

Environmental Stewardship: Reconsidering the Creation Narratives in the 21st Century

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This four-part bible engagement sets out to take a closer look at the two creation stories, in Genesis 1:1-3:24, through an environmental and social justice prism. The goal is to reconsider humanity's unique role in God's divinely envisaged creation, with an eye on environmental stewardship, social justice, and community building. Through the incorporation of various translations and Hebrew etymology, this study looks for the macro and micro nuances in the texts to reconsider the Christian response to current issues on climate change, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, ageism, and sexism. It goes back to the very beginning to uncover the purpose behind God's radical love for, investment in, and blueprint for humans and all of creation.

Objectives

- Help readers consider the etymology of Hebrew words to better understand text,
- Reconsider the two Creation stories side-by-side through an environmental hermeneutic,
- Guide readers in making connections between the Creation narratives and modern justice movements.
- Identify ways to apply what is learned in the Creation narratives to our outreach, personal lives, and social justice advocacy.

Hebrew to consider:

- עזר כנגדו (ezer kenegdo): suitable help mate
- ברא (bara): created; type of creation that only God can do,
- יצר (yatzar): formed; this is a type of creation that can be done by both God and humans.
- עשה (asah): made; and again, both God and humans can do this.

יצר (yatzar) is the formation, the utilizing of creative energy to establish a blueprint, עשה (asah) is actually bringing the form into a finished product, and ברא (bara) we understand that there are things that are beyond our ability to do, that only God can create.

- נפש (nephesh): a soul, living being, life, self, person, desire, passion, appetite, emotion
- רוח (ruach): breath, wind, spirit.
- רדה (radah): not the normal verb for “rule”, more closely means “hold sway”, seems to suggest a fierce exercise of mastery.
- תוהו ואבול (tohu wabohu): welter and waste, formless and void.
- אדם (adam) (adj): red, dyed red, ruddy.
- אדם (adam) (n): collective human beings, not a proper noun.

- אדמה (adamah) (n): soil (from its general redness), country, earth, ground, husband(-man) (-ry), land, dirt, dust, farming, fields.
- דם (dam) (n): blood, bloodguilt, blood-guiltiness, bloodshed, bloody, death, guilt of blood, homicide, life, lifeblood.
- צלם (tselem) (n): form, likenesses, phantom, expression, image, statue.

(Gen. 1 is the only place in the bible where the word refers to humans, as opposed to idols.

- דמות (demuth) (n): likeness, figure, figures like, resembling, form, like, pattern.

Session Overview: 1-hour

Welcome and introduction (5-10 min)

- Open with a prayer and share overview.

Bible Study with slides and discussion (45 min)

- Using outline below, read through weekly verse selections,
- Use various translations and Hebrew to help tease out new understandings and points of view,
- Prompt questions about how the text might pertain to stewardship of the:
 1. Earth/land, universe/space, animals, other people/minorities/widows/children/aging/disabled, and the Sabbath?
 2. Do the differing translations offer a fresh understanding of environmental stewardship and social justice? Explain.

Closing (5-10 min)

- Preview the upcoming week and close with prayer.

Session 1: God's Divine Plan— (Genesis 1:1-25)

Summary: Genesis 1:1-25 is a revolutionary proclamation that God and God's creation are bound together by the powerful, gracious movement of God towards creation. Simply, God is deeply invested in everything He creates, not just humans, but the cosmos and earth, animals and beasts, and fish and fowl.

- God's decisive act of creating and ordering out of chaos.
- Time, command, execution, and assessment.
- The divine symmetry of creation.
- God's Relationship to Creation.

Session 2: God's Image— (Genesis 1:26-2:4a)

Summary: Gen. 1:26-2:4a shows the freedom given to human persons by God, which provides the ultimate hope against the massive power of empire (Deut. 4:15-20). God is not imaged in anything fixed but in the freedom of human persons to be faithful and gracious. Humans attest to

the Godness of God by exercising freedom with, and authority over, all the other creatures entrusted to their care.

- Creation of human persons in God's image (1:26-31)
- "Subdue ...and have dominion" (1:28)
- The serene and joyous rule of God over a universe secure enough to be at rest (2:1-4a)

Session 3: God's Character (Gen 2:4b-2:24)

Summary: Genesis 2:4b-3:24 explicates how delicate and precarious the relationship between creator and creation is. God provides humanity with a perfect plan for stewardship, living in community, and: a mandate, a gift, and a prohibition. After the majestic statement of (Gen 1:1-2:4a) the text turns to human beings as the glory, and the central problem, of creation.

- Placement of man in the garden (2:4b-9)
- God establishes human community through:
 1. The Mandate of Vocation, sharing in God's work, (2:15)
 2. The Gift of Permission, everything is permitted for elemental sustenance (2:16),
 3. The Prohibition (2:17).
- Second creation narrative—formation of a "help mate" (2:18-24)
 1. Not good to be alone (2:18),
 2. Neither God nor other creatures are suitable (2:19),
 3. One flesh—covenant human relationship (2:24).

Session 4: God's Community (Gen 2:24-3:24)

Summary: Human beings, before God, are characterized by vocation, permission, and prohibition, and if any one aspect is missing, humans become alienated from their Creator and the community-at-large breaks down. The primary task of humanity is to find a way to hold the three aspects of divine purpose together.

- Disruption of the garden (given disproportionate attention in theology) (3:1-7)
- Centers around the prohibition in (2:17), first conversation in the Bible, and the first theological misrepresentation of God (3:1), leads to anxiety about trusting God, which leads to disobedience, and ultimately alienation from God's Divine Plan for creation in community.
- Judgement and expulsion (3:8-24)
- Self-centeredness and autonomy: "I heard, ...I was afraid, ... I was naked, ...I hid, and I ate" (3:10-13), judgement lightened (3:8-19), but the first alienation from God, and His community occurs (3:20-24).
- God's bond with human creation cannot be broken. In His mercy, the humans do not die, and God takes care of them and covers the shame they cannot (2:21). God addresses the root of human anxiety, which stems from the seduction of believing there is any security apart from God (3:1).