

Rethinking the Genesis Message

Since ancient times, mankind has struggled against chaos, often seeking to control differences and manage conflicts through violence and war. The Bible has played an insidious role in this history, though an alternate interpretation of its opening chapter would recognize an appeal to do good, not to harshly impose order, says Rev. Howard Bess.

By the Rev. Howard Bess

It is unfortunate that the collection of writings that Christians most revere has been entitled The Holy Bible, a title that has placed this collection of letters, essays, tracts, poetry, myths, legends and stories in a category that does not allow for critical examination. Many believers treat the Bible's contents as the unquestioned word of God.

"The Bible says" are three words that end discussion rather than initiate debate. New titles have been attempted. "Good News for Modern Man" and "The Message" are attempts that come to mind. However, neither of these titles, nor others that have been tried, grabbed the imagination of readers sufficiently. I want to make the case to read the Bible material as "Life in the Pursuit of the Good" – though I acknowledge that the Bible can be read with an almost endless number of perspectives.

Much earlier in my theological career, I struggled with the seeming conflict between my Christian faith and modern science. My struggle focused on the first chapter of the book of Genesis. Conventional understanding told me that this story was an account of the God of the Israelites creating all things out of nothing in seven days.

I was exposed to all kinds of explanations about how the story could be reconciled to modern science. However, modern science won all the arguments. Genesis 1 simply did not pass scientific muster. So, I reached my next conclusion. Unwilling to throw away Genesis 1, I concluded that the chapter was not history and could not be understood as history. Genesis 1 was written as a myth and should be read as a myth.

Myth is a time-honored literary form used to talk about God, but myths never make scientific sense and can never be read as history. Myths can witness to truth in a manner that mere history can never speak. Thus, I read Genesis with new eyes.

The Genesis 1 story has ancient roots that go back to Mesopotamia, the cradle of

western civilization which covered the same area as modern Iraq, with Babylon its capital city. In Mesopotamian mythology, a recurring theme was the struggle with chaos, with their answer to chaos, war. But chaos could not be defeated by fighting it. Chaos kept coming back to haunt the people of Mesopotamia. In their mythology, war was inevitable and victory over chaos was temporary at best.

According to Biblical tradition, Abraham grew up in Mesopotamia, was familiar with the ways of that region, and by the call of God went on a grand journey. Over the ensuing generations, Israelite thinking took a turn away from the Babylonian myths. Genesis 1 is the Israelite response to chaos and endless war.

In the Genesis 1 myth, the Israelite God confronts a world that is without form and is engulfed in darkness. In modern language, the earth was chaotic beyond useful function. So God sets out to do something about chaos and the useless nature of the world. Simply by speaking, the Israelite God made light, vegetation, animal life and finally human life. God's world was to be a place of plenty and robust life. As God completed his actions, he paused periodically and said that what he was doing was good.

This alternative reading of Genesis 1 and understanding Genesis 1 as myth were for me a marvelous discovery. I could let science do its work, while I was given a new vision of what my life as a religious person was to be about. Jesus and Paul affirmed the message that evil/chaos is never to be fought but overcome with the doing of good.

Genesis 1 lays out the message about the power of doing good, though mankind keeps finding ways of nullifying the program. Christians, Jews and Muslims all say that they embrace the Genesis 1 story. However, much of the time we choose to be Babylonians, warring against chaos rather than addressing it with good.

In that way, we ignore one of the most profound ethical statements ever proposed.

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