

CORRELATIONS WITH PROVIDENCE IN GENESIS 2

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In an earlier article I put forward the principle that we could best understand Gen 1 by using correlations between creation and providence.¹ Let us explore the same principle with Gen 2.

God's acts of creation cannot be equated with his later acts of providence, but there are analogies between the two, which enables us to understand the acts of creation. The analogies deal with aspects of providence that can be observed by ordinary people, including Israelites in the ancient Near Eastern context and contemporary people in non-modern cultures. Such analogies are available to us as well, and awareness of them may help us to avoid improperly reading in modern scientific assumptions when we interpret Gen 1–2.

I. *Interpreting Correlations in Genesis 2:4–25*

We may now explore in detail how these principles work for Gen 2. My earlier article discussed Gen 1:1–2:3. So in this article we continue from Gen 2:4 onward. As with the preceding article, we will leave most issues of interpretation to commentaries,² and focus only on the correlations between Gen 2:2–25 and providence.

1. *Genesis 2:4*

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens. (v. 4)³

The expression “these are the generations” introduces the first of a number of sections of genealogical history in the Book of Genesis.⁴ It is succeeded by

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¹ Vern S. Poythress, “Correlations with Providence in Genesis 1,” *WTJ* 77 (2015): 71–99.

² C. John Collins, *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2006), may serve as a primary resource.

³ Scriptural quotations are from the English Standard Version.

⁴ The unity and function of Gen 2:4 are disputed. See Collins, *Genesis 1–4*, 40–42; Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1967), 23–25; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 150–53; Gordon

analogous headings, such as “This is the book of the generations of Adam” (5:1) and “these are the generations of Noah” (6:9). It is clearly an expression that uses analogy, since the heavens and the earth do not father (“beget,” “generate”) children in the same way that human beings do.

The first section of generations, extending from 2:4 to 4:26, includes elements belonging to the original acts of creation, such as the creation of Adam (2:7) and Eve (2:22), and elements belonging to the subsequent providential history (3:1–4:26). Technically, we might expect that the “generations” would include only events after the completion of the heavens and earth in 1:31. But 5:2 shows that a genealogical section can include some recapitulation of earlier events. Using the word *generations*, Gen 2:4 makes the point that the heavens and earth bring forth events leading to an unfolding history, in a manner analogous to the unfolding of generations that an Israelite could observe in his own time.

2. *Genesis 2:5–6*

⁵ When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground,⁶ and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground—

The ESV uses the word *land* twice to translate the Hebrew word פְּרִשָׁה, the same word used in Gen 1:1 and 2:4 for the whole earth. It is possible that 2:5 is returning us to the unformed situation of 1:2, in order to recommence a narrative of the acts of creation.⁵ But this interpretation is unlikely because 2:4 has promised us a new section, and because the terminology for the plants in 2:5 does not correspond directly to the terminology in 1:11–12. The trees go unmentioned in 2:5. Verse 5 may be describing a dry place before the rainy season starts. The “land” is then not the whole “earth” but a smaller region, where the garden of Eden will later be planted. If so, God’s work in vv. 5–6 enjoys an analogy with his later acts of providence, when he makes a land green after a dry spell.

In v. 6, the Hebrew word טֶלֶל, translated “mist” (ESV), is rare. It occurs elsewhere in the OT only at Job 36:27. The ESV provides an alternate marginal reading “spring.” It is some kind of source of water.⁶ It may be describing the beginning of the rainy season.

J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC 1 (Waco: Word, 1987), 49. On the structure of genealogical history, see *ibid.*, xxi–xxii; Hamilton, *Genesis*, 2–11.

⁵ So Derek Kidner, “Gen 2:5–6, Wet or Dry?,” *TynBul* 17 (1966): 109–14.

⁶ See Collins, *Genesis 1–4*, 104n6. Job 36:27–28 seems to use טֶלֶל in a context where it designates water coming down from above (“mist [טֶלֶל] in rain, which the skies pour down and drop on mankind abundantly”). In view of Job 36:27 and the uncertainties in etymology, “mist” or “rain cloud” (Mark Futato, “Because It Had Rained: A Study of Gen 2:5–7 with Implications for Gen 2:4–25 and Gen 1:1–2:3,” *WTJ* 60 [1998]: 1–21 [esp. 5–9]) seems better as a translation in Gen 2:6 than “stream” or “spring” (but see Edward J. Young, *Studies in Genesis One* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1964], 62n50).

3. *Genesis 2:7*

Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. (v. 7)

God provides the “breath of life” in a unique way with the creation of Adam. But by analogy God also acts providentially in giving the “breath” of life to each individual human being:

The *Spirit* of God has *made* me,
and the *breath* of the Almighty gives me *life*. (Job 33:4)

The language about “forming” and “dust” in Gen 2:7 also occurs in the context of God’s providence. It describes the fact that God forms each new individual human being:

Your hands *fashioned* and made me,
and now you have destroyed me altogether.
Remember that you have made me like *clay*;
and will you return me to the *dust*? (Job 10:8–9)

For he knows how we are *formed*;
he remembers that we are *dust*. (Ps 103:14 ESV margin)

For you *formed* my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. (Ps 139:13)

God’s acts of creation also have analogies with human acts of formation. The mention of “dust” as the starting material suggests the analogy with a potter who forms clay (Jer 18:1–6; Rom 9:21).

Further verses indicate that both man and animals come from dust and return to dust:

for you are *dust*,
and to *dust* you shall return. (Gen 3:19)

When you take away their breath, they [animals] die
and return to their *dust*. (Ps 104:29)

All [man and beast] go to one place. All are from the *dust*, and to *dust* all return.
(Eccl 3:20)

and the *dust* [of man’s body] returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. (Eccl 12:7)

Within God's providential order, Israelites could observe that the bodies of dead animals and dead human beings gradually disintegrate. If not torn apart by scavengers, they gradually lose their distinctive shape and structure, and become less and less distinguishable from the ground on which they lie or in which they are buried. So, after death, the body ends up becoming dust.

As usual, the language is not technical. Genesis 2:7 is not making a theoretically precise statement about the chemical constituents of the human body, or about the molecular structures present in human bodies or in soil, but is making a statement that makes sense against the background of ordinary observations about what happens to bodies after they die.

What about the beginning of human life? Within the order of providence, God makes new human beings in the womb. But the way he does it is mysterious (Ps 139:13–15; Eccl 11:5). Instances of miscarriage and observations of gestation and birth with animals would provide some further information to Israelites.

The description of God making the first man invites Israelites to see analogies between the original creation and later providence. But not everything is analogous. The fact that Adam is made of dust and will return to dust is clearly analogous. But Adam is the first man ever made. This prime role for Adam is implied not only by the context of Gen 1–2, but by later theological reflections (Rom 5:12–21; 1 Cor 15:45–49; see Acts 17:26).⁷ If Adam is first, he cannot have a human mother who gave birth to him. So at this point the text invites Israelites to see *discontinuity* rather than a positive analogy with later human conception and birth.

The biblical texts outside Genesis that talk about “forming” and “dust” echo Gen 2:7. But none of them *combines* terms for *form* and *dust* in order to say that God forms a human individual from dust. Some texts use the language of forming or fashioning, as is appropriate to indicate God's involvement as primary cause along with the secondary causes involved in the growth of babies in the womb. Some texts say that human beings *are* dust or are “from dust.” That language echoes Gen 3:19, and is confirmed by what happens to corpses. But the later biblical texts do not say that God *makes* or *forms* a human being from dust. In a sense that would be true, but it would be odd to say it that way, because it would overlook the key role of the mother and the very indirect way in which dust gets involved.

Thus, Gen 2:7 has a distinctive message. It stands out notably from the verses around it, precisely because it does not have a complete analogue within providence. This lack of analogue serves to underline the unique character of the original creation of man.

To highlight this uniqueness, let us briefly consider an alternative. Those who want biological gradualism in human origins picture for themselves in

⁷ See J. P. Versteeg, *Adam in the New Testament: Mere Teaching Model or First Historical Man?*, translated and with a foreword by Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2012); C. John Collins, *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist? Who They Were and Why You Should Care* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

the dim past a tribe or a larger group or a race instead of an individual Adam.⁸ If they are theorists with atheistic or deistic inclinations, they may imagine a random or purposeless evolution toward humanity. If they are robust theists, they may imagine that God worked within and on a tribe. He gradually or suddenly switched on defining religious characteristics of humanity. In other words, a whole tribe or race somehow traveled from a prehuman to a human state.

But if that were indeed the way it happened, a text is surely capable of saying so. It should be noted that, even apart from the special character of divine inspiration, ancient people were just as capable as we are of telling a story that involved a group or a tribe or an animal ancestry, rather than a single man, from which came a single woman. For example, the Atrahasis epic has humanity originate with seven human pairs, not one.⁹ In addition, according to Atrahasis the creation of humanity is an extended process, involving multiple stages and multiple gods. The poem could easily have included an animal stage, if it had so desired.

We can find various stories in other parts of the world. The Korean legend of Dangun contains a part where a bear becomes a woman. She mates with a god Hwanung to produce a son Dan-gun, who “founded the first Korean kingdom.”¹⁰ A Tibetan myth says that Tibetan people originated from the union of a spirit/ogress with a monkey or ape.¹¹ A Samoan myth of the creator god Tangaloa says that he “took maggots and shaped them into humans. When he gave them a heart and soul, they came to life.”¹² A Chinese myth says that the goddess Nu Wa created *many* humans by molding yellow earth.¹³ We could multiply examples.

The story of the origin of humanity in Gen 2:4–25 is not merely a general assertion that God created humanity. In its details, it *contrasts* pointedly with other possible stories, involving a group or an animal ancestor.

4. *Genesis 2:8*

And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. (v. 8)

God planted a garden in a manner analogous to later work by human beings in which they plant gardens and grow crops (Ps 104:14).

⁸ For critical discussion of scientific claims for allegedly gradualistic origins, see Vern S. Poythress, “Adam versus Claims from Genetics,” *WTJ* 75 (2013): 65–82.

⁹ Wilfred G. Lambert and Alan R. Millard, *Atra-ḥa-sīs: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 60–63; Tablet I.255–260; S iii 5–14.

¹⁰ http://www.san-shin.org/Dan-gun_Myth.html (accessed June 6, 2014).

¹¹ <http://www.tew.org/archived/tibetan.origins.html> (accessed June 6, 2014).

¹² <http://www.mythencyclopedia.com/Pa-Pr/Polynesian-Mythology.html> (accessed June 6, 2014).

¹³ <http://heathenchinese.wordpress.com/tag/nu-wa/> (accessed June 6, 2014).

In this verse we observe the first of a whole series of events that are not completely in chronological order. Rather, they are in *teleological* order. They show how God's works in creating various things suit human needs. The garden in Eden is planted in order to provide a suitable environment in which man may live. By analogy, human beings plant gardens and do other types of work to suit their own needs and those of their families and neighbors.

5. *Genesis 2:9*

And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (v. 9)

The verse says that trees sprang up. In his providence God continues to cause trees to grow (Ps 104:16). Trees are still pleasant to the sight, and many are good for food. So the act of creation in Gen 2:9 has analogies with later acts of providence.

The tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil are both special trees, no longer encountered in providence. Part of the point of the narrative is that these two trees are *not* like all the rest. They play special roles with respect to the relation between God and man, and they may become an intense source of blessing or curse.

When Adam and Eve are cast out of the garden of Eden, the cherubim bar the way to the tree of life (Gen 3:23–24). Thus, God explicitly indicates that this tree is no longer accessible to mankind. The lampstand within the holy place of the tabernacle probably symbolizes a tree of life, as does Aaron's staff that budded (Num 17:8). Both are inaccessible to ordinary Israelites (Num 17:10).

In several places the Bible provides symbolical references to a tree of life: wisdom "is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her" (Prov 3:18); "the fruit of righteousness is a tree of life" (Prov 11:30; cf. 13:12; 15:4). So is the tree of life in the garden of Eden merely a figurative representation of wisdom or righteousness or some other blessing? In view of its close connection with "every tree" (Gen 2:9) and the geographical markers used in describing the garden of Eden (2:8, 10–14), the text of Gen 2 represents the garden as an actual garden, and the trees are physical trees. The later symbolical references build figurative usages on top of the original use in Gen 2:9.

6. *Genesis 2:10*

A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. (v. 10)

The presence of a river is analogous to God's present providential order, which includes rivers. Commentaries debate whether the division from one

river into four means that one water source splits into four downstream rivers, or four rivers come together into one downstream river. Since in providence the latter is far more typical, the latter is probably being communicated at this point, by analogy with present-day providence.

7. *Genesis 2:11–14*

¹¹ The name of the first is the Pishon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold.

¹² And the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there.

¹³ The name of the second river is the Gihon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Cush.

¹⁴ And the name of the third river is the Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

The rivers Tigris and Euphrates and the place-name Assyria are identifiable. These names show continuities with the present providential order. Commentaries discuss the identification of the rest.¹⁴

8. *Genesis 2:15*

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. (v. 15)

The task of working and keeping the garden is analogous to gardening and agricultural tasks that continue within God's providential order.

9. *Genesis 2:16–17*

¹⁶ And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

The first of this pair of verses contains the permission, "You may surely eat of every tree...." Within God's providential order, mankind continues to enjoy the privilege of eating fruits (Acts 14:17). The effects of the fall mean that it is now harder (Gen 3:17–19).

¹⁴ See, e.g., Kidner, *Genesis*, 63–64; Collins, *Genesis 1–4*, 119–20. Given the information about the Tigris and the Euphrates, it seems probable that the two other rivers were rivers that once flowed into the area near the Persian Gulf where the Tigris and the Euphrates join. The joining of the four rivers at a downstream location would confirm our interpretation that Gen 2:10 describes four tributaries joining into one downstream river.

In v. 17 comes the prohibition, “you shall not eat.” As we observed, the tree of knowledge is unique, and does not correspond directly to any tree in God’s present providential order. The significance of the tree lies in the fact that it is used as a test of obedience or disobedience. This test is analogous to the tests that later confront the patriarchs and the nation of Israel, as to whether they will serve God faithfully or turn to false gods and their own devices. Thus, we find analogies both in the test and in the fact that this tree is similar in some ways to other trees.

10. *Genesis 2:18*

Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” (v. 18)

At this point the text shows explicitly the theme of God’s purpose and the theme that God’s work establishes a home suitable for mankind. By analogy, within the subsequent providential order, the Lord in his mercy continues to bless mankind. One of the blessings is the blessing of marriage and children.

11. *Genesis 2:19*

So out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. (v. 19)

The man names the animals, in imitation of God’s earlier naming (Gen 1:5, 8, 10). Within God’s providential order, mankind continues to use and invent names, and this use of language is one expression of human dominion.

12. *Genesis 2:20*

The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. (v. 20)

The lack of a fitting helper has an analogy with human experience in providence. Human beings continue to experience the fact that a man can only have children in cooperation with a woman. In a broader way, other human beings serve as companions, co-workers, conversation partners, and fellow worshipers in ways that no animal can. The intimacy in marriage is a particularly strong expression of this companionship and cooperation. A good wife complements her husband in a unique way.

13. *Genesis 2:21*

So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. (v. 21)

The “deep sleep” described here is obviously uniquely designed by God to provide a context for a unique work. At the same time, it is analogous to everyday sleep that human beings experience in providence. When a person is asleep, he does not notice what is going on around him. If his sleep is deep, he may not be awakened even when he is touched or softly spoken to or lightly shaken. By extrapolation from such ordinary experiences, Israelites could understand what it would mean for a person to be so deeply asleep that God could remove a rib. Would they have worried about pain being inflicted on Adam? Modern anesthetics were not known in the time of ancient Israel, but people could have observed cases where neurological malfunction dulled or eliminated the experience of pain in some parts of the body. God’s power gives him the ability to eliminate pain in the case of Adam.

What about the “rib”? Elsewhere I have argued that the text designates a rib, and does not just offer a vague metaphorical picture for Eve’s social and spiritual status in relation to Adam.¹⁵ This and the following verse are the only places in the OT where the Hebrew word רֵיבָּ (rib) designates a rib, but the same meaning “rib” is attested in rabbinic Hebrew, with reference to the ribs of animals.¹⁶ Israelites would be familiar with ribs, from experience with cutting up the meat of slaughtered animals, from experience with human bones (cf., e.g., 2 Kgs 13:21; 23:16), and from the experience of feeling one’s own ribs underneath the skin. All these offer providential analogues for understanding Adam’s rib. However, none of these offers an analogue to the complete process described in Gen 2:21–22. The making of Eve is unique, as is fitting for the creation of the first woman.

14. *Genesis 2:22*

And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. (v. 22)

Providence offers no complete analogue for the miraculous construction of a whole body from a rib. God’s way of making Eve is unique in this respect as well. Nevertheless, the text does invoke an analogy between God’s work and man’s work. It says, “he *made* into a woman.” The key word *made* (from בָּנָה) is not the

¹⁵ Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 249–51.

¹⁶ Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: Pardes, 1950), 2:1285.

most common word for making (הָשַׁע), but a word often translated *build*. God made the woman in a manner analogous to a man building a house.

15. *Genesis 2:23*

Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." (v. 23)

The unique way in which God makes Eve has analogies to the providential experience of the spiritual, social, and familial bond between man and woman, especially expressed in the intimacy of marriage. The unique, once-for-all creation of Eve forms the foundation for a permanent providential order.

16. *Genesis 2:24*

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. (v. 24)

Marriage as an institution within God's providential order has its foundation in the original act when God created Eve. The first marriage between Adam and Eve offers the paradigm case that subsequent marriages imitate.

17. *Genesis 2:25*

And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. (v. 25)

Nakedness has a correlation with the nakedness expressed providentially in sexual intercourse. The lack of shame expresses Adam and Eve's innocence, which is *unlike* the present post-fall situation, where we feel shame (Gen 3:8–11). However, shame is partially overcome in the expression of intimacy in marriage. So people in the post-fall situation have some analogy with which to work in order to understand the pre-fall situation.

II. *The Meaning of Correlations*

The pattern of correlations between Gen 2:4–25 and later providential events should now be evident. Nearly everything in Gen 2, but not quite everything, has obvious suitable analogues within the present-day providential order. Even the points that stand out as different employ *some* degree of analogy with the providential order. Just as with Gen 1, the resonances between creation and later providential events occur by God's design and in accord with his unified plan.

The entire description remains at a level of simplicity. It uses ordinary language. It uses analogies from ordinary life, familiar to Israelites and many other cultures. It offers only a comparatively sparse description of events. The

formation of the garden of Eden, the formation of Adam, Adam's naming of the animals, and the formation of Eve would all have involved many details about which the narrative is silent. It sticks to the main points.

The correlations between creation and providence are real. But these correlations include a distinction between the two poles involved in the correlation. Creation is *distinct* from providence, as well as analogous to it. The correlations thus actually count *against* rather than in favor of the modern view that Gen 2:5–25 is not really about creation, but *only* and *wholly* concerned to articulate God's providential care for humanity. This modern view basically wipes out the doctrine of creation and reductionistically collapses it into providence. This view has a superficial plausibility because it invokes the meaning of *correlations*. But it does not really work because all the correlations presuppose two distinct poles that are being correlated.

For example, the creation of Eve is one pole. It correlates with a second pole, namely, meanings that belong to later analogous events and cultural settings within God's providential control. Among these providential meanings are the meaning of womanhood, the meaning of the providential relationship between man and woman, and the meaning of marriage as an institution within God's providential order. This correlation between creation (Gen 2:5–25) and providence (all later history) presupposes the reality of two poles, with creation distinct from the later providence.

The same holds for Gen 1. Some modern interpreters might say that Gen 1 does nothing more than articulate a theology of God's wisdom and care for the world. Creation gets collapsed into present-day significance, namely, God's providential rule over the world. This interpretation has the same superficial plausibility as the providentialistic interpretation of Gen 2. It plausibly appeals to correlations, but in reality the correlations make sense only with two poles (creation and providence), not merely one (providence). Creation ought not to be collapsed conceptually into providence.

Some interpreters try to back up their attempt to collapse two poles into one by appealing to analogies from the ancient Near East. As discussed in an earlier article, the ancient Near East did have its cosmogonic myths.¹⁷ Scholars can interpret these myths in a variety of competing ways, depending on the modern assumptions that they presuppose. In particular, an approach using a reductionistic form of social anthropology can reduce the "meaning" of myths to their functions in maintaining social order.

According to this anthropological view, the work of myths is the work of providing common social reference points: they offer stories that generate divine significance for the culture and offer explanations for various social customs and structures. When myths are interpreted this way, their meanings all belong to the present providential order. A mythic story about the past is interpreted

¹⁷ Vern S. Poythress, "Three Modern Myths in Interpreting Genesis 1," *WTJ* 76 (2014): 321–50.

as “really” being about the present.¹⁸ No doubt myths have *implications* for the present. But to collapse the past into the present is a form of reductionism. It looks suspiciously like a product of modern assumptions rather than ancient consciousness.

In ancient times, myths could indeed contribute to social stability, and their perceived social importance was presumably one reason why they were recited and shared. They also had attraction because they seemed to promise a higher and deeper knowledge about the world, including the world of spirits. This feeling of shared knowledge also contributed to religious and social cohesion. But the myths effectively strengthened social stability and fulfilled the promise of knowledge only if at some level people believed them.¹⁹ The myths depended on correlations between beginnings at one pole and the present order at the other. Both poles were needed if the myths were to offer an effective social *foundation* and a deeper knowledge, in contrast to mere commentary on social life.

In reply, the reductionistically inclined student of social anthropology might admit that ancient peoples mostly believed in their myths. “But,” he says, “we, with our superior knowledge, know that the spirits and gods postulated in these ancient myths are not real. So the *real* function of the myths can be found only in their social function of promoting social cohesion.”

That reply misses the point in two ways.

First, it depends on a modern metaphysical commitment to the nonexistence of the spirit world. This modern view is false, according to biblical testimony about angels and demons. And such a view undermines sympathetic understanding of the ancient myths.

Second, even if the modern view were right in its assumptions, it should analyze the myths according to their *meanings*, in their own context, not just inject its own opinions about their truthfulness. Analysis does not take place merely to find the social truths that modern people think they can extract. Within their own cultural context, the meanings in myths support both social cohesion and belief in the gods whose past actions have brought things into their present shape. It is a distortion to eliminate one pole. It amounts to an imposition of modern dogma by a reductionistic form of anthropology.

Similarly, it is a distortion—a form of reductionism—to eliminate one pole of the correlations involved in Gen 1–2. The communicative power of Gen 1–2 depends on retaining the function of both poles. Genesis 1–2 is unlike the ancient Near Eastern myths, because of its consistent monotheism and its simplicity in description. But if for the sake of argument we were to grant that

¹⁸ Some myths, of course, may focus only on a repeated pattern (e.g., the dawn as rebirth of the sun god), not on a founding event. The general principle is that each myth must be interpreted by respecting the correlations it evokes, not by abolishing one pole of the correlations.

¹⁹ Thus, Socrates was tried and condemned to death on two charges, not one: allegedly he did not properly respect the Greek gods, and he was corrupting the youths of Athens by his skepticism. Belief or lack of belief has social consequences.

it belongs to the same genre²⁰ as the myths, the same arguments would hold for both the myths and for Gen 1–2: they both use two poles that are correlated.

In sum, Gen 1–2 and the ancient Near Eastern myths about origins both rely on the distinction between *founding* events in the past and providential continuation in the present. The difference is that Gen 1–2 offers a true account concerning the work of the true God, in contrast to the corrupt, counterfeit accounts that depict the interaction of many gods.

III. *Genesis 3 and the Fall*

We can apply to Gen 3 similar reasoning to what we have used with Gen 1 and 2. The narrative as a whole obviously resonates with all subsequent temptations to rebellion and sin, such as human beings experience daily. It also resonates with Jesus' temptation in the wilderness in Matt 4:1–11 and Luke 4:1–13. Jesus successfully resisted the devil's temptations, whereas Adam did not. Modern theorists may therefore propose that Gen 3, along with Gen 2, is "really" about "everyman" rather than Adam as an actual historical individual. Though superficially plausible, this argument ignores the presence of two poles to the correlation. Adam and Eve are simultaneously real historical individuals and a pattern for subsequent temptation and sin, as Gen 5:1–5, Luke 3:38, Rom 5:12–21, and 1 Cor 15:45–49 indicate.

IV. *Points without Full Analogy*

It is also worthwhile noting what points in Gen 1–3 have *less* strong analogies with the present providential order. All the analogies that we have discussed involve both similarity and dissimilarity. So analogy is a matter of degree. In which cases do dissimilarities stand out more prominently? In my mind, the following stand out.

1. *The Beginning in Genesis 1:1*

In Gen 1:1 God's original act of creation is an absolute beginning. It tacitly implies that God uses no pre-existing, eternal material.²¹ This absolute begin-

²⁰ Genre classifications depend on choices about broad or narrow terms used for classification (Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009], 186–91).

²¹ See Collins, *Genesis 1–4*, 50–55. Collins and I maintain that Gen 1:1 describes the initial act of creation, rather than being a title covering what happens in detail in 1:2–31. But even if it is a title, the phrase "in the beginning" has a unique function. Even if it does not directly denote an absolute beginning, it implies it. Otherwise, we have eternal matter, and eternal matter plays a godlike role in addition to the true God. Religiously, such a view about eternal matter undermines the thrust of Gen 1:2–31 as well as the whole rest of the Bible. And it directly contradicts the claims of 1 Cor 8:6 and Col 1:16.

ning is unlike any later “relatively new” beginning. It is such by necessity, of course, and this uniqueness can be appreciated by ordinary readers who in normal circumstances are looking for analogies with their present providential experience.

2. *The Creation of Man in Genesis 2:7*

By necessity, the creation of the first human being cannot involve the present providential process of gestation and birth from a human mother. Accordingly, the description in Gen 2:7 has only limited parallels with the passages elsewhere in Scripture about God’s subsequent providential work of creating new human beings, as in Ps 139:13–18. Language about “forming” and “breathing” and “dust” occurs later, but later passages do not bring everything together into a single event: “then the LORD God formed the man *of* dust from the ground.” In providence, God forms individuals in the womb (Ps 139:13). God “forms” man in a manner analogous to a potter “forming” clay, but no human potter actually creates a living being.

3. *The Two Special Trees in Genesis 2:9*

The tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:9) both function as special symbols for God’s blessing and curse. The trees exercise their distinct functions within the unique initial situation of testing that Adam and Eve confront in Gen 3. Accordingly, they have no direct parallels today.

4. *The Creation of Woman in Genesis 2:21–22*

In a manner parallel to the creation of Adam, the creation of the first human woman cannot involve the present process of gestation and birth from a human mother. The use of Adam’s rib is a truly extraordinary, miraculous process.

5. *The Appearance of a Talking Serpent in Genesis 3:1*

The snake in Gen 3:1 is special. As any number of skeptical interpreters have pointed out, snakes do not talk. Of course we have providential experiences of encountering snakes. But the description in Gen 3:1 is utterly without parallel in normal providence. (The closest we can come is Balaam’s donkey in Num 22:28–30. In Numbers, the text itself clearly recognizes the extraordinary, miraculous character of the event by explaining, “Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey,” implying that donkeys do not normally speak.)

Within Gen 3, skeptics have taken the presence of a talking snake to be a sign of its fabulous or allegorical character. But actually the extraordinary character of the serpent’s action fits the context. It takes a supernatural, demonic source to attack boldly the truthfulness of God within the original situation of fellowship

and peace with God. The serpent is not merely a serpent, as later scriptural reflection explicitly recognizes (Rev 12:9).

The extraordinary character of the talking serpent is meant to shock readers into deeper reflection. Through reflection, they will understand that the serpent does not merely represent one animal among many within the original created order, which is “very good” (Gen 1:31). Rather, this animal has become a mouthpiece for a deep, supernatural evil. The function of rhetorical shock has its full effect only if the text *is* presenting us with a real talking serpent and not an allegory or a fable.

V. *Broader Issues of Interpretation*

We may now consider the broader interpretive issues surrounding our interpretation of Gen 2–3.

1. *The Exceptional and the Normal*

The five points listed above with respect to the text of Gen 1:1–3:24 stand out as exceptional. They call for special attention precisely because they are different from the surrounding verses. Most of the material in the verses in the early chapters of Genesis presents us with analogies between creation and providence. Since the events of providence occur in time and space today, the many analogies with providence confirm that Gen 1:1–3:24 is likewise giving us real events in space and time. The cumulative force of many analogies increases the confirmation. If we are going to deny the reality of the originating events, we might as well go the whole way and deny the reality of present-day providence—which is what modern materialism virtually does.

The suspicion arises that modern agenda, modern myths, and pressures from a materialistic worldview are exerting influence on how people go about interpreting the first three chapters of Genesis. In opposition to these trends, a firm belief in God’s providence, as well as a firm belief in supernatural salvation accomplished in Christ, aid us in recovering in our own thinking a healthy view of the world. In such a view, we believe in the robust involvement of God in the world and the reality of the supernatural. Ultimately, our beliefs find their foundation in the nature of God. Not only Gen 1 but the whole rest of the Bible tells us that he is sovereign in creation and providence. A firm conviction about the true nature of God encourages a sound interpretation of Gen 1–3.

2. *Historical Narrative versus Fable and Legend*

We may also reflect more generally about the difference between a fable and a narrative such as Gen 1–3 that purports to be about events in space and time. In Judg 9:8–15 Jotham tells a fable that involves talking trees. We know that it is a fable through several reinforcing kinds of information in the context.

(1) In 9:16–20 Jotham interprets his fable as referring to Abimelech and the inhabitants of Shechem. (2) The fable in 9:8–15 has a clean literary boundary within Judges, with a sharp shift in subject-matter at its beginning and end. (3) The larger interest of Judg 9 concerns Abimelech and his ambitions, with no direct relation to trees. (4) The fable has a relation to the surrounding context only when it is perceived as having allegorical meaning. We may make similar observations about many of Jesus’ parables.

Both Jotham’s fable and Jesus’ parables have meaning by establishing two distinct levels of action. The one level concerns actions within the story. The other concerns actions outside the story, to which the story intentionally points. In Jotham’s fable, actions of trees within the story correspond to actions of individuals and groups outside the story.

These cases involving two-level fictional stories contrast with Balaam’s donkey, who fits solidly into the one-level historical narrative about Balaam’s visit to Balak, or the snake of Gen 3:1, who fits solidly into the fall narrative of 3:1–24. And if we have doubts about whether Adam and Eve are real or fabulous figures, observe how Adam and Eve fit solidly into a one-level genealogical history going from Adam to Abraham and beyond. This history leads to the nation of descendants prophesied in Genesis (12:2; 13:16; 15:5; etc.) and attained in Exod 1:7.

Scholars may reject the idea that Gen 3 is fable or mythic invention, but still downgrade the material in Genesis by classifying it as legend. But such judgments have no real basis in the literary form of the text as we have it in the canon. The text connects itself forward to later history, with no indications of hesitancy about the relation of its narrative to actual events. Later Jewish and NT comments on Genesis confirm this impression of historicity, showing that the presence of historical reference is not a modern misreading. There is nothing in the form of qualifying comments such as, “our ancestors told us that” or “people say that” or “our tradition says that” or the like. So the scholarly label “legend” (and similar labels) is based on a broader historical skepticism or rejection of the divine authority of the product. The issue of divine authority is key. Without that, Genesis reduces to a book that scholars imagine to be the endpoint of a long, accreting process of repeated retelling and rewriting without divine superintendence, and therefore presumed to be of mixed value.

3. *Literal and Figurative*

I conclude that Gen 1–3 describes actual events that took place in the past, in time and space, long ago. This understanding of Gen 1–3 as referring to actual events is sometimes described as a *literal* interpretation, while an interpretation as fable or allegory or myth is *figurative*. But the terms *literal* and *figurative* can be used in a range of ways. And, depending on what they denote, they are not always opposites. A poetic passage like Exod 15:1–18 can use figures of speech to describe the same historical events that are described in more prosaic

fashion in Exod 14. Similarly, Judg 5 poetically refers to the historical events in Judg 4. Are the two poetic passages (Exod 15 and Judg 5) literal or figurative? The poetry is “figurative” in using figures of speech, and at the same time “literal” in referring to historical events, unlike fables and allegories.

Thus, I do not find the polarity between *literal* and *figurative* helpful in discussing Exod 15. In like manner, I do not find it helpful in discussing passages that use *analogies*. Analogies occur all the way through Gen 1–3. Neither the word *literal* nor the word *figurative* gives us a well-rounded and clear description of the way that analogy functions.

Consider: the word *literal* can be taken to mean that there is no use of analogy at all, anywhere in the text. If so, we have only a pure identity between descriptions of creation and descriptions of providence. But that route leads to identifying creation with providence, in tension with Gen 2:2, “God finished his work.” On the other hand, the word *figurative* easily implies that Gen 1–3 contains allegories whose whole point is to describe truths about providence. Then God’s works of creation are simply eliminated from the text.

As an example, let us consider Gen 1:9, where God commands the dry land to appear. The appearance of the dry land is the *first* appearance, after an earlier time when water covered everything. It is analogous to but not identical with later events in providence when waters recede off temporarily flooded land.

We can ask whether the description in Gen 1:9 is “literal” or “figurative.” Neither label is apt. The word *figurative* is inappropriate, because the verse is describing an observable event when the dry land first appeared. This event involved a physical change in the relative positions of water and the dry land. So shall we use the word *literal*? But that word can easily imply the rejection of analogy. It implies that analogies are irrelevant to understanding what the text describes. If so, we are in a quandary. The first appearance of dry land comes after an earlier point when water covered the whole earth. It is not completely like later, providential appearances of land after a flood that comes to a limited area of land (e.g., the flooding of the Nile). The later re-appearances of land within God’s providential order are partly analogous to the first appearance. But if we reject analogy, we have to say that the later events have nothing to do with the first. That conclusion ignores the way in which God repeatedly communicates using analogies between creation and providence.

Moreover, the word *literal* might imply the verse has no dimensions of meaning beyond a minimal physical description. And this inference creates tension with Gen 1 as a whole, because in Gen 1 the appearance of dry land involves not merely physical change but divine purpose. It prepares a space for plants and land animals and man. The separation of sea from dry land also coheres with other acts of God in separating distinct regions and in bringing about a structured and ordered world. It is not an event that has its entire meaning in complete isolation from the other acts of God in creation.

In sum, I fear that the use of the word *literal* can push interpretation in the direction of pure identity between creation and later providence, or between

any two events that have similar verbal descriptions. If we assume a pure identity, the entire *nature* and the entire *process* of the appearance of dry land must be exactly the same in the details of the two cases. That is, creation and providence must involve exactly the same detailed physical processes. As a result, we cannot have mountain building in one case (creation) and water running back into the Nile in the other case (providence). So the banner of “literalism” can unwittingly lead to reading Gen 1 as if it were a precisionistic description, where everything must correspond exactly and precisely to later providential workings of God and to our expectations about how God does things.

Does the word *figurative* function any better? No, it pushes interpretation in a minimalistic direction. If we use the word *figurative* to describe Gen 1:9, it seems to imply that there was no physical event in which the dry land appeared. Rather, it tells us to treat Gen 1:9 as merely a symbol—perhaps a symbol for God’s commitment to maintaining the dry land for the sake of human life (cf. Gen 9:11, 15). People might say that the point is *only* that God is responsible in some principal way for the continued providential separation between water and dry land. The fact that the dry land appeared at a particular point in time evaporates. It is allegedly “not the point.”

More controversially, the same polarity between *literal* and *figurative* interferes with a discussion of the nature of the six days of creation. The word *literal* easily encourages a mentality where there must be an exact match between the six days of creation and later days in providence. But clearly there cannot actually be an exact match for any of the days, precisely because they are days of creation rather than later days of providential action. Creation and providential action cannot simply be equated.

In practice, interpreters who champion literalism retreat from this extreme. But they still maintain the principle that the match must extend to the length of the days, as measured by some technical apparatus. But this principle is problematic. For the first three days, there cannot be a match for the ordinary human method of numerically measuring length of time, because these first three days come before the creation of “the greater light” and “the lesser light” and the stars.²²

In such discussion, the words *literal* and *figurative* are not helpful. By themselves they are too “thin” in meaning to describe robustly the meaning of what God is saying in Gen 1–3. For example, human beings are not purely “literal” beings, in the strictest sense, because they are made in the image of God, in analogy with God. A human father fathers sons. But the meaning of fathering is not self-contained. Human fathers are imitating God the Father’s eternal relation to his Son. Neither are human beings purely “figurative” beings. They are real, and not *just* symbols pointing to something else—perhaps a symbol for God whose image they reflect. The meaning of humanity includes both aspects—symbolical and material/literal. Symbolically a human being points

²² Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, 141–42.

to God, and simultaneously he is there as a created being distinct from God. Precisely as created beings, humans point back to God who made them. Human personhood is intelligible only by reflecting on God who is the origin of persons.

Similarly, human work is neither “literal” nor “figurative.” It is real work in distinction from God’s work in creation; simultaneously, it is analogous to God’s work. It is empowered by God’s presence. Neither are human days purely “literal,” because they are analogous to the six original days of God’s work, and his final day of rest. Meaning throughout the universe is meaning in relationship to God, and so cannot rightly be flattened into a purely prosaic, purely earthly, minimizing core. Neither can be it flattened into mere “symbol” for truths about ideas or ethereal realms.

Thus, the words *literal* and *figurative* easily contribute to an unhelpful polarization.

VI. *Overinterpretation or Underinterpretation?*

Because any analogy involves both similarity and dissimilarity, it may not provide us with detailed technical information unless we artificially force such detail into our interpretation. For example, God “breathed into his [Adam’s] nostrils the breath of life” (Gen 2:7). But we should not deduce that God has a body that produced the “breath,” or that we know that his breath contained normal atmospheric proportions of oxygen, nitrogen, and carbon dioxide. We do not conclude that God used mouth-to-mouth resuscitation in exactly the same way as in modern human rescue operations.

God “built” the rib into a woman (Gen 2:22). But we cannot infer the exact relationship between Adam’s DNA and Eve’s. We do not know the technical details. We do not infer that God used physical fingers in the process of building.

The tree of life was a physical tree. But we do not know whether it was an apple tree, a pear tree, or a tree with special fruit such as we never see today.

Genesis 1:6–8 provides no scientific “theory” about the physical structure of the expanse.

In short, it is easy to err by trying to supply extra detail and imagining that our details are actually there in Gen 1–2. When we try to make correlations between Gen 1–2 and modern science, we inevitably fill in detail, using information gathered from science. But we must not become confused and read that detail directly back into Gen 1–2. If we do, we are setting ourselves up for a clash if the science changes in the future.

It is also possible to err by denying phenomenal information that is actually provided by the text, and claiming that the text has *only* the intention of supplying a very general picture—that God created the world and mankind. If we move in that direction, we lose details—for example, the indication that there was a special tree, called the tree of life. Under a minimizing interpretation, the tree of life becomes *only a symbol* for the general principle of life in the presence of God.

Using analogy, by contrast, involves affirming both the physicality of the tree of life and its unique covenantal role, which includes symbolical dimensions. Though this one tree is unique, its significance also resonates with the significance of all fruit trees whatsoever. God gives us fruit trees for food (Deut 6:11; Acts 14:17), and they symbolize at a lower level of intensity the life of God that they reflect on a creaturely level. No tree is merely flatly, prosaically a technical biological structure and “nothing more.”

Similarly, in a minimizing symbolical interpretation of Gen 1:9–10, the appearing of the dry land becomes *only a symbol* for the general principle that God sustains the distinction between the sea and the dry land. Using analogy involves affirming the physical (i.e., phenomenal) reality of God’s initial act in separating the sea and the dry land. At the same time, we affirm the importance of this act as a manifestation of God’s care and his faithfulness, which we now see in his commitment to preserve the separation. Through the continued separation of sea and dry land, God still provides today a suitable habitat for the land animals and mankind.

Consequently, we should acknowledge both a physical side to the descriptions in Gen 1–3 and a theological side. Far from being in tension, the two reinforce each other.