coherent perspective on creation, which the P writer presumably had, is to be found in these two chapters *in interaction with each other*. In effect, these chapters together become the *canonical* perspective on originating creation; indeed, given the speculative nature of efforts to discern the original scope and context of the J material, Genesis 1-2 together constitute the only perspective on creation of which we can be certain. The differing theological voices of the tradition, woven together, have become a more sophisticated theological perspective on creation and more closely approximate the understanding that Israel, finally, discerned regarding Creator and creature and their interrelationship.