

The Revolutionary Principles Behind the Biblical Story of Creation

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Can everyone see how the Biblical Creation story is a rejection and a refutation of everything that the Babylonian story of creation stands for? In the Hebrew worldview, God does not engage in jealousy and competition. God is the absolute sovereign of the world. In the Hebrew worldview, God does not bring chaos and capriciousness to the world, but goodness, order, predictability, and harmony. And finally, in the Hebrew worldview, human beings are not the slaves of the Gods. Humanity is the pinnacle and the purpose of creation.

On Wednesday night and Thursday morning, we celebrated the festival of Simchat Torah, rejoicing with the Torah. We completed the reading of the final Torah portion in Deuteronomy, and then without pause, immediately began to read the first Torah portion in Genesis. This is our Jewish way of proclaiming that our study of Torah never ends, nor our enthusiasm for its teachings.

The annual cycle of 54 Torah readings begins anew with this Shabbat. The Torah reading for this Shabbat is called *Parashat Bereshit*. It includes Genesis, chapter one, the famous story of creation.

What are the most important teachings that emerge from the biblical story of creation? Let's read Genesis 1:1-5.

What is the state of the world when God begins to interact with it? It is a mess. It is pure chaos.

What is the very first action God does for this mess of a world? God creates light. In a world that was completely dark, God brings light.

What other "good" things does God do? God separates the light from the darkness, meaning there will always be light in the world.

Now if we had more time, we would read how God engages in more and more separations in each of the 7 days of creation. The point is not just that God created the world in seven days. The point is that God made order out of chaos. God took a world that was unfavorable and nasty to human life and made it favorable. God made it life-nurturing and life-affirming.

This is the message of the recurring phrase in verses 4, 10, 12, 18, 25, and 31. What is the phrase? "God saw how good it was," in Hebrew, "*Vayar ki tov.*" Good for who? Good for the nurturance of all life, most especially human life. And how else is the message brought out that

what God does is to bring order and harmony and predictability to the world? What is another repetitive refrain?

Whenever God creates, God says “Let there be” and it is. “*Yehi or vayehi or:*” “Let there be light, and there is light.” God creates by divine fiat. God wills and God makes it so.

And there is still another recurring pattern. Who sees it? “*Vayehi erev vayehi voker...*”: “There was evening and there was morning, the first day, the second day, and so forth.

The unknown Biblical author of Genesis chapter one was absolutely brilliant in his ability to make the form of the narrative parallel the message of the narrative. As Genesis chapter one describes a God-made world characterized by order, structure, and pattern, so chapter 1 is literarily characterized by order, structure, and recurring pattern. Does everyone see that?

Now the Biblical story of creation is not the only ancient narrative of creation. The Babylonians, the Canaanites, the Egyptians, and others had their own creation stories. Briefly, let’s compare and contrast the Biblical story of creation with *Enuma elish*, the Babylonian creation story. *Enuma elish* means “When on high.”

Let me summarize the story for you. The Babylonian creation story portrays creation as the result of a ferocious battle between the male god Marduk, the storm god, and the female god Tiamat, the goddess of salt water. In the end, Marduk kills Tiamat and by dividing her body creates the heavens and the earth.

In the Babylonian vision of reality, the world is absolute chaos and that chaos is caused by competition and jealousy between the gods. The world was created through violence, through war between the gods. And what is the role of humanity? Human beings are slaves. They are the play toys of the gods. There is no doubt that our biblical ancestors were aware of *Enuma elish*. Notice that the Babylonian and the Hebrew creation stories both begin with the same dependent clause: *Enuma elish* means “when on high,” and Genesis begins “When God began to create.” In Hebrew, “*Bereshit bara elohim.*” That is no coincidence.

Can everyone see how Genesis chapter 1 is a rejection and a refutation of everything that *Enuma elish* stands for? In the Hebrew world view God does not engage in jealousy and competition. God is the absolute sovereign of the world. In the Hebrew worldview, God does not bring chaos and capriciousness to the world, but goodness, order, stability, and harmony. And finally, in the Hebrew world view, human beings are not the slaves of the Gods. Humanity is the pinnacle and the purpose of creation.

These are just some of the revolutionary principles behind the Biblical story of creation, principles that would transform the way the Western world thinks about God and God’s relationship to humanity.