

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Theological Lessons From Genesis and the Relevancy for Modern Christians

Submitted to Dr. Michael Chiavone, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the completion of the course

THEO 626-D01

Doctrine of God

by

Stuart D. Smith

December 13, 2014

Contents

Introduction and Thesis	1
The Theology of Genesis	2
The Relevancy of Genesis for Christians	8
Relevancy of the Creation Account	8
Relevancy of the Creation Order	9
God’s Relationship With His Creation	10
God’s Justice and Mercy in the Fall	11
Conclusions	13
Bibliography	15

Introduction and Thesis

The book of Genesis forms the foundation of the historical and theological content of the Bible. Genesis is the basis for the doctrines of creation, the fall, and God's ultimate plan of redemption through Jesus Christ. An appropriate interpretation of Genesis is fundamental to an accurate understanding of the totality of scripture. The Book of Genesis and the creation story have been subject to many different interpretations by scholars, theologians, and skeptics. Some have the perspective that the creation and fall of man in Genesis as allegory or metaphor, while others take aspects of the creation account literally. Some negate the Genesis account entirely, considering it myth, legend, or outright fantasy. Rather than focusing on the debate about the allegorical or literal interpretation of Genesis, it is more appropriate to understand key theological doctrines revealed in the first book of the Bible. Despite what the critics may say, the theology of Genesis is still relevant to twenty-first century Christians and provides insight into God's eternity, his wisdom, his love, and his justice.

The Theology of Genesis

The great German theologian Martin Luther was once asked, “What was God doing before the creation of the world?” His response was that God was cutting sticks to cane people who ask such idle questions.¹ While this response may seem a bit harsh, Luther’s answer demonstrates that when people fail to recognize God as an all-loving, merciful creator of the Universe, they naturally gravitate towards God being harsh and judgmental. God was “in the beginning.” There was no “before” prior to creation, and nothing existed before God. The great “I am” (Exodus 3:14) simply is. He is the uncaused first cause of everything. He is Aristotle’s “unmoved mover.” The story of Genesis is, at its core, the story of God. It is the foundation of virtually all theology contained in the Bible. Written by Moses in about 1,400 BC, it contains, among other things, the account of the awesome acts of God in the creation of the Universe, earth, and all life on earth. Genesis is the first of the books that make up the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible); and is important for Christians because it “opens with a theology of creation and thereby provides a universal context for determining the meaning of everything that transpires in the entire Biblical narrative.”² The fundamental theological themes of the first three chapters of Genesis are creation and the fall of man. “The primary thrust of the creation account is to trace the origin and meaning of history and human existence back to the creative, sovereign will of God.”³ The fall of man demonstrates how sin entered into the world through Adam, and sets the stage for God’s plan of salvation for all of humanity through the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, ed. John W. DeGruchy, trans. Martin Ruter and Ilse Todt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), Chap. 1. Logos Bible Software.

² Bernard Och, "Creation and Redemption: Towards a Theology of Creation," *Judaism* 44, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 227.

³ Ibid.

Moses wrote Genesis after Israel's exodus from Egypt and their salvation from about four hundred years of slavery and domination under the hand of the pharaohs. During the period of slavery, Abraham's offspring were totally immersed in Egyptian language, culture, and religion; thus after the exodus, they desperately needed to reconnect with their heritage and their God.⁴ Egyptian beliefs were so embedded in the cultural mindset of the Jews that Joshua 2:14 demonstrates that even long after the exodus "Israel still had Egyptian gods in their pantheon."⁵ The creation account of Genesis was unique in that it revealed to Israel the awesome power of God and impressed upon them that unlike other ancient Near Eastern creation mythologies, "God is never the creation but always the Creator."⁶

At the time Moses wrote Genesis, the cultures surrounding Israel were steeped in mythical thought.⁷ The faith of the Israelites and "Moses' revelation of God, given through the Holy Spirit's inspiration, conflicted diametrically with the concepts of the gods and goddesses found in the nations all around him."⁸ The surrounding cultures of Mesopotamia had a vast array of gods who played an intrinsic role in the creation mythologies of their respective cultures. These accounts were intended to reveal the power and authority of a particular god.⁹ Furthermore, Mesopotamian creation mythos was based on a saga of creation out of chaos, struggle, and conflict. The gods warred among each other with superhuman strength; battling for

4 Johnny V. Miller and John M. Soden, *In the Beginning We Misunderstood: Interpreting Genesis 1 in Its Original Context* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2012), 63.

5 Ibid., 77.

6 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, Chap. 4. Logos Bible Software.

7 Bruce K. Waltke, "The Creation Account in Genesis 1: 1-3, Part IV: The Theology of Genesis 1," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132, no. 527 (October 1, 1975): 330.

8 Ibid., 327.

9 Miller and Soden, *In the Beginning*, 124.

supremacy over the primordial Universe with various weapons and magical powers.¹⁰ In Egyptian culture in particular, a god or gods represented different parts of the creation. The sun, moon, earth, the underworld, all were symbolic of different gods. Mesopotamia had gods of the sky, the air, and the water; there was a storm god, a god of the mist, and a god of rivers and streams.¹¹ By contrast, the Genesis account reveals that Israel's Yahweh Elohim is in complete control, effortlessly speaking the Universe into existence (Genesis 1:3, 6, 9, 14, 20, 24). Israel's God created the sun, the stars, the moon, other heavenly bodies, and the planet earth through his complete and utter omnipotent power (Genesis 1:14-18). There was no struggle or conflict with other gods. "The Lord is God; besides him there is no other" (Deuteronomy 4:35).¹² The Genesis creation account depicts God as a master craftsman working carefully in his shop. Yahweh is sovereign over creation, not subordinate to it. Furthermore, in stark contrast to the Mesopotamian gods, the God of Genesis is distinctly separate from creation and not a part of it. God's creative acts were by and through his decision, and he was not compelled to create anything, nor is he any part of creation. John 1:3 says, "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made."

Only after God created the Universe, the earth, and all the plants and animals necessary for a functioning ecosystem did he create man. The Bible speaks of God creating man in his own image (Genesis 1:26-27). The fact that God created man in his own image makes man a singularly unique part of God's creation. "The Bible expresses the essential difference between

¹⁰ Miller and Soden, *In the Beginning*, 114-126.

¹¹ Ibid, 116.

¹² Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

this work and all God’s previous creative activity by the way in which it introduces this work.”¹³ God’s creative acts prior to man involved God speaking into existence various aspects of creation. When God created man, he “formed a man from the dust of the ground” (Genesis 2:7a). God took time to carefully gather bits of his creation and artfully formed man from preexisting matter. God did not simply speak man into existence as with the rest of creation. Next, God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7b). God imparted something special into man at the moment he brought man to life. He breathed his own breath, or spirit, into man. This singular, miraculous act represented the pinnacle of God’s creation. However, God did not stop with man alone. Recognizing that it was “not good” for man to be alone, God made woman (Eve) to be a partner with man (Genesis 2:20-22). By forming woman from man’s rib, God emphasized the partnership that man and woman should have. The sanctity of the relationship that a man and woman have is indicated in Genesis 2:24, “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.” Becoming “one flesh” signifies a union of both body and spirit. After this, “God had finished the work he had been doing; so...he rested from all his work” (Genesis 2:2).

In the first chapter of Genesis, Moses explicitly states seven times that God’s creation was “good” (v. 3, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Clearly, God’s creation was a magnificent, awesome thing. Yet along with this goodness of creation came a troubling aspect: man’s free will. “In creating man in his own image on earth means that humankind is like the Creator in that it is free.”¹⁴ Without creating man with the capacity for freedom, God could not have created man with the capacity to love. However, by giving man freedom and free will, God also introduced

¹³ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, Chap. 4.

¹⁴ Ibid.

the potential that man would chose something other than to love and obey God. This, unfortunately, is what man chose. “God gave the command not to eat of the fruit of the tree (Gen 2:16-17), because Man should not forget that God is His master”; thus the purpose of God’s command was to impress upon man the “distinction between God and Man, Creator and creation.”¹⁵ Adam’s sin “in its primitive form is Man’s attempt to be God.”¹⁶ Ultimately, sin is disobedience of God and God’s commandments. James writes, “If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn’t do it, it is sin for them” (James 4:17). Man was originally created in a relationship with God. Adam and Eve enjoyed the personal, physical presence of God in the Garden of Eden. Genesis 3:8 says, “Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden.” It is curious that the Bible would say that God was “walking in the garden.” Nonetheless, this seems to indicate that God, perhaps as the pre-incarnate Christ, was physically present with Adam and Eve in the garden. Further, it establishes they had experienced his company preceding the situation described in verse 8. Had this been the first instance God walked in the garden, Adam and Eve would have had no concept that “the sound” of someone walking was God and, despite their shame, would not have hid from him. The consequences of sin were profound. Adam’s act of disobedience disrupted the harmony, peace, and order of God’s divine creation.¹⁷ The consequences of Adam’s sin resulted in God’s curse on all of creation (Romans 8:22). It caused an unfathomable gap between God and man; a separation that would keep man from having a relationship with God. Because of their sin,

¹⁵ Anders-Christian Jacobsen, "The Importance of Genesis 1-3 in the Theology of Irenaeus," *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 8, no. 2 (January 2004): 303.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Och, "Creation and Redemption", 229.

Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden (Genesis 3:23). This banishment is also symbolic of the abrogation of the personal, physical relationship that Adam and Eve had with their Creator. Never again would Adam experience God's presence in his life.

The theology of Genesis establishes several critical principles. It establishes God's sovereignty and dominion over his creation.¹⁸ "The Bible begins with the free confirmation, attestation, and revelation of God by God: In the beginning God created...."¹⁹ God is the sole power by which all of creation came into being, and "without him nothing was made that has been made" (John 1:3b). Genesis establishes the unique place that humanity has in God's created order. Man was created last. He was created in a manner that was fundamentally different from the rest of creation. Contained within man was the very breath of God. God created man in his image. "God is omniscient. Therefore, it is logical to conclude man was given an amount of knowledge."²⁰ With the knowledge God imparted into man, man was given dominion over God's creation (Genesis 1:28), and he was given the honor and of naming parts of God's creation (Genesis 2:19-20). This reveals that man was a partner with God in managing God's creation. Woman was created as an equal partner with man; however, God created two distinctly different sexes (Genesis 1:27). While procreation was certainly one purpose for this, however the joining together as "one flesh" (Genesis 2:24) seems to be the more significant reason. Christ himself spoke of this in Matthew 19:5 and Mark 10:7-8. Finally, the theology of Genesis denotes the source and nature of man's eternal separation from God through sin. Because of sin, man experienced spiritual death (Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death...),

18 Waltke, "The Creation Account, Part IV", 341.

19 Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, Chap. 5.

20 William H. Bishop, "The Genesis of Values in Genesis," *Journal of Human Values* 19, no. 2 (October 2013): 128.

however it also was the catalyst for God’s plan for salvation. Ultimately, the creation account in “Genesis 1 revealed to Israel the activities of God as Creator, Savior, and Ruler. But it also revealed something about His attributes, including His greatness, wisdom, and goodness.”²¹

The Relevancy of Genesis for Christians

For the modern, twenty-first century Christian, the Biblical account of Genesis may seem far removed from theological teachings of the New Testament. After all, Christians are under the New Covenant. Christ said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20). The prophet Jeremiah writes, “‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah’” (Jeremiah 31:31). So what relevancy is the Old Testament in general and the Book of Genesis in particular to Christian’s today? There are actually several reasons the creation account in Genesis is relevant to New Testament Christian believers.

Relevancy of the Creation Account

The creation account itself provides the backdrop through which all of scripture should be interpreted. Genesis reveals the greatness of God through the incomprehensible awesome power of creation itself. God’s greatness was evident to ancient Israel despite their limited understanding of the vastness of the Universe; his greatness should be even more profound to modern, twenty first century man given the understanding man has of the Universe today. Modern cosmology has established that the Universe is infinitely more complex than past

²¹ Bruce K. Waltke, "The Creation Account in Genesis 1: 1-3, Part V: The Theology of Genesis 1-Continued," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132, no. 527 (October 1, 1975): 28.

generations have understood. The fine-tuning of the initial conditions of the cosmos to allow for life are so profound as to defy comprehension. For example, some physicists estimate that if the ratios between electromagnetic interaction and gravitation were altered by one part in 10^{100} that a life-permitting Universe would not be possible.²² The fact that the Universe even exists provides one of the most compelling proofs for the existence of God. The Cosmological Argument is one of the traditional arguments used to prove God's existence. The fundamental "idea of this argument is that, since there is a Universe rather than none at all, it must have been caused by something beyond itself."²³ Modern cosmology presumes that the Universe began to exist some 13.5 billion years ago in a cataclysmic event called the Big Bang in which all time, space, and matter exploded into existence. This even generated tremendous heat and light. Genesis describes that at the moment of creation, God said, "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3). How apropos is it that the Biblical account of creation, which was written some 3,400 years ago, demonstrates that the origin of the Universe began with an enormous flash of light? The Biblical account of creation is relevant to modern Christians because it provides the believer with an explanation of the origin of the Universe that comports with modern cosmology and provides a satisfactory answer to the question of ultimate origins.

Relevancy of the Creation Order

The creation order is of particular relevance to modern Christians, as "the original order of creation is the starting point for the movement towards perfection."²⁴ First it demonstrates

²² William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 3rd ed. (Weaton: Crossway, 2008), 158.

²³ Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 160.

²⁴ Jacobsen, "The Importance of Genesis", 299.

that man, was created last, is the pinnacle of God's creation. The nobility of man is revealed through the image of God that is contained within him. Human beings are God's special creation. No other created being is said to bear the "image of God." This gives the Christian the assurance that humans hold a special place in God's eyes, and are truly the "children of God" (Romans 8:14, Galatians 3:27). "The creator God who has, heretofore, radically separated Himself from His creation now opens up the possibility of entering the world through His involvement with humanity."²⁵ For the Christian, the relationship is possible through the salvific work of Jesus. However, the image of God found in man is what makes salvation possible. Only man, who bears God's image, can be saved.

The creation order also emphasizes the relevance of the Sabbath. "According to Exodus 31:13, 17 the observance of the Sabbath was a sign between Israel and God."²⁶ For modern Christians, the Sabbath also holds special meaning. Christians now typically celebrate the Sabbath on Sunday, which is the day of the week on which Christ was raised from the dead. Thus the Sabbath is now a sign between those under the New Covenant and God, and is a continuous reminder of the work of Christ on the cross.

God's Relationship With His Creation

The Genesis creation account reveals God's overall relationship with his creation. Unlike the concept of a purely deistic god, the God of the Bible is actively involved in his creation both during the act of creation and after his work was finished. Genesis demonstrates that God has absolute sovereignty over his creation. While God was primarily responsible for naming certain

²⁵ Och, "Creation and Redemption," 228.

²⁶ Waltke, "The Creation Account in Genesis, Part V", 29.

aspects of his creation, giving names to light and darkness and to the dry land and waters, “he left it to man to decide the names of the birds and of the domesticated and wild animals. He did not name these because He had delegated His authority to man to have dominion over the earth.”²⁷ God considered man a partner. God’s creation was his and his alone. Yet he freely chose to allow man to take part in creation. The creation narrative found in Genesis revealed God’s goodness to Israel. God’s called his creation good; “but more than that, He gave it all to man as gift. All was under the dominion of Yahweh and He in turn had committed the dominion of the earth to man.”²⁸ Christians today can have confidence that God continues to play an active role in creation and in the lives of his people. God loves his creation, and he loves humanity. God commanded man to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28). God delegated his authority to man, thus humanity has a great responsibility to care for and manage God’s creation. While humanity is to rule over creation, they should not abuse it. An attitude of wise stewardship is called for in managing the earth.

God’s Justice and Mercy in the Fall

The fall of man is the most tragic aspect of the creation story. “Adam’s act of disobedience disrupts the order and harmony of Divine creation and unleashes anticreational forces which enmesh man and nature in an ongoing process of decreation.”²⁹ Adam and Eve disobeyed the one who gave them a place to live, sustenance, and their very lives. God’s perfect justice demanded a penalty for this act, yet God’s perfect mercy was also revealed in what he

²⁷ Waltke, "The Creation Account in Genesis, Part IV", 341.

²⁸ Waltke, "The Creation Account in Genesis, Part V", 32.

²⁹ Och, "Creation and Redemption," 229.

did. The consequences for sin were profound. Sin resulted in Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden; however more heartbreakingly it resulted in a curse over all of creation and in man's spiritual death and separation from God. It may be asked why God did not create man perfect from the outset, free from a sin nature. "Irenaeus answers that the Creator could very easily have created Man perfect, but Man couldn't bear to be perfect from the beginning, exactly because he is a created being."³⁰ Despite man's disobedience of God, God did not destroy man. He could have very easily annihilated Adam and Eve for their sin. But God withheld his rightful wrath. He expelled them from the Garden, yet he also gave them the knowledge they would need to survive. Genesis 3:21 says, "The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them." Adam and Eve's prior attempt at making clothing had been primitive and ineffective. In Verse 3, after consuming the fruit and realizing they were naked, "they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves." God mercifully, he provided the first clothes from animal skins and undoubtedly other knowledge Adam and Eve would need to survive in the harsh world that was to come. Through God's examples of mercy despite man's sin, the modern Christian can have trust and security in the fact that God will show mercy. The significant result of man's sin is that it ushered in God's ultimate plan of redemption. The Logos "whose image and likeness man was created in" is the same incarnate Logos who would be the ultimate sacrifice to pay the penalty for the sin of all men.³¹

³⁰ Jacobsen, "The Importance of Genesis," 302.

³¹ Ibid., 308.

Conclusion

The book of Genesis, and the creation story contained therein, is one of the most significant aspects of the Bible. The perspective from which one approaches a study of Genesis plays a fundamental role in how one perceives the nature of God and man. The theology of Genesis reveals that Elohim Yahweh is a God of immense power, majesty, and glory. Furthermore, he is not restricted by any limitations on his power. He freely created the Universe solely through his spoken word, and played an active role in the creation. Unlike other ancient Near Eastern creation accounts, the Bible reveals that the creation was very orderly and not a chaotic event between warring gods. Genesis teaches that man is the pinnacle of God's creation, holding a special place in the created order. Man alone was created by God's direct, physical touch; and man alone was created in the image of God. Humanity has intrinsic worth by virtue of bearing God's image. God created man with free will, and established a partnership with man where man was head of all creation. Unfortunately, man chose to disobey God and reject his authority. Thus the unique relationship he had with God was destroyed. The consequence of man's sin was enormous. The Apostle Paul writes, "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12). Nevertheless, despite man's sin, God's mercy prevailed.

Through a careful study of the Genesis creation account, the modern Christian can gain valuable insight into the nature of God, the nature of man's special place in creation, and an understanding into the consequences of sin. Most importantly, Christians can perceive the origins of God's plan of salvation through Jesus Christ to bring man back into a right relationship with himself. "The creation account of the Old Testament finds its full explication in Jesus of Nazareth, the God-man. As God, He is the Creator, the One full of light, life, wisdom, and

goodness. As man, He is the One who is bringing the earth under His dominion.”³² Clearly, the creation account revealed in the Book of Genesis is still relevant to twenty-first century Christians and provides valuable insight into God’s eternity, his wisdom, his love, and his justice. It is upon these foundational principles that Christians can have trust in God and place their faith in the saving grace found solely through Jesus Christ.

³² Waltke, "The Creation Account in Genesis, Part V", 40.

Bibliography

- Bishop, William H. "The Genesis of Values in Genesis." *Journal of Human Values* 19, no. 2 (October 2013): 127-32.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*. Edited by John W. DeGruchy. Translated by Martin Ruter and Ilse Todt. Vol. 3. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007.
- Craig, William Lane. *Reasonable Faith*. 3rd ed. Wheaton: Crossway, 2008.
- Geisler, Norman L. Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999.
- Jacobsen, Anders-Christian. "The Importance of Genesis 1-3 in the Theology of Irenaeus." *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 8, no. 2 (January 2004): 299-316.
- Miller, Johnny V., and John M. Soden. *In the Beginning... We Misunderstood: Interpreting Genesis 1 in Its Original Context*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2012.
- Och, Bernard. "Creation and Redemption: Towards a Theology of Creation." *Judaism* 44, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 226-43.
- Waltke, Bruce K. "The Creation Account in Genesis 1: 1-3: Part IV: The Theology of Genesis 1" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132, no. 527 (October 1, 1975): 327-42.
- Waltke, Bruce K. "The Creation Account in Genesis 1: 1-3: Part V: The Theology of Genesis 1 ~Continued" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 133, no. 529 (March 1, 1976): 28-41.