

God's Creation: How shall we understand God's Creation?

The first requirement in our reading the Bible is that we still our tongue and permit the Bible to speak. This could be little more than a pious phrase, but it is intended to make a demand on us: that we respect the Bible because it is always beyond us—simply because God is always beyond us. That is we can never fully comprehend the Bible. If we did, we would no longer need to listen to it. This lofty and difficult demand—that we approach in silence something with which we are already acquainted in order to really hear what it says—applies particularly when we turn our attention to the creation account at the beginning of the Bible. Without really realizing it, we have become accustomed to it in the light of a particular type of interpretation. For example, “Was the world created in six days or not?” These conceptions which we ourselves have created (to which we might also add the notion that the creation accounts are hopelessly outmoded and hence no longer of any concern for us) are like walls we must break down if the text is actually to speak to us. This is impossible unless we first of all overcome our resistance to such a step, including the reservations regarding the implications of following where the text leads, and the necessity of rethinking various positions. The sole purpose in demolishing these long-standing notions concerning creation is to make it possible for God's Word to be heard.

The Creation Story

Actually the Bible does not begin with Genesis I but with Exodus I. What I mean by this is that with the Book of Exodus the history of God's dealing with his people begins. It is here that biblical history in the strict sense has its beginnings, that history which culminates in Christ. It is prefaced by two pre-histories: that of the patriarchs and the primeval stories. Both of these stories were added later to the history that begins with the exodus from Egypt and have been drafted in the light of it. Both of the pre-histories merely develop what is contained in the narrative framework, of which the commencement and culmination are fixed in the focal point of Israelite history, namely, the confession of faith which deals with the exodus deliverance, the providential guidance in the wilderness, and the gift of the promise land. To put it more simply, the story of creation must be understood in its proper context, that context is the entire first five books of the Old Testament.

There is another sense in which the creation account must be understood in its proper context. In the past we have looked on Genesis 1 and 2 as not only the basic but indeed the exclusive biblical evidence concerning creation. If we look at the Old Testament in its entirety, however, we shall notice, even at a glance, that statements concerning both creation and the Creator are to be found throughout the entire Old Testament canon. Genesis 1 and 2 are only two of many such statements. If it is our earnest desire to listen to what the Bible really has to say concerning creation and the Creator, we must not isolate Genesis 1 and 2 from the rest of the evidence. Rather we must seek to comprehend these chapters in the light of the many statements concerning creation stretched over the entire Bible. This is one of the elementary rules for interpreting the Bible.

For him, however, whose eyes are open to the necessity of considering all of the various statements concerning creation in the entire Bible, he realizes that the Bible contains numerous statements concerning creation, coming from many different times, couched in very different language, and presented in many different ways. He will rather catch a glimpse of what it really means that, in the Old Testament, praise of the Creator stretches over the span of an entire millennium, attaining an almost, incalculable fullness and breadth. He will no longer be troubled to find that the language and presuppositions of statements concerning creation capable of undergoing such change.

So far we have been speaking of *statements* concerning creation, and this is the general practice. But if one searches thoroughly and gathers painstakingly what the entire Bible says about the Creator and creation, and permits these statements to possess him, he simply cannot escape the conclusion that in the strictest sense these are not really statements or propositions; Creator and creation are spoken of neither in a descriptive or factual way nor after the manner of doctrinal discourse. Rather the great majority of the passages concerning Creator and creation in the Old Testament are intimately associated with God's praise; and this is quite different. When the biblical writers speak about Creator and creation, they break forth in praise of God's majesty, in a joyous, sincere, and spontaneous praise of his glory.

The purpose of Genesis 1 and 2 can only be seen when these chapters are placed alongside all the other Old Testament passages praising the Creator. Or to put it yet another way, the real purpose is appreciated only when one considers that the original hearers of the creation account heard it as part of Israel's total praise of God as Creator, which, for them, had its proper setting in the liturgical

psalms. Knowing this should make clearer to us how to praise the Creator, especially as we know it from the creation psalms, could remain constant and consistent through the centuries while the language in which God was praised as Creator, and the terms in which the act of creation was presented, could change. This, with no diminution of the power and certainty of the faith which expressed its joy in the creation in praise of the Creator.

A considerable number of the difficulties we have gotten vis-à-vis the natural sciences, with regard to the opening chapters of Genesis, can be resolved when we see once again that the statements concerning creation in the Bible belong in the context of the praise of God.*

--Claus Westermann, *The Genesis Accounts of Creation*, Fortress, 1964, pp. 1-5.