

CREATOR: WHO IS GOD?

GENESIS 1:1 – 2:3

Today when we think of existence, we often think of the materialistic makeup of what it means for something to exist (i.e. the molecular components or physical properties of things). This causes us to read the Book of Genesis with our own cultural biases that we often don't even realize are there. Today, many of us read the creation account in Genesis 1, and we automatically begin to think in terms of God creating the material world from nothing at all (*ex nihilo*). But as we stated in our first study, Genesis was not originally written or read by people who think like we think. It was written and read by ancient people with an ancient perception of the world. This means that we must do some homework and try our best to think like they would have thought when they read Genesis 1.

What did the ancient world think of when they thought of creation and existence?

While we can hold firmly to the belief that God created everything that exists from nothing¹, we must also understand that “in the ancient world something existed when it had a function – a role to play.”² The ancient world didn't really think in terms of creating something from nothing. They had no real concept or categories for the idea of nothingness. In the ancient world, material things simply didn't have an existence until they had a special place in this world and a specific meaning and purpose.

In the ancient Babylonian creation accounts, the gods brought things into existence by naming them – the name designated the function it was created to serve. In the ancient Egyptian accounts, the gods brought things into existence by separating them out from the non-ordered and non-functional whole. And so when we read the Genesis creation account, it should not surprise us that we see God bringing things into existence by separating them out and giving them names that determine their role and function.

¹ see John 1:3; Colossians 1:16; Romans 11:36; Hebrews 11:3

² Keener, C. S., & Walton, J. H. NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, (Zondervan:2016), 4.

When we step out of our modern shoes and slip on the sandals of the ancient Israelites, we discover that Genesis 1 is not primarily concerned about the material things being created as much as it is about the meaning and purpose for which they are created. It is not trying to give us detailed information on what came first and what came next and exactly how long all this took. It is trying to give us an answer for why this world is so ordered and beautiful and perfectly designed for flourishing. But even more importantly, it is providing an introduction and answering the question, “Who is the God responsible for such a wonderful creation?” It should not be read like it is an ancient scientific essay but rather appreciated as “a hymn of praise to the Creator through whom and for whom all things exist.”³

Genesis 1 is a poetic song of praise that introduces us to the God of creation who has brought order and meaningful life to this world and who now rests as the Sovereign God over all of creation.

As we examine the creation account in Genesis, we will look at how it all begins, the six days of creation and the significance of God resting on the seventh day.

The Beginning: Formless & Void

The creation account in Genesis 1 begins with these two verses:

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” (Genesis 1:1-2)

Our perception and understanding of Genesis 1 largely depends on how we read and interpret these first two verses of the Bible.

What is meant by “the beginning”? What is meant by “the heavens and the earth”? Was the earth “formless and void” before God created or after God created? What does “formless and void” even mean? And then the million-dollar question, “How would the original ancient readers have understood all these things?”

³ New Bible Commentary, (InterVarsity Press: 2010), 59

Today when we think of the “heavens and the earth,” we immediately think about a globe spinning around the sun in the midst of an enormous universe. When we think of the word “beginning,” we immediately think of a specific point in time that starts a chronological sequence of time that follows.

But we must realize that an ancient Israelite reading these words would have had no clue or concept of the earth being a globe orbiting the sun in a vastness of space. They would have simply viewed “the heavens” as what was in the sky and “the earth” as what they were living on. And the Hebrew word used here for “beginning” actually does not refer to an exact point in a chronological timeline but rather an unspecified period of time in the past.⁴

So why is this important?

It is important because if we ignore the ancient perspective then we might begin to ask and assume too much of the text. We might just assume that Genesis 1 is trying to teach us about the exact starting point of the entire universe when in fact that is not the main thing that it is trying to teach.

Scripture definitely affirms that God is the Creator of everything, but Genesis is actually trying to teach us something more intimate and more important to the ancient mind. It is telling us that the visible world that we see all around us has been ordered and filled with meaning and purpose by an awesome Creator.

The difference is subtle but nevertheless significant. When we read Genesis 1 as if it is a strict blueprint for the universe’s construction, we miss out on the essence of what the ancient author is saying. The clue to what the six days of creation are trying to tell us is found in this opening description of the earth’s condition. The earth is a wild wasteland and darkness is over the face of the deep waters. But like a mother-bird fluttering over her nest, the Spirit of God is hovering over the waters; the breath of God is getting ready to speak.

⁴ There is a word in the Hebrew language that fits our modern definition of the word *beginning*, but that word is actually not used here in Genesis 1. Instead, a different Hebrew word is used that is actually fairly general and similar to the English phrase “way back when”.

The Creation: Order & Meaningful Life

In the six days of creation in Genesis 1, we see God bringing things into existence by separating them and naming them. We see him putting things in a specific order and giving things a specific role and function. And all of this is explained to us in a highly repetitive and carefully patterned text.

When we get to Genesis 2, we notice the repetitions and the pattern of Genesis 1 stop. The structure of the text is totally different. And this is because Genesis 2 is more like historical reporting while Genesis 1 is a poetic song.

As soon as the creation week begins in Genesis 1:3, we find ourselves reading in rhythm. Over and over again, we read, "And God said... let there be... and it was so... God saw that it was good... and there was evening and there was morning, the ____ day." Unlike other ancient accounts, God is not struggling and there is no rival or conflict that he is striving to overcome. In Genesis 1, creation is not the result of a chaotic battle but is more like a well orchestrated symphony. Like the conductor taking his place at the podium, God simply takes his place before the formless darkness and begins to elegantly draw out the members of the creation into an awesome harmonious masterpiece. God seems to be enjoying himself, and with every move he makes, he is producing something that is pleasing, joyful and good.

There is also a broader pattern that we can see in the division of the six days themselves. As we stated earlier, the creation week is showing us how God has brought order and meaning to what was previously wild and void of meaning. Genesis 1 is not so much trying to show God creating the material out of the immaterial as much as it is showing God creating form and fullness to what was previously formless and void.⁵ As Derek Kidner puts it:

"Indeed, the six days now to be described can be viewed as the positive counterpart of the twin negatives 'without form and void', matching them with form and fullness... the order belongs to the poetic form of the passage, and [therefore it] must not be over-pressed."⁶

⁵ Formless and void are the English translations of the Hebrew phrase *tohu* and *bohu*. In visions of judgement, God allows places to become *tohu* and *bohu* again (see Jeremiah 4:23 and Isaiah 34:11).

⁶ Kidner, D., *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, (Inter-Varsity Press:1967), 50, 58

And so when we look at the pattern of these six days, we must not obsess over what came first and what came next and whether or not such a sequence is possible or impossible. The ordering of the days seems to be more rhythmical than chronological. When we look at Days 1-3, we see God bringing form to what was previously formless, and when we look at Days 4-6, we see God bringing meaningful fullness to the realms that he has just formed.

Form (separating & ordering)

Day 1 – Light and Dark

Day 2 – Waters and Sky

Day 3 – Sea and Land

Fullness (meaningful inhabitants)

Day 4 – sun, moon, stars

Day 5 – sea creatures, fish, birds

Day 6 – land creatures, humanity

God begins his work of creation by separating the light from darkness and gives them both names that determine their role and function – Day and Night. On Day 2, God continues his work of creation by separating the deep dark waters and providing a space between the waters above and the waters below. He gives a name to this space – Sky – and its role and function is to hold back the waters above it. On Day 3, God pushes back the waters below the Sky separating the water from the dry land that surfaces. He names them – Sea and Land – and the Land’s role and function is to produce a wide variety of life-sustaining food.

And so after Day 3, God has brought form to what was previously formless, and now he proceeds to bring meaningful fullness to the realms that he has just formed. On Day 4, he creates lights in the Sky – sun, moon and stars – and gives them the purpose of regulating the rhythms of life.⁷ On Day 5, God creates living creatures in the waters and Sky and gives them the role and function of being fruitful and filling those realms with life.⁸ And then finally on Day 6, God creates the living creatures on the Land. He brings forth all beasts, livestock and crawling things on the ground, and then he creates humanity in his image and likeness. Humanity is given the role of ruling over the rest of creation as his special representatives, and they are told to be fruitful and to fill the world with the image and glory of God.⁹

⁷ In contrast with other ancient Near Eastern beliefs, the sun and moon are deliberately not named to strip them of any sense of deity.

⁸ In contrast with other ancient Near Eastern beliefs, it is emphasized that God simply created the great sea creatures who were often considered to be equal rivals to the gods that must be defeated and conquered.

⁹ In contrast with other ancient Near Eastern beliefs, all of humanity rules on behalf of God, fertility and multiplication are desired by God and it is God who is the one providing food for humanity and not humanity performing the task of providing food for the gods.

The pattern of the six days closes with a sort of master benediction where God looks upon everything that he had made, and behold it was very good (Genesis 1:21). The land that was previously a wild wasteland is now full of order, beauty, purpose and meaningful life. And the God who did this is unlike any other god in the ancient world.

He is not simply a force or the soul of the universe; he is a personal God who speaks, plans, creates, sees, evaluates and enjoys. He is not one of many gods nor is he a deified part of the creation; he is the only God who is unrivaled and ruler over all. He is not a struggling god who has won his authority over another; he is the sovereign God and the primary source of everything that has ever existed. He is not a silent god who has left humanity here to figure it out on their own; he is a speaking God whose word is powerful and life-giving. And he is not a greedy god who has created humanity to serve him as his slaves; he is a good God who has provided a good home for humanity and who desires to partner with humanity in the continual subduing and filling of the earth.

The God of Genesis 1 is matchless, majestic and mysterious, and he is good, gracious and glorious. Through his Spirit and his Word, the God of the Bible brings life where there is no life. The poetic song of creation has portrayed the Creator's work in the regular pattern of six days, and now we enter Day 7 where God rests and delights in his finished work.

The Sabbath: Rest & Reign

Once the work of creation is completed, we are told that, "God rested from all his work that he had done in creation." (Genesis 2:3)

What is the significance of the seventh day and why did God rest?

Well, in other ancient Near Eastern accounts, gods would enter into a state of rest whenever their temples were finished being built. And so when God rests on the seventh day in Genesis, it is not that he needs time to recover from his work; he is declaring that the created world will now be his dwelling place from which he will reign (see Isaiah 66:1).¹⁰

¹⁰ As we read through the Bible, we see that this concept of the earth as God's temple continues on from the next chapter of Genesis all the way through to the "new heaven and new earth" of Revelation.

It is also clear from the link between 1:31 and 2:1-3 that the seventh day is a time of God delighting in his creation and enjoying the benefits of a work that was now finished. "It is the rest of achievement, not inactivity."¹¹ God rested, blessed the seventh day and made it holy which would provide the basis for God's people to follow this pattern and also set apart a Sabbath day at the end of their work week.¹²

David Atkinson writes:

"In one sense, the whole of Genesis 1 is about the sabbath. The rhythm of six days plus one is the way things are in the world. Our lives are built to reflect that reality. A human being's alternation of work and rest is meant to echo the alternation between work and rest in the creative activity of God. And what is God's rest? Is it not delight in his creation? Is it not looking with joy on his world and saying, 'This is good!'"¹³

As creatures made in the image and likeness of God, we reflect the way of our Creator when we work hard at what we do and rest in satisfaction of a job well done. We work hard for six days to produce order, creativity and progress in this world, and then we take a day at the end of the week to stand back, look at what we've done and declare with joy, "This is good."

This view of a delightful rest of achievement reminds me of that feeling I get every time I cut my grass during the summer. As soon as I am finished, I sit in one of our chairs that we have outside, and I just soak in the smell and the beauty of a lawn that looks ordered and good.

What is that feeling and why do we have it inside of us? There seems to be no evolutionary advantage for possessing this feeling. The beasts of the field and the birds of the air don't do this. It seems to be something more than biological or psychological, and that's because at its core, it's something spiritual. It's something that we have inherited from the One who made us in his image and after his likeness. When we take this time to sit back and soak in some delightful rest of achievement, we are imaging our Creator. We are bringing forth order and beauty and declaring in our soul, "This is good."

¹¹ Kidner, D. *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Inter-Varsity Press:1967), 57.

¹² see Exodus 20:8-11

¹³ Atkinson, 49

The creation week concluded with God resting from all his work that he had done in his creation, but there was no evening and no morning on the seventh day. This seems to suggest that the seventh day never-ended – that it is more than a mere day in history but rather a transcendent reality.

Scripture seems to interpret God's Sabbath rest as something that continues on into the present day. Throughout history, God's people have been invited to enter into his rest which means that we are invited to enjoy an unhindered relationship with him and to share his fellowship. However, through disobedience man has often rejected this invitation and has failed to enter into his rest. But God's rest is never-ending, and the invitation to enjoy God's rest still remains. And now today, it is through the re-creating work of Jesus that we may once again share fellowship with God, enter into his eternal rest and reign with him over his creation forever and forever.¹⁴

Genesis 1 is a poetic song of praise that introduces us to the God of creation who has brought order and meaningful life to this world and who now rests as the Sovereign God over all of creation. Thanks to the creative work of God, the land that was previously a wild wasteland is now full of order, beauty, purpose and meaningful life. The creation has become the dwelling place of God, and together with him, we get to delight in and enjoy what he has created.

¹⁴ see Hebrews 3-5