

In the beginning God created... Genesis 1 and 2 as an argumentative poem

This following text is Jonathan Green's speaking notes from the gathering held at The Sanctuary Westminster on 2nd November 2006.

Introduction

We have taken our first few tentative steps into this story we find ourselves in. A story that we intentionally root ourselves in as followers of Jesus Christ, as God's children. We have thought together about pre-creation. About a being who becomes a creator. Where the words 'let there be' become powerful world-forming words — creative words which form the universe we find ourselves in, where the creator is deeply invested and involved with his creation in an ongoing way.

We also thought about why having a grasp upon Act 1 – upon our origins - is so vital. To live life to its fullest we need to know what 'normal' is and we find out what 'normal' looks like here in these first few chapters! By spending time here and refusing to hurry along, we are helped to find our place in the story of God. This week we are going to think some more about the kind of narrative Genesis 1 and 2 is, asking the question: 'What is the purpose of these texts?'

The significance of names

Who here knows the meaning of their name? Jonathan means 'God has gifted' or 'God's gift'. I don't know what your name means... you should certainly find out if you don't know.

In the context of the ancient Near East, names have great significance. The names that are used in Genesis 1 are significant. They tell us a lot about who God is. In Genesis 1, the Hebrew word *Elohim* is just translated 'God' in our English Bibles, but it is the general name used for God throughout the ancient Near East. And the Bible says that *Elohim*, brings the whole creation into existence out of nothing.

In Exodus chapter 3 and 6.1-12 God reveals himself to Moses as *Yahweh* when he calls Moses to lead the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. The name *Yahweh* is the title God chooses to identify himself as the divine Redeemer, the God who rescues his people from slavery and meets with them at Mount Sinai.

When the names *Yahweh* (LORD) and *Elohim* (God) are joined in Genesis 2.4, it makes the powerful point that the same God who rescued Israel from slavery is the God who has made all things: the Creator of heaven and earth. The Israelites came to know God firstly as their Redeemer; only afterward do they learn of his role as the Creator...¹

Pay attention!

The first act of any drama is worth paying attention to. The first chapters of Genesis, were written for the Israelites long ago in a culture quite different from our own. And though some aspects of the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2 may seem strange to us, we need to remember that they made perfect sense to the people of Israel when they first heard them. This is because the writer is using imagery and concepts familiar to his own audience. It's called effective communication, and once we read the first chapters of Genesis against the backdrop of the ancient world in which they were written, we begin to see the power of the message the story is meant to convey.

I think that this is a helpful observation to make as we unpack scripture together and it is something we will come to again and again. We cannot just expect to read the Bible and understand its meaning at first glance – often to understand a text as it was meant to be read means that we need to understand the original context of often thousands of years ago. We see this in the New Testament

¹ This first part is taken from the brilliant book, *The Drama of Scripture*, by Craig Bartholemew and Michael Gohen, check out the book for a helpful overview of the Biblical narrative.

too. Reading a letter of Paul is often like listening to one end of a phone call... there is much of the conversation that we do not hear!

You see, just because the Creation narrative is the opening words of The Bible as we know it, doesn't necessarily mean that it was written first. Indeed, the book of Job is probably the oldest book in the Bible. But the scriptures were edited so as to effectively tell the story of Israel in relation to the God of heaven and earth. The story of origins was most likely written much later in Israel's history...

An argument

The ancient Near East had many competing accounts of how the world came into existence and we know quite a bit about the kind of creation stories circulating in the ancient world. These stories were common in Egypt when Israel was captive there, and also in Canaan when Israel began to take it over as its land. It would have been only too easy for the Israelites to adopt the stories of those who lived in the land before them or alongside them... Many of the gods worshipped by the Canaanites were closely associated with the fertility of the land. And you can imagine how the newcomers struggling to learn how to farm there would be tempted to call out to these 'gods' rather than to the Lord God.

Several scholars have pointed out a strong argumentative aspect to Genesis 1 and 2. And it is fascinating to see how the story told in Genesis 1 and 2 deliberately contradicts certain important elements of them. For example, look at how Genesis 1:16 describes the sun and the moon. The text does not refer to the sun by its normal Hebrew name, but instead merely as 'the greater light', which God made for the day. Similarly, it calls the moon 'the lesser light'.

Why? Well it was probably because the sun and moon were so often worshipped as gods by the people among whom the Israelites were now living. In the Genesis story, readers cannot mistake the sun for a divinity to be worshipped because the scripture clearly describes the sun as a created thing, an object placed in the heavens for the simple, practical purpose of giving light. The attention is therefore on the *One* who created this marvelous light.

'It is saying that no mere 'light;' in the heavens deserves to be bowed down to. God alone is to be worshipped.

It also tells us that the Creator is not like the gods described in the Babylonian creation story, who make humankind merely to serve the gods; servants, to wait on them and keep them happy. In Genesis, the God who creates the world sets men and women within it as the crowning touch on what he has brought into being. The creation itself is described as a marvelous home prepared for humankind, a place in which they may live and thrive and enjoy the intimate presence and companionship of the creator himself.'²

The creation poem of Genesis 1 that Lisa read to us so brilliantly last week, and Genesis 2 which we have heard this evening are argumentative in nature in that they claim to tell the truth about the world, and flatly contradict other creation stories commonplace in the ancient world.

And there is more!

But, the creation narratives are more than simply an argument. They use a story form to unpack for us what faith in God means for how we think about the world and how we live in it. In other words, the story helps to orientate us. And it is precisely to this story form that we need to be sensitive if we are not to misinterpret it.

² *The Drama of Scripture*, 9.

In order to understand the Genesis creation story we must understand something else about the kind of writing it is. What scholars tell us is that the first chapters of Genesis have been very carefully put together and I think that you will agree that the evidence of craftsmanship in the telling is clear.

We need to focus as much on the way in which the story is told as upon the details themselves. We must weigh whether these details are meant to be read as a modern historian or scientist would read them. And I think that you will agree that a scientific explanation is not the intention of Genesis 1 and 2. Therefore it is actually a mistake to debunk the narrative in the light of science. It is like people want to argue about the story on this plane down here of science and fact and all that familiar stuff. When in fact the narrative is speaking on a different plane altogether... unfortunately it is a mistake many people make and we are robbed of the power of this text.

You see, the story of creation does not satisfy our twenty-first century curiosity concerning the details of how God made the world. No, the Genesis story is given so that we might have a true understanding of the world in which we live, of its divine author, and of our own place in it. The creation narrative is not a science textbook, but argument clothed in poetry. Meaning given through meter!

So what is Genesis 1 and 2 telling us?

1. God is the divine source of all that is.
2. God stands apart from all other things in the special relationship of Creator and creation.
3. The fashioning of humankind by God was intended to be the high point of all his work of making and forming
4. God had in mind very special relationship between himself and this last-formed of his creatures.

Over against pagan religious notions dominant in Egypt and Canaan, Genesis 1 proclaims the truth about God, about humankind and about the world. When contrasted with the ancient Near Eastern myths, the portrait of God, humanity and the world becomes clear. This opening act introduces us to the main actors in the play - God and humanity - and the world in which the historical drama will unfold. This is why the Creation stories found in Genesis 1 and 2 is the truest story ever told. And we need to pay attention to the deep truths held therein.

Identity is important in exile

When you find yourself in exile, living in a foreign land, identity becomes important. When you find yourself in a strange land which is not your own, your story becomes even more important. Have you ever noticed how when you travel overseas you are more aware of where you come from? You reinforce customs... you celebrate things you may not when in your homeland. These things become precious to you! This is precisely why we are looking at the story and finding ways to reinforce its power among us as a forming community, because if we believe that the Bible truly holds our identity as God's people. If we believe that then we will work hard at unpacking the story and living in the light of that narrative flow.

In a sense we can think of ourselves as an exilic people in a strange land – we are resident aliens. Read Hebrews 11:13

Oh and there are many stories which are trying to bait us... there are many stories that are vying for our allegiance. Trying to shape and form us! And in this climate, we need to understand our difference. We find that in these opening words. The story of creation grounds us and gives meaning to our existence. It helps us to find our place in creation. It helps us to argue with other interpretations of how things are. It gives us a fighting chance!

Let me tell you about what is coming up soon?

Let me tell you what is coming up in November and December... just so you get a sense of where this journey is taking us...

- Next time (16th November) we are going to think more about being human and what 'Normal' is! Part of being human is caring for creation... It is also about walking with God... So we are going to explore relationship with God and with the earth...
- On 30th November we are then going to unpack human sexuality and relationships with others and ourselves.
- We are then going to look at the story when shame entered the garden and what is going on around a certain tree and a snake that talks. On that week (7th December) we will also take communion together and Tony Miles will be joining us and sharing something of his story.
- On the 21st we will then think about having a Christmas party...

Concluding thoughts

So you can see why understanding our origins is important and helps us in our Christian discipleship. So many things flow out of the creation story. Firstly, the maker is connected to everything else there is. It all comes from his creative word. The same God who liberated the Israelites from Slavery is the same God who invites us to follow him through his son Jesus. We read the story as an invitation to locate ourselves within its narrative flow!

The cosmos pictured in the first chapters of Genesis is unforgettable in its beauty, harmony, joy and happiness. It helps us to understand what 'Normal' is. It therefore helps us to understand how to live within creation today as we see God's kingdom come among us. The kingdom of God after all, as Hans Küng reminds us 'is creation healed.'

On that note let us pray.