

If you're thinking of a comfortable place to ponder the origins of the universe, the South Pole would probably be pretty far down on your list. The highest temperature ever recorded there was just 9.9 degrees Fahrenheit, while the lowest was -117 degrees -- not exactly the kind of place to put one in a garden-of-Eden frame of mind.

Yet, the South Pole is the perfect place for cosmic contemplation because it's the one place on Earth that you can get closest to space and still be on the ground. It's also one of the driest and clearest locations for observing things like faint microwaves in space -- which scientists think are linked to the "Big Bang" theory of creation.

So science people love the South Pole. But maybe not people of faith. Since the Enlightenment, science and religion have often been at odds over the origins of life and the universe. Some *Christians* are afraid that if creation didn't happen *exactly how* the Bible says, then perhaps the other 1,187 chapters of the Bible aren't true either. Some *scientists* struggle to hold their faith in tension with the evidence of cosmic observation, fossils and geologic time. But is this debate between science and faith really necessary? Isn't there a way to understand the stories in Genesis 1-3 as authoritative while making room for scientific discoveries?

Old Testament scholar and Wheaton College professor John Walton thinks so. In his intriguing books *The Lost World of Genesis One* and *The Lost World of Adam and Eve*, Walton suggests that science and Scriptures observe the same universe through two different but equally valid lenses -- like the difference between viewing Van Gogh's painting "Starry Night" and looking at a picture of deep space from the Kitt Peak telescopes. They are both true in the sense that they describe an actual thing: the night sky.

Van Gogh wasn't trying to describe it scientifically; that's a function of the telescope. Instead he painted an artistic rendering of the reality he saw. It's a picture made to tell a story in ways beyond systematic description - it makes you *feel* something. Telescope photos can do that as well, of course, but they are intended for a particular scientific purpose.

There is, in other words, a way to tell a story that transcends our categories of true versus false, science versus myth. The writers of Genesis would not have even recognized those categories. They lived in a world of story, where people arranged their lives around a particular story set in a particular time and place. It is not pure history or science, nor is it pure myth and fiction. It is the story they found themselves in -- it is the story of two central characters: God and humanity. It's a story that's about "cosmic elation" -- the joy of a creating God, a God who creates all things "good."

To get to the heart of the matter, we have consider what the text actually says. Walton concludes that Genesis 1 is not describing the *material* origins of the universe as we have assumed, but rather the *functional* origins of the world. In other words, Genesis is less about how God made the world than about how God made it to function. When it is functioning well, it is "good" and God delights in it: Cosmic elation!

Look at how our text begins: "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the waters." An ancient person would have understood what's going on here: formless void, darkness and "the deep" are all indicators of chaos and non-order. The Hebrew word for "formless" is *tohu* -- it means to lack worth or purpose.

And what is God's response to this non-order? God "creates." The Hebrew word for "create" is *bara*. *Bara* is used some 50 times throughout the Old Testament, and in most of those cases, the direct object of the verb has to do with creating something for a specific role or function. God doesn't just create something; *God creates it for a specific purpose*.

We see this purposeful creation in the structure of Genesis 1. During the first day, God creates "light" but calls it "day." God is not merely creating light, but rather the function of *time*. On the second day, God "separates" the waters, creating the function of *weather*. On the third day God creates vegetation in order to *provide food*. In other words, God begins by creating the functions of time, weather and food -- all the things that are

necessary for human existence (and the things we talk about the most). Everything is created for a purpose, and at the end of the sixth day, God looks at it all and calls it "very good" -- it's all functioning as he intended.

But then there is this curious description of the seventh day: "And on the seventh day, God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work he had done." Isn't God a Spirit, omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent? Why would God need a nap after all this? This description of the seventh day is *actually the key to understanding all of Genesis 1* and, indeed, the whole biblical narrative.

The ancient people who read this text would have instantly understood what it was: a temple-building story. In the ancient world, people believed that gods "rested" in temples. Temples were not merely residences for the gods, they were also the places from which the gods controlled the cosmos. When a god is at rest, it means that there is security and stability within an ordered system because that god is in control. This is not rest in the sense of relaxation, but rest in the sense of engagement, rule and order.

God sets things in their proper order and function. Creation was now prepared and ready as a temple in which God would dwell with his people. The first six days are really about God building a house. The seventh day, it becomes a home.

This is really the point of the creation story: God at rest, dwelling with his people. The creation account is not merely an itemization of the material things that were scientifically or supernaturally formed at such and such a time and in such and such a manner. No, creation is the place where God lives and in which God delights.

Of course, God is disappointed with the poor choices humans make. But even after humans messed up, God did not abandon them. God walked with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He would dwell with Israel in tabernacle and temple. And then, in the most stunning evidence of cosmic elation, God became the "Word made flesh" that dwelt among us in Jesus Christ. And still the promise remains for the future. At the end of the Bible, just like at the beginning, the main point is that God will dwell with his people again (Revelation 21:1-3).

The creation story is not so much about the *how* but about the *who*. Here, a God is revealed who creates for the purpose of relationship. This shouldn't surprise us, given that God's very nature is *communal*. Witness the three Persons of the Trinity. It's natural that this unity in community would seek to bring others into relationship as well. God made the whole universe and dwells within it with the cosmic elation of love.

When we understand creation in this way, we better understand our place within it.

- + We're not merely the product of cosmic dust and eons of evolution.
- + We're beloved by the God who created us in his image.
- + The earth is not merely a happy accident, but God's dwelling place.
- + We're the priests in God's temple and our vocation is to care for it in God's name.
- + We're not merely animals who will die, but people made in the image of God.
- + We're humans about whom God cared enough to send Jesus Christ to redeem us from our sin and brokenness.

Sabbath reminds us of this reality. We gather to stop our daily routine, our attempts at controlling the world around us, and we simply worship. We enjoy God's dwelling with us. We gather at the table with Christ, God with us. We gather to hear the promise of Scripture -- that God will rest with us forever. Where creation has been gives way to where it is headed -- to the glory of God who makes all things new.

The South Pole might be the one place on Earth which is closest to space and the expanse of the universe.

Genesis 1 tells us, however, that we don't have to go that far to touch the face of God.

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