

Guidelines

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Commissioned by **Jeremy Duff**; *edited by* **Lisa Cherrett**

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Writers in this issue

Volker Rabens teaches New Testament at Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany. He is the author of *The Holy Spirit and Ethics in Paul: Transformation and Empowering for Religious-Ethical Life*.

Andrew Wingate was involved in theological education for 25 years in India and the UK. He moved to Leicester in 2000, and developed the St Philip's Centre for Study and Engagement in a Multi Faith Society. He is also Bishop's Inter Faith Adviser, and a Chaplain to The Queen.

Jane Williams read Theology at Cambridge University before going on to work in theological publishing and education. She now works as a Visiting Lecturer at King's College London, as a Lecturer at the St Paul's Theological Centre, and for Redemptorist Publications.

Jeremy Duff is a vicar in Widnes with a teaching and writing ministry, which has included posts at Liverpool Cathedral and within Oxford University. His writings include *Meeting Jesus: Human Responses to a Yearning God* (SPCK, 2006) and *The Elements of New Testament Greek* (CUP, 2005).

Henry Wansbrough OSB is a monk at Ampleforth Abbey in Yorkshire. He is Executive Secretary of the International Commission for Producing an English-Language Lectionary (ICPEL) for the Roman Catholic Church, and lectures frequently across the globe.

Justin Welby is Dean of Liverpool. Previously, as Canon of Coventry Cathedral, he was responsible for Coventry's international ministry of reconciliation. Justin is also the Personal and Ethical Adviser to the UK Association of Corporate Treasurers, and lectures extensively on ethics and finance.

Melissa Jackson recently completed her doctoral work at the University of Oxford. Her thesis was an examination of the intersection of comedy and feminist interpretation in several Old Testament stories. She is a lecturer in Old Testament and Hebrew at Baptist Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia, USA.

Chris Tilling is the New Testament Tutor at St Mellitus College and St Paul's Theological Centre, London. His present area of research concerns the apostle Paul's understanding of the identity of Christ.

Robert Mackley read history and theology at Cambridge University before ordination. Fr Robert is currently Assistant Chaplain and Research Student at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. He is a published church historian and a regular columnist and reviewer for the *Church Times*.

Genesis 1—11

We really shouldn't be doing this, you know. Imagine an appreciation of Shakespeare's *King Lear* that covered only Act I, and that will give you some idea of what I mean. Genesis has 50 chapters, and we will be looking only at the first eleven. What's more, Genesis itself is only Book One of a five-part series: its final editors conceived the Pentateuch as a continuous narrative, for which these eleven opening chapters set the scene. The huge interest that these early chapters have for us now should not blind us to the fact that they were vital, but preliminary, for most of their readers throughout most of history. They set the scene for God's interaction with his people, Israel. That's where the focus of attention is designed by its writers to be. Whereas Genesis covers a few thousand years in a broad sweep, the next few books start to go into detail as the real plot begins to unfold.

But if we don't forget that, perhaps it is all right to treat Genesis 1—11 separately. Its grand scene-setting has carried and continues to carry so much theological weight that it would be hard to do it justice if it was treated just as an introduction. Its authors should be allowed some weight, too, however, in guiding us into the meaning and purpose of these chapters.

Like most, though not all, scholars of Genesis, I am assuming that it is the work of a number of consummate theologians. The latest one, chronologically, is called 'P'—the priestly author—and is often thought to be the theologian who gave the book its final shape, incorporating older material and adding some of his own: he was particularly interested in genealogies, for example. The two other theological traditions we find in Genesis are called 'J' and 'E', after their names for God—Yahweh and Elohim. Yahweh is usually translated 'Lord', and 'Elohim', God. Pretty well everything about these three traditions, from their dates to the extent of their contributions, is debated, but for our purposes it is enough to know that the 'book' of Genesis contains traditions of immense antiquity—perhaps as early as the tenth century BC—and is the reflection of generations of believers and theologians. It is also, of course, the work of the Holy Spirit.

When I quote, I will be using the English of the New Revised Standard Version.

1 The purpose of creation

Genesis 1:1—2:3

This beautifully structured, complex description of the creation is theological, through and through. It is stating the nature of the God who is the main character in all that follows. It seems beyond doubt that this is a deliberate theological restatement of what the Ancient Near East took for granted in its creation myths. While it is not clear that Genesis depends on one particular form of that myth, the stories have certain themes in common, which Genesis 1 boldly opposes in the name of the one true God of Israel.

Throughout Genesis 1, the emphasis is on the sheer, effortless will of God, unlike the mythic deities who can create only out of struggle with opposing forces. They may have to slay dragons in order to create the world, but God simply speaks. In other mythologies, divinities of various kinds vie for honour and battle with each other in the formation of matter—like the sun and moon, for example, deserving of worship in most Ancient Near Eastern cultures. Not so in Genesis.

Perhaps most striking of all is the role of the human creation. In parallel mythologies, human beings are created as serfs so that the gods can sit back and enjoy themselves. In Genesis, human beings are made to share with God in ruling and caring for the creation. Whatever that vexed phrase ‘in our image’ means about the relationship between God and humanity, it cannot be made to mean less than a deep connection between God and humans, freely given by God. It is not earned by us; it is not won by us through battle; it is not natural to us. Here we have the nature of God displayed, utterly unthreatened, utterly generous.

This is a whole new vision of God and of the purpose of creation. Everywhere there is orderly joy and purpose, interdependence and relation. Everything is very good. That is not what our experience always tells us; it is not what other mythologies—religious, personal, social or scientific—say. It was not the experience of the first hearers of this story, defeated by powerful neighbours, decimated and exiled. But Genesis 1 declares it to be the truth: it is very good.

2 Connected relationships

Genesis 2:4–25

Although many of us have woven Genesis 1 and 2 together in our minds into one seamless whole, just as we have with Matthew's and Luke's nativity stories, if we stop and look, we see that these are actually two separate creation accounts, almost certainly from two different sources initially.

This second story isn't really a 'creation' story, since the world has already been made at the start of it. Instead, it concentrates on the creation of human beings, not as the culmination of the process, as in Genesis 1, but deeply connected with all that God has made. 'Adam', the dust-creature, gets life both from God and from what God has already made—the ground. 'Adam' then joins in the life-making process, nurturing and being nurtured by all that God is making.

The verse that introduces this section, verse 4, is interesting. Here it says, 'These are the generations of the heavens and the earth', but the same phrase in 6:9 and 10:1 is translated 'These are the descendants of...'. It does look as though a theological point is being made here. All life is a 'descendant' of the heavens and the earth: we share the earth's family tree. We know that, through evolutionary science, but Genesis also reminds us of the profound relationships that God has built into creation. When he goes on, later, to choose Abraham and his descendants for his own special purposes, it is not to cut this tribe off from their roots but to nourish the common root of all life.

The mud-creature that God makes knows its proper connectedness. It knows God and can speak with him, and it knows the plants and the animals and can tell them the truth about themselves by naming them. Perhaps that is why it cannot really understand the penalty that eating the fruit of the forbidden tree will bring. To eat from that tree will mean to be cut off from God, from life, from the world. How can the earth-creature possibly imagine that, experiencing only the life of God flowing through all things?

God further deepens his clay person's understanding of interdependence as the source of life by separating it into two. Now human beings know with the utmost intimacy the generative, intertwined nature of life.

3 Knowledge of life

Genesis 3

The serpent is not the devil, although so much later reflection on this passage has seen it as such. Verse 1 explicitly says that it is just one of the wild creatures that God has made, though a particularly clever one.

Its cleverness, its 'craftiness', is described with a Hebrew word that can be either a good quality or a bad one, depending upon the circumstances. In the book of Proverbs, for example, it is often translated as 'clever' or 'prudent' (see Proverbs 12:16; 13:16); but in other places it is translated as 'cunning', and it suggests a kind of devious intelligence that tries to ignore God (see, for example, Joshua 9:4).

In its context here in Genesis, it is an important word because it sounds very similar to the Hebrew word translated as 'naked'. We have just been told that the woman and the man are serenely 'naked' (2:25). They are equipped with the kind of intelligence that allows them to fit peacefully and unselfconsciously into the world. When they have disobeyed God and eaten the fruit, they become aware of their 'nakedness'. They will now have to live with a dissonance: they are no longer one with the purposeful, interconnected flow of the created world, and they and all living creatures will suffer from this rupture.

Again, the consummate theologian of this narrative is suggesting something. God made the whole world to be interdependent, full of his own life—its own intelligence, though created, still connected with the creative, life-giving intelligence of its maker. But by allowing the crafty serpent to step out of its role and into the human role, human beings have made a break in the circle of life. They now have a kind of 'knowledge' that they cannot handle. It is like God's creative knowledge, but, since they are not God, what they create is not 'very good' but broken.

This whole story, then, becomes a kind of commentary on different kinds of knowledge, the creative and the disruptive. This knowledge is not about facts. Instead, it is about whether we can see how all life flows into and out of the life of God, the unbroken flow of being throughout the universe. In other words, it is about 'the generations of the heaven and the earth'.

4 The first murder

Genesis 4:1–16

Although Adam and Eve no longer live with God in Eden, they are not otherwise cut off from him. They still understand that creativity flows from God, and that the human ability to reproduce is a powerful symbol that connects us back to our source.

Now, though, the break that was introduced in the previous chapter, in the flow of life from God through his world, is about to become much wider with the murder of Abel. Now the real force of that disruption becomes clear as death enters what was once the shining circle of life.

It is dismayingly unclear why God chooses Abel's offering and not Cain's. Perhaps this ignorance about the divine purpose is, itself, one of the results of the rift between God's knowledge and that of human beings. The echo between God's words to Cain in 4:7 and to Eve in 3:16 does encourage us to make this connection. In the world before Adam and Eve's choice, there was no need to speak of 'mastery': the man and the woman fitted together as partners. Similarly, before Adam and Eve chose to 'know' good and evil, there was no need to exercise 'mastery' over sin. But now Cain knows the struggle to choose to trust God when God's purposes are hidden.

The ground has not chosen to 'know' apart from God, and it cries out with Abel's blood. The ground knows that this life flowed from it and should not now be flowing backwards into it again. Cain has made an enemy of the earth from which he is descended.

Too late, Cain longs to reconnect. He cries out with terror at the loneliness he has brought upon himself, cut off from the soil and from his human family. No wonder he expects to be killed by anyone who meets him, because how will they recognise what he is, as he stands outside the circle of life?

Just as Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent and each sinner blames anyone but themselves, so Cain blames God for what he has brought upon himself. Patiently, God explains that Cain cannot force his own choice upon God, and he cannot read God's nature from his own. God is not a killer but the creator and preserver of life, even Cain's.

What does it tell us about ourselves that the phrase 'the mark of Cain'

has come to be synonymous with something cursed, when it is actually a symbol of God's compassionate protection?

5 Children of Cain

Genesis 4:17—5:32

Whatever Cain has done, still his story and that of his descendants is part of the narrative. The creativity of God still lives in Cain's children, even though Cain has so wrenched the stream of life from its course. He and his family help to invent the different ways of life known to human beings as city dwellers or as nomadic herders; they invent art and technology; they prove that God was faithful to his promise to Cain, whatever Cain may have feared. Cain thought he was going to be a solitary wanderer, far from all human contact, but instead he is at the centre of a thriving, inventive community. His story is still part of the 'generations of the heavens and the earth'—but perhaps he does not know that any more?

When we return to Adam and Eve, the connection is made explicit again. Seth's children 'invoke the name of the Lord' (4:26), and chapter 5 starts by reminding us of God's original creative act of making human beings in his own likeness, designed for partnership with each other. The connection between God and his creation, and among the created beings themselves, still holds. Adam can pass on his 'likeness' to his children, just as God put his 'likeness' in humankind.

It is intriguing that Cain's family has a long list of inventions to its credit, but Seth's family has only one: prayer. Is it this prayer that enables chapter 5 to start again, with the remembrance that people are made in God's likeness? That likeness was always a gift. It was not a property of the earth from which the human creature was made. So it is something that can be mislaid, and can only be retrieved as a gift, through prayer.

I'm afraid I can't pass on a really convincing explanation of the extraordinary ages ascribed to these patriarchs, because I haven't come across one. In the 17th century, Archbishop Ussher worked out, using these figures, that God must have created the world in 4004BC. He was probably wrong.

6 Anguish and faithfulness

Genesis 6

At last! Daughters! They have been mentioned in passing in some of the genealogies in chapter 5, but now, briefly, they take centre stage, even if the role they play is rather dubious.

It is a matter of considerable debate just who the ‘sons of God’ are. It would seem strange if they were divine beings of some kind, when Genesis has so far insisted upon God the Creator as the sole divinity in the universe. But it is possible that these ‘sons’ are created beings who are neither human nor divine, sharing some characteristics with each. For example, like God, they see that the human creation is very good—or ‘fair’, as verse 2 puts it—but, like humans, they ‘take’ what they find good, as Eve did in 3:6.

Either way, what God sees is a horrible mess, in which all the beautiful order of creation is ruined. Instead of the steady flow that Genesis 1 describes of one stage of creation into the next, each dependent upon the other, now everything is confused. The ongoing effect of the human attempt to ‘know’ separately from God’s life-giving knowledge is wreaking havoc, so that the divine creativity that human beings used to be able to bring to the world through their likeness to God is now turned to destruction.

Genesis wants us to hear God’s anguish, but it also expects us to pick up the hints about God’s faithfulness. We know that God is not going to ‘blot out’ all that he has made, because we have the careful record of the generations of the heavens and the earth from its inception, and we have Noah.

Noah’s name means ‘relief from work’ (5:29) or ‘rest’, and Noah ‘found favour’ with God (v. 8). Of course, Genesis does not know of the woman who will find favour with God and carry the seed of the new humanity in the safe ark of her body.

Guidelines

It is usual to think of Genesis 1—3 as ‘the creation narrative’, but actually the whole of Genesis 1—11 is about the creation. It takes the whole of these eleven chapters to get the world to the point where it is recognisable as the world we live in.

At the point at which we have paused, creation is hanging by a thread,

and that thread is Noah. Many things will be different after the flood, but there will also be continuity, thanks to Noah—or perhaps, more truthfully, thanks to God.

So far, these *Guidelines* notes have avoided many controversies that seem to be the obvious ones connected with the creation accounts in Genesis. For example, nothing whatever has been said about ‘science and religion’ in Genesis 1—3. For many, this is a horribly painful area, where biblical authority seems to be under attack.

But is it possible that we have set the Bible up by ignoring what it tells us itself? Genesis gives us two accounts of the origins of life, one in chapter 1 and one in chapter 2. That is surely a hint that this is a theological discourse, not a scientific treatise. As God reminds Job, we were not there when he made the world, and if we had been, we wouldn’t have had a clue what was going on.

That is not to say that none of the Bible is factually true, only that common courtesy to this authoritative text requires us to listen to what it says about itself before demanding that it answer our questions.

The creation stories in Genesis take the assumptions common to their time and critique them in the light of their knowledge of God. Creation is not born out of violence or indifference or power struggle, but out of peaceful, powerful, loving intelligence. That is a critique we can still apply to the creation myths of our own time.

27 September–3 October

1 Noah’s flood

Genesis 7—8 (i)

‘Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it’ (Song of Solomon 8:7) could perhaps stand as a summary of the theological heart of the story of Noah’s flood.

There are several versions of this story of a great and destructive flood, deriving from Mesopotamia. Both the Gilgamesh epic and the Atrahasis cycle include stories that bear a marked similarity to Noah’s flood. (You can read both of these on the web, in a number of different forms.) In

each, divine anger causes the flood, with its devastation of life. In each, the obedient man and his boatful are the only survivors. Gilgamesh even has the birds being sent out to prospect for dry land. It is impossible to be sure quite which form of these stories the Genesis theologians knew, but it is clear that, as with the creation stories in chapters 1 and 2, what is going on is a deliberate reinterpretation of common themes.

So, for example, Genesis' received stories speak of conflict between the gods, some of whom want to destroy the world and some of whom don't. The people who survive do so because the main character happens to be in favour with one of the gods, who lets him in on the secret of what is about to happen. The gods who created the flood are taken aback to find that anyone is left alive at the end. They are also frightened of the power of the flood, which is not entirely in their control.

In all of these vital details, Genesis is different. God acts alone and is in complete command of the situation throughout. It is by God's careful provision that examples of all that he has made are to be preserved. The terrifying chaos of the flood is neither terrifying nor chaotic to God. He sets a pattern of days—days before the flood, days during the flood, days as the flood retreats—all symmetrical and orderly, like rows of knitting.

There is no attempt to hide or to explain the destructiveness of God's flood, but equally there is no attempt to hide or to explain God's tenderness to Noah, as he shuts up the doors of the ark, like a mother pulling up the sides of a baby's cot.

2 Restoration

Genesis 7—8 (ii)

God's memory and God's action are not separable. When God 'remembers' his people in Exodus 2:23–25, it is the start of their liberation from Pharaoh. It is as though what God 'remembers' is his own nature and his love for his creation.

So now, at the beginning of chapter 8, God once again restrains the waters, as he did in Genesis 1, to allow the dry land to emerge. Once again, the wind of life blows over the waters. Once again, life comes forth at God's command.

For those of us unduly influenced by the Noah's ark toys we had as children, it is worth rereading 7:2–3. There are certainly matched pairs of animals, but there are also bigger family groups on the ark.

As always, the effortless mastery of the writing in these chapters is breathtaking. We are expected to be highly attentive and intelligent readers. We are expected, for example, to notice that in the story of Noah's flood, time is measured in days again, as it was in the first creation narrative. Creation, devastation and restoration all happen in patterns of weeks and of repeating numbers of days. God's rhythm and order are still implicit, even in the flood.

As God spoke to bring creation into existence, so now God speaks to Noah and brings him out of the ark to resume the life of creation. God's command to the first human creature is repeated to Noah: 'Be fruitful and multiply' (8:17).

The deliberate echoes between creation and restoration after the flood also highlight the differences, however. God no longer sees that it is 'very good'. Instead, he sees that 'the inclination of the human heart is evil' (8:21). But the faithfulness of God is not affected by faithless humanity. God will remember Noah for ever and, in remembering, God will be himself.

3 A covenant with Noah

Genesis 9

Turn back to Genesis 1:28–31 and compare it with Genesis 9:1–7. In each case, God blesses the human beings and describes what their relationship will be with the rest of creation. In each case, human beings are to 'be fruitful and multiply'. But whereas in Genesis 1 their dominion over the earth is to be an image of God's own, and so to be part of the relationship between Creator and creatures, now the rest of creation is afraid of human beings. Instead of being about life-giving orderliness, 'dominion' has now become a concept implying mastery, power and dread. Whereas in Genesis 1 human beings were vegetarians, now they are permitted to eat other living creatures. The balance of creation has changed.

Two things, though, remain fixed. The first is that human beings are not

to imagine that they now have God's powers of life and death. Even though they can eat God's animals, the life in those animals belongs to God. God is not careless of life and death, whether of humans or animals. Each death is remembered by God.

The second fixed point is, of course, God himself. God makes a covenant with Noah and with all living creatures, promising that he will always be their faithful God. Whether they remember or not, God will remember. This treaty has no binding clauses for Noah and creation, only for God. God voluntarily curtails his own freedom of action. After this, God will not deal with evil by wiping out everything that it feeds on. This is not to say that God will not deal with evil at all, since God is not short of ideas, but this theology of the faithfulness of God to faithless creation is going to lead directly to the cross.

There is a heaviness about this passage in Genesis, as God accepts the new, marred, diminished state of creation. Even Noah, the blameless man who carried the remnants of creation safely through the flood, forgets God in drink and makes his own family pay for it.

4 The family line of Noah

Genesis 10

These are no longer the generations of the heavens and the earth, but the generations, the family line, of Noah. The innate interconnectedness of all life, with itself and with its Creator, is now masked. People trace their line back with pride, but they do not realise how far they could trace it if only they remembered. They could trace it back to the dust, and know their dependence upon God, and understand that their life is a gift.

We who are reading Genesis as a continuous narrative can see these threads. So when, at the end of chapter 10, we are told that from Noah's sons came all the peoples of the earth, we know that God's commission, 'be fruitful and multiply', is being fulfilled. We also see the slender ribbon of continuity, back to the beginning, forward to the future, coming safely through the waters under God's protection. Can you hear the baptismal echoes there?

People have done a lot of work in tracing these names and their mean-

ings through other records, biblical and non-biblical. For some of the names there are other sources, and for others there are not. But this genealogy is deliberately connecting past and future, deliberately ‘remembering’, in imitation of God. Many of Israel’s territorial neighbours, friends and enemies, are mentioned in this list, reminding the reader of the unity of all human life. This unity is a given in creation, whatever we might do to unmake it.

The children of Shem are mentioned last because they are the most interesting to our author. It is from Shem that Abram comes, eventually.

The New Testament also traces Jesus’ ancestry in this line. Luke 3:23–38 lays out a genealogy which is very similar to this one. So Jesus is not just the heir and the fulfilment of the covenants with Abram and Noah, but also the heir and fulfilment of the creation of Adam. The faithful God who pledges himself to his creation is also the redeemer: creation and salvation have the same characteristics.

5 The tower of Babel

Genesis 11:1–9

The tower of Babel is the final straw in these accounts of primeval history. First Adam and Eve chose to believe the serpent rather than God, then the daughters of men intermarried with the sons of God, and now, instead of spreading out over the earth to populate and cultivate it, the people decide they would rather live together in one place. Each of these incidents provokes God’s wrath.

It is hard for us to understand why God should be seen to react so violently to what has happened. But while it is important to note that the Genesis theologians are deliberately telling a story, not claiming to report God’s actual words, they do emphasise the theological importance of these human transgressions.

The creation story of Genesis 1 describes God bringing life and order into being, making relationships of mutuality and reciprocity among all that he creates, but the human beings keep making choices that reduce harmony to chaos again. They do not understand God’s music of creation, and they keep forgetting that it is God’s, not theirs. They are not the only

ones to suffer. The whole creation, designed as a beautiful interlocking web of life, is wrenched out of shape by snatching human hands.

Babel is almost certainly a sly dig at Israel's mighty neighbour, Babylon, whose temple was said to have its head in the clouds and to reach up to the heavens. But here God has to make a special trip even to see Babel, so tiny is it compared to him. Human pride is put in its place, as the people boast that they will make a name for themselves, while in an instant they find that they cannot understand each other at all. What is the point of boasting if no one can understand you? It is not until Pentecost that human language is reclaimed, and then it is received back as a gift from the Holy Spirit, not as an example of human cleverness.

6 A continuing story

Genesis 11:10–32

After Adam and Eve are evicted from Eden, they and their children still speak with God. After the flood, God comes to Noah and makes a covenant with him. But after Babel, there is no reconciling speech.

This does not mean, however, that there is no hope or that God has lost interest in his creation. For now, with quiet patience, we pick up the genealogy again. When, at last, at the beginning of chapter 12, God speaks to Abram, as he spoke to Adam and to Noah, we know the backstory. Abram is not the beginning of a new story but the inheritor of all that has gone before. He inherits the damaged human nature that Adam and Eve passed on (the Bible is not starry-eyed about its heroes) but he also inherits Adam's relationship with God.

God has not changed. He is still faithfully, persistently relating to all he has made, and working to draw it back into relationship with itself and with him. The role for which human beings were created in this circle of life has not been given to others. Every loyal, obedient human being makes the universe sing its true tune, even if only quietly. So when Abram sets out at God's request, our hearts lift.

It is not until Jesus that we see a human being living and breathing the relationship for which we were all meant. But Jesus is not God finally washing his hands of the rest of humanity; Jesus is God's respectful, un-

swerving, omnipotent commitment to humanity. Jesus is the image that we were made in, and, wherever the Holy Spirit teaches human beings to say 'Abba, Father' in Jesus' name, there is the beginning of the new creation.

Guidelines

These chapters of Genesis are so well known that we can become careless in our use of them and overlook the profundity of the theology they offer. We come to these stories demanding answers to our questions and are baffled to find that Genesis does not always even recognise them.

For example, the creation accounts do not tell us how evil crept into God's world. They do not account for Adam's 'fall'. They simply describe what we all recognise: the dissonance between our understanding and experience of God and our understanding and experience of the world.

Genesis does, however, have an unsentimental perception that the world is made for complementarity, and that human beings keep trampling over the relationships that would allow all created things to be themselves. It also has an unquestioned certainty that God's relationship to what he has made is not changeable. Nothing we do can force him out of the relationship that he himself instituted towards us: he is the Creator, and he has made the world for a purpose. We can make it almost impossible for ourselves to recognise that, but we cannot make it impossible for God to know it, and what God knows happens.

FURTHER READING

Writing on Genesis is so prolific that it is hard to know where to start. In terms of commentaries, Gordon Wenham's *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nelson, 1987) and Walter Brueggemann's *Genesis* (John Knox Press, 1982) are both outstandingly helpful. Then there are the theological studies of creation, such as Moltmann's *God in Creation* (SCM, 1985), or Colin Gunton's helpful summary chapter on creation in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (CUP, 1997).

For those who particularly want to pursue the questions of science and religion, I recommend:

Denis Alexander, *Creation or Evolution: Do We Have to Choose?* (Monarch Books, 2008).

Alister McGrath, *Science and Religion* (Blackwell, 1999).

Keith Ward, *The Big Questions in Science and Religion* (Blackwell, 2008).

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