

## A Commentary on the First Chapter of Genesis

“IN THE BEGINNING.” What a powerful way to begin the greatest book ever written. The gospel of John also began with those same words. With the book of Genesis, “in the beginning” does not refer to the absolute beginnings of all things, but the beginning of the ordered universe. The seven-day patterns in the first chapter of Genesis establishes a pattern to be observed by all human beings.

The basis of my interpretation of the Old Testament, especially the book of Genesis, is built around the teaching of my favorite teacher and friend, Dr. Walter Brueggemann, 1933-2025. One of many lines from Walter that stir and haunt me till today is “if we don’t get the meaning of Genesis one through eleven correct, we will never get the meaning of the Bible.”

In a book Walter wrote with three other scholars, “The Theological Introduction to the Old Testament”, they wrote, “Genesis has served as an anvil upon which many biblical studies are based.” The authors continued writing Genesis is a composite work drawn from various sources and edited over the courses of many centuries.

### OTHER VOICES:

Gerhard von Rad...Genesis is not an independent book that can be interpreted by itself. The principal subject of Genesis is not about the religiosity of the patriarchs, rather it was the laying of the foundations for Israel's faith. The book of Genesis was written later than many other Old Testament books in order for Israel to place creation in a better theological relationship with their older beliefs.

Kathleen O'Connor...Beginnings are the subject of the book of Genesis: beginnings of the cosmos, its inhabitants and most particularly the people of Israel. God, the One who brings order from disorder.

Fr. Richard Rohr... Genesis is about God's abundant love for the universe and its inhabitants. Genesis needs to remind us that original blessings are over original sin. It is a book emphasizing God's grace and his gifts.

Davie Napier 1915-2007 ... We must always interpret the past in light of the whole. The book of Genesis falls into two parts: primeval history chapters one through eleven and ancestral history, chapters twelve through fifty.

John Bright 1908-1995 ... Genesis covers only a few families who move through the world as if they were alone in it. The Genesis narrative is painted in black and white on a simple canvas with no perspective in depth.

Barbara Essex 1951—God provides freedom, choice, and limitations. God remains present and faithful; this is the real meaning of grace.

Brueggemann again:

GOD CALLS THE WORLD INTO BEING.

GOD CALLS A COMMUNITY TO BE HIS WITNESS.

GOD OFFERS HOPE TO A MARGINALIZED COMMUNITY.

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Author of Genesis:

On 11-9-1952 I received from Zion my first Bible, the King James Version. The KJV read about its authorship "Genesis, the first book of Moses." WRONG! Although some denominations and authors still attribute Moses as the author of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, they forgot about the Period of the Enlightenment 1685-1815 where the age of reason, philosophy, science and theology rose.

We "enlightened" people now believe that Genesis 1:1 through 2:4a was written not by Moses, but a family called "P" Priestly.

500-430 B.C.E. The interest of the authors were in cultic matters, worship, law and religious institutions, sacrifice, and using words like fruitful, blessed, multiply, subdue and dominion. God is referred to as Elohim in the Hebrew.

ARE YOU READY FOR SOME INTERPRETATION? IF SO  
CONTINUE

Genesis 1:1 to 2:4a is the first of two creation stories. Following 2:4a you are on your own or ask you minister!

Chapter 1 vs 1-2

Genesis assumes that God does not have to be introduced. God is the subject of more activities than any other character. This chapter is not about science or history; it is poetic liturgy. The chapter and much of the Bible is hope for a frustrated world, a calm above the storm. It is about the ability of God to bring purpose to out chaotic lives.

Verse 1 is similar to a well-known Enuma Elish, an older Mesopotamian account of creation.

Our first two verses draw our attention to a complex world, a time of chaos and formlessness, some call it a liturgy of wonder. We are invited into a time when there was no time. Everything was formless, chaotic and nothingness. According to the notes I placed in my Bible, God was over us like a brewed hen. Creation began in the shadows yet God, Elohim was present.

Genesis one was addressed to a community in exile. "P" views a God who is binding, bringing together hope to a community in despair. This chapter is not so much about creation rather it is a theological narrative about creating order above chaos. It was about God's ability to bring purpose to our chaotic lives.

Unlike our second creation story found in Genesis two, our first story about creation took place in six days.

DAY ONE: Genesis 1:3-5

Our agent of creation is first found in the stories from the Babylonians, the Egyptians. Gunkel reminds us that "in these earlier stories their myths were in a world was a world of magic." God created light, representing life. The days of creation build upon one another like an architectural blue- print.

DAY TWO: Genesis 1:6-8

A "firmament" was created. The firmament was a solid substance. The sky was like a dome, and this dome covered the earth protecting the earth from receiving too much water. God's design of the world is not accidental but based on the will of God. God called the dome sky.

In the Babylonian creation the sun god Marduk split the slain chaos in two and used one half of the carcass as a firmament, the other half as the earth.

#### DAY THREE: Genesis 1:9-13

God gathers the water and creates vegetation. Dry land appears and we have the earth. Day three was marked by two acts, gathering of the waters and letting the dry land appear. Once again, God commands this to be done.

#### DAY FOUR: Genesis 1:14-19

The purpose of the light was to separate the day from the night, they are not just to produce light. Light signifies time and distinguishes days, seasons and years from one another. God sees that this is good.

#### DAY FIVE: Genesis 1:20-22

At God's command, the waters bring forth living creatures, thus creating biological reproduction. Waters are now endowed with productive powers. Now water participates in the production of life. The once empty seas and skies are suddenly alive with swimming and flying creatures.

#### DAY SIX: Genesis 1:23-31

Once again, we have here two creation acts, animals and humans. Here God delegates responsibilities for the non-human. Animals were divided into three classifications, cattle, creeping things and beasts of the earth. There is no blessing of the animals similar to that of the fishes.

We were created the same day showing the need we have to share with one another. Note, we humans do not have our own

day set aside just for us. We all share in the image of God. We all receive God's blessings, and we are very good creating human dignity for all. We are all co-members of a larger community of life. Something we have yet to understand!

DAY SEVEN: Genesis 2:1-4a Sabbath Those in Exile can now rest.

The seventh day was blessed and God stopped working; she rested. Resting is not the same as sleeping. Resting was meant for us to pick up a good book, time to give thanks for all that we have. Day seven is the opportunity for all of us to break away from a frantic world and to know God. For some that takes place by attending church, but many churches are so full of drama that the pursuit of becoming whole is nonexistent. Resting gives us time, an invitation to form a new kind of human community, to pursue wholeness.

The seventh day is when we stop grasping, exploiting others, self-indulgence and we create a new community where all are respected and loved. Like "the good shepherd," who does not grasp for herself, but show human dignity and compassion for all of God's creation.

SO WHAT? This is not just a cute story about creation. "P" wrote this story to offer hope to a people in exile. We too live in exile, many of our churches are worried more about their continued existence that they miss the role of shepherding others. Can one truly rest at Zion? God created a harmony for all, hope for all, accepting all.

During my research I contacted a teacher from Eden Theological Seminary. He wrote back, "We really need the UCC's voice to

counter what I consider to be the idolatrous “Christian” Nationalism that is so prevalent these days.” Rev. McCann concluded by saying, “Genesis leads me to conclude that God loves and wills the well-being of the entirety of humankind.”

Are we in harmony with others? Does the story of creation give us hope for a better self and a better place for all? We are all invited to participate in all of God’s creation.

SHALOM TO ALL. (peace and wholeness)

Dennis Siebert

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