

## LS — Week 2 Response

I find it hard to answer the question about what I “expected” because my expectations have been so shaped by long familiarity with the text. There are passages of the Bible that are more liable to surprise me with things I’ve forgotten than the first few chapters of Genesis. As I mentioned in our Zoom class, it’s more often a footnote or commentary or Hebrew root that makes me see it in a new light. But I’ve been led along the usual footpaths a few times with these ones (e.g. Genesis vs. Enuma Elish, which is a common Grade 12 English essay topic).

One thing I found interesting was Fletcher-Louis’ reading of “let us” as cohortative not with a heavenly court but with the whole of the cosmos, by analogy with “let the earth bring forth” and so on. I’m not sure I’m convinced of this reading, and certainly not of the conclusion he draws from it (that we are the image not only of God but of the rest of creation), but it was interesting and novel.

One thing I was discouraged by, alongside Kevin, was the simplifying move in Bartholomew in Goheen in their discussion of the fragmented creation narrative. I somewhat suspect as I read their text that they will mostly land on these conventional readings, which seem to me to be surface readings informed by traditional views. I’m a fan of close readings as I go through it in the Hebrew. One example not mentioned in B&G is the nuance of the word “helper”. This word is not a very good translation in modern English, since it suggests an assistant, whereas the Hebrew word ‘ezer (<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/5826.htm>) can be seen in the concordance to be used almost always for help from God or military aid, e.g. in Psalm 70:5, of God: “You are my help and my deliverer.” The connotations are very different... the role of Adam’s ‘ezer is perhaps very different from what we typically imagine, especially if (to look ahead) this is before the Fall and God’s curse on the woman that her husband will “rule over her”. This is the kind of insight I find most interesting in the more familiar passages these days. Meanwhile, B&G go out of their way to stress from “male and female he created them” that every human is either a man or a woman, suggesting to me a bent towards a more traditional view of gender roles — though I admit I’m reading more into their point of view than is there. (By the by, Hebrew, like English, uses different words for “male” and “female” than for “man” and “woman”; and it might be an interesting avenue to consider that the word for “man” is rarely used for Adam, but instead the word “adam”, a human. It’s unfortunate that we still translate “adam” as “man” given that when that word was first chosen, “man” was ambiguous between “a male human” and “a human”, but is no longer!)

Speaking of gender roles, in a course given by Iain Provan on Genesis I was exposed to the interesting point that the Pentateuch often favours the newest-born, subverting the cultural norm. For instance, God favours Jacob rather than Esau, despite Esau being the firstborn and having the birthright. Rachel is Jacob’s beloved despite being younger than Leah (which Laban fails to honour). Jacob’s love is tenderest for Benjamin despite his being the youngest. Moses was the youngest of his siblings but led Israel. Abel died, Seth lived. Instead of the first in the sequence receiving all the glory, God seems to consider the final creation the crowning achievement, and indeed humanity caps off the process of creation. But — and not many commentators pursue this one step further — Eve was last of all, perhaps a crowning achievement within humanity.

Gender roles come up fairly often in teaching high school students, not least because they come loaded with tensions and stereotypes and expectations and joys and disappointments in each other. Non-traditional gender roles are sensitive topics and liable to become the butt of a joke, and a teacher has to decide how to represent the class's "official position" on the question. This is especially true at a Christian school with a potentially significant conservative base. I've been at a staff meeting where a devotion given by a right-leaning colleague included the sentence, "Those who engage in homosexual sexual activity have no place in the kingdom of heaven." I wanted to walk out but didn't, and I'm still not sure whether that was cowardly.

That devotion in fact came a week after a related incident. It was orientation day and we had split the boys and girls into separate rooms. In the gym with the boys, one student called out in response to something or other, "That's so gay!" Another one of the teachers immediately paused the meeting and addressed, more importantly than the insubordination, the use of the word as an insult. "Statistically speaking, there are several people in this room who are gay, and if they have chosen not to reveal that about themselves, it's because we have created a space in which they know it is not safe to do so." This powerful sentence has stuck with me and I've used it more than once since then.

After this meeting, I went to teach my English course and a student asked me, "You know that thing that just happened? Do you think we really allow gay people here? Aren't we a Christian school?" I said, "Yes. We are a Christian school. And this is why we not only allow gay people here, but love them the same as anyone else," and words to that effect. It was an ongoing conversation, and it still comes up in classes from time to time — not just that incident but related questions. The other day in French I played the song "On brûlera" by Pomme, which begins "On brûlera toutes les deux en enfer, mon ange" (We will both burn in hell, my angel), pointing out that the feminine ending on "toutes" shows the speaker and addressee to be both feminine, and we talked about Biblical views on this.

So, yes, the way we read passages like "Male and female he created them... this is why a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife" — and our view of the supposed orderliness of creation and whether God's vision of creation is comprehensively described in Genesis — has a significant impact on our choices as Christian teachers.