

THE GENESIS OF THE GOSPEL

WEEK 1 | CREATOR

GENESIS 1:1-2

¹ In the beginning God *created* the heavens and the earth.

² Now the earth was *formless* and *empty*, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

PSALM 95:1-7

¹ Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD;
let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.

² Let us come before him with thanksgiving
and extol him with music and song.

³ For the LORD is the great God,
the great King above all gods.

⁴ In his hand are the depths of the earth,
and the mountain peaks belong to him.

⁵ The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.

⁶ Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the LORD our Maker;

⁷ for he is our God
and we are the people of his pasture,
the flock under his care.

Commentary and background

In this series we are looking at the opening three chapters of Genesis with special attention to what they have to teach us about the **identity, character, and purpose** of both **God** and **humankind**. These are always central concerns for us as Christians, but they are especially pertinent in our current cultural moment which is searching for truth about what it means to be *human*, what it means to be *male and female*, what it means to be *mortal*, what it means to carry *responsibility* and agency, and what it means to live in a world facing *ecological crisis*.

We will be reading these passages slowly taking time to do some important exegesis as we go, giving ourselves time to reflect on all that we are learning. As well as being based in Genesis 1-3, we will accompany this with readings from the Psalms. These add texture and colour to the first chapters of our scriptures and are good partners to enjoy alongside.

While we will be studying the passages slowly, it can also be beneficial to repeatedly read them in context and so I recommend reading chapters 1 – 3 as a block as part of the learning. Different things will arise every time.

Identity

Old Testament scholar John Walton argues convincingly that when read these early chapters of Genesis as narratives written to ancient near eastern peoples, which is exactly what they, were, then it is important that we read them as **'identity'** narratives, rather than what we might call **'origin'** narratives.

As modern readers with a strong scientific and materialistic worldview, it is hard for us not to read them with our scientific eyes looking for information about our origins. However, Walton argues, it is much better, more accurate, more instructive, and more consistent with the narrator's original intent, to read them as accounts which tell the truth about **the identity, character and purpose of God, the world and humankind** – who they are, what their purpose is, and what their place is in relation to each other.

Reading and understanding the text

As evangelicals, who take seriously the authority of Scripture for shaping our thinking and behaviour, we submit ourselves to the human instruments God used to convey his message, by trying to understand, as best we can, the message of the authors as they meant it to be read. This is what it means to be accountable to scripture. While this is not completely straightforward, it's vital work. It is important to seek to understand bible authors on their own terms, believing that they've been communicated effectively as God-given scripture.

We note that while the Bible has been written **for** us, it wasn't written **to** us. It was written to a people, who spoke a very different language, and thought in very different ways, and who lived in a very different time and place. People who lived in a very different **'cultural river'**.

"We don't expect to go to Proverbs and find verses about social media. We don't expect to go into Kings and find discussions of monarchy versus democracy. We don't expect to go to Deuteronomy and find discussions of market economy and capitalism. And we shouldn't expect to go to Genesis and find discussions of science. It's not their cultural river. And we dare not impose our cultural river on the text because when we do so, we are imposing something foreign on the text. And when we do that, we change it. That's not accountability. That's exploitation." John Walton

Choosing to read scripture 'literally', therefore, means reading it the way the original authors intended us to read it. In Genesis 1, the Israelites are answering the question about how the world began from within their own cultural river, in ways that interest them not us. They're not anticipating us. They're not trying to answer our question about how we would describe how the world began. They're addressing an Israelite audience, in an ancient world, with those concerns that were present in that culture, and they answer the question much more like a Babylonian or Egyptian would than we would. That's why it's important to hear *their* story (if we're going to be faithful interpreters) on *their terms*.

Bara – Creating function

Walton argues that in the ancient world, 'creation' accounts concerned installation of *function* rather than *material creation* – the shaping and forming of purpose, rather than bringing something into material existence.

"People in the ancient world believed that something existed not by virtue of its material properties, *but by virtue of it having a function in an ordered system.*"

The Hebrew word ***bārā'*** (translated "created" in Genesis 1) appears many times through Scripture and very often it makes most sense for this to be translated as a *functional creation*, rather than a material one.

Modern examples of this abound. 'Creating' something doesn't always mean making something from scratch – for example:

- Creating a committee
- Creating a university
- Making soldiers
- Creating a vision
- Creating (or throwing) a piece of pottery

In light of this, Genesis 1:1 is best read as a *heading* or title and translated as, "In the initial period, God created by assigning functions throughout the heavens and the earth, and this is how he did it."

Genesis 1:1

¹ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

¹ In the initial period, God created by assigning functions throughout the heavens and the earth, and this is how he did it.

Creating function and order

When we read Genesis 1, alongside Psalm 104, we get a particular story about 'creation' – less about the creation or the making, of a **house** (a material structure) than about the creation, or making, of a **home** (a specific kind of place or dwelling with a particular function).

The illustration works like this: When we first move into a new place, there is lots to do. We have stuff to paint, and things we want to fix up. More than anything else, we've got boxes and boxes and boxes that are all packed up. Nothing's in order. Nothing is functioning. Everything is in a box.

To turn a *house* into a *home*, we have to spend time unpacking the boxes and putting things in their proper places, one box at a time.

The house we receive exists in a state of **non-order**. The home has yet to be made. But bit by bit we unpack things, organise things, separate one thing from another, and put everything in its place. We plug things in and switch things on. We decide what's going to be in which room and how each of those rooms is going to function.

What we are doing isn't about the making a *house*. It's about making a **home**.

Making a house and making a home are two different creation stories and it is best to read **Genesis as a home making story** - a story of how things were separated and put in their proper place, and 'switched on', made to function – rather than a *house* story.

Tohu Staff-Vohu - Order, non-order and disorder

Ancient near eastern people had different categories for things – not so much as 'good' and 'bad' (the way we tend to think of things) but as 'ordered' and 'non-ordered' and 'disordered'.

Non-ordered life was called chaos. It's not evil, but it's not ordered. It's not organised. It hasn't been brought into made useful, or functioning. It's a mess.

Genesis 1:2

Now the earth was '**formless and void**' (tohu va-Vohu) –

"Tohu" describes things that aren't ordered yet – which is translated 'formless'.

Every creation text in the ancient world, across Babylon, Egypt, and the ancient Near-East, puts things the same way. They start with **non-order** - with things that aren't the way they ought to be. '**Creation is the ordering process**'.

For ancient readers, creation is not a 'manufacturing process' where physical objects roll off the assembly line. Rather, for them, the major element of creation is this ordering, putting things together, so that **they work the way they're supposed to**, so that they fit into the **purpose** that the creator has for them. Creation is an **ordering process**

Even though the Israelites had a different creator than the Egyptians or the Babylonians, they still thought this same way, that ordering was the most important idea. That's their cultural

river, and therefore it is best to read Genesis 1 in a similar way, carry the same ideas of 'non-order', 'order', and lastly 'disorder'.

For ancient readers, while disorder was disruption to an already ordered system, non-order was existence outside the ordered system. Disorder operates *within* the ordered system to peck away at it and disrupting it. In the Genesis accounts, disorder comes in chapter 3 – but that's getting ahead of ourselves.

Summary

This week we want to take time to reflect on what it means for the world to be 'created' and 'ordered' by God, and what it means for God to be the creator God (the ordering God), the maker of the heavens and the earth as a home.

Small Group / Further Study Questions

- What have you made that makes you feel proud?
Talk about things you have made – families, workplaces, objects, events, experiences and enjoy sharing the pleasure of making things.
- What is the difference between building a house and making a home?
- What is the difference between making and ordering?

- What does it mean to call God creator?
- What does this say about him?
- What does it say about what he made?

- What is the best thing about the world?
- What do you enjoy most about the created world?
- Can you believe in a world without a creator? Why? Why not?

THE GENESIS OF THE GOSPEL

WEEK 2 | ORDERING CREATION THROUGH SEPARATION AND FILLING

GENEISIS 1:1-25

¹ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

³ And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. ⁴ God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light 'day', and the darkness he called 'night'. And there was evening, and there was morning – the first day.

⁶ And God said, 'Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water.' ⁷ So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. ⁸ God called the vault 'sky'. And there was evening, and there was morning – the second day.

⁹ And God said, 'Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.' And it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry ground 'land', and the gathered waters he called 'seas'. And God saw that it was good.

¹¹ Then God said, 'Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.' And it was so. ¹² The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. ¹³ And there was evening, and there was morning – the third day.

¹⁴ And God said, 'Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years, ¹⁵ and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth.' And it was so. ¹⁶ God made two great lights – the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. ¹⁷ God set them in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth, ¹⁸ to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹ And there was evening, and there was morning – the fourth day.

²⁰ And God said, 'Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky.' ²¹ So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ²² God blessed them and said, 'Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.' ²³ And there was evening, and there was morning – the fifth day.

²⁴ And God said, 'Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind.' And it was so. ²⁵ God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

PSALM 104:1-34

¹ Praise the LORD, my soul.

LORD my God, you are very great;
you are clothed with splendour and majesty.

² The LORD wraps himself in light as with a garment;
he stretches out the heavens like a tent

³ and lays the beams of his upper chambers on their waters.
He makes the clouds his chariot
and rides on the wings of the wind.

⁴ He makes winds his messengers,
flames of fire his servants.

⁵ He set the earth on its foundations;
it can never be moved.

⁶ You covered it with the watery depths as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.

⁷ But at your rebuke the waters fled,
at the sound of your thunder they took to flight;

⁸ they flowed over the mountains,
they went down into the valleys,
to the place you assigned for them.

⁹ You set a boundary they cannot cross;
never again will they cover the earth.

¹⁰ He makes springs pour water into the ravines;
it flows between the mountains.

¹¹ They give water to all the beasts of the field;
the wild donkeys quench their thirst.

¹² The birds of the sky nest by the waters;
they sing among the branches.

¹³ He waters the mountains from his upper chambers;
the land is satisfied by the fruit of his work.

¹⁴ He makes grass grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to cultivate –
bringing forth food from the earth:

¹⁵ wine that gladdens human hearts,
oil to make their faces shine,
and bread that sustains their hearts.

¹⁶ The trees of the LORD are well watered,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.

¹⁷ There the birds make their nests;
the stork has its home in the junipers.

¹⁸ The high mountains belong to the wild goats;
the crags are a refuge for the hyrax.

- ¹⁹ He made the moon to mark the seasons,
and the sun knows when to go down.
- ²⁰ You bring darkness, it becomes night,
and all the beasts of the forest prowl.
- ²¹ The lions roar for their prey
and seek their food from God.
- ²² The sun rises, and they steal away;
they return and lie down in their dens.
- ²³ Then people go out to their work,
to their labour until evening.
- ²⁴ How many are your works, LORD!
In wisdom you made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
- ²⁵ There is the sea, vast and spacious,
teeming with creatures beyond number –
living things both large and small.
- ²⁶ There the ships go to and fro,
and Leviathan, which you formed to frolic there.
- ²⁷ All creatures look to you
to give them their food at the proper time.
- ²⁸ When you give it to them,
they gather it up;
when you open your hand,
they are satisfied with good things.
- ²⁹ When you hide your face,
they are terrified;
when you take away their breath,
they die and return to the dust.
- ³⁰ When you send your Spirit,
they are created,
and you renew the face of the ground.
- ³¹ May the glory of the LORD endure for ever;
may the LORD rejoice in his works –
- ³² he who looks at the earth, and it trembles,
who touches the mountains, and they smoke.
- ³³ I will sing to the LORD all my life;
I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.
- ³⁴ May my meditation be pleasing to him,
as I rejoice in the LORD.

Commentary and background

As we explored last week, we note that the Bible does not give us a *scientific* explanation of the origins of the cosmos. Instead, appropriate for the people of the ancient near east, the first chapters of our Scriptures present a story about **identity** and **purpose** of the cosmos.

The first readers and listeners of Genesis would not have been able to weigh in on the science of 'creation'. They would not have any conceptual basis for evolution or the big-bang or any of our commonly understood ideas about the way the cosmos holds together. They did not know about gravity or that the world was a globe which revolved around the sun. It makes perfect sense, therefore, from their perspective, to say that 'God makes the sun to rise and to set'. The Bible works within the "science" of their day and the God's action is understood from within the limits of their knowledge.

The Purpose of the Six-Days

It is useful to divide the six-day period of creation into two sets of three which correspond to each other:

- Days 1-3 establish **function**.
- Days 4-6 installing **functionaries**.

Days 1-3 - God establishes the **functions** of the cosmos.

1. Light (day one).
2. The waters above the waters below – a place for living things to live and the source of rain (day two).
3. Land and vegetation – the space for food to grow and for terrestrial animals and man to live (day three).

Days 4-6 - God installs the **functionaries** to carry out the functions he had established in the previous three days.

4. Sun, moon and stars - Cosmic bodies to ensure the continued separation of day and night established on day one (day four).
5. The sea animals and fish, and the birds to fill the space provided on day two (day five).
6. Animals and man to fill the dry land God established on day three (day six).

Notice the neat, poetic correspondence between the first three and last three days. (Day one corresponds to day four, day two to day five, etc.)

Read this way, we see that God firstly instils creation with **purpose** and then assigns **functionaries** to carry out those purposes.

The material things and functionaries already existed. The story is of God's moving to establish **order** and give material objects **purpose**.

Small Group / Further Study Questions

- What is the popularity of 'Planet Earth' and programs like this? Why do we seem to love them so much?
- What does it do for us when we climb a mountain or a hill and look over a vast view? Why are we attracted to this feeling? Why do we seek it out? What wisdom, viewpoint, does it give us?
- Is there a clash between our modern scientific understandings about the cosmos and the world, and the way the bible speaks? Why? Why not?
- What difference does it make to see the world as purposeful?
- What does it mean to be part of a created order?
- What does it mean to be a 'creature' (something created), not just a 'being' (something that exists)?
- To speak of creation, by its very nature of not having been made by us, is to speak of the world and our life as **gift**. How does this encourage us to adopt a posture of humility and gratitude.