

Creation: Wonder, Order, Mission

Genesis 1 | Jonathan Dodson | June 16, 2013

Genesis wasn't written to explain whether or how unicellular organisms became multi-cellular organisms. It is not a scientific account of things. Its aim is not to communicate how long God took to create things. It has a more profound aim. However, Christians should consider the claims and insights of science. I addressed this, making a plausible case for Christian evolution, in a sermon in the FAITH series. But this morning, we are concerned with the actual intent of the author, the intended meaning of the story (not meanings we bring to it). So we will set the scientific viewpoint aside in order to climb into the viewpoint the ancient Israelites. In slavery, surrounded by ancient Near Eastern mythologies, Israel wanted to know where they came from, and Moses set out to record an account of *origins*. Instead of how—the mechanics—Genesis is concerned with what and why—the meaning. Genesis is going deeper to answer the question, in the words of philosopher Leibniz, “**Why is there not nothing?**” Genesis tells us why there is *something*, but it does so in poetic form. It plunges the reader into a story. So, if we're to get it, we'll need to plunge in too. Turn on your imagination: look, listen, feel, observe. As we do, we'll see three deliberate themes unfold in the story: wonder, order, and purpose.

Wonder (Poetry)

Why is there something rather than nothing? A partial answer is because *God* created: “**In the beginning, God created the heavens and earth**” (Gen 1:1). The Bible invites us into a story where there is a Creator. The alternative is rather dim. Without a Creator, we lack satisfying reason for wonder, order, & purpose. Depending on how we translate this sentence, we encounter God in the middle or beginning of creating. It could be translated “in the beginning of God's creating.” Now, why is the relevant? Well, we could extend the line back a bit on history to locate where the angels were created (Neh 9:6; Col 1:16) and possibly where Lucifer fell from glory (Isa 14:12-15). An implied pre-history. Yet, we find ourselves in the now—the creation of the heavens and the earth. Two characters create—God and the Spirit of God. The Spirit *hovers* like a bird over the primordial waters, while God *speaks*: “*let there be light, atmosphere, sea, vegetation, luminaries, and living creatures.*” Word and wing work together, lyric and instrument in concert, as the music of creation builds, poetry in motion. There is a cadence to these words: “and God said” is repeated twelve times, and when God is finished with each verse, a chorus follows: “there was evening and there was morning, the first, second, third day.” There is a repetitive emphasis seven times. Why? **What happened the last time you sat and soaked in the creative goodness of nature, what did you feel? I think its here to evoke wonder at the creative goodness of God.** Isn't that what poetry is for? Seas filled with creatures and multi-colored coral; air populated with birds and bees that buzz. The world bursting forth with life. Blades of grass, symmetrical, rubbery but real, organic, alive. Wind blowing the tops of trees back and forth, the leaves shimmering like a sequin dress. The perfect construction of a bird for flight and its ability to move so quickly. Here we have a time lapse of all creation. Eugene Peterson recently reminded me that *we wake up every morning to a world we did not make*. Sizzling bacon, scrambling eggs, quibbling children, percolating cuvee coffee, cooing birds and dancing squirrels! But soon we quit noticing. We get sucked

into a task, riveted by an issue, caught in the interwebs. Why is there something rather than nothing? Wonder. Are we quiet enough to notice, to hear the wing and the word speak to us? Like a movie that introduces information later in the story to make sense of events earlier in the story, we come upon this insight in Hebrews: “[Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets \(Moses included\), but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world](#)” (Heb 1:1-2). A third character is present beneath the surface of creation story—Christ. He is the actual Word the Father speaks—the agent of creative action—which works with the wing of the Spirit to breathe all things to life. Father, Spirit, Son collaborating for their opus. We are meant to *wonder* at the Trinity at play in creation. Poet Gerard Manley Hopkins captures this well when he writes:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
...
I say móre: the just man justifies;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —
Christ — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces

Christ plays in ten thousand places. He glances off animate limbs and faces. He the creator become the creation. Through the majesty of the kingfisher and the glory of the dragonfly dancing in the sun, we are meant to see the creative goodness and beauty of Christ, and to marvel at the Agent of Creation. In seven days and seven epithets the Trinity assigns the created order virtue: “it was good.” **There is cadence to the story because there is transcendence in the story.**

Order (Kingdom)

Within the poetry we find an order. Genesis one has a deliberate literary structure filled with theological meaning. The days can be divided or organized around two themes, three in each column. Look through. Can you see them? One column of movable creatures and one column of immovable creation, one set of kings and one set of kingdoms. [draw chart] Verse 16 tips us off to this relationship: “[And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars.](#)” **Now why is this significant?** Several reasons. First, this order tells us that creation is a kingdom. It has domains ruled little kings. Then, all of the domains are ruled by one, true King, their Creator. Now this would be particularly relevant to Israel, who was surrounded by alternative stories of creation. For instance, the Egyptians worshiped a sun god who ruled. Moses merely refers to the sun and moon as “lights” and goes out of his way to show their submission to the Creator God. Polemical angle to the structure. Israel is meant to see that their king is King of the gods. Now as this order unfolds, it reaches a climax—the creation of humanity: “[So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them](#)” (Gen 1:27). **What do you think it means to be created in God’s image?** In the ancient near east, an image was often placed in a temple, in

a land, to represent a god's rule. You may recall the image of Dagon, a god of the Philistines, that fell down, face forward, toward the captured ark of Israel until it broke (1 Sam 5). As the story reaches a climax, we discover God has placed his own image in the land, to represent his rule and order creation. The image is none other than male and female, *the kings and queens of his kingdom*. **Can you think of any implications for being made in God's image?** In addition to our responsibility to rule like God, we are also created to relate like God. We are made in the image of a community, a community who communicates. Remember this is the speaking God. Now, interestingly, in all other days he spoke—and God said—and things came into being, but on the sixth day there is an addition of two words: “**And God blessed them. And God said to them...**” (1:28)—and God said *to them*. He spoke to them. God speaks to us. He initiates with his kings and queens. He is near. Within God's kingdom, there is covenant—a relationship between God and man. This is a relationship of love and devotion. We exist not only to work but also to love. We are truly human when we are relating to God and carrying out his rule. This is why there is something rather than nothing. *Ruling and relating are not separate in God's kingdom. Man's work is for love. Adam tends the garden out of devotion. So it is for us. A Christian cannot be one person at work and another person at home because wherever they go, they represent God; they are his image to the world. They relate to him as they rule.* How would this change your approach to work? **There is order to creation because it is God's kingdom; there is love in relation because of covenant.**

Purpose (Mission)

We have seen Genesis one is poetry to instill *wonder* and kingdom to create *order*. Our final element is *purpose*. Back to Liebniz, there is something rather than nothing because God creates with a telos, an end, a mission. As it turns out, Genesis one continues into 2:4 (the chapter divisions are artificial and came long after the original writings). As we continue to read, we discover that God rests after creating. **Why do you think he rested?** Rest in the ANE was a sign that the god was finished with his work and ready to ascend to his throne. The temple was complete; now the king simply need take his throne, rest in his temple (Ps 132: 7-8, 13-16). Similarly, the whole creation is a kind of cosmic temple. Heaven is his throne and earth is his footstool (Isa 66:1). The temple wasn't mainly a place of worship but a place of rule. It is the control center of the universe, where the god conducts his rule. White House analogy. The president rests in the seat of power, the Oval Office, in the White House. God can rest from creating and get on with *governing*. **What does this imply about our purpose or mission?** God carries out his governing purpose—his mission—through his kings and queens. Our mission is to be fruitful and multiply, rule and subdue the earth. This means creation had a mission from the beginning; it was meant to go somewhere. The whole project is still unfolding. God isn't finished; he just got started. Humanity was to populate the earth a sense of *wonder* (poetry) and create a sense of *order* (kingdom). Poetry & Kingdom. Take away the poetry and you've got dried up religion or lifeless secularism. Take away the kingdom and you get escapist pietism, purposeless pluralism. **Our purpose is to be an awe-struck people on God's mission.** To be a people who wonder at God's poetic nature and participate in his order, expanding God's kingdom. Now, as we will see, the kingdom is quickly subverted but God's mission continues, with a redemptive twist. The agent of creation, Christ, will also become the agent of redemption.



Though Christ plays in ten thousand places, there are many places where he is not wondered at or represented well. This is where we take up the mission, to bring an awe of God into our neighborhoods and families. To represent his redemptive grace and majestic rule through our work and witness.