**Choices and Consequences Bible Month June 2024**

**Bible Month 1 Genesis 2-3 Eve and Adam**

In Genesis (meaning origin or coming into being) we are presented with archetypes for humanity: Adam and Eve.  It is very different from modern scientific perspectives of our origins: a primordial soup of amino acids, or of life springing from localised chemicals around hydrothermal vents on the seafloor; or even protohumans, predating Neanderthals and other hominids who gathered together and expressed an understanding of divinity, of gods, of one God.

Genesis presents us with God creating us from the earth, but also from our own flesh.  As created beings we are made from the substance of creation itself; our origins are in and from the make-up of the universe itself.   Being made from ‘dust’, from the elemental (to which we return after death) presents us with a very simple picture, which in reality is actually very complex.

But we are more than the dust to which we return.  There is our biology; our “flesh”.  Eve is portrayed as coming from Adam’s rib, or even in some translations from “part of the man’s side”.  If you don’t take a sexist perspective on this, then, we have shared flesh and blood, biology, and metabolism. Our life is other than our chemical make-up, and that implies something of our communal nature, which is biological.  This is all in the context of Adam being lonely, and other creatures not providing a suitable helper to be what was needed for a proper companion.  There is something here about the spiritual, too.

With the emphasis on origins to start with, we move on to look at relationships.  This includes family and its complications; sexuality; and how we relate to things that are ‘other to us’ - all of which are in this ‘foundation myth (a truth bearing narrative).  That includes things we have power over, and also God who gives us freedom under God’s power.  Helping each other, compatibility, mutuality, and difference are all in these chapters with something far from a happy ending.

Concepts of good and evil (and knowing good and evil), nakedness, blame, perfection (knowing God) and being fallen with the consequences of sin make this short section of Genesis produce a wealth of material to explore ourselves, how we relate those whom we consider to be close to us; but it also goes well beyond that begging questions of how humanity relates in wider society; and then asks questions of us (individually and as society) of how we relate to the divine, to God, and as Christians to Jesus?

God is relational: the story of Adam and Eve is surely about being relational.  It is even said the Godhead of Father Son and Holy Spirit is relational, the One God as Trinity is in “perichoresis” – meaning a circle dance.  Ultimately the Holy Almighty, creator God is LOVE – relational.  Jesus clarified that loving God with our whole being and our neighbours as ourselves sums up what God calls on us to do.  That touches on sin and forgiveness.

Possible Gospel passages that might be worth exploring:

Luke 3:23-38

John 3:1-8

**Questions**

1.      *Who are we, and what are we composed of, that is more than our physical substance?*

2.      *Adam and Eve and their story…  What is life about?  Is humanity’s preoccupation with continuation of our species over all others routed in this Genesis story?  And what more is here than Adam needing Eve?*

3.      *In what ways do Adam and Eve give us an insight of our relationships with each other? (Individuals, families, society, and God.  Even the natural order).*

4.      *What are people that God is mindful of us? (Read Psalm 8:4-9).*

5.      *The serpent in the third chapter of Genesis is often seen as Satan, but would Adam or Eve have picked the forbidden fruit anyway – because of what it offered?  What other things could the serpent be a metaphor for?  And what is so bad about knowledge (of good and evil)?*

6.      *This is an ancient text predating Christianity by a very long time.  What can we see of the second Adam, Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:45-49), in this?*

John Schofield

**Bible Month 2 Genesis 4:1-16 Abel and Cain**

What do you notice?

One of the ways to explore a story, whether biblical or non-biblical, is to read it through or listen to it at a relatively slow pace, asking yourself the question: “What do I notice in this?” Elements that catch your attention may relate to the plot, to the characters, to the dilemmas, to the choices, to the consequences, to the emotions or to something else completely. There is a sense in which “noticing” is the first act in our reading, the noticing that invites us to pay attention to the questions which surface for us and provide us with material to explore with others or on own, with insights which shine a light on what it means for us to be human beings.

Turning to Genesis 4 and to Abel and Cain, the younger and older sons of Eve and Adam, here are a few aspects of the narrative that might stand out for us, stir our imagination and depict something of our own experience of relationships, choices and consequences. Whether the following possibilities strike a chord for you or not is relatively unimportant. What matters is what **you** notice and what you do with the noticing.

I notice that, when God accepts Abel’s offering and does not accept Cain’s offering, we are not given a reason for the rejection. Why, I wonder, is the explanation missing? We are dealing with a highly skilful author, so the absence of a reason would seem to be deliberate. And I also notice that I have some sympathy for Cain in his frustration and anger. What is so wrong with what he has done?

I notice that Cain takes his anger out on Abel, not on God, that Cain does not answer God back, that he does not ask “why”, that he does not take God to task and shout out “It’s not fair!” Why, I wonder, does Cain feel so unjustly treated that he resorts to violence and murder? And I also notice that Cain transfers his frustration to an easier target, to a brother with whom he may already have a strained relationship.

I notice that God seems to have a preference for the younger sibling. Why, I wonder, does this appear to be the case throughout Genesis? And I also notice that this sibling envy and rivalry sets the tone for the future stories of Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah, Joseph and his brothers. What’s more, I notice something similar happening in Jesus’ parable of the father and his two sons (Luke 15:11-32) and that Jesus may well have had an eye on Genesis when he came up with that tale.

I notice that the punishment pronounced on Cain evokes from him a sense of vulnerability and a fear of dying. Why, I wonder, does he stand up for himself and his survival at this point and not when the original problem of the rejection occurred? And I also notice that in this interaction between God and Cain, not only does Cain seek to evade responsibility for Abel’s death, but that he raises too the broader question about commitment to others. “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

I notice that Abel is presented as a very passive character. Why, I wonder, do we not hear Abel’s voice? And I also notice that Eve and Adam are nowhere to be found as the story unfolds, which may pose wider questions about relationships within the home. What’s more, I am reminded that in Jesus’ story of the father and his two sons (Luke 15:11-32) we do not meet their mother.

**Questions**

1. *What do you notice in your reading of the story? How does the story leave you feeling?*
2. *Why do you think that the author of Genesis presents God as having a preference for younger siblings? What might the writer be trying to communicate about how she/he understands God?*
3. *Why do you think we are given no reason for Cain’s rejection?*
4. *A possible reason for Cain’s violence towards Abel may be envy. Envy can sometimes arise out of a perception of injustice. How do we understand the roots of our own feelings of envy? What ways do we find for handling them?*
5. *Can you think of any occasions when you have taken your anger out on an easier target?*
6. *“Am I my brother’s keeper?” Cain’s phrase has often been used to raise the question of our responsibility for and to others. How do you understand it?*

David Bidnell

**Bible Month 3 Genesis 6-9 Noah**

Perhaps, like me, the story of the flood is one learnt as a child. We heard the story, we sang the song, “the animals went in two by two, the elephant and the kangaroo”. We recall doves with olive branches and rainbows. In the Mystery Plays of York and Chester Noah is treated as a figure of fun, nagged by his wife. It is all very light-hearted but when we take a step back from popular culture we see a much darker tale, one where almost all of humanity and land-based animals are wiped out. It is destruction on a global scale.

Many ancient civilisations have flood myths where one man (and family) is chosen because of his righteousness to survive the cataclysm. The closest parallel to the story of Noah is contained in the Gilgamesh epic from ancient Mesopotamia where Uta-Napishti is the chosen man. This myth is thought to be related to devastating flooding in the Tigris-Euphrates valley around 2900 BC and may have provided a source for the Biblical flood story.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, such myths are not limited to the Middle East and similar accounts of a flood can be found in the first nations in North and South America and Oceania. Myth is a powerful way of carrying information of past events from prehistoric times. The details are not history as we know it but are foundational stories based on real events. A good example of this close to home is the myth of Merlin going to the west and stealing a stone circle and placing it at Stonehenge. Scientific evidence now points to migrants from Wales bringing their blue stone circle, originally erected in southwest Wales, to Stonehenge around 3000 BC.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Question:** *What are the foundational myths/stories of your church?*

The structure of Genesis often shows the intertwining of two or more stories. There are two accounts of the Creation in Genesis 1 and 2. Similar intertwining is also evident in the story of Noah.

**Questions:** *How many pairs of each animal are to be taken into the ark (6:19-20 and 7:2-3)? How many days does it rain for (7:4 and 7:23; 8:3)? Why might the inclusion of two slightly different versions of the story be important to the people who wrote the book of Genesis?*

The story of Noah also carries parallels with the Creation and the story of Adam and Eve. In the Creation God creates order out of chaos, we see the dry land appearing from the water (Gen. 1:1-10). Disorder is then created by humankind. Eventually God decides to act. There must be judgement. It is clear in the story that the judgement is not just on humankind but on creation. However, the presence of Noah is pivotal in that it demonstrates our God is both demanding of justice but also merciful. “The justice of God demands that the flood occurs, but the grace of God allows an escape for Noah”.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the Bible Month booklet Paynter discusses how, after the flood, we see the dry land once more being separated from the water. There is an act of “de-creation” where there is once more the chaos of the waters followed by an act of re-creation. A new creation and order re-established. We might be self-destructive, but God is there to re-create us through his mercy and grace.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Questions:** *How do you feel about this interplay of judgement and grace? What about those left behind?*

*As we face choices and challenges and possibly difficult decisions as churches and as a circuit how might God be challenging us to de-create and re-create?*

The cycle of order leading to disorder to judgement then rescue and hope leading to order is played out throughout the Bible. Its zenith is achieved in the death and resurrection of Jesus. De-creation and re-creation, judgement and mercy being dealt with by God incarnate.

When developing a sermon around judgement and mercy we could consider using John 3:16-17 as a Gospel reading. “In this way God loved the world, he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn it, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

**Questions:** *Does this suggest that there is no judgement due to Jesus’ action on the cross? Is it conditional on belief in or a response to Jesus? Is atonement a judgement or an alignment?*

If we consider Mark 1:14-15: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’” The Greek word used for repent, metanoia, is much richer than its English translation. It means to have a complete change of mind or purpose. We live our lives differently because we are in Christ.

**Questions:** *Is the judgement in our response to Jesus? Are we de-created and re-created in our response to his grace through our repentance in the sense of metanoia?*

We might also consider this de-creation and re-creation theme in Revelation - that final new heaven and new earth and the new “earth” Noah stepped onto. If we are thinking about an EcoChurch themed service around Noah, then John 3:16-17 might also provide us with material. In Genesis 9:11-13 God covenants with Noah and all living creatures that there will never again be a flood to destroy the earth. We might read this as a promise to the whole of Creation. In John 3:16-17, the Greek word used for world is cosmos. It is not too much of a stretch to substitute “his creation” for the word “world”. “In this way God loved his Creation …..” There is also clever wordplay in the Hebrew around the word for human, *adam*, and the word for earth or land, *adama*, which strengthens the link with the Creation story and the relationship between humankind and the earth.

**Questions:** *If God was prepared to give his most precious gift due to his love for his Creation how should we respond as stewards of God’s Creation? Have we lost the close relationship with the land that is evident in the stories of Creation and Noah? If so, how might we go about recovering it?*

The Noah story has a curious twist at the end. Noah gets drunk and his son sees him naked and tells his brothers. His brothers, without looking, cover Noah. As a result of Ham looking and telling Noah curses Canaan, Ham’s son. Canaan is blameless in this, and Noah’s drunken behaviour does not get judged. This curse creates the backdrop to ongoing strife between the Patriarchs and the Canaanites and later the Israelites and the Canaanites until eventually the land of Canaan is taken by the Israelites under Joshua with the Canaanites either driven out, killed or enslaved.

**Questions:** *In what ways might we “curse” the blameless for our own faults and inadequacies? Who might be our Canaanites and what should we do to build a relationship with them?*

John Hayward

**Bible Month 4 Genesis 11:1-9 The Tower of Babel**

In the narrative of the **Tower of Babel** humans are once more disrupting God’s plans. With arrogance and pride they have chosen to turn to their own courses and, in so doing, are challenging God’s authority with their actions and attitudes – with unexpected consequences. This is traditionally a lesson in humility. It emphasizes the need for choosing obedience to God's will rather than pursuing self-glorification and independence. God seeks to work co-operatively with humanity - when will humans respond?

In Genesis 10 we discover Noah and his family are already widely geographically spread (there is a far from exhaustive list of 70 nations including 4 different generations). There was great pressure at the time to maintain a ‘remembering-linkage’ with ancestors. Such links helped to anchor individuals and families securely with their historical identity as part of a close-knit social group. ‘Should the ties between the ancestor and his offspring dissolve, the family is doomed to dispersion and annihilation.’[[5]](#endnote-1)

A drawing of a pyramid

Description automatically generatedThis Genesis story focuses solely on the descendants of Ham who have settled in the plains of Shinar not far from Babylon. Most of this group were seen as trouble for Israel. Climate change at the end of the fourth millennium, known as the Uruk period, saw this former wetland dry out and become good habitable land, but with limited natural resources. With no stone, mud was used to construct the tower, presumed to be a Ziggurat. The invention of sun-baked bricks and bitumen was used for the outer walls, but the inner were simple mud, which required less fuel. The scale suggests slave labour was used. A Ziggurat, unlike a temple, was designed to meet the heavens. At the top was a small room, where a table would be set, and rather than the priests going up, the aim was for the god to descend the sloping staircase to the temple at the base. Surrounding the Ziggurat, like an out-of-town shopping centre, would be the temples and granaries – but no habitation. We don’t know which god they were seeking, but Yahweh did come down and did not appreciate what the people had done.

Outside of Shinar, and Ham’s particular tribal offshoot, it would appear that the spreading and diversifying of Noah’s family was part of God’s plan for humans to flourish. Each offshoot developed their own cultural and linguistic uniqueness. Even for this one tribe, the result of God’s intervention, just as in creation, is a general movement towards diversity and acknowledging its important gifts. In **Acts 2:1-18** we see an echo of this when, at Pentecost, the Spirit enables the disciples to speak in different tongues. This God given gift, can be thought of as a correction to Babel. Arguably it is a signpost to an increase in the diversity of outlook of the disciple and openness to those beyond ‘the people of God’.

Assuming this diversity reflects something of who God is and wishes to relate to us, then arguably, if we wish to encounter God more fully, we can do so by exploring diversity, either in the natural, human, cultural or linguistic worlds. There is an amazing vision of this in **Revelation 7:9–10** where a multitude of tribes, peoples and languages worship the Lamb. Surely this signals a call for each one of us to embrace all people as loved by God, and seek racial justice and equity for all people?

The Ziggurat, in some respects, aimed to tame God, to focus his presence and place the power of encounter into the hands of human beings, the thought being they could somehow control how and who God encountered. Arguably God instructed the Israelites in the desert to do something similar, building the Tabernacle with its Holy of Holies, Mercy Seat and subsequently developing into later permanent temples. You may wish to note how the degrees of separation and segregation developed between different groups of people in these later iterations!

Presumably this setup was a reassurance at a time for Israel of scattering and disconnecting from their culture, land and belonging. In a more settled time, however, it became an issue. Psychologically it seemed to limit their awareness, expectations or possibilities of God being at work more widely in the world. Power centred on the priests, so the temple became the ONLY place to encounter God. When God descends at Babel and scatters the people, he forces them to explore new places (where God already was), new cultures (where God already was) and new languages (where God already was). The parallel for this in the Gospel is perhaps when God, upon Jesus’ death, tears the temple curtain in two (**Matthew 27:50-54).**

Things have changed! **And YET…** Have they? Where are people expected to seek God? In the church!

Where do we focus our energy? In encouraging people to come into the building. Why? so that they can encounter the God whom we have welcomed to come down and meet with them inside?

One positive of COVID was we were forced out of our temples. I heard someone recently say that we have idolised the church, over Jesus. Yet Jesus described himself as the new temple -

John 1:51 [NIV](https://biblehub.com/niv/john/1.htm) *He then added, “Very truly I tell you, you will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’ the Son of Man.”*

We gnash our teeth at the idea that our churches might have to close, but for those who have already left church buildings and who have scattered and remain scattered - guess what? They’ve encountered a bigger God!

**Questions**

* *Brickmaking was a pioneering technology that enabled higher constructions. Are there modern technologies that concern you today? If so, why? [e.g. A.I, The Internet, Large Hadron Collider]*
* *To what extent do you identify with your ancestors? What might be the motivation to research your own family tree? Is it curiosity about ancestors or ensuring your particular interpretation of events and connections for your descendants?*
* *We might value and embrace diversity, but most of our churches are pretty uniform. It has been quite challenging to engage in conversations about difference, such as ‘God in Love Unites us’. Why is it threatening to discuss our differences in beliefs, understandings, politics?*
* *How can we better engage and learn about the diversity that surrounds us, through going out, or inviting in others?*
* *How might we put into practice our EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) training from last year?*
* *Sometimes, as in this story, difference leads to schism and separation. Whether that be of a family, a church, or a community, is it something that is always negative?*
* *When we stopped attending the building in COVID, we still found God BUT we were limited in how we could explore God in the world. Reflect back on experience of COVID …. what did you gain? what did you lose? To what extent did your view of God change?*
* *If we deliberately chose not to attend church once a month and sought out a different expression of faith, or church, or simply spent time in nature, what difference would it make spiritually? Would it be an opening or a closing of spiritual experiences?*
* *Even if we are physically or geographically limited, or our context is not very diverse, how else might we engage with a wider demography of people?*

**Additional Activities**

* Find out more about Cities of Sanctuary, and about Churches of Sanctuary across the whole of Britain and Ireland - and thank God for Sanctuary. <https://churchofsanctuary.org/>
* Find out about Churches Together racial justice <https://ctbi.org.uk/racial-justice-sunday-2024/>
* Checkout *Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UN, 1948*declares that **'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights’.**
* Listen to Dr Martin Luther King (Jnr)’s full speech. *Stanford University website as part of an animated presentation.* <https://freedomsring.stanford.edu/?view=Speech> *You may wish to focus on the closing sections: from about 11.11* ***“****Let us not wallow in the valley of despair…” to 14:39 “to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day”*
* What parts of the speech make the strongest impression on you?
* What would it have been like to be there that day – as a white person?
* What might you have done as a result of hearing it?

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1. Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 106–7. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Stonehenge: The Lost Circle Revealed*, dir. by Pete Chinn <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m000s5xm/stonehenge-the-lost-circle-revealed> [accessed 29 April 2024]. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Arnold, p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Helen Paynter, ‘Reflections on the Flood’, *Bible Month: Genesis*, 2024, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *K. van der Toorn, Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria and Israel: Continuity and Change in the Forms of Religious Life (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 127. 270. See extensive discussion in Walton* [↑](#endnote-ref-1)