

## SESSION ONE In the Beginning: The Two Creation Stories (Genesis 1 and 2)

The Priestly Writers' (P's) solemn, creed-like poetry in Genesis 1:1-2:3 stands in marked contrast to the colorful story the Jahwist (J) tells in Genesis 2:4-24. We see P's God as primarily transcendent, J's as primarily immanent. Paradoxically and significantly, they are the same God.

Questions for reflection as you read:

1. Describe P's view of the creator God, nature and humankind. Describe his style of writing. (1:1-2:4)
2. Describe J's view of the creator God, nature, humankind, and his style of writing. (2:4-39)
3. What is the underlying unity of both P and J in their understanding of God?

### I. AN INTRODUCTION

The Book of Genesis begins with two quite different stories of Creation. (Genesis 1:1-2:3 and 2:4-24) Traditionally, Moses was considered the author of the first five books of the Bible, known as the Pentateuch or Torah (the Hebrew word for "Law"). It was believed that God spoke directly to Moses and that Moses wrote down God's words with complete accuracy. In the King James Version (KJV), the first five books are called the Books of Moses.

Modern scholars, however, reject the notion that Moses wrote the Pentateuch. The style of writing varies greatly; the theological emphases differ; the historical references come from different periods in Israel's history. We will return to the question of the authorship of the Pentateuch later; meanwhile, notice the differences between the creation story in Genesis 1 and the creation story in Genesis 2. It was due in large part to these differences in the first two chapters of Genesis that Western Christian scholars first began to question the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch.

## II. THE FIRST CREATION STORY (Genesis 1:1-2:4a)

1. In the beginning (1:1-2) When God began to create the heavens and earth, chaos was there: "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep." The universe looked something like this:

The formless chaos is called in Hebrew *tohu wabohu*, a term which has become Anglicized as *tohubohu* and means "chaos, frantic disorder." The ancient Hebrew thought of the primeval chaos as dark, raging water-as ocean water might look if stirred up at night by a hurricane: "Darkness covered the face of the deep." Gerhard von Rad, the Old Testament scholar, says in his great commentary Genesis that the second verse speaks not only of a reality that once existed, but also of a possibility that always exists, that "behind all creation lies the abyss of formlessness. Humankind is always ready to sink into the abyss of the formless." We will see later in the creation story and throughout the Hebrew Scripture that it is only the work of a loving God that holds the waters of chaos back so that we are not destroyed.

Note that God is active even in the chaos. "The Spirit (Wind, Storm, Breath) of God was moving over the face of the waters" (Revised Standard Version-RSV). The Hebrew word for spirit is *ruach*. *Ruach* is the same word as wind. Significantly, the Greek word for Spirit in the New Testament, *pneuma*, also means wind, breath of God. The invisible but mighty power of God-called Spirit-is at work right from the beginning of our world.

2. The name of God The name of God in this chapter is *Elohim* (El O Heem) The word is impersonal; it just means Deity.

3. The order of creation: verse by verse

1st day light 4th day sun, moon, stars

2nd day vault, firmament 5th day birds, fish

3rd day dry land, vegetation 6th day land animals, man/woman

7th day rest

The first day (3-5)

By Word alone, God creates light. Throughout Scripture, light signifies God's epiphany, God's manifestation in the world. John begins his Gospel with reference to the same light:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:1-5, New Revised Standard Version, NRSV)

Light, the firstborn of creation, precedes the sun, which was thought to reflect God's light. The idea of the creation by word alone makes us know of the radical distinction between the Creator and the creation, an important theme in this creation story and this course. God says . . . and it happens!

The second day (6-8)

On the second day, God creates (literally "hammers out") the firmament, a bell-shaped vault, out of the waters of chaos; it looked something like this:

Think of the firmament as a biosphere, as a bubble in a vast sea of chaos. The ancient Hebrew believed that our earth and the heavens were surrounded by the threatening waters of chaos.

The waters were above the earth and under the earth. You could look up at the blue sky and see the waters above. Springs and rivers testified to the waters welling up from below. The breath (wind, spirit) of a loving God held the waters back and kept life alive inside the bubble.

The third day (9 13)

God creates the dry land, which God calls Earth. And then God causes the earth to bring forth vegetation and living animals. Thus, something of the primitive idea of Mother Earth is retained. The earth, as Mother, is a good creation. "She" has great creative powers and a dignity all of her own. (If humankind ever learned to view Earth as Mother, ecological problems would certainly decrease.)

The fourth day (14 19)

The creation of the heavenly bodies is next, but they are downplayed. In this passage they are not even named. They have an essential function to be sure: to give light to the earth and to be the instruments of telling time—the hours of the day, the days of the year, and the seasons of the year. But for Israel, unlike many early cultures, the heavenly bodies are creatures of God—they are not in themselves divine. There will be no Sun or Moon god in Israel. Note these words from Deuteronomy:

And when you look up to the heavens and see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, do not be led astray and bow down to them and serve them, things that the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples everywhere under heaven. (4:19)

The fifth day (20 23)

On the fifth day, God creates birds that fly across the firmament or dome of heaven. And then God creates the fish in the waters that rise up from below. Note that everything is created good, even the great sea monsters.

### The sixth day (24 31)

On the sixth day, God causes Mother Earth to produce the land animals, but God alone creates man and woman. The land animals are God's highest creation next to human beings. But the woman and man are created in the image of God! They are blessed and are given authority, dominion over the earth. God makes the man and the woman the stewards of all creation. At the end of the sixth day, after the creation of the woman and the man, God looks at the creation, and sees that it is not just good, but very good! (See also Psalm 8, noting the Psalmist's high view of humankind.)

In creating the man and the woman in the Divine Image God says, "Let us make humankind in our image." Most scholars believe that this is a reference to the heavenly court, which is mentioned only occasionally in Scripture. (See Isaiah 6 and 40 for examples.) The mention of the heavenly court at this moment in the creation story helps maintain the distance between God and the man and the woman. We are created in the image of God, but we are set at some distance from God: the heavenly court stands between God and us. Again, this is an important theme in this course. (In the Christian era many have claimed that the us in the creation story refers to the Trinity-Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.)

### The seventh day (2:1 4a)

On the seventh day God rests. The word for the seventh day, the Sabbath, comes from the Hebrew verb for "rested," shabat. Israel would set aside the Sabbath as a mandatory day for rest.

Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed (Ex. 23:12, RSV).

Rest, as well as work, then is part of the created order of things. In the best of Judaism, rest is ceasing to work so that you might enjoy the work you have done. God creates a good world and then on the seventh day God delights in the work of his hands.

4. The style of writing

a. The passage is balanced, symmetrical. (In the diagram above, day one is related to day four (the general light to the specific lights), day two is related to day five (the firmament and the waters are related to the birds in the air and the fish that swim in the waters), day three is related to day six (the dry land is the created home of the land animals). In *Understanding the Old Testament*, Bernhard Anderson says, "To enter sympathetically into this part of the Pentateuch is like standing in an ancient cathedral, whose symmetrical design and religious symbolism, hallowed by centuries of worship, produce a solemn sense of the holiness and majesty of God."

b. It is held together by repeated formulas. "And God said . . . . And God saw that it was good . . . . Evening came and morning came, another day."

c. It is precise. Variations are carefully used. After the creation of the man and woman, God sees that the creation is not just good, but very good. The earth brings forth the land animals, but God creates the woman and the man. God is shown as both transcendent creator who says, "Let there be" and there is and also as immanent creator, for God makes the firmament as a potter forms exquisite pottery. Gerhard Von Rad says of this chapter, "Nothing is here by chance. Everything must be considered carefully, deliberately, precisely." This need for order comes no doubt from Israel's experience of chaos in the Babylonian exile in the 6th century.

5. The view of God

a. God is all-powerful, transcendent. God creates from afar through the mighty Word. But God is also immanent, involved with creation as a potter is "involved" with the clay.

b. A radical distinction is made between the Creator and the creature. There is no pantheistic idea of the emanation of God, that is, of the overflowing of God into the Creation. God lives in one realm; the creation exists in another. The distinction is maintained even when the man and woman are created in the image of God. The heavenly court helps maintain the distance.

c. God, nevertheless, has an intimate relationship with the creation. God does create the woman and man in the divine image; God does make sure that the whole creation is good. God is like an artist who puts the best that she has to offer into her art, but God is nevertheless quite distinct from the divine work. God delegates responsibility to the newly created man and woman.

6. The view of the natural world

a. It is emphatically a good world; everything in it is good. Mother Earth exists for the man and the woman, but nevertheless the Earth has a dignity all her own.

b. The created order must not be confused with the Creator. Neither sun, nor moon, nor humankind can be deified. St. Paul says in his Letter to the Romans that a fundamental problem with pagans is that they worship the creature and not the creator (Romans. 1:25). (Think of the implications of this for life today!)

7. View of the man and the woman

a. The man and the woman are the highest of the creations. God begins by creating inorganic matter, then vegetation, then fish and birds, then land animals, and finally creates the man and the woman in the divine image. Furthermore, God blesses this creation. The man and the woman are an order of creation qualitatively different from the rest. It was only after this creation that God saw that the creation was very good.

b. The woman and man are made stewards of all of creation. They are thus made free, able to make decisions. In this sense, they are like God. The creation of the man and the woman in the image of God has been called God's great gamble. God created an other, a free other to love, a free other to be responsible for this world-with no guarantee that the other would love God and act responsibly.

c. The human creature is male and female, right from the start. Sexuality is thus part of God's plan for us and is blessed; it is a good thing. (In some religions and in the practice of too many Christians, sex is considered sinful in itself, even cursed, part of the fall of humankind.)

d. The man and woman (as well as the land animals) are made vegetarians. God clearly wants them to refrain from shedding blood, of any kind. This condition signifies God's hope that humankind will be completely peaceful. Later, the Lord relents and allows humans to kill animals for food (see Genesis 9:2).

e. The woman and man are, by implication, given a day of rest. The Lord rests on the seventh day and blesses it. Very early in its history, Israel determined that God wanted humankind to rest on the Sabbath as well. Rest is thus part of the created order of things. It is not an extra, a luxury; it is part of God's will for us, so that we can delight in what both God and we ourselves have made with our hands.

8. Other comments on the first creation story

a. The 34 verses are like a creed. They reflect Israel's faith that developed over centuries. The language is intentionally austere so that the listener will dwell on the theological statements of belief. (Compare to Psalm 104.)

b. The belief in a created order out of chaos prepared Jews of a later age, and Christians as well, for belief in the Resurrection, which is a second creation. (The Resurrection is not to be confused with immortality—a belief that the center of the personality continues to live on even though the body is shed. See I Corinthians 15.)

c. At the time of the writing, there was a kind of unity between "scientific belief"—how things came to be (which Israel inherited from Babylonia)—and faith, a unity of reason and faith. Israel actually believed in a seven-day creation and found immense theological meaning in it. Israel was not, however, going to make scientific accuracy their God.

9. Psalm 104:1-24

As a way of summing up the discussion so far, read Psalm 104:1-24. What Genesis 1 says in somewhat austere creed-like language, the Psalmist says in poetry. (Though credited to David, the King in the 10th century BCE, the Psalms were written throughout the Biblical history of the Jews. In order to better understand and appreciate the Psalms, see Supplement B and read the section on Hebrew poetry in *The New Oxford Annotated NRSV*, 722-725. We will be reading various Psalms as we move through this course.)

III. THE SECOND CREATION STORY (Genesis 2:4b-25)

1. In the beginning In the beginning there was God, and then there was a desert, for God had not yet caused it to rain. There was no garden because there was no gardener. For this writer, the desert has something of the same function that the waters of chaos have for the author of the first chapter—the parched Middle East desert being a primary threat to the ability of humans to live, grow crops, and multiply.

2. The name of God The name of God is Yahweh (YAH way), which means "I am who I am." It is usually translated Lord. It is a personal name for God, just as Jesus is a personal name for the Christ, the Savior. In Hebrew the name was originally YHWH for there were no written vowels. In a later period, Christians began pronouncing the name Jehovah, but in Genesis the name of the Lord and God is YHWH, Yahweh. (When you see LORD written in the Bible in small capitals, the word being translated is Yahweh.)

3. The order of creation In this story, the order of creation is quite different. God creates a human being first, then the trees, then the animals, and then the woman. The streams and the four rivers seem just to appear. The order of creation is not so important in this story.

4. The style of writing

a. It is imaginative, delightful with the kind of detail that makes for a good story. Note such intriguing images as: "the tree of life," "the tree of the knowledge of good and

evil," God breathing life into the man, God seeing that it is not good for the man to be alone.

b. Intentional puns are used: adam means "man," in Hebrew while the earth from which he is taken is adamah. The name for Eve is related to the verb that means "to make alive." Finally, the word Eden means "bliss."

#### 5. The view of God

a. God is presented as anthropomorphic, described in human terms: God makes, plants, experiments, feels (for example, God realizes that it is not good for the man to be alone).

b. God is immanent, that is, close to humankind and to the creation. God makes the human being out of the ground and blows the breath of life into his nostrils.

c. But, God does preserve some distance from man. God will not be seen by a human being, but causes a deep sleep to fall upon the man during the creation of the woman. (This is a recurring Biblical theme. On one occasion, God put Abraham to sleep before appearing to him, Gen. 15:12. Once when Moses asked God if he could see "him," the Lord said, "You cannot see my face, for a human cannot see me and live.")

d. God sets limits: the man and the woman cannot eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

#### 6. The view of the natural world

a. The world is envisioned as a desert, part of which has been made fertile. It is a world bounded by four rivers. Compare this world with the vast cosmos in Genesis 1.

b. Water is seen as an assisting element in creation, not a symbol of chaos as it is in Genesis 1.

c. There is an intrinsic relationship between man and the natural world, as symbolized by the two names, adam and adamah, man and the earth. (Think of Adam as generic man, "Everyman, Everywoman.") It is as though adam and adamah are great friends.

7. The view of the man and woman

a. Human beings are created to work. The Lord put the man in the garden to "till it and keep it." (For Sigmund Freud the work drive was as important as the sex drive even though he chose to focus his research on the latter.)

b. The man is made a social creature; it is not good that he be alone.

c. He is given authority over the animal kingdom, as he names all the creatures. In ancient Middle Eastern society, one gained power over others by knowing their names. It is for this reason that God does not easily give the divine name to Moses, and when doing so, God gives him the name YHWH, meaning "I am who I am," a name which in itself prevents manipulation.

It is hard to overemphasize the importance of the naming of animals. Whatever name the man gives the animals God will accept: "Whatever the man called every living being, that was its name." God thus forfeits the right to reverse human decisions, at least in this story.

d. The man is created for sexuality. He and the woman were one flesh at the beginning; they are then made separate-she from Adam's rib-and they yearn to be one flesh again.

e. The man is given both immense freedom (he can eat the fruit from any tree except one) and also the Law, even though it is in a rudimentary form. He is told that he cannot eat of the tree of knowledge.

f. The man is made whole through the breath of God. Wind, breath, and spirit in the Old and New Testaments are all closely related. In breathing life into the man, God gives him

the Divine Self. (Christians call this manifestation of God the Holy Spirit, the force that makes us fully human.)

8. Other comments

a. This is more of a story that explains who we are in relation to God, the world, and where we have come from than it is a statement of belief, like Genesis 1. It is a story told by one who enjoys telling a good story!

b. The writer has etiological concerns trying to explain why things are the way they are: why there is such strong love between a man and a woman, why the rib cage doesn't cover the entire upper torso. In Genesis 3, the writer will explain why men and women wear clothes, why there is such hatred between humankind and snakes, why men toil in the fields, why women suffer (toil) in childbirth, and other observable phenomena. Keep this etiological concern in mind as you read all of the Hebrew Scripture.

c. The woman is not viewed as inferior to the man in Genesis 2, according to The New Interpreter's Bible. Just as the man is not inferior to the earth from which he was formed, neither is the woman inferior to the man from whom she was formed. She is called in the NRSV not just a "helpmate" but "partner"! (The word means also "companion," "mutual helper." It the same word used for God in many of the psalms. See Psalm 30:10: "Be gracious unto me! / O Lord, be my helper!")

d. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil intrigues. While it is hard to translate precisely the meaning of "knowledge of good and evil," a Hebrew idiom, we come close when we think of it as meaning knowing good and evil or truth the way God knows truth. (See Deut. 1:39 and 2 Sam 19:35, the only other times the expression is used in the Hebrew Scripture.) Children cannot know truth the way adults can, and humankind cannot know truth the way God can. Given that situation: Don't eat that fruit!

#### IV. THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE PENTATEUCH

While Genesis 1 and 2 certainly have many similarities and agree on the most important points, there are also a number of differences. Modern scholarship is nearly unanimous in its view that the two creation stories were written by different authors at very different times in Israel's history. The author of Genesis 1, modern scholars usually call P because he and his fellow writers apparently were priests. They believe P wrote during the Babylonian exile (587-537 BCE) or shortly after. The author of Genesis 2, they often call J because he and his fellow writers use the name YHWH, Yahweh, for God (Jahweh in German) right from the beginning. They believe J may have been written down as early as the time of Solomon (962-922 BCE). (There is presently no scholarly consensus concerning J. But in this text, we take the position that there was a J, who drew on sources before him and whose work was no doubt later modified.) Thus, the first story was probably written centuries after the second. Apparently both the Priestly writers and the Yahwist wrote epic length narratives to recount Israel's beginnings. These were later combined with other narratives and bodies of law to complete the Pentateuch as we have it today.

#### Personal Connections

1. What images in both Genesis One and Two stand out most vividly? Why?
2. Do you tend to see people as created "very good," made in the image of God, and then worry about their shortcomings? Or do you tend to see the shortcomings and then try to find something good to appreciate? Can you give an example?
3. Adam and Eve (Everyman, Everywoman) are given the responsibility of being good stewards of the Creation. How would you evaluate yourself as a steward of God's good creation? What are your growing edges (ways you can improve)?
4. Do you take the time to truly rest each week and appreciate the good work you have tried to do in the previous six days? Should you? Could you?
5. Are you more drawn to the transcendent, omnipotent God emphasized in Genesis 1 or the more immanent, personal God emphasized in Genesis 2?
6. Genesis One and Two emphasize Original Blessing. Do you feel blessed by God? If not, how can the church help you to receive this blessing? ○