

Session 12: The Old Testament Creation Stories

A. The Creation Narrative of Genesis 1

Activity 12.1

Read Genesis 1:1 – 2:4

Make notes on the features of this account that particularly strike you or puzzle you

This passage is the first of two narratives of creation which stand at the beginning of the Hebrew Bible. The second narrative, which we look at in the next section, is the story of the Garden of Eden in the rest of chapter 2 and chapter 3.

In form Genesis 1 has been described as 'hymnic' prose. It is apparent straight away that this account is carefully structured. The acts of creation are divided into seven days, seven being a 'complete' number in Hebrew thought. Each day begins with a resolution of God, whose word sets the actions of that day in motion. Each day ends with the announcement: 'God saw that it was good,' and the formula, 'There was evening and morning, the ... day.'

The careful structure of the prose echoes the emphasis on structure in the content. This creation account is one of dividing, fixing and classifying. First there is darkness, then God creates light and divides it from the darkness, naming the light 'Day' and the darkness 'Night'. The naming has particular significance: names in Hebrew thought are more than simply labels, but convey something important about the bearer of the name. To give a name to something is to say what the essential nature of the thing is to be.

Then God divides the waters into two by means of a dome or space (in the old versions, a 'firmament'). Some of the waters are to be above the dome and some below, while the dome is to be named 'Sky'. Then follows the separation of sea and dry land with names given to each.

Days 4, 5 and 6 correspond to days 1, 2 and 3. Day 1 saw the separation of Day and Night: on day 4 the sun, moon and stars are set in place and given their function, to divide night and day and to mark times, seasons, days and years. The concern for order and structure continues in the marking of times and seasons. The stars are not gods, but part of the created order. In Second Isaiah we have seen this point made polemically against the Astrologers of Babylon. Now it is assimilated and takes its part in the overall account of creation.

Day 2 saw the separation of sea and land; on day 5 sea and land are populated. The inhabitants of the sea include the 'great sea monsters'. Like the stars, these have been dethroned from their semi-divine status and included in the creative order. In most Near Eastern mythology the sea monster was a mythical creature who fought against the gods and whose vanquished body was then used in the creation of the world. Echoes of this ancient creation myth occur at several places in the Old Testament, where the sea monster is called 'Rahab':

Psalm 89:9-10

You rule the raging of the sea;
when its waves rise, you still them.
You crushed Rahab like a carcass;
you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.

Isaiah 51:9-10

Awake, awake, put on strength,
O arm of the Lord!
Awake, as in days of old,
the generations of long ago!
Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces,
who pierced the dragon?
Was it not you who dried up the sea,
the waters of the great deep;
who made the depths of the sea a way
for the redeemed to cross over?

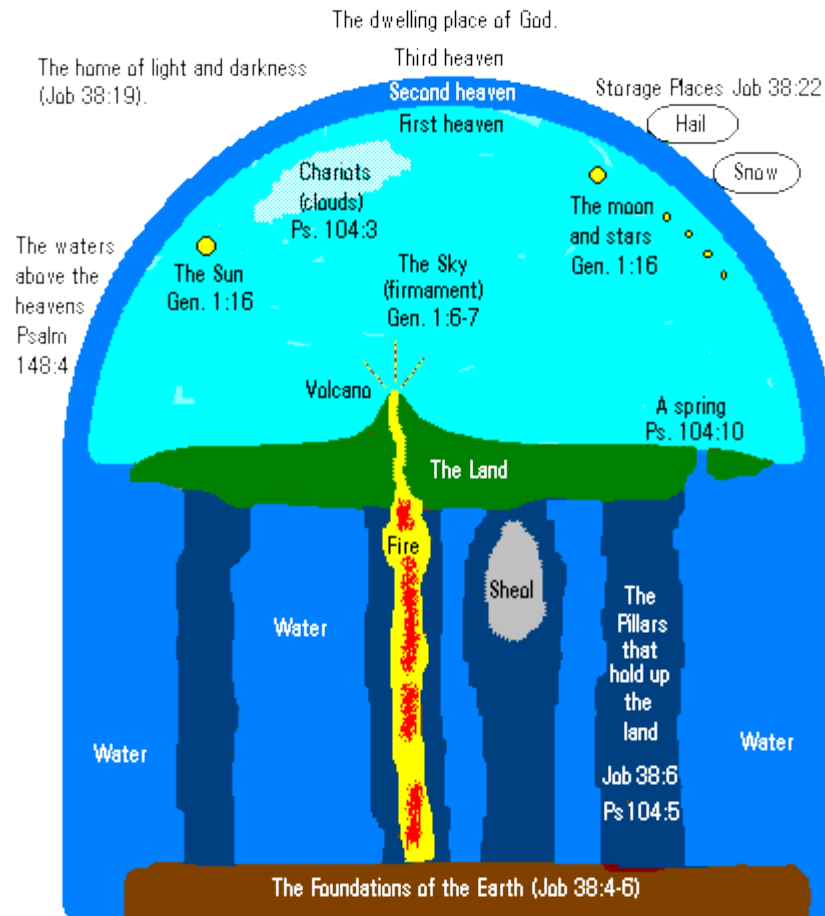
The sea too has changed its status: in pagan mythologies the sea was the primeval source of chaos. In Isaiah 51:10, above, the crossing of the Red Sea is linked to the victory of Yahweh over the sea. In Genesis, God literally puts the sea in its place, taming the waters of chaos. Even so this sense of the sea as a hostile force opposed to God continues to echo through the Bible, even as far as the Revelation 21, in which the writer sees in his vision that in the new heaven and the new earth there will be 'no more sea'.

On Day 6 the land, created on day 3, is populated. The animals are classified into three orders: cattle (that is, domesticated animals), wild animals and 'creeping things', and each is commanded to reproduce 'after its kind'. In God's perfect world there is to be no mixing of kinds: everything is to occupy its proper place.

On the one hand, this description of the earth is entirely traditional. The universe described here has been described as a 'three-decker' universe. Above the earth is the heavens, popularly thought of as God's dwelling place. Under the earth are the pillars on which the earth is supported and Sheol, the place of the dead. This is the world as pictured, for example, in Psalm 139, even though the psalmist knows that this picture is inadequate: God cannot be contained in heaven alone:

Psalm 139:8-10

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.



The cosmos as viewed by the authors of Job, Psalms, and Genesis.

from *Genesis 1 for Today* by Herb Drake, www.hccentral.com/magazine/gen1.html (20/8/08)

On the other hand, the whole account is heavily theological. We have already seen that this account of creation implicitly repudiates the rival pagan accounts of its day. Moreover, it presents the world as ordered and predictable because it has been made so by God. It is written to declare timeless truths about God and his relationship to the created world.

1. God is transcendent. He never appears in the world but is completely 'other'. The other side of the same coin is that creation is 'secularised'. Trees, springs and rocks are not gods: there is nothing sacred about them. God is utterly different and in no way part of his creation. The monotheism of Second Isaiah has been thoroughly assimilated. It is not argued polemically against a rival world-view; it is simply declared.
2. When God creates it is by his word. God speaks and things happen. He says, 'Let there be light,' and light appears. The expression of the great power of God's word in Isaiah 40 and 55, deriving from the prophetic tradition, has likewise been assimilated. Genesis 1 uses a particular word for the creative acts of God, 'bara', which is only ever used in the Old Testament for the what God does. It is also characteristic of Second Isaiah, as in his declaration, 'I form light and *create* darkness, I make weal and *create* woe' (Isaiah 45:7).
3. In Genesis 1 men and women are the crown of creation, the apex of the cosmological pyramid. In the children's book, *God Made the World*, part of the Lion Story Bible, the

author introduces this point with the words, 'Now the world was ready for people to enjoy.' This exactly expresses the theology of Genesis 1: the world is not complete until occupied by human beings. The whole of creation to this point has been preparation for the creation of humankind. This fundamental truth is signalled in three important ways:

- Use of the word 'bara'. This special word occurs once in 1:1 of the creation of the whole world, once in 1:21 of the sea monsters and *three times* in 1:27 of human beings. In other words, the creation of humankind is a new and distinctive creation, on a par with that of the universe itself.
 - The phrase 'image and likeness'. 'Image' is the same word as 'statue', a physical image; 'likeness' qualifies it, meaning 'something like'. The phrase tells us that God himself is the pattern on which human beings are created and that this includes every part of human nature, including bodily form. The term 'image' occurs only very infrequently in the Old Testament, but occurring here it is clearly very significant. In Genesis 5:1, Adam passes on the image to his son, so it is clearly not seen as lost at the 'Fall'. In Genesis 9:6 the prohibition of the shedding of human blood is based on the dignity of the image of God and this is contrasted specifically with animals, since in Genesis 9 people are allowed for the first time to eat animals.
 - The purpose for which human beings were created. This is to 'have dominion'. Human beings are given a freedom in relation to creation which the animals do not have. The animals have their own place, whether earth, sea or sky, and human beings are placed over them all to rule them.
4. The final and vitally important theological point concerns the Sabbath. In Deuteronomy, the land itself is a Sabbath:

Deuteronomy 12:9

For you have not yet come into the rest and the possession that the Lord your God is giving you.

The economy is based on the Sabbath principle: there is to be no work on the seventh day, no planting and reaping in the seventh year. All this was seen as a feature of God's salvation, exclusive to Israel. They were to keep this law because they had been slaves in Egypt and now were free. Here the Sabbath is seen as an original and integral part of God's creation, something to apply to all people everywhere. This is reflected in the difference between the text of the fourth commandment in Deuteronomy compared to Exodus:

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

Exodus 20:8-11

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour 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; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Activity 12.2

Take some time to consider the following:

If you had to give an account of creation on one side of a piece of paper, as this Genesis account is, what features of the world would you want to try to explain?

What media would you use to do it? Art, poetry, story, scientific description, or some other?