

SESSION 2: TO WHOM WAS THE BIBLE WRITTEN AND FOR WHAT PURPOSE

It might be startling for many to realize that Genesis, the book of beginnings, actually had an audience. Moses, the writer of the book of Genesis, wrote to a particular people for a particular purpose. In fact, all the books of the Bible had both a writer and an audience. It is important to realize—as Biblical scholars are now trying to impress upon us—that the Bible was written *for* us, but not written *to* us.

Certainly, God had us in mind at the time, although we would not yet exist for many hundreds of years into the future. Paul, for example, says that 'all of scripture is God-breathed and useful (that is, for us) for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness' (2 Tim 3:16).

However, the fact remains that the Bible was not written *to* us. We were not the targeted audience at the time the books of the Bible were written. So in this case, who was Genesis written to? Who was God, through Moses, specifically addressing? And for what purpose? What was the message God wanted to deliver to them?

The answer is quite simple. The audience was the Hebrew people, the people whom God had just delivered out of Egypt, to be his chosen people for a special mission. This special mission was to work together with God in getting his 'creation project' back on track, and outworking it towards its ultimate conclusion (Rev 21 and 22). Genesis is all about God, through Moses, preparing the Hebrew people for their special calling.

Firstly, Moses begins by describing creation itself and the totality of creation, the entire universe. He explains how creation came about, and that it was by an act of God: "In the beginning, God created...." The term used for God, in the language understood by the Hebrew people, was 'Elohim.' "Elohim created..."

Now, Elohim is identified in scripture as the one and only true God, creator, and sustainer of all things. It was he who created the entire universe, the heavens and the earth, and everything on the earth. Now most, if not every nation in the ancient world, at the time of Genesis being written, had an understanding that there was one sovereign creator of all things, who had always existed and was the giver and sustainer of life. And they referred to him as Elohim, or the equivalent in their respective languages.

But God (Elohim), to them was remote, so most nations also had their lesser, tribal deities or gods that they understood would favor them if appeased, and often through very harsh and costly sacrifices. The Hebrews had a clear understanding of

this, as the Egyptians who held them captive for 400 years had some 2000 tribal deities.

Now, moving into Genesis chapter 2, and this is where it really gets interesting, we find the account of creation repeated. But this time the name Elohim does not appear *alone*; the name Yahweh (or Lord God, in English) is added. Yahweh is the name of the personal God of the Hebrews, introduced to Moses, in the wilderness, as recorded in Exodus 3.

So, unlike the nations around them that had their 'lesser than Elohim' personal gods, the Hebrews' personal God was none other than Elohim, the one and only true God, creator and sustainer of all things. Moses was determined that the Hebrew people understood that the God who had called them for a special purpose was none other than the one and only true God, who had no equal, and therefore nothing would be impossible for *him*.

Isn't it encouraging for us today to know this as well, that the God whom we serve, in Christ, has no equal? He is the God of all gods, the Lord of lords, the King of kings and nothing is too difficult for him (Lk1:37).

Secondly, Moses, was describing creation in such a way that it would be very clear to the Hebrew people why God had created the heavens and earth.

What was the purpose of God's 'creation project'? Put simply, the universe—the heavens and the earth, and every aspect of creation, including us—was created for God. Now, remember Genesis was written *for* us but not *to* us, right? So, it was written to answer the 'purpose questions'—the *who* and *why* of the ancient Hebrew people—and not the *how* and *when* questions of science that are so often demanded today. Moses' description of creation, which he gave in just two chapters, would have perfectly answered the *who* and *why* questions of the ancient Hebrew people.

So how would they have understood creation from Moses's account? Professor John Walton in his book, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, says that the writers' description of Genesis 1 would have caused the ancient Hebrew people to understand the universe as a 'cosmic temple,' as 'God's dwelling place.'

In fact, Isaiah says exactly this in Isaiah 40: 22. He says, 'He (God) stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in.' This is not Isaiah having a poetic moment. This was how the ancient people of Israel understood the universe, as did most, if not all, the ancient peoples of that time in human history.

The 'garden of Eden' was exactly this in miniature form. It was a miniature 'temple' and a prototype of God's plan for the entire earth. In the garden we have three things: we have God, Man, and a fruitful, completed, orderly creation. Adam and Eve's commissioning in Genesis chapter 1:26 would have made it very clear to them, that Man was commissioned by God to extend this sacred orderly garden, or 'temple,' all over the entire earth.

We see that in Genesis chapters 1 and 2, Moses was describing to this 'covenanted people of God' what their commissioning and calling was all about. He was

introducing them to their life's calling as a nation. They were to work, together with God, in getting God's 'creation project' back on track, and outworking it towards its glorious conclusion.

At this point, it's important to note that the chronology of God's 'creation project' begins in Genesis 1. However, the chronology of *the Bible story* begins after the Hebrews' great Exodus from Egypt, with Moses addressing the Hebrew people as a free nation, who are being readied to live a life on mission with God.

The calling of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis chapter 12, and therefore also the calling of the Hebrew people, had already taken place when Moses wrote the Book of Genesis for the Hebrew people. It is striking to note the similarities between the commission given to Adam (Adam and Eve and the human race) with the commission given to Abraham (Abraham and Sarah and the chosen race).

So, at the time when Moses was writing Genesis 1, it would have been obvious to the entire Hebrew nation that the earth was anything but what God had intended it to be, and also that Man was living a life that resembled anything but the life God had intended Man to live. The Hebrew people had just been delivered from 400 years of brutal slavery under a merciless tyrant. What happened to the loving, image-bearing purpose Man was meant to manifest, and the blessing Man was meant to extend throughout the whole earth?

So, the Hebrew people, in these first two chapters of Genesis, were getting their initial introduction to their mission, which was to be elaborated on throughout all the entire five books that Moses was to write, which we know today as the Pentateuch.

Perhaps we could title the Bible 'The Story of God on Mission, and God on Mission with His People.' How would that be? What do you think? And I would like to suggest right here, that this Bible Story theme of 'God on mission and God on mission with his people' flows seamlessly from the Old Testament into the New Testament, and clear down to the end of the age. We will find that God on mission, and God on mission with his people, unites and makes sense of the entire Bible story. We have sixty-six books, written over a period of some 1500 years, by some 40 different writers. But they all make up one book, one story, one author (GOD) and one purpose: one God-centered dream being outworked, and brought to glorious completion.

How and why has God chosen and called one people to live an extraordinary life on mission with himself? This is an important question because in this generation, this chosen people, is us.