



A SCIENCE & RELIGION COMMENTARY

GENESIS 1:3

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3 Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

Much has been made of the fact that the first day of Genesis 1 begins with the creation of light. For those seeking a strong affinity between Genesis and contemporary science, the original sequence of the creation process seems remarkably consonant with Big Bang theory. Some go so far as to take a detailed description such as Steven Weinberg's *The First Three Minutes*, place it alongside the opening verses of Genesis 1, and claim to discover a foreshadowing of contemporary scientific cosmogony. As one web writer puts it, "Weinberg chronicles the science behind 'Let there be light.'"

Even some reputable scientists seem to support speaking in this fashion. The astro-physicist Robert Jastrow famously described 20th century discoveries in astrophysics this way: "For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story of the big bang ends like a bad dream. For the past three hundred years, scientists have scaled the mountain of ignorance and as they pull themselves over the final rock, they are greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries." Big Bang theory suggests the cosmos has a beginning in light/energy. The Bible, especially Genesis 1:3, has been there for millennia.

The fundamental caution that scripture uses the language, the idioms, and the word pictures of its culture and time applies here as well. To suggest that Genesis teaches Big Bang theory is too much. Jastrow's comment is provocative and entertaining, but there is justifiable nervousness at some of its implications. As Walter Brueggemann observes, "this text is not a scientific description but a theological affirmation."

It may, however, be an equal error to insist on a total disconnect between ancient text and contemporary science. Consider, for instance, the British scientist and theologian John Polkinghorne's take on this passage in his book *Testing Scripture: A Scientist Explores the Bible*. After a brief comparison of the Genesis account with the Babylonian creation myth of Tiamat and Marduk in the *Enuma Elish*, Polkinghorne observes that few of the embarrassments of the *Enuma Elish* story are to be found in Genesis. Instead, as he puts it, the Genesis account which begins with the creation of light is "astonishingly 'sensible' from a modern point of view." This is echoed in Steven Weinberg's own words, who notes that "in the early universe . . . it was light that formed the dominant constituent of the universe, and ordinary matter played only a role of negligible contaminant."

Whatever the impulses that led the Biblical authors to veer from the mythological formulations of the creation stories of surrounding cultures, the Genesis text proves to be remarkably prescient. Without claiming too much (e.g., that the Bible teaches the Big Bang theory), a preacher can safely indulge a little poeticism in connecting Genesis 1:3 with contemporary science.