

PART XI

In the Beginning

Introduction

The Hebrew Bible is a collection of narrative traditions, legal materials, historical chronicles, and a selection of oracles, poetry and songs and their interpretations over time produced and transmitted by priests, scribes, prophets and other community leaders. The common thread underlying the selection of a considerable portion of the material is the hope of the eventual redemption of the people of Israel by the God of Israel.

It is a book written by Israelites, for Israelites, about Israelites. The allegorical story of the pair of humans in Eden is intended to represent the unknown progenitors of Israelites and other Ancient Near Eastern peoples at a time before the call of Abraham, after which point the story narrows its focus to the descendants of Abraham and their interactions with non-Israelites. The accounts in Genesis are therefore geographically, linguistically, and culturally limited in scope.

The intent of this commentary is not to deal exhaustively with all the issues in the early chapters of Genesis but rather to raise just a few important points for consideration.

CHAPTER TWO

Note

Without going into laborious detail, Hebrew words are formed from stem roots with the addition of prefixes and suffixes which determine particular meanings. A single word in Hebrew often represents several words in English.

In the beginning

Creation *ex-nihilo* is a term which refers to God creating everything from nothing. A majority of Jews, Christians and Muslims now believe in this concept although it has been the subject of classic disputes among theologians and philosophers from all religious traditions since the earliest of times, disputes which continue to this day.

Creation *ex-nihilo* is one of the foundational assumptions of Christian theology. It is based on the opening verses of the Bible which are usually translated into English as a sequence of independent statements:

1. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.
2. And the earth was formless and void and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God was hovering over the face of the water.
3. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

It is not generally recognised that this understanding of Genesis 1:1-3 has been challenged on a linguistic and exegetical basis since at least mediaeval times by great Jewish scholars and sages such as Rashi and Ibn Ezra, and by later scholars who adopted their views. According to these critics, the three verses are not a sequence of independent statements but depend absolutely on the correct understanding of the very first Hebrew word (*bereshith*) which then governs the meaning of the verses that follow.

Rashi

Because Rashi's reputation is unassailable, and because so much depends upon a correct understanding of this word, we will focus on his view.

Rashi's rendering of Genesis 1:1-3 is as follows:

1. In the beginning *of* (*bereshith*) God's creation (*bara*) of the heavens and the earth.

2. Now the earth was astonishingly empty, and darkness was on the face of the deep, and the spirit of God was hovering over the face of the water.
3. And God said, “Let there be light”, and there was light.

The Hebrew word *bereshith* (בְּרֵשִׁית) is formed from the root noun *reshith* meaning “beginning”. Prefixed to this root is an inseparable prepositional form indicating “in the”. The form of the noun *reshith* is in the “construct” state meaning that it is dependent on the word *bara* (בָּרָא) which follows it and indicates possession, hence “In the beginning *of*...”

Rashi also pointed out that there are five occurrences of the word *bereshith* in the Bible: one in Genesis and four in the Book of Jeremiah. In every case, except for perhaps the most important one in Genesis, the word has been rendered into English as “in the beginning of” e.g:

The word of the LORD that came to Jeremiah the prophet against Elam in the beginning of (*bereshith*) the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah, saying...(Jeremiah 49:34 KJV).

According to Rashi, Verse 1 is a temporal clause stating when the action takes place, Verse 2 is a circumstantial clause describing the conditions in which the action takes place, and Verse 3 is the main clause stating what the action is: “Let there be light...”

There is a modern English version of the Hebrew Bible that reflects the general views of critics such as Rashi so let’s take a look at the primary translation of Genesis 1:1-3 according to this version:

When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.¹

If the above translations of Genesis 1:1-3 are correct, and one were to take a purely naturalistic approach to the story, then one could assume that the only difference between the Creation story and the view of modern science is one of agency. Modern science would claim that natural processes can explain the development of life on earth from primordial waters whereas the authors of Genesis would claim that the initiation of such development can only be explained by divine creative activity.

However, such a naturalistic approach does little justice to an account which is multi-levelled and rich in meaning. We will explore a different approach in a future Chapter.

¹ *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society. 1985

Reflections

Further indications that Genesis is not describing Creation *ex-nihilo* are the several Biblical references to the “divine council” created previously. This council, consisting of God and the ministering messengers and servants, is called to witness God’s creative activity in Genesis. For references to this divine council see Job 1:6-12, 15:8, 38:4-7; Isaiah 6:1-8; Jeremiah 23:18; and I Kings 22:19-23.

It has been asserted by certain critics that if the account in Genesis does not claim Creation *ex-nihilo*, then it is merely a reflection of ancient pagan and Hellenist cosmologies. For instance, Aristotle’s view of the universe is not something created from nothing (*ex nihilo*) or created anew (*de novo*). The universe—as it is now—was eternally this way. Plato’s view is similar to Aristotle in that uncreated matter always existed but, unlike Aristotle, God fashioned that matter from its chaotic state into refined substances and forms. Although the rendering of Genesis 1:1-3 according to the critics noted above appears to support these views, essentially that God imposed order upon eternal uncreated matter, the similarity is only superficial because the authors of Genesis would assert that since only God is eternal and uncreated, all matter in the universe must have been created *ex-nihilo* in the actual “beginning”.

In their book *The Atheist Crusade: A Jewish rebuttal to Richard Dawkins’ The God Delusion*, Sara Yoheved Rigler with Rabbi Moshe Zeldman wrote:

The problem of “First Cause” is the knock-out argument against which Dawkins has no defense. Even if Dawkins, the evolutionary biologist, could prove that human beings evolved out of some primordial soup, evolution still begs the bigger questions: Where did the elements of the primordial soup come from? What caused the first particles to come into being? What caused the Big Bang? How can you believe in a beginning without also believing in a beginner?

Rigler and Zeldman also point out that:

Einstein understood that the beginning of the universe implies a transcendent force that brought it into being. That’s why for so long he clung to his belief in a static universe (one that had always existed, and therefore had no beginning) and resisted the mounting evidence for an expanding universe... Faced with evidence of an expanding universe discovered by astronomer Vesto Slipher and deduced by mathematicians Willem de Sitter and Alexander Friedman, Einstein refused to accept the inevitable conclusion. “I have not yet fallen into the hands of the priests,” was Einstein’s famous response to the possibility of

an expanding universe. Clearly he understood that an expanding universe must have a non-physical First Cause.²

A Rabbinical View

There are authentic, respected voices in the Jewish community that take a literalist position with regard to these issues; at the same time, Judaism has a history of diverse approaches to the understanding of the biblical account of creation. As Rabbi Joseph Hertz wrote, “While the fact of creation has to this day remained the first of the articles of the Jewish creed, there is no uniform and binding belief as to the manner of creation, i.e. as to the process whereby the universe came into existence. The manner of the Divine creative activity is presented in varying forms and under differing metaphors by Prophet, Psalmist and Sage; by the Rabbis in Talmudic times, as well as by our medieval Jewish thinkers.” Some refer to the Midrash (Koheleth Rabbah 3:13) which speaks of God “developing and destroying many worlds” before our current epoch. Others explain that the word “yom” in Biblical Hebrew, usually translated as “day,” can also refer to an undefined period of time, as in Isaiah 11:10-11. Maimonides stated that “what the Torah writes about the Account of Creation is not all to be taken literally, as believed by the masses” (Guide to the Perplexed II:29), and recent Rabbinic leaders who have discussed the topic of creation, such as Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, saw no difficulty in explaining Genesis as a theological text rather than a scientific account.³

2 Sara Yoheved Rigler with Rabbi Moshe Zeldman. *The Atheist Crusade: A Jewish rebuttal to Richard Dawkins' The God Delusion*. Accessed 4 September 2017
<http://www.aish.com/sp/ph/The-Atheist-Crusade.html>

3 Rabbinical Council of America. *Creation, Evolution, and Intelligent Design*, accessed 1 September 2017
<http://www.rabbis.org/news/article.cfm?id=100635>

Anti-Myth in Genesis

Although the creation account in Genesis 1 is often described as a “myth”, it is in reality an heroic attempt by ancient authors to de-mythologise the creation epics of other peoples. With the very first words, the authors of Genesis signal an intention to mount an anti-mythological refutation of those other ancient Near-Eastern cosmogonies by demonstrating the difference between the God of the Israelites and the gods of other peoples.

Most Ancient Near-Eastern creation accounts are theogonies, that is, they are accounts of the origin and genealogy of the gods. These gods produce their offspring, mainly through sexual acts, and engage in cosmic battles for supremacy. The Egyptian god *Ptah*, for example, masturbates and from his seed creates his divine family and the world.

Even though the Bible’s view of the Israelite God is often criticised for being too “anthropomorphic”, the reality is that the creation account in Genesis is notable for the absence of such crude anthropomorphisms. The Israelite God just *is*. He alone is sovereign. There is no trace of emanation or pantheism. No beginning, no end, no origins, no parents, no wife, no consort. By divine *fiat*, by his magisterial Word, the waters of chaos and darkness are defeated and the structured world we inhabit comes into existence.

In other creation epics, the visible heavens,⁴ the “sky”, not only *were* the gods but all the gods were contained *within them*. Contrast this view with that put forward in Genesis where the Israelite God is pictured as outside and in control of the visible heavens as is a potter his clay.

The story in Genesis was designed to confront the nature deities, the nature religions and the fertility myths of the Canaanites and the Babylonians. Genesis postulates that the Israelite God is not a nature deity but a God who intervenes in human history.

The Israelite God did not create humans to be lackeys and to perform menial tasks for the gods, as did the gods in the Babylonian epic *Enuma Elish*. Rather than humans being just an afterthought of the gods, as in other creation epics, they were created to reflect God’s own image, the *imago dei*, and were expected to reflect God’s righteous behaviour, thereby demonstrating God’s presence in the world.

4 The fifth word of verse 1 is שָׁמַיִם (*shamayim*) which means the “visible heaven” or “sky.”

Genesis ridicules the perceived powers of the Sun, the Moon and other heavenly bodies to control human existence. These bodies, the “greater” and “lesser” lights and the stars, are relegated to the simple functionary roles of giving light on the earth, enabling humans to tell time, to order crop planting, to navigate, and so on. Humans cannot guarantee the return of the seasons by sacrificing to the “gods”. Neither can sacrifice guarantee reproduction of plants and animals because every living thing reproduces “after its kind”.

Genesis posits that the Israelite God has so arranged nature that nature takes care of itself. This view of nature may seem a given to the modern mind but, for its time, it is a model of sophisticated and enlightened thinking.

Note

Although pagan concepts and practices lingered on in certain sectors of the population, they were explicitly condemned by the prophets and historians of Israel throughout all generations.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Days

Despite its manifest absurdity, and despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, many continue to insist on six literal twenty-four hour Creation days, no doubt for fear that to pull on just one thread may result in a wholesale unravelling of cherished beliefs.

The Hebrew word *yom* (day), as in English, is used both for a literal twenty-four-hour day and also for an indefinite period of time, such as in the expression “for the day of the Lord is at hand” (Joel 1:15) or the “Day of the Dinosaur”. Because Genesis was compiled after the Exodus event, the authors chose to frame the story within six figurative days of Creation followed by a seventh figurative day of rest as a means of reinforcing the commandment of God given at Sinai:

For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day shall be your holy day, a day of sabbath rest to the LORD...(Exodus 35:2 NIV).

The Bible is replete with patterns and groups of seven. The words for “sabbath” and “seven” are derived from the same Hebrew root. In the world of the Genesis authors, seven was the perfect number, and seven days the perfect length of a process:

Akkadian and Ugaritic literature...prove that a series of seven consecutive days was considered a perfect period in which to develop an important work, the action lasting six days and reaching its conclusion and outcome on the seventh day.⁵

The six periods of Creation given the term “day” (*yom*) can only be figurative because the same term (*yom*) is also used for the seventh-day period during which God rests from his creative labours (see Genesis 2:4). The elements of the day, the “evening” and “morning” periods into which the day is divided, must also be figurative for they are features of the three days before the creation of the lights in the firmament which were to divide day from night. Most important of all, however, is Jesus’ understanding of the creation days, “...My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working” (John 5:17).

For Jesus, the six days of Creation are not yet finished. God has not yet entered into the Sabbath rest.

⁵ Cassuto, U. *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*. The Hebrew University: Jerusalem, 1961, p. 13.

The Trees

As stated in Part X: *Aftermath*, the Bible speaks of no other existence for mankind but the one we have always shared together—this Earth. When it does speak of “Heaven” as a destination for man it always implies life in an ideal earthly Kingdom, envisioned as a re-establishment of the Garden of Eden from which we were expelled. To complete the cycle of life on Earth, we must symbolically return to Eden and to our previous state of being ruled by God and not by man.

Of Life

Consider the description of the symbolic Garden in the Hebrew Scriptures:

And the LORD God planted a garden (Hebrew: *gan*) eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden (Hebrew: *gan*), and the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:8-9 KJV).

Also consider that the expulsion from the Garden was to deny human access to the “tree of life”:

And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden (*gan*) of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life. (Genesis 3:22-24 KJV).

Now consider the New Testament promise about the “tree of life”:

...To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise (*paradeisos*) of God (Revelation 2:7 NIV).

The Greek Septuagint translation of Genesis 2:8-9 substitutes the equivalent Greek word *paradeisos* for the Hebrew *gan* (garden) of Eden. The author of the Greek text of Revelation 2:7 similarly substitutes the equivalent Greek word *paradeisos* for the Hebrew *gan*.

Given that the author of Revelation locates the “tree of life” within the *paradeisos*, and given that *paradeisos* is synonymous with *gan*, it is clear that the author of Revelation is envisioning humanity’s symbolic return to the Garden of Eden. “Heaven” for humans is, therefore, the right to eat from the “tree of life” in the new Garden of Eden, an earthly Kingdom that will pattern God’s own kingship of the Heavens.

Of Wisdom

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (Genesis 2:16-17 KJV).

The attributes of the “tree of knowledge of good and evil” come from the mouth of the serpent:

But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired **to make one wise**, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths (Genesis 3:4-7 ESV).

In both the Hebrew and English languages, to *see* with the eyes also carries the implication of *understanding* with the mind. Thus, for Eve, the prospect of having their eyes opened by eating from the tree was the prospect of gaining “wisdom”. In some Biblical passages, the phrase “knowing good and evil” refers to the wise discernment of mature adults but in others it is an attribute of the wise ruler as, for example, King Solomon who prays for the ability to discern between good and evil:

Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people? (1 Kings 3:9 ESV cf. 2 Samuel 14:17; Hebrews 5:14).

According to the account in Genesis, humans were created to reflect God’s image and to rule the created world as viceroys. By choosing to believe the lies of the serpent and grasp at a wisdom which could not be pre-empted, their eyes were indeed opened. Rather than reflecting the image of God and acquiring the knowledge and discernment of wise rulers, they instead acquired a knowledge of their own guilt at

violating God's command. Their guilt and shame are represented by the nakedness of which they were now aware. They search to cover their guilt and shame before God but can find nothing but leaves. The humans have undergone a transformation—from innocence to guilt, from light to darkness, from blessing to curse, and from life to death. God in his mercy does not exact the full penalty for their disobedience but banishes them clothed in animal skins, clothing greater than leaves but less than the regal robes with which they would have been invested had they not disobeyed.

Note

There could be no better metaphor for cunning lies and slippery deceptions than a fork-tongued snake.

The end of the beginning

As noted in a previous Chapter, if the alternative translation of Genesis 1:1-3 is correct, and if one were to take a purely naturalistic approach to the story, then one could assume that the only difference between the Creation story and the view of modern science is one of agency. Modern science would claim that natural processes can explain the development of life on earth from primordial waters whereas the authors of Genesis would claim that the initiation of such development can only be explained by divine creative activity.

As also noted in a previous Chapter, such a naturalistic approach does not do justice to a story which is multi-levelled and rich in meaning.

As Jon D. Levenson, Albert A. List Professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard Divinity School, observes:

Two and a half millennia of Western theology have made it easy to forget that throughout the ancient Near Eastern world, including Israel, the point of creation is not the production of matter out of nothing, but rather the emergence of a stable community in a benevolent and life-sustaining order. The defeat by YHWH of the forces that have interrupted that order is intrinsically an act of creation.¹

Within the account of God's mastery over the forces of chaos and formless darkness is embedded a more meaningful story about the intention of God to bring "light", to bring wisdom, understanding and order to the chaotic darkness of the human mind.

According to this approach, Adam and Eve are the representative humans who portray their darkness of mind in an allegory using conflicting values: lies as opposed to truth; evil as opposed to good; guilt as opposed to innocence; curse as opposed to blessing; and death as opposed to life. They cannot master their darkness of mind and so fail to reach their *imago dei* potential. It is a message which is deep in consequence, a message quite lost on creationists and evolutionists alike.

Consider the ramifications if the authors of Genesis were not asserting Creation *ex-nihilo* of the material world but making theological statements about the human condition. Not only would those who espouse a fundamentalist, literalist doctrine

¹ Levenson, Jon.D. *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, 1988, p. 12.

of Creation have their positions finally and fully discredited, but also those who use this literalist view as a weapon of ridicule to promote wholesale rejection of the Bible would find themselves disarmed.

Imaging God

According to the account in Genesis, the representative humans are portrayed as knowing what God's boundaries are, as knowing the consequences of stepping outside those boundaries, yet deliberately choosing to do so anyway. When they disobey, they destroy their relationship with God and with the world in which they live. Through their premature aspiration to gain wisdom and be like God (Genesis 3:5), they have instead brought disorder, disharmony, and death into the world.

Were it not for the doctrines of mainstream Christianity, it would have been recognised centuries ago that the entire biblical narrative is a cohesive and themed account of the progressive growth in wisdom and understanding of Adam and Eve's descendants and that their original potential to reflect the image of God only came to fruition in Jesus of Nazareth, a man who transformed their guilt into innocence, their darkness into light, their curse into blessing, and their death into life, becoming the fullness of the *imago dei*.

The "Jesus Christ" of Christian theology renders this biblical narrative meaningless.

The Persistence of Evil

I am indebted to Jon Levenson's work, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish drama of Divine Omnipotence*, for some of the following observations.

The Creation account does not speak of the annihilation of malign forces, only of their being neutralised by containment. Levenson notes under the heading *The Vitality of Evil and the Fragility of Creation*:

Creation itself offers no ground for the optimistic belief that the malign powers will not deprive the human community of its friendly and supportive environment. In the story of Noah, the ground of security is not creation, which is undone in those days, but God's mysterious oath not to destroy his world. Only that oath, only that universal covenant sworn to Noah, and nothing more, keeps human life safe from total annihilation.²

A dialectic between God's absolute sovereignty and the lived reality of evil unchecked underscores passages in Psalm 74 and Isaiah 51 and 54 where we find their authors urging God to once more act like the hero of old and reassert his mastery over the

² Levenson, pp 48-49.

world. For example, Isaiah 51:9-11 calls upon the “arm of the Lord” to “awaken as in the days of old”. However, throughout the Hebrew Bible, the conviction that God will finally and completely triumph over malevolent forces is unquestioned and inevitable. As Levinson observes:

...Leviathan, Amalek, Gog, and the like are symbols from different traditional complexes for the same theological concept: the ancient and enduring opposition to the full realisation of God’s mastery, the opposition destined to be eliminated at the turn of the aeon.³ (The “Age to Come”).

We see this conviction carried through into the New Testament, especially in the Book of Revelation with its radical vision of a “new heaven and a new earth” in which the “sea is no more”. The “sea” of course represents the waters of chaos and darkness originally mastered at Creation.

The view to which I ascribe is that God, in a sense, released his containment of the forces of evil after Eden and will allow them to persist until the recreation of humanity and the return to a symbolic Eden in the “Age to Come”. This theme of humanity reborn, a new creation in which their better impulses will no longer be undermined by their evil ones is pervasive in the New Testament whose authors drew on passages such as the following from the Book of Ezekiel:

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws” (Ezekiel 36:26-27 NIV).

Notes

See Part VIII: *Sin and Salvation* for a commentary on the teaching of Original Sin.

For an extensive commentary on the use of plural pronouns in Genesis 1:26, 3:22, 11:7, and Isaiah 6:8, see also Part VI.3: *Trinity on Trial-Proof Texts*.

³ Levenson, p 38..