

# Along the track

## Where Did We Come From?

At regular intervals the media runs stories about what is commonly called Creationism – the notion that the Genesis accounts of Creation are to be taken literally. Too often that's all we seem to hear about in this extraordinary book. That's a great pity. Genesis does offer very rich and earthy accounts of Creation (there are more than one) but it also attempts to explain many of the great mysteries of life. God's passionate and loving desire to create us and the world in which we live is vividly and colourfully described. Genesis contains some wonderful exchanges between God and humankind and we discover much about God's relationship with us and our relationship with God.

In the stories and parables in the Book of Genesis, the most riveting and complex character is God, not because God is the all-powerful creator but rather the One who seeks out humankind, who is at times troubled and confounded and often appears to be moved by as many human feelings and emotions as the human beings God has created!

To say the least, these humans were a motley crew! Unlike other early civilizations, Genesis does not claim that our ancestors are descendants of the gods or the sun, the moon or the stars. In most of the great early civilizations of the Middle and Far East, as well as in Mexico and Peru, the 'ruling' families claim supernatural destiny directly from the sun. In the written sagas of Iceland and in the oral traditions throughout Polynesia, their genealogical lines merge with demi-gods and deities. Not so in Genesis. In the first account of creation, there is a very clear distinction between the creative Spirit of God which hovers over the abyss, and the creation which follows. In contrast to other civilisations' stories of creation, rather than being descendant from the deity, we come from very ordinary, flawed and even sinful folk.

Abraham for example, pretends Sarah his wife is his sister and offers her to Pharaoh to obtain security in Egypt as well as great wealth in the numbers of stock he amasses. He later offers the same deal to the king of the Philistines! Later on, Abraham's son Isaac imitated his father when he went to the land of the Philistines: he introduced his wife Rebecca as his sister. Rebecca in turn cheated Isaac by helping her son Jacob obtain the birthright of his brother Esau by fooling the blind old father. Jacob's sons later on end up in Egypt after attempts to kill one of their brothers and forgery! And so the list goes on. Genesis continually reveals human nature in all its weakness.

There are two strong messages that emerge from the pages of Genesis. God is very much involved in our world – the stories of creation, the fall of Adam and Eve, the flood, the tower of Babel, the almost daily communication from God via dreams and promises and signs such as the pillar of fire and the burning bush are all attempts to describe this intimate and close relationship with the living God.

The Psalms pick up this theme when they tell us that happiness is not found in other sacred spirits of this earth (Psalm 16), but rather  
My help comes from Yahweh  
Who made heaven and earth.  
You see, God never sleeps nor slumbers,  
The Guardian of Israel (Ps 121 2-3)

Secondly, Genesis reminds us that we are made out of clay and the breath of God:

Yahweh shaped man from out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being (Genesis 2:7)

So what's this mean? Earth/dust is a vivid symbol. On Ash Wednesday this symbol is used as a reminder of our fragility and mortality. As we are signed with ashes we are told to 'Remember, from dust you have come and to dust you will return'. But earth is also rich in possibilities – we only need to look around us to see what good earth can grow and what neglected and spoiled earth cannot. Making objects from earth or clay was one of the earliest technologies - Isaiah even likens God to a potter

But now, Yahweh, you are our father; we are the clay, and you our potter; and we all are the work of your hand. (Isaiah 64:8)

Jeremiah's meditation (Jeremiah 18 1-11) on God as potter is well worth reading. So despite our flaws, our faults, our failings, the breath of God still energises us, still inspires us, still calls us to new and wonderful possibilities.

Is it any wonder that the psalmist ponders:

What are human beings that you spare a thought for them,  
Or a child of Adam that you care for him?  
Yet you have made him a little less than a God,  
You have crowned him with glory and beauty,  
Made him Lord of all the works of your hands,  
Put all things under his feet (Psalm 8 3-6)

Jesus, as a faithful Jew, was familiar with the Book of Genesis. Six centuries after him, Mohammed frequently quoted from His teachings as well as from the Genesis stories of creation and the other books attributed to Moses. Genesis is a basic text shared by Hebrews, Christians and Muslims. It is indeed, an extraordinary book!

Regards  
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