

Genesis 1 is a gift that keeps on giving. It also keeps on summoning to continued consideration and interpretation. These two books, in very different ways, offer fresh critical, even erudite discussions of the chapter.

Mark Smith (New York University) has brought together six of his distinct studies, five of which constitute an effort “to draw on and synthesize various approaches in order to think about the priestly vision of creation.” The sixth chapter, an appendix, is a reflection on the history of interpretation that casts a glance toward Genesis 1. The first three chapters of Smith’s book focus specifically on Genesis 1. In the first chapter he outlines three “models” of creation in the Bible. These are (1) creation by divine power, (2) creation by divine wisdom, and (3) creation by divine presence. As with such “models,” these are richly suggestive without being excessively precise. Creation by divine power (through conflict) portrays God as a warrior-king, a model that serves royal political interests, given the linkage of divine king/human king and overlap of divine enemies/national enemies. Smith proposes Ps. 74:12-17 as an exemplar of this model that culminates in awe before the majestic power of the creator. Creation by divine wisdom takes as its exemplar Psalm 104, a model that culminates in joy. This model, not surprisingly, is situated among wisdom teachers, a connection that will provide an opening for Smith’s analysis of scribal work in Genesis 1. Creation by divine presence is exposited through Psalm 8 (with an aside to Psalm 23) that evokes “a picture of the universe as a divine sanctuary” marked by the holiness of the Sabbath. Smith offers an assessment of each model. He finds the first model marked by intrusive violence to be the most repugnant; he suggests that the third is the most difficult for modern readers to understand, but one that gives great comfort. He judges that from these models and examples, that,

We gain a view of the world’s goodness, grace, and wondrous potential for the divine, even as we acknowledge the world’s unruliness, its chaotic quality, and the potential for terrible human evil. (37)

In a move toward the chapter that is his real subject, Smith suggests that Genesis 1 transforms all of this imagery into its own priestly vision of reality. Smith makes a significant gain in linking the models to identifiable social agents, respectively, the circles of kings, scribes, and priests.

In Chapters 2 and 3 we are offered a close critical reading of Genesis 1 that reflects Smith’s vast learning, his attention to detail, and his disciplined method. The argument is supported by copious and rich documentation. He accepts the critical consensus that the chapter is priestly and dated to the sixth century. His discussion is informed
to some great extent by that of Jon Levenson in the connections he sees to the priestly construction of the tabernacle as a place for hosting the divine presence. Chapter 2 provides a careful probe of the legitimacy of translating verse 1 as a dependent clause (dependent on verse 3 rather than on verse 2), and a shrewd consideration of creation as divine work on a “pre-world” (Umwelt) or “pre-creation.” His conclusion, reflective of a near consensus among us, is that this is not creation out of nothing. While the point is regularly taken for granted in the discipline, his powerful statement of the case is important, because Christian theologians (recently R. R. Reno in his Genesis commentary) continue to ignore the point and proceed, in the interest of doctrinal claims, as though the text witnessed to creatio ex nihilo. Smith’s exposition makes that an untenable assumption. He nicely translates tōhû wābōhû as “void and vacuum,” but sees that pre-creation is not resistant to or recalcitrant against the creator. It is simply formless and powerless and awaits the work of the creator.

I find most intriguing in this chapter the conclusion concerning light before the creation of the sun as “God’s own light” that comes with God’s own presence. Here, as in several places, Smith notices the close parallel to Exodus 39-40 and the divine presence in the tabernacle. The theme, moreover, exhibits Smith’s theological acumen as the theme of “God’s own light” runs, among other places, toward the Nicean formulation of “Light from Light.”

In the third chapter Smith continues his reading of Genesis 1 after verse 5 and places the accent on “separation,” seeing close connections to priestly work in Leviticus 11 and the distinction between clean and unclean. He treats the creation of humankind as an authorization for human rule and dominion, and notices that the several blessings in the narrative reflect a priestly propensity that is not without parallel to the Aaronide blessing of Numbers 6.

Smith judges that the sum of the chapter is a “vision of goodness” that is “wildly optimistic” about the world as God’s creation. He concludes that the chapter is not only descriptive of the world intended by God in a way that evokes wonder and doxology; it is also prescriptive for the role of humanity as the ones who must maintain and preserve the goodness of creation. While much of this reflects common scholarly consensus (one in part established by Smith), Smith is remarkably disciplined and clear; along the way, moreover, his discussion teems with suggestive insight about the text.

In the second part of the book (two chapters and the appendix), Smith reflects on the ways in which Genesis 1 relates to the rest of the Bible. In the fourth chapter Smith offers some of the most evocative of his many interpretive suggestions. He reflects on Genesis 1 and its relation to Genesis 2. He first judges that Genesis 1 is the work of scribes in the late period of biblical Israel. Building on the work of David Carr and Karel van der Toorn, he links scribes to priests, and takes them together in nearly a hyphenated fashion. He proposes that the work of scribes is to preserve and extend the tradition in a way that “involved reading, writing, memorizing, and reciting,” that is, with a considerable emphasis upon oral recitation.

He then proposes that Genesis 1 is a commentary on Genesis 2 in a way that fits into a pattern whereby new “introductions” have been placed before many pieces