



Laying the Foundations for Correctly Understanding the World (*Genesis 1*)

Primeval History (Gen. 1:1–11:9)

The book of Genesis was written to show that Israel's God is the sovereign Creator whose purpose to establish His covenant rule upon the earth will not be hindered by the sinfulness of humanity. The first major section of Genesis, called Primeval History, covers the creation of the world, the fall of mankind into sin, and the triumph and progress of sin through to the flood and the Tower of Babel. Foundational truths about mankind and this world are set forth in this section. Human beings learn their identity and their role within God's good creation. The power of sin and its devastating effects are clearly laid out. One also sees, however, God's proactive response to sin in order to establish His purposes in fulfillment of His covenant promises. Whenever sin seems to be getting the upper hand, God moves to hinder its effects and to establish His sovereign rule. When sin triumphs in chapter 4 through the murder of Abel and there is the escalation of sin in Lamech's boast, the godly community worships God and God moves to replace Abel with Seth. When sin and violence dominate the whole world, God moves to preserve a family through the judgment of the flood. When human beings seek

to establish a name for themselves at the Tower of Babel, God scatters them and calls Abram, whose name will become great and through whom God will establish His covenant in order to bless the world. Thus, Genesis 1:1–11:9 sets forth foundational truths concerning the character and role of human beings within the world God has created.

These chapters are vital because if people do not understand the basic truths laid out here then they will operate from a world view that is distorted. Without understanding the goodness of God's creation, people will either conclude that material things are bad, or they will pursue material things as the highest good without recognizing the boundaries God the Creator has established for His creation. Without recognizing the nature of sin, people will not be effective in living with other human beings, in establishing policies to deal with human behavior, and in understanding God's solution to the problem. And finally, without understanding the character of God, people will conclude that God is unjust in His judgment and they will not see His gracious pursuit to establish His people through the fulfillment of His promises. If people do not understand Genesis 1–11, they will be operating with a distorted view of their own life and the world in which they live.

Prologue: Creation (Gen. 1:1–2:3)

The Character of God and Creation

The account of creation establishes the character of God, the character of His creation, and the place of mankind within creation. Genesis 1 assumes God's existence 'in the beginning', establishing His transcendent priority and separation from His creation. The name for 'God' in Genesis 1 is Elohim, which is used over 35 times in Genesis 1. It is actually a plural noun, which in some contexts could be translated 'gods', but when used of Israel's God, the God of creation, it is always translated with the singular 'God'.¹ The plural is explained as an intensive plural, which means that the individual or thing is thoroughly characterized by the qualities of the noun. Thus,

1. In Genesis 1:1 the plural Elohim is used with the singular verb 'create' which shows that Elohim should be translated as 'God'.

Israel's God fully partakes of the character of deity. In fact, Israel's God is the true definition of deity. The aspect of deity that is emphasized in Genesis 1 is God's sovereign, majestic power as Creator. God is so powerful, that He merely speaks to bring things into existence and to make things happen (the verb translated 'said' is used ten times in Genesis 1, with each day beginning with God speaking, except the seventh day).

The power of God is also demonstrated in His forming and fashioning the earth to be a good place for mankind to live. The condition of the earth in Genesis 1:2 is 'formless and void'. These two words describe the earth as uninhabitable for human beings. The word 'formless' (*tōhû*) is used in Deuteronomy 32:10 in parallel with 'desert' (*midbār*), which is an uninhabitable place (described in verse 10 as a 'howling waste of the wilderness'). The word 'void' (*bōhû*) can also mean 'empty' and it is used in Isaiah 45:18 in parallel with 'inhabited'. God's purpose in creating the heavens and the earth was not that they would be empty but that they would be inhabited. In fact, the phrase 'formless and void' is used in Jeremiah 4:23 to describe the land of Palestine as uninhabitable because of the judgment of God through the exile of His people. The fruitful land became a desert. In Genesis 1 God forms and fashions what was 'formless and void' and makes it inhabitable for humanity.

The character of God's creation is declared good. This declaration is made throughout Genesis 1 at distinct stages of the work of creation and is made in a summary statement in Genesis 1:31. The word 'good' can mean that something is beautiful (Exod. 2:2) or that something is useful in fulfilling a purpose.² The latter meaning fits Genesis 1 as various aspects of creation are declared good. The things which God creates fulfill their purpose in making the earth a place for human habitation. The fact that God's creation is good affirms the benefit of the material world for human beings (1 Tim. 4:4) and argues against the view that matter is evil.

2. A. Bowling, "טוֹב (*tōb*)," in *TWOT* (eds. R. Laird Harris, Gleason Archer, and Bruce Waltke; 2 vols; Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1980), 1:345-46.

The Creation and Role of Mankind

It is clear that the creation of 'man' (*'ādām*) is special and that it represents the crown of God's work.³ 'The majestic march of the days'⁴ climaxes with the creation of human beings. The special place of human beings within God's creation is demonstrated in several ways in Genesis 1.

First, when God creates 'man' He uses terminology which was not used in reference to any other creation in Genesis 1. He does not say 'let the earth bring forth living creatures' as in verse 24, but rather states 'Let us make man.'

There is much discussion concerning the meaning of 'let us'. Some argue that the 'us' refers to the heavenly court that surrounds God's throne, a reference to angelic beings who act as messengers for God (1 Kings 22:19, Job 1-2).⁵ However, God goes on to say that 'man' would be made in 'our image' and it is hard to conceive of human beings created in the image of the angels or of God and the angels.⁶ Plus, there is no evidence for the existence of a heavenly court in Genesis 1.

When God takes counsel it is clearly stated with whom He takes counsel. God is the sole actor throughout Genesis 1. Isaiah 40:14 denies that God consults with anyone, whether human or heavenly, in the creation or administration of the world.⁷ Cassuto argues that 'let us' is a plural of exhortation as when a person exhorts himself to do a certain task. He appeals to 2 Samuel 24:14 where the plural 'let us fall' is used, followed by the singular 'let me not fall'.⁸

This view is closely associated with the view that 'let us' is expressing self-deliberation. In this view God deliberates with Himself in the creation of 'mankind'.⁹ Gerhard Hasel argues that the plural 'let us' is a plural of fullness which

3. Matthews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, p. 160.

4. This phrase comes from Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), p. 54.

5. Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, pp. 212-14 makes the best case for this view.

6. Keil and Delitzsch, *Genesis*, p. 61.

7. John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 59-60.

8. Cassuto, *Genesis Part 1*, p. 55.

9. *Gesenius Hebrew Grammar* (ed. E. Kautzsch; rev. by A. E. Cowley; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), sec. 124.g, n. 2 mentions this view but does not explain it. Gesenius' grammar will be abbreviated GKC throughout the rest of the commentary.

supposes that there is within the divine being a distinction of personalities so that there is an intra-divine deliberation among the 'persons' within the divine being. He goes on to say that 'in the creation of man a deliberating counseling between "persons" and a mutual summons within the deity or divine Being took place'.¹⁰ In the context of Genesis 1:2, where the Spirit of God is mentioned as participating in creation, it makes sense that God here speaks to the Spirit as a co-participant in creation.¹¹

However the phrase is understood, it highlights the importance of God's creation of 'man' because it is a unique phrase in Genesis 1. The ongoing march of creation in the pattern of 'God said' and then 'God created or made' is interrupted with 'let us make' to highlight the importance of the creation of human beings.

Second, the importance of the creation of 'mankind' is seen in the fact that only human beings are said to be created in the image of God. The plants and the animals are not created in His image. There is much discussion concerning the meaning of the image of God. The image of God is not specifically defined in Genesis 1 but the emphasis is on how those who are made in the image of God should function within God's creation. Of course, this has led to various reflections on what the image of God entails. Some argue that because human beings are a reflection of God the image includes both spiritual and material aspects. Although God does not have a physical body, some would argue, based on the unity of the human person, that the human physical form reflects God in some way. This view would stress that humans represent God on earth.¹² Others would stress that we are like God and unlike the animals in that humans are personal beings who are self-conscious and have the ability to be self-reflective. The ability of human beings to think and speak sets them apart from

10. Gerhard F. Hasel, 'The Meaning of "Let Us" in Gen 1:26,' *AUSS* 13.1 (1975): pp. 58-66.

11. Matthews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, pp. 162-63 and Hamilton, *Genesis Chapters 1-17*, p. 134. Others who argue for some kind of deliberation on the part of God include John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), pp. 91-92 and John Currid, *Genesis 1:1-25:18* (Darlington, Evangelical Press, 2003), p. 85.

12. David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1-11* (BST; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), p. 40, mentions the representational view.

the animals. Some would also bring in the New Testament perspective of what is restored to a person when they are regenerated, which includes knowledge, righteousness, and holiness (Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:24; WCF 4.2).¹³

The text emphasizes the role of those made in God's image within God's creation. In order to fulfill that role God created 'mankind' as male and female. This differentiation was necessary if 'mankind' was to fulfill God's purposes of being fruitful, multiplying, filling the earth, and subduing it (Gen. 1:28). The aspect of dominion over the animals also demonstrates the special place of human beings in God's creation. The fact that human beings rule over God's creation is based on their special place in God's creation.¹⁴ However, this view is under attack today from many who do not want to give human beings a special place in God's creation, partly because they adamantly oppose the concept of dominion.¹⁵ Many also misunderstand the concept. Dominion does not mean that human beings are free to exploit creation in a negative way without regard for the beauty and glory of God's creation; rather, in exercising dominion human beings mirror God's actions in Genesis 1. God's power and authority in bringing this world into existence is emphasized in Genesis 1 and the role of human beings reflects that aspect of God in ruling over creation (for the role of caring for creation, see the discussion on Genesis 2). Of course, human beings

13. Keil and Delitzsch (*Genesis*, pp. 63-64) stresses the image as the spiritual and mental aspects of human beings with an emphasis on what is lost in the fall and restored in Christ.

14. Matthews (*Genesis 1-11:26*, p. 169) argues that the language of 1:26 reflects the idea of a royal figure representing God as his appointed ruler (see also Psalm 8).

15. Blaming the ecological crisis on the Christian view of dominion goes back to a seminal article by Lynn White, Jr., 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,' in an Appendix to the book by Francis A. Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1970), pp. 97-116 (it originally appeared in *Science* 155 [1967], 1203-07). It is interesting that James Barr, who is no friend to evangelicals, writes the following: 'As far as one must speak of responsibility and guilt, I would say that the great modern exploitation of nature has taken place under the reign of liberal humanism in which man no longer conceives of himself as being under a creator, and in which therefore his place of dominance in the universe and his right to dispose of nature for his own ends is, unlike the situation of the Bible, unlimited' (Barr, *Ecology and Religion in History*, 1974, quoted in Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Treasures Old and New: Essays in the Theology of the Pentateuch* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004]), p. 38.

rule creation under God's authority. Practically, this means that it is appropriate for human beings to use creation for their benefit. Dominion is a Biblical concept and any view that would deny the unique role of human beings within God's creation and place humans and animals on the same level is to be vehemently rejected.¹⁶

It is clear that human beings have a royal calling in their rule over creation. All human beings participate in this rule over creation by virtue of their being created in the image of God. In some views in the ancient Near East only the king partakes of the divine image. For example, a statement to King Esarhaddon of Assyria asserts, 'A (free) man is as a shadow of the god, the slave is as the shadow of a (free) man, but the king, he is like unto the (very) image of God.'¹⁷ However, in the Scriptural account every human being is made in the image of God and thus takes on a royal, kingly function within creation.

Dominion, however, is made very difficult by the fall, but God sets out to restore man's dominion in redemptive history, beginning with the promise that one would come to crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). The covenant with Abraham includes the promise of kings and the possibility of restoring dominion in the land of Canaan (Gen. 17:7-8; 15:18-21). Israel and her kings do not exercise proper dominion because they fail to live in obedience to God and thus lose the land. The promises in the Old Testament of one who would come to rule righteously and establish a kingdom of peace (Gen. 49:10-11; Num. 24:17; Isa. 9:6-7; 11:1-16) are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself exercises dominion by casting out demons (Mark 5), by restoring order in creation through healing (Mark 3:1-6), and by exercising power over creation (Mark 4:35-41). Hebrews 2 presents Christ as the man who fulfills the original role of dominion given to human beings and makes it possible for humans to share in that dominion restored to them in Christ. Thus, the kingdom is given to His disciples who will inherit the earth and participate in the reign of Christ by crushing Satan under their feet (Rom. 16:20). Full restoration will be

16. For the implications of affirming that humans are no different from animals, see Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002) and *Rethinking Life and Death* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996).

17. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p. 66, n. 47.

established when Christ comes again and we will reign with Him in the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 22:5).¹⁸

The account of creation ends with God resting on the seventh day from the work of creation. This rest has implications for human beings because God also blesses the seventh day and makes it holy. The blessing of the day means that the day will be fruitful with respect to the purposes of that day, which parallels the blessing of male and female for the purpose of multiplying and filling the earth. The fact that the seventh day is holy sets it apart not only for God but also for human beings who will benefit from the 'rest' of that day. How human beings participate in the rest of the seventh day is not spelled out explicitly, but the blessing of the seventh day must have implications for human beings. It will include imitating God in stopping the activity of work in order to rest, which must include not just a physical rest but also a spiritual rest. God does not get tired and yet He rested on the seventh day, and it will become clear that human beings are also to enter into that rest. The fall into sin will highlight the necessity of rest from the weariness of work and also the necessity of spiritual rest which can only be found in God. Thus a pattern of work and rest is established that human beings will imitate in honor of God.

The concept of rest is lost in the fall as Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden of Eden. God seeks to restore that rest through the restoration of fellowship with mankind and in establishing places of rest which exemplify His presence, such as the tabernacle and the land of Canaan. Such rest is forfeited by the sin of Israel so that they lose the place of rest in the destruction of the temple and the loss of their land. Jesus comes to restore God's rest by establishing fellowship with God through His death on the cross. He is the temple and He comes to establish His dwelling in a new temple, the church. Thus He offers rest to the weary (Matt. 11:28) and makes it possible for God's people to enter into His rest (Heb. 4), both now through faith in Christ but also in the future when full rest will be restored in the presence of God in the new heavens and the new earth. There will be no temple in that

18. See Dan G. McCartney, 'Ecce Homo: The Coming of the Kingdom as the Restoration of Human Vicegerency,' *WTJ* 56 (1994): 1-21.

place of rest because God Himself will be with His people, which will lead to the vanquishing of tears, pain, sorrow, and death (Rev. 21:3-4).

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How does the fact that God spoke and the world came into existence affect our understanding of His providential care of and power over creation?
2. How does the fact that human beings are created in the image of God affect your view of the relationship between human beings and animals, your view of other human beings, and your view of your role in God's creation?
3. What is the Biblical concept of rest? How is it ignored in modern society?

2

God Provides Everything for Adam and Eve (Genesis 2)

The first section of Genesis to be introduced by the word 'toledot' is 2:4–4:26 (The Account [Toledot] of the Heavens and the Earth). This section of Genesis is part of the larger unit of Genesis 2:4–11:9, which describes the fall and its results. In Genesis 2:4 the word 'toledot' is followed by a narrative account of what happened to the heavens and the earth. After the broad, sweeping, majestic view of creation in Genesis 1 and its emphasis on the sovereignty of God, Genesis 2 takes a closer look at God's preparation of a place for Adam and Eve to live, the creation of Adam and Eve, and the role they have in the garden.

Genesis 2 no longer describes God in His majesty as the creator but it gives a much more personal account of His care for and interaction with His creation. This explains why Elohim alone is not used for God in Genesis 2 but LORD God (Yahweh Elohim) is used. At this point in the narrative the name Yahweh (LORD) is not fully understood, but this name becomes significant as the covenant name of God in the Exodus from Egypt. Yahweh remembers His covenant with Abraham and fights to deliver His people from the bondage of Egypt. In Genesis 2 Yahweh demonstrates His close relationship with Adam and Eve in the way they are created and in His concern for their welfare by providing for them all that they need.