

Genesis 1:1-23
October 11, 2020

1) Genesis 1:1-5 – Day 1 of Creation: Nothingness or Chaos

- a) Two important details should be noted concerning verse 1.1st, there is no “the” in the Hebrew text, which is why the translators of the NRSV placed in the footnotes the optional reading, “When God began to create...” I think that is the preferred translation. 2nd, though there is no punctuation in the original text, the translators of the KJV (the version most of us 1st learned) placed a period at the end of verse 1 as if to say this verse is the main clause governing everything that is to follow. But, if verse 1 is a subordinate clause and not a complete sentence, then its purpose is to point to the main clause in verse 3, which proclaims that light was the 1st act of divine creation. If those things are true, it is important to focus on the words of verse 2 describing the chaotic setting of God’s creation, “the earth was a formless void.” Sibley Towner concludes, “... the creative activity of God in the beginning of cosmic time and history was not to produce a world out of nothing (ex nihilo). Instead, it was to take the dark and swirling chaos that was already there and to put it into life-supporting, fruitful order.” Von Rad states it like this: “the marvel of creation... speaks 1st of the formless and the abysmal out of which God’s will lifted creation... chapter 1 moves not so much between the poles of nothingness and creation as between the poles of chaos and cosmos.”
- b) The Priestly writers did not consider it a threat to divine power to suggest that some form of chaotic matter existed prior to creation. These opening verses of Genesis depict God as a masterful artist taking the chaotic material available and creating a beautiful masterpiece of a universe beginning with the formation of light out of total darkness. The Hebrew verb that is translated “created” in verse 1 has a unique role in the Old Testament. The term is only used to describe different objects of God’s creation: the entire universe in Genesis 1, a new heaven and earth in Isaiah 65, and a new heart in Psalm 51. Though the objects of God’s creation may differ, the subject is always the same: God is the sole creator. These are things only God can make. The point is obvious: each creation of God is a unique result of divine artistry and power. Creation is not self-generated, and it is not autonomous.

- c) In verse 2 the earth or cosmos is described as “a formless void” translating the Hebrew words, “tohu wa-bohu.” Walter Brueggemann puts it bluntly in these words, “creation is an ordering out of an already existing chaos. Conventionally, it is been held that Genesis 1 is creation by God out of nothing. But this verse denies that.” Whatever this chaotic realm of material may be, it is not correct, according to Genesis 1:1-5, to refer to it as simply nothing. Sibley Towner in his Genesis commentary concludes, “In fact, nowhere does the Bible specifically say that God created the world ‘from nothing’.” Karl Barth, one of the 20th century’s most conservative biblical theologians insisted that the “nothing” out of which God created was in fact “something.” Barth referred to it as “das nichtige” or that to which God said “no” in the process of creation. Edgar Sheffield Brightman refers to it as “the given” from which meaningless evil arises. Nicholas Berdyaev used the mythical images of “meonic freedom” or “the ungrund” to describe the uninformed freedom that existed prior to God’s creation. David Ray Griffin, disputing the doctrine of creation out of nothing, postulated instead a primordial chaos out of which God created. Whatever philosophical verbiage one may use to describe the setting of God’s creative actions, the Hebrew language of Genesis refers to an unformed realm of chaotic existence from which God calls forth a divinely created order. That is to say, the process of creation is one of bringing order and intensity out of absolute chaos.
- d) There are clear advantages in setting aside the doctrine of creation out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) and adopting the pattern of Genesis 1 which speaks of a realm of chaotic matter as the stuff from which God has drawn the harmony and beauty of creation. Most importantly, it provides a reasonable way to speak of the source of natural evil in our world. The source of natural evil, it seems to me, is the most difficult question posed for those who believe in God. Why are there natural disasters in a divine creation and how do you explain plagues and illnesses in a world fashioned by a benevolent God? Genesis 1:1-5 gives us a clue. That same chaos and meaningless material that was present before God’s creative act remains in part as a constituent of our universe as God continues the divine work of bringing order and beauty out of disorder and chaos. Otherwise, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that natural evil is the product of God’s own creative will.

- e) A 2nd advantage of adopting the Genesis 1 pattern of a chaotic realm out of which God created, is the bridge it builds to modern science with its emphasis on randomness, chance, and chaos theory. As the straitjacket of Newtonian physics with its emphasis on immutable laws operating with clockwork regularity is repudiated by contemporary scientific theory, the language of Genesis 1 is dramatically more congenial with modern thought. How are we to describe the natural world around us? Is it a benevolent and trustworthy world created by a kindly God or is it a sometimes random and chaotic realm that often challenges and frustrates us? The creation story of Genesis 1 allows us to answer not in an either/or fashion but with a both/and response. We can speak of both order and chaos.
- f) A third advantage of the Genesis 1 account of creation is the biblical theme that God's creative act does not end when God rests on the 7th day. God's work of bringing order and harmony out of the chaos continues throughout the entire biblical story. Sibley Towner states, "All through the rest of the Bible God is at work bringing order both in the cosmic reaches of creation and in the midst of the chaos of human affairs. God never stopped struggling." In this fight against chaos God is not alone for God invites humankind to join in an "eighth day of creation" bringing order and harmony to a disorderly and misshapen world. In fact, without the challenge of an imperfect world the human personality would have no stage for developing its creative possibilities. Human life would be without purpose. I would rather live a life of disability and disorder than live in a dull-as-dishwater world of supposed perfection. I would rather have something to do than to live a monotonous life where no accomplishments are possible. We will return to this theme later.
- g) Verse 2 also speaks of "a wind from God." The Hebrew words could just as easily be translated as "a mighty wind" or "God's wind." The reference here is to a divine power or spirit that does not arise from the chaos, but rules over the chaos. The Priestly writers pictured God as a mighty bird soaring over the surface of the chaotic abyss. It is as if God is surveying the situation before making the 1st creative act to bring light to the darkness.

- h) Verse 3 begins, “Then God said...” making clear the proper sequence: 1st the chaos of verses 1-2, then the creative act of bringing light in the darkness. Light is the firstborn of creation, and without it the contours of the creative act remain concealed by the darkness. The source of the light is not to be found in the chaos but springs from God’s creative word. In verses 4 and 5 the beginnings of creation received God’s benediction as the light is called good and the presence of light made it possible to distinguish night and day.
- i) Walter Brueggemann reminds us that this Priestly text was written in the 6th century BC and addressed to the Babylonian exiles. It seemed to many that the God of Israel had been humiliated and defeated. To these despairing exiles Brueggemann writes that these words of Genesis proclaim, “Yahweh is still God, one who watches over his creation and will bring it to well-being... The God of Israel is the Lord of all life.” Even in the terror of our current situation, Genesis insists on the singular rule of their God who alone is the creator of the universe.

2) Genesis 1:6-23 – Days 2-5 of Creation

- a) Brueggemann argues that Genesis 1:1-2:4 was crafted by the Priestly writers as a poetic liturgy, which can be seen most clearly in the symmetrical formation of the description of each day of creation. The language used includes words of confession and praise. Brueggemann writes, “... what we have in the text is proclamation. The poem does not narrate how it happened as though Israel were interested in the method of how the world became God’s world... Israel is concerned with God’s lordly intent, not his technique.” The structure of these verses is part of the message that the design of the world is not accidental; it is based upon the will of God. The pattern is seen in each passing day: command (“God said”), execution (“and it was so”), blessing (“it was good”).
- b) Verses 6-8 describe the 2nd day of creation when the creator separated the chaotic waters above the earth from the chaotic waters on the earth. The ancient cosmology of the Hebrew people, described in Job 9:6 and Psalm 75:3, pictured a three-tiered universe consisting of flat earth, covered by a dome or firmament (literally a beaten metal bowl), supported by pillars hovering over the netherworld of Sheol. The firmament had trap doors

through which the heavenly waters could descend as rain upon the earth. As is often depicted in the poetry of Psalms, for people living in an arid environment, the watery deep was a depiction of chaos itself. This is one place in the creation story where it is important not to confuse the Genesis account with scientific explanation. If these words are of little scientific value, they are vital in terms of their theological message. God is the creator of night and day, sky and sea, and they are all good.

- c) These verses introduce us to 2 different ways of speaking of the creative power of God. The 1st simply says, “then God made,” as in verse 7. This language pictures the world as coming directly from God’s hands, an emphasis on immanence. The other speaks of creation as a result of God’s commanding word. This terminology focuses on the distance between the creator and the creature, an emphasis on transcendence.
- d) Verses 9-13 provide the account of the 3rd day of creation, specifically the confinement of the oceans, the origin of dry land, and the appearance of plant life. This includes the completion of what was begun on the 2nd day. The waters under the firmament are drained off and confined. Plant life appears and is divided into 2 kinds: plants yielding seeds and trees yielding fruit. These achievements prepare the way for the coming of humankind. The seed-bearing plants will become the source of life for the creatures of the earth, so their creation is of vital importance to the Priestly writers. We are told in these verses that the sustenance of human life comes from God, not from ourselves, and certainly not by chance. God is thinking of humankind from the beginning moments of creation. The creation story is a theological and anthropological event providing the setting for humanity.
- e) Verses 14-19 tell of the events of the 4th day of creation when the sun, moon, and stars were created. The order of creation is interesting and raises the question of what provided the light on the 1st day of creation. The phrasing of verse 14 is important for the Priestly writers when they speak of the sun and the moon, “let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years.” The priests were obviously concerned with regulating the religious festivals during the year, Sabbath rest, and prayer times during the day.

- f) Von Rad, always remembering the culture in which these words were written, emphasizes the importance of the terminology used in describing the creation of the stars. The term “lights” used in verse 14-17 is meant to be a degrading term, and notice the terms sun, moon, and stars never appear. Every form of independent astronomical power is disputed by the Priestly writers. Von Rad argues for the significance of these words, “remember that they were formulated in a cultural and religious atmosphere that was saturated with all kinds of astrological false belief.” Beginning at this point the stargazers of Scripture are repudiated over and over again.
- g) Verses 20-23 describe the creation of fish and fowl, “and every living creature.” These verses also include God’s blessing as he speaks the word to all creation, “Be fruitful and multiply.” These living creatures have received some creative capacity of their own since they are made capable of passing on the life they have received by means of procreation. What is new on this day is the creation of living beings who share in the animated life of people. The Priestly story is literally preparing the ground for the appearance of humanity. That will be the focus of our next lesson.

Questions for Reflection:

In your own mind how do you envision the beginning moments of creation? Do you see a gigantic explosion like the Big Bang? Do you see the coming of light as the dawning of the 1st day? And how do you picture the 6th day of creation as the animals appear? I will never forget a morning drive through a nature preserve in Zimbabwe during the dry season. In a valley gathered around a pond was an amazing variety of thirsty animals. That for me is the best picture of the 6th day.

Do you think God created the world out of nothing, or is it possible for you to picture God creating by bringing harmony, order, and intensity out of a realm of chaos? Does it make any difference to you whether God created out of nothing? Are you more comfortable with the King James Version of Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.”? That seems to make it easier to believe in a divine creation out of nothing.

How do you relate the biblical creation story to modern science?