

A New Look at Genesis: Part 1
A sermon by the Rev. Robert L. Morriss
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Let me say at the start that I know it is rare for Makaanah or I to preach a two-part sermon. Thus it probably seems very peculiar that of all things I might choose to devote two Sundays to, I would pick the creation stories at the beginning of the book of Genesis. What may seem even stranger is that I intend to talk about the value of these stories rather than argue with them.

Now I know that may leave some of you wondering if I have lost my mind and I want to assure you that the answer to that question is a definite yes, and no, or perhaps a more accurate answer is sometimes ... and anyway I'm trying and doing the best that I can even though I know you can't get there by trying ... but sometimes I try anyway ... and then sometimes I remember to relax and breathe and I do lose my mind (in the Buddhist sense) and when I do it's wonderful which is why I wanted to spend two Sundays talking about the value of meditating on Genesis.

Why Genesis? Well, it provides a sharp contrast to "end time thinking" which seems to be getting us in a lot of trouble these days. It's not just the conflict that has arisen between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim fundamentalists, which is threatening our lives as they compete to bring about their particular end time scenario. Neil Douglas-Klotz reminds us in his introduction to *The Genesis Meditations*, that "As the Christian theologian Thomas Berry has pointed out, this pursuit of a utopian ideal infects even materialistic constructs like Marxism and the new world order of global capitalism. It causes human beings to overlook the process of the journey of life, including the ways they treat each other and nature, in favor of reaching some idealized goal: *In the last few centuries [utopian hope often described as] the millennium has appeared as the Enlightenment, the democratic age, the nation-state, the classless society, the capitalist age of peace and plenty, and the industrial wonderworld. It is the supreme irony of history that the consequences of these millennial expectations have been the devastation of the planet – wasteworld rather than wonderworld.*"

It should seem pretty obvious to anyone who thinks about it that we can't keep going in the direction we are headed at the moment without disastrous consequences. To the millennialists who are awaiting either the first or the second coming this impending disaster doesn't currently matter. But it will matter a great deal to all of us when there is no miraculous new order descending from heaven, and we have to make do with what is left of nature's regenerative capacity.

I do not question the sincerity of the faith of those like former Secretary of the Interior, James Watt, who honestly believed that it didn't matter if we cut down all the trees, because as he said, before or as the last tree was cut, Jesus would come again. I don't question his sincerity, and I do question the accuracy of his religious vision about what will really happen. I also question his Biblical scholarship. The problem of course is that one can argue end time scenarios until one is blue in the face, and aside from one-upping each other with whose quoting the most respected religious authority, little is gained, and minds are rarely changed.

Neil Douglas-Klotz suggests a fascinating alternative. He suggests that if we return to the Biblical stories as they were understood by the Semitic people who first told them, we will gain insights for living that will render competing end time scenarios irrelevant. And so I want to invite you on a journey into a way of looking at and understanding the world that is very different from the usual western understanding of a spiritual journey.

As some of you will remember from our look at decoding the spiritual message of the Aramaic Jesus in December, the Hebrew and Aramaic mindset with respect to such crucial religious concepts as spirit, and time is very hard to translate into a language that is based on a Greek and Latin understanding of these words. If we think of time as linear, proceeding from one point to another, we can not understand the Semitic concept of Being, called into existence in every now – a notion remarkably consistent with some folks understanding of quantum physics. If one thinks of Spirit as something we have – separate from our minds and bodies – one can not understand the Semitic concept of Spirit – a dimension of being that animates everything, even stones. How one parses the individual words to reach this understanding is fascinating if you're into that sort of thing, but it's far too complicated for a sermon.

Still, Douglas-Klotz is convinced that the recorders of Genesis – who were writing down the insights of years of story telling and meditative practices, which had evolved as they were handed down through hundreds of years of oral tradition - these writers were recording insights into the nature of their reality that were not and could not have been derived from linear thinking. As Neil points out in his chapter on Genesis Now: “In order to understand these mystics, we must change our conception that prayer and meditation are some sort of religious recreation or sacred stress management technique. For the people who practiced what I call Original Meditation, they were not taking a break from real life. They were attempting to experience a connection to what they considered real life [to be,] and the sacred power behind it. Miracles were not supernatural to them. When you live in a sacred universe, there is not “super anything”. The Holy One included everything in the universe, and anything was possible at any time, even if some things were unusual or wonderful.”

Douglas-Klotz is convinced that the concept of Genesis being a now – ongoing event is not something we only find in the book of Genesis. “The potential for this breakthrough of divine power infuses the statements of Jesus in the Gospels. He calls it in Aramaic the malkuta D'Alaha, usually translated the “Kingdom of God.” But this malkuta was not a space or place, not before or later; it was the living moving force of vision that had created [and was still creating] the cosmos, present now. Alaha was no a god sitting somewhere above in a private heavenly penthouse, but rather as the word stated, Divine Unity, the Being that included all beings and without which nothing would exist.” The process of empowering people to create a sacred now was what a lot of Jesus' ministry was about.

Neil does a thorough job of demonstrating the presence of this concept of the creative presence and potential of the now in the Gospels, the prophets, the psalms, and even the Song of Solomon. It is a theme that is also carried forward in the Islamic tradition as well as among Kabbalists, and Christian and Sufi mystics. While it has always been present, it has not been a popular or dominant view, due at least in part to the fact that it undercuts dualistic thinking and hierarchical expressions of power. Most

of those who managed to recapture the power of original meditation were seen as a threat to the established order of whatever religious tradition they practiced and their practice and writings were almost always banished from mainstream religious practice, or failing that, their message was reinterpreted in such a way as to support the established order.

While recognizing that the power of the creation story has been largely lost in western culture, Neil points to several advantages of reviving it. These include that: “Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all share ‘In the Beginning, God...’ They disagree at the level of ‘I believe’ (that is credos and theologies.) In relations with each other, why not return to this beginning rather than emphasizing the doctrinal differences? The latter only reinforce the more egotistical side of human nature, against which all of the traditions speak.” Why not emphasize what unites rather than what divides.

A second point he emphasizes is that while the Hubble telescope has enabled us to see back almost to the beginning of the Universe, it has not displaced our need to be able to imagine, see, and feel the presence of this creative process in a way which gives life meaning. Somehow we need to be able to personally connect with the power of this creative process in our lives.

To accomplish this Neil suggests a personal devotional practice designed to appeal not only to the intellect, but also to the heart and all the senses of the body. His hope is that by recovering a sacred cosmology we might gradually eliminate the difference between the sacred and the secular, once again realizing the power that resides in us to be co creators of a living process that commands our deepest love and devotion.

[A note of caution. I know that some of us have trouble with any story that assumes a transcendent dimension to existence. Such a dimension can be posited, or intuited, but certainly not logically proven. However you feel about it, I invite you to set aside your logical arguments for a few moments if for no other reason than that it makes a better story if one is not arguing with it all the time. After all, we are talking about the book of Genesis.]

But enough explanation: Let’s see where we can get using story and a Semitic understanding of the text we might use for meditation.

Chapter 5: The Caravan of Creation.

“The Storyteller Begins: The Caravan of Creation set out long before us.

We don’t know what if anything was there before the Caravan began or what lies ahead of the front of it, in the unknown, as it continues to move forward.

Our ancestors are in the Caravan ahead of us, moving through a mysterious reality that has no boundaries. That doesn’t mean that it’s infinite and will go on “forever”. (As someone once said, forever is a long time.) From where we are at the moment, looking into the fathomless distance, the horizon recedes as we move towards it; it has no boundary we can see or measure.

We shouldn’t mistake this picture of the Caravan for what actually happened, and is happening, as the cosmos moves forward – or rather, spreads in all directions – from the place where

... you are hearing this story.

... The story I'm telling says that the whole cosmos unfurled from a Universe Being that already included everything, in both its unity and its diversity, but in seed form. That's why this Universe Being created the cosmos the same way: in oneness and many-ness, called in the ancient Hebrew language "heaven" and "earth".

We also know that the journey is infused with divine purpose. How do we know? We can feel this purpose as we cast our awareness ahead to join those "first ones" – the primordial fireball, the great darkness, the elements, the stars and planets, the one-celled and many celled beings, the plants, animals, birds and humans. As we look around us, as we look further into space, as we look deeper into ourselves and our cells, we see that every being has its own sense of rightness and is moving with a sense of its own unique destiny.

In retelling the [Genesis] story, we affirm this sacred purpose. We honor all the beings of the earth who have gone before us.

We also affirm this sacred purpose in the way we live our lives – for those coming after us on the Caravan, moving from the great darkness of nonexistence "behind us", into the present."

And now the text: Gen 1:1a: B'reshith KJV "In the beginning..."

In the Beginningness, In the time before time begins, In the rest before movement begins, In the space where nothing but Elohim is, was, and will be. It all unfolds and moves like the wings of a bird taking flight, like a spark turning to flame, spreading to fire in all directions. From this center everything travels toward its purpose, somehow moving together and yet each with its own kernel of destiny known only to the Holy One.

Gen.1.1b: *bara' elohim* KJV "... god created ..."

One and many, single and diverse, including all, excluding none, the Unity of Existence, the Holy One and Many, is acting, creating, shaping from a center where there is yet no periphery, from inside where there is yet no outside, from something and nothing, from a space-time where "thing" and "no-thing" do not exist, where "yes" and "no" exist only in the vibration of the Holy One's name."

Gen. 1.1c: "*et ha-shemayim we'et ha'aretz.* KJV "the heaven and the earth."

'et ha-shemayim The "heaven" in us vibrates through creation, rising like a volatile mixture of fire and water. The **shem** of the Holy one vibrates name, light, and atmosphere constantly telling us, even when we deny it, that nothing is ever separate. This **shemayim** extends from a center that could be anywhere to a border that may be everywhere. It is part of what is created and at the same time part of what is doing the creating. How do we make sense of this?

We'et ha'aretz The 'earth' in us offers a unique gift to the rest of the cosmos, descending like a fixed

fire toward a definite end and purpose. We came for a reason; there is no other like us. This uniqueness reminds us of the preciousness of what we are, the opportunity of what we can be.

Community. Individuality. Wave. Particle. Heaven. Earth. The first outpouring of sacred reality expresses itself in these ways, in a beginningness full of mystery present then, now, and in the future.

And that's just the first verse. Next week I hope to invite you into the practice of some guided meditations on some of these and subsequent texts. As I mentioned earlier, Neil mixes his understanding of Genesis with similar passages found in the writings of Christian and Islamic mystics. To illustrate this I want to close with a meditation he includes on Quran 43.9.

The hearts and minds of all beings share a common sense of the Source of Being. Were someone to be asked suddenly "Who creates the heavens and the earth?" that person would instinctively respond: "Some Supreme Power and Intelligence must be the Source of this universe." So my beloved, please teach persons to explore their own intuitive sense of Divine creativity. Give them spiritual instruction to contemplate the Source of Love preparing the earth for humanity as carefully as a mother prepares a cradle for her infant."

May these meditations prove intellectually and perhaps even spiritually stimulating to you in the week ahead.