

THE GENRE OF GENESIS ONE

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ABSTRACT

Though there have been many recent attempts to redefine the narrative of Genesis 1:1-2:4a as prophecy or poetry, thus lessening the literalness of that passage's terminology, such attempts fail to be conclusive or even plausible in the light of genre analysis. Even more recent attempts to declare the passage a special creation genre, not to be taken literally and also unique in both Scripture and in the milieu of the ancient near East, likewise fail in view of the non-existence of documentable literary parallels. It is therefore to be interpreted within the genre in which it best fits, that of historical narrative.

INTRODUCTION

The interpretation of Genesis 1:1-2:4a has long been a matter of interest to many expositors of the Scriptures. Of particular interest has been the length of time involved in the Creation. Though the Hebrew text seems to indicate this length in terms of six earth "days" of 24 hours each, further defined by the terms "evening" and "morning," many have seen lengthier periods of time indicated in those same terms. The Patristic writers, for instance, seem to be mixed in their understanding of the passage, even though the tradition of six 24 hour days goes back at least as far as the Priestly writer, or in my thinking, to Moses himself (Exod. 20:11).

In the last 200 years, the developments in source criticism, comparative Semitic literature and language, and genre studies, coupled with Darwinism and its aftermath, have greatly intensified the discussion, even among Evangelicals. Many have abandoned the recent, quick creation viewpoint for one that suggests that the terms used to express time passage in Gen. 1:1-2:4a are to be understood symbolically or metaphorically as figures of speech instead of six sequential 24-hour days.

Some justify this change of understanding based on their perception of the way that the term "day" is used in Scripture. Ross [13, pp. 11, 45-52], for instance, claims that it is broad enough to include a meaning of millions or billions of years. Others [7, p. 117] would call it a metaphor for a lengthy period of time, or an "anthropomorphic" day, simply a term used for the benefit of humans who cannot comprehend the time needed for the Creative process. Some others [10, p. 193] would refer to it as a day of God's revelation to Moses, though such a concept is foreign to the context of the passage.

In order to justify these interpretations that abandon a literal 24-hour day, commentators must, consciously or not, deal with the concept of literary genre. It is the purpose of this work generally to engage the discussion of the genre of the Creation account as it informs our understanding of the details of the passage. Waltke [18, p. 2] has recently noted: "In light of the biblical text's literary genre, the reader will be in a better position to decide the compatibility or the incompatibility of this creation account with scientific theories of origin." Proper understanding of the details of Genesis 1:1-2:4a informs our understanding of the remainder of Scripture as well.

There are only three major choices of genre available when interpreting Genesis 1:1-2:4a; prophecy, poetry, or narrative (with several sub-categories of each to consider). This essay will first investigate under which of these three broad categories the Genesis account of creation best fits, then attempt to

analyze which if any sub-category best fits. After this process, another developing category of genre will be analyzed for its potential contribution to the discussion.

GENESIS 1:1-2:4A AS PROPHECY

Some advocate understanding the Genesis account of creation as prophecy [26]. This is done ostensibly by appealing to the verbal forms that are grammatically ambiguous, understanding those forms to be specific future imperfects rather than jussives of command. This could have happened grammatically only on days 5 and 6 in the creation of teeming animals of the seas and heavens and land animals. Yet this view violates the obvious patterning of command, fulfillment, assessment, and equal time passage found on days 1-4 [cf. 2, p. 23; 19, p. 56]. That same pattern seems to demand that the ambiguous forms are instead to be read jussives of command, as are the clearly jussive forms employed on days 1-4. Therefore, the burden of proof falls on those who would argue differently.

Too, if prophetic, the passage does not fit into any of the understood prophetic genres. In prophetic literature, there are genres that may be isolated and analyzed. These include salvation oracles, damnation oracles, exhortations, covenant lawsuits, disputations and apocalyptic. All of these are identifiable as to specific genre by the content, structure, vocabulary, and at times, figures of speech employed. The Genesis account of Creation does not fit into these sub-categories, so the problem of genre classification remains.

GENESIS 1:1-2:4A AS POETRY

Cassuto [5, p. 11] has said:

. . . in the course of the Biblical story, which is mainly in prose, the special importance of the subject led to an exaltation of style approaching the level of poetry, the thought took on of its own accord, as it were, an aspect conforming to the traditional pattern of narrative poetry—an aspect, at all events, that was in keeping with ancient poetic tradition.

Arnold [2, p. 23] has said: “Its elevated style is more like poetry and the unit is unique when compared to the narrative sections you will read elsewhere in Genesis.”

Indeed, much has been made of the symmetry involved between days 1-3 and days 4-6 in the passage [12, p. 104], about the cycle of introduction, command, report, evaluation, and time sequence of each diurnal activity [2, p. 23], about the repetition so important otherwise in Hebrew narrative [14, p. 25], and even about the numerical symbolism present [5, pp. 12-19]. But are style and structure alone determinative to designate a Biblical Hebrew passage as poetic, rather than the work of a narrator who is also a skilled writer? For instance, there are also observable patterns of symmetry, style, and structure in the book of Acts, yet no one maintains that it is poetry [27].

Genesis 1:1-2:4a as a whole is not Hebrew poetry, and there are many problems for those who would see it as such. It does not contain overall the most important and determinative structural feature of Hebrew poetry: balance between juxtaposed lines, commonly known as parallelism. Too, there is no consistent metrical balance between juxtaposed lines [28]. There are to be sure figures of speech (merism in 1:1, perhaps anthropomorphism in the phrase “God said” in 1:3, 1:6, 1:9, 1:11 and others), but not in an amount inordinate to normal Hebrew prose. For instance, if the construction “God said” is indeed to be understood anthropomorphically, and the presence of figures of speech automatically mandates Poetic genre, then a myriad of passages within the Pentateuch understood to be historical narrative have now to be re-categorized. The point is that the presence of figures of speech alone is not determinative of genre, inasmuch as figures of speech are found in narrative, in prophecy, and in poetry.

Anyone familiar with the work of Anderson [1] or Westermann [22] has been exposed to the various genres of poetic literature, especially as applied in the Psalter. Such genres include individual and communal lament, declarative and descriptive praise, pilgrim psalms, wisdom psalms, Hallel psalms, songs of ascent, songs of Zion, etc. Each of these can be identified by certain structural and/or rhetorical devices, and though there may be disagreement from time to time over a given psalm, most would agree that these are viable categories of poetic genre.

In content, the closest that Genesis 1:1-2:4a comes to among the poetic genres above is that of a praise psalm. Yet, it cannot be a declarative praise psalm that would normally reveal what God has done for the individual or the nation. Deliverance, normally expected, is not included. Nor can it be a descriptive praise hymn depicting the attributes of God in the expected fixed format of call to praise, cause for

praise, and renewed call or vow of praise. It cannot be wisdom discourse in the manner of Prov. 8:22-31, nor can it be seen in the same way as the creation accounts of Job 38-41. And since it still does not contain the parallelism or metrical balance necessary for the broad category designation of poetry; how then can it be placed in any sub-category of the larger? It is therefore amazing to me that the NIV has opted to format 1:1-2:3 as indented text, reminiscent of poetic verse.

GENESIS 1:1-2:4A AS NARRATIVE PROSE

Many have seen the Creation account as narrative, though the subcategories of that narrative are widely debated. Sailhamer [14, p. 25], for instance, sees the passage as a clear example of historical narrative. Young [25, p. 1] sees it as “a factual account of what actually occurred.” Van Wolde [24, p. 134] calls it a narrative story, and Schottroff [16] entitles her Feminist work “The Creation Narrative: Genesis 1.1-2.4a.” Sternberg [17, p. 103], while affirming the passage as narrative, qualifies it as an asymmetrical demonstration of God’s omnipotence, i.e., “wherever God works wonders unseen by humanity.” Ostensibly, this feature would distinguish it from subsequent narratives of the symmetrical kind, those observable by humanity. After stating the passage is narrative, Brueggemann [4, PP. 8, 16] espouses that it is neither history nor myth. Sarna [15, P. 9] affirms it as non-mythological narrative. Westermann [21, p. 80] designates the section as narrative, but sees the description as needing modification. It differs from the sub-category of narrative called story in that there is no tension to be resolved. Instead, the “narrative of Gen 1 is characterized by its onward, irresistible and majestic flow that distinguishes it so clearly from the drama narrated in Gen 2-3” [21, p. 80]. He concludes that it “has acquired this peculiar narrative form which is really no narrative at all” [21, p. 80].

If the Genesis account is to be understood as narrative, which genre of narrative is it? Possible types could include Tale, Legend, History, Report, Fable, Etiology, and Myth [6, pp. 5-10]. Some of these may be excluded immediately, because Genesis 1:1-2:4a does not fit the basic criteria needed for such identification. Too, some of these choices are not theologically palatable to evangelicals. For instance, we probably would not accept the categories of legends, fables, and myths in Scripture in so far as those categories are often characterized as containing falsehood. At that same time, many would accept the possibility of mytho-poetic language being employed at times in polemic literature and perhaps elsewhere. After all, Israel’s literature often reflected on aspects of pagan culture. On the other hand, history, report, and etiology are easy to accept, since these ostensibly may involve the truth. For instance, Coats states that: “History as a genre of literature represents that kind of writing designed to record the events of the past as they actually occurred” [6, p. 9]. To this short list we could add legal material, covenant formula, royal inscription, and succession narratives, but one can quickly see that Genesis 1:1-2:4a does not fit into any of these final four. Therefore, the only recognized and documentable genre possibilities for the narrative Genesis account of creation are history, report, and etiology.

Of these three (history, report, and etiology), many would say that the passage should be understood as historical narrative. Though a report is seen as a simple, true account, and an etiology as a true explanation of a past event of usually a single line of duration, Genesis 1:1-2:4a fits the pattern of neither of these. Rather, Sailhamer says that it is “clearly recognizable as a unit of historical narrative. It has an introduction (1:1), a body (1:2-2:3), and a conclusion (2:4a). These three segments form a unit” [14, p. 25]. Other structural indicators of historical narrative Sailhamer indicates are: “sequence, disjuncture, repetition, deletion, description, and dialogue” [14, p. 25]. Genesis 1:1-2:4a, while lacking dialogue between humans, does have dialogue of God with the Creation and God with Himself. It has the sequence of the order of days, it has disjuncture at 1:2, repetition in the phrases “and it was so,” “and it was good,” “there was evening and there was morning,” the xth day,” and so on. When one adds to this the typical narrative diagnostic of the *wayyiqṭōl* formula of *waws* consecutive (or conversive, if one prefers), then it becomes reasonably clear that the genre of the passage was intended to fall within the category of historical narrative.

Is it therefore possible that Genesis 1:1-2:4a could be considered historical narrative and still contain figures of speech? It has been noted that there is merism in 1:1: “the heavens and the earth.” There may also be such in the repeated terms “and there was evening and there was morning.” Anthropomorphism may be seen in the phrase “and God said,” though with the emphasis in Scripture on Creation being by means of the divine word (cf. Ps. 33:8-9, John 1:1-5, Hebrews 11:3) some could argue that He actually did speak and thus this should not be seen as anthropomorphism [25, pp. 55-58].

Figures of speech are to be found within historical narrative, but not usually to the extent they are found in poetic literature. For instance, God uses both simile and literary hyperbole when He informs Abraham

that his descendants will be like the stars of heaven or like the sand on the seashore in number (Gen. 15:5; 22:17). We are informed again by simile that in Solomon's time, silver was like stones in Jerusalem (1 Kings 10:27). Other types of figures seen in narrative include euphemism and anthropomorphism. At times, these figures are easily identifiable, as in the case of simile, hyperbole, and euphemism (and some would say anthropomorphism as well). At other times they may be informed by comparative Semitic studies, such as in the case of Deut. 11:10 where "to water with the foot" could be an idiom from Egypt (irrigation canals had sluice gates that were operated by the use of the foot). Another example may be found in numerical hyperbole abundantly attested in royal inscriptions of the nations of the Semitic world. These may be seen in Scripture as well [8]. Figures of speech in narrative then seem to be readily identifiable in scriptural contexts or informed by studies in comparative ANE literature and cultures.

Of all the known literature of the ANE, therefore, Genesis 1:1-2:4a best fits that of historical narrative and fits no other genre well.

GENESIS 1:1-2:4A AS A SPECIAL CREATION GENRE

More recently, others are claiming for Genesis 1:1-2:4a what essentially amounts to a separate category of genre that has no ANE parallel. It is to be seen ostensibly as comprising elements of both historical narrative and metaphorical poetry. This may be called a Biblical Cosmology, an older term now to be imbued with new meaning. Or, it may yet be called the Special Creation Genre [cf. 18, p. 9]. As such, it is narrative in form, but uses terms in a manner uniquely distinct from their usage elsewhere in the Bible. It could therefore yield a result that meshes with empirical data from science concerning the length of time necessary for the creation to have taken place. As such, it affirms that God is indeed the Creator of all things, but that instead of Creation being the immediate response to the divine command issued over six successive literal 24 hour days, the narrative intends no implications at all regarding the time issue. The passage then may still be seen as a polemic against the other ANE gods, and it may still serve as a model for the human work week and Shabbat, since God did it all in six anthropomorphic "God days," but we may no longer understand it to be communicating a recent and quick creation.

It may be said here that Genesis 1:1-2:4a is indeed unique in both the Bible and in the milieu of the ANE [20, p. 34]. No other passage dealing with the creation in the OT comes close to the style or structure of the Genesis account (other passages, as Job 38-41, Psalms 8, 104, and Proverbs 8 are all clearly poetic in genre). As compared with the ANE cosmogonies, the Genesis account differs in several ways: creation is by divine decree; creation is offered within a time framework of 6 days; no struggle is evident (not a dualistic cosmogony); the purpose of man is not an afterthought, but the pinnacle; etc. [11]. However, must the literary genre of Genesis 1:1-24a be seen in this way?

It is my contention that if the Genesis Creation account is to be taken as a special and unique Creation Genre, then we as biblical scholars are still restrained by normal hermeneutic to interpret the passage as well as we can within parameters established by the literature of the Bible and comparative ANE documents. This means avoiding the temptation to yield too quickly to the evolving conclusions of science. This means trying to answer the questions that arise in a manner intra-contextually, intra-biblically, and intra-culturally before we interact with extra-biblical scientific findings. In short, it must be analyzed within the genre it best fits, namely, the genre of historical narrative.

Genre identification, though not absolutely determinative in every case for the purposes of interpretation, can be extremely helpful if a particular conundrum arises. For instance, in my dissertation, I found that biblical historical literature that included enormous numbers often paralleled other ancient near Eastern literature. In similar ANE royal inscriptions, large numbers were often employed to glorify a given king. This in turn helped to understand the reason such large numbers were employed in Scripture: they glorify the King of Kings. Therefore, the largest numbers of Scripture, found in biblical literature of the same or similar genre to the royal inscriptions of the ANE, may be interpreted as numerical hyperbole [8]. Might the same thing by analogy be happening with the term "day" and the phrase "and there was evening and there was morning" in Genesis 1:1-2:4a? (These are of course the terms that give rise to the impetus to seek another genre). This is at least a possibility, but there is as yet no other ANE literature comparable to Genesis account of creation with which to compare. To state that the Genesis account is a differing genre seems to be a decree by those who do not see it as literal historical narrative with its accompanying implications of time passage. To so declare it a different genre without any other examples anywhere in the ANE world seems to be special pleading.

In recent publications concerning Genesis 1:1-2:4a, the discussions have centered primarily on the use of “day” (*yôm*). As I hope it was clearly demonstrated in my presentation in 2001 to the Evangelical Theological Society [9, p. 9]:

In none of these cases can *yôm* be understood as an indefinite and lengthy period of time, from a grammatical/syntactical standpoint, if one considers the very similar usages of the same constructions elsewhere in the Old Testament Hebrew text. In fact, “day” and “days” are never used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible in the sense of multiple thousands or millions of years, i.e., the period of time necessary for evolution to have occurred. The burden of proof rests upon those who would argue differently—scriptural usage does not allow for such nuances.

Of course, my conclusions were based in understanding Gen. 1:1-2:4a as historical narrative. It is precisely at this point that others may wish to see the Genesis Creation account as an entirely separate genre: the normally understood biblical usage of *yôm* seems inadequate to account for the information available to us from empirical analysis of the cosmos in which we live. If the passage is a different genre, perhaps we can understand *yôm* as representing millions of years, accepting in the term what some have deemed to be “anthropomorphic” days. That is, “day” is meant not to be one of 24 hours duration, but an indefinite time period. God condescends to mankind’s very limited understanding. The choice of “day” then becomes usable in support of the six-day workweek capstoned by Shabbat (2:2-3; Exod. 20:11).

Appeal is normally made to other passages to demonstrate that *yôm* can mean an indefinite period of time, as it can in certain syntactical constructions. But this appeal is generally made with occurrences of the term in historical narrative. Hugh Ross for instance cites Genesis 30:14: “days of the wheat harvest” and Joshua 24:7: “and you dwelt in the wilderness many days,” as indicating the use of *yôm* as an indefinite period of time [13, p. 46]. Similar appeal is made to historical narrative to conclude differently, i.e., that though *yôm* can be used indefinitely, it is never used biblically in the sense of millions or billions of years necessary for evolutionary processes to occur [9, p. 9]. At this juncture, those that argue the latter are met with the counter-argument from the former that since Genesis 1:1-2:4a is a different genre, one cannot argue the use of “day” as being restricted in any sense demonstrated from historical narrative. If this is true, then it is equally true that appeals to historical narrative (or in any other known biblical genres for that matter) for nuances of *yôm* that would support millions of years should not be allowed either, since the Creation account is, by their own admission, an entirely differing genre. And in the case of Gen. 1:1-2:4a, it is totally unique, both in the Bible and in the ANE world. If its uniqueness demands a differing genre, a Special Creation Genre as it were (and it has yet to be established that it does, since it best fits known genres under the rubric of historical narrative), one must find support for reading *yôm* in this sense elsewhere. For some, this “elsewhere” is found in mere conjecture. For others, it is found in appeal to the “Book of Creation,” i.e., the data from science, which is now to be elevated to a plain of authority equal to that of Scripture or even superior to Scripture if necessary [cf. 23].

THE RECENT WORK OF DR. WALTKE

In his 1991 *Crux* article [18, p. 9] and again in his commentary on Genesis in 2001 [19, p. 78], Waltke, following Blocher, claims for the Creation account a genre more described than named: “a literary-artistic representation of the creation.” Though narrative, its language is “figurative, anthropomorphic, not plain [18, p. 7]. As distinct from straight forward historical narrative, he says: “The text . . . is begging us not to read it in this way” [18, p. 6].” He then proceeds to name problems commonly offered as evidence against a recent quick creation mandated by historical narrative. He questions the numerous activities of day six that seem to indicate more than 24 hours of time passage, the issue of light appearing without the existence of the sun, and then broaches the issue of anthropomorphic language [18, p. 7]. These will be dealt with in the order Waltke suggests.

The Activities of Day Six

Waltke is particularly perturbed by the order and number of events that occurred on day six of the Creation week, particularly in regard to the growth of the trees: “Unlike chapter 1, where one could appeal to apparent age with reference to such things as the stellar bodies, one cannot make a similar appeal to the planted trees. . . the Genesis narrative, using the verbs ‘plant’ and ‘cause to grow,’ gives no indication that an extraordinary quick growth of trees is intended. . .” [18, p. 7]. (It seems to this writer that the apparent age of stellar bodies is a more difficult problem than that of the trees). It is true that the verbs themselves do not give us an indication of the speed of growth. However, do not the examples given to us by the creation of Adam and Eve as mature adults and the creation of the best

wine by Jesus at the wedding of Cana in John 2 grant at least some insight in the way God can produce apparent age? Regarding Adam naming “all” the animals, could it not be that perhaps Adam named only that fauna concomitant with the garden itself, i.e., a limited amount of animals in a apparently somewhat confined space, rather than all possible species? Surely, if Adam were blessed with the faculties of a mind untainted by sin, it would not take him very long to recognize what God did: it was not good for him to be alone and as yet, there was no helper suitable for him.

Light Apart from the Sun

Waltke states: “the creation of light on the first day and of luminaries on the fourth, confirms our suspicion that Genesis 1 ought not be read as straightforward history” [18, p. 7]. He further asks: “How can there be three days characterized by day and night before the creation of the luminaries to separate the day from the night and to mark off the days? Are we clueless?” [18, p. 7]. Is it not at least just as plausible to see God Himself as serving as the point (or points) of light necessary for the first three days of earth rotation? The theo-photic relationship is not unheard of elsewhere in Scripture (Ps. 104:2; 1 John 1:5; Revelation 21:23).

Anthropomorphic Language

Waltke [18, p. 8] poses the question:

If the other panels in the process of creation are anthropomorphic representations of creation, is it not plausible to suppose the same is true of the chronological framework, the six days? God lispied so that Israel could mime him, working six days and resting the seventh (Exod. 20:11). To be sure the six days in the Genesis creation account are our twenty-four hours days (*sic*), but they are metaphorical representations of a reality beyond human comprehension and imitation.

This last statement is plausible, and may yet prove to be the case. However, with the literary data now available to us, should we join hands in agreement? In employing anthropomorphism and metaphor, it is important to realize the element of truth behind those figures of speech. When we are told that “God said” we may agree that God does not have organs of speech as ours, but we would probably all agree that God is able to communicate. Likewise, “God heard” does not mandate organs of hearing, but does indicate His ability to receive information as if He indeed had those auditory, cartilage filled extremities. The growing hot of the nose of God, idiomatic for His anger, does not require that God have a physical nose as ours. So, in agreement with this man whom I highly honor and esteem, Genesis 1 does contain “metaphorical representations beyond human comprehension.” But does this require that the “days” of Genesis 1:1-2:4 be so understood?

I believe that several factors militate against accepting the metaphorical interpretation. One, the term *yôm* is used in five different ways in Genesis 1:1-2:4a: as daylight (1:4), with cardinal number (“day one” or “one day”), with ordinal numbers (2nd –7th days), as a 24 hour day (“signs and seasons and days and years”), in the idiomatic temporal expression “in the day” (when) [9, pp. 7-9]. Only its use with the numbers is in question. As I demonstrated last year, and as has been observed by many others, when *yôm* occurs with the ordinal numbers in the remainder of the Hebrew scriptures, it always indicates a 24-hour day (The sole exception to this is found in Hosea 6:2, a clearly poetic example of the widespread *x//x+1* formula of numerical parallelism [9, pp. 7-9]). The construct relationship, often appealed to by those seeking a metaphorical meaning for *yôm* and exemplified by such phrases elsewhere in the Old Testament by “day of the Philistines,” “day of judgment,” “day of the Lord,” etc., does not occur in Gen. 1:1-2:4a.

Two, the expression that further qualifies *yôm* when it appears with the ordinals “and there was evening and there was morning,” is unique to Genesis one. It would be to argue from silence to claim either that it supports normal usage of *yôm* or the metaphorical usage. However, the normal usage of the similar construction “evening and morning” emphasizes events over a 24-hour period in the rest of the Old Testament, so the burden of proof seems to lie with those desiring a metaphorical interpretation [9, pp. 10-11].

Three, the jussives of command (vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, etc.) employed indicate a quickness of completion [9, pp. 12-13].

Four, the expression *wayyehî-kēn* (“and it was so”), used elsewhere only in historical narrative, indicates completion within the time frame parameters indicated [9, p. 11].

Five, the author of Exodus 20:11 understood these as actual 24 hour days that serve as the basis for our workweek and day of rest. It had been God who initiated this day of rest (Genesis 2:3).

Six, the author of Psalms 33:6-9 enjoins us to fear God because of the power He displayed in enacting the Created order with an efficacious word: “He spoke, and it was; He commanded, and it stood” (33:9). What reason is there to fear a god whose commands are not carried out quickly?

CONCLUSION

Genesis 1:1-2:4a best fits within the known biblical genre of historical narrative, and should be taken normally and literally as communicating a very quick and recent creation, consistent with traditional understanding of 6 successive days of 24-hours duration.

Seeing Genesis 1:1-2:4a as a Special Creation Genre because of its uniqueness is at least possible, but there is nothing yet discovered that can, by comparison, confirm that possibility. Unless and until such discoveries are made, I believe that prudence dictates that our interpretation of the passage should be constrained by intra-textual, intra-contextual, and intra-cultural studies within the ANE milieu. It therefore should be interpreted within the literary genre of historical narrative.

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- [26] Though I have not personally observed such a position in print, I have heard such proclamations on various radio programs dealing with the issue of Creation versus evolution.
- [27] Consider that the structure of the book follows the pattern established in Acts 1:8: in Jerusalem (ch. 1-7), in Judea and Samaria (ch. 8-12), and to the remotest parts of the earth (ch. 13-28).
- [28] Metrical balance involves the meter of syllable count within the Hebrew lines of verse.