

A Simple Lay Potato's Commentary on the Bible

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Preface

Over the last few years, my theology has changed quite a bit. I was raised in a conservative evangelical tradition. Conservative evangelicals have a very particular reading of the Bible, which supposedly comes from reading it literally, or according to the “plain” meaning of the bare text. But this also typically means reading without (a good) consideration of the context of the broader Biblical text, the purpose for which particular parts of the Bible were written, or the cultural context in which the words would have been received. In other words, I was originally taught to read what the Bible “says” rather than what it “means”, if that makes sense.

I’ve learned a lot since then. I’ve learned a lot about myself. I’ve learned that I basically have the values I was raised with, but I disagree with what that translates into specifically politically and theologically. I’ve learned about the process that brought us the Bible we have today. And I think I’ve learned a lot about what some of this text should mean for us today.

Some of this came from reading scholarly work or talking to others. Some came from prayerful reflection. There’s a lot of the Bible I’ve re-read since or as a part of this transition, but I’ve yet to go through from cover to cover since my outlook started changing. So this project is me going through the entirety of the text now that my perspective is different since the last time I visited some of these passages, and making notes on the whole thing.

I don’t claim to be a theological or biblical expert. I don’t have a seminary degree, I don’t have experience as a pastor. What I have is a few decades’ experience as a Christian and a human, a deep desire to learn as much from God’s Word as I can, and to get it right, and lots of reading and thinking done toward that end. So if someone other than me ends up reading these notes, take them for what they are, and I hope they help.

Introduction

This “book” represents my own personal notes on a full read through of the Bible. In terms of what translation to read, there’s of course a lot of difference of opinion on that, and different translations have different strengths. I usually read in the New International Version (Zondervan 2011). This is a decent translation that tries to balance thought-for-thought, or *dynamic equivalence*, translation with word-for-word, or *formal equivalence* (though the NIV does have some issues, which is fine when you’re aware of them). Some prefer the New Revised Standard Version for a translation that balances formal and dynamic equivalence, but it does tend just a little bit more toward formal than dynamic equivalence. The English Standard Version is a decent translation that falls in the formal equivalence camp, as is the New American Standard Bible. No matter what, the best translation is the one you will read! When writing up these notes, I’ll often try to point out translation issues to the extent I can find out they exist. I’m not a Hebrew or Greek scholar, though I have tried to learn about the languages biblical texts were written in and become comfortable researching issues of translation in academic sources so that I can better understand the Word.

Genesis

Background information on Genesis

Genesis is the first book of the Bible that tells of the creation of the Earth, Noah and the flood, and God’s covenant with Abraham. The first five books of the Bible—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—are collectively called the Torah. Tradition holds the author of the Torah to be Moses (except the last chapter of Deuteronomy, which recounts Moses’ death), but most modern scholars believe it was put together from multiple sources, as evidenced by blocks using distinctive language and by parallel narratives (Schmid 2021). Genesis starts out with what many identify as parallel creation narratives: the description in Genesis 1 and the beginning of Genesis 2, and the story in the remainder of Genesis 2.

Whether Genesis was written by Moses alone, or a combination of sources, and whether Genesis 1–2 is a single creation account or two parallel accounts, the basic lessons I’ll focus on from Genesis 1–2 will be the same. Whether you are a literalist who holds to Moses’ authorship, or someone who sees these chapters as two parallel accounts whose specifics might best be described as “myth” need not change *too* much about how we view this passage.

The Beginning: Genesis 1:1–2:3

The book of Genesis begins with an account of the creation of the heavens and the earth by God. In this creation narrative, God repeatedly calls into existence new aspects of our reality by command alone. God says, “Let there be light”, and there is light, etc. The phases of creation each occur in one “day”; in the first “day”, day and night are created, then in the second, the

air and the sea, etc. After six “days”, the heavens and the earth are fully formed and humans are created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth.

So should the take-away here be that God literally created everything in six days, in the order and manner specified in the text? Personally, I don’t think that aspect of it is important. I think the important parts are recognizing that all that there is flows from God, and what we can learn about God and ourselves from the passage. But some folks find it very important, so I’m going to take a moment to talk about it.

The Hebrew word used here for day is *yom*, which has differing meanings depending on context. It can be used to mean a 24 hour day, or a long but finite span of time like an “age”, or even just a time period of unspecified length. So for people who focus on this passage as an actual account of the creation of Earth, several “literal” interpretations could be had:

- The Earth was created in six consecutive 24-hour periods (this is called “young Earth creationism”)
- Each “day” is actually a quite-long time span, with or without gaps in between (this is called “old Earth creationism”)

There are several sub-types of old Earth creationism that I won’t go into further. Many Christians also hold to non-literal interpretations of this text, focusing on its statement that God created the universe and humanity, and why, rather than getting hung up on the how. It is my own personal view that this passage should not be read literally, but more importantly, even if you read this passage literally, the most important lessons are the same as if you do not.

So what are the important lessons we should draw from this passage? This narrative can teach us about the universe and about humans. Almost everyone has wondered at some point, “Where does it all come from?” And sure, maybe your answer is that the universe as we know came about as a result of the Big Bang, or whatever the scientific consensus is, but that’s not incompatible with finding a deeper meaning in the origin of the universe. This creation account teaches us that God created everything from nothing, that God forged order from chaos, by His authority and power. It teaches us that God is the source of all life, and that humans—*all* humans—are made in God’s image. These are powerful and important messages! I care *much*

less about whether the “six days” is a literary device used to communicate these messages or whether it’s supposed to be taken literally.

There are some additional lessons we might learn from delving a bit deeper. For example, it’s common to notice the literary structure here in this account: In the first three days, God creates spaces or environments that in the next three days He fills with inhabitants, as illustrated in Table 1. This device underscores the theme of God turning chaos into an environment habitable for humans.

Table 1: The Seven Days of Creation

Day 1: Day & Night	Day 4: Sun, Moon, & Stars
Day 2: Air & Sea	Day 5: Birds & Fish
Day 3: Land & Vegetation	Day 6: Land Animals & Humans
Day 7: A day of rest	

On “the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work” (2:2). There are a lot of interesting and important aspects of this. For one thing it rounds out the literary device of creation in a week, that the work was done and completed in one familiar “unit” of work. It also stresses that man should set aside time both to rest from work and to dedicate to God; the next verse says “God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done”. Although God Himself need not rest, he sets an example here for humans of periodically (here once a week) taking time off, which eventually becomes a command to the Israelites. Importantly, however, this is also completely tied up with the day being “blessed... and made... holy”. Finally, there is an interesting literary aspect of the seventh day of rest that becomes theologically important in the New Testament: While the description of every other day of creation ends with the phrase, “And there was evening, and there was morning—the [Xth] day”, we see no such phrase

regarding the seventh day.

What does Genesis 1 say about gender?

Adam and Eve: Genesis 2:4–25

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