

Names of God, Part 2: Elohim. Genesis 1:1-8, John 1:1-14. Mike Starkey, 2 June 2024.

Every so often you see an image that stops you in your tracks. Here's one I saw recently. It's a close-up of Jupiter, taken from NASA's Juno space probe. The dark patch is the shadow of Ganymede, one of the moons of Jupiter. We'll leave it on the screen because it gives a good backdrop for our theme this morning. First let's back up a bit.

Last week we looked at the personal name of God in the Bible: *Yahweh*. It's Hebrew, and it means something like: God is real, and saves and helps his people. In English Bibles, the name *Yahweh* is translated as LORD (all capitals).

This week we're looking at another name of God. It's there in the very first verse of the Bible. Genesis 1 verse 1: 'In the beginning *God* created the heavens and the earth.' The Hebrew word for God here is *Elohim*. In fact, *Elohim* appears 32 times just in the first chapter of the Bible. It's the name associated with God's power in creation, his sovereignty over the universe. It's the name that tells us God is responsible for the existence of the universe, that God alone is all-powerful and worthy of praise.

Last week we saw that *Yahweh* is normally written in English Bibles as LORD in capitals. What about *Elohim*? *Elohim* is usually written simply as God, with a capital G.

(Interestingly, Elohim is plural. The '-im ending in Hebrew makes a plural: one cherub, two cherubim; one seraph, two seraphim. But it's not saying there are lots of gods. It's a plural that gives special respect to royalty, a bit like when Britain's Queen Victoria said: 'We are not amused'. The plural also makes sense in the light of the later revelation of God as Trinity: Father, Son and Spirit.)

Then in our Gospel reading we read: '*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.*' This puts Jesus in a cosmic context. Jesus wasn't just a man in first-century Holy Land. It's saying Jesus was at the side of *Elohim* at the moment of creation.

Now, the moment we talk about *Elohim* and creation, somebody will say: 'Aha, but I believe in a *scientific* account of the origins of the universe'. Our culture sometimes talks about science *versus* faith. Especially here in secular France!

But I don't believe there is a genuine battle between science and faith. Lots of today's top scientists have a very real faith in God. Just to give one example. One of the biggest scientific breakthroughs of the past century was the Human Genome Project, to map and

sequence the DNA of the human body. Its director was Francis Collins, a keen practising Christian.

In the past scientists with a Christian faith included Michael Faraday, pioneer in electromagnetism, Lise Meitner who helped discover nuclear fission, Gregor Mendel the father of modern genetics. The list is a very long one.

How faith and science relate is obviously a big subject. For me, a helpful way of bringing them together is this. Science explores *how* the world was made, and *how* the world works. Faith gives insights into *why* it was made, and *why* it works the way it does.

Thoughtful science and thoughtful faith belong together. In fact, modern physics in particular has pushed lots of people towards faith in God. Just one example: the idea of a Big Bang that started the universe. Back in 1929 the astronomer Edwin Hubble found something astonishing. Our neighbouring galaxies are moving away from our galaxy. Everything in the universe appears to be flying apart.

Now, this started a flurry of research by astronomers and physicists. And they found it's true. Everything in the universe really is flying apart. Most scientists now believe the universe began at a single moment, called the Big Bang, possibly around 14 billion years ago. The universe began as an infinitely dense point of pure energy, which exploded, and the way it exploded created stars and planets. The universe had a beginning.

There was a time before the universe existed, and there was a moment of creation, effectively out of nothing. And right there, in the very first sentence of the Bible, we're told the ultimate cause. All things came into existence through the power of *Elohim*.

The NASA scientist Robert Jastrow was an agnostic, who came to believe in a Creator because of the Big Bang. He wrote this: *'Now we see how the astronomical evidence supports the biblical view of the origin of the world.... the essential elements in the astronomical and biblical accounts of Genesis are the same. Consider the enormity of the problem: Science has proved that the universe exploded into being at a certain moment. It asks: "What cause produced this effect? Who or what put the matter or energy into the universe?" And science cannot answer these questions.'*

There are lots of pointers that are making some scientists reassess the place of a creator. In particular the sheer improbability of it all happening purely by chance.

We know the universe had to expand at exactly the right rate for stars and planets to form. Physicists tell us if the rate of expansion one second after the Big Bang had been slower by one part in 100 thousand million million, the universe would have collapsed back in on itself again. On the other hand, if the rate of expansion had been faster by just one

part in a million, stars and planets couldn't have formed. One leading scientist says this: 'The existence of a universe as we know it rests upon a knife edge of improbability.'

There are at least separate 15 factors of physics that all have to be exactly right for the stars and planets to come into existence. And any of these could have been different. Things like the speed of light and the force of gravity. It's a combination lock where all the dials have million of numbers and they all have to be turned to the right number to unlock. The existence of our universe following the Big Bang is staggeringly unlikely.

This isn't theologians saying this: it's scientists. The universe started at a moment in time. Something happened to create the universe, and lots of separate factors all had to be minutely calibrated for that huge explosion then to produce stars and planets and life. The whole thing begins to look like more than an accident!

So what are the implications of linking the biblical understanding of *Elohim*, the Creator God, with insights from astronomy and physics? If you're an unbeliever or agnostic, the challenge is the message of the Psalmist, in Psalm 19: 'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.' It's a challenge to look behind the wonders of science and the natural world and discover the Creator behind it all.

For those of us who're believers, I suspect the challenge is this: even though we say God is Creator, and we sing about God's majesty, for many of us our God is too small, too parochial. In practice, our prayers can end up being about our own needs. Prayers for guidance, or a parking space! It's not wrong to pray for those things, but they're a fraction of the big picture. God called the vast reaches of space into existence. God is the Creator of all matter and life. So our vision of God may well need to expand.

For some Christians, when they realize the unimaginable size of the universe, it can cause questions about faith. Is it possible even to imagine a God behind the mind-boggling size of the universe? In practice, Christians often avoid thinking about things like the size of the universe and the distances between the stars, because it's all a bit unsettling. They're worried it might challenge their faith. But in a way, it *should* challenge our faith. It *should* enlarge our vision of who God is, and the staggering scope of God's creation.

And that's partly why I love to find out about astronomy, about space and the planets. The distances and the dimensions involved really are mind-bogglingly huge. But it reminds me of the greatness of God. And here's the thing: it *stops me bringing God down to my own size*. It stops me settling for a God who's too small.

In our series so far, we've looked at two of the names of God in the Bible. And you sometimes find these names of God are brought together. He's *Yahweh Elohim*, the LORD

God. And those two words tell me something huge. That God is *Elohim*, the Creator, the source of the universe and all life. But he's also *Yahweh*, the one who's personal, who cares for his people and shares their lives.

So here's a question to ponder this week. How does knowing that, expand your vision of who God is? And how will knowing that affect how you pray this week?