

MAKING
SENSE
of
CREATION
AND FALL

*How Themes in Genesis 1–3
Help Us Understand the Bible,
God, and Ourselves*

VERN S. POYTHRESS


P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

Titles by Vern S. Poythress from P&R Publishing

God-Centered Biblical Interpretation
Inerrancy and the Gospels
Knowing and the Trinity
Making Sense of Man
Making Sense of the World
The Mystery of the Trinity
The Returning King
The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses
Theophany
Understanding Dispensationalists
What Are Spiritual Gifts?

© 2026 by Vern S. Poythress

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865-0817.

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Figure 27.1, "Ten Attributes as Facets," CC BY-SA 4.0 by T. P. Yates (modified), <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

Printed in India

ISBN: 979-8-88779-270-5 (hdbk)

ISBN: 979-8-88779-271-2 (ePub)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Poythress, Vern S. author

Title: Making sense of creation and fall : how themes in Genesis 1-3 help us understand the Bible, God, and ourselves / Vern S. Poythress.

Description: Phillipsburg, New Jersey : P&R Publishing Company, [2026] |

Series: Making sense | Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Summary: "Setting aside disputes over creation, Vern Poythress unpacks the theological meaning of God's acts of creation and his existing creation order. Learn to see the transcendent meaning in the material world"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2025042952 | ISBN 9798887792705 hardcover | ISBN 9798887792712 epub

Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Genesis, I-III--Theology | Bible. Genesis, I-III--Commentaries | Creation--Biblical teaching | Fall of man

Classification: LCC BS1235.53 .P695 2026

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025042952>

To my wife, Diane

CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	xi
Foreword by R. Albert Mohler Jr.	xiii
Preface	xix

Part 1: Introducing Biblical-Theological Themes

Introduction: Studying Themes of Genesis 1–3	3
1. Genesis 1–3 and Theology	9
2. Basic Principles for Interpreting Genesis 1–3	15

Part 2: Genesis 1:1–2:3: Creation of the Cosmos

3. Creation Out of Nothing (Gen. 1:1): The Theme of Creation	25
4. The Unformed Earth (Gen. 1:2): The Theme of Emptiness and Desolation	41
5. Day One: The Light (Gen. 1:3–5): The Themes of Light and God’s Speaking	61
6. Day Two: Separating the Waters (Gen. 1:6–8): The Theme of Separation	79
7. Day Three: Dry Land and Plants (Gen. 1:9–13): The Theme of Living Things	85
8. Day Four: Heavenly Lights (Gen. 1:14–19): The Theme of Ordered Time	91
9. Day Five: Sea Creatures and Flying Creatures (Gen. 1:20–23): The Theme of Multiplication	101

10. Day Six (Part 1): Land Animals (Gen. 1:24–25): The Theme of Kinds	109
11. Day Six (Part 2): Humanity (Gen. 1:26–31): The Theme of Image and the Cultural Mandate	115
12. Day Seven: God's Rest (Gen. 2:1–3): The Theme of Work and Rest	123

Part 3: Genesis 2:4–25: Focus on Man

13. Introduction to Generations (Gen. 2:4): The Theme of Generations and Productiveness	129
14. The Situation Before Man (Gen. 2:5–6): The Theme of Water	135
15. God Creates Adam from Dust (Gen. 2:7): The Theme of Human Life	141
16. The Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:8–9): The Theme of Garden Paradise	151
17. The Four Rivers (Gen. 2:10–14): The Theme of Abundant Water	159
18. The Task of Man (Gen. 2:15–17): The Theme of Human Stewardship	163
19. Naming the Animals (Gen. 2:18–20): The Theme of Naming	173
20. The Creation of Woman (Gen. 2:21–25): The Theme of Sexuality and Marriage	181

Part 4: Genesis 3:1–24: Focus on the Fall

21. Temptation and Fall (Gen. 3:1–7): The Theme of Sin	189
22. God's Interrogation (Gen. 3:8–13): The Theme of Guilt and Exposure	195
23. God's Judgment (Gen. 3:14–19): The Themes of Punishment and Grace	199
24. Immediate Aftermath of the Fall (Gen. 3:20–24): The Themes of Life, Hope, and Banishment	207

Part 5: Further Themes, Applying to All of Genesis 1–3

25. The Triad for Lordship, Applied to Genesis 1–3	217
26. The Trinity, Applied to Genesis 1–3	233
27. The Law of Christ (<i>Lex Christi</i>)	265
Conclusion	297
Glossary	303
Bibliography	315
Index of Scripture	319
Index of Subjects and Names	329

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figures

1.1. God as Archetype for Light	13
5.1. God's Work as Trinitarian	73
11.1. Human Action Imitating Divine Action	120
19.1. The Three Offices: Prophet, King, and Priest	175
19.2. From Lordship to Three Offices	177
25.1. John Frame's Triad for Lordship	218
26.1. Three Perspectives on God's Speaking	239
26.2. From the Trinity to Frame's Triad for Lordship	243
26.3. From the Trinity to the Triad for Action	247
26.4. Frame's Three Perspectives on Ethics	259
26.5. From Divine Action to the Triad for Ethics	260
27.1. Ten Attributes as Facets	267

Tables

5.1. God's Work as Trinitarian	74
11.1. Human Action Imitating Divine Action	121
20.1. Analogies Between Adam's Marriage and Christ's	183
25.1. Three Perspectives on Lordship	219
26.1. Three Perspectives on God's Speaking	238
26.2. From Trinity to Lordship	244
26.3. From the Trinity to the Triad for Action	246
26.4. From Divine Action to the Triad for Ethics	259
26.5. Satan's Counterfeits to God	261
27.1. Commandments Display God's Attributes	266
27.2. Ten Perspectives on Human Imitation of God	272
27.3. Human Beings Imitating God at a Creaturely Level	273

FOREWORD

Every worldview eventually tells a story, but the biblical worldview *begins* with a story. The first words of the Bible set the stage for everything that follows: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). This is where the story of the Bible begins, and it is necessary to the entire story that follows. Christianity stands or falls on certain essential truth claims, and the perfect truthfulness and eternal authority of the Word of God both reveal and establish those truth claims. Every truth revealed in Holy Scripture after the opening chapters of the book of Genesis is accountable to and intelligible through the lens of those opening chapters, specifically Genesis 1–3.

In this new book, Vern Poythress offers a distinctly theological consideration of those three chapters of the Bible. At the same time, it is a display of biblical theology, exegesis, and pastoral application. He rightly begins with a study of “the earliest events in the history of the world.” As he explains, “Those events lay the foundation for everything that comes afterward—the whole rest of history, including not only the coming of Christ on earth, but his second coming and the coming of the new heaven and the new earth.”¹

Thus, the importance of this work is underlined by the specific task and scope that the author has outlined. We must start our consideration of history here. We must commence our understanding of the universe here. We must learn the meaning of life here, right down to the meaning

1. Poythress, *Making Sense of Creation and Fall*, 4.

of time and the purpose of life. We must establish our understanding of human dignity here, in these opening chapters of Genesis. We find the origin of marriage, the meaning of male and female, the goodness of life, the mandate of human reproduction, and the duality of labor and rest, right here. The view of these things that we derive from Genesis 1–3 determines our understanding of everything else, including both the meaning of the cosmos and the truth of our own lives. Furthermore, as Dr. Poythress affirms from the start, every word points ultimately to Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Author and Finisher of our faith—the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.

In his 1890 presentation of the inaugural Kerr Lectures at the University of Glasgow, James Orr asserted as his “fundamental assumption” that “the central point in the Christian view of God and the world is the acknowledgment of Jesus Christ as a truly divine person—the Son of God made flesh.”² Orr went on to confess, “I do not conceal from myself that the issues involved are very stupendous.”³

The issues involved are stupendous indeed—even *very* stupendous, as Orr suggested. So how do they relate to this book and its purpose? Early in the volume, Dr. Poythress states this: “Appreciating what Christ has done for us includes appreciating the themes that relate his work backward to the creation of the world and the fall into sin.”⁴

That sentence is crucial for our understanding of Genesis and for understanding this new book. Christians rightly learn to think Christologically, with every thought brought captive to Christ. At the same time, even as believers learn to read the Bible forward, from creation to the fall, from the fall to redemption, and from redemption to new creation, we also have to learn how to read the Scriptures *backward*, aiming for a genuinely Christian and Christ-centered knowledge of all things, all the way back to the opening texts of Genesis. We must learn to be as faithful in reading the Bible backward as we are faithful in reading the Bible forward.

Why must this point be stressed? For far too many Christians, the

2. James Orr, *A Christian View of God and the World* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), 42.

3. Orr, *Christian View of God and the World*, 42.

4. Poythress, *Making Sense of Creation and Fall*, 4.

entire Old Testament is a puzzle. Most believers know that Jesus was foreseen and foretold by the prophets, but fewer have any notion of how to read Genesis through Christian eyes. If nothing else, this underlines the peril of a church starving for biblical theology and wandering in a textual wilderness. In this volume, we are guided through the first three chapters of Genesis and taken through an introduction to biblical theology. Truths are connected, history is revealed, and pastoral applications are made.

We must also recognize that everything covered in this book is contested—as the entirety of the Christian faith is now contested. As Dr. Poythress concisely observes, “What the Bible says about creation is radically different from modern secularism.”⁵ That clarification is fundamental to any Christian consideration in these times. Modern philosophical materialism is indeed the dominant worldview in the academy and, in both more and less sophisticated forms, throughout much of the rest of modern society. The materialist worldview is dominant among the intellectual classes and is taken as absolute and unquestionable.

This materialist commitment explains the pervasive confusion in the public mind over issues ranging from abortion to climate change and an entire constellation of other public controversies that reveal the deep antagonism between the Christian worldview and modern secularism. In one short sentence, Dr. Poythress states the truth: “God created everything.”⁶ At the same time, everything has a significance beyond itself. Readers should look for considerations of what Dr. Poythress calls the “multidimensional” meaning of all creation—including the lilies of the field and the trees. Of the latter, he writes: “By bearing the curse for us on a tree, Christ became the source of eternal life for all those who are united to him. He is thus the fulfillment of the tree of life.”⁷

The modern secularist worldview seeks to learn few lessons from the cosmos and its history. In his massive television series *Cosmos*, released to much acclaim a generation ago, astronomer Carl Sagan concluded that the only lessons taught by the entire cosmological reality are that humans

5. Poythress, *Making Sense of Creation and Fall*, 11.

6. Poythress, *Making Sense of Creation and Fall*, 11.

7. Poythress, *Making Sense of Creation and Fall*, 156.

are very small accidents and that the environment is worth preserving. His worldview—very representative of the scientific community both then and now—attempted to frame some dignity for human beings but failed. The smallness of our individual and corporate lives set against the vastness of the cosmos supposedly told us that as a species, we are just a blip on the evolutionary timetable, or what another scientist described as a “fortuitous accident.”

Professor Poythress is committed to a very different way of understanding the cosmos and everything in it, and to a very different way of understanding humanity, both before and after the fall. Those who have studied under Dr. Poythress in the classroom will recognize his argument and applications immediately, as will the many readers who have already gained so much by reading this professor’s many other published works. In his own unique manner, he walks the reader through these three crucial opening chapters of the Bible with keen insight and deep faithfulness. He affirms the truthfulness of every word, the integrity of the biblical text, and the meaning of every verse. More than that, he demonstrates what he affirms, a reading of the biblical text both forward and backward, with Christ preeminent and the gospel clear.

This author also addresses sin and the fall with candor and Christian conviction. Humans cannot possibly understand our world or ourselves without an honest and bracing consideration of sin and the evil and corruption it unleashes. Dr. Poythress presents an honest and critically important understanding of the fall and its consequences. As he observes, we find in Genesis 3 “the vicious cycle that repeats itself again and again throughout history. Desire, sin, death. Desire, sin, death. Human beings are stuck in the rut created by the pattern of Adam and Eve.” And yet, remember that we are reading these chapters backward from Christ and his gospel. Thanks be to God, and to God alone be the glory.

This is the work of a mature scholar, a man trained in both science and theology, skilled in both the interpretation and application of Holy Scripture. Teaching the reader how to read Genesis backward from the gospel, Dr. Poythress explains: “Redemption does not undermine creation, which is good. Rather, it undermines sin, which is bad; sin is an intrusion

into an originally good creation. . . . Christ is not only our one Redeemer, but the one Creator—together with the Father and the Spirit, one God.”

The reader must read the whole book in order to gain the most from those words. The entire book is both edifying and doxological. So get ready to enter Dr. Poythress’s exhilarating classroom, page after page, verse after verse, and truth after truth.

R. Albert Mohler Jr., President
Centennial Professor of Theology
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

PREFACE

This volume constitutes another book in a series from P&R Publishing on “Making Sense.”

- *Making Sense of the World: How the Trinity Helps to Explain Reality*
- *Making Sense of Man: Using Biblical Perspectives to Develop a Theology of Humanity*
- *Making Sense of God: Using Biblical Perspectives to Develop the Doctrine of God*

Each book uses multiple biblically based perspectives in order to enhance our understanding of God and his purposes. Like the other volumes, this book continues to use John Frame’s triad of themes for lordship—authority, control, and presence. It also continues to use the ten perspectives of *lex Christi* (to be discussed below). What is different about this one is the focus on the specific themes that Genesis 1–3 displays. These themes illumine the meaning of the world and the meaning of Christ’s redemption.



INTRODUCING BIBLICAL- THEOLOGICAL THEMES

This book focuses on biblical-theological themes in Genesis 1–3, in order to enhance our understanding of God’s entire plan for us. This focus on *themes* complements other works that focus on the reality of the *events* in Genesis 1–3 (Genesis 1–3 is nonfiction) and on the use of *literary artistry* in the first chapters of Genesis.

INTRODUCTION: STUDYING THEMES OF GENESIS 1–3

This book studies theological themes in Genesis 1–3, in order to enhance our understanding of God’s entire plan for the world.

Themes

The themes in Genesis 1–3 include the theme of creation itself, the theme of God’s speaking (Gen. 1:3), the theme of light (1:3), the theme of separation (separating the light from the darkness, 1:4), the theme of God’s working (2:2–3), the theme of life, the theme of fruitfulness, the theme of the unique status of humanity (1:26–30), and other themes. Genesis 3 introduces the theme of sin. We may call these themes *biblical-theological themes*.¹ They are *biblical* themes—they receive explicit attention in the Bible itself. And they are *theological* themes, in the sense that they introduce topics that are important when Christians attempt to summarize the teaching of the Bible as a whole.

The Value of Studying Themes

Why do such a study? There is more than one reason.

First, Genesis 1–3 is a key portion within the Bible as a whole. It

1. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (repr., Wipf & Stock, 2003), uses the term *biblical theology* in a more specialized way to describe a study of the unfolding of God’s revelation over time. That is also an interest in this book.

describes the earliest events in the history of the world. Those events lay the foundation for everything that comes afterward—the whole rest of history, including not only the coming of Christ on earth, but his second coming and the coming of the new heaven and the new earth (Rev. 21:1). These events are also foundational for *you*. You have a distinct place in the entire plan of God, which unfolds from Genesis 1 onward.

Second, the themes introduced in Genesis 1–3 do not disappear in the rest of history. They appear again and again. For example, the fall into sin, as described in Genesis 3, affects the whole rest of history. It explains why sin and its effects have existed ever since. It explains why human beings repeatedly reject God's voice and follow their own self-centered desires. It explains why *you* sin. Moreover, the first sin is a fall *away* from the original created situation in Genesis 1–2. So it results in breaking and distorting what already existed. For example, God promised life in the symbolism of the tree of life (Gen. 2:9; 3:22). But now there is death (3:19). Adam and Eve are barred from the tree of life (vv. 23–24). Life does continue because of the grace of God (v. 20), but it is beset by difficulties (vv. 16–19).

The preparatory acts of redemption in the Old Testament take up the themes introduced in Genesis 1–3. The climactic acts of redemption in Christ's earthly life display the same themes. For example, Christ's speech is the speech of God, continuing the theme of God's speaking from Genesis 1:3. Christ is the Light of the World (John 8:12), continuing the theme of light introduced in Genesis 1:3. The theme that Christ accomplishes the *work* of the Father is a continuation of the theme of God's doing work in Genesis 1.

Appreciating what Christ has done for us includes appreciating the themes that relate his work backward to the creation of the world and the fall into sin. And this appreciation has practical results. We learn more about God, more about God's world, more about the depth of the redemption that Christ has accomplished for us. We learn that Christ, as the eternal Word of God (John 1:1), is Creator as well as Redeemer. So it changes our attitude toward the world around us. We learn more about what God is now working *in us* as we are progressively conformed to the image of Christ:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being *transformed into the same image* from one degree of glory to another. (2 Cor. 3:18)

For example, not only is Christ the Light of the World in the definitive sense (John 8:12), but he also tells his disciples to be the light of the world:

You [plural] are the light of the world. (Matt. 5:14)

Every disciple of Christ has to take to heart the theme of light in the Bible because it has something to say about how disciples are supposed to live. Likewise, the theme of work is relevant. The fact that God worked to structure and fill the world in Genesis 1 gives meaning to all the work that he calls people to do (Eph. 2:10; Col. 3:17, 22–25).

The Meaning of the World

Understanding the themes in Genesis 1–3 also broadens and deepens our understanding of God and his purposes. When God created the world, he gave it meanings and had purposes in mind. Ever since, the world has displayed what he is like:

The heavens *declare* the glory of God,
and the sky above *proclaims* his handiwork.
Day to day pours out speech,
and night to night *reveals* knowledge. (Ps. 19:1–2)

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been *clearly perceived*, ever since the creation of the world, in the *things that have been made*. (Rom. 1:20)

The created world displays the glory of God. It shows us who God is and what he is like—if we have eyes to see and hearts to understand. Because sin has blinded us, we need God to restore us in order to appreciate

him and his purposes. This book, then, is for people who have received forgiveness for their sins and restoration of their sight through Christ and his work. Christ healed the man born blind (John 9) and gave him spiritual sight as well as physical sight (vv. 7, 15, 38–39). One of the symbolic implications of John 9 is that Christ has to heal us to give us spiritual sight in order to see who he is, to trust in him, and then also to see how we fit into the world that God created.

God knew the end from the beginning. So from the beginning, he made a world that had things in it that would serve thematically to illustrate his salvation. For example, as already observed, God made physical light in Genesis 1:3:

And God said, “Let there be *light*,” and there was *light*.

This creational background is in place when Jesus comes into the world and proclaims that he is the Light of the World, in the context of being the *Redeemer* (John 8:12). Every time that we appreciate the physical light of the world, we can also think of how it is designed by God so that it can remind us of Jesus as our redeeming light. But there is more, because God declares in 1 John 1:5 that God himself *is* light: “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.” The physical light that God created in Genesis 1:3 displays who God *always* is. It *also* displays what he does when Jesus brings the light of salvation.

Physical light is creaturely; it is not the Creator. Genesis 1 contains a firm distinction between the Creator and the creatures. At the same time, physical light *displays* the Creator. The meaning of light includes this display. It is not “merely” light, as though the physical aspect could be detached from God’s purposes or his presence or his display of himself.

Focus on Themes, Complementing Other Kinds of Study

How does this focus on themes differ from that of other books?

Many books about the Bible consider some of its themes. This book looks at the themes in *one* main passage, namely, Genesis 1–3. Themes

in later parts of the Bible often have a background in the creation of the world and the fall into sin. This background needs to be appreciated in order to understand the later parts of the Bible more deeply.

Some books about Genesis 1–3 focus on the general teaching that God created the world and that Adam and Eve subsequently rebelled. As we have already observed, those teachings are vastly important as the background for the historical development in the rest of the Bible. But this book primarily explores the more detailed themes that occur, passage by passage, in the first three chapters of Genesis.

So let us turn to Genesis 1–3.

Key Terms

attribute	light
biblical-theological theme	redemption
creation	sin
fall	theme
Genesis	theology
history	Word
life	

Study Questions

1. What are some themes in Genesis 1–3, and why are they important in understanding the Bible?
2. What theological connections are there between Genesis 1–3 and the Bible's story of redemption?
3. How does our knowledge of God affect thinking about modern science?

For Further Reading

Poythress, Vern S. *Interpreting Eden: A Guide to Faithfully Reading and Understanding Genesis 1–3*. Crossway, 2019. Chaps. 1–4, 6.

Poythress, Vern S. *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach*. Crossway, 2006. Chap. 3.

Prayer

Thank you, our God, for giving us Genesis. Please help us to understand in depth how it fits in with your purposes for the whole world and for all of history. Enable us to live in the light of your instruction.

1

GENESIS 1–3 AND THEOLOGY

Consider the relation of Genesis 1–3 to theology as a whole. Genesis 1–3 is important theologically because it lays the foundation for the whole rest of history found in the Bible.

Creation and Later Works of God

In particular, God and his work of creation are the background for his later works of *providence* and of *redemption*. Creation is a distinct work of God, described in Genesis 1–2. It is not the same as providence or redemption. *Providence* is God’s continual governing of the world, day by day. *Redemption* is God’s distinct work in rescuing his people from their condition of sin and rebellion against him. Both are *later* works of God, in distinction from his initial work described in Genesis 1–2.

But there are numerous thematic connections between creation and the later works of God. For example, God created the plants on the third day of the creation week (Gen. 1:11–13). He continues to sustain the plants every day. On the third day God set in place a general pattern, that the plants *reproduce* according to their kinds (vv. 11–12). This reproduction, which continues today, occurs through God’s providential control. So providence continues patterns that God set in place in creation. It is worthwhile to take a careful look at the numerous relations between creation and providence.

Appreciating creation is of practical value in Christian living because every day we enjoy the benefits of a completed creation order that

surrounds us. The example of plants is illustrative. We all enjoy the benefits of food deriving from plants:

Yet he [God] did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and *fruitful seasons*, satisfying your hearts with *food* and gladness. (Acts 14:17)

Light is another illustration of God's bounty. We enjoy the benefits of light. We can see what is around us.

This created order includes not only what is around us but what is *in* us—because we are creatures. We are morally responsible to God, with a sense of conscience. When we are redeemed, we also have a distinct task given by God. When Jesus says, “You are the light of the world” (Matt. 5:14), he comments on *us*, and on our role. It is helpful to appreciate more deeply the meaning of God's gifts to us as Genesis 1 describes them.

Philosophical Materialism and Secularism

The appreciation of biblical-theological themes in Genesis 1–3 contrasts with much of the thinking in modern Western cultures. In particular, *philosophical materialism* influences the Western world. What is philosophical materialism? It is a philosophy that says that the world consists in matter, and nothing more. More cautious versions of philosophical materialism might say that the world's most basic constituent is matter. These cautious versions can then allow that complex combinations of matter may sometimes lead to additional structures with some surprising properties. A human body is one instance of a complex structure. But philosophical materialism claims that in the end, the complex structures—including all of human thinking and moral evaluations—arise wholly from matter. There is no divine spark. God is banished from the world.

Philosophical materialism claims natural science for its support. But that claim involves confusion. Natural sciences study various aspects of the material world. The human decision by a scientist to *focus* on matter can never demonstrate that matter is the only dimension of the world

that really counts. Moreover, the human decisions to study the material aspect of the world have no meaning if the decisions are not real. And they cannot be real if human decisions themselves are not real because, allegedly, they are reduced to the chemistry of firing neurons.

Philosophical materialism has an influence far broader than its core. The West as a whole is in “a secular age,” to use Charles Taylor’s expression.¹ People grow up to think of the world about them as a world where God is absent and where there is no transcendence. They suppress the testimony of created things to their Creator (Rom. 1:18–23). This approach is *secularism*.

What the Bible says about creation is radically different from modern secularism. God created everything. Created things on earth have a material aspect, as one aspect. But he also created *us*, human beings, to have all the rich potentials and personalities that belong to us. Human beings are social, intellectual, political, and religious creatures, not simply collections of molecules. Even the lilies of the field are full of multidimensional meanings because God has purposes for them:

And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider *the lilies of the field*, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not *arrayed like one of these*. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (Matt. 6:28–33)

Not least of these purposes is to display his glory to human beings, and to angelic creatures as well:

1. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2018).

The heavens *declare* the *glory of God*,
and the sky above *proclaims* his handiwork.
Day to day pours out speech,
and night to night reveals knowledge. (Ps. 19:1–2)

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been *clearly perceived*, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. (Rom. 1:20)

Consider again the example of light. God created physical light (Gen. 1:3–4). He created light in such a way that it has built into it features enabling it to symbolize good versus evil. By contrast, darkness symbolizes evil:

And this is the judgment: the *light* has come into the world, and people loved the *darkness* rather than the *light* because their works were *evil*. For everyone who does wicked things hates the *light* and does not come to the *light*, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the *light*, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God. (John 3:19–21)

Light can also symbolize guidance, rather than confusion:

Your word is a *lamp* to my feet
and a *light* to my *path*. (Ps. 119:105)

Such meanings are derived from God. They are not “merely” human inventions (though we who are human may have more or less sensitivity to them).

It is important for Christians and non-Christians alike to wake up to the rich meanings of the world. The world contains atoms in motion; it contains a physical dimension. But the world is *more* than atoms in motion. Light is *more* than electromagnetic radiation as described by physics. It is also a created display and reflection of God, who is the original light:

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that *God is light*, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the *light*, as he is in the *light*, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. (1 John 1:5–7)

In other words, God is the *archetype* with respect to light. An archetype is an original, a pattern that serves as a model for derivative instances or images, which may be called *ectypes*. God is the archetypal light, while physical light is ectypal light. (See fig. 1.1.)

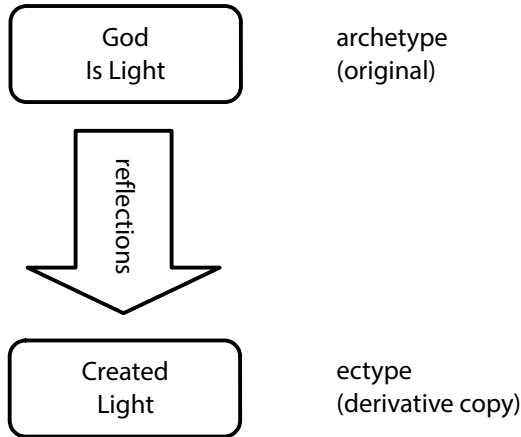


Fig. 1.1. God as Archetype for Light

So created light has more dimensions of meaning than what physical analysis inspects. The description in physics is not wrong. In fact, it is beautiful, reflecting the beauty and harmony of God.² But the physical analysis explores only *one* dimension, *one* aspect out of many aspects of God's meaning. We who are human beings are meant to appreciate and

2. Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Crossway, 2006), chaps. 20–21.

enjoy the world and praise God for all its aspects, not just those on which natural sciences focus. We are supposed to see that the light of the sky is beautiful, and it illuminates the beauties of trees and flowers and butterflies. It reflects the beauty of God himself (Ps. 27:4).

Key Terms

archetype	philosophical materialism
biblical-theological theme	providence
creation	redemption
ectype	science
Genesis	secularism
history	theology
light	

Study Questions

1. What is philosophical materialism, and in what way is it destructive?
2. What difference does it make in our attitude toward the meaning of the world to know that God made it?
3. How does a full-orbed attention to God's purposes help to complement the focus of modern scientific analyses of the world?

For Further Reading

Poythress, Vern S. *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach*. Crossway, 2006. Chap. 3.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord of lords and King of kings, for ruling history with wisdom and artistry, and for providing us with your instruction in a way that reveals you as well as your purposes for time and history. Enable us to live in the light of your instruction in Genesis.