

What's in a Word?

Genesis 1-2:4a

When on high the heaven had not been named,
Firm ground below had not been called by name,
When primordial Apsu, their begetter,
And Mummu-Tiamat, she who bore them all,
Their waters mingled as a single body,
No reed hut had sprung forth, no marshland had appeared,
None of the gods had been brought into being,
And none bore a name, and no destinies determined—
Then it was that the gods were formed in the midst of heaven. (*Enuma Elish*)

These are the opening lines of the *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian-Mesopotamian creation story. The goddess of salt water (chaos), Tiamat, sought to destroy many of the other younger gods until her own son, the sky god Marduk went to war against her and killed her. This was the great cosmic conflict dividing the heavens and the primordial waters. When Marduk killed Tiamat, he sliced her body in half, dividing waters from waters, and created earth and sky from her remains.

In the 6th century BCE, the kingdom of Judah, with its capital in Jerusalem, was conquered and sent into exile in Babylon. The people and their remaining leaders were faced with the challenge to preserve their own culture and faith. One of the results of that time was the story preserved in Genesis one (through the first few verses of chapter two). This is a distinctive story—unique, but written in response to the *Enuma Elish*.

Hebrew creation story was based on the Babylonian creation myth, a fact that is quite evident when the two are compared. They have the same sequence of events of creation, but are significantly different in the meaning they convey. The Babylonian story began “When on high” while the Genesis story, “In the beginning, when God created.” Throughout, where the Babylonian story has gods in conflict with each other, the Genesis story has God speaking creation into being. The violence of Marduk’s killing of Tiamat stands in contrast to the one God’s pronouncement that all creation “was very good.” Most profoundly, the Babylon story reflects the idea of creative violence through a conflict of the gods while Genesis depicts creative non-violence as a benevolent God gave birth to a holy creation.

This brings us to the “Ask Jack” question for today: “I often wonder if creation is a linguistic phenomenon instead of a physical one. What is your thought on this? Is there anything in the Bible that speaks to this? Doesn’t it say, ‘In the beginning was the Word?’”

Genesis 1-2:4a is a story. Most likely it is a completely separate story from the second creation story in Genesis, the one about Adam and Eve. All the stories of Genesis and of the Bible as a whole were woven together by now anonymous editors at much later date than the events they convey. Genesis 1 was constructed with a great deal of thought, care and skill. It was designed to convey truth more than historical fact.

There were six days of creation, each day moving from evening through morning, and ending with a day of rest. It is the Sabbath that was culmination of creation, not the creation of people. To whom was Sabbath most important? It was to the priests. Sabbath was their day! The chances are good that the priests were the source of this story. It might even have been written for use as a worship litany. You may have already noticed parallel construction in the story. The first three days set the stage for the next three. The second half fulfills the promise of the first.

Day 1 and light was separated from darkness. Day 4 and the sun, moon and stars fill the heavens to govern the light and dark, the cycle of seasons. These heavenly bodies were not gods as in the Babylonian story. They were only created objects by a creator God.

Day 2 and the primordial waters were separated to form the sky. Day 5 and creatures were given to fill the seas and populate the skies.

Day 3 and water was divided from water to form earth, dry land. Day 6 and creatures were made to live on the land. Then, as part of that sixth day, mankind was created and it was all very good.

Finally, on the seventh day, God rested, creating Sabbath for all Israel to rest and to refrain from striving, grasping for more. They were to in emulation of their creator.

Genesis 1 was probably written about 500 years before Jesus. It was most likely written during, or near the end of, the Babylonian exile to remind people who God was and is; written to differentiate them from their Babylonian captors; and written to call Israel to worship God.

The Bible is an ancient document. It is the faith history of Judaism and also of Christianity. Its culture can sound somewhat strange to our modern ears. So how should we read it? We should not read the Bible with a mind either to validate its historicity nor with the attitude that nothing it says actually happened. Understanding the Bible as our faith *text* means there is a difference between its words and the events they describe. The Bible reflects an interpretation of history, not a direct depiction. Scholar Walter Brueggemann reminds us that the Bible is a “stylized, artistic act of imagination that transposed history into artistry. It represents remembered events and stories interpreted by scribes.” Brueggemann suggests it is these scribes who were, in many ways, the true authors of the faith.

In reading the Bible, we need to remember two things. First is the big picture—the overarching story. The Bible is about the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham through the tangible sign of a chosen people; their journey from slavery to freedom and from scarcity to abundance. And Jesus’ message: *freedom for captives, sight to the blind, and hope for the hopeless* (Luke 4: 18); our movement from scarcity to abundance and from death to life.

The second thing to remember is that many of us read the Bible hoping that it will give us answers, that it will offer a sense of certainty. The Bible offers meaning in terms of life rather than certainty about life. Instead of historical reliability, we can find tools and testimonies for interpreting our own life experience. We find the meaning we seek from the Bible by entering into its own internal conversation. Jesus taught using parables with their meaning available only by entering and finding yourself in the story. The meaning we find is not usually a clearly articulated doctrine, but the ambiguous and multi-layered truth of life and of God.

Meaning is found in the Bible as we enter its story with the story of our own lives. In that conversation, we can find the Word of God. It is not a word that gives us all the answers--not a word of certainty, but a word of presence, relationship, fidelity, and love. Neither conservative nor liberal interpretations are thick enough for Biblical meaning. The way to read the Bible honestly is with eyes open to mystery—to read it with our whole lives!

So, what does it matter how we read Bible, how we interpret this text of our faith? The Bible is part of our tradition of faith, reflections on the journeys of saints past. It is a record of their experience of God and Interpretations of that experience. And it gives us the stories about Jesus. It is important to honor this tradition that shows us where we’ve been and helps light the way forward.

We are highlighting our core values this year at Crossroads. Some of them specifically relate to how we see the Bible.

- We are a Bible-based community and read it with openness to various interpretations, discussion, and questioning.
- We trust the Bible, revelation through the Holy Spirit, and the discernment of our Christian community as sources of wisdom for our Christian faith and action. (Crossroads Church)

We value the Bible and the rich variety of ways we can interpret its meaning, that it ultimately points us to the living Word of Jesus, the living Word of the Holy Spirit, and the living Word through us.

A few weeks ago, I was leading a study of my book at a church in our neighborhood, a church that tended to be a little more conservative theologically than Crossroads. We had a really good conversation and participants were opening up to some of the ideas I suggested. Except this one guy! He was resistant. But his answer to every question, especially when he did not like my ideas, was, "I believe the Bible." Of course, he meant he was committed to his interpretation of the Bible, but he would not say that because, to him, there was not another way of seeing it.

I'm reminded that, in the history of the church, there has almost always been a search for some external authority to follow: an infallible Pope, an infallible Church, then with the Protestant Reformation, an infallible Bible to be taken literally as God's words rather than as God's Word. Many ascribe authority to science and to the rational process of scholarship. But the Bible warns us about the dangers of idolatry: worship of an external authority that is something less than what is ultimate—God. It seemed to me this gentleman was hiding behind Bible just as others have hidden behind the authority of the Church or the authority of science.

Authority is better held within ourselves, where God meets us. Guided by our tradition and scripture, guided by our community of faith and wisdom, and guided by our experience and Holy Spirit in us, we choose how we will view life and how we will live. I believe that we, made in the image of God, were created to be creators of life. We were made to be creators of our lives and we are responsible for what we do. We were made to reflect the nature and the image of God in our living, and we will never experience life in its fullness until we do.