

Creation – Session 2

The opening verse of Genesis is majestic in its simplicity: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Originally, the Hebrew was written without vowels. The vowels were added later as points above and below the consonants. The consonantal text can also be translated as: "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth. . . ." The Babylonian creation myth, *Enuma Elish*, similarly begins with a temporal clause. (There is another possible reflection of the Babylonian myth in Gen 1:2. The Hebrew word for "the deep" [*t^ehom*] is a cognate of the name of the Babylonian monster Tiamat in *Enuma Elish*.) If the opening words are translated as a temporal clause, it is clear that we are not speaking of creation out of nothing. Already when God set about creating the heavens and the earth, there was a formless void (*tohu wabohu*), and the wind or spirit of God was hovering over the waters. God proceeds to bring order out of chaos simply by uttering commands.

In Genesis 1, God creates simply by issuing commands. This is exceptional even within the Hebrew Bible. We see a more "hands-on" approach to creation in Genesis 2, where God fashions Adam from the earth. Other passages allude to a mythic account of creation involving a battle with a dragon or sea monster (Job 26:12; Isa 51:9). There were precedents for creation by divine word in Egyptian mythology, but there is an evident contrast here with Genesis 2 and with the creation

mythologies of Mesopotamia. The God of the Priestly writers is more exalted, or more remote, than the God of J.

The creation is arranged in seven days:

1. Light; separation of light and darkness
2. Firmament; separation of lower and upper water
- 3a. Dry land; separation of water and dry land
- 3b. Vegetation
4. Sun, moon, and stars; separation of day and night
5. Water and air creatures
- 6a. Land creatures; human beings
- 6b. Vegetation given to birds, animals and human beings as food
7. God rests

The narrative is formulaic. There are frequent pronouncements that "God saw that it was good," and after the sixth day, everything is pronounced "very good." At the same time, the narrative is not fully consistent. The pronouncement that "it was good" is lacking for the second and fourth days, and there are double acts of creation on the third and sixth days. The duplications are necessary to fit the work of creation into six days, thereby allowing the Creator to rest on the seventh, in effect inaugurating the Sabbath day. The fact that the whole process ends in a liturgical observance is typical of the Priestly source. Also typical is the emphasis on separation—of light and darkness, upper waters and lower waters, and so on. In the Priestly creation, everything must be in its proper place.

Genesis 1 does not represent creation as instantaneous. It takes place over a period of time. (The days need not be taken literally. With the Lord, a thousand years is as a day. But neither should they be converted into some longer period of time. The point of the story is to provide a divine precedent for resting on the seventh day). Occasionally, scholars try to argue that this description is compatible with modern science. The original formless void, we are told, represents the “soupy” state of the universe at its inception. One biblical scholar has even suggested that the breath of God represents the “big bang.” This kind of attempt to find scientific truth in the Bible is misguided. Genesis 1, like all ancient accounts of the beginning of the universe, is an act of imagination that tells us more about the values of the authors than about the physical universe. The gradual progress of creation over seven days has nothing whatever to do with the scientific idea of evolution. People who try to read Genesis 1 as a scientific account are making an elementary genre mistake – misconstruing the kind of story it is, and the kind of truth that can be gleaned from it.

The creation of humanity

Human beings are created on the sixth day. While humankind is designated by the masculine word *adam*, both male and female are explicitly included. (The rabbis later speculated that the first human being was a hermaphrodite, both male and female, an idea that is known most famously from Plato's dialogue, the *Symposium*). Both males and females, then, are created in the image of God. In the ancient Near East, images were very important for cult and worship, as the presence of the

divinity was made manifest to the worshipers in the statues. At least in the period after the Exile, no such images were used in the cult of YHWH. Instead, according to the Priestly writer, the presence of God was made manifest in human beings. Moreover, gods in the ancient Near East were often depicted in the form of animals. Such depictions are rejected here. Near Eastern deities were also often depicted in human form. If human beings are made in the divine image, it follows that the Deity has humanlike form. In the modern world, we tend to say that God is conceived or imagined in human form—our knowledge of human form comes first and what we say about the Deity is an inference. In the ancient world, however, the divine typically comes first, and human beings are thought to be an imitation of the divine form. This account of creation, then, attributes great dignity to human beings, both male and female. The Priestly account of creation, then, is remarkably humanistic. One should not, of course, exaggerate the egalitarianism of the story. Genesis 1 says nothing about the social roles of men and women. In the rest of the Pentateuch, the Priestly source is no less patriarchal than the other sources – all are products of an ancient Near Eastern world.

The fact that humanity is made in the image of God is seldom recalled later in the Bible, but there is one notable instance in Gen 9:5-6, where it is invoked to guard the sanctity of life. God, we are told, will require a reckoning for the lifeblood of humans:

“Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind.”

The sanctity of life is not absolute: the punishment for murder is death. But it is clear that the intention of the passage is to deter people from shedding blood.

It should also be noted that all humanity is made in the image of God. This status is not reserved for Israel or any other segment of humanity.

Male and female

The distinction between male and female in Gen 1:27 leads directly to the command to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. In Jewish tradition, this has often been viewed as a commandment, which would exclude the option of celibacy for the religiously observant. The Priestly account of creation, then, affirms human sexuality, and seems to rule out at the outset an ethic of abstinence and asceticism. This point is important, as the Priestly rules of purity in Leviticus have often been taken to suggest a rather negative view of sexuality. In its context in Genesis, however, the directive to increase and multiply is rather an exhortation, or even an authorization: it is good to marry and have children. One might well argue that this commandment, if such it be, has now been adequately fulfilled. The problem in the modern world is population control. This was seldom a problem in the ancient world, because of short life spans and the inability to control the spread of disease. (Plague and disease are created specifically to prevent overpopulation in Babylonian mythology.) As we will find in Genesis 2, Genesis 1 is an attempt to explain the world as the author saw it, rather than a prescription that can be taken as valid in all times and places.

Gen 1:27 is often invoked in modern debates about homosexuality on the grounds that people were created male and female so that they might procreate. The primeval couple were Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve. It should be clear that no such argument can be based on Genesis 1. As we have seen, the account of creation in Genesis 1 is highly schematic. To say that God created Day and Night is not to deny that there are such things as Dusk and Dawn. Genesis only makes sweeping generalities, emphasizing the typical. Transgender people, and people whose sexuality are ambiguous are presumably created by God too, and Genesis says nothing to suggest that they are not the image of God.

There are only two unambiguous statements about homosexual relations in the Hebrew Bible. Both, as it happens, are in the Priestly tradition, more specifically in the Holiness Code, in Lev 18:22 and 20:13. These verses declare that “if a man lies with a male as with a woman” (literally, “the lyings of a woman”), it is an abomination, and both must be put to death. Scholars debate the exact meaning of “the lyings of a woman” but the reference is most probably to male homosexual relations. Remarkably, lesbian relations are not singled out for condemnation anywhere in the Hebrew Bible. Leviticus does not appeal to the account of creation as the basis for this ruling. It seems to be part of a priestly concern with improper combinations: “you shall not let your animals breed with a different kind, you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials” (Lev 19:19). Few people in the modern world regard all these prohibitions as binding. For our present purposes,

however, it is enough to note that Genesis 1 does not address the question of homosexual relations at all.

Dominion over the rest of creation.

Gen 1:28 tells the first human beings to have “dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing.”

This verse has drawn the ire of some environmentalists, who trace the human exploitation of nature to biblical roots. Human sovereignty over creation has not always been a blessing, and it has often been abused. Genesis, however, was not giving humanity a license to do whatever it wished. Genesis 1 only allows for vegetarian food: “See I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.” Only after the Flood will provision be made for eating meat. In the P account, creation is good and self-sustaining even before humanity is created. In Genesis 2, the rest of creation exists to serve humanity’s needs.

The Sabbath rest, with which the account of creation ends, also sets a limit to the human exploitation of the earth. The implications of the Sabbath will later be filled out in Exodus 20:9 (a priestly addition to the Decalogue): Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth the sea and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day.”

Perhaps the most striking thing about the Priestly creation account, however, is its positive tone. Everything is very good. The origin of sin and evil is not addressed. The story in Genesis 2-3 will set a very different tone.

This is not the only account of creation that we find in the Bible. The prophets and poetic books often allude to a more openly mythological account, in which the Lord “stretches out Zaphon over the void, and hangs the earth upon nothing” (Job 26: 7). Creation also involved a battle with the Sea and its monsters: “By his power, he stilled the Sea; by his understanding he struck down Rahab” (Job 26:12; compare Isa 51:9). The idea that creation involves a battle with the Deep and its monsters is familiar from Ancient Near Eastern mythology. According to Psalm 104, God set the earth on its foundations and set a boundary for the sea that it must not pass (Psalm 104:9). We should not then think of Genesis 1 simply as THE biblical account of creation, but rather as one of several accounts, which acquires special importance because of its place at the beginning of the canonical text.

Questions for discussion:

1. What are the implications of the many similarities with Babylonian creation stories for our understanding of the meaning of Genesis 1?
2. How much of Genesis 1 should we consider determinative for our current worldview?
3. Why do we tell creation stories? What larger cultural purposes do they serve?

Reading

Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 1–23.

Further Reading

Phyllis A. Bird, “Male and Female He Created Them. Gen. 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation,” in eadem, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 123-54.

Mark S. Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).