

LEFT OF MATTHEW

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:: NORMAN HUBBARD

LEFT OF MATTHEW

EXPLORING THE GREAT IDEAS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT ::



NAV PRESS®

BRINGING TRUTH TO LIFE

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To the students and staff of
The Navigators campus ministry
at The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire
from 1999–2006.
And especially to Joe and Ronni Bernardy,
who gave me the freedom to try many things
and fail at most of them.

“You shall therefore lay up these words of mine
in your heart and in your soul.”

Deuteronomy 11:18, ESV

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INTRODUCTION

THE JOURNEY AHEAD ::

Christians worship God as Creator, Judge, Redeemer, and Friend. But seldom do we think of Him as an Author. It's time for us to expand our appreciation of the divine genius!

God penned sixty-six books. Why should any of us limit ourselves to studying only twenty-seven of them? God's works span three thousand years of human history. Why only read about the last sixty? But that's exactly what we do if we overlook the Old Testament.

If we closely follow Jesus' teaching, we would be hard-pressed to justify any apathy toward the Old Testament. When Jesus taught, He quoted the Old Testament, argued from it, and directed His disciples to think about it. If we intend to follow Jesus, He will lead us into an understanding of the entire Bible.

The study you hold in your hands will help you start this very journey.

No doubt, the Old Testament is thick. If you pinch the pages of your Bible together and compare the ones to the left of Matthew with

the ones to the right of Malachi, you'll get an idea of just how much revelation awaits you in the Old Testament. But how much of the Old Testament have you actually read? How solid is your grasp of the great ideas presented in its pages? For many Christians, the Old Testament is a vast, under-explored collection of inspired writings taken to be authoritative yet imposing.

Consider how vast the Old Testament is. If you set out to read the whole Bible in a year, starting with Genesis on January 1 and ending with the maps in the back, you wouldn't reach the New Testament until mid-October! That's more than ten months of reading in the Old Testament before you ever read the first reference to Jesus in the gospel of Matthew.

When, if ever, have you spent ten months reading the Old Testament? What would happen if you did? How would you even begin?

On this unfamiliar continent, you could cross borders without even knowing it and meet people you don't remotely understand. Couldn't you just play it safe and stick to the familiar terrain of the New Testament, peppering your reading plan with a psalm here and a proverb there?

You could certainly try, but what will you do with the hundreds of allusions to the Old Testament throughout the New Testament? We can't even read the twenty-five verses in Jude without bumping into eight specific Old Testament references. How much less so the pivotal letters of Romans and Hebrews or the teachings of Jesus.

Of course, no sincere Christian really wants to avoid the Old Testament altogether. Most of us just want to avoid confusion, and the Old Testament can be confusing. I am reminded of the time my wife questioned our then five-year-old daughter about her Sunday school lesson.

"Were you studying about Elijah?" my wife asked.

"Yeah," our daughter answered, staring thoughtfully into space. "And Goliath and King Darius."

Either my daughter's kindergarten class had embarked on a comprehensive survey of the Old Testament from the united monarchy under

Saul to the Exile—or she was somewhat confused. All the names, dates, events, and people were tumbled together into one muddled collage.

Her experience is not unlike ours. The Old Testament can be confusing if you've never spent much time studying it. How could hundreds of pages of poetry, prophecy, proverbs, and narrative spanning three millennia prove otherwise when you first begin?

Yet too many of us end where we begin, leaving the Old Testament just the way we found it—a collection of extraordinary scenes and storybook morals, kind of like a baptized version of Aesop's fables. We develop a passing familiarity with Old Testament stories but reserve our serious religious reflection for the New Testament.

It's time to invest adult reflection, historical imagination, and theological substance into our reading of the Old Testament. It's time to rescue Elijah from Goliath (or was it King Darius?) and begin treating the Old Testament as divine revelation, not a helpful storybook or source for ancient quotations. It's time to take a guided tour through the Old Testament.

What you hold in your hands is a roadmap to help you on your journey. As with any map, this one is intended to chart a course through the great themes and big ideas of the Old Testament. But like any other map, this one can only take you so far: It can help you chart a course, but it can't make you move. It can offer a sensible route, but it can't ensure you will go the distance. More than all this, it cannot satisfy your deep longings to know God, any more than a map of Colorado could satisfy your desire to experience the Rocky Mountains by driving into the clouds on a narrow mountain pass.

You have to go there to experience it. You have to make the journey to live the reality. If it is deeper knowledge of God that you seek, you'll find it to the "left of Matthew." Enjoy the journey!

OUR PLACE IN SPACE

CREATION SETS THE STORY OF HUMANITY IN MOTION ::

Nearly every person in the Western world grew up hearing the story of how God created the heavens and the earth, how Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden, and how the snake tempted the first couple into making a really lousy decision. Even those brought up in families that weren't particularly religious may still have heard stories or read books about the Bible's version of the beginning of time.

In fact, the account of Creation in Genesis 1–2 is probably one of the best-known stories in the Bible. While it's wonderful that so many are acquainted with the creation story, this familiarity causes many people to gloss over the events and breeze over the details. Being accustomed to the broad strokes of the narrative may account for its relative *unimportance* in the lives of many believers. As G. K. Chesterton said, "It is almost impossible to make the facts vivid, because the facts are familiar; and for fallen men . . . familiarity is fatigue."¹ That's certainly true in regard to the creation story.

Let's set aside our familiarity and shake off the fatigue. Let's come at

the story with an open mind and a fresh set of eyes. It will require some effort on your part, not just to read and write your way into an original investigation, but also to think historically and imaginatively about a story you could easily paraphrase.

As you prepare to come at the creation story as if for the first time, bear in mind the following: While the account of Creation is not incompatible with science, you won't be reading an ancient lab report. The Genesis narrative was not intended to be a scientific dissertation or a forensic investigation into the origins of humankind. And while the opening pages of Genesis describe our *prehistoric* origins, the work is self-evidently a *historic* production for a particular people, namely, the children of Israel. Genesis was written by a person and for a people who already believed in the God who said, "Let there be light." These people already addressed Him by the names *Elohim* and *Yahweh*—sacred and holy names for the One they knew to be their Creator. And they already believed themselves to be a chosen nation, under God.

What purpose, then, did the account of Creation serve in this community? Was it a concise retelling of explanations long offered about where everything had come from? Or was it just a sensible way to begin an account of the nation's formative years and founding figures? Could it have been written to promote fervent worship of the true God in religious gatherings? Or to make the standard of truth explicit against false teachings that were creeping into the community?

Keep all of these ideas in mind as you study the creation account in Genesis 1 and 2. Read the text with your powers of observation sharpened. Keep your mind open. Keep your heart open. For that matter, keep your eyes open so you can periodically gaze out your window into the sky. See if you do not agree with the brilliant scientist and theologian Blaise Pascal, who said the universe is so great a "sensible mark of the almighty power of God that imagination loses itself in the thought."²

THE OPEN ROAD

Read Genesis 1–2.

::CREATED TO MAKE

Two distinct words are used of God’s creative power in Genesis 1 and 2. The word *created* (*bara’* in Hebrew) in Genesis 1:1 signifies that God brought the material world into existence *from nothing*. The word *made* (*‘asah*) in Genesis 1:7 and following passages signifies that God fashioned the matter He had created into the things that pleased Him, thus giving the cosmos its particular frame. These words are combined to describe God’s creative work in Genesis 2:3, “Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.” These last words can be literally translated “created to make.”

1. Suppose that you possessed no other revelation about God than the first two chapters of Genesis. What could you conclude about the character, interests, and capacities of the Creator?

2. No arguments are set forward to prove the existence of God in the beginning. God is simply the first subject of the first sentence. Yet we write books and convene conferences to prove the existence of God today. What do you make of this contrast between our contemporary interest in proving God’s existence and the ancient text, which makes no attempt to prove His existence?

:: THE IMAGE OF LIGHT

The very first words spoken by God are, “Let there be light.” It is no wonder, then, that light becomes a dominant metaphor throughout the rest of Scripture for concepts like divine presence (John 1:1-9), knowledge (1 John 1:5-7), and salvation (Revelation 21:22-27). Perhaps the first words of God should form a regular prayer of yours, “O send out Your light and Your truth, let them lead me” (Psalm 43:3).

3. Jewish sages noted that each of the first three days of Creation finds its complement in the subsequent three days. Using the chart below, take note of what is created and what you discover about the creation or Creator on each day:

<p style="text-align: center;">PREPARING THE UNIVERSE AS A HOME</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">FILLING THE UNIVERSE AS A HOME</p>
<p>Day One</p>	<p>Day Four</p>
<p>Day Two</p>	<p>Day Five</p>
<p>Day Three</p>	<p>Day Six</p>

:: CREATION FOCUSED ON MAN

On day four of Creation, the writer of Genesis lets us in on a great mystery. The lights of the heavens were to “be for signs and for seasons and for days and years” (1:14). We should stop to ask, “Signs for whom?” Although man had not yet been created, the heavens were being fashioned for him. God established the cosmos as a home for man, who would read the signs (and seasons, days, and years) by the revolution of the heavenly bodies.

4. In the whole array of creation, only one creature was fashioned “in the image of God.” What responsibilities and capabilities did God give to Adam, traits that set him apart from the rest of the created order?

While the opening chapters of Genesis are cosmic in their scope, they are personal in their implications. How has your reading influenced your sense of self-worth before God and your perspective of belonging in His universe?

:: PREJUDICE IMPERILED

If you accept the authority of the Bible, all forms of racial prejudice become untenable. All other animals in the sky, sea, and land were created “according to their kinds.” There is, however, only one kind of creature called *man*. According to the Mishnah — the authoritative compilation of Jewish oral law — Adam was created alone, as the sole progenitor of the whole human race, so that no one could say to another, “My father is

greater than your father” (Sanhedrin 4:5).³ Thus, no one group of people can claim superiority over another. As the prophet Malachi put it, “Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created us?” (2:10).

- When God created the cosmos, He didn’t spin a thousand *autonomous* entities into existence; rather, He created a system of ordered *interrelationships*. What is stated or implied about each of the following interrelationships?

GOD AND THE COSMOS	HUMANITY AND THE EARTH
GOD AND HUMANITY	MAN AND WOMAN

- How can you practically and purposefully improve on the relationships God designed you for: Your relationship with the earth? Your relationship with your family members or spouse? Your relationship with your Creator?

When God spoke into nothingness and said, “Let there be light,” it was so. When He separated the seas from the dry land, it was good. But when He rested from all His work on the seventh day, the work was not finished. Indeed, God had finished *His* part of the work (2:2), but the ongoing work of creation had just begun.

7. How do the plants and animals carry on the work of creation?

How do humans carry out the ongoing, creative work of God in the cosmos?

In regard to your own God-given strengths and interests, how might you participate in the ongoing, creative work of God?

8. Genesis 2:10-14 describes a river that waters Eden, which then divides into four separate channels as it flows out of the garden. What does this detail suggest about the connection between Eden and the rest of earth?

:: FOLLOW THE RIVER'S COURSE

In the book of Ezekiel, we read how the prophet had a vision of a life-giving river flowing from God's presence in the temple, bringing life to everything it touches (47:8-11, *ESV*). John saw the same river flowing from God's throne in heaven, bringing healing for the nations (Revelation 22:1-2). You might say that the river of life continued to flow from Eden into eternity!

9. When God searched for a helper suitable for the first man, He paraded all the other animals before Adam. Why do you think He did this?

Describe the real and felt connection between Adam and Eve.

:: ONE SMALL PROBLEM

Writing more than fifty years before the birth of Christ, Lucretius insisted that "this world has been made by nature, just as the seeds of things [i.e. atoms] have chanced spontaneously to clash, after being brought together in manifold wise without purpose, without foresight."⁴ The only serious challenge to the worldview of this brilliant, ancient materialist was the mind and soul of man. About these, he conceded, "I am unable at present to set forth [their] hidden causes."⁵ The only problem we run into if we attempt to dismiss or discredit the notion of the divine image in man is . . . the divine image in man.

A NEW TESTAMENT EXCURSION

Read John 1:1-14.

When the apostle John began his gospel narrative about the life and teachings of Jesus, he opted for a highly stylized prologue to take the reader back to the opening chapters of Genesis.

1. How does the word choice and imagery of this introduction remind you of the account of Creation in Genesis?
2. What role did “the Word” play in creating the cosmos? (“The Word” is specifically identified as “the only Son from the Father” in verse 14, ESV.)
3. How would you restate in your own words the ironic tension John describes between the Word’s authority over the world and the world’s reception of the Word?

Now read Hebrews 11:1-3.

Consider how someone would urge a persecution-weary church to hold fast to the faith they originally professed. The writer of Hebrews opted to do so by presenting example after example of men and women in the Bible who related to God on the basis of tenacious faith. Before

the writer gave any example of how others have demonstrated fidelity to God, though, he began by saying, “By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God” (11:3).

4. Why do you suppose belief in the doctrine of Creation stands at the head of this list of examples of faithful people?

5. How would you describe the relationship between believing and understanding indicated in Hebrews 11:3?

6. How might a believer’s understanding of the Creator and the cosmos shape his or her response to suffering or persecution?

REFLECTIONS

Many people today are troubled by the suggestion that something was created *out of nothing*. They do not seem equally mystified by the notion that something was created *instead of nothing*.

1. Pause and ponder the following questions: Why did God make anything at all? Why did He create me? How would you answer these questions now that you have studied Genesis 1 and 2?

There are multiple stories—scientific and religious—that attempt to explain the origin of the cosmos. Choose one of these alternative explanations and consider the following questions:

2. How is it distinct from the biblical account you have studied?
3. Is it incompatible in whole or in part with the biblical version?
4. What are (or could be) the consequences of adopting a contrasting account of the origins of the world and of humanity?

:: PERSONAL SIGNIFICANCE IN THE COSMIC VOID

For many people in the modern era, the vastness of the universe makes the prospect of a personal God seem unlikely. “Now that we know how insignificant our planet is,” the argument goes, “how could we possibly suppose there is a God watching over us who is interested in a personal relationship with individuals?”

It might be helpful to point a person who holds such a view to Ptolemy’s *Almagest* — an astronomical treatise composed more than a hundred years after Christ’s ascension. In three short proofs, the author concludes that “the Earth has the Ratio of a Point to the Heavens” (*Almagest* 1, 6).⁶ King David had made the same observation in a more personal way centuries before Ptolemy by asking, “When I consider Your heavens . . . what is man?” (Psalm 8:3-4). The thinkers in antiquity were well aware of the vast emptiness of the heavens and the virtual insignificance of humanity relative to it. Yet somehow they found it possible to believe they were more than atomic accidents floating atop an unremarkable rock around an insignificant star.

INTERSECTIONS

The story of Job is one of the most poignant and probing dramas in the Bible. In it we learn that one man can be the focal point of a cosmic conflict between God and Satan — and that somehow the archenemy of God loses if one man will hold fast to his faith in the face of severe affliction.⁷ At the end of thirty-seven chapters, Job has lost everything — his property, family, and dignity — and it appears that he might indeed lose his faith as he grows increasingly defiant of God. But then God shows up to answer Job. Read Job 38:1–42:6 and consider:

1. In a few sentences, how would you summarize God’s reply to Job?

2. List the kinds of things over which God exerts creative or sustaining force in the cosmos.

3. What words would you use to describe Job's response to God?

G. K. Chesterton commented that “the more we really look at man as an animal, the less he will look like one.”⁸ Apparently, the directors of the London Zoo failed to consider this point when they sponsored a special event designed to “teach members of the public that the human is just another primate.” In the summer of 2005, the zoo opened an exhibit featuring *Homo sapiens* in fig leaves, sitting in a cage, picking at one another's hair. There was one problem with this publicity event: the *Homo sapiens* in the cage were not acting like *Homo sapiens* at all.

4. Using all your powers of imagination and irony, mentally redesign this exhibit in your mind with *Homo sapiens* truly acting like humans. What would they be wearing, discussing, and doing?

LAY IT TO YOUR HEART

Meditate on these passages and commit them to memory:

- By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host. (Psalm 33:6)
- Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created us? (Malachi 2:10)
- By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible. (Hebrews 11:3)