

The Word of God in Creation

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The Word of God in Creation

4 For the word of the LORD is upright,
 And all His work is *done* in faithfulness.
 5 He loves righteousness and justice;
 The earth is full of the lovingkindness of the LORD.
 6 By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
 And by the breath of His mouth all their host.
 7 He gathers the waters of the sea together as a heap;
 He lays up the deeps in storehouses.
 8 Let all the earth fear the LORD;
 Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him.
 9 For He spoke, and it was done;
 He commanded, and it stood fast.
 10 The LORD nullifies the counsel of the nations;
 He frustrates the plans of the peoples.
 11 The counsel of the LORD stands forever,
 The plans of His heart from generation to generation.
 12 Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD,
 The people whom He has chosen for His own inheritance (Psa 33:4-12 NASB).

Introduction

Genesis chapter one records the beginning of time and reality as we know and experience it in the physical world. Our entire basic context upon which our existence depends – our hopes, fears, experiences and frame of reference, even life itself, as we now know it, started here. All things were set in motion from this beginning. Everything God hoped to accomplish with this material existence started here encapsulated in embryo form, aimed and given direction by the Living One in Whom has dwelt total wisdom and power from out of all eternity. Actually, we and all reality we know is what has come out of eternity, not Him. He brought us out of eternity and the eternal context in which He had always lived to give us a share of life and to start the pages of history turning toward His eternal purpose. There is no end to the contemplation of what happened “in the beginning”, described for us in Genesis chapter one, the beginning of the book of beginnings. Its very sobering and absolute in proportion. Equally so, even stunning, I think, is to realize it all began with a word from the Divine. He used language to start everything

we know as reality. The language of God. This paper, with God's help, will look briefly at three aspects to the use of Divine speech as "God created the heavens and the earth".

First we'll look at the creative force of God's word. Second, we'll examine lessons to be learned about the power of God to carry out His plans. And third, we'll look at what can be learned about the character of God from His use of words to bring reality into existence.

Creative Force

Actually, in the first act of creation we are left in ignorance of the methodology. We read only that "God created". This was the beginning, a formless, empty, dark mixture of what might be called the mother of it all. The next six days were filled with the speaking of God saturating the universe with order and life. "Then God said" changed everything and set in motion a plan He had conceived in eternity. A plan conceived in eternity to create a window of separate reality called time and space where reality was measurable and finite. God chose His word to be the means to accomplish this. Why? There must have been infinite ways He could have brought these same conclusions to bear. He chose to bring them to bear with words. A full discussion of the "why" question is beyond the scope of this paper. We will only try to learn from the "what" that happened and leave the "why" for another day.

Verbal Creation

The fact is that God spoke and things that never existed in any form whatsoever came into existence. He "calls into being that which does not exist" (Rom 4:17 NASB). "For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast." (Psa 33:9 NASB). This is astonishing. Speech is for us as unconscious as breathing. It's among the easiest things we do. To think that such a comprehensive and thoroughgoing work as the creation of the universe was accomplished so effortlessly is incredulous to us. This may be behind the reluctance of so many to support this

view of creation in Genesis – its beyond the scope of our view of God. In fact, I think, we probably don't want to conceive of God as having this kind of omnipotence. We feel threatened, especially at the point of creation. We don't want authority over us at all, much less one like this. If He created the universe, then He has a right, even a responsibility to regulate and care for it and us – this means accountability and judgment. We'd, even as Christians, rather be irresponsible.

Incredulous or not, “He spoke and it was done”. Faith is the “necessary starting point for any consideration of the doctrine”¹ of creation. James Houston puts it this way, “Each deed of creation is accomplished by the Word. God's will is spoken, and with His speech the deed is done. The Word is the deed.”²

Clarity

This is not a matter that can be torn apart and looked at empirically or in some sort of rational way. Its an irrational statement according to our still often modernistic thinking. God either did it by speaking or not. As soon as qualifications or equivocations are added, its not *creatio per verbum*, creation by the word or verbal creation any more. “By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible” (Heb 11:3 NASB). Even the historical and common assertion of *creatio ex nihilo*, creation out of nothing, takes away from the point of creation by the word. The latter end of the above verse and other evidences make clear that creation out of nothing is true and that God is separate and distinct from His creation. He alone and not matter is eternal. But I agree with James Houston, at least on this point of his thoughts on creation out of nothing. The emphasis this teaching has carried for so long “tends to turn our attention towards how the

¹ New Bible Dictionary. 3rd ed. s.v. “Creation.”

² James Houston, *I Believe in the Creator*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 53.

creation was formed”³ and the process and mechanism rather than allowing us to dwell on the wonder of creation by the speech of God. In so doing, our reverence for the power of God and His word is diminished. Certainly, we must counter untruth with truth and be on guard for ourselves and for all the flock (Acts 20:28 NASB). However, the church has had a habit through the years of maintaining a defensive posture to the damage of positive proclamation. Things must be different. The creation literature of our own time is dominated, as well, with defending God’s creating against evolution rather than proclaiming it and learning from it to supply our lives with the knowledge of Him and give ourselves, our proclamation of the gospel and our culture the solid foundation of a creation oriented framework for life.

The biblical account itself is a good example of the right way to do this. Far from restating or accommodating other ancient creation stories, as some have insisted, the Genesis account is actually a polemic countering them.⁴ The way this is done is by statement of the truth, taking a positive track rather than a defensive one, which inevitably gives some ground away or concedes plausibility to some degree. Genesis seems to say, “Let them come attack this, if they dare. Here is the truth and here we stand.”

The Genesis account is clearly different in a number of ways. Orderly process, declaration mode and the elevation of man are three of these. Moltmann says, “The world, we are told here (in the Priestly Writing), is not the result of a struggle between the gods, as the Enuma Elish epic says. Nor was it born from a cosmic egg, or from some primordial matter.”⁵ Henry Morris, in *The Twilight of Evolution*, says, “One striking fact emerges from the study of all the ancient cosmogonic myths, whether from Babylon, Greece, Egypt, India, or wherever.

³ James Houston, *I Believe in the Creator*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 51.

⁴ Ibid., crediting Hasel, 64.

⁵ Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1985), 72.

The concept that the universe had originally been *created*, out of nothing, by an act of God, is completely absent. Always there is a primeval chaos or a primeval system of some kind, upon which the "gods," or the forces of nature, begin to work in order to bring the world and its inhabitants into their present state. Special creation seems to have been a doctrine completely unknown (or, if known, rejected) by the ancients."⁶ The New Bible Dictionary states about the creation of man, "The ancient world held that the gods were not wholly in favor of human existence. . . . Genesis paints a very different scenario. The creation of mankind is the climax of the creation story. . . . the creation of man is no afterthought: the previous five days' activity builds up to it."⁷

Perhaps the greatest difference with other creation accounts is the presence of only the one true Deity in clear contrast to the prevailing polytheistic notions of the time. This is clear from all the commentators and practically goes without saying.

There are some things in common, such as similar sequences of events, but even here a different message and emphasis prevails(NBD, 240).⁸ So we see that the Genesis account of God's activity in creation stands in contrast to the surrounding cultures and speaks against them, or rather, for the truth, in a positive, declarative way. Let's deal with questions related to the "how" of creation, evolution and science of creation, even reemerging dualistic systems that see matter as eternal, but let's abandon our preoccupation with the aspect of the process. It obscures the main point God wants us to see – that He did it and He did it with His word. That's really all we must need to know about the "how" question, since that's all the Scripture really reveals – the Living God did it and He did it with His word.

⁶ Henry Morris, *The Twilight of Evolution*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1963), 75.

⁷ *New Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Creation",240

⁸ Ibid.

Besides the preoccupation with secular “how” explanations, there are some who want to spiritualize the account of creation. This obscures the power of God’s word in creation also. Jack Cottrell has an excellent section, in *What the Bible Says about God the Creator*, on this tendency in philosophy and theology. Beginning this section, he says, “It is significant, however, that in modern philosophy and theology the doctrine of creation is more and more being separated from the concept of the beginning of the universe. The idea of creation *ex nihilo* is either questioned or reinterpreted to stand for a particular kind of relationship between God and man. The idea of a beginning is dismissed as unimportant.”⁹ Cottrell quotes a number of recent thinkers in support of this statement. Among them is Gustaf Aulen, “. . . faith’s affirmations about creation do not imply a theoretical proposition about the origin of the universe, but rather a religious statement about the nature of the relation between God and man.”¹⁰

Why are we shy about our stand on origins? Are we embarrassed by God’s word? Have we given ground to scientific theory and accepted the verdict of the ungodly that sees the Genesis account as rationally ludicrous and absurd? Balance is, again, at issue. Certainly, a relationship is inherent in the facts of creation. We are certainly dependent on our Creator. But there’s no need to avoid the admittedly confrontational issue of origins. Truth is not subject to social and cultural pressure. As Cottrell says in conclusion, “It is just because creation is the absolute origination of the universe that the universe (including man) is absolutely dependent upon God. The former is what makes the latter true.”¹¹

⁹ Jack Cottrell, *What the Bible Says about God the Creator*, (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1983), 100.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, quoting Aulen, 102.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

Again, we don't apologize for what God says. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." He did it and He did it with His word.

8 Let all the earth fear the LORD;
Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him.
9 For He spoke, and it was done;
He commanded, and it stood fast. (Psa 33:8, 9 NASB)

Nurture

Finally, we must look an aspect of the creative force of God's word that is connected to original creation by extension. Does our Creator step back from His creation once the initial startup is accomplished? Does He plug it in and then leave it to run on its own? This would be the view of the Deist, is it correct? What is the means by which the universe continues once it is begun?

According to the Scripture, it seems clear that the Creator is also the Caretaker. He (Jesus Christ, specifically) "upholds all things by the word of His power (Heb 1:3 NASB)". Colossians adds that "in Him all things hold together (Col 1:17 NASB)", also, II Peter 3:7 confirms, "the present heavens and earth by His word are being reserved". God by His word, it seems, is still attentive to the needs of His "child" which He made. "God's continuing creative preservation of the world in existence is as vital as the initial act of creation."¹² Gustaf Wingren quotes Martin Luther on this, "When you hear this saying, 'and God spake', beware that you do not think that it is a passing saying such as we men speak; know that it is an eternal saying, which is spoken from eternity and continues to be spoken. . . . But it continues to speak and goes on without interruption, for no creature can maintain his own existence."¹³

¹² Ibid., 104.

¹³ Gustaf Wingren, quotes Luther, *The Living Word*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 72-73.

We are assured of the continuing care in the physical realm by our Creator. He is, by His word, companion to us physically as He is, by His Spirit, to us spiritually. This is as unknowable to me as the fact of original beginning by His word. Perhaps it's what Paul meant by, "in Him we live and move and exist" (Acts 17:28 NASB). He's here with His word nurturing and sustaining and continuing to create all things, even our own lives.

Spiritual and Character Creation

There seems to be a generative energy when God speaks that gives life, either initiating it or sustaining it, if there is really much difference. His word gives eternal life to us, as well as temporal life. We are "a new creature", "created in Christ Jesus" and "created in righteousness and holiness of the truth" (2 Cor 5:17, Eph 2:10, 4:24). We know that we are "born again . . . through the living and abiding word of God (1 Pet 1:23 NASB)." The Genesis account should shake and stir us to think of what God's word can do in us. His word established the mountains, the oceans and the mighty forces of the physical world. The word of God placed the stars in the heavens, the distant galaxies we continue to discover. Also the smallest particles and forces, the intranuclear glue of all matter, some of which we also continue to discover and know only by their mathematical necessity, completely undetectable by any device of measurement we have developed. All this our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ have flicked into reality with a word.

God, now says, "Listen, that you may live" (Isa 55:3 NASB). "Long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation" (1 Pet 2:2 NASB) that is, "the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe" (1 Thess 2:13 NASB). May God forgive us for reading the Bible like any other book and resisting or ignoring His Spirit who is engaged to "reveal His Son" (Gal 1:16) in us. "See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking" (Heb 12:25 NASB).

Power of God

What can God do? How great is He? Specifically, since so much rides on promises He has made throughout history, can He fulfill them? How do we know? Is there some demonstration of His power that can be seen to reassure us? Maybe a miracle of some sort – healing someone with an impossible illness or changing something into something else. We tend to associate God’s great power with the alteration of physical laws for some reason. Why not something within the established, known laws that govern the way things work? Why do we always want Him to change what’s been established? Is that really more difficult for Him than to do something within the system? What would it take for us to have the confidence in Him that He deserves? How about if He were to establish out of nothing all of reality as we know it? If He were to fling the entire universe into place, would that be enough to convince us, or would we want Him to walk on water or something?

Assurance

I see in the creation of the universe with mere speech, the greatest possible demonstration of God’s power I can think of. Maybe someone with more intelligence could come up with something better, but that does it for me.

9For He spoke, and it was done;
He commanded, and it stood fast.
.....
11The counsel of the LORD stands forever,
The plans of His heart from generation to generation.

We see the contextual emphasis here. The reliability of the Creator to carry out His plans, “Plans *formed* long ago, with perfect faithfulness” (Isa 25:1 NASB). He has given us in the relatively short but poignant and poetic first chapter of Genesis, all we really need to know about His ability to carry out promises made throughout history.

Making Plans

We know that God was busy thinking before He created our universe. He was busy deciding and foreknowing and planning and simply being in relationship with Himself as the perfect self-contained and self-sustaining and self-fulfilled Triune God. He chose to create for His own glory and creating knew the “risks” of placing creatures with prerogatives in His universe. Not only did He go ahead and place us here but we seem to have been the point of it all. This paper is not the place to sort out the ideas and truths about foreknowledge and reality and plans and purposes. There is a great section in Cottrell’s book mentioned earlier, *What the Bible Says about God the Creator*, that covers these things in some detail. He says, “Thus God’s purpose in creation stands in its own independent integrity.”¹⁴ And, “Creation does not serve the purposes of redemption, but redemption serves the purposes of creation.”¹⁵

Let us simply speak of these things as they seem to be (to me) and go with that for now without explanations or examination, if I may be allowed. God created the universe and man as the original plan to accomplish greater self giving glory for Himself. Self giving because the way God gets or generates glory is by being who He is, giving and serving and loving as He always has for the ages of eternity. Creation provided the opportunity for more of this giving and serving and loving coupled with a doubling of the returns by sharing these with creatures that could give it all back in return and share it with one another. God came upon a way to increase what He already had in perfect measure by giving freewill creatures the opportunity to respond to and so fulfill His love.

¹⁴ Cottrell, *What the Bible*, 181.

¹⁵ Ibid., 183

Things, of course, went awry and a plan had to be developed to get things back on track and still accomplish the original purpose. God cannot fail to do what He sets out to do regardless of the obstacles. The plan started in a garden with one couple and will end in a city full of people redeemed from the earth. Its going to work out just fine.

Implementation by Word

Each step of the way, as the plan has unfolded, God's word has gone first. There was always God's word of prediction or promise first, then the event. Promises to Abraham first, then a son and a nation. Prophetic word first, then the Messiah. Creation assures us that God's word is sufficient to carry out the plan because it already carried out the plan that everything else is taking place within, the verbally generated universe.

Psalms demonstrate this principle of the assurance creation gave that God would carry out all His plans the same as He did in the origination of the universe. After repeating the promise made to David to keep his descendants on the throne of Israel forever, we find a series of verses on the wonders of God and His power. "O Lord God of hosts, who is like You, O mighty Lord? Your faithfulness also surrounds You" (Psa 89:8, 9 NASB). Included in this section we find the following,

11 The heavens are Yours, the earth also is Yours;
The world and all it contains, You have founded them.
12 The north and the south, You have created them;
Tabor and Hermon shout for joy at Your name.
13 You have a strong arm;
Your hand is mighty, Your right hand is exalted (Psa 89:11-13).

Clearly, creation story is a part of this context of the mighty power of God. It is included to substantiate God's possession of what He has created as well as to illustrate His power. Remember what started all this, a reminder of the Messianic promise to David, which is

followed, again, by the rehearsal and recognition of the greatness of the One who had made the promise, including the creation phrases.

Watching the plan of redemption unfold throughout history is very revealing. We see that “what God had promised, He was able also to perform” (Rom 4:21). With deliberation and wisdom a holy and loving Creator is carefully carrying out His plan for glory through the salvation of fallen mankind, creatures made in His image.

Character of God

What can we learn about God Himself from His use of words to form the heavens and the earth and the life that inhabits these? Again, He could have chosen any method to create but He chose words. Why? “Because God is good, He saw that all that He had done was good. Likewise, as we shall see later, the righteousness, the justice and the wisdom of God are reflected also in the moral ordering of creation. Thus all the creative works of God reflect upon His character, revealing who He is.”¹⁶

Person

Words reveal, first of all, that God is a Person. Not a person like we know, not human, of course, but possessive of traits we can recognize and even see in ourselves.¹⁷ By person, here, we mean a possessor of life and consciousness capable of being understood and understanding. Understanding and communication, the exchange of ideas, of thoughts seems to be a central driving force in the makeup of our Triune God. “O that my people would listen to Me” (Psa 81:13 NASB). Speech, or using words to communicate, is one of the most basic elements of who the Divine is, and by association, who we are, being made in His image, though flawed.

¹⁶ Houston, *I Believe*, 54.

¹⁷ Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible (1988), Vol. 1, s.v. “Creation.”, 540.

He would need to send His own essence to earth to be the image we have failed to be. Christ became the unflawed “image of the invisible God”(Col 1:15 NASB) living life for us in our place the way we were meant to have lived it. But even in man, God placed a stamp of Himself, an unmistakable likeness that He has been drawn to down through history, in spite of the degradation, and pain caused, the frustration and disappointment, the embarrassment we must have caused Him before the angels, especially Satan. Jurgen Moltmann has said, “Whatever this may mean for human beings and their position in creation . . . what it means for God is that in creation he does not merely want to recognize his work; he also wants in his work to recognize himself. The creation of God’s image on earth means that in his work God finds, as it were, the mirror in which he recognizes his own countenance – a correspondence which resembles him.”¹⁸

Power

We have already mentioned the power of God that is displayed by His use of words to create. This unique way to communicate supreme mastery or authority was recognized by some during the time of Jesus’ ministry. “Just say the word” (Lk 7:7 NASB), we hear. Jesus, in fact, often healed with a word, “Go in peace and be healed” (Mk 5:34 NASB). Martin Luther says of the power of God in spoken creation, “Wherefore we are to learn, from this book of Genesis, the *power* of God; that we may accustom ourselves to doubt nothing of those things which God promises in His word! For in this glorious and marvelous creation work is there laid a confirmation of our faith in all the *promises of God*: that there is nothing so difficult, nothing so seemingly impossible which God cannot do and perfect by His word. For all this is here proved by God’s creation of the heaven, of the earth, and of the sea, and of all that they contain.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 77.

¹⁹ Langdon Gilkey, quoting Luther, *Maker of Heaven and Earth*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1959), 279.

Praise

A good heart cannot help but be stirred to worship by the facts of creation.

O may Your glorious name be blessed
 And exalted above all blessing and praise!
 6You alone are the LORD.
 You have made the heavens,
 The heaven of heavens with all their host,
 The earth and all that is on it,
 The seas and all that is in them.
 You give life to all of them
 And the heavenly host bows down before You (Neh 9:5, 6 NASB).

These events take our breath away, they're stunning in scope and importance. Scientific knowledge only increases our wonder. To realize it all happened at a word from the Sovereign crystallizes His status in our hearts and sirs a reverence and awe that is lost on many in a time when our regard for secular theories of origins have made us reluctant, at best, to acknowledge the One who made our world with a word. "As soon as we are aware of ourselves as creatures made by the hand of the almighty God, our hearts should be filled with an overwhelming sense of fear, awe, and reverence toward the one who has made us."²⁰

8Let all the earth fear the LORD;
 Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him.
 9For He spoke, and it was done;
 He commanded, and it stood fast (Psa 33:8, 9 NASB).

²⁰ Cottrell, *What the Bible Says*, 443.

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