

NOTES ON GENESIS 1:1-2:4a

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When interpreting the first creation story in Genesis perhaps the most critical step is to remember that this account was addressed to an audience in one of two contexts. Most likely, the first hearers of this text were living in deportee camps in Babylon, working at forced labor for the benefit of their conquerors, the mighty Babylonian empire. Alternatively, they lived under the rule of the still mightier Persian Empire, and were scattered in diaspora across Egypt, Judaea and Babylon. Taking account of the dynamics they faced in these contexts alters how we hear the passage's meaning and import.

In either context, the first hearers of this account of the world were not much in control of their fate since they were a fragmented and dominated community. They lived in a world in which the strong ruled the weak and exploited them and the world for their own ends. The most common and accepted account of the nature of the world was a Mesopotamian creation myth in which the world was born out of violence and the human race was a by-product of that violence. The audience lived in a violent world in which those who wielded that violence had them at their mercy, and religion said that was the very nature of existence.

Scattered in fragments around the ancient Fertile Crescent, without a space where they could all be together and safeguard their own culture and community, the audience rubbed shoulders with a myriad of peoples and cultures. Those cultures taught that there were multiple gods, who carved the world up into their private bits of turf. Thus the fragmentation of their community and world was made to seem the natural way of the world just as violence was made to seem the natural way of the world.

To these people Genesis 1 presents a startling contrast. It presents a world that is not naturally violent, but naturally peaceful, a world that is not naturally fragmented and chaotic, but unified and orderly. It presents a world that is not at the mercy of warring deities and warring nations, but a world ruled by a single God that creates a habitable home for all of the inhabitants of the world. Two aspects of this account are especially striking.

First, in a world where the hearers of this account experience a great diversity of cultures and peoples, of "kinds" of humanity, if you will, and in which some kinds of humanity are better than other kinds, some kinds of humanity are more privileged than others, in Genesis there are NO "kinds" of humanity. There is a great array of "kinds" of plants, of "kinds" of birds, of "kinds" of sea creatures, of "kinds" of land animals, there are NO "kinds" of humanity. Before our Creator, all humans are the same. Moreover, men and women are equal in this world. This is reinforced by the Hebrew term used to designate humanity in its creation: *'adam*. This is not the term for a single male of the species *homo sapiens*, but a collective term for the whole human race – all of us. Thus also, while each of us is created in the image of God, it is as a part of the actual bearer of the image of God, the whole human race.

Second, in the world of the audience of Genesis 1 the language of "in the image of God" was language used otherwise only in Babylon, and only of kings. In Babylon kings were said to be created in the image of God, thus establishing their right to rule over others as the representative of the gods. Genesis applies this language to the whole human race. On the one hand, this is the language that defines our role in creation, the governance of creation in the best interests of the well-being of ALL God's creatures. On the other hand, this utterly undercuts the claims of the powerful to rule the weak because the all-powerful ruler of the universe has made us all "in the image of God."