

The Book of Genesis is a book of beginnings. It does not appear to tell of human growth and development in a way palatable to moderns, schooled in the principles of evolution. Indeed, Genesis—as well as succeeding books—freely mixes devolution (descent from primal eminence) with evolution (ascent from a lower to a higher stage). Religion and moral insight are not generally presented in the Bible as a process of slow and painful moral growth; quite the contrary, religious genius appears

repeatedly without traceable antecedents, as, for instance, in the case of Abraham. This, however, should not cause us to dismiss such stories as “improbable,” for moral history is not like physical history. Mutations in the realm of the spiritual seem to have occurred frequently in human experience, and the biblical record should be read in part as the record of such mutations. The very creation of the people of Israel, to which the Torah is devoted, breaks the rules of mechanical evolution.

Prologue: Creation

Chapter 1 and the first three verses of ch. 2 serve as the poetic prologue, setting the stage for the universal drama that is about to commence. Once the scene is set, once order has been brought out of chaos, once heaven and earth, plants and animals have been created, the epic story of humankind can begin.

The prologue is cast in the form of a prose poem. It is written in terse, controlled phrases with rhythmic repetitions, the slow ascent of

the cosmic drama culminating in the creation of humankind and the serene postscript describing the sanctification of the seventh day. In sparse, austere language, it speaks of God, the world, and humans in relationship to each other and reveals the basic and unalterable dependence of the world on the presence of God. The prologue tells, with the assurance of faith, of life’s foundations, and it is in the light of this faith that it must be read and understood.*

The Lines of Heaven, Earth, and Primeval Humankind

Chapter 2, verse 4, begins the tale of “earth and heaven” and particularly the epic of humankind. This part of the book continues to near the end of the next sidrah.

LIVING IN EDEN (2:4-24)

Language and tone now change markedly: spare rhythms marked ch. 1; a familiar, personal, and frankly human manner when speak-

ing of God marks what follows, and the divine cognomen is expanded to “God Eternal.” The order of creation is changed, too: in ch. 1 the animals preceded humankind, in ch. 2 the order is reversed; in ch. 1 humankind began with male and female, in ch. 2 with male only. Where before humans appeared in generic

* On creation in the light of science, see p. 6.

form, they now become concretely human: they speak and feel.

(Because of these differences the two creation stories have been seen as stemming from two different traditions. The former is assigned to a source known as "P," the latter to one called "J," though this division is disputed by some scholars.)

In the text as we now have it, ch. 1 may be seen as the *ideal* and ch. 2 as the *actual* state of creation. Thus, the derivative origin of woman in ch. 2 reflected her prevailing social condition, while ideally (as told in ch. 1) men and women were created together and equal.

EXPULSION FROM EDEN (2:25-3:24)

The first two chapters of Genesis spoke of the origins of the world in its original condition. Now, the focus turns to growth, to humankind's actual condition, and to the general challenge of being human.

Here, once again, the underlying Near Eastern traditions that helped to shape the Eden story have been radically recast to express an explicit view of God and humankind: the transcendent Creator of all has formed us that we might freely do God's will. In the Babylonian epic of *Gilgamesh*, the hero loses his immortality not only through weakness but also through accident, for the serpent steals the life-giving plant. In another Near Eastern tradition, the tale of *Adapa*, immortality is lost by deliberate misrepresentation. In the Bible, the loss of Eden is ultimately traceable to human volition and action. If we fail to live up to our potential, it is our own and no one else's doing.

CAIN AND ABEL (4:1-26)

Adam and Eve's eviction from Eden and their consequent mortality imply a sharing of important powers by God with humans. Both the creation and termination of life now rest with them—the former with the help of the Eternal (Gen. 4:1), the latter in defiance of God (the killing of Abel). In the story of Cain and Abel, the human relationship to God is explored in a social setting. It is in this context that choices between good and evil will henceforth have to be made. And it is in this context that the interplay between human and divine responsibility must be viewed.

The story of the brothers also introduces a secondary theme that will recur often in the Bible: the struggle between siblings. Time after time our sympathy will be directed toward the younger one. Now, even as Abel dies, a still younger sibling, Seth, provides the link with the future.

PRIMEVAL HUMANKIND (5:1-6:8)

In this section the Bible presents the second of its genealogical lines. The first was that of heaven and earth (Gen. 2:4), the second is the line of human progeny. The careful listing of names (which occurs twice) and the detailed accounts of legendary long lives find their parallels in other ancient Near Eastern traditions. These annotated genealogies bridge the gap between Adam and Noah, show the rise of civilization, and try to explain the present-day limitations of human life expectancy.

1:1] When God was about to create heaven and earth, 2] the earth was a chaos, unformed, and on the chaotic waters' face there was darkness. Then God's spirit glided over the face of the waters, 3] and God said, "Let there be light!"—and there was light. 4] And when God saw how good the light was, God divided the light from the darkness; 5] God then called the light Day, and called the darkness Night, and there was evening and there was morning, [the] first day.

6] God then said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it divide water from water!" 7] So God made the expanse, separating the waters beneath the expanse from the waters above the expanse—and so it was. 8] God then called the expanse Sky, and there was evening and there was morning, a second day.

9] God then said, "Let the waters beneath the sky be collected in one place, so that the dry ground may be seen!"—and so it was. 10] And God called the dry ground Earth, and called the collected waters Seas. And when God saw how good it was, 11] God said, "Let the earth grow vegetation, seed-bearing plants, fruit trees on the earth that bear fruit, each true to its type, with its seed in it!"—and so it was. 12] The earth brought forth vegetation, seed-bearing plants, each true to its type, and trees bearing fruit, each true to its type, with its seed in it.

א בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם
וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ: 2 וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תוֹהוּ וָבִהוּ
וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת
עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם: 3 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אוֹר
וַיְהִי-אוֹר: 4 וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאֹר כִּי-
טוֹב וַיְבָדֵל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ:
5 וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאוֹר יוֹם וְאֶת-הַחֹשֶׁךְ
לַיְלָה וַיְהִי-עֶרֶב וַיְהִי-בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד: 6
וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי רָקִיעַ בְּתוֹךְ הַמַּיִם
וַיְהִי מִבְדִּיל בֵּין מַיִם לְמַיִם: 7 וַיַּעַשׂ
אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הַרְקִיעַ וַיְבָדֵל בֵּין הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר
מִתַּחַת לַרָקִיעַ וּבֵין הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מֵעַל
לַרָקִיעַ וַיְהִי-כֵן: 8 וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לַרָקִיעַ
שָׁמַיִם וַיְהִי-עֶרֶב וַיְהִי-בֹקֶר יוֹם שֵׁנִי: 9
וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יִקּוּוּ הַמַּיִם מִתַּחַת
הַשָּׁמַיִם אֶל-מְקוֹם אֶחָד וְתִרְאֶה הַיַּבְשָׁה
וַיְהִי-כֵן: 10 וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָרֶץ
וְאֶת-הַיָּם וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הַיָּם
כִּי-טוֹב: 11 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים תִּשְׂא הָאָרֶץ
דָּשָׁא עֵשֶׂב מְזִרְעַ עֵץ פְּרִי עֵשֶׂה פְּרִי
לְמִינֹו אֲשֶׁר זֶרְעוֹ וְזֶרְעוֹ עַל-הָאָרֶץ וַיְהִי-כֵן:
12 וַתִּצֵּא הָאָרֶץ דָּשָׁא עֵשֶׂב מְזִרְעַ זֶרַע
לְמִינֹהוּ וְעֵץ פְּרִי עֵשֶׂה פְּרִי אֲשֶׁר זֶרְעוֹ

1:1] CREATION (See Essays, pp. 34–36; Gleanings, pp. 43–45)

1–2] *When God was about to create.* בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים (*b'reishit bara elohim*); other translations render this: "In the beginning God created." Our translation follows Rashi, who said that the first word would have been written בְּרֵאשִׁיטָה (*ba-rishonah*, at first) if its primary purpose had been to teach the *order* in which creation took place. Later scholars used the translation "In the beginning" as proof that God created out of nothing (Latin: *ex nihilo*), but it is not likely that the biblical author was concerned with the question of matter's origin [1]. On creation in the light of science, see p. 6.

2] *Chaotic waters' face.* The translation leans on the assonance of תוהו (*tohu*, chaos), and תְהוֹם (*t'hom*). Others render תְהוֹם as "deep." Here, as in other ancient traditions, water is given priority of existence.

God's spirit. In the sense of power. רוּחַ (*ruach*) can also mean wind [2], which would provide a parallel to Babylonian texts [3].

3] *God said.* As though addressing the universe. Note the rhythm of God's actions: speaking, seeing, separating, calling.

6] *Expanse.* רָקִיעַ (*raki'a*), a firm plane, hammered out. According to ancient belief, it held the stars and provided the boundary beyond which the Deity dwelled.