

Cosmic Destiny

Creation from Its Beginning

In this unit you will explore:

1. How the cosmos came into being and has evolved.
2. Some religious perspectives on why the cosmos exists.
3. The options of:
 - belief in a chance destiny
 - belief in God's planned destiny.

This unit raises some important questions about human beings and the cosmos. Consider these questions before investigating what the narrative on the next page has to say on the subject. Make a note of your own response and any different views others may have expressed, so that you can refer to these later. At the end of the unit you will have another opportunity to reflect on the differing responses to these questions.

Questions

1. Is our cosmos purposeless?
2. Is our cosmos the result of random chance?
3. Is our cosmos God's planned creation to fulfil God's purposes?
4. Are human beings the result of chance factors?
5. Are human beings part of God's plan for the whole universe?
6. Are science and religion contradictory or complementary?
7. Can there be any type of truth in a story that is not literally true? (Think of Aesop's fables.)



The cosmic clock starts ticking ...

How did creation happen?
A scientist might tell this story.

In a flash, out of nowhere, a tiny fireball of cosmic embryo ignited. Thirteen billion years later its force still pulsates throughout the cosmos and drives it towards its destiny, fuelled by its primordial energy. Time, space and everything there is came into being with this rather small bang!

Boiling gas was released, catapulting everywhere. Clouds of cooling gas whirled, expanded and puffed ever onwards. About half a billion years after it all began, the pull of gravity caused them to collide and give birth to billions of galaxies of stars.

More than 4 billion years ago, in the Milky Way galaxy, a cloud of dust and gas shrank, spinning faster into a disc shape. Its core became hotter and denser until it flashed into life, giving birth to a star – the Sun. In the surrounding disc nine planets began to form, including Earth, generated by light and energy from the Sun's nuclear fusion reactions. The cosmic egg had hatched.

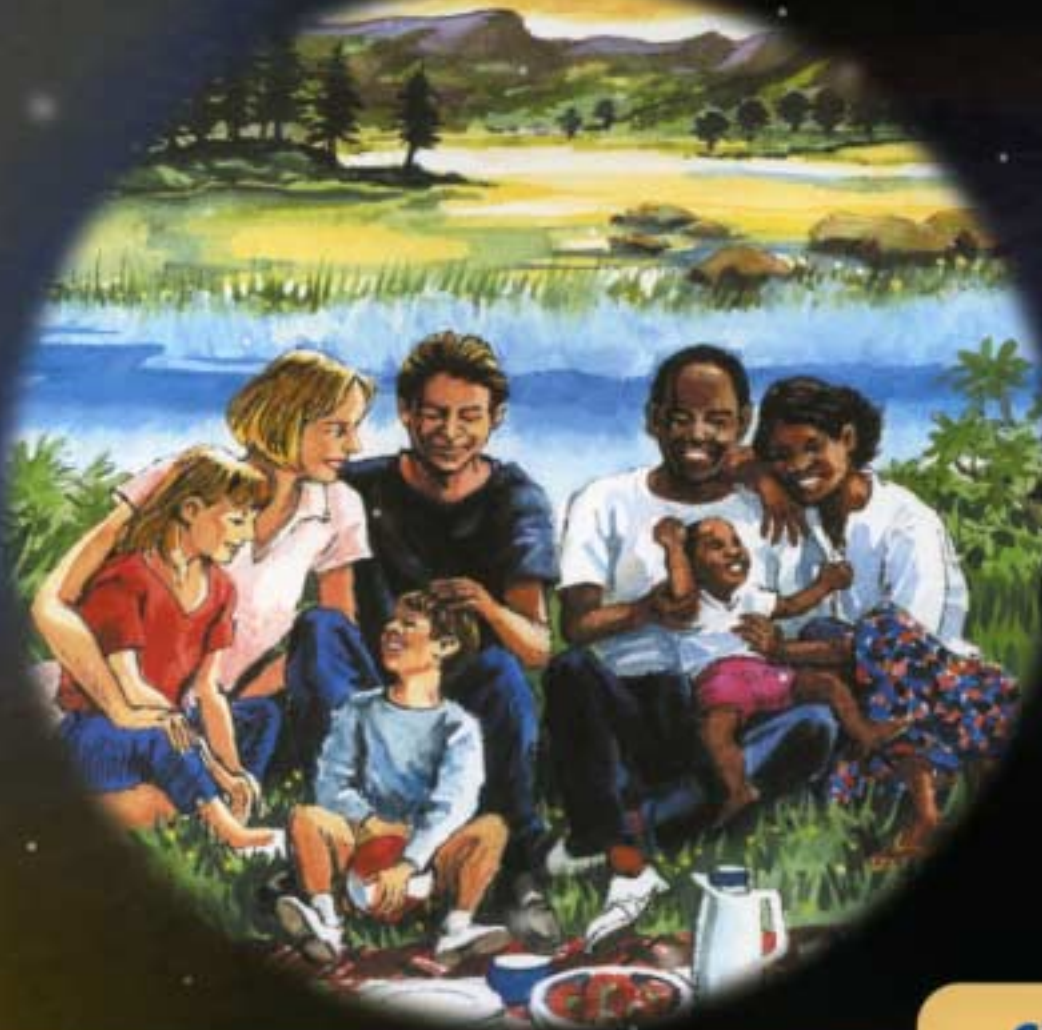
A precise combination of raw material (dust and mud) from the surface of Earth, with energy and heat, took over 4500 million years to evolve intelligent life – human beings!

The cosmos is special because the finely balanced forces of nature produced conditions that were just right for life to evolve. But a different cosmic story could have unfolded. It is even possible that many diverse universes exist!

Meanwhile our universe continues to expand at 100 000 miles per second ...

Consider these questions:

1. What is your reaction to such an amazing story?
2. Do you wonder exactly where you are and why you are here?
3. If, as the text says, you are made from stardust, who are you and do you really matter?



Clues

Read these two clues.

The scientific narrative

Scientists generally accept that:

- The Big Bang could have produced a vast number of possible outcomes. The probability of evolution of an earth like ours is small but not entirely a matter of random chance.
- Alternatively, our cosmos and the laws of physics operating in it could be the result of random chance.

Religious truth

Religion uses stories to convey important religious truths which otherwise are difficult to express and grasp. These symbolic stories are known as 'myths'. Literal truth has a different function from religious truth. The former states the facts of the matter and the latter draws out the meaning.

Now read Genesis 1:1-2:4a and Genesis 2:4b-25. These are two Jewish religious narratives explaining beliefs about why the cosmos was created.

Clues

Use these clues to help you understand the Bible narratives and see what the writers may be getting at. They will help you to answer the 'Reflection, Response' questions.

Jewish creation narratives

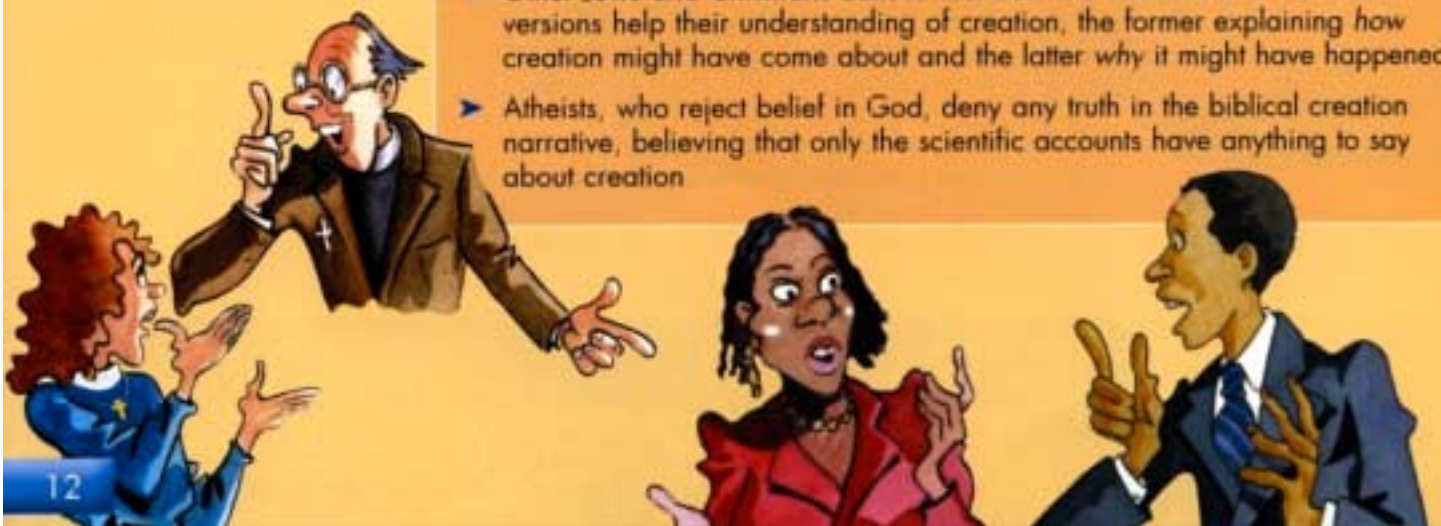


- All ancient civilizations produced their own versions of the world's origins and significance. Obviously they had limited scientific knowledge about the universe but these narratives emphasized religious truth.
- The Jews have two different creation narratives incorporating their own distinctive beliefs about God and the destiny of God's creation. These narratives were not intended to be mainly scientific accounts of how the cosmos originated (they actually contradict each other in their details) but rather they state why the universe was created – as a deliberate act of God who had a purpose and a plan for it.
- Although the narratives are different, they both proclaim:
 - that God, not chance, is responsible for creation
 - that creation is overwhelmingly good
 - that humans have a special relationship with God and a special part to play in accomplishing God's plan for them and the cosmos
- The older narrative, in Genesis 2:4b–25, tells about Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It focuses on the forming of man and woman as God's first act of creation, with the rest of creation directly serving humankind's needs. The close relationship between God and people is emphasized.
- The narrative in Genesis 1:1–2:4a, written later, describes creation in a six-day time-scale. It is a more sophisticated account, where God is more remote and orders creation to happen. There is an emphasis here on the importance of the Sabbath (Friday sunset to Saturday sunset), with God resting on the seventh day after completing his work. Human beings are made in God's 'image'. This identifies them as God's representatives, created to share the responsibilities of creation.

Different responses to these Jewish narratives

Biblical material is interpreted differently within both Judaism and Christianity, depending on whether believers have a traditional or more modern approach to their Scriptures.

- Some Jews and Christians believe creation took place exactly as recounted in these two narratives and they reject alternative scientific accounts of creation.
- Other Jews and Christians believe that both the scientific and the biblical versions help their understanding of creation, the former explaining how creation might have come about and the latter why it might have happened.
- Atheists, who reject belief in God, deny any truth in the biblical creation narrative, believing that only the scientific accounts have anything to say about creation.



Discuss

1. What evidence might have led the writers of the Jewish creation narratives to believe God was responsible for creation?
2. What evidence would have convinced them that creation was good?
3. What might have led them to believe they were partners with God in fulfilling the destiny of creation?
4. In practice, what might such a partnership require from people?
5. How do you account for people's different interpretations of biblical material, e.g. literal and more liberal?
6. Why are religion and science often seen as enemies?
7. What are your own feelings and questions as you learn more about the complexities and vastness of the universe?

Record

1. From the two biblical narratives about creation choose quotations which express the religious truth claims in the accounts. Devise an interesting way of presenting these quotations and their truth claims on paper.
2. Write a conversation between:
 - (a) A religious person who believes the universe was created by God literally as the Genesis accounts state.
 - (b) A religious person who believes the universe evolves in the way it does because God designed it to develop in that way.
 - (c) An atheist who believes that chance factors, not God, resulted in evolution taking the particular course it has.Include reasons for the points made. (Work in threes, each taking a role. Think about which role is hardest to get into and why.)
3. Write a fictitious story which conveys an important message you would like to pass on to readers.

Find Out

1. Research the latest scientific knowledge on the origins of the universe. If possible use the internet. Keep a personal or class record of developments over a period of weeks by checking websites. Write a personal or class report on your findings and comment on: (a) the significance of these for humankind; (b) why this scientific progress might be interesting and relevant to some religious believers and not to others.
2. Record an interview with a person who believes that their life is part of God's plan and with one who believes that chance is in control and get both to explain how their beliefs influence the way they live. Use these interviews as the basis for a class

discussion or more formal debate with prepared speeches. You could use some of the information gathered in Unit 1, 'Find Out' question 5.

3. Collect articles from the media about people who you believe demonstrate a sense of purpose in their lives. Categorize them to identify motivations, e.g. personal ambitions, political ideology, desire to improve the planet, commitment to religious belief. Write a statement that draws on your evidence to demonstrate the significance of purpose in people's lives.
4. Identify examples from contemporary songwriters who describe the problems of life and the search for personal destiny and meaning. Create a design or poster to focus on your findings.

Imagine

1. Imagine you had the opportunity to design a cosmos and life-forms within it. Consider such questions as: Would the cosmos be vast and mysterious? Would life-forms be programmed or left to their own devices? Would there be time? Identify either in a diagram or in note form:
 - the key features of your blueprint
 - how your world would develop
 - your hopes for your world.
2. Imagine the instructions God might give to the parents of a new-born baby about its purpose and destiny. Design a handbook to be delivered with the baby!
3. Imagine you were in control of the existing universe, with complete power to change and run it. What would your major delights and worries be? What changes would you make in the first week?

Questions

Look again at the questions at the beginning of the unit (page 9). Have you changed your initial response? Why? Why not?

Concepts

Here are some concepts you have encountered in this unit:

- creation explained in non-conflicting religious and scientific terms
- story as the conveyor of religious truth
- cosmic and personal destiny as dependent on chance or on divine design.