

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Genesis 1:1-5

NRSV

This passage answers the question: how did the world come to be? But, being written long before the dawn of modern science, it is obviously not, and cannot be, *scientific* in our terms. Even so, it is valuable. We ask: did life arise when elements in the primeval ooze by pure chance formed DNA? Even if our answer is *yes*, we maintain that, behind all of creation, is a transcendent being (supernatural and involved in earthly affairs) whom we call God. He has total control of creation.

Vv. 1-2 were first translated as a sentence in the 200s BC, but in Hebrew these verses are a phrase. A modern translation is: “When God began to create heaven and earth – the earth being formless and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep, a wind of God sweeping [hovering] over the waters – then God said ...” Vv. 1-2 are the *when* clause, and v. 3 the *then*. “Heavens and earth” is a way of saying *everything*. (Hebrew cosmology held that there were multiple heavens, with God living in the highest one.) Non-existence of the earth involved darkness and deep waters. Even at this time, God was in control: his wind, breath, rushing-spirit, *ruah*, were here. The text is orderly (note “God said ... God saw ... God separated ... God called ...”, a pattern repeated through the six *days* of creation); and so too are God’s acts. Vv. 3-5 are the events of the first day. His first priority is to overcome darkness: he creates light. Rather than destroying darkness, he relegates it to night-time: it too becomes part of the good, godly world, and is declared so by God. Naming night and day show God’s mastery of them. Jewish feast days begin at sun-down, so “evening” is first. This pattern is repeated for five more *days*. On the seventh day (the Sabbath), God rests. Is this account unscientific? The writer worked with the cosmology of his day to show divine power and purpose, and the unique place of humans. Unlike other ancient Near East peoples, Israel’s story of how humankind came to be is peaceful, effortless (all God does is to speak); what is created is good, beautiful. God intended that the world be wholly good.

Psalms 29

NRSV

This psalm is probably based on one to the Canaanite god Baal, the storm God, who brings the annual thunder-storm, the source of fertility for the land. In Israelite hands, it expresses God’s supremacy and universal rule. In vv. 1-2, all other gods are invited to acknowledge the Lord’s supremacy and the glory due to him. (Israel was not yet strictly monotheistic.) Vv. 3-9 give us a picture of the storm. The “voice of the Lord” (vv. 3, 4, 5, 7-9) is thunder (repetitious claps). The storm is first seen approaching over the Mediterranean (v. 3); it sweeps in to the land, breaking the tall “cedars” (v. 5), as it advances across southern Lebanon. It vents

its power on Mount “Lebanon” (v. 6) and then on Mount “Sirion”; it proceeds on into “the wilderness” (v. 8, the Arabian Desert). (“Flames of fire”, v. 7, is lightning.) “Kadesh” (v. 8) is probably *Kedar*, part of the desert. The Word of God is indeed mighty. In v. 9, “all” the gods do acknowledge God’s supremacy; they cry *Glory be to the Lord!* God rules over all from his throne (v. 10). May the Lord strengthen Israel and give it peace.

Acts 19:1-7

NRSV

Luke, also the author of Acts, has just told us, in 18:24-25, about Apollos, a Jew from Alexandria, “eloquent ... well-versed in the scriptures [the Old Testament] ... instructed in the Way of the Lord” who “spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John” the Baptist. When Priscilla and Aquila (a couple) heard him speak in the synagogue, they explained the Word of God “more accurately” (18:26) to him. He went to Achaia (in southern Greece) where he showed from scripture that Jesus is the Messiah, the saviour (18:28). Apollos was already on the way to becoming a Christian.

The “disciples” (19:1) of John whom Paul found at Ephesus did not know the scriptures (19:2), for the Spirit is mentioned in the Old Testament. They had been baptised into the belief that when we admit our fault and promise to amend our ways (“repentance”, 19:4), God will forgive us. Paul tells them that the one of whom John spoke, “who was to come after him”, is already here: he is Jesus; in him they should believe – as a natural consequence of following John. They are baptised into the church, and when Paul lays hands on them, are empowered by the Holy Spirit, with particular spiritual gifts (speaking in tongues and prophecy). Apollos and the twelve both come to accept Christ, one through the scriptures and the witness of a couple, the twelve through hearing the good news from Paul and others. We do not know whether Apollos was baptised; he may have been an effective messenger for Christ, perhaps outside the church.

Mark 1:4-11

NRSV

This gospel begins with the messenger whom God sends ahead of Christ, to prepare the way. John is the forerunner of Jesus. Tradition says that John baptised near Jericho, in an arid region. People came to him in large numbers, repenting (changing their mind sets), “confessing their sins” (v. 5), resolving to sin no more, and (probably) dipping themselves in the River. John dressed like a hermit or prophet (v. 6). In Palestine, some species of “locusts” were eaten. Mark does not tell us why Jesus was baptised by John, but what follows is important. The opening of the heavens symbolizes the start of a new mode of communication between God and humankind. Perhaps “like a dove” (v. 10) is an allusion to the *spirit hovering* in Genesis 1:2. To Mark, the “voice ... from heaven” (v. 11) confirms the already existing relationship between God and Jesus. (The Greek word translated “Beloved” indicates God’s choice more than his feelings.) Part of Jesus’ message in Galilee (v. 15) is “repent, and believe in the good news.”