

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Genesis 1:1-2:4a

NRSV

This passage says much about God and his relationship to humans. Long ago, people in the Near East asked how the earth came to be. A single creation story (with variants) was known throughout the region; one such, dating from at least 1700 BC, is *Enuma Elish* from Mesopotamia (now Iraq.) It and Genesis 1 have a similar sequence of events, so studying what the authors of the Genesis story added, and what they left out, tells us about our God.

First, “In the beginning when God created ...”: God pre-exists all creation; he existed before all time. The whole visible world came into being as a result of divine activity. At first, there was no order to the earth; it was *chaotic*; it was empty; “a formless void” (1:2). However here, unlike in *Enuma Elish*, a force is present, a life-giving power: “a wind [or Spirit] from God”. From 1:3 on, the creation story is in the form of a hymn, with a refrain, “God saw that ... [it] was good” (1:4, etc). This ancient story is divided into seven *days*, or stages of creation. The sequence is like *Enuma Elish*.

On the first day, God creates light, thus overcoming the “darkness” (1:2). In the Semitic mind, God’s ability to give names to light and darkness shows that he controls them. To grasp Day 2 (1:6-10), we need to appreciate that people saw the earth as covered by a huge inverted pudding bowl, the “dome”, above which were the upper waters: snow, hail and rain. The “waters” surrounded the “dry land”, which God again names. On Day 3 (1:11-13), God has vegetation created through his agent, Earth. Other peoples worshipped some kinds of vegetation; in not creating vegetation directly, God reduces the chances of Israel doing the same: they are to worship only God. On the following days, living things (as seen by the ancient mind) are created or made. People then thought plants were unable to transmit life. The Sun and the Moon, created on Day 4 (1:14-19), are inanimate to us, but to ancient people they were beings, moving on fixed tracks on the under-side of the dome. To Israel, they are beings under God’s command. On Day 5 (1:20-23), God creates animals of the sea and air. Even the “great sea monsters” (e.g. Leviathan) were seen as creatures of the one God, and are therefore good. They, the fish and the birds get a special blessing because people thought they did not have the same ability to reproduce as land animals. On Day 6, land animals are created. 1:24 says that God caused the earth to “bring [them] forth”; however, in 1:25, God creates them directly. The creation story was handed down orally for centuries, and a tale varies in the telling. As we often find in Genesis, the author (or editor) is not afraid to include divergent versions.

“Let us” (1:26) is like a *royal we*; the creation of humans is the climax of the creation story. *Human* is made (created) in God’s “image” (the Hebrew word implies

an exact copy or reproduction); but he is also a “likeness” (resemblance, similarity). He rules over all creatures. Sex is of divine origin. It is because of God’s blessing that we have procreative power. *Human* is to “subdue” (1:28) the earth and all that is in it. His rule over the animals won’t always be easy. 1:29-30 say that we were initially vegetarian. (God permits Noah to eat meat.) Day 7 is the day of rest, a reminder of the Sabbath. God blesses the seventh day, thus setting it apart. There is no evening of this day: the relationship between God and man continues for ever.

Genesis uses “generations” (2:4) to mark important stages in God’s actions, starting with creation. The text shows him as creator in his total and uncompromised power, the intrinsic order and balance of the created world, and mankind’s importance and his key role in the scheme of creation. God’s creation is also peaceful, unlike the warring factions (gods) of *Enuma Elish*. The focus is on the emergence of a people; the earth serves as an environment for the human community. Genesis 1 works within the *science* of its time to tell of divine power and purpose, and the unique place of humans.

Psalm 8

NRSV

This is a psalm of praise of God as creator and of man as head of creation. Because of the modest means God uses (“babes and infants”, v. 2), his majesty is even more evident. The “foes” may be the powers of chaos, as in Genesis 1:1. In vv. 3-4, the psalmist contrasts God’s majesty with “the work of ... [his] fingers”, especially humans, for whom he cares. (“Mortals” is *ben'adam*, literally *son of man*.) Vv. 7-9 recall Genesis 1:26-28: we share in God’s dignity for he has conferred on us mastery of, and responsibility for, the rest of creation.

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

NRSV

This letter, which Paul now concludes, shows a lack of harmony among Corinthian Christians. Paul exhorts them to restore the “order” and “peace” which God expects. The “holy kiss” (v. 12) was a symbol of communal love among Christians; it was shared at the Eucharist. The “saints” are other Christians. Note the order in v. 13: the “grace of ... Christ” leads us to “the love of God”; this love flows into common participation in God and with each other. This verse is known as *the Grace*.

Matthew 28:16-20

NRSV

After his resurrection, Jesus has told Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” (v. 1) to “tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me” (v. 10). Now Jesus appears to “the eleven” (v. 16, less Judas) on “the mountain” where he was transfigured. Some *worship* (v. 17) him, but others doubt. He has received “all authority” (v. 18) from the Father, so he now sends out his followers to “all nations” (v. 19, not just Israel) to: (1) baptise in the possession and protection (“name”) of the Trinity, and (2) to carry on his teaching ministry. To help in this daunting task, he is, and will be, with them until the Kingdom of God comes fully.