

Genesis 1:1-2:3  
Psalm 136  
John 1

“In the Beginning”

February 1, 2009

Why preach on Genesis?

It will probably take us about a year to get through Genesis.

Why should you spend a half hour every Sunday morning for the next year listening to sermons about Adam and Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?

Well, hopefully, after working through Romans, you will understand why:  
because Paul says that Abraham’s story has become yours.

We (Gentiles) have been grafted into Israel.

In Jesus Christ, Israel’s story has become ours

But as we will see, this is also the message of the book of Genesis itself.

Because Israel’s story is the story of how God gave hope to humanity,  
and preserved it for generations in the seed of Abraham.

And if you have ears to hear,

this story will also give you hope,

as you begin to see – or continue to see –

how your life is bound up with the seed of Abraham  
in this narrative that we call history.

As we saw last Sunday night from Psalm 111,

our theology (what we believe about God) is bound up in history –  
the history of what God has done in creation and redemption;  
and our ethics (what we do) is also bound up in history –  
because all of God’s commands come to us in time and space,  
connected to a particular time and a particular place.

So what we believe concerning God, and the duty that he requires of us,  
are both rooted and grounded in history –

in this glorious narrative of what God has *done*.

### **1. In the Beginning, God (1:1)**

Before there was anything else, there was God.

Throughout the rest of Genesis each section will begin

“Eleh toledot”

These are the generations of...

Throughout the rest of Genesis each section will tell the story

of the descendants – of the seed of those who came before.

But Genesis 1 cannot begin “Eleh toledot,”

because there were none who came before!

“Ah,” you might say, “but God came before!”

This is true,

but creation does not flow from God.

There is no organic relationship between God and his creatures.

We were not “generated” by him.

So Genesis 1 does not say

*Eleh toledot Elohim*

“These are the generations of God”!

But rather,

*Bereshit bara Elohim*

“In the beginning God created”

Genesis 1:1 stands in stark contrast with the ten sections that follow.

The rest of Genesis tells the story of what flows out of this chapter.

But this chapter flows from nothing.

Because in the beginning, *God*.

Genesis will be a story of redemption.

It will be a story of how God establishes his covenant with man –  
even rebellious, sinful man.

Genesis will be a story of God’s mercy and faithfulness and love.

But right up front you are faced with the fact that God is utterly different from creation.

There are only two categories of things in existence.

The Creator.

And the creature.

So much of human philosophy and history has been about blurring that distinction.

But the Creator/creature distinction is central to everything else in the Bible.

The ancients spoke of a “chain of being”

descending in a gradual flow from the divine to the human.

The moderns speak of “pantheism” everything is God,

or “pan-en-theism” – everything is in God.

But Genesis 1:1 declares that God is fundamentally different from creation.

Right up front, the Word of God declares that this is God’s world.

He made it.

The world is not part of God.

He created it out of nothing.

And if you are going to live in God’s world,

then you need to acknowledge him as God.

In the beginning... *God*

There were many “creation stories” in the ancient world.

The Babylonians, the Egyptians, the Sumerians, the Akkadians –  
all had their versions of how the world came into existence.  
Indeed they all agreed was that the world came into existence  
through the conflict of the gods.

I once heard a debate between two scholars

about whether Genesis was an apologetic against Egyptian mythology  
or against Akkadian mythology.

After listening to the debate for a while I decided they were both right!

Genesis 1 is an apologetic against *all* rival worldviews.

Whether the Akkadian *Atrahasis*

or modern attempts to say that everything came  
from some random nothingness,

Genesis declares that in the beginning *God* created the heavens and the earth.

Everything that the nations around them worshiped are *created* by God out of nothing.

In the *Atrahasis*, the gods created man to provide food for them.

But in Genesis God provides food for man!

In the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* man was created as slaves to serve the gods.

But in Genesis God creates man in his own image to rule over creation.

The Babylonians believed that Marduk created the world

by slaying the great sea monster Tiamat,

but in Genesis God does not “battle” sea monsters –

he creates the sea monsters and they play in his oceans.

Genesis was written to show Israel that the things that others worship –

the sun and the moon, the animals and the fish –

all things in heaven and on earth were created by God.

Who was Genesis written for?

Some would say Israel as they are going into the land –

but the book is anonymous (both as to author and audience).

God did not want us to be overly concerned

with for whom and when this book was written.

It seems reasonable to say that Moses had something to do with its composition,

(and certainly the author of Genesis was familiar

with the ancient customs of Egypt

as well as the customs of the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> millennium in Canaan).

but some have suggested Joseph as a possible source,  
and all we know for certain  
is that it is an integral part of the five books of Moses.

What we know is that Genesis spoke clearly to Israel  
as they were coming out of Egypt into the Promised Land,  
warning them against the myths of Egypt – and the myths of Canaan.

Do not listen to those who would tell you that the God of Israel  
is just like the gods of the nations.

But Genesis spoke just as clearly to King Hezekiah  
as the Assyrians sat perched outside Jerusalem –  
mocking the God of heaven and earth.

And it spoke just as clearly to the early church  
as Rome demanded that they declare that Caesar is Lord.

And it speaks just as clearly today.  
*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth*

## **2. In the Beginning, God Created the Heavens and the Earth (v1-2)**

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

Verse 1 is the overall statement or introduction to the creation narrative.  
The rest of chapter 1 will explain what this means.

I do need to warn you, though,  
that Genesis is not interested in a lot of the questions we would like to ask.  
Where did the serpent come from?  
Where does evil come from?

Genesis does not tell us.

For that matter, where did matter come from?

Verse 2 tells us that the earth was formless and void,  
but it does not tell us where the earth came from.

Some have tried to say that verse 1 is the “original creation” –  
that “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”  
is the statement of the original creation,  
and then verses 2-31 tell you what God did with that original creation.

But we are told in verse 8 that God did not create the heavens until the second day,  
so it is highly unlikely that verse 1 is describing a prior event.

Rather, verse 1 is the title or superscription  
that tells you what the following section is all about.

Genesis will do this throughout.

Modern editors have come up with all sorts of nifty divisions,  
but Moses gave us the creation narrative (*bereshit* “in the beginning”),  
and then ten sections that follow.

And each of these ten sections begins with the same introduction:

*Eleh toledot* “These are the generations of...”

Each section of Genesis tells the story of the “seed” of the previous character.

For instance,

in chapters 2-4 we hear of “the generations of the heavens and the earth –  
namely, the lifetime of Adam and Eve –  
the only two human beings in history who had no father and no mother.

In chapters 5-6 we hear of the generations of Adam,  
what happened to his seed until the flood.

In chapters 6-9 we hear of the generations of Noah,  
what happened to his seed in the destruction of the first creation.

All of these narratives of “the generations”  
tell us about what happened to the descendents of the previous character.

But chapter 1 tells us about that which came before all seeds –  
that which came before all begetting.

Indeed, the language of verse 2 makes it clear that no begetting was possible!

*The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep.*

This is a great phrase in Hebrew:

The earth was “tohu vbohu.”

Children, this is one Hebrew phrase you should learn:

*Tohu vbohu*

The word “tohu” means empty

The word “bohu” means barren

Put together, *tohu vbohu* means an utter and complete wasteland.

Oh wait, maybe it’s the mothers of small children who should learn this phrase!

In a world that is tohu vbohu, nothing good can happen.

This does not mean that the earth was *evil*.

In a world that is tohu vbohu, nothing evil can happen either!

It is empty and barren.  
It is formless, lifeless, and devoid of anything fruitful.

Truly, in a world that is *tohu vbohu*, there is no begetting – there is no generation.

*Tohu vbohu* is used in two other places in scripture.  
(*Tohu* is used nearly 30 times in scripture –  
*bohu* is used only in conjunction with *tohu*)

They appear together again in Isaiah 34:11 and Jeremiah 4:23.  
In Isaiah 34, God is speaking of his judgment against the nations,  
and he says that he will bring “*tohu vbohu*” upon Edom.  
And in Jeremiah 4 God says that he will return creation itself  
to its primordial chaos,  
and Jeremiah replies:  
*I looked on the earth, and behold, it was without form and void*  
(*tohu vbohu*)  
*and to the heavens, and they had no light* (the 4<sup>th</sup> day reversed)  
*I looked on the mountains, and behold, they were quaking,*  
*and all the hills moved to and fro.*  
*I looked, and behold, there was no man* (the 6<sup>th</sup> day reversed),  
*and all the birds of the air had fled* (the 5<sup>th</sup> day reversed).  
*I looked, and behold, the fruitful land was a desert,*  
*and all its cities were laid in ruins before the LORD,*  
*before his fierce anger. (4:23-26)*

And throughout the scriptures, the word *tohu* (empty)  
is used to speak of an empty wasteland –  
frequently as a judgment of God against the wicked.

In Exodus you read about the plagues of Egypt.  
There are a lot of verbal connections between those chapters  
and the days of creation.  
In the plagues of Egypt, God is returning Egypt  
to a barren wasteland.  
(Indeed, Deuteronomy 32 will say that God found Israel in a wasteland – *tohu*)

Earth began as a *tohu* – a wasteland.  
And yet by the word of his power God formed it and made it beautiful.  
Earth began as a *bohu* – a barren land.  
And yet by the word of his power God caused it to bring forth creatures.

*Tohu vbohu* tells us that the earth was a barren wasteland,  
which is to say the same thing as you hear in the next phrase:

*and darkness was over the face of the deep.*

There is no life, there is no light, there is only darkness and the deep.

If you think about the picture that Moses is drawing for us,  
all we have heard so far is that “the earth” consists of “the deep” –  
or “the abyss” – a vast, chaotic, watery realm.

Don’t think in terms of modern science.  
It won’t help you!

Let God draw the picture for you through his servant Moses.  
In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

And where he began was with a watery realm.  
No outer space.  
No dry land.  
No planets.  
No stars.  
No sky.

Just the deep – the tehom (in Hebrew) –  
tohu vbohu  
empty and barren  
chaotic and uninhabitable.

And above the face of the deep there is darkness.

So there is darkness, and there is the abyss – a chaotic watery mass.

*And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.*  
Into this dark and dismal scene blows the Spirit of God.  
The word for “spirit” is also the word for “wind” or “breath.”

The meaning is plain in most usages –  
when “ruach elohim” is used (Spirit of God),  
then it refers to the Holy Spirit.  
But we need to understand that the idea of Spirit  
is closely associated with the idea of breath and of wind.

Into the stillness of the watery deep blows a mighty wind!  
Into the utter barrenness and emptiness of the tohu vbohu  
comes the lifegiving Spirit of God.

And the Spirit of God “hovers” or “broods” upon the face of the waters.  
When God brings life to that which lacked it,  
you will invariably find the Spirit of God present.

When God creates man,  
    he will breathe the breath of life (the Spirit of life) into man.  
When God creates Israel,  
    the Spirit of God will hover over them in the pillar of cloud and fire.  
    (Isaiah 63:11 says that the Holy Spirit divided the waters and  
    led Israel through the wilderness).  
And on the day of Pentecost when God gave resurrection life to his people,  
    it came about through the Spirit of God hovering over his people.

And where God's Spirit blows, God's Word will not be lacking!

### **3. In the Beginning...God said (v3-31)**

*And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.*

We will look next time at the details of all that God said.

For today we will only be able to point out that God speaks ten times in Genesis 1.  
Just as there are ten sections in Genesis,  
    each beginning with the "toledot" (These are the generations of...)  
    and just as there are ten commandments and ten plagues in Exodus,  
    so also God speaks ten times in creation.

The number 7 is important throughout scripture as the number of completeness,  
    but the number 10 also speaks of ordered completion.

When God speaks, creation obeys.

    This is one of the key distinctions between the Creator and the creature.  
    God's word is powerful – it accomplishes what he says.

It is perhaps worth noting that in verse 1 we hear about God.

    In verse 2 we hear about the Spirit of God.

    In verse 3 we hear God's word.

I don't think that Moses understood this to be a Trinitarian reference.

    But then again, Moses would not have understood the full import  
    of much of what he said.

John 1:1 tells us,

*In the beginning was the Word,*

*and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

*He was in the beginning with God.*

*All things were made through him,*

*and without him was not any thing made that was made.*

*In him was life, and the life was the light of men.*

*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

John 1 provides us with perhaps a little different perspective on Genesis 1



than we might have expected.

John tells us that if you want to understand what the creation narrative is all about,  
you have to understand who Jesus is.

Because *in the beginning* –  
God spoke.

And the same Word that brought life and light to all creation  
is the same Word who became flesh and dwelt among us.  
It was by his *Word* that God took the *tohu vbohu*  
and brought order out of chaos.  
It was by his Word that God spoke light,  
and the darkness fled,  
and God spoke life  
and the barrenness was no more.

All of humanity, since the fall, has been engaged in a headlong sprint back into chaos.

You know what I mean.

You crave order –  
but what do you have?  
Tohu! – a wasteland

You long to be fruitful –  
but what do you produce?  
Bohu – barrenness.

We say we love light,  
but secretly we delight in works of darkness,  
and we feel within us the seething abyss.

The Word of God – the Word who became flesh –  
is the one who brings order to the wasteland,  
life to the barren,  
light to the darkness.

He is the one who stills the primordial chaos that has been unleashed in us,  
as he speaks into our hearts:  
“Let their be light”

As Paul said,

*For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’  
has shone in our hearts  
to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God  
in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor 4:6)*

You might respond to this by saying,  
but Pastor, you aren’t helping me with what I’m dealing with in life!

I want to know how...

Wait, I think there's a spelling problem.

You are asking HOW (h-o-w)

But the Word of God keeps answering WHO (w-h-o)

Who is God?

What has he done? – in history.

What has he said? – in his Word

Listen to him!

Worship him!

Love him!