

Question: How important is it whether God created over a long time or in exactly seven calendar days?

As we continue our **Knowing Your Faith** series we turn to look at the Book of Genesis. If there is one book that engenders a lot of debate and confusion it is the first book of the Scriptures. But first our why - a reminder here: what are we doing in this series? We are looking at topics that people generally are keen to learn more about, discuss or debate. In doing so we are providing tools that we can use as Christians when talking with family and friends about faith, particularly our faith in Jesus and God's Word. This is aimed to be material you can use. If you are not sure on a topic then this series will give you solid foundational material to learn from. So today let's turn to one of the most hotly debated books in the Bible; that of Genesis.

First, a note on the authorship of Genesis. Generally, it is held that first five books of the Scriptures were written by Moses at Mt Sinai. There is a degree of debate as to whether or not additional authors contributed to the various texts and someone redacted, or edited them at a later stage, to become the version we have today. There is good evidence this may be the case. We will touch on one such example further on. However, if so, it was done very early in the written record and is not a concern to us. Moses, clearly, wasn't present at the creation of the earth so however, or whenever, the Pentateuch (the first five books) came together we hold they were divinely inspired, as are all the Scriptures, so we have what God wants us to have. You may be interested to know that the first five books are considered sacred and referred to as the *Torah* (by Jews), the *Pentateuch*, that is, the Five Books of Law, (by Christians and the Western world) and the *Taurat* (by Muslims).

Often the debates around Genesis are somewhat uninformed and sides are taken dogmatically, as if we actually know, or could know, all of the answers to questions that arise. Often the Scriptures are mistranslated, misused, or misunderstood, and the wrong things are emphasised.

I want to start here by saying that this is one area of great interest to me, in fact a life-time interest. My first degree was in politics and anthropology. In anthropology I split between social anthropology that looks at human social systems and physical anthropology that looks at historical evidence. It has intrigued me ever since, particularly as a Christian and as related to the Biblical accounts, evidence and the evolution debate. The best way, I believe, we can address these issues is to have a good understanding of what the Scriptures say and don't say, and how they were intended to be used and understood. In that light, it is interesting to see where the world and science heads. Let's start today by seeing what the Scriptures can tell us.

We turn to Genesis 1 which starts with the famous words **"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth"**. This is quite intentional. There has been endless scholastic research, from Hebrew, Christian and multiple other sources, into how to understand and translate the intent of these words correctly. The linguistic case is

detailed but clear, as summarised nicely by Jiri Moskala of Andrews University¹. Jiri tells us that in spite of some interpretative difficulties with Gen 1:1-3, the main message and intent of the author are clear: the focal point is God. God is the Creator of the heavens, the earth and everything that exists. Creation exists only because of God. God created the material, the physical, everything we know and can know. God is the source of life, all life, wherever it comes from. This creation is unique. God and matter have not co-existed; God pre-existed everything and is eternal. God created matter and anti-matter as well for that matter! The main point then is that God is the sole and Ultimate Creator.

Some of you might know that joke about the scientists who thought that, now they had the ability to create life, they could compete with God. In fact, it has been quite a thing lately in scientific news. Scientists believe they are close to being able to replicate the building blocks of life from primary elements. The scientists challenged God to a competition to create life and picked up the dirt to extract the elements they needed. God looked at them and said, *“Wait on, create your own dirt.”* The point is well made in Genesis’ opening phrase. Without God there is nothing, absolutely nothing at all. God brought everything into existence.

In the New Testament this is further expounded. The apostle Paul, speaking to the Greek religious leaders and philosophers in the Areopagus, recorded in Acts 17:24, proclaimed, **“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything....”** The case is made even more explicitly by the author of the epistle to the Hebrews, probably the orator Apollos, who writes in Hebrews 11:3, **“By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.”** Scholar Hermann Gunkel states that *“the author first establishes the doctrine that God created the world. No statement in the cosmogonies of other peoples’ approaches this first statement in the Bible.”* In other words, as we saw last week with the virgin birth, what is claimed here, is that when Moses wrote these words, they were not something that any other culture or worldview of the time had claimed or expected.

You may have heard the term *“ex nihilo”* bandied around in debates in this field. *“Ex nihilo”* is the Latin term derived from the intent of Hebrews 11:3; God created everything out of nothing. The term doesn’t actually exist in the Scriptures *per se*. So no one is left in any doubt the apostle John wrote, in John 1:3, **“Through Him all things were made, and without Him nothing was made that has been made”**.

So, what’s the key point? God is the source of everything, of all we know, everything exists simply because of God’s will to create. Furthermore, the Scriptures reveal that the Creation itself was a Trinitarian exercise; that is God, as the Father and Creator, worked through the Holy Spirit and the Son to create.

In Genesis 1:2 the Spirit is depicted as hovering over the waters. The Hebrew word for hovering *רָחַף* (*râchaph* - pronounce raw-khaf) that is used has a pensive feel, some translations use “brooding”, which conveys a better sense of a mother hen brooding over a nest, which is what is intended. The Spirit is the active force of God’s creation.

In the fuller text of John 1, in verses 1-5, the gospel writer John reveals Jesus’ contribution to the Creation in a beautiful way that naturally leads to worship. **“In the**

¹ Jiri Moskala, *Interpretation of Bere’sit in the Context of Genesis 1:1-3*, Andrews University, April 2011

beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” This is further affirmed by the apostle Paul, the writer of Colossians, when he states in 1:15-17, **“The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”** We understand the “first-born” statement about Christ to understand His was the first physical presence in the new creation. That takes a bit of thinking about, but we can come back to that later.

A little gem for you now that most people don't know about. There is a word not translated in Genesis 1 in English or any other translation because there is no easy way to translate it. In the Hebrew text of Genesis 1 we have

בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:

The highlighted Aleph-Tav combination is not a word. It is simply the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet inserted into the Creation story. The beginning and the end. It is picked up again by John in the Book of Revelation using the Greek alphabet:

- 1:8: **"I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty"**
- 21:6 **"He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life."**
- 22:13: **"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End."**

There is a clear link in the Biblical text between Jesus, right at the start and at the end of all things, across two languages, across time and Old and New Testaments.

A key and vital purpose of the creation account is thus revealed, even in these first few short words: God is to be worshipped, to be honoured for who God is and what God has done. His Son Jesus has been there from the beginning in a vital role and the Holy Spirit has been the active force of Creation. One cannot begin to comprehend God as Creator without a sense of awe, admiration and worship. The Creation is not to be argued about but enjoyed and proclaimed.

Of course, one of the greatest debates that arises in Genesis is related to the age of the earth. In the Hebrew world the Jewish people have been celebrating the festival of Rosh Hashanah this last week from Monday to Wednesday. In their calendar it is the annual celebration of the creation of the universe and the creation of mankind. It is the Jewish New Year and in their calendar it is year it is now year 5786. Interestingly, while China uses the Gregorian calendar like most of the world, in their cultural calendar it is year 4723. The Scriptural record has been analysed multiple times since Bishop James Ussher, an archbishop and a professor at Trinity College in Dublin, famously declared the world was 6026 years old in the mid 1600's. Yet scientists and multiple sources of research tell us that world is far older than that. There are now multiple heritage sites of

human populations going back to almost 10,000 years of age and the development of homo sapiens is argued, from physical evidence, to go back many thousands, even hundreds of thousands of years. What do we make of this?

Firstly, we approach it from a faith perspective. What is important, what do we want to affirm in faith? We affirm that God created, not *how* God created, or what God has allowed to develop from what God created. This is our affirmation of faith; that God is the Ultimate Creator, as is affirmed in both the Apostle's Creed: "*I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth*" and the Nicene Creed, "*I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.*"

Secondly, we need to look at what the Genesis record is. Take any modern Bible and you will see that the large parts of Genesis 1 are indented. Why? Because the text is an unusual mix of poetry and narrative in an almost unique form of literary art that sets the stage for all that will follow. It is critically not intended to be taken as a scientific document. In Genesis 2 however, the text changes to a narrative, story-telling form and that too is different. Scholars have suggested it is a re-telling of part of the creation story by another author with a focus on the creation of humanity.

The key point here is would you take a piece of poetry and try and argue it as a scientific document? It doesn't mean that it wouldn't contain elements of literal truth, but the weight goes on purpose rather than a dogmatic focus on events. It doesn't mean it isn't literally right, but the text itself gives no certainty of this other than that God created, God brought order out of Chaos and that God saw that what He had created was good.

The third key point in the Genesis 1 narrative is found in the words, "**So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.**" Unlike all the animals we were created in the likeness of God. It is this aspect, more than anything else, that we should take away from Genesis 1. As human beings we share many of God's attributes: we have the capacity to love, for moral reason and action, we are incredibly creative, we have a spiritual life that every human being shares and we have the blessing of being able to have a relationship with God, our Creator, at a personal level. God wants this, right from the beginning, as God walked with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden God has wanted us to be in a close, loving and responsive relationship with Him.

We also have responsibilities to love and care for each other and the created order. We are charged with a stewardship of, not just our own immediate situation, but all of the world, as God's ambassadors. In the way that we live we are to reflect God, as seen in Jesus. We have been given the capacity for great love and relationship as seen in the Trinity, so we can love one another and our Creator as God intended.

What matters then in Genesis 1 is that we recognise that God is the Creator of everything. That God has created an amazing world and given us the responsibility, as His ambassadors to care for it ... no matter how long it has, or will be, around. Moreover, we are to love God and each other and develop all that God has given us, as creations in God's image. It's probably better to spend more time working on this than debating years since and the manner of God's creation, fascinating as it is.

Amen

Next week – Genesis 2 – A bad day at the office.

