

PETE HUGHES

ALL
THINGS
NEW

JOINING GOD'S STORY
OF RE-CREATION

Foreword by Pete Greig

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OF RE-CREATION

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Chapter 1

GENESIS, SCIENCE AND THE ART OF MYTH-BUSTING

I was one of those annoying kids who constantly asked my mum, ‘Why?’

Why are we going shopping? Why do we eat three times a day? Why not four times? Why is my brother so annoying? Why do people speak different languages?

The questions never ended, exhausting for my mum. To her credit, she encouraged me to be inquisitive about everything. As a teenager, I put up a poster on my bedroom wall that said, ‘All you need to be a good philosopher is the faculty of wonder.’ I was full of wonder, hungry for understanding and dissatisfied with shallow answers. The first book I read as a teenager on the subject of philosophy was the fantastic and hugely popular book *Sophie’s World*. The author, Jostein Gaarder, writes:

What is the most important thing in life? If we ask someone living on the edge of starvation, the answer

is food. If we ask someone dying of cold, the answer is warmth. If we put the same question to someone who feels lonely and isolated, the answer will probably be the company of other people. But when these basic needs have been satisfied—will there be something that everybody needs? Philosophers think so. They believe that man cannot live by bread alone. Of course everyone needs food. And everyone needs love and care. But there is something else—apart from that—which everyone needs, and that is to figure out who we are and why we are here.³

These huge questions, and the pursuit of answers, energised me. I eventually went on to study maths and philosophy at university, and I wrestled to integrate my Christian faith with the weighty questions philosophers had been asking through the ages.

These fundamental questions involve our worldview, meaning that how we answer such questions shapes how we understand the world around us. We all have a worldview, a lens through which we interpret the world around us. Our worldview is shaped by our upbringing, education, painful experiences, dreams for the future and many other factors. All of these are fused together to form a framework that helps us understand and make sense of our surroundings. Sociologists tell us that our worldview is essentially an attempt to answer four core questions: Where am I? Who am I? What's wrong with the world? What's the remedy?⁴

The Bible opens up with an epic story addressing all of these questions.

The World(view) of Eden

‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth ...’
(Gen. 1:1).

The story that follows is central to our understanding of the whole narrative of Scripture. It is the story that introduces us to the key characters, establishes the key plotlines and sets the trajectory for what’s to come. It’s also the story that creates the worldview to help us make sense of what’s happening in the unfolding drama. It would be impossible to exaggerate the importance of this text to our understanding of Scripture, which is why it is so tragic that this story is so often ignored or completely misunderstood.

Here’s the problem: when we start reading Genesis 1-3, we bring our own worldviews to the text. Our interpretations of the text often reveal more about our existing worldviews than they do about the worldview of Scripture. This is inevitable and means that we need to read these ancient texts with both self-awareness and humility.

So how do we read the Genesis creation account to get to the heart of what the initial writer was saying about God, humanity and the world? How do we take off the cultural lens through which we currently see and make sense of everything around us?

To do this we need to lay some foundations and do some myth-busting.

Text or Pretext?

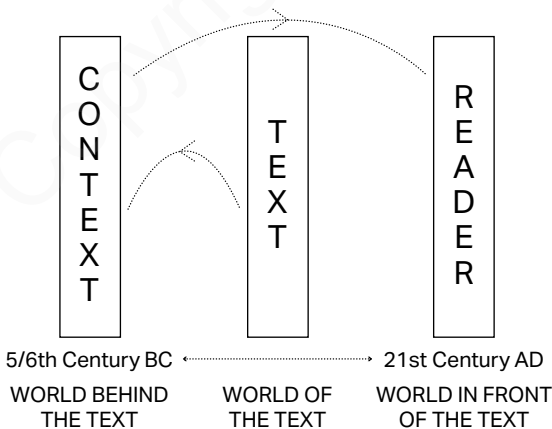
It has been said that a ‘text without a context is just a pretext.’⁵ Anyone can rip a part of Scripture out of context and use that Scripture to

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defend or justify a particular position. Parts of the church, in their darker moments in history, have used the Bible to defend and justify slavery, the Crusades, apartheid and other forms of oppression and discrimination. How? Leaders and communicators took a text out of context and used it to support their agendas.

To avoid this, Terence Fretheim advocates what he calls a ‘Three Worlds Approach’ to reading Scripture. He argues that when we read Scripture, three worlds are colliding: the world of the text, the world behind the text and the world in front of the text.⁶

The task of interpretation is to read the text, and before applying it to our culture (the world in front of the text), we need to delve into the world behind the text to better understand the context the writer was speaking into. Once we have a better grasp of that world, we are more likely to answer the question of what the author was trying to say to his intended audience. We will then be equipped to do the work of translation in figuring what the author might want to say to us, his unintended audience.



The text is what connects readers in the twenty-first century with, for example, the author of Genesis 1 writing from perhaps the fifth century BC from Babylonian captivity. None of this threatens our belief that all Scripture is God-breathed and inspired by him. But it does highlight that by speaking through certain people in certain times from certain contexts, a work of interpretation is necessary for us to hear the timeless words of God.

How does this help when it comes to reading the Genesis creation account? The answer is that this approach encourages us to read the Bible ‘literately’ not just ‘literally.’ Reading the Bible literately means recognising that Genesis 1-3 is not a scientific account. It belongs to an entirely different genre of literature.

The Elephant in the Room: Genesis as ‘Lousy Science’

You’ve probably heard the argument of the new atheists: ‘the biblical account of creation has no rational basis, it can’t be explained on scientific grounds and hence must be dismissed. For progress to be made, we must liberate ourselves from the old way of thinking that keeps us in the dark.’ The problem is that throwing out the bathwater (treating Genesis 1-3 as a scientific account of creation) inevitably leads to throwing out the baby (all of the truths contained within this creation account).

To dismiss Genesis 1-3 as lousy science is to miss the very heartbeat of these creation accounts. Genesis 1-3 is not science. It’s relatively disinterested in the question of *how*, being far more concerned with *why* God created the earth. To impose the genre of science upon an

ancient text is something any historian would describe as an elementary error. Though Richard Dawkins, for example, acknowledges that not all Christians are creationists, holding to a literal understanding of the Genesis creation account, he proceeds to state: ‘Of course irritated theologians will protest that we don’t take the book of Genesis literally anymore. But that is my whole point! We pick and choose which bits of scripture to believe, which bits to write off as symbols or allegories. Such picking and choosing is a matter of personal decision...’⁷

However, faithful reading of any historic document, let alone Scripture, has nothing to do with ‘picking and choosing’ but about reading that document contextually, according to its genre. Genesis 1-3 belongs to the genre of mythology, so to appreciate the purpose of the text, we need to understand this genre.

Mythology and Ancient Trash-Talking

The story of Genesis 1 was written either in or under the influence of Babylonian exile in the sixth or fifth centuries BC. This means it was written hundreds and hundreds of years before the Enlightenment and long before ‘scientific literature’ as we know it today. In fact, it was written before the genre of philosophy rose to prominence with the Greeks. So before scientific ways of knowing and before philosophical discourse, the ancients told stories about the world as they knew it, and they called these stories ‘myths.’

The term *myth* is often used these days to refer to a fable or false story, but academic use of the term generally does not pass judgement on truth or falsehood. To ask if Genesis 1-3 is true, or if Adam and Eve really existed, is to impose Enlightenment categories on a premodern

text. That is not to say Adam and Eve didn't exist, only that Genesis 1-3 is not addressing such a question. In the study of mythology, a myth is a sacred narrative explaining how the world and humankind came to be in their present form. Myths are 'true,' not in the way that scientific data is true, but in that these stories answer the big questions about the nature of God, humanity and the world around us. So how do we access these 'truths' contained in the Genesis story?

One way to dig for these truths is to compare the Hebrew creation myth with other ancient Near Eastern creation stories—for example, the Babylonian myth of Enuma Elish, the Canaanite myth of Baal or the numerous Egyptian creation accounts. The fact that so many of these stories significantly overlap terrifies many Christians. Questions and doubts begin to emerge: Is our story borrowed? If so, does that undermine its authenticity? How do we now interpret the story?

These are all important questions, but they don't threaten the integrity or authenticity of Genesis 1. The strong similarities between these creation accounts make sense when you consider that each of the myths was attempting to explain the cosmos as they commonly experienced it. The structure and order of creation is pretty much consistent in each account: the separation between light and darkness, day and night, the heavens above and the earth below, the land and the sea, humanity and the animal kingdom.

The strong similarities also make sense when you consider the long time the people of Israel spent in Egypt and the fact that Genesis 1 was written either in or under the influence of Babylonian exile. The people of Israel had spent centuries immersed in these other creation stories elevating Marduk, Baal and other such deities. No doubt these myths had been imposed upon the Jewish people: they knew them thoroughly.

Genesis 1 therefore borrows key elements of these creation stories from the surrounding cultures, and then twists them in order to differentiate the Hebrew God from the competition. It is subversive literature at its best, a form of ancient trash-talking if you like. The writer confronts and challenges Mesopotamian theology (whether Babylonian or Egyptian) and provides an account of creation that points to the God of Israel, rather than any of the Mesopotamian gods, as the supreme, unique and sovereign deity. Genesis trumps all the other stories. It puts those stories, and the deities they point to, firmly in their place as subservient to the Hebrew account and the one true God it showcases.

Digging for Gold: The Explosive ‘Truths’ of Genesis 1

What are the truths contained in the Hebrew creation account? If the similarities are to be expected, the explosive truths about the character of God and the nature of humanity are most likely to be found in how it stands apart from the alternatives on offer. Let me outline three major differences:

Firstly, Israel’s God has no myth of origin, and he transcends all cosmic matter. He was and is and will always be. This strongly contrasts the polytheistic creation accounts throughout the ancient Near East, where most gods have a story of origin and fail to transcend nature. Reading or hearing the creation accounts side by side, one would swiftly conclude that Israel’s God is uncreated, unrivalled and supreme. He has no match.

Secondly, the means of creation are quite different. Most ancient Near Eastern creation stories involve warfare and violence. Two

of the gods engage in battle, with the conquering god using the defeated victim as the raw materials for creation. Compare that with the Hebrew account where there is a complete absence of bloodshed. Instead, Israel's God creates through divine speech. He's that powerful. His breath has the power to form planets. He says 'Let there be light' (Gen. 1:3), and there is light. Our worldviews today mean we miss the shock and awe that Genesis 1 would have created: a creation story without violence, a deity creating through speech.

Last is the great difference in the descriptions of how and why humanity came to be. In the Enuma Elish and numerous other ancient myths, humanity is made from the blood of the defeated gods and created to be the servants of the gods, but in the Genesis account God created man in his own 'image and likeness' (Gen. 1:26). And rather than making him a slave to the gods, God gave him dominion over creation.

Reading these ancient myths begins to make sense of why the Greeks and Romans spent so much time appeasing the deities, living in genuine fear and terror as to what they might do and how they might act. However, this unparalleled Hebrew story features a god who created the world out of the overflow of love, and then created humanity to be his friend, to share in his rule and to walk and talk together in a garden of delight. It's a story so beautiful, so profound, that rather than trying to make it fit our worldview, we need to allow it to create a whole new worldview.

Let's explore then this new world and, in particular, the climactic moment of the creation story: God creating humanity in his image and likeness.