

Study 8: The Meaning of Creation

Introduction. We will now study what is surely one of the all-time great religious statements: the first 11 chapters of the Book of Genesis, the greatest description of the very heart and soul of religion. In one very important respect, these are the foundational chapters of the entire Bible. The Bible is really the story of God's struggle with human beings to make Himself understandable to them over the course of time; as well as the story of their struggle to seize hold of God over time. And this ongoing struggle begins with these chapters of Genesis.

God's portrait, as sketched in Genesis, encompasses His infinite majesty as well as His tender concern for humanity. In Genesis, man is presented in all his dignity and in all his sinfulness. But Genesis is not just a statement of the basic religious facts of life. More importantly, it is an appeal to all of us, descendants of Adam and Eve, to live up to our vocation of being created in God's image and likeness.

It might seem a bit odd that we've waited until God's people are about to be sent off into exile from the Promised Land before taking up the story of the creation of the world. The reason we've waited is because the Genesis creation account is told in a very special way. If we have no knowledge of the people who wrote the account, if we don't understand their customs or their world view, then we can easily misunderstand what they're telling us. This is why it was important for us first to become acquainted with this tribe of Abraham before listening to their explanation of the basic questions of life.

There's a lot we *don't* know about how the Book of Genesis was put together, but one thing we do know is that the first 11 chapters have a very long history. These chapters actually form a little book in itself and took nearly 1,200 years to reach its present form! Some elements of the account likely go back to before the time of Abraham; and we suspect that it didn't reach its present form until sometime in the 8th Century B.C. Its principle elements probably had their origin long before that time in the oral traditions of the people, stories told around the campfires of the wandering tribe of Abraham.

Many of the images and expressions used stem from the common folklore of the peoples of the Middle East, for the authors and those who listened to them were people of their times, and quite naturally would speak and write in the imagery of the ancient East. Of course, there is one significant difference that separates Genesis from the stories of other peoples: it is stripped of all pagan polytheism and describes both a creative act and a God that are unique to the time.

The Genesis story is an argument cast in poetic and imaginative language in which the authors tell the pagan world: "You're wrong! The world is neither an accident nor the byproduct of some battle among gods. The world is the carefully planned work of the one, true God." The authors desire to arm their people against the fantastic explanations of the origin of man and the universe which were current among their pagan neighbors. In contrast to these explanations – a confusing mix of fantasy, vulgarity, myth and pessimism – the account of Genesis stands apart in its sublimity, beauty and tone. These chapters were written to ensure the People of God had a correct view of the basic religious questions of life.

Reading. Now open your Bible and read: Genesis 1-11

Background. For the first-time reader, Genesis can pose some interesting problems. We'll try to address several of the more obvious ones now.

✠ Was the world created in exactly as the author of Genesis describes the Creation?

No. God, through collaboration with the human author, was putting across, in a simple and easily understandable way, the basic truths of man's destiny and purpose of life. His audience was a simple group of primitive nomads; He was not addressing modern scientists. And so the descriptions of creation were not intended to be scientific. The people of the time had no telescopes or microscopes; they had only their eyes. God described things as they appeared to ancient man.

† Is the story of Genesis a true story?

Yes, provided we take the author on his own terms. To understand the creation story, we must put aside such questions as: “Did God really create the world in seven 24-hour periods?” “Was there a real tree, and what kind of fruit did our first parents eat?” Instead, we should approach the account logically and ask the proper questions: What is the message of Genesis? What answers are offered here by God to the great questions that have puzzled humanity for centuries?

† What is the message of Genesis?

God, our Creator, not only made us, but also knows the questionings of our heart. Loving us with an eternal love, He entrusted to one people, as guardians of the truth, some of the basic answers to these questions, so we would not grope forever in the darkness of ignorance. For example:

- √ There is only one God and everything depends on Him. Even the sun and the moon, so awe-inspiring that many people had turned them into gods, were merely God’s handiwork.
- √ God is all-powerful, something the author brings out by describing the act of creation as a mere word of command, “God spoke and it was so!”
- √ God is a God of order and harmony, going about His work of creation as a skilled carpenter would build a house. Creation is described as taking place in a single week to emphasize God’s great power and orderly plan, even though the work of creation likely took billions of years.
- √ To crown His work, God made man and woman. Though we are by no means the largest of God’s creations, we are among the most important because God has given us the awesome task of ruling over and subduing the rest of God’s handiwork. We were made in God’s image and likeness because, like God, who rules all of creation, we are to exercise dominion over the world.

Key Passages. Highlight these key passages in your Bible by writing key words in the margins.

† **God prepares a home for man.** [*Gen 1:1-2:3*]

† **The creation and fall of man.** [*Gen 2:4-3:6*]

† **The effects of Adam’s sin.** [*Gen 3:7-11:9*].

Some Highpoints.

- † **The “philosophy” of Genesis.** [*Gen 1:1*] When reading the creation story keep in mind that the authors were not, in any sense, philosophers. Abstract ideas like “nothingness” had no meaning for them. The closest they could come to an idea of “creation” – i.e., making something out of nothing -- was to describe it as putting order to a vast chaos. They expressed their ideas concretely, and so we should try to read Genesis as it was written and not quarrel with the authors because they lacked the intellectual tools of the philosopher.
- † **The goodness of creation.** [*Gen 1:4*] In Genesis we repeatedly read, “...and God saw that it was good.” The authors wanted their hearers to understand clearly that everything was created by the one God who is all good and who shares His goodness with His creation. Nothing that God has made is bad in itself. All depends on how we exercise our dominion over it.
- † **Sabbath.** [*Gen 1:5*] Creation is oriented to the Sabbath, a sign of the covenant between God and humanity. To celebrate the Sabbath, therefore, is to celebrate the covenant. Creation, therefore, exists for the sake of worship, giving a religious significance to the Sabbath rest. The ordering of the work of creation within the framework of a week is also intended to show us that creation was not an accident but a carefully planned process. I’ve always found it interesting that the concept of the seven-day week, first introduced in the creation story of Genesis, still orders the rhythm of our lives today, thousands of years later.

- † **Creation in service of man.** [*Gen 1:14*] Far from being gods themselves, the stars, sun and moon were placed in the heavens to serve man, providing warmth, light and aids to navigation.
- † **Equality of man and woman.** [*Gen 1:27*] Here the authors present God's sublime teaching on sex. They show how human reproduction is a blessing from God. Later [*Genesis 2:18-25*], they describe how man and woman possess equal dignity – woman comes from man and is his helpmate – that woman completes man – it is not good for man to be alone – and in marriage they find perfect and unbreakable union – two in one flesh.
- † **Man's freedom.** [*Gen 3:1-9*] Unlike other creatures, man has been given the wonderful privilege of offering God a free service of love. But this privilege carries with it the possibility of refusing to serve and the consequent loss of God's special gift of supernatural life. The author's description of the fall of man accounts for that vague feeling in all our hearts that there was once some terrible calamity that altered the course of history and left suffering and death in its wake. The psychological process of temptation outlined in these verses shows a remarkable insight into human nature:
- √ The tempter sows a doubt about God's goodness (*Gen 3:1*)
 - √ The woman dallies with temptation instead of dismissing it (*Gen 3:2*)
 - √ The serpent implies that God is mean and jealous of His position (*Gen 3:4-5*)
 - √ He further holds out as bait a new experience (*Gen 3:5*)
 - √ Finally, the woman takes over and the seed sown by the devil blossoms into sin (*Gen 3:6*)
- † **Sin's consequences.** [*Gen 3:10-11:9*] In a masterful series of episodes, the authors describe the terrible consequences of man's using his dominion against God.
- √ **Loss of control; shame.** [*Gen 3:7*] First man loses perfect control and discovers a conflict of desires and emotions within himself. This gives rise to shame.
 - √ **Disrupted harmony between husband and wife.** [*Gen 3:12-13*] The perfect harmony between Adam and Eve (husband and wife) is disrupted and turned into bickering and blame-shifting.
 - √ **Loss of effortless dominion.** [*Gen 3:13-19*] Man has lost his effortless dominion over the world, and now finds nature "red in tooth and claw." But God shows that He hasn't abandoned man, and in His words to the serpent, holds out the promise of restoration. This is the first mention of God's plan of redemption that will come about through the Incarnation. And so, in the first three chapters of Genesis, we have creation, fall and the promise of redemption.
 - √ **Death.** [*Gen 3:19*] Death is now man's fate, and is an image of the loss of the eternal life that God had originally planned for men.
 - √ **The second sin.** [*Gen 4:1-16*] Following close on the fall is the second sin, the first murder. Cain, a tiller of the soil, would be the likely choice as "bad guy" by the authors, whose audience was a tribe of desert wanderers and herdsmen. They were quite familiar with the constant rivalry between rootless nomads and settled farmers.
 - √ **The flood.** [*Gen 6:5-9:17*] In the story of the flood we see to what depths of sin and degradation Adam's descendants had sunk. Scriptural scholars tell us that the way in which the authors depict this disaster doesn't necessarily mean that it was worldwide. But the letter of the text is certainly satisfied if it involved the extensive flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates valley, which was certainly the "whole world" to this primitive Semitic people. The early Church Fathers saw in the story of the ark and image of the Church, for just as the family was saved from annihilation by taking refuge in the ark, so also through the Church we are saved from spiritual annihilation.

- √ **Covenant with Noah.** [Gen 9:9-17] This covenant is important because it shows that the God of the Jews is the Father of all humanity, and that the entire human race has a role to play and will eventually share in the benefits of God's plan.
- √ **Tower of Babel.** [Gen 11:1-9] Once again man tries to exercise dominion apart from God with original sin repeating its story. Here we also see an example of the innate distrust of the desert dwellers for the city dwellers.

Old and New Testaments.

- † **The New Adam.** The New Testament writers saw our Lord as the "New Adam." Read *Romans 5:12-21* for St. Paul's description of this comparison. And we see this echoed in the liturgy, especially in the liturgy of Christmas Day and Easter Vigil.
- † **The New Creation.** St. Peter tells us that "In fulfillment of His promise we expect a new heaven and a new earth, where uprightness will prevail" [2 *Pet 3:13*]. This "new heaven and new earth" is the restoration of all men to God through Christ and His Church. God carries forward this new work of creation which will not reach its completion until the last day. A major part is already completed in Christ's life and work [Rom 8:18-25]. And it is Jesus Christ who unites both Jews and Gentiles in His death, making them a single "new man" and making the Church a new humanity [1 *Cor 12:12-14*].
- † **The Old fulfilled in the New.** For the Christian the Old Testament represents, *in its totality*, an advance toward Christ; only when it attains Him does its real meaning, which was gradually hinted at, become clear. Every individual part derives its meaning from the whole, and the whole derives its meaning from the end – from Jesus Christ. To see how deeply the Gospel writers appreciated Christ and the work of redemption as a new creation in grace, just read the prologue of John's Gospel and note the deliberate parallel with the words of Genesis 1. And even before John, St. Paul had said, "All things were created through Him and for Him" [See *Colossians 1:15-23*]. God created the universe, then, to be able to become a human being and to pour out His love upon us and to invite us to love Him in return. As Christians, therefore, we do not read the Old Testament for its own sake but always with Christ and through Christ.

The ancient Church and the Church of the Middle Ages knew this, that the Bible is a whole and that we understand its truth only when we understand it with Christ in mind. But in more modern times, this understanding was forgotten by many scriptural scholars, who, under the influence of the new historical thinking, read every scriptural text in itself, interested only in the explanation of particulars. They studied texts going backward, not forward, interested not in Christ, but only in the probable origins of the texts. Thankfully, many scholars are today correcting this approach – an approach that contradicts the entire inner nature of the Bible – and are once again examining the Bible as a whole

Questions. Reflect on the following questions offered for discussion:

1. What do you think the offer made by the serpent – "You shall be like God, knowing good and evil" – meant to Adam and Eve?
2. What is the biggest obstacle faced by the modern reader when trying to understand the first eleven chapters of Genesis?
3. If you had to use one word to describe the atmosphere of the creation story, what word would you use?
4. How would you describe the relationship between Adam and Eve in God's original plan?
5. What does the story of Cain and Abel mean to you? What lessons can we take from it?
6. Why exactly was God punishing the builders of the Tower of Babel? What connections can you make to our society today?