

Old Testament Creation Accounts

In the OT there are two classic creation accounts contained in the first chapter of Genesis -- Gen. 1:1 to 2:4a (the P tradition) and Gen. 2:4b to 2:25 (the J tradition). There are also brief references made to God's creative activity found in Psalms 74, 89, 93 and 104. Other references are found in Job chapter 38 and in Isaiah chapters 40-55. Most scholars agree that these accounts adapted the cosmologies and creation stories which circulated in the ancient world, however, they are unique in many respects and certainly they are completely unique in their theology.

Let us return, for a moment, to the words of Pius XII and John Paul II which speak to the adaptation of ancient pagan creation stories by the biblical authors:

Pope Pius XII -- Encyclical *Humani Generis*, 1950 -- "The first eleven chapters of Genesis...do nevertheless pertain to history in a true sense; the same chapters...both state the principal truths which are fundamental for our salvation, and also give a popular description of the origin of the human race and the chosen people. *If however, the ancient sacred writers have taken anything from popular narrations (and this may be conceded)*, it must never be forgotten that they did so with the help of divine inspiration, through which they were rendered immune from any error in selecting and evaluating those documents."

In 1943 Pius XII had also issued the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* which inaugurated the modern era of Catholic biblical scholarship. An extremely important part of this encyclical was the recognition of the need to consider the various literary forms in the Scriptures -- poetry, parable, myth, saga, law, fiction, wisdom sayings etc.-- which the inspired authors used to convey the theological message of the Scriptures.

Pope John Paul II -- Message to the Director of the Vatican Observatory, 1988 -- "If the cosmologies of the ancient Near Eastern world could be purified and assimilated into the first chapters of Genesis, might contemporary cosmology have something to offer to our reflections upon creation?"

Let us now examine, briefly, each account. (for a good verse by verse commentary consult *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*)

1) **Gen. 1:1 to 2:4a** -- This creation account is from the P (Priestly) tradition which probably was begun during the Exile in the 6th century BC and took its final form around 400 BC, but which contains ancient oral traditions going back some 400 years. It is to be found especially in the book of Leviticus and is identified with the southern part of Israel, later known as Judea.

In this account there is a brief allusion to an original condition of chaos in a reference to the earth being formless, darkness over the abyss and the earth covered with water. This hints at the popular theme in many ancient creation stories of a battle of the god or gods with the forces of chaos, often symbolized by water. In general, however, the scene is one

of tranquility with God completely in charge and with no competing gods or monsters on the scene.

The most striking parallel is that between the P Genesis account and the Babylonian creation myth “Enuma Elish”. This ancient myth depicts the earth in an initial state of chaos, enveloped in darkness. It then goes on to narrate the creative process in this sequence: Light created; Firmament created; Dry land created; Sun, moon, stars created; Men and women created; finally the gods rest and celebrate. This order of creation is repeated almost step for step in the P Genesis account and most scholars agree that this is an instance of the adaptation of “popular narrations” or ancient cosmologies as referred to by Pius XII and John Paul II respectively. These adaptations were employed to express fundamental theological concepts about mankind’s relationship to self, others, the material world and God .

The literary form of this narrative is probably best described as “poetic prose” which can include myth. It is not history in any modern sense and, as we have discussed in earlier lectures, it is certainly not a scientific account of the origins of the universe and life on our planet. The form is poetic prose, the message is theological.

2) **Gen. 2:4b to 2:25** -- This account is from the J (Yahwist) tradition compiled about 850 BC. It was a combination of various earlier oral traditions and is identified with the southern part of Israel. It was combined with other traditions around 722 BC when the north was conquered by Assyria.

It begins with the creation of the earth and heavens without reference to chaos. There is no step by step chronological order and no special account of the creation of the heavens. This creation story in the J tradition is different in a number of ways from the P tradition (above):

- P tells of God creating the world in 6 days; J implies that it is one day.
- P tells of the creation of fruit trees before Adam and Eve; J says God created Adam, then the fruit trees, then Eve.
- P has God creating the animals before Adam and Eve; in J God creates Adam, then the animals, then Eve.
- P give no indication how birds are created; J indicates that they are formed by God out of the ground.
- P makes a simple statement that God created mankind, (both at once); in J there is an elaborate story of Adam created first, then Eve from Adam’s rib.
- P makes no mention of a Garden or of “the Fall”, J has an elaborate narrative of temptation and sin complete with a talking snake.
- P mentions that God rested on the seventh day and blessed it; J makes no mention of the Sabbath rest.

There are other differences, however, the point is made that these are two different stories from two different traditions. There is no single creation account in the OT.

It is interesting to note that reference is made in Exodus 20:11 and 31:17 to the six days of creation and God resting on the seventh day to justify the Sabbath observance. While Job 38:7 could be interpreted to say that God created the world in one morning “when the morning stars sang together”.

We have mentioned that many ancient eastern religions depicted the creation of the world in terms of a battle between a god and the forces of chaos, typically symbolized by water and sometimes by monsters. Except as noted above, this is absent from the Genesis creation accounts. However, some of the other OT passages which mention the creation of the world are more explicit about this notion of conflict between God and the forces of chaos. These are creation events very different from the two classical accounts.

1) **Psalm 74:12 to 17** -- Here are echoes of an ancient Semitic myth which depicted the origin of heaven and earth as the result of a primeval warfare between the chaos-dragon force and a god of order. It tells of sea monsters, sea-serpents and the Leviathan. The Leviathan is a slippery serpent having many heads, sometimes seven.

In the Babylonian mythology the god Marduk split in half the dragon monster Tiamat and from her carcass created the world. The god Baal of the Canaanites was said to have broken the heads of Leviathan with a magic club. However, it was God (Yahweh) who in the beginning overcame all the forces of chaos, including the Leviathan.

2) **Psalm 89:9 to 11** -- Again God defeats the mythic powers of chaos symbolized by raging waters. He also defeats Rahab. Rahab is an alternative monster to Leviathan. They both represent the Dragon of Chaos in ancient pagan creation stories. Again the theme of a battle against chaotic forces in the creation of the world.

3) **Psalm 93:1 to 4** -- Here the mighty God is Israel establishes the world and is seen as stronger than the flood waters and the waves of the sea -- the primeval chaotic forces.

4) **Psalm 104** -- The entire psalm is a hymn of praise to the Creator God and many scholars judge it to be earlier than the Genesis accounts. It shows God in complete control and setting up the pillars of the earth over the chaotic waters. In this account God is seen as creating the Leviathan to play with the ships in the sea. Like other OT creation accounts, it does not focus on the creation of the world from nothing, but creation made possible because of God’s power to bring about order and overcome the forces of chaos.

5) **Job 38** -- In this chapter God describes himself as Creator and creates the world, the light and the seas (in reverse order from Genesis 3-10). He is in complete control of the chaotic seas (vs.8-11). God overwhelms Job with his creative might and power.

6) **Isaiah 44-50** -- God as creator is mentioned throughout these chapters. For example, in Chapter 51:9 to 10 God again conquers Rahab and the waters of the deep. Again he overcomes chaos.