

Divergence on the Lectionary - First Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B

First Reading

Genesis 1:1–5

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. (ESV)

Second Reading

Acts 19:1–7

And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. And he said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They said, “Into John’s baptism.” And Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.” On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. There were about twelve men in all. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Mark 1:4–11

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

Before I begin, I’d like to alert you to something you’ll notice in this and the Divergences that follow. I’m changing the pronouns I use to refer to God. I’ve been convicted concerning my use of masculine pronouns for a while now, but I was really reluctant to give up the masculine pronouns that have been and still are my personal choice. This is how I came to know God as my own Savior, but I’m not writing this for myself. This isn’t a personal journal. So it is with some real sadness that I will use plural pronouns going forward. They and Their make perfectly good sense for a Triune God. Part of my reluctance to abandon the masculine has always been that just saying God and God’s instead of using pronouns was just too awkward and impersonal. God is very personal to me and I won’t let that go. I am grateful to my queer siblings for their adoption of “they” and “their” for their own use and the way that opened my eyes to a personal and supra-gendered way of expressing selfhood. This isn’t “woke,” this is me, learning to write in a way that is true to the expansiveness of God’s being. I have a boatload of editing to do on the Divergences past.

First Reading

Reading this opening to the entire Bible in the context of the First Sunday after the Epiphany, also known as the Feast of the Baptism of Christ, isn’t an easy task. Apart from the theme of “beginnings” I find myself wondering why it was chosen. So stepping aside from 1 Epiphany, I decided to take a fresh look at the text as it stands on its own.

It turns out that ancient rabbis and more modern scholars both take issue with the commonly accepted translation of the first verse of the Bible. It’s the translation of the first word, *beresit*, that causes the problems, the word we know as “In the beginning.” That’s not really what it means. Rabbi Rashi, in the middle ages, explained it this way.

If you wish to interpret it according to its clear grammatical sense then interpret it this way: “At the beginning of God’s creating heaven and earth, when the earth was chaos and void and darkness...then God said, ‘let there be light.’ Scripture does not intend to teach the order of creation, that heaven and earth were first. If it had it would have written ‘in the beginning (*barisona*).’

Of course, for our modern theological purposes, retranslating this verse correctly doesn't rule out the idea of God's creating *ex nihilo*, but it does mean that the Bible doesn't support it, either. I was pleased to find that at least the New Revised Standard Version (Updated Edition) had the courage to translate this verse correctly. Doing so means raising a host of questions about our understanding of Creation. Hopefully others will be willing to follow suit in years to come.

In the earliest translations of Genesis 1 (the targums) we do find that it reads "In the beginning," but this isn't real support for an *ex nihilo* interpretation of the phrase. Recent scholarship has shown that this was not taught at time of the composition of the targums. Rather, it's a result of a change in Hebrew grammar. This first phrase, an "asyndetic relative clause" wasn't used in Hebrew during the time of the targums, so they resorted to something familiar to their readers.

Of course, reading this text as an explanation of God's creation *ex nihilo* raises a difficult question, too. "Was there something wrong with God's initial creation that it was so chaotic?" Those early targumic translators noticed this, too, and dealt with this question in different ways. Note this translation in *Targum Neofiti*:

Now the earth was *tehi* and *behi* [meaning it was] desolate (*sdv*) with respect to people and animals and empty (*ryqn*) in respect to all manner of agricultural work and trees.

The article from which I've been quoting much too liberally here goes on to explore the variety of ways that the different Targums understood this opening verse of Genesis, and it would be well worth reading if you can give it the time. I'll cite it at the end of this section of the Divergence. But studying this passage on its own raises lots of interesting questions. "What if the Bible never meant to teach that God created from nothing?" "What do we do with that if it's so?" "How does that change my understanding of God's relationship to the created order?" "Where did the chaos come from?"

I won't presume to try to answer those questions here. I hope you'll tackle them in your own discussions.

One thought did come to me as I pondered this passage, translated properly, (I hope that you'll all be reading the NRSVue in church on Sunday) is that this translation makes better connections to our text from Mark than the more traditional one. That is, in both instances God is working with what (or who) *is* and creating through *word*. God speaks light and dark into being, and God speaks sonship over Jesus and in so doing, sets parts of Their plan into motion. I'll try to come back to this idea when I get to writing about Jesus' baptism later in the Divergence.

Oh, and [here's the link](#) for the article on *beresit*.

Second Reading

In our reading from Acts this week we find the story of Paul's visit to Ephesus and his discovery of some "disciples" who had received John's baptism, but not the Holy Spirit. This occurs near the conclusion of his second missionary journey, and it has raised a lot of questions concerning just who these 12 men were and what sort of disciples they might have been.

In Luke's two volume work, Luke-Acts, baptism is always accompanied by the gift of the Holy Spirit, so these disciples are clearly anomalous. What's more, they've received Baptism at the hands of John, for repentance, but they tell Paul that they have not even "heard that there is a Holy Spirit." This is peculiar because even John taught about the Holy Spirit, with Whom Jesus would baptize. Modern scholars have suggested that perhaps what they meant was "We haven't heard that the Holy Spirit has come." Some ancient copyists seem to have thought the same, because there are some manuscripts that read this way.

Here is my take on all this. These were "disciples" of John, who had received his baptism, and were looking for the One who would come after him. They had heard about Jesus and believed in Him, but had never received baptism in His Name. Indeed, they had not even heard about the Pentecost event. Paul teaches them about the link between baptism in Jesus' Name and the gift of the Holy Spirit and they receive this baptism and begin to manifest the gifts of tongues and prophecy.

Some will read this text as support for the idea that all real baptism must result in the manifestation of these gifts. Others will suggest that we find here evidence of two baptisms, water baptism and Holy Spirit baptism. I think that trying to create doctrines like these from this small passage is a dubious enterprise. It is important to read this narrative in the larger context of Luke's work, in which he tells the story of Jesus and the early church with a specific goal in mind, to relate events in a way that binds up early rifts between Jewish and Gentile Christians. (Certainly not his only goal, but a unique one among the evangelists.)

For Luke, the glue that holds all Christians together, Jew and Gentile, is the Holy Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit is threaded through Luke and Acts like one of those plastic threads they put through ten pairs of socks to keep them together in the store, working in Jew and Gentile alike. Given this context it becomes clear that Luke's purposes were not to create doctrines around baptism, but to emphasize the unity created by the gift of

the Holy Spirit. We are one because we have all received of the One Spirit. The manifestations are secondary, and only related as indicators that the Spirit had indeed been given.

Gospel Text

As we work our way through the Gospel of Mark during Year B, it'll be important to keep in mind Mark's larger framework and purpose when we deal with the smaller passages we're given in the Lectionary. Many years ago I wrote an entire paper on this structure of Mark, called a "chiasm" and it's available on The Vicar's Keep. ([CLICK HERE](#) if you'd like to read it)

Mark has laid out his Gospel in a large X shape, which is why it's called a chiasm. (Chi being the name of the Greek letter X.) It's a form used in many different historical and current literatures in which there are at least five elements. The first two elements "pass through" the middle element and occur again in reverse order in the second half of the chiasm, transformed in some way by their passage through the center, so the order comes out like this:

A B
C
B' A'

Draw a line from A to A', and B to B' through the center, and you can see the X shape.

Mark's Gospel has more than just two pairs, though. There are at least 8 that I've identified in my paper. (I may have found one or two more in the years since I wrote it.) All them pass through the very center of the Gospel, which is Jesus' first declaration of His crucifixion. A chiasm focuses the reader's or hearer's attention on that center and Mark wants his readers' to focus on this as well. I personally believe that Mark wrote his Gospel especially for use with those being prepared for baptism, and it asks rather forcefully, "Will you declare your faith in a crucified Messiah?" This is in contrast to the Messiah expected by so many Jews in Jesus' day, a Messiah who would come as a conquering Davidic king.

This catechetical purpose makes sense then of Mark's brevity relative to all the other Gospels. It has a very specific goal and group in mind and leaves aside much that Matthew, Luke, and John included for larger audiences. As I write my way through Year B, I'll make constant reference to Mark's purpose and each text's place in his larger chiasm. Doing this will help to draw out meaning that Mark intended us to hear. As an

aid to many (most?) of the folks who read the Divergences but don't want to wade through the whole paper on Mark, here's an image of the structure of Mark

- A Beginning - John points to Jesus 1:4-8
- B Jesus' baptism - The splitting of the heavens,
"You are my son," 1:9-11
- C Jesus is tested in the wilderness 1:12-13
- D The parable of the sower 4:1-9
- E Raising of the young girl 5:21-43
- F The death of John the Baptist 6:14-29
- G Stilling of the second storm (exorcism of the deep) 6:45-52
- H Peter's confession 8:27-30
- I - Jesus' first passion prediction 8:31-33
- H' Transfiguration 9:2-10
- G' Exorcism of possessed boy 9:14-29
- F' Appearance of the rich (young) man 10:17-22
- E' Raising of the young man in Secret Mark
(followed Mark 10:34)
- D' Parable of the vineyard 12:1-11
- C' Jesus is tested in the temple 12:13-27
- B' Jesus dies, the temple veil is split "Truly this was God's son."
15:33-39
- A' The "post-runner" the young man, points to Jesus 16:1-8

You might want to save that image for later reference, though it'll always be available on The Vicar's Keep as well.

In our reading from Mark for the First Sunday after the Epiphany (The Feast of the Baptism of Christ) we have the first halves of the first two pairs of the chiasm. John points to Jesus (but John expects the Davidic king) and Jesus' baptism, the first "splitting/tearing" of the heavens.

John's proclamation of Jesus is of a coming One who is "mightier" than he, and he tells us that "all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him." Mark contrasts that with the proclamation of the crucified and risen One made by the young man at the tomb, a proclamation so startling that the two women who hear it ran away and "said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." (Mark 16:8) The first version of the Messiah everyone wants to hear about, the second, almost no one.

The other other part of our reading depicts Jesus' baptism and the way that the heavens are torn open. Many scholars have taken note of the way that the verb for tearing (*schizo*) bookends Mark's Gospel, but none that I am aware of have identified the way that this tearing is transformed as it passes through the chiasm's center. In this first opening of the heavens, it is for Jesus' benefit. When the Temple Veil is torn (It was deep blue with stars painted on it, and image of the heavens.) It is for the benefit of all humankind.

In our two stories then, we have part of a pair that shifts from the many to the few, and then another part of a pair that shifts from the one to the many. To be honest, I'm not sure if there's anything to be made of that, but I do find it curious. What is certain is that in these opening verses of Mark's Gospel he confronts us immediately (Mark's favorite word?) with the question, "Which Savior will you choose? The Mighty One or the Crucified One?" I find this question especially relevant in the current moment, in which we are witnessing a rise in a kind of Christianity that is deeply wedded to political power, one that seeks to impose its views the world around it as John's Mighty One would have done.