

The First Sunday After the Epiphany
Cycle B RCL
Revised

Genesis 1:1-5

This account of the creation comes from a writer or school of writers in exile in Babylon known to scholars simply as “P” or “the Priestly Writer.” The story begins with a black, watery chaos into which God introduced, as it were, a bubble of complex order, protected from the chaos by a membrane of sorts called a “dome” or “firmament.” The earth floats within this bubble leaving an air space between it and the dome above (=“the heavens”). This writer, following the tenants of Babylonian “list science,” produced an account of the formation of the world in accordance with the best scholarship of the day.

Psalm 29

This *hymn* is an “enthronement psalm” that celebrates God’s rule over heaven and earth. The physical power of a thunderstorm comprises the psalm’s figure for the power of God that the hymn calls upon all the gods of heaven (29:1) to acknowledge along with the worshipers in the Temple (29:9-11). As such, the psalm becomes an interchange in which both human beings and the very creation itself delights in God’s kingship. The similarities of certain sequences in the psalm have suggested to some interpreters a dependence upon Canaanite poetry, and they argue in favor of an early date for the composition.

Acts 19:1–7

In the first century CE, Jews believed that the Holy Spirit had left Israel at the time of the “desolating sacrilege” of 1 Maccabees 1:54 and would not return until the end time. Christian discourse about the Holy Spirit rests upon the Christian conviction that the end time began with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Not all Christians, however, were of one mind about this matter; and this passage envisions contact between Paul and Christians who had not received the Spirit. In Acts, the greatest manifestation of the Spirit was, of course, at the first Pentecost (Acts 2:4). The author no doubt means to associate the Spirit not only with a particular doctrine but with gifts of healing and speaking in foreign tongues.

Mark 1:4–11

The depiction of John the Baptist suggests a person who has taken a holy vow called a Nazarite vow. In the last century, it was popular to portray John as an Essene associated, perhaps, with the sectarians who lived at Qumran and were responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls. This view is no longer viable. John was a prophet who raised up his own students (disciples) in his end-of-the-world teachings. Ritual washings, very common in Judaism, are ordinarily for the removal of ritual uncleanness. This may have been a requirement for admission to John’s sect in order to wash away the impurities of the present evil age. In Mark’s account, only Jesus sees the dove and only he hears the voice from heaven. Perhaps under the influence of Greek philosophy, Judaism in the first century was reluctant to portray God as undertaking such a directly human activity as speaking, so the divine voice in heaven is called an “echo” (Hebrew: *bat qol*) instead.