

E 100 Block 1.1. Genesis 1 to 11 Overview

Introduction to your readings

The first block of five readings are selections from Genesis 1 to 11 -- The Creation, Adam and Eve, Noah's Flood, the Tower of Babel.

So much in these opening chapters difficult but Let's begin with this --

"in fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.

From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
a pair of starcrossed lovers take their life,
whose misadventured piteous overthrows
doth with their death bury their parents' strife."

Part of the prologue to...? -- Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet.

Prologue -- something which sets the scene for what comes after --

Chapters 1 to 11 of Genesis are best understood as a prologue to the rest of the Bible. They set the scene, the rationale for everything else.

The chapters describe the problem of mankind.

The rest of the Bible describes God's plan to solve that problem.

Interpretation -- Genesis 1 and 2.

But how do we understand these chapters? If we accept that we do get to recognisable history when we reach the stories of Abraham in chapter 12, then what are these chapters? Are they history or prehistoric parable?

Let's take Genesis 1 and 2. The two stories of creation.

This I believe is scientific truth. (Pause)

but, but it is not our scientific truth. It is cosmology -- a scientific explanation of how the Cosmos came to be.

But it is not 21st century cosmology.

One of the rules when reading historical documents is that you should not impose modern ideas on them -- that would be abuse of the documents.

For example -- Even Enid Blyton children's stories -- written in the 1940s -- seemed to 21st century readers to contain discrimination and racism.

But within the culture of their time this wasn't obvious. Our sensitivities

have changed. The same with a Victorian novel -- you read it as the first readers would have -- get into their culture their mindset.

So with the Bible -- to understand an ancient document such as this -- the first question is always "what did this passage mean to its original hearers or readers"?

Only when we have answered this question can we find a meaning for our era.

For example in the New Testament Paul writes about Christians and the issue of meat offered to idols. We have to understand what the problem was there at that time before we can see any possible relevance for ourselves. (Also Paul and women)

Back to Genesis 1 and 2. Thirty Three centuries ago their understanding of the creation of the Cosmos and its structure was very different to ours. But this was their science.

For example Genesis speaks about there being a sea of water held up above the sky. Well, it's pretty obvious that that must be the case because that water keeps dropping on us!!

God spoke to the people according to where they were at.

Genesis 1 and 2 is where science was at 33 centuries ago.

Because science is always changing.

Isaac Newton's scientific explanations seemed to be accurate as a description of the world's workings until Einstein came along. And maybe in 3000 years time people will look back and say " how could the people in the 21st century really believe that everything in the universe came from nothing via one big explosion?"

So, the point I'm making is this - It is unwise to try and impose 20th century scientific ideas on the biblical account.

Many Christians do it.

-- the "creation scientists" as they are called try and explain a literal seven days of creation, (or eras), geography changed at the flood etc --

Others try and make it fit evolutionary theory saying that the order in Genesis 1 approximates to the order in the theory of evolution. Plants fish animals man. Plausible but NO, NO, NO.

You cannot put our scientific ideas onto this text.

Now, at the moment we do understand our origins in terms of evolutionary theory. This is not a bad theory for the present. It makes sense of many of our observations. It's not perfect and has quite a few flaws - the missing links; the fossil record -- doesn't support; It has had to be amended with revision clauses to get it out of trouble more than once e.g. the existence of beneficial mutations.

But it's good enough for now, and if Genesis was being written now, no doubt God would have used it as explanation.

So take Genesis 1 & 2 as God revealing himself at the level of understanding of the people at the time. The way we avoid much pointless debate.

Interpretation -- The Flood and The Tower

Then as we move forward from there are we moving forward more into history? The flood? There is much evidence of a localised flood -- but the Bible speaks of a worldwide one.

By Chapter 11 we can recognise in the Tower of Babel those ancient near East buildings the ziggurats which can still be found in Iraq.

Ultimately whether we decide this is history or parable -- does it matter how we classify these texts?

There will be times when the classification will be crucial -- if the life and resurrection of Jesus is not history, then our faith is futile.

In the case of Genesis 1 to 11, I think it's less crucial. Because regardless of how we classify the narrative, it's the same points that keep jumping out at us.

Now on Sundays we haven't the time to go into details -- that's what we shall be looking at in the midweek groups.

But here are some of the issues which you may find are raised by these passages --

What is God like? (let us); human origin - do we differ from animals or we just refined apes, or dolphins as the Greeks thought ; Human nature - What does it mean to be made in God's image - are we naturally good or bad?; the seventh Day and sabbath rest; our relationship with the environment; the man and woman relationship ; the institution of marriage. Temptation ; death ; Capital punishment. Vegetarianism ;work and employment.; (had to stop there !!)

Lot more than just funny old stories !!

But let's close with the big picture of these chapters -- what is the prologue saying

1 A good world (Genesis 1,2)

We live in a personal universe with a personal God there is a purpose to our lives. God creates a good world and makes humans who bear his image, are to live in relationship with him and are to be his representatives on the earth.

2 A broken world (Genesis 3)

The first humans' desire for independence from God and their act of rebellion leads to all humanity being alienated from God ... and the disruption of the created order. >> spread of evil - Cain kills Abel

Despite this we have glimpses of hope for the future in the promise to Adam and Eve of ultimate victory over evil (Genesis 3:15b) the seed of the woman will redeem fallen man... so the messianic line begins.

and in the story of Noah - who is saved through God's gracious initiative -- and with whom God makes his covenant (Genesis 8:20-9:17).

Even even so the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) gives us further evidence of human pride, and rebellion -- so it seems as if man has not learnt anything.

But God is ultimately in control, and he doesn't give up and the lesson is going to take a little longer..... the whole of the Bible !!