

Appendix 1:

How the Creation Story Deepened Israel's identity as set-apart and anti-imperial

It is a common temptation in our day to read the Bible through 21st century lenses, thinking that it always speaks directly to our world of strip malls, television, drugs, etc. We have no problem with trying to understand what the Bible means for us today. Obviously this whole book is such an attempt. But to gain biblical understanding for us today we must understand what the words recorded in the Bible meant *to its first listeners*.

A great place to explore these original perspectives is in the creation story. Many readers today like to take this story and insert it into the fashionable religion vs. science, creation vs. evolution debates. Christians then, misunderstanding the original meaning of the text, assume that the Bible is trying to present an alternative science textbook for class. But this is not what it is for.

The creation story as we read it was not penned by Adam and Eve, and then passed down until King James got hold of it. The stories we find there floated around in oral tradition and become solidified, edited, and compiled by the Jews while in exile in Babylon (starting around 586 B.C.E.). The Jews found themselves in a two class society: the “images of the gods” and the slaves of the gods—the Hebrews, as refugees and exiled slaves, obviously fit into the latter category.

In the beginning, so goes the Babylonian story *Enuma elish*¹, the world was created through violence and bloodshed. The world was created through the result of a fight between the sea goddess, Tiamat, and Marduk. Marduk cut Tiamat in half, and split her in two, creating the sky from her top half and the earth from her lower half. And to fill everything in between, to create a population to take care of the world, Marduk would use another god's (Kingu's) blood. This story shaped the way people viewed the world. It was their main ingredient for saying, “that's just the way the world is”; it is based on conflict.

But this story oppressed the Hebrews (and others) who lived as the slaves of the images of god. The Jews had a counter-narrative, one that spoke of another God. Their creation story begins with God “hovering over the *deep*.” “Deep,” here (Hebrew *Tehom*)², is related to the Babylonian word “Tiamat”! They are going to tell of a story that hovers over the enslaving creation story. The sky and earth are not split from the bloodied body of a revolution, but from the loving evocation of God's word. And instead of creating images of god and slaves to them, God would create a world where *all* of humanity from its inception is made in the image of a loving God. And instead of work

¹ This reading is indebted to the scholarship of Brian Walsh in *Subversive Christianity* (Alta Vista College Press: Seattle, WA. 1994. Pp18-26) and Richard Middleton (see *The Liberating Image?: Interpreting the Image Dei in Context*. Christian Scholars Review 24.1 (1994) 8-25).

² The New Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV). 3rd edn. (Oxford University Press: New York. 2001). Pp11. This notation (p. 11) goes on to show how the narrative's point is not that God created the world out of nothing—a contemporary idea imported into the text—but rather that God creates order out of an existing chaos.

being considered a curse for slaves, tending the earth is written about as participation in the divine creation-rhythm of work and rest—a day of rest being a very thing that the Israelites struggled to celebrate under slavery.

If you follow the parallels you see how the Israelites shaped their identity in contrast to their ruling culture. We cannot improve on Brian Walsh's treatment:

“[W]riting that story down and proclaiming it in worship in the context of Babylon is not simply an exercise in comparative mythology or a suggesting of an alternative understanding of how creation got started. Rather, telling this story is a subversive act. It says, in the face of a powerful and brutal empire, that the true God of creation, the true lord and sovereign, indeed, the only king, is none other than Yahweh, the God of these vanquished Israelites. He, not the body of Tiamat, is the source of creational life. And he, not Marduk or his underlings, is the final rule, power and authority in heaven or on earth. To tell this story is to engage in an act of radical civil disobedience because it dethrones, dismantles and topples the false god Marduk. To tell this story liberates a people in captivity by liberating their imaginations. This story gives them an alternative worldview, an alternative reality” (p. 20).

Even in the face of brutal slavery and the cultural colonization they were facing under Babylonian captivity, the Israelites found a way to maintain a unique and peculiar identity. They told stories. They remembered what the world is really about. To the cynics who would proclaim “this is just the way the world is” (while ordering them about their slavish tasks), they would proclaim an alternative world, while they renewed their imaginations for a creation ruled by a loving Creator-God.

Instead of seeing the world as a place of violence, exploitation, and wars between numerous gods, we see a contrary vision of the world as *creation*—a place that was evoked by a Word, intentionally created by one god, and called *good*.

But we can understand this story as deeper and broader than a commentary on Jewish relations with Babylon. “In fact, though there are Middle Eastern myths far older than the Genesis tale, the biblical account represents the world's first systematic ideology of resistance to the project of *civilization*, and it is produced by a people who had front row seats in the historical drama, surrounded as they were by empires of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Anatolia” (Myers, emphasis added)³. While a criticism of *civilization itself* is much more radical and deep than any average person is ready to go, the Torah would seem to contain some of these unlikely themes.

We can start by asking the question: in their sacrifices to God, why is Cain's sacrifice of vegetables rejected and Abel's of meat accepted? After all, isn't vegetarianism God's plan until the compromise after the flood (Gen. 9:3)? Aren't Adam and Eve the quintessential gardeners? But, if you read the story, Adam and Eve are foragers. Rather, it is the curse of the fall that brings work by the sweat of one's brow in cultivation and land use. The Garden of Paradise might be seen then as a symbol of the “light living” that comes from foraging, harkening back to the Neolithic patterns of life.

³ All following quoted material is from Myers' article titled “Cultural/Linguistic Diversity and Deep Social Ecology (Genesis 11:1-9)” published for *The Witness* magazine. See also Myers, *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, section titled *Anarcho-Primitivism and The Bible*. Basically any points made here can be understood as drawing on his points made in the articles.

They own no land because all the earth is the Lord's. After the fall comes "civilization," land ownership, and an attempt to "re-create" (the name of the first city, *Enoch*) the world. "The city becomes the re-engineered alternative to the garden—an accurate reflection of what actually happened in the last millennia of pre-history. In this way the Genesis scribes boldly portray the rise of civilization as a progressive history of the Fall." We might have a small key to understanding God's rejection of the sacrifice: Cain is the frowned upon as the archetype of land holding, whereas Abel, older and wiser, is the nomadic herdsman.

The similar themes then become more visible. In the creation story we see a movement from communion with God in the wild to a "metropolitan nightmare" of civilization. The entire scope of the Torah is set in contrast to the "centralized regimes of Mesopotamia, Egypt and Anatolia (modern day Turkey)" and their "fortified cities." But there is no envy for these fortifications, as Jericho is not repopulated but left uninhabited. In Babel we see a "thinly veiled reference to imperial Babylon" and its ziggurats. These towers continue through the scriptures to symbolize civilization's arrogance.⁴ Instead of a tragedy, it is a liberation that God prefers Babel's builders be "scattered abroad throughout the face of the earth," "a mandate reiterated throughout the primeval cycle (Genesis 1:28; 9:1)."⁵ The typical urban motifs of "centralization," "cultural conformity," and "architecture of domination" stand out in Babel's story. Abraham is called to *come out* of Chaldea.⁶ God prefers wild, unhewn stones for any altar building and is considerably opposed to the idea of a Temple, but in favor of camping. Even reality represented through "images," which shape, mediate, and constrict our perception of reality⁷, are considerably too domesticated for these wild people.

If you follow the pattern, you begin to see the bias of the scriptures in a new light, quite contrasted to the popular modern (sub)urban-bound lens. We can then imagine the identity of the people of God through renewed language and goals.⁸ Myers puts it well:

Early Israel was a heterogeneous mix of foragers, fringe-dwellers, pastoralists and small-scale farmers who existed at the margins of the late Bronze Age Egyptian empire, as has been outlined so persuasively by Norman Gottwald. Their myths of origin had to do with wandering Aramaeans, and a prophet who summoned them to abandon the store cities of Late Dynastic Egypt for a reconstituted life in the

⁴ Isaiah 14:13, 33:18; Jeremiah 51:53; Zephaniah 1:16; Judges 8:9.

⁵ The monolingual world is also frowned upon in favor of linguistic diversity. This confounds the imperialistic modern mind of unification and globalization—whereas the ecologists have always known that God's world is healthiest with diversity.

⁶ The drama between horticulturalists (often equated with the upper class and land ownership) and light living herdsman (with no owned land but "the Lord's earth") is a theme made popular by Daniel Quinn's *Ishmael* series. It also has been used as a motif to understand the conflict between Hutus (herdsmen) and Tutsis (land owners) in Rwanda (see Philip Gourevich's *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed With Our Families: Stories from Rwanda*. Picador Publishing. 1999.)

⁷ One only need consider the most blasphemous concept of "reality" or hype we receive from television.

⁸ While the basic point of our book is not dependent on this reading of the Torah, if it is true it would only support the sense of God's people as truly "set-apart."

wilderness. Their divine revelations came under trees and upon mountaintops and beside magically flowing rivers and burning bushes. Their form of social organization was for many generations a kinship-based and loosely confederated tribal system. Their economy was based on gift ritual and generalized reciprocity, or what I call 'Sabbath economics.' And they largely eschewed the urban life of Canaan until they abandoned their primal ways and fashioned their own centralized kingdom under David and Solomon so they could be like all the other surrounding nations. This 'civilizing' project, understood in I Samuel 8 to be a betrayal of their tribal identity, was centered in an old Canannite fortress city called Jerusalem. (Myers, *Ibid.*)

In the hearts of this peculiar people echoes this prayer (Psalm 55:7,9-11):

Truly, I would flee far off; I would lodge in the wilderness...

Confuse, O Lord, confound their speech, for I see violence and strife in the city.

Day and night they go around it on its walls, and iniquity and trouble are within;

Ruin is in its midst; oppression and fraud do not depart from its marketplace.