

The book of origins

Genesis simply explained

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The origin of the universe and of life

Please read Genesis 1:1–25

The Prologue to Genesis (1:1–2:3) is a most sublime and stately section. It is not poetry, neither is it a hymn of praise. Rather, it is a moving and powerful statement of God's creative activity which should stir us to worship and adore the great King of creation.¹

God

On Christmas Eve 1968 the crew of the spaceship Apollo 8 became the first humans to orbit the moon. In their Christmas greetings to earth, the astronauts quoted these words: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.'

This opening sentence, so simple yet so profound, sets the tone for the whole prologue. It makes us sit up and prepare for what follows. Appropriately, the subject of the first sentence of the Bible and of Genesis is God. He is the subject of nearly every sentence in this first section: 'God said ...', 'God saw ...', 'God divided ...', 'God called ...', 'God made ...', 'God created ...', 'God

set ...', 'God blessed ...' The Bible is first and foremost revelation concerning God. From the very first verse God discloses truth about himself. The term used for 'God' is *Elohim*, the most common word in the Old Testament when referring to the deity. Like our English word 'God', it can be used of pagan gods, but here it is used for the one true and living God, the God who communicates and does things.

The Bible does not set out to prove God. God is bigger than any mathematical calculation or philosophical argument. The very fact of creation bears testimony to the reality of God: 'The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows his handiwork' (Psalm 19:1). When Paul took the gospel to the pagan cities of the Roman empire he taught the people to turn from their worthless idols to the living God who made heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them (cf. Acts 14:15; 17:24-31; 1 Thessalonians 1:8-9).

No human being is qualified to speak with certainty on the subject of origins. 'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding' (Job 38:4). Only God can give authoritative information. This book of Genesis is not the result of some thoughtful person's trying to grapple with the origin of all things and coming up with the great idea that behind everything there is a first cause, or a being above whom no greater can be conceived. Moses could have tossed such ideas around in the Egyptian court with the wise men of his day. But the first chapter of Genesis is not Moses' thoughts on God. Far from it! Here is God speaking through Moses. Moses is a prophet, God's spokesman, declaring God's Word. The verse tells us that there was a commencement to everything—to time and space and the whole universe. Matter is not eternal, as the ancient Babylonians and Greeks thought, and as some scientists

of today postulate. Everything that is in the universe had a beginning, and the universe itself had a beginning.

Before the commencement of all things God was already there. God was there when time began, when the universe began. John, in the opening words of his Gospel, has this verse of Genesis in mind when he writes concerning Jesus Christ: 'In the beginning was the Word ... He was in the beginning with God' (John 1:1-2). By implication, we are being told about God's eternity.

Before the mountains were brought forth,
Or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
Even from everlasting to everlasting, you are God
(Psalm 90:2).

We bow in wonder and amazement at the greatness of God.

The creator God

We are also informed that God is the Creator. This whole chapter is about God's creative power. Verse 1 is an introductory, comprehensive statement. It informs us of the origin of all things, as well as summarizing the whole creative process described in the following verses. Before the beginning only God existed.

The phrase 'the heavens and the earth' is often used in the Bible to mean the whole universe and all that is in it. God is the origin of the universe. It teaches us that God is the Creator of the heavenly realm as well as the earthly; of the unseen, spirit world of angelic beings as well as the physical things which we can see. Psalm 148:1-5 includes angels as well as sun, moon and stars under the heading of 'heavens' and calls out: 'Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded and they were created.' What is true of God the Father is also true of the Son, Jesus Christ (see John 1:3; Colossians 1:16).

A common belief among 'New Agers' is the ancient idea that God is another term for everything. This belief is known as pantheism. The opening verse of Genesis is contrary to such a notion. The universe is not God. God is quite distinct from what he has made. Though all things have their being in God, God is above all. He remains transcendent and the only self-existent being in the whole universe. Everything that exists depends ultimately on God.

The word translated 'created' is used very sparingly in the Old Testament, and every time it is used, God is the subject. Though the term is not always used for 'creation out of nothing', it is significant that no materials are ever mentioned when it is employed. It is never said that God created *out of* something. The word always refers to what is new, unusual or wonderful. No human, no other so-called god, can create in this sense. Creation is God's work and in this first verse of the Bible the ultimate wonder is clearly implied that the raw material out of which everything exists in the universe was made from nothing. It appeared because God willed it into being. All the other creative acts described in this chapter follow from this initial act.

Our universe, therefore, is not the result of an accident. There was nothing there to have an accident! Human beings in rebellion against God hate the thought that before anything existed there was nothing but God. Does anyone really believe that nothing evolved into something? Our universe did not evolve through chance happenings. Sinful humanity would sooner believe a lie than face up to the reality of God. The Bible's estimate of the human mind is so accurate: 'Although they knew God, they did not glorify him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools ...' (Romans 1:21-22).

Because the universe is the result of God's creative activity people can be assured that there is meaning and purpose to life. Creation is a purposeful act. It is not like an unexpected or unwanted pregnancy. God ordered it and planned it. He created all things for his glory. There is no higher purpose, no greater reason for living. God himself is the highest end, the chief and ultimate goal.

You are worthy, O Lord,
To receive glory and honour and power;
For you created all things,
And by your will they exist and were created

(Revelation 4:11).

Earth

A more accurate translation of the opening words of verse 2 would be 'Now the earth ...'² Attention is drawn to the earth. The rest of the chapter deals with items that are in one way or another related to this world. Nothing is said about the creation of spirit beings who belong to the heavenly, invisible realm. There is a very good reason why the text so quickly focuses on the earth. This is where human beings were placed, where they rebelled against God and where God eventually came in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. It was on this earth that the Son of God shed his precious blood to bring us to God. It was here in our world that his body was placed in a tomb and on the third day was resurrected. From earth he ascended bodily into heaven, and it will be to this earth that he will return a second time in great power to judge the living and the dead and to bring in a new creation. Then the earth will be populated with redeemed humanity and God will be as much at home here as he is in heaven.

After the general declaration concerning the creation of the entire universe, we zoom in on the earth and we are told what

it looked like before its transformation into the lovely ordered world that we read of later. The earth 'was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep'. It was a mass of fluid, dark and totally incapable of sustaining life. It was a trackless waste, a great void. Imagine yourself standing on a raft in the middle of the Pacific Ocean on a dark, misty night. That was the kind of state the whole earth was in at first. 'Chaos', when used as the opposite of 'cosmos', is the term to describe the state of the earth at that time. 'Chaos', in this context, is not to be taken in its more popular sense of an absolute mess, or a totally confused, out-of-control state as if a bomb had hit it. 'Cosmos' is the world as a habitable, well-formed place to live. 'Chaos', therefore, in this technical sense, stands for the original unformed state of the earth, unfit for human and animal habitation.

Some have argued that verse 2 is describing the results of a great catastrophe that occurred between the original creation of verse 1 and the situation presented in verse 2. They suggest that it was the result of Satan's fall causing complete devastation on the earth. To further support this idea the beginning of verse 2 is rendered: 'And the earth *became* without form and void.' The 'gap theory', as it is called, uses Jeremiah 4:23, which speaks of the coming judgement in terms of the earth's being 'without form, and void' and the heavens having 'no light' because of the wickedness of the people. This idea was first suggested in the nineteenth century to take account of the evidence of the fossils and the length of time needed for the rock formations. It is a clear case of allowing a particular theory to influence the interpretation and translation of the Scriptures. The passage gives no hint of any satanic rebellion or divine judgement and the Hebrew text does not allow for the force of the verb to be changed from 'was' to 'become'.

The Spirit of God

That things were not out of control or under judgement is confirmed by the phrase: 'And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.' 'Hovering' is found elsewhere in the Old Testament only in Deuteronomy 32:11, where it is used to describe an eagle hovering over her young to keep watch over them, ready to swoop into action if necessary. Here in Genesis, the Spirit of God was present to protect and control, and was ready to act. Some scholars have tried to translate 'Spirit of God' as 'mighty wind'. While it is true that the word for God (*Elohim*) can occasionally be used as a superlative,³ this is unlikely in a chapter where all the other references to *Elohim* refer to God. Furthermore, in every other case where the phrase occurs in the Old Testament, it means 'Spirit of God'. For instance, God says of Bezalel, the master craftsman, 'I have filled him with the Spirit of God' (Exodus 31:3). Not only is the Son of God associated with creation, but also the Spirit of God (Psalm 104:29-30). The Son and the Spirit are also involved in the new creation (John 3:5-8; Romans 7:6; 8:9-11,23; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15).

Notice the parallel between the last two lines. 'On the face of the deep' parallels 'over the face of the waters' and 'darkness' parallels 'Spirit of God'. Darkness is primarily a reference to the lack of light and prepares for the commanding word of verse 3. In some contexts darkness can include a more sinister idea associated with evil or judgement. In view of the parallel with 'Spirit of God', darkness certainly has no such connotations here. When God spoke from Sinai he appeared with darkness, cloud and thick darkness (Deuteronomy 4:11; 5:23). 'God can veil himself in darkness at moments of great revelation,' and the phrase could be hinting 'at the hidden presence of God waiting to reveal himself'.⁴ In other words, God was powerfully present by his Spirit in that darkness (Psalm 18:11), watching over what

had already been brought into being by his creative action and poised to continue the good work.

The situation in verse 2 prepares us for the revelatory words of command that follow. What God commences he finishes. There is a principle here that holds good in connection with the new creation as it applies to the church and individual believers. Paul reminds us in Philippians 1:6 'that he who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ'. God does not leave jobs half done.

The days of creation

The way in which God transformed the earth from an inhospitable, unformed mass into the beautiful, well-ordered world teeming with various forms of life and fit for human habitation is now described. God took time to do it. He could have produced the final product the moment he first created the universe from nothing. This was not God's way of doing things then, nor is it God's general way of working in our created world.

In the matter of salvation, the right moment in God's plan for sending his Son to redeem us was thousands of years after the initial promise in the Garden of Eden and nearly two thousand years after God's promise to Abraham. Even preparing believers for glory takes time. Though we are created anew in Christ Jesus in a moment and are positionally complete in him, in practice our conformity to what we are in Christ takes time. Only when Christ appears at the end of the age will we be completely transformed into his likeness, physically as well as spiritually. The final act, however, will be as quick as the initial act for we read, 'We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed' (1 Corinthians 15:51–52). We often like