

COVENANT COMMUNITY
Meta-stories in the Pentateuch

LESSON NINE: BACK TO THE BEGINNING
GENESIS 1-11

Opening prayer

Lord of new beginnings, we lay our lives before You. When we consider the evolution of the Universe, who are we that You should be mindful of us? For Your efforts to bond with us in a Holy Covenant we give you profound thanks. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Navigating this lesson

The first eleven chapters of *Genesis* were probably added only after the stories of Abraham, Joseph and Moses were compiled. They are an “afterthought” because early Judaism was not concerned with philosophical questions such as “does God exist?” or “how did the world begin?” Judaism is a religion of identity, command, behavior and praise.

The stories in *Genesis 1-11* are so profound they could be the basis of a year's study. This lesson is merely an introduction.

Read *Genesis 1:1 – 11:32*

Focus texts: Genesis 1:1 – 2:3; Genesis 3:1-24; Psalm 8; Romans 8:18-39

Why does this lesson come last? Doesn't the Pentateuch begin with “Creation”? No. The first 11 chapters of *Genesis* were added later, long after the other documents first took written form.

The familiar stories of Creation, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah's Ark, and the Tower of Babel are mythic. They were popular with the Israelite people but they came from foreign cultures (mostly Mesopotamia). They are not “just” myths. The word “just” is unjustified when applied to myth. Myths are about wisdom, not science. Myths shape cultures, nations and self-understanding. They are **true** – very true – when they convey wisdom that helps people understand themselves. The myths in the first 11 chapters of *Genesis* provide a profound *prequel* to the Pentateuch.

Only after the Israelites settled in Canaan did they begin to write down the stories of Abraham, Joseph and Moses. There were different oral traditions; there were scattered written accounts. Paid scribes hand copied the stories on parchment scrolls. The sacred scrolls were not owned by individuals or families; they were the property of a village synagogue or the Jerusalem Temple. The scrolls were meant to be read aloud by a priest or rabbi.

As it became clear that little Israel was soon to be swallowed up in the Babylonian Empire (mid 6th century BCE), the need to collect Israel's sacred history became urgent. The Babylonians overran small nations; they allowed the farmers to remain to till the soil (as long as they paid taxes to Babylon); but the leaders and educated citizens were taken into exile somewhere inside Babylon. There would be nobody left in Israel who could read the sacred stories of **covenant**, **providence**, **holiness** and **community**. And how could the exiles sing songs of YHWH in a foreign land?



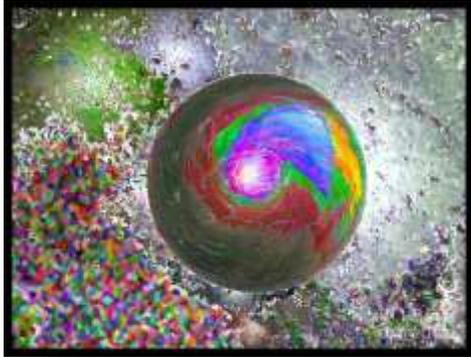
By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion... How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?
{ *Psalm 137:1,4* }

The Pentateuch was probably compiled and edited just prior to the exile. It was written on scrolls that could be carried into with them when they were taken into Babylon. While they were at it, they added the *prequel*: two different Creation stories, the stories of Cain and Abel, of Noah and the Flood, of Methusaleh and of the Tower of Babel. They wove these together – very loosely – with genealogies purporting to trace Abraham's ancestry all the way back to Adam.

The *prequel* begins with two Creation myths. The first (*Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a*) is an eloquent poem that describes a distant, pre-existing and transcendent God who "speaks" the Universe into existence over the course of six days (resting on the seventh day).

The second Creation myth (*Genesis 2:4b – 3:24*) starts all over again in the Garden of Eden. It presents a very different sequence of events; for instance, *Adam* (which can be translated "red earth" or "humanity") precedes the animals and plants. The God of the Garden of Eden is immanent, nearby and rather human-like.

Let's look at these two myths separately. We'll start with the poem.



In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

{ *Genesis 1:1-5 KJV* }

If you grew up hearing the King James Version of the Bible, the above passage will sound familiar. King James (a horrid person, by the way) was a contemporary of Shakespeare. It was the age of grand Elizabethan English, and King James hired scholars to translate the Latin Bible into English. The 1st chapter of Genesis is a poem, and it is best heard in the dramatic cadences of Shakespearean English. It is one of the most beautiful pieces of literature in the English literary canon. But it is not science.

The Universe has been developing into its present state over billions of years; it is still evolving; it was NOT completed in six days. That does not deny the imagery of this exquisite poem which is about God's brooding creativity and God's love of every created thing.

God's primal characteristic in this beautiful poem is creativity. Humans possess creative attributes and impulses. We share those attributes with the Creator of all things. "Let us create humankind in our image, according to our likeness..." *Genesis 1:26*) We can do what God does. We can create!

But God transcends creation. Creation is "good" but we do not worship it. God is not "in" the trees and oceans and animals. God is the Source of everything that exists. But God is not a being, not even a Supreme Being. God is the Ground of Being Itself. We can use our creative minds to examine and understand the trees and oceans and animals. This sanctifies the scientific enterprise – unless we use our knowledge to exploit and despoil Creation. An Asian theologian has said, "We need to learn to think like a mountain." That is Sabbath thinking!

And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it... { *Genesis 2:2-3* }

The Sabbath is the climax of the magnificent Creation poem. The Sabbath is the culmination and glorification of all Creation. It was a radical idea to the farmers and shepherds eking out a living in the desert, that they should get a whole day to revel in God, to enjoy God's presence, to pause and reflect on the meaning of existence and, of course, to remember and re-tell the stories of Covenant and Providence, of Holiness and Beloved Community. The Sabbath was for everybody, for the poorest farmer, for the lonely shepherd, for women, and even for resident aliens who labored at the most undesirable and poorly paid tasks.

Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it. { *Exodus 20:8-11* }

The first Creation poem in *Genesis* is spare and economical. God's words are powerful but few: "Let there be light!," "Let dry land appear!" God's actions are precise: "God created," "God saw that it was good," "God blessed them," "God rested."

The second Creation story is in prose, not poetry. It is lush with details. It is less about "how did the world begin," and more about "why are we here?" It is in response to the universal question posed in *Psalms 8*.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you

have established; ***what are human beings that you are mindful of them***, mortals that you care for them?

{ *Psalm 8:3-4* }

The God of Eden's Garden appears to be making things up as He goes along, responding to whatever doesn't work out.



Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air ... The man gave names to all [the creatures]; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. { *Genesis 2:18-20* }

When the animals and birds prove insufficient for Adam's companionship, God creates Eve. They are separate beings and yet they are “one flesh.”

This second Creation story contains profound psychological insights. Adam and Eve exist in blissful ignorance in the Garden of Eden. They are happy companions and they enjoy a casual relationship with God who comes visiting “at the time of the evening breeze.” (*Genesis 3:8*) Only one thing is forbidden in the entire Garden – the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Such a temptation! The very rational snake convinces Eve to taste the apple and a sequence of consequence is initiated.

... when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife

hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. { *Genesis 3:6-8* }

“They hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God.” That is the moment when human nature goes awry!

They realized they were naked and they experienced shame; they became alienated from their bodies. They sewed fig leaves to “cover up.”

They heard God approaching and they tried to hide; they became alienated from God.

God asked them what they had done and each tried to pass the buck; they grew estranged from each other.

They ended up alienated from Creation (nature) itself. They were cast out of the Garden; gardening and childbirth became difficult labors.

This sense of alienation and estrangement is the source of the world’s ills. In our desperation to be re-united (at-one) with God, with each other, with Creation, and to be at peace in our own souls, we do things that hurt others, that hurt the environment, that hurt God, and that shrivel our souls.

Sin is separation. It is the alienation and estrangement people feel. It is the human condition. We are severed from the womb, from our mothers, from others, and from the innocence of Eden. We try desperate measures to fill the emptiness left when our souls are estranged from nature, community, love, and God. Violence, possessiveness, greed, and warfare ensue.

The ancients offered sacrifices to pacify their angry gods. The Israelites invented rituals to make them holy enough to approach *YHWH*’s presence. The Law that takes up so much of the Pentateuch was an attempt to define every circumstance in which humans rubbed each other the wrong way, thereby rubbing God the wrong way. And it was never enough!

Nearly every culture (Mesopotamian, Native American, etc.) has a Flood story or its equivalent. This has led literalists to search for archeological evidence of a Flood that once “covered the earth.” That is a vain endeavor. Why not search our souls for why this story has such universal appeal? (Maybe “appeal” is the wrong word here.)

When the editors of the Pentateuch got to the Flood story they must have been in a hurry. Whereas the two Creation myths are placed side by side, the story of Noah takes twists and turns leading to confusion. Did Noah take “two of every kind” of bird and animal (*Genesis 6:20*) or did he take “seven pairs of every clean animal” (*Genesis 7:2*)? Did it rain for 40 days and 40 nights or did “all the

fountains of the great deep burst forth and the windows of the heavens [open]" (*Genesis 7:11*) If it was the "fountains of the great deep" and "the windows of the heavens" it implies more than a 40 day deluge. It suggests that Creation reverted to the primordial state preceding God's Word, to the timeless time before Creation when "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep."

Pre-literate peoples in every culture intuited that something is wrong, that Creation is at risk. They spun myths that portray the Creator's anger at our malfeasance. And they followed up their Flood stories with other stories of reconciliation, atonement, and an uneasy relationship with the gods.

To have faith – to have Christian faith – is to bet our lives on Christ as the truth of reconciliation, revelation, atonement and covenant. Christ is the healing the Creator offers. The Resurrection is the sign that we do not have to make Creation perfect by ourselves. The God of Creation continues to create and reconcile this marvelous thing called the Universe. A God capable of the Big Bang is capable of Resurrection! We can join with all the creative power evoked in *Genesis 1* to add our bits to this thing that God is doing, to the ongoing **process** of Creation and reconciliation.



We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love god . . .

{ *Romans 8:22-28* }

The Apostle Paul is writing to the Romans. He must know that an early death awaits him. He struggles mightily to draw into a few sentences all the strands of the meta-stories we have been studying: creation, alienation, believing in things we cannot see. And finally he subsides with the affirmation that if we love God, the “very Spirit” takes our hopes and prayers and presents them pure and holy to the God who “searches the heart.” God searches our hearts and finds the Spirit of God. Reunion. Reconciliation. We’ve been struggling to believe that for 3000 years.

YHWH makes a covenant with Noah, promising never again to destroy Creation. It’s as if God shouted “Choose life!” at Noah. (Just as Moses shouted “Choose life!” in his sermon to the Israelites; see the previous lesson.) **But** Noah’s descendants forget. *YHWH* enters into a covenant with Abraham, promising land and a future. **But** Abraham’s descendants wander off into Egypt. *YHWH* shouts even louder and Moses writes the Covenant of the Law on stones (with 600 later footnotes). **But** the descendants of the twelve tribes fill their longings with lesser things.

So God offers us a new Covenant – through Christ, sealed with Baptism and nourished with bread and wine and the company of saints. We are invited to throw in our lot with Christ and to offer our bodies as a “living sacrifice.” **Choose life!**

With a great economy of words, the prophet *Micah* sums it all up:

With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly **with** your God? { *Micah 6:6-8* }

There it is again: the most important word in the Bible: **with**. God is ***with*** us through our covenants. God is ***with*** us when providence provides new paths. God is ***with*** us in the sacred and blessed community of the Church, where we are fed with the bread of heaven, through Word and sacraments. All that is asked of us is to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly **with** God.

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SOME QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION
AND FOR REFLECTION, PONDERING, CONVERSATION

Do you find evidence of the meta-stories (Covenant, providence, holy community) in *Genesis 1 -11*?

What does it mean that even when we don't know how to pray "the Spirit intercedes [for us] with sighs too deep for words?"

How do you feel about Bob's description of myth?

How has this study influenced your walk ***with*** God?

Is Federated Church a "continuation" of the meta-stories in the Pentateuch?
How?

(refer back to lessons one and two if you need a 'refresher' about meta-stories)