Four Accounts of the Creation

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All authentic accounts of the earth’s origins have a single source—the Creator of all things, whose explanations come to us through prophets. For centuries only one account has been available to the world—the record now preserved in the Bible. But with the Restoration have come three others. Each of these four accounts offers valuable insight into the process and purposes of the Creation.

1. The Genesis Account (Gen. 1-2). This is the common account shared by all Bible readers. Latter-day Saints regard it as the remnant of an account originally given to Moses.

2. The Book of Moses Account (Moses 1-3; JST Gen. 1-2). After Joseph Smith had translated the Book of Mormon and learned that many plain and precious truths had been taken from the Bible, the Lord commanded him to “translate” the Bible. In doing so, he used neither Hebrew nor Greek documents but drew upon revelation and inspiration as the source of the text.

Moses had been shown a vision depicting something of the breadth and depth of the Lord’s creations. When Moses asked for more information about the origin of this earth, the Lord responded: “Moses … I will speak unto thee concerning this earth; … write the things which I shall speak.” (Moses 1:40; italics added.) Moses then wrote his account, which is the basis for the account appearing in the Joseph Smith Translation (JST, sometimes called the Inspired Version). The text now known as the Book of Moses was extracted from the Joseph Smith Translation and published in the Pearl of Great Price in 1851.

3. The Book of Abraham Account (Abr. 3-5). This account was recorded by Abraham. A form of it was discovered in an Egyptian tomb and later sold to the Latter-day Saints. By revelation, the Prophet Joseph Smith produced the text of the Book of Abraham and published it in the Times and Seasons. In 1851 it was reprinted in the first edition of the Pearl of Great Price.

4. The Temple Account. Using the power of drama and group participation, this account teaches, so far as possible within the limits of dramatic structure, the various steps involved in the Creation, the sequence of events, and the roles of those involved.

Why More Than One Account?

For those who may feel overwhelmed with so many accounts and feel, perhaps, that one should suffice, it helps to know that Abraham, despite having “a knowledge of the beginning of the creation” (Abr. 1:31) from the records available to him, still received a personal revelation from the Lord on the same subject—though it didn’t necessarily cover the identical material. He didn’t feel to say: “Account! Account! I’ve got an account, there can be no more accounts of the Creation!” There is always more to be learned from another recital of anything of value.

This is true of all teachings of the Church, as the history of revelation shows. Brigham Young taught that no revelation is ever received in its fullness. (See Discourses of Brigham Young, sel. John A. Widtsoe, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1954, p. 40.) And revelations of general application don’t totally duplicate each other in phraseology, topics discussed, sequence of ideas, or application. This is true of the plan of salvation, the Atonement, and many other important doctrines. The complexity of gospel subjects, the circumstances under which revelations are given, the preparation of the one to whom the revelation is given—all suggest why no revelation can be defined by any single combination of words. Obviously, the Lord is not bothered that there are details in one account that are not in another. Furthermore, the Lord himself emphasizes to us the limitations of the present revelations when he promises that when he comes he will “reveal all things—

“Things which have passed, and hidden things which no man knew, things of the earth, by which it was made, and the purpose and the end thereof …

“Things that are in the earth, and upon the earth.” (D&C 101:32-34.)

In God’s dynamic work, the depth and breadth of any revelation depends upon many factors—the doctrinal foundations already laid, God’s desires, the people’s needs, and the prophet’s individual preparation, since revelations come to the Lord’s servants “in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding.” (D&C 1:24.) It follows, then, that those who have access to the most information on any topic have the richest opportunity to understand it and be prepared to receive more when it comes.

I am glad, for example, that we have several accounts of the First Vision, the ministry of Christ, the Atonement, the plan of salvation, the signs of the last days, and the conditions during the millennium. None of the various accounts exhaust the subject; each contributes to its advancement line upon line, even though important elements may be
repeated. We need not regard them as competing or as being at odds with each other, but rather, as enhancing our understanding of the whole.

Thus, accounts of the Creation could be infinite in their variety because the subject is complex and because individual needs and specific emphases are different. An elaboration of some of the contributions of each of the four accounts enables us to better appreciate each.

**Contributions of Genesis**

In comparing the four accounts of the Creation, we need to remember that we learn not only by differences, but also by similarities. All the accounts are basically similar and emphasize the points made by Genesis:

1. God created all things. Nothing came by chance, but rather by his will and pleasure, his planning and knowledge, his power and love. The universe, in its infinite variety of life, testifies of his infinite intelligence, power, and majesty. And we, who want to know the meaning of it all, are reassured, not merely by the words, but by the whisperings of the Spirit that divine intelligence ordered all of it: by the power of his word, they were created.

2. Man—male and female—was made in the image of God, with all the power of the great potential that this statement evokes. Of “divine mintage,” man has a true perspective of who he really is and this gives him power to overcome his various challenges.

3. We are commanded to multiply. Ultimately, the power to procreate and perpetuate the divine image is a divine gift (see D&C 131:1-4; D&C 132:19-20, 24), as is the love by which we nurture the offspring thus produced. And for those made in the divine image, there is another divine role—dominion over and responsibility for the use of the earth and its creatures. (See D&C 59:16-20.)

**Contributions of the Book of Moses**

Going from Genesis to the book of Moses, we find explanations replacing enigmas. At the conclusion of Genesis 1 and the beginning of Genesis 2, the record of the six creative periods—including the creation of man in God’s image—seems to be complete. (See Gen. 2:1-2.) But then we discover that “there was not a man to till the ground.” Consequently, the Lord “formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” (Gen. 2:5-9.) How could this be, when Genesis 1:26-27 has already declared that “God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him?”

Many scholars assume that two different writers were at work recording two different versions of Moses’ account of creation and that the second half of Genesis is the beginning of the second version. They attribute the redundancy to a rather unskilful scriptural editor.

Complicating the issue, however, is the doctrine clarified in the Book of Moses that all forms of life were created in heaven “spiritually before they were naturally upon the face of the earth.” (See Moses 3:7-9.)

(This teaching that spirits were created in heaven before they gained bodies on earth should instruct Christians, who usually assume that the spirits or souls of men are created at the time of birth.)

Complicating the issue further for some Latter-day Saints is the idea that Genesis 1 may not be an account of Creation by another author but may, in fact, be an account of another creation, Genesis 1 being, in their minds, the account of the spiritual creation and Genesis 2 of the physical creation. But a close reading of the scriptures indicates otherwise.

If Genesis 1 is an account of the spiritual creation, then Genesis 1:26-27 would be the account of the creation of the first man in the spirit—“the first-born of every creature,” the premortal Jesus. (See Col. 1:15; D&C 93:21.) The Moses account, however, shows that this cannot be so:

“And I, God, said unto mine Only Begotten, which was with me from the beginning: Let us make man in our image. …

“And I, God, created man in mine own image, in the image of mine Only Begotten created I him.” (Moses 2:26-27.)

Since Jehovah was there when the man referred to in Genesis 1:26-27 was formed, the spiritual creation obviously had already occurred. The object of their creative intent could only have been Adam, the first earthly man. Thus, the creation being described in Genesis 1 is the physical and not the spiritual creation.

The conclusion is that the Bible offers no account of the sequential process by which all things were spiritually created, although it does offer a reference to the spiritual creation in Genesis 2:5.

Joseph Fielding Smith said: “The account of the creation of the earth as given in Genesis, and the Book of Moses, and as given in the temple, is the Creation of the physical earth, and of physical animals and plants. … There is no account of the Creation of man or other forms of life when they were created as spirits.” (*Doctrines of Salvation*, 5 vols., comp. Bruce R. McConkie, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954-56, 1:75.)
Contributions of Abraham

Many Christian writers have defined the Creation as creation from nothing. But the book of Abraham clarifies that God “organized” the worlds out of unorganized matter. To those who were with him, God said, “We will go down, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell.” (Abr. 3:24.) And since all life came from the earth’s elements, all things came from existing material. This insight in no way diminishes the significance of the Lord’s creation, but rather gives us a glimpse into the nature of eternal law.

The book of Abraham also contributes to our knowledge of the nature of our spiritual life. We learn that in premortal life we existed as individuals (intelligences that were organized) and that there was a gradation in intelligence and nobleness in that premortal world.

This insight profoundly affects how we think of ourselves, our children, and others around us as we come to understand that earthly heredity and environment are not the only ways to explain individual behavior. It helps to know that man, in becoming something here, starts out in mortality with personality and certain predispositions. This account of Creation makes it clear that man is not merely a blank tablet provided by heredity upon which environment writes. Each of us comes into the world as a unique spirit with a capacity for becoming what our Creator is, in whose image we are formed.

We also learn from the Abrahamic account that the intelligence and nobility we developed in the premortal world were fundamental to the callings and assignments we were given before we came into the mortal world. Jehovah was called to be God’s Only Begotten in the Flesh, with everything that implied, and Abraham was among those whom the Lord called to be his rulers. (See Abr. 3:23.) This explains the Lord’s comment to Jeremiah that before he came forth out of the womb he was ordained a prophet. (Jer. 1:4-5.) Joseph Smith said that all who have callings here in mortality received them in premortality. (See Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1938, p. 365.)

Abraham provides perhaps the singular scripture explaining God’s purpose for creating the earth. Said the Creator: “We will make an earth whereon these may dwell; And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them.” (Abr. 3:24-25.)

There must be opposition in order for this proving to take place. Life, typically, has its wildernesses, where we walk by faith and not by sight. Yet where else can faith grow but in wildernesses, where it is under trial and the future is uncertain, where obedience to God is the issue and the means to survive. Passing such trials successfully is the basis for future high status. Those who prove faithful under trial and “keep” their second estate “shall have glory added upon their heads for ever and ever.” (Abr. 3:26.)

Contributions of the Temple Account

It is in the temple account of the Creation that we learn that Adam is Michael, who helped Jehovah in the Creation. Elder Joseph Fielding Smith wrote: “Adam helped to form this earth. He labored with our Savior Jesus Christ. I have a strong ... conviction that there were others also who assisted them. Perhaps Noah and Enoch; and why not Joseph Smith, and those who were appointed to be rulers before the earth was formed?” (Doctrines of Salvation, 1:75.)

In one sense, the harmony of the four accounts of the Creation could be compared to the harmony of the four gospels of the New Testament. They complement one another. Details from one embellish those of the others, ultimately giving us a fuller picture, a broader understanding, and a deeper appreciation.

Contemplating God’s marvelous works moves us to awe at his knowledge and power, to joy for the gift of life—for seed and soil, surf and sand, crag and tree, cloud and sun, bones and brawn; for companionship and offspring, for beauty and order, for sustenance and new beginnings, for creative opportunity and challenges, and for the confidence experienced in being entrusted with dominion over this wondrous world. All of this is enhanced for us as God recounts, at different times and in different ways, his role in creating our world and placing us upon it.