The Beginning of the Story

Video Transcript

All of us, at one time or another, have stopped reading a book or watching a movie because its beginning did not interest or engage us. The story took too long to develop or it wasn’t really clear why someone was sharing these events or ideas.

Thankfully, the beginning of the Bible does not suffer from these weaknesses. Quite the contrary. Its first five books, referred to by Christians as the Pentateuch, start with plenty of action and a clear picture of why God is an immanent and personal being who remains active in creation and shares a partnership with humanity.

The Pentateuch contains the oldest books of the Old Testament, which provide the foundational narrative that recounts God’s choosing a select people, making a special covenant with them, and providing laws and guidance that would make them a holy people. In the first 11 chapters of Genesis, we read about the creation of the world, the corruption of humankind, the destruction of early humans by flood, and the dispersion and eventual spread of humans to form the first nations.

Whew!

All of this is followed by stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, and then the epic saga of the exodus of the people of Israel from Egyptian bondage. Throw in the Ten Commandments, God’s covenant with the people of Israel, and the hardships of desert life and you have quite an opening narrative.

Just as engaging is the picture of God’s nature depicted in these first five books of the Old Testament. The Pentateuch sketches out two particular aspects of God’s nature, that of transcendent creator and personal partner to humanity. God is a supreme and powerful being who exists apart from the world and human experience and God is a personal God, present in all creation. The personal God bargains with Abraham over the fate of Sodom (Gen 18:16-33), while the transcendent God tells Moses that no one may see God and live (Ex 33:20).
These two aspects of God’s nature are particularly important in the development of Christianity. God as transcendent creator is unique, beyond human definitions and assertions, and cannot be limited to one particular group or point of view. At the same time, God is personal, not unaffected by the events of the world. This aspect makes God more personally accessible to believers. They can relate to a God who understands their personal difficulties.

When you think about a supreme being like God, which of the two aspects — all-powerful transcendence or personal partnership — seems most important?

About this transcript:
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