

Genesis

AS THE FIRST BOOK in the Hebrew Bible, Genesis speaks to beginnings. It opens with two differing stories on the creation of the universe (1:1—2:4a) and of the earth (2:4b-25). It contains narratives of the first family (3–4), first city (11:1-9), and the beginnings of the Hebrew children (12–50). Scholars have long noted how the creation story in Genesis 1 and the flood stories in chapters 6–9 are patterned on similar stories found in ancient Mesopotamia and how the creation story in Genesis 2 is patterned on creation stories in ancient Egypt. This borrowing from other cultures was common. As 2:10-14 claims, the Garden of Eden extended from Africa (ancient Cush/Ethiopia) to Mesopotamia (Euphrates River). All ancient cultures presented creation as controlled by their god(s) and set in their own backyards. Similarly, the idea of the seas being gathered into “one place” (1:9) is explained by people’s knowledge of the Mediterranean. While the story line of Genesis goes from a *universal* story of the beginning (1–5) and rebeginning (6–11) of humanity to a story of a *particular* people, the descendants of Abram/Abraham (12–50), many different nations, cultures, and ethnicities are mentioned and engaged. The Table of Nations (Genesis 10) is an attempt to describe the interrelatedness of nations in the “known world” by depicting them as the descendants of Noah’s three sons, Japheth, Ham, and Shem. Within the stories of Abraham’s descendants are stories of the beginnings of Israel’s neighbors, the Moabites and Ammonites (19:37-8), Ishmaelites (21:17-18), and the Edomites (36:1). In this way there is a claim that these nations were tribally related to Israel just as Lot, Ishmael, and Esau were related to Abraham and Jacob, though they were not from Israel, the line that God favored.

These stories were composed in a society that valued men more than women. The lists of generations in Genesis 4–5 and 29:31—30:24 are lists primarily of men. The promises made by God for a great nation stemming from Abraham are given to men (12:1-3; 15:7-21; 28:13-15). Divine promises to women are about giving birth to sons (16:11-12; 25:23). The women who are important characters in the story, for example Sarah in 21:9-11 and Rebekah in 27:6-9, 46, are all depicted as trying to ensure a social place for their sons. Polygamy was the basic form of family assumed in the stories about the ancestors. God is depicted as male and is referred to as the God of Abraham (24:42), the God of Abraham and Isaac (28:13), or the God of your father (43:23; 46:3) and never the God of your mother(s). Finally, the sign of the covenant for Israel, circumcision, is only given to the men (17:10-12a).

In the society in which these stories were written, it was normal for people to own slaves. Sarai/Sarah has an Egyptian slave, Hagar (16:1). Abraham has a slave, Eliezer (15:2). Laban gives his daughters female slaves as marriage presents (29:24, 29). Potiphar buys Joseph as a slave (39:1). All these slaves are exploited sexually. The women are forced to have sex with the slave master to

produce children (16:2, 4; 30:3-12), and the male slaves have to be circumcised and service their slave masters (17:12; 24:2). As an African American, whose people were enslaved in the United States, I am always concerned about such passages in the Bible that present slave society as acceptable to the people and God of the Book. Bible translators often soften this abuse of slaves by calling these characters “servants” or maids. But such distinctions reflect the translators’ embarrassment about the text, not the true social and cultural distinctions of those ancient societies.

Finally, some of the stories found in Genesis have played a major role in supporting political positions. Environmentalists adopt the biblical idea of God calling the creation “good” in Genesis 1. The divine curses on Adam and Eve (3:16-19) have been used to support concepts of men controlling women and their bodies. The so-called “Curse of Ham” (9:26-27)—really a set of curses on Canaan—was used to sanction the enslavement of Africans in Europe and the Americas. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah has been interpreted as a story of homosexuality rather than one of the sexual exploitation of daughters (19:8, 26, 33, 36) and has been used to sanction the oppression of gays and lesbians. The Lord’s killing of Onan because he ended sex with Tamar before climax (38:9-10) is used as an argument against masturbation and contraceptives.

The good news about Genesis is that as we read the book, we have much to discuss, especially as it relates to our own lives, views of God, humanity, and the world in which we live. As we continue to interpret this richly diverse collection of texts, we engage interpreters past and present and participate in an ongoing dialogue with ancients and contemporaries who seek to locate their place in the world from “the beginning.”

—Randall C. Bailey

In the beginning when God created^a the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God^b swept over the face of the waters. ³Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

⁶ And God said, “Let there be a dome in the

midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” ⁷So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. ⁸God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

⁹ And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. ¹⁰God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that

^a Or when God began to create or In the beginning God created

^b Or while the spirit of God or while a mighty wind

Genesis 1:1-2

The first two depictions of God are masculine—literally, “When beginning, he, God created” (verse 1) and feminine—“The Spirit of God, she was brooding”—(verse 2), foreshadowing human creation in the divine image as male and female in 1:27. Most translations of the Bible obscure the gender of God’s Spirit, leaving readers with the erroneous impression that the Scriptures use only masculine language when describing God. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, God’s Spirit is feminine; in the Christian Scriptures, the Spirit is neuter.

— WG

it was good. ¹¹Then God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so. ¹²The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. ¹³And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

¹⁴ And God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, ¹⁵and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. ¹⁶God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. ¹⁷God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, ¹⁸to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

²⁰ And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.” ²¹So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which

the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. ²²God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” ²³And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

²⁴ And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.” And it was so. ²⁵God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make humankind^a in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth,^b and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

²⁷ So God created humankind^a in his image, in the image of God he created them;^c male and female he created them.

²⁸God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” ²⁹God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. ³⁰And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. ³¹God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

2 Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. ²And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. ³So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested

^aHeb *adam* ^bSyr: Heb *and over all the earth* ^cHeb *him*

Genesis 2

At the beginning of the Hebrew Bible the story of creation tells us that God created one couple who became the parents of all people on earth. The Acts of the Apostles refers to this report in saying: “From one single stock [God] not only created the whole human race so that they could occupy the entire earth, but . . . decreed how long each nation should flourish and what the boundaries of its territory should be (Acts 17:26). This implies two important aspects of biblical faith: first, that all nations stem from one stock (blood) and that in origin humankind is one creation. This conviction excludes any form of racism or ethnic superiority. Second, that existing ethnic diversities are not constitutive for humanness, as they are not rooted in origin but in history. These two aspects mark the essential difference between the biblical image of humankind and the myths of origin of most other peoples.¹

— Gerhard Hoffmann

from all the work that he had done in creation.

⁴ These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

In the day that the LORD^a God made the earth and the heavens, ⁵when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; ⁶but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground—⁷then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground,^b and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. ⁸And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

^aHeb YHWH, as in other places where “LORD” is spelled with capital letters (see also Exod 3.14–15 with notes).

^bOr *formed a man (Heb adam) of dust from the ground (Heb adamah)*

¹⁰ A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. ¹¹The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; ¹²and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. ¹³The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. ¹⁴The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you

Genesis 2:8

The Hebrew geographic term *Eden* is a loanword from the ancient Mesopotamian culture of Sumer, signifying that the tradition of the “garden of God” goes back to that culture. That Eden was considered to be in Mesopotamia is further specified by the four rivers—most notably the Tigris and Euphrates—that flow the length of that once-fertile land (now Iraq). The man and woman pictured here as created by the Lord God and placed in this garden have the Hebrew names *Adam* (the common Hebrew word for “human” and closely related to *adamah*, “earth,” from which he was molded) and *Chawwah* or *Eve* (a word meaning “living” or “mother of life”). While they are depicted as individuals in the narrative, both have names that are clearly generic and representative of earth’s first humans. This story of the first humans is not at all interested in ethnicity or race. Not even Israel is favored. Adam and Eve are simply depicted as the earliest human progenitors. And even though Western culture has long imaged them as white, European-looking people, this narrative in Genesis 2 locates them clearly as Middle Eastern.

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