

4. STORIES OF CREATION



Focus: How one perceives the creation stories is not only critical to the way one looks at the Bible, but how one understands the purpose of creation, the essence of human nature, and the attitude one takes toward the environment in which we live.

The ancient Hebrews who composed what we now know as Genesis were brilliant storytellers – and although their writings have for generations been thought to explain the “how” of what happened historically, their stories are much deeper and richer when they are properly understood metaphorically as wrestling with the “whys” of human life.

When we delve into these ancient stories, we catch a glimpse of the answer to the eternal question, “What’s the meaning of life?” We are reminded that we are made in the image of the Divine – the one who brings order out of chaos and finds joy in the act of creating.

CREATION AS STORY

In the beginning, God may have created the heavens and the earth, but not even the Bible is daring enough to claim exactly how it happened. In fact, Genesis begins with *two* distinctive creation stories that are impossible to synthesize or string together into consecutive events with any integrity. Neither one was ever meant to give a scientific account of how creation happened. Instead, they offer theological claims about the characteristics of the creator and poetic explanations as to why human beings are the way we are.

Each story grew out of different eras and reflects the purposes of two different “schools” or authors. Genesis 1 is the product of authors that scholars have dubbed the “Priestly” writers. Their rhythmic liturgical order of creation grew out of their experience in Babylonian exile sometime after 586 BCE. As a product of the exile and the apparent defeat of Yahweh by the Babylonian Marduk, it has even been suggested that Genesis 1 is a kind of “resistance literature” created to claim Yahweh’s superiority over all of creation. The second story, beginning with Genesis 2:4, is believed to have its roots in much older folk-stories of creation. The editors of this story refer to the creator with the name “Yahweh,” the distinctive Hebrew name for the Divine. As such they have since come to be known collectively as the “Yahwist.” The two sources present the story in totally different styles. Where the Priestly author is interested in how things are organized and presents the origin of all things with a structured list, the Yahwist is a wonderful storyteller, often emphasizing humor and relationships as a vehicle

for making theological points. Overall, the authors never intended to answer the analytical Greco-Roman question of “how?” but instead, in typical rabbinic fashion, set out to address the much more important question of “why?”

GENESIS 1

Far from everything being created out of “nothing” (*ex nihilo*), creation begins with a torrential midnight hurricane at sea. The “formless void,” *tohu wabohu*, in Hebrew, literally means an unordered chaos, here described as an unending storm of violent wind on dark waters. When reading Genesis 1, keep in mind that ancient Jews perceived the sea as a symbol of chaos and distance from God. The sea in Genesis 1 is a metaphor for the chaos out of which God brings order. You might recall that Jonah was so determined to get away from God, he actually went to sea and eventually jumped in – clear acts of desperation to hearers who understood the sea as separation from the Divine. This cosmology is picked up at the end of the Biblical canon in Revelation 21:1. One of the characteristics of God’s “new heaven and new earth” is that the sea – chaos – will be no more.

The Priestly authors’ rhythmic unfolding of creation is not without its theological digs. In a world where the surrounding cultures worshipped the sun, moon, and stars as gods, to claim that your God had *created* the sun, moon, and stars was not-so-veiled theological one-upmanship. Growing out of the experience of exile and intending to offer hope to a despairing people, this “propaganda” piece had as its essence the message that our God is better than your god. Not only were these other gods cast as the creations of the God of the Hebrews, but they were also gutted of their basic functions. The sun, for instance, doesn’t actually provide light. Light has already been around for three days before the sun comes on the scene. This, of course, also throws a wrench into the literal interpretation of 24-hour days. We’ve already had three “days” pass and the sun hasn’t even been created yet.

One of the clearest conflicts between the two stories is in the creation of human beings. In Genesis 1, human beings are created male *and* female at the same time. The story of woman being created from man with all of its patriarchal implications is a story element used in Genesis 2.

Genesis 2:2ff reserves the highest order of creation being left for last. Shabbat, to rest, is the crowning glory of creation, a day of holiness separating humans from their animal roots – a tradition unique to Jewish culture in the ancient world. It’s not surprising that the “Priestly” authors would make the Sabbath, the event that would keep them in business, the pinnacle of creation.

GENESIS 2

Where Genesis 1 presents the maritime nightmare of too much water, Genesis 2 begins with the agricultural nightmare of drought. From the very beginning, the feel and style of Genesis 2 is different than that of Genesis 1. The Yahwist is a

consummate storyteller who portrays Yahweh anthropomorphically – like a human being – in relationship with his creation: interacting with it, in conversation with the man and the woman, and taking a walk in the garden. One of the most obvious differences is that while Genesis 1 moves from wet to dry, Genesis 2 moves from dry to wet.

One of the Yahwist's many wordplays that is lost in the translation from Hebrew is in the creation of the first human being. In order for the ground to be tilled, God formed the farmer, "ha adam," which means "the earth creature" in Hebrew. "Earth" or ground in Hebrew is "adamah." So, ha adam was formed from the adamah – words that take on a poetic flair when chanted in Hebrew. The character we call "Adam" is unnamed. English translators dropped "ha" (the definite article) and capitalized "adam" (a plural noun) and gave us Adam.

THE TWO STORIES IN BRIEF OUTLINE:

As you can see below, one of the most obvious differences between the two creation stories in Genesis is the order of events. The differing order excludes the possibilities of their a) describing the same events from different perspectives or b) their being sequential. They are simply different stories from different sources that were both important enough to the Jewish sense of identity to be included in the canon.

Creation 1 (Priestly Source)

(from wet to dry)

Stage 1: light

**Stage 2: firmament separated
from water**

Stage 3: land

Stage 4: inhabitants of firmament

Stage 5: inhabitants of sea & air

Stage 6: inhabitants of earth

Stage 7: God rests

Creation 2 (Yahwist)

(from dry to wet)

Stage 1: a mist goes up

**Stage 2: farmer "ha adam"
created**

Stage 3: garden created

Stage 4: the one commandment

Stage 5: critters all created

Stage 6: woman created

Stage 7: everybody out!

It is a disservice to the richness of the individual stories to try to synthesize them or make their two divergent story lines consecutive. For many, not seeing the two separate stories is simply a matter of having not read the stories since childhood Sunday School. But many Christians, bent on maintaining an inerrant Bible, manage to do the mental gymnastics necessary to ignore the blatantly obvious. In some circles, belief in a literal seven-day Creation has become a litmus test for being a "true" Christian. Those who claim the Bible as inerrant and interpret everything they can in a literal fashion are even now promoting the newest form of creation science, "intelligent design," to be taught in public schools across the United States.

What one thinks of the creation stories is not only critical to the way one look at the Bible, but to one's worldview. What is at issue is no less than the way people think, who controls our schools, and who controls our culture. Reading the Bible metaphorically opens one to meanings that go deeper than literal interpretations allow. Unbending readings of the text have led to the alleged Biblical endorsement of all kinds of social ills from slavery to the subjugation of women. But reading the text in a way that is alert to meanings that transcend the literal paves the way for deeper understandings – including advancement in scientific understanding.

The Church has often been slow to embrace advances in science. Galileo was condemned in 1633 because his teaching that the earth revolved around the sun contradicted the Biblical evidence. It only took the Vatican until 1992 (359 years later) to admit Galileo might have been right.

Although the seminary-trained Charles Darwin died a professed agnostic, he didn't completely divorce his religious understanding from his passion for science. In letters edited by his son, Francis, it is related that Darwin considered the theory of evolution to be "quite compatible with the belief in a God; but that you must remember that different persons have different definitions of what they mean by God."

The time is long past when a literal interpretation of the creation stories has any scientific, intellectual, or spiritual integrity. They remain, however, a tribute to the wisdom of the compilers who saw in the inclusion of two different creation stories an assurance that there would be "wiggle room" for people with "different definitions of what they mean by God" and the purposes of creation.

DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(Note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)

DVD Chapter 2:

According to McKenna & Fox, what are some of the purposes of creation stories in general?

Rossing suggests that the false conflict between creation and evolution is distracting us from what we should really be spending our energies on. Explain.

DVD Chapter 3:

The Bible's stories of creation can't possibly be God's stories of creation. Explain.

DVD Chapter 4:

Levine points out that Genesis 1 is "clean" and orderly, while Genesis 2 is more "messy." What are some of the defining characteristics of the two stories?

What do the stories say about "partnerships" between creation, human beings, the Creator, etc.?

DVD Chapter 5:

One of the major themes of the second Genesis creation story is "the Fall." How has that concept been helpful or detrimental to the spiritual enterprise of Christianity?

A more traditional, dogmatic Christianity makes sin and redemption the focus of the Eden saga. Describe how Nelson's suggestion that failure to accept responsibility for one's own actions is an equally persuasive thematic emphasis.

Questions for Personal Reflection:

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material so far?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

Consider the following questions as a group:

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

SPIRITPRACTICE:

"Tending a Garden" is just one way to be in touch with a deeper appreciation of creation. What are some other ways you've found to be helpful?

BONUS READING FOR POTENTIAL “JEOPARDY” CONTESTANTS:

Jewish folklore suggests that God created a woman who was brought before Adam like the other creatures. However, there was conflict between Adam and his “first wife.” In some stories, Adam didn’t even acknowledge her with a name, let alone calling her “mate.” In others (*Alphabet of Ben Sira*, 23a-b), she was created from the dirt as Adam’s equal and refused to be dominated by him. Either way, she was cast out of the garden. The tradition gave her the name Lilith and she eventually became the manifestation of the expression of “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned...” She was portrayed as a she-demon, as the jealous queen of the underworld, and was said to be responsible for S.I.D.S., men straying from their wives, and any other circumstance that brought grief to families. In some traditions, she became identified as Satan’s lover and mother to demons.

Lilith fans: As Lilith was created independently from man and had to make her own way in the world, she became the heroine of choice not only of the feminist movement of the 1960s but as the namesake of the music tour of women rockers in the 1990s, “The Lilith Fair.” An independent Jewish women’s magazine, “Lilith,” has been published since 1976. See www.lilithmag.com

TV Trivia: Keeping in mind that no self-respecting Jewish family would name their daughter Lilith (it would be like Christians naming their son “Lucifer”), the writers of “Cheers” had character Frasier Crane married to a Jewish woman named Lilith. Frasier being married to the queen of the underworld is an inside joke to those familiar with Jewish folklore that is totally lost on most Goyim (Gentiles).

Be sure to follow up on this session’s theme with Session 4’s *Living it Out:* “Creation’s Dance,” distributed by your facilitator.