

Introduction: It All Begins with God

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

(Genesis 1:1)

*“To be ignorant of what happened before you were born is to remain a child always,”*¹ claimed the Roman orator Cicero. Perhaps that’s why Genesis is one of the most loved and hated books ever written. Genesis – the name is simply the Greek word for *“Origins”* – is the God-inspired history of the world from its inception, and right from the outset it was always controversial.

Jesus and the writers of the New Testament refer to Genesis and the other four books which make up the Pentateuch as *“The Book of Moses”*.² It contains facts which no human being could ever know, because Moses heard them from God personally during his eighty days and nights at the top of Mount Sinai.³ They were God’s way of turning a “childish” rabble of Hebrew

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¹ Marcus Tullius Cicero wrote this in his Orator ad M. Brutum in 46 BC.

² For example in Mark 12:26, Luke 24:27, 44 and John 1:45; 5:46. This is not to deny that later editors updated Moses’ geographical references (as in 14:14; 36:31; 47:11), or that the account of Moses’ death in the final chapter of Deuteronomy was written by someone else. It is simply to affirm the New Testament’s clear teaching that the *Pentateuch* – Greek for *Five-Volumed Book* – was written by Moses in the desert.

³ Moses spent forty days and nights on Mount Sinai before discovering the Golden Calf (Exodus 24:18) and then another forty days and nights immediately afterwards (Exodus 34:28).

ex-slaves into a mature and obedient nation he could use. They are still the way he chooses to mature his People today.

Imagine what the book of Genesis must have done for the Hebrews. They had been born into slavery in Egypt under the pompous propaganda of the insecure Pharaohs. They had been brought up on the culture and stories of Egypt, and at times had even been tempted to worship Egypt's gods themselves.⁴ They had been taught to address Pharaoh as "*My Lord, my God, my Sun, the Sun in the sky*",⁵ and that the history of the world was really Egypt's history. Then God gave them Genesis, which told a scandalously different story. It claimed that the world did not in fact revolve around Ra and the many other gods of Egypt. The universe began at the command of the only true God, Yahweh, the same God who had just delivered them from slavery. It urged them to distrust the lies they had heard from the mouths of their former slave-masters in Egypt, and to listen to God's story of how they got where they were and why it mattered.

Part One of Genesis consists of eleven chapters which describe the world's earliest millennia. It doesn't try to prove that God exists or even that he is the only true God. It simply begins with the four words "*In the beginning God...*", and then tells us that the universe all began with him. He spoke and the world came to be. He breathed and the human race came to life. He warned them to remember that it all began with him, and provided them with one tree with which to submit to that fact and one tree through which they could try to resist it. When they chose the wrong tree and fell under sin's judgment, God showed them that salvation all began with him too. Whether judgment at the Flood and at the building-site of Babel, or salvation in the ark and through the blood which he told them to shed at their altars, the message of Part One of Genesis is consistently the same: Everything begins with the true God, Yahweh.

⁴ Joshua 24:14 and Ezekiel 20:7-8.

⁵ Yapahu of Gezer repeatedly uses this sycophantic formula to address Pharaoh in one of the *Amarna Letters*, written shortly after the Exodus.

Part Two of Genesis gets more controversial still.⁶ When God chooses a people to reflect his glory to the rest of the world, he does not choose the superpower nation of Egypt, but an obscure and unimpressive Mesopotamian herdsman. From chapters 12 to 50, Abraham and his descendants sin, deceive and show themselves utterly unworthy of the God who has chosen them, yet this simply serves to reinforce the same message. God did not choose to turn the Hebrew family into his Holy Nation because they were worthy or qualified. He did so to demonstrate his grace and mercy towards weak people who do not deserve it. From the calling of Abraham to the arrival of the seventy Hebrew founding fathers in Egypt, their remarkable blessing began with God alone.

This made the book of Genesis very good news for those Hebrew refugees at Mount Sinai. They had just crossed the Red Sea and could smell the sweet air of freedom, but they needed to look back if they were ever to move forward. They were in spiritual no-man's-land, saved from the lies of Egypt but unsure of what was true, knowing that God had saved them but not altogether sure why. Genesis explained to them what their God was like and what was on his agenda for their lives and for the world. It was not merely the first of the books of Hebrew Scripture. It was the foundational book which helped turn them into a nation – strong and mature and ready for God's purposes.

This also makes the book of Genesis very good news for you and me today. Don't be put off by descriptions like the one in 13:10 that a patch of land was *"like the land of Egypt as you come to Zoar"*.⁷

Even though you probably do not know where Zoar was, let alone what it looked like, the book of Genesis is still very

⁶ It is possible to split Genesis into ten parts, each beginning with the Hebrew word *tōledōth* or *generations* (2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1; 37:2), but the simplest division is chapters 1–11 and 12–50.

⁷ Genesis 13:10 in the Modern King James Version.

much your story. Paul told a group of Galatian Christians fifteen centuries after Genesis was written that *“those who believe are the children of Abraham.”*⁸ The ancient history, the family trees and the Middle Eastern adventures were *“written down... for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come.”*⁹ God still saves people from their spiritual “Egypt”, still leads them through the “desert” of discipleship and still brings them into his “Promised Land” through the same book of Genesis. He uses it to teach us that the world began with him, that salvation begins with him, that our mission begins with him, and that our fruitfulness must begin with him too.

I have written this book to help you understand the timeless message of the book of Genesis. I want to unfold for you what Moses heard at Mount Sinai about God, about his purposes, about the universe and about yourself. Most of all, I want to help you to grow up into Christian maturity, because the story which began in Genesis has not yet reached its conclusion. I want to help you make a difference at your own stage in history by stepping out in the faith that it all begins with God.

⁸ Galatians 3:7.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 10:11.

Part One:

Primeval History

(Creation to c.2100 BC)

Creator God (1:1–31)

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.

(Genesis 1:2–3)

Every culture has its own creation story. The Hebrews had heard a lot of them. The Mesopotamians told them that their god Marduk killed the ocean-goddess Tiamat and created the universe from her severed remains.¹ The Egyptians told them that their god Atum created the world from a mixture of his own spit, snot and semen. These stories may sound strange and far-fetched to us, but ancient Middle Easterners believed them without question. No Egyptian ever dared to challenge his culture’s great creation story – except for the one who came down from Mount Sinai. Moses, the Hebrew baby who had been plucked from the River Nile and brought up as an Egyptian in Pharaoh’s royal family, begins the book of Genesis with a very different story.

The world was not created by Atum or Marduk, but by a different kind of God whose name is *Elōhīm*. This was not just another name for the sun-god of Egypt or the moon-god of Mesopotamia; that’s why Moses deliberately avoids using the words *sun* and *moon* altogether in this chapter.²

¹ This story is preserved in the *Enuma Elish*, which dates back to around 1800 BC.

² Moses refers to the sun and moon in v. 16 as “*the greater light*” and “*the lesser light*”. This euphemism is repeated nowhere else in the whole Bible, so Moses uses it here for this reason.

He is a self-sufficient, independent God, who hints that he is three-in-one and that he is creating the universe out of love, not out of loneliness.³ He uses a plural name, which can be translated gods as well as God, but takes singular verbs to make it clear which word translators should choose. He is One God, yet creates by his Word⁴ and through his Spirit, and he hints at the Trinity when he says “Let **us** make man in **our** image, in **our** likeness.”⁵ The word “God” occurs over thirty times in this short chapter to make it clear that the creation stories of the ancient world were mistaken. The universe began with the only true and living God.

Our culture has its own creation story which is believed with the same committed dogma as the stories of the ancient world. In our classrooms and on our television screens, Charles Darwin’s tale of evolution and natural selection is not just taught as theory but as fact. The heroes of our story are not Marduk or Atum, but chance and time, yet Moses insists that it all began with God. In fact, Professor Stephen Hawking, one of my former neighbours at Cambridge, argues that science actually points in the same direction: “*The odds against a universe like ours emerging out of something like the Big Bang are enormous. I think there are clearly religious implications... It would be very difficult to explain why the universe would have begun in just this way except as the act of a God who intended to create beings like us.*”⁶ Good science is the friend and not the foe of good theology.

Moses does not attack science itself. He endorses the goals of science when he tells us in 15:5 that God encouraged

³ Verses such as Isaiah 62:5 and Zephaniah 3:17 remind us that God created us because he loves us and rejoices over us, not because he lacks anything without us.

⁴ The New Testament explains in John 1:1–3, 10 that this *Word* was Jesus, the pre-incarnate Son of God.

⁵ Hebrew nouns can be *singular* (one), *dual* (two) or *plural* (three or more). The word *Elohim*, or *God*, is plural, as is *Adonai*, or *Lord*, which is used from Genesis 15:2 onwards. Other hints at the Trinity are in 3:22 and 11:7.

⁶ Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (1988).

Abraham to discover his character by examining his universe in more detail.⁷ What he would attack is science hijacked by secular humanism, which fixes and twists the evidence to pursue its own agenda. As the Harvard evolutionist Richard Lewontin admits:

We take the side of science in spite of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs... in spite of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our a priori adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is an absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.⁸

It is this blinkered fundamentalism which Moses says must die. The “Divine Foot” is well and truly in the door, because the universe began with God.

A wide spectrum of views is held by Christians today on how to interpret Moses’ words in this first chapter. My purpose is not to champion any party, but simply to make sure that you respond to Moses’ challenge as fully as you should. Our thinking can become as enslaved to our own culture as the Hebrews were to Egypt’s, so we need to take seriously what Moses wrote after eighty days with God on Mount Sinai.

He tells us that God needed no raw materials for his work of creation. God’s Word is so powerful that Moses simply repeats that “*God said*” and “*it was so.*” We even discover in verses 5 and

⁷ The Bible also issues a more general invitation to do so in Psalm 19:1-3.

⁸ Richard Lewontin, *The New York Review of Books*, 9th January 1997.

14 that he created time itself, and proceeded to create the whole world in just six days.⁹ He made the first human beings, not from animals, but from dust and the breath of his mouth, and Moses tells us this in Hebrew prose rather than poetry to encourage us to take his words literally. Jesus believed him when he taught on marriage from 1:27 and 2:24, that “*at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’*”.¹⁰ Paul also believed him when he quoted from 1:3, 2:7 and 2:24 as literal reasons for us to obey God’s Word today.¹¹ All this should make us feel very uneasy about our own culture’s cherished creation story. It sheds light into those places which Richard Lewontin would prefer to keep hidden.

How the world came about made all the difference to the group of Hebrew refugees who huddled together at Mount Sinai. If the world had truly begun with their God, then their lives had a purpose and they needed to follow him. They believed what Moses told them because they had just seen this God take on and defeat the so-called mighty gods of Egypt, but we have even more reason than them to believe that what Moses writes here is true. If this world merely evolved through chance and time, our lives are random and have no eternal purpose, but the fact that Jesus endorsed the words of this chapter and proved that he was right through his resurrection changes everything.¹²

The New Testament reminds us of this when it tells us that “*By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command.*”¹³ It accepts that every culture has its own creation story, but insists that God revealed the real one to Moses. It

⁹ Christians take different views over whether or not the “days” in Genesis are 24-hour periods of time. Since the Hebrew day ran from 6 p.m. to 6 p.m. and Moses tells us that “*there was evening and there was morning*”, I personally think that he expects us to take him literally.

¹⁰ Matthew 19:4–5; Mark 10:6–8.

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 4:6; 1 Corinthians 6:16; 15:45; Ephesians 5:31.

¹² Matthew 12:38–40; Acts 17:31. Psalm 24:1–2 reminds us that whoever began the world also owns the world.

¹³ Hebrews 11:3.

urges us to grasp where the universe is heading by believing this account of how the universe was started. It began with God, it is sustained by God and ultimately it will end with God too. Our culture's creation story must submit with all the others to the overarching fact that it all begins with God.