

Welcome to our on-line Bible study for 2009.

We will be looking at the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis. Please add any comments or questions you have online. Later on, probably in March, we would like to have a face-to-face discussion of the book with all who are doing the study. We'll give more details closer to March.

I. Genesis 1:1-2:4a – “In the Beginning”

The book of Genesis is the first book of the Bible. It literally means “beginning.” The account of creation is not only a description. It is also a definition of what life is and how it should be lived. Most scholars believe there are two accounts of creation which have been placed at the beginning of the Bible. The first goes from chapter 1:1-2:4a.

The Genesis account is not intended to be a scientific picture of creation since modern science was unknown at the time it was written. Nonetheless, there are some scientists who have commented on the ways it does follow what we know from science. However, as noted above, the purpose of this account is to *define* creation in terms of the activity of God and the role and nature of human beings.

In many ways this opening is part of a prologue to the main story of the book which focuses not on creation but on redemption, the salvation of fallen humanity through God's calling of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is the theme of redemption that ultimately defines life for us in the twenty-first century.

A. The beginning of life – 1:1-13

- a. The picture given of creation is not of emptiness but rather of “a formless void.” Darkness covers the face of the deep or the waters (sea). There is a strong possibility that this account was written down when Israel was in bondage to the Babylonians. The intention of the author (inspired by the Holy Spirit) would have been to contradict the Babylonian account of creation.

Genesis belongs to the first five books of the Bible known as the Torah (“law” or “teaching”) or Pentateuch (“five books”). These books are identified with Moses. We are told that Moses wrote the sections on the law (Exodus 24:4). However, it is unlikely that Moses wrote of himself in the third person, described his own death and referred to himself as the most humble person on the face of the earth (Numbers 12:3)! Most scholars believe that the final form of the Torah or Five Books of Moses came into their present form at a later time, possibly during the captivity in Babylon. The fact the books went through a process of development

in no way lessens the fact that the final written form was inspired by the Holy Spirit (II Timothy 3:16).

- b. According to the Babylonian account, the world began with two sea serpents, Apsu and his wife, Tiamat. They give birth to the first race of gods. Apsu is annoyed by all the noise which the gods make, so he determines to kill them. However, the gods learn of his intention and kill him first. This introduces a classic mythical theme, that a son (or daughter) must kill or defeat their father in order to enter fully into life. Tiamat is actually a more dominant figure than Apsu, and she plots revenge against the first generation of gods. She conjures up a race of “gods and monsters” to destroy the first gods. The gods, however, give birth to a great hero, Marduk (or Bel), who destroys the murderous mother serpent-goddess, Tiamat. Marduk then cuts up the body of Tiamat, and from her carcass, he creates the world. It is interesting that the name “Tiamat” is somewhat similar to the Hebrew word for “deep” which is “tehom.”
- c. The Biblical account is radically different from the Babylonian myth.
 - i. There is one God, not many.
 - ii. There is no conflict which results in creation.
 - iii. God’s creative power is his Word. He speaks the world into existence. Light appears first. At this point, there is no sun nor stars. Some may see in this a type of explosion like the “big bang.” Yet as John retells the account, light has a spiritual reality which overcomes the darkness of evil. The Word, of course, for John is Christ (John 1:1-9). He is the agent of creation (Colossians 1:15-17).
 - iv. Prior to God’s Word, the world is a dark, watery chaos. Once God’s Word is revealed, the world not only receives light, but order. There is morning and evening.
- d. There are a number of important spiritual truths in these opening verses:
 - i. God has no rivals. Whereas other cultures believed in many gods, Scripture makes clear there is only one, and he is supreme (When God says, “Let there be light,” no one says “Keep things dark.”).
 - ii. God alone provides order in our lives. Apart from God, the world appears as a “formless void” with darkness in its depths.
 - iii. Conflict and violence are not natural. Peace and order are. This has enormous implications for how we see life. Many ancient cultures believed that violence and war were the normal state of affairs. The Bible shows this is not true.
 - iv. The Bible uses the symbolism of the Babylonian account on several occasions. It speaks of the Leviathan which is another name for the ancient sea serpent (Psalm 74:12-17, 104:24-26; Job 41:1-34). It pictures God symbolically as Marduk destroying the sea serpent with his sword (Isaiah 27:1). In other passages, Marduk or Bel is spoken of in mocking terms, Isaiah 46:1; Jeremiah 50:2, 51:44).

- e. God separates the sky and the land from out of the waters of chaos. Again, this is an important spiritual picture. Water in Scripture is a symbol of life but also a symbol of death. Certainly the dark void of Genesis 1 presents water in a threatening light. It is God's intention from the very beginning of creation to separate out the basis of life from the waters. This is a key theme in Scripture. God delivers the children of Israel through the depths of the Red Sea (Exodus 15). The psalmist speaks of being rescued by God "out of mighty waters" (Psalm 18:16). God promises Israel, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you" (Isaiah 43:2). The lesson for us, then, is whatever deep waters we are called to go through in life, we need to remember that God from the beginning has pushed those waters aside. He is always with us to deliver us.

B. Light and Life – 1:14-25

- a. On the fourth day, after God has overcome the chaos of the deep and established light and order, he now creates the sun, moon and stars. There is a clear purpose here, "to separate the light from the darkness." This is a fundamental theme of Scripture. There is darkness in the world. Darkness in one sense can represent the mystery of God (Exodus 20:12; I Kings 8:12; Psalm 18:9-11; Joel 2:2). Darkness also represents sin, evil and destruction (I Samuel 2:9; Psalm 82:5, 91:6; Isaiah 60:2; Micah 7:8; Matthew 6:22-23; John 1:5, 3:19; Romans 13:12). The darkness of God (as in the plague in Egypt, Exodus 10:21) may be a sign of judgment. However, the creation story makes clear that darkness is not God's ultimate intent. His intent is to give light.
- b. On the fifth day, God creates the animals, the "living creatures." Life comes out of the sea. The birds are created. As a comment on the Babylonian view, God even creates the "sea monsters" (1:21). This is to show that figures like Tiamat or Leviathan were not the original beings. They were created by the true God. Now the earth, in turn, on the sixth day, brings forth its "living creatures" of every kind. All are created by God.

C. God finishes creation – 1:26-2:4a

- a. God's final creative act is creating humanity.
 - i. Human beings, unlike everything else, are created in the image of God.
 - ii. Humanity is both male and female.
 - iii. Human beings are given dominion (not domination) over the whole of the earth.
 - iv. Everything that God made was "very good."
 - v. God rests on the seventh day. There is no morning and evening to this day. God's Sabbath rest is eternal (Hebrews 4:1-11).
- b. There are enormous implications to this passage:
 - i. All human beings bear the image of God. All humans are therefore equal and possess an essential dignity. In the Babylonian Creation story, humans were created to be slaves of the gods. The difference is vast. The biblical definition relates strongly to how we view other people,

especially those who differ from us. All humanity shares in the image of God (Psalm 8:3-8).

- ii. Men are not human without women nor are women human without men. Both sexes share God's image equally (I Corinthians 11:11-12).
- iii. Everything that God has created is good. This should color our whole view, not only of humanity, but of the world and everything in it. Certainly that which is good can be misused (and we will see that clearly when sin comes into the world). Yet the essential goodness of the world should lead to a much more positive outlook than Christians have sometimes had (I Timothy 4:4-5; Titus 1:15).
- iv. Human beings have been given the care of God's creation. This has implications for anything that would despoil God's world or exploit it for selfish reasons. This is our stewardship and the creation story reminds us that we will be held accountable for our dominion of the earth.
- v. The principle of a Sabbath rest is built into creation. This rest is not simply a time for leisure but also a recognition that God's work is completed. In the context of the New Testament, this refers to God's completed work of salvation in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 9:12). God's people have sometimes taken a legalistic approach to the Sabbath. Jesus himself resists this (Matthew 12:1-12; Luke 13:1-16, 14:1-6). Part of the principle of a Sabbath rest is that we are to be free from worry not just on the Sabbath, but always (Matthew 6:25-34).

Questions for us –

1. How can we apply the principle of God's ordered creation, as opposed to the view that conflict and violence are essential, to the way we live our lives? Do we view conflict as necessary? How does the Genesis creation account challenge that view?
2. What is the significance for all of us of the images of water in this passage? How does water represent both death and life? How does this apply to Jesus' statement that we are to be "born of water and Spirit" (John 3:5)? Does this have implications for our view of baptism?
3. How should the fact that we are made in the image of God affect the way we view ourselves, our world and other people?
4. Do we view creation as "very good?" Why or why not?