

The Primeval History

Genesis 1-11

As soon as they can ask questions, most children want to know, "Where do I come from?" In the same way, stories of origins play an important part in the identity of a people. They give us a sense of our significance, our place in the world, our relationship to the animals, to one another, and to God.

The Bible is essentially a story of salvation. Beginning with Abraham it tells how God set apart the people of Israel in order to bless the whole world through them (Genesis 12:1-3). The early chapters of Genesis set the scene by describing the problem, the human predicament, which makes salvation a necessity. They contain the essential outlines for a Christian understanding of Creation, Humanity, Sin, Judgement, Culture, Work, Sex, Race and much more.

The stories grouped in Genesis 1-11 come from two collections. In the reign of Solomon, about 950 B.C, some of his wise men set about the task of collecting the ancient traditions of Israel, including the stories of the ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the exodus from Egypt and the journey to the Promised Land and arranging them into a connected narrative. They did not confine their researches to Israel alone. Israel in Solomon's time was a world power as powerful as the empires of Egypt and Babylonia. Solomon's scribes travelled widely and brought back the stories of primeval times current in the Near East to create a wide-ranging epic in which the history of Israel is seen in the context of the history of the whole world. Scholars have called this epic, "J" since it consistently uses the name "Yahweh" for God (In German, "Jahweh" began with a "J". In our Bibles it is always translated, "the Lord"). The stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, part of the Flood story and the Tower of Babel come from "J".

Much later, in the centuries following the return of Israel from exile in Babylon in 538 B.C., another epic history was created, this time by the priests, to tell the story of Israel's system of worship. This strand of history, known as "P" was then combined with "J" and other strands of Israel's history and laws to form the Pentateuch or five Books of Moses as we have them today. "P" also goes back to the creation to show how Israel's system of worship, which God had revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai, had developed from earliest times. It presents four ages, the age of creation ending with the Flood; the age of Noah; the age of the

patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; and finally the age of Moses. "P" began with the story of creation in Genesis 1, with which the whole Bible now begins.

The Psalms

The psalms are the hymn-book of the "second Temple", the Temple which was rebuilt after the return of Israel from exile. They were written over a long period of time and some are very ancient indeed. Many are songs of praise and thanksgiving, either for an individual (Psalm 30) or for the whole congregation (Psalm 145). Others are laments or complaints, either for the whole community (Psalm 44) or for an individual (Psalm 17). Some combine both prayer and praise (Psalm 12). As well as these four basic types there are also prayers for the king (Psalms 21, 72) or by the king (Psalms 18, 101), and meditations on the law (Psalms 19, 119) or the mystery of life (Psalms 49, 73).

The language of the psalms is uninhibited and full of emotion and their subjects range widely. In some, the psalmist calls for as much noise as possible (Psalm 150). In others he lets off steam to God, expressing anger, hurt and bewilderment (Psalms 13, 22). These prayers of God's ancient people can teach us how to deepen our own prayer life by being real before God and bringing him into every aspect of our life.

In this series of studies, most of the psalms are used as a devotional introduction to the reading. Some are studied in their own right for the light they throw on the subject.

Day 1. Psalm 148, Genesis 1:1 - 2:4a; Psalm 104

Creation

Psalm 148

All the different orders of creation praise the Lord: the angels in heaven, the sun moon and stars, the waters above the heavens (see Genesis 1:7), the oceans, weather, earth, animals and finally men and women. In this way the psalm reflects the way creation is classified in Genesis 1.

Genesis 1:1 - 2:4a

References with a letter included in the verse number divide the verse into two or more parts. The instruction to end at verse 4a means stopping half-way through the verse, wherever the natural break appears to be. In this case, the break coincides with a paragraph break in most editions of the Bible.

The opening chapter of the Bible addresses the mystery of creation. Its subject is the perennial human questions, How did anything come to be? Is the universe designed? Where do human beings fit in? What is the purpose of human life? Is there a God and, if so, what is God like and can we know God?

There are three accounts of the creation story to be found in the Old Testament. Two occur in the opening chapters of Genesis, one in the present passage and the other in the remainder of chapter 2. The oldest is found in allusions to the old Babylonian creation story, in which the god Marduk subdues the sea monster Tiamat and creates the world out of her dead body (eg. Psalm 89:9-11 where the Lord is the victor and the monster is called Rahab). The Hebrew word *te'hom* meaning "the deep" in 1:2 is an echo of the name, "Tiamat". In Psalm 104, the "waters" stand for the primeval chaos which was resistant to God's will. Also in Genesis 1:2, the word *ru'ach* means "wind", "breath" or "spirit". That is why some versions translate "the spirit of God," and others, "a mighty wind."

Genesis 1 is the latest of the three accounts and the result of deepest reflection. It should be read as a *theological* account, not as a scientific one. The truths it has to affirm are about the *relationship* between God and creation, rather than *how* the world was made.

These passages affirm:

1. The whole universe owes its existence to a free, creative act of God. God is 'transcendent': not a part of the world. He brings the world into being by the power of his word (Psalm 33:6). The seven days of creation and the theme of separation and fixing emphasise the God-given order of the world, seven being the number which stood for completeness. The whole account is one of order and structure. Each of the seven days is introduced by a resolution of God which results in a new stage of creation and ends with the statements, "God saw that it was good," and "There was evening and there was morning ...". Moreover, God creates by dividing, fixing and naming. Each element of creation has its designated place within the whole and its own particular part to play. We are used to thinking of the regularity of the world as being due to scientific laws, but to the Bible writers it was first and foremost a sign of the faithfulness and dependability of God.
2. Creation as God made it is *good*, (1:4,10,12,18,21,25,31). The psalms rejoice in the goodness of all God's works. Later in chapter 3 and following, we see how creation was spoiled and fell from God's original purpose.
3. Humankind is the pinnacle of creation. The whole account is like a liturgical procession in which men and women appear at the end as the most important figures. Human beings are made "in the image of God," (1:26-27), made on the pattern of God himself to be like him. The creation of 'male and female' hints that being created in God's image means that relationships are fundamental to human life and, moreover, that the relationship of male and female is intrinsic to humanity.
4. Men and women are given "dominion" over the rest of God's creation to subdue the earth to their own purposes and rule over everything God has made. Thus, the world is "our" world, entrusted by God to his human creation, ours to make or to mar.
5. Creation is finished. The creation story contradicts the philosophy behind evolution, in which everything is continually getting better. It presents creation as essentially good, but marred by human wrongdoing. This is perhaps the most fundamental difference between Christian belief and that of secular society.
6. At the end of creation, God rested and blessed the seventh day as the sabbath. Human beings are made to work, since it is by work that we fulfil God's command to subdue the earth, but also to rest and enjoy the sabbath.

Psalm 104

Psalm 104 celebrates the wisdom of God revealed in creation. He is not only the world's creator but constantly cares for all he has made and provides for all living things. (See also Jesus' words in Matthew 6:11,25-33). The world is a home in which every creature has its place. Even the fact that some animals eat others is celebrated as part of God's wisdom (v.21). And the sea monsters are now 'tamed': no longer principal actors in a great creation struggle, but simply part of God's good creation (v.26; Genesis 1:21). God is not remote from creation, but involved, and all living things depend on him for life (v.27-30).

Verses 6-13: God tames the waters and makes them serve him, fixing a boundary beyond which they cannot pass. At the Flood, the waters burst this boundary again (Genesis 7:11).

Verses 21-23: Wild animals seek their food from God, while people get theirs by their daily work. Yet God has provided for rest and relaxation as well as for work (v.14-15)

Day 2. Psalm 139; Genesis 2:4b-end; Psalm 8

Humankind in Creation

Psalm 139

A meditation leading to prayer. God knows each of us completely, from the cradle to the grave and in everything we do. Meditating on God's complete knowledge leads the psalmist to desire a world full of God's goodness, and thus to hatred of evil.

Genesis 2:4b-end

The second creation account is the story with which the early epic "J" began. While Genesis 1 is an elaborate theological hymn, this is a much simpler folk-tale. Stories like this make their point in a number of ways. They evoke the imagination and draw the reader in to think and feel from the point of view of the actors. Thus God's statement, "It is not good for the man to be alone," (2:18) creates a point of tension, making us wonder how God will resolve the problem. The best stories, like this one, are full of symbolic features which resonate with experience and whose meaning is greater than anyone can exactly pin down, features like the garden, rivers, trees, fruit and the serpent, which work by striking chords in the human unconscious. Here, the garden God planted is the source of life for the whole of the earth through the rivers which flow out of it (2:10-14). Rather than abstract philosophical reflection, stories give us evocative patterns as ways of thinking about experience. The story of the Garden of Eden presents an original state of communion with God in a paradise garden, from which human beings are forever shut out through our own fault.

The God of chapter 1 is transcendent and creates by his Word; in chapter 2 he forms the man with his hands like a potter moulding clay. Later he makes a woman and presents her to the man and in chapter 3 he walks in the garden in the cool of the day. This style of presenting God is known as *anthropomorphism* - picturing God as a human being, making God down to earth and accessible. It does not distort his character since men and women are made in the image of God.

Although the *styles* of the two creation accounts are different, their *teaching* about God, the world and mankind is complementary. Both chapters affirm that men and women are the pinnacle of creation. The world is made for them and they have a special relationship with God. In 1:26-27, this is indicated by the phrase,

"the image of God." In chapter 2, the man (in Hebrew: *adam*) is formed out of the ground (in Hebrew: *adamah*) indicating our relationship with the rest of creation, but in 2:7 God breathes into the man the breath of life. This verse introduces the idea of the "spiritual" nature of human beings, "breath" and "spirit" being the same Hebrew word, *ru'ach*.

The two creation stories do not tell us explicitly what it means to be created in God's image and to be enlivened by his breath but they do give us a number of clues, so that, several lines of interpretation seem well grounded:

1. Men and women are quite distinct from the animal kingdom. We have a relationship with God which they do not share. Men and women are not only stewards of creation, but also lords. They have dominion (1:26,28) reflected in the naming of the animals (2:19; Psalm 8:6-8).
2. In chapter 2, before the "Fall", work is seen as something good and purposeful, a part of our stewardship of creation. God gives the man a task: to work the garden and take care of it (2:15). We could say that the God-given task of humankind is to work with nature to help it realise its God-given potential.
3. Men and women are responsible for the world, but not its owner. Our freedom to do what we like has limits (2:17). God's command is first permissive: "You may eat of any tree ..." and then restrictive: "From that tree you may not eat." It is the breaking of these limits which spoils the original relationship between human beings and God and between us and the world.
4. Men and women are made to live in communion, both with God and with each other. In the New Testament, Jesus' "greatest commandment" is the command to love both God and neighbour (Mark 12:28-34). The image is not realised in people as individuals, but in relationships, of which the sexual relationship between man and woman is the deepest. 2:18-25 emphasises the complementarity of men and women, made as companions for each other.

Psalm 8

This psalm is a perfect expression of Hebrew/Christian creation belief. Far from being a cosmic accident, the world is the creation of a good and wise God. In the beauty and complexity of creation, human beings have a special place of authority, given by God.

Day 3. Psalm 53; Genesis 3

Rebellion in Paradise

Psalm 53

The psalmist meditates on the consequences of human godlessness. To turn away from God leads to corruption, a life of needless fear and finally shame and destruction.

Genesis 3

The story of the garden of Eden continues boldly to deal with the mystery of evil, the question of why, in this good and beautiful world, we experience so much pain, evil and suffering. It shows why the beautiful harmony God desires for human beings turns to tragedy.

The exchange between the woman and the serpent presents an anatomy of temptation. It includes distrust of authority (3:1,4); the mixture of truth and falsehood (3:4-5); the attractiveness of the forbidden fruit (3:6); the desire for autonomy over obedience (3:6); and at the back of it all the possibility of taking the place of God in our own lives (3:5). Most important, the woman is led to distrust God's goodness and care, to see our life under God as limited by arbitrary command rather than loving care, leading to a desire to transgress those limits.

At its heart, Adam's sin was *rebellion*, deliberate disobedience of a divine command (Romans 5:14,19). Adam and Eve represent the heart of us all, our mistrust of God and desire to be independent of him (Jeremiah 17:9, Romans 3:9-20).

The results of sin are briefly outlined but far-reaching:

1. Adam and Eve's discovery of their nakedness symbolises not only physical shame but the loss of deep relationship; men and women living from a centre in themselves can no longer know each other at the depth at which we were meant to. Perhaps this is the reason for the attraction of sex - the longing for that lost depth of relationship and affirmation (3:7).
2. For women, childbirth, which should be a wonderful participation in the creativity of God, becomes marred by pain. An element of power enters the relationships between the sexes. Women are to become emotionally

dependent on men, but this dependence men will lead to resentment, hostility and sexism (3:16).

3. Men, and all engaged in working for a living, are condemned to a life of frustration. Work, our essential vocation, is no longer joyful and fulfilling (2:15), but becomes frustrating toil (3:17-19, compare 4:12, 5:29). Instead of being sure of having enough to live on, so that work is simply creative and satisfying, now we must work to live. Economics, the science of scarcity, is born and with it insecurity and jealousy, poverty and the power of money.
4. Worst of all, men and women lose their close relationship with God. First they attempt to shift the blame for their disobedience on to each other and then on to him. Finally they are banished from the Garden (3:9-13,22-24). God is no longer a friend, the loving provider of all their needs, but an enemy who finds them out in sin and banishes them from all that is best.
5. Alienation from God results in death (3:19). Death is a restraining judgement, placing a limit on the spread of sin. The fact that men and women die prevents the evil they might do from getting out of control. As far as is known, there is no biological necessity for death. But the whole human race lives under the shadow of mortality, the knowledge that the achievements of this life will be temporary and fleeting, and sets up a longing for freedom, fulfilment and eternity (see Ecclesiastes 2:12-23 and several other passages in Ecclesiastes).
6. But the passage also hints that things will not always be this way. God is not defeated by human disobedience. 3:15 is traditionally taken as a prophesy of the coming of Christ, "the offspring of woman" who will crush the serpent's head.

Along with the judgement goes an element of mercy. As he provided for their life in paradise, God also provides for Adam and Eve's new life outside the garden, making for them garments of skins to make their shame tolerable. Yet, even in making this provision, something must die. Adam's sin is already beginning to affect the rest of creation.

In 3:22, as at 1:26, God speaks in the plural. This is an echo of the older picture of the Lord as chief of the gods (Psalm 82:1). "Elohim" is a plural word, literally meaning "gods". Later, the spirits surrounding God's throne were demoted to angelic beings.

Finally, although so much is revealed, the ultimate origin of evil remains a mystery. The tempter is one of the creatures which the Lord God has made (3:1) but why he should have set himself up in opposition to God is not explained. Was evil simply inevitable? Was it necessary that the man and woman should be tested by being given the possibility of rebellion? What is clear is that God remains in control. He can cope with evil and will in time provide the ultimate solution.

Day 4. Psalm 36; Genesis 4 - 6

God's Verdict on Human Wrongdoing

Psalm 36

The deceitfulness of wickedness contrasted with the faithfulness of God.

Genesis 4

Adam and Eve's disobedience led to the loss of their close relationship with God, banishment from the Garden of Eden and eventual death. These chapters tell of how their children continued to grow further from God and how their sinfulness increased.

Chapter 3 shows how one result of sin is the element of power in the relation of the sexes (3:16). Chapter 4 introduces the next cause of strife, envy between brothers. Because of the curse on work (3:17), Cain and Abel need God's blessing to succeed. The story does not tell us why Cain's offering was not acceptable, but compares it with Abel's, which was taken from the best of the flock (4:4-5). Sin is pictured as an enemy, a tendency which if not mastered will master us (4:7). Cain has a choice between doing well and envy and hatred, but chooses the latter.

In these chapters, each successive sin is followed first by punishment and then by mercy. Cain is driven from the ground but placed under God's protection (4:10-15). But sin continues to spread among his descendants. Cain builds a city and names it after his son, introducing political pride (4:17). Lamech takes two wives, emphasising male domination (4:19). Strife between brothers is multiplied to the point that Lamech kills a man simply for wounding him (4:23-24).

According to the "J" source, Yahweh was the god worshipped by all mankind at this time (4:26). "P", however, holds back the revelation of God's name until the time of Moses and then exclusively to Israel (Exodus 6:2-8) and at this time uses the name "Elohim", which means simply "God" (Genesis 5:1; 6:11-13)

Genesis 5

Genealogy is crucially important to Israel's self-understanding as the descendants of Abraham. Chapter 5 comes from the priestly source, which has a special interest in preserving Israel's genealogies. Here and in chapter 11 the descent of Abraham from Adam is carefully mapped out. The long lifespans are the recording of traditions handed down over centuries. The compiler sees a

progressive judgement in the way the human lifespans decreases. After the Flood, the lifespans become much shorter although the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob still live for a long time (11:10-end; 47:7-9).

Amongst the descendants of Adam are two who "walk with God," Enoch and Noah (5:22,24; 6:9). Their righteousness is described in terms of an especially close relationship with him.

Genesis 6

The descent into wrongdoing and rebellion leading to God's judgement is portrayed using two more ancient stories. The first is the strange story of the angel marriages (Genesis 6:1-4). The point here is that by marrying each other both the heavenly beings and humankind have broken all God-given bounds.

Evil has spread to such an extent that the Lord's only solution is to destroy the earth and begin again. Here the narrator emphasises God's grief and pain as he looks at the good and beautiful world he has made marred by human rebellion. The words of Genesis 6:5-8 record God's view of the human race and his response. This is part of the background against which the whole Bible needs to be read. The extent of sin is so great that we all merit final destruction. It is only through God's mercy that life on earth is allowed to continue.

Stories of a great flood were current in nearly every ancient civilisation, but the compilers of the Bible have included it here with a purpose, to demonstrate the judgement of God on human sin. Yet, just as in the story of Cain judgement is tempered with mercy, here again God has mercy by deciding to spare Noah and his family with whom to begin again. God rescues all humanity by means of a *covenant* with Noah (6:18), an agreement in which God promises blessing and protection in return for obedience. God thus binds himself to Noah as the representative of the human race which will continue after the Flood.

Day 5. Psalm 107; Genesis 7 - 9

The Covenant with Noah

Psalm 107

God has mercy on people who cry to him in all kinds of troubles.

Genesis 7:1 - 9:17

The discrepancy between the number of animals to be saved at different points in the story (6:20; 7:2-3) arises because the accounts of the Flood taken from "J" and "P" have been dovetailed together. Notice that the Flood resulted not only from heavy rain but from the resurgence of the great deep, which God had previously confined under the earth (7:11; 1:7,9). The Flood signals a partial return to original chaos; nevertheless the forces of chaos are firmly under God's control.

The story of the Flood emphasises an aspect of Christian belief that many find unpalatable: the whole world falls under God's judgement. Because of our sinfulness human beings have no rights before God: we deserve only obliteration. We only continue to exist on earth through God's decision to exercise forbearance (8:21-22). The saving of Noah shows that God's deepest will is to have mercy (see Exodus 33:19; Romans 9:15). And so the world is granted a stay of execution (see 2 Peter 2:4-9; 3:8-13).

After the Flood, God enters into a covenant with Noah (6:18; 9:8-11). A covenant is a binding agreement with conditions on each side:

1. The command given to men and women at the creation to be fruitful and multiply is repeated to Noah (Genesis 1:28; 9:1). But now their dominion over the animals is to include the right to eat them (9:3-5; compare 1:29).
2. Nevertheless, there is to be a reverence for animal life, since the animals are created by God and belong to God. Slaughter of an animal is to be a sacred occasion. The taboo on eating blood derives from the belief that the life of the animal is in the blood and its life is God's property (9:4-5a; Leviticus 17:10-14).
3. There is to be special reverence for human life based on the dignity of the image of God. 9:6 is the basis for the biblical argument in favour of capital punishment, as the only way to preserve the value of human life. God thus commits to human civil authority the right to punish. The state is an

instrument of God's common grace, whose purpose is to restrain the evil tendencies of human beings. This means that human societies are allowed the ultimate sanction in the pursuit of self-preservation, and justifies the use of force by the police and the military (see Romans 13:1-7).

4. Finally God promises that he will never again destroy the earth (8:21-22, 9:12-17). Instead he gives himself a greater task: to save humankind by bringing us back into free submission to his will. The story of how he is to do this begins with Abraham and culminates in Jesus Christ.

Thus God establishes an "interim order", under which we all now live. The covenant with Noah, and thus with all mankind, is a "preserving" covenant: God pledges himself to care for the world and for humanity whilst allowing for human sinfulness.

Genesis 9:18-end

Far from acting as a perfect hero, Noah goes wrong almost as soon as the Flood is over. 9:18-27 preserves the tradition of a curse on the Canaanite peoples, the peoples who were eventually dispossessed when Israel took over the Promised Land. But 15:16 makes it clear that it was not the curse but their sinfulness that was the reason for their dispossession.

Day 6. Psalm 145; Genesis 10 - 13

Abraham Chosen from the Nations

Psalm 145

God's chosen people celebrate his faithfulness, love and compassion.

Genesis 10

These verses record the spread of the nations: Japheth, the western, European peoples; Ham the eastern and southern peoples; and Shem the Semites from whom Israel is descended.

Genesis 11:1-9

Having recorded the descent of the various national groups from Noah, their common ancestor, the compiler now sets out to explain the reasons for hostility between the nations. The story of the Tower of Babel explains the division between nations as the result of God's judgement on political pride. In chapter 9, we saw that human governments have a God-given purpose. They are instruments of his common grace, whose task is to restrain human selfishness. This story gives the other side of the coin, by showing that the powers delegated to civil government are liable to become instruments of human pride. In the Bible, Babel or Babylon is a symbol of political pride in rebellion against God. In Revelation 18, the wicked city and oppressor of God's people meets her end as part of God's judgement on the whole world.

In the meantime, we live under imperfect, but divinely instituted government. Ideas of the brotherhood of humankind and dreams of human unity are an illusion; the reality is fear, hatred, suspicion and division. Real reconciliation only comes about through Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17-19).

Genesis 11:10 - 12:9

After the story of Cain and Abel and again after the Flood God pronounces both judgement and mercy. After the Tower of Babel there is only judgement. In place of mercy comes the choice of Abraham (known by his original name, Abram until chapter 17). At Babel the nations in rebellion against God are scattered. In Abraham, God's purpose is to bless all the nations through him (12:1-3). The inhabitants of Babel wanted to make a name for themselves (11:4); now God promises Abraham to make his name great (12:2). But for this promise to be

fulfilled, Abraham has to be obedient. In this way he points forward to Jesus, who was obedient to the point of death before receiving a 'name above all other names' (Philippians 2:6-11).

The genealogy of 11:10-30 links Abraham with Noah, charting the transition from the myths of world history to the history of God's chosen people. Israel is taken from among the nations, not special in any way except in being the object of God's choice (see Exodus 19:4-6; Deuteronomy 7:6-11). Right from the start it is clear that the choice of Abram was for the salvation of the whole world, not just for a privileged few.

Genesis 12:10 - 13:end

Running through the stories of Abraham is the theme of God's promise and Abraham's faith. Almost at once the ancestress, through whom God's promise of descendants is to be fulfilled, is placed in danger because of his fear. Then through the squabble with Lot, Abram has to give away the best part of the land. This time he trusts God by giving Lot the choice and God reaffirms his promise.