

## ***Let There Be a Dome***

*By Dr. Dave Neale*

In the three-year cycle of the lectionary, that compendium of biblical references that a good deal of Christendom uses to guide their preaching and reading of the Bible, this is Year A, the year we study the Torah, and today we look at the first chapter of the first book of the Bible. Because Easter/Pentecost is concluded and we enter the common year, up to Advent.

### **Behind the Text**

The Old Testament books are named by the first word of the Hebrew text. Genesis, “In the Beginning,” *Bereshit*. The title says so much about the importance of Genesis that its meaning is, as von Rad said, “scarcely to be comprehended”; concepts which “lie beyond human imagination.”<sup>1</sup> What a joy to share these sacred lines with you today.

There is no such thing as a simplistic reading of the creation account. No one who studies this passage will get far without hearing about other ancient creation mythologies, from which our biblical account, it is said, might have arisen or shown affinities.

None of which are, in my view, of any importance really, because they have nothing to do with the *meaning* of the account.

In fact, there could not be more difference between our story of God than those of other ancient cultures. There could not!

The world was not carved from the body of the sea monster Tiamat, as the Babylonians held, or by means of some ludicrous cosmic battle of the gods, stories fully deserving of the epithet “mythology.”

The astonishing aspect of this creation story is that “little Israel,” as Gerhard von Rad affectionately calls this wee entity on the geopolitical stage, is that she drew a sharp line between herself and all the great creation myths of the world to assert that *one* God is the Lord and creator of the world.

And that God creates it all by fiat, with a word. ***Let there be...!*** Magnificent.

### **In the Text**

Here is the question: How do we liberate this passage from its life-long familiarity to us? Somethings become so familiar that they sort of disappear. You have a beautiful garden in June but by September you barely see it. You drive by a gorgeous ocean vista and barely turn your head any more. How indeed to we see it afresh?

***In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was formless and void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.*** (Gen 1:1-2)

Oh that fearsome phrase, ***formless and void***, famous among the readers of Genesis in Hebrew as the alliterative *tohu wa bohu*, meaning “wilderness, emptiness and desolation.”

...***darkness covered the face of the deep*** (*pani t’hōm*, “abyss”).<sup>2</sup> And, it was said, the Spirit of the Lord “moved gently” (*marahfat*) over the ***face of the waters***. I’m no great hand at Hebrew but I can

get through the first lines of Genesis, they being so familiar. And oh... you guys, it is so moving. Please, please slow down when you read these great texts. Read with your heart.

It helps us appreciate what we see here when we realize that "It was not "written" one upon a time; but, rather, it is a doctrine that had been carefully enriched over centuries by very slow growth" (von Rad, p 47). Here are centuries of reflection on the meaning of life.

Why is water so important to the imagery of the passage?

There are over 600 references to water in the Bible and it represents many different aspects of life. It can represent life (living water, **Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow springs of life** Prov 4:23), death, affliction, blessing, the curse of the flood, and so on.

But in our passage this morning water represents primal watery chaos. And then this:

***And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters form the waters." So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. And God called the dome Sky.*** (Gen 1:6-8a)

Speaking of watery chaos, I should update you on my swimming lessons. You may remember that last fall I took Adult Beginning Swimming lessons and passed level 1, which it is virtually impossible to flunk.

So as I've been swimming a few times a week, Commonwealth has been my personal **face of the deep** (*t'hōm*, "abyss"). There is still watery chaos in my crawl, but it is coming along! There is hope in life.

The cosmology<sup>3</sup> of Genesis is a universe of water, from which God pushes back the waters and creates a dome, or orb of safety for life. This basic watery environment is referred to as ...**the face of the deep** in vs 2.

We understand how the ancients might have thought all this plausible. Water falls from the sky and if you dig down very far you will hit water.

The word translated "dome," רַקִּיעַ, *rkah*, is an extended surface, pushed out against the solid waters (Brown, Driver Briggs Lexicon, 956). Often translated as "firmament."<sup>4</sup>

A sanctuary of life. Air, birds, land, wind, trees, animals, humans - a biosphere of life carved out, in the midst of the face of the deep. It's so beautiful!

In the story of Noah, having prepared the ark for the coming flood, ... **on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened** (Gen 7:11).

Did the ancients believe this cosmology was literally true? I think they probably did.

It would be 2000 years before Copernicus was born (who said the sun was the centre of the solar system, not the earth).

The civilizations of antiquity, Egyptians and Babylonians, Greeks and Romans, from the Areopogus of Athens to the plains of Stonehenge all studied the dome. Stonehenge was already standing as a monument to the stars when Abraham walked the earth, 4000 years ago. 1500 years before Genesis was written down.

What we call observational astronomy is as old as civilization. But no one the understood physics of course.<sup>5</sup> Physics as a discipline didn't exist. We know better now. This is an "obsolete" cosmology. The first chapters of Genesis aren't science, they aren't myth.

This text is our *foundation story*. It is the basis of all meaning in life for us. It is the place from which we derive all our sense of identity as human beings - *creatures of God in God's creation*.

What blows me away is that Genesis is God *graciously* speaking truth to his people in a way they can understand – in terms of a cosmology they could recognize. Don't you think that places an imperative on us to speak to our friends and neighbors in ways they can understand – with the same gracious spirit. Stephen would say so!

There is nothing in the faith that requires modern Christians to believe obsolete cosmologies. A literalism that suggests we are required to do so is shallow and, to say the least, inappropriate as a reading strategy for a foundation story.

The amount of water never changes by one drop. There will never be more, there will never be one drop less. Did you know 71% of the earth's surface is covered by water, but only 3% of the earth's water is usable (non-salty)? Of all the fresh water on earth 69% is in ice. That is why we say, in reference to climate change and the melting poles, if the ice melts into the oceans, we are in trouble.<sup>6</sup>

The "water cycle" is the great engine of life as water migrates from ocean, to rain, to ice, to runoff, to ground water and so on. If we deplete an aquifer it will replenish itself, but it will take 1500 years.

I love the great hymn to the water cycle of the earth in Job 38:

- ...the storehouses of the snow and hail
- ...the drops of dew
- ...the torrents of rain
- ...the ice born of the earth's womb
- ...the hoarfrost of heaven
- ...the waters become hard like stone... the face of the deep is frozen (*pani t'hōm*, exactly the same words, the only other place in Scripture I can find this phrase, the writer of Job was thinking of the Genesis 1:2)

### **From the Text**

What I would hope to have you take away from this message is the profound grandeur of our 'In the Beginning'; the audacity of its assertion that One God did this. In our world where the source for meaning of identity is so fraught, we can rely on this one truth. In the beginning, we are created beings!

For us the first lines of *Bereshit* are the bedrock of everything we believe. How can we do anything but rejoice!

We hear it in the first line of the Creed: *We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.*

The waters of chaos are held at bay in the created order and, yet, sometimes, they do seem to break forth upon us.

[Musicians come]

“Though storms may appear to threaten the cosmic order, God is himself the Lord of the storm, with all the elements of nature, water in particular, firmly under his sovereign control” (*ibid*).

***As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?*** (Ps 42:1-2a)

Thanks be to God, Amen.

Benediction:

And now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you. *2 Cor 13:13*

Amen

<sup>1</sup> I rely on von Rad's magisterial commentary *Genesis* throughout this message. See pages 47ff.

<sup>2</sup> *t'hom* Thought by some to be cognate to the great sea monster Tiamat, of the Babylonian creation narrative, from whose conquered body the world was created.

<sup>3</sup> “The branch of philosophy dealing with the origin and general structure of the universe, with its parts, elements, and laws, and especially with such of its characteristics as space, time, causality, and freedom.”

<sup>4</sup> 2 Esdras 4:7, “...how many streams are above the firmament?”

<sup>5</sup> Moses was said to have been ***instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians*** (Acts 7:22), which would have included some pretty sophisticated observational astronomy.

<sup>6</sup> The first thing to observe is that the land of Israel is a land where water is scarce. Too much of it is a problem. Too little of it is a problem. In fact, almost all the water in the region comes from below the earth, springs and wells. If you do a study of wells in the Bible you will see their theological significance in Israel's history. Jacob's well and so on.