

EXETER COLLEGE CHAPEL: TRICKY THEOLOGY:

"How does the Bible deal with different views of creation?"

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1. Introduction.

Happy New Year, and welcome back for the Hilary term. I hope you all had a wonderful holiday.

One of the things I love best about Christmas is playing charades. Not only does it bring people closer together, it also enables the frustrated actor to have a yearly outing! On Boxing Day we had a game. I was given by my sons "The Big Bang Theory". (I will spare you a re-enactment!)

As you all know, it's a TV show. Of course I started the charade with the sign for the TV then held up 4 four fingers to indicate that the title was made up of four words. To illustrate the second word "Big" I did a big round with my arms and the third word "Bang" an action of clashing together two symbols. Now you here tonight, at Exeter College, being a very intelligent congregation would have got the charade by now but with my family of young boys I had to approach from another angle.

Second time round for "Big" I did the sign of the Earth growing for "Bang" I took a pretend hammer to the nearest table!

My point of course is that getting a concept across to an audience often means you need to approach the concept from two directions. Or deliver two narratives -- just as we have in the beginning of the Book of Genesis.

The Israelites were trying grappling with the most difficult and important of questions:

"What existed at the beginning of the universe?"

"How did the universe begin, and what form did it take? "

It's hardly surprising that two versions emerged. The stories of Creation in Genesis Chapters 1 and 2 are both beautifully written, but they are different and distinct. Before we explore the differences between the two stories, let's just focus for a moment on scientific fact.

2. The Science of Evolution our friend, not our enemy.

Early chinks of questioning about the date of the Earth began in 1650 when the Archbishop of Dublin, James Ussher dated the Earth from 4004BC. Two centuries

later, the 1859 publication of Darwin's "On the Origin of the Species" posed a more profound challenge to the factual reading of Genesis.

Darwin's theory of natural selection and his follow-up work the *Descent of Man* (1871), and a Christian response to them, could be the basis for a whole sermon. But for tonight let me just say that in the *Descent of Man*, Darwin tries to show how all human characteristics might be accounted for in terms of the gradual modification of anthropoid ancestors by the process of natural selection. (QED, Man could not be created in a day.).

From Darwin's writings, "Evidence for a long evolutionary history of descent from common ancestors and simpler life forms [became] widely accepted".¹

I am no scientist. But we all know that there are scientific facts, flowing from a century and a half of geology and paleontology, about the age of the universe and Earth which are now just about universally accepted.

The Earth has been dated at 4.5 million years old. *Homo erectus*, our Stone Age ancestor, has been estimated as appearing about two million years ago. *Homo sapiens* emerged roughly 120,000 years ago.

Even if few of us understand all of the detail, the case for evolution and for this approximate time line of Earth and Man is just about universally accepted. How can they be reconciled with the Bible's version(s) of events?

My response, and that of I think many (or most?) Christians, is to argue that Genesis should be read as allegorical and not as a literal account of how we and our Earth were born.

Of course, even today there are Creationists: Christians who believe in the literal interpretation of the Bible. They would disagree with me, believing that each and every word of the Bible is literally true. There are a lot of scholarly, polite rebuttals of Creationism that you can find for yourself. But a good start is simply to look at the two Genesis creation stories: If every single word is true, wouldn't that mean that God created the Earth twice? ²

All that Genesis 1 says is that, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the Earth," and that, "Man was created in His image." ³

I do believe you can still have faith that the Bible, including the Genesis narrative, is the inspired Word of God. As St Paul wrote to Timothy, all scripture is "God-breathed", written by man, [and] carried along by the Holy Spirit" ⁴

3. The two versions of Creation in Genesis.

¹ Barbour, Ian G., *Religion and Science* (London: SCM Press, 1998), p. 53.

² See Genesis 1 v 1 to 31, compared to Genesis 2 v 4 to 5.

³ Fuentes, Antonio, *A Guide to the Bible*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1987), p. 29.

⁴ 2 Timothy 3 v 16

Genesis 1 is believed to have been written around 500BC. It is commonly called "P", standing for "Priestly", since it is part of the larger block of material extending through the Pentateuch. .

Genesis 2 was written earlier, around 900 BC. This scripture is commonly called "Yahwist", or "J", for creation story because the author uses Yahweh as the name of God. ⁵

J's perception is of a certain distinction between man and the divine. Instead of being composed of the same stuff as God, man belongs to Earth. (Adam), as the pun indicated, man is made from dust.⁶

These two narratives are quite different but for the sake of this sermon I am just going to call them Genesis 1 and 2 .

Genesis 1 is the classic 7-days narrative. We were probably all taught this version at nursery school and it has stayed with us ever since. God created the world in six days and God made the seventh day as a day of rest. "So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work he had done in creation." ⁷

Chronologically, it goes like this: On days 1-3, God gave form to the world: Day 1, light; Day 2, water; and Day 3, ground and vegetation. God then carried on, creating day and night on Day 4, the birds on Day 5 and finally on Day 6 making all the other creatures and Man.

"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them".⁸ So in Genesis 1, the emphasis is on the formation of the Earth – with the Sabbath as a day of rest being included – the creation of man occurs at the end of the creation narrative.

But in Genesis 2: 4., the second account of creation, the emphasis and the word count is very different. All six days of creation are put into just six verses, Genesis 2 verses 4 through 10. Then the narrative focuses on the creation of man, "Adam". This narrative, unlike Genesis 1, barely focuses on creation of the world but almost entirely focuses in the creation of mankind.

In Genesis 1 we have humankind created in the image of God.⁹ In Genesis 2 God formed man, "from dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living being".¹⁰

⁵ Borg, Marcus, Reading the Bible Again for the First Time, (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), p. 63.

⁶ Armstrong, Karen , A History of God (London: Vintage Press,1999), p. 26.

⁷ Genesis 2 v 3

⁸ Genesis 1 v 26

⁹ Genesis 1 v 27

¹⁰ Genesis 2 v 7

The Genesis 1 story has portrays humankind as the climax of creation by having people created last, after everything else: God's first words are, "Let there be light...calling forth light in the mist of primeval darkness". And every thing that God creates is good, in fact "very good".¹¹

Genesis 2's story gives humankind priority by having people created first, before vegetation and animals.

Another difference I want to point out is each chapter's approach to man's stewardship of the Earth.

In Genesis 1, Man has, "dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air".¹² This is a more controlling and powerful approach whereas in Genesis 2 v 15, God puts Man in the "Garden of Eden to till it and keep it". The second creation story has much gentle language - a more nurturing and considerate approach to managing the land and environment. Mankind is described here as being *part* of Earth's beauty, not lording above it. We are responsible for the Earth, in other words, not put here to use it for our own selfish ends.

The final difference I want to point out is that the Genesis 2 narrative concentrates more on the very nature of what it means to be human. In Genesis 2 we have the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which relates to mans moral knowledge and ethical discernment. Man is made from dust set further apart for God, capable of good and evil action. This contrasts with Genesis 1 where we have man made in the image God , God is in-dwelling in man and we are reminded of John's words: "Those who live in love , live in God and he in them".¹³

4. Christian responses to Genesis 1 and 2

I hope I have, in this brief time, sketched out how the Bible presents two different creation narratives, and explained some of the differences between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. **In the few minutes that remain, I'd like to give you four ways in which, as Christians, we can respond to these two creation stories.**

Firstly with intelligence. The great Anglican tradition of looking at Bible exegesis is a combining our understanding of scripture with reason and tradition. This means we do not take scripture literally as the direct word of God but contextualize it from both a historical/traditional perspective and appraise it from a reason cultural contemporary analysis. (Slavery would be a good example of this).

Also we must take heed of the great academics and theologians of our time. The former Regis Professor of Divinity at Oxford University, Keith Ward, said that

¹¹ Genesis 1 v 31

¹² Genesis 1 v 28

¹³ 1 John 4 v 16

there will always be, “[l]imits to what can be know of reality, whether scientific or religious”.¹⁴

Secondly, we can respond with acknowledgement of current scientific research.

Sir Arthur Peacocke, a chemistry student of Exeter college, a famous biochemist and theologian, (and Catechist too at Exeter College!), proposed a theory know as “Critical Realism” and “Co-creationism”. He believed that science and religion are not at loggerheads. Alistair McGrath in Science and Religion God quotes Peacocke:

“The search for intelligibility that characterizes science and the search for meaning that characterize religion are two necessary intertwined strands of human enterprise and are not opposed”. The processes of evolution are consistent with an all knowing, all-powerful God who exists through all time, sets natural laws and knows what the results will be.

Peacocke’s conclusion is that progress in scientific understanding reveals God’s action and purpose and that all scientific propositions are consistent with religious ones.

Thirdly we must read these narratives as *stories* which are steeped in allegorical language which use rhythms, metaphors and symbolism.

In Genesis 1 the author uses language which makes the narrative sounds like a hymn, or even liturgy. The language is poetry, full of metaphor and praise. This is called a doxology -- a hymn of praise -- whose words focus on the glory of God.¹⁵

As I said earlier, we need to make a shift from thinking that the Adam and Ev stories were factual and then hence literally true to seeing them quite differently. Marcus Borg says these Genesis stories are,

“Not God’s stories of the world’s beginnings, but rather ancient Israel’s stories of the world’s beginnings. They are ancient Israel’s stories of their pre-history”.¹⁶

Also, Borg points out that the author of Genesis 2 uses *names* symbolically: Adam is not a proper name in ancient Hebrew. No person in the Bible is called Adam. Rather, Adam is a common Hebrew noun meaning “humankind”. It comes from the Hebrew word “*adhamah*” which means ground or dust. We are dust creatures made from dust. Thus in the Genesis 2 narrative we are not hearing about one particular man here but about all of mankind. Similarly, Eve means “mother of all living”.

¹⁴ Ward, Keith, God, Chance and Necessity (Oxford: One World Publications,1996), p. 19.

¹⁵ A modern era example of a doxology is the hymn, “Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise God all creature here below,” written by Thomas Ken in 1674.

¹⁶ Borg, p. 60.

The creation narratives need, according to Borg, to be read from a historical and metaphorical approach. Through that lens a profound truth can be gleamed. While the Genesis stories are not literally true, they can nevertheless be profoundly true rich in powerful persuasive meaning and reflect the true nature of God and the wonder of our existence locate life within a cosmic order.¹⁷

Fourthly, we should use these different narratives to examine man's responsibility and attitude to the guardianship of the Earth . As previously stated, in Genesis 1 man has "dominion over the Earth and all the beasts." Power and dominion over nature. In the second version of Genesis: man has been asked in the Garden of Eden, "to till and keep".

It seems right at the beginning of creation man has been put on this planet to preserve it and protect it for now and for future generations. The concept of stewardship appears in Genesis 2, and we have a responsibility to protect and preserve God creation and our environment.

Finally, humans have been made in the image of God. We live within a moral, ethical and spiritual framework that determines our life choices and that of those around us. Moral freedom means the ability to choose between good and evil. In the creation story, we learn what it means to have human nature, to make the right and wrong choices and to live with the consequences of those choices. We learn what it means to live outside the garden, east of Eden, in a fallen state.

In conclusion, I implore you to go and re-read these texts. Take time to bask in their beauty, mystery and wonder. Be inspired by their majesty. Oh, and maybe next Christmas give some one the charade of, "The Book of Genesis", and watch them struggle!

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

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¹⁷ Barbour, p. 203.

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