

## Creation in Genesis 1:1–2; 4a | BY HEROLD WEISS

While Gen. 2:4b–4: 26 is a narrative, with a plot and recognizable actors, Gen. 1:1–2: 4a is not. The narrative flow that characterizes Gen. 2–4 is absent in Gen. 1. Its architectonic structure makes for notable rigidity. It is like a building which has the scaffolding used for its construction still visible. The formulas that sustain the presentation are monotonously repeated: “And God said,” “And it was so,” “And God called it ‘thus,’” “And God saw that it was good,” “And it was evening and morning of day...” Even though these formulas are tied to days in time, they make it appear as though creation were taking place outside of time. This is reinforced by a God who pronounces the creative words without making an appearance. One gets the impression that the formula of Ps. 33:6, “By the word of the Lord where the heavens made and all the host of them...” is being fleshed out.

Much theology has been made about the use of the Hebrew verb *bara'* to describe the creation. Some scholars have argued that it indicates a creation *ex nihilo*. This verb appears many times in the Old Testament, and in every case the subject of the sentence is God. On account of this, it has been said that the author is describing a creative activity that is of a different kind and superior to any human creation. That this creation is different is without question, even if in this creation the primordial sea is essential. That the verb *bara'* signals a different creation “from nothing” is quite doubtful because the author also uses the verb “made” (1:7, 16, 25, 26, 2:2, 3), “separated” (1:7), “called” (1:5, 8, 10) and “set” (1:17), and Gen. 2:3 uses “created” and “made” as synonyms in an epexegetical [an additional explanatory] construction. The evidence, therefore, does not support the notion that *bara'* has a special theological meaning.

Returning to the structure of the presentation, it has been noted that the sequence raises some questions. The most obvious have been two: *How could there have been night and day on the first day without the solar system? And, How could there have been plants on the third day without the photosynthesis made possible by solar light?* The second question, obviously, came up with the discovery of photosynthesis in modern times. The first one was already taken up in antiquity. At the time of Jesus, his contemporary Philo of Alexandria noted that the light of the first three days was a supernatural, primordial light. For Philo, this primordial light is the light that shines on every Sabbath making each one of them a special day. The primordial luminosity that does not depend on the sun is the luminosity of the “Sabbath candles” Jews light up every Friday at sunset. The apostle Paul also alludes to that primordial light to describe the glory of the risen Christ that is transferred in stages to believers who are transformed from glory to glory to the image of the second Adam (2 Cor. 4: 6). John the Theologian tells us that in the New Earth there will be neither sun nor moon, and the primordial light of the first three days will light the lives of the redeemed (Rev. 22:23). In reality, the questions mentioned above reveal that those asking them have not entered the theological space created by the text of Genesis 1.

If we take a closer look at the structure of the presentation of creation, we note that it is more tied to time than to space. It begins with the creation of a day and culminates with the creation of the holy and blessed day. In other words, the Sabbath dominates the sequence. Here creation and Sabbath are organically tied. A bit more attention reveals that the first six days are divided in two sequences of three days each. The second series of three are related to the first three so that the fourth corresponds to the first, the fifth to the second and the sixth to

the third. In the first three God creates three environments or houses, and in the second three God creates the corresponding inhabitants.

On the first day, creating light and separating it from darkness, God creates a day. In the fourth day, the sun, the moon and the stars inhabit the night and the day. On the second day God creates the blue dome of heaven and separates the waters placing some of them above the dome in order to make rain possible. Effectively, God has

contrasting pairs present in ancient creation stories where theogonic [the study of the origins and genealogy of the gods] pairs constitute the pantheon. Our curiosity is also awakened by the reference to the wind that blows over the sea. Is this a reference to a warm breeze that incubates the sea, or a reference to the wind that must put down a tempestuous sea that refuses to be controlled by the creating Will? The notion that something must be done to the sea before creation can begin was presupposed then and



created the airy space between the waters above and the waters below. On the fifth day God creates the birds of the air and the fish of the waters. On the third day God gathers the waters below to allow the appearance of dry land and makes vegetation cover the earth. On the sixth day God creates the land animals, including humans, and gives them the vegetation as food.

The logic of this structure, surely, is not that of a scientist. It is that of a theologian. It serves to establish the Sabbath as a cosmic reality, rather than a historical one, as is the case when it is based on the liberation from Egyptian slavery (Deut. 5). This structure also fulfills polemical needs against the fertility cults that were prevalent among the Israelites before the exile. By not telling a story, as all other creation narratives in antiquity do, the author has transcended those myths. In spite of his efforts in this direction, however, some mythical remnants are noticeable. In verse 2, the pairs “the darkness and the deep” as well as “the formless and the void” remind us of the complementary or

appears in the prophetic and wisdom books.

It is surprising that in Genesis 2 the sea is not mentioned, and instead of depending on the sea God depends on the primordial dusty ground of a wasteland. Also surprising is that even though provision had been made for rain with the water deposits above the heavenly dome (see Gen. 7: 11–12), on the third day the vegetation comes forth without the benefit of rain. In the fertility cults rain had singular importance (recall Baal, the Canaanite god of the thunderstorms), but here, obviously polemically, rain plays no role at all. Even if the absence of the sea in Genesis 2 and the absence of rain in Genesis 1 are “arguments from silence,” these silences have a very strong voice.

Moreover, the author marginalizes the sun and the moon, foundational divinities in the mythologies of the surrounding nations. These celestial bodies are denigrated by leaving them nameless. God names the darkness “night” and the light “day.” God names the space between the waters “heaven.” God names the gathered waters

below “seas,” and what then appears God names “earth.” The sun and the moon are left without a name. They are described as the “the greater light” and “the lesser light.” How insulting. What does not have a name has no power. The heavenly bodies do not create time. They are the means for measuring it. Their function is not to rule the destinies of human beings. They only facilitate the adoration of God at the proper time weekly, monthly and yearly. In this way the polemical intention of the author

to obey God, as in Gen. 2: 4b – 4: 26. They were created, male and female together, to represent the absent God within creation. Like the image of Nabuchadnezzar that the Israelites in Babylon, together with all Babylonians, were instructed to worship, the image of God on earth was placed to represent God and rule over the other creatures. Every thing created was subjected to the dominion of the representative of God. The image takes the place of, makes present, the God it represents, and must be



who has risen above the mythologies of his time becomes clear. The God of Genesis 1 is a transcendent God who remains absent and independent of what God created, with the exception of the Sabbath.

The creation of human beings gets special handling. In the *Enuma Elish* [the Babylonian creation myth] the gods also consult among themselves before taking this important step. Undoubtedly they are about to make an important decision with strong repercussions. In Genesis 1 the “counsel of the sons of God” of which we read in Job and in the Psalms is left unmentioned. The words “Let us make man (sic) in our image, according to our likeness” are, undoubtedly, the remnants of an earlier narrative underlying this formulaic presentation. The declaration quotes the decision the divine counsel arrived at after some deliberations, even if the circumstantial details of the underlying narrative have been eliminated.

What is most notable, however, is that human beings were not created to serve the gods, as in the *Enuma Elish*, or

respected as such. Human beings do not have the image stamped on them; they do not carry it; they do not reflect it. They *are* the image of God in creation. It is difficult to imagine that something more sublime could be said of their vocation without divinizing them. It is, therefore, understandable that Eastern Orthodox Christianity refers to the process by which Christians are transformed in the image of the Risen Christ as the process of divinization.

Finally, God rests, sanctifies and blesses the seventh day. In this way creation culminates, as all creation stories do, with the creation of the temple that functions as the umbilical cord between the transcendent God who does not dwell in space and God’s creation within time and space. The temple in this case is in time. It is a temple supremely appropriate to those who live in exile or are dispersed among the nations. Surely the Sabbath as a memorial of the liberation from forced labors in Egypt attained at the Exodus (Deut. 5) already existed in Israel before the Exile. The priestly tradition within the Penta-

**To believe in creation is to believe that every instant is created by God. It is to believe that the human family and the world in which it lives is being created and preserved by God every moment.**

teach reaches its highest theological expression when it gives the Sabbath a cosmic foundation.

With the exception of fundamentalists, Old Testament scholars agree that this presentation of creation is one of the last texts of the Pentateuch to be written, and that it reflects the wisdom that made it possible for a people with a long history, most of which was lived among peoples of other races and cultures, to survive with their identity intact. Their temple, their cosmic center, their bridge to eternity and their sign of identity is fixed in time. The sanctification of the Sabbath made their survival possible in spite of the vicissitudes of their history.

The presentation of creation in Gen. 1:1–2:4a is not an official eyewitness report of creation. Neither is it a functional or symbolic representation of reality. It must be read literally for what it is: an admirable monotheistic theological declaration that denies a material connection between God and creation, or that nature has divine powers. The secularization of nature is necessary to understand the God who transcends nature, and therefore is the only God worthy of adoration. The Creator of creation is not the god of this or that natural force but of everything that is. The link that relates the Creator to creation was the powerful and effective word of God. The creative word that is alive and active links the Creator to the creation, but does not establish a material connection. This is one of the most significant theological steps forward in the whole of the Old Testament.

The faith of those who understood this did not need supports or material scaffoldings. The identification of human beings as the representatives of God, as the ones who are God's image, is the foundation for every conceptualization of our responsibility toward creation and before God. This is theology with which one can live assured of one's value before God and confident in the power of the God who created us, even when God remains hidden in the cloud mysterious, awesome and threatening of God's holiness. This presentation, like the

theology of the wisdom books, is a theology that is positive and comforting.

To base the Sabbath on creation and to conceive the Sabbath as the temple that facilitates the interchange of energy between God and the creation is the highest expression of a faith that does not need divine materials for its life, even while it recognizes that all material reality is good. Imitating the God who rested on the seventh day, human beings who were created to be God's representatives on earth enter into eternity where the transcendent and luminous God of the first day of creation dwells. The Sabbath is the Old Testament's way of presenting the incarnation.

Actually, Genesis 1 has a didactic function. Its logic is neither historical nor scientific. Its argument is the answer to the first question every theology needs to answer: How are we, all human beings, related to the world in which we live and to God? The answer is found in the two fundamental doctrines taught here.

God placed God's image in space by creating human beings. In other words, God did not consecrate space geographically but existentially. God's image is present wherever human beings reveal the existence of their Creator and exercise responsible stewardship over all creatures. Rather than being under the powers of nature, human beings are representatives of God within creation. On the one hand, human beings are one with all animals created on the sixth day. On the other hand, as the image of God, as God's representatives created in God's likeness, they have an extraordinary function within creation. They are a link that ties the Creator to the creation.

The architectonic structure of Genesis 1 establishes that God, while absent, is present in the Sabbath, the slice of time sanctified by God's rest. On the seventh day God created and rested. Is not this a contradiction? Already at the time of Jesus Jews thought it necessary to explain how this could be. For them, of course, creation was not something that took place, let's say, four thousand years earlier. For them,

if God does not create today, creation would cease to exist now. Creation is not the “cosmos,” a beautiful system that functions by itself. Creation and providence are one and the same thing. Each Sabbath God creates and rests, and this happens weekly so that human beings may rest in God’s creation. How can God create and observe the Sabbath rest at the same time?

This is the logic of this presentation of creation. First God creates three environments or houses. Then, on the following three days, God creates the inhabitants of these houses. Finally, God creates the Sabbath to remind human beings that they are God’s image within creation. Or, maybe it could be said, God created the Sabbath to guarantee to human beings that God’s creation is based on the blessing of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is the sign of the efficacy of God’s creative power. It is a contradiction, but God creates by God’s word while resting. As the rainbow is the sign of God’s covenant with Noah, and circumcision is the sign of God’s covenant with Abraham, the Sabbath is the sign of God’s covenant about creation with those made in God’s image. This is how the human family, the world in which it lives and God are related.

Theologically speaking, creation is not an automatic mechanism with a limitless supply of energy that is ruled by eternal laws. The Old Testament does not contemplate the abstract notion of “nature,” the object of persistent modern scientific investigation. Nothing in the world assures us that a minute from now the universe will be functioning the way it does now. To believe in creation is not to believe that God created the universe thousands of years ago in a lost golden age. Such conception of creation is a return to the mythologies the authors of Genesis took pains to leave behind. To believe in creation is to believe that every instant is created by God. It is to believe that the human family and the world in which it lives is being created and preserved by God every moment. To rest on the Sabbath is to recognize the presence of God in our time and to actualize one’s faith in the transcendent God who does not remain absent. Those of faith rest trustfully because God is actively creating the heavens and the earth, and every Sabbath becomes incarnate with us in the Holiness of Rest. ■

---

**Herold Weiss** is Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at Saint Mary’s College, Notre Dame, IN. His most recent book is *Finding My Way in Christianity: Recollections of a Journey*.

## Upcoming Events at San Diego!

October 22, 2011

### “Rescuing the Remnant: LeRoy Froom and the Definition of Adventism”

— Dr. Paul McGraw, Associate Professor and Chairman,  
History Department, PUC

February 18, 2012

### To Be Announced

— Dr. David Neff, Editor-in-Chief, Christianity Today

CDS OR AUDIO CASSETTES MAY BE ORDERED FROM:

## San Diego Adventist Forum

P.O. Box 3148, La Mesa, CA 91944-3148  
SDAF.org@gmail.com | 858-694-0755

\*\*\*\*\*

Please visit our current website for membership application (includes free emailed newsletters), CD/tape subscription form, complete list of SDAF CD/tape archives and a list of upcoming presentations.

**www.tsdachurch.org**

(click SDAF link at the bottom of the page)

Also, watch for our new website under development  
(check above link and/or spectrummagazine.org)

## New York’s Best-Kept Secret

### Upcoming Events

**September 10**

Michael Cafferky: *Spirituality and Faith in Workplace*

**September 17**

Ruben Sanchez: *Diet’s Role in Early Adventism*

**October 8**

Ron Numbers: *Adventist Origins of Creation Science and Three Most Influential Adventists: EG White, John Harvey Kellogg, George McCready Price*

**October 15**

Paul Mikov: *ADRA and World Vision*

**November 12** Abraham Terian: TBA

**December 10** Alex Carpenter: TBA

See [www.MNYAForum.org](http://www.MNYAForum.org) for our current program.

Contact us at (718) 885-9533 or [chaplain@mnyaforum.org](mailto:chaplain@mnyaforum.org).

Worship with us Sabbath mornings at 11:00 at

St. Mary’s Episcopal Church, 521 W. 126 St., Manhattan

(two short blocks from the 125 St. Subway station on the #1 line).