

CREATION

Genesis 1

MAIN IDEA:

There is one God who created everything, and made it good. God made humans to be God's helpers in taking care of the world so that it would be filled with goodness and justice and life and joy, just like God!

HISTORICAL CONTEXT - ORDER

You may have been taught to read Genesis 1 as a story of how things came into existence, because medieval and modern philosophers were most concerned with questions like: "Why is there something instead of nothing?" or "Where did the universe come from?". Scholars like John Walton have found that in the Ancient Near East (the cultural region the Bible was written in) these weren't the questions people were asking. Rather, they were much more concerned with order and function, questions like: "What is the purpose for the world and the things in it?" or "Who is in charge of keeping things as orderly and non-chaotic as possible?" When we read Genesis 1 with those questions in mind, we get answers much closer to what the original author was actually trying to say.

GENRE - CREATION STORY

There were lots of other creation stories in the Ancient Near East, from people groups like the Babylonians, Egyptians, and Assyrians. Genesis 1 shares some features with those stories, which has led some people to dismiss the Genesis story as just another myth copied from the others. But what's especially interesting in the Bible's creation story are the differences with those other stories. One God creates everything. God does the creating peacefully, and with a word, not through a violent battle with other gods and monsters. God cares about all humans, not just men, not just the king. Humanity is created to be God's partners, not God's slaves. The picture that emerges as you put those differences together is of a God who is different from the other gods – powerful, yes, but also loving, desiring relationship with people, sharing power instead of hoarding it, loving peace, and full of grace.

KEY WORD - IMAGE OF GOD

People have argued about what Genesis means by humans being made in the "image of God" for thousands of years, often by bringing in all sorts of outside concerns that do more to reflect what they value, not what the story is saying. As we read Genesis 1, a big piece of the answer is included. Immediately after it says that God created humans in the image of God, in the very next verse, it tells us what that means: "fill the earth and govern it" (NLT). Humans are made to be God's representatives on earth, taking care of creation well. Unsurprisingly, this is exactly what we see in other Ancient stories that talk about an "image of God". In those other stories, only one human is given that status – the King. The King is described as the representative of the gods, meant to rule over their people. But Genesis democratizes it, giving all people, male and female, the status and dignity of being God's representatives and partners.

LITERARY FEATURE – POETIC STRUCTURE

Genesis 1 is a poem, not because it rhymes, or has a consistent meter, but because it uses a tight structure as part of how it communicates what's important--the repetition of "evening and morning" and "it was good", for example. The structure of the days is very significant. In days 1-3 God creates spaces that are then filled in days 4-6. In fact they line up with each other exactly: Day 1's day and night are filled with the sun, moon, and stars in Day 4. Day 2's ocean and sky are filled with Day 5's fish and birds. Day 3's land is filled with Day 6's animals. It's all very neat, tidy, and purposeful, because the author is saying God creates an orderly, purposeful world in an orderly, purposeful way.

KEY WORD – GOOD

Genesis 1 repeatedly deems creation to be "good" before calling it "very good" after humans take their place within it. The scholar John Walton encourages us to hear a slightly different note than we might be used to in that word. He points out that in the Ancient world, goodness was usually related to order. Chaos was bad. Order was good, because order is what allows things to work out the way they are supposed to. Chaos is always getting in the way. For God to be good, and for creation to be good, God needs to make creation orderly, and one of the main points Genesis 1 is trying to make is that that is exactly what God does.

FUN DETAIL – WATER

Genesis 1 says that God separates the waters above from the waters beneath. It's a strange way of saying things until you know that in the Ancient world, people believed that if you were able to go up past the sky you'd find a massive body of water. After all, the sky is blue. And rain comes out of it. So there must be water up there right? They also believed that, since you couldn't find the bottom of the ocean, it must be water all the way down. Waters above, waters below.

This is important for two reasons: one, it's fun. But two, it is another clue that what we are reading is not a science textbook, it's a story. The author is using their current understanding of the world to make a point about God's power and goodness, which is a far more important thing than where water is or isn't.

KEY NUMBER – 7

The number 7 is one that shows up a lot in the Ancient Near East in general, and the Bible in particular. Like many numbers in ancient writings, it's not meant to be taken literally in the counting sense, but is instead used to make a more important point about what it all means. 7 is often used as a symbol for unity and completeness, for example. Here, 7 days does not mean 7 twenty-four hour periods, as if what was important was how many minutes it took God to work. 7 days means that the whole act of creation was truly complete, God finished all the work, not leaving anything out. Which, I think we can agree, is far more important than what a stopwatch would have told us.

FUN DETAIL – THE SUN

A sharp eyed reader might notice that plants appear on day 3, but the sun doesn't until day 4. Um... what? The scholar Terence Fretheim points out that Ancient Israel's botanists hadn't yet figured out the role of the sun in plant growth, but instead thought it was the earth that did all the work. Since dry land had appeared, plants could now grow!