

On the day the LORD God made earth and heavens, no shrub of the field being yet on the earth and no plant of the field yet sprouted, for the LORD God had not caused rain to fall on the earth and there was no human to till the soil, and wetness would well from the earth to water all the surface of the soil, then the LORD God fashioned the human, humus from the soil, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living creature.

And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, to the east, and He placed there the human He had fashioned. And the LORD God caused to sprout from the soil every tree lovely to look at and good for food, and the tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge, good and evil. Now a river runs out of Eden to water the garden and from there splits off into four streams. The name of the first is Pishon, the one that winds through the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. And the gold of that land is goodly, bdellium is there, and lapis lazuli. And the name of the second river is Gihon, the one that winds through all the land of Cush. And the name of the third river is Tigris, the one that goes to the east of Ashur. And the fourth river is Euphrates.

And the LORD God took the human and set him down in the garden of Eden to till it and watch it. And the LORD God commanded the human, saying, "From every tree of the garden you may surely eat. But from the tree of knowledge, good and evil, you shall not eat, for on the day you eat from it, you are doomed to die."

And the LORD God said, "It is not good for the human to be alone, I shall make him a sustainer beside him." And the LORD God fashioned from the soil each beast of the field and each fowl of the heavens and brought each to the human to see what he would call it, and whatever the human called a living creature, that was its name.

And the human called names to all the cattle and to the fowl of the heavens and to all the beasts of the field, but for the human no sustainer beside him was found. And the LORD God cast a deep slumber on the human, and he slept, and He took one of his ribs and closed over the flesh where it had been, and the LORD God built the rib He had taken from the human into a woman and He brought her to the human.

And the human said: "This one at last, bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called Woman, for from man was this one taken." Therefore does a man leave his father and his mother and cling to his wife and they become one flesh. And the two of them were naked, the human and his woman, and they were not ashamed.

(translation by Robert Alter)

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Today we begin at the beginning. It is surely a good place to start. But where does the beginning begin? How do we do this? If you are a thinking person, you must have wondered about this at some point in your life.

Who was there at creation to record this? What evidence was there that the authors drew on? Was there a message chiseled in stone left behind for someone to read, millennia after the creation? I don't think so.



Sometimes diving into Genesis brings us more questions than answers - and that's actually a good way for us to begin. Asking questions is part of who we are as human beings; it's a big part

of what makes us who and what we are... and sometimes the answers we find are more helpful than we could ever imagine.

One of the first real 'eye-opening' things that I learned when I went to seminary (in Old Testament 01 class), that at first threw me for a loop and then made all the sense in the world, was that Genesis, as a 'book', was not the first book written in the Bible. (The composition of the Bible is a huge topic in and of itself.)

Genesis could only have been written AFTER the creation of a nation, when there was a stable situation for the Hebrew people and an established group of priests and scribes, after they left slavery in Egypt, settled in Palestine, and a kingdom was made under David. So while it might seem a bit disorienting that the first stories of the Bible are not the oldest stories (the oldest being the saga of Abraham), but after thinking it through, it makes plenty of sense.

So it was that perhaps around 1,000 BC, during David's reign, or perhaps later, even after the kingdom had fallen to the Babylonians and the Jewish people needed to record their story, distinguishing it over against other competing cultures, that these stories in Genesis began to take their current form. It's also important to note that Genesis is not the only place where you can find creation stories in the Bible. The Hebrews loved to tell stories about their God. There are at least seven other distinct stories of creation recorded in different parts of Hebrew scripture, each reflecting an important perspective of God's purpose in creating the world and all there is therein. From the Psalms (29, 8, 104, 136), the prophets Amos (4), Nehemiah (9), Isaiah (51), and passing references in Job (26), and 1 Kings (7), there are numerous references in Scripture to the creative power of God who makes the world with resolve and clear purpose.

It was upon a final 'editing' of sacred writings, a hundred years or so before Jesus, that the 'books' of the Hebrew Bible were ordered, more or less in their present positions. What hasn't changed in any of this is the Spirit with which the Biblical writers shared their convictions about God's purposes in creation.



There is a clear plan in all of the creation stories. They were written for a reason, and not necessarily the reason we're first looking for. Again, the creation stories are not a chronology of **how** things happened (this is not a 'eye-witness', or 'God's-eye witness' account), by **why**.

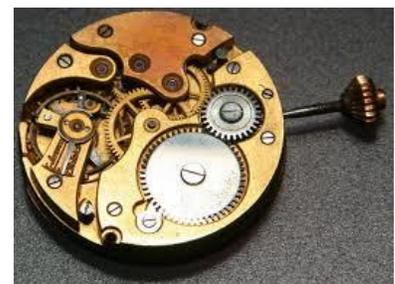
I don't know about you, but I always think the 'why' question is more important to answer than the how (though not always the easiest.) [Geologists and cosmologists take on the 'how' of creation, theologians try their best with the 'why.']

In the first version of the creation account (Chapter 1), the intentionality of God is straightforward... after each of the six days of creation it is clearly announced that 'it was good', and after all was done, 'very good.' All is made fitting God's good desire and design.



The second account of creation for us today focuses the lens a little closer, not on the great expanse of the universe, the earth, plants and all living beings thereon, but upon God's creatures, including you & me. It's a one day excursion through the creation of the heavens and earth, humanity and animals, too. (The fact that there are two, back-to-back and different accounts of Creation usually throws confirmation classes for a loop. The varying traditions behind these different accounts is too much to venture into for us now.)

The initial scene is set in Chapter 2, all in a day's work for a caring, careful and responsive God, one who is intimately involved in the process of creation, step by step. This is no passive 'watchmaker' God, who sets things in motion and lets them run of their own accord (as Isaac Newton once characterized the creator of the universe.)



This God kneels down to blow life into the first human's nostrils! This God plants a forest and a garden, a lush and fruitful place for creatures to live. And in this place are also two trees, symbols of long life and blessing, with their fruit somehow bearing the



weighty and fate-filled knowledge of good and evil. (What this exactly means by the authors is up for endless interpretation.)

And a river runs from the Garden, dividing itself into four streams to establish boundaries of some sort, leading to valuable resources of gems, minerals and the entryway to significant places. And in that Garden, in those trees, God's commands are embodied, do's and don'ts for life in absolute fullness or life cut short by sure and certain death.

I've often thought that the careful way that the narrator engages us in this internal discussion of the Lord God is as interesting and important as the message delivered. Being given insight into the 'mind of the Creator' is in itself a gift (albeit a potentially life-threatening one), which in itself draws us into the message. This public, internal 'Holy' conversation that spills over into print has engaged humanity for millennia- a creative literary device that succeeds in its purpose of drawing us into the conversation. As readers, we instinctively ask 'why' about the blessings and curses of the trees and get engaged in the drama of the power of human decisions.

With the trees of decision already blooming comes to God's mind the need for a partner, a 'helpmeet', a 'sustainer' for the first human being. The Hebrew word here is notoriously difficult to translate. It seems it was equally difficult for God to find the right partner for the first human creature, for a myriad of birds and animals were created for this purpose, but failed in the final analysis. They were fine in and of themselves, but did not meet the need at hand.

So in taking a rib (my favorite translator, Robert Alter, refers to this body part as 'a chop', more meaty than mere bone, although the same Hebrew term is sometimes used in descriptions of architecture, as a supporting structure), the Lord God fashions a woman.

And with this new creation the first human words are spoken, announcing God's work of creating a blessed, lasting partnership. The first two humans discover that the God who created them is ready to be present with them, come what may. These first two humans will live long, hard lives, with hope, happiness, and each other.

They also, just like us, live with boundaries and blessings.

Their boundaries were not just the rivers and the trees. Limits will appear to them, even as we experience them ourselves. What boundaries do you know? We all have physical limits; death will sometime come, and we



might not be able to shake off illnesses like we once could. We all have financial limits of one sort or another. (We all would like to contribute to the hardships of those in the Bahamas, and help more than we are able.)

If your life is filled with more boundaries than blessings- this is the place where you need to be, for there is more support for you here than you know.

And, if your life is filled with blessings, (and if you woke up this morning you have already received one; the breath of God)- this is also the right place for you to be. The blessings we have are meant to be shared, and not hoarded. The gift of song, the beauty of friendships, new and old... the peace we too often take for granted that we enjoy. There is a balance in life, a back and forth between boundaries and blessings, aptly described in the words of a hymn written by Thomas Troeger.

The title is "God set a Line", and it is set to a very difficult tune, but the words are well worth repeating....

God set a limit in the glade
where tempting, fruited branches swayed,
and that first limit stands behind
the limits that the law defined.

2. The line, the limit and the law
are patterns meant to help us draw
a bound between what life requires
and all the things our heart desires.

3. But, discontent with finite powers,
we reach to take what is not ours,
and then defend our claims by force
and swerve from life's intended course.

4. We are not free when we're confined
to every wish that sweeps the mind,
but free when freely we accept
the sacred bounds that must be kept.

Together we are given God gifts to share; life, love, togetherness, fellowship and more, in good times and in trying times. In God's presence, we have reason for be keenly aware of God's support both in our boundaries and our blessings. God calls this day to celebrate. Thanks be to God. Amen.