

“The Creation”**Genesis 1:1-2:3****August 31, 2014****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

We have before us this morning, as we said last time, one of the most important passages in the Bible, fundamental to the Christian’s entire worldview or philosophy of life. If God himself, the living God of Scripture, made the world by the word of his power, immensely important implications follow by rigorous necessity. It is a controversial passage precisely because so much is at stake.

The chapter divisions in the Bible, as you know, were added a thousand years after Christ and so are hardly original to the Bible. Often they reflect natural breaks in the text, but frequently they reflect a failure to grasp the biblical author’s own organization of his material and the first chapter division in the Bible, unfortunately, is an example of such a failure. The opening phrase of chapter 2 verse 4, “These are the generations of...” is the first chapter heading in the book. That heading will reappear a number of times throughout Genesis as the title of a new section of material. That being so, chapter 1 of Genesis should continue through verse 3 of our chapter 2. What this further indicates is that the account of 1:1-2:3 is something of a prologue to the book, an introduction that precedes the first chapter.

Text Comment

- v.1 Unlike the pagan cosmologies or creation stories, the Bible shows no interest in the question of where God himself came from. His existence prior to that of the cosmos is taken for granted. It is *Elohim*, God, not *Yahweh*, the Lord, in this account of the creation for, though both names refer to the same being, the former is the name for the deity in his transcendence and universality, as in his relationship to the entire universe; the latter the personal name used more specifically for God in his relationship with his people. It is a distinction not always observed but frequently observed and certainly here.
- v.2 God first created disorganized matter and then brought order to it. In the language of the ancient near east creation came *before* chaos, the reverse of the order in the other ancient creation accounts, though what God made was never “chaos” in the ancient near eastern sense. And from the creation of matter itself, what theologians call the *creatio prima*, the first creation, God continued with the *creatio secunda*, the combination of elements and the organization of them into things. This is God’s normal way of working, as the rest of the Bible will teach us: to move from the formless to the formed. It is as well his way in the salvation of sinners, the *new creation!* We also read that the Spirit of God was hovering. No Olympian detachment here but active involvement on God’s part.
- v.3 This simple phrase, “And God said...” leaves no room for a self-existent universe, or a random universe, or, as in all pantheism and especially the eastern religions, a universe that is a natural emanation from God. What is more there is no mention of an intermediary as in so many pagan cosmologies. The universe and everything in it existed first as a thought in God’s mind and then were immediately brought into being by the

utterance of God's word. A highly personal beginning of all things! There is also none of the tension or strife or resistance that is characteristic of ANE creation accounts. God's power is absolute and he is in complete control. Everything is calm. [Sarna, 7]

- v.4 It is only natural that light should mark the first step from chaos to order. Light is the manifestation of God's presence in a world that, without it, would be chaos and darkness. Light here precedes the creation of the sun, just as it outlasts the sun according to Rev. 22:5. But in the world God made darkness as well so it is also good; it is good for us to have both. Who would want a world without a starlit night and how hard would it be to sleep at mid-day. Ask Alaskans about that!
 - v.5 Now as we have begun the succession of the six days of creation, let me draw your attention to the shape of the account. The progress of creation is presented in two triads of days. The first triad involves separations of formless **matter** chaos into three spheres, the second triad fills up those spheres (light and darkness filled with sun, moon, and stars; the water and the sky then filled with fish and birds, finally the earth was then filled with animals and human beings). There is more to the repeated patterns of these verses than that but too much detail will bog us down.
- God giving the light a name and the night a name and so on is significant. "According to the conceptions of the ancient Near East, possessing no name was equivalent to nonexistence. An Egyptian text describes [the time before creation] as the time 'when no name of anything had yet been named.'" To give something a name also demonstrates one's dominion over a thing. Parents name their children because they have that dominion over their lives. God names these things because he is absolutely sovereign over everything he has made. [Sarna, 7-8]
- v.8 An interesting detail. In Orthodox Judaism one doesn't marry on a Monday because it alone among the days of creation was not pronounced "good" by God. But, then, on Tuesday God said twice that what he had made was good.
 - v.12 God did not immediately create every plant and tree, every blade of grass as it were, but invested in the earth he had made the capacity or potential to generate the vast array of life that we observe in the world. This is not a scientific statement of the fixity of species but rather a simple assertion that God provided with the first things he made the potential for the rich diversity and multiformity of life. How many different plants and later how many different animals were immediately made by God no one knows. In the ANE the productive forces of nature were personified and deified. But not so here. There is no room here for the fertility cults that were features of ancient near eastern religions. The powers of the natural world to reproduce and generate life were God-given and so subject to his rule. [Sarna, 9]
 - v.13 Note that vegetation emerges before the creation of the sun.
 - v.14 The perspective is geo-centric. Everything exists for the sake of the earth and what is to happen on the earth. That is because God made this world to be home for mankind. We

need not be geo-centric in our astronomy, but we ought to be geo-centric in our theology! The lights are God's gifts to us; they speak for God, not for some impersonal fate and are only light bearers, not deities as in virtually all ancient near eastern cosmologies. The bare mention of the stars, which are not then further discussed, is an implicit rejection of astrology. [Sarna, 9] Stars are beautiful to look at at night, but they don't control anything on earth!

- v.21 In ancient near eastern religion the great monsters of the seas were also gods or were thought to stand for the powers of chaos, the destabilizing forces that threatened life at every turn. Here again the creation account serves to contradict the pagan cosmologies of the time. The *tannim*, the Hebrew term for what is translated “great sea creatures” appears in ancient near eastern myths as the name of a primeval dragon-god who assisted *Yam*, the Sea, in his battle against Baal, the god of fertility. But here the great sea creatures are summarily stripped of their deity and of their independent power. They are also God's creatures and subject to him. *God may later have to deal with rebels, but he has no rivals.*
- v.25 As an illustration of how richly compressed and uniquely profound the account of creation is, and how unending its implications for human life, both Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, the influential Dutch Reformed theologians, appealed to vv. 24 and 25 as a biblical basis for their concept of “sphere sovereignty,” the idea that there are separate spheres of life -- physical and psychological, intellectual and ethical, the family and society, the school and the government, science and art, and so on -- and that God built into each sphere its own nature, laws, freedoms, and obligations. It is an important principle of life: the family is one thing, the state is another, the church still another. The laws and powers of the one are not the laws and powers of the others, and so on. [Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ii, 610-611] Each sphere is intended by God, as it were, to “do its own thing.” Bavinck takes that thought back right here to the creation account in vv. 24, 25. [R. Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper*, 23-24]

I'm going to return to these following verses next time, so I won't comment on them at this reading.

Now, some of you are expecting me to enter the lists in regard to the controversies that continue to roil the believing Christian church, even our Presbyterian Church in America. What were these creation “days” of which we read in Genesis 1? Were they our periods of twenty-four hours or something else? And what does this account suggest concerning the age of the earth? Is it of comparatively recent origin, only 10 to 20 thousand years old or can we accept the scientific consensus that the earth is very old, indeed has been in existence for some 4 1/2 billion years? The Creation Research Institute argues one way, the American Scientific Affiliation another, though both are organizations of Bible believers; *Biologos* has one position regarding some of these questions and the Discovery Institute has a quite different one, though Bible-believing Christians are active and influential in both organizations. I have read books and articles discussing these issues and have had correspondence with men who are quite certain that the Bible provides a definitive answer to such questions. Very often in such cases anyone who differs from a man's confident conclusion is either an ignoramus or a toady of the godless

scientific establishment. I have my own opinions about how these questions are to be answered as many of you do. Various views are held in our own church by good and learned men and, though the arguments for the different viewpoints are well known, the advocates of none of these positions have succeeded in convincing their fellows -- likewise defenders of the inerrancy and authority of the Bible and the importance of its grammatical-historical interpretation -- I say, none has convinced the other. The result in our case was a study committee report of the General Assembly some years ago which frankly acknowledged that we didn't agree with one another about how to read Genesis 1, were unlikely to agree any time soon, that each position made its argument from the Scripture, and that we would have to live with our disagreements, as we do in regard to other matters of biblical interpretation -- for example not just how the world began but how the world will end, whether there will be a millennium -- and so on. Frankly, it would take weeks to do justice to these controversies and to what purpose, given that we will still not agree at the end of the day. Nuf said!

But it may be useful for us to ask why these questions remain so difficult to answer. Jack Collins, our own Professor of Old Testament at Covenant Theological Seminary and sometime son of this congregation, describes the language of Genesis 1, of this prologue to the book, as "exalted prose narrative." The chapter, as we briefly noted and might have demonstrated in far greater detail, is formulaic, with certain patterns repeated, with unusual vocabulary employed and so on. "[In a] crescendo the narrator devotes more time and space to each day until the climactic apex of creation, when motion ceases and God rests." [Waltke, 57] The triadic structure of the six days of creation that we noted when reading the text is another instance of the formulaic way in which the narrative is structured. In certain literary ways Genesis 1 is quite different from the narrative that follows it in Genesis. [Collins, 43-44] There are also many rather obvious questions that are left unremarked upon and certainly unanswered. Take these for examples. Why did God create the world when he created it? To what end was the Spirit hovering over the face of the waters and who and what was that Spirit and why is the Spirit mentioned in such a way but not mentioned again? How was there morning and particularly evening in the days before the sun and moon? Why, after reading in v. 11 that the earth brought forth vegetation, do we read in 2:5 that no bush or plant had yet sprung up because it had not yet rained? Why is nothing said about the creation of angels, some of whom will appear in the next few chapters? None of these questions and many others is addressed or seems to matter to the point that the author is making. He is after something else than an account that will satisfy the curiosity of readers in the 21st century. In many respects it must not have satisfied the curiosity of thoughtful readers in the 15th century B.C. They were more sophisticated than we might think and they would have had their questions as we do. But the author had his point to make and it wasn't to provide an account satisfying to scientists. He was interested in ultimate causes and, still more, in the theology of the world and human life. Don't take me to be saying anything other than this; I certainly do not deny the historicity of the account, it's written as history, it *is* history. I only observe that the picture we are given is painted in very broad strokes. We are told precious little besides "God made the world and everything in it."

What has become clear as more of the literature of the ancient near east has been dug up and translated, is that Genesis 1 and its beautiful and powerful account of creation *is a polemic against the cosmology of the ancient pagan world*, that is, the way Israel's contemporaries thought about the world. You perhaps will know that there are a number of similarities between

the creation account we have here and other ancient near eastern creation stories, for example, the Mesopotamian creation epics known as *Enuma elish* and the epic of *Atrahasis*. There too we read of a primitive darkness, of light emanating from the gods, of the creation of the firmament, then of dry land, of the heavenly lights, and finally of man. And there too we read that at the end of the creation the gods rested. [Wenham, *WBC*, ii, 8; cf. E.A. Speiser, *AB*, 9-10] The pagan accounts are, to be sure, dramatically different in content and style. I encourage you to read one or more of them as I did this past week. It will wonderfully confirm your confidence in Genesis 1 as the authentic record of the beginning of all things, at least as much as we can know!

But Genesis 1 is not simply different from those pagan creation stories. It is intentionally the repudiation of them. Those accounts teem with various gods at war with one another, with battle and strife between competing cosmic powers, with the personification and deification of natural forces, and so on. At point after point in Genesis 1 this view of the world and its origin is explicitly and emphatically contradicted. There is but one God; all natural forces are his creation and are subject to him, and so on.

Genesis 1 was written at a time when the people of that part of the world were polytheists whose view of the world and of their place in the world was an extension of their theology. They thought themselves subject to forces beyond their control, forces seemingly impersonal and indifferent, forces the gods themselves scarcely controlled, as there was strife and conflict between them as there was between men on earth. “Man’s best hope to get a favorable nod from the cosmic powers lay, it was [thought], in ritualistic appeasement.” [Speiser, xlviii] But that was all it was; their best hope. Life in all its dimensions was marked by oppressive uncertainty. There was nothing and no one that anyone could absolutely count on. You won’t hear anywhere in ancient religious texts about the exceeding great and precious promises of God because their gods didn’t make promises and couldn’t be sure to deliver on them if they had.

Their creation stories reflected that unsettled understanding of life and the world. But Genesis 1 is profoundly different. It is not only wonderfully more compelling, chaste, and credible; it advances a theology upon which a completely different understanding of the world must be built. There is but one God and he is a person of infinite wisdom, power, and goodness. He can be counted on absolutely to be true to his nature and to his Word, a word that he has revealed to human beings and a nature he has built into them. The world is good because God made it so. True enough, it has been cursed because of man’s sin, but God is no less in complete control of what he has made. And as the history unfolds we will learn of God’s love and his plan to recover the world and to save human beings from themselves. All of the message of the Bible rests on this account of the only God, perfectly good, all-wise and all-powerful, who created the world, and made it the theater of the outworking of his relationship with the human beings he had created. This is the foundation of everything: from the nature of human life, its purpose and its destiny, to the way of salvation and the hope of eternal life in fellowship with God.

Again, this is an utterly different message from that communicated by the pagan creation stories, an utterly different message about an utterly different world because the God revealed in Genesis 1 is so utterly unlike the gods of the ancient pantheons. You cannot build the Christian faith on the foundation of pagan cosmology and you can’t build a pagan faith on Genesis 1. But, take the point: whether read by the generation for which Moses first wrote Genesis 1 or by people today,

the creation account serves the same purpose. After all, we live today in a western world increasingly dominated by pagan or perhaps even a sub-pagan cosmology.

What we learn from the way Genesis 1 was written is that, without a doubt, if Genesis had been written in our day, instead of in the time in which it was, it would have been written to contradict the leading cosmological myth of *our* time: that the world came into being and human beings in the world without the involvement of a person at all, without the acts of an infinite intelligence, and without a purpose or a plan. I suspect Genesis 1 would read in such a way that any modern reader would immediately recognize that it was a polemic against naturalism, against an impersonal universe, and against neo-Darwinism as an explanation for the origin of life. It would have a more scientific cast and sound to its prose because that is the way many modern people think about the origin of things. No one had thought of our modern theory of evolution in the 15th century B.C. so it was not the foil of Genesis 1.

But equally false views of the origin of the world were most definitely in the crosshairs of the author of the first chapter of the Bible. But whether the account had been written against the reigning cosmology of the near east in the 15th century B.C. or against the theorizing of modern paleontologists and biologists in the 21st century, the point would be the same. This world is the artifact of divine intelligence and power. It has the fingerprints of the Almighty all over it. We are his creatures and that fact is both our responsibility and our only hope! Genesis 1 is a revelation of God himself; you will have noticed that as we read: *he creates, he speaks, he sees, he separates, he names, he appoints, he blesses, and he rests. Together with the incarnation of God the Son, the creation is the supreme self-revelation of God.* We see and know him in the things he has made. And that is the first of all truths for every human being: his or her life, yours or mine, is the gift of God and so we have to do with God in everything. We are what we are; the world is what it is because God made it so.

This is what makes human beings so important and that is what they *must* understand. Falsehood here, at the base, must make for falsehood all the way up. A failure to understand where we come from makes it impossible truly to know who we are or where we are going. And it is here, at the beginning, that our Christian faith so radically diverges from the thinking of the world, whether the ancient world or the world of our own day. Here begins the explanation of what men must know to understand themselves both in the wonder of their life and its tragedy, the longings of their souls and their perpetual dissatisfaction.

This first chapter provides the essential background for the rest of what we read in the Bible. It puts the history of our salvation in a cosmic and universal perspective. It relates us who believe in Jesus Christ to the rest of mankind. The Lord who called Abraham to himself and then redeemed you and me through the death of Jesus Christ is not some local deity. He is the creator of the universe and of every human being.

It is interesting and important that thoughtful unbelievers understand this very well. They fully appreciate how much is at stake in the cosmology of Genesis 1. That is why evolution, our culture's alternate creation story, is so carefully protected by them; why, for example, they don't want public school students to hear of doubts being raised as to whether the facts actually support the theory. This is why, as Ronald Numbers, once put it, the attitude of the educational

elite towards the biblical doctrine of creation is “We’ve got to stop these bastards.” [Cited in P. Johnson, *Reason in the Balance*, 44] Here is Phillip Johnson, who as a retired law professor, has perhaps done more than any scientist to cast substantial doubt on the evidence for the theory of evolution in our time:

“The elite attitude...is a clear sign that modernist culture finds [creation] -- as distinguished from, say, the New Age mysticism of a Shirley MacLaine -- genuinely threatening. The problem is...with the...doctrine that, one way or another, God brought about our existence for a purpose and cares about what we do. The vast majority of Americans say that they believe in such a God, and if that belief were to emerge as a serious contender at the intellectual level, there could be important consequences. If God is more than a myth or a figure of speech, then modernist culture is ignoring something really important, and its ruling philosophy may be in serious trouble.” [44-45]

What all of this indicates is that the question of the origin of the cosmos is a profoundly religious question. It strikes deep into the heart and must profoundly shape one’s philosophy of life, one’s views of life’s purpose and destiny. The so-called scientific facts have little to do with these convictions. How perceptive it was of George Bernard Shaw to have observed of the reception of Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* in 1859, “the world leaped at Darwin.” People wanted a world without God and Darwin, so they thought, gave it to them. And how revealing that, after all these years and the mounting problems for the theory posed by the accumulation of evidence in the various disciplines, so many are still so deeply, personally, and emotionally committed to this cosmology, love it, and need it desperately; so much so that when scientists like Dean Kenyon or Michael Denton or Michael Behe or philosophers such as Antony Flew or Thomas Nagel or specialists in evidence like Phillip Johnson have the temerity to attack the theory in public or to point out how the evidence has mounted against it, their reaction continues to be, “We’ve got to stop these bastards!”

Just as at the end of the Ptolemaic consensus in astronomy, before Copernicus, when one clever astronomer after another spun out still more complicated theories of epicycles to save the theory of geocentricity, that is the theory according to which the sun rotated around the earth, so today very clever people continue to be deeply intent on saving naturalism and its theory of evolution and for this single reason: it is the chief alternative, really the only serious alternative to the creation story of Genesis 1, with all of its immense theological implications.

I find it wonderful, I hope you do as well, that while many in the academic world and in the elite culture still wish to believe that only Appalachian snake-handling rednecks or folk of like mental sophistication would not believe that the world as we know it came to be as the result of a long series of physical, chemical, and biological accidents, it remains so easy for serious, thoughtful, highly educated Christians to be supremely confident in their disbelief of our culture’s creation story. The more scientists do their work, the less plausible the whole idea becomes.

Last Tuesday, Florence and I went to see Woody Allen’s new movie *Magic in the Moonlight*. It is a comedic farce, the story of a rationalist debunker of the supernatural being conned into believing in it after all. Like most Woody Allen films it philosophizes about the meaning of life. But in Woody Allen’s telling, the proof that there is a God, that life has meaning, that there might be such a thing as life beyond death, I say the proof of that would be something like the

existence of ESP or contact with the dead through séances. The fact is, the world itself and everything in it is shouting the existence of its maker as from the rooftops. And with the existence of the infinite, eternal, personal God comes an utterly different understanding of human life. *That* is the great point of Genesis 1.

Look at the world, look at human life, look carefully, seriously and thoughtfully at yourself: what you see is something God has done and only he could have done. And once you face that fact, all other truth about yourself and human life lies open to your view.