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Genesis 1:1–2:3

First Message

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THIS IS MY FATHER'S WORLD

SERIES: THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE NEW, AND THE PERFECT

My formal studies as an undergraduate were in Geography, but I also spent much time pursuing a less formal curriculum on my own, studying the Bible and leading Bible studies. I didn't pursue these two subjects in isolation one from the other. Instead I tried to reconcile my Geography studies and my Biblical studies. If you understand Geography as being merely the rote memorization of a list of countries and capitals, then there is not much to reconcile. But Geography is the study of anything to do with the earth's surface and the activities that take place thereupon. The early chapters of Genesis therefore have rather a lot to say about Geography: the creation of the earth, the planting of a garden, the birth of economic activity, the first city, a Flood, the spread of mankind, and so on. I was fascinated by these first chapters of the Bible. I read books about the intersection of creation and science, books such as *The Genesis Flood* by John Whitcomb and Henry Morris, then regarded as a classic of the creation scientist cause. I joined the Biblical Creation Society in the UK. In my assignments I argued for what I considered to be a Biblical view of the origins of the earth.

Looking back on those years now, I realize that I was approaching Genesis scientifically; that is, I considered that these early chapters of Genesis had things to say about science. In effect, I treated Genesis as a scientific textbook. The books I read taught me how to read Genesis scientifically, but I now realize that no one taught me how to read it theologically—that is, to read it as a record of who God is, who man is, and how the two relate. In the eighteen years since graduation my understanding of Genesis has changed a great deal. It is not that I have conceded defeat to the evolutionists—my views about science have changed very little. But I have come to think that Genesis has very little to say about science and very much to say about theology. Instead of reading Genesis scientifically I now read it theologically. This is why, when two years ago I taught a Monday night class on the early chapters of Genesis, I entitled the class not “Genesis 1–12” but “The theology of Genesis 1–12.” I wanted to emphasize the fact that Genesis is to be read theologically.

I. Learning to read theologically

Three things have helped me make the transition from reading Genesis scientifically to reading it theologically.

1. Reading as literature

Firstly, I have learnt the importance of literary structure. For most of the Twentieth Century it has been commonplace to consider the OT as the error-filled product of unsophisticated editors. So for example, the first two chapters of Genesis were viewed as containing two contradictory accounts of creation. The Hebrew editor who put these chapters together thousands of years ago was obviously not very bright, otherwise he would have realized how contradictory the two accounts were. But the modern scholar, being a very clever fellow, can see right through it all and unravel the chapters, indeed the whole Pentateuch, into separate color-coded strands. But in the

past twenty years there has been a great change, thanks largely to the attention of professors of literature. When these literature scholars looked at the Bible, they were amazed at the literary sophistication of the writers and editors. The arrogance of several generations of scholars has been replaced by a measure of humility. The Bible is very carefully written. Anyone who attempts to interpret the Bible without understanding its structure runs the risk of arriving at a wrong understanding. Each book of the OT has a literary structure, and this is especially true of Genesis.

2. Reading the Bible as a whole

Secondly, I have learnt the importance of reading Genesis, or any other book of the Bible, in the light of the whole of Scripture. The Bible is like a mystery novel. In a well-written mystery the reader doesn't learn “whodunit” until the last page of the book, but then he realizes that everything written in the rest of the book leads up to that final page. The seemingly insignificant details turn out to be not insignificant at all. So it is with the Bible. Everything leads up to the end of the story, which we are given in Revelation 21–22. Therefore, I don't read Genesis in a vacuum. I read it in the light of the rest of the story, and especially in the light of the end of the story.

3. Reading symbolically

Thirdly, I have learnt to read and think symbolically. A few months ago I heard on NPR an interview with a mathematics professor from St. Mary's College. He was asked why students who breeze through algebra, geometry and trigonometry have such a hard time when they hit calculus. His reply fascinated me: people have difficulty understanding calculus because of a failure to think symbolically. When I heard that I immediately thought that this is true also of the Bible. A symbol is “something that stands for or represents another thing; esp., an object used to represent something abstract” (Webster's). People tend to get rather uncomfortable when I talk of reading the Bible symbolically. They assume that I am robbing things of any literal reality. But take the case of the Land. The land that God gave Israel was a physical reality, but if you see the land as only a piece of real estate you completely miss the point of what the land was all about. Ultimately, the land was a symbol, referring to a greater reality. It is the failure to understand this that leads to much confusion over the land occupied by the current state of Israel. Or take the example of the Temple. Look at the verse on the cover of your bulletin:

“Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool.

Where is the house you will build for me?

Where will my resting place be?

Has not my hand made all these things,
and so they came into being?”

declares the LORD. (Isa 66:1-2)

The Temple was a real physical building but it was also a symbol pointing to a greater reality, for a mere physical building can never

be a sufficient temple for the Lord. It is when we see the Temple as a symbol that we can understand the absence of a Temple in the new heavens and the new earth. The symbol has given way to the reality toward which the symbol always pointed.

To understand any portion of Scripture, therefore, we need to pay attention to its literary structure, to the rest of the story, and to the meaning of symbols. With these three points in mind, let us embark on a theological reading of the first chapter of Genesis.

II. A Theological Reading of Genesis 1:1–2:3

1. Structure

Genesis is a carefully-written and highly-structured book. The book is divided into sections by the heading, occurring ten times, “This is the account of...” (2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1; 37:2). The first of these headings does not occur until 2:4, setting the first chapter apart from the rest of the book. Genesis 1 functions as an introduction to Genesis, indeed to the whole Bible.

The unique nature of chapter 1 is also indicated by the language. Though written in prose, the language is highly structured and patterned. The six days are described using repetitive language. The first two verses stand outside this structure as a heading. The first three verses of chapter 2 are an epilogue.

2. The Initial State (1:1-2)

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 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. (1:1-2 NIV)

The Bible opens abruptly with the statement, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The Bible makes no attempt to prove the existence of God. We are presented with his existence as a fact. In verse 2 we are presented with an earth that is already in existence. We are not told how it came into being, although its existence is covered under the general statement of verse 1, as being created by God. Much though we might like to prove the existence of God and argue about how the earth itself was created, the Bible gives us nothing to go on. We must learn to be content with a large measure of ignorance, for the Lord has left much mystery in this world.

Verse 2 describes the state of the earth before the six days of creation. We are told three things. Firstly, the earth was formless and empty. In Hebrew this is the delightful-sounding *tohu va-vohu*. The earth was both uninhabitable, because it had no form, and uninhabited, because it was empty. Secondly, the earth was covered by darkness and the deep. This reinforces the idea that the earth was a blank slate, devoid of form and content. Thirdly, the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. God through his Spirit was actively present upon an otherwise still and inactive world, ready to be the executor of God’s command.

3. Forming and Filling (1:3-31)

And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day. (1:3-5)

Over this shapeless and empty blob called “earth,” covered by darkness and sea, God speaks. God effortlessly calls all things into being through his word. His word is put into effect by the Spirit,

and, as we learn from the NT, by the Son. The six days of creation are carefully ordered into two sets of three days. In the first three days God counteracts the formlessness of the blank earth, giving it form, shape and order. A key word here is the verb “divide” or “separate,” used five times. On the first day he creates light, dividing the light from the darkness, the day from the night. On the second day he creates a firmament (NASB) or expanse (NIV), dividing the waters above from the waters below, the sky from the sea. On the third day he creates dry land, dividing the land from the sea. By the end of the third day we have a formed earth. It has structure and shape. But it is still empty.

In the second set of three days, days 4-6, God counteracts this emptiness, filling the realms that he formed on the first three days. On the first day he formed the day and the night; on the fourth day he fills these two realms with their respective created entities, the sun, moon and stars. On the second day he formed the sky and the sea; on the fifth day he fills these realms with their respective creatures, birds and fish. On the third day he created the dry land with its vegetation; on the sixth day he fills this realm with its appropriate creatures, the animals. Everything is carefully ordered with each creature in its appropriate realm. The repetitive language reinforces this careful ordering.

The last creature created is man.

4. Man (1:26-30)

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

**So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.**

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.

The events of the first five and a half days have followed a pattern. And so, when we reach verse 26 we expect to read, “Then God said, ‘Let the land produce man according to his kind.’” But the pattern is broken. This is where it is so important to pay attention to literary structure, because this literary method places great emphasis on the event that breaks the pattern. The pattern is broken in numerous ways.

Firstly, each other act of creation is announced with the divine fiat—the declaration, “Let there be.” But the creation of man is introduced with a statement of divine deliberation, “Let us make.” However we interpret the plurality here, it is clear that this new act of creation is being presented in a different category.

Secondly, a different verb is used. The verb used for God’s making of the other creatures is *asah*, the usual Hebrew verb for make. But for man, the verb is *bara*, used three times in v. 27. This verb is used only of God and there is never any mention of the material from

which the object is created. It is used only of new acts of creation. The creation of man is not in the same category as that of the other creatures.

Thirdly, for most of the other creatures we are told that they were created after their kind: the seed-bearing plants and the fruit-bearing trees (1:12), the sea creatures and the birds (1:21), the wild animals, the livestock, and the creepy-crawlies (1:24-25). The birds take the form of birds, and the sea creatures take the form of sea creatures. The two don't cross. As Tevye said in *Fiddler on the Roof*, "If a bird were to marry a fish, where would they live?" But when we come to the creation of man, we find a striking omission of this little phrase. God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness." This can only mean that man is made not after his own kind but after God's kind. What does it mean to be in the image and likeness of God? In the Ancient Near East when a king conquered a territory and moved on, he left behind him a statue, an image, representing his rule over that domain. Man is created to be God's representative ruler over the earth. The fish fill their realm, the birds their realm, the animals their realm, but man is given dominion over all of these realms. He is commissioned by God to rule on his behalf. This does not give man license to rape the earth. If anything, man is to be an ardent environmentalist, caring for the earth that God has created but never falling into the trap of worshipping the creature rather than the creator, of exalting "Nature" with a capital N. So, man is created to be God's representative ruler on earth. But he is more than that. He is also created in the likeness of God. In some way man is actually like God. Man, therefore, is both representative and representational of God.

Fourthly, man is created as both male and female, sharing a divine-like unity in diversity.

Though man is a creature, he is far exalted above the other creatures. Man is no mere animal. Man is created according to God's kind. Luke traces his genealogy back to "Adam, the son of God" (Luke 3:37). With the creation of this earthly human representative of the heavenly divine, the six days of creation are complete. The blank earth has been formed and filled.

5. Verdict (1:31)

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

Six times God has seen that what he has made was good. Now at the end of the sixth day he surveys the cosmos as a completed whole, and for the seventh time we are told that it was good, nay "it was very good." The Hebrew word "good" means that something is what it is supposed to be and that it functions as it should. God surveyed all that he had made, and, behold, it was what he had intended making and it was functioning the way he intended it to function. It was a harmonious whole.

We would expect the creation story to end there, but we find that there is yet another day, the seventh day.

6. The seventh day (2:1-3)

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

As I said in my sermon on the Sabbath a year ago, for someone who is supposed to be at rest God had a busy day on that seventh day.¹ Four verbs are predicated of him: he finished his work, he

rested, he blessed that seventh day, and he sanctified it. Many have trouble with the idea of God working on the first sabbath, so, in order to help him out, they move some of his work to the sixth day. Both NASB and NIV state that it was "by the seventh day" that God completed his work, meaning that he finished it late on the sixth day. The Revised English Bible is even more explicit: "On the sixth day God completed." But the Hebrew text is very clear: it was on the seventh day, not the sixth day, that God completed his work. On the seventh day he brought his creation into a state of being complete. Then God did something very special to that seventh day, something that he did not do to any of the other days. He both blessed the day and he sanctified it. By blessing the day God endowed it with the potential to be the day he intended it to be. If "good" is the declaration that something is what it is intended to be, "bless" is the endowment of the wherewithal to continue in a state of goodness. Then God went a stage further and he sanctified the day. To sanctify means to make holy. Holiness is fundamental to the biblical view of the world. The cosmos is divided into two realms, the common and the uncommon, the profane and the holy. To sanctify something is to set it aside as "other." On the seventh day God moved a portion of his creation into a different realm, the realm of the other.

III. Implications

I wish to draw out three profound implications of this story, implications that affect how we view the whole story of redemption.

1. God is redeeming his whole world

This is the world that God has made. As we sang earlier, "This is my Father's world." He spoke it into existence with his word, carefully forming the cosmos and filling it. He put each creature in its appropriate place. At the end of the sixth day he saw that everything that he had made, the whole cosmos as a harmoniously functioning whole, was very good. Though creation has been marred by the fall and by the effects of the fall, God still cares for this creation that he has made. He ensures that this earth continues to function. He will ensure that this, his earth, continues to function until he has accomplished his plan of salvation, $\gamma 2K$ notwithstanding.

Too many Christians think that redemption is just a neat legal trick whereby God lets us off the hook for our sins. But redemption is about very much more than the forgiveness of sins. Redemption is a full and complete restoration of all things. Paul wrote the Romans that "the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Rom 8:22). The whole creation awaits its redemption. The popular image of heaven is of cherubs, harps and clouds. No wonder it seems boring to most people. Fortunately, this image has nothing to do with Biblical reality. According to the Bible, at the end of redemption lie a new heavens and a new earth. God's plan of redemption concerns the whole cosmos. He has seated Christ at his right hand and is in the process of bringing his entire cosmos under the rule of Christ.

The church has always had an uncomfortable relationship with the earth. Jesus' disciples were earthy men who wrestled their livelihood from the land and the sea. But within just a few generations the church was beset by neoplatonism, the resurgence of certain ideas of Plato. One of the distinctives of neoplatonism was to regard matter as evil and spirit as good. The first monks, influenced by these platonic ideas, forsook the world to live in desert caves, mortifying their evil bodies. They longed for the day when their soul would be set free from the confines of their body. But this longing for a disem-

bodied soul is much closer to Buddhism than to Biblical Christianity. The Bible teaches us to expect a resurrection of the body not its annihilation.

Today we are beset by another variation of the neoplatonic belittling of the body. Many Christians think that since the world is headed to hell in a handbasket, we ought to distance ourselves from the world. We ought not to waste time on culture or art or caring for the earth. But this continues to be God's world, however much Satan may be its present ruler. The recognition that this is God's world was crucial to the rise of modern science. Behind the scientific pursuits of early scientists such as Isaac Newton lay the Reformation rediscovery of the sovereignty and providence of God. They sought to probe this fascinating world that God had made, confident that there were patterns to be discovered. Newton considered that he was but as a little child playing at the seashore of the vast ocean of God's creation.

This world is tainted by the effects of sin, but it is not evil. Let us never forget that God's redemptive purposes concern the whole of creation. I have no interest in being a disembodied soul.

2. God's pursuit of man

The second implication concerns mankind. Without an adequate understanding of creation we will never understand why God pursues us so. Many Christians don't even understand that it is God that pursues us. Modern evangelicalism usually fosters the impression that we have to pursue God. But as Augustine discovered long ago we are able to pursue God only because he first pursues us. Redemption does not depend upon us. It depends upon God. He created man to be his faithful image and likeness. He is determined to restore fallen man to being his faithful image and likeness. God created us for glory and he is not going to abandon that intent.

3. Eschatology

The third implication concerns eschatology. This fancy word means the study of last things, from the Greek word *eschatos*, meaning last. Most Christians, if they understand the term at all, associate eschatology with the last book of the Bible, Revelation, with Armageddon, the Millennium, and now $\Upsilon 2\kappa$. But eschatology starts in the creation story of the first book. Much faulty thinking about the eschatology of Revelation has arisen from a failure to grasp the eschatology of Genesis. We have seen that the formed and filled cosmos that God made was very good. But beyond the very good lies another realm: beyond the good lies the holy. When God transferred the seventh day into the realm of the holy, that left six days in the realm of the common, outside the holy. Surely this, though good, is less than perfect. Would God be content leaving such a large portion of his cosmos outside the holy?

Holiness is a major theme through the rest of the Bible. Redemption is not merely the restoration of holiness to things that were holy before the Fall. It is the extension of holiness to realms that have not been holy before, of the transfer of these portions of the cosmos into the realm of the holy. The whole nation of Israel is set aside as holy. The land of Israel is set aside as holy, with the Holy of Holies being the most holy. Where is all this leading? God is intent on drawing all things into the realm of the holy. One of the ways this is presented is using the symbolism of light and land. The blank state of the unformed earth was characterized as darkness and sea. Into the darkness God spoke light, driving the darkness back to the

periphery. Into the sea he spoke dry land, driving the sea back to the periphery. Darkness and sea, though being real, tangible things, also have symbolic meaning in the Bible, serving as symbols of that which is chaotic. Into the disorder of the primeval state God spoke order. At the end of Revelation we find that the new cosmos will contain neither darkness nor sea. I take this to mean that all will be rendered holy.

We live betwixt times, in a cosmos that contains both light and darkness, both dry land and sea. Even had there been no Fall there would have been further activity necessary on the part of God, eliminating the darkness and the sea, transferring the first six days into the realm of the holy. The Fall necessitated a recovery operation. But it is more than a recovery operation. God is doing far more than restoring the world to a mixture of light and darkness, of land and sea. He will both restore creation and fulfill it. The end will be far better than the beginning. Indeed, the last two chapters of Revelation describe not the end, but the end of the beginning, for it is only with the new cosmos of Revelation 21–22 that we attain to the cosmos that God always intended. That's when life will really begin. Meanwhile though, God has spoken his light into the darkness of our hearts, has spoken order into our disordered beings. He is re-forming and re-filling us so that we be fit for that new heavens and new earth.

This is eschatology. What usually passes for eschatology is a travesty of the Biblical concept. Even if there were to be a conflict at Armageddon and a millennium, and I am by no means convinced of that, these are not the last things. These are merely conjectured penultimate things. But so much attention is focused on them that people lose sight of the truly last things. Forget the books on Armageddon. Where are the books about the new heavens and the new earth? A glorious future awaits us. The end will be far better than the beginning. It is because God is the Creator of this vast cosmos that he is able to be its Redeemer, renewing it and bringing it to its great goal of being the perpetual dwelling place of both God and man. Because he wants this new cosmos to be a dwelling place not only for himself but for us, he is relentless in his pursuit of us. Redemption is driven by God, and to him be the glory.

As we sang earlier:

This is my Father's world,
 O let me ne'er forget
 That though the wrong seems oft so strong,
 God is the Ruler yet.
 This is my Father's world:
 the battle is not done;
 Jesus who dies shall be satisfied,
 and earth and heav'n be one.

1. Bernard Bell, "Sabbath: A Token of Eternity," Catalog No. 1176, September 20, 1998.

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