

In the Beginning, God

Genesis 1: 1ⁱ

The Line is Drawn

¹ In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Genesis 1:1 (ESV)

This is the opening statement of the Book of Genesis, and the opening statement of the whole of Scripture. It hardly seems controversial, at least to those of us who have been part of the church for any length of time. We may not always understand it in the same way and, for the most part, we may pretty much ignore the fact that it is even there, but the Bible begins with creation, and this sets the framework for our understanding of everything that follows.

There are those who disagree with this. Andrew Sandlin, in his book Creational Worldview, quotes Paul F. M. Zahl, “a prominent evangelical”, who said,

We [evangelicals] do not start with a theology of creation. The idea that God or a god created the world may be considered a surmise, even a conclusion, based on observation and human reason, but it is not the starting point of Christianity. The starting point of Christianity is more specific and less abstract. God became “one of us.” This is the essence and starting point of Christianity.ⁱⁱ

Of course, Zahl’s use of the phrase “The idea that God **or a god** created the world may be considered **a surmise**, even a conclusion, **based on observation and human reason...**” tells us all that we need to know about his particular brand of “evangelicalism”, because:

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is and always has been the opening statement of holy and divine scripture (to borrow a phrase from the Belgic Confessionⁱⁱⁱ), so, apart from Genesis 1, verse 1, we could only speculate or surmise which God (or, presumably, “god” with a small g) “became ‘one of us’” and why that would even matter, and, in the end, if we are merely guessing about the incarnation of Christ, then we really have no gospel to proclaim. We have, rather, an evangelicalism without an evangel—gospel centered churches without a gospel at the center. As Sandlin wrote:

Because evangelicals have embraced a truncated view of the Bible’s message, because they have emphasized the evangel (narrowly construed) as the be-all-and-end-all, a growing number have been willing to sacrifice the more fundamental creational truths on which the true evangel is founded.^{iv}

He went on:

Have you ever been watching a movie at home and had a relative or friend arrive late, sit down, watch for 10 minutes, and then ask, “Why did she [a character] say that?” and similar annoying questions? After a while you probably respond in exasperation: “You’ll just have to watch it from the beginning.” The same is true of the Bible. You can observe the action and teaching, but if you really want to know what’s going on, you’ll just have to read it from the beginning.^v

This is all the more obvious when we consider that Jesus Christ himself, the Son of God, and presumably the One in whom God became “one of us”, as Zahl put it, believed the Genesis account to be true. In Mark 10, verse 6, He said,

⁶ But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ Mark 10:6 (ESV)

So, how could we claim to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a meaningful way if we deny the truth that Jesus Christ himself evidently believed? “Well,” someone might say, “He lived in a different time, and didn’t have the advantage of “modern science” to inform His worldview.” True, He lived in a different time, but He was also God, and therefore didn’t need the advantage of modern science. Regarding creation, He knew what He was talking about because He was there, as we have seen in our study of the Gospel of John.

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ **All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.** John 1:1–3 (ESV)

So, when He said (as He did in Matthew 19, verse 4),

⁴ ...he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, Matthew 19:4 (ESV)

not only did He know what He was talking about, He was talking about His own handiwork. He was talking about Himself. See, Jesus is not only “the author and finisher of our faith”^{vi}, He is “the Author of life”^{vii} itself. If we deny creation, then, we deny the Creator. If we get creation wrong, we get the gospel wrong. If we deny Genesis, we deny Jesus. That means that with the opening statement

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a line is drawn between a biblical worldview and an unbiblical worldview—between the gospel of Jesus Christ, and some other gospel

⁷ not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. Galatians 1:7 (ESV)

This is why I am beginning this study of Genesis this summer, because in this account of “beginnings” given to us by the one person who was there (well, God, so three persons in one essence), we have the foundation on which our understanding of the Gospel must rest if we want to truly understand the gospel.

Author and Date

Just quickly then, who wrote it and when was it written? This is important because we may come to this book as if it were a stand alone volume or even just one of the 66 books which together make up the Bible. The thing is, Genesis is not a book that was written over a vast period of time based on multiple sources which were themselves compilations of oral traditions handed down over the generations. These are not stories and myths that were eventually codified to cement the power of the priesthood over an ancient (and ignorant) people.

Rather, Genesis came to the people of God as the first volume of the Pentateuch—the first five books of the Old Testament—commonly known as the Books of Moses—and in John chapter 5, verse 46, Jesus said to those who were persecuting Him,

⁴⁶ ...if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. John 5:46 (ESV)

and in Luke 24, with two of His disciples on the road to Emmaus,

²⁷ ...beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. Luke 24:26–27 (ESV)

A little later, in the upper room, “he said to them,”

⁴⁴ ...“These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Luke 24:44 (ESV)

Incidentally, by saying “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms”, Jesus was effectively saying, “everything that was written about me in the whole of the Bible”, referring at that time, of course, to the whole of the Old Testament, since the New Testament had not yet been given, and “the Law of Moses” specifically was understood to mean the Pentateuch—the first five books, including Genesis. So, who wrote Genesis? Moses. How do I know this? Once again, because this is what Jesus Christ, the Son of God believed and said, so to deny Mosaic authorship is to, in some sense, claim to be smarter than Jesus.

As to when Genesis was written, it should go without saying that since Moses was the human author of this divinely inspired volume, then it was written sometime during his lifetime, right? And given that it is the first volume of the Pentateuch, it seems likely that it was composed sometime between when Israel first arrived at Mount Sinai and received the Law, and Moses’ final address to the people of Israel on the east side of the Jordan river, recorded for us in the book of Deuteronomy.

This also answers another question. Occasionally, someone will ask, “Why doesn’t the first book of the Bible begin by proving, or at least attempting to prove, the existence of God?” This is a question that would almost make sense if the book were a compilation of oral traditions that appeared after the Babylonian exile, but when you understand that Genesis was given to the people of Israel at Sinai after the crossing of the Red Sea, you also understand why it was not necessary to “prove” the existence of God. In Deuteronomy chapter 5, after reiterating the 10 Commandments, Moses said,

²² “These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, with a loud voice; and he added no more. And he wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me. ²³ And as soon as you heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you came near to me, all the heads of your tribes, and your elders. ²⁴ And you said, ‘Behold, the LORD our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire. This day we have seen God speak with man, and man still live. Deuteronomy 5:22–24 (ESV)

So, the people didn't need proof that God existed. They had seen the fire, cloud, and darkness at the top of Sinai, and they had heard God's voice speaking to them. They knew that God was there, they just needed to know more about who He was, particularly in terms of the covenant that He had established with them. When Moses had gone to Pharaoh and said, "Thus says the Lord God, 'Let my people go...'" Pharaoh responded,

² ...**"Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go?..."** Exodus 5:2 (ESV)

And at this point in their history, the people of Israel might well have asked a similar question. Genesis is given then as an answer. Who is the Lord? Well,

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Jesus is God (and We are Not)

This is the Lord—The Living God—with whom Israel had to do. Everything that would follow the Exodus from Egypt only made sense in the light of this understanding, and the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our Lord, only makes sense in light of the same. Again, in the words of Andrew Sandlin:

This is why Genesis comes first in the Bible, and we must always keep Genesis in our thoughts as we read the Bible and live out our Christian lives. Creation is the foundation of, and backdrop for, the rest of the Bible. You can't get creation wrong and get the rest of the Bible right. Some well-meaning Christians seem to think that we should begin with redemption (the cross and the resurrection and salvation) and then work in reverse to explain creation in terms of it. This has things precisely backwards.^{viii}

Since Jesus Christ is not only the Redeemer of God's people and the One through whom God has reconciled all things to Himself, "making peace by the blood of His cross,"^{ix} but also the Creator, without whom "was not any thing made that was made,"^x we can only truly know Him when we know Him through this lens. Jesus is God, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of all things, and we are not. He is our Savior precisely because He is God, and as God, the Creator of all things, we exist and have been saved **for Him**, not the other way around. In other words, not only is He our Savior, Jesus Christ, through whom and for whom "all things were created"^{xi}, is Lord.

In the course of this series, if the Lord is willing, we will be looking not only at creation, but also at what some have called creational norms—in other words, we will be looking at some of those things that were broken by man's fall into sin, not at the way they are in their brokenness, but at the way they were, and the way that they were meant to be. But all of this is meant, as with all Scripture, to lead us not to despair at the brokenness of our fallen world, but to rest our hope in God.

¹⁸ For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its

bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.²² For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, **the redemption of our bodies.** Romans 8:18–23 (ESV)

(the restoration of what is to the way it was meant to be),

²⁴ For in this hope we were saved... Romans 8:24 (ESV)

For,

⁵ Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God, ⁶ who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, who keeps faith forever;

⁷ who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; ⁸ the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous.

⁹ The LORD watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the fatherless, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

¹⁰ The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, to all generations. Praise the LORD! Psalms 146:5–10 (ESV)

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- i All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).
- ii Paul F. M. Zahl, *The Protestant Face of Anglicanism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 73–74, as quoted in P. Andrew Sandlin, *Creational Worldview: An Introduction* (Center for Cultural Leadership, Kindle Edition), 23.
- iii Christian Reformed Church, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 1988), 79.
- iv Sandlin, *Creational Worldview*, 24.
- v *Ibid.*, 26.
- vi Cf. Hebrews 12: 2 (KJV)
- vii Cf. Acts 3: 15.
- viii Sandlin, *Creational Worldview*, 34.
- ix Cf. Colossians 1: 19.
- x Cf. John 1: 1 – 3.
- xi Cf. Colossians 1: 15 – 20.