

Exploring the Genesis Creation Narratives

Reflection on the Texts

Almost everyone in western culture is aware of the creation narrative of Genesis One, at least in outline, but few are equally aware of the second origins narrative of Genesis Two. These two narratives are significantly different in content, in literary structure and in meaning. Individually they are each inspiring pieces of literature, but together the tension between their different themes and styles gives us a balanced picture of God, of creation and of our place in that relationship.

The first creation narrative is a highly structured text. Formed around the repeated refrains of “God said, ... and it was so,... evening and morning, the first day” it describes the origins of all creation in terms of a transcendent creator God (referred to simply as God) who speaks creation and order into being. In this narrative God is the central character who, step by step, brings order to creation. This is done first by separating the implied chaos to bring the three habitations of sky, seas and land into being and then by populating each of those habitations with heavenly lights, fish and animals respectively. The narrative builds steadily towards a climax as successive parts of creation are described as “good” and eventually humanity as “very good” and “in his image”. The ordered, rhythmic, repetitive, structure of the text underlines its message of God bringing order to his creation – especially when read aloud. In this creation account humanity is the final pinnacle of creation and male and female are created together, distinct but equal. God is the sole actor in this narrative - standing apart from his creation and speaking the words that become true. He speaks to his creation, and in particular to humankind, but to bless them - there is little or no sense of creation interacting with God or any part of creation partnering with God. This is a majestic account of an awesome but somewhat distant all powerful creator God, transcendent but not immanent.

By contrast the second creation narrative pictures God as though he were a human, forming creation with his hands, breathing his life into Adam, and walking in the garden. This narrative is more flowing, less formally structured, and here Adam is created early in the story and becomes a character in his own right, interacting with God (here called

LORD God or YHWH God) and participating with God in bringing order to creation by naming the animals. The climax of this story is the creation of a satisfactory companion for Adam – the woman created from his side, similar and complementary. This account shows an immanent God, intimately involved in and with his creation. If the Genesis One account is like a soaring gothic cathedral pointing to the glory of God, this account is an encounter with the personal God during a walk in the woods.

The first account is centred on showing God as the creator of everything and creation as good, and ordered. The account has purpose, a sense that all is planned in advance and everything has its proper place and that humanity is the centrepiece of that creation, created in God's image, blessed, and given the task of dominion or stewardship over the rest of creation. Male and female are created together and both are declared to be in the image of God - no scope is given for seeing one as less than the other, and they are given creation both to use and care for.

The second account is focused on relationships. Adam, the man, is created first and almost half the text is devoted to the search for a suitable companion. The text speaks primarily about relationships; the relationship between humanity and the rest of creation symbolised in the animals and Adam's naming of them, the relationship between man and woman created complementary to each other, and the relationship between God and humanity shown as the story progresses. The text makes clear the importance of right relationships and so sets the scene to describe what will happen when those relationships start to break down in the next chapter.

Genesis Two in Detail

The two creation accounts in Genesis are linked by verse 2:4

“These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens,...(NRSV)

When the structure “These are the generations of” occur elsewhere in Genesis it introduce a new section rather than acting as a conclusion and the chiasmic structure of

this verse points towards it being treated as a single whole¹ introducing the following account (Genesis 2/3) and by extension the rest of Genesis and the Pentateuch. The word *generations* implies begetting, story, and results²; the account that is to follow is the result or story that follows from the creation of heavens and the earth (i.e. all the cosmos) that has already happened.

The structure of this narrative cannot be fully considered apart from Genesis Three, with which it forms a whole as the as the Garden of Eden story. Within that whole Genesis 2:5-25 forms the first two parts of a seven part chiasmic structure.³

The opening verses of the narrative describe an uncompleted creation. Land and water are available, but no plant or food is growing for there is neither rain to water nor man to work the ground. The implication is that creation is incomplete without humanity to form and use it.

Word plays form a significant aspect of the style of the Yahwist, the author of this text. The most important in this narrative is in the name of Adam, which is a generic word for humanity but also a word-play on the way Adam is formed from the dust of the ground to which he will return.⁴ In this way the Yahwist acknowledges the fragility and limitations of our situation.⁵ God forms Adam from the earth as a potter crafts a pot, and breathes

¹ Gordon J. Wenham, "Genesis 1-15" vol. 1 of *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. David A .Hubbard and Glen W Barker (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987), 55-56.

² R Laird Harris, Gleason Archer and Bruce K Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1980, electronic edition), entry for toledot.

³ Andrew Reid, *Genesis. Salvation Begins.* (Sydney: Aquila Press, 2007), 28.

⁴ J.J. Scullion, *Genesis. An Introduction for Students, Teachers and Preachers*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 35.

⁵ Laurie Woods, "It is not Good to be Alone: A Literary Reading of Genesis 2," *Journal of Religious Education* 55, no. 2 (2007): 28

into him the breath that symbolises and defines life for the author⁶. This breath of life differentiates man from the animals that are to be created in an otherwise similar way.

While there is little evidence that Genesis Two is written in direct response to other ancient Near Eastern texts as is suggested for Genesis One, nevertheless it does share similarities to some texts of surrounding people, in particular to the aspects of the Sumerian flood story, the Epic of Gilgamesh⁷ and Atrahasis.⁸ That the Yahwist has borrowed literary and mythical motifs from one or more surrounding cultures seems indisputable, but the story he has crafted is independent of, not primarily a response to or an elaboration on, those sources.

While there is wide consensus that these two narratives have their origins in separate source documents a variety of views exist about the dates of authorship, how and when those texts came together, and even in what order the two accounts were originally compiled⁹. The Genesis Two account comes from the J tradition¹⁰ and the consensus has been that this is a tenth-century work resting on a possibly older oral tradition.¹¹

If mythology is understood as “a means of conveying certain transcendent truths which are almost inexpressible within the factual confines of a "realistic" novel”, as Tolkien

⁶ Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament. An Introduction.* (New York, NY: Paulist, 1984), 118-119

⁷ Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament. A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 16

⁸ Gordon J. Wenham, “Genesis 1-15” vol. 1 of *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glen W Barker (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987), xxxix-xli

⁹ Gordon J. Wenham, “Genesis 1-15” vol. 1 of *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glen W Barker (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987), xxxiv.

¹⁰ Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament. An Introduction.* (New York, NY: Paulist, 1984), 118

¹¹ Gordon J. Wenham, “Genesis 1-15” vol. 1 of *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glen W Barker (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987), xlii.

suggested,¹² then there can be little doubt that Genesis Two is myth. The generic name for Adam, the paradise in an unfindable location¹³, the similarities with the myths of surrounding cultures, all point away from this being history in any factual sense. However the description of the human condition, the portrayal of ideals of life in a garden, of pleasurable work and of right relationships make this an inspiring piece of literature describing truths that can only be addressed adequately in narrative form.

Beliefs and Meanings

The two Genesis accounts together speak to many of the questions most important to their originally authors and audiences. Genesis One answers questions about the nature of God, is creation good or bad, what is man's place in creation and how does work and rest fit into that picture?

Genesis Two overlaps with some of this, but also addresses questions about human relationships and marriage. Both speak of the goodness of the created order and that humanity is created to enjoy that created order as well as to contribute to it in a balance of joyful work and appropriate rest. In contrast to the stories of many surrounding cultures, Genesis speaks of God working on behalf of humanity rather than humanity being created to do the slave work of God. At the heart of Genesis Two is the subject of relationships; God notes that it is not good for man to be alone. Adam is offered a succession of possible companions which he names but finds inadequate until God finally creates woman from his side and Adam recognises her as his ideal companion and kin. The Yahwist recognises that we cannot be fulfilled individually but our humanity can only be properly realised in relationship with other people. This is, perhaps, the most important message Genesis has for the culture of the western world with its emphasis on

¹² J.R.R. Tolkien's *Take on the Truth*. Interview with Author Joseph Peace on "Lord of the Rings". Innovative Media Inc., 2001. Accessed 6 April 2009. Available from <http://www.zenit.org/english/>.

¹³ Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament. A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 12.

the individual, in contrast to the African thinking explored in the Ubuntu theology of Archbishop Desmond Tutu that maintains “a person is a person through other persons” and “I am human because I belong. I participate. I share”.¹⁴

Genesis Two also has much to say about the ideal of marriage. It sets marriage at the heart of God’s initial creation and Adam, on seeing the woman names her with a name derived (at least in the story) from his own name¹⁵. Adam declares her to be “bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh”, a phrase used elsewhere in Genesis for what we would call “blood relationships”¹⁶. The implication here is that marriage is intended to be as permanent and unassailable as kinship. Both Genesis One and Genesis Two recognise the equality in nature of male and female, and yet also recognise a distinction between them. In naming the woman the man takes a particular role in the relationship. Balancing those two ideas, maintaining the tension between equality in nature and distinction in role without reading our own cultural assumptions about what those roles are back into the text appears to have always been a challenge for those taking the Genesis accounts seriously as it still is today. Matthew Henry captured something of the spirit of Genesis with his famous quote:

The woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved.¹⁷

¹⁴ Desmond Tutu, *God has a Dream. A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (London: Random House, 2004), 25-27

¹⁵ J.J. Scullion, *Genesis. An Introduction for Students, Teachers and Preachers*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 37.

¹⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, “Genesis 1-15” vol. 1 of *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glen W Barker (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987), 70.

¹⁷ Matthew Henry *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (e-Sword electronic edition, 2002), Gen 2:22.

Implications for Teaching

Many of the considerations in the presentation of biblical texts in a teaching context would be similar to the considerations given to any other text. While the bible holds a particular and special status and authority within the church it is, nevertheless, a diverse collection of texts in a diverse selection of genres and styles and to fail to respect that is to fail to do justice to the text.

The two creation narratives need, therefore, to be presented as complementary and contrasting narratives about the fundamental truths of God, creation and our natures. Students need to be introduced to the idea of reading them as stories and that stories, even stories of the same event, are written for a purpose and that purpose influences the way the story is told.¹⁸ Reflection on other instances where stories are explicitly told for a reason (advertising, political spin, the stories students tell of each other) and some examples of very different reports (for example in a newspaper) of the same event told from different perspectives or for different effect would be helpful for this. Texts that are designed for reading aloud could be compared to texts designed for quiet individual reflection and this comparison brought to bear on the differences between the Genesis One and Two narratives.

Students also need to be given opportunities to explore how other examples of fictional and non-fictional stories contain and are used to teach truths. Students could be asked to consider what truths or otherwise lie beneath the surface of a recent episode of their favourite fictional television series and what truths and perspectives motivate the telling of the Gallipoli story each year.

The bible is primarily narrative in nature, and even those parts of the bible that are not explicitly narrative have a considerable amount of implied narrative and sit within the bible's overarching meta-narrative. Biblical texts should not, therefore, be seen as sources of propositional statements to be extracted and rearranged in a more useful form, but as parts of the story of God's work in creation. As a church we are called to

¹⁸ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (London: SPCK, 1992), 84-85.

continue that story, living in continuity with what has gone before, respecting the previous acts and living in character with them without simply repeating them, and taking the story onwards with one eye on the glimpses of the final scene given in such passages as 1 Corinthians 15, the final chapters of Revelations and parts of Isaiah.¹⁹

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¹⁹ N. T. Wright, "How Can the Bible Be Authoritative". (Available from http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Bible_Authoritative.htm), accessed 11 April 2009

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