

We all know learning takes more patience when it requires unlearning. Like learning to parent or to be a great partner or friend, we don't start with a clean slate, fill it with a few parenting books, or an Esther Perell podcast. We find ourselves learning new ways of being that require us to unlearn old ways of being—sorting through the past while we're creating a new future.

In matters of faith and spirituality it may be easier to know what doesn't work than what does. Is it Richard Rohr who speaks of 3 phases in this process? An original construction, then deconstruction when that no longer works, followed, by a time of reconstruction.

In January, we'll do an online class to deconstruct four toxic teachings (like the dominant view of hell) and offer alternatives that make better use of the raw data of our spiritual tradition. On Sundays we tend to lean into reconstruction—perspectives going forward.

When Emily a said last Sunday that we were going to focus on this for a while in our content time—at least among us Zoomies, the chat lit up—like, yeah, good timing. So, today, some reconstruction on how God is introduced in the opening chapter of Genesis, highlighting a few surprises we might have missed in an older construction. T

But first, what's in our hands when we hold a Bible? Many emphasize the authority of the Bible, as if this is absolutely God speaking, every word, receive it, believe, submit to it, even if it doesn't make sense. It's an unprovable hypothesis, and an unhelpful starting point, one that feels like a raw power play. Cults make similar demands. When the concern is with the authority of Scripture, that to me, is a tip-off: I'm encountering a system that is using Scripture to impose control. My defenses are automatically up. I'm wound up a little tight. And for me? That totally works against experiencing God. It's like, even if it is a great restaurant with a Michelin star chef, I don't wanna be force fed. I'll just slip away and grab me an Impossible Whopper with light mayo and heavy pickles.

There's a more humble, less fraught approach than "this book is the boss of everyone." And it's this: "this is a work in the genre called sacred writing." Meaning it's an attempt to bear witness to experience of the divine within a particular culture inhabiting a

particular historical context. If that's the case, *Inspiration*, is what we're after, not authority. Inspiration is what we're after whether it's art or athletics or math or science or anything that floats our boat. We are life-seeking creatures, after all.

First thing we notice when we crack the thing open is that it's a translation—done by scholars who have devoted their lives to this work, translating from an original language Hebrew, and later Greek, into English for most of us here. I mean this is not a modern North American writing to modern North Americans (notice how I adroitly included Canadians there?) This is not Brené Brown distilling her fascinating research on contemporary concerns that easily resonate because we share a rich cultural context with Brené Brown.

The Bible first appears as a collection of writings (not just oral tradition or scattered manuscripts) about 2600 years ago. It was put together by the Southern tribe of Israel (originally a loose confederation of nomadic peoples) who found themselves in forced exile in Babylon. Babylonian conquerors of Jerusalem and destroyers of the first temple, targeted the literate class for deportation, so they had some manuscripts. In exile, it seems they put them together, in what became a collection we now call the bible. *All of this underscores: this comes from a cultural context that is light years removed from our cultural context.*

Why bother with such a book? (First, we don't have to bother—sacred literature is not the only way to connect with God) But a reason to bother engaging perspectives that come from a cultural context very different than our own—an ancient one, is *because* it speaks in very different ways than we are used to. Every culture, including our own, is a filter for experience.

So every culture filters out some aspects of human experience—highlights some aspects, diminishes others. So in a sense, it's the Bible's cultural remoteness, not its "cultural relevance" that is the draw here. Our smartphones feed us cultural relevance hours each day! This is a break from all that cultural relevance—just like traveling to a remote part of the world is break from North American culture.

And the one thing that this very different cultural context did not filter out, is the raw human desire to engage divine, transcendent realities. I mean this remote to us culture, was not at all conflicted or embarrassed or shy about interacting with transcendent or

divine realities. To do so, for them, was as normal as it is normal for a sex therapist to talk about sex. So let's dive into the way this book goes about introducing a figure we call God.

The book of Genesis received its English name, from the Heb word *toledot*, which is used 13 times in Genesis, and means "story" or "record" or "line," as in "generations"—keeping in mind that for the ancients, a genealogy was a way of telling a story. If we were on a first online dating service meet up (as if I have any experience!) having a coffee, we might say, 'tell me a bit of your story.' And if the initial meet up seems worth it, more meet ups might follow, and we'd be listening for stories, vignettes, that paint a picture of the person. Stories. Great introduction.

In this first book, Genesis, a character we call God shows up in one story after another.

Now let's look for those three surprises in just the first few lines of this opening story-poem. I'm using the Orthodox Jewish Translation which mixes English with Hebrew.

In the beginning *Elohim* created *hasho-mayim* (the heavens) and *ha-aretz* (the earth). And the earth was *tohu vay-vo-hu* (without form, and void); and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the *Ruach Elohim* was hovering upon the face of the waters.

And *Elohim* said, Let there be light: and there was light.

And *Elohim* saw the light, that it was *tov* (good); and *Elohim* divided the *ohr* (light) from the *choshech* [*show-sheck*] (darkness).

And *Elohim* called the light *Yom* (Day), and the darkness He called *Lailah* (Night). And the *erev* (evening) and the *boker* (morning) were *Yom Echad* (Day One).

First surprise is the name for God used several times: *Elohim*. Why is that a surprise? Well. It's a plural noun, *Elohim*. The *El* of *Elohim* was the common name for a god in the Near Eastern region, often the head of the pantheon of gods, often depicted with long hair and beard—*El* shows up in Syria, Babylon, among the Canaanites, and Israel. And *Elohim* was the plural form. So the correct pronoun for this divine being would be "they" not "he," "she," or "it." This is from the tradition known for inventing monotheism. But it must be a flexible form of monotheism, a pluralistic monotheism.

So these were people very much at ease with paradox, people not overconcerned with logical consistency, as if paradox (two contradictory things being true at the same time) was necessary to employ in the realm of divine discourse. This ease with paradox has a great advantage: it allows for multiple points of view—which is really helpful when we’re talking about something as subjective and mysterious as humans trying to communicate things far beyond them, like God. So the appearance of a plural noun for the divine, Elohim, in writings famous for monotheism, well that’s a surprise.

The second surprise is like unto it, the next term used for the divine “Ruah *Elohim*”—Ruah is Spirit/Wind/Breath, depending on context. So the Jewish Publication society translation of Ruach Elohim is “the wind of God [Elohim] was over the water.” Also, hello, Ruah is a feminine noun—so she, rather than he would fit best. If Ruah Elohim showed up as a Zoom participants, we might see She/They as pronouns. There’s very good evidence that the presence of the divine in the Holy of Holies—the Shekinah—was perceived as feminine divine presence.

That’s two surprises, just with the opening verse of this Introduction to God.

Here’s the third: this Creative Divine Agency name Ruach Elohim breathes or speaks things into being like an artist whose art has to speak back to the artist before the artist knows what it is.

Anyone who has ever been an artist knows there is something mysterious going on. It’s not cooking by a recipe or assembling something from Ikea according to the instructions. No, no, no, there’s woo-woo factor. Like good novelists have an initial idea for characters and plot but once they get to writing, it’s like the characters and the plot gain their own agency, and take on a life of their own. And the writer isn’t just concocting them—she’s discovering who they are who they want to be (just like a reader does.) Same thing here.

So Elohim says “Light” and something appears, and Elohim, before declaring it anything at all, has to look at it (behold it) to see that it is good. Jorella Andrews, an art professor calls this the necessity of the creation, “Showing Off” to the creator. The creation has to reveal itself even to the creator before the creator knows what it is.

And that’s the pattern throughout this opening poem—all the various created things, including all the creatures, have to show themselves to the divine creative agency, and

only then does the divine creative agency know that they are good. So this is another paradox for us in relation to this God. We can say this God knows us better than we know ourselves, but equally, we can say that this God doesn't know us until we show ourselves to She/They. So this God has agency, but so do we in relation to this God. That's something to place in our pipes for the purpose of smoking it. So there we have it: three surprises in our Introduction to God. Amen.