

Genesis 1:26-2:17

God's Blessing and Mankind

Introduction

As presented in the first 2 classes on Genesis, the initial “prologue” of Genesis (1:1 to 2:3) is a highly structured, almost poetic, text that presents a number of foundational concepts about God, the universe and mankind. The rest of Genesis consists of a number of “sections” each preceded with the phrase “this is the account of [some name]...”. This is probably better translated as in the ESV as “These are the generations of [some name]”. Each section typically follows the death of the father of the person named and ends with his death. It is either in the form of a narrative or a genealogy describing what comes about during that person’s lifetime and his sons’ as well. Thus “an account of” does not describe how “someone” came to be, but what that person did.

Verse 2:4 then, begins this cycle with the phrase “*This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created*”. Given the explanation above, this then does not mean this is an account of how the heavens and the earth were created, but begins to detail the “generations” of the heavens and the earth or what came next! This first section goes from 2:4 to the end of chapter 4 the generation of Adam (the first man) and his first two sons:

- The story of the Garden of Eden, in 2 parts:
 - Creation of man and his wife
 - The fall
- Story of the Murder of Abel
- Story of Cain's family

The first story (Gen. 2:4-3:24) has been carefully constructed in a set of scenes chiastically related by actors and themes often inverted, moving from man being placed in the garden to when he is expelled.¹ Today we return briefly to revisit the concept of man created in God’s image and the blessing God bestowed on mankind as that is the primary backdrop for the rest of the class that will look at the beginning of this first section beginning at 2:4.

Made in the Image of God – Vs. 1:26-1:29

That the creation of mankind is significant is indicated by the change in pattern in this creation account. First, God *announces* that he is about to create man, calling attention to this last, culminating work. He uses plural pronouns (*us, our*) in this announcement which has been a challenge for commentators. While from a Christian perspective, we are tempted to read this as the Trinity, this is not a concept that would have been familiar to the original author’s audience. However, they would have been familiar with language of a “royal court” and would likely have seen this as God addressing his court of heavenly angels. Note that while the plural pronouns are used in the announcement, the verb for the actual act of creation in vs. 27 is singular. One God, alone, is responsible for man’s creation.

It was discussed in the previous class what it means to be created in the image of God. In the ancient world, kings were regarded as “images” of the god who ruled on the god’s behalf as his regent. Here, that concept is democratized, so that all of mankind is to serve as an image, representative of God ruling over the rest of creation as His stewards. However, this concept entails more than just being stewards. While it is not spelled out, there are characteristics that we share with God (reason, love,

¹ For more details on this chiastic structure, see Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 1-15, **Word Biblical Commentary**, 1987, pp. 49-51

language, appreciation of beauty, humor, etc.) since being made in the image of God distinguishes us from all other living creatures. And finally, as God's regents, all human beings can be regarded as "sacred" for each bears God's image.

Vs. 27 is a set of 3 related clauses describing the creation of mankind. The first two are arranged chiastically with "He created – in His own image" in the first clause and "in His own image He created" in the second. The last clause provides additional detail that mankind consists of both male and female and both are made in His image. This sets the stage for the blessing of fertility to follow.

Like the animals in vs. 22, God blesses mankind, but here God speaks to them rather than simply proclaiming His blessing. Note that while this may look like a command that we must be fruitful and multiply, it is in the language of "blessing" so that it is a privilege not an obligation, and there is an implicit promise that God will bring about the fruitfulness. The purpose of mankind is repeated, he is to subdue (control) the earth and rule over the creatures, but as God's representative, we are to act as He would act as benevolent stewards caring for His creation. In turn, God has provided an abundance of food both for us and all creatures. As opposed to the other creation texts that demanded that mankind was to provide food for the gods!

The Generations of Heaven and Earth – Vs. 2:4-17

As mentioned above, vs. 2:4 begins with what will be the typical "new section" title: "these are the generations of..." Note that the verse uses 2 chiastic clauses beginning with heavens, earth, created in the 1st clause and made, earth, heaven, in the 2nd. This verse also nicely links back to the beginning of Genesis in vs. 1:1 that states that *God created the heavens and the earth*, and so concludes the prologue as well introducing this section. As an introduction to the rest of Genesis, this is the first verse to use the revealed *name* of God, Yahweh (i.e. LORD in English texts). It is paired with *Elohim* (God) which is a more generic reference to the divinity. In the Pentateuch, this pairing is only used in chapters 2 and 3 of Genesis and in Exodus 9:30.

Vs. 5 through 17 now return to a more detailed narrative of the creation of man. Vs. 5 and 6 initially seem in conflict with the previous chapter in claiming there was no shrub or plant but just a mist watering the ground when God creates man. However, vs. 5 and 6 describe two simultaneous situations related to what was available for food which God was to provide. In the first case, since rain was not yet falling, the land with no other water source would be arid and dry without anyone to provide irrigation. However, at the same time there were streams apparently fed by subterranean water sources that would flood certain areas also as a hindrance. Note that other ancient texts mention the presence of springs from subterranean water sources.

In verse 7, God *shapes* the man from the dust of the land even as a potter would mold clay. Other ancient texts have man created from clay or clay and blood. However, here, God breathes into the man's nostrils which gives him life. This is *not* what make man distinct from other creatures, but simply gives him the same life as other breathing creatures. The verse merely highlights God as the source of life, and without that life, man returns to dust.

In Vs. 8-9 God plants a garden *in Eden* and there He places the man. This is the only place in the Bible the preposition *in* is used, but it indicates that the garden is planted within the larger location of Eden; however in vs. 10 that distinction is implied as the great river flows out of Eden and waters the garden. The author's audience would have understood this garden as a large park area such as a royal garden or arboretum. In ancient times, large, royal gardens were often constructed around palaces. In this case, the architect and original gardener of the garden is God Himself, who plants it with *every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food*. This emphasizes an abundance of provision by God. Included in the middle of the garden were two special trees, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

In vs. 10-14, the narrative focuses on a river flowing out of Eden, watering the garden. The idea of a river springing from the presence of God providing life is echoed in Ps. 146 as well as Ezekiel and Revelation. Here it not only waters the Garden, but then divides as the headwaters of four great rivers, only 2 of which are known to us today (the Tigris and the Euphrates). The other two may have been known to the original readers, but regardless are annotated with geographic markers that more modern readers have tried to identify. The Pishon flowed around Havilah, a land of gold and precious stones, which could be identified as possibly in Arabia. The Gihon flows around Cush – maybe referring to Ethiopia, and so perhaps could be the Nile. However, the real problematic issue is that there is no good geographic location that can be identified as the headwaters for these four rivers. Perhaps that is not the point, but rather that Eden represented a source of life emanating from God flowing out throughout the earth.

Vs. 15 picks up where the narrative left off in vs. 8 to describe the garden and rivers. It repeats that God placed the man in the garden, but then adds the detail that the man was *put to work!* Even before the fall, man was intended to have a purpose and activity. Work was intrinsic to human life. The words used for “working” the garden and “taking care” of it are actually used less of agricultural activity than of service to God such as by a priest in the tabernacle. Adam (the man) was given a priestly task to care for this sacred place. In fact there are a number of parallels between the garden and the tabernacle/temples built or described in the Bible with the mention of gold and precious stones, a river of life flowing through the garden, etc.

Vs. 16 and 17 then end with blessing and command and warning. The blessing is that the man is permitted to eat of any tree of the garden, including the tree of life, but the command is that he is not allowed to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This command is worded in similar fashion to the 10 commandments, “you shall not eat.” The command comes with the sentence associated with breaking the command – the sentence of death. The question we are left with is what is the knowledge of good and evil and why was it forbidden? That has been debated by many scholars. “Good and evil” are a merism, meaning that the use of extreme terms means everything in between as well. The use of “good and evil” is often used in terms of judgment and discernment, and in this case, may imply the ability to take on deciding right and wrong for oneself without reference to God.

Genesis provides a vastly different perspective on man’s place in creation than the other ancient accounts. The question for us today is how does this view differ from our culture now? And how should being made in the image of God affect how we see ourselves and others. How do you see your purpose in life in light of this passage?