

Rediscovering the Story of the Old Testament – Session 2 Lesson 4

Language of Meaning

Contents

Main Idea	2
Exercise.....	2
Core questions.....	2
Establishing Meaning	2
Ancient Near East (ANE) Culture, cosmology and meaning-giving.....	2
Existence	2
Shape of the cosmos	2
Emerging from the waters of chaos	3
Genesis 1-2 redefining meaning.....	3
Genesis 1:1-2:2.....	3
The 6 days of creation.....	4
The 7th day – the purpose of creation revealed.....	5
Words and meaning	7
The Conceptual Image of the Heavens and the Earth.....	9

Rediscovering the Story of the Old Testament – Session 2 Lesson 4

Language of Meaning

Main Idea

Understand how the origin narratives were constructed to establish the meaning of our origins rather than attempting to describe the physical nature of our origins.

Exercise

- What activities in your life give you a sense of meaning?
 - What Bible tools do you use? [Ex: Biblegateway, Biblehub, Blue Letter Bible ...]
- [NOTE: All figures in this lesson are from Bibleproject.com]

Core questions

1. Where are we in relation to the cosmos and to heaven and earth
2. Who are we in relation to God and to creation
3. What is our story, how did we begin and what is it leading to

Establishing Meaning

Ps 36:5-9 Your love, Lord, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies. Your righteousness is like the highest mountains, your justice like the great deep. You, Lord, preserve both people and animals. How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.

Ancient Near East (ANE) Culture, cosmology and meaning-giving

Existence

We cannot properly understand Genesis if we interpret it through modern Western eyes. We need to try to understand Genesis as it would have been understood in the days when it was written. God would not have tried to explain the world in terms they could not understand, He would have used concepts that were available to them in their time.

In ANE thinking there is no concept of a “natural” world vs. a “supernatural” world. The physical world and the world of the gods intermingled. Every event was the result of the act of a deity.

In our current thinking, we have a material conception of the world. Most of the time we think that something comes into existence when it begins to physically exist. But in the case of businesses, we would say that a business begins to exist, not when the buildings are built but when the business begins to do business – that is, when it becomes functional. This is similar to the ANE world. People in the ancient world did not consider that something begins to exist until it had a function within an ordered system. Something may physically be present but not “existing” until it has a recognized function within a system.

Shape of the cosmos

ANE cosmic geography is based on what the ANE people could observe from their vantage point. In the modern day, we observe the universe from a modern scientific view, but the ANE view had a different model of the universe. For the ANE people, if water comes down, there must be some up there—so they all thought in terms of cosmic waters in the sky. If the cosmic water doesn’t come down all the time, something must hold the water back—so there must be something solid (a firmament) holding back the waters. Then if that is true something like mountains must be holding up this firmament. Water comes

Rediscovering the Story of the Old Testament – Session 2 Lesson 4

Language of Meaning

up from the ground so there must be waters under the ground, yet something must hold the ground steady.

In Egyptian cosmology the functions were more due to gods than in the actual material structures. The material structures reflected the attributes of the deities. The cosmos functioned as an extension of the gods, and the gods functioned within the cosmos. The origins of cosmos were linked to the origins of the gods.

Emerging from the waters of chaos

Nearly all the creation accounts of the ancient world begin with a “formless” physical world, usually with water, but the waters are chaotic. Then Creation often began with something like a god or land emerging from the waters. But at this stage, nothing “existed” yet, because there was no order and nothing had designated functions. The next stage usually began with naming. Naming was the first activity associated with assigning functions. The next activity was usually separating (ex: heaven and earth). But in most stories, most creation accounts did not include creatures.

The creation accounts of humans speak of what they are made of (clay, blood of deity, breath of deity) although not in a chemical sense. Instead these ingredients communicated ideas of identity and relationship.

But in all these accounts, the stress was not on the material creation but of assigning functions in an ordered system.

Genesis 1-2 redefining meaning

Genesis 1:1-2:2

In the beginning God (Elohim) created (bara) the heavens and the earth. ² Now the earth was formless (tohu) and empty (bohu), darkness was over the surface (panim) of the deep (tehom), and the Spirit (ruach) of God (Elohim) was hovering (rachap) over the waters. ³ And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. ⁴ God saw that the light was good (tov), and he separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day. ⁶ And God said, “Let there be a vault between the waters (mayim) to separate water from water.” ⁷ So God made the vault (rakia) and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. ⁸ God called the vault “sky.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day. ⁹ And God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” And it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry ground “land,” and the gathered waters he called “seas.” And God saw that it was good. ¹¹ Then God said, “Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.” And it was so. ¹² The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. ¹³ And there was evening, and there was morning—the third day. ¹⁴ And God said, “Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years, ¹⁵ and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth.” And it was so. ¹⁶ God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. ¹⁷ God set them in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth, ¹⁸ to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹ And there was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day. ²⁰ And God said, “Let the water teem with living creatures, and

Rediscovering the Story of the Old Testament – Session 2 Lesson 4

Language of Meaning

*let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky.”²¹ So God created the great creatures (**tannin**) of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.²² God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.”²³ And there was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day.²⁴ And God said, “Let the land produce living creatures (**chai nephesh**) according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind.” And it was so.²⁵ God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,^[a] and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”*

*²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image (**tselem**),
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

*²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it (**kabash**). Rule (**radah**) over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”²⁹ Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.³⁰ And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.² By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.³ Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.*

The 6 days of creation

To understand Genesis, we need to turn away from modern thinking which tries to understand Genesis as a description of a physical creation. Instead, we need to try to understand Genesis in terms of Ancient Near East concepts. Creation stories established the meaning of life in terms of our functions in the world system.

As we look at the 6 days of creation, we see that the first three days were the assignment of functions and the last three days, the “functionaries,” the objects/creatures who carried out the functions, were created.

Day 1 produced the alternation between day and night, thus the function of time. Day 2 produced rakia, the dome that held up the waters above which are the waters that provided weather. Day 3 produced the land and the plants that grew on the land, thus providing food.

So, on days one through three, God created the basis for time; day weather; and food. Together, these three functions are the foundation of life, particularly human life. For the ANE people, the greatest work of the Creator is not found in the materials that He used, but that he brought them together to serve a purpose.

In days four through six God installed functionaries who carried out the purpose of each area of Creation (time, cosmic space, terrestrial space). On day four, celestial bodies served for human oriented functions, as “signs that established seasons (festivals), days and years” and that governed the day and

Rediscovering the Story of the Old Testament – Session 2 Lesson 4

Language of Meaning

night. On day 5, the **birds** and the **fish** are to teem and fly and are to be fruitful and multiply. On day 5 we also see the ‘great **creatures** of the sea,’ which in the ancient world were considered to be creatures that operated against the **ordered** system. Yet in the **Bible** these creatures are simply part of the **ordered** system. On day 6 we see **livestock** and **wild** animals that are to be fruitful and multiply. Then we also see **humans** to rule over the all the other creatures, so they are not only to be fruitful and multiply but also to **rule** and **subdue** the earth. The humans also have a function relative to each other, as male and female.

Humankind is connected to the **ground** from which we are drawn. Womankind is connected to **mankind** from whom she is drawn. In both male and female forms, humankind is connected to **God** in whose image we all are made. As such they have the privilege of procreation, the role of subduing and ruling, and serving sacred space in the garden.

THE LAND	
wild/unordered (tohu) and waste/uninhabited (bohu)	
Day 1 "and God said..." light and dark / day and night evening & morning: day 1	Day 4 "and God said..." lights separate and rule day and night evening and morning: day 4
Day 2 "and God said..." The dome separates... ... the waters above ... the waters below evening & morning: day 2	Day 5 "and God said..." Creatures in the waters ... birds by the waters above ... fish in the waters below evening & morning: day 5
Day 3 "and God said..." the waters below gather the dry land emerges	Day 6 "and God said..." land creatures emerge from the dry land humans appointed to rule
+1 Bonus! plants and seed emerges from the ground evening & morning: day 3	+1 Bonus! and provided with trees, plants and seed evening & morning: day 6
AND SO THEY WERE COMPLETED	
the skies and the land and	all of their hosts

The 7th day – the purpose of creation revealed

In the other cultures of the ANE, the people are created to **serve** the gods by **supplying** their needs. But in Genesis, God **provides** for His people – time, weather and food – while their role is to **represent** God to the rest of creation.

The seventh day is a day with **no** specified **beginning** and **end**, no morning and evening. In the seventh day God is introduced by His **personal** name, **Yahweh**, as He begins his **relationship** with the humans he created in His image. [tselem aka idol] This then reveals the **purpose** of creation. All of creation was to a cosmic **temple**, a place for **God** to be with His **people** forever.

The end purpose for the heavens and the earth is to **provide** what is **necessary** for humans to **sustain** themselves and grow and **thrive** as they spend time with Yahweh as they act as the His stewards over His creation. The three major **functions** of this cosmic temple were described as the spaces that would **provide** time weather and food for the humans. God **filled** those spaces with objects or creatures to carry out **functions** prescribed by God. The spaces of day and night were filled with the sun, moon and stars whose purpose was to provide **signs** for the **humans**, helping the determine **festivals**. The spaces of

Rediscovering the Story of the Old Testament – Session 2 Lesson 4

Language of Meaning

heaven above (the firmament, *raqia*) and the waters below (*mayim*) were filled with birds and fish and even the creatures of chaos (later identified as the behemoth (*bahāmôt*) and leviathan (*livyātān*)) whose purpose was to multiply and fill the earth. The spaces of the earth (*eret*) were filled with living creatures (*chai nephesh*) such as livestock (*behemah*), and creeping things (*remes*), whose purpose was to fill the earth. And that was all good.

After all the other creatures of the sky, land and sea were in place, there was one more thing to do to finish the creation of heavens and earth. Yahweh now needed to make **creatures** who would bear His **image** and who would **rule** His creation on His behalf. So, Yahweh made the **humans** (*adam* can serve as a name or as a reference to *mankind/humankind*), male and female. He **blessed** them and **instructed** them not only to multiply and fill the earth as with all the other creatures, but then also **subdue** the earth and **rule** it. In the other creation stories of the time, humans were created to serve the needs of the gods, but in Genesis, Yahweh **serves** the humans He created so that they might **rule** with Him.

The temple was finished on the **never-ending** seventh day (was not described by having an evening and a morning). With the cosmic temple completed, Yahweh could now **do** what he **intended** from the beginning, to spend **time** with us as we **participated** with him in establishing His **kingdom** on earth. The Sabbath day rest as described in Exodus and Deuteronomy was to be a regular reminder in our fallen universe that our purpose in life is not to work but to spend time with Yahweh.

The description of creation was not intended to be a physical description of the creation, but rather to be a description that assigned meaning to our creation.

	1:1 Summary Prologue	
	In the beginning, God created <i>the skies and the land</i> [7 words]	
	1:2 Exposition of Prologue in 3 lines	
	Now, <i>the land</i> was wild and waste (תהו ובהו <i>tohu va-vohu</i>) and darkness was over the face of the deep abyss (תהום <i>tehom</i>) [7 x 2 words] but the breath of Elohim was hovering over the face of the waters (המים <i>hamayim</i>)	
	Day 1	Day 4
	Day 2	Day 5
	Day 3	Day 6
	2:1 Summary Epilogue	
	"Thus were finished <i>the skies and the land</i> and all their host	
	2:2-3 Exposition of Epilogue in 3 lines	
	1. And God completed on the seventh day his work which he had made [7 words]	
	2. And he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made [7 words]	
	3. And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it [7 words]	
	because on it he rested from all his work which God created to make [key word of 1:1]	

SEVEN : 717

COMPLETE / FULL : 717

Rediscovering the Story of the Old Testament – Session 2 Lesson 4

Language of Meaning

Words and meaning

Translations usually lose many of the **nuances** of words written in the original language. There is much **richness** to be gained from investigating the words in Hebrew. There is much paid attention to these words at the beginning of Genesis because they will become part of the **pattern** making that occurs throughout the Bible. As you continue to study the Bible, use a **concordance** to see where and how the following words are used throughout scripture.

- Elohim vs. Yahweh – **Elohim** is usually translated as God and **Yahweh** as LORD.
 - Elohim is a plural word that by itself means “gods.” In Hebrew, the verb precedes the subject of a sentence. When the verb preceding Elohim is singular, then the Elohim is translated as “God.”
 - **יהוה** The original written Hebrew language had no vowels. Most of the time that was not a problem because until a few hundred years ago people always read out loud to others. But during the time of exile, the tradition developed of considering God’s name too holy, so they stop trying to pronounce the name, **יהוה**.
 - The tradition was to say *Adonai* instead of **יהוה**, which translates to “lord.” When English translations were made, they then used the “lord” but in all lower-case capitals (LORD), to distinguish that from other words that they also translated as “lord.”
 - When Christians started to make attempts to pronounce **יהוה** back in the 1800s the pronunciation became *Jehovah*, but later on, in the 1960s, new scholarship led to a change in pronunciation to *Yahweh*.
- **Bara** – created. Always associated with an activity of God. Notice how few times the word appears in Genesis: only in relation to “the heavens and the earth,” “the tannin,” and “man.”
- **Tohu v’ bohu** – “Formless and empty.” This phrase indicates a state of chaos, a condition where spaces have no purpose and therefore no items to fulfill that purpose.
 - All the ANE cultures begin with this condition.
 - In later biblical passages there will situations that parallel the Creation even and order will be brought out of chaos, even man-made chaos.
- **Panim** – “face” is actually a plural word. It literally could be translated as “faces.” This speaks to the observation that our face can refer to not just our physical face, but our attitudes, feelings and sentiments. It also presence, surface, front, before and countenance.
- **Tehom** vs. **mayim**
 - Tehom represents the waters of chaos, before the world was given purpose. All the ANE cultures start with the world in this condition. When the rains and fountains opened during the floods of Noah, the world again became tehom, until the floods receded, starting a new creation. When evil reigns in the world, it is in a state of tehom. When order is restored it is a new creation event.
 - Mayim is water that serves a purpose in the world: watering gardens, providing refreshing drinks, etc. Mayim is a plural because it is always more than one drop.
- **Ruach** – wind, breath or spirit. It is breath that gives physical life and spirit that gives spiritual life.
- **Rachap** -hovering or brooding. We can get the sense of the Ruach of Elohim brooding over the tehom as a mother bird brooding over the eggs in a nest until life springs out.
- **Tov** – Good. Carefully, notice how the word is used. Tov is applied whenever something is useful for humans. When humans appear, things are “very good.” Things are good not because they are

Rediscovering the Story of the Old Testament – Session 2 Lesson 4

Language of Meaning

pleasing to us, but when they serve their purpose. This is an Elohim centric concept, not a human centric concept.

- **Rakia** – a solid dome that covers the earth holding back the “waters over the earth.” When “windows” in the rakia open up, water comes down like rain.
- **Tannin** – translated as whales, dragons, sea monsters, serpents. These are regarded, in the ANE cultures, as creatures of chaos world. Unlike other cultures, *tannin*, are His creation and under His control, even though they may be dangerous to us. This world is also used in Exodus when Moses cast down his rod and it became a *tannin*.
- **Nephesh** – Living soul, appetite, mind, desires, emotions, passions, inner being of man. Applies to animals and humans. Literally means breathing creatures. In Ugaritic and Akkadian languages it refers to the neck which we need to eat and drink and breathe and so can be translated as life.
- **Tselem** – an image or idol. We are representations of God in the world. It is foolish when we, as idols of God, try to make idols to represent God. That is what we already are – and we live and breathe.
- **Kabash** – subdue, subject, bring into bondage, make subservient, dominate. The term, kabash, can have a violent aspect to it, which could be seen as necessary when the humans task was to shape the chaos of the surrounding world into order. This can be related to when created the raqia to hold up the waters in the heavens above. The term, raqia, is built off the word, raqa, which means to hammer out, smooth, spread out. It can be pictured that there could have been a violent raqa, hammering out of the raqa to hold up the chaotic waters in the heavens above the raqa.
 - That said, there is a mitigating factor to our subduing. And that is our role as stewards of God’s creation, and it is God’s intent to make the world a place for all living things to flourish
- **Radah** – rule, have dominion, subjugate. God authorized man and woman to rule on earth below. When we are saved, we are automatically raised up and seated with Christ, serving as his rulers on earth.

Rediscovering the Story of the Old Testament – Session 2 Lesson 4

Language of Meaning

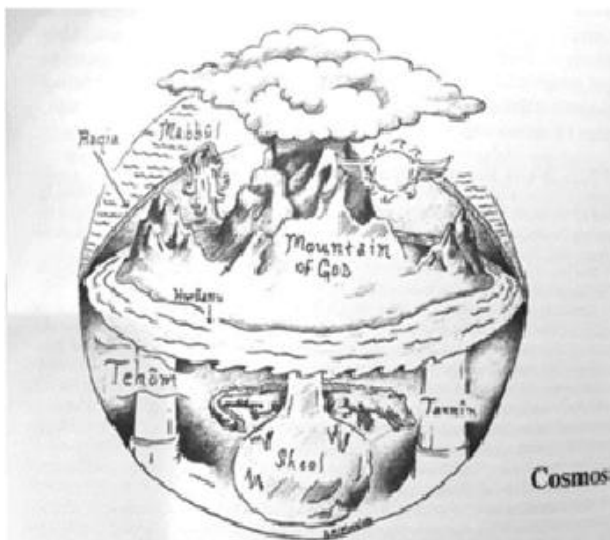
The Conceptual Image of the Heavens and the Earth

Ancient Israel did not conceptualize the earth as we do, as a **physical** model. Their concept was based on bringing order out of the waters of **chaos** which included an order that connected **earth** and **heaven**. The models below are artists' conception of how the different parts of the earth and heaven came together.

At first there were just the waters of **chaos**, *tehom* (that is, they had no purpose). On the second day, God **separated** the waters above from the waters beneath. The object separating them was the **rakia**, an apparently solid dome that held up the “waters above.” Rain would be due to some “**windows**” in the **rakia** opening up so that the water could come down.

On the third day, the **land** was **separated** from the **waters**. In later Biblical passages, we see a little more detail of the conceptual world. We see that the land was held up by **columns** going down into the *tehom*. **Sheol** was visualized as being under the land. The land would have **mountains** on it that reached up into the “waters above” which were the “heavens” were. Therefore, the top of the mountain would be the place where heaven and earth **intersected**. In the Bible, mountain tops were the places where humans could meet with God. We see this with Moses at Mt. Sinai, and with Zion in Jerusalem.

When Noah's flood occurred, it was pictured as the “**windows**” of the **rakia** opened up and the “fountains of the **deep**” poured out water so that creation went back to the original state of **chaos** (a de-creation event). The flood subsiding would be the emergence of a new creation.



From Michael Morales,

Who Shall Ascend the Hill of the Lord

Israelites thought about the world in terms similar to those of the cultures around them. The terminology of the

Old Testament reflects this cosmic geography, and discussions of creation are based on this understanding.



Image depicts modern artistic reconstruction of an ancient Israelite view of the cosmos. The sky, supported by mountains at the edges, holds back the waters above as it arches over the flat, disk-shaped earth, which is upheld by pillars.

John H. Walton, drawing by Alva Steffler