

Understanding Creation¹

Creation *Ex Nihilo*

Paul described God as the One “who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist” (Romans 4:17, NASB). His words are the perfect definition of the Hebrew word for “create” (*bara*) used in Genesis 1:1. The word literally means “to bring something into existence that did not exist before.” God created everything that now exists *ex nihilo*, a Latin term meaning “out of nothing.”

A sculptor will take a rough piece of marble and “create” a beautiful statue. A carpenter will cut down a few trees, and “create” a house. But unlike human craftsmen, God did not use any pre-existing material in the creation of the world. He did not merely take a lump of *disorganized* matter and *organize* it into stars, planets, mountains, oceans, plants, animals, and people. God called into being things which did not exist *at all*—in any form! “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made. . . .” God “spoke and it was done; He commanded and it stood fast” (Psalm 33:6,9; also see Hebrews 11:3).

Six Days

What are we to make of the first chapter of Genesis? We are told that God created everything *in six days* (Genesis 1:31; also see Exodus 20:11; 31:17). The word for “day” in the Hebrew language (*yom*) is used in a variety of ways in the Bible. It often refers to a 24 hour day, but it is also used to describe longer periods of time, ages of time, etc. In the New Testament, we are told that “with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day” (2 Peter 3:8, NASB). So how are we to understand the creation account? Does “six days” mean six *literal* days?

If we allow certain scientific theories to color our interpretation of Genesis 1, we will surely prefer the “thousand years” version of a single day, which is often taken to mean any long period of time. And it doesn’t take much imagination to stretch a thousand years into billions and billions of years. But notice how the word is used in Genesis. The individual days of creation are denoted by the phrase, “So the evening and the morning were the first day” (v. 5), “. . . second day” (v. 8), “. . . third day” (v. 13), etc. All of this seems to call to mind a “day” as we know it. And when we study the other uses of the word in the Old Testament, we find that where the word *yom* is preceded by a numerical adjective (i.e. “first,” “second,” “third,” etc., as in Genesis 1), it *always* refers to a twenty-four hour day.

Made in the Image of God

The same theories that stretch creation out over multiple eons also portray man as just an advanced animal—one that crawled a little higher out of the same slimy, primordial ooze that gave birth to fish, frogs, and snakes. But we are not merely the creatures who have climbed to the top of the food chain. From the very first chapter of the Bible we are told that we are different.

Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in His own image; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:26-27).

God made people, not animals, to be like Himself in some sense. Since God is a Spirit (John 4:24) we know the resemblance cannot be physical. But when we understand that God is a self-conscious being who is morally pure, just, creative, and loving, One who does not act on instinct, but rather because of reason and for a purpose—we can begin to see His image in people. The likeness is more difficult to see in *fallen* humanity than it was in the beginning. God’s image in people has been terribly marred through sin. But God has planted a sense of personal moral responsibility in every person. He has instilled in each one a general sense of right and wrong. He has created people to be reasonable, rational beings. God’s image in us is seen in the way we value justice, mercy, and love, even though we often distort them. It is why we are creative, artistic, and musical. These things simply cannot be said about even the most intelligent of the animals.

Dominion Over Creation

From the beginning, God has placed people in charge of the earth (Genesis 1:28). Through the power He created in nature (i.e. heat, cold, storms, floods, famines, plagues, earthquakes, fires, etc.) God often reminds us that He is the only true Sovereign. But He has given humans the authority and responsibility to use the earth’s resources to suit their needs. Certainly we must exercise our God-given authority wisely. We must *use*, not *abuse*, what God has given us. But we may cut, mine, build, cultivate, harness, and domesticate as we see fit. For food, clothing, protection, or other needs, we have even been granted the authority to kill lesser creatures when necessary.

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