

Views from the Pews: Asking the right questions about Genesis One

Faced with new information, we all search for an explanation that fits with what we already believe, whether or not our idea is what the author intended. Misinterpretation of the written word is especially easy. Turns out, we have all been doing exactly that with our reading of Genesis, for at least the last 400 years.

We live in a materialist culture, and the materialist assumptions of how the universe works (the subject of modern cosmology) colours our thinking in ways completely unknown to the authors(s) of Genesis. We leap to the conclusion that Genesis 1 is describing the origin of the material universe, because we can't see how else it could be read. But the real primary concern of Genesis was quite different.

The ancient cosmology common to all cultures of 3000 years ago saw the universe as created by multiple deities for their own pleasures, and the human population as living in slavery and fear of them. Contrary to that, Genesis One is a masterly statement of the Hebrew belief in a world created by one, all-powerful and loving God, specifically for the benefit of human creatures capable of enjoying and caring for it. It insists that the sun, moon and stars were creatures, not gods, with specific functions designed to serve humanity. Genesis saw no need to describe the material origins of the earth, because everything was simply assumed to have been made by God. The questions we ask of the Genesis text (like, how could there be light on Day 1 when the sun didn't appear until Day 4?) would have been pointless and incomprehensible to those for whom it was written.

If we understand Genesis as a powerful statement of the Hebrews' rejection of that lost world of ancient, pagan cosmology, and step out of our world into theirs, we discover a liberating experience. If Genesis One is not and never was intended to explain the material origins of the universe, all the usual arguments about science versus six day creation disappear. Meanwhile, science confirms Hebrew ideas of God's continuing upholding of creation. Physicists describe a set of fundamental forces that determine how everyday chemical reactions work, and how gravity continually restrains the relentless expansion of the universe. The strengths of these forces were set at the beginning of time, and life on earth is possible only because their ceaseless actions are exactly as they are. We believe that God's continuing action maintains them.

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