

CREATION

Introduction

There is no more important decision you can make about the universe than this. Is there a Person behind it or not? How you regard the Universe, how you treat it, what you hope to get from it and give to it, how you view your own life, all will be shaped decisively by how you answer this question. *(Mike Lloyd – Café Theology)*

The rise of the New Atheists has brought into sharp focus the debate over whether the world we inhabit is the Creation of a good God or simply the product of random, impersonal natural forces. It has been unfairly polarised as a debate between science and faith, between the Bible and the rational world.

'The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.' *(Richard Dawkins - River out of Eden)*

The Hebrew writers do not see works of Creation (beauty of created order etc) as proofs or evidences of the existence of God (they were not sceptics but believers already) but they do see the world as disclosing the glory of God and speaking of his character.

'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands'
(Psalm 19)

Although people's first experience/encounter with God in Scripture is as Redeemer, the assumption throughout the Biblical literature is that he is the Creator of everything which exists.

GENESIS 1-2

These chapters, along with chapters 3-11, form the overture to the whole Bible and introduce the central character.

They are comparatively late in composition probably finding written form in Exilic/post-exilic period (c6-7th century BC) though very probably had earlier origins in liturgical texts in use before the Exile in Solomon's Temple, being recited as part of the festival liturgies. The Hebrew text has a strongly liturgical character to it.

Controversy over the dating of Creation often obscures for us the main thrust and intentions of these narratives.

The attitude which seeks, in Genesis 1, to discover the processes whereby God created the world, is the product of deistic views that would speculate about how the world began and was then left alone to run its own course. God is no King if he only originated Creation and then left it to unwind like a big clock. Rather he is somehow behind all physical processes, and without him, nothing could continue. (Ps 33:6, 9, Isaiah 40:26) *(James Houston – I Believe in the Creator)*

Several different approaches to reading and understanding them:

1) Literal Historical:

Age of earth can be calculated by tracking back through genealogies (c 10,000 yrs old).

Challenged by science which estimates that universe is actually 12bn yrs old. Either God must have created a fiction, a Universe with the appearance of being old, or scientists have got things badly wrong. However, the Biblical narratives themselves do have features within which appear to be deliberately figurative and which suggest that they should not be taken quite literally.

Further, what purpose is served by God designing the nature of the Universe in order to deceive us? This undermines the whole philosophy of the empirical method of science.

2) Gap theory:

Gap between vv1 & 2 of Genesis 1. v1 refers to original Creation (billions of years ago). Fall of Satan responsible for bringing ruin and destruction on the earth and v 2 translated the earth **became** formless and void. Rest of chapter is a work of reconstruction.

3) Days as Ages:

Unspecified period of time. However, still conflicts with fossil record; trees should not actually appear before marine creatures, nor evening and morning before the sun and moon.

4) Literary/theological approach:

Author is primarily concerned to write theology; not all truth is scientific truth. Writer more concerned with who God is rather than with how he made the universe. Had God written Genesis as a textbook of modern cosmology, then few of us would understand it.

“The Bible exists not so much to tell us how the heavens go, but to tell us how to go to heaven” (Galileo)

Different suggestions as to what type of literature we have here if not literal/historical:

1) Myth

Profound similarities with Babylonian and other near Eastern creation epics and sharing many key features (e.g. creation of man from dust, flood narrative etc).

However many equally profound differences in key emphases:

Takes time and space seriously; the arena of God’s activity is time and space, not outside of it. The historic faith of Israel is incompatible with the mythic mindset.

2) Parable

An extended metaphor calling for a response from the hearers.

This does not really take seriously enough the actuality of the deeds of god in creation.

3) Aetiology

Aetiology means the cause of something is inferred from what one sees around one, at the present time.

So, Genesis becomes a religious story explaining one’s experience of living in Created order.

4) Polemic

Unique character of narratives (sui generis) may make it impossible to categorise them into one particular literary tradition without distorting their theological character as the revelation of God. We can, however, trace a polemical intent.

Sumerian tablets indicate that their Creation myths were to be recited as a way of upholding structuring of reality as they conceived it. Imagery but not theology of these myths borrowed by Biblical writers. Basic to biblical polemic is that Word of God set over against myth. There is no magic with innate powers whose recitation can somehow keep the world going. Rather all is sustained by creative power of God. Intent moreover is not simply information but moral reformation and centring through worship of Creator.

God is one God as opposed to polytheism of ancient myths. Light is created before the luminaries (sun and moon) to indicate that God is not bound by natural entities. God also made the stars; they have no power really to control the fates of people of Babylonian astrology.

No rival powers (e.g. of chaos) have to be wrestled with in work of Creation (cf v21 “He also created the sea monsters”); God is without peer or rival.

Creation of man; in the Babylonian epics, man is created (from the blood of a slain god mingled with the dust of earth) merely to relieve the gods of their hard labours. Gods depend on man to provide for them food. In Genesis man is no afterthought but rather the pinnacle of created beings, not a slave but rather God’s vice-regent of creation. Food bearing things are man’s as God has no need of such sustenance.

So, in a pagan context, these narratives are an assertion of the unique sovereignty of the one true God the sole Creator of everything that exists. They are theological polemic.

Key Implications:

1. God is the sole Creator of the Universe

Everything derives from him (including the objects frequently worshipped as gods and regarded as having inherent power). The action of naming things equally implies authority – in the OT world to give something a name is to assert sovereignty over it.

2. God Creates from nothing by the power of His Word

God is completely free in the exercise of his will. There is no constraint upon his act of creation. This differs profoundly from the Platonic worldview in which the world of forms imposed a given world order within which God would be compelled to operate.

John 1 and Colossians 1 both refer to the role of Jesus, the Word of God, in the process of creation.

3. Creation is distinct from God and is Dependent upon God (Contingent)

- It is not divine (Pantheism, Gaia theory) of New Age worldview
- It is not part of God (Panentheism)

Thus God is able to stand back and make accurate declarations about the world which he has made, declaring it to be good.

If nature is divine, and there is cruelty in nature, then it is clearly ok to be cruel. The inherent dangers in naturalistic or pagan worldviews are clearly apparent here.

4. God creates out of sheer love

God is self-consistent perfection and has no need for anything outside of himself.

The more one emphasises the superfluity of the world in relation to the essential nature of God, the more its actual existence needs to be attributed to the generosity of love as its sole adequate ground, for what other reason could there be? The more complete God is seen to be in himself, the more his act of creation is seen as an unrequired act only attributable to love. (John Polkinghorne)

5. Creation is orderly reflecting God's faithfulness

Pattern and order to God's creation is reflected in the literary structure of the narrative. Number 7 is number of perfection, completion, fulfilment etc.

Number of Hebrew words in v1 = 7 Number of words in v 2 = 14

Word God occurs 35 times in chapter, the word Earth 21 times, and the phrase 'God saw that it was good' 7 times.

If there is one Creator God then there is one created reality, coherent and with a sense of order. If it was made by an intelligent being then there is a reason for believing that Creation will be rational and consistent. We will feel the need to explain the disorder, pain etc rather than having to explain the order. We talk of the problem of evil, not the problem of good.

This makes it possible for science to function. Because Creation is dependent upon God who is free, we cannot simply deduce what it must be like. We need to explore it. Because Creation is rational and ordered, experiments are worth doing. Doctrine of Creation provided soil in which modern science could uniquely grow and flourish.

God shows his faithfulness and reliability in his interactions with the world. He will not be an arbitrary intervener in its processes but they will have about them a consistency which reflects his character. The laws of nature are signs of God's fidelity.

6. Creation is Good

The Creation reflects the love and goodness of God's nature.

Plato saw our physicality as a temporary evil from which we would finally escape into the purely spiritual identity which is our true nature. Yet Bible insists that physicality is good. Creation is reflection of Creator and we are created to be creative beings.

All of Creation is deemed to be good; there are no areas which are 'off limits' to God, nothing in which he is uninterested.

7. Creation belongs to God

Psalm 24:1, 89:11

It is designed to praise its maker and reflect his glory (Ps 19) and it finds its true purpose in the Son of God for whom it exists (Colossians 1:16).

8. Creation is sustained by God

The act of creation is a continuing process; God is not the heavenly clockmaker of Deism. Rather, the world is kept in being by a continuous act of will by its Creator (Psalm 104, Hebrews 1:3).

9. Creation demands a response

- It should inspire wonder. The purpose of the Biblical text is to draw the reader into the wonder of Creation itself. This is a doctrine which is designed to provoke worship, increase faith, and to change our perspective on life.
- It is to be enjoyed
- It is to be explored
- It is to be ruled. Often in the ancient world an emperor would set up a statue of himself as a symbol of his rule. We are the image of God on earth. The sort of rule we are to exercise should mirror God's rule over us; servant leadership. We are to enable the Creation to function as itself, as intended as a response of praise to its creator.
- It is to be cared for. Environmental concern.

CREATION AND SCIENCE

Whilst holding fast to the truth that science and the Bible offer complementary answers to different questions, and recognising the limits of both (science is competent to answer the 'how and when' question whilst the Bible is concerned with questions such as 'Who' and 'Why'), we need to recognise that, far from being hostile to faith, contemporary science, especially Astrophysics, is increasingly open to the possibility of a divine Creator.

The *Anthropic principle* deals with the infinitesimally small probability of a universe emerging capable of human habitation and raises questions of design and the existence of a designer. A tiny change in the physical constants would have resulted in an uninhabitable universe. Amongst other factors to note are:

- The expansion rate.
 - If the rate of expansion one second after the Big Bang had been smaller by even one part in a hundred thousand million million the universe would have recollapsed before reaching its present size. If greater by one part in a million, it would have expanded too rapidly for stars and planets to form. The cosmos is balanced on a knife edge.
- The formation of the elements
 - If strong nuclear force were either slightly stronger or slightly weaker it would have been impossible for carbon to form, crucial to development of life.
- Particle/Antiparticle ratio.
 - For every billion antiprotons in the early universe, there were a billion and one protons. The billion pairs annihilated each other to produce radiation, with just one proton left over. A greater or smaller number of survivors would have made our world impossible. The laws of physics seem to be symmetrical between particles and antiparticles. Why was there a tiny asymmetry?

Stephen Hawking: "The odds against a Universe like ours emerging out of something like the Big Bang are enormous. I think there are clearly religious implications."

Freeman Dyson: "The more I examine the universe and the details of its architecture, the more evidence I find that the universe must in some sense have known we were coming."

At this moment it seems as though science will never be able to raise the curtain on the mystery of Creation. For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries. (*Robert Jastrow – God and the Astronomers*)

THE PINNACLE OF CREATION

The Bible is more concerned to help us understand who we are before God (Genesis 2:23 is a present tense) than to describe the processes whereby we came into being. Christians and atheists tend to be agreed that the species *Homo sapiens* has only existed for a few thousand years, though there is less agreement on how we came into existence.

Those who are persuaded by the veracity of the theory of evolution will acknowledge that at some stage in the process God caused humans to become distinctive as his image bearers on earth (see below). The creation thus becomes a wonderfully complex series of processes suitable for the emergence of life as we know it and this in itself is a cause of wonder and worship. We will not, however, adopt the reductionist/naturalist position which sees life as emerging spontaneously and unaided.

Although evolutionary theory has held the day virtually unchallenged for a considerable length of time, by no means everyone in the scientific community remain completely persuaded by it and a number of inconsistencies in the theory might be highlighted:

- There is little evidence for the notion that 'nothing' might bring something into being; we assume that things have a cause, and the more complex is an entity, the more intelligent we assume the designer to be.
- Pasteur's experiments in the 19th century demonstrated that life can only emerge from life rather than arise spontaneously
- The evidence of physics suggests that entities tend to progress from complex to simple and to break down steadily rather than to grow in complexity (entropy)
- Whilst there is considerable evidence for micro evolution (variation within species as species adapt to their environment) there is no evidence for macro evolution (dogs becoming cats etc)
- The fossil record does not support such a theory, contains gaps, and evidences the presence of complex 'highly evolved' organisms at an early stage in the record

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that many are far more swayed by their preconceived philosophical assumptions than by pure science.

IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

Precise meaning of 'image' is difficult.

In what ways does the image of God render humankind distinctive?

Sovereignty/Dominion

Image in ancient near eastern thought had connotations of being a representative. Hence link with exercising dominion on God's behalf. Naming of animals is indicative of this.

Responsibility

Man exercises responsible oversight over environment, other creatures and over himself.

Relationship

The image of God is not so much a part of the human constitution as it is a description of the process of creation that makes humans different. The image is not really about a part of us but rather about a relationship.

Westermann: 'Human beings are created in such a way that their very existence is intended to be their relationship with God.' Image of God is that we are sufficiently like God in order to have a relationship with him. So, God speaks personally and intimately only to Adam and Eve, while they understand and respond.

God himself is a perfect relational being, a Trinity. His image in humankind is possessed by people in community, evidenced by the juxtaposition and conjunction of male and female, rather than by individual human beings.

Humanism will ultimately depersonalise humankind. Falling away of man into sin follows from determination to deny God as source of his personhood and to sever I-thou line that links him to his Creator.

The cult of the individual leads to the isolation of the self not only in irresponsible separation from those who are fellow human beings but also from God the Creator of personality.

Buber: 'The more a man, humanity, is mastered by individuality, the deeper does the I sink into unreality; through the *Thou* man becomes I'

Hell in at least one of its aspects is to hear Christ's pronouncement "Depart from me" and to suffer the intolerable condition of total introverted unconnectedness which is the end product of wilful self-separation from God, who is both the source and the fulfilment of our personhood. Self-obsession not self-realisation but self-destruction.

Rationality

Man is hallmarked by his self-consciousness, sense of uniqueness, tool-making ability, capacity for thought and speech, capacity to think abstractly and to have knowledge.

Unique too in his search for truth, in his ethical aspirations and concern for moral values

Morality

Image of God inseparable from the Holiness of God; man is designed for holiness which is the sum of all morality. Affirmed as logical demand from God to his people (Lev 19:2). God's standard of holiness is not just an ideal, or an unattainable goal towards which man is required to strive; it is rather the actual demand which man was created to meet. Condition of goodness in which man was created is not passive – he was designed to be actively holy, establishing his holiness by faithful performance of the Creator's will.

Moral obligation is equally a moral incentive i.e. to promote the will of the Creator. Conscience incessantly testifies to sense of accountability to God.

Spirituality

God is spirit, and by virtue of his creation in the image of God man is a spiritual being. To God man owes gratitude, worship and adoration, and constant prayerful dependence.

As a worshipping being, if man refuses to worship God then he will end up worshipping false and idolatrous gods of his own imagination. By turning away from God man does not cease to be a spiritual creature, but rather perverts his spirituality. The boasted independence of man is the degradation of his humanity.

Worship of God is essential to the self-fulfilment of man. Recognition of his creatureliness and of his indebtedness to God.

The purpose of God in Creation actually gives purpose to the life of man as the head of Creation.

Worship of God is essential for the integrity of man as a religious being and an indispensable component of the lifeline which connects the spiritual creature to his spiritual Creator who is the source not only of his existence but also of the harmony and goodness of his existence. For man to turn away from his spiritual communion with his Maker is for him to throw away the key to the understanding of his origin and his destiny. It is in effect the denial of the transcendental element of his nature which enables him to soar above and beyond himself in his finite and temporal existence to the sublime reality of harmonious fellowship with his eternal and infinite Creator.

Creativity

We cannot be originally creative; our creativity is derived from the Creator and is essentially the rearrangement of already created things. The Latin word 'cultura' literally means 'cultivation'.

Interestingly, man's first experience of life after being created is to rest, living reflectively with God, worshipping him. This is a profound challenge to the neurotic work ethic which has become so much part and parcel of our experience of life.

Of course a Christian understanding of what it means to be human begins with Jesus Christ, the true image of God, the true model of authentic humanity.

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. In what specific ways does the loss of the idea of a Creator affect and impact upon contemporary society?
2. What are the implications of viewing human beings as simply well evolved animals as opposed to people created in the image of God?
3. How does the idea of Creation in God's image affect the way we understand our own identity and responsibilities as human beings?
4. In what ways do we find our own belief in the existence of a Creator most challenged? What contrary arguments do we find most difficult to counter?
5. What fresh light has been shed upon the Scriptures for you through today's session?
6. Are there other things you would particularly like to discuss?
7. Are there specific questions you want to bring to the Plenary session?

FOR FURTHER READING:

Genesis	Walter Brueggemann: Interpretation Commentary (John Knox Press)
Genesis 1-15	Gordon Wenham: Word Bible Commentary (Word/Nelson)
The Message of Creation	David Wilkinson (IVP)
Café Theology	Michael Lloyd (Alpha International)
I Believe in the Creator	James Houston (Hodder)
Evolution: A theory in crisis	Michael Denton
Darwin on trial	Philip Johnson (IVP)

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January 2009