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Questions to think about

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1. What do you understand by “a materialist culture”?
2. Why is it so important to read ancient documents in the context that their original readers understood them
3. If we accept that Genesis 1 is liturgy filled with metaphors, rather than history read as facts, what “right” (non-materialist) questions should we be asking?
4. In what way would the answers to our “right” question(s) be good news for the church, for the world, for ourselves personally?
5. How might Genesis 1 as liturgy help the church engage with our sceptical world?
6. “Not properly discerning the difference between metaphor and history has led the Church into many foolish arguments, wasted efforts, and dead-end ideas in the past 200 years.

For example:-

- a. The search for Noah’s Ark
- b. How big would the fish have to be to swallow Jonah? And what sort of fish might it have been?
- c. How could Jonah have breathed while in the belly of the fish?
- d. Where did the water come from, enough to flood the whole world?



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

Theology of Creation Notes for a Bible Study

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Views from the Pews: Theology of Creation 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 author(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 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.

Theological reflection

The first and most important question any Biblical interpreter must ask is "What is the 'genre' (or literary style) of the passage or book I am studying? If we do not know the genre, we cannot properly understand the content. For example, imagine that Wordsworth's poem "I wandered lonely as a cloud" was originally written in a language you did not understand, and that your first encounter with the poem was as a translation, made by a translator who did not understand that it was a poem full of metaphors. On reading it, you would probably find yourself asking questions like, "Can this be true?" Did Wordsworth really believe that flowers can dance and listen to music?" These are not questions we would ask if we knew it was a poem, using words not intended to be taken literally. Simply put, if we don't know the genre, we can't ask the right questions.

Sadly, something similar has happened to Genesis Ch. 1. Earlier translations of the Bible, such as the RSV, have written the creation account as though it were a narrative describing an actual event. The Church's assumption that this is the genre of Genesis Ch. 1 has had far reaching consequences. In a world whose perception of reality is dominated by scientific materialism, questions such as those I have posed above have naturally been asked. As a result, the Biblical creation account is largely regarded as being debunked by science, which has led to a significant loss of confidence in religious faith in our time.

Further, the defence of Christianity has not been helped by readers trying to defend the literal meaning of Genesis One by arguing that each day = 1000 years. God really did it in 6 days, just made it look as though it were longer. Fossils were also created by God.... Etc. etc.). So, what then might the genre of Genesis Ch. 1 be? Current scholarship calls it an "Affirmation of Faith" (i.e. It is Liturgy). The structure and form of the chapter (especially when read in the original Hebrew) strongly support this interpretation. That makes an enormous difference to our understanding of it. . Rather than struggling with an indefensible concept of "how" creation is supposed to have happened, the Church is hugely encouraged by a stirring affirmation of the intention, purpose, and love of God for his creation and his people.