

# The Genesis Creation Account in Its Ancient Context

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The Old Testament begins with the famous words “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). There is, in the Bible as it stands, no prelude to or explanation of this text, so this section immediately invites question and interpretation. Indeed, the famous Jewish biblical interpreter Rashi said, “This verse says nothing other than, ‘Interpret me!’”<sup>1</sup> Example questions that immediately arise include “Who is God?” “In the beginning of what?” and “What does it mean to create?” Further, the question of how creation informs our relationship with God and each other has underscored Jewish and Christian cosmologies for centuries, including the cosmology of Latter-day Saints.<sup>2</sup>

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not committed to a specific literal reading of much in the Genesis Creation accounts.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Rashi, on Genesis 1:1 (author’s translation). There is an accessible Jewish Bible with English translations of the various medieval Jewish commentators in *The Commentators’ Bible: Genesis: The Rubin JPS Miqra’ot Gedolot*, ed. Michael Carasik (Jewish Publication Society, 2018). The citation from Rashi is on p. 3.

2. The first few chapters of Genesis have been the subject of myriads of studies and commentaries. Some that the present author found useful were the following: Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion, (Augsburg Publishing House, 1984); E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Doubleday, 1964); Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part I from Adam to Noah*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Magnes Press, 1961); Ronald S. Hendel, *The Text of Genesis 1–11: Textual Studies and Critical Edition* (Oxford University Press, 1998); and Thomas Krüger, “Genesis 1:1–2:3 and the Development of the Pentateuch,” in *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research*, ed. Thomas B. Dozeman, Konrad Shmid, and Baruch J. Schwartz (Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 125–38.

3. Although not quite as many as in the sphere of general biblical scholarship, there are numerous Latter-day Saint studies on Genesis as well. See Kevin L. Barney,

For example, in discussing the description of Eve's creation from the rib, President Spencer W. Kimball succinctly observed, "The story of the rib, of course, is figurative."<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, Elder Russell M. Nelson stated that "whether termed a *day*, a *time*, or an *age*, each phase was a period between two identifiable events—a division of eternity."<sup>5</sup> These observations create space for understanding the Creation accounts in Genesis in a variety of ways, whether figuratively as President Kimball did or indefinitely as Elder Nelson did.<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to explore the ancient context and cosmological worldview of the Creation account as presented in Genesis 1 and 2 as well as what that means for Latter-day Saints. It is also worth noting what this paper is *not* doing. This paper does not attempt a reconciliation between modern science and the Creation account in the biblical book of Genesis.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in this chapter, I take as a base assumption Nephi's statement that God speaks to people "according to

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"Examining Six Key Concepts in Joseph Smith's Understanding of Genesis 1:1," *BYU Studies* 39, no. 3 (2000): 107–24; Daniel L. Belnap, "The Law of Moses: An Overview," in *New Testament History, Culture, and Society: A Background to the Texts of the New Testament*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2019), 19–34; Daniel L. Belnap, "In the Beginning: Genesis 1–3 and Its Significance to the Latter-day Saints," in *From Creation to Sinai: The Old Testament through the Lens of the Restoration*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap and Aaron P. Schade (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2021), 1–42; and David Rolph Seely, "'We Believe the Bible as Far as It Is Translated Correctly': Latter-day Saints and Historical Biblical Criticism," in *Tracing Ancient Threads in the Book of Moses: Inspired Origins, Temple Contexts, and Literary Qualities*, ed. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and others (Interpreter Foundation, 2021), 137–62.

4. Spencer W. Kimball, "The Blessings and Responsibilities of Womanhood," *Ensign*, March 1976, 71.

5. Russell M. Nelson, "The Creation," *Ensign*, May 2000, 85, emphasis in original. Elder Nelson cited the textual difference in the book of Abraham as part of the rationale for this statement.

6. Philip L. Barlow describes this Latter-day Saint reading tendency as "selective literalism." See Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (Oxford University Press, 1991), 33–35.

7. Others have attempted to make this connection, and the interested reader is directed in that direction. For a few Latter-day Saint examples, see R. Grant Athay, "And God Said, Let There Be Lights in the Firmament of Heaven," *BYU Studies* 30, no. 4 (1990): 39–53; Hollis R. Johnson, "Worlds Come and Pass Away: Evolution of Stars and Planets in the Pearl of Great Price?," *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 46–64; and Michael D. Rhodes, "The Scriptural Accounts of the Creation: A Scientific Perspective," in *Converging Paths to Truth: The Summerhays Lectures on Science and Religion*, ed. Michael D. Rhodes and J. Ward Moody (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2011), 123–49.

their language, unto their understanding” (2 Ne. 31:3). The authors and editors of Genesis were not twenty-first-century scientists, and we do them and ourselves a disservice if we expect twenty-first-century science from them.<sup>8</sup> In the dedication of the Life Sciences Building at BYU, President Russell M. Nelson stated, “There is no conflict between science and religion. Conflict only arises from an incomplete knowledge of either science or religion, or both.”<sup>9</sup> Understanding what Genesis is and is not doing gives us a more complete knowledge of the scriptural perspective by showing its ancient perspective. This can then help us to reduce potential conflict in reading the scriptures by giving us a more complete knowledge of religion.

## Moses and Authorship

In order to understand the ancient context of Genesis, it is important to consider who wrote it. Numerous Restoration scriptures, including the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible (JST), assume the existence of Moses as a historical figure associated with a law given by God.<sup>10</sup> However, Moses can be a historical prophet, and the books in the Bible records can be of God’s doing, without Moses specifically having written those books as we now have them. Moreover, Restoration scriptures do not claim that Moses wrote every word in the “five books of Moses,” nor do the books themselves.<sup>11</sup> In fact, they make no claims about authorship at all and are all written in the third person,

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8. T. Benjamin Spackman has been speaking and writing on this topic for long time. See his FairMormon presentations “Truth, Scripture, and Interpretation: Some Precursors for Reading Genesis,” <https://www.fairmormon.org/conference/august-2017/truth-scripture-and-interpretation>; and “A Paradoxical Preservation of Faith: LDS Creation Accounts and the Composite Nature of Revelation,” <https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/conference/august-2019/a-paradoxical-preservation-of-faith>. Spackman is particularly good at articulating how our expectations feed into our readings of Genesis.

9. Marianne Holman Prescott, “Church Leaders Gather at BYU’s Life Sciences Building for Dedication,” Church News, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, April 17, 2015, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/church-leaders-gather-at-byus-life-sciences-building-for-dedication>.

10. See, for example, 1 Nephi 4:2; 17:24–29; 2 Nephi 3:9–10; 25:20–24; Mosiah 13:5.

11. Belnap, “The Law of Moses,” 20. For some thoughts on the organization and composition of the law of Moses on the brass plates, see Avram R. Shannon, “The Documentary Hypothesis and the Book of Mormon,” in *They Shall Grow Together: The Bible in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Charles Swift and Nicholas J. Frederick (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2022), 249–76. Although the Church’s Bible Dictionary entry for “Pentateuch,” 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/bd/pentateuch>, suggests that Moses was the principal author of the

suggesting that the record that we have is from someone else speaking about Moses.<sup>12</sup>

This is true even of the inspired changes made by Joseph Smith as part of his New Translation. Because the Creation accounts in Moses 2–3 are framed as direct discourse between the Lord and Moses, Latter-day Saints have occasionally assumed that the JST supports notions of Mosaic authorship.<sup>13</sup> But a close examination of the Book of Moses, especially the prefatory vision published as Moses 1, shows that this is not the case (see the revelatory aside to Joseph Smith in Moses 1:42). Like the Book of Mormon, Genesis is an ancient record that draws on previous sources to produce an inspired record. The JST supports the theory that the Creation accounts are based on revelations given to Moses, but it also informs us that this is a third-person retelling of Moses's interaction with the Lord, rather than a first-person account of his experience. We see similar things happening with Mormon in the Book of Mormon and with certain sections of the Doctrine and Covenants.<sup>14</sup>

Although Latter-day Saints affirm the inspired nature of Genesis, it should not be troubling for Latter-day Saints to think of our scriptural books as revisions of various edited and redacted sources.<sup>15</sup> This process

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Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), it also suggests that he used sources and that the books were edited by later authors.

12. This is not to say that the scriptures claim that Moses did no writing. In fact, Moses 1:40 explicitly states Moses does write. It does not claim, however, that we have that writing, and Moses 1:41 implies that we do not have that writing.

13. Kent P. Jackson, *The Restored Gospel and the Book of Genesis* (Deseret Book, 2001), 55–65.

14. For the Book of Mormon, see Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 121–51. See also Hardy's earlier "Mormon as Editor," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1991), 15–28. For the Doctrine and Covenants, see Ryan J. Wessel, "The Textual Context of Doctrine and Covenants 121–23," *Religious Educator* 13, no. 1 (2012): 103–15. See the discussion on redaction in the scriptures in Avram R. Shannon, "The Bible Before and After: Interpretation and Translation in Antiquity and the Book of Moses," in Bradshaw and others, *Tracing Ancient Threads*, 257–92, discussion on 263.

15. For a Latter-day Saint discussion of the law of Moses, with a discussion of sources and redaction, see Belnap, "The Law of Moses." See also the historical overview in Shannon, "Bible Before and After," 261–63. A popular explanation of what is called the Documentary Hypothesis is available in Richard Elliot Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (Harper San Francisco, 1997). The first Creation is associated with the Priestly Source, while the second is associated with the Yahwistic Source. For a recent discussion of the composition of Genesis 1 and 2 from a scholarly perspective, see David M. Carr, *The Formation of Genesis 1–11: Biblical and Other Precursors* (Oxford University Press, 2020). On

of combining and updating the scriptures is an important part of how the scriptures remain relevant for the Lord's people in every dispensation.<sup>16</sup> As we read the Book of Mormon, we see that Mormon's project was one of editing and compiling but also that Mormon felt comfortable including his interpretive glosses (see Alma 24:27). The Book of Mormon is explicit that the book of Alma in its present form was composed by Mormon from authentic material deriving from Alma. In a similar fashion, the five books of Moses, including Genesis, seem to have been composed and compiled from authentic material deriving from Moses and other earlier prophetic sources.<sup>17</sup> All of this suggests that Latter-day Saints can take a strong stand on the inspired nature of the material in Genesis while still allowing for complexities in how it came together.

## The Work of the Editor

The use of sources by the inspired editor of Genesis suggests that there is not a unified Creation account in Genesis. As scholars have studied Genesis, they have identified two Creation accounts woven together by a later editor or redactor.<sup>18</sup> The first Creation account runs from Genesis 1:1 through 2:3. The second begins at 2:4. The two Creation accounts differ in several particulars. In the first Creation account, males and females are created at the same time (Gen. 1:26–27), while in the second account, the female is created after and from the male (Gen. 2:18–22). The splitting up of the Creation into days is a characteristic of the first Creation account, while the creation of the Garden of Eden is a characteristic of the second account.

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the other side, David Fried has recently argued that Genesis 1 and 2 are integrally related to one another. See David Fried, “The Image of God and the Literary Interdependence of Genesis 1 and Genesis 2–3,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (2019): 211–16.

16. The process of ongoing revelation is a vital part of how Latter-day Saints understand their religion and their relationship with Jesus Christ. This is evident in Joseph Smith's Articles of Faith 1:9. See the discussion in Richard Lyman Bushman with Jed Woodworth, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 172–76. See also Shannon, “Bible Before and After,” 266–74.

17. It is perhaps worth noting that we do not have evidence for Hebrew as a language until centuries after Moses. This means that Moses could not have written Genesis in its present form, since Genesis is written in Hebrew and Moses did not speak Hebrew. See Angel Sáenz-Badillo, *A History of the Hebrew Language*, trans. John Elwolde (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 53–56, 64–65.

18. See Bradford A. Anderson, *An Introduction to the Study of the Pentateuch* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 78–79. Because Latter-day Saints “believe the Bible to be the word of God” (A of F 1:8), this implies that we believe this editor or redactor to be inspired. See Seely, “We Believe the Bible,” 141–43.

It is also worth remembering that the authors and editors of Genesis were not writing for a future audience the way Mormon was. The immediate addressees of the Creation accounts were not modern Latter-day Saints; they were ancient Israelites, and the Creation accounts in Genesis contain cosmological and scientific perspectives that are derived from that audience's worldview. Although it can be valuable to read the Creation accounts as metaphorical and figurative (we will see clear examples of this, even anciently), they also had scientific value in the ancient world. The ancient Israelites simply had a different understanding of science than we do today. It appears the Lord was comfortable with that—as noted above, this is part of what Nephi seems to be referring to when he talks about God speaking to people “according to their language, unto their understanding” (2 Ne. 31:3). This statement can include cosmological and scientific understandings.<sup>19</sup>

## Cosmology in Genesis 1

The difference between ancient and modern understandings comes out even in translation. The King James translation of Genesis 1:1 is, in many ways, a reflection of how the seventeenth-century European cosmological perspective differed from that of the ancient Israelite-Judahite authors and editors of Genesis.<sup>20</sup> As it stands in the English of the KJV, “In the beginning” reflects a notion that this was where everything started, and there was nothing before.<sup>21</sup> This is not the Latter-day Saint position, and it is not really the position of the book of Genesis.

In fact, the Hebrew here, *bereshit*, lacks the definite article and would be better translated as “in a beginning.”<sup>22</sup> This certainly fits

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19. See Doctrine and Covenants 1:24, where the Lord tells the Saints that he gave the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants to “[his] servants in their weakness.” The Lord acknowledges that we are not able to comprehend everything he is trying to tell us.

20. There is a useful discussion of the cosmological worldview of the ancient Israelites in Luis I. J. Stadelmann, *The Hebrew Conception of the World: A Philological and Literary Study* (Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1970). See also Louis Jacobs, “Jewish Cosmology,” in *Ancient Cosmologies*, ed. Carmen Blacker and Michael Loewe (George Allen and Unwin, 1975), 66–86. Although it is focused on the New Testament, Lincoln H. Blumell and Jan J. Martin’s article on the history and character of the KJV is instructive. See Lincoln H. Blumell and Jan J. Martin, “The King James Translation and the New Testament,” in *New Testament History, Culture, and Society*, 672–90.

21. For a discussion of the difficulties in translating Genesis 1:1, see Krüger, “Genesis 1:1–2:3,” 128–29. See also Barney, “Examining Six Key Concepts.”

22. To say “In the beginning,” it would need to read *bareshit*. There is some evidence of this reading in Origen’s Hexapla, but that is not how the Masoretes (the school of

Latter-day Saint understandings better. However, a closer examination of the Hebrew shows that even this does not quite explain what is happening grammatically.<sup>23</sup> *Bereshit* is best understood as a temporal adjunct explaining the situation that arises when God creates the earth. The New Jewish Publication Society (NJPS) translation of Genesis 1 provides a translation that reflects this grammatical reading: “When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void” (Gen. 1:1–2a). Note here how this translation turns the term not into an absolute statement about beginnings but rather into a statement about the state of the earth when Creation begins.<sup>24</sup>

The NJPS translation of Genesis 1:1 retains the very theological-sounding word “heaven.” Although this is fine, it does not really reflect the nuance of the Hebrew. “Heaven” is one possibility for the Hebrew word *shamayim*, which has “sky” as its core meaning.<sup>25</sup> Many languages do not differentiate between “sky” as a descriptive noun and “heaven” as a theological or cosmological concept.<sup>26</sup> Hebrew is no different. As far as Genesis is concerned, what is being created here is not the heavens in the specific sense of the grand cosmological worldview but the visible sky, which is understood as being in some sense where God will dwell, but he clearly does not at this point because the sky has not yet been created. There is a similar process going on with the Hebrew word *eretz*, which does mean “earth,” but usually in the sense of land or ground<sup>27</sup> rather than in the sense of the entire planet (in part because, as we will see, the ancient Israelites did not view the world as a globe). Thus,

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copyists who preserved the traditional reading of the Hebrew text) understood the Hebrew of Genesis 1:1. In the Middle Ages, Jewish scholar and exegete Rashi discussed the grammatical difficulties with this word, concluding that water must have already existed when the earth was created. See Rashi, on Genesis 1:1, in Carasik, *Commentators' Bible*, 4–5.

23. Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 19–20.

24. Barney, “Examining Six Key Concepts,” 110–12.

25. Stadelmann, *Hebrew Conception*, 37–39.

26. See, for example, *ciel* in French or *Himmel* in German.

27. Biblical scholar Scott B. Noegel has argued from Mesopotamian parallels that it means “underworld” in this context. Scott B. Noegel, “God of Heaven and Sheol: The ‘Unearthing’ of Creation,” *Hebrew Studies* 58 (2017): 119–44. Noegel is correct in his observation that there are numerous places in both the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and cognate literature where *eretz* means “underworld.” He himself notes that the ordinary meaning of the word is “earth, land” (120). It does not materially affect the argument of this paper, however, which is that the ancient conception of Creation involves the organization of something that is already in place.

I would translate Genesis 1:1–2a as, “When God began to create sky and land, the land being empty and desolate.”<sup>28</sup>

Creation in Genesis is not framed around the idea of creation out of nothing but is based on the organization of material that is already extant. The word “create” is translated from the Hebrew *bara*, a word that means something like “organize” rather than active creation out of nothing.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the original Genesis 1 presumes that there is already something there when God begins his creative activity: “empty and desolate” land.

Genesis 1:2 (NJPS) goes on, “With darkness over the surface of the deep, and a wind from God sweeping over the water.” The KJV here has “And darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” There is here a key difference between “wind from God” and “the Spirit of God.” Once again, the difference lies in the translation. In Hebrew, the word for “spirit” and the word for “wind” are the same.<sup>30</sup> This makes it very difficult (if not impossible) to differentiate between the theological and the natural meaning of this word.<sup>31</sup>

The different cosmological perspective of Genesis is made very clear by the discussion of the “firmament.”<sup>32</sup> This unusual English is translated from an unusual Hebrew word: *raqia*. This word comes from a Hebrew root that means “to beat out,” as in beating out a metal plate.<sup>33</sup> This is how Genesis understands the sky—a flat surface that separates

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28. “Empty and desolate” translates *tohu vevohu*, which KJV has as “without form and void.” For the meaning and translation of this, see Speiser, *Genesis*, 5n2; David Toshio Tsumura, *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2: A Linguistic Investigation* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 41–43; and Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 21–23.

29. This verb was the subject to a specific exegesis by Joseph Smith in his famous King Follett discourse. See Barney, “Examining Six Key Concepts” 108–9. Barney correctly points out that Joseph Smith’s understanding of this particular verb is defensible from the Hebrew.

30. The idea is that it is breath or wind that animates people. For a discussion of the ancient ideas behind breath and wind and the Latter-day Saint use of this idea, see Dana M. Pike, “The Latter-day Saint Reimaging of ‘the Breath of Life’ (Genesis 2:7),” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (2017): 71–104, especially 74–77.

31. For an attempt at this differentiation, see Lynn Hilton Wilson, “The Holy Spirit: Creating, Anointing, and Empowering throughout the Old Testament,” in *The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament*, ed. D. Kelly Osgden, Jared W. Ludlow, and Kerry Muhlestein (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2009), 250–81.

32. See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “firmament,” last modified March 2022, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/70586>.

33. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Hendrickson, 2008, reprinted from the 1906 edition), 955–6; Jacobs, “Jewish Cosmology,” 81–82n4.

the waters above from the waters below. Again, it is worth noting here that the ancient Israelites were not stupid—they based their different scientific perspective on the observational evidence of the world they saw. The ancient Israelites speak of waters above because of the clear example of falling rain. This idea is at play in the famous verse in Malachi about tithing, where the Lord promises to “open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing” (Mal. 3:10, author’s translation). The “windows of heaven” here are windows in the sky, and the blessing that the Lord is pouring out is rain.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, Genesis describes the sky as a barrier that separates the “waters above” from the “waters below.” Retranslating Genesis 1:6–8 yields, “And God said, ‘Let there be a beaten dome<sup>35</sup> in the middle of the waters and let it separate the waters from the waters.’ God made the beaten dome, and it separated the waters that were under the beaten dome from the waters that were on top of the beaten dome, and it was so. And God called the beaten dome ‘sky’ and there was evening and there was morning—day two.” On day three, the Lord gathers the “waters below” into one place and all of the land into one place: “And God said, ‘Let the waters under the sky be gathered together to one place, and let the dry land be seen,’ and it was so. And God called the dry land ‘land’ and the gathering of the waters he called ‘seas,’ and God saw that it was good” (Gen. 1:9–10, author’s translation). The cosmological picture presented within Genesis 1 is of a central land mass, floating on top of great waters, protected from waters above it with the sky acting as a kind of barrier.

The theological underpinning of Genesis 1 derives from the Hebrew word *hibdil*, meaning “to separate.” Creation in Genesis 1 is fundamentally a process of dividing in order to put things into their proper places.<sup>36</sup> Light is separated from darkness (1:4), the upper waters are divided from the lower waters (1:6–7), and day is divided from night (1:14, 18). Even when the specific sense of *hibdil* is not used, division is a major feature of creation in Genesis 1—a key example of this is the specification of plants

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34. Stadelmann, *Hebrew Conception*, 46.

35. For *raqia*, which the KJV translates as “firmament.”

36. Anthropologist Mary Douglas, in explaining the dietary laws of Leviticus 11, articulated this idea. See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (Routledge Classics, 2002), 51–71. Douglas’s theory has been generally accepted in biblical scholarship, with some individual disagreements about proper application. See the discussion in Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, “Creation and Classification in Judaism: From Priestly to Rabbinic Conceptions,” *History of Religions* 26, no. 4 (1987): 357–81, discussion of Douglas at 358–60. Eilberg-Schwartz points out that Mircea Eliade postulated a similar system before Douglas.

and animals “according to type” (1:11, 21, 24, author’s translation). Even within categories of creation, Genesis 1 presents subcategories. Thus, the category of land animals contains wild animals (KJV’s beasts “of the earth” [Gen. 1:24] or “of the field” [Gen. 2:19]), domesticated animals (KJV’s “cattle” [Gen. 1:25]), and a special category of ritually unclean animals (KJV’s “every creeping thing” [Gen. 1:26]).

Biblical scholarship ascribes the current form of Genesis 1 to a school of ancient authors who were associated with the ancient priesthood and the temple.<sup>37</sup> In Leviticus 10:10–11, the Lord commands certain behaviors of Aaron’s priest descendants, “that ye may put difference between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean.” The verb that the KJV translates here as “put difference” is *hibdil*, the same verb that appears in the Creation account in Genesis 1. Genesis 1 teaches that Creation was an act of division and making differences, and Leviticus shows that when priests are making these kinds of distinctions, they are engaged in divine behavior.<sup>38</sup>

## The Creation of Humanity

The culmination of Creation in both Genesis 1 and 2 is the creation of humanity. For both of these Creation accounts, it is humanity and its role in the cosmos that take the center stage. The accounts take slightly different perspectives on the process, and so it is profitable to explore the similarities and the differences between the two accounts.

One of the first differences is the relationship between males and females. In the first Creation account, now recorded in Genesis

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37. Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?*, 162. Although Latter-day Saints are used to a concept of priesthood that is focused on Church service and administration, this is not the case in the ancient world. There, the priestly focus is on the temple, sacrifice, and the cosmic order. This is laid out nicely in terms of its relation to Creation in Mark S. Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1* (Fortress Press, 2010). For a Latter-day Saint discussion on priestly material in Genesis and Moses, see John W. Welch with Jackson Abbau, “The Priestly Interests of Moses the Levite,” in Bradshaw and others, *Tracing Ancient Threads*, 163–256, especially the discussion on 173–88. For a discussion of the priestly concern with temples and divine order, see the seminal John M. Lundquist, “What Is a Temple? A Preliminary Typology,” in *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Deseret Book; Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1994), 83–117.

38. Eilberg-Schwartz, “Creation and Classification,” 362. Leviticus fundamentally understands this divine quality of being able to make distinctions to be holiness, as in Leviticus 11:44–45, where the Lord tells Israel to “be holy; for I am holy.” See the discussion in Warren Zev Harvey, “Holiness: A Command to *Imitatio Dei*,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 16, no. 3 (1977): 7–28.

1:26–27, males and females are created simultaneously, and both are called “human.” In the second Creation account, recorded in Genesis 2:18–22, the female is created not only after the male but after all of the rest of the animals as well. Females are the final living thing created, a helper equal to the male. Both of these accounts have things to teach about these scriptures’ views on humanity and on the male-female relationship.

For the account in Genesis 1, humans are fundamentally both female and male from the very beginning. Females are not a derivative form of males but are an independent part of Creation, and both are created in the image of God.<sup>39</sup> There has been, of course, much discussion in both Christianity and Judaism about the interpretation of these verses, but Latter-day Saints have traditionally read them as referring to humanity’s physical body being like God’s.<sup>40</sup> Because the ancient Israelites did not have the distinctive creedal position that their God was wholly other, in this case Latter-day Saint readings reflect something very similar to the likely ancient conception of these verses.<sup>41</sup>

As noted above, the creation of humanity is one of the distinctive elements between the two Creation accounts. In the first account, humanity is created, male and female, through God’s speech. In the second account, God first forms the male human from dirt and then breathes life into him (Gen. 2:7).<sup>42</sup> All the animals are then considered as companions for the male human, but none of them are suitable, so the Lord puts the male human to sleep and builds a female human from the male human’s rib as a “helper appropriate to him” (Gen. 2:18, author’s translation).<sup>43</sup>

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39. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 160.

40. For a discussion of the various ways of reading this verse, see Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 147–61. On the Latter-day Saint side of discussion, the Guide to the Scriptures entry on “Body” glosses Genesis 9:6 as meaning, “God created male and female in the image of his own body.” See “Body,” Guide to the Scriptures, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed April 28, 2022, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/gs/body>. BYU professor Larry Tucker gave a devotional dealing with the implications of this teaching for Latter-day Saints. See Larry Tucker, “The Human Body: A Gift and a Responsibility,” devotional address, Brigham Young University, May 28, 2013, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/larry-tucker/the-human-body-a-gift-and-a-responsibility/>.

41. Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 56; C. L. Crouch, “Genesis 1:26–7 as a Statement of Humanity’s Divine Parentage,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 61, no. 1 (2010): 1–15, discussion on 3–5.

42. Pike, “Reimaging of ‘the Breath of Life,’” 72–74.

43. KJV has the famous “help meet for him.” In its original English meaning and in Hebrew, “help meet” is not a single collocation but is instead using “meet” in the sense

Comparing these two Creation accounts, in both their similarities and their differences, shows that when we speak of the biblical perspective of Creation, we are not speaking of a single perspective with a single goal. Both of the Creation accounts present important viewpoints on the role of humanity in Creation, but neither presents a single authoritative statement on how humanity came into this world. These multiple perspectives reinforce to readers the importance of reading Genesis and the Creation in its ancient context, as an ancient Israelite would.<sup>44</sup> President Brigham Young once asked, “Do you read the Scriptures, my brethren and sisters, as though you were writing them a thousand, two thousand, or five thousand years ago? . . . If you do not feel thus, it is your privilege to do so.”<sup>45</sup> It also helps to remind us that, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, Latter-day Saints are not committed to a specific literal interpretation of Creation in Genesis.

## Conclusion

In order to understand Creation in its ancient context, it is necessary to understand that the picture painted in Genesis 1 and 2 derives from cosmological and scientific perspectives different from modern ones. As we think about the relationship between scripture and science, it is useful for us to remember what the scriptures are and are not doing. The Creation accounts are not intended, either anciently or modernly, to serve as definitive scientific statements about the universe from our current perspective. This is not to say that everything in these chapters is to be understood in terms of metaphor or symbolism (although there are certainly symbolic aspects to the narratives)—it is likely the ancient authors and editors viewed their universe as it is described. However, that acknowledgement should not diminish our appreciation of the value Genesis brings to the table.

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of “appropriate” for him. See Donald W. Parry, “Eve’s Role as a ‘Help’ (*‘ezer*) Revisited,” in *Seek Ye Words of Wisdom: Studies of the Book of Mormon, Bible, and Temple in Honor of Stephen D. Ricks*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Gaye Strathearn, and Shon D. Hopkin (Interpreter Foundation; Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2020), 199–216. Parry correctly notes that this story of human creation does not place women in an inferior role but in an equal role. It is certain that God did not intend this story to signify inferiority, but that does not change the fact that many have read it that way and have used it to justify the oppression of women. See the discussion in Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 74–78.

44. Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 74.

45. *Discourses of Brigham Young*, ed. John A. Widtsoe (Deseret Book, 1954, reprinted numerous times), 128.

For the authors and editors of Genesis, Creation is fundamentally about humanity and its relationship to God. Both of the Creation accounts discussed in this paper show not only the centrality of humanity in God's creative plans but also his divine care for the other animals that share this world with us. The dominion described in Genesis is not an absolute or unrighteous dominion. Although humans are the culmination of Creation (see Gen. 2), they are still part of a broader creative process. The earth is not here for humans to despoil.

The ancient perspective on Creation provides another point of view in the inexhaustible world of interpreting scripture. It illustrates amply the importance of recognizing that the relationship between science and scripture is not an inherently adversarial one, especially if both sources of knowledge are placed in their proper contexts.

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