

A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

by Revd John Haley

SESSION ONE CREATION

Introduction

Why study the Old Testament?

1. Creation

Humanity created in the image of God

Reading: Genesis 1:1-2:3

2. Fall

Sin enters the world

Reading: Genesis 3:1-24

3. Flood

Judgement upon sin

Reading: Genesis 6:9-22, 7:17-8:22, 9:12-13

4. Tower

The international consequences of sin

Reading: Genesis 11:1-9

Discussion questions:

What does it mean to be created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27)?

How important is Genesis to understanding the rest of the Bible?

Introduction

The Old Testament is a big and difficult book. We can easily get stuck on particular difficulties and not get an overview (*A Bird's Eye View*). Some Christians ask why we should bother at all?

1. These are the Scriptures that Jesus used.

When we read the Old Testament, we read the Bible Jesus read and used. These are the prayers Jesus prayed, the poems he memorized, the songs he sang, the bedtime stories he heard as a child, the prophecies he pondered.

(Philip Yancey)

2. These are the Scriptures that spoke of him and that Jesus used to reveal who he is.

Jesus quoted often from the Old Testament and never from any other book.

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

3. These are the Scriptures which foreshadowed his coming and that he came to fulfil.

Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

(Luke 24:27)

4. These are the Scriptures of the New Testament Church that the Apostles studied.

Paul ... reasoned with them from the Scriptures.

(Acts 17:2)

5. In these Scriptures we have the record of God's unfolding revelation.

6. In these Scriptures we have the record of God's saving acts.

7. In these Scriptures we have material for worship and prayer.

8. In these Scriptures we have promises of which Christians are heirs.

9. In these Scriptures we have the background to Christ's coming.

10. In these Scriptures we meet people of faith in great stories.

Nearly all the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, the language of Ancient Israel. Parts of Ezra and Daniel were written in Aramaic, which is similar to Hebrew and the language that Jesus spoke. From 1947 onwards, very old scrolls were found of every Old Testament book except Esther (The Dead Sea Scrolls). There is also a Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint, LXX) which the Jews began in the third century B.C. The Old Testament that we have today is the same as the Jewish Old Testament.

The 14 books of the *Apocrypha* were not included in the Jewish Scriptures but were included in the Septuagint, which is one of the reasons why Roman Catholics include them with their Old Testaments. The order of the books in our Old Testaments also comes from the Septuagint. The books are not arranged chronologically but by type. The Old Testament begins with five books of the Law (Pentateuch) and continues with 12 historical books, five wisdom and poetical books and 17 books of prophecy. The three long prophecies (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel) are called 'the major prophets' and the 12 short prophecies 'the minor prophets'.

1. Creation

Humanity created in the image of God

Reading: Genesis 1:1-2:3

The Bible starts with the book of Genesis. If you remember nothing else from this session, knowing that one thing would put you ahead of most Americans. Author Philip Yancey writes:

Half of all adult Americans cannot identify the Bible's first book as Genesis.
And 14% identify Joan of Arc as Noah's wife.

In the modern world, science attempts to offer its own theories of origins and operations and makes no room for God. Genesis 1 offers an explanation of how the world operates, not only for the people of ancient Israel but also for people today who put their faith in the Bible. Genesis makes no attempt to describe cosmology in modern terms or to address modern questions. We must not make the Bible say what it is not saying nor to answer questions that it is not asking - but one thing is for sure, without Genesis the rest of the Bible would make little sense.

'Genesis' means 'origin' or 'beginnings'. It is a book of 'beginnings'. The first eleven chapters of Genesis give accounts of the origins of different things (aetiological stories) – the universe (sun, moon and stars) and the earth (plants, birds, fish, animals, and particularly humanity).

Human relationships with God are explored. At the outset, the relationship of God the creator with the man and the woman he created is explored. Then, interpersonal relationships are explored - first between the man and the woman together in sex, marriage and family life, and then, as all the relationships break down, through sin, death and murder - and that's just the first four chapters!

The creation story is clearly very old. It is written in the simplest language and yet is most beautifully structured. The Bible starts: 'In the beginning, God' (Genesis 1:1). It is both profound and perfectly clear. God creates by his powerful word. God is the mighty creator of the heavens and the earth. The vastness of the universe where the unit of measurement is the light-year (light travels at 186,282 miles per second) causes us to wonder at the awesomeness of God and smallness of humanity.

We can only make a passing reference to the apparent conflict between the theories of modern science and the creation account. It is not necessary to make science and Scripture enemies. Instead, it is better to seek to harmonise science and Scripture. Far from being fixed, science is developing and not static. While some geologists tell us that the earth took billions of years to form, other geologists offer more conservative estimates – they can't all be right!

On the other hand, while the Bible is inspired by God our interpretation of it may not always be (e.g. the Bible uses the language of appearance and describes the sun as rising and setting – we know that is how things *appear* – even scientists speak of sunrise and sunset). Many interesting attempts are being made to harmonise the two – is there a gap in time between verse 2 and verse 3? Are the 'days' meant to be understood as eras? In Genesis, are we dealing with visions of the past, rather like in Revelation, through which the Apostle John was given visions of the future.

The most important thing we gain from Genesis is a picture of God, our creator. The Genesis approach is different from so much modern thinking. In the modern world, people seem to accept the existence of everything else and question the existence of God. In the Bible, the existence of God is accepted and explains the existence of everything else.

God is personal. The Bible describes him as having a mind that thinks, a heart that feels and voice that speaks. God is living and God communicates – with us (people who are made in his 'image', Genesis 1:27). The good qualities that distinguish humanity from animals perhaps point to the divine 'image' (not least original speech in the 'Word').

2. Fall

Sin enters the world

Reading: Genesis 3:1-24

There are essentially two main themes in the Bible: what has gone wrong with our world and how it can be put right.

(David Pawson)

After the account of creation, Genesis continues in a carefully constructed literary style. The New Testament assumes the historicity of this account and argues from it, but this need not force us into a wooden and unhelpful exegesis (what is the Bible saying?). The New Testament book of Revelation is sometimes described as 'apocalyptic' (a glimpse into that which is hidden). What kind of writing are the early chapters of Genesis? Are they some kind of 'retrospective apocalyptic', a glimpse into proto-history? If we accept that interpretation, it is possible to accept a real Adam and a real Eve, without necessarily interpreting the talking serpent and the trees with special properties literally.

The tempter's first ploy was to cause the woman to doubt the Word of God

Did God really say, 'you must not eat from any tree in the garden'?

(Genesis 3:1).

The woman was on shaky ground when, in response, she misquoted the Word of God. The temptation seemed so reasonable, the commandment so unreasonable. Temptation often has as its basis humanity in the place of God.

You will be like God, knowing good and evil.

(Genesis 3:5)

Temptation often looks attractive.

The fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom.

(Genesis 3:6)

Those tempted readily find excuses for doing what they want and passing the blame. First the man blames the woman. Indeed, there is a hint that he is blaming God!

The woman you put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree and I ate it'

(Genesis 3:12)

The woman, in turn, blames the serpent.

The serpent deceived me, and I ate.

(Genesis 3:13).

Unbelief is soon followed by disobedience and disobedience is followed by broken relationships, deceit and judgment. The breakdown in relationships results in the man and woman hiding from God, and hiding themselves from each other. The most intimate and pure relationship is now open to shame and impurity. Soon, the first murder is recorded yet this chapter also has a promise. As sin came into the world through the woman so the Saviour will also come through the woman for it is her offspring that will crush the serpent's head (3: 15).

3. Flood

Judgement upon sin

Reading: Genesis 6:9-22, 7:17-8:22, 9:12-13

Many ancient peoples have stories of a great flood within their traditions (including the Ebla tablets found in Syria, and the Babylonian story which has similarities to the Genesis account). It is not entirely clear from the text whether we are meant to understand a flood that went all the way around the world or a flood that covered the known-world at that time (i.e. Mesopotamia). The main emphasis of the Bible account is why the flood happened.

The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.

(Genesis 6:5-6)

The story of 'The flood' often misnamed 'Noah's ark' can be divided into three sections. In the first section (Genesis 6:1-7:5), God reveals that the world is so wicked that only one man, Noah, who walks with God, and his family will be spared from the flood that marks God's judgment. In obedience to God's command, Noah builds a great boat (ark) and retains a pair of unclean animals and seven pairs of clean animals.

In the second section (Genesis 7:6-24), 40 days of rain flood the earth and everything is drowned except that which is in the floating ark. Finally, in the third section (Genesis 8:1-9:17), after 150 days the water level drops and the ark is grounded. Noah sends out a raven that returns, and then a dove which first returns with an olive leaf but then does not come back. Noah sacrifices to God. God makes a covenant with Noah and his descendants of which the rainbow is a sign.

Unlike the familiar artists' impressions of the ark (often a traditionally shaped boat with a little house on the top), according to the dimensions given in Genesis, the ark would have been longer than a football pitch with room for over 400 double-decker buses. We are not given any details as to the precise shape of the ark but the proportions would have made it incredibly stable.

The account of Noah begins with some undoubtedly difficult references. The sons of God are said to have married the daughters of men (Genesis 6:2). A widely held view is that the *sons of God* refer to the pious, godly line of Seth (Adam's third son) who mingle themselves with the children of Cain (the first murderer who killed Abel his brother). What is clear is that humanity continues in its wicked downward spiral but, although God is patient, divine judgment on persistent sin is inevitable.

Even after the flood humanity is still depraved and still misusing God's gifts but the story includes an account of the covenant (or sacred promise) of God, signified in the rainbow.

Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.

(Genesis 8:21-22)

And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come."

(Genesis 9:12)

4. Tower

The international consequences of sin

Reading: Genesis 11:1-9

The story of the Tower of Babel is another story to do with origins – this time why the world has so many languages.

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

(Genesis 11:1-2)

The plain of Shinar is in modern Iraq (ancient Babylonia). The people had discovered a new technology (the ability to make bricks and mortar). Believing they had the means of guaranteeing their own unity and security they set about the building of a great tower, with the aim of reaching into heaven and challenging heaven's authority by making a name for themselves.

Remains have been found in Mesopotamia of ziggurats, or temple towers, several stories high with a temple on top. The tower, to which this story refers, may have been something like that. The idea seems to be to build your way to heaven, with men and women becoming the means of their own salvation.

The grandiose plan is typical of human pride. The builders thought their work was very splendid but even the materials were particularly prone to decay. In the sight of God it was all really rather small.

But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building.

(Genesis 11:5)

The futile attempts to get to heaven by their own work offended God very greatly. Babylon was the heart of the ancient world and the centre of its power. To Babylonians 'Babel' meant the gate of the gods.

The divine disruption of language is a sign of judgment at a deep level. Language is fundamental to society. Even very primitive societies have very complex languages. As a general rule the older a language is the more complicated it is. Linguists tell us that although there are about fifty 'language families' in the world, they seem to bear no relation to each other. Though anthropologists agree about the essential oneness of the human race, there is no evidence that there was a common language. Babel offers an explanation.

Unable to communicate, the builders are forced to disperse. God had commanded that the people spread and populate the earth but they had resisted his will. Therefore, by an act of judgment God ensures that his will is ultimately obeyed.

The story of the tower of Babel is a sad description of the fracture of community, of breakdown of fellowship, of failure in communication, of growth in isolation and confusion. It shows the folly of giving pride of place to human achievements, an insistence on trying to reach the heavens, rather than for trusting God, living in obedience to his commands and walking with him in righteousness.

Human rebellion, foolishness, spiritual blindness and unbelief are the dominant issues in the first part of Genesis. It is against this background that plans, promises and salvation of God will be revealed. It is through the line of Adam's third son, Seth, and through the line of Noah's son, Shem, that the one born of woman will come. The long journey towards the birth of Jesus has begun.