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PAUL'S USE OF CREATION & GENESIS

By David Meager

“Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.” Rev 4.11.

When reading the book of Acts and Paul's letter to the Romans it is clear that the Apostle Paul used creation to convict the pagan world of God's existence, and as a foundation for the truth of the gospel to be proclaimed. It is also clear that Paul believed the opening chapters of Genesis as historical fact. This article will attempt to examine what Paul had to say on creation and the implications for us as Christians today.

Acts

In the book of Acts there are two accounts recorded of Paul addressing groups of Gentiles who worshipped idols (polytheists). Firstly, in Acts 14, after facing opposition in Iconium Paul and Barnabas fled to Lystra (a mainly Gentile town with no synagogue) where Paul healed a man crippled from birth. When the Gentile crowds had seen the miraculous healing they tried to worship both Paul and Barnabas. However, Paul attempted to stop the crowds worshipping them by explaining that they were *‘also men of like nature with you.’* Paul then pleaded with them to turn from *‘these vain things’* [their idols] to the *‘living God who made the heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in them,’* and then explained to them (vs17) that the good things that they enjoy (*‘rains...and fruitful seasons satisfying your hearts with food and gladness’*) are a witness to them of God's existence and goodness. Sadly the crowds continued to worship Paul and Barnabas and later stone Paul.

Later, in Acts 17 whilst Paul was waiting for Silas and Timothy in Athens his spirit was provoked when he saw the city full of idols. Therefore, Paul reasoned with them in the synagogue and in the marketplace, this brought him to the attention of some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers (the two most popular philosophies of the day) and they took him to the Areopagus (where the leading intellectuals of the day met for discussion) to explain his *‘new teaching’* to the Athenian philosophers. Paul revealed to them that *‘the unknown God’* whom they worshipped is the *‘God who made the world and everything in it...being the Lord of heaven and earth...he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth’* (v24-26). After Paul explained to them that this God is the creator and Lord of heaven and earth he then talked to them about repentance, judgment and resurrection. Paul's use of creation in evangelism clearly had an impact as although some mocked him, some joined him and believed (v34).

Romans 1

In Romans chapter 1 Paul uses creation as a foundation to proclaim the gospel. In verse 18 we read that *‘the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.’* This truth is what we can know about God from creation i.e. God's invisible attributes of his eternal power and his divine nature - in fact **God has shown it to them** through creation (v19), and therefore *‘they are without excuse.’* However, because man has suppressed the truth about God his thinking has become futile and his heart darkened. Consequently, God has given mankind up to a downward spiral of idolatry and immorality. From *this* foundation Paul then explains the gospel in the rest of Romans.

Paul's verification of the historicity of the early chapters of Genesis

The above passages contain most of Paul's teaching on creation. However, there are also other instances in the New Testament where Paul quotes or alludes to the first three chapters of Genesis:

- Rom 5 – Sin and death infecting the entire human race through Adam.
- Rom 16.20 – God will crush Satan/the serpent.
- 1 Cor 6.16 – The two will become one flesh.
- 1 Cor 11.9 – Woman created for Man.
- 1 Cor 11.12 – Woman made from Man.
- 1 Cor 15.22 – In Adam all die.
- 2 Cor 4.6 – Light shining out of Darkness.
- 2 Cor 11.3 – Eve deceived by the serpent's cunning.
- 1 Tim 2.13-14 – Adam formed first then Eve, and Eve deceived.
- 1 Tim 4.3-4 – Everything created by God is good.

Implications for us today

The use of creation in evangelism

As Christians living in post-Christian Britain today, we find ourselves in a similar cultural situation to the apostle Paul; we are faced with evangelising vast numbers of people who are ignorant of the gospel and do not have a Biblical world view.

Although preaching Christ should be our priority, when we are trying to convince those around us of God's existence we should also point them to the wonder of God's creation and tell them that they are *without excuse* because of the *things that have been made*. We should also try to inform people (as Paul did in Lystra) that the good things that they enjoy and make their hearts glad are all good gifts from God (Jas 1.17). We should also resist being tempted to avoid using creation in evangelism because we may feel that we could be diverted from the gospel message or think that we are ill-equipped to deal with people's scientific objections, especially if they are more academic than us.

It is worth remembering that whatever views people hold on creation or however intelligent or academic they are, according to the Bible they are still without excuse and therefore God will hold them to account for this – they cannot claim ignorance of God's existence even if they don't believe there is a God – the creation is still there for people to see! Therefore we should not be reluctant to explain to people that they are accountable to their creator God because they are without excuse, no matter how much they try to suppress their consciences.

Implications for our own views on creation

“The marrow of the religious life of the psalmists was undoubtedly their knowledge of God. They never tire of singing His majesty in creation. In all His works in the heavens, the earth and the sea He has made Himself known as the all-powerful, the all-knowing, the everywhere-present God. He is also the God of all history who guides everything towards the final goal which He has purposed to fulfil... With such a high conception of God it is not surprising that the psalmists found their chief delight in prayer to God.” Bishop Dowden (1840-1910)

As Christians we should meditate on the wonder of God's creation (as David did in Psalms 8 & 19) and even the complexity of our own human bodies, and in response praise God for his creation. We should also be quick to thank and praise God for providing us with so many good things that make our hearts glad and acknowledge that every good thing comes from our creator God.

We should resist the danger of becoming like the unbelieving world around us which has become dulled to the wonder of God's creation through listening to those voices in the media and science (e.g. in nature documentaries or news reports of the latest fossil finds etc) which try to explain creation in ways apart from God i.e. through naturalistic processes. When we listen to the views of scientists in the media, particularly those propounding atheistic-evolutionary world-views, we should remember that man naturally suppresses the truth about God. When we form our own views on creation issues we should remember that the church is 'the pillar of God's truth' (1 Tim 3.15), and therefore we should not be afraid to question scientific views which contradict the Bible.

In his teaching Paul regarded the early chapters of Genesis as real history despite the fact that, as today, the pagan world had very different views about the world and its origin. In grounding his evangelism and teaching in Genesis Paul was following in the footsteps of Jesus. For example in Mark 10.6 Jesus says: '*but from the **beginning of creation**, God made them male and female.*' Jesus also used the flood in the time of Noah as a warning of the Second Coming, and cites other early Biblical characters such as Abel, Abraham and Lot. The Apostle Peter also used the flood as a warning of the judgment to come (2 Pt 3.6), and Jude cites both Cain and Enoch.

In conclusion, like the Psalmist we should meditate on the wonder of God's creation and give thanks for the good things we enjoy. Like Paul we should not be ashamed to explain to people that the wonder of creation points to their creator God whom they have rejected and are accountable to. Our use of creation should never sideline or replace the Cross of Christ in our evangelism but it should point to Him whom all things were made through and for (Col 1.16).

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Endnotes:

- 1) Quoted in Edgar Dowse *The teaching of the English reformers on ministry and worship* (Churchman vol 106.2 1992).