

January 11, 2015
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Genesis 1:1-5

Origins

Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning...” The very first words, of the very first book of the Bible, have a storybook sound to them, “In the beginning...” It’s a phrase that tells the reader, “Listen...” that promises a tale to follow. Some say, not just a tale, a tall tale, a fairy tale, make believe. The world was created in seven days? Take a look at the fossil record. “In the beginning?” You might as well say, “Once upon a time.”

I think that’s a misreading—which is not to say that I think Genesis should be inserted into science text books. I think that’s a misreading as well. When I hear those debates about school curriculum and evolution and the Bible, I think they engage in a category mistake, make a false dichotomy, try to force a choice between science and faith—as if the two must and can only be opposed, as if Genesis were claiming to be something other than it is.

I remember an observation on this from an esteemed professor of mine. He had a Ph. D. from Harvard, his expertise: ancient Near Eastern literature. I don’t know how many historic and esoteric languages he could read and translate, but they included things like Ugaritic, and he knew all about the epic of Gilgamesh and the Code of Hammurabi. (If there are any They Might Be Giants fans out there, you may know a related song ...) I would describe this old professor of mine as a genius—as well as pious. He studies those ancient texts, because he is a scholar of the book of Genesis, because he is a teacher of the Hebrew Bible, of Christianity’s Old Testament, because learning about the history and character and worldview of cultures surrounding Genesis sheds light on what it says, and how, and why. My professor, this thoughtful, gentle, white-bearded man was also known to employ a wry wit. He could be acerbic, but with a twinkle in his eye. He found the debates on evolution and Genesis curious, because evolution is a worldview of our time, not of Genesis. He said, “Genesis is not a diatribe against evolution. If it’s a diatribe against anything, it’s against a worldview that worships the sun, that believes creation comes out of battle, and that believes that the world is bad.”

From the beginning, Genesis says something very different than that. It’s not make-believe, and it’s not the Origin of the Species, rather, it’s about the Originator, and what Christians believe. It’s not so much about what we know, it’s about what we hold on to, as guiding principles for life. Genesis is not trying to make sense of explosions and organisms of ever increasing complexity, it’s about how we understand creation and our Creator.

Genesis one says there is order to world, good order. Genesis 1 describes the act of creation as a divine putting things in place, a magnificent situating, a separating, and organizing. You get a sense from Genesis chapter 1 that God would like the Container Store, or Custom Closets. And I get that, don’t you? If you have ever instituted a new filing system, or cleaned out your refrigerator (I need to clean out my refrigerator...), or dumped out your dresser drawers and refreshed your wardrobe, you know something of the sense of accomplishment that is abundant in Genesis, albeit on a much bigger scale! With this cosmic organizing there is approval, divine approval, the succinct and satisfying and repeated comment, “and it was good.” There is the possibility of flourishing, there is a fruitfulness, a continuing creativity, that is made possible when things have been appropriately positioned. It’s good, and allows for more good.

Before God got started with all this, though, as Genesis 1 verse 2 says, there was this whole big, dark something, the earth, or whatever there was before there was the earth, was a

“formless void.” In Hebrew the words have a wonderfully evocative sound, *tohu wa bohu*. They’re not really sure what that exactly means, *tohu wa bohu*, so they translate it, “a formless void...” I’m not exactly sure what that means. Is that like a shapeless emptiness? An undifferentiated chasm? An amorphous hole? Somehow it seems both redundant, and an oxymoron. In this pre-existing non-existence there’s also a sense of chaos, “darkness covered the face of the deep,” and “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters...”

And then God speaks. God speaks, and light breaks forth. God takes the *tohu wa bohu* and distinguishes light and darkness. God takes this strange, roiling, active lack, and makes it life, by arranging it, and by utterance, by speaking, four words: “Let there be light.” That’s all it takes. “And there was light.” In marked contrast to other creation myths, which are full of battles, and blood, of multiple births out of slain bodies of monsters, Genesis is gentle, calm—but powerfully authoritative. With an order, God gives order.

If you continue to read through Genesis chapter one, the orderliness of creation is underscored in the ordering of the account, in the repetitions of phrases and in the structure of days. There is a rhythm and cadence to the verses, a symmetry and a poetry. There is an orderliness to the components of creation, from the broader and atmospheric to the more specific and tactile, from the air, to the water, to land.

There’s a snub, too, for sun-worshippers and cults of the moon. This appears in the timing and naming of the so called lights in the sky, the way they are given less than prime status. Now, Genesis does put light first. It’s of no small significance that in the Bible, the first words God speaks are: “Let there be light,” which is then reiterated, which culminated, in Jesus, the light of the world. But that’s a different kind of light, a different category than the sun and moon. In Genesis, the sun and moon don’t even appear until day four of seven, and then, in something of a slight, they don’t even get named. They’re called, “the greater light” for the day and “the lesser light” for the night. They’re there to keep track of the hours. They’re mere timekeepers; nothing to worship. Worship the one who made them, who made everything.

Of course, the order of creation in Genesis doesn’t exactly align with our enlightened understandings of the sequence and continued development of life. There’s the question of time, and a whole lot of things that get not a mention. As a child, I used to worry about dinosaurs. Where are they in the Bible? We really don’t have to worry about that. Faith is not something you carbon date—which takes nothing away from carbon dating, or faith. They are different things. Importing modern science into Genesis is a misreading. Or, to say it more gently, but much more significantly, it misses the point.

And this has been pointed out since well before we learned about evolution. Way back in the 3rd century, a scholar of the Bible and early Christian theologian named Origen wrote a commentary on Genesis. Origen pointed out the curious fact that Genesis says that light was created on day one, while the sun was not created until day four. Origen said, we humans, we intelligent living creatures, we can see that that jars with science, so Genesis one must be about something else. .

It’s about the one we know as the source of life. That one said, there is order to life. Said it, and still says it, to us, in all our *tohu wa bohu*. Whatever formless void you are living in, whatever emptiness, whatever darkness, God says, “Let there be light.” God says, “Creation is good,” and God continues to create, and recreate, to make the world and us into a new creation, to make us good, and even better. Listen, from the very beginning and still now, God’s spirit is moving, sweeping over the face of the water, sweeping over our faces, dripping down our foreheads in the waters of baptism, saying, even better, “You are my Beloved.”