

John Docherty, June 11, 2017

“... The light was good ...”

Creation stories are wonderful things. I think every society, every cultural group, has its myth of how it all began. They give expression, on some level, to the question I think we all pose ourselves at some point : “Why are we here?”

I frankly don't think we'd have these stories if we didn't seek an answer to that question.

If the only things that interested us were the practicalities of day-to-day existence :

- Where is my next meal coming from?
- Where can I find shelter?
- How can I keep safe?

I doubt very much that we would bother much with the how and why of that existence. We would simply get on with the business of living.

But we *do* ask ourselves that question in one way or another :

- How did all this come to be?
- Is there meaning to it all?
- Are we just a fluke of nature; a random product of a series of random molecular interactions?
- Do we matter?

Even dyed-in-the-wool scientific atheists ponder this, I suspect. They may decide that the answer is “no – there is no moral significance to all of this ordered chaos”, but they won't come to this conclusion before having at least asked themselves the question.

That's not to say that there is no morality if there is no moral significance to existence. Every society establishes its own moral code for the sake of any hope of survival as a community. That moral code may be some version of “the survival of the fittest”, or “might is right”, but it is a moral code nonetheless.

Even if the moral code is nothing more than a utilitarian recognition of the need for some kind of social contract to avoid anarchy and the ultimate breakdown of any hope of a stable social structure, it is a partial answer to this question :

Why are we here?

But it's only a partial answer to that question, and not really a particularly satisfying partial answer, because it's really only an answer to the question :

“What do we need to do to get along well enough to have any kind of stability?”

The ancient Hebrews formulated their own answer to the question “Why are we here?” in a cultural context that was rife with other creation stories that tried to answer the question. Most, if not all, of the surrounding cultures answered the question with descriptions of multiple gods vying for ascendancy and creating the world as we know it in an attempt to have their own needs met.

The Sumerians, writing about 2,000 BC, spoke of a “primeval sea” from which is drawn land, then air, then the sun and the moon. Plants, animals and man are then the result of procreation between the air, earth and water. Other gods are also the result of this procreation. The suggestion is that humankind is created to provide offerings to the gods, allowing them the leisure to pursue their own selfish interests.

The Akkadians, (with a “K”, not a “C”) about 1,000 BC, spoke of a similar mating of a fresh water god and a salt water god with a resulting multitude of lesser gods. There is much strife and violence between these gods, with the spilled blood of these deities being mixed with clay to produce humankind – again, with a view to serving the gods.

All of these creation stories, including the Hebrew story in the book Genesis, basically depict a scene of chaos that is finally brought under control somehow, to produce an ordered universe.

What I find interesting about the account in Genesis is its fundamentally optimistic outlook.

While the other creation stories dwell on fantastic and epic battles between forces beyond the control of humans, and far outside our experience of life, the Genesis story is, by comparison, a somewhat tame and poetic picture of domestic bliss.

It begins with a kind of chaos, yes. We're told that the earth was without form and void, and that there was darkness above this primeval sea.

But this isn't the chaos of violence and narcissistic gods and demi-gods. It's the chaos of disordered matter; the chaos of apparently meaningless existence; the chaos of undefined being.

I'm not even sure it can be rightly described as chaos. I think when most of us think of

chaos we think of a state of disruption; of something that is somehow inherently wrong or undesirable. We like order. But there's no hint here of turbulence; of distress of some kind. In fact, I think the idea of chaos carries with it a somewhat negative connotation simply because we humans are uncomfortable with disorder and have a felt need to bring things under control.

I'm married to a Dutch woman – I know of what I speak.

So ... we're told that the earth was without form and void, but this isn't presented as somehow disturbing. In fact, we're also told that above this primeval sea the Spirit of God is moving.

There is, I think, a somewhat comforting component to this piece of information : we're not dealing with a frightening and dangerous place of unknowns. We're dealing with a universe where God is already actively present, hovering over the nascent universe that *we're* familiar with, much like a mother hen hovering over her chicks – a metaphor we'll meet again in the New Testament.

But it *is*, as the story makes clear, a place of darkness.

So the first act of God's creation is the production of light.

And this is where the story truly takes on the note of optimism that is absent from the other creation stories of the region : God creates light, and God sees that the light is good.

This theme of the goodness of creation is then repeated over and over again as the poetry of the myth takes on its form and presents us with a picture of a Creator who is pleased with the results of this act of creation. There's no hint *here* of humankind being brought into existence with the sole purpose of serving violent, self-absorbed, and capricious gods. In these first lines of the Hebrew understanding of God's creation, we have, instead, a series of stages, each of which is assessed by God and found to be good, and each of which contributes to the wholeness of existence.

By the time we get to the end of the fourth day of this creation story, God has created light, which is good;

then the Heavens, which is also good;

then dry land and vegetation, which is also good;

and finally, the sun, the moon and the stars, all of which are seen to be good.

On the fifth day then, we have the beginning of what is clearly presented as a generous and loving act of giving life to multiple creatures. On this day, we're told that God said "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." That too, is seen to be good, but then we're told that God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth."

And that, I think, is significant. God doesn't just create and smugly declare "... nice piece of work, eh ... ?" (God obviously chooses to use Canadian forms of expression when being humbly self-congratulatory).

No. God creates, sees that the creation is good, then *blesses* what has been created. These beasts have been given life, and they are then given God's blessing that they might flourish and multiply. There's a warmth to that act that goes beyond a simple, mechanical building of something. It seems to me that the writer of these words recognizes a level of intimacy here that we don't see in the earlier acts of creation.

We're not told that God blessed the light.

We're not told that God blessed the Heavens.

We're not told that God blessed the dry land.

We're not told that God blessed the sun and the moon and the stars.

We're not even told that God blessed the vegetation, though it too is made up of living things.

But, for some reason, we're told that God blessed the fish of the sea and the birds of the air – living, breathing creatures that somehow now have not only life, but also a special relationship to the Creator.

We're not told that God blesses the other living creatures mentioned – cattle and creeping things and wild animals – but I expect they're included in the blessing that is given to humankind.

It is, as I've said, a note of optimism that sets the stage for all that is to come. A God who gives life generously, with a blessing and a desire for a fruitful sharing of existence.

God even then provides for a day of rest. It doesn't get much better than that.

Of course, the Genesis creation story doesn't end with this idyllic paradise of sunshine, singing birds and fluttering butterflies.

It fairly quickly takes a dark turn into deception, disobedience and death. By the end of the third chapter of Genesis, creation has been tainted, and this intimate relationship of blessing has been compromised.

But it doesn't start that way.

It starts with an upbeat, positive appreciation of the value of life and relationship, and the rest of this Book is a scrapbook of the many ways in which we have tried to regain that.

And I think this is why this creation story is so basic to our understanding of God, even if it is not to be read literally. It is a declaration that we believe, first of all, that we are dependent on a Creator – a Creator whose vision includes life, and blessing.

And secondly, it's a declaration by the writer that life is to be valued;

that it is a gift freely given by God;

and that in spite of all that may come our way to cause us to question the goodness of this life (and there is plenty of potential for raising *that* question), that God's act of giving us life is fundamentally *good* (mosquitos and black flies notwithstanding).

And for all the struggling and failure that fills most of this Book, this initial optimism is recaptured in chapters 21 and 22 of the book of Revelation, in spite of so much in *that* book that is difficult and other-worldly.

Chapter 21 starts with these words :

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

‘See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.’

Chapter 22 of the Book of Revelation then carries on with these words:

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light ...”

The Book of Revelation has its share of dire warnings and dark prophecies, but I think these two short passages capture the vision of hope and optimism of the early writer of Genesis : that God has created everything with a view to blessing it, that we were created for relationship, and that the goodness of God's initial creation will someday be regained

.