

The Garden Story Never Happened. The Garden Story Always Happens.

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Section 1: Multiple Creation Stories in Genesis.

A careful reading of Genesis shows that it starts with two different creation accounts. The first account depicts a more transcendent God and occurs in 1:1-2:3. Genesis 2:4a serves as a concluding summary for the first narrative and the second account, depicting a more immanent God with more anthropomorphic features, picks up there through the end of the second chapter (Genesis 2:4-25). The evidence for this view is delineated below.

[A] Who is the Creator?

1st Account: God is referred to as Elohim throughout.

2nd Account: God is referred to as Yahweh throughout.

Throughout the text of Genesis we see the alternating names Elohim and Yahweh.¹ Alone this would prove very little and the documentary hypothesis has a long and complicated history, but coincidentally the two divine names often occur in places where we seem to have different versions of the same story or where one part of a text creates friction with another. The two creation stories not only look like two completely different stories, but the first one uses Elohim for God and the second Yahweh. This indicates we are dealing with two different authors and two different stories here.

[B] What did the Primordial Earth Look Like?

1st Account: Dark, deep, formless void with waters (chaotic to ordered)

2nd Account: Dry land turned into a garden paradise (desert to oasis)

¹ Westermann writes, "The divine name in Genesis 2-3 is always *"yhwh Elohim"*; in Genesis 1 it was "Elohim"; from Genesis 4 on (from J, the Yahwist), it is *"yhwh."* *"yhwh Elohim"* (translated "the LORDGod") as a divine name in Genesis 2-3 is prob- ably meant to form a transition between the two names." -- Genesis, p 18.

There is much more to this if we look at ancient near east mythology. In *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition*, Bernard Batto writes, “In the ancient Near East there were two primary, equally powerful symbols of chaos. One was the primeval flood or ocean, frequently portrayed as a dragonlike monster; the other was the barren desert, sometimes portrayed as a dreadful land beast. Life—at least human life—was impossible under either of these conditions; hence the utility of the sea and the desert as symbols of nonexistence, or chaos.

The author of Job understood and utilized these symbols well. As part of his literary ploy to emphasize the Creator’s awesome transcendence vis-a-vis a mere human, the author of Job 40:15-41:34 has Yahweh challenge Job to play the role of creator, if he can, by subduing Behemoth and Leviathan, the traditional twin chaos monsters representing the dry wasteland and the unformed ocean, respectively. Since Job obviously cannot subdue the chaos monsters, Job has no right to challenge the Creator about the way he runs this world.”²

It seems then that the first creation account uses the primeval ocean where God is hovering over the waters and draws parallels with Babylonian creation mythology in the *Enuma Elish*. The second creation account is more entuned with the *Atrahasis* myth and appeals to the motif of a barren dessert that God transforms and cultivates into a lush and fertile garden. In fact, in Genesis the humans were meant to tend to God’s garden just as in the story of Atrahasis they were servants, expected to work the land for the gods. The second creation account is embedded in an agricultural time period. People lived off of what they grew. The ground is what sustained them and where humans come from. Once kicked from Eden, Adam’s problem is partly with the ground (“cursed is the ground because of you”) as he turns from a gardener into a farmer. The story behind the creation of Eve herself might reflect the humor of ancient agricultural perspective as well. After failing to find a suitable mate for Adam in attempt after attempt with new creations, “God's Yahweh then tries a second way, the way of the gardener, and performs the world's first clone. If you really want a second plant in every way comparable to the first, the best way is to use part of the one you have, It works the same with humans: like from like!”³

[C] What was the order of Creation?

1st Account: Light (not the sun), a dome, dry land and seas, plants and fruit trees, sun and moon, sea creatures and birds, land animals, human beings.

2nd Account: A stream/water rises from the ground, Adam, the Garden with many trees, land animals and birds, Eve after Adam names the animals.

The first creation account depicts animals being created before humans while the second depicts God creating land animals and birds after he creates Adam but before he creates Eve. Some interpreters have sought to get around this difficulty by using a different translation of

² Bernard Batto, *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition*, pg 47-48

³ Thomas Thompson, *The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel*, p. 84

the underlying Hebrew text. It is claimed the text could read God “had formed” these creatures as the NIV and ESV have it. Thus in Genesis 2:19, Adam would be naming pre-formed animals. Of course this interpretation is not the one most experts prefer as God has just said, “It is not good for man to be alone.” That God is now making a helper for Adam and creating these animals is the simplest interpretation of the text itself. The scene is troubling as a whole since God’s behavior is comically naïve and perplexing if the account is not figurative. Armstrong writes:

“When God had finished creating the animal kingdom, he paraded them all before Adam. . . . God’s purpose was . . . to find a mate for Adam from among “all cattle,” “the birds of the air,” and “every animal of the field” (2:20). It is a comic picture. Like an eager matchmaker, God presented the inexperienced Adam with one animal after another. Bison? Elephant? Kangaroo? We are not surprised to hear that at the end of the day, “for the man there was not found a helper as his partner” (2:20). How could God have imagined for one moment that Adam would find a mate in this way? The God who appeared to be so omnipotent and omniscient in Chapter 1 was now unable to fathom the desires and needs of his creature.”⁴

[D] How long Was God’s Creative activity?

1st Account: God creates everything in 6 days and rests on the seventh.

2nd Account: “In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens (Gen 2:4b).

[E] How does God Go about Creating Things?

1st Account: God creates by his divine word. He speaks and it comes to pass (*bar’a*).

2nd Account: God fashions and forms things more intimately (*yatsar*).

Regarding the second account Robert Alter writes: “In this more vividly anthropomorphic account, God, now called *YHWH ’Elohim* instead of *’Elohim* as in the first version, does not summon things into being from a lofty distance through the mere agency of divine speech, but works as a craftsman, fashioning (*yatsar* instead of *bar’a*, “create”), blowing life breath into nostrils, building a woman from a rib.”⁵

Regarding the passage where God forms man from the dust in the ground, Westermann writes, “This sentence does not, as is commonly supposed, represent the idea of the theologian who wrote down this narrative in the tenth or ninth century B.C. Rather, he has preserved in his account a very old and widespread ancestral tradition that he considers worthy of respect, a tradition that also appears elsewhere in the Old Testament (e.g., Job 10:8: “Thy hands fashioned and made me . . . ;” cf. Job 4:19; Ps. 90:3; 103:14; 104:29; 146:4; Isa. 29:16). It is found in Egypt and Babylon, and is also encountered frequently in creation narratives of primitive cultures”

⁴ Karen Armstrong, *In the Beginning*

⁵ Robert Alter, *Genesis Translation and Commentary*, p. 7

[F] Purpose of Human Beings

1st Account: In God's image, rulers of the earth (given dominion).

2nd Account: Adam and Eve were servants or caretakers in God's garden.

[G] Anthropomorphic Features

1st Account: God is transcendent, creates by mere word, humans are fashioned in **His** image.

2nd Account: God creates more intimately, fashioning and building things.

God decides Adam needs a mate (it doesn't look preplanned at all) and He doesn't realize none of the animals will be a suitable match for Adam before He tries to woo him with each one. God seems to be fashioned more in **our** image in the second account.

Concluding Remarks

It does appear we have two completely distinct creation accounts that don't agree on all details kicking off Genesis that are tied extensively to older creation myths. In order for the accounts to make sense as part of our Sacred Scripture, we should not understand them as in competition with science or each other. The Bible reflects the cosmology of its time and offers us a theological hierarchy and understanding of God and humanity in the midst of a pantheon of other deities and ancient near east mythologies. These are theological narratives meant to teach us truths about God and ourselves, not specifics in how exactly He created the world. If we get the genre wrong then we do a disservice to our Sacred Scripture as we are surely misinterpreting it. Thompson writes, "The garden story is an aetiology. It is a fictional tale that evokes a perspective of reality that helps us understand the truth of things, and here, the truth about being human. The garden story isn't a story about a romantic place of paradise where no one is hungry, no one suffers and no one dies. Quite the contrary, its story's goal is the real world we live in, where hunger, pain and death are commonplace, and where each, unfortunately, does a thorough job of defining us as human. The story does not talk about history. It talks about the realities of human life, and how we are defined through our hunger, our pain and our deaths."⁶ To steal the format of famous saying from a historical Jesus scholar: The Garden of Eden never happened. The garden of Eden always happens.⁷

⁶ Thomas L. Thompson, *The Mythic Past Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel*, p 85

⁷ Crossan famously wrote in *Jesus A Revolutionary Biography*, "Emmaus never happened. Emmaus always happens."