

## Part 1: An Overview of the Redemptive-Historical Story of the Old Testament

### A. Beginnings

#### 2. Primeval History

The first eleven chapters of Genesis deal with what is called primeval history. Here we have God's revelation of the beginnings of the world and humankind. It's a story that all of the biblical authors, as well as Jesus, himself, regarded as authentic and very important.

The main question that the opening chapters of Genesis address is "Where did this world and its populations of things and plants and animals and peoples come from?"

All the other religions of the ancient world believed their gods had something to do with it. But their gods were themselves part of the cosmos: animals, heavenly bodies, mythical creatures, or some variety of superhumans. These religions told stories of how the gods were born and how they quarreled; they alleged that the birth of the universe coincided with their battles, love affairs, and reproduction.

The Bible, however, makes a unique claim: "The world and all that is in it, is God's creation; it is his project." Gen 1:1 says, *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.* And v. 2 talks about the involvement of the Spirit of God. And Col. 1:16 tells us, speaking of Christ, *All things were created by him and for him.* So everything that exists came from God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

God alone stands distinct from and outside of the universe. He existed before it and he created it all. There is nothing which does not owe its existence to Him. He is the one in charge and he alone, has the authority and power to define the natures and roles of what he brings into existence. The heavens, the earth, including sea and dry land, and everything that populates them, both living and non-living creatures - All is a testimony to the power and authority of the Triune God. What's more, God Created Everything out of NOTHING.

What did the nothing look like before God created everything out of it?

It didn't look like anything. It was just nothing. For us, creativity is rearranging the stuff God has made; putting them together in different ways. For God, creation is making it all out of nothing. This necessarily takes us beyond the limits of scientific understanding, which can only explain, more or less, how the world works and not how it began.

God built order into his creation: "seasons and days and years" and living creatures that reproduced "according to their kinds." The order was not an accident; it was intentional, by design. And when he finished each stage of his work of Creation, God Saw That It Was GOOD. This goodness was specifically connected to Adam and Eve in Gen 2:25, *"The man and his wife were both naked and they felt no shame."* This speaks of much more than their ease with physical nakedness; this signifies that there were no barriers in their relationship with God or with each other; there was no hesitancy, no guilt, and no shame.

It may sound uncontroversial to say that creation is "good," but some of the most destructive false teaching in the history of the world has revolved around the idea of the creation not being good but evil. It's not so. This world and the things in it are not inherently evil. They only become evil if we people put them to bad use or if we begin to worship them rather than their maker.

This good original state becomes very important in the rest of the Bible as the condition to which mankind and all of creation longs to return. And, more than that, as the condition to which God was arranging for his creation to return.

The goodness of God's creation is displayed, moreover, in lawful order and in the created hierarchy of things. Not everything is equal or on the same level. Plants are food for animals, and both plants and animals are subject to the use and management of the crown of God's creation, who serve God by their stewardship.

The order of creation also comes through, although Gen 1 doesn't speak of it, in the orderly development of culture. The whole idea of government presupposes order. Lawfulness, government, and morality is order, while criminality, anarchy, and immorality is disorder. And today, when we witness the breakdown of order in so many sectors of our culture, it's precisely because so many have rejected the God of whom Genesis 1 testifies.

In fact, those silly pagan religions whom some may have thought we outgrew with the advent of modern and unsuperstitious civilization – they're coming back. Some today don't just idly talk about mother earth; they worship her. And Hinduism exports to the world its pagan ideas that a spark of the divine permeates all things. And so that perverse Hindu notion that a fly or a cow has just as much right to existence as a human being also finds proponents in civilized American society under the umbrella of the radical animal rights movement.

But the biblical truth is that God has given ruling authority to humankind, who, alone of all God's creatures, are created in the image of God. We, like God, have a personality: mind, will, emotions. God thinks, we think. God decides, we decide. God feels, we feel. We are also moral beings. We know right from wrong. When Adam and Eve sinned, they immediately felt shame. We are Spiritual beings too, created with the ability to relate to God in a unique way.

Now another truth about Creation: God finished the job. This doesn't mean there is no change in the universe, or that God has ceased his daily care and oversight, but that his creation is complete; the universe is not some vast unfinished symphony, not a work in progress. It is instead a finished work of creation that has been marred by the presence of sin. What this means is that there is no utopia toward which we are evolving but an original created relationship with God toward which we are being restored.

After giving us the account of the beginnings of our world, the primeval biblical story moves on to tell us the story of how sin and death entered God's good Creation. From the beginning God set up boundaries for Adam and Eve. In one breath God gave them a permission and a prohibition (Gen. 2:16-17): "*Eat from any tree in the garden (including the tree of life cf. v.9), but do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*"

Both from the context, and from other scripture references, we may understand that the tree of life in the garden "represented communion with God, the inexhaustible source of life." By eating from the Tree of Life, Adam and Eve would show that they agreed with the divine order of things, in which the Creator alone had the right to decide how things would be. They would show their understanding, furthermore, that they needed to live in constant dependence on him. Cf Blocher, 125

If, on the other hand, Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would be denying their complete and utter dependence on God. To do such a thing would show ingratitude to God and rebellion against Him – against his provision, and against being dependent on, and accountable to Him. And that would result in death and the the destruction of Paradise. Blocher, 133

But rebellion is precisely what the serpent tempted Eve to engage in. He said that she would not die and that God was trying to hide something from her. She could be just like God, the serpent continued, in the knowledge of good and evil and in the ability to live independently of God. Eve thought that sounded good and went to Adam with the possibility, and it sounded good to him too. And together they ate. Their disobedience was deliberate. And Paradise was lost, and with it, their freedom to live as the little-lower-than-angels creatures that God had created them to be.

You see, human freedom is always defined by boundaries. Adam and Eve's freedom and that of all mankind, is defined by the boundaries of dependence upon God. You might compare Adam and Eve's situation with fish in an aquarium. Perhaps you can imagine seeing the world from the perspective of a fish in a bowl. It looks at the much bigger world of your living room and thinks, "I want to be free to live out there." So, one day, it jumps out of the tank and of course falls on the floor, unable to move around in its new environment and unable to breathe. And if it is not put back in his watery home, it dies. A fish can only be free in water. And similarly, you and I can be free only as we live in a dependent relationship with God. Without that we die.

Adam and Eve's rebellion should have meant instant death or even uncreation – a reversion to the nothingness before the beginning of Creation. But, by God's grace it didn't. Life continued even though Paradise was lost. It was an act of grace that God searched out Adam and Eve, who were unsuccessfully trying to hide. He told them of the pain and distress they would experience from now on. But he also made a promise of better things for the future. God also had a message for the serpent (Ge 3:15): *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.* This was the first promise of God for One who would redeem people from sin and its effects – in effect, restoring his "very good" creation.

Immediately after the Fall, people began to offer sacrifices to the Lord. No doubt God had ordered these sacrifices for the purpose of keeping before humanity both the terrible reality of sin and the wonderful promise of future redemption.

Two of Adam's sons, Cain and Abel, brought their sacrifices to God. *Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil... But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock* (Gen 4:3-4). Next Scripture tells us that Abel's offering was accepted while Cain's was rejected.

Why the difference?

It's because when God looked at Cain he saw a person pretending to worship. He saw a person trying to build up credit with Him by giving him something besides himself. Cain's sacrifice was not from the heart, as he himself knew. For God told him, "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted; if you bring the kind of sacrifice that you know I want, you too will enjoy my favor."

I cannot emphasize this too strongly, for this is just the first of many times that the Bible makes this point. God doesn't give a hoot about the good things you do if they come from some other place than a heart that genuinely loves Him. You cannot fool God with acts of worship that are not real. Real worship comes only when you give God yourself, as Abel did. Heb 11:4 speaks of this very difference, calling Abel's sacrifice a gift of faith: "**By faith** Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man when God spoke well of his offerings."

Abel had learned from the sin of his parents: "You live by the grace of God, and you owe him everything you have, most of all yourself. Abel was what he was because he focused on the Creator God, and when he saw God he submitted to Him, laying his heart on the altar. I suppose that to any casual bystander, Cain would have appeared to be doing the same thing, but God knew that his heart was false. Cain apparently had not learned from the sin of his parents, as was further demonstrated by the murderous anger he showed against his brother Abel.

This murder gave rise to the biggest crisis after the Fall. How would God make his promise for a victorious offspring come true with the death of the good son? But God, who is never short of answers, gave an answer here too in the gift of another son for Adam and Eve: Seth.

But the war between good and evil continued. Cain's descendants proved to be as godless as their ancestor. Some were quite talented, but their spirit is captured in the boast of Cain's fifth generation descendent, Lamech (Ge 4:23-24): *I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times.* In contrast Seth became the head of a line who *called on the name of the Lord.*

However, through the years, wickedness and violence increased in the earth until, with the exception of Noah and his family, the Bible says that *The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the LORD said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth--men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air--for I am grieved that I have made them."* But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD (Gen 6:7-8).

Then follows the account of the flood – God's judgment on an evil world. It's a story of both judgment and salvation. As to judgment, it reaffirms these truths, seen in the earlier seasons of primeval history, and reiterated throughout the whole Bible:

1. God hates wickedness (i.e. rebellion against himself), and He does not take it lightly when his intentions are disregarded. And since He created the world and its inhabitants, he has the right to judge it for its rebellion.
2. God will not yield his will to the desires of those who rebel against him. People often change their minds, especially in the face of opposition. God never does, but always remains committed to his perfect plans and intentions.
3. God is able to have his way. What he created, he can just as easily uncreate. He who brought order from chaos, can just as easily turn order back into chaos.
4. However, God does not rush to judgment, but always provides opportunity for repentance. As grieved as God was by Noah's generation, he graciously postponed judgment for a time.
5. God means for this and every judgment of his to stand as a warning for future generations until the day of final judgment.

But the flood is also a story of salvation. In fact it teaches us a lot about the even fuller salvation that has come through Jesus Christ. Notice that

1. The saving from death of Noah and his family, along with the animals, was at God's initiative and by his grace. God came to Noah to instruct him how to escape the coming judgment.
2. Salvation always comes as God's answer to extreme need and in the midst of judgment. It's not even necessary in any other context.
3. Salvation is not just the snatching of individuals from destruction, but the re-establishment of certain people into something like the original community that God intended his image-bearers to be.
4. Another aspect of salvation, at least in its ultimate sense, is its enduring quality; it is the enjoyment of God's unending grace. After the flood, and while receiving Noah's thankful sacrifice, God promised to never again destroy all living creature as he had done in the flood.
5. Notice finally that the grace that God showed Noah was intended to be passed on to generations who followed. God repeated to Noah the mandate he had given long before to Adam and Eve (Gen 9:1): *Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.* Mankind got another chance to live in God's world the way God intended. Similarly, the salvation by which God has blessed you and me is also meant through us, to bless both brothers and sisters in Christ, and those who have yet to come to personally know the saving power of Christ.

After the flood it soon became clear that sinfulness was still in the human heart. One of Noah's sons dishonored his father and received a curse of God for it. And after several generations the descendants of Noah seemed to have largely forgotten the command of God to be his stewards throughout the whole earth and instead made plans to do precisely the opposite: to make a name for themselves *and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth* (Gen 11:4). I'm talking about the building of the Tower of Babel in defiance of God. They thought they could establish a worldwide empire that would be independent of God.

In fact, Gen 11 is very similar to Gen 3. In Eden, Adam and Eve had tried to construct their own reality without God; in the post-flood world the community erected a tower and a culture to similarly proclaim the independence of the human race. But it didn't work any better here than it had worked for Adam and Eve. God so hindered their efforts, that they gave up in frustration and were forced to obey the divine command to "fill the earth."

This story, then, serves as a constant reminder to us that life is never about us building our own kingdoms, but about participating in God's eternal kingdom.

That brings us to the end of the primeval era. God prevails in the end. And yet, it seems that God's reclamation of his sin-damaged world is kind of stalled. But God is just getting started as we'll see in the next installment of this course: The Patriarchs.