

## CREATION

### **I. The biblical doctrine**

This must not be confused or identified with any scientific theory of origins. The purpose of the biblical doctrine, in contrast to that of scientific investigation, is ethical and religious. Reference to the doctrine is widespread in both the OT and the NT, and is not confined to the opening chapters of Genesis. The following references may be noted: in the prophets, [Is. 40:26, 28; 42:5; 45:18](#); [Je. 10:12–16](#); [Am. 4:13](#); in the Psalms, [33:6, 9; 90:2; 102:25](#); also [Jb. 38:4ff.](#); [Ne. 9:6](#); and in the NT, [Jn. 1:1ff.](#); [Acts 17:24](#); [Rom. 1:20, 25; 11:36](#); [Col. 1:16](#); [Heb. 1:2; 11:3](#); [Rev. 4:11; 10:6](#).

A necessary starting-point for any consideration of the doctrine is [Heb. 11:3](#), ‘By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God.’ This means that the biblical doctrine of creation is based on divine revelation and understood only from the standpoint of faith. It is this that sharply distinguishes the biblical approach from the scientific. The work of creation, no less than the mystery of redemption, is hidden from man and can be perceived only by faith.

The work of creation is variously attributed to all three persons of the Trinity: to the Father, as in [Gn. 1:1](#); [Is. 44:24; 45:12](#); [Ps. 33:6](#); to the Son, as in [Jn. 1:3, 10](#); [Col. 1:16](#); to the Holy Spirit, as in [Gn. 1:2](#); [Jb. 26:13](#). This is not to be taken to mean that different parts of creation are attributed to different persons within the Trinity, but rather that the whole is the work of the triune God.

The words in [Heb. 11:3](#), ‘what is seen was made out of things which do not appear’, taken with [Gn. 1:1](#), ‘in the

beginning God created the heavens and the earth', indicate that the worlds were not made out of any pre-existent material, but out of nothing by the divine Word, in the sense that prior to the divine creative fiat there was no other kind of existence. This *creatio ex nihilo* has important theological implications, for among other things it precludes the idea that matter is eternal ([Gn. 1:1](#) indicates that it had a beginning) or that there can be any kind of [dualism](#) in the universe in which another kind of existence or power stands over against God and outside his control. Likewise it indicates that God is distinct from his creation, and it is not, as [pantheism](#) maintains, a phenomenal, or external, manifestation of the Absolute.

At the same time, however, it is clear that the idea of primary creation contained in the formula *creatio ex nihilo* does not exhaust the biblical teaching on the subject. Man was not created *ex nihilo*, but out of the dust of the ground ([Gn. 2:7](#)) and the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air were formed out of the ground ([Gn. 2:19](#)). This has been called secondary creation, a creative activity making use of already created materials, and stands alongside primary creation as part of the biblical testimony.

Statements such as [Eph. 4:6](#), 'One God ... above all, and through all, and in all' indicate that God stands in a relationship of both [transcendence](#) and immanence to the created order. In that he is 'above all' and 'over all' ([Rom. 9:5](#)), he is the transcendent God, and independent of his creation, self-existent and self-sufficient. Thus creation must be understood as a free act of God determined only by his sovereign will, and in no way a necessary act. He did not need to create the universe (see [Acts 17:25](#)). He chose to do so. It is nec-

essary to make this distinction, for only thus can he be God the Lord, the unconditioned, transcendent one. On the other hand, in that he is ‘through all, and in all’, he is immanent in his creation (though distinct from it), and it is entirely dependent on his power for its continued existence. ‘In him (*en auto*) all things hold together’ (Col. 1:17) and ‘in him we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28).

The words ‘by thy will they existed and were created’ (Rev. 4:11), cf. ‘created through him, and for him’ (Col. 1:16), indicate the purpose and goal of creation. God created the world ‘for the manifestation of the glory of his eternal power, wisdom and goodness’ (*Westminster Confession*). Creation, in other words, is theocentric, and intended to display the glory of God; to be, as Calvin says, ‘the theatre of his glory’.

J.P.

## II. The Genesis account

The opening chapter of Genesis is a majestic festive overture to the whole Bible. It introduces the reader to the two principal actors in the biblical drama, God and man (*i.e.* mankind, Heb. *’adam*), and sketches the main elements in their relationship. We meet God, the almighty creator of all that exists, but also the triumphant climax of his work, man, made in the divine image to rule over God’s world on his behalf. We sense God’s concern for man’s well-being as he assigns the plants for his food. This divine concern is even more apparent in Gn. 2, where the Lord God provides a garden for man to dwell in, animals as his companions, and a wife as his perfect counterpart.

These points are obvious to readers, naive and sophisticated alike. But the latter often find great problems with the

Genesis account, for it seems so out of tune with current scientific thinking. It is embarrassing to have such apparently mythical accounts opening the Christian Bible. But this is the fault of the reader who brings his anachronistic ideas to an ancient text. If the text is allowed to address the ideas and concerns of the age it was written for, some 3,000 years ago, it will be found to be a most revolutionary document, challenging some of the fond assumptions of its age and yet continuing to speak powerfully to all interested in fathoming the mystery of life.

To appreciate the uniqueness and originality of Genesis, its account of creation must be compared with other ancient accounts of about the same era from Babylon, Egypt and Canaan. We shall therefore begin by summarizing some of the main ancient Near Eastern beliefs about creation to illuminate the background to Genesis. Then we shall focus on the main assertions of Genesis about God, the world and man. A comparison with ancient Near Eastern creation stories also illuminates the nature of the genre of [Gn. 1–3](#), and will allow us to elucidate the nature of the days of creation. We shall close by discussing the importance of these chapters to biblical theology and ethics and their relationship to modern scientific thought.

The ancient world was polytheistic: they believed in a multitude of gods and goddesses who varied in power and benevolence. [Gn. 1](#) mentions only one God of supreme power: it goes out of its way to point out that the sun, moon and stars which were often regarded as divine were just created by God. The power of this one God is highlighted by the mode of creation: he just says ‘Let there be’ and there is, quite unlike the struggle of some Babylonian and Canaanite gods to create things.

The ancient world held that the gods were not wholly in

favour of human existence. According to the Atrahasis epic, mankind was created as a divine strike-breaker: the minor gods had gone on strike, thus depriving the great gods of food, so the latter created seven human couples to supply them with food. Unfortunately, the human race turned out to be a mixed blessing: the population explosion spoiled the tranquillity of heaven, so the gods tried to annihilate mankind through famine, plague and flood.

Genesis paints a very different scenario. The creation of mankind is the climax of the creation story. God invites the angels 'Let us make man in our image' to witness the grand conclusion of his creative activity. He is not worried by the potential growth of the human race; he positively encourages it by creating mankind in two sexes and making their first duty, to 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth' (Gn. 1:28). Further analysis of Gn. 1 reveals that the creation of man is no afterthought: the previous five days' activity builds up to it. Those days on which things most essential to human existence, sun, land, plants, were created are described more fully than the others. The divine goodwill towards man is accentuated by his providing food for man, not *vice versa* as in the Babylonian account.

There thus runs through the opening chapters a critique of the theology of other oriental creation accounts. In some cases (e.g. the Atrahasis epic and the Sumerian flood story) a similar sequence of events may be observed to Gn. 1–9. But the theological emphases are quite different: the unity, the power of God, and his benevolence towards man are clear. Another difference is that whereas Mesopotamians tended to view human society as evolving upward. Genesis sees society as created perfect and then disintegrating as the result of human sin. Thus Genesis takes a story-line that was familiar in the ancient world, and in retelling it puts

forward a quite new theology.

But how far does Genesis intend us to read its opening chapters as history? Would they, as many maintain, be better termed ‘myth’? The first point to make is that [Gn. 1:1–2:3](#) is quite different from all the following sections of the book. Each of these ten sections is headed ‘This is the account of’ ([2:4](#); [6:9](#), *etc.*). [1:1](#), whether taken as title or first statement of chapter 1, is quite different: ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth’. Second, [1:1–2:3](#) is full of repetitive formulae and quasi-poetic language. It is not quite poetry, but rather high-flown prose. The division of the account into seven days is the most obvious repetition, but repeated commands, fulfilments, naming, blessing, and appreciation formulae, mostly in multiples of seven, show that is a very carefully-crafted opening to the book.

Furthermore, there is an interesting pattern in the arrangement of the creative acts by days. The first three days match the next three:

Day 1 Light

Day 2 Sky

Day 3 Seas and Land

Day 4 Luminaries

Day 5 Birds

Day 6 Animals and Man

Day 7 Sabbath

The unique character of [1:1–2:3](#) *vis à vis* what follows needs to be borne in mind as we seek to determine the character of the opening chapters of Genesis. Not only does [2:4](#) begin with a formula that links it up to later sections of Genesis, suggesting that the author saw Adam and Eve in a similar way to the later patriarchs such as Abraham and Jacob, but he links the actors named in these opening chapters to those who lived later, by genealogies (*e.g.* chs. 5, 11).

If he saw the stories of Jacob as describing real events and characters, it seems likely that he saw [Gn. 2–3](#) in similar terms.

However, the absence of the usual opening formula and the distinctive style of [1:1–2:3](#) makes it likely that the author wants us to view this chapter differently. He gives us another clue, pointing in the same direction, by speaking of ‘days’ on days [1–3](#), before the creation of the sun on day 4 which he says marks the days and other seasons. ‘What sort of days are those which are not defined by the sun and moon?’ we should ask.

If ‘myth’ is defined as stories about God’s action in the past which affect the present, it is clear that Genesis’ accounts of the creation and the fall fit this definition. But as Jacobsen pointed out, in Genesis and many Near Eastern accounts there is a strong interest in cause and effect, the linkage of events over time, which give the narratives a historical cast. So he called them mytho-historical. If myth could be purged of its negative overtones of error and falsity, this might be acceptable. It is preferable to describe these chapters as proto-historical (German *Urgeschichte*) or theological history.

But there is more to [Genesis 1ff.](#) than a narrative making theological points about God and his relationship to man. Genesis is the first of the five books of the Torah, the Law. It is also teaching ethics as well as theology. We have already noted that God’s first word to man was a command, ‘Be fruitful’. But [ch. 1](#) tells of six days of divine work, followed by one of divine rest. It leaves open how long God’s days are from a human point of view. [Ps. 90:4](#) compares a thousand human years to a day, or even a watch in the night, to God. Yet man was created in the divine image, hence it seems likely that he is meant to imitate his creator by working six

days and resting on the seventh (*cf.* Ex. 20:8–11). Further models for human behaviour, especially between the sexes, are suggested by the Gn. 2 account of the creation of Adam and Eve.

Interpreted along these lines Gn. 1–2 conflicts with modern scientific discovery less than is often supposed. In its original BC context it was challenging the theology and ethics of ancient orientals, declaring that their notions of polytheism and the human situation were quite wrong. The world was not run by a set of capricious amoral deities for their own benefit, but was created by one sovereign holy God who controlled all things and desired the good of his supreme creature, man. Gn. 1 is not so much a scientific or historical explanation of how the world came to be, but a theological hymn of praise to the creator for his bounty bestowed on man. As the inspired writer of Genesis transformed the stories of origins well known in ancient times, to disclose the true nature of God to his contemporaries, so his achievement should provoke modern theologians to do the same. The character of the God revealed in Genesis, and his love for mankind, is now more fully revealed, especially through the incarnation, but new revelation has not so much as challenged Genesis so much as enriched its insights. The same surely is true of scientific discovery. The size and complexity of the universe as we know it is beyond the imaginings of the ancients, yet they worshipped and adored the creator of the little world they knew. How much more should modern man be awestruck by the wisdom and power of the God who can create and sustain the universe revealed by modern science, and be amazed by his love for mankind created in the divine image and redeemed by grace.