

As It Is Written

Last month we learned that the author of Genesis 1 sought to emphasize the completion of God's creation. He did this by using a verbal form (one not found in English) that explicitly emphasizes the action in question – in this case *completion*. This month we learn that the author uses two additional techniques – literary and mythical - that emphasize the importance of the completion. The former technique uses the “coda” and the latter depends on the mythical meaning of the number seven.

First, the coda. In music, composers use the coda to change the momentum and trajectory of their composition. For example, where the main body of a symphony might be compelling and forceful, its coda is often peaceful and contemplative. But, no matter how designed, codas are obviously distinctive in one or more ways and it is this distinctiveness that is crucial. Codas announce the end of the piece. In Genesis 1 the seventh day of creation serves as a literary coda announcing the end of God's symphony of creation by separating the frenetic pace of the first six days from the tranquility of the seventh. The change of pace is linguistically jarring and calls our attention to the end of the six days of creation.

As for the number seven, in the ANE¹ the number seven is a figure of speech meaning perfection. In biblical Hebrew, as in other ancient Semitic languages, the idea of perfection *does not* mean without error. It means complete and ready-to-go. And this is precisely the sense that the use of the seventh day conveyed to its ancient audiences.

Of course, none of this complexity needed to be explained to the biblical audiences of the ANE. With the completion of God's creation foremost in their minds the audience has been primed for the denouement. So, what might that be? The answer may reside in two observations: God's blessing the seventh day and the observation that, unlike the previous six days, the seventh does not end.

To understand the significance of the blessing, it might help to look at the Hebrew word for *curse* (אָרַר, *arar*) which, in biblical Hebrew, is the opposite of bless. In the Bible, to curse someone or something is to restrain it in some way. For example, the first use of *arar* occurs in Gen 3:17 when God curses the earth ground is not being “punished”. It is being constrained in a way as to require significant effort for Adam to eek out a living.

A blessing, being the opposite of curse, can be understood as liberating force. Under this interpretation, the seventh day is a day free from the curse of having to work to survive. The seventh day, then, is not a day of rest or relaxation. Rather, it becomes a day whose purpose is satisfied when we put aside the exigencies of life and exercise those talents that separate us from nature and the atavistic

¹ ANE = Ancient Near East.

necessity to march to its drum. In so doing, we elevate ourselves above nature to our rightful status as its ruler. Finally, the observation that the seventh day does not end, surely implies that the God meant for us to realize that we are now in charge of His creation. He has passed His torch and we have a mission to fulfill.

Now, go and study