

The Johannine Creation Account

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The influence of Genesis 1 on the opening verses of John seems obvious. Opening with ‘in the beginning,’ there seems to be a deliberate attempt by the author to get the reader to recall the Genesis creation.¹ Added to that is the explicit identification of the Logos as the means of creation (John 1:3), just as the original came about by the words of God. In addition, there is the important role of light in these first verses of John, the same thing that was God’s first act of creation in Gen 1:3. There is no debate that creation is important to John’s theology. Raymond Brown stated: ‘If the Gospel begins with “In the beginning,” it is because the coming of Jesus will be presented as a new and definitive creation.’² The question is: how far does this creation theme go? Some have noticed that John actually divides some of the early events in his Gospel into days. Thomas Barrosse saw the days as being about the creation of the church with the six days assembling the elements of the Precursor, the Savior, the disciples, the chief apostle, the apostles and believing Israel. The seventh day is then is the first sign, the miracle at Cana, seen as symbol of the great eschatological banquet.³

The division of days by John are significant, but there is another way to look at John’s reinterpretation of the Genesis account. Barrosse may be correct when he suggests that the new creation is about the creation of the church,⁴ but there is an alternative that is more faithful to the Genesis account. The first creation account of Genesis could be summarized in the following order:

1. Creation of light
2. Separation into that which is above and that is below
3. Creation of vegetation
4. Creation of the great lights
5. Creation of living creatures

¹ Andreas Kostenberger refers to this as a “canonical link between the first words of the OT Scriptures and John’s Gospel.” A. Kostenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009) 338.

² R.E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John* (New York: Doubleday, 2003) 245.

³ T. Barrosse, “The Seven Days of the New Creation in St. John’s Gospel” in *CBQ* 21 (1959) 507-516. Cf. Kostenberger, 349.

⁴ Barrosse, 507.

6. Creation of humankind
7. Rest

It would be remarkable if these themes appeared in John's Gospel in the order that they are presented in Genesis. An examination of John reveals that this is indeed the case. There is a danger that one could force creation imagery onto the text, especially since the passages are not adjacent. However, the order of the images strongly suggests that John was thinking in terms of the Genesis creation. The theory that John meant for these passages to be seen together is strengthened by the fact that each creation image is also linked to the common pattern of a revelation of the identity of the Christ followed by a frustrated response.

1. *Day One: Light in John 1:3-9*

The parallel between Genesis and John is obvious when it comes to the image of light. Light is the first act of God's creation in Gen 1:3 and light is integral to John's portrayal of the Logos. John specifically compares the light to the previous darkness, recalling the appearance in Genesis of light into the darkness and void. George Beasley-Murray comments on this passage by stating: 'The light of the Logos shone in the primal darkness at creation, and continued amidst the darkness of fallen mankind; it shone with greater brilliance in the glory of the Incarnate One; and it shines on in the era of the Resurrection, which is the time of the Paraclete.'⁵ F.F. Bruce suggests that 'In the first creation, 'darkness was upon the face of the deep' (Gen 1:2) until God called light into being, so the new creation (in which the Word is God's agent as effectively as in the earlier one) involves the banishment of spiritual darkness by the light which shines in the Word.'⁶ The revelation is that the Word is the light of men. The frustrated response is that although the darkness did not overcome the light, the darkness did the light (John 1:11). The appearance of the light challenged people to believe and to therefore become children of God (John 1:12-13).

2. *Day Two: Separation in John 3:1-5*

On the second day in Gen 1:6-8, the waters are separated into what is above and what is below. There is a parallel to this found in John 3. In this passage, Nicodemus approaches Jesus seeking

⁵ G.R. Beasley-Murray, *John* WBC (Waco: Word, 1987) 11.

⁶ F.F. Bruce, *Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 33.

spiritual insight. Without waiting for Nicodemus' question, Jesus responds by saying "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." (John 3:3) Jesus goes on to contrast natural birth and spiritual birth. C.H. Dodd explains that 'Rebirth is necessary because there are two levels of existence.'⁷ Understanding that birth is closely connected with water, it is not difficult to see the parallel of the separating of the waters in Genesis 1. John could have described the spiritual birth in any number of ways but referring to it in its difference from natural birth as birth from above suggests an allusion to Genesis.⁸ It is worth noting the common use of 'heaven' (Gen 1:8; John 3:13). Beasley-Murray notes: 'The concept of being begotten from above is not a simple translation of becoming *as* a child, but an adaptation of the Jewish hope of a new creation.'⁹ Jesus challenges Nicodemus to see the spiritual separation and to respond in the appropriate way. The revelation of Christ in this section is less clear than in other passages. However, by focusing on the active role of the Holy Spirit in the receiving of the Kingdom, Jesus is identifying himself as the one whom John announced would baptize in the Spirit (John 1:33). The frustration is that Nicodemus, despite being an educated religious leader, is unable to comprehend the message.

3. Day Three: Creation of Vegetation in John 6:1-38

On the third day of creation in Gen 1:9-13, plants and vegetation are created. In the ancient world there was no more important plant than wheat, as bread was the staple food of most people. It is no surprise then that there is a lengthy passage in John 6 with reference to bread. In John 6:1-15 there is the rare parallel with the Synoptic Gospels with the feeding of the 5000. Jesus is able to supernaturally multiply the bread, thus producing a miracle of creation. More importantly, Jesus later describes himself as the bread of life (John 6:35) and the acceptance of this teaching becomes a turning point in the early Jesus movement. Rejection of Jesus as the bread of life leads many disciples to forsake Jesus (John 6:66).

⁷ C.H. Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (London: Cambridge, 1960) 304.

⁸ In the article on "*anathen*" in the *TDNT*, it states "In Philo the religious antithesis between God and the world is linked with a speculation which distinguishes an upper and a lower world." *TDNT* vol. 1 377.

⁹ Beasley-Murray, 47.

4. Day Four: Creation of Light in John 8:12

In Gen 1:14-19, it is somewhat surprising that the sun and the moon are created three days after the light. Yet light was such an important concept that it deserved a prominent position in the creation account. Light also makes a second appearance in John with John 8:12, where Jesus describes himself as the light of the world. This is given not as a description of Jesus' nature but as a challenge for how the followers of Jesus are to act. Those who follow Jesus must choose to walk in the light and the darkness. This proclamation of Jesus as the light of the world is immediately followed by a strong rejection by the Pharisees (John 8:13-20).

5. Day Five: Creation of the Living Creatures in John 10:1-18

The fifth day of the Genesis account is the creation of the birds and the animals of the sea (Gen 1:20-23). John of course has a fish story (John 21:1-14), but he does not include it here. Instead John has a story using the image of land animals in John 10 with the image of sheep. Is this a problem for the theory of a creation account in John, since in Genesis animals are created on the sixth day? John moves the creation of the land animals (Gen 1:24:25) to the place of all animal life as it more logically belongs there than with the creation of humanity. John is not slavishly bound to the day divisions but is rather more interested in the general patterns and the order of creation. The fact that God refers to the land animals as good in Gen 1:25, lends support to seeing this unit as separate to the following account of the creation of humanity. In John 10, Jesus uses one of his rare animal images in John by speaking of his followers as sheep and himself as the Shepherd (John 10:11).¹⁰ Again, the passage does more than use a creation image, it calls the reader to decision. This new revelation of Jesus as the Good Shepherd again brings a frustrated response. John records that the Jews were divided after hearing this teaching (John 10,19) and some even suggested that he was demon possessed (John 10:20).

6. Day Six: Creation of Human Life in John 11:1-44

The sixth day in Genesis 1:24-31, although technically including the creation of land animals, is really about the creation of humanity (Gen 1:26-31). Only after creating humanity is God able to

¹⁰ The image of the shepherd is abundant throughout the Bible. But it should be noted that one of the responsibilities that God shares with Adam is the care for the animals. (Gen 1:26)

describe creation as ‘very good’ (Gen 1:31), thus suggesting this is the pinnacle of God’s creation. It is fitting that the greatest miracle in John’s Gospel is the giving of human life back to Lazarus.¹¹ It is interesting that in the second Genesis creation account, that the creation of Adam includes the giving of life to the previously lifeless body (Gen 2:7). Comparing the vision of the dry bones from Ezekiel 37 with the creation of Adam in Gen 2:7, Leslie Allen speaks of when ‘the human being was first given shape, like some life-size doll, and then received from God himself animating breath.’¹² Likewise Jesus is able to revive Lazarus’ previously lifeless body, transforming him from a corpse into a living soul. Once more, this act of Jesus has another self-designation, this time as the ‘resurrection and the life’ (John 11:25). According to C. H. Dodd, ‘the Raising of Lazarus adds to the presentation of Christ as giver of life, which has already taken such varied forms of expression, this especial new element: that the gift of life is here presented expressly as victory over death.’¹³ With each stage of the new creation, the people have been challenged to make a decision about where they stand. The giving of life to Lazarus brings to the Jews to the final decision with one group choosing to follow Jesus and the other determining to kill Jesus (John 11:45-53).

7. Day Seven: Rest in John 17:1-8

The seventh day in Gen 2:1-3 is about God looking back on his creation and resting in the satisfaction that his work is complete. Jesus also speaks of his work being finished in John 17:4. This is surprising as neither the cross or the resurrection had taken place yet. It is understandable what Jesus meant when he said that ‘It is finished’ in John 19:30, but what did Jesus mean in John 17:4?¹⁴ The work that Jesus described is not his coming crucifixion but rather the revelation of his identity and the resulting response of his followers. At each stage of the new creation, Jesus had revealed a little more of who he was according to the Genesis creation

¹¹ The Lazarus pericope is the longest narrative in John outside the Passion narrative.

¹² L.C. Allen, *Ezekiel 20-48* WBC (Dallas: Word, 1990) 185.

¹³ Dodd, 366.

¹⁴ Kostenberger suggests that John 17:4 anticipates John 19:30 but does not explain why Jesus speaks of his work as already finished. Kostenberger, 247. For a discussion how this verse could include the death and resurrection, see Beasley-Murray, 297.

account and each stage the people were challenged to decide where they stood. By John 17, Jesus had a group of people who understood and believed and were now a part of the new creation and so Jesus' work was finished.

8. Implications

There are a number of implications from this study. First of all, this helps to shed light on the question of the Johannine prologue as a possible later addition. The creation motifs do not end at the conclusion of the prologue but continue throughout the first half of the Gospel. Thus it seems likely that John's Gospel always included the prologue. Secondly, this helps to explain Jesus' comments about his work being done in John 17:4. Rather than being a crucifixion concept transplanted back into the earlier life of Jesus, the idea of resting fits very well with the creation concepts found in the first half of John. Jesus had revealed his identity and had called the people to a decision. Once this work was done, he was able to rest as his Father had rested on the seventh day of the first creation. This helps readers to understand the incredible importance of the OT for John. The OT is not just a collection of proof texts to support his positions and beliefs of the author. Rather, the OT actually provides the matrix by which John understands both the identity of Jesus and the nature of church. The appearance of Jesus was not just the introduction of a new prophet but the beginning of the new creation.

Conclusion

Spread throughout the first half of the Gospel of John are passages that closely parallel the six days of creation from Genesis 1. After stating explicitly that Jesus is responsible for creation, John describes how Jesus brings light, separates birth from above and below, is the bread of life, is the shepherd of the sheep, and the resurrection and the life that can raise Lazarus from the dead. Each stage reveals a little more of who Jesus is and calls the reader to make a choice as to where they stand. John describes each revelation as initially receiving a frustrated response, ranging from lack of understanding to decisions to kill Jesus. The new creation consists of those who recognize Jesus for who he is and respond in obedience. The challenge to the church is to respond positively where the original audience responded negatively. Having gathered a new creation, Jesus is able to say that his work is finished even though he has still the cross and resurrection to experience. This fits well with John's stated purpose that this Gospel was written

‘so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.’ (John 20:31)¹⁵

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