



We often approach Genesis as a science manual. *How* did it all happen? But the ancient Israelites were concerned with different questions—questions of *purpose* . . . who and why. Rachel helps us focus on the *who* of Creation so we can find meaning and rest for our souls.

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# RESTLESS HEARTS

THIS IS MY FATHER'S WORLD.

O LET ME NE'ER FORGET

THAT THOUGH THE WRONG SEEMS OFT SO STRONG,

GOD IS THE RULER YET.

When my daughter Clara was six, she was diagnosed with cancer. Our reality abruptly shifted within three days.

On Thursday, she was fine. On Friday, she fell and ruptured the tumor. By Saturday, she was an inpatient in the children's hospital cancer ward. After a surgery to remove her tumor-encased kidney, there was a hospital stay, chemo, and radiation. My career as a carpool driver and afternoon snack dispenser ended, and I became a full-time student in the bewildering world of medical acronyms and medication side effects.

One day, Clara and I were driving home from an oncology visit. Sometimes, I would reach my hand back to hers as she sat in her booster chair—and today was one of those days. It had been long hours of appointments, and we were both tired. She was bald and nauseous from the chemo. I was exhausted from playing medical quarterback and keeping an upbeat demeanor, smiling reassuringly to my little girl as nurses administered poison.

We typically rode home in silence with Audrey Assad or Sara Groves playing. Within that Year of Cancer, in an act of sheer grace, both artists had put out albums that directly applied ice to our swollen hearts. Today, as we traveled the highway, Audrey's song "Restless" came on, the chorus repeating a phrase in St. Augustine's *Confessions*:

I am restless, I'm restless  
'Til I rest in You, 'til I rest in You  
Oh God, I wanna rest in You.<sup>1</sup>

I heard Clara's quiet voice from the back seat. "Hey, Mom?"  
"Yeah?"

She took a deep breath. "Is it a sin to feel restless?"

I paused. Was it? I didn't know. Theologically, I was at a loss. My mom instincts kicked in, and I realized that she needed to know that it was okay to feel the storm of our season.

"No, honey. God knows that sometimes it's hard."

She sighed and stared out the window, singing softly with the tune.

It's been over a decade since that day, yet her question teased my mind for years. *Is it a sin to feel restless?*

## REST IN CREATION

Childhood cancer is extreme, but a restless heart can plague any situation. Our emotional equilibrium is fragile, slipping quickly into frustration with one child's shriek, a car breakdown, a work crisis, or an argument with a loved one. As Augustine notes (in his same paragraph about unquiet hearts), we who are humanity "carry our mortality about with us."<sup>2</sup> Our impermanence

and infirmities can feel like a threadbare jacket we can't take off.

As we experienced the frailty of our humanity in our home, rest looked like a nice idea rather than an attainable reality. Restlessness rang true. Rest did not. It wasn't until years later that I had the bandwidth to dig deep and explore what rest meant.

After Clara recovered fully from cancer, I started seminary. There, I fell in love with the complexity and texture of the Bible, especially the way God revealed Himself to Israel within their culture and language. I learned that the word *rest* meant something very different to an ancient Israelite than it did to my modern mind. In a class titled *Torah*, we began our studies with creation. We saw that creation stories were widespread and commonly told, probably around the universal storytelling backdrop: campfires.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, I learned rest is the culmination of many ancient Near East (ANE) creation stories, not just Genesis.<sup>4</sup> These stories are like term papers ending with "in conclusion." If the story announced that the deity was at rest, then creation was complete.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, in Genesis, rest wasn't about God taking a nap or saying "whew" as He collapsed into a recliner. In the creation literary styling, rest is best understood as an enthronement or God sitting down on His throne. This enthronement—whether it's in Genesis or an ANE story—only happens after the world has achieved complete harmonious order.<sup>6</sup> When the throne is occupied and the deity rests, the story is complete.

In our modern world, we have a similar concept when making big changes. For instance, what needs to be in place before a significant career change? Do you need your desk set up? Are your financials in order and your healthcare plan in place? Did you finish those online training modules? Once the essential tasks are completed, when you finally sit at your desk ready to

take on your new role and rock it—that’s rest.

Or how about after a move? The signed purchase or rental agreement doesn’t mean it’s time to rest. It’s still necessary to get the furniture in place, find the elusive forks, set beds up, locate the box labeled “sheets,” and finish the seemingly endless to-do list. When all those things are in order—when you can take a breath and start running your home—that’s rest.

Rest means that everything is set up just right and running well. In the creation story, we learn that when God is at rest, people can be at rest too. Why? Because all of His creation is just right and running well, and God is on the throne.

## A HOLY EAVESDROP

Learning the dimensions of the word *rest* showed me I had been reading the creation story with a very Western mindset. I had to replace my image of God collapsing into a La-Z-Boy<sup>7</sup> (as I have done after a long day of work) with the image of a satisfied Creator reigning over a perfectly designed creation. It turns out that many of my expectations about the ancient text of Genesis were unintentionally infused with my twenty-first-century mindset. Peeling back that mindset and stepping into ancient Israelite sandals took me a lot of time, study, and humility.

In Genesis, we get the privilege of a holy eavesdrop, leaning over the ancient Israelites’ shoulders and listening to the truths God shares. Dr. John Walton of Wheaton College notes that “the Bible was written *for* us, but not *to* us.”<sup>8</sup> When we read Genesis, we assume that God is introducing Himself to us, but He’s not. This introduction is made explicitly to the ancient Israelites, using their language and culture, but knowing that it would be preserved and passed down so that we might benefit from this holy

eavesdrop (like Paul's letters to ancient churches in distant lands). We are part of the eventual audience because, as Dr. Walton says, the introduction is *for us*.

Setting aside our natural tendency to read a text as if we are the initial audience is difficult. We slip into assumptions from our own context without even noticing. For instance, it may bother us to read that light was created before the sun. Our inclination is to make a scientific explanation retrofit into the narrative or even to claim this as proof that creation is a fable.

Those two conclusions leapfrog over the first question we should ask: *Would the creation of light before sun bother the intended audience?* If the answer is no, we are asking a modern question that the text is not answering. (Don't worry. You can read more in the section called Twenty-First-Century Questions on p. 173.) When modern assumptions invade our reading, we will almost always get pulled away from what the text is trying to communicate.

One such modern assumption has to do with science. If you've been in the church for a while, you are likely familiar with the issues debated between the science and church communities. Maybe you've been put off by the debate, or perhaps you have a side you've taken. It may seem odd to you, but none of those issues belong in the Genesis creation room.<sup>9</sup> These are all modern concerns, foreign and irrelevant to the ancient Israelite.

All this is to say that science is not going to be a part of our conversation together. Take a deep breath and relax because we aren't going to delve into those issues or the baggage they possess. Together, we will examine the text for the elements it is trying to explain. By not reading it as a scientific account, we will discern what it can provide.<sup>10</sup> We are going to read creation as a piece of sacred and true literature, putting ourselves in the shoes of an

ancient Israelite as much as we are able. We will listen well to their concerns, learn parts of their culture, and appreciate their understanding of the world.

## THE FIRST HELLO

Our task, then, as good Bible readers, is to pay attention to the diverse cultures across the ANE. Who were these ANE men and women? Scholars debate the period that God's people first heard about His creation.<sup>11</sup> What's relevant for our study is that the Israelites who initially encountered the first chapter of Genesis and were part of the ANE cultures would be familiar with commonly shared stories (just as Marvel and Star Wars movies are commonly known today by both superfans and five-year-olds who have never seen the films but can identify Iron Man on a T-shirt). These Israelites had a multicultural heritage (Ex. 12:38; Deut. 26:5) with exposure to varied stories and storytelling from Mesopotamia to Egypt.<sup>12</sup> Across the ANE, people were deeply theological; to them "all experience was religious experience, all law was spiritual in nature, all duties were duties to the gods, all events had deity as their cause."<sup>13</sup> In the view of ancient people, the world came into being because the gods had a purpose for it. All actions were either parallel or counter to that purpose; the natural and supernatural were interrelated.<sup>14</sup>

Just as we are disturbed by restless hearts, so were they. They wanted to know what God cared about, and so do we. A glance at the self-help section of Amazon will tell you we wonder if we have value and purpose, and so did they. They wanted to know their place in the world and how to live, and so do we. Families were very important to them, just as they are to us. They wondered if they would have enough provision, or if relational harmony would



ever come easily. Those concerns rank high on our priority list as well. Genesis 1 is intended to answer these questions. We can ask the same questions the ancient Israelites asked and then read the well-written theological literature of creation for God's answers.

Our focus will be on the nature of our Creator and what He intended life to look like in His creation. The way God set up our world to run shows us His priorities.

Did God set up creation to be for His benefit? Were other gods involved in creation? Did He use warfare or diplomacy? All these questions are answered in the first thirty-four verses of Genesis (Gen. 1–2:3), quietly speaking to the ANE cultures and telling them about the character and values of God from the beginning. The answers speak to us too. What an amazing privilege it is to read this introduction.

## SACRED LITERATURE

You and I can learn about creation in this way because history, archaeology, and language scholars have all done deep dives into ancient Israelite cultural perspectives and literature. In the coming chapters, I will share ways they have held up their findings to the light and turned the kaleidoscope just a bit, revealing colors and dimensions that are simply stunning.

After I studied how an ancient Israelite would have heard the creation account of Genesis, it was like a black-and-white movie was suddenly in vivid color. The theological implications for God's reign on day seven have given me a direction within my identity as an image of God, revealed God's heart to provide for His creation, and helped me handle tragedy.

To best study creation as twenty-first-century Christians, we will stick close to the original text and context in Genesis. The

original context of Genesis includes learning how Israel's contemporaries thought about everyday events (like the sun rising). If we can get a sense of the broader cultures, the contrasts in God's message will naturally be highlighted. Original texts for Israel's neighboring cultures include reading an ancient Egyptian creation story or looking to Mesopotamian writings to learn how they saw the world.

Don't worry. Examining other pieces of ancient literature doesn't mean we will encounter Genesis as fiction. I believe the Genesis creation account is true and absolutely happened. Its beautiful stylings are written using a type of storytelling the ANE person could readily theologically process in a way that holds profound truths about God's character. When we look at creation as *sacred* literature, we can find nuances we may have missed. I want to show you the kaleidoscope of biblical insights within creation. The way God chose to introduce Himself and His character is truly awe-inspiring. Reading this one story well can change how you see God.

In this book, we'll learn how to approach this ancient text written three thousand years ago by checking our expectations and making sure we don't set ourselves up for misunderstanding. Then we will walk together through the days of creation, always focusing on who our God is and how He presented Himself to an ancient culture. Most of all, we will look at what God set up and called "good" before He rested. We will learn that creation calls us to rest, but more than that, it tells us *why* we can rest.

## A POSTURE OF REST

Rest is meant to be our daily posture because our soul finds a restful posture anchored in God's character. Day seven persists.

Just as in our earlier example, where the house is running and the job is active, the world is running and God is reigning.

If I could go back and talk to Clara's tender six-year-old heart, I would tell her that being troubled is different from being restless. I would remind her of the truths I have learned in creation: that God set up a beautiful world, put us in it last, loves to be in relationship with us, and a glance at the birds on our drive can remind us that He cares. It is remembering who God is, His value for humanity, His provision, and His beauty that grants our souls rest.

Rest is found in knowing the God of creation. As Augustine notes, "Because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you."<sup>15</sup> But, for a Christian, rest must go deeper than acknowledging God is seated on His throne. Rest is found when we align our restless hearts with *who* God is as He reigns. Together, we will explore the opening verses of history and find God's design is a place of rest.<sup>16</sup>

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