

Baptism of Our Lord

BEGINNINGS

Genesis 1:1-5

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Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

1:1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,
2the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of
the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the
waters. 3Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was
light. 4And God saw that the light was good; and God separated
the light from the darkness. 5God called the light Day, and the
darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was
morning, the first day.

[Note: These few verses cannot be separated from the liturgical narrative 1:1-2:4a, nor indeed from the rest of the canon. And since they were written towards the end of the Babylonian Exile c. 540 BCE, we may also look to the most significant prophet of that era known to us as Second Isaiah (Isa. 40-55) for guidance. But in order to narrow the scope of this analysis, I am taking the Gospel text for today, Mark 1:1-11, as another creative "beginning" (Mark 1:1) that puts the first "beginning" (Gen. 1:1) into theological relief. Both beginnings are "good news" (Isa. 52:7); only the latter news is so much better.]

DIAGNOSIS: From the Beginning: How Dark the Darkness

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *A Beginning, But*

to What Purpose?

Genesis 1 was and is addressed to Israel and to all those who call on “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” for their identity and purpose. The One who called them out from the darkness and chaos of the nations to become his own people is the one and only God (Isa. 51:16; 54:5). This singular God is no idol of human making, neither a regional god confined to a particular plot of land nor a deity identified as Water or Sun, but the Creator of the cosmos and hence the Creator of world history. To the Israelites exiled in Babylon came this “good” news: YHWH is the only God (Genesis 1 uses the generic *elohim*); nothing ever happens apart from YHWH’s purposes; Israel’s sins are forgiven; her exile from the land of promise is coming to an end; and YHWH’s final purpose for Israel is about to be fulfilled. Thus, YHWH is “beginning” again what he had already begun and promised from the beginning (Gen. 1:1; 12:3; Isa. 46:10), that is, to make Israel his “servant” in the world and a “blessing” to all the nations, in order that all the earth may know that YHWH alone is God and respond in trust to his creative call. For Israel in Babylon amongst a plethora of gods, it was an open question whether YHWH was their God only or the one God of “the heavens and the earth” (v. 1; the expression denotes everything that is or ever will be). That question is definitively answered in Genesis 1.

Our text is not speaking abstractly about “creation” as a done deal but about YHWH’s *purpose* for calling Israel “from the beginning.” Yet Israel’s continual failure to answer YHWH’s call on behalf of all creation, and Israel’s latest subjugation by other world powers with their godless gods, does not thwart YHWH’s purpose (Isa. 54:5-8). YHWH is firmly in control of “everything” (v. 1) including world history (Isa. 45:7). That YHWH’s creation is “very good” (1:31; in the sense of pleasing to God) is because it is suitable for his purpose despite all

the threatening forces that seem to undermine that purpose. “Do not fear,” YHWH claims, “for I am with you” (Isa. 41:10, etc.). Yet fear of the darkness all about, that is, the natural and world historical powers that are always subject to YHWH’s command, always seems to win out.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Persisting Darkness*

Despite the reaffirmation of God’s commitment to Israel in exile (Isa. 51:6; 55:11), the problem of Israel’s continual failure to trust in YHWH was not solved by the Return to the land of promise. Metaphorically, the primordial “darkness” at creation’s beginning (v. 2) persists. The question as to whether creation is from nothing at all (v. 1) or from a chaotic mass (v. 2) is a modern one. The important question to Israel is this: In view of Israel as YHWH’s servant to the world (Isa. 49:1-7; already purposed in Gen. 12:1-3), will Israel’s persistent lack of trust in YHWH ultimately thwart the purpose for creation itself, or is that purpose hidden from view and/or still unfolding (Isa. 45:15-19)? How can human faithlessness coexist with the faithfulness of God? How then can creation as a whole be “very good” (1:31)? Through Israel, creation itself is at risk of falling back into the darkness from whence it came. How can Israel be a “blessing for all the nations” if she herself is continually in the dark?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Unraveling Creation?*

From the perspective of exilic Israel, then, not only is Israel’s future at stake but Creation itself and with it God’s purpose are also at stake. Creation itself is at risk of unraveling into chaos. The only apparent certainty for Israel, even as she basks in her prospective Return from exile, is more of the same: more darkness, more judgment, more exile, more death. After 200 years of trying to reconstitute the nation, only to be thwarted by the Persians; and after another 400 years

of trying to reestablish Temple worship and remnants of the Davidic throne, only to be thwarted by the Ptolemies, the Seleucids, and the Romans—let alone by internal dissensions—what was so promising “at the beginning” (whether of Creation or of the Return) was now proving to be at best uncertain. If the near-death of Israel and the failure of God’s promised blessing was to be the final outcome of God’s purpose, the greatest question would necessarily become: How committed is YHWH himself to his creation?—for creation without Israel was and is, for biblical faith, unthinkable.

PROGNOSIS: The New Beginning: God Baptized into Creation

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Promise and Purpose Fulfilled*

Mark’s “good news” (1:1), pertaining to Israel’s crucified messiah, is all the more startling in view of the events following Israel’s return from exile. Mark’s quotation from Second Isaiah (Isa. 40:3) announced a “beginning” (1:1) that had already begun 600 years earlier (even as that beginning had begun already at the beginning of creation). Only now, the unresolved problems of Israel’s faithlessness and God’s commitment to creation were definitively answered. In Jesus, whose erstwhile messiahship ended so brutally, the very Spirit of God rested (1:10) and God was “well pleased” (1:11). [Note that the NRSV’s translation of the Hebrew *ruah* as “wind” rather than “spirit” excises God from the initial chaos and darkness (or world history) of creation. As if God was not there too! The Greek Septuagint, translated c. 250 BCE, reads *pneuma*, “spirit.”] In Jesus’ death and resurrection, all superlatives fail to describe the fulfillment of YHWH’s purpose for creation and promise to Abraham (1:15; see Paul’s summary of God’s purpose in Rom. 11:32 where “disobedience” is better translated as “hearing without trusting”). Mark makes the point by re-using

thoughts drawn from our Genesis text: God, water, heavens, Spirit, well-pleased. So radical is God's commitment to Creation in Jesus that we may speak of a new beginning, even of a new creation. One can even say that, in Jesus, God "baptized" (that is, "immersed") himself into Creation by making a full and irrevocable commitment of his own self to fulfill his *promise* to Abraham—and thus also his *purpose* for creation as a whole.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : Unending Blessing

In Jesus (Mark 1), YHWH's creative call (Gen. 1) and promise to Abraham to bless all nations (Gen. 12) is a new creation. The "blessing" consists entirely on trusting in Jesus. This blessing is not based on any human desire or power or pleasing work—the mark of the old creation, but entirely on God's gift of himself—the mark of the new creation. I. In this way, the persistent quest to please God on our own is ended, and the darkness of human faithlessness is swept away forever. By trusting in Jesus alone, the old creation is behind us and the new creation is before us as an unending blessing. Incomprehensibly, the new creation is the "Spirit of God" creating us anew in the resurrected Body of Christ. This is received by God's gift of faith in Christ, and is *itself* the blessing that YHWH had promised to Israel and to the nations.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : No End in Sight!

We who trust in Christ alone are no longer concerned either about our own mortality or goodness or faithfulness, or even about God's own investment in Creation. Those issues are now settled. By proclaiming the "good news" of Jesus Messiah, the blessing of Israel to the nations is being fulfilled unendingly, with no end in sight. From now on, our spirit-immersed new lives may be lived wholly for others—as indeed God's own life is lived for Creation. And although our lives are still thoroughly beset in the old creation with darkness and faithlessness—which have

no future (except death), the new creation of faith in Christ is even now beginning to take shape, albeit a shape that is cruciform. For the old creation will ever seek to crush the new. Whatever the new creation is becoming, whatever shape it is taking, is unending creativity. God himself will make it a blessing. Such "life" has no analogue in the old creation. When it is heard, it is believed. When it is seen, it is cruciform. When it is touched, it is immeasurable. What we may call it, whether selfless love or abundant life, is of little consequence. Since it carries with it the sure promise of God, every moment of it is a new beginning.

The New Creation, as envisioned by the prophets in Isa. 65-66 and Rev. 22, and by Paul in 1 Cor. 15 and 2 Cor. 5, is neither timeless nor unhistorical! Though it is ever new, it remains creation, a creature of God's ongoing creativity. It participates in the very life of God which, as far as we know, is always creative life with no end in sight!