

CONTEXT & CONNECTIONS

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LIVING THE WORD

Narrative Lectionary



Context & Connections

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Living the Word: Contexts & Connections (Narrative Lectionary, Year 2)

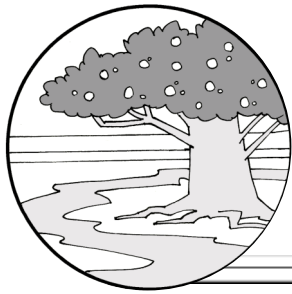
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God Creates Humans

God Creates Family

The Point

We are created to be partners in God's work.

Key Verse

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner."

- Genesis 2:18

Summary

God forms the first human from dust and God's own breath. Then, God creates animals, but none of these could be Adam's partner. God separates this first human into male and female, creating the first family.

Accompanying Text

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

- Mark 1:16-20

Contexts

Linguistics

- In verse 7, the words for man (Heb. *'ādām*) and ground (Heb. *'ādāmāb*) create a play on words. This likely was an attempt by the author to make a connection between the words.¹
- Additionally, in verse 7, the word dust (Heb. *'āpār*) is better translated as clods (of soil).²
- In verse 8, Eden (Heb. *'ēden*) likely refers to a geological feature, as it is a Sumerian loanword that means plain or steppe.³
- In verse 21, the word translated as rib (Heb. *hassēlā*) actually is better translated as side, and in fact, every other occurrence of the word in the Hebrew Bible is translated as side. This also results in the mistranslation of Genesis 2:23, where it says "out of Man this one was taken," but should better be translated "from" instead of "out of."⁴

Geography/Setting

- Eden was a mythic garden. While the intended location of Eden is unknown, four rivers mentioned in verses 10-14 likely once converged near the Persian Gulf, and this would have created a very rich and fertile region.⁵
- Regardless as to whether Eden was based on a real location or not, it is portrayed as an act of God's grace. It contains an abundance of greenery that would provide for the first humans and animals, all of which are freely available for humankind except for the tree of knowledge (see **Culture/Religion**).⁶

History

- The story provides an account of the creation of the world and, more specifically, of humanity. While it is unknown when the story was initially composed, Genesis (and the Torah, or first five books of the Bible, as a whole) was likely compiled in the sixth century BCE during or following the Babylonian exile, with many stories based on earlier oral traditions.⁷

Culture/Religion

- The story is most concerned with the relationship between God and humanity. This relationship is shown in the following three ways:
 - ♦Vocation: Humankind is meant to till and keep the garden.
 - ♦Permission: Humankind is granted the entire garden to eat from and utilize with one exception.
 - ♦Prohibition: Humankind is instructed not to eat from one tree.
- This story sets up the covenantal relationship between God and Israel, which follows a similar pattern of calling the people (vocation), providing for them (permission), then setting up laws designed to set the people of God apart from the rest of humanity (prohibition).⁸
- It is important to note the distinction between our contemporary understanding of the term helper and how it would have been understood by the intended audience. In contemporary understanding, helper comes with an idea of lesser status, similar to assistant. In the original context, helper was understood as a more equal role (as seen in Psalm 70:5, for instance, where God is Israel's helper).⁹
- The two trees—the tree of life and the tree of knowledge—likely are connected to an earlier mythological tradition. Within the Bible, the tree of life's only other appearances are in Proverbs and Revelation, and the tree of knowledge only appears in this story. The trees likely are references to other Canaanite creation myths. In this story, very little is said about the character of the trees. Instead, they serve a functional role in the story: namely, to set up the one prohibition in the garden which will be broken by the first humans in Genesis 3.¹⁰

Literature/Genre

- This is an origin story (sometimes called etiological stories), explaining the origin of the cosmos, animals, and humankind. However, the story was likely not meant to be taken as literal history; the story's primary purpose is to reveal the relationship between God and humankind, setting up many of the themes that will be repeated throughout the Torah (see **Culture/Religion**).

Authorial Intention/Occasion

- The Documentary Hypothesis is the theory that the Torah is drawn from four major sources. Each of these sources, known as the J, E, P, and D sources, had different purposes and concerns that affected what they added to the text. Today's text was more likely drawn from the J source as the story is very concerned with God's direct action with humanity and in fact shows the origin of that relationship. Additionally, this story sets up the relationship between humanity and the rest of creation, as humankind is instructed to till and keep the garden. To read more about the Documentary Hypothesis, see **More Information**.¹¹
- Additionally, the story is meant to build the identity of Israel as a people in the Babylonian exile and following.¹²

Audience

- The intended audience was likely the people of Israel in exile in Babylon or shortly after the exile. Because of this context, the Torah deals with the origins of the people of Israel and their relationship to God and the world. This story is meant to provide hope and explanation within the context of exile. These all help to build their identity as a people.¹³

Common Misunderstandings

- While the reading for today ends at the end of chapter 2, the story continues with the description of the eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge in chapter 3. This story is often used as the origin of evil in the world or of humanity's fall. The text itself does not directly address this interpretation as the author is more concerned with the faithful response of God to humankind's disobedience. Paul will provide another interpretation of the story through a Christological lens in Romans 5.¹⁴

More Information

- Biblical scholar Michael Coogan describes the Documentary Hypothesis, including the differences and similarities between the J, E, P, and D sources: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/ancient/writers-bible.html>
- An explanation of the connection of Hebrew creation myths to Canaanite and other Mesopotamian myths intended for a lay audience: <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/.premium-where-did-creation-story-come-from-1.5404560>

Connections

Narrative Lectionary Connections

- **Last Week** – Today’s story is the beginning of the Narrative Lectionary, so we start at the beginning of God’s relationship with humanity in Genesis.
- **Next Week (Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7)** – Next week, the story continues the theme of God’s relationship with humanity as God promises a child to Sarah and Abraham.
- **Other Year 2 Connections** – The theme of God’s relationship with humanity continues throughout Year 2 and is especially seen in Genesis 18 and 21 (9/17/23), where God promises that Abraham and Sarah will have a child; Exodus 1 and 3 (10/1/23), where God answers Israel’s prayers for deliverance out of slavery by sending Moses; Deuteronomy 5 (10/8/23), where Israel is instructed to love God with all their heart; and in Ezra 1 and 3 (12/17/23), where the Israelites are finally able to return home after decades of exile.

Other Bible Connections

- In Genesis 1:1–2:4, the first creation account is shared.
- In Genesis 3, the story of the first humans continues as they disobey God and eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge.
- In Romans 5:12-18, Paul contrasts Adam, the first man, with Christ, the new Adam, referencing today’s story and Genesis 3.

Thematic Connections

- **Annual Theme: Living out God’s Kingdom** – With the creation of the first two humans, God forms the first community. God gives them a purpose—to care for the earth—and God gives them everything they need to do so. In response, they love God and each other. This is the first glimpse we see in the Bible of the world as God wills it, the kingdom of God.
- **Unit Theme: God Creates Family** – Today we hear the story of how God created the first humans, the first family. Their relationship is defined by love and cooperation as it is with the best of all human families, no matter what their shape or size may be. God’s kingdom of peace and justice is formed out of these loving relationships.

Liturgical/Seasonal Connections

- As we begin the school year in the Northern Hemisphere, which for many congregations also begins the program year, today’s story shares the beginning of creation and God’s relationship with humanity. Because today’s story sets up that relationship (both with God and each other), the story can be used as a launching point for further discussion about how we encounter God in our daily lives and how we are all created to work together to live out God’s kingdom.

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 are “Hip-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 television series *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage* (1980) and its sequel *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey* (2014) both feature the origin of the universe from a scientific perspective, told in a compelling and visual narrative.
- The first episode of the television miniseries *The Bible* (2013) includes the creation of the world and the tale of Adam and Eve.
- In 2014, Joe Davis, artist in residence at Harvard Medical School, created a literal tree of knowledge by injecting a DNA-encoded version of Wikipedia into an apple tree. More information about his project can be found here: <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/object-of-interest-the-twice-forbidden-fruit>
- Today’s story, especially when read alongside Genesis 3, has been featured in art throughout history. One can find art of today’s story by searching for “Genesis Creation Story Art” on your favorite search engine. Additionally, the website Art and the Bible includes several depictions of today’s story, and can be found at this link: <https://www.artbible.info/bible/genesis/2.html>

¹ E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1964), 16.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 21.

⁵ Speiser, 20.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 45.

⁷ John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 35.

⁸ Brueggemann, 48.

⁹ Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1978), 92.

¹⁰ Brueggemann, 45-46.

¹¹ Ibid., 12-13.

¹² Stephen L. Harris, *Understanding the Bible: A Reader’s Guide and Reference*, 6th ed., (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 110-114.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Brueggemann, 40-42.