

### **Why Did God Create?**

One question that you rarely hear asked when the study of the Book of Genesis begins is the fundamental question of why God chose to create the world in the first place. Clearly for God, the omnipotent and omnipresent Lord of the Universe, there was no *need* to create. Speculations as to God's *feelings* on the matter, that He was lonely or He wanted workers in His garden, tell us more about how we feel about ourselves than about the motivations behind this first act. It is a terribly important question, the answer to which will color how you as a reader will look at the rest of the Book of Genesis and indeed the rest of Sacred Scripture. A little care and clarity will go a long way for there is much more happening in this book than meets the eye.

#### **The Book of Genesis and the Catechism:**

**282** *Catechesis on creation is of major importance. It concerns the very foundations of human and Christian life: for it makes explicit the response of the Christian faith to the basic question that men of all times have asked themselves: "Where do we come from?" "Where are we going?" "What is our origin?" "What is our end?" "Where does everything that exists come from and where is it going?" The two questions, the first about the origin and the second about the end, are inseparable. They are decisive for the meaning and orientation of our life and actions.*

For the Jews, this book forms the beginning of the most sacred five books in their scriptures, the Torah. These five books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) were and indeed still are the basis for the Jewish religion. Genesis occupies pride of place in the Torah for it is not only the first book, the head or beginning of the Torah, but it is also the beginning of the all-important relationship between God and His people that will unfold throughout the Bible. For the Jews, the Book of Genesis begins to answer the important question of "Who are we?" Fundamental to answering this question is knowing where they as a people existed in relation to their Creator. This relationship, with all its ups and downs, joy and sadness, is the story of the Old Testament. As with any relationship, how things begin can give some insight into how things might progress over time.

This story about the relationship with God, which permeates and pervades the Sacred Scriptures, a story that we are only beginning in the Book of Genesis, is the story of salvation history. It encompasses not only the people we are about to meet in the Genesis account (Adam, Eve, Noah, Jacob, Joseph, etc.) but us, you and me. Genesis is the story of *all* creation. It is *our* story.

Like all good stories in Sacred Scripture, it has a beginning that tells us much about God, much about ourselves, and most importantly much about the Divine Plan. But not to get too far ahead of ourselves, let's take a closer look at the opening lines of our story.

*“In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters.”*

Genesis 1:1-2

The opening verses of the Book of Genesis are such a part of who we are as Roman Catholics that it is tempting to rush through them and get to the place in the story when we make an appearance, i.e., the creation of humanity. However, a brief pause to reflect upon exactly what is being said and its tremendous impact on history is in order.

Two aspects of these first few lines of Genesis set the Jews and later the Christians apart from all that came before in discussions about God, namely, the idea of creating from nothing and the idea that this creation was fundamentally good. The idea of one God creating the earth from nothing (in Latin translated as *ex nihilo*) was something unheard of among ancient peoples and one of the first great contributions of the Jews to theology. Other cultures such as the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and later the Greek and Roman civilizations also had creation stories. However, these creation stories centered around multiple gods fighting amongst themselves, terrible monsters being vanquished, blood being spilled and creation arising from the subjugation of chaos. These gods had to wrestle creation from the hands of defeat and forge what was to follow from what remained. The blood and bones of the vanquished gods figured highly in what was created on the earth, not so with our story. Instead, we have the one God creating with His words alone, *“Let there be light”* Genesis 1:3. The God of the Book of Genesis has no struggles to face, no monsters to vanquish, and no raw materials with which to work.

In addition, to differentiate the One God from all those divinities that came before and after, our God seals his first creative act with the pronouncement that what He created was good (Genesis 1:4). This makes the tradition we have received unique among the creation accounts of the previously mentioned ancient civilizations. Thus, our story, the story of Genesis, the story of the Bible, the ongoing story of salvation history, starts with the idea of goodness. The Divine Plan, whatever turns and twists in the road humanity added to it along the way, was in its essence and from the beginning, good. Now answering the question with which we began our discussion is a little easier.

God without need or desire (as these are human sentiments) created a good creation for no apparent reason other than that He loved those that were to inhabit the world. These first few lines, this first act of creation, sets up all that is to follow.

From our discussion of the introduction, remember that at different times in the Book of Genesis we will be hearing from the various, divinely inspired authors who contributed to the text. In this first section of Genesis, we are being treated to the poetic language of the Priestly writer who has an image of God that can only be described as majestic and awe inspiring. The Priestly writer describes God as not requiring any raw materials with which to create (in Hebrew the word *bara*) and who can bring things about simply by His command, by His Word. The power of the Word of God, and indeed the power of the words of God in the words of his prophets and messengers, will be a recurring theme throughout the Book of Genesis and indeed in all of Sacred Scripture.

From the beginning of Christianity, the opening verses of Genesis had deep Christological significance. Early Church Fathers such as Origen (a Christian theologian and scholar, born in Alexandria, 185-254 A. D.) saw Christ in these first lines primarily because these verses resonate strongly with the opening of the Gospel of St. John:

*“What is the beginning of all things except our Lord and Savior of all, Jesus Christ, the Firstborn of every creature? In this beginning, therefore, that is in his Word, ‘God made heaven and earth’ as the evangelist John also says in the beginning of his Gospel: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him, and without him nothing was made.’”* (Origen, Homilies on Genesis 1.1)

The idea that Christ was at the beginning and that whenever we encounter the beginning of creation in scripture (Psalms 8:4, Proverbs 8:22-31, Wisdom 7:22-30, Sirach 24:3-9) we are encountering Christ was fundamental to early Christian readings of the Old Testament. This has been part of Christian interpretation of these sacred texts ever since. Like the first Christians, we must always remember that we as Roman Catholics read Sacred Scripture with the belief and the reality of the Incarnation of Our Lord firmly in our hearts. St. Augustine said that the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New. Reading the Old Testament from the perspective of what it can tell us about the Incarnation is *the* way for Roman Catholics to read scripture. However, we must also be aware that the first readers of these texts, the first people to pass them down to subsequent generations, did not have the benefit of the Christian Revelation. These Jewish writers and their communities, writing over several centuries in the millennia before Christ, were expressing their views on God and His creation in their words for their time.

**A Very Brief Word on Genesis and Evolution:**

*Invariably when I teach at local parishes around Houston, Texas, people ask me about the literal meaning of the creation accounts found in the Bible. My response is that the creation accounts in the Bible were never meant to be read as a scientific explanation of the origins of life and were revealed to a people just recently emerging from a semi-nomadic way of life. We cannot expect an Iron-Age civilization like the Hebrews to be able to convey scientific accuracy on a par with what we want in the twenty-first century.*

*However, simply because the creation accounts do not relay a scientific explanation of the origin of life does not mean they do not convey a deeper theological truth, namely that the origin of all life as we know it, is God. Pope Pius XII declared that "For these reasons the Teaching Authority of the Church does not forbid that, in conformity with the present state of human sciences and sacred theology, research and discussions, on the part of men experienced in both fields, take place with regard to the doctrine of evolution, in as far as it inquires into the origin of the human body as coming from pre-existent and living matter - for the Catholic faith obliges us to hold that souls are immediately created by God." Pius XII, Humani Generis 36*

### **Created in the Image of God**

When one reads the order of creation in the first chapter of Genesis, you have to be struck by the position of man and women in the list. God began with the cosmos, first creating light and dark, the earth and plants, the seas, our own sun and moon and eventually the animal kingdom. Things begin to change at this stage in the process for God, in addition to pronouncing the creation of the animals of the sea and the air as "good" He also blessed them. It is a blessing which has a bit of the ring of commandment about it, *"Be fertile, multiply, and fill the waters of the seas; and let the birds multiply on the earth."* Genesis 1:22 Clearly, as you are now dealing with beings that in some sense obey the law of God, a blessing/commandment is in order. With the deviation in the process, however, one thing is patently clear - at each step in the creative process it was made evident that God was solely in charge. Whoever God was making these statements to, and the Heavenly Host or the Trinity has been posited by some commentators, it is unequivocal that He was the one creating and the only one with the power over that which was created.

### **Dominion Over Creation**

When male and female were created on the sixth day, there was a momentous change in that God now gave mankind dominion over all of the animals that were created previously to mankind (Genesis 1:26). Clearly, God was establishing a hierarchy where mankind, male and female, is not only the pinnacle of the creative process (note that they were the last entities to be created in this our first Creation account) but also have dominion and authority over the other creatures. Mankind, therefore, occupies a very different role in that male and female are to have authority over other creatures, a power reserved for God alone in the first twenty-six verses of Genesis, but now shared.

What a tremendous responsibility was bestowed on the male and female creations even before they were made. From before God's creative act bringing forth the male and female (Genesis 1:27), man and woman were destined for something far above that which was destined for the creatures he created in the preceding days.

**The Church Fathers and Genesis, St. John Chrysostom:**

*“Behold the remarkable character of the blessing! I mean, those words ‘increase and multiply and fill the earth’ anyone could see are said of the brute beasts and the reptiles alike, whereas ‘gain dominion and take control’ are directed to the man and woman. See the Lord’s loving kindness: even before creating them, he makes them share in this control and bestows on them the blessing...So no longer entertain casual impressions of this rational being (man) but rather realize the extent of the esteem and the Lord’s magnanimity toward it and be amazed at his love beyond all telling.”*

**Homilies on Genesis 10.9**

The second momentous change in the Creation accounts, which has occupied theologians and philosophers of the Church for nearly two thousand years, concerns how mankind, male and female, were made: *“Then God said: ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’”*  
Genesis 1:26

From the very beginning learned men and women of the Church have had a very difficult time deciding precisely what was meant by the word “image” as used here. In the original Hebrew the word is *tselem*, meaning something along the lines of a statue or copy. When Greek speaking Jews translated the Book of Genesis into Greek centuries later, they opted for *eikon* which has a similar meaning. However, the phrase “in the image of God” clearly meant more to early Christians than something that looks like or was modeled upon God, something much more than simply a copy.

In the early centuries of Christianity the theologians of the Church (heavily influenced by the philosophy of Plato) discussed the various philosophical meanings behind this all-important word of “image,” often times comparing it to the word “likeness.” These discussions often ventured into lofty intellectual debates as to the relationship between the intellect and the soul<sup>1</sup> or to Jesus being the image of the Father.<sup>2</sup> Without getting into these difficult, yet wonderfully fruitful discussions, the surrounding verses can help us begin our journey to understand what it means to be made in the image and likeness of God. We see that we are to be like God in that we have responsibility and dominion over the rest of creation, yet it is much more than simply a role or a job. Being made in the image and likeness of God entails even greater responsibility.

**Genesis and the Catechism:**

**357-358** *Being in the image of God the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone. He is capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons. And he is called by grace to a covenant with his Creator, to offer him a response of faith and love that no other creature can give in his stead. God created everything for man, but man in turn was created to serve and love God and to offer all creation back to him.*

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<sup>1</sup> John of Damascus, *Orthodox Faith* 2.12

<sup>2</sup> St. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 7.6.12

One major difficulty some individuals encounter as they read this section of the Book of Genesis is that they try to project *backward* upon God that which is being said about mankind, namely, if we are made in God's image is not God in some way "in the image of man"? Although you might be tempted to engage in this line of reasoning in an attempt to conceptualize what God looks like (and you would be in the company of Michelangelo who envisioned God as looking something like Adam as an old man) you cannot. The biblical description is decidedly one way, we are made in the image and likeness of God with all that this entails, and indeed it entails a great many things.

At this point in the narrative you will also begin to notice that your ideas about the created order might be a little hazy, i.e. what you are expecting and what you read tend to differ to a great extent. When most Christians reflect upon the Creation accounts in Genesis (and yes, there are two distinct and beautiful accounts) they tend to conflate or mix them together. If you asked one hundred individuals who was created first in the Book of Genesis probably eighty to ninety per cent would say, "Adam first and then Eve from his rib." These people would all be correct if you were asking them about the *second* Creation account (one of our next lessons) however, that is not the case with this our first Creation account in which the Divine Author makes it clear that, "*God created man in his image, in the divine image he created him, male and female he created them.*" Genesis 1:27

### Equal and Different

One thing that you cannot escape as you read through this first Creation account is that there is clearly a differentiation between male and female. I use the term differentiation because the biblical text is clear on two things. First, male and female are both created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Second, the text specifies "male and female" emphasizing that for all their equality they are still fundamentally different. It is a necessary and indeed wonderful difference that has been willed by God. Both man and woman must now equally reflect the Creator's wisdom and goodness.<sup>3</sup> This section on the Book of Genesis ends, like all the major creative moments that came before it, with a reflection by God on what He has made.<sup>4</sup> This final statement, however, is a bit different than what we have seen before:

After the creation of light	<u>Genesis 1:4</u>	"...God saw how <i>good</i> the light was."
After the earth/sea are created	<u>Genesis 1:10</u>	"...God saw how <i>good</i> it was."
After the plants are created	<u>Genesis 1:12</u>	"...God saw how <i>good</i> it was."
After the sun/moon are created	<u>Genesis 1:18</u>	"...God saw how <i>good</i> it was."
After the animals are created	<u>Genesis 1:21, 25</u>	"...God saw how <i>good</i> it was."
After male and female are created	<u>Genesis 1:31</u>	"...God looked at everything he had made and found it <i>very good</i> ."

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<sup>3</sup> CCC, 369.

<sup>4</sup> Fr. Jim Mueller, O. Carm. In a reflection at St. Mary's Seminary, Houston, Texas, May 2010.

Thus, after all of Creation has been set in place, after the ultimate creation has taken center stage and been given authority and dominion, God finds this *very* good. And as authority comes with responsibility, this very good creation is now called to *be* very good as well.

One last thought as we are about to embark upon the second great Creation account – always remember that the Holy Spirit has divinely inspired the authors and conservators of the Bible to maintain both accounts and that each account, while complementary to the other, is distinct. Each contributes to our image of the Lord and each teaches us something about the relationship we are to have with Him.

**Why are there multiple accounts of events in Sacred Scripture?**

*In my undergraduate and graduate classes on the Old Testament this is the first question that arises in every class. As we have covered some, but not all of this ground, in the introduction, a brief word must be said here. I normally explain it this way, using our Gospels as the prime example. The Church in her wisdom has preserved four different yet complementary portraits of Jesus in the Gospels. Similarly, multiple portraits of various events in the Old Testament have been preserved (the Creation accounts, the Flood, the kidnapping of Joseph) in a similar fashion. These complementary accounts, when read together, give us a fuller sense of the meaning. You just have to remember to read all of them and not pick and choose your favorite version.*