

Genesis 1:1-2:3

The Lights Are On

There is an episode of “The Cosmos,” with Neil DeGrasse Theissen in which he chronicles the evolutionary development of the eye and sight. Theissen claims to be an atheist but his description actually makes a strong case for theistic belief because he begins with single-cell organisms which were unable to detect light and ends with a picture of a beautiful set of green eyes looking at the camera, a “miracle” of evolutionary progress involving an indefinite number of genetic mutations over billions of years.

As a teaching device he climbs into an animated machine that looks like the bridge of the Starship Enterprise only instead of cruising through inter-stellar space, it turns out to be an incredible shrinking time machine that at once becomes small enough to observe single-celled organisms and travel back in time to when these cells were dark, neither giving out nor apprehending light.

How he expects anyone to take him seriously using such fantastic animated images, I don’t know, but it makes his criticisms of the apparently fantastic theological poem in Genesis seem irrelevant.

Nonetheless, he quotes the poem itself, when in the animated scene one of the cells lights up and he narrates, “Let there be light.”

The Conflicts

The first chapter of Genesis is controversial. The center of the conflict is the poetic language, when taken literally appears at odds with a scientific understanding of the universe, of both space and time. Clearly, the entire bible was written by people and read by people who shared pre-scientific beliefs about these things.

Of course, there is no rule that says we are bound by their state of knowledge or that a theological poem ever was intended to be read as if it was a scientific treatise. Only in modern times has this been done and it has been used to discredit science and create suspicion that it can’t be trusted.

There is also another kind of harm that has resulted from this conflict. The other kind of harm stems from the almost obsessive focus on the poem as science. *This obsession takes the focus off the theology in this theological poem.*

I confess that I have avoided preaching on this poem to avoid confronting this situation. Needless to say, if

you haven't figured it out by now, I do not believe the earth is flat or that it came into existence in six 24-hour days in 4004 BCE.

Furthermore, when one lets go of an overly literal interpretation of this passage there ceases to be a conflict between science and theology; there is no conflict between the theory of evolution and the biblical doctrine of creation. I accept them both.

God, Creator

But I do believe the theology is important and should be not be overlooked in an over-emphasis on the apparent conflict with science. There are five theological issues that stand out and should be named. The first one is obvious. It is the conviction that however one describes it, *God has created the universe*.

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” is the way Genesis begins. One notices the similarity with the Gospel of John, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . Through the Word, all things were made, without the Word, nothing was made that has been made. In the Word was life, and that life was the light of all humanity. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Or in the words of the letter to the Hebrews, “by faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.”

There is a choice - that is quite frankly not answered by science; either the universe just happened, or something like a being did it on purpose. The bible is convinced of the latter interpretation. All this () . . . is on purpose. The circumstantial evidence in favor of this view is profound and powerful but in the end it is not conclusive. We accept it by faith.

Order and Light

The second theological idea is expressed by two phrases early in this Genesis text. The first phrase refers to *order made out of chaos* and is attributed to the Spirit of God. The second phrase is, “*Let there be light,*” and in John light is associated with life.

Whenever we are tempted to see life as chaos and darkness, we are confronted here in this text, once again by faith, to accept also an affirmation of the victory of order and light. This acceptance can be challenging because it is informed by the contrary experiences of disappointment and death. Faith overcomes that disappointment.

Goodness

In a related aspect of the theology expressed in this poem, every description of the creation is accompanied by an affirmation of its goodness.

Material life is good.

This conviction stands in stark contrast to Plato's Greek philosophy (and also much Stoic, Hindu and Buddhist thought) that physical life is evil and must be escaped. The bible affirms the goodness of material life. It warns against the worship of the created order, which is idolatry, but claims that it is essentially good.

Imago Dei

Of course, one cannot overlook the description of *human beings as made in God's image*. This idea not only acknowledges some kind of pre-eminence for humanity among all the created beings *and* is the foundation of the idea of the human stewardship of creation, that is, humanity is charged with its care, but also affirms a connection to the divine.

It is sometimes thought that the capacity for reason is the best expression of Imago Dei, but I do not find this consistent with biblical truth. If it were so, the greatest commandment would be right thinking and correct doctrine.

Instead, the greatest commandment is the command to love, which means the best expression of Imago Dei is the capacity for relationship, an aspect of life that draws us together into community, and when neglected, threatens us.

Sabbath

Finally, there is *Sabbath, rest*. Because God rested, we are to rest. Labor is good, but restoration is necessary. The keeping of the Sabbath is meant to maintain the perspective that the created order is not God, and neither are we. Life is a gift.

The Lights Are On

Taken together we are given a philosophy to live by, that explains who God is and what God has done; who we are and what are our responsibilities. The passage itself doesn't give a helpful understanding of sin, the human failure to live up to the gift, that is left for the story in Genesis 3.

Part of what it means to accept Christ is that we accept this theology. The result is; gratitude, awe, a good conscience, healthy self-esteem, a sense of responsibility, respect for others, love of neighbor, inner peace, undying hope.

These are at the foundation of the life that is the story of the bible, the story of humanity, the story of the world, the story of God.

If someone were to say to me that they *did* believe in the literal interpretation of Genesis 1, and wanted to know my response, I would say that I would let them believe what they want as long as they would respect my beliefs. I do not think it is my job to overcome the conflict between science and the bible, but it is my job to offer suggestions about theology.

So I would say, believe what you think is right about the history and the science, *but don't neglect the theology*: that *God has made* these heavens; order has been forged out of chaos, *the lights are on*; and this earth, whatever you can see, *and it is good*. What is more, we are all somehow *in God's Image*, we are God's workmanship, created for good works in Christ, is the way Paul put it.

Let us not think only in academic terms, but in terms of relationships, with God and neighbor. And let our relationships be characterized by love and grace.

May that be our rest and our peace.

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