

# The Pentateuch: Genesis (I)

Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> July 2020



The word Pentateuch comes from Greek meaning ‘five books’. In our Christian context these are the first five books of the Bible and they are worth knowing as they are often many an answer to a pub quiz! Genesis (Gn), Exodus (Ex), Leviticus (Lv), Numbers (Nb) and Deuteronomy (Dt). Our brothers and sisters in the Jewish community know these five books as the Torah, also called the Law.

- The book of Genesis describes creation and tells of the epic lives of the Patriarchs, the Fathers of the people of Israel, like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph.
- In the book of Exodus we read about God’s deliverance for His people from the hands of Pharaoh in Egypt. Exodus also describes the covenant, that unique relationship, between God and His freed people.
- The final three books, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy all contain the commandments and laws of God. These rules are to help the people stay in a right relationship of love and holiness with God, their deliverer.

Now we have an overview of what the Pentateuch/Torah is, let’s delve into our first text from the book of Genesis. As we begin, let us pray.

## Prayer before (or after) reading the Holy Bible

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Come, O Holy Spirit,  
and fill us with the gifts of knowledge and wisdom.  
Strengthen us, we pray, with heavenly grace,  
so that we may grasp with our minds,  
treasure in our hearts,  
and carry out in our deeds,  
all the teachings of your Holy Book  
which lead to salvation.  
Amen.

I found that prayer (above) on a piece of paper that fell from one of many books I was given by a kindly man called Mr Austin McCauley. He was a neighbour of my grandparents and when he found out that I was going to seminary he very generously gave me some books to help with my studies. When that prayer fell out from the pages of one of his books I knew that not only did he read, extensively and seriously, but more importantly he was a man of prayer. Without prayer are hearts remain cold and we can never truly grow in Faith despite how much knowledge our brains can retain. I would invite you to say this prayer each time you begin to read your Bible so that your heart will be open to God's voice.

## Genesis

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Gn 1:1)*



As we begin to journey through the book of Genesis please read for today's reflection Gn1:1 – 2:4. As a refresher for those who are still unsure about biblical referencing Gn 1:1 – 2:4 is the book of Genesis (Gn), Chapter One, verse One (1:1), and read through until chapter two, verse four (2:4).

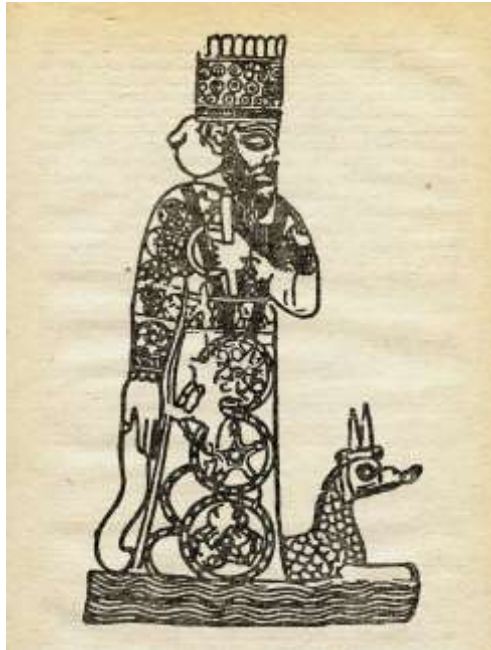
Let's first of all put these words of Genesis into their historical context. Do you remember one of the hit records of 1978 by Boney M called, 'The Rivers of Babylon'? The lyrics of this Top-Ten song were based on Psalm 136.

*'By the rivers of Babylon  
there we sat and wept,  
remembering Sion;  
on the poplars that grew there  
we hung up our harps.  
O how could we sing  
the song of the Lord  
on alien soil?  
If I forget you, Jerusalem,  
let my right hand river.'* (Ps 136:1–5)

These words were originally written by an exile and who was missing his homeland and longing to return. In 596BC his country of Judah was invaded and its capital, Jerusalem, was captured. The Babylonians then forced many of their newly conquered inhabitants to live in exile in Babylon so to assimilate them into their own culture and quash the threat of future uprisings in their empire. Between 597Bc to 539BC, many of God's people lived in exile and their yearning for home, as seen in Psalm 136, never truly went away.



Living in a new land, learning a new language and attempting to embrace a new culture was both frustrating and confusing for the exiled people of Judah. The Babylonians believed in an ancient story about the origins of creation and humankind that was known as the '*Enuma Elish*'. It described the origins of the seasons, the makings of life and the battles between the gods – Marduk being their great venerated deity.



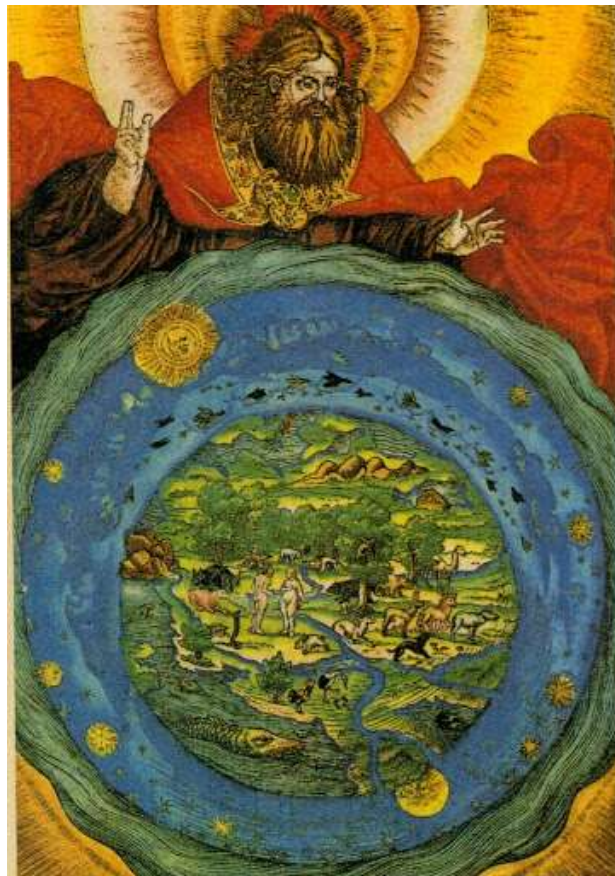
The *Enuma Elish* explains that human beings were created to serve the gods and undertake menial tasks. Marduk (picture above) achieved this goal by using the blood of his enemy to create mortals whose sole purpose and existence was to be subservient. The exiled community of Judah knew these Babylonian creation myths to be fantastical and contrary to what God had revealed to them about the origins of life. They undertook to write down formally the Creation story so that they could pass down the truth and hence the book of Genesis began to take shape.

Now we know the historical context for this passage in Genesis let's begin to look at it's literary style. Genesis is not, was not and has never claimed to be a detailed scientific account of the origins of the world. The creation narrative found in Genesis is a poetic epic that reveals fundamental divine truths. William Wordsworth, the great poet, will help us to unpack this further.

*'I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils;*

*Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.'*

The above lines are infamous and well known. Nobody really believes Wordsworth actually supernaturally began to hover over vales and hills and physically took the shape of a cloud when they read his words. Hopefully, no sane person, believes that a bunch of daffodils suddenly took up the foxtrot as they danced in the breeze. However, what we do accept in the poets work is the emotion he is trying to convey about a personal experience. The images and metaphors paint a picture of a concrete moment in Wordsworth's life that elated him in a profound and deeply moving way. The creation narrative in Genesis is doing the same thing. It is revealing the truth of God's work in the universe and the beauty of the living world.



The writers of Genesis show that God made an ordered universe without defect. The repetition of '*Let there be...*', '*God saw that it was good...*' and '*Evening came and morning came...*' all emphasise the beauty and unique design of the world and all the elements that God personally created to make it. The world is in a perfect relationship with God, it is in a state of original holiness.

Creation is structured as a working week. Day one God creates and separates light from darkness. Day two the waters are divided from the dome of the sky. On the third day the earth and its vegetation are created with day four being reserved for the formation of the sun, moon and stars. Day five God fills the waters and air with living beings and on day six man is made and finally on the seventh day God rests. The imagery used in this passage of Genesis continues to emphasise the beautiful order of God's creation and how it all fits and works together in harmony. Think of an orchestra. Every section, no matter how small a part that section may play, all help to create something wonderful.

When the human family is formed on the sixth day, it is formed out of nothing but God's love. The Creator does not make humankind to be slaves and perform menial tasks for Him, unlike the Babylonian mythical god Marduk. God instead wants to allow others, wants man, to share and relish in His Divine Love.

Our biblical journey next week will be an encounter with Adam and Eve.

God Bless and keep praying  
Fr. O'Brien