IN THE BEGINNING

A look at the revolutionary significance of the creation stories in Genesis

R. BOAZ JOHNSON

This month the Companion *begins a new series exploring the specific contexts in which the Bible was written. North Park University and North Park Theological Seminary faculty will examine the audience, setting, and purpose of biblical books, stories, and passages in order to help readers more fully understand the origins of the texts.*

The creation narrative found in Genesis 1-3 is one of the most familiar texts of the Bible.

At North Park University, my colleagues in the biblical and theological studies department and I teach a course called Introduction to the Bible to all incoming freshmen. On the first day, I give the students a test to assess their biblical knowledge in order to help me know how best to teach them. Here is what I find: usually every student knows about Adam and Eve. Unfortunately, most students do not get beyond this basic knowledge. When I ask the question, "What is the purpose of the creation narrative?" it is not uncommon to hear answers like the following:

"The Bible shows that evolution is wrong."

"The Bible says in no uncertain terms that God created the universe in six twenty-four-hour days."

"The Bible shows how Eve, the woman, disobeyed God and brought sin upon man. Therefore, women are

---

R. Boaz Johnson teaches in the Department of Biblical and Theological Studies at North Park University in Chicago. He is also a preaching pastor at DeerGrove Covenant Church in Palatine, Illinois.

cursed to serve men."

"The Bible shows how knowledge is bad and faith is good, because the woman wanted knowledge instead of trusting in God."

Usually, students are fired up by this time, wanting to take sides on these interpretations. I ask them to withhold judgment until they have been able to read the creation narrative in the light of the rest of the Bible, and in the light of the texts that originated in the period of time when the biblical text was written. I tell them, "The context is the king—the biblical context and the religious, political, and social context. These help us better understand the original intent of the text."

Creation in ancient religions

Archeological digs have given us a good picture of religion and society during the time of the biblical writers. A cursory reading of documents from ancient Egyptian and Sumerian civilizations gives us a pretty good understanding of the context of the biblical creation narrative. One such document is the Enuma Elish, which depicts the Babylonian creation story. It describes the religion of the people who lived during the time of Moses. Texts like the Enuma Elish show us that the people of that time believed in chaos and warfare between various gods and goddesses. The bloody result of this warfare led to the creation of humanity.

One of the gods of the Mesopotamians, called Marduk, boasts, "I will knead blood and bone [of Tiamat, the destroyed goddess] into a savage; 'aborigine slave' will be his name." The aborigines—the term refers to the bulk of humanity—were created explicitly to do the work of slavery. In this creation narrative, the female goddess Tiamat was defeated by the quintessential male god Marduk. It seems very clear that the Enuma Elish—and the religion it describes—is the product of the worshipers of Marduk, who sought to enslave other people.

Egyptian religions give us further examples. Humans are portrayed as the products of bizarre sexual rituals between gods and goddesses. In the ritual song for the worship of the Egyptian god Ra we see the Pharaoh, priests, and royalty who were the descendants of Ra and his coterie of gods and goddesses. All of these emerged from the holy river Nile. A part of the ritual song reads, "I exhaled the wind; I spat the rain . . . and common human beings appeared; with my tears, I made the reptiles and their companions." It is clear that the Egyptian religions portray "common humanity" to be the product of the refuse of the gods and goddesses. Those human beings who were not priests
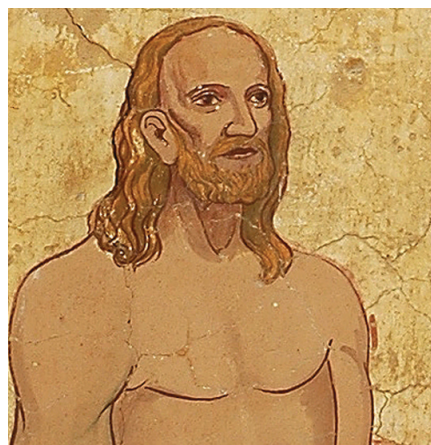
and rulers were created to be slaves.

The laws of ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian societies additionally portray a demeaning state of women. Women fell into one of two categories: either they were the property of men, or they were temple prostitutes who were used by priests and rulers for sexually oriented worship in their temples. The Code of Hammurabi, a Mesopotamian law code, depicts several examples of this attitude toward women. "When a woman squanders her man's possessions, she destroys his honor. She must die by drowning." And, "If a woman robs her man when he is dead, she is to be put to death." It seems clear from these laws that the place of women was to be slaves to men.

It is in this context that the biblical creation narrative was written. Genesis 1-3 must be read as an apologetic against other ancient religions. The Torah, comprising the creation narrative of the book of Genesis and the laws pertaining to human beings, was not

written in a vacuum. It was given to Moses and to God's people to counter the enslavement found in other ancient religions. Those religions were designed to give power to a minority of priestly ruling classes, justifying the subjugation of a majority of people.

God's creation is good

Genesis begins with the words "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (TNIV). The phrase "heavens and earth" in linguistic categories is called a "merism," which is a term that describes one single thing by using a phrase that lists only some of its parts. The Genesis writer uses "heavens and earth" to indicate that God created everything. The biblical creation narrative makes clear, right off the bat, that creation is not a result of a fight between gods and goddesses in which the female goddess gets defeated, and her body parts form various parts of creation and humanity. Rather God, the transcendent one, creates the universe and everything in it. Everything has a purpose. It is not chaotic creation. It is the creation of one God.

Genesis 1 stresses the idea that when God created the universe he created everything to be "good." The word is used seven times in this chapter. In Hebrew the word is *tov*, which signifies the fact that God put a bit of his essential goodness into creation. This is crucially different from the Sumerian and Egyptian concepts of humanity and the environment. In those religions, creation was evil and therefore was meant to be plundered. In contrast, the biblical creation narrative is a picture of God's goodness; therefore it is to be cherished and nurtured.

We see the apex of God's goodness in the creation of human beings. "God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (1:27, TNIV). This is in direct contrast to the religions of that time at several levels. In other religions, some human beings, such as the priestly ruling classes, were the direct descendants of the gods and goddesses. Others—a

large majority of them—were created to be slaves. Genesis 1, however, emphasizes that all human beings are created in the image of God. There is no distinction between higher human beings and lower human beings. There is no racial difference. All human beings are created in the image of God. This concept rules out any kind of slavery.

Further, Genesis 1 clearly emphasizes complete equality between man and woman. Both are equally created in the image of God. This is surely an apologetic against the religions of that time. In those religions women were created to be enslaved to men. The biblical creation narrative declares that there is no such distinction. Both are equal.

This is a unique picture of human sexuality. The creation narrative declares that unity between man and woman is a picture of God. Genesis 2:25 declares, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one" (TNIV). The word translated as "one," is the Hebrew word *echad*, which is used to describe the identity of God himself. A good example of this may be seen in the central creedal statement of the Torah: "YHWH our God, YHWH is *echad* [one]" (Deuteronomy 6:4, TNIV). The biblical creation narrative claims that when a man and woman become "one" in marriage, their union is an intrinsic picture of God. In world religions of that time higher caste men had sexual encounters with multiple women, especially women who were called temple prostitutes. In contrast, the creation narrative emphasizes that such approach to sexuality is utterly wrong thinking. Sexual, emotional, and intellectual oneness between one man and one woman is a picture of the *echad* God—the one who alone created the universe.

The Genesis creation narrative also seeks to give human beings the essential

mandate for all humanity, irrespective of race or gender. The essence of it may be seen in the Hebrew text of Genesis 2:15. This verse is usually translated as "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (NIV). This translation, which is passed down from the King James Version, seems to be influenced by the modern Protestant work

ethic. It is helpful to see how the Bible itself uses these words elsewhere.

The Hebrew word *nuach,* which is translated here as "put," is translated elsewhere in the Pentateuch as "gave rest" (e.g., Genesis 8:4; Exodus 23:12); the Hebrew word *avad,* which is translated as "work," literally means "worship or serve" (e.g., Exodus 4:23; 23:24). And the Hebrew word *shamar,* which is translated as "to care of," literally means "keep," as in "keeping the commandments" (e.g., Exodus 19:5; 20:6; Deuteronomy 5:10). Unfortunately the word *avad* was misused by some interpreters of the Bible in the antebellum South to suggest a biblical nod to the subjugation of slaves for works of *avad*, or slavery. It is clear that this was a complete misunderstanding of the biblical text.

Therefore, in light of the usage of these words in the rest of the Pentateuch and the Bible, Genesis 2:15 should more appropriately be translated and amplified as "YHWH God gave human beings eternal rest [*nuach*] in the
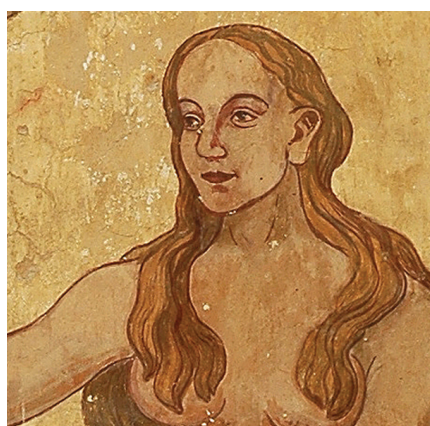
Garden of Eden, to worship [*avad*] and to keep [*shamar*] the commandments and the word of God." The Genesis creation narrative emphasizes that all human beings, regardless of their race and color, were created to serve or worship God, and in doing so, all human beings were keeping his Torah—his word. Furthermore, the creation narrative emphasizes that no human beings were supposed to be enslaved, but rather, all human beings—regardless of their race or color—were created to worship God through their care of God's good creation.

Transforming society

The context of the Genesis creation narrative reveals that it is very complex and powerful. Unfortunately, a wrong understanding of this narrative has led to modernistic debates—debates of the kind reflected in the comments of my freshman students. The original intent of the creation narrative was not these issues, however. Rather, the creation narrative was intended to transform ancient society into a new society through the power of the creation gospel of the God who created everything and everyone as "good."

When we read Genesis 1-3 from this perspective we see not only the apologetic and transformative value for that period of time, but we also see its value for our time as the church today encounters crucial issues like human trafficking and global slavery. The biblical creation narrative must be communicated to global cultures from this perspective, so that world cultures are able to encounter a new story, the re-creation gospel, which by the power of the Holy Spirit can transform modern society into a Genesis 1-3 society. This is what Christ accomplished on the cross (Ephesians 2). This, it seems to me, was the original intent of the creation narrative, and remains the intent today, as well. ❏

The biblical creation narrative makes clear, right off the bat, that creation is not a result of a fight between gods and goddesses…. Rather God, the transcendent one, creates the universe and everything in it.