

Hespeler, 10 January 2020 © Scott McAndless
Genesis 1:1-5, Psalm 29, Acts 19:1-7, Mark 1:4-11

Most of the Old Testament of the Bible was written in ancient Hebrew. And that means that, since nobody actually speaks ancient Hebrew anymore, every time we read it, we are completely dependent on the work of translators. And the translators of the Bible have done an extraordinary job. The translations that we have are very good and quite reliable.

But the simple fact is that there is no such thing as a perfect translation from one language to the other. Whenever you translate, you are going to miss out on some of the nuance and the deeper meaning of the original text. What's more, sometimes a word or a phrase can have more than one meaning and it can be impossible to know which one is intended. And that means that, sometimes, familiar biblical passages that we think we know well, may actually surprise us a great deal when we look behind the translations and we look at the translators' footnotes in our Bibles.

I would like to show you what I mean this morning by taking a good look at one of the most famous passages in the Bible, one that you may have thought that you understood exactly what it meant. The opening passage of the Bible, the story of creation. It is well known and loved, but it is kind of notoriously difficult to translate.

Most everybody has heard the opening words of the Bible. **“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.”** That is how it is translated in the King James Version, and most other modern translations have nearly the same thing. And that is, let me stress, a perfectly adequate translation of the opening Hebrew words of the Bible.

It also has going for it the fact that it is a familiar translation and that we at least think we know what it means. It seems to mean that God's first act of creation was to create the heavens and the earth. And since, in ancient Hebrew, there was no word for what we would call the universe, that phrase, **“the heaven and the earth,”** means, basically, that God started by creating the whole universe.

But here is the problem with that. The original Hebrew also has one other, perfectly acceptable translation. It is in the footnotes of the New Revised Standard Version. There you discover that this verse could also be translated as, *“When God began creating the heavens and earth, the earth was formless and void.”*

Now, that is a little bit different, isn't it? It sort of implies that something was already there when God started this great work of creation. That doesn't mean, of course, that God



didn't create everything. But it does mean that the creation of the heavens and the earth themselves are not really part of this seven-day creation story. They had already been established before the seven days began.

Now, as I say, each of these translations is equally possible. There's no way to be sure which translation best captures the original meaning. But, I think, if you look at the entire passage, it actually does make more sense if you translate it as, "*when God began creating...*" Every other time God creates in this story, it follows the same pattern: God speaks, the thing happens and God calls it good – every time except for the creation of heaven and earth. That act of creation is not part of the regular pattern of this story. So the creation of heaven and earth stand apart.

We also need to look closer at the original form of the earth. We are told that it was "**formless and void.**" Now that is an interesting Hebrew phrase! The original Hebrew phrase is "*tohu bohu.*" Now if you ever wanted a Hebrew phrase to use to impress people at parties, that has got to be it. "The earth was *tohu bohu.*" It is a great phrase because *tohu bohu* doesn't just mean formless and void, it could also be translated as chaotic and empty or as a confused wasteland. In short, it seems to be saying that at the beginning of creation, the earth was basically a neglected mess.

And, once you understand that, you begin to see the work of creation carried out by God in this story in a bit of a different light. You begin to notice that, in the work of creation, God is not just making things, God is clearly organizing things. God creates light but then separates it from darkness and organizes it. God separates the waters by creating the sky and then God separates the waters upon the earth. In other words, God is carefully putting the waters in their appropriate places.

God creates animals but then is said to have carefully sorted them out each according to their kind. A whole lot of God's work of creation seems to be about putting everything that has been made into its proper place. It seems that a great deal of God's work of creation is essentially to bring order and organization out of chaos and disorder. So the original *tohu bohu* state of the earth is quite significant.

The next phrase in the creation story also has multiple meanings. The New Revised Standard Version translates it as, "**while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.**" But if you look up that one in other translations, you will often find the word Spirit there instead of wind. That is because in Hebrew, there is only one word, "*ruach*" that can be translated either as wind or breath or spirit and there is really no way to know which meaning is intended.

I actually prefer the translation "Spirit," because it seems to make most sense in the context. After all, what is a wind from God if not the Spirit? There is also a question of what the significance of this reference to a *ruach* has to do with the creation story. The *ruach* is said to sweep over the waters that seem, at this time, to cover the whole Earth.

But that word that is translated as sweep could also be translated differently. It could also be translated as hover or even as brood. That is to say that it could be describing the action that a mother bird performs when she sits upon her eggs.

Now that is an interesting image, isn't it? The Spirit of God was like a mother bird brooding over the waters. Especially when you consider that, within a few paragraphs, we will see something truly extraordinary springing from the water, for it is there, on the fifth day, that animate life will first appear: **“And God said, ‘Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures.’”**

When a dove broods over an egg and five days later a living squab pops out of that egg, we know there is a connection. And so I wonder if we are not meant to assume that there is also a connection between the Spirit from God that broods over the waters and the life that appears there five days later.

And so you see that, if you look just a little bit closer at the original language behind this short passage of scripture that is so familiar, there is a great deal to be discovered. We get a fuller picture of a God who is not only bringing all things into being but who is also bringing about order and putting things in their rightful place. And we also, in these opening words get surprising new insight into the work of the Spirit or wind of God and the Spirit's role in bringing forth life.

But I guess that the obvious question is what do we do with all of this? I personally do not think that, by looking a little bit closer into the Genesis creation story, we necessarily are going to come to a better understanding of how our planet and the life upon it came into being. Yes, this passage does affirm that God is the ultimate source of everything that exists and I don't have any issues with that. But I do not think that we should make any conclusions about *how* it all came into existence.

I do not think that this passage confirms or denies the big bang theory or the theory of evolution. Nor should we think that we can take the seven-day framing of the story as an invitation to calculate the date of the beginning of all things. That is simply because this passage is really not concerned with such matters. I think it is clear, when you look closely at this passage, that it is meant to teach us more about the Creator than it is to teach us about the creation. It is about who God is, the one who brings order out of chaos the one who brings life out of churning water and maybe especially about the one who makes it all good.

No, this story is not really about something that happened six thousand or four and a half billion years ago (depending on who you talk to). In order to really understand what this passage is saying, you need to understand that it is talking about here and now and that it is talking about you.

Today, the first Sunday after Epiphany is traditionally known as the Baptism of Jesus Sunday. On this day in the church, we traditionally do read the story that we read today from Mark's Gospel of how Jesus was baptized.

And in our reading from Mark's gospel, the author does something really extraordinary. I'm convinced that he does it intentionally.

Mark writes this, **“And just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”** There, in just a few words, we have all the imagery and words that we find in the opening passage of the Bible.

We have the heavens above and the earth below and upon the face of the earth we have the churning waters. We have the heavens split in two, just as they are split on the second day of creation. And, of course, we have the Spirit or wind from God (because, yes, in the Greek of the New Testament just like in the Hebrew of the old, there is only one word that means both wind and spirit) – we have a Spirit from God descending and hovering over the waters and here it is made explicit that the Spirit is like a bird brooding over these waters in the form of a dove.

And, of course, finally we have the voice of the Creator booming from heaven, demanding that a new creation come into being, as Jesus is declared to be the Son of God. It is all there, and I guarantee you that it is no accident. Mark has gone out of his way to take us back in the moment of Jesus' baptism to the very beginning of all things.

Why? Because Mark wants us to understand that the baptism of Jesus isn't just one moment in time. It is one of those unique moments in the history of the world when all times are brought together. And I think he wants us to understand not only that the baptism of Jesus took us back to the very beginning of time, but that it also took us forward. Mark wants you to understand that that moment when Jesus went down and came up out of the water was a moment of creation for him and for the new movement of the church, but also that there is a very real sense in which the baptism of every believer also took place in that moment of time.

He wants you to understand that you were there, that at whatever moment in your life you were truly baptized, that you were the one who was in those primeval chaotic waters and that God sent his Holy Spirit upon you to create you as a new being in Christ Jesus. What's more, Mark wants you to understand that God, in creating you anew, wants to bring you out of the chaos of life in this world and set your life on a path that makes sense, that is focused towards what is good and right and just.

The new creation, is you. And it all came together at that moment in the Jordan River when Jesus went down into the waters and did it for you. It came together when Jesus rose from the waters a new being, and so did you.