

Creation in context (Psalm 8)

In Psalm 8, humankind is crowned in glory and honor, loved and valued.

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Our psalm for this week reflects the creation story of Genesis. Many scholars believe the ancient Hebrew origin story could have been compiled during the Babylonian exile. If this is true, the story might be clarified by its contrast with other creation myths that we find in that cultural milieu.

One example is the Enuma Elish, the creation story of the Mesopotamian or Babylonian empire. In that story, war and violence launch creation.

Aspu is the father god and Tiamat the mother god. They give birth to noisy, rambunctious, frolicking gods. The elder gods plot to kill them so they can rest, but the younger gods uncover the plot and kill Aspu. Tiamat, the dragon of chaos, pledges revenge. The little gods turn to Marduk, who agrees to go to war with Tiamat—giving him an opportunity to become chief of the council of gods.

Marduk catches Tiamat in a net, blows a destructive wind down her throat, and kills her with an arrow. He stretches out her corpse to create the cosmos.

The gods who sided with Tiamat in the war are imprisoned. They are hungry, and they complain that they need someone to care for them. So Marduk's father, Ea, executes one of the captive gods, and from his blood he creates humans—as slaves or servants of the captured gods.

Viewed in this context, we see in the biblical story a divine divergence from the violence and chaos of Aspu, Tiamat, and Marduk. It is in contrast to the Mesopotamian creation myth—and those of the Canaanites and Egyptians—that we begin to identify the attributes of the God of our origin story.

We get a glimpse into the nature of God and the relationship between God and humankind. We are not made to be enslaved, to serve the whims of an angry god. Instead, the ancient Hebrew God is orchestrating a dynamic and image-bearing relationship with creation.

In Psalm 8, humankind is crowned in glory and honor, loved and valued. Made a little lower than the Divine, not created from spilled blood to serve imprisoned gods. We are created as co-creators, contributing to the care of creation. It is in this deeply relational way that God loves and cares for creation, that we bear the image of the Divine.

Karl Barth said we are like God not in substance but relationally. This means we bear the image of God in communities of shalom, justice, and love. We bear the image of God caring for the more-than-human world in the same way the Divine has cared for humankind.

The psalmist speaks of a cosmos created not in chaos but rather out of it, of a caring God who is mindful of humankind and in relationship with humankind, building a collaborative community of care for all of creation.