

Genesis 1 and Theologies of Creation in the Hebrew Bible

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Opening words are important. Authors and editors both know that the first sentence of a book needs to be arresting and engaging. It should capture the imagination of the reader, inviting the reader into the larger story or, at the very least, the larger story of the first chapter. Consider the first line of the novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez:

“Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.”¹

In this example, the first sentence (and thus the novel as a whole) begins in two different time frames: a much later period, long after the discovery of ice—indeed, at the end of life as the colonel faces the firing squad; and much earlier, when as a boy Aureliano learned about ice with his father. These two temporal frames create interest by juxtaposition: how will we get from the first to the second? The contrast in content, too, is striking: a firing squad and a military execution of a ranking soldier, on the one hand, and a young boy, his father, and ice on the other.

In addition to arresting readers’ attention and engaging them in the story, openings give important background for the rest of the plot. The opening words of the Bible also do so:

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” (Gen 1:1)

Like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the Bible begins in two different time frames: a later period, the time of the anonymous narrator, sometime presumably long after the creation of the world; and much earlier, at the putative moment of creation itself. Here too the juxtaposition of temporal frames creates interest and raises questions. How did the later narrator know what took place “in the beginning?” How will we get from that first moment to when the narrator lived? These questions indicate from the very start—the very beginning of the beginning, as it were—that the Bible is literature.

There is more to say about Genesis 1:1, however. Not even the first word of the Bible can pass by without controversy. The translation of Genesis 1:1 above is a traditional one, from the King James Version (KJV) of 1611, but it is no longer the only option. Consider the following translations from the late twentieth century:

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,” (NRSV)

“When God began to create heaven and earth—” (NJPSV/Tanakh)

“In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth,” (NAB)

As both the grammar and punctuation demonstrate, these three translations treat the first verse not as a self-contained sentence introducing the first chapter of Genesis (and the Bible as a whole), but as a

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temporal clause that introduces the first few verses. This makes the first important verb, not “created” but the verb “was” in v. 2 or even “said” in v. 3.

Here is how the NRSV puts it:

¹In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³Then God said, Let there be light; and there was light. (Gen 1:1-3).

This translation—which is, linguistically speaking, just as likely if not more so than other translations—also leads to a different interpretation than the standard one in the KJV. Among other things, the temporal translation found in the NRSV and elsewhere may have something to say (or not to say, as the case may be) to the doctrine that God created all that is out of nothing. The KJV translation—“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”—would seem to support creation out of nothing. The temporal translations, however, would seem not to support it, and may instead imply that—at least from the perspective of the ancient Israelite narrator, when God began to create there was already something around: the earth, evidently, in some sort of amorphous and dark state, as well as a mysterious watery “deep.”

The translation and interpretation of Genesis 1:1 has been controversial because, seen in this light, the very first word of the very first verse of the very first chapter of the very first book of the Bible has bearing on things people care about—in this specific instance, the world and how it came to be. In our own day most people, whether religious or not, look to the realm of science for “hard data” about the environment and cosmology. Prior to the modern period and the rise of the natural sciences, people tended to be more simple or naïve about such things and tended to think—if they thought about it much at all—about the origin of the world in religious and theological terms. In the United States of America, the difference between religious and scientific ways of thinking about creation came to a head in the early twentieth-century with the fundamentalist-modernist controversy and the Scopes or “Monkey” trial in 1925, which saw a young high school teacher, John Scopes, tried for teaching evolution. While the prosecutor, the well-known politician William Jennings Bryan, won the legal case, it is widely held that he lost in the court of public opinion. Be that as it may, the debate between proponents of evolution and “creationists” or “Creation Scientists” continues to this day.

The religion-science debate is in many ways rooted in the Bible and especially in the first chapter of Genesis, which describes the creation of the world in an almost poetic fashion and employs a seven-day week framework. This seven-day chronology has sometimes been interpreted literally by religious persons opposed to scientific theories such as evolution and natural selection, so that the data from fossil records, geology, dinosaurs, and the like, must be somehow fit in to the seven days of the creation account in Genesis 1.

Yet despite the importance of opening words, books include much more than just the first sentence or chapter. And so, as important as the first chapter typically is to a book, and as important as Genesis 1 is to the Bible, we can find much more about creation if we keep reading. In fact, the importance of Genesis 1 is not primarily or exclusively to be found in its seven-day framework but rather in its

introduction—from the beginning—of the theme of creation and God’s creative activity. References to the seven-day chronology of creation are, in fact, rare elsewhere in the Bible,² but God is always and everywhere the subject of the verb “create” (Hebrew *bārā’*), which occurs no less than 38 times. But here too, this is just the beginning of the discussion, since the Hebrew Bible discusses creation even where that particular verb does not occur.

What is noteworthy is that these other texts dealing with creation—regardless of whether the verb *bārā’* appears—often discuss creation in ways that are different from Genesis 1. For example, Genesis 2 discusses the creation of humans and then animals in an order that reverses that of Genesis 1, which has animals created first and only then humans. While this does not mean the two chapters are completely irreconcilable, it certainly complicates any simplistic harmonization of the accounts. Said differently, if these two versions of creation are to be reconciled, it will not be at the level of logical order or sequencing. Instead, they will need to be reconciled by other means: historically, for example. Perhaps the accounts are different because the narrator of Genesis 2 is a different one than the narrator of Genesis 1—biblical scholars have long thought that these two accounts in Genesis 1-2 are from different authors writing in different time periods, centuries removed from one another. Or perhaps the versions can be reconciled literarily or theologically in some way. After all, despite the differences, the compilers of the Hebrew Bible saw fit to include both versions in the final form of Genesis, and even placed them next to each other in immediate succession! This would seem to indicate that those responsible for the final form of the Hebrew Bible thought that both of these accounts of creation, different though they are, are important. They may not be logically consistent, but both were deemed essential testimonies about creation in ancient Israelite belief.

This point is even clearer when other passages concerning creation are taken into consideration. One example is Proverbs 8:22-31, which describes the creation of personified Wisdom as the first of God’s acts; she then helps God with the rest of creation. Another is Psalm 74:12-17, which in a piece of highly mythological poetry portrays God’s creation by means of primeval combat with the sea monster—a motif found in other ancient Near Eastern creation accounts. How do these correlate with Genesis 1’s seven-day week of creation? Quite simply, they do not. Instead, one must reckon in the Hebrew Bible with multiple perspectives and theologies of creation.

Do these different texts and theologies of creation undermine the first chapter of the book that is Genesis, which is the first chapter, as it were, of the book that is the Bible? Some might think so, but one might instead see these other texts and theologies as simply the rest of the story. The first chapter of a book, after all, is not the entire book. It serves to capture the reader’s imagination and to open the story in important ways that may foreshadow or intimate what is to come. But it cannot do all the work of a book or the book itself would be unnecessary.

This is probably the best way the different theologies of creation in the Hebrew Bible ought to be viewed vis-à-vis Genesis 1. Cosmology, the origins of the world, and the role of God in all of that are, after all, rather large topics. They cannot be resolved simply or easily. Many voices are needed to make sure the important points all get said. There is considerable evidence that the Hebrew Bible often preserved multiple perspectives on topics that were of crucial import in Israelite religion. Such

important topics often reflect dense editorial work in key passages in the Hebrew Bible. Analogically, one might see the theme of creation as a dense literary-theological idea or trope. Multiple perspectives are needed. If we find such a scenario troubling—especially in our contemporary context, with its valuation of scientific and technological rationality—we might do well to remember that even science is a discourse marked by debate. Scientific hypotheses, no less than others, are discussed with old ones refined or rejected and new ones offered. The way humans proceed toward truth—whether in science or religion and theology—is through dialogue and discussion. Rarely does only one person or one perspective have the corner on the market of truth, especially when the truth in question is a particularly thick, dense, or important one. Theologies of creation in the Bible, in brief, may well work the same way. Somewhat ironically, then, the Apostles' Creed, widely held by many Christians, even very conservative ones, while affirming belief in God as creator, may be quite shrewd in its silence about how specifically God created.

To come full circle, first chapters and even first lines of books are important. So also with Genesis 1:1 or, for that matter, Genesis 1 as a whole. It is the unfortunate case that oftentimes readers don't read much beyond the first chapter of a book. Much is lost if one doesn't keep reading. When one does, however, much is gained.

Notes

¹ Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (New York: Harper & Row, 2003 [original:1967]), 1.

² See, e.g., Exodus 20:11, for one of the few clear references. But contrast Deuteronomy 5:15, a parallel text which leaves out the reference to the seven-day creation. Cf. also, perhaps, Deuteronomy 4:32.

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