

# Understanding the Bible #2 – Origins 1

Based on *The Bible: A Story That Makes Sense of Life* by Andrew Ollerton

## Bible Reading

*<sup>1</sup>In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. <sup>2</sup>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.*

*<sup>3</sup>And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. <sup>4</sup>God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup>God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning – the first day.*

Genesis 1:1-5

## Introduction

In the previous session we looked at how the Bible is a collection of 66 books, written by about 40 different authors over a period of at least a thousand years, and how Christians quickly came to believe that the words are inspired by God and useful in helping us understand the way God has worked and continues to work in the universe he created and sustains.

Today we’ll start at the very beginning (a very good place to start)...

## Origins

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All human civilisations are interested in where they came from. Television series like ‘Who do you think you are?’ are popular because people are fascinated, often surprised and sometimes horrified by their ancestry.

400 years ago if you asked someone the question, “Where do you come from?” it would almost certainly have been, ‘Here’. In general,

people lived and died in the same area they were born. There are many cultures where that is still the case.

But in countries like ours, things have changed. Ask me, 'Where do you come from?' and things get complicated.

My mum and dad were both born and brought up in South Harrow. So far, so simple.

But I was born in Kuwait (mum and dad moved there shortly after they were married because dad was offered a job there).

Mum got homesick, so we returned to England not long after I was born, and after a short time in Chalfont St. Giles (at that time property there was cheap!) we moved back to South Harrow (the house they purchased is the one I now live in).

Dad then got itchy feet, and when I was about 5-years-old moved the family to Fiji

then to Sydney, Australia,

then Perth, Western Australia

then to various mining communities in North West Australia,

before moving us all back to England again.

So, on my passport, my birthplace is 'Kuwait', but I was born 'under the British Consulate', so I am British. But I spent a lot of my childhood in Fiji and Australia.

So, if asked, 'Where do you come from?', to keep things simple I'll usually answer 'Harrow'. But the whole picture is more complicated. I'm sure it's a question that many of you can identify with.

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The beginning of the Bible takes us back to humanity's earliest origins. The opening verses of Genesis take us back to the beginning of time

itself. The book of Genesis (the word means ‘origins’ or ‘beginnings’) sets out how God created the universe and the planet we inhabit.

Genesis answers the big questions. The authors wanted their readers to know that there is only one God, and that he created and sustains everything that exists in this universe. It also explains why the world we live in today is both amazingly beautiful and extremely messed up. Why in a couple of minutes I can go from marvelling at a beautiful sunrise to reading about the atrocities occurring in Ukraine.

An important thing to understand about Genesis is that it is not *primarily* a scientific explanation of how the universe was created. Remember what we were saying in the last session, about needing to think about what the text meant to the original authors and hearers? The authors of Genesis are primarily asking ‘Why’ questions. ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’, ‘Why am I me?’, Why is there good and evil?

Modern scientists primarily ask ‘How’ questions. ‘How old is the universe?’, ‘How do plants get their energy?’, ‘How do living things reproduce?’

A good explanation of the difference between ‘how’ and ‘why’ is to think about a cake baked by your aunty Maureen. (What do you mean you don’t have an aunt called Maureen? Everyone has an aunt called Maureen!). Science can analyse the ingredients, the temperature of the oven, the order in which the items are mixed, etc. Science can tell us *how* the cake was created. But only aunty Maureen knows *why* she baked it.

The two types of questions are not contradictory, but they are different. Genesis is more interested in ‘why’ aunty Maureen baked the cake than analysing the ingredients that the cake is composed of.

Francis Collins, is a committed Christian who was head of the Human Genome Project, and winner of the Templeton Prize which is given to

people who have ‘harnessed the power of the sciences to explore the deepest questions of the universe and humankind’s place and purpose within it’. He says:

*‘The God of the Bible is also the God of the genome. He can be worshipped in the cathedral and in the laboratory.’*

The Bible and science are not contradictory but complementary. And, compared to literature written at the time, the language of Genesis is surprisingly fresh and scientific. But it is not a 21st Century scientific text book.

Related to this is the fact that Genesis was written *for us* but not *to us*.

**בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ**

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*

Genesis was written thousands of years ago, in a different language and culture to ours. And, as I’ve already suggested, the authors’ understanding of how the universe works was very different from ours. One of the things that they are very interested in is getting us to understand that the God of Genesis is not like the gods of the surrounding nations.

Many ancient cultures have origin stories. The Babylonian version says the origin of the world was caused by a fight between rival gods. The male god Marduk slays the evil goddess Tiamat, and hollows out her carcass to create the earth and sky.

Humans are created as slaves for the gods, to keep them supplied with food and drink, and for the gods’ general entertainment.

The authors of Genesis are saying that one God created the universe and all that is in it, from nothing, simply by speaking! And humans aren’t God’s slaves, they’re his co-rulers, made in his image.

And understanding it in this way, the way it was understood by its original hearers, helps us to understand it properly in the 21st century.

Genesis chapter one is an overview of God creating the universe.

Genesis 1:16 states 'God also made the stars'... that's (by current estimates) around 200 billion trillion stars, summed up in 5 words.

It then focusses on the planet we all live on.

The authors of Genesis and atheistic scientists both believe that the universe began from nothing. The difference is that in the Genesis account there is a God who exists outside of time and space who created the universe. In contrast to this, an atheistic scientist will claim that our universe and ultimately us, evolved out of nothing, with no God involved. Both are statements of faith. Each of us has to decide which account is true.

So, let's assume the Genesis account is correct (because, it is). If there is a divine being who created and sustains the universe, what is this God like? My last series provided some clues to that question, but Genesis provides us with its own (complementary) set of answers.

## **God is creative**

God is a God who creates and sustains things. He is a God who is in simultaneous control of every atom and atomic subparticle in the cosmos. He is the source and sustainer of all beauty and goodness.

Let's look at Genesis 1:2-3 again:

*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. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.*

What wonderful words. They poetically describe God the master artist at work. Unlike the other 'gods', the God of Genesis doesn't have to struggle to keep the forces of nature under control, God simply speaks and stuff happens.

And so it continues, the rest of Genesis 1 describes the way God 'paints' his masterpiece.

<b>God forms the world</b>	<b>God fills the world</b>
Day 1 Separation of light and darkness.	Day 4 Creation of the lights to fill the day and night sky.
Day 2 Separation of the waters to form the sky and the sea.	Day 5 Creation of the birds and fish to fill the sky and sea.
Day 3 Separation of the sea from the dry land and creation of plants.	Day 6 Creation of animals and humans to fill the land.
Day 7 Creation of the heavens and the earth completed and God rests.	

It is a wonderful piece of descriptive poetry, with a distinctive structure and pattern.

In the first three days, God forms the world, and in the second three days, he fills the world. In days 1-3, he separates and parts, and in days 4-6 he stocks and populates. So we have two sets of three days which correspond to each other.

This is not a scientific description. It is explaining that this world didn't 'just happen'. It was lovingly shaped by a supremely powerful creator. And like any great artist, every now and again God steps back a few paces and looks at how things are going. And at each stage, God sees that it is 'good'. And when it is completed, he declares that it is 'very good'.

Many Christians and non-Christians seem to get hung up on whether the days of creation were literal 24 hour days? I think if you had asked an author of Genesis that question, they would have looked at you a bit puzzled and asked "24 hours?". And assuming you continued the discussion I can imagine them pointing to Day 7 and asking you

whether you think an almighty God who can create an entire universe simply by speaking really *needs* to ‘rest’.

The authors of Genesis are telling us that the universe is something created by God. But the universe is not divine. Many early civilisations worshipped the sun and the moon. Genesis says they are created things. They have no supernatural power. Only God is God.

If you take one thing home with you today, let it be that Genesis is primarily about the ‘why’, not the ‘how’. It is about a God who delights in creating wonderful things. A God who is in complete control. Who knows the beginning from the end, and is involved in all points inbetween.

## **God is the source of meaning**

The universe is a very, very, very big place. If you’ve watched any television over the past few years, you’ll have seen programmes that demonstrate this much better than a few powerpoint slides will.

For an atheist, this is just a fact. An awesome, awe-inspiring fact, but still, just a fact. Interestingly, atheist scientist Professor Brian Cox puts it like this...

*“We humans represent an isolated island of meaning in a meaningless universe.”*

Professor Cox, despite believing that he is ultimately a product of random chance, still sees humans as being proof of meaning in the universe. Deep down, he seems to be aware that humans are special.

If you believe in the God of the Bible, then your ultimate source of meaning is not humans, but the God who created us.

Toward the end of Genesis 1 there is a verse that has intrigued theologians for centuries.

*Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”*

Genesis 1:26

The intriguing bit is that God says, “Let **US** make...”.

There are a number of explanations, including that God is talking with a heavenly court of angels, or that God is using what is called the ‘magisterial’ use of ‘us’, where the plural implies authority, a bit like when Queen Elizabeth II uses the ‘royal we’.

While I don’t believe the authors of Genesis knew about the Trinity, I do believe that it is providing an insight that God is not a solitary ‘old man with a beard’ figure, but that there is a communal conversation going on within God.

God understands the importance of relationship. Up until now in Genesis all the things God has done have been declared ‘good’ or ‘very good’. But Adam being alone is ‘not good’, and so God provides him with a female partner, Eve.

When God made humans in his image, he also gives them work to do. In the ancient world kings would set up statues in the territories they conquered to remind their subjects who the boss is.

Humans are like living statues, representing planet earth’s true ruler. And humans are not designed to be passive.

Genesis 1:27 reads:

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

Genesis 1:27



There is a lot of important stuff packed into that verse. All of creation bears God's marks of God's personality and creativity. But only humans are made 'in his own image'. And both male and female are made in that image. Every human being has value. No matter how much we reject it or deface it, every person bears God's image.

## **Why are we here?**

So, with that in mind, how should humans live? There is a lot of debate these days about how to 'succeed' in life. There are those who think it involves wealth and fame, others who insist that a simpler life is the way forward, and a multitude of variants in-between.

Genesis 1 provided an overview of how the universe, earth and the human race began. The next chapter zooms in on the first humans – Adam and Eve. The Bible consistently sees this couple as being the ancestors of the human race.

Christians get used to hearing that we are made in the image of God. But the reality is quite astonishing, that each of us shares aspects of our creator. Not all of them, we are not all powerful and all knowing (well, except my mum). But we are *uniquely* like our creator, designed to be co-rulers with him on this planet.

Genesis says that God walked with Adam and Eve in the garden. God loves spending time with the people he created. We are designed to live in relationship with him. Anything that destroys that relationship is a very bad idea.

*God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.*

Genesis 1:28b

Eden was a thriving, living place. And it needed tending.

And beyond Eden was an entire planet to be explored! God transformed the earth from chaos to order, and Adam and Eve are meant to continue that work.

Adam and Eve were created to enjoy relationship with God and with one another. The world had been created to nurture and enjoy. But disaster was just around the corner. We'll look at that in the next talk.