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In the Beginning...

The first biblical book, Genesis, tells us the story of the beginning of everything. In fact, the very first word of the book is *'bereshit'*, which means, *'in the beginning'*. The first eleven chapters of Genesis tell us of the beginnings of the universe and humanity; the rest of the book (chapters 12 to 50) describes the saga of the patriarchs from Abraham to Joseph. The first eleven chapters of the book contain texts of the two great traditions: Yahwist tradition and Priestly tradition. In many places of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, the texts of these two traditions follow one another; in other places the last redactor combined and merged them together into one story. The example of the latter can be found in the story of the flood (Genesis 6:5-9:17); the example of the former can be found in the first three chapters of the book: the texts of Priestly tradition (which are much younger than Yahwist) are Genesis 1:1-2:4a, and the texts of the Yahwist (Genesis 2:4b-3:24)

The last redactors of Pentateuch decided to begin it with a monumental prologue-hymn in the honor of God, the creator of heaven and earth. We have to remember however, that this text has been composed much later than the second creation story in Genesis 2:4-3:24, that comes from the Yahwist tradition. Before I begin reflecting on the text of Genesis 1, I think I need to clarify some misunderstandings and misinterpretations that people have about this text.

Some Challenges

Let me begin with a question: How are we to read the biblical story of the creation in Genesis? We are people who live in the scientific age of the twenty first century and have developed an enormous body of scientific knowledge about our world. Some people claim that there is no reason for us whatsoever to read the story of creation in the Bible, because it was written by people who had very little scientific knowledge and did not understand and comprehend the laws of nature. They claim that what we find in the creation story are myths and folklore traditions of the ancients. Truly, from the scientific point of view, the creation story seems to be very primitive.

Other people read the story of creation literally, trying to prove that the Bible tells us exactly how it was, how it happened; for example they claim that the world was created in 6 days 6000 years ago.

These are not minor issues and many contemporary readers of the Bible wrestle with them. But both of the above approaches to the creation story are erroneous.

If one looks in the Bible for the scientific description of the beginning of the universe and humanity, one will be very disappointed and will never understand what the Biblical authors really wanted to convey. We will not find there the scientific description of the creation because the Biblical authors were primitive (On the contrary, they belonged to the intellectual elite), but because their purpose for writing the story was totally different. It can be easily proven that the Biblical authors were not

interested in scientific presentation of the stages of creation. For example, in Genesis 1 all the animals are created before humans, whereas in Genesis 2, God creates them after he had already made Adam. The point in both texts is the same: God had created everything for man, who in God's name is to govern and cultivate the earth. Thus when we begin reading Genesis we must keep in mind the fundamental rule of interpretation of every text, Biblical or non-Biblical: if we want to understand the text, we must first understand what the author of the text really wants to tell us.

The aim of the story of creation is not to tell us *how* exactly everything happened; rather, the aim of the Biblical text is to tell us about the deepest sense of everything and to lead us to God. Saint Augustine expressed that when he said that God did not give us the Holy Spirit to teach us about the laws of nature, because he wanted to form Christians and not mathematicians.

Therefore the author of Genesis used the language, images and knowledge of the epoch in which he lived in order to teach us about the deepest sense and purpose of our existence. He wanted to teach us about where we came from and what our destiny is. We cannot understand any Biblical text without the context of the time and place in which it had been written. The priestly author of Genesis 1:1-2:4a lived in the exile in Babylon in VI century B.C. and was deeply influenced by the experience of living in exile, far from the land that God had given the chosen people. That is why he writes about the mighty wind sweeping over the waters (Genesis 1:1). The Yahwist, on the other hand, who wrote probably in Jerusalem, everything begins with the description of dry steppe (Genesis 2:4b-7).

Enuma Elish

Not only were the Biblical authors influenced by the place in which they lived, but they were also influenced by the ancient literature and mythology as well. Our knowledge of these things is quite recent. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the English archeologists discovered in the ruins of the ancient city of Niniveh, the great royal library of the Assyrian king Assurbanipal (668-627). The library contained the collection of thousands of clay tablets with texts of all kinds from seventh century B.C. Among them was the famous *Epic of Gilgamesh*, an epic poem, one of the earliest works of human literature. They also found the text of *Enuma Elish*, a Babylonian creation myth that helps us to understand the world view of the ancient Babylonians. The author of Genesis 1 was very familiar with the story of *Enuma Elish* and incorporated many of its themes into his own story of creation.

Enuma Elish speaks of the beginnings, of the creation of everything. The story begins with describing that in the beginning nothing existed (literally: it wasn't named; in the ancient world view not to have a name equals non-existence), and describes the struggle between the cosmic chaos and order. It speaks of the vast waters and chaos and it introduces two primeval gods: Apsu and Tiamat:

*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, Tiamat, 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...*

In *Enuma Elish*, like in many other ancient mythologies (Greek or Egyptian), cosmogony (the theory of the creation of the universe) is at the same time theogony (the theory of the origin of the gods). To be more exact: in the non-biblical texts the birth of the universe is intrinsically connected with the birth of the gods who do not exist outside it. *Enuma Elish* speaks of many relations between gods and many different births, as the new gods come into being.

At some point, the younger gods rebel against the older ones and they kill old Apsu. Tiamat, in order to avenge his death, starts the war against other gods. They get together and chose Marduk, the youngest of them, as their leader in the fight against Tiamat. Marduk won the war and became the strongest and mightiest of all gods. He then created humanity from the dirt of the earth and the blood of defeated gods and imposed order on the entire universe: the humanity was to serve him as slaves.

Enuma Elish is a long poem (there is no place here to summarize the entire work) – it is recorded on seven tablets, 150 verses each. In the fourth day of each New Year in Babylon, the priest of Marduk stood in front of the huge statue of Marduk and recited (or sung) the entire *Enuma Elish*. The purpose of this rite was to recreate and renew the universe by giving honor to the god Marduk.

Marduk and Yahweh

For the Israelites living in the VI century B.C. in the Babylonian exile this god Marduk must have seem to be mighty and powerful. Didn't the king of Babylon conquer Jerusalem and enslave them? For some Israelites Marduk seemed to be more powerful than Yahweh! Therefore some of them felt the temptation to renounce the faith of their fathers and to worship Marduk, who seemed to be much more real to them. Because of that, the priests of Israel began to rethink and reinterpret the history of the chosen people as well as the history of the entire universe, in order to preserve the faith of the chosen people.

The Priestly Author of Genesis 1

The author of the first page of the Bible, the great hymn of creation in honor of the one true God of Israel, challenged the entire belief system of Babylon, with their myths and stories. It is not Marduk who is truly powerful but the God of Israel, creator of heaven and earth – everything that exists. When we read the creation story of Genesis 1, we should keep in mind of what it is – it is a well crafted hymn in honor of God the creator. A lot of people have a difficulty in understanding the six days of creation and the seventh day in which God ‘rested’. We have to remember that at the time this text was written, the Jews had celebrated Sabbath for six or seven centuries already! By using the seven-day schema, the author wanted to urge his contemporaries (who lived in the land of exile, surrounded by pagan religions!), to remain faithful to their own religious patrimony and to observe Sabbath.

Babylonians have celebrated their own feasts in honor of their gods, but none of their feasts repeated with weekly regularity (like Sabbath) and required rest. It was not at all easy for the Israelites to remain faithful to their Sabbath observance. For the author of Genesis 1 the observance of Sabbath was a matter of religious life and death. That is why God created everything in six days and he rested on the seventh day making it holy.

Moreover, number seven, understood symbolically, means fullness, perfection and completeness. Like a refrain, Genesis 1 repeats that everything God made was good. Finally, “*God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good*” (Genesis 1:31). Everything God has created was perfect because God who had created it was perfect.

God, Creator of Everything

“*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*” The very first verse of the great hymn of creation contains everything: heaven and earth means universe (ancient Hebrews did not have the word ‘universe’), everything that exists. It is not the beginning of something, but simply beginning. Everything begins with God who is so powerful that everything comes to existence just on his word: he says and things are made. His words are incredibly, creatively powerful. How different that idea is from that of *Enuma Elish* with its complicated genealogies of gods and many births! According to Genesis, there is only one God and his name, Elohim, is repeated 35 times.

How different is this God from the gods of Babylonian myths! He does not have genealogy, parents, wife, palace... He simply exists. God of Israel is very different from any gods of ancient religions. On the one hand, we have all the things that he created: stars, sun, moon, earth, plants and animals and on the other hand we have this almighty, powerful God.

So Genesis 1 tells us that God created everything. Did he create everything from nothing? This kind of question would not make any sense for the priestly author of Genesis 1. The philosophical idea of nothingness would have been unknown to him. He simply says that God created everything and that means that all things that exist came to be through the power of God, and nothing that exists

is beyond God's power. The statement that God created everything from nothing will appear much later, in 2 Maccabees, influenced by Greek philosophy: "*I beg you, child, to look at the heavens and the earth and see all that is in them; then you will know that God did not make them out of existing things*" (2 Maccabees 7:28).

Bara

We need to pay close attention to the Hebrew verb 'to create'. The Hebrew word used to describe the action of God is 'bara', which means, 'to create'. The Hebrew word 'bara' rarely appears in the Bible, but if it does, it always describes the action of God. Only God can create. In Genesis 1 the verb 'bara' appears 5 times to describe the creative action of almighty God.

Formless Wasteland

In the very first verse we read that "*the earth was a formless wasteland and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters.*" The Hebrew '*tohu wabohu*' is translated in the New American Bible as '*formless wasteland*'. The New Jerusalem Bible translates it as '*formless void*'. The idea is the same – '*tohu wabohu*' is unorganized, shapeless void. Ancient Greek mythology would use the word 'chaos'. Then we hear of '*the waters*'. Hebrew word is '*tehom*' which literally means '*chaos*' or '*abyss*' and refers to the primordial waters of creation. It may not be an accident that that word is similar to Babylonian '*Tiamat*' from *Enuma Elish*. Whereas in *Enuma Elish* Tiamat is a powerful goddess, in the Bible it is simply waters.

Three Separations

The world that was to become a home for the animals and the people is created in stages through three great acts of separation. On the first day, God creates the light and separates it from darkness. On the second day, God creates the dome and separates the waters above the dome from those below it. And finally, on the third day, God separates the waters from the dry land. This very methodic action of God organizes time and space. As God creates everything, he also gives names to all the things he creates.

The idea of great separations is also present in *Enuma Elish*. The differences however, between the story in Genesis and the Babylonian myth are striking. In *Enuma Elish* Marduk, who conquered Tiamat in the mythical fight, kills her and divides her enormous body into two parts. From one he creates the dome, from the other the earth. How different it is in Genesis! God creates and organizes everything simply by the power of his word.

Plants; Sun, Moon and Stars

After the three great separations that create order intended by God, God creates plants. "*Let the earth bring forth vegetation: every kind of plant that bears seed and every kind of fruit tree on earth that*

bears fruit with its seeds in it” (Genesis 1:11). We would expect that after the plants we would read of the creation of the animals. Instead we hear that on the fourth day God created sun, moon and the stars. Again, we see that surely the aim of the Biblical author was not to give us an exact chronology – the light created on the first day existed before the sun!

The Biblical scholars explain that the author of Genesis was at pains to show that sun, moon and stars are just as everything else, creations of God. We have to remember that in the ancient world, people regarded sun and moon to be gods. Not so, according to Genesis. Sun and moon belong to the same family of created things like plants and animals. They are not gods in any sense.

Animals and Man

Finally, on the sixth day, animals and man are created. The author of Genesis seems to be aware that animals and man have a lot of things in common, but there is also a great difference. The creation of man is a crowning of all creation. God was about to make a very important decision; he even thought about it beforehand: *“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground”* (Genesis 1:26). How do we explain the plural ‘we’ used in that sentence? The most probable explanation is that the author used here, so called, *pluralis deliberationis*, the plural form expressing the process of making an important decision. The other explanation of the plural ‘we’ is that it expresses the majesty and fullness of God’s being. The common name for God in Hebrew is Elohim, which is a plural form.

The solemn pronouncement of God in the creation of man is stressed even more in the next sentence: *“God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them”* (Genesis 1:27). The important word ‘*bara*’, reserved in the Bible for God alone and quite rare, in this sentence appears three times!

These two verses of Genesis 1 (verses 26 and 27) inspired many philosophical and theological treaties throughout the centuries. The main thought of the author seems however to be pretty clear: man, created in the image and likeness of God, is supposed to govern the rest of creation in the name of God and in accord with his plan. It is a great gift, a gift that also requires great responsibility.

Then God blesses man who he created: *“God blessed them, saying: be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it”* (Genesis 1:28). Man was supposed to live in union with God and the created world. *“God look at everything he had made, and he found it very good”* (Genesis 1:31).

Finally, *“on the seventh day God finished with the work he had been doing, he rested on the seventh day from the work he had undertaken. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work he had done in creation”* (Genesis 2:1). The Hebrew word describing the rest of God is rich in meaning: it implies the joyful celebration, delight and contemplation. So we can say that on the seventh day God in delight contemplated his created universe.

