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God's World and God's People



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Introduction to

God's World and God's People

Appropriately enough, the Bible commences with these words: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). What follows that pregnant sentence in Genesis is a wonderful series of stories about the creation of the world and its creatures. There are stories about how God’s good creation went awry and narratives about the divine determination to restore a wayward world to God’s self. In particular, Genesis introduces us to Abraham, a particular descendant of the first humans, Adam and Eve, and to Abraham’s wife Sarah. The texts tell us about that family’s faults and foibles, but mostly about a Lord who simply will not rest until the *shalom* (peace) of the original creation is restored.

The ending of this story, of course, runs well past the episodes discussed in this quarter. God’s full story includes Jesus Christ, the quintessential descendant of Abraham; a cross; an empty tomb; and a distant glimpse of the heavenly Jerusalem.

With Genesis, however, we make a beginning. We will examine God’s creation of the universe, the earth, and its creatures, especially human beings. Sometimes we might discover that the stories raise as many questions as they answer. It may be the case that to hear the Truth of God’s revelation in Genesis—that is, Truth spelled with a capital “T”—we will need to open ourselves to reading familiar stories with new lenses. We will almost certainly be left in wondering awe at the breadth of God’s loving patience with human beings and with the chosen family of Abraham.

The first three sessions concentrate on God’s creation of the universe, earth, and people—a creation God declares to be “good.” Session 4 explores how the Lord created human beings to be in community with each other in ways that provide security and joy. Session 5 explores humankind’s rebellion against their creator in an attempt to be like God.

Sessions 6 and 7 focus on God’s interactions with Noah and his descendants. Although Noah is an obedient preservationist, the focus is once again on God’s intention to restore the world to God’s self.

That same divine determination leads to a study of the Lord’s promises of blessing to Abraham and Sarah in session 8. How God might deliver on the trifold promises of land, children, and blessing is not always straightforward. Session 9 explores how the Lord providentially provided a wife for Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah.

Sessions 10 through 13 examine the life of Abraham and Sarah’s grandson, Jacob. Jacob was not an obvious choice as the recipient of God’s promises. Nevertheless, his complicated life and family remind us of God’s determination and faithfulness.

Purpose of the Study

The goals of this study are to help participants reflect upon God’s intentions in creating the world, human beings, and

human community and to consider what it means to be created “in the image of God.” Group members will discover the breadth of God’s fierce determination to restore the world to God’s self and marvel at God’s willingness to work through ordinary people to bring about God’s good ends. Such exploration will encourage all participants to fear and love God more and more.

Our Writer

Walter C. Bouzard is an ELCA pastor with a bunch of fancy-sounding degrees, including a Ph.D. from Princeton Seminary.

He waxes on with interminable lectures at Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa, where he has taught since 1994. Generally humorless, his few friends describe him with words like “dusty,” “tepid,” and “milquetoast.” He collects mustard.

Supplementary Resources

Lutheran Study Bible, NRSV
(Augsburg Fortress Publishers,
2009).

Genesis, Interpretation, A Bible Commentary, Walter
Brueggemann (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

The New Interpreter's Bible: Genesis to Leviticus (Volume 1),
Walter Brueggemann, Walter C. Kaiser, Leander E. Keck,
Terence E. Fretheim (Abingdon Press, 1994).

God Created the Heavens and Earth

Genesis 1:1-13

The objectives of this session are to help participants:

- explore the historical context from which the account of the creation in Genesis 1 emerged.
- learn how ancient Israel's cosmology, though different from their own, nevertheless teaches truths about God and the creation.
- consider how God might bring light and order to their own experiences of darkness.

Session Preparation

Spend time in prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to lead and teach you as you prepare. Pray for each participant by name

and for the time you will spend together.

As you prepare, read Genesis 1:1—2:25 and John 1:1-14.

Ancient Israel's cosmology was quite different from our own. Search online for “ancient Israel's cosmology” for illustrations to print or project for the group.

The notes below refer to ancient Babylon's creation account, *Enuma Elish*. Since its publication in 1876, scholars noted the connection between Genesis 1 and the pagan account. You can read the text of the account, with explanations, at www.crivoice.org/enumaelish.html. The similarities between the *Enuma Elish* and the biblical account are as

undeniable as are its differences. It seems likely that ancient Israelite authors knew and used the frame of the Babylonian story to provide a powerful counter-testimony of the creative power of God and the role of human beings in the world.

The session may invite conversation about genetically modified seeds. If you choose to pursue that, you may want to bring information from gmoanswers.com/ask/how-are-plants-modified-produce-gmos-3.

Have available Bibles, newsprint or writing board, pens or pencils, and markers. For the Closing, bring *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)* or the hymnal your church uses, matches or a lighter, one votive candle for yourself, and one votive candle for each pair of participants. (If fire regulations prevent the use of lit candles, use battery-powered candles instead.)



Bible Text Overview



Before the group begins to read and discuss the biblical text, take time to discuss the Beginnings questions on page 11 in the participant book, as suggested on page 11 in this leader guide.

While some wish to harmonize the creation stories appearing in the first chapters of Genesis, a careful reading reveals that Genesis 1:1—2:4a represents the first of two creation accounts in the book of Genesis. Written by priestly writers in the time of the Babylonian Exile, the authors forward a story of God's ordering power in the face of the disorder of the exile.

We damage the account when we attempt to force out of it scientific truths of physics or geology. Indeed, we cannot square the structure of the world described in Genesis 1:1-13 with a world of space travel and the Phoenix Mars Lander. The sky, for example, is not a solid dome holding out the waters of chaos, even if that was ancient Israel's opinion. This observation does not mean, of course, that the Genesis account is not true. Not all truth is empirically verifiable.

Valentines, for example, can express a profound truth even if I do not literally “give my heart” to my spouse. Indeed, to read a valentine literally makes it heinous and ugly. Consequently, and even if the ancient authors thought they were describing the world as it is, we can sift through their cosmology to see truth about God, who created all things good.

1:1-5 The first day

With the first words of the Bible—actually the very first word in Hebrew—we encounter a translation problem. The scholars who translated the NRSV decided that the best reading is “In the beginning when God created . . .” In footnote *a*, however, those same scholars acknowledge that two other readings are possible. Other translations (KJV, RSV, NIV, NJB) state, “In the beginning God created,” while the Jewish Publication Society has “When God began to create.” What is the difference? “In the beginning God created” assumes that God created out of nothing and then proceeded to fashion the earth as a formless void, with darkness covering the deep. In contrast, both the RSV and the JPS translations acknowledge that verse 2 is a parenthetical clause. *When* God began to create, the Priestly writer declares, formless, dark chaos was what God had to work with. The syntax of the first three verses, therefore, is *when* God created (v. 1), what *at that time* the conditions were (v. 2), and *then* God created light.

Hebrew employs a particular word to describe God’s creative activity (*bārā*). This form of the verb always describes divine activity; only God can “create.” The same verb appears in Genesis 1:27; 2:3, 4; 5:1 and dozens of other times in the Hebrew scriptures.

1:6-8 The second day

The division of the sea by God surely echoes the Babylonian creation story, *Enuma Elish*. In that account, the warrior god Marduk fights the goddess of salt water, Tiamat. Marduk kills her, using half of her body to form the heavens and the other half to form the earth. Ancient Israelites testified to the

power of their God; God needed only to speak in order to create the heavens above and the dry land.

Other examples of God's control of the sea and chaos monsters are less sedate, including Job 26:10-14 (the sea, Rahab—the name of a mythical sea monster or dragon—and the serpent) and Psalm 89:8-12 (the sea and Rahab). In Psalm 104:5-9, God lays the sea out like a garment and sets boundaries for its unruly ways. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the Lord's defeat of Leviathan (Isaiah 27:1-2) as well as God's triumph over the sea, Rahab, and the fleeing serpent (Isaiah 51:9-11). Besides these poetic examples, God divides the water in Exodus 14, using it as God's own instrument of destruction against Pharaoh. God also divides the waters of the Jordan, causing them to "heap up" so that the Israelites might pass dry shod into the promised land (Joshua 3:13-16).

In the New Testament Jesus walks on water (Matthew 14:23-33) and stills the storm (Mark 4:35-41). The obvious answer to the disciples' question, "Who is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (v. 41) is none other than God. John reports in Revelation 21:1 that the "sea was no more." That is, in the eschatological reign of God, all that is chaotic and all that resists God will be finished.

1:9-13 The third day

The fact that the biblical author twice mentions the fertility of the vegetation is noteworthy. God speaks self-reproducing plants and trees into being, "and it was so" (v. 11). The subject of verse 12, however, is not God, but the earth itself. Now, the earth itself brings forth the seed bearing plants and trees of every kind. The creation, and in particular all flora, is intended by God to perpetuate itself. The fact that the earth does so earns God's approval as something "good."

God refers to the green plants twice more, in verses 29 and 30. God declares to the first humans that seed bearing plants and trees are to be their food. Likewise, every creature—beasts of the field, birds, and creeping things—are to be vegetarians. That situation changes dramatically in the world after the flood. In Genesis 9:1-7, God makes compromises for

humankind's carnivorous inclinations, provided that one exsanguinates (drains the blood from) the meat before eating it.

Nevertheless, given that God intended and approved of an earth with self-reproducing plants and that such vegetation was and remains a primary food for human beings (see Genesis 9:3), it seems reasonable to consider contemporary agricultural practices. For example, are genetically modified seeds a violation of the created order? Are human beings “playing God” or is this an example of the employment of human gifts to better feed the world?



Turn to page 11 in the participant book.

Beginnings

10–15 minutes

1. This question is an easy way to encourage adults to participate in group conversation.

2. As this is the first session, participants might be more comfortable telling about this experience to one other person rather than to the entire group. Conclude by noting that everyone has such experiences and that the creation story offers us hope for such times.

Exploring the Word

20–25 minutes

1. All three translations are possible, although this course writer prefers the NRSV wording or the first alternative (“when God began to create”). Both of those readings leave verse 2 as a parenthetical remark about the conditions with which God had to deal. The difference rests on whether or not God created the cosmos out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) or if God created light, bounded the seas, and formed dry land by controlling a formless void of darkness. Either idea inspires awe.

2. The translation difficulty rests in the Hebrew word *rûah*, which can mean “spirit,” “breath,” or “wind.” “Mighty wind” is equally possible—and likely here—because the divine epithet sometimes functions as a superlative. For example, 1 Samuel 14:15 (“a very great panic”) includes the Hebrew noun for panic followed by God (*elôhîm*). The same construction appears in Genesis 35:5 (“a terror from God”). The point of the question is to assist participants to see that translation matters. The Spirit helps us see new things in the biblical text.

3. Some points of tension include: light without the sun, plants without photosynthesis, and the “dome” that resists cosmic waters. Show an illustration of ancient Israelite cosmology and invite participants to make observations about the cosmos as ancient Israelites conceived of it. Note that their knowledge of the cosmos was less broad than our own—and ours is less comprehensive than we might think! Ask: “Given that ancient Israel’s view of the cosmos is not scientifically correct, how might the Bible still be true?” The valentine example mentioned above may help. Invite adults to consider what true things are said about God in the passage.

4. “Good” appears in Genesis 1:1, 10, and 12. (It also appears in verses 18, 21, 25, and 31.) In verse 31, God considers the entire creation and judges it “very good.” After participants respond to the questions, ask what God’s judgment about the creation implies for our treatment of it. If it seems appropriate, you may wish to ask whether genetically modified seeds are likewise “good.”

The Word Today

15–20 minutes

1. Participants may be more comfortable writing their responses. Possibilities might include God’s ability and will to overcome any sort of “formless void” and darkness, or the self-perpetuating character of the earth’s vegetation.

2. As Christians, we believe that God, who spoke the world into being and who spoke through the incarnate Word,

continues to speak to us through the Word. Perhaps they heard God speaking to them in a recent sermon, a biblical passage, or when receiving the Eucharist. What might God be saying to your congregation?

Closing

Form pairs and give each pair a candle and *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Dim the lights in your room or move to the altar area in your sanctuary. Light a candle and read aloud Genesis 1:1-3. Pass the flame to light the other candles. Sing “God, Who Made the Earth and Heaven” (*ELW* 564) or read it in unison. Invite participants to pray for situations nearby or abroad that feel filled with formlessness and darkness. Pray together the prayer on page 12 of the participant book.