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IN THE BEGINNING, GOD

WHO STARTED IT?

When on high no heaven had been named, no earth called, and no gods, there was nothing—nothing but Old Father Apsu and Mummu-Tiamat, Mother of All Living. Their two bodies, one of salt water and one of fresh, became one. Together they created the gods: Lahmu and Lahamu, who were the parents of Ea, and then Anshar and Kishar, whose son Anu was also a great god. The gods played together in the water, creating so much turmoil and noise that Tiamat and Apsu could not control them and decided to kill them all.

But Ea discovered the plot. He killed Apsu and became the greatest of the gods. He had a son, Marduk, who became even greater. Marduk was a god of fire. His four eyes and four ears heard and saw everything. He was the Sun of the Heavens.

Tiamat was plotting her revenge for the murder of her husband, Apsu. As mother of all living things, she created not sons but monsters—Viper, Dragon, Sphinx, Lion, Mad Dog, Scorpion Man, Dragon-Fly, Centaur, and others. Of these, she created one as chief: Kingu, the greatest monster of all.

Summoned by the gods to a council of war, Lord Marduk was chosen their champion. “I will fight for you and defeat Tiamat,” he promised, “but as a reward you must make me the supreme god. My words will be the ones that are obeyed; my creations must not be destroyed.” Marduk prepared for battle: he gathered lightning, stepped into his chariot of rage, and made his body into a ball of fire. Raising the four winds, he churned the watery home of Tiamat so that Tiamat emerged to fight him.

The battle was fierce, but Tiamat’s defeat was certain. Marduk stood over her as she died, cut in half by his bolts of lightning. He crushed her monsters with his feet.

He placed one half of Tiamat up in the sky and created the heavens; he placed the other half in the water and created the earth. Then Lord Marduk the Victorious made the days of the year, the planets, and the moon. He set constellations of the gods in the night sky. Order was created out of the chaos.

The gods asked to rest from their labors, so Marduk created servants for them from the carcass of the monster Kingu. He said, “I will knead blood and bone into a savage; ‘man’ will be its name. They will do the gods’ work; they will set the gods free.” With the men to cook and serve them, the gods rested and celebrated with a great feast.

Thus was the world created by Lord Marduk, the great god of our city Babylon.

Imagine listening to this story at your school in Babylon. How did the world come into being? What are human beings? Why are we here? The world, you learn, was created out of a royal battle of the gods. The dark, watery chaos was brought under control by Marduk, the fiery sun god, when he defeated the angry mother Tiamat and her monsters. He turned her carcass into the dome of heaven and the land of earth. Then Marduk created human beings as slaves to the gods so that the gods could rest and party.

Then imagine coming home to your family—Jewish exiles who worship a God called Elohim—and telling them this Babylonian tale. “Is it true?” you ask. “Is that how the world was created? Is that why the Babylonians defeated us and took us captive? Is it because their god is the real god? Is Elohim just the god of Jerusalem, not of the whole world?”

Your parents send you off to evening synagogue school, suggesting you ask your questions of Ezekiel, the prophet who teaches your Hebrew Scriptures class. “He’ll explain it better than we can,” they say.



GODS OF THE BABYLONIANS

EZEKIEL’S STORY

Ezekiel doesn’t seem surprised by the Marduk story. “Let me tell you another story,” he says, “and then you decide which one to believe.”

In the beginning the earth was wild and waste. Darkness was over the face of the ocean, and the rushing Spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters.

God said, “Let there be light!” And there was light—good light that separated the light from darkness. God called the light Day and the darkness Night.

God said, “Let there be a dome amid the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters!” And there was a dome—a good dome that separated the sky from the ocean. God called the dome Heaven.

God said, “Let the waters be gathered into one place, and let there be dry land.” And there was land—good land, and water—good water. God called the land Earth and the water Seas. Then God said, “Let there be plants of all kinds, trees of all kinds, and seeds from each to grow more.” And there were plants and trees and seeds—all of them good.

God said, “Let there be lights in the Heaven, one for the Day and one for the Night.” And there were two lights—a great light for the day, the Sun, and a lesser light for the night, the Moon—good lights.

God said, “Let there be living things for the Seas and the Heaven.” And there were creatures of all kinds: fish, birds, and sea serpents. They were all good.

God said, “Let there be living things for the Earth.” And there were creatures of all kinds: wildlife and crawling animals, and animals that travel in herds. They too were all good.

Then God said, “Let us make a human being, a likeness of us that will have lordship over all the good things I have created.” And there were human beings: male and female. And they were good.

When God completed the creation of the world, he blessed the world and everything in it, making it all holy. Then God rested.

Thus was the world created by our great God, Elohim, the only God.

When Ezekiel finishes, the class is silent. Then the questions come. There was chaos, but was it Elohim who tamed it? Since God made the sun, does that mean Marduk isn’t really a god at all? Does this mean that there aren’t a whole bunch of gods but only one? Does this mean that no magic or monsters were involved—just God’s words? Are we really lords, not slaves? What does it mean that Elohim created us to be a likeness of him?

Ezekiel shakes his head, “These are too many questions for one class. Come back tomorrow, and we will study the Scriptures and find the answers.”

You head for home with your brain spinning. Looking up at the sky, you notice the moon. Could it be true? Was the world created by Elohim, not Marduk? You ask yourself, Could it be true that Elohim created me too?

HERMENEUTICS AND EXEGESIS

Why do we need to interpret the Bible? Why can't we just read it?

That's a good question. What's the answer?

The truth is, we can't *not* interpret the Bible whenever we read it. First, much of the Bible was meant to be listened to, not read; so the simple act of reading it makes it different for us than it was for the people who first heard it. Second, we come from different social situations. The Bible's first audience was made up of Jews and Greeks, not Canadians and Americans.

Think of it this way. Have you ever heard a song you really liked, one that seemed to be written just for you? If so, you haven't just heard the song—you've interpreted it. You've figured out the meaning and applied it to yourself. That's what it means to interpret a text.

We all interpret what is

“HERMENEUTICS? WHO'S HE?”

communicated to us. We “read” body language, voice inflection, illustrations, and even the medium itself in order to understand the message.

Because the Bible is a book, it also needs to be interpreted. The original hearers of Paul's letter to the Philippians were Christians in Philippi. We read the letter secondhand. But because the Bible is the Word of God, the Holy Spirit lives in the text, so it is a letter to us too. How does that happen?

First, we need to figure out what the words meant to the original audience. To do this, we ask three questions.

❶ What is the historical background of this passage?

- When was it written?
- To whom was it written?
- What was happening during the time and in the culture of the readers?
- How was the original audience different from me?
- How was the original audience similar to me?

❷ Who was the author of this passage?

- What was the author's purpose?
- What was the relationship of the author to the original audience?
- What is the author's personal history?

❸ What is the author saying?

- What type of writing is it?
- What types of language and speech are used?
- What part of Scripture is it in?
- What is the author's main point or message to the original audience?

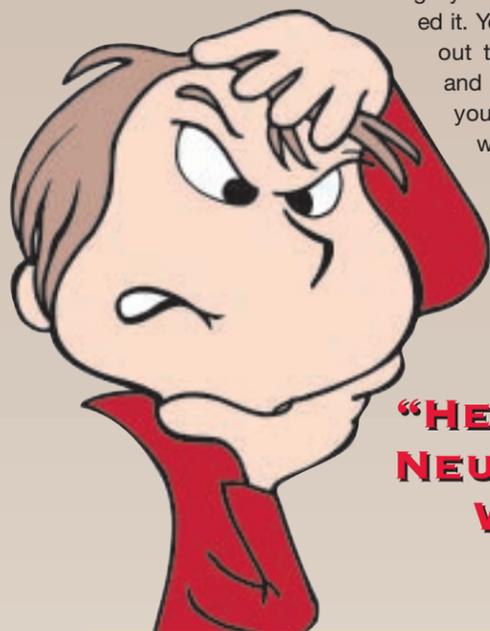
Congratulations! You've just done *exegesis*: determining the original intent of the text. And yes, you do have to look up the answers to some of these questions.

Next, we need to figure out what the text means to us. Here are some guidelines to help with that process:

- A text can't mean today what it didn't mean for the author or its original audience.
- If the situation of the original audience is similar to our own, then the message is probably the same.
- If the situation is different, then we must take the central truth of the passage and apply it to our situation.
- Once we think we understand what the passage is teaching us, we must evaluate it against what the rest of the Bible teaches. The Bible doesn't contradict itself.
- Our understanding is never complete. We must be humble about our own interpretations and respect others' interpretations, especially when we draw different conclusions.

Congratulations again! You've just practiced the art of *hermeneutics*: applying the text to today.

So what about that song that seemed to be written just for you? Maybe it was composed by a 48-year-old Irish rock star about his relationship to his wife—but its message of loyalty and trust also applies to your relationship with your boyfriend. Truth transcends oceans, years, nationalities, and language.



THE GREAT IRRIGATION PROJECT

Could anything be worse than farming? You wonder as you return once again to the spring for water. Sometimes it seems like your only purpose in life is to fetch water under a hot sun. A cool, shady oasis would be nice! Today you are especially eager to finish the chores, because once the day has cooled, people will gather in the center of the village to celebrate the harvest. They'll bring their favorite foods. (Someone—you can tell from the smoke—has already begun to roast a lamb.) People will sing songs and tell stories. Pilgrims returning from Jerusalem might bring news about the new temple King Solomon is building.

Later, the feast has been served, the music quieted. The Jerusalem pilgrims have brought a fellow traveler back with them—a storyteller. He tells this tale to repay the village for its hospitality. . . .

At the time of Yahweh, at the time God made the heaven and the earth, there were no bushes or fields, no rain to make the crops grow, and no humans to plant the seeds—only a stream of water that bubbled up from the ground and watered the earth around it. Then Yahweh took some of the wet dirt and molded it into a human. God blew his breath into the human's nose, and the human became a living being.

Then Yahweh planted a garden, a garden with every fruit tree you can imagine, and put the human in the garden. This garden was an oasis. At the center flowed a river that split off into four rivers—each one rushing in a different direction. By each river beautiful gardens grew—lands of gold and precious gems. Yahweh told the man to watch over and take care of the garden. He could eat anything in it he wanted, except for the fruit from the Tree of the Knowing of Good and Evil.

Yahweh saw that the man would get lonely living in the garden by himself, so he decided to make the man a helping counterpart. Yahweh made from the wet dirt every bird and animal you can name. One by one, God brought



Illustration: Scott Holladay

them to the man. The man named each one, but none of them was a fitting companion. So Yahweh made the man fall asleep. While the man was sleeping, Yahweh took one of the man's ribs, closed up his side, and made the rib into a woman. When the man awoke, God brought her to the man to be named. The man named her woman and recognized her as the one he was meant to be one with. And the two of them lived in the garden and were content.

This is the story of the creation of the heavens and the earth.

Listening to the story, you can't help but think that when the world was as it should be, gardening was not a chore—it was fun! Why did it change?

I BELIEVE

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

—Apostles' Creed

ADAM AND EVE: GENESIS 2:4-25

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens—and no shrub of the field had yet appeared on the earth and no plant of the field had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no man to work the ground, but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground—the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.) The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”

The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field.

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The man said,
 “This is now bone of my bones
 and flesh of my flesh;
 she shall be called ‘woman,’
 for she was taken out of man.”

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

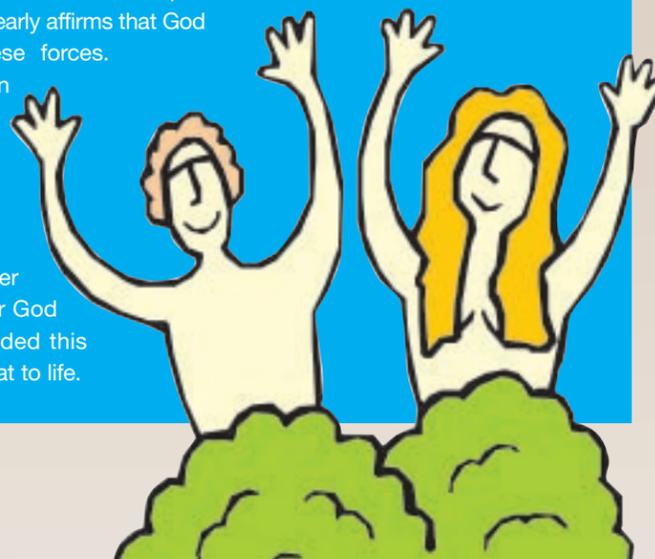
The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

GENESIS—THE BOOK OF BEGINNINGS

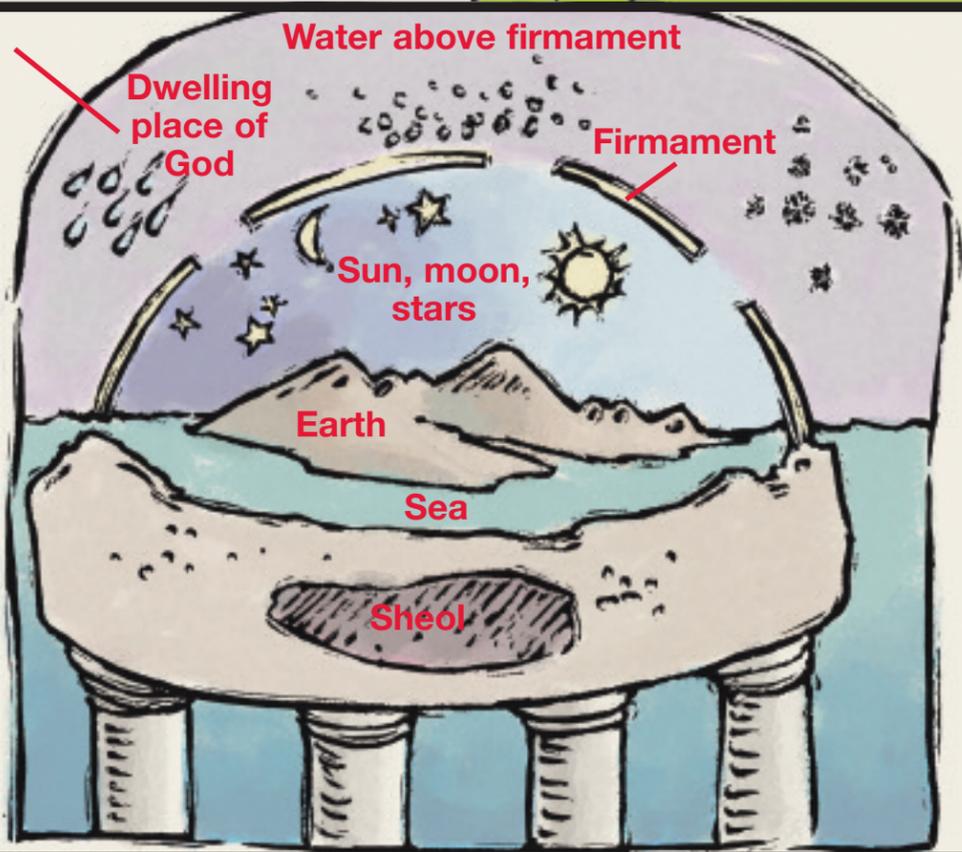
- Hebrew title: *Bereshith*, “in the beginning.”
- Greek title: *Geneseos*, “birth, genealogy, or history of origin.”
- Author and date of writing: Genesis is traditionally considered the first of five books written by Moses. It is referred to as the first book of the Pentateuch or “five-volume book” of the Hebrew Bible. Strong evidence suggests that the original texts recorded in these books were edited several times during Israel’s history, most recently in the years following the exile of Judah into Babylon (586 B.C.).
- Theme: Everything begins with God—the world, human beings, sin and redemption, civilizations, families, art, law, and nations.
- Composition: There are ten accounts in the book, beginning with the account of the heavens and the earth (chapters 1-4) and ending with the account of Jacob (chapters 37-50). The book can also be divided into two sections: prehistory (chapters 1-11) and patriarchal history (chapters 12-50). The first section refers to the stories of the world’s beginnings, and the second refers to the stories of Israel’s beginnings.

NAMING IT

- **Adam:** From the Hebrew word meaning “humankind.” The Hebrew word for dirt is *adamah*. Adam isn’t used as the name for the first male until Genesis 5:1.
- **Eve:** From the Hebrew word meaning “to live.” In Genesis 2:23 the first man says of the first woman: “She shall be called *isha* (woman), for she was taken out of *ish* (man).” The woman is addressed as Eve for the first time in Genesis 3:20.
- **Eden:** From the Hebrew word for “delight.” Eden is a delightful garden.
- **Ruah:** This Hebrew word has several related meanings—“spirit,” “wind,” and “breath.” The same Spirit that is involved in the creation of the world in Genesis 1 is the breath that brings human beings to life in Genesis 2.
- **Myth:** A story that tells a profound truth. Each of the ancient Near Eastern cultures had a creation myth—a story that told how the world and humans came to be.
- **Water/chaos:** In Old Testament cosmology people believed that the waters were the forces that constantly lapped at the edges of the world and tried to overpower it. Genesis 1 clearly affirms that God controls these forces. Revelation 21:1 proclaims that in the newly recreated earth there will no longer be a sea, for God will have ended this chaotic threat to life.



ANCIENT NEAR-EASTERN COSMOLOGY



MIDRASH

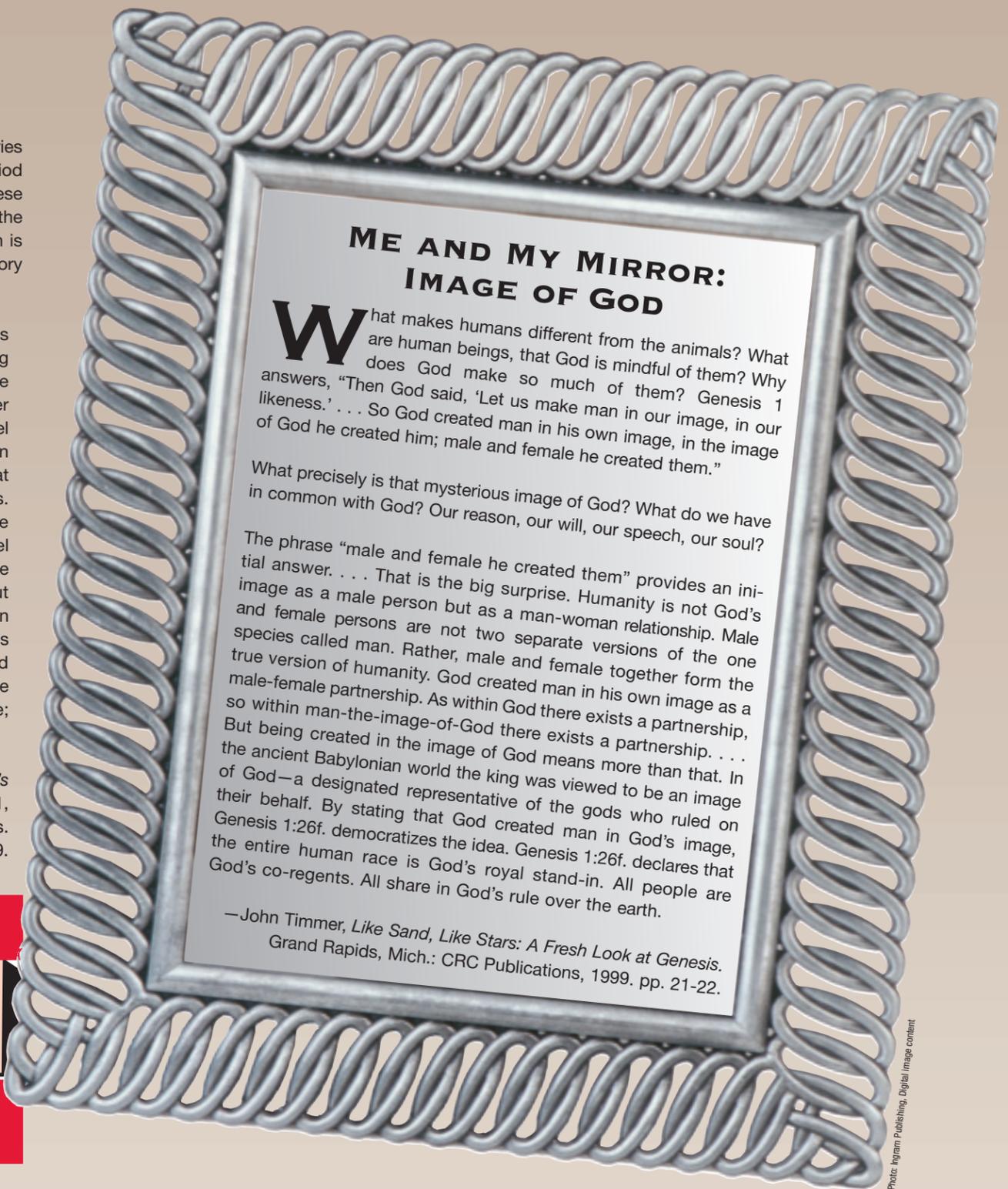
Jewish rabbis collected traditional stories that interpreted biblical texts over a period of 600 years, beginning in A.D. 400. These stories insert illuminating embellishments into the “gaps” of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Midrash is the title given to this collection. Here is one story about creation:

Whom did God speak to when saying, “Let us . . .”? Some rabbis say it was the ministering angels to whom God spoke and that there was some strong disagreement over whether the human should be created at all. The angel of love supported God’s creation of the human because of all the acts of compassion that would enter the world through human beings. The angel of truth opposed the human because of the lies that humans would tell. The angel of righteousness was for the human, since humans would do many righteous deeds, but the angel of peace was against the human because humans start wars. While the angels were arguing among themselves, God created the humans, male and female, and told the angels to be quiet: “It’s too late to argue; humans are a fact of life now.”

—Genesis Rabbah 8.4, *The Storyteller’s Companion to the Bible*, Volume 1, “Genesis,” ed. Michael E. Williams. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991. p. 29.

**BRING YOUR
BRAIN**

What are human beings?
Who am I?
Why did God make me?



SABBATH: THE DAY GOD RESTED

After pronouncing everything “very good” (Genesis 1:31), “on the seventh day God rested [the Hebrew word *shabat* means “ceased”] from all his work” (2:2). That does not mean that, tired by all the creative work, God took time off. Rather, the day of rest is a divine sign that the work of creation is finished. It’s complete! No more needs to be added. God signals that he will not interfere with this created order. It is very good as it is. Of course, God continues to maintain it and give it life, but there will be no more of these gigantic creative acts.

The day of rest divides the week into regular time and holy time, into time for work and time for rest (the Sabbath). God institutes a basic polarity here that is meant to be present in all of creation. The seventh day is “made holy” (2:3). This lays the basis for the later commandment, “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” (Exodus 20:8).

The day of rest also tells us that humanity is not the end and goal of creation. Everything begins and ends with God. We say both “In the beginning God created . . .” and in the end “God rested.”

By this day of rest, creation is made part of God’s overall plan in history. The divine work of creation sets the stage for the divine work of salvation that culminates in the Lord Jesus Christ. And this will all lead to the time when “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 11:15).

—Harvey A. Smit, *The Genesis Message: A New Look at the Old Stories*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 1999. p. 15.

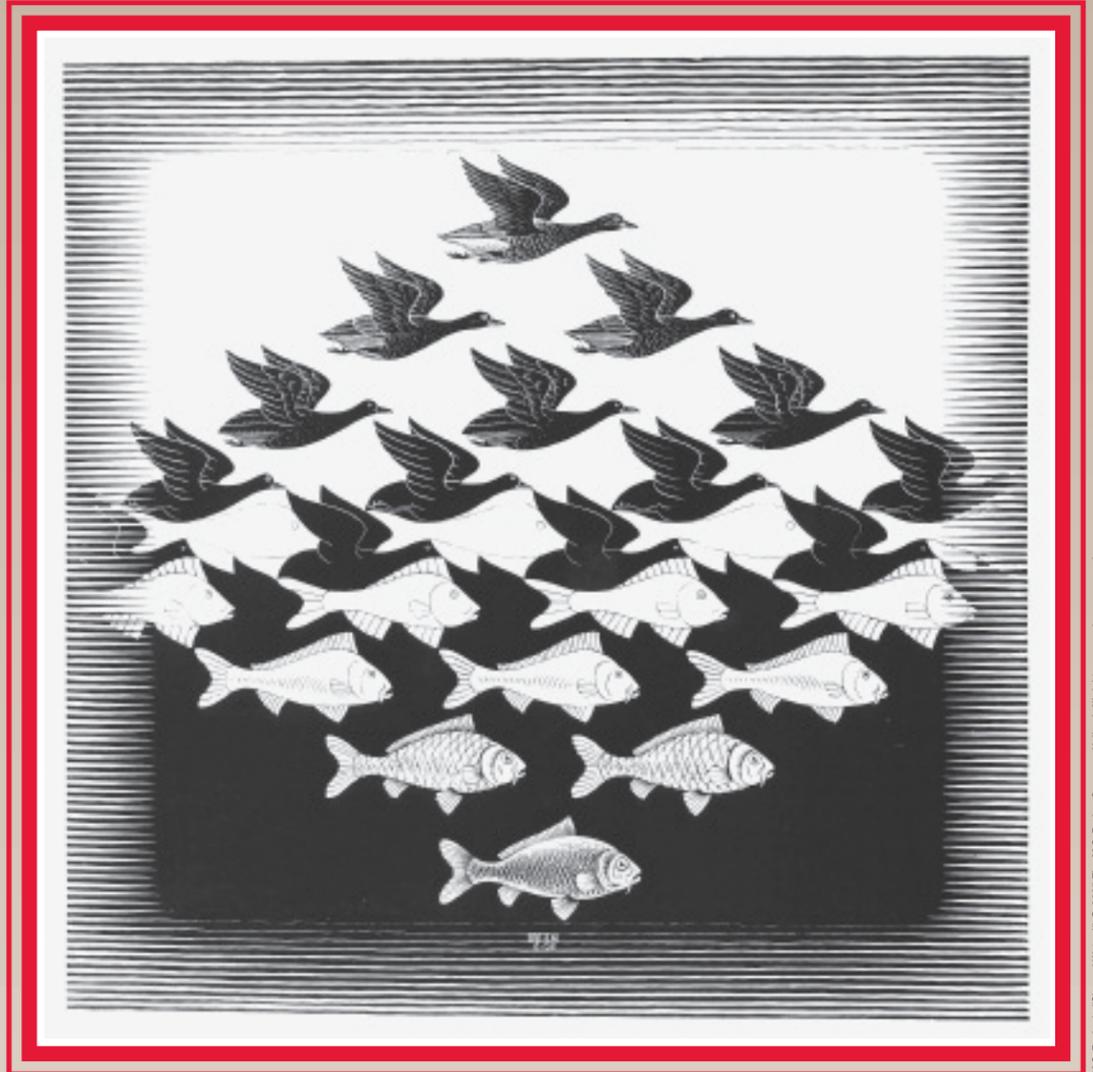


ESCHER TESSELLATIONS

Think tight, interlocking shapes with no overlaps and you have a tessellation. The most famous tessellations are those made by Dutch artist and printmaker M. C. Escher (1898-1972). Early in his career Escher drew scenes from Italy's countryside; later, he developed them into prints. In his work he often combined various vantage points to create puzzling spatial effects; for example, the point of view of the print would involve looking up and down at the same time. His use of black and white contrasts made the results even more dramatic.

A visit to a Spanish palace adorned with mosaic tile led Escher to experiment with shapes, replacing the abstract forms from the mosaics with recognizable shapes. These experiments led to Escher's tessellations and to his Metamorphosis prints, in which he turned one shape into something completely different (see the print *Sky and Water*, in which fish change into birds in the sky).

SKY AND WATER



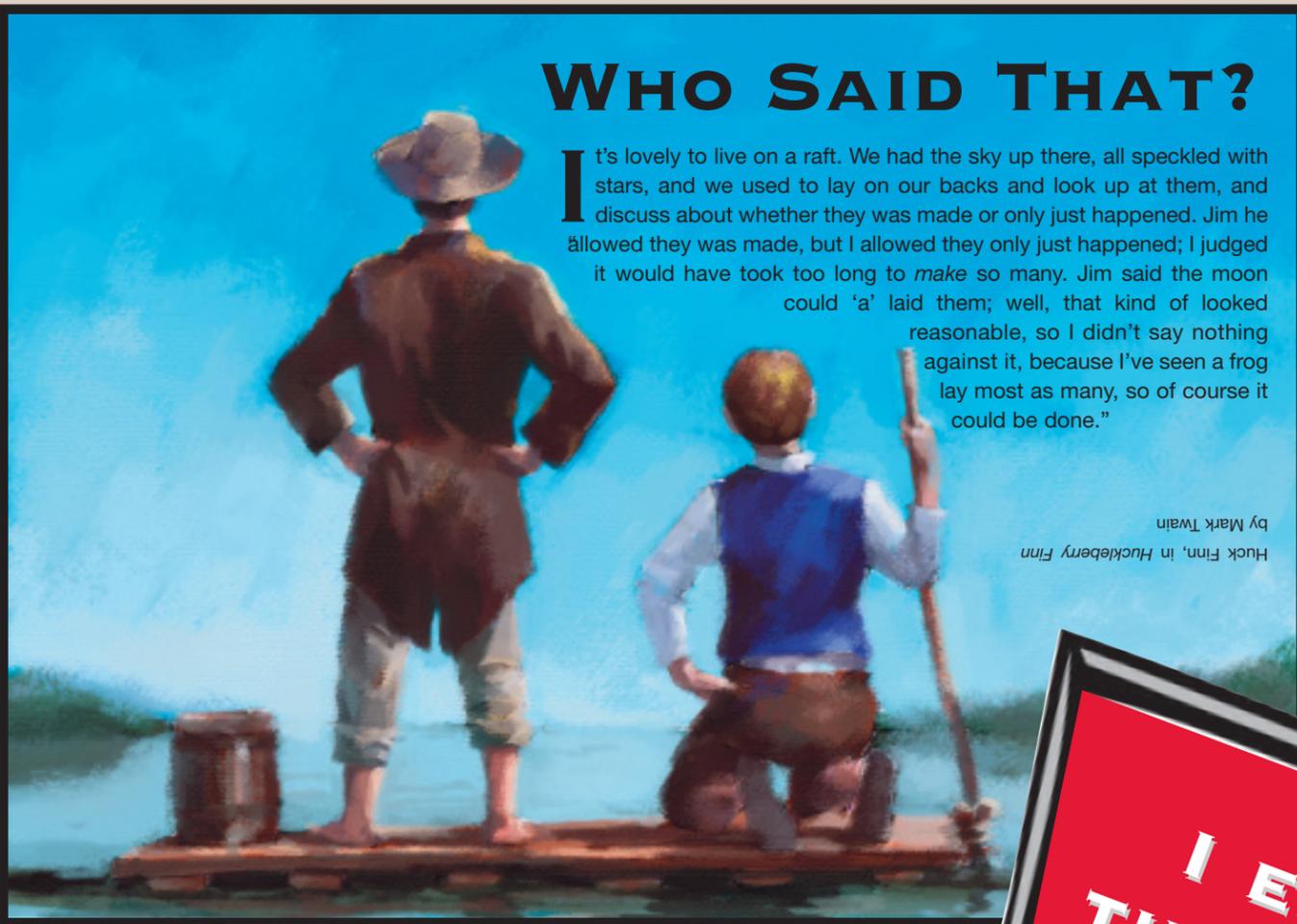
M.C. Escher's "Sky and Water I" © 2005 The M.C. Escher Company-Holland. All rights reserved. www.mcescher.com

WHO SAID THAT?

It's lovely to live on a raft. We had the sky up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether they was made or only just happened. Jim he allowed they was made, but I allowed they only just happened; I judged it would have took too long to *make* so many. Jim said the moon could 'a' laid them; well, that kind of looked reasonable, so I didn't say nothing against it, because I've seen a frog lay most as many, so of course it could be done."

Huck Finn, in *Huckleberry Finn*
by Mark Twain

Illustration: Scott Holladay



JOB 38:4-7

"WHERE WERE YOU WHEN I LAID THE EARTH'S FOUNDATION?
TELL ME, IF YOU UNDERSTAND.

WHO MARKED OFF ITS DIMENSIONS? SURELY YOU KNOW!

WHO STRETCHED A MEASURING LINE ACROSS IT?

ON WHAT WERE ITS FOOTINGS SET,

OR WHO LAID ITS CORNERSTONE—

WHILE THE MORNING STARS SANG TOGETHER

AND ALL THE ANGELS SHOUTED FOR JOY?"



THE CREATION

And God stepped out on space,
And He looked around and said,
*"I'm lonely—
I'll make me a world."*

And far as the eye of God could see
Darkness covered everything,
Blacker than a hundred midnights
Down in a cypress swamp.

Then God smiled,
And the light broke,
And the darkness rolled up on one side,
And the light stood shining on the other,
And God said, *"That's good!"*

Then God reached out and took the light in
His hands,
And God rolled the light around in His hands
Until He made the sun;
And He set that sun a-blazing in the heavens.
And the light that was left from making the sun
God gathered it up in a shining ball
And flung it against the darkness,
Spangling the night with the moon and stars.
Then down between
The darkness and the light
He hurled the world;
And God said, *"That's good!"*

Then God himself stepped down—
And the sun was on His right hand,

And the moon was on His left;
The stars were clustered about His head,
And the earth was under His feet.
And God walked, and where He trod
His footsteps hollowed the valleys out
And bulged the mountains up.

Then He stopped and looked and saw
That the earth was hot and barren.
So God stepped over to the edge of
the world
And He spat out the seven seas;
He batted His eyes, and the lightnings
flashed;
He clapped His hands, and the
thunders rolled;
And the waters above the earth came
down,
The cooling waters came down.

Then the green grass sprouted,
And the little red flowers blossomed,
The pine tree pointed his finger to the sky,
And the oak spread out his arms,
The lakes cuddled down in the hollows of
the ground,
And the rivers ran down to the sea;
And God smiled again,
And the rainbow appeared,
And curled itself around His shoulder.

Then God raised His arm and He waved His hand
Over the sea and over the land,
And He said, *"Bring forth! Bring forth!"*
And quicker than God could drop His hand,
Fishes and fowls
And beasts and birds
Swam the rivers and the seas,
Roamed the forests and the woods,
And split the air with their wings.
And God said, *"That's good!"*

Then God walked around,
And God looked around
On all that He had made.
He looked at His sun,
And He looked at His moon,
And He looked at His little stars;
He looked on His world
With all its living things,
And God said, *"I'm lonely still."*

Then God sat down
On the side of a hill where He could think;
By a deep, wide river He sat down;
With His head in His hands,
God thought and thought,
Till He thought, *"I'll make me a man!"*

Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled Him down;
And there the great God Almighty
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of
the night,
Who rounded the earth in the middle of His hand;
This Great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till He shaped it in His own image;

Then into it He blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul.
Amen. Amen.

—*"The Creation,"* from *God's Trombones* by
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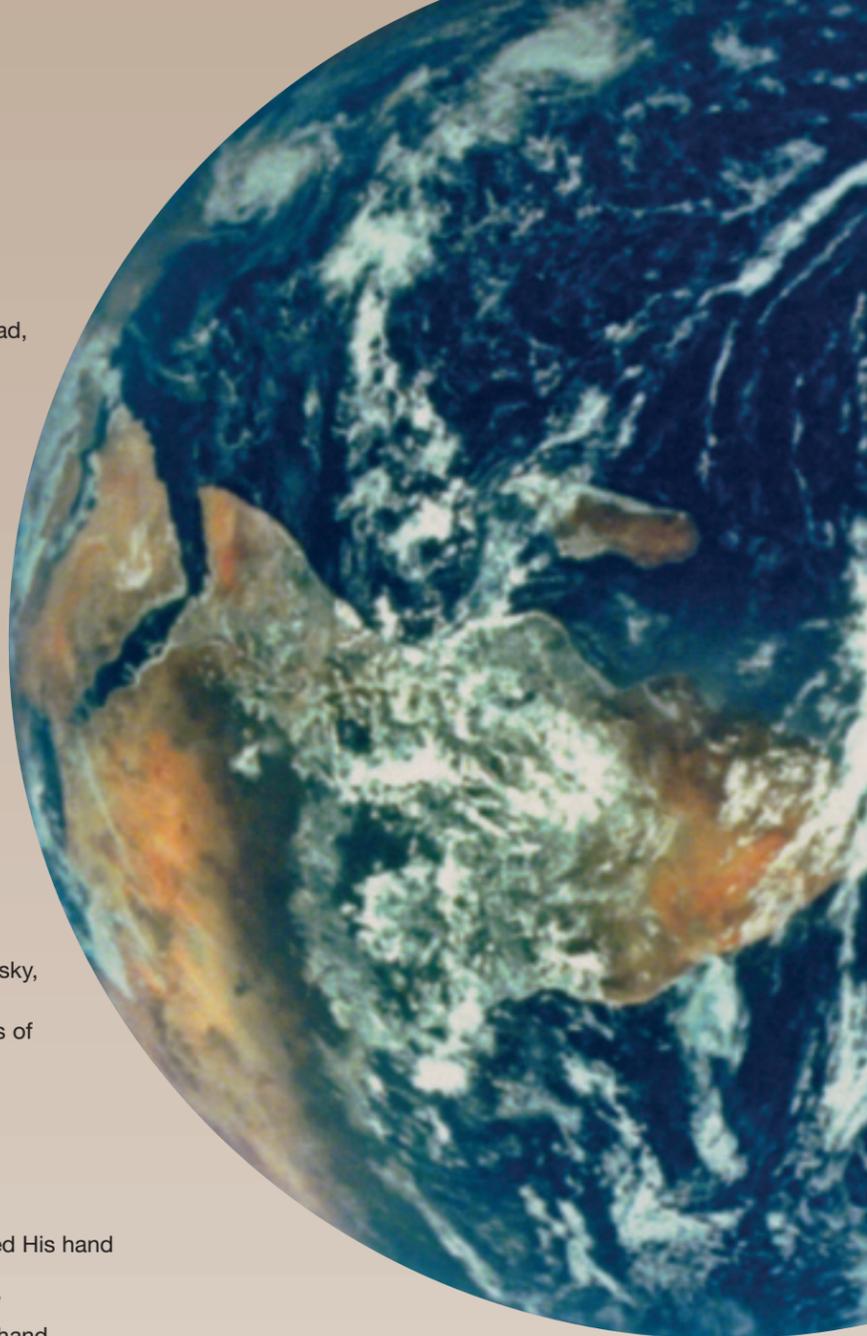


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IN THE BEGINNING, GOD

In the beginning, God—
Father, Word, and Spirit—
called this world into being
out of nothing,
and gave it
shape and order.

God formed the land, the sky, and
the seas,
making the earth a fitting home
for the plants, animals,
and humans he created.
The world was filled with color,
beauty, and variety;
it provided room for
work and play,
worship and service,
love and laughter.
God rested—
and gave us rest.
In the beginning
everything was very good.

As God's creatures, we are made
in his image
to represent him on earth,
and to live in loving communion
with him.

—*Our World Belongs to God,*
stanzas 8-10

PRAYER OF PRAISE TO OUR CREATOR

Creator God,
whose Spirit moved over the face of the waters,
who gathers the seas into their places
and directs the courses of the rivers,
who sends rain upon the earth that it should
bring forth life;
We praise you for the gift of water.

Creator God,
whose hands shaped us out of the dust of the earth,
who lifted up the mountains
and formed the dry land,
who formed the soil and made this earth
a place of beauty and abundance:
We praise you for the gift of soil.

Creator God,
whose Word called forth light from darkness,
who has robed this earth with a thin garment of air,
making it a haven of beauty and life,
who has breathed into each of us the breath of
life:
We thank you for the gift of air.

**Create in us such a sense of wonder and delight
in these and all your gifts,
that we may receive them with gratitude,
care for them with love,
and generously share them with all your
creatures,
to the honor and glory of your holy name. Amen.**

—John Paarlberg, as found in *Reformed Worship*
34 (Dec. 1994), p. 6. © 1994,
CRC Publications.