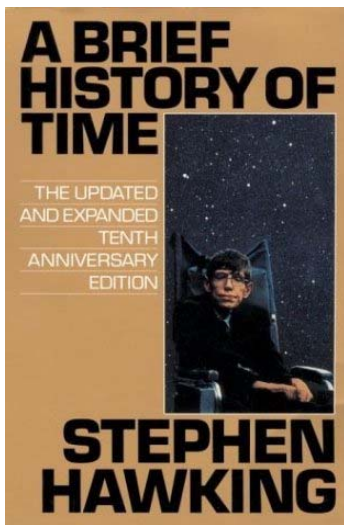


Genesis 1.26-31

Discovering Our Origins



You may have come across this book. Has anyone read it ? It has been described as “one of the greatest books I’ve never read”. There were thousands of copies sold, but many gathered dust on the shelves.

The irony is that it was written by Hawking with the non-specialist, the average person, in mind. It is designed to explain the origin of the universe. But does it do that for us if none of us can understand what it says ?

Compare it with Genesis chapter 1. It is so readable, so approachable and so appealing ! A child could comprehend it. An adult can ponder its depths. It is simple and majestic, profound yet clear.

It does not deal with the scientific mechanics of the origin of the universe, yet it really does communicate about our origins. It gives us the meaning of it all ! And it does so with such amazing brevity, such intricacy and such colour, that its brilliance adds credibility to the belief that this account was inspired by God.

Setting the Scene for Humanity

Today we are focusing on the creation of humans in verses 26-31. But we need to begin by seeing that the first part of chapter 1 sets the scene. Last time we saw how the story of creation shows that God is a God of order and fullness, who makes a good creation that is a wonderful habitat in which life can thrive.

What we discover in Day 6 is that humans are the ones for whom the whole work of creation has been made. The narrative is carefully structured to show us that humanity is the pinnacle of creation.

The Climax of Creation

The author uses four ‘markers’ to create the sense of humanity as the peak of God’s creative activity. The **first** is the amount of space given to the description of each day.

Cast your eye over the text of Genesis 1 and notice how the description of each day gets longer and longer. Look at Day 1 in verses 3-5. The description there is quite short. Now look at Day 6, stretching over verses 24-31. It is much longer !

In fact there is a kind of ballooning effect.

Day 1 + 2	31, 38 words	= 69 words
Day 3, 4, 5	69, 69, 57 words	= 195 words (each day is almost double Day 1, 2)
Day 6	149 words	= 149 words (double the length of any Day 3-5)

We form the impression of creation growing in variety and extent. It is all leading to a great climax.

The **second** marker is the fact that humanity is the last of God's works of creation. We often give the final position to what is most important. We call it "saving the best till last". For example, in a concert you will often have a 'Grand Finale', where the music finishes on a great flourish. Humanity is given the most prominent position in the ordering of the account.

The **third** marker is the special introduction to the creation of humans in verse 26:

Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness ...

Every other time it has been "And God said, 'Let there be X ... and it was so". The change in the introduction tells us something. Here we have a unique introduction for a unique creation. We witness God pausing to deliberate within himself which adds a heightened sense of drama and purpose.

The **fourth** marker is the use of the word "create" in verse 27. The author uses this word very sparingly (v 1 and v 21). It is a special word for the creative work of God. The author tends to use "make" and "made" elsewhere. Now look again at v 27:

So God *created* humankind in his image
in the image of God he *created* them

Did you see that ? The word appears three times ! There is a triple underscoring of this work of God. Humans are an extra super special creation of God !

Can you see how wonderfully positive this is ? We have here a beautiful depiction of God's love for humanity. They are the climax of all his creative work. Out of all creation, humans are shown to be God's pride and joy. This 'high view' of humanity is only reinforced by the wording used to describe humanity.

The Image of God

The description of humanity as "in the image of God" (verse 27) is one that exalts humanity. It means that humans are a visible representation of God on earth. In the ANE kings would place a statue (or 'image') of themselves in the areas of their territory to show that they ruled in this place. However, humanity is no mere static statue, but an active exerciser of God's rule over the earth. What a dignified position !

In the ANE, the phrase 'image of God' was applied to the King himself. For example, Pharaoh was said to be "the image of Re", and so the one invested with the power and authority of the god Re to rule. But Genesis 1 applies the phrase "image of God", not to *one* person only, but to the *whole* of humanity ! All humans were created to have a ruling function, not just a small elite. This is a remarkably egalitarian view of humanity when you think about either the ancient or even the modern world, and has radical implications for the way we treat people, contrary to the ways of our world.

But there is a further thing to notice about how this phrase “the image of God” is used. Look at the last part of verse 27:

So God created humankind in his image
in the image of God he created them
male and female he created them.

The phrase “image of God” is applied *equally* to male and female. Both participate in imaging God and ruling the earth. Again if you think about the patriarchal nature of ancient society, you must see that this is a radical statement. What’s more, this is the only distinction in humanity that Genesis 1 allows. No other distinction (race, class, culture, ability etc) is grounded in creation. This is a radical blueprint for harmony in humanity as originally created by God.

At the same time that this description exalts humanity, it also keeps our humanity in perspective. We are not independent beings, but those who derive their existence and status from God. We are who we are by virtue of our relationship to God. The meaning of our existence comes from living out this role as God’s image. Life is defined by relationship to God, and not by anything else (achievement, capacity, personality, biology etc).

In the same way, the term “likeness” in verse 26 shows that we are not “gods”, we are not copies or clones of God. Rather, there is a resemblance, a similarity, but we are not the same. God is still unique, he is over and above all creation and humans are dependent on him.

Likewise, the word “Adam” in verses 26 and 27 (translated “humanity”) comes from the Hebrew word for “earth”. We could translate “Adam” as “earthling”. Humans have a connection with the ground (unlike God), we are earth-bound, and this name is here to help us “stay grounded”.

Now let’s see what God says to the humans.

God’s Blessing

Although God speaks throughout Genesis 1, it is only to the humans that he speaks directly (in verse 28):

God blessed them and *God said to them* “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.

Again we how the whole of creation is made for the humans in the instructions they are given. For these are the main categories of creatures from Genesis 1 (sea, air, land). This is a wonderful habitat for them to rule over.

Again we sense the great abundance of God in the command “be fruitful and multiply and *fill the earth* and subdue it”. God’s word to them is truly a word of blessing. By the way, the word ‘subdue’ does not imply a harsh rule, but rather a sense of the effort

involved. The picture is of humans cultivating the earth, harnessing its potential, breeding the animals, developing science and so on.

We see God providing food for the humans and the animals (verses 29-30), showing his goodness and care for all that he has made. This provides a model for the human rule over creation. It is to be one of love.

Finally we see God surveying the whole panorama of creation in verse 31:

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

The finished whole is even better than the individual parts. Now there is in operation a great harmony that fits God's purpose exactly and reflects his character. And all this is the place of life and dominion for humans. It is like a magnificent palace, with stunning grounds and woods, created as the home for a prince ! God created humans in love and treats them like royalty.

Human Living

There are four implications I would like to draw out for us from this passage.

First, the description shows us that right living is living in line with the truth about us, living as the image of God, reflecting God in his actions. Humans were made to act as God acts. This is "normal" and "natural" human living according to the Bible: obeying God, loving people and ruling creation.

Second, we are set to understand the absolute tragedy of human disobedience. This is humanity living *in contradiction* of its own nature ! It is so out of kilter with what we were created for, it ought to make us groan and weep. The apostle Paul says "I tell you *with tears* ... their god is their stomach". We should never think of disobedience to God as anything less than tragic and heartbreaking.

Third, taking account of human disobedience, it has always been God's plan to send his only Son, the true image of God (Colossians 1.15) to restore humans to his image by restoring us to our proper relationship with God. The way for us to live as the image of God in the present is to continually look to Christ. God is conforming us to the image of his Son (Romans 8.29). This is our life project.

Fourth, we need to see that evangelism is not weird or crazy. We are not asking people to sacrifice "the good life" in order to become miserable Christians ! Rather, we are calling people to find their true humanity in Christ. We are urging them to move from a tragic contradiction of their humanity to its fulfillment in Jesus. This is what gives us confidence and hope in evangelism.

All of the wonder of God's creation captured for us in Genesis 1 spurs us on to desire the future – God's New Creation. The Bible shows us that there is only one difference between the New Creation and the Old – it is like Genesis 1 only *better* ! There our original destiny will be fulfilled, but in an eternal experience of God's grace. As Paul says in Romans 5.17 "those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness [will] exercise *dominion in life* through the one man Jesus Christ". This is your life in Christ: embrace it, live it, love it, do it – for the glory of God !