

1: This world - as God's creation

'Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.'
(Isaiah 40:28)



Earthrise - Apollo 8, 1968, NASA

Opening Discussion

How would you describe the earth to a visitor passing through from another planet?

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Created by the will and word of God

(Read Genesis 1:1-10, Proverbs 3:19-20, John 1:1-5)

Chapter 1 of Genesis begins with the words 'In the beginning God...' and we must acknowledge at the start that this book is not a scientific treatise and should not be taken as such. It was written in simple structured language so that every generation, of whatever age, could gain understanding. Its language is quite poetic, and the structure carefully thought out to give extra meaning. The creation story is spread over two sets of three days. Days 1-3 are about separating and gathering, bringing form. Days 4-6 fill the emptiness and bring order out of chaos. The earth is now full of life.

To emphasise the careful structure of the prose, the writer uses significant numbers, particularly 3 (which speaks of what God is, representing divine wholeness and perfection), and 7 (the number of completeness and perfection) On three occasions God creates

something out of nothing, on three occasions he names something and three times something is blessed. Seven times we're told that 'God saw that it was good'. There are seven days and both the first and last three sentences, in the Hebrew, contain seven words.

So, what about those six days of creation? Whilst some are happy to see these as 'earth days' of 24 hours, this is difficult to reconcile with the geological data that science provides. Some have suggested a deliberate gap between verses 2 and 3, others that God chose to make the earth look old.

Another way of looking at these time periods might be to try and equate them with geological eras or consider that they are simply 'markers' in a story and not intended to equate with distinct periods of time.

An alternative view is that we consider them to be 'God days', rather than 'earth days' (see 2 Peter 3:8 which emphasises that God does not view time by human standards.). The writer places the process of creation, very much condensed, into this poetic form so that the real emphasis, God's relationship with humankind, can now take centre stage.

John joins both Old and New Testaments by telling his readers that in Christ there is a visible link between God and the material world, countering the Gnostic heresy of the day which saw a difference between the creator god of our Old Testament and the God and Father of Jesus Christ in the New.

Q) How do you view the description of creation given in Genesis 1, given the diversity of interpretations present within the Church?

Q) It has been said that science asks the question 'How?' and religion addresses the question 'Why?'. This might present a complimentary rather than a confrontational viewpoint. Does that seem fair, or is it important to see Genesis 1 as fitting the scientific 'how' exactly?

Q) Genesis 1 is actually more about the creator than creation, as the word 'God' appears 35 times. So, taking a quick look at the chapter, what kind of picture does it paint of God?

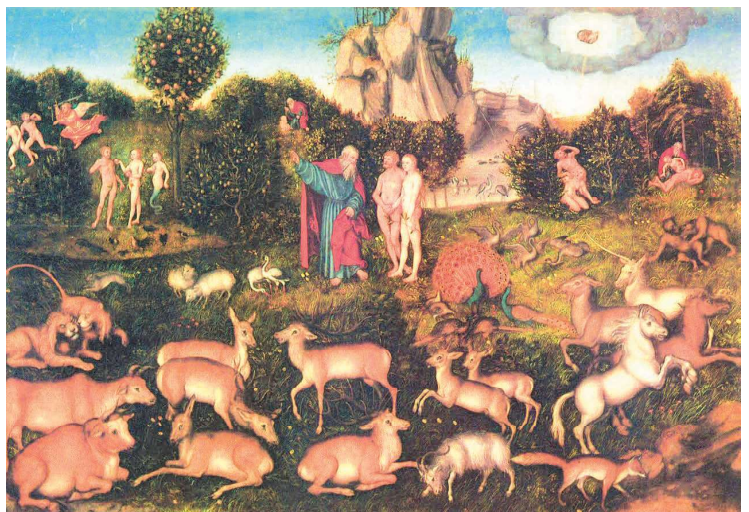
Q) The opening chapter to our Bibles causes a lot of controversy both outside and in the Church – so why not simply get rid of it? Is it actually needed?

Created good

(Read Genesis 1:31, Psalm 19:1, 1 Timothy 4:4)

The opening chapter of Genesis is peppered with the phrase 'And God saw that it was good.' In the final verse the emphasis is on 'very good!' So, do we take 'good' to mean acceptable or excellent as we might use the word? In the context of this passage, particularly applied to God's judgement, it can be said to mean conformity to God's will - it is exactly as it was intended to be.

We can also find another meaning within the text. In verses 6-8 of the chapter (the second day) the word 'good' is missing, and this corresponds to a period when nothing was created that was directly beneficial



Lucas Cranach the Elder, Garden of Eden, 1530

to humankind. The heavens were created, and the waters divided, but the land where people were to dwell remained hidden under the 'deep.' It was on the third day when the seas were parted and dry ground appeared that the word 'good' appears again. So here the emphasis in v.31 is on God seeing that everything is now in place, as was intended, to enable humankind, and indeed all created life to thrive.

That this creation is a wonderful thing is echoed in the Psalmists words, as he gazes upward toward the night sky with its bright stars, or gazes across the countryside on a sunlit day. In those days 'the skies' would

describe a solid canopy that was believed to be over the earth, across which the sun made its daily journey, and within which were windows or gates to allow the rain to pour through (Gen 7:11). Our understanding of the universe has changed somewhat over the centuries!

Paul in his letter to Timothy also uses the word 'good' to describe the things that God has created, in this case relating to food, which should be received with thanksgiving and prayer.

Q) The writer uses the word 'Good' to describe the created world. How would you describe it in just a couple of words?

Q) The ancient world had a much smaller view of the universe, the stars of the night sky as a globe above a flat earth. Now we have images of black holes and other galaxies and know that our universe is far bigger than any of us can imagine. Has this expansion of knowledge altered anything about your own understanding of the creation story?

Q) Is everything in nature 'good' or are there some parts you struggle to apply that word to? (ignoring humankind for the moment)

Created for a purpose

(Read Psalm 148:1-5, 24:1-2, Isaiah 45:18, Colossians 1:15-17)

Psalm 148 is one of the hymns of praise, and encourages all things, both above and on the earth (vv. 7-14) to sing praises to God, not just for their creation but for the particular functions and unique roles that they have been given. Each can tell of the glory of God through His craftsmanship, just as we might look at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and wonder at the talent of Michelangelo.

Just as the Genesis story tells us that God looked at the stages of creation and saw that they were 'good', or 'as they were intended to be', so we too can gaze at the universe visible

in a night sky, understand that it might speak of God's glory and wonder at our role within it.

Psalm 24 asserts God's right of 'ownership' as the one who created the earth and everything on it, a right that is his particularly because he has made the world inhabitable. This fits well with the idea that the writer of Genesis is talking of a world intended for all living things to thrive upon.

Paul in writing to the Colossians brings us back to John's Gospel and the relationship between

God, Jesus, and creation. Jesus is the image of God, in the sense that the nature and being of God are perfectly revealed in him. He is the firstborn over all creation, a position of rank, and the agent of all creation.

Paul goes further by inferring that the earth finds its purpose through Jesus. One commentator says, 'Creation is for Christ in the sense that he is the end for which all things exist, the goal toward whom all things were intended to move. They are meant to serve his will and to contribute to his glory.'¹

(¹ Expositor's Bible Commentary (Abridged Edition): New Testament, Copyright 2004)

Q) There is a real sense of an interconnected world in Genesis 1; well planned and distinct stages before that final 'It was very good!'. Could this pattern fit into our understanding of God's answers to some of our prayers?

Q) Does there need to be a purpose for the creation of this world, or could it have been purely a vanity project?

Q) How good are we at following the advice of Psalm 148, and particularly thinking about our own skills and talents?

'If one could conclude as to the nature of the Creator from a study of creation it would appear that God has an inordinate fondness for stars and beetles.'
(J.B.S. Haldane)

'I would rather be what God chose to make me than the most glorious creature that I could think of; for to have been thought about, born in God's thought, and then made by God, is the dearest, grandest and most precious thing in all thinking.'
(George MacDonald)

'I look out of this window and I think this is a cosmos, this is a huge creation, this is one small corner of it. The trees and birds and everything else and I'm part of it. I didn't ask to be put here, I've been lucky in finding myself here.'
(Morris West)

To ponder and pray

What is there in this brief examination of the created world that you can bring into your prayer life?

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