

## Creation in Genesis 1 – A Propaganda Story

The first two chapters of the book of Genesis are often described as creation accounts that present two different perspectives on God's act of creation. The differences in these narratives have been explained by scholars as due to the different purpose and starting point of the Yahwist and Priestly sources and so they are viewed as complementary creation stories. If, however, we move away from this convention and allow the texts to speak for themselves we may be able to see them in quite a different light. A greater appreciation of the purpose behind Gen 1:1–2:4a and Gen 2:4b-25 will add to our understanding of these texts.

Our quest might be assisted by the realization that the whole of the Hebrew Bible is a story of relationships and chiefly the relationship between YHWH and the people of Israel. No story in the Bible sits there for its own sake. Every anecdote and tale carries a message that has some association with relationships and so it is at this relational level that each one ought to be interpreted.

### Historical Background of Genesis 1

Let us focus on the creation story of Genesis chapter 1. A key factor guiding our interpretation is a consideration of the historical and cultural backdrop against which the account was crafted. The consensus among modern scholars is that this first chapter was written around the time of the Babylonian exile, i.e., sometime between 586 and 530 B.C.E.

The dominant power in the 6<sup>th</sup> century world of the people of Israel was Babylon. In the drive to extend his empire, the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar (605-562 B.C.E.) conquered the kingdom of Judah, captured Jerusalem and destroyed the city and its temple. To prevent the city from regaining any power or building up resistance the invaders took the leading citizens to Babylon, to live not as slaves but as exiles. As a result of a number of deportations there was a Jewish community of exiles in Babylon. We have to bear in mind that the exile community was not made up of a large population of Judeans but consisted of individuals and families of the upper class and nobility, the intellectuals, leading priestly families and community leaders. This meant that the land of Judea was not left desolate as there was a population whose lives carried on more or less as before.

When the exiles first saw the city of Babylon on the Euphrates River they could not help but be impressed by the richness of the place with its grid-like plan, its spacious avenues and its dozens of superb temples. The very walls of the city were decorated with beautiful faience tiles that displayed a highly sophisticated level of artistic design. Babylon simply breathed wealth, prosperity and technological refinement. Even such mundane features as plumbing, drainage and garbage disposal had reached a high level of technical finesse. Faced with all this magnificence the citizens of Jerusalem naturally began to think that the gods of Babylon were more powerful than their own God, YHWH. After all, it appeared that the Babylonian deities had made their people wealthy and powerful and were granting prosperity to this immensely beautiful city and its provinces.

In addition to this kind of thinking the community of Jewish exiles were worried that they might have been abandoned by their God. Was it possible, then, that YHWH would be willing, or even have the power to bring the exiles out of this awful situation? Furthermore, was it possible for the community to worship their God in a foreign land since YHWH could only be properly worshipped in the temple, in the holy city of Jerusalem? Ezekiel, one of the leading prophets of the exile, assured his people that they could worship God appropriately in a foreign land and he also prophesied a restoration of the glory of Israel and a return to Jerusalem in the future (esp. Ezek 33-39). The proviso, of course, was that the exiles would remain faithful to YHWH and live righteously.

The religious leaders of the exile community could see that there was a risk that the people would abandon God and turn to the worship of the Babylonian deities and so they were determined to remind the exiles of the greatness of their God. It is against this background that Genesis 1 comes into

existence. The priestly writer (P) who put this chapter together was intent on going to the beginning to show YHWH as the source of all life and of everything that exists. To do this he used the Babylonian creation myth as a template. It is clear that by the time he put pen to parchment his own people had become familiar with the Babylonian creation mythology and had some knowledge of the roles of the different Babylonian deities.

### Babylonian Mythology

To present his ‘theology’ the Priestly writer began in the same vein as the Babylonian creation myth, *Enuma Elish*, by describing a state of chaos that preceded creation. The *Enuma Elish* epic, which scholars would situate around the early part of the second millennium B.C.E., is much older than the Priestly account of creation. The likelihood of P borrowing the ideas and structure from the Babylonian accounts is really indisputable. *Enuma Elish* begins:

When on high the heaven had not been named,  
Firm ground below had not been called by name,  
Naught but primordial Apsu their begetter  
(And) Mummu-Tiamat, she who bore them all,  
Their waters commingling as a single body;  
No reed hut had been matted, no marshland had appeared....  
When no gods whatever had been brought into being,  
Uncalled by name, their destinies undetermined,—  
Then it was that the gods were formed within them.

The initial gods, Apsu, god of fresh water and Tiamat, god of salt water, mingle and from this union were born the gods of Mesopotamia. Apsu grows tired of the noise made by the younger gods and decides to kill them. However, the god Ea takes preventive action and slays Apsu. From a new generation of gods comes Marduk, son of Ea, who emerges as the champion of the gods and overcomes Tiamat and her bodyguard monsters in battle. He forms a new world from Tiamat’s body which he splits in two, using half to make the sky and half to make the earth and then sets up the horizons to separate the waters of Apsu from the earth. He then sets the gods in the heavens as constellations (Tablet 5).

He gave the moon the lustre of a jewel, he gave him all the night, to mark off days, to watch by night each month the circle of a waxing waning light.  
'New moon, when you rise on the world, six days your horns are crescent, until half-circle on the seventh, waxing still phase follows phase, you will divide the month from full to full'.

The intention of the Priestly writer is to use the same story structure as the *Enuma Elish* myth but to insert variations that reflect the Hebrew belief that there is only one God who is ultimately responsible for all that is. The narrative now becomes a piece of theological propaganda that sets out to argue that the Babylonian deities are, in fact, of no consequence at all and that there is no god but YHWH. The writer then portrays YHWH presiding over the watery chaos and deciding to begin his creative activity by filling the primordial darkness with light. The stage is now set for the creation of life and matter.

It is worth noting that there is no theogony in this account, that is, no tale of the birth or origin of the god. Unlike the Babylonian myth and its Akkadian and Sumerian predecessors there is no account of how God came to be. There is no speculation on the origin of YHWH in any Hebrew writing. Rather, it is taken for granted in the Hebrew Scriptures that God has always existed, having no beginning and no end.

...from everlasting to everlasting you are God (Ps 90:2)

Your throne is established from of old;  
you are from everlasting (*m'ôlam*) (Ps 93:2)

You are the same and your years have no end (Ps 102:27)

O Lord...Creator of all things...you alone are just and almighty and eternal (2 Maccabees 1:25)

### **YHWH is Superior to the Gods of Babylon**

Straightaway, this elevates the Hebrew God above all the deities of Babylon. The implication is that there can be none superior to YHWH since no other god created him. As the account unfolds YHWH is seen to create effortlessly by the simple pronunciation of the word that brings things into existence. Again, we are shown how YHWH is immeasurably greater than the Babylonian deities. Marduk, for instance, created the world out of the body of Tiamat and similarly other creation myths follow the principle that the creating god(s) fashions the world and its contents out of some primary matter. The Hebrew God creates from nothing at all, but calls things into being by mere command.

God next separates the waters from the waters (Gen 1:6-10) in much the same way as described in the Enuma Elish epic. Marduk slays Tiamat and:

Half of her he set up and ceiled it as sky,  
Pulled down the bar and posted guards,  
He bade them to allow not her waters to escape.  
He crossed the heavens and surveyed the regions.  
He squared Aspsu's quarter, the abode of Nudimmud,  
As the lord measured the dimensions of Apsu.  
The Great Abode, its likeness, he fixed as Esharra,  
The Great Abode, Esharra, which he made as the firmament.  
Anu, Enlil, and Ea he made occupy their places. (Tablet IV 138-146)

The Priestly writer then goes into detail to make it clear that the earth's plants and vegetation did not spring up by accident but were part of God's plan. That is to say no detail was left out of the Creator's design.

On the fourth day God created the sun, the moon and the stars. The not so subtle point of propaganda here is that in Babylon the heavenly bodies were worshipped as deities set in place by Marduk. Nanna was the moon god, Utu/Shamash the sun god and Inanna the queen of heaven and goddess of love, fertility and war. Inanna was also associated with the morning and evening star. Well known for their expertise in astronomy, astrology and their knowledge of the movements of the astral bodies, the Babylonians attributed the function and movements of the astral bodies to the deities they represented. The Priestly writer of Genesis 1 is really saying to his community that there are no such deities because YHWH alone made the heavens and all they contain. What is more, YHWH established the roles of these astral phenomena, which means that not only their existence, but their very activity is under YHWH's control.

Let them mark the fixed times, the days and the years, and serve as luminaries in the dome of the sky, to shed light upon the earth. And so it happened. God made the two great lights, the greater one to govern the day and the lesser one to govern the night; and he made the stars (Gen 1:14-16)

There is clearly a message of one upmanship here where the Hebrew writer is saying that YHWH actually created the things that the Babylonians worship.

On the next day God created the creatures of the sea:

God created the great sea monsters and all kinds of swimming creatures with which the water teams (Gen 1:21)

Again, there is a response here that counters the beliefs of the Babylonians. In Mesopotamian mythology Tiamat was the god of the sea who assumed the guise of a sea monster when confronted by Marduk. In the mythology of Canaan the monsters of the sea were inimical to humankind and greatly feared. Leviathan was the chief monster who controlled the sea. In presenting YHWH as creator of the sea creatures the writer is making the point that God not only controls the sea monsters but actually created them. This puts YHWH immeasurably above and beyond the nature of the gods who belonged to the pantheons of Mesopotamia and Canaan. Psalm 74:13-14, using imagery from Canaanite poetry in particular, echoes this superiority of YHWH over all other supposed gods:

You divided the sea by your might,  
you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters.  
You crushed the heads of Leviathan,  
you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.

The animal kingdom is completed on the sixth day in Genesis 1 when God creates all the wild creatures on the earth. Again, P denies creative ability to any of the so-called gods of Mesopotamia, insisting that all life owes its origin to YHWH. The climax of God's work is reached with the creation of humankind, and it is here that P adds the touch that is unique to the Hebrew view of creation. Enuma Elish quotes Marduk's words as he plans to create humankind:

Blood I will mass and cause bone to be,  
I will establish a savage; 'man' shall be his name.  
Verily savage man I will create.  
He shall be charged with the service of the gods  
That they might be at ease! (Tablet VI)

### **God Establishes Relationship with Humanity**

Whereas Marduk fashioned humankind to be the slaves of the gods, YHWH fashioned humans in the divine image and likeness so that they, of all creation, would have the ability to know their creator and form a relationship with God. In the Enuma Elish epic the gods of Mesopotamia assembled to find the guilty one among them who incited Tiamat to rise up against her children. Kingu is brought before Ea, accused and condemned and then has his blood vessels severed. Ea fashions humankind out of Kingu's blood and assigns them the task of serving the gods.

Unlike the Mesopotamian gods YHWH blesses the humans and encourages them to increase and multiply, thus giving them a share in the creative attribute of God. This means that the humans are now like God in two significant ways:

1. they can relate to God and
2. they can take part in the procreation of their own kind who will also be like God.

Another difference between humans and the rest of creation is expressed in v.28 when God addresses humankind in the second person. By having God speak directly to the humans P is saying that a close relationship exists here. The likeness of the humans to God is expressed in their ability to communicate directly with God, thus relating to God on a level that the rest of creation cannot reach. There is a similar idea in Gen 2:18-23 where the narrator makes it clear that a close relationship can only exist between beings that are alike.

By saying that God creates humans in the divine image and likeness the author is affirming the ability of humans to relate to and communicate with God. Here is another contrast with the gods of Babylon who do not enjoy a close and loving relationship with the humans they are responsible for. In contrast to the gods of Babylon YHWH creates humans with the express purpose of establishing a relationship with them, not as master to slave but as a loving creator who blesses the creatures that are fashioned in the divine likeness.

God then gives the humans dominion over all the creatures of the earth. We do well to keep in mind that in sixth century Israel dominion was given to the kings, who were seen as sons of God (Ps 2:6-7) inasmuch as they ruled their people in God's name and derived their authority from YHWH. The king was responsible for looking after his people and acting as a shepherd ensuring that the flock was given what it needed for life and happiness. Dominion in this context meant exercising responsible authority over creation. The idea of wielding power in order to exploit and abuse for personal gain is foreign to this notion and is certainly not the intention here.

In the author's terms both male and female are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26); both male and female are reflections of God. There is no distinction of gender here and even though the Hebrews always referred to God in masculine terms there is never any suggestion that God has a gender or is specifically male. After all, it must be remembered that the chosen people were forbidden to make images of God in drawing or sculpture. This was based on the understanding that the supreme God cannot be imaged in concrete materials and any attempt to do so would only impoverish the way one could think about God.

The difference is that in speaking and writing about God there has to be some commitment to using the conventions of vocabulary and language, so, reflecting the patriarchal nature of their society, the Hebrews spoke of God as a masculine entity. But this was never intended to confine God or reduce the image of God to male only. Again, this would only impoverish human thinking about God. Throughout the whole creation account the Priestly writer is affirming the transcendence of YHWH, which means that YHWH is above all things physical and earthly, and human language can never adequately express the transcendence of God. The writer is telling his people that, in reality, there is only one God, and their God is supreme over all. This is done as part of the argument to the exiles that the gods of Babylon are nothing compared to YHWH.

### **Sabbath**

Finally, the God of Genesis 1 rested from the work of creation on the seventh day, thus making this day special and holy. The importance of Sabbath can be appreciated if we consider the conditions of the Babylonian exile in which the Hebrews have no temple and no spatial focus for worship. Add to this the temptation to abandon YHWH and convert to the deities of Babylon and it is not hard to see a conscious effort on the part of the Priestly writer to emphasize the role of Sabbath in the life of the people of God. Moreover, the observance of Sabbath was a distinguishing feature of the Jewish lifestyle, and the writer is making a strong plea for its authentic preservation.

It is clear that the Priestly writer is highlighting the importance in Hebrew life of the one day of the week that is given to God. This reinforces the narrator's message that if the Jewish people abandon the practice of refraining from work and giving attention to God on the Sabbath then their unique relationship with God would be put at risk. Sabbath observance is seen as one essential and practical way in which the people can give God a proper place in their lives.

By the time of the Babylonian exile, when this creation narrative was written, the pattern of working for six days and giving God the seventh was well established in Israelite custom, but P is emphasizing the importance of Sabbath observance by linking its institution with the very beginning of the world and showing how it was firmly in the mind and intention of the Creator. In practical terms P is saying to his community, 'We run the risk of forgetting about God altogether if we do not dedicate the Sabbath to reflecting on God and our relationship with God as a covenant people.'

### **Why the Seven Day Pattern?**

An examination of other creation stories of the ancient Middle East reveals that none of them tells of a creative process that takes place over six days. P's account is unique in this respect. One common element, however, is the rest taken by the gods, which marks the conclusion of the work of creation. The Priestly writer uses this rest time to incorporate in his story the Jewish tradition of Sabbath as a

day on which to stop focusing on daily work and chores and concentrate on God through worship and prayer.

The repetition of ‘morning and evening’ throughout the creation narrative is an unmistakable reference to a 24-hour day as we understand it, so a day is not meant to be some kind of mythical period of time or an aeon or a geological age. Such things would have been unknown to the writer. A literalist reading of Genesis 1 runs the risk of missing the points being made by the author, quite apart from getting bogged down in strained explanations, e.g., how the writer could describe three mornings and evenings before the creation of the sun, moon and stars which regulate the cycle of day and night. Where literalist readers have argued that the six days represent six geological ages of time, they have overlooked the idea that three geological ages of the earth came and went without any sun, moon or stars.

The period of 6+1 days represents an attempt to describe the divine work of creation as a unit of time and activity. P is drawing a comparison between God’s work and human work and just as a week of work and rest makes up a unit of human activity in ancient Jewish society, so P uses the same human terms to describe a unit of God’s creative work. At the same time P is making a value judgment and is putting the seal of approval on the established Jewish practice of working for six days and giving God the seventh. The 6+1 pattern is a structure that P has chosen to use in his version of creation. In effect he is saying to the exile community, ‘we should continue the practice of working for six days and giving God the seventh because God gave us the example by creating in six days and making the Sabbath holy.’

### **The Inspired Message of Genesis 1**

Given the historical and religious background of the text of the first chapter of Genesis 1 we may well ask what message the writer intended. He is not setting out a scientific account of the origins of the universe but is rather responding to the concepts and language of the Babylonian creation myth. The author’s concern is to remind the Jewish exiles of the qualities of their God and so convince them that YHWH is supreme and that the Babylonian deities are not even in the race. The creation story of Genesis 1 is primarily about God and the relationship Israel has with the Almighty. The author’s key ideas are:

God is one – this counters the polytheism of Babylon.

God has no beginning and no end – this contrasts with the cosmogony of Babylon.

God is the source of all that exists.

God transcends creation and is not subject to the human weaknesses of the deities of Babylon. In fact, the deities of Babylon have been portrayed in the image and likeness of human beings.

God is all powerful and creates by mere word – this puts YHWH infinitely above the Babylonian deities.

God’s creation is an ordered place and is all good.

God creates humanity in order to establish an intimate relationship with men and women.

God blesses humanity and bestows the gift of procreating other beings in the likeness of God.

God reinforces the Israelite observance of Sabbath by creating in six days and resting on the seventh.

### **Creationism and Evolution**

It should be obvious as a consequence of all these considerations that the issue of creationism versus evolution derives from a false opposition. The Priestly writer is responding to the prevailing error of his day and pointing to the worthlessness of the Babylonian gods and the mythology surrounding them. His textual propaganda is designed to demolish the deities of Babylon and reinforce the unity, omnipotence and ineffable holiness of YHWH. He depicts God’s transcendence and at the same time points up the divine wish for intimacy with humanity. He is not presenting a scientific account of the origins of the universe but a religious argument in favour of the God of Israel, which in his mind is the only authentic Creator of all that exists. It is unfair and methodologically unsound to compare the religious intention of the Jewish author of Genesis 1 with the discoveries of modern science since they are both addressing different issues.

The details of the Priestly writer's creation account are founded on his model of the cosmos, which is made up of solid earth over which there is a firmament forming a dome. Above the firmament and below the earth there is water, which provides the substance of oceans, rivers and rain. Modern space exploration proves that this model does not match reality and yet this in no way vitiates the value of P's theology of the Creator God who is the source of all that is.

### **The Spirit of Creation**

Finally, as we read the Genesis creation account, we would do well to draw from the narrative the author's sense of wonder at the creative genius of God, who is the ultimate source of all that is beautiful. The creation, as we observe it, is filled with the overflowing extravagance of a God who spares no expense to fill it with richness and incredible variety. The psalmist (Ps 104) reflects on creation and responds to it in pure poetry:

O Lord, how many are your works!  
In wisdom you have made them all...  
May the glory of the lord endure forever,  
May the Lord rejoice in his works!

From an educational point of view, it is important that some of the rich poetry of the Bible be incorporated into any discussion of creation in both Genesis 1 and 2. A rounded study of creation should allow students to see and appreciate the sense of wonder, beauty and theology that is contained in the following texts:-

Psalm 19, 33, 65, 104, 148	Job 38–41 Proverbs 8:22–31 Wisdom 11:24–26 Sirach 42:15–43:33	Isaiah 40:12–31 Isaiah 42:5–9; 45:7– 12; 55:12–13	John 1:1–5, 10–14 Romans 8:18–23 Colossians 1:15–17
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### **Reference**

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*Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament.* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969. All quotations from *Enuma Elish* are taken from this work.

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