

## **“THE CREATIVE GOD”**

January 9, 2011  
Dean Feldmeyer

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” Genesis 1:1

You’ve already heard the text read, this morning, and, as promised, we’re going to spend a few minutes laying out some context – literary and historical – before we break down the passage and ask it to expose its meaning for us.

Most of you were probably taught in Sunday school, as I was, that the first five books of the Bible, the Torah, was written by Moses. This was the traditional understanding and it was passed on from generation to generation without question for hundreds of years until someone actually sat down and examined the ancient manuscripts of the books in their original language – Hebrew.

This method of studying scripture, known as the “critical method” (question asking) was first introduced in the late 1800’s and has, over the past 100 years become the gold standard for biblical scholarship in universities and seminaries around the world.

Unfortunately, the people who introduced and championed it were cowards.

They were afraid that normal, pew sitting, church members would not be able to handle the conclusions to which such scholarship led. They feared they would lose their jobs if they were honest with the lay people about what they discovered through the critical study of scripture. So they kept it to themselves and shared it sparingly with their students but only with the warning that, as one of my professors said, “it’s a long way from Oxford to Washington Court House.”

Well, while I share their enthusiasm for the serious, critical study of the Bible, I do not share their anxiety and fear. I think you all can handle it. No one, in the course of this year is going to put a gun to your head and force you to accept anything that is said in this series of sermons.

What we are going to do is introduce some new ways of looking at the Bible and ask you to consider the questions that this new perspective raises for how we live our lives. You are, of course, free to accept or reject these ways of studying scripture as God’s Spirit leads you.

So, let’s begin, this morning by applying some critical thought to the first chapter of Genesis.

### **J, E, P, & D**

Most scholars today – Christians and Jews – agree that the first five books of the Bible and a few others were written by four authors whose names we do not know. We believe this because different parts of the Torah are written in different styles in different dialects of Hebrew, using different words for God.

One writer uses the sacred, holy and unpronounceable YHWH which was later made pronounceable by including vowels to make it Yahweh – in English, Jehovah. We call this writer “J,” or the “J writer.”

One writer uses the more common name, “Elohim,” and we call him “E” or the “E writer.”

A third writer writes almost exclusively in poetry and most of what he writes seems intended for use in worship or other liturgical settings. We call him “P” or the “Priestly writer.” A name he often uses for God is Adonae (ad-on-EYE).

And the fourth writer we call “D” because he wrote Deuteronomy. He was probably a scribe, what the early Hebrews called their lawyers, and he seems to be mostly interested in law and the good order of the Hebrew community.

We believe that most of the stories of the Hebrew Bible were passed down for centuries as oral tradition, stories told from one generation to another. This worked fairly well as long as the Hebrew people were a homogenous group who shared the same geography and ethnicity.

In 586 BCE, however, Palestine was invaded, sacked, looted and nearly destroyed by the army of Babylon under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar. Thousands of the inhabitants of Judah were taken in chains north to Babylon where they were expected to live and be absorbed into the Babylonian (Chaldean) culture.

Afraid of losing their religious and ethnic identity, the Hebrews (they would not be called Jews for another 100 years) began to collect the stories of their history and write them down. Some may have been written down already, others were preserved in the orders of worship that the priests used in the temple. But these four writers and those that worked with them – J, E, P, and D – began to collect, edit, redact, and digest the stories of their history, their culture and the activity of Yahweh – Elohim – Adonae in that history.

Throughout the Babylonian captivity, which lasted about 80 years, and for another 100 years after they returned to Palestine and tried to rebuild their culture, they brought these stories together, edited and re-edited them, compressed and digested them and, finally, published them as the Torah or the books of the Law that would lead and guide them in their religious and political lives as a community of faith.

Most scholars agree that the canon or official text of the Torah was finally completed and closed between 500 & 400 BCE. Any changes in the text that have happened since then are the result of copier errors, redactions or edits. Remember, these books were hand copied for more than 2000 years and, in the case of Torahs that are used in most Jewish synagogues and temples, they still are.

## THE PURPOSE DRIVEN BIBLE

The Torah, as we have it, today, was brought together and published with several goals in mind.

Primary, of course, was the goal of preserving the Hebrew culture and religion during the Babylonian Captivity. If you are a Star Trek fan you will understand the following metaphor: The Babylonians were the Borg of their time. Their goal was not just to conquer but to assimilate other cultures, to absorb them into the Babylonian empire and the Chaldean culture.

This is why, in the book of Daniel, we see Daniel and his friends, Shadrack, Meshack and Abed-nego being separated from their families as teenagers and being sent to Chaldean colleges to be trained in the Chaldean culture and language. Nebuchadnezzar's hope and plan is to simply turn them into Chaldeans.

And, to a certain degree, his plan worked. Seventy five years later, when Darius conquers Babylon and allows the captives to return to Judea only about 20 percent of them actually go in the first group. Some others join them later but the number never is more than 35-40% of the captives. Most of them have made lives for themselves in Babylon, don't remember much, if anything about Judea, and have no desire to go back and try to rebuild a civilization and culture they know very little about.

In fact, they would know nothing about that culture if it weren't for the work of those priests, rabbis and scribes who have worked so hard to write it all down and preserve it in the Torah.

Here are some of the aspects of Hebrew culture and religion that the Torah was supposed to preserve:

1. **Radical Monotheism.**  
There is only one God and that God is YHWH. Israel is his chosen people and with them he has a special, though not exclusive covenant.
2. **The Law.**  
The special relationship between Israel and YHWH is preserved through the Law as the law is preserved in the Torah. The Law is a lamp to the feet and a light to the path of Israel and, if they are obedient, it will preserve their relationship with YHWH and with each other as a faith community.
3. **The Story**  
Israel's history is the story of the evolution of its relationship with God. To understand that relationship one must know and understand the history as it is related through story.
4. **Temple Worship**  
The story of Israel and YHWH is rehearsed and relived through the rituals, songs and liturgy of worship which is practiced in the temple and in the home.

The preservation of these four things is so important in Hebrew culture that later, as Hebrews become known as Jews ("people of the land of Judah" or "people descended from Judah") they will add other books to what would become the Hebrew Bible. No genre will be ignored or turned away. Poetry, lyrics, letters, histories, short stories, fiction, folk tales, liturgies, -- anything that achieves the end of preserving these four things will be included as holy scripture.

The passage we have read today, what we call the "First Creation Story" (the second is in the second chapter of Genesis) manages to pull together several purposes and genres to accomplish its goal.

## THE CREATION STORY

There are some topics that are too important to be left solely to words.

There are some subjects that are so complex, so powerful and so profound that any talk about them demands something more than mere grammar.

There are some experiences that affect us deeply, that go to the core of who we are, that reach into the very marrow of our being and subjects like that often outdistance, in a definitive way, our ability to talk about them.

This is the stuff of philosophy, the study of value and meaning, or metaphysics, the branch of philosophy that has to do with the nature of being and beings. It is the stuff of theology, the study of God and things divine.

Whenever we attempt to discuss or talk seriously about these things we often find that language fails us. We turn to the arts – to music, to poetry, to paint and sculpture, to dance – to speak for us because while language speaks the language of the brain, art speaks the language of the heart. When we talk about God, that which has created us and has given value and meaning to our being, maybe art is the only language that can speak lucidly.

Now don't get me wrong. I speak to you this morning as a systematic theologian, one who has spent most of my adult life and a significant part of my youth trying to make rational sense out of Christian theology so that it can be put into words and communicated to others. (That is what Jesus told us to do, isn't it? Communicate it to others.)

But I realize as I get older that just as we can communicate our understanding of God and God's will by speaking rationally to each other, intellect to intellect, as it were, I also believe that we can communicate that same message by speaking from one heart to another. Art does this.

And I believe that this is what the author of the First Creation Story was doing: He was speaking to us of God, of God's nature and will, by using art. This is artistry and poetry and, most importantly, liturgy. Listen carefully to it and you can almost hear the music playing in the background as it is read.

When we try to turn this majestic piece of art into a scientific treatise we don't just disrespect, misinterpret and wound it, we destroy it.

Written by the "Priestly Writer" or "P" shortly after the 586 BCE, this wonderfully talented poet and liturgist begins by telling us his theme and purpose in the first verse: "In the beginning Adonae created the heavens and the earth."

It wasn't created by human agency. It wasn't created by Gog or Magog. It wasn't created by the gods and goddesses of the Babylonian pantheon as they expressed in their creation poem:

When in the height heaven was not named,  
And the earth beneath did not yet bear a name,  
And the primeval Apsu, who begat them,  
And chaos, Tiamut, the mother of them both  
Their waters were mingled together,  
And no field was formed, no marsh was to be seen;  
When of the gods none had been called into being,  
And none bore a name, and no destinies were ordained;  
Then were created the gods in the midst of heaven,  
Lahmu and Lahamu were called into being...  
Ages increased,...  
Then Ansar and Kisar were created, and over them....  
Long were the days, then there came forth.....  
Anu, their son,...  
Ansar and Anu...  
And the god Anu...  
Nudimmud, whom his fathers, his begetters.....  
Abounding in all wisdom,...'  
He was exceeding strong...  
He had no rival -  
Thus were established and were... the great gods.<sup>1</sup>

No, the earth, the whole universe, was created by the one and only God, the God of the Hebrews, the Lord Adonae, YHWH, Elohim the Only and Almighty.

And now follows a song, a liturgy meant to be read chorally in the temple at worship. You participated in a liturgical reading of the text just a few minutes ago. Now listen to how another poet, James Weldon Johnson, re-interpreted the poetry of Genesis into the idiom of the African American church:

And God stepped out on space,  
And he looked around and said:  
I'm lonely -  
I'll make me a world.

And far as the eye of God could see  
Darkness covered everything,  
Blacker than a hundred midnights  
Down in a cypress swamp.

Then God smiled,  
And the light broke,  
And the darkness rolled up on one side,  
And the light stood shining on the other,  
And God said: That's good!

Then God reached out and took the light in his hands,  
And God rolled the light around in his hands

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<sup>1</sup> Enuma Elish: The Epic of Creation, translated by L.W. King, London, 1902. (<http://www.sacred-texts.com/ane/enuma.htm>).

Until he made the sun;  
And he set that sun a-blazing in the heavens.  
And the light that was left from making the sun  
God gathered it up in a shining ball  
And flung it against the darkness,  
Spangling the night with the moon and stars.  
Then down between  
The darkness and the light  
He hurled the world;  
And God said: That's good!

Then God himself stepped down -  
And the sun was on his right hand,  
And the moon was on his left;  
The stars were clustered about his head,  
And the earth was under his feet.  
And God walked, and where he trod  
His footsteps hollowed the valleys out  
And bulged the mountains up.

Then he stopped and looked and saw  
That the earth was hot and barren.  
So God stepped over to the edge of the world  
And he spat out the seven seas -  
He batted his eyes, and the lightnings flashed -  
He clapped his hands, and the thunders rolled -  
And the waters above the earth came down,  
The cooling waters came down.

Then the green grass sprouted,  
And the little red flowers blossomed,  
The pine tree pointed his finger to the sky,  
And the oak spread out his arms,  
The lakes cuddled down in the hollows of the ground,  
And the rivers ran down to the sea;  
And God smiled again,  
And the rainbow appeared,  
And curled itself around his shoulder.

The God raised his arm and he waved his hand  
Over the sea and over the land,  
And he said: Bring forth! Bring forth!  
And quicker than God could drop his hand,  
Fishes and fowls  
And beasts and birds  
Swam the rivers and the seas,  
Roamed the forests and the woods,  
And split the air with their wings.  
And God said: That's good!

Then God walked around,  
And God looked around  
On all that he had made.  
He looked at his sun,  
And he looked at his moon,  
And he looked at his little stars;  
He looked on his world  
With all its living things,  
And God said: I'm lonely still.

Then God sat down -  
On the side of a hill where he could think;  
By a deep, wide river he sat down;  
With his head in his hands,  
God thought and thought,  
Till he thought: I'll make me a man!

Up from the bed of the river  
God scooped the clay;  
And by the bank of the river  
He kneeled him down;  
And there the great God Almighty  
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,  
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,  
Who rounded the earth in the middle of his hand;  
This Great God,  
Like a mammy bending over her baby,  
Kneeled down in the dust  
Toiling over a lump of clay  
Till he shaped it in his own image;

Then into it he blew the breath of life,  
And man became a living soul.  
Amen. Amen.<sup>2</sup>

I don't know if the creation of the universe happened in that way or not, but I know that poem is true.

**AMEN**

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<sup>2</sup> From God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse by James Weldon Johnson, N.Y. (Viking Press, 1927). Electronic Edition can be found at (<http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/johnson/johnson.html>).