



CHAPTER

2

THE MEANINGS OF THE
BEGINNING

*And on the seventh day God finished the work that he
had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the
work that he had done.*

Genesis 2:2

A more auspicious beginning for the seventh day than the one that is put forward in the first book of the Bible is hard to imagine: “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation” (Gen. 2:1–3). Accepting that the seventh day makes a spectacular entry, it is well to ask whether the first impression will be sustained once we look more closely at the text, the context, and the meanings that we might infer concerning the seventh day in the Creation account.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

In the compact verses in Genesis the writer’s claims with respect to the seventh day fairly stumble over each other, one assertion surpassing the next, appearing to endow the seventh day with an enchanting aura of distinction. First of all, the writer does not hang the seventh day on nothing, nor is the writer content merely to anchor the seventh day to a great occasion in the maze of human history. Instead, Genesis ties it indissolubly to the foundational event of human and creaturely existence.¹ The seventh day is a feature of Creation; indeed, it is the capstone of Creation and comes forth at the dawn of history as the first signifier of the character and meaning of Creation. Second, this Creation must be understood as an achievement that is the exclusive prerogative of God. It features God’s sovereign action, engaged in a pursuit for which there is no corresponding human activity. Third, the seventh day is not introduced accidentally or haphazardly. Rather, the seventh day is an immediate fact of Creation, belonging to it and completing it, a day without which Creation remains in limbo.²

The elements of deliberation and purpose are described in two sets of carefully worded pairs. In the first of these pairs, the writer of Genesis states that “on the seventh day God *finished* the work that he had done, and he *rested* on the seventh day” (Gen. 2:2). This is a

report of the completion of God's activity without any attribution of significance. In the second pair, Genesis announces that "God *blessed* the seventh day and *hallowed* it" (Gen. 2:3). This reports a specific act concerning the seventh day. Here God marks out the significance of the occasion so as to take the matter of its interpretation into God's own hands. If the first of these pairs is retrospective, the second looks forward, and is an indicator of permanence. By the act of hallowing the seventh day God drives the stake of the divine presence into the soil of human time.

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According to the plain reading of the text, the seventh day was given immense prestige from the very beginning. Divine purpose and action are involved in a way that give the seventh day significance far beyond anything situational or temporary. The action of the Creator in the Genesis account brings a degree of distinction to the seventh day that represents a formidable deterrent to denigrating it.

ASSESSING THE TEXT AND ITS CONTEXT

Just as the seventh day in many ways has become an ideological and theological orphan, so the modern world has lost touch with the text describing the beginning. The sense of looking at an alien thought world applies not just to the way scholars have analyzed and dissected the biblical narrative during the past two centuries. What has happened to the perception of the biblical text itself is probably less important than the seismic shift in the worldview of its readers. The modern account of evolution speaks of chance, not purpose; it envisions a process without an agent that initiates, guides, and completes it; and it reflects a view of reality in which the seventh day has no meaningful point of contact.

The text itself has also become an object in motion and not a fixed point. Scholars have scrutinized the first five books of the Bible, probing for its nature and origin. The consensus that gradually emerged—and to some extent still prevails—holds that the first five or six books in the Bible derive from several sources, each with its own unique characteristics and each originating at different periods in history. Scholars have attempted to delineate the multiple layers in the finished composition, much like archaeologists excavating a mound try to identify the various strata left behind by the site's inhabitants. Eventually the nameless authors behind the various textual strata have come to be identified by a single letter of the alphabet.

In this reconstruction, known as “the Documentary hypothesis,” at least three hands are seen at work in Genesis, designated respectively as J, E, and P. Behind these letters lie characteristics of the imagined author, and between them, at assorted suture lines in the biblical narrative, scholars see the handiwork of anonymous redactors. J, assumed to be the oldest of the primary sources, is known for his fondness for the divine name Yahweh, and the letter J therefore represents the “Yahwist.”³ E, for his part, knows God primarily as Elohim, and thus is dubbed the “Elohist.” P, the more important character in the present context, is seen as a much later person or group with a priestly orientation. In this scheme chronological progression in the Bible story follows a different trajectory and sequence than the composition of the text itself.

As to chronology, the “classic” version, in the view of the influential Old Testament theologian Gerhard von Rad, places the material in the so-called J source at approximately 950 BCE, the E source one or two centuries later, while P is relegated to the time after Israel's Babylonian exile, about 538–450 BCE.⁴ Increasingly aware of the complexity and pitfalls of this reconstructive task, however, even von Rad hedges his bets, making the precise timing of the writers less critical, “because they are in every instance only guesses and, above all, because they refer only to the completed literary composition. The question of the

age of a single tradition within any one of the source documents is an entirely different matter. The youngest document (P), for example, contains an abundance of ancient and very ancient material.”⁵

P is important in the present context because the first mention of the seventh day is frequently attributed to the P source. Then again, P is not all that important, partly because P is no more than a scholarly construction and partly because, even where P is recognized, it is admitted that the alleged P contribution “contains an abundance of ancient and very ancient material.”⁶ On this logic it is the antiquity of the material, not the role or the time of the mysterious P, that counts.

Other developments tend to lessen further the relevance of these fixtures of Old Testament criticism. A sense of weariness, even futility, has been felt in circles occupied by the pursuit of dating the various parts of the Old Testament. The once neat theory has been shaken by realities that not only affect minor details but many of the underlying assumptions as well. Textual elements once said to belong to one source or period are suddenly found embedded in the wrong layer to the extent that the paradigm threatens to unravel. Such instances have led a few scholars to question the basis for the old theory because the existing scholarly maps are in conflict with the actual textual terrain. Instead of the tendency to see the books of the Bible as a composite of textual fragments welded together into a disparate and incoherent whole, the trend is now to see its unity, or, at the very least, there is a renewed appreciation for the indicators of unity.⁷

In the field of biblical studies the source criticism of the Old Testament, largely a Protestant enterprise, seems to have run its course nearly to exhaustion, doomed equally by a flawed premise and by the fact that it left its proponents with very little to say. Alternative approaches seek to let Scripture speak again in its own voice. Projects useful for the present inquiry are literary approaches that are more attentive to Scriptural narrative,⁸ and approaches that treat the Bible as more than a human phenomenon, broadly known as a “canonical” reading of Scripture.⁹