

I. Advanced Organizers

A. We're gonna start by playing a game. I'm Calling it "Name That Genre!!!"

1. "Once upon a time there was a young princess named Snow White." (*fiction, fairytale*)
2. "Mitosis is a fundamental process for life. During mitosis, a cell duplicates all of its contents, including its chromosomes, and splits to form two identical daughter cells." (*Scientific non-fiction*)
3. "To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them." (*Shakespearean Drama*)
4. "Born into slavery in Maryland, Harriet Tubman escaped to freedom in the North in 1849 to become the most famous "conductor" on the Underground Railroad." (*U.S. history, biography*)
5. "Combine white sugar, brown sugar, salt, eggs, vanilla, and instant espresso, if using, in the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the whisk attachment." (*nonfiction cookbook*)
6. "I am not throwing away my shot
I am not throwing away my shot
Hey yo, I'm just like my country
I'm young, scrappy and hungry
And I'm not throwing away my shot." (*musical theatre, hip-hop*)
7. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was without shape and empty, and darkness was over the surface of the watery deep, but the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the water. God said, "Let there be light." And there was light!"
 - a) What would you call that genre? Is it historical non-fiction? Cosmology? Fable? Myth?

B. I'm starting with this game and this exploration of genre because I think it's super-relevant to the topic of the new teaching series I'm starting today on some of the earliest stories in the Bible. Calling it "Origin Stories" as we look at some of the episodes related in Genesis and Exodus, the first books in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament.

1. Some of us may have heard these stories our whole life but as we've aged we **find it hard to understand what to do with them:**
 - a) How do we square a six day creation with what natural science has demonstrated? Can the creation described in Genesis square with evolution?
 - b) How are we supposed to understand fantastical elements like talking snakes in a garden of Eden? Are we supposed to believe that actually happened in a historical sense?
 - c) What about this whole flood story? What are we supposed to think about God wiping out most living creatures through drowning? Shouldn't we find that really disturbing as opposed to a cute story we tell kids with lots of sweet animal pictures?
2. This summer, I thought it would be fun to press into some of these questions and explore them together, hopefully feeling freed to ask our hard questions and perhaps find new helpful answers in a context that's striving to be safe, diverse and Jesus-centered. Our kids are doing the same, so for those of us who are parents, my hope is that we can have some fun conversation as we track things together.
3. As you may or may not know, these earliest stories in Genesis and Exodus are not just stories that are vital to Christians. These stories were crafted in Jewish community and are

still the heart of their sacred texts. They are also formative stories for the Muslim faith. Recognizing this, we're gonna look for help from friends outside of our community in this series which I'm really excited about. I've made a friend recently, Rabbi Dorothy Richman, who is a scholar of Hebrew Bible, and she's agree to come and deliver two teachings in the series, sharing her perspective as a scholar and Jewish Rabbi for us to consider.

- II. **Two Creation Tales.** We're gonna start by looking at the **story of creation, a story that's actually told in two stories** (2 Creation Tales). We're not gonna have time to dig into them exhaustively, but I'm hoping how we handle these first stories can give us a template for the ways we might handles texts like this going forward. For the purposes of time we'll mainly focus on the first one, but we need to look some at the second as well for context. Let's start by reading the first. (hear the story)

A. *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*

2 Now the earth was without shape and empty, and darkness was over the surface of the watery deep, but the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the water. 3 God said, "Let there be light." And there was light! 4 God saw that the light was good, so God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light "day" and the darkness "night." There was evening, and there was morning, marking the first day.

6 God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters and let it separate water from water." 7 So God made the expanse and separated the water under the expanse from the water above it. It was so. 8 God called the expanse "sky." There was evening, and there was morning, a second day.

9 God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place and let dry ground appear." It was so. 10 God called the dry ground "land" and the gathered waters he called "seas." God saw that it was good.

11 God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: plants yielding seeds according to their kinds, and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds." It was so. 12 The land produced vegetation—plants yielding seeds according to their kinds, and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. God saw that it was good. 13 There was evening, and there was morning, a third day.

14 God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them be signs to indicate seasons and days and years, 15 and let them serve as lights in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth." It was so. 16 God made two great lights—the greater light to rule over the day and the lesser light to rule over the night. He made the stars also. 17 God placed the lights in the expanse of the sky to shine on the earth, 18 to preside over the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. God saw that it was good. 19 There was evening, and there was morning, a fourth day.

20 God said, "Let the water swarm with swarms of living creatures and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky." 21 God created the great sea creatures and every living and moving thing with which the water swarmed, according to their

kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. God saw that it was good. 22 God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds multiply on the earth.” 23 There was evening, and there was morning, a fifth day.

24 God said, “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: cattle, creeping things, and wild animals, each according to its kind.” It was so. 25 God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the cattle according to their kinds, and all the creatures that creep along the ground according to their kinds. God saw that it was good.

26 Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness, so they may rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move on the earth.”

27 God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply! Fill the earth and subdue it! Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every creature that moves on the ground.” 29 Then God said, “I now give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the entire earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. 30 And to all the animals of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” It was so.

31 God saw all that he had made—and it was very good! There was evening, and there was morning, the sixth day.

2 The heavens and the earth were completed with everything that was in them. 2 By the seventh day God finished the work that he had been doing, and he ceased on the seventh day all the work that he had been doing. 3 God blessed the seventh day and made it holy because on it he ceased all the work that he had been doing in creation.

1. We'll stop there for a moment; take a breather, and notice a little of what we've seen.
2. This seems to be a story describing **the creation of the cosmos**. It reflects a God that is **thoughtful and careful speaking** various things into existence. Interestingly, this God doesn't create out of absolute nothingness, but seems to bring **order from chaos**. There is a dark watery deep that the Creator begins with, and by first speaking light into existence and then separating light from dark **the work taming the dark chaotic waters begins**. Each thing God creates, God admires. This creator is happy with his handiwork. The creator creates one thing after another, with a sense of building, and the capstone on the experience is the **creation of humans, male and female, who are both uniquely said to be made in this God's image**. And then God blesses the whole thing and takes a personal day.

3. Now before we unpack this, I just want to read a few excerpts and summarize what comes right after.

B. 4 *This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created—when the Lord God made the earth and heavens.*

5 *Now no shrub of the field had yet grown on the earth, and no plant of the field had yet sprouted, for the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the earth, and there was no man to cultivate the ground. 6 Springs would well up from the earth and water the whole surface of the ground. 7 The Lord God formed the man from the soil of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.*

8 *The Lord God planted an orchard in the east, in Eden; and there he placed the man he had formed. 9 The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow from the soil, every tree that was pleasing to look at and good for food. (Now the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil were in the middle of the orchard.)*

1. So here we have this second story, also describing creation. It continues by talking about streams and rivers being formed, by the man being placed in the orchard and commanded to care for it, given instruction about eating from it, and avoiding the tree with the knowledge of good and evil.
2. Then we get into God noticing that the man is lonely, and so in order to create companionship, God creates all these animals and brings them to Adam and ask him name them, but none of them are seen as suitable companions. So God puts the man to sleep, makes woman out of the man's rib, brings her to him and in vs. 23 it says,

23 *Then the man said,*

***“This one at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one will be called ‘woman,’
for she was taken out of man.”***

3. So here we seem to have another story about creation. And if you're like me, looking at all of it, you're aware there are some complicated questions we have to deal with. And hopefully you're aware that those questions probably scratch the surface, but are a clue that we need to dig a bit deeper than just reading this as it is to really get what it's saying. I've been doing a lot of reading myself this week, particularly leaning on the work of Biblical scholar **Peter Enns and his book *The Evolution of Adam***, so relying on that particularly, I'm gonna help identify some of the issues to be addressed if one really wants to study these passages and understand what they're trying to say. Get ready for information download.

C. Issues that need to be considered.

1. Inconsistencies between the stories, Genesis 1 and 2.

- a) When you read Genesis 2, there are places of resonance with the first. But we don't have to read too far to also see some ways that these stories don't exactly line up.
- b) We don't have the benefit of reading this in Hebrew but if we did we'd see some other clues - different names being used of God that are easy to miss. In Genesis 1, God is

Elohim. In Genesis 2, God is called *Yahweh-Elohim*. In English (God vs. Lord God). Subtle but meaningful.

- c) the word adam used for both - but in the first chapter it seems to speak of universal mankind. In the second, it seems to represent one individual, like a personal name.
- d) Other specific differences:
 - (1) Duration of Creation: six days (Gen. 1) vs 1 day implied (Gen. 2)
 - (2) Setting: Dark, watery chaos (1) vs a desert oasis (2)
 - (3) Sequence: Light, Firmament, Dry land, Plants, Lights in the sky, Sea and sky creatures, Land animals, Humans (male and female) (1); Man (Adam), Garden with trees and river, Land animals and birds as potential helpers to Adam, Woman as the fitting helper to Adam (2)
- e) As you can tell, there's a lot that doesn't quite match. These seem to be two different stories telling us two different accounts of creation. What are we supposed to do with that?

2. **Connections between these stories and the stories of Israel's cultural neighbors.**

Beginning in 1847 work in the field of archaeology began to have significant implications on how we were to read these early texts in Genesis, and that came through the discovery of documents arising from Israel's ancient neighbors. Some of these texts also tell stories about the origins of the cosmos, and upon study it becomes evident that they bear striking similarities to the stories in Genesis. I'm just gonna highlight a couple of the most significant, to demonstrate the point

- a) Genesis 1 - has a lot in common with the Babylonian story *Enuma Elish*. It's dated likely 7th century BC, which by ancient standards isn't crazy-old, but it's likely older than Genesis by a couple hundred years. And likely the story as it was captured in 7th century BC reflected a story that had been told orally for centuries before. Let's just go over Peter Enns' list of similarities very briefly.
 - (1) Matter exists independently of the divine spirit. In other words, Genesis 1 does not describe creation out of nothing, but the establishment of order out of "chaos."
 - (2) Darkness precedes creation. In *Enuma Elish* the chaos symbol is the goddess Tiamat.
 - (3) In Genesis the chaos symbol is in Hebrew *tehom* ("the deep"), which is linguistically related to Tiamat.
 - (4) Light exists before the creation of the sun, moon, and stars.
 - (5) In *Enuma Elish*, Marduk fillets the body of the slain Tiamat; with half of it, Marduk forms a barrier to keep the waters from escaping. Genesis 1:6-8 depicts the sky not as a slain goddess but as a solid dome ("firmament") to keep the waters above where they belong.
 - (6) The sequence of the days of creation is similar, including the creation of the firmament, dry land, luminaries, and humanity, all followed by rest.

b) Genesis 2 has lots of its own commonalities with ancient stories too.

- D. So we have internal inconsistencies between the stories to contend with. We have a lot of overlap with ancient stories from other cultures to consider. And we haven't begun to touch on the questions these stories bring up when we compare either of them with what natural science has told us over the last few hundred years. So what do we do with it all?

- 1. I have a few big takeaways from this exercise that I hope will help us going forward as we press into more of these stories, as well as some thoughts on these two particularly.

III. Three Takeaways

- A. When approaching these texts, our fundamental question should not be “What happened?”, but “Why were these stories told, and what did they mean to the people who told them?”
1. **“What happened?” assumes a genre.** The question assumes that these are texts meant to give an historically accurate, scientifically verifiable view of what went down. Tends to believe that because these books are inspired, God has given us the most accurate view of things that we need to hold as authoritative above anything else. **But to make these assumptions sets us up for a lot of angst** as we try to reconcile these texts with internal and external information. Lots of Christians, have either had to silence information they found unhelpful or done severe mental gymnastics to try to maintain a belief that these are texts are here to tell us “what happened”. **Countless others have lost their faith altogether because the reconciling seemed too impossible.** But **what if this is simply an issue of genre misunderstanding?** What is this is something like asking Hamilton lyrics to tell us how to bake a pie?
 2. Instead, asking “Why were these stories told, and what did they mean to the people who told them?” **carefully considers the cultural setting in which these stories arose**, the genres that were available to them, and the reasons these stories were composed the way they were. It **takes a lot more work**, but it also has the potential of allowing these sacred stories to speak to us in a fresh way, free from the constraints of the Western post-enlightenment expectations we try to put on them. They can speak to us on their own terms, and I’d argue, this will help us understand what God is communicating through them.
- B. **Every text, including the texts in our Bible, speaks the language of it’s culture. If we want to understand the stories, we have to look at the kind of language they use.**
1. Why I’m excited to have Rabbi Richman come, she reads and studies the text in Hebrew and will bring insights we’re not even able to perceive!
 2. But even not reading Hebrew, we are able to think critically about language. **Genres are a kind of language**, a way of organizing thought into human communication. And just like languages are culturally bound, rooted in and deeply connected to human culture, so are our forms of expression: art, music, literature. All of these have forms, genres that develop in culture to give voice to experience. To take the Bible seriously is to take seriously the idea that **God relates to us where we are at**, God comes to **speak our human languages**, inspiring us with concepts of God that we can understand and **articulate in the languages of our cultures**.
 3. Jesus was a master at this, not only coming as a human in a particular time and place and fully inhabiting that life, but he **drew on the language of that culture continuously**, both quoting Hebrew scripture and rooting his descriptions of God in Jewish theology, but also relating the stuff of the cosmos to agriculture, and fishing, and family life, all the every day stuff of the people he inhabited life with. **What we see happening in Genesis is the same, God’s Spirit speaking to people through humans, who have human language and human genres of communication to work with.**
 4. For the Israelites who collected and wrote these stories, **primordial story** was a kind of language, it was the genre that every culture used to describe how phenomena in the natural world reflected what people believed and understood of the divine. Peter Enns puts it this way: *“Explanations for why things are the way they are were sought not in laboratories, telescopes, or therapy but ultimately in the activity of the gods in primordial*

time. Divine activity in the deep past helped explain the world and answered questions of meaning and existence. Stories of the deep past gave stability and coherence to life.”

5. The writers and compilers of Genesis weren't asking questions of how cells divided and species developed; they were asking questions about who was shaping and holding the universe. What did it mean? And the stories they told about the universe's origins reflected their perspectives on those things.

C. Every text was composed in a specific time with a specific intent.

1. There's a tradition that arose that Moses wrote all the pentateuch, (first 5 books of the Bible). It held for hundreds of years. Maybe that's what you've been taught. Hardly any scholars still believe this. I don't have time to get into all the reasons why, but they're pretty compelling.
2. The overwhelming consensus is that **these stories were composed by multiple authors over decades, perhaps even over centuries**, but they were **finally compiled into the form we see now after the Babylonian exile, about 500 years before Jesus and a long time after Moses**. Most scholars believe there were at least four primary texts that were compiled together to create these books. The reason Genesis 1 and 2 look different is that they were two different stories being told by different people that the compilers put side by side, so as to preserve them both and allow both to speak their unique messages. That tells us about the time.
3. But what about the intent? **The exile was a unique time when the people of God had experienced great trauma. They were ripped from their homeland**, their kingdom was taken from them, their temple, the seat of worship, obliterated. Those who weren't killed were carried off to Babylon. And now the remnant has returned to their homeland, a fragment of what they once were. The people in Israel were traumatized and in need of healing and hope and a renewed sense of corporate identity. These stories were compiled, edited and crafted to speak into a people in need of hearing who they were as a people, and how they were connected to the divine that they called Yahweh.

IV. If all of this is true, what might the creation account in Genesis 1 have been trying to communicate? (in broad strokes, a few things)

A. Speaking the language of primordial story, Genesis 1 made an argument to the people of God about who their God was, who they as a people were, and how they were distinctive from their cultural neighbors, many of whom they had experienced as violent oppressors.

B. Specifically, this account told them things like this:

1. **Their God is one, not a pantheon.** (All the other cultures describe a group of gods who love and squabble and war just like humans.)
2. **Their God creates through calm imagination and intention, rather than by accident or through violent conflict.**
 - a) Most of the stories their neighbors told, creation often was war-like, and the effects of creation were side effects of the conflict. In comparison to that, Israel's God presents a very different picture of thoughtfulness, patience, and enjoyment in creation.
 - b) Look at the firmament. In the Babylonian myth, it's a brutal image: a fillet goddess. Marduk tames the goddess of chaos through violence and separates the water from the earth through her filleted corpse.
 - c) But Yahweh's firmament is different. It's not an act of violence, it's an act of care and blessing.

3. **Their God does not view humans as slaves (as many of the ancient stories told), but as representatives of the divine who carry agency and authority.** They govern alongside God (bearing God's image). In the ancient world, governors and kings were often seen as image bearers of the divine. They also put statues of themselves throughout their kingdoms to remind the governed who they were ruled by. In this language, God was telling Israel that each human being was created not to be a slaves but to be a co-rulers with God, representing the Divine on earth. It was an important message of dignity and worth to a people who'd been stripped of their power for so long.
4. **Their God recognized the sacred need for rest,** that their God had laid the ground work for that important Israelite practice of Sabbath in the foundations of creation. By setting aside a day for rest, and creating a template that God would bring the image-bearers into, the people understood that their well-being mattered. In other ancient stories, the gods enslave the humans to work so that they can rest. Here we have a different picture, where God makes sacred a rhythm of work and rest, and brings humanity into it.

V. These words matter to us too.

- A. Where do we need to be reminded that the God we worship isn't subject to our human drama and conflict but has the power to bring order to chaos in ways that bring life and blessing, not violence?
- B. Where do we need to hear the message that no human is meant to live enslaved either to the gods or to their appointed image bearers? All of us humans are made to carry dignity, agency, and the capacity to be co-governors with the Divine, not in ways that bring the exploitation and oppression of creation, but that promote it's flourishing?
- C. Where do we need to be reminded that we carry within us the need both for labor and for rest, and that that need is blessed by the Divine who made us in their image?
- D. At the beginning of John's gospel, John connects the person of Jesus to the very word, the very language through which these stories said that God spoke the universe into being. In doing so, John was proclaiming that Jesus embodies in his very self all that Genesis communicated of the Creator. As Jesus-followers, this personalizes this story in a deeper way. We're invited to see Jesus present even in creation. Jesus, inviting us to see him as the orderer of our chaos, as the one who call us image bearers, as the one who wants to bring us rest. Let's end with a moment to interact with Jesus about that in prayer.