

Leaders

Living the Word

Contexts & Connections
Narrative Lectionary, Year 4



Background Notes

Sample Resource

Lesson #4-1—September 12, 2021

Contributors

Publisher

Gregory Rawn

Editors

Rev. Dr. Daphne Burt

Elaine Seekon

J. Pace Warfield

Gregory Rawn

Layout

Nance Keyes

Writers

Rev. Aimee Frye Appell

Kristofer Coffman

Stephanie Luedtke

Heather Roth Johnson

Rev. Ed Strietelmeier

J. Pace Warfield

Copyrights

Living the Word: Contexts & Connections (Narrative Lectionary, Year 4)

Text copyright © 2016-2021 by Spirit & Truth Publishing

All rights reserved. No part of this resource may be used or reproduced in any other manner whatsoever without written permission. For information, contact Spirit & Truth Publishing at www.SpiritAndTruthPublishing.com.

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is quoted from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Disclaimer

For your convenience, *Living the Word: Contexts & Connections* provides hyperlinks and Internet searching suggestions that point to a diverse assortment of websites not under the control of Spirit & Truth Publishing. We have no control over the nature, content, and availability of these websites, and the inclusion of these links does not necessarily imply a recommendation or endorsement of the content or views expressed within them. As with all things, please judge linked websites and content in accordance with your own theological and biblical standards.



God's Good Creation

God Provides Blessings

The Point

God declares that creation is good.

Key Verse

God saw everything that [God] had made, and indeed, it was very good.

- Genesis 1:31

Summary

God creates the heavens, the earth, and everything that fills them. God does not do the work of creation haphazardly; instead, God separates and orders creation with great care.

Accompanying Text

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [The Word] was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through [the Word], and without [the Word] not one thing came into being. What has come into being in [the Word] was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

- John 1:1-5

Contexts

Linguistics

- In Genesis 1:1, there is considerable debate over whether to translate the first word in the Bible (Heb. *bērešit*) as “in *the* beginning” or in “in *a* beginning.” The Hebrew does not contain the definite article “the.” However, the use of the definite article is not consistent from language to language (cf. in the Koine Greek of the New Testament, Jesus is almost always referred to as “the Jesus”).
- The word translated “spirit” (Heb. *rūah*) in Genesis 1:2 can mean either “spirit” or “wind.” The double meaning of the word shows the close association between life/spirit and breath in the ancient world.¹
- At the end of each verse, “good” (Heb. *tov*) is more expressive than its English connotation. It can be translated as joyful, prosperous, vigorous, or appropriate.²

Geography/Setting

- The description of the primeval earth as a watery chaos (Genesis 1:2) points towards the setting of a people living in a country prone to the ravages of flooding. Due to the emphasis on controlling waters, Genesis 1 probably originated in Mesopotamia (the land between the rivers).³

History

- This story is concerned with the origins of the world, life, and human beings, and extends back into prehistory. However, the emphasis on order and creating out of chaos points to the story being written down either in the exilic or post-exilic period, when the people of Israel looked to make sense of their chaotic lives (see **Culture/Religion**). This dating would place the writing in the middle of the 6th century BCE.⁴

Cultural/Religion

- The cultural assumption of the passage is that the people reading it are living in a state of chaos. It is written for the Israelite people who are trying to make sense of their new lives as captives in Babylon. Later, they continue to use the story to make sense of their efforts to rebuild the nation of Judah. The story attempts to provide them comfort by emphasizing God's triumph over chaos and God's careful ordering of a chaotic world.⁵
- The religious assumption of the passage is that God lies behind the ordering and the division of the world. This assumption reflects the concerns of a priestly religion, in which the priests are charged with ordering the religious life of the people and dividing between that which is clean and that which is unclean.⁶

Literature/Genre

- This passage is meant as the grand starting point of the biblical story. It is meant to establish that God is uniquely involved in the origins of the world and will continue to be uniquely involved in the lives of the people to come.⁷
- This passage is prose which borders on liturgy. Though it is written in rhythmic, repetitious language, it does not fit into the category of Hebrew poetry.⁸ In addition, this passage is a foundational myth. It is important to remember that foundational myths are cosmologies, not cosmogonies. A cosmology attempts to explain *why* the world came to be and who made it. In contrast, cosmogony is meant to explain *how* the world came to be.⁹

Authorial Intention/Occasion

- The author of this passage has two intentions: 1) to reassure his readers that despite their chaotic lives, God is a God who brings order out of chaos, and, 2) to show that God carefully divided between the land and the sea and the sky, and that God created the animals and plants in an ordered fashion. It is not random or chaotic.¹⁰

Audience

- The audience of the passage is the people of Israel living in exile in Babylon, and later, the people of Israel who moved back to their home country. They were living in a time of chaos and upheaval and were concerned that their nation, to whom God had made such great promises, might cease to exist.

Common Misunderstandings

- Genesis chapter 1 is written in poetic language, but is not poetry (see **Literature/Genre**). Hebrew has several distinct genres of poetry, (just as English has the sonnet, quatrain, etc.) and Genesis 1 does not fit in to any of them.

More Information

- For those interested in the Middle Eastern setting of the text and parallel stories in Mesopotamian mythology: <http://www.i-cias.com/e.o/mesopotamia.htm>.

Connections

Narrative Lectionary Connections

- **Last Week** – It is the first week, the beginning of the Narrative Lectionary, the beginning of the Bible, and in the story, the beginning of all creation!
- **Next Week (Genesis 21:1-3; 22:1-14)** – Next week, the story zooms in. We leave behind the cosmic emphasis of Genesis 1, and focus on three people: Abraham, Sarah, and their son Isaac. In a story known as the “Binding of Isaac,” we see how God’s care and blessing plays out in the lives of ordinary people.
- **Other Year 4 Connections** – God feeding the Israelites in the wilderness in Exodus 16 (10/10/21) continues the theme of God providing food for all creatures. In Ezekiel 37 (12/5/21), God shows that the spirit of God is continually given to God’s people, not just at the beginning of the world, but even amidst death. John 1 (12/19/21) picks up the story of creation and weaves Jesus into the story. In Acts 17 (5/15/22), Paul preaches to a group of Greeks who worship the God who created the heavens and the earth.

Other Bible Connections

- In Psalm 8, the Psalmist extols the wondrous way in which God made creation.
- In Mark 4:41, the disciples are astounded that the wind and the sea obey the words of Jesus, in the same way that the wind and the sea obeyed the words of God at the beginning of creation.

Thematic Connections

- **Called by God, Blessed to Serve** – As discussed above, the passage today is a cosmology (see **Literature/Genre**); it seeks to answer the question of why God created the world. Beyond that, this story seeks to show that God’s blessings are woven into the fabric of creation, and that God has called people to be a blessing for creation through caring for it.
- **God Provides Blessings** – Our story today also sets the theme for the rest of the biblical story. God orders creation to be a blessing for humanity. God gives day and night, water and plants, birds and fish and creeping creatures for humanity to be blessed by and to take care of.

Liturgical/Seasonal Connections

- This is a good story to read again as we come to the end of the abundance of summer. It inspires us to think about our role in the order of creation, and the way that we treat the creation that God has entrusted to us.

Hymns/Music

- There are many hymns that deal with the wonder of God’s creation, such as “How Great Thou Art,” “Beautiful Savior,” “Creating God, Your Fingers Trace,” and “God of the Sparrow, God of the Whale.”
- Some praise songs with creation as the theme: “Hip Hip Hippopotamus (The Hippo Song);” “The Earth Is Yours” by Gungor; “Let Creation Sing” by Hillsong; and “Countless Wonders” by Chris Tomlin.

Media Connections

- The first episode of the History Channel series *The Bible*, contains a helpful illustration of the original oral nature of the creation story.
- The movie *Prometheus* contains an alien-filled alternate take on the story of the origin of humankind. Trailer: <https://youtu.be/34cEo0VhfGE>.
- Aldo Leopold’s book *A Sand County Almanac* contains short, easy-to-read essays on the nature of humanity’s connection to the earth and our responsibilities as caretakers.

- Wendell Berry is another author who wrote extensively about the task of caring for the world that God has made. He wrote both poems and books about humanity’s role as steward of creation, for example *A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural & Agricultural*, *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural*, and *Meeting the Expectations of the Land: Essays in Sustainable Agriculture and Stewardship*.

¹ Richard Elliott Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 6.

² “*tōb*” in *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Francis Brown, et. al., trans. Edward Robinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 373-4.

³ Clare Amos, *The Book of Genesis*, Epworth Commentaries (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2004), 3.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Baranabe Assohoto and Samuel Ngewa, “Genesis” in *Africa Bible Commentary*, ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 11.

⁶ Amos, 3-4.

⁷ Ibid., 1.

⁸ Friedman, 7.

⁹ Robert Farrar Capon, *Genesis: The Movie* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 7-8.

¹⁰ Amos, 4.