SHORT STUDY

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS
AND THE INTERPRETATION OF GEN 2:4-7

JACK COLLINS

I. Introduction

The interpretation of Gen 2:4-7 is a traditional hard place for Biblical studies. These verses are often cited as proof of discord between the creation narratives of Genesis 1 and 2, and hence as evidence of disparate sources of the originals. In response, many have sought to harmonize the two pericopes, but with widely differing conclusions. The purpose of this essay is to employ the tools of discourse grammar to see if they can shed light on this passage.

We begin by giving the Hebrew of Gen 2:4-8, with the RSV for a sample English version. Our grammatical discussion will lead to an interpretation that we can express by modifying the RSV

4 אלה תולדות השמים והארץ בהבראם ביום עשות יהוה אלהים ארץ ושמים

5 וכל שיח השדה טרם יהיה בארץ וכל־עשׂב השדה טרם יצמח
כי לא המטיר יהוה אלהים על־הארץ ואדם אין לעבד את־האדמה

6 ואד יעלה מן־הארץ והשקה את־כל־פני־האדמה

7 וייצר יהוה אלהים את־האדם עפר מן־האדמה ויפח באפיו נשמת חיים
ויהי האדם לנפש חיה

8 ויטע יהוה אלהים גן־בעדן מקדם וישם שם את־האדם אשר יצר

(4) These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, (5) when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up--for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground; (6) but a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground--(7) then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. (8) And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. (RSV)

The way the RSV has divided verse 4 into two parts, with 4b as the beginning of the sentence that continues on through verse 5, represents a

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common analysis of the clause-to-clause relationships.[1] Further, the inter-
pretation of the Hebrew '*eres* as "earth" in verses 5-6 is also common.
Indeed, it is this that leads to the declaration of contradiction between these
verses and the events of Genesis 1. S. R. Driver is typical:[2]

> The words [of verses 4b-5], taken in connexion with the sequel (v. 7), are intended
> to describe the condition of the earth at the time when man was created: no shrub
> or herb--and *a fortiori*, no tree--had yet appeared upon it, for it was not suffi-
> ciently watered to support vegetation. According to i. 11f., plant- and tree-life was
> complete three 'days' before the creation of man: obviously the present writer
> views the order of events differently.

Those who oppose source criticism but still accept this clause-to-clause analysis
typically contend that the two pericopes are better seen as complementary
rather than contradictory; and any successful harmonization between the
two pericopes diminishes the credibility of conventional source analysis.[3]
    A recent example of such a complementary interpretation comes from
Mark Futato.[4] He says,

> I understand Gen 2:5 as having a global reference that would parallel the situa-
> tion prior to Days 3b [Gen 1:11-12] and 6b [Gen 1:26-30], i.e., before God created
> vegetation and people.... Rather than being a second creation account, Gen 2:4-25
> is properly read as a resumption and expansion not of Day 6 but of Days 3b and
> 6b taken together as a unit.[5]

He uses this to support the conclusion that strict chronological sequence is
not a part of the communicative intent of either Genesis 1 or 2, and hence
to support the so-called "framework" interpretation of the Genesis days.

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[1] The RSV as it stands is non-committal on whether verse 4a goes with 1:1-2:3 as its
conclusion, or with 2:4b-25 as its heading. My discussion will address that question later.

[2] S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (Westminster Commentary; London: Methuen, (1904), 36-
37. Cf. Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997 [German original,
1910]),4-5; John Skinner, *Genesis* (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T & T. Clark),
51; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984 [German original, 1974]),
197. Terje Stordalen, "Genesis 2, 4: Restudying a locus classicus," *ZAW* 104:2 (1992) 163-177,
gives an overview of the process whereby this became dominant (at 163). The influence of this
approach is visible in many places, which it would be tedious to document; one example would
be Dianne Bergant and Carroll Stuhlmueller, "Creation according to the Old Testament,"
in Ernan McMullin, ed., *Evolution and Creation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press,
1985), 153-175, at 155, who simply take it for granted.

[3] Richard Hess, "Genesis 1-2 in its literary context," *TynB* 41:1 (1990), 143-53, gives a
rationale for this approach without discussing the particulars of Genesis 2:4-7. As he observes,
it is a feature of Genesis first to give the overall picture, and then to go back and focus on some
details. Derek Kidner, "Genesis 2:5, 6: Wet or Dry?" *TynB* 17 (1966) 109-14, attempts to
harmonize the two passages by taking 2:5-6 as describing the same conditions as 1:2, "the
unrelieved expanse of waters" (112).

[4] Mark Futato, "Because it had rained: A study of Gen 2:5-7 with implications for Gen 2:4-25
and Gen 1:1-2:3," *WTJ* 60 (1998), 1-21. Although the analysis and conclusions of the present
paper originated independently of Futato's work, they have profited greatly from that work.

[5] Futato, "Because it had rained," 12 n.41 and 14.

In my judgment Futato is probably right in supposing that, under this analysis of Gen 2:4-8, the only way to avoid the declaration of incoherence between the two pericopes is to do away with sequentiality. But this can lead us to question whether the analysis is itself right. I am the more interested in raising this question, because my own exegesis has convinced me of a view of the Genesis days as "analogical days," namely they are God's work days: they are analogous, and not identical, to ours, structured for the purpose of setting a pattern for the human rhythm of work and rest. According to this interpretation, the days are "broadly consecutive" (allowing for the possibility that parts of the days may overlap, or that there may be logical rather than chronological criteria for grouping some events in a particular day).[6]

II. Discourse Considerations and Literary Structure for Gen 2:4-25

Discourse analysis is the discipline that studies texts as acts of communication. Discourse grammar analyzes grammatical structures, such as verb tense and aspect, to find patterns of usage related to communicative intent. Described this way, its advantages for exegesis should be obvious and not particularly controversial. Unfortunately, discourse grammarians often use exotic vocabulary and make extravagant claims, and generally do not make clear to the uninitiated just which parts of their position are common ground among Hebrew grammarians, and which are not.[7] I aim to make use of those parts which are in fact common ground.

Our first task is to identify the genre of our text: is it narrative, exposition, exhortation, eulogistic poetry, lament, or something else? There is no difficulty in discerning that in this passage we are dealing with narrative prose. Next we must delineate the boundaries and structures of the individual pericopes. In this case, we must decide whether we should in fact divide verse 4; and then whether any of its parts belong to the first pericope (1:1-2:3) or to the second (2:5-25).

Many have noticed that in Gen 2:4 we have an elaborate chiasmus.[8] In general, the communicative function of a chiasmus is to unify its parts, with

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[6] C. John Collins, "Reading Genesis 1:1-2:3 as an act of communication: Discourse analysis and literal interpretation," in Joseph Pipa, Jr. and David Hall, eds., *Did God Create in Six Days?* (Taylors: Southern Presbyterian Press, 1999), 131-51. At 142-43 I offer some critique of the framework scheme.

7 In this light it is understandable that Bruce Waltke and Michael O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 55, "have resisted the strong claims of the discourse grammarians"; but it is nonetheless an unfortunate decision on their part. After all, the goal of discourse grammar is riot to replace the traditional grammar (which seems to be Waltke and O'Connor's perception), but to incorporate that grammar into a systematic description of what good readers in the receptor audience do when they receive a text.

[8] E.g., Yehudah Kiel, *Sefer Biresit* (Genesis, Da'at Miqra; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1997), 43 (Hebrew page numbers); C. John Collins, "The *wayyiqtol* as 'pluperfect': When and

the context allowing us to infer just what kind of unity the author has in view.[9] The chiasmus here can be seen thus: **a** heavens ... **b** earth ... **c** when they were created **c'** in the day that the Lord God made **b'** earth and **a'** heavens. As I observed in an earlier paper,

> Such an elaborate chiasmus is evidence of art, not coincidence. Further, by this means the author has tied the two accounts together: note how the word order "the heavens and the earth" (**a** and **b**), as well as the verb *bara* "create" (c), point us back to 1:1 (as well as 1:21, 27 for the verb); whereas the change in divine name from '*elohim*, "God" (ch. 1) to *yhwh elohim*, "the Lord God" (ch. 2-3) is reflected in the c' element. It is hard to escape the conclusion that the final editor wanted his readers to read the two accounts as complementary, not contradictory.[10]

This further shows why the change in divine name from 4a to 4b does not of itself indicate that the two parts are separable:[11] instead, as Franz Delitzsch put it, "The combination of the two names denotes ... the oneness of God the Creator [*'elohim*, 1:1-2:4a] and the God of Israel, or the God of positive revelation [yhwh, 2:4b-3:24]."[12]

Therefore the features of the text invite us to read verse 4 as a unit, and to start a new sentence at the beginning of verse 5. However, is it a postscript to the first pericope,[13] or a heading to the second? The simplest answer is that it introduces what follows: that is the function of the *toledot* "generations" phrases throughout Genesis (cf. 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2),[14] but so long as the communicative function is observed (i.e., as an invitation to read the two narratives as complements) it does not matter much.[15]

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why," *TynB* 46:1 (1995) 117-140, at 138-40; Stordalen, "Genesis 2, 4," 169-75; Alviero Niccacci, *The Syntax of the Verb in Classical Hebrew Prose* (JSOTSS 86, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990 [Italian original, 1986]), 200 n.26; Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Word Commentary; Waco: Word, 1987), 46, 53; Umberto Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961 [Hebrew original, 1944]), I: 98-99.

[9] For example, the chiastic word order of Genesis 1:5 expresses simultaneous naming of the light and darkness. A good discussion of the chiasmus appears in H. Van Dyke Parunak, "Oral typesetting: Some uses of Biblical structure," *Bib* 62:2 (1981) 153-68.

[10] Collins, "*Wayyiqtol* as pluperfect," 139. Stephen Kempf, "Introducing the Garden of Eden: The structure and function of Genesis 2:4b-7," *JOTT* 7:4 (1996) 33-53, acknowledges the chiasmus but supports the division of the verse on the basis of, among other things, the change in divine name (at 39-41).

[12] Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1888), 114. Cf. also Cassuto, Genesis, I: 86-88.

[13] As preferred recently by Alviero Niccacci, "Analysis of Biblical narrative," in R. D. Bergen, ed., *Biblical Hebrew and Discourse Linguistics* (Dallas: SIL, 1994), 175-98, at 184 (but without discussion).

[14] Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 49; Delitzsch, *Genesis*, 110. This agrees with the paragraph marker of the Masoretic text.

[15] As Cassuto noted, *Genesis*, I: 99. Hence the suggestion that the difference in conclusion between Niccacci and myself on this point is evidence of "the subjective nature of Discourse Analysis" is a drastic overstatement (Joseph Pipa, Jr., "From chaos to cosmos: A critique of the non-literal interpretations of Genesis 1: 1-2:3," in *Did God Create in Six Days?*, 153-98, at 179;

Next we must assess the structure of the whole pericope. Here is where the discourse grammar of the verb can help us. In a Biblical Hebrew narrative, the function of the *wayyiqtol* verb form (also improperly called "the waw-consecutive with imperfect") is as "the backbone or storyline tense of Biblical Hebrew narrative discourse."[16] Hence, if we want to find the main sequence of events in a narrator"s presentation,, we should begin by looking for the *wayyiqtol* verbs.[17] Other verb forms are used for supplying background information: e.g., the "perfect" (*qatal*) is used to denote events off the storyline, while the "imperfect" (*yiqtol*), "converted perfect" (*weqatal*), and participle (*qotel*) denote background activities with process aspect ("something was happening").[18]

From this we can see that the storyline begins in verse 7 with the first *wayyiqtol* verb (*wayyiser*, "and he formed"). Verses 5-6 are syntactically background, or setting, for verse 7: with verbs describing what had "not yet" happened in verse 5, and then verbs with process aspect in verse 6 (*ya'aleh*, RSV "went up," better "was going up"; *wehisqa*, RSV "watered," better "was watering") describing what was happening when the action of verse 7 took place.[19] This yields a structure as follows:

> 2:4   Hinge/heading
> 2:5-6 Background/setting--specific circumstances for following events
> 2:7-9 Events: formation of man, planting of garden, placing of man
> 2:10-14 Excursus: the four primeval rivers[20]

cf. Benjamin Shaw, "The literal day interpretation," in the same volume, 199-220, at 200 n.3). The difference is simply one of literary judgment, and does not impinge on the validity of the methodology (especially since Niccacci does not interact with the alternative).

[16] R. E. Longacre, "Discourse perspective on the Hebrew verb: Affirmation and restatement," in Walter Bodine, ed., *Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 177-89, at 178. Cf. also Randall Buth, "The Hebrew verb in current discussions," *JOTT* 5:2 (1992) 91-105.

[17] Of course, since this verb form can be used for imbedded storylines, we cannot mechanically identify the occurrence of the verb form with this function.

[18] "Process aspect" has a number of contextually inferred nuances, such as habitual action, repeated action, one action in process, inceptive action.

[19] This analysis agrees with Niccacci;, "Analysis of Biblical narrative," 187; cf. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 46 n.5a. Futato, "Because it had rained," 2 n.5 and 5-6, argues that verse 7 is part of the background with verses 5-6. However, this is unsatisfactory because (1) the *wayyiqtol* sequence begins in verse 7 and runs through verse 9; and (2) it gives no indication of how the discontinuity between verses 7 and 8 is detectable. He depends, not so much on the grammatical particulars as on his assessment of this section as having a "problem-resolution" structure, as well as on his interest in supporting a version of the "framework" view of 1:1-2:3. But if neither of those has independent support, his case loses its force.

[20] The verb forms are participles, an imperfect (verse 10 *yippared*, RSV "it divided"), and a converted perfect (verse 10 *wehaya*, RSV "and became"), which have the function of giving process aspect background with past time reference. That is, these four rivers were flowing etc., though they might not flow the same way now (cf. John Munday, Jr., "Eden's geography erodes flood geology," *WTJ* 58:1 [1996] 123-54). The existence of the excursus explains why verse 15 begins by re-stating the action of verse 8 (verse 8 "there he put the man" . . . verse 15 "the Lord God took the man and set him"): it resumes the narrative after a digression. This

2:15-17 Events: God establishes terms of relationship with man
2:18-25 Events: formation of complementary helper
                    Peak: verses 23-24[21]

III. *Harmonizing with Gen 1:1-2:3*

Since Gen 2:7 recounts the formation of the first human (cf. verse 6 which says there was not a human up to this point), we cooperate with the author by taking it as complementary to 1:27. In doing so we note that the formation of the woman, which is given in the same verse in the broad stroke account of chapter 1, is in chapter 2 separated from the making of the man by several events. The making of the woman is preceded by a declaration of "not good" in 2:18, indicating that at that point we have not yet come to the "very good" status of everything in 1:31. We note further that Gen 2:19 describes the formation of the animals.[22] All of this suggests that the storyline events of 2:5-25 are events of the "sixth day" of 1:24-31.[23]

This being the case, it makes sense to see if we can interpret 2:5-6 in a simple way as background to the events that begin in verse 7. Can we cooperate with the invitation of verse 4, to read the two pericopes as complementary, in a way that is consonant with the grammar and the lexicon? We can if we take note of several factors. First, we note that discourse-oriented exegesis shows that the "days" of Genesis 1 need not be the 24-hour kind, and that hence the events of the sixth "day" could be some number of weeks, years, or even longer after the beginning of the creation week in 1:3.[24]

We note further that the semantic range of Hebrew *'eres* in verse 5: is it "earth," "land," or "region"? It is fairly common to take *'eres* as "earth" (cf. RSV, NASB, NIV text), and to find in this a description of the condition of the whole earth.[25] But the word quite often means simply "land" (cf.

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explanation of verse 15 hardly supports Futato's contention that the narrative of Genesis 2 is not governed by chronological concerns ("Because it had rained," 11-13; Futato takes verse 9-14 as an expansion of verse 8a).

[21] The "peak" is the place of maximum interest in the narrative, and here it is marked by (1) the poetic and rhetorical features of verse 23; (2) the fact that the project of verse 18 is now complete; (3) the enduring consequences described in verse 24; and (4) the viewpoints of the chief characters, man (verse 23) and God (verse 24) being clearly stated.

[22] See Collins, "The *wayyiqtol* as pluperfect," 135-40, justifying the interpretation of 2:19, "The Lord God had formed from the ground every animal of the field and every flying thing of the sky," i.e., this formation actually took place before the making of the man, as recorded in Genesis 1.

[23] Kiel, *Sefer Beresit*, 44 (Hebrew page numbers), points out that Jewish tradition sees the second pericope as an elaboration of the sixth day (see his note 7 for evidence).

[24] See Collins, "Reading Genesis 1:1-2:3 as an act of communication."

[25] If we reject the view that there are two competing creation accounts, we have to decide what to do about it not having rained: are we to suppose that rain did not fall until the flood?

NIV margin), either as dry land (its sense in 1:10-31) or as a specific region (its sense in 2:11-13), where God made man prior to moving him into the Garden of Eden.[26]

The discourse relation of verses 5-6 to verse 7, as the setting for the events of verse 7, makes the latter line of interpretation the simplest: that is, in a particular year, at the time of year before the rain fell to water the ground (e.g. in Palestine it does not rain during the summer),[27] and at the time when the "mist" (or perhaps "spring"?)[28] was rising (possibly beginning to rise),[29] in some unspecified region, God formed the first human, planted a garden, and then transplanted the man to this new place to enjoy it and care for it. This interpretation has the advantages of (1) following directly from the discourse relations; (2) using ordinary meanings of words; and (3) being easily harmonious with Gen 1:1-2:3.[30]

IV. *A Revised Translation of Gen 2:4-8 (with notes)*

We may modify the RSV given above to reflect this analysis (I have included several philological comments as annotations):

> (4) These are the generations
>   of the heavens and the earth when they were created,

[26] Cf. Kiel, *Sefer Biresit*, 46 (Hebrew page numbers), for a good discussion of the options and an argument for "region."

[27] Cf. John Bimson et al., .*New Bible Atlas* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 14-15. Futato, "Because it had rained," 3, notes this fact but does not apply it in the same way as I do.

[28] Hebrew '*ed*, no one knows for sure what this word means. I see no reason to dissent from Delitzsch, *Genesis*, 117, who argues on the basis of Job 36:27 (its only other occurrence in the Bible) and an Arabic cognate for the sense "mist" (i.e., "condensed vapor"). The Septuagint rendered the Hebrew with πηγή, "spring," and comparative evidence may favor something like "flood" (cf. Wenham, Genesis 1-15, 58; Victor Hamilton, *Genesis 1-17* [New International Commentary on the OT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 154-56). I do not, however, consider this evidence decisive. Futato, "Because it had rained," 5-9, argues strongly and, I think, successfully, against the "flood"/"stream" interpretation and in favor of something like "rain-cloud," i.e., along the lines of Delitzsch. Kiel, *Sefer Beresit,* 48 (Hebrew page numbers), shows that this is the Targum and Rabbinic tradition. (Futato does not like the rendering "mist" because according to his definition the English word does not quite match the meaning "rain-cloud"; but it seems clear that Delitzsch means something close to the sense for which Futato argues.)

[29] It is possible to infer from the context that the particular nuance of the process aspect is inceptive action, "it was beginning to go up. .. it was beginning to water." Waltke and O'Connor, *Hebrew Syntax*, §31.2c, support such a possibility, but their examples are not all persuasive (2 Sam 15:37 is the best, cf. RSV).

[30] This harmonization, by the way, which began with the *possibility* that the "days" were not the 24-hour kind, seems actually to, *favor* the likelihood that they represent longer spans of time. The passage itself supplies an explicit reason why the vegetation had not grown, namely the absence of rain and man (verse 5). In order for this to hold there must be some lapse of time longer than a few days.

in the day that[31] the LORD God made earth and heaven.
(5) When no bush of the field[32] was yet in the land and no small plant of the field
had yet sprung up--for the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the land, and
there was no man to work the ground, (6) and a mist was going up[33] from the land
and was watering the whole face of the ground--(7) then the Lord God formed
the man[34] of dust[35] from the ground,[36] and breathed into his nostrils the breath
of life, and the man became a living creature.[37] (8) And the Lord God planted[38]
a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed.

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[31] I.e., "when the Lord God made." For this meaning of *beyom* followed by an infinitive
construct see Brown-Driver-Briggs, 400a; P Jouon and T. Muraoka, *Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*
(Rome: Editrice Pontifico Biblico, 1993), §129p A.2.

[32] Futato, "Because it had rained," 4, argues that the only legitimate interpretation of *siah
hassddeh* "bush of the field" must be "wild shrubs of the steppe," in contrast to the *seb hassadeh*
"small plant of the field," which he takes to be cultivated (a possibility mentioned in Kidner,
"Genesis 2:5, 6," 109).

[33] Taking the verb *ya'aleh*, as most do, as a simple Qal imperfect with *'ed* as subject. Futato,
"Because it had rained," 8, argues that we should interpret the verb as a Hiphil imperfect
with the Lord God as subject of both it and the next verb *wehisqa* "and it was a mist that he
[i.e., the Lord God] was bringing up, and he was watering." This is possible, but the reasons
he offers do not settle the question. (I) When the first element of a clause is not the verb, as
is here the case, it is more expected for that element to be the subject. (2) A noun in the
semantic category "mist/cloud" can as easily be the subject of the Qal of the verb (cf.
1 Kgs 18:44) as the object of the Hiphil (cf. Ps 135:7). (3) Similarly, it is quite proper for a
source of water to be the subject of the next verb, *wehisqa* "and was watering" (as it is in verse
10). The credibility of his argument that "God would be the explicit solver of both the
problem of no rain and the problem of no cultivator" (8-9) depends in turn on the prior
acceptance of his literary reading for the text, and hence cannot establish that reading in
opposition to others. Hence I see no reason not to translate this in the usual way.

[34] The Hebrew has a definite article *ha'ddam,* "*the* man," namely the first human. I would
take the article as anaphoric to the mention of "man" in verse 5, which does not have the
article: literally, "and as for man, there was none to work." Without the article it becomes the
proper name Adam in verse 20. In verse 23, using different terms, the "woman" (*'issa*) is taken
from the "man" (*is*).

[35] That is, loose soil.

[36] Many suppose that there is a play on words here: "human" is *'adam*, while "ground"
is *'adama*, from which man was made and now to which lie will returns because of sin (cf. 3:19).
Since, however, in verse 19 God also "forms" the animals "from the ground," we must not
push this too far.

[37] It is difficult to give a good literal translation of this term (*nepes hayya*, traditionally
"living soul": cf. 1:21, 24, 30; 2:7, 19) and still have elegant English: "living animated being"
would be the closest. Delitzsch, *Genesis*, 94, points out that since a *nepes* (often rendered "soul")
animates a body, the expression denotes "animated material beings, bodies having souls." In
I Cor 15:45, Paul employs the LXX rendering of this expression, ψυχὴ ζῶσα ("living soul")
in the sense of "living natural being," to contrast with the supernatural life he denotes by
nvefμa ("spirit") in verses 44-46.

[38] In Collins, "The *wayyiqtol* as pluperfect," 140 n.75, I reject the NIV's making this
pluperfect: "the Lord God *had* planted." I think the end of the verse, *'aser yasar* "whom he
had formed," places the formation of verse 7 prior to the planting of verse 8.

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