

Session #1: Genesis and the Creation Stories

Some Words of Introduction

Welcome to the second session of the Sts. Peter and Paul Gifts of Finest Wheat program. Those of you who are planning on being fully involved in this program are probably aware that this is a three year program, with three approximately eight week sessions being held every year. Fr. Milota taught the first unit this fall, an introduction to Catholic philosophy, and our third session will be in the spring as I teach an eight week session on the New Testament.

I want to encourage everyone to attend as many of the classes that make up this session as possible, to continue to attend the sessions that will be held over the next several years, to do as much of the assigned reading as possible, and to be willing to take on the assignments that are a required part of the course for those who wish to receive the certificate verifying their full participation in this program.

But...

...this is meant to be something that is open to everyone no matter how much of a time commitment you can make. Even if all you do is drop in on one or two talks and you never do a word of outside reading to prepare, this is still something that can help you to have a better understanding of God and what he has revealed to us. Please don't say "I can't come that often, and I don't have time for any extra reading, so there's no point in coming at all." This program is designed to be of use to people who vary tremendously when it comes to the amount of time they are able to commit to being involved in and preparing for these sessions.

Opening Video

What are some of the things shown in this video (*The Simpsons Bible Stories*) that are consistent with what the bible tells us about creation in Genesis 1-3?

- 1. The video takes the time to show the various aspects of creation; plants, animals, humans. God specifically created all of these and Genesis takes the time to tell us that he did, which reveals the goodness of all aspects of the created world.*
- 2. The video is consistent with Genesis in that it shows us the equal and loving relationship between Man and Woman.*
- 3. The video echoes Genesis in showing us a world that has been created good in which there is no suffering.*

What are the main points we need to learn about creation from the first three chapters of Genesis?

Genesis 1:1, God existed before everything else, is separate from everything else

Genesis 1:27 (and 2:7), man and woman made in the image of God, uniquely related to God, set apart from the rest of creation

Genesis 1:31, the goodness of all creation

Genesis 2:20b-:23, the equality of man and woman

Genesis 2:24-:25, the goodness of marriage and sexuality as a part of marriage

Some Comments on Genesis 2:20-:25 and the Rest of this Series of Classes

John Paul II's Theology of the Body

A series of talks given on the human body, marriage, and sexuality between 1979 and 1984

<http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/JP2TBIND.HTM>

www.christopherwest.com

<http://www.theologyofthebody.net/>

This series vs. Sunday homilies

Able to talk about biblical teaching on human sexuality more frankly and in greater depth than is possible at typical Sunday mass

Problems with absolute Biblical literalism

What is the significance of the date Sunday October 23rd, 4004 BC?

If you take all the ages and time spans in the bible literally and add them up this is the date you get for the creation of the world.

Fossils of dinosaurs and other plants and animals

Evidence showing us world is much, much older than 6012 years

Two different creation stories (Genesis 1:1-2:4a and Genesis 2:4b-25)

Do these issues mean that we can't trust the bible, that the Book of Genesis is not inspired by God?

Ways to Deal With These Difficulties

Genesis contains important truths we need to know about God but many of it's stories can be understood in a number of ways.

Genesis 6-10 the story of Noah and the Flood

1. Absolute literal truth

...or...

2. Inspired by serious, but not world destroying, flood

...or...

3. Symbolic story meant to teach us that God takes sin very seriously

Genesis 9:20-:25 (1st Genesis 2:20-:25 related side note)

Lev 20:17, 18:6-:18, “seeing” or “uncovering” nakedness and incest

Hahn 85-88 says maternal incest, paternal seems more likely

Genesis 11 the story of the Tower of Babel

1. Absolute literal truth

...or...

2. Story, inspired by towers built by Israel’s enemy Babylon, that takes about the danger of pride and makes the point that humanity is divided because of it’s sin

The story of creation, Genesis 1:1-2:25, can also be understood in two primary ways:

1. Absolute literal truth

...or...

2. Story that tells us truths about why God created the world, and what he created it to be like, but which isn’t worried about exact historical timelines or scientific precision.

St. Augustine, who lived from 354 to 430 AD, argued that each day in Genesis could refer to a much lengthier period of time. St. Basil the Great (330-379 AD) was also open to the idea that the days in the Book of Genesis were not 24 hour periods. So even in the 4th century, well before anything had been discovered about fossils or what physics had to tell us about the age of the universe, it was an acceptable Christian belief to say that the opening chapters of Genesis were not literal, and that the earth was older than it would be if they were.

It seems that as the bible goes on it becomes less symbolic and more literal. Many of the early chapters of the bible talk about people who lived for hundreds and hundreds of years. Maybe this is literal, but probably not. These ages were probably just meant to make the point that God blessed them and that they lived for a long time. As we get further into the Old Testament these incredible ages become less and less frequent. So in all likelihood this means that there were different styles when it comes to how parts of the bible was written. Parts of the bible contain symbolic stories, such as about Noah and the Tower of Babel, that were meant to teach lessons. The author could have simply said God punishes sin, or they could write a story to make this point. Sometimes these stories had a lot to do with literal historical facts, sometimes they didn't.

As we get further into the bible things become less symbolic and more literal. It does matter if God really chose one nation, Israel, and protected them, taught them, and prepared them to be the ones who would bring the Messiah into the world. It does matter if Jesus really was God became man, who died, and who then rose from the dead.

Sometimes it is easy to figure out the exact balance between symbolic and literal, and sometimes this is a difficult task. When the bible says that someone lived for 950 years (Genesis 9:29), it's pretty clear that this language is symbolic. When the bible tells us "Then they crucified him (Matthew 27:35a), it's pretty clear this is a plain, straightforward, literal statement of fact. But, other passages are trickier to figure out.

It might be helpful to think that interpreting the bible is less like interpreting a book and more like interpreting a library. There are sections of the bible that are straightforward history, sections of poetry, parables, and parts that are a mix of a historic core and symbolic elements. This is an idea expressed by one of my former seminary professors, Fr. Robert Barron: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sk0el9nH6Q4>

What This Means

Genesis 1:1-2:4a vs. Genesis 2:4b-:25

Not competing and contradictory stories

Same truths told in different language

The five truths listed on the first and second pages of this lesson plan

These can be true whether the earth is 6012 years old or 4.54 billion years old (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_the_Earth)

Human beings can be believed to be created by a loving God, whether he took a couple of days to do this, or a couple hundred thousand years (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_evolution)

Were Adam and Eve Historical Individuals?

Is it possible for Catholics to believe that the story of Adam and Eve is a symbolic retelling of events experienced by a larger group of original human beings? This is

something that could, possibly, make the book of Genesis easier to reconcile with what science tells us about human origins. In his 1950 encyclical *Humani Generis* Pope Pius XII wrote:

When, however, there is question of another conjectural opinion, namely polygenism, the children of the Church by no means enjoy such liberty. For the faithful cannot embrace that opinion which maintains that either after Adam there existed on this earth true men who did not take their origin through natural generation from him as from the first parent of all, or that Adam represents a certain number of first parents. Now it is in no way apparent how such an opinion can be reconciled with that which the sources of revealed truth and the documents of the Teaching Authority of the Church propose with regard to original sin, which proceeds from a sin actually committed by an individual Adam and which, through generation, is passed on to all and is in everyone as his own. *HG 37*

This is a pretty strong opinion on the matter, but there are some current official theological sources which seem to present the possibility of an alternative view.

A document issued by the Vatican's International Theological Commission in 2004, and approved by then Cardinal Ratzinger, says that:

In its original unity – of which Adam is the symbol – the human race is made in the image of the divine Trinity.” (*Communion and Stewardship # 43*)

This seems to indicate that when Genesis refers to Adam and Eve this could be a way of symbolically referring to a larger group of original human ancestors. The document also says that:

“Catholic theology affirms that the emergence of the first members of the human species (whether as individuals or in populations) represents an event that is not susceptible of a purely natural explanation and which can appropriately be attributed to divine intervention. Acting indirectly through causal chains operating from the beginning of cosmic history, God prepared the way for what Pope John Paul II has called ‘an ontological leap...the moment of transition to the spiritual.’” (*Communion and Stewardship # 70*)

This means that the theologians who crafted this document seem to be open to the possibility that the first beings who shared in God's image, the first men and women, could have been a single couple or a larger population.

This is obviously an incredibly complex discussion. The exact manner in which we should go about reconciling the truth of the book of Genesis with scientific truth is not something that is easy to determine. These are complex issues and there is tremendous room for debate and discussion when it comes to some very important questions about human origins and exactly what it means for us to say that we are made in God's image.

The Vatican's International Theological Commission's document "Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God" can be found here:

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040723_communion-stewardship_en.html

With relevant sections quoted here in the section on polygenism:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evolution_and_the_Roman_Catholic_Church#cite_note-5

A relevant discussion of these issues and related statements by a variety of Church officials in recent years can be found at these two links:

http://jimmyakin.typepad.com/defensor_fidei/2006/10/monogenism_scie.html

http://www.jimmyakin.org/2006/01/a_reader_writes.html