

Outline notes for two sessions on the biblical creation texts

Length: 2 contact hours (though either hour can be free-standing)

Level: 5

Aim: to give students an understanding of the range and significance of OT creation texts.

Objectives:

- i) to enable students to understand the range of creation narratives in the OT.
- ii) to enable students to understand OT creation texts in their ancient Near Eastern context and to be able to relate them in a responsible way to current scientific ideas about creation.
- iii) to enable students to understand how the OT and later Jewish wisdom thought influenced NT Christology resulting in the pre-existent Son being thought of as the agent in creation, and to appreciate the implications of this for a Christian approach to ecological issues.

Relevant Modules at L5: 2061 Old Testament Studies; 2051 New Testament Studies; 2021 Biblical Studies; also 2121 Topics in Christian Doctrine; 2117 Selected Topics in Christian Doctrine; Issues in Science and Religion (if validated)

Source: Ernest Lucas, vice principal emeritus of Bristol Baptist College and an honorary research fellow in theology and religious studies at the University of Bristol.



Session 1: OT Creation Texts.

Objectives: by the end of this session students will be able to,

1. Understand the range of types of creation narratives in the OT
2. Understand OT creation texts as expressing ideas about creation within the context of an ancient Near Eastern world view.
3. Understand the difference in approach to ideas about creation in these texts and in modern science.
4. Understand how to relate the OT texts to current scientific ideas about creation.

Preparatory reading: Pss. 74, 89; Job 26; Isa. 27:1; 51:9-11.
W. P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation*, chs. 1&2.

Brief discussion of the range of creation texts listed by Brown on p6. Did any of these narratives surprise students? How does this range of texts affect the classic Bible v science dialogue that tends to focus on Gen 1?

Discuss the picture of creation given in Pss. 74:12-17; 89:8-12; Job 26:12-13; Isa. 51:9-10. It is one of God stilling the sea and destroying opponents who are described as sea-monsters, serpents and dragons and two are named as Rahab and Leviathan.

The way Leviathan is described in Isa. 27:1 is significant. Among the stories about Baal found in texts excavated at a Canaanite site in Syria called Ras Shamra, which date to about 1200 BC, are an account of his battle with the Sea and a brief mention of him defeating a monster called Leviathan. The way Leviathan is described as follows:

... you smote Leviathan the fleeing (or slippery) serpent,
and made an end of the wriggling serpent,
the tyrant with seven heads.

With regard to this description the Ugaritic scholar Nicholas Wyatt says (*Religious Texts from Ugarit*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998, 115, n.4), 'The first two lines of this tricolon are, allowing for translation, remarkably close to the Heb. text of Isa. 27:1.' There is also a similarity between the Ugaritic text and Ps. 74:14, where Leviathan is said to have several heads, though the number is not specified. It is also notable that in Job 26:13 there is mention of God piercing 'the fleeing serpent'. There is little doubt that the Leviathan of Hebrew poetry is the monster of the much older Canaanite texts. This shows that, in some respects at least, the Hebrews envisaged creation in the same way as their ancient Near Eastern neighbours did.

Behind these poetic passages in the OT which refer to some kind of conflict at creation, and probably behind the Ugaritic text as well, lies the creation story that we know best from the Babylonian creation epic *Enuma Elish*. (Give a brief summary of it. An English translation of the text is given in S. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*.)

There is an important lesson we need to learn from this. It concerns how God revealed to the ancient Hebrews the truth he wanted them to know, and what that means for how we should interpret the OT. In fact it relates to the whole of the Bible, NT as well as OT. It can be called '*the principle of incarnation*' because it is very obvious in God's self-revelation in Jesus (Jn 1:14). The fullest revelation of God that we have come in the form of

a single human person, of a particular gender and ethnicity, who lived in a particular culture at a particular place and particular moment of human history, and he spoke a particular language. This 'particularity' of the incarnation shaped the way in which the revelation was given. But this is true throughout the Bible. God's message always comes in a form that is 'incarnated' in a particular ethnic, cultural, historical and linguistic context. Moreover, because what we have in the Bible is a written record of that revelation, it also comes in literary forms which are appropriate to the time when it was written down. All this is very relevant to how we interpret the Bible in general and the opening chapters of Genesis in particular.

Genesis 1:1-2:3 assumes the generally accepted 'cosmological geography' held in the ancient Near East. A simple example of this is the 'separator' which God 'made' to separate the waters in Gen. 1:6-8. The Hebrew word used for it implies something solid, probably made of metal. Hence the translation of it as 'a firmament' in the KJV of the Bible. Speaking of the OT in general Prof. John Walton says,

'They [the OT writers] believed the sky was material (not vaporous), solid enough to support the residence of deity as well as hold back the waters. In these ways, and many others, they thought about the cosmos in much the same way that anyone in the ancient world thought, and not like anyone thinks today. And God did not think it important to revise their thinking ... In contrast, it makes perfect sense that God communicated his revelation to his immediate audience in terms they understood ... God could communicate what he desired regardless of one's cosmic geography.' (*The Lost World of Genesis One*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009, 16-18.)

So, the important message in Gen. 1 is not the details of what God made or how it was made, but the theological message that the story conveys.

Ancient Near Eastern creation stories and modern scientific creation accounts have different concerns. Clifford and Collins (R. J. Clifford & J. J. Collins, 'Introduction: The Theology of Creation Traditions', in R. J. Clifford & J. J. Collins, *Creation in the Biblical Traditions*, Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1992, 1-15) have done a study of ancient near-eastern (ANE) creation stories and list four major differences between them and scientific ways of approaching the topic of creation.

1. ANE writers imagine and present divine action in creation on the model of human making or natural activity. Scientists regard creation as the impersonal action of physical forces.
2. The focus of ANE accounts is the emergence of human society. They are primarily concerned about the origins of community and culture. Scientists are primarily concerned about the emergence of the physical world.
3. ANE texts present creation as a drama, a story. The story is usually selective and incomplete because it has a limited purpose. Science offers an account of the unfolding of an impersonal process governed by the laws of nature and seeks to be as comprehensive as possible.
4. The criterion of truth in the ANE accounts is functional, 'Does the story enable me to cope satisfactorily with some aspect of life now?' For scientists the criterion is, 'Does it explain all the scientific data satisfactorily?'

Each of these points applies to Genesis 1. God is depicted as a worker doing a week's work. The focus at the end of it is on humans, their role in the world and their relationship to their Creator as the One they are to worship. It is a story and as such is very selective. Lots

of aspects of the created world get no mention. Whether or not it is true cannot be decided by science but by the test of whether or not it enables us to live well in this world.

The structure of Genesis 1:1-2:3. Walton also argues that in ancient Near Eastern creation stories something is thought of as created, not when it exists as a material entity, but when it is given a function relative to human beings,

‘People in the ancient world believed that something existed not by virtue of its material properties, *but by virtue of its having a function in an ordered system* .. That is, in relation to society and culture.’ (*The Lost World of Genesis One*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009, 26).

This helps us understand the structure of the ‘creation week’. On the first three days God brings into being three functional systems that are crucial for human life: the time system (the pattern of day/night is the basis of our time system, on which Day 4 expands); the weather system (with the waters above the firmament providing rain and snow through the ‘windows’ in heaven mentioned, for example, in Gen. 7:11; Ps. 78:23; Isa. 24:18); and the food system (plants are the basis of the whole food chain). On the second three days God creates the functionaries that are involved in these functional systems. When God’s acts of creation are described as ‘good’ the Hebrew word used, *tôb*, which has wide range of meaning, is best understood in this context in its commonest sense as ‘fit for purpose’. These three systems were fit for the purpose God intended, that of making human society and culture possible on earth. Although the emphasis here is on the fitness of the earth as an environment for humnasa, v. 30 makes it clear that God has also made it an environment that is fit for non-human creatures.

A number of scholars have suggested that ancient Near Eastern literature may illuminate the seventh day of rest in the Genesis story. In the Babylonian creation story, after Marduk has defeated the forces of chaos and created the cosmos the other gods build him a temple in which he can rest. Similarly, in the Ugaritic texts, after Baal has been victorious in his battle with the Sea the other gods build him a temple in which to rest. In the ancient Near East temple dedication ceremonies, including Solomon’s dedication of the temple he built in Jerusalem, lasted seven days. So it may be that the Genesis story reflects a temple-dedication liturgy.

The theological message. The students can be asked to discuss what they think are key theological points to be drawn from the story. Here are some pointers.

In the view of many historians of science the worldview generated by Genesis 1 and some other OT texts was important for the rise of modern science in late-medieval Europe. Key points of this are:

1. There is a single, self-existent Creator.
2. This Creator is rational (‘wise’ would be the biblical word).
3. As a result there is a planned and ordered created universe.
4. **Therefore** there are ‘laws of nature’.
5. Humans are made in the image and likeness of God.
6. **Therefore** we can perceive and understand the ‘laws’.
7. Creation was a free act of God.
8. **Therefore** observation and experiment are necessary if we are to discover the ‘laws’.

Two other key points which need discussion arise from Gen. 1:26-28. One is what it means for humans to be 'the image of God'. This is a big topic. Arguably it contributed to the rise of the concept of 'human rights' in Europe. Another is the ecological implications of the creation mandate' (this should be discussed along with Gen. 2:15). To avoid it being misunderstood it is important to note that being 'God's image' human 'rule' of God's creation should reflect the nature of God, and be just, loving, wise etc. See the introductory texts by David Horrell and Richard Bauckham on the handling of these texts in ecological theology.

Follow up reading:

Ernest Lucas, 'Interpreting Genesis in the 21st Century', Faraday Paper No. 11. (This is available as a free download from the Faraday Institute website, www.faraday-institute.org)

W. P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation*, ch. 3.

Bibliography:

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- Brown, W. P. *the Seven Pillars of Creation*, Oxford: OUP, 2010.
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- Daley, S. *Myths from Mesopotamia*, Oxford: OUP, 2008 (revised edition).
- Horrell, D.G. *The Bible and the Environment* London: Equinox, 2010.
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- Walton, J. H. *The Lost World of Genesis One*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009.
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[If there is time in the course a session could be included to discuss Gen. 2&3 using the same approach as for Gen.1. Some resources for this will be found in my Faraday Paper and book above, in Brown's book, ch. 3, J.H. Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP, Academic, 2015, and in a (hopefully) forthcoming paper: Ernest C. Lucas, Denis R. Alexander, R. J. (Sam) Berry, G. Andrew D. Briggs, Colin J. Humphreys, Malcolm A. Jeeves, Anthony C. Thiselton, 'The Bible, Science and Human Origins'.]

Session 2: Creation, Wisdom and Christology.

Objectives: at the end of this session students will be able to,

1. To understand how the OT and later Jewish wisdom thought influenced NT Christology resulting in the pre-existent Son being thought of as the agent in creation.
2. Appreciate the implications of this for a Christian approach to ecological issues.

Preparatory reading: Prov. 3:19-20; 8:22-36; Sirach 24:1-12; Wisdom of Solomon 1:1-8; 7:22-8:1; Jn. 1:1-18; Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 1:1-4.
Ernest C. Lucas, 'Wisdom and Creation' in Ernest C. Lucas, *Proverbs, Two Horizons OT Commentary*, Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2015, pp. 343-363.

In the OT wisdom is 'the ability to cope with life'. In the Book of Proverbs wisdom is personified as a woman (the Hebrew word for wisdom is feminine in grammatical gender). Wisdom is depicted as existing before the creation of the world and as being present at, and possibly having a role in, the creation of the world. [What that role was is unclear, depending on how one understands Prov. 8:30, see the discussion in my commentary on *Proverbs*.]

Gerhard von Rad noted a structural parallel between Prov. 3:13-35 and Prov. 8:1-36 (*Wisdom in Israel*, p. 151, n. 4).

3:13-18	8:1-21	In praise of wisdom
3:19-20	8:22-31	The role of Wisdom in creation
3:21-26	8:32-36	An appeal to follow wisdom

The point which this structure makes is that the way to get the most out of life in this world is to understand how it works and to understand its rhythms and patterns. There is no better way to do this than to become acquainted with the wisdom which produced the world in the first place. Living in accord with that wisdom is the way to live in accord with the structure and purpose of creation. Again, note the contrast with the modern scientific method. There could be an interesting discussion here about how wisdom teaching would be done in relation to an issue such as climate change.

The figure of personified wisdom fascinated later Jewish sages and important developments took place in thought about wisdom in the period between the OT and NT.

Discuss with the students the main points made about wisdom in Sirach 24:1-10 (v. 2 she is located in the Divine Council; v. 3 she is identified with the creative word of Gen. 1; v. 4 she is enthroned in heaven; vv. 8ff she is the mediator between God and his people). Later, she is identified with the Law (v. 23).

Discuss with the students the main points made about wisdom in Wisdom of Solomon 1:1-8 (vv. 5-7 she is a spiritual entity; v. 7 she is omnipresent; v. 7 she is power that holds the world together) and 7:22-8:1 (7:22a she fashions all things; 8:1 she orders all things well; 7:22b she is a perfect spiritual being; 7:24 she is omnipresent; 7:25-26 she reveals the nature of God; v. 27 she unites people to God). Note also Wisd. 9:4 where wisdom is said to sit by God's throne.

Heb. 1:1-4. There are at least three places in the New Testament where scholars see evidence of ideas about wisdom influencing what is said about Jesus. Perhaps the most obvious is in the opening verses of Hebrews. Ask the students what ideas about wisdom they can see reflected in these verses.

Although there is no explicit mention of wisdom here, there seem to be many echoes of Wis 7:25-26 in these verses. Several of the metaphors used in those verses are found here: exhalation in the idea of the spoken word; effulgence or mirror, depending on the translation of ἀπαύγασμα; image, although the word used here is χαρακτήρ (*charaktēr*, 'imprint') rather than εἰκὼν (*eikōn*, 'image'). There are possible echoes of wider ideas about wisdom in the references to the creation of the world, the upholding of the universe and sitting 'at the right hand of the Majesty on high' – though this latter imagery may well be derived from Ps 110:1. Ellingworth (*Hebrews*, p. 99) sees in Heb 1:2-3 'an implicit reapplication to Christ of what had been written of the divine wisdom' in passages such as Prov 8:22-31 and Wis 7. Lane (*Hebrews*, p. 12) also recognises the echoes of the Wisdom of Solomon, especially Wis 7:21-27, in Heb 1:2-3. Referring to the whole of Heb 1:1-4 Lane (*Hebrews*, 19) says, 'the writer gave Christological precision to a cluster of ideas derived from Hellenistic Judaism. He boldly applied the categories of Wisdom to a historical figure, Jesus.' What motivated this bold move? It may have been the ascension of the resurrected Jesus, seen as prophesied in Ps 110:1, because this put Jesus by the throne of God, the location of Wisdom in Hellenistic Jewish thought.

Colossians 1:15-20. This passage is a carefully constructed piece of poetry. Many commentators conclude that the writer of the letter has made use of a pre-existing hymn to Christ. Some argue that the hymn itself is a development of a pre-Christian hymn to wisdom, though there is considerable disagreement about what the form and content of that hymn might have been.

The hymn has two halves (vv. 15-16 & vv. 18b-20) which are clearly linked by their opening phrases: 'He is ... the firstborn ...'. They each contain a 'whether ... or ...' clause and reference to 'in heaven, on earth'. The use of 'through him' in v. 20 echoes the same words in v. 16. The first strophe speaks of the supremacy of Christ over the 'old creation', the cosmos. The second half speaks of his supremacy over the 'new creation', the church. The two strophes are joined by a 'hinge' consisting of two statements, each beginning, 'He is ...'.

Verses 15-17 echo many of the things that are said of wisdom in Proverbs and in later Jewish wisdom literature. Dunn (*Colossians*, 89) comments, 'As the sequence of parallels with motifs characteristically used of Jewish Wisdom in these verses will confirm, the writer here is taking over language used of divine Wisdom and reusing it to express the significance of Christ.' Ask the students what echoes of ideas about wisdom they see here.

Dunn (*Colossians*, 101) comments concerning v. 19, 'Here the thought reaches well beyond that of Wisdom or even God "dwelling in" a good or compassionate person ... to grasp at the idea of the wholeness of divine immanence dwelling in Christ.' O'Brien (*Colossians*, 61) says of the hymn, 'It begins with a series of predicates and activities employed in the OT and Judaism of the personalized Wisdom of God which are applied to the One who had been so ignominiously executed only a few years before.' What motivated this amazing development? The second strophe indicates that it was the death, resurrection, and presumably also the ascension, of Jesus.

John 1:1-18. The use and development of the concept of the Logos in the Prologue to John's Gospel has no parallel elsewhere in the New Testament. Scholars have for a long time debated possible backgrounds to John's use of the concept: the creative and revelatory word of God in the Old Testament; Jewish thought about personified Wisdom; Hellenistic philosophy, especially Stoicism; Philo's concept of the Logos; Jewish speculation about the

Torah; Targumic use of the Aramaic word *memra* ('word') as an alternative to the word 'God'; early/proto-gnostic ideas. Some of the suggested backgrounds have not found much support. The two about which there is a general consensus are the Old Testament and Jewish wisdom thought. Lincoln (*John*, 95), for example, says, 'The origins of the prologue's use of "the Word" are in all probability to be found in earlier Jewish thought about both Wisdom and the Word of God.' In the Old Testament God's word is the means by which he created the world (Gen 1; Ps 33:6). The revelatory word which God spoke to and through the prophets is presented in Isa 55:8-11 as an agent that achieves God's purpose on earth. The word of God, in the form of the Torah, is spoken of as a source of light (Ps 119:105, 130) and life (Deut 32:46-47). Dodd (*Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 274-5) says, 'There are obvious and striking similarities between certain of the propositions of the Prologue and passages in the Wisdom literature.' He then gives a list of eleven phrases from the Prologue for which he provides parallels from Prov 1, 3, 8; Wis 7, 8, 9; Sir 24. He says that the list is not exhaustive but 'is sufficient to show that in composing the Prologue the author's mind was moving along lines similar to those followed by Jewish writers of the "Wisdom" school.'

As is the case with Heb 1:1-4 and Col 1:15-20, what is said of the Logos in the Prologue goes beyond the bounds of earlier thought about Wisdom. This is so in the opening verses. Whereas Wisdom was said to have been created before 'the beginning of the earth', before anything else (Prov 8:22-24; Sir 1:4), the Logos is not said to have been created but to have existed 'in the beginning'. Wisdom was thought of as sitting beside God's throne (Wis 9:4) but the Logos is described as always having had an intimate relationship with God such that it can be said 'the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God'.

In John's Prologue, as in the previous two passages, we see attributes and activities of personified Wisdom now applied to the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth. In doing this, however, these Christian writers find that they have to go beyond the bounds of Jewish thought about Wisdom in order to express their understanding of Jesus. What was it about Jesus that motivated this? John tells us that he wrote his Gospel to answer that question (20:30-31).

Creation and Salvation. It seems to have been the application of the attributes and activities of personified Wisdom, as understood within the Judaism of the time, to the risen and ascended Jesus that led the early Christians to see the pre-existent Christ as God's agent in creation. This is clearly seen in Col 1:15-20 where the two strophes of the poem put the creation of all things 'through him' in the first strophe in parallel with the reconciliation of all things 'through him'. The poem itself does not give any explanation as to why reconciliation is necessary. It simply implies that following the creation of all things something happened to bring disruption, disorder and disharmony into the cosmos. The death of Jesus on the cross seen as a sacrifice, as indicated by the use of the word 'blood' in v. 20, has made the restoration of order and harmony possible. There has been much debate about the meaning of 'all things, whether on earth or in heaven' in this verse. The most obvious and satisfactory meaning in context is that expressed by Dunn (*Colossians*, 104) when he says, 'What is being claimed is quite simply and profoundly that the divine purpose in the act of reconciliation and peacemaking was to restore the harmony of the original creation, to bring into renewed oneness and wholeness "all things," "whether things on earth or things in the heavens"' The poem, then, presents what Jesus achieved on the cross not as something to be understood as a 'free-standing' event but as the achievement of what God intended in the original creation of the cosmos through Christ.

The connection between Christ's work in creation and salvation is less clear in John 1:1-18. However, it might not be pressing things too far to see such a connection implied in vv. 10-13. Verse 10a asserts that the world was made through him, but then v10b-11 imply that something went wrong, because the world does not know him and is not willing to

receive him. Here 'the world' in the author's mind seems to be the world of sentient beings, of humans. The achievement of the Logos is described in v. 12. He gave humans the right to become 'children of God'. There is general agreement that the opening of v. 1 deliberately echoes Gen 1:1 as in the LXX. It may be that v. 12 echoes Gen 1:26-27 with John transposing 'image of God' into 'child of God' in the light of the Father-Son imagery which pervades his Gospel. If so, we once again have the connection between creation and salvation. God's original purpose in creating human beings through the Logos is achieved through the incarnate Logos.

The quotation of Ps 8:4-6 in Heb 2:6-8a is very significant. Heb 1 emphasizes the deity of the Son. He shares and reveals the nature of God and is utterly superior to angels. He is the one through whom God created the world and he upholds everything by his powerful word (vv. 2-3). Heb 2 emphasizes that he shares the nature of humans, being 'made like his brothers in every respect' (v. 17). The centrepiece of these two chapters, which shows how they are linked, is the quotation from Ps 8. This very clearly alludes to Gen 1:26-28 and God's purpose in creating humans. God's purpose in creating humans in his own image was that they should rule over the world as his representatives, his vice-regents. However, says the writer, this is not what we see happening in reality (2:8b). Humans have forfeited their sovereignty over creation. As in Col. 1:15-20 and John 1:10-13 there is the clear implication that something has gone wrong and prevented the fulfilment of God's original purpose for the creation. But all is not lost. The writer of Hebrews declares, 'But we see him ... namely Jesus' (2:9). Jesus, through his incarnation and death as a human being has regained for humans the sovereignty that God originally intended for them. God's purpose in creating the world has been put back on track.

This intimate connection between creation and salvation which arose out of the influence of thought about Wisdom on the understanding of the significance of Jesus and his incarnation and death, and so of the salvation he achieved for us, has great importance in the light of the ecological crisis which faces us in the twenty-first century. All too often Christians have thought that all that matters is the salvation of their (immaterial) 'soul' for an eternal existence in 'heaven' away from this world. The created (material) world is seen as a disposable container. This can lead to an attitude that is dismissive of ecological concerns. If God is going to dispose of this creation, why bother about what human exploitation is doing to it? There are one or two biblical passages (Rev 21:1; 2 Pet 3:7-13) which may seem to support the 'disposable container' view, but to read them this way is to misunderstand them and to go against the general tenor of Scripture.

Follow up reading:

Ernest C. Lucas, 'Wisdom and Christology' in Ernest C. Lucas, *Proverbs*, Two Horizons OT Commentary, Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2015, pp. 314-343.

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