

## Time and Eternity

John Houghton ©

### A. Introduction

1. Shakespeare wrote: All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts' (As you like it). But he didn't tell us what the play was about! What is the plot? Why are we here?
2. What is the meaning of human history? Does God have a plan? Acts 17:22-28 tells us that God is the supreme Ruler whose person and purposes are revealed through the history of the human race. He has set the stage so that we players, made in his image, might choose to love him.
3. The Bible is the official script for this epic drama of love and passion, of laughter and tears, of money, sex and power, of war and peace – and of redemption through irresistible grace. All of us are involved, either for good or ill.
4. A Christian world-view really means understanding the play and our part in it.

### B. The players and the stage

1. God himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the eternal triangle of love, the Trinity – is the originator, producer, director, and leading character.
2. Angels, a hierarchy of spiritual beings, both good and evil, interact supernaturally (they don't mediate) between the throne of God (third heaven) and the material world (first heaven, and earth). Their operation is mostly in the heavenly places (second heaven).
3. Human beings, God's offspring, made in his image, are the key players. Their response and relationship to God is the heart of the drama. We are never just puppets in his hand. God in his sovereignty chooses to operate by interactive grace – we are granted the freedom to co-operate or to oppose his will. In other words we may *ad lib* our parts, but we will be accountable!
4. The setting for this story of creation, rebellion and reconciliation is one small part of the vast cosmos – planet Earth.

### C. Behind the scenes

1. Revelation 4 (cf Ezekiel 1) provides a heavenly prologue, revealing God as the Creator of all, and introducing to us the world of angels and men, and of their relationship to him.
2. Note that this realm is opened only by divine revelation. Without this we will not understand the Christian faith. Human-centred religion fails to recognise the centrality of the throne of God, and instead puts the self on the throne in terms of either the body (the

hedonist), the intellect (the rationalist) or the spirit (the spiritist). Ecclesiastes and Isaiah expose the folly of these alternatives.

## D. The creation of the world

### 1. God's diary

- a. The creation narrative marks the advent of time – so, God's diary – and it addresses the basic questions of our observable existence.
- b. There is a beginning, a zero point, the 'when' of which is unspecified. What matters is that God did it *ex nihilo*.
- c. The focus is local; this is specifically the creation of our world from an earth centred perspective (Genesis 1:1-2:3) This is our stage. Little is said about the creation of the rest of the cosmos – though that is implied, and made explicit in other parts of the Bible.

#### **Sunday 1st.**

Take shapeless, dark, watery mass – introduce light, therefore reflective qualities, colour and tones – binary numbers, digital technology, moral analogues. Call difference Day & Night. Assumes creation of elements, fundamental forces and constants.

#### **Monday 2nd.**

Make a sky sandwich – water below and water vapour canopy above. This may be needed later. Meanwhile, it will protect the earth from necessary but harmful cosmic radiation. Call sky Heaven.

#### **Tuesday 3rd.**

Separate land from sea and cover with vegetation, introducing the carbon cycle. Precisely done, this will modulate the temperature and the oxygen levels within the close bounds required for organic life. Invent genetic code, microbes and seeds.

#### **Wednesday 4th.**

Install astronomical clock with sun, moon & stars. This initiates times and seasons, harvests and history – the necessary framework for human existence, meaning and aspiration – see Ecclesiastes 3:11.

#### **Thursday 5th.**

Invent fish and birds by genetic engineering and fill the sea and sky with living creatures, using a common template. Assumes the availability of algae, plankton and seeds, and therefore life cycles, including death and decay. Evolution within a species doesn't contradict the creation story; the evolution of the species possibly does.

### **Friday 6th.**

More genetics – fill the world with land creatures. Make human beings, man and woman – tell them to have lots of babies and put them in charge of the physical world. God uses the same common template, but makes us uniquely in his trinitarian image, capable of moral choice, reflectivity, abstract thought, governance and love.

### **Saturday 7th.**

Have a rest and enjoy the view. Decide everyone should do this for their own good. One day he will abolish religion by self effort with this principle – see Hebrews 4:1-11.

## 2. The Sculptor and the Surgeon

- a. Genesis 2:4-25 zooms in to focus specially on the creation of humankind. It reveals God as a sculptor and as a surgeon. Note that humans are a distinct species with distinct genes, but they are of the same elements as animals (Ecclesiastes 3:18-21). Our uniqueness is because of the breath of God in us – a fusion of dust and deity. We also have a special sexual interdependence between men and women that transcends reproduction – we are capable of love.
- b. The action occurs in the Garden of Eden (Delight) in the fertile crescent. The props include the Tree of Life (grapevine), the Tree of Moral Knowledge (knowingness), The river of life, which became four rivers.
- c. The setting is idyllic and full of blessings – eternal life & health, ample food and water, satisfying labour, control over the environment, marriage companionship and sex without shame, the prospect of children, unbroken fellowship with God.
- d. Adam and Eve were created to live in obedience to God, that is, sinlessly. But they were not perfect in an idealistic sense. God, to make them capable of love, also made them vulnerable. He did so in related but different ways according to their genetic structure.

## 3. Interpreting the story

- a. Advances in knowledge have raised serious questions about the literal reality of the creation account and forced a regrettable and unnecessary divide between science and religion.
- b. Responses include:
  - i. Treating the account as a fairy story.
  - ii. Treating the story as myth, meaning divinely revealed timeless truth in narrative form, but the narrative is not necessarily literally and chronologically true, e.g. an *aide-memoire* for the illiterate; or an apologetic against polytheism, a grand metaphor for the human condition.

- iii. Recasting science to fit the creation story as literally historical – the so-called creation science movement.
- iv. Resolving the minor difficulties with modern scientific theory and evidence by careful contextual exegesis.
- c. Whatever your view note Hebrews 11:3 and Ecclesiastes 3:11.

## E. Enter the bad guy

1. Who was the Serpent and what did he do?
  - a. A splendid creature possessed by Lucifer (Day Star) (Isaiah 14:12-15) – doomed because of his hubris. He was the anointed cherub given responsibility for the spiritual protection of the world (Ezekiel 28:12-17).
  - b. What was his treachery? Revelation 12 pulls back the curtain on the heavenly conflict and shows why the conflict continues on earth. Note Satan's obsessive hatred of children (cf. Genesis 3:15).
  - c. What was at stake? In a word: authority. Whom will we spiritually serve? Therefore, who is our God? We become like the deity we serve, and the story will unfold to demonstrate that fact.
  - d. What were the temptations? (Genesis 3:6; cf. Luke 4:1-13 & 1 John 2:16) These sum up all possible temptations. Jesus took on the 'garden' temptations in the fallen wilderness and defeated Satan, undoing the fall and becoming the head of the new humanity, the first human to live free from sin.
    - i. The lust of the flesh – I want.
    - ii. The lust of the eyes – I like.
    - iii. The pride of life – I am!
2. What were the consequences?
  - a. Guilt and shame (v. 7-10) – the beginnings of religion.
  - b. Self-justification (v. 12-13) – the beginnings of antagonism.
  - c. Judgement on the serpent (v. 14) – the beginnings of animal wildness.
  - d. Judgement on the generations (v. 15) – the beginnings of spiritual warfare.
  - e. Judgement on the woman (v. 16) – the beginnings of sexual conflict.
  - f. Judgement on the man (v. 17-19) – the beginnings of ecological catastrophe.
  - g. Spiritual death (v. 22-24) – the beginnings of hell.

3. The Seed and the Sacrifice.

- a. A sign of hope. This is ultimately a comedy, not a tragedy. (Genesis 3:15, 21). This is known as the proto-evangelium – the first good news that God will do something to undo the fall (See 1 John 3:8-9). He will bring redemption through the fallen woman and her Seed. He sacrifices animals to provide a covering for their sense of shame, in place of their leaves.
- b. Paul takes up this great theme in Romans 5:12-21. Jesus is the Seed, the Christ, the Head of a redeemed humanity.

F. Questions for reflection

1. If God is the Creator how do you think this should affect our daily living?
2. How would you currently define your role in the cast of this divine drama?
3. How does the invisible spiritual world influence your perceptions of reality?
4. Is it essential to believe in a literal seven day creation in order to be saved?
5. Under what categories of Eve's temptations would you place the sins you are most prone to?
6. How would you use the story of the fall to share the gospel with your colleagues and friends?