

YAHU, MUDFACE, AND THE ANIMALS

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A NOTE TO THE READER

There are two creation stories in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. The first, Genesis 1:1-2:4a, is the more familiar one. It is called the “Priestly account” by many Bible scholars, since it emphasizes order, a more distant, majestic creator, and God’s rest on the seventh day, or sabbath.

The second creation account, on which this story is based, is found in Genesis 2:4b-25 and is less familiar to most people. It is considered to be the older of the two and is called the “Yahwist account” because of its use of the name “Yahweh” for God (“Lord God,” in most English translations).

Since the ancient Hebrew alphabet had no vowels, no one really knows how to pronounce this ancient, four consonant word for God. For example, the translators of the King James Version of the Bible (1611) vocalized the word J (for the Hebrew letter “yod”) [e] H (for the Hebrew letter “hay”) [o] V (for the Hebrew letter “waw”) [a] H (for the Hebrew letter “ay”). This is the origin of the word “Jehovah.” Most contemporary scholars vocalize the word Y [a] H W [e] H, or “Yahweh.” However, in keeping with its use in other ancient Near Eastern sources, I have chosen the less familiar spelling “Yahu” for this retelling of the biblical creation story.

In contrast to the straightforward language of the Priestly account, the Yahwist's story revels in wordplay. For example, the Hebrew name for man (Adam) is related to the word earth (adamah) just as male ('ish) is related to female ('ishah). In another striking contrast to the Priestly account, the Yahwist's God is pictured in very human ways. In these accounts God walks in the Garden of Eden at the time of the cool evening breeze and visits the humans (Gen 3:8); later on the Yahwist's God will visit Abraham, will eat in his tent, and barter with him (Gen 18:1-33). It is also the Yahwist's God who will one day wrestle with Jacob (Gen 32:22-32).

My retelling of the second creation story for the contemporary reader underscores the playfulness of the Yahwist's account with its more human-like God, and maintains non-sexist language until the very end when the androgynous human is split into two separate genders.

Long, long ago, when Yahu was young and the earth was flat, there was nothing anywhere but dusty brown desert sand. There were no forests or flowers; no oceans or streams; no animals, no people, no sounds. There was nothing but dusty brown desert sand. And Yahu was lonely. Yahu had no one to play with or talk to; no one to hide from or chase after and find; no one to call friend. And so with nothing else to do, Yahu began to count. In the times of bright blue heat Yahu counted the specks of gleaming sand below, and in the periods of cold purple darkness Yahu counted the specks of sparkling light above.

“One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve. . . .” Yahu started at the very beginning and soon became an expert counter. Every day and every night Yahu added to the numbers.

Thirteen trillion, fifty-five billion, nine hundred and seventy-two million, three hundred and forty-four thousand and six stars.” Yahu paused for breath. “I guess that’s a good stopping-off place for tonight.” Yahu spoke out loud, but there was no one listening. “Someday, perhaps someone will be glad I’m doing all this work,” Yahu said. Then Yahu yawned and went to sleep.

One day Yahu was lying all alone in the dusty brown desert sand, counting as usual, when some water came up from the ground and turned the sand to mud. Yahu smiled for the first time in many years and started to stir the dirt and water around and around. Yahu pushed and pulled, poked and punched until the mud was just right. Then slowly, ever so carefully, Yahu began to shape it.

First, Yahu made a big ball like the sun in the sky above. Next, Yahu rolled out four long thin things and stuck them into the big ball--two at the top, and two at the bottom. They looked like rays of light shooting out from the sun. Then Yahu shaped a smaller ball, poked moon-craters in it and put it on top of the large one. After many hours of play Yahu had made a two-legged, one-headed, two-armed, one-nosed, two-eyed, ten-toed, two-eared, ten fingered, half-hairy, half-smooth thing.

Yahu sat up to look at the strange shape and laughed. "It's not perfect, but it's pretty good," Yahu said. "And it's a good start at something new and different. I haven't had this much fun in a million years. I should have tried this a long time ago!"

After staring at the mud sculpture for a long time, Yahu said, "I think I will call you Mudface." And so the thing got a name. Then Yahu knelt over the clay shape, pinched its fat belly, and whispered "Mudface, Mudface, wake up!"

Much to Yahu's surprise, that soft breath of air flew into the creature's nostrils making it lighter and lighter. Suddenly, the thing floated upright.

"Ouch!" it cried, as it bumped into the sky. Its head got stuck halfway between the bright blue heaven and the dusty brown earth. So Yahu quickly put more clay on the creature's legs and feet, weighing it down and stretching it out. Slowly it drifted back to earth, its toes gently touching the ground. It was the first human. A living person who could run and play and ask Yahu questions.

Then Yahu said, "I will make a garden for Mudface to live in."

And Mudface asked, "What is a garden?"

Yahu said, "I'm not exactly sure, but watch, and you will see." And as Yahu spoke, a beautiful, lush, green place appeared in the middle of the dusty brown desert

sand. A great river flowed out of the garden, divided into four babbling streams, and rushed to the sea. And all plants delightful to the eyes and fingers, fragrant to the nostrils, and delicious to the tongue grew there for the creature's pleasure. And in a secret place of the garden Yahu planted a large tree and called it the Knowing Tree.

Then Yahu said to Mudface, "Everything in this garden is for you to enjoy. Only don't eat from the Knowing Tree, because if you do, you will die."

Mudface laughed and danced around Yahu. "Everything here is so beautiful!" the human said. "But tell me, what is a Knowing Tree, and how will I know when I find it? And what does die mean? Is that a beautiful thing too?"

Yahu smiled and held the human close. "So many questions! The answers will come in their own time. For now, let's just run and play." And so they did.

Yahu and Mudface were very happy in their world. Every morning Yahu would come visit the human and the two of them would work at gathering nuts and berries for supper. And every evening after eating they would explore the garden together. Sometimes they would play hide-and-seek, sometimes they would climb trees and swing from the branches, and sometimes they would play chase in the tall grass. But in none of their games nor in any of their explorations did the human ever see the Knowing Tree.

Sometimes, when they were tired of playing, the two of them would lie down, look up at the deepening purple darkness, and talk about important things. The human would ask questions and Yahu would answer them. One time Yahu even told the human the secrets of counting gleaming grains of sand and glimmering stars. Mudface and Yahu had become best friends.

Then one evening, after an especially hard game of tag, Yahu could see that the human was no longer happy. “You always win when we play,” Mudface said crossly, stamping one foot and then the other. “I can’t climb as high, swim as fast, hide as well, or run as quickly as you do. And when the cold purple darkness of night comes, you always go away and leave me here. And that is scary.

“I’ve tried to make things to keep me company when you’re gone, but the things I make don’t turn out like yours. My things always break or crumble. They don’t move, or talk, or grow. I wish I had a creature for myself, the way you have me.

“And another thing. I’m tired of you calling me Mudface all the time. I don’t think it’s very nice and I wish you would think of something else to call me.”

Yahu was surprised and saddened to hear all this. But Yahu was good and cared about the human, so Yahu started with the easiest thing first, beginning at the beginning. “Since you don’t like Mudface for a name, how about Aaron or Abel instead?”

“No!” said the human, “Aaron sounds too much like ‘errand,’ and Abel sounds as if you just think of me as a little helper ‘able’ to do whatever you want. I’m not only your little worker or errand runner, you know. I don’t want those names. I don’t like any of them.”

“Then what do you think of Abigail or Abishag? Or Abraham, Aardvark, or Acrobat?” Yahu asked gently, realizing that the human’s feelings had been hurt.

“I don’t like those either,” the human said, looking down and digging a toe in the dirt. “They’re too long and they sound silly.”

“Well, how about Adam?” Yahu said, giving the human a hug and watching another four toes disappear in the sand.

The human stopped digging for a moment. “That’s sort of nice sounding, but what does it mean?”

“It means ‘Dusty,’ Yahu answered. “Do you remember the time I told you how I made you out of the brown sandy soil?”

The lost toes dug their way up out of the dirt and the human began to smile again. “Yes, I remember. Adam. . . .” The human spoke the word softly and thoughtfully. “Adam. . . . I like that! I’ll be Adam.” So the human got a new name, and Yahu and Adam were friends once again.

That night Yahu did not count bright specks in the cold purple darkness. Instead, Yahu began to think about what Adam had said that day, about never being able to win any games and about being afraid at night and wanting a companion. All night Yahu thought long and hard, without ever sleeping. And Yahu never counted once.

In the morning Yahu had a surprise for Adam. Long before the sun came up, Yahu had been busy making a new living, moving creature. Yahu brought the creature to Adam and said, “If you can think of a name for this strange thing, it will be yours.”

The animal was sleek and fine-haired. It had four strong, prancing legs with hoofs on the ends; a long, dark, thick mane; and a tail that blew in the breeze when it galloped. It ran circles around Adam, and then stopped right in front of the human. It snorted, whinnied, and pawed the earth.

Adam stared at it with wide open eyes. Adam’s head shook back and forth in rhythm with the creature’s head, and the human voice tried to imitate the sound coming from the animal’s nostrils: “Kkhhorse! kkhhorse! You shall be called Horse!” And Adam’s hands clapped with delight.

For the next two days Adam rode the horse everywhere. And when the human and Yahu played chase on the hard-baked sand, Adam very nearly caught Yahu once or twice. But when they raced back toward the garden, Yahu would disappear into the thickets and tall trees once again.

So Adam came back to Yahu and said, "I love the horse. On the hard-baked sand it's as fast as the wind. But it can't climb trees or push through the tall grass and bushes here in the garden. I need something else."

The next morning Yahu brought another creature to Adam. Its legs were longer than the horse was tall, and its orange and brown skin looked like the curly cracks in a dried up desert mud puddle. Its neck was as long as a palm tree and little leafy branches seemed to be growing out of the top of its head. It was a horse that had stayed the same in the middle, but had been stretched out at the top and the bottom.

Adam roared with laughter as the animal stood wobbly-kneed, peeking at them through the trees. Suddenly its long legs carried it far away through the tall green grass and thickets. "Zzzhirrhafe, zzzhirrhafe, zzzhirrhafe," was the sound it made.

"Giraffe," Adam giggled, "you shall be called Giraffe." And so it was.

After a few hours of watching the human from a distance the giraffe got over its shyness and let Adam ride on its back. The giraffe could take huge strides over the tall grass and bushes, and Adam could easily stretch out and pick fruit off the trees as they went looking for Yahu. Best of all, Adam could climb up the giraffe's long neck and find Yahu's hiding places in the treetops. The giraffe was a wonderful animal.

Then, during one especially long game of hide-and-seek, Adam felt the giraffe suddenly stop. Adam looked up and saw a tree nearby that towered over all the others of the garden. Its trunk was cinnamon brown and its leaves were the dark, glossy-green of aloe. Its fruit was round and deep yellow, like a full desert moon just risen. And its scent was like honeysuckle in bloom. The fragrance tickled Adam's nose and Adam knew instantly that the giraffe had found the forbidden Knowing Tree.

The human longed to reach out and touch the soft, round smoothness of the shimmering moon-fruit, and the giraffe's head was just the right height for grasping it. But the moment the human was about to touch the fruit, the giraffe stooped down to nibble the tree's leafy lower branches. With a loud shriek, the human slid off its slippery neck onto the grass below.

Adam forgot all about the Knowing Tree and the game of hide-and-seek. For the rest of the afternoon Adam climbed up and slid down the giraffe's long neck again and again.

But when Yahu finally came out from hiding, Adam was frowning. "Why are you frowning?" Yahu asked. "Couldn't you find me with the giraffe?"

"I'm sorry," Adam said, "I forgot about the game. I stopped looking for you a long time ago.

"I know the horse and giraffe that you made for me are wonderful creatures, and they are good for using in our games, but neither of them can keep me warm at night or comfort me when I'm afraid."

Yahu felt sad that the animals weren't right for the human. So Yahu left Adam and went off to make something else. The next morning Yahu brought the human a roly-

poly animal covered with dark brown hair as thick and long as the bottomland marshes. It had large, soft-padded paws with sharp claws on the ends, and it was sniffing the air, searching for something sweet.

“What do you think of this new thing?” Yahu asked, smiling broadly.

But Adam didn't have time to reply. “Breaearrhh!” The animal gave a friendly growl as it bounded forward and gave Adam a warm, furry hug. “Brreaearrhh!” it said again, licking Adam's honey-sweet cheeks.

Adam gulped and tried to wiggle out of its tight grasp. “Whew!” the human gasped, finally breaking away and catching a breath of air. “You shall be called Bear. Bear will be your name.” And so it was. And that night, for the first time ever, Adam fell asleep smiling, curled up in the arms of one of Yahu's creatures.

But when Yahu came to visit the human the next day, Adam was no longer smiling. “Why are you looking so sad?” Yahu asked. “Didn't the bear comfort you and keep you from being afraid?”

“No, it didn't,” Adam said, pouting. “In fact, it only made me more unhappy and afraid. The bear never once spoke a soothing word to me, and it has awful, long prickly things stuck in its paws. Every time I turned over in the night they scratched me. Look at my back and side! Then to top it all off, the bear snored horribly loud all night long. I hardly slept at all!”

Yahu was trying to be patient with Adam, and said, “Please don't be sad. Let me try again. In two days I'll be back with a new set of animals. In fact, I've already started on some of them. They will be even better than these first three creatures.” And with that, Yahu went away.

So Yahu began making more and more animals, faster and faster, hoping that one of them would be the perfect helper and companion for the human. Yahu made the penguin and the porpoise; the seahorse, the jellyfish, and the praying mantis; the cockroach and the yellow-bellied sapsucker; the gap-toothed hippopotamus, the duck-billed platypus, and the orange-haired orangutan. And for every creature Yahu made, Adam was able to match a name. In a few days Adam and Yahu seemed to have forgotten the reason for making and naming animals. The task had grown into a game, matching wit against wit.

Weeks later Adam had an “Index of Infinitesimally Small Insects,” a “Thesaurus of Monstrosities from Aptosaurus and Brontosaurus to Zigongosaurus,” and a three-volume Dictionary of Crocodiles, Elephants, Eels, and Canaries. But still the human had not found a creature that was both friend and helper.

No matter what Yahu made, nothing kept Adam happy for long. In fact, the human seemed to be getting sadder and sadder with each passing day. More and more of the human’s time was spent thinking up new names, and less and less time was spent playing hide-and-seek or asking Yahu questions. What once had been an exciting game matching Adam’s clever names with Yahu’s lively imagination had turned into hard, tedious work.

Finally, after another week of making an unlikely assortment of amphibians and arachnids, a series of cephalopods and a miscellany of marsupials, Yahu said to Adam, “I will try just one more time. This last thing will be different from all the rest, and if it doesn’t do the trick, I don’t think anything will.”

But the next morning Yahu came to Adam with just a smile and empty hands. “Where is the thing?” Adam asked, looking around impatiently, “You said that you would bring me something totally different today. Where is it? Is it some kind of invisible creature, or are you playing a joke on me?”

“Just wait and see,” Yahu laughed, “just wait and see.”

“Sssssss, sssssss,” went the grass, swishing around the human’s feet. “Sssssss, sssss!” Suddenly a long, thick, vine-like thing shot up into the air. “Sssssuurrprissse!” it said, with eyes glittering.

The human jumped back in astonishment. “What is this? How can this thing move and speak? It has no wings or beak like the birds of the air, no fins or gills like the fish of the sea, and no legs or mouth like me, and yet it moves and speaks!”

“Ssssseecretsss, Ssssseecretsss!” the creature said, opening wide its disguised mouth, and grinning. Then the animal began a slow, swaying dance, balancing delicately on nothing. “Sssssseee me? Sssssseee me?”

And Adam saw in its shimmering smoothness every shade and shape of precious stone that Yahu had put in the garden. As it swayed to and fro from sunlight to shadow, the iridescent colors and patterns of its skin changed again and again, and its two-pronged tongue waved back and forth.

Adam reached out to touch its luminous scales but the creature moved away. Its pearly-toothed mouth opened and shut. Once. Twice. “Ssssss, ssssssnhhhaaaaaaake! Ssssss, ssssssnhhhaaaaaaake!” it said.

Adam was fascinated by Yahu's new creature that never stayed the same. "You are so very, very beautiful, and you can speak our words! I will call you Snake. Snake will be your name."

"Yessssss, yessssss, sssssnnhhaaaake," it replied. And so it was.

For two whole weeks Adam and the snake played games in the grass and trees of the garden. And because the snake was the most special of all Yahu's creations, one day Adam took it to see the lovely Knowing Tree. Adam told the snake how the tree had been found and what Yahu had said about it. But strangely, the snake seemed uninterested in the story or the tree.

"I've seen trees like this before," the snake said, slowly closing its eyes and coiling around the trunk of the tree.

"Where have you seen trees like this before?" Adam asked challengingly. "This is the only Knowing Tree there is. Where have you seen one?"

"In my dreams," the snake replied, "I've seen trees like it in my dreams. Many times."

"What are dreams?" asked Adam, squinting at the sunlight reflecting off the tree's jade-green leaves. "If you have so many of them, why haven't you given me one before? I want a dream too, so I can carry this lovely tree with me wherever I go. Give me one. Please!"

"So many questions!" The snake opened its eyes and grinned widely. "Perhaps someday you'll have a dream of your own. But right now let's play a new game. Come, ride me. We'll save dreams for another day."

For the rest of that afternoon Adam rode on the snake's smooth, glossy back. They slid silently across scorching sand, slithered through swamp grass, and soared across lacy, treetop branches. When they finished playing, Adam had forgotten all about questions and dreams. And when night came, the snake wound itself snugly around the human, providing warmth and words of comfort. The splendid new creature had nearly made Adam forget about Yahu.

But the next day Yahu came to visit the human. "How are you doing with the new animal I gave you?" Yahu asked quietly. Suddenly Adam realized how long Yahu had been gone.

"I have missed you!" Adam exclaimed. "I have missed our walks in the evenings and the times for asking questions. I have missed our games of chase and hide-and-seek. These animals are wonderful, and the all-wise, ever-changing snake is the best creature of all. But they are not enough. Something is still missing."

"I know," Yahu said. "I've had the same feeling. Let me think for awhile. Perhaps I can come up with something else."

Now the snake had been hiding in the trees and had heard Yahu talking with Adam. "Fffriendss! Fffriendss!" it hissed angrily. "No more fffriendss!" And with that, the snake disappeared. Adam would not see it again for a long, long time.

The next morning, Yahu once again came to the garden empty-handed. "What do you have for me this time?" Adam laughed gaily, tugging on Yahu's arm. "You know you can't fool me twice in a row! Where is the new animal? Show it to me now!"

“But I have brought nothing,” Yahu said sadly. “I have no more ideas, no more surprises. I can’t make any more animals. You have exhausted my imagination.” Yahu sat down heavily beside the human. “I just don’t know what to do anymore.”

Adam’s arms went around Yahu as tears began to trickle down Yahu’s cheeks. “It’s all right, it’s all right,” the human whispered, “It’s not your fault. You tried really hard to make something just right for me. And anyway, we still have each other.”

But the human’s words didn’t help Yahu feel any better. And that day became the longest day Yahu had ever lived through. The bright blue of the sky just wouldn’t disappear and the hot, round sun seemed to stay straight overhead forever. Yahu tried playing in the mud again, remembering how Adam had been formed. But no new ideas would come. Finally, Yahu lay down in the warm wet sand and fell asleep. When Yahu awoke, it was cold and night.

There had never been a darkness like the deep purple blackness of that moonless night. And millions of barely visible pinpricks dotted the distant heavens. With much sadness, Yahu began to count. It had been a long time since the last counting and Yahu had forgotten the stopping-off place. Yahu sighed deeply, peered into the darkness, and started over from the beginning. “One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve. . . .”

By the time Yahu got to the stopping-off place of two million, six hundred thousand and eighty-five, the cold purple darkness was turning ruby-red. But Yahu was not thinking of sleep, for Yahu had come up with a plan at star number two million, five hundred thousand, nine hundred and thirteen.

“I know what I’ll do,” Yahu said to no one in particular. “I’ll play a trick on the human.” And Yahu stretched out on the cold, shimmering sand and watched the yellow sun come up. “It will be risky, but I’ll have to take the chance and hope the human falls for it.

“I’m going to split Adam in two. I’ll take part of the human’s insides--some of Adam’s own breath, flesh and bone--and make another creature. It must be enough like Adam so that Adam will never again ask for anything, and different enough that Adam will always delight in it.”

And so while Adam was sleeping, Yahu leaned over and scooped out part of the human’s breath, flesh and bone. Then Yahu tied up Adam’s side, leaving a tiny round knot in the middle of the belly so nothing more could fall out. Lastly, Yahu took those parts of Adam and shaped a new creature, just like Adam, yet different.

When the sun had fully risen, Yahu brought the new creature to Adam, just as he was waking. Adam sat up, rubbed his eyes and stared at the new thing Yahu was leading toward him. He felt a strange, hunger-like pang in his side, and his mouth fell open.

“Finally, someone who looks like me! Another two-legged, one-headed, two-armed, one-nosed, two-eyed, ten-toed, two-eared, ten-fingered, half-hairy, half-smooth thing just like me!” he shouted excitedly. He jumped up and stretched out his hands toward the creature.

“Adam, . . . I’m Adam,” he said, gazing into a pair of moon-shaped eyes. He seemed lighter somehow and was having difficulty keeping his feet on the ground. Yahu smiled at them then turned away, leaving the two alone.

“Mmmmm adam? I, I, I, Mmmadam?” the creature asked slowly and deliberately,

tasting each sound as it rolled off her tongue and lips. “Mmadam, madam!” She repeated the new word softly, but forcefully. Then the woman took the man’s hands.

Adam laughed with delight, “Yes, madam, you’re Madam. You must be called Madam.” And as he said this, he looked curiously at the new round knot in his belly, and realized that the hunger-like pangs in his side had gone away. “You’re Madam because you were taken out of the flesh, breath, and bone of Adam!”

Then Adam took the woman to Yahu and said, “What a great trick! What a marvelous thing you have done! What a lovely creature you have made! I know she will be the perfect friend and helper for me, and I will be the perfect friend and helper for her. You have truly saved the best for last.”

Then Yahu, the man and the woman rolled on the ground with laughter. “Madam and Adam, adam and madam!” they shrieked over and over again. And they laughed until they could laugh no more. All of Yahu’s creatures joined in the laughter, and even the trees danced for joy. And for the rest of the day Adam and Madam went exploring in the marvelous garden Yahu had made.

The woman tasted all the different fruits of the garden, and then last of all, Adam showed her the secret place of the Knowing Tree. And when the man and woman were together, it was as though they were one person. But when they were apart, Adam would again feel the hunger-like pangs in his side.

Long after Yahu had finished making everything, Yahu would still occasionally come for an afternoon visit or an evening meal with the two humans. There was always time for play, and their games of hide-and-seek and chase were twice as much fun with

the three of them playing together. Sometimes the man would win, and sometimes the woman would win. But the best thing was that no one ever had to be afraid again.

And when the cold purple darkness would come and Yahu would leave as always, the two people Yahu made would hold each other close for warmth and comfort. It was not a time for questions or fear, for the human that Yahu had divided had become complete and whole again. And except for the snake which no one could find, all of Yahu's creatures lived happily together.

And whenever Yahu would leave the creatures, Yahu would begin counting again. "Now what was that last stopping-off place? Oh yes, two million, six hundred thousand and eighty-five; two million, six hundred thousand and eighty-six; two million, six hundred thousand and eighty-seven; two million, six hundred thousand and eighty-eight. . .

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"One day, I just know someone will be glad I'm doing all this work," Yahu said with a wink.

It was a tricky way to start a world.

The End