

The Bible is not merely a book or even THE BOOK; it is a collection of books; a library of books of poetry, history and biography, proverbs and legal discourse, correspondence, visions – so many types of literature are found in this collection of books.

Or rather, I should make clear it is a collection of holy books; which has been written by God through human agents who wrote out of a particular time and place, in a certain language with a point of view they thought important enough that they wanted to share it with those who could come after them. Those of us who come after find these words more than ordinary words – these words in this book are for us far more than any biography or poetry book we might pick up at Vancouver Island Public Library. These words in this book are the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit at the time of writing, at the time of editing, at the time of translation, at the time of our reading it together and even as I speak about it and even as you hear the Word and it settles in your heart.

The Living Faith, a document based in Scripture, written by the Presbyterian Church in Canada and one of our Subordinate Standards – that means it is subordinate to or based on Scripture - as simple outline of what we believe, puts it this way:

The Bible has been given to us by the inspiration of God to the rule of faith and life. (5.1) The Holy Spirit gives us inner testimony to the unique authority of the bible and is the source of its power. The Bible, written by human hands, is nonetheless the word of God as no other word ever written. To it not other writings are to be added. The Scriptures are necessary, sufficient and reliable, revealing Jesus Christ, the living Word. (5.2) both Old and New Testaments were written within communities of faith and accepted as scripture by them. Those who seek to understand the Bible need to stand within the church and listen to its teaching. (5.3) The Bible is to be understood in the light of the revelation of God's work in Christ.... relying on the Holy Spirit, we seek the application of God's Word for our time. (5.4).

Regardless of how often we have read some passages of scripture, the Holy Spirit breathes through the ink on the page bringing these words to life so that they become, *for us*, the Word of God pointing to the Word of Life, who is Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord.

But as we read, we might notice some things that strike us as odd, perplexing, unsettling – and that is one reason why we gather as God's people – to talk about what we are reading and discovering and puzzling over. As the church, we are blessed to have access to the struggles, thoughts and discovery of so many Christians throughout history. How wonderful that we are not alone as we try to hear the word of God for us today!

The first book in the Bible is called Genesis – which means “beginning” and it is a story of beginnings, the beginning of the world, the beginning of God's interactions with humanity, first as individuals, then as a family or a clan. If we keep reading beyond Genesis we will see how that family grew into a gathered people who eventually became a nation and how God made it possible for anyone from any tribe or nation to become a child of God.

Our first two scripture readings from Genesis contain the two creation stories. Often, if we read them at all, we don't read them back to back. Did you notice anything about them? They are different, right? How different are they? VERY!

One is very focussed on the Word of God – God speaks and things happen – God is very orderly and divides and separates things neatly into their proper places – birds in the sky, fish in the water, green growing things on the dry land...

In the second creation story, God is very hands on – gathering the dust or clay – the *adamah* - which is the Hebrew word for earth for the earth creature we call Adam – it's a Hebrew pun, get it? Adam is made out of *adamah*. God is like a sculptor or potter modelling the clay into the desired shape and getting God's hands dirty. And God breathes the breath of life into the earth creature and it becomes a living soul. And then God decides that the earth creature needs a companion and so makes and brings the animals to Adam until finally the woman is made out of Adam's rib.

So, are you noticing that not only is God presented differently

– merely speaking the word and it is done

– versus getting God's own hands dirty

but notice that even the order of creation is different

– were humans first

– or last?

What's up with that? Gives a different emphasis, doesn't it?

And if we were to read quite closely, we might begin to notice subtle differences in the words used – differences which have survived centuries of oral tradition until it was written down and then more centuries of copying and translation – the inspiration of God did not allow them to 'correct' the differences in vocabulary or to harmonize the two stories to erase their differences.

If we look carefully, we might notice that God's name is slightly different:

Elohim - God

YHWH Elohim - the Lord God

and so are some of the expressions

"heavens and earth"

"earth and heavens"

Trees of the field

shrub of the field

The differences are subtle but they are there - suggesting that two different creation stories existed as separate stories, a poem or song and a narrative, until an editor, inspired by God put them side by side in a book we know as Genesis. "Hmm, I think I'll begin my history of the world before time with that really lovely poem..."

Example: Letter or email from someone – differences in handwriting, sentences structure & vocabulary suggest more than one person is behind the document – perhaps even describing the same event, seen through their individual perspective – eg kid and grandparent reporting to parent the fun they have been having while parents on vacation.

If we had kept reading in Genesis, we would have read about Noah and the flood. And we begin to think about all that water and what we have seen on TV of the floods in Quebec and on the prairies. We might think about 40 days and nights of rain and of EVERYTHING being underwater and how long it took for the waters to recede and how much stuff would get wrecked. If anything had been written down before the flood, the water would have disintegrated anything that wasn't in the ark – certainly paper and probably clay tablets and how much silt would be on top of them? and how much room was there in the ark for stuff? So, was Noah and his family the keeper of these traditions? Can we imagine Noah telling his family the sacred history of the world each night in the ark to keep the story alive? Or did God inspire poets and singers and story tellers with this information later so they could tell others the mighty acts of God in creation?

However these stories came about, we can see the hand of God guiding the editors and translators and we can experience the Holy Spirit even in our lives calling our attention to important features of the story as it meet our life today.

We often say that the Bible is God's truth. And there was a time when I thought that meant that every word in the Bible was literally an accurate rendering of something that had happened. But when I read these two creation stories back to back as we did this morning, and especially when we add the passage from the gospel according to John – "in the beginning was the Word..."

I have to question that assumption – the creation stories are so different – in detail and in the order of events – it is logically impossible for them to simultaneously be accurate reportage of a prehistoric event in the sense that they could be used as evidence in a court of law. But, I don't think they were ever *intended* to be legal evidence or even scientific proof.

Instead, these stories have a theological purpose – they are telling us something about God: who God is, what God thinks is important; how God relates to creation and especially to people. These stories of creation are in a sense an Affirmation of Faith – God has a purpose for creation and God chooses to be intimately involved in the existence of human creatures. As we read on in Genesis, we see the Creator, God of all, calling humans into a close, conversational relationship. We see the Creator giving responsibility for actions and bringing consequences to the choices made.

I don't know that the people of ancient Israel who compiled Genesis were uninterested in how the world came into being. But they clearly thought it important to know by whose agency and for what purpose the world came to be. The bold intent of their proclamation in Genesis was confession of faith.

Did God really make the world in seven 24 hour days? Or were days different back then? It's worth noticing that the sun and moon were not created until the fourth day – so perhaps time was measured differently at the time of creation. Whatever time it took, it all begins with God's pre-existence outside of creation and God's desire to create and to be in relationship. If we were to ask the ancient Hebrew editor "is it true?" the answer would be a resounding -----→ (see next page)

"YES! it is TRUE!" God creates order out of chaos. God creates everything in goodness. God gives human creatures special responsibility as stewards of God's good earth. God delights in creation and invites Sabbath rest... Thanks be to God for the gift of Holy Scripture which tells us of God's loving purposes for our life together. Amen

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