Faculty Publications

2006

Understanding the Purpose of Creation Accounts

Terry Ball
Brigham Young University - Provo, terry_ball@byu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub

Part of the Biblical Studies Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Ball, Terry, "Understanding the Purpose of Creation Accounts" (2006). Faculty Publications. 3541. https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/3541

This Peer-Reviewed Article is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Gospel Insight

Understanding the Purpose of the Creation Accounts

Terry B. Ball, Chair
Department of Ancient Scripture

Jeopardy is a popular and long-running TV game show in the United States. It is somewhat unusual in the world of game shows. In typical game shows, contestants are asked questions and then awarded money for providing correct answers. But, in Jeopardy that process is reversed: the contestants are given the answers and then receive money for correctly providing the questions. For example, contestants might be given the answer “a biblical measurement of volume approximately equivalent to eight gallons.” The contestant who first correctly asks the question “What is an ephah?” would then be awarded money. Unlike much of what is on television, this game show provides a wonderful educational experience.

Creation continued on page 5

What Some Scholars Call Legend

D. Kelly Ogden, professor of ancient scripture (recently called to be president of the Missionary Training Center in Guatemala)

Through my years of textual study of the Bible (in English and in the original languages), I have encountered an impressive barrage of scholars who, in their zeal to critically analyze the various documents and hypothesize about their origin (“higher criticism”), have made concerted efforts to take prophecy and anything miraculous out of the Bible.

For biblical stories like the meal jar and oil cruise which never seemed to be exhausted, Balaam’s ass, Elijah’s ravens, Jonah’s whale, Lot’s wife, Samson’s jawbone and foxes, the manna and quails and water from the rock, the miracles in Daniel, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the sun and moon standing still—for all these and more, the scholars have a tidy repertoire of labels like myth, fairy tale, folklore, saga, and legend. Anything the critic cannot himself understand or that lacks some “tangible evidence” is summarily classified as something which could not have been.

Yohanan Aharoni, one of modern Israel’s greatest archaeologists, regarded the biblical accounts of the Israelite conquest of Canaan as fictitious. He wrote: “The biblical tradition speaks only in legendary terms about the conquest of Jericho and Ai . . . Evidently, these stories are popular etiological legends faithfully describing the situation in the period of the Judges in which Israelite villages were founded on the ruins of these ancient mounds, but one may not use them to reconstruct the course of the Israelite conquest.”

In A History of the Jews, Abram Leon Sachar wrote of the conquest, “This account, with its miracles and its lessons, is, of course, the romantic fabrication of the Deuteronomistic and priestly historians.”

The text of the Reader’s Digest Atlas of the Bible is quite accurately presented by a group of renowned Bible scholars. He who prepared the section entitled “The Prophet Elijah,” however, wrote in rather condescending terms: “The Elijah stories in 1 and 2 Kings are a legendary cycle, weaving together his miraculous adventures and
Creation (continued)

Often the Josephus approach can be beneficially applied to scripture study too. For example, helpful insights to the Attonement can be gained by reading Alma 34:5-35 and pondering the questions that each verse is answering. Likewise, when studying the Creation account in Genesis, our learning can be enhanced by considering the questions the account is addressing.

Questions Asked by Moses

Latter-day Saints are fortunate to have a record of a conversation between God and Moses that helps us identify the questions that the Creation narrative is addressing. When Moses was “caught up into an exceedingly high mountain” and spoke with God “face to face,” he “beheld the earth, yea, even all of it; and there was not a particle of it which he did not behold. . . . And he beheld also the inhabitants thereof, and there was not a soul which he beheld not. . . . And he beheld many lands; and each land was called earth, and there were inhabitants on the face thereof” (Moses 1:30).

In response to the first question about why He created earths, God gave a rather obscure answer, “For mine own purpose have I made these things. Here is wisdom and it remaineth in me” (Moses 1:31). God’s response to the second question suggests that He understood that the interrogative was not “by what” but rather “by whom” thou madest” the earths. God answered, “By the word of my power, have I created them, which is mine Only Begotten Son” (Moses 1:32; see also John 1:1–3, 14; Hebrews 1:2).

After hearing God’s responses, Moses wanted to know more about “this earth, and the inhabitants thereof, and also the heavens” (Moses 1:36). God subsequently explained that there are many earths and heavens which have and will come and go as part of His work and glory “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39), and He agreed to reveal to Moses more concerning this earth upon which thou [Moses] standest” (Moses 1:40). God then specifically commanded Moses to “write the things” that he was about to be told (Moses 1:40). What follows in the next two chapters of the book of Moses (Moses 2–3) is an account of the Creation similar to Genesis 1–2.

This conversation between God and Moses suggests that of the interrogatives we typically consider (who, what, where, when, why, and how) the Creation narratives respond primarily to the who (who created the earth) and the why (why was the earth created; see Moses 1:30). Reading through the Genesis account of the Creation, we can see that the what (what was created) is also discussed in general terms, but the text does not give much information about when or where the Creation took place.

The question of how the earth was created also seems to be addressed, but only in broad terms with very little detail. Accordingly, the text should not be viewed as a step-by-step discussion of how the earth was created. Indeed, doing so has led to difficulties for biblical scholars and students because the order and method of Creation is not consistent throughout the account. For example, in Genesis 1:26–27, man and woman are created together, after all the animals have been created, but in Genesis 2:19–25, man is created from the dust of the ground, then the animal, and finally, woman.

If the Creation account is attempting to give a detailed account of how God created the earth, such discrepancies should not occur. Scholars and theologians have contrived many reasons for explaining the inconsistencies in the narrative. A common rationale is that the discrepancies arise because Genesis actually contains two separate accounts of the Creation, written by different authors or coming from different sources that have a conflicting understanding of the process. Proponents of this hypothesis often suggest that the first Creation account is recorded in Genesis 1:1–2:4a and comes from what they typically identify as the “Elohist” or “E” source because the Hebrew name used for the Creator in the text is Elohim.
which is translated simply as "God" in the King James Version. They postulate that Genesis 2:4b–25 contains a second and different account of the creation coming from what they typically identify as the "Yahwist" or "J" source because it prefers to refer to the Creator with the Hebrew title of Yahweh Elohim, which is translated as "Lord God" in the King James Version. The inconsistencies, they suggest, arise because the two different sources or authors have different ideas about how the earth was created.1

### Comparing Accounts

Latter-day Saints can find insight to the issue of whether or not there are two conflicting accounts of the Creation recorded in Genesis by comparing the corresponding accounts found in the books of Moses and Abraham. In Moses we read:

And now, behold, I say unto you, that these are the generations of the heaven and of the earth, when they were created, in the day that I, the Lord God, made the heaven and the earth,

And every plant of the field before it was in the earth, and every herb of the field before it grew. For I, the Lord God, created all things, of which I have spoken, spiritually, before they were naturally upon the face of the earth. For I, the Lord God, had not caused it to rain upon the face of the earth. And I, the Lord God, created all the children of men; and not yet a man to till the ground; for in heaven created I them; and there was not yet flesh upon the earth, neither in the water, neither in the air. (Moses 3:4–5)

This passage indicates that rather than containing two conflicting accounts, the narrative is simply describing or emphasizing two different aspects of the Creation.2

In Abraham, the Creation is handled with what is a slightly different paradigm. In the fourth chapter of Abraham, analogous to Genesis 1, a council of Gods is planning the Creation. As they finish the process, they declare, "We will do everything that we have said, and organize them" (Abraham 4:31). The fifth chapter of Abraham, analogous to Genesis 2, then describes how the Gods carried out their plans, "And the Gods came down and formed these the generations of the heavens and of the earth" (Abraham 5:4). Thus the Abraham creation account likewise suggests that the Creation narrative does not contain two different conflicting versions, but rather one account of two parts of the Creation—first the planning, and then the carrying out of those plans.3

While the Moses and Abraham accounts of the Creation may provide some insights into what may appear to be inconsistencies within the Genesis text, the problems associated with regarding any of the texts as a "how-to" narrative for creating an earth still persist for Latter-day Saints. The lack of detail in all of the Creation texts, differences between the texts themselves, and the rather terse and generalized discussion of the Creation in the accounts overall, combine to indicate that the authors' primary intents were not to give neither a precise nor comprehensive answer to the question of how God created the earth. Accordingly, a wise approach to studying any of the Creation texts may be to focus on the answers they provide to the questions of who created the earth and why, rather than how, when, or where. In so doing, valuable insights can be gained about the purpose of the Creation, our relationship to the Creator, and our stewardship from Him.

### Notes

1. There are many variations of this hypothesis, and many other altogether different approaches to resolving the perceived discrepancies in the account, a discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper. For an introduction to the issue, see Brevard S. Childs, Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 147–50.

2. The terms "spiritually" and "naturally" are not defined in the text, and many interpretations have been given. For a review of the issue, see Charles R. Harrell, "The Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence, 1830–1844," BYU Studies 28, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 75–96.

3. Joseph Fielding Smith taught that the Abraham account is the "blueprint" for the Creation (Doctrines of Salvation [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954], 1:174–75).