



THE WAIKATO CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF ST PETER
Te whare karakia matua o Pita Tapu ki Waikato

Views from the Pews: What was God doing at the beginning of time?

Cosmologists tell us that time and space both began together at one single instant, 14 billion years ago, during the catastrophic explosion known as the Big Bang. The entire universe has continued to expand rapidly ever since. We miss the point if we ask what happened before that, since time itself did not exist until then. But we believe that our God is the only entity that could exist outside time. Therefore, only God could have set off the Big Bang. Non-believers reject that idea but can find no agreed alternative.

At the moment time began, a set of extraordinary, coincidences became fact. Altogether, there are 15 real, measurable physical forces that had to be exactly as they are before the universe could become habitable for us. For example, if the strength of gravity been only slightly weaker, the universe would have gone on expanding too fast to allow stars and planets to form. Had it been only slightly stronger, the universe would have collapsed back into a Big Crunch. If the nuclear forces that hold molecules together had been only slightly different, the carbon and other heavy elements necessary for life could not have been forged in the furnaces of the exploding supernovae.

The statistical probability that all of these forces should come together and remain unchanged over 14 billion years is way off the scale. Materialists committed to the idea that science can explain everything are stuck, because all their possible explanations are equally unacceptable, unproven or wildly improbable. The simplest explanation is that God set all these constants from the start. For the first 9 billion years after the Big Bang, we can imagine God watching as the life cycles of the galaxies created stardust full of heavy elements and scattered them through the cosmos. By 4.5 billion years ago, there was enough to form our planet Earth. Life began around 2 billion years ago. Genesis One describes God's action in gifting the human environment with all the functions needed for life, plus freedom to use it, and then coming to live in it with us. Christians do not have to choose between belief in God as Creator, versus science for explanations of our material origins.

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Theological reflection

Science has limits, and cannot consider what might (or might not) have existed before the “The Big Bang” because, mathematically, there was no “before”. However, non scientists are free to (tongue in cheek) suggest that God may well have been doing the maths, drafting engineering diagrams, and preparing an environmental impact report prior applying for resource consents. As Charlie Brown famously said when he was planning a trip, “If you don’t know where you are going, you might end up someplace else and not even know it.” Theologically, the critical “truth” about creation was that it was **intentional**, and that means there was a “before” as well an “after” and God was present in both.

Thus, at the point of Creation, God must have been establishing the impossibly vast number of forces, chemicals, atoms, laws, etc. that govern the whole of reality, laws such as those that control the relationship between energy, matter, and time. And that, from a theological point of view, he did this with the intention that 14 billion years later (among everything else) you and I could exist here in this place and consider his mighty works, and:-

- a. Respond to him in love for the incredible gift of life that he has given us. An extremely unlikely gift we might add, given the astonishingly vast number of events, coincidences and random happenings that must have taken place over the past 14 billion years to enable each of us to be here.
- b. Be amazed that we are created with the ability to see and ponder his creation.

However, there is more to be said. Biblically, Creation is not just regarded as a “one off” event, but also as an ongoing work of God (c.f. Acts 17:28, John 5:17). Thus, Genesis Ch.1’s conclusion that God “rested” on the seventh day, does not imply that God put down his tools and left us to it. We are all part of an unfolding story.

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Reflection Questions.

If science sees our present existence as being the result of a vast chain of “cause and effect” that started at the beginning of time and continues to this day, how could the Biblical theology of God’s ongoing creative work complement science?

Suppose for a moment, that God’s ongoing involvement with his creation suggests that creation might be regarded as being more like a musical instrument than only the outcome of a “once only” event. Instruments require frequent tuning, and are means by which an infinite number of new compositions may be played.

There is a well-known quote: - “If you always do what you always did, you will always get what you always got.” What can we say about this quote in the light of the theology of God’s continuous involvement with all he has made?

Consider the impossibly vast odds against you ever existing. What does this mean to you in terms of your life and your relationship with God?