

Creation: Some Important Questions

Reading sensibly

There has been much discussion about the early chapters of the Bible. At the one extreme are those who rightly respect the inspiration and authority of scripture but wrongly infer that we should look to the Bible for a scientific explanation of how God created the world. They feel defensive about any explanation or scientific model that seems to contradict *their understanding* of what Genesis teaches. At the other, are people who are equally imperceptive in the way they read the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Instead of rejecting the most current scientific theories, they repudiate the Genesis account as belonging to a credulous and pre-scientific age and some resort to ridicule. (In fairness, most of the derisive comments come not from the scientific community but from those who wish to assert their own enlightenment and dissociate themselves from a simplistic worldview).

It always helps to respect the passage we are reading. This means that we try to identify its genre. By doing so we are in a better position to hear the emphasis of the author and ascertain his/her intention.

In the first two chapters of the Bible we have accounts of creation. Some see them as contradictory, but this is quite unnecessary. If we step back and see how they function in the context of the book as a whole, it is clear that these are complementary accounts. No matter what sources the author did or did not use, clearly he is not unintelligent (not to even mention inspiration). In Genesis 1 he wishes to tell us some really important things about the creation in general and about mankind in particular; in Genesis 2 (and 3), he zooms in on mankind and the important drama that is about to ensue. When one loses sight of the message of Scripture as a whole, or disbelieves it, one inevitably gets lost in details. If I am following *the message* of Genesis, chapter 2 follows on from chapter 1 and leads to chapter 3. If I ignore the message, I may find it difficult to reconcile the two accounts (I can't see the forest for the trees).

And, by the way, Hugh Ross points out that there are a number of "creation accounts" in the Bible besides Genesis 1 and 2. He is really referring to referring to brief references and longer treatments of "topics relevant to creation and science," for example, Job 9; Psalm 8, 19, 33, 65, 104, 139, 147-48; Proverbs 8; Eccl 1-3; Isa 40-51; John 1:1-3; Acts 17:24; Rom 1:20; Col 1:16; Heb 1:3; 4.

Some suggestions

Ask what *the point* of the passage is. What is God telling us about himself, the world, and mankind? Does he expect us to read this as literal fact? If not, what truth is he seeking to convey? Writers consciously or unconsciously use literary devices to convey meaning.

What words and phrases are repeated? Who or what is the subject of the action? If the passage is essentially prose and a small part of it is poetry, why does the author do this? Are there clear markers of the commencement and/or conclusion of a passage that constitute it a unit?

Communication and scientific accuracy

One only has to compare the first two chapters of Genesis with Hindu, Egyptian, Greek and Germanic creation stories to realise how sublime the biblical record is. But it does not purport to provide a scientific explanation of the origin of the universe. The chapters are written from a theological perspective. For example, the major philosophies which are at variance with the Judeo-Christian worldview are countered in the very first verse: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Atheism, polytheism, pantheism, deism, dualism and materialism are rejected. The *one God created* the universe (which is therefore *not eternal*; nor is it either identical with God or an emanation of his being).

Consider this simple description of a sunrise:

This morning the sun rose at about 7:01 am. It shone all day but, at times, it was covered by clouds. Nevertheless, for most of the day, the sky was blue. The sun moved across the sky from east to west. It ceased shining about half an hour ago at 7:07 pm. In about a half an hour it will have set completely, the stars will come out and soon the moon began to shine.

I think we all understand what I have said. As *communication* it conveys information about a day we might have experienced here on the west coast of Canada. If, however, you are interested in scientific explanations of phenomena, the description is woefully inadequate; it is even misleading. Actually, if we brought it into line with our understanding of science it would probably make less sense to the majority of us. We might have to say something like this:

This morning the earth was rotating on its axis (which, from one point of view, doesn't even exist). Due to the earth's position in relation to the sun and our position at 113 degrees longitude, west of Greenwich and 49 degrees latitude, north of the equator we first saw the sun at 7h01 or 15h01 GMT. Actually we only *thought* we were seeing it, because the earth had not yet revolved sufficiently on its axis but, due to the refraction of the sun's rays in the gasses which comprise our atmosphere, we 'saw' the sun even before the earth had turned enough for there to be a straight line between the sun and our position on the earth. And what's more, what we "saw" was a picture of the sun as it was eight and a half minutes prior to our seeing it (that's how long it takes the light of the sun to reach us). From our point of view we might say that the sun was still below the horizon, that is, if we don't take into account the

heliocentricity of our solar system. At times, clouds prevented us from seeing it. The sky is not really blue but dust particles in the atmosphere give us that impression. The sun never ceases to shine or, should we say, it never stops emitting electro-magnetic energy. The stars never come out, and the moon does not actually emit light; as we know it reflects the sun's light.

A scientist, and for that matter a secondary school student, would probably laugh at this amateurish attempt. A comparison of the two versions shows that a description can be helpful and accurate (and shorter) on one level without attempting to be a precise scientific explanation. If it were scientifically perfect (is there such a thing?), what would the ancients have made of it? And what would the next generation say when new insights have rendered some of our descriptions obsolete? And how much would one need to say so as not to fall into numerous half-truths and inaccuracies? That is, if one is attempting to describe the origin of the universe from the point of view of astrophysics.

Definition

Millard Erickson defines creation as follows:

By creation we mean the work of God in bringing into being, without the use of any pre-existing materials, everything that is.¹

Importance of this teaching

- It is stressed in Scripture (Gen 1:1; John 1:1-3; Col 1:15; Heb 11:3; Rev 4:11).
- It has always had an important place in the church's teaching (The Apostles' Creed: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth").
- It affects our understanding of other doctrines (matter, mankind, good and evil, general revelation, the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus, the creation/establishment of "a new heavens and a new earth").
- It distinguishes Christianity from some other world religions.
- It is a point of meaningful dialogue between Christianity and the natural sciences.
- Quite apart from the value of considering the essential consonance (or otherwise) of the Genesis account and, say, the big bang theories,² there is *theological*

¹Millard J Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 366.

significance. All the major doctrines of the faith are dependent on the other doctrines.

²More than one model has been proposed.