

Genesis
By Ella Relf

'Genesis' is commonly known as the first book of the Christian bible, explaining the beginning and creation. But over the course of human history, almost every culture, community and system has endeavoured to complete the same interminable, niggling sentence which begins that text; "*In the beginning, there was...*". The answers each culture has produced (some phrased better or more plausibly than others), affect the understanding of how each society has come to exist, and each individual to be alive in the present moment; all of which constantly reach back to the question of fundamental origins.

Why we desire so deeply to know the answer to this conundrum of 'the beginning' is almost as inexplicable as it is self-evident. What is fascinating is that we all possess this kind of wonder, starting right down with children old enough to use sentences with a question mark at the end. It does not take long for the human brain to realise we are in fact born into a world where time is already progressing, and other people already exist. It becomes increasingly evident that we cannot know about these beginnings because, in a vital sense, we were not there first.

Not only, however, have our families already spanned generations to produce the human that is 'me', but our individual memories of the 'beginning' are also limited. It would be rare to recall our individual consciousness at age zero and zero seconds, so for most of us the first world we remember is one where we have already been alive. One of my earliest memories is sitting in a pile of leaves, from a recently cut banana tree in our backyard. The tree was not even a banana tree, my mother tells me, but in terms of memory I can't really do anything about that. Obviously, this was not the moment of my creation. When I question where I began, however, this is the furthest back I can recall - and it certainly does not provide all the answers. From the compilation of our conscious selves, it seems that for the individual, knowing about our genesis is a glaring impossibility.

Nevertheless, knowing *something* of our beginnings is mysteriously important. Like our individual selves, the present does not conceivably exist on its own, but linked to a past that by the inexorable unfolding of one event to another, has brought time up to this moment. Beginnings themselves therefore provide a crucial starting point for understanding concepts of history, progress, and value, which can be measured against this base. If nothing else, a reliable sense of comparison and meaningfulness can be gained this way. In this sense, the contemporary era's fascination with the big bang is not so different from the tradition of creation stories from the immense spread of human cultures. Though the story may now be transcribed onto a scientific base, and construed in precise, measurable terms, the *will* to understand why we are here and 'how things began' is largely unchanged. What the big bang theory *has* done, in its own terms, is provide a creation story that places human civilisation in a vast chronology of existence, and makes our lives fit within a landscape of time.

On a crucial level, the basic function of creation stories fill this explanatory hole in our capacity for understanding, and respond to the urgent need to know. I use the word 'know' because the explanation we require is one which can be believed, and which is expected to make the world comprehensible; we do *not* necessarily need a kind of knowing that is felt, really, to be true. There is an essential difference between *knowing* something and *feeling* it: I might 'know' about the big bang theory, for example, and believe it, but it is also very difficult to imagine things before the invention of time and space, and therefore terribly difficult to 'know' this theory in the sense of 'feeling' it to be true, in the same way that I 'know' what being sleepy means. What might be more important, then, is the fact that society *can* tell such a story.

Because we cannot 'know' our genesis, what this uncertainty so often confronts is that authority which provides an answer. Whether this be a parent, a sacred text, or the field of science, we have probably all listened as *someone* settled back and said, 'Well. In the beginning there was...'. I would like to suggest that here, *any* creation story which ensues is already satisfying a profound desire to know about that beginning, and far outweighs what those creation stories contain. They provide temporary relief from the uncertainty of our existence, and satisfy - at least for a short time the - the incomprehensibility of the world. For a short time, even, our confidence and trust can be vested in that storyteller as a source of knowledge, and from this comprehensibility our own search of meaning can begin. Ultimately however, we do not stop asking: because we are curious; unsatisfied; and life is puzzling.