

# *In the Beginning*: welcome affirmation of creation

***In the Beginning: Listening to Genesis 1 and 2***

Cornelis van Dam

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Reading the creation account of Genesis 1 and 2 as history is not only justified but necessary. The Hebrew text claims to be an accurate account of the origin of the earth and the human race, using the language of human experience. In the swelling tide of theistic evolution and agnosticism, Dr Cornelis van Dam’s book *In the Beginning* is a welcome affirmation of the historicity of the biblical creation account.

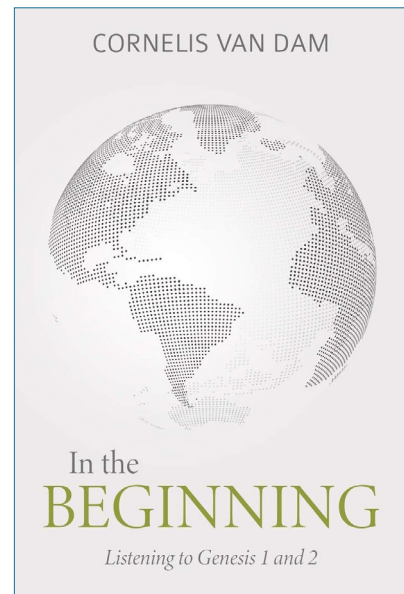
Cornelis van Dam was professor of Old Testament studies at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary in Hamilton, Ontario (1984–2011). In this role he laid the basis for this present book (How Shall We Read Genesis 1? *Mid-America J. Theology* 6:19–32, 1990). Van Dam is concerned with some of the present trends in evangelical scholarship and used his retirement years to reflect on the first chapters of Genesis. It is perhaps indicative that most scholars who endorsed this book have retired from active academic life.

Although his treatment of Genesis 2 appears to be quite limited (pp. 249–277)—most of the book deals with Genesis 1—van Dam raises important questions, like the geographical location of Eden, and considers the arguments for Eden as a temple. He also discusses the creation of angels separately.

## Reformed perspective

It is helpful to be aware of the Presbyterian & Reformed denominational setting of the author. Van Dam writes from a Dutch reformed theological perspective in the tradition of Abraham Kuyper (and subsequently Klaas Schilder). Kuyper separated from the Dutch Reformed Church in 1886 to form the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands. A conflict within this denomination about presumed regeneration as the basis for infant baptism (1944/45) led to the formation of a federated reformed church in the Netherlands, of which the Canadian Reformed Churches are the migrant version.

This explains why this book uses names like Schilder, Herman Bavinck, and Ridderbosch as if these men should be naturally familiar to all readers. They certainly are to van Dam, who also pays attention to the Princeton tradition and similarly minded American theologians in Presbyterian & Reformed circles. This, in part, explains the thetic approach of *In the Beginning*. At times this causes a lack of interaction with primary and secondary sources, and conflicting theories, unless these are contemporary and English speaking, like John Walton or John Collins. More interaction with original sources and a careful interaction with opposing views would strengthen van Dam’s case, if only to avoid additional questions. Nonetheless, van Dam makes out a strong case for a traditional interpretation of Genesis from the biblical text. Otherwise, the main alternative theories are discussed.



## Gap theory

An illustration of this perceived lack of interaction with the arguments of opponents, is van Dam’s chapter on the ‘gap theory’. It is quite helpful in linking this with the Scofield Bible and in describing some of the origins of the gap theory in evangelical thinking. However, it subsequently presents an impressive line-up of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Dutch theologians (including creationist scholars like Willem Velema and Jan van Genderen) who all adhered to the view that the first verses of Genesis reflect two separate creations. As a reader, one expects the author to carefully weigh the arguments of these godly men. For this the interested reader waits in vain. Van Dam merely mentions and dismisses, while presenting and maintaining, his own view.

In the meantime, the reader should be satisfied with the knowledge that François Turretin (or Turretini), a Calvinist who died in 1687, specifically rejected the idea that verses 1 and 2 refer to a time before the six days of creation (figure 1). This simply isn’t good enough for most. Many readers would not have heard of this learned Genevan or attach any authority to his

views. Even if van Dam was justified in proposing Turretin as an authority for today's problems, it would have been helpful if Turretin's good reasons for his position were shared with the reader.

### Lack of interaction

Interaction with opposing views is also absent or superficial when van Dam deals with the long list of theologians in the neo-reformed tradition who proposed two separate creation moments in Genesis. For instance, van Dam is probably correct in asserting that the Sabbath commandment in Exodus 20:11—"for in six days God made the heavens and the earth"—is probably the best argument against the notion of a first or earlier creation in Genesis 1:1–2. However, the author does not interact with Bavinck's arguments for understanding the fourth commandments as building on Genesis 1:3–31 rather than 1:1–2. Van Dam is quick to dismiss: "But such reasoning is arbitrary and has no basis in Scripture" (p. 104). Well now, tell us why? The author perhaps genuinely feels he does so, as he continues: "No distinction is made between a first creation (Gen. 1:1–2) and a separate second creation comprised of the six-day period." But this is merely a form of circular reasoning and a repetition of his view.

Perhaps the best common-sense argument against the gap theory is borrowed from John Frame; it makes no sense to science whatsoever. Introducing a time gap before Genesis 1:3 creates more problems with science than it solves. The proposition that the earth existed without light or heavenly bodies is something very few scientists would contemplate seriously. So, in the end, the gap theory is dealt with by van Dam, but not on the basis of carefully weighing arguments from the source materials. This thetic style perhaps fails to do justice to opponents, but also affects the methodology, particularly in

the strength of its conclusions; because van Dam has not really refuted opposing views but merely dismissed them from his own paradigm. His Reformed and Presbyterian readership will no doubt be satisfied; however, he fails to build a positive basis for his final conclusions that would persuade readers from different paradigms or backgrounds.

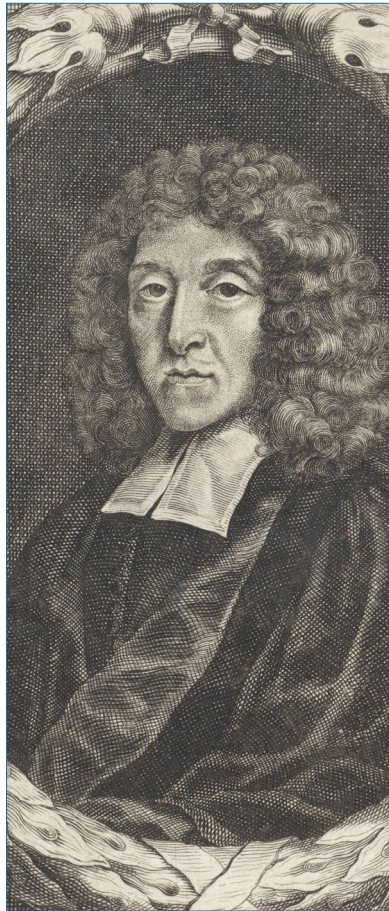
In the case of the gap theory and a double creation, one would have liked to see positive reasons and conclusive arguments from the text of Genesis, and the history of reception of the text in its initial context, plus supporting data from early Judaism and Christianity. A word of explanation as to why this long list of mostly Bible-believing scholars

from van Dam's religious tradition had it all wrong, despite being firm believers in the historicity of Genesis, would have enhanced his argument.

### Methodology

This lack of specific interaction also reflects in, at times, vague and general conclusions. For instance: "There is no convincing evidence of an indeterminate time gap within the first verses of Genesis 1" (p. 105). This is an ambiguous statement; rather a series of caveats than a firm statement. There may be lots of evidence, but for van Dam it is not convincing. There may well be a time gap, but not an indeterminate one, etc. This is hardly compelling. Also, readers have a right to wonder what practical difference there is between the position of van Dam and that of the esteemed litany of reformed theologians that he disagrees with. Not only is his conclusion inconclusive, but the careful reader wonders about the relevance of van Dam's stance.

Had the author opted for a different method, the results should have been more specific and helpful for the development of independent thought. Van Dam could have pointed to the rich exegetical tradition of the church of all ages, where the idea of two creations within Genesis 1 was unheard of. Not as a dismissive generalization, but illustrating with specific examples from the Church Fathers or from Hebrew and Greek scholars of renown who insist that the text in Genesis teaches one creation. The author could have asked the question as to why this 'gap' was introduced only after general science had developed and insisted on a geological worldview with long ages; not merely by inference but proving from the writings of his opponents that a foreign element was introduced in the exegesis of the text and why. The history of exegesis and church history have much to offer in this regard.



**Figure 1.** Calvinist François Turretin (1623–1687) specifically rejected the idea that verses 1 and 2 of Genesis refer to a time before the six days of creation.

## Augustine

Van Dam's book does not fully employ these treasures. It easily switches from the Bible and van Dam's own view to a little Augustine, some Calvin, and then mainly the Dutch neo-reformed tradition. The early church is largely overlooked, and, when it is discussed, it is dismissed, as in the case of Augustine's view on a single creation of everything together and subsequently worked out in creation days. Traditional Christianity has always allowed Augustine's view on the days in Genesis—not because the Church necessarily agreed—most fathers did not—but because she weighed his arguments. For all practical intents and purposes, Augustine believed in an instantaneous historical creation and a young earth on the basis of God's revelation. His anthropomorphic views of the six days were quite different from those that are ventilated by contemporary scholarship.

In dismissing Augustine's view, van Dam points to the *Wisdom of Jesus Sirach* (18:1) as the source of Augustine's position that there was one moment of creation. ΣΟΦΙΑ ΣΙΡΑΧ 18.1 Ὁ ζῶν εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα ἔκτισεν τὰ πάντα κοινῇ. (He who lives in eternity has created all things together). Augustine's Latin version similarly reads: *Qui vivit in aeternum creavit omnia simul*. Van Dam suggests that *simul* is a wrong translation for κοινῇ and prefers the rendition of the New English Translation Septuagint (Oxford University Press 2009), that God: "created everything in common". This closely follows the Common English Bible: "The one who lives forever created everything in a common fashion."

But this is questionable. The Greek κοινῇ refers to the common time of creation, everything was made together, part of the same creation process; just like Latin *simul* does. For this reason, the NRSV translates: "He who lives forever created the whole universe."

This is independently confirmed by a very different theological tradition in the Geneva Bible: "He that liveth forever, made all things together." The Geneva Bible even provides a specific reference to Gen 1:1, so that there is no room for misunderstanding. This notion of togetherness is also reflected by the Dutch *Statenvertaling*: "DIE in eeuwigheid leeft, heeft alle dingen in het gemeen geschapen." Greek commentators in the Byzantine tradition use words like 'without exception' (ἀνεξαίρετως) or 'universal' (γενικῶς) to explain what is meant by κοινῇ.

In sum, Augustine's view is not the result of poor linguistic skills, but of interpretation. Jesus Sirach makes perfect sense, even from a literal six-day perspective, as a general reference to God making everything together and complementary. What van Dam should have discussed is whether Augustine's turning of this into a momentary occasion is the best interpretation of Genesis or rather a consequence of imported neo-Platonic constructs. Or he could, perhaps, have questioned whether Augustine should have used a deuterocanonical book as basis for his theories, if he did.

In other words, the Latin text of Jesus Sirach is fine.

## Henry Morris

One final critical remark about what I consider to be generally a helpful and timely book. Dr van Dam rather forcefully dismisses Dr Henry Morris and an earlier generation of creationist scholars who tended to read scientific data in Bible passages where theologians could not detect any (pp. 30–35). He also finds it embarrassing that Morris's essay on the Bible as a textbook of science has not (yet) been removed from the website of the Institute for Creation Research. How desirable is this?

Is it really so embarrassing to display what are these days recognized as fallible attempts that were nonetheless

carried by an overall balanced trust in the God who exists and speaks? Henry Morris probably read too much into the Bible, perhaps somewhat carried away by his discovery that God's Word was reliable in all respects, and not merely a spiritual book for theologians. This is no excuse, but it does provide a context to his words. Also, many of the things that Morris asserted were true and biblical. Even if the specific text he referred to did not literally say so, more often than not he expressed a truth or a possibility that was evidenced generally in Scripture or in nature (*Belgic Confession* article 2). Morris then asked the question: shouldn't we consider this? God upholding the universe may have energy implications, certainly of some sort. The early church would have considered this a valid form of allegory.

And, finally, theologians have been wrong before. There are very few creationists among the scholars at leading seminaries. Even the endorsements of *In the Beginning* are mostly from retired professors at less well-known institutions. Many professional theologians have been affected by a post-Enlightenment separation between the things of God and the material world. Henry Morris, even in his fallible attempts, was a light bearer of an integrated attempt. Hopefully, his controversial article about the Bible as textbook for science will remain available on the internet, as a reminder of a great and humble man, who was sometimes wrong, as are most good scientists.