

# Introduction to Genesis Chapter 1:1-2:3

## In the beginning of everything

**[NS]** The story of Creation, or cosmology, that opens the Book of Genesis differs from all other such accounts that were current among the peoples of the ancient world. Its lack of interest in the realm of heaven and its economy of words in depicting primeval chaos are highly uncharacteristic of this genre of literature. The descriptions in Genesis deal solely with what lies beneath the celestial realm, and still the narration is marked by compactness, solemnity, and dignity.

There is abundant evidence that other cosmologies once existed in Israel. Scattered allusions to be found in the prophetic, poetic, and wisdom literature of the Bible testify to a popular belief that prior to the onset of the creative process the powers of watery chaos had to be subdued by God. These mythical beings are variously designated Yam (Sea), Nahar (River), Leviathan (Coiled One), Rahab (Arrogant One), and Tannin (Dragon). There is no consensus in these fragments regarding the ultimate fate of these creatures. One version has them utterly destroyed by God; in another, the chaotic forces, personalized as monsters, are put under restraint by His power.

These myths about a cosmic battle at the beginning of time appear in the Bible in fragmentary form, and the several allusions have to be pieced together to produce some kind of coherent unity. Still, the fact that these myths appear in literary compositions in ancient Israel indicates clearly that they had achieved wide currency over a long period of time. They have survived in the Bible solely as obscure, picturesque metaphors and exclusively in the language of poetry. *Never are these creatures accorded divine attributes, nor is there anywhere a suggestion that their struggle against God could in any way have posed a challenge to His sovereign rule.*

This is of particular significance in light of the fact that one of the inherent characteristics of all other ancient Near Eastern cosmologies is the internecine strife of the gods. Polytheistic accounts of creation always begin with the predominance of the divinized powers of nature and then describe in detail a titanic struggle between the opposing forces. They inevitably regard the achievement of world order as the outgrowth of an overwhelming exhibition of power on the part of one god who then manages to impose his will upon all other gods.

The early Israelite creation myths, with all their color and drama, must have been particularly attractive to the masses. But none became the regnant version. It was the austere account set forth in the first chapter of Genesis that won unrivaled authority. At first it could only have been the intellectual elite in ancient Israel, most likely the priestly and scholarly circles, who could have been capable of realizing and appreciating the compact forms of symbolization found in Genesis. It is they who would have cherished and nurtured this version until its symbols finally exerted a decisive impact upon the religious consciousness of the entire people of Israel.

The mystery of divine creativity is, of course, ultimately unknowable. The Genesis narrative does not seek to make intelligible what is beyond human ken. To draw upon human language to explain that which is outside any model of human experience is inevitably to confront the inescapable limitations of any attempt to give verbal expression to this subject.

For this reason alone, the narrative in its external form must reflect the time and place of its composition. Thus it directs us to take account of the characteristic modes of literary expression current in ancient Israel. It forces us to realize that a literalistic approach to the text must inevitably confuse idiom with idea, symbol with reality. The result would be to obscure the enduring meaning of that text.

The biblical Creation narrative is a document of faith. It is a quest for meaning and a statement of a religious position. It enunciates the fundamental postulates of the religion of Israel, the central ideas and concepts that animate the whole of biblical literature. Its quintessential teaching is that the universe is wholly the purposeful product of divine intelligence, that is, of the one self-sufficient, self-existing God, who is a transcendent Being outside of nature and who is sovereign over space and time.

This credo finds reiterated expression in the narrative in a number of ways, the first of which is the literary framework. The opening and closing lines epitomize the central idea: "God created." Then there is the literary structure, which presents the creative process with bilateral symmetry. The systematic progression from chaos to cosmos unfolds in an orderly and harmonious manner through a series of six successive and equal units of time. The series is divided into two parallel groups, each of which comprises four creative acts performed in three days. The third day in each group is distinguished by two productions. In each group the movement is from heaven to terrestrial water to dry land. Moreover, the arrangement is such that each creation in the first group furnishes the resource that is to be utilized by the corresponding creature in the second group. The chart below illustrates the schematization.

### THE SIX DAYS OF CREATION

<b>Group I , The Resource</b>		<b>Group II, The Utilizer</b>	
Day	Creative Act	Day	Creative Act
1	Light	4	The luminaries
2	Sky, leaving terrestrial waters	5	Fish and fowl
3	Dry land	6	Land creatures
	Vegetation, (Lowest form of organic life)		Humankind, (Highest form of organic life)

The principle of order, deliberation, and direction is further inculcated by means of the progression from inorganic matter to the lowest forms of organic life to four categories of living creatures: fish and fowl, reptiles, the higher animals, and finally humankind. In addition, the entire narrative adheres to a uniform literary pattern. Each of the literary units begins with a declaration formula, "God said," followed by a command, a statement recording its fulfillment, a notice of divine approbation, and a closing formula, "There was evening and there was morning," with the accompanying numbered day.

Finally, the Narrator employs the device of number symbolism, the heptad, to emphasize the basic idea of design, completion, and perfection. The opening proclamation contains seven words; the description of primal chaos is set forth in twice seven words; the narrative's seven literary units feature seven times the formula for the effectuation of the divine will and the statement of divine approval; and the six days of creation culminate in the climactic seventh.

This seven-day typology is widely attested in the ancient world. As early as the twenty-second century B.C.E., King Gudea of Lagash, in southern Mesopotamia, dedicated a temple with a seven-day feast. The literatures of Mesopotamia and Ugarit are replete with examples of seven-day units of time. Most common is a state of affairs that lasts for six days with a climactic change taking place on the seventh. While the Creation narrative conforms to this literary convention, it is unique in that a different action occurs each day, with no activity at all on the seventh.

**[REF]** The first portion of the Torah has a double role: it conveys its own story, and it sets the context of the entire Torah. The Torah's stories have been observed to be rich in background, as opposed to, for example, the epic poems of Homer. In Homer, each episode is self-contained: all the information that a reader needs is provided then and there, and all action is in the foreground.

That is fine, but it is not the way of the Torah. To read the Torah at any level beyond "Sunday school," one must have a sense of the whole when one reads the parts. To comprehend what happens in the exodus and in the revelation at Sinai, you have to know what has happened in Genesis 1. Like some films that begin with a sweeping shot that then narrows, so the first chapter of Genesis moves gradually from a picture of the skies and the earth down to the first man and woman. The story's focus will continue to narrow: from the universe to the earth to humankind to specific lands and peoples to a single family. (It will expand back out to nations in Exodus.) But the wider concern with skies and the entire earth that is established here in the first portion will remain.

When the story narrows to a singular divine relationship with Abraham, it will still be with the ultimate aim that this will be "a blessing to all the families of the earth." Every biblical scene will be laden—artistically, theologically, psychologically, spiritually—with all that has come before. So when we read later of a man and his son going up a mountain to perform a fearful sacrifice, that moment in the history of a family is set in a cosmic context of the creation of the universe and the nature of the relationship between the creator and humankind. You can read the account of the binding of Isaac without being aware of the account of the creation or the account of the covenant between God and Abraham, but you lose something. The something that you lose—depth—is one of the essential qualities of the Torah.

The first portion initiates the historical flow of the Torah (and of the entire Tanach). It establishes that this is to be a related, linear sequence of events through generations. That may seem so natural to us now that we find this point obvious and banal. But the texts of the Torah are the first texts on earth known to do this. The ancient world did not write history prior to these accounts. The Torah's accounts are the first human attempts to recount history. Whether one believes all or part or none of its history to be true is a separate matter. The literary point is that this had the effect of producing a text that was rich in background: every event carries the weight of everything that comes before it. And the historical point is that this was a new way to conceive of time and human destiny.

There is also a theological point: this was a new way to conceive of a God. The pagan deities were known through their functions in nature: The sun god, Shamash, was the sun. If one wanted to know essence of Shamash, the thing to do was to contemplate the sun. If you wanted know the essence of the grain deity Dagon, you contemplated wheat.

But the God of the Torah was different, creating all of nature and therefore not knowable or identifiable through any one element of nature. One could learn no more about this God by contemplating the sea than by contemplating grain, sky, or anything else. The essence of this God remains hidden. One knows God by the divine acts in history. One never finds out what God is, but rather what God does—and what God says. This conception, which informs all of biblical narrative, did not necessarily have to be developed at the very beginning of the story, but it was. Parashat B'reshit establishes this by beginning with accounts of creation and by then flowing through the first 10 generations of humankind. (Those "begat" lists are more important than people generally think.)

The Torah's theology is thus inseparable from its history and from its literary qualities. Ultimately, there is no such thing as "The Bible as Literature" or "The Bible as History" or "The Bible as . . . anything." There is: the Bible.

**[WGP]** Beginning with the first sentence of Genesis, the existence of God is taken for granted. To the ancients, God was Parent, Friend, Sovereign, rather than an abstract force, principle, or process. Individuality was the highest expression of creation, and thus God the Creator could be spoken of only in such terms. It would not have occurred to the ancients to speak of God in any way other than the way one speaks of humans (who were created in the divine image), and it was therefore most natural to think of God as speaking, seeing, regretting, and occasionally as walking or descending. The divinity and majesty of the Deity were thereby not diminished. For instance, the expression “God said to Abraham” was the natural and even best method of recording a vital experience. As the Rabbis taught: “The Torah speaks in the language of [ordinary] people.” Only much later did these human ascriptions of God (called anthropomorphisms) begin to create the kind of serious problems that are being experienced by the modern Bible reader.

However one interprets the nature of God—as person or as process, as individual reality or generalized principle—there are three basic ideas that the contemporary reader can share with biblical perceptions and that are implicit in Genesis:

- That God, as Creative Force, provides all creation with purpose and that therefore to understand God means to understand one’s own potential;
- That God, as Lawgiver, validates the principles of justice and righteousness that must govern human affairs;
- That God, as Redeemer, guarantees the ultimate goals of existence and enables us to find meaning in our life.

Added to these is a pervasive theme that above all has made the Bible, the Tanach, from Genesis through Chronicles, a Jewish book—that through Abraham and Sarah and their descendants the realization of God’s plan for humanity will be hastened and, in fact, be made possible altogether.

The Rabbis said that God, the Master Architect, had a master plan of creation: The Torah, which provided that God’s world would exist for all purposes bound up with the creation of humanity. Humanity is placed on the stage of creation after all else has been formed and is represented as the crown of God’s labors. In anticipation, the text shifts into a slower gear; the words “God said” are not, as previously, directly followed by a creative act but by a further resolve, almost contemplative in nature: “Let us make human beings.”

The creature called human [*adam* means human, not the gender-specific “man”] is formed in God’s likeness. These words reflect the Torah’s abiding wonder over our special stature in Creation, over our unique intellectual capacity, which bears the imprint of the Creator. This likeness also describes our moral potential. Our nature is radically different from God’s, but we are capable of approaching God’s actions: divine love, divine mercy, divine justice. We become truly human as we attempt to do godly deeds. “As God is merciful,” said the Rabbis, “so shall you be merciful; as God is just, so shall you be just.”

Our likeness to the Divine has a third and most important meaning: It stresses the essential holiness and, by implication, the dignity of all humanity, without any distinctions. “Above all demarcations of races and nations, castes and classes, oppressors and servants, givers and recipients, above all delineations even of gifts and talents stands one certainty: the human being,” says Leo Baeck. “Whoever bears this image is created and called to be a revelation of human dignity.”

Six times the text says that God found the Creation “good”; after humankind was created it was found “very good.” Being is better than nothingness, order superior to chaos, and human existence—with all its difficulties—a blessing. But Creation is never called perfect; it will, in fact, be our task to assist the Creator in perfecting Creation, to become the Eternal’s co-worker.

# Genesis Chapter 1:1-2:3—Translations and Commentary

1. In the beginning of God's creating the heavens and the earth [In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth—OJPS]

2. the earth was *tohu* and *vohu* [unformed and void—OJPS; wild and waste—EF; welter and waste—RA; shapeless and formless—REF], and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

**[NS] 1. When God began to create** We have here a momentous assertion about the nature of God: that He is wholly outside of time, just as He is outside of space, both of which He proceeds to create. In other words, for the first time in the religious history of the Near East, God is conceived as being entirely free of temporal and spatial dimensions.

**God** The term for God used here and throughout Chapter 1 is '*elohim*'. This is not a personal name but the general Hebrew word for deity. It can even refer to pagan gods. The preference for the use of '*elohim*' in this chapter, rather than the sacred divine name YHWH, connotes universalism and abstraction, and thus is most appropriate for the transcendent God of Creation.

**create** The Hebrew stem *b-r-'* is used in the Bible exclusively of divine creativity. It signifies that the product is absolutely novel and unexampled, depends solely on God for its coming into existence, and is beyond the human capacity to reproduce.

**heaven and earth** The definite article in the Hebrew specifies the observable universe. The use here of a merism, the combination of opposites, expresses the totality of cosmic phenomena, for which there is no single word in biblical Hebrew. The subsequent usage of each term separately refers to the sky and the dry land in the more restricted and concrete sense.

**[REF] 1:1. In the beginning of God's creating the skies and the earth.** The translation of the Torah's first phrase is a classic problem. Even at the risk of a slightly awkward English, I have translated it literally, not only to make it reflect the Hebrew, but to show the significant parallel between this opening and the opening of the second picture of creation in Genesis 2:4, thus:

In the beginning of	God's	creating	the skies and the earth
In the day of	YHWH God's	making	earth and skies

The second line is translated slightly differently above because it is not possible to reproduce the doubled divine identification, YHWH God, with a possessive in English. Note that this first, universal conception puts the skies first, while the second, more earthly account starts with earth.

**[REF] 1:2. the earth had been.** Here is a case in which a tiny point of grammar makes a difference for theology. In the Hebrew of this verse, the noun comes before the verb (in the perfect form). This is now known to be the way of conveying the past perfect in Biblical Hebrew. This point of grammar means that this verse does not mean "the earth was shapeless and formless"—referring to the condition of the earth starting the instant after it was created. This verse rather means that "the earth had been shapeless and formless"—that is, it had already existed in this shapeless condition prior to the creation. Creation of matter in the Torah is not out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), as many have claimed. And the Torah is not claiming to be telling events from the beginning of time.

**[RA] 2. welter and waste.** The Hebrew *tohu vavohu* occurs only here and in two later biblical texts that are clearly alluding to this one. The second word of the pair looks like a nonce term coined to rhyme with the first and to reinforce it, an effect I have tried to approximate in English by alliteration. *Tohu* by itself means "emptiness" or "futility," and in some contexts is associated with the trackless vacancy of the desert.

## Guide to the Translators and Commentators used here

**EF:** Everett Fox    **REF:** Richard Elliott Friedman    **RA:** Robert Alter    **NS:** Nahum Sarna    **CS:** Chaim Stern  
**SRH:** Samson Raphael Hirsch    **RASHI:** Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak    **OJPS:** Old Jewish Publication Society version  
**WGP:** W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* <sup>5</sup>    **TWC:** *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*

3. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

4. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.

**[NS] 3. God said** "God said" means "God thought" or "God willed." It signifies that the Creator is wholly independent of His creation. It implies effortlessness and absolute sovereignty over nature.

**Let there be** The directive *y'hi*, found again in verses 6 and 14, is reserved for the creation of celestial phenomena.

**and there was light** God's commanding utterance possesses the inherent power of self-realization and is unchallengeable. The sevenfold repetition of the execution formula, "and there was," emphasizes the distinction between the tension, resistance, and strife that are characteristic of ancient Near Eastern cosmologies and the fullness of divine power that we find here.

**[REF] 3. Let there be light.** God creates light simply by saying the words: "Let there be" (the Hebrew jussive [a word, form, case, or mood expressing command]). Only light is expressly created from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*). All other elements of creation may possibly be formed out of pre-existing matter, that is, from the initially undifferentiated chaos. Thus God later says, "Let there be a space," but the text then adds, "And God made the space." And God says, "Let there be sources of light," but the text adds, "And God made the sources of light." So we cannot understand these things to be formed simply by the words "Let there be." Now we can appreciate the importance of understanding the Torah's first words correctly: The Torah does not claim to report everything that has occurred since the beginning of space and time. It does not say, "In the beginning, God created the skies and the earth." It rather says, "In the beginning of God's creating the skies and the earth, when the earth had been shapeless and formless...." That is, there is pre-existing matter, which is in a state of watery chaos. Subsequent matter—dry land, heavenly bodies, plants, animals—may be formed out of this undifferentiated fluid. In Greece, the first philosopher, Thales, later proposed such a concept, that all things derive from water. Examples from other cultures could be cited as well. There appears to be an essential human feeling that everything derives originally from water, which is hardly surprising given that we—and all life on this planet—did in fact proceed from water.

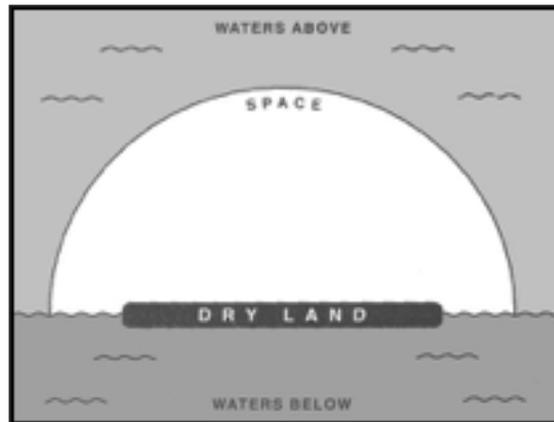
**[NS] 4. God saw** Not visual examination but perception. The formula of divine approbation, "God saw that [it] was good," affirms the consummate perfection of God's creation, an idea that has important consequences for the religion of Israel. Reality is imbued with God's goodness. The pagan notion of inherent, primordial evil is banished. Henceforth, evil is to be apprehended on the moral and not the mythological plane.

5. God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day [first day—RA].

6. And God said, "Let there be a dome [firmament—OJPS; vault—RA; space—REF] in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters."

**[RA] 5. one day.** Unusually, the Hebrew uses a cardinal, not ordinal, number. As with all the six days except the sixth, the expected definite article is omitted.

**[REF] 6. space.** The distinction between "the water that was under the space and the water that was above the space" is particularly important and was frequently confusing to readers who were not certain of the meaning of the old term for this space: "firmament." As Rashi perceived, the text pictures a territory formed in the middle of the watery chaos, a giant bubble of air surrounded on all sides by water. Once the land is created, the universe as pictured in Genesis is a habitable bubble, with land and seas at its base, surrounded by a mass of water. Like this:



**God calls the space "skies"** "The skies" (or "heavens") here refer simply to space, to the sky that we see, not to some other, unseen place where God dwells or where people dwell after their death. The reference to "water that was above the space" presumably reflects the fact that when the ancients looked at the sky they understood from its blue color that there was water up there above the air. As when we look out at the horizon on a clear day and can barely distinguish where the blue sea ends and the blue sky begins, so they pictured the earth as surrounded by water above and below. The space was the invisible substance that holds the upper waters back. It is important to appreciate this picture of the cosmos with which the Torah begins or one cannot understand other matters that come later, especially the story of the flood.

**6. Let there be a space.** The "firmament" is either the entire air space or, more probably, just the transparent edge of the space, like a glass dome (Ramban, Nachmanides, says "like a tent"), which is actually up against the water. It is difficult to say which. The Hebrew root of the word, *raki'a*, refers to the way in which a goldsmith hammers gold leaf very thin. This may suggest that the firmament is best understood to be the thin outermost layer of the air space. Still, we must be cautious not to automatically derive the meaning of a word from its root. People commonly make this mistake because the Hebrew of the Tanach is so beautifully constructed around three-letter roots. Looking for root meanings is usually very helpful. But sometimes it can lead to misunderstandings. Words can evolve away from their root meanings over centuries.

7. So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so.

8. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning [there was setting and there was dawning—EF], Day Two.

9. And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so.

10. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together He called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

11. Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so.

**[NS] 7. God made** This verb *'s-h*, used again in verses 16 and 25, simply means that the divine intention became a reality. It does not represent a tradition of creation by deed as opposed to word. This is clear from a passage like Psalms 33:6, which features God's creative word and deed with no perceptible difference between them: "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made (Heb. *na'asu*) / by the breath of His mouth, all their host." In the same way, several texts indiscriminately interchange "create" (*b-r-*) and "make" (*'s-h*), with God as the actor.

**and it was so** Henceforth this is the standard formula for expressing the execution of the divine command. It was only the brevity of God's initial utterance in verse 3 that permitted repetition of its content without stylistic clumsiness. The formula *ki tov*, "that it was good," is omitted because rain has no value unless there is dry land to be fructified; the creative acts relating to water are not completed until the third day, the account of which appropriately records the formula twice.

**[REF] 8. a second day.** The first day's account concludes with the cardinal number: "one day." All of the following accounts conclude with ordinal numbers: "a second day," "a third day," and so on. This sets off the first day more blatantly as something special in itself rather than merely the first step in an order. It may be because the first day's creation—light—is qualitatively different from all other things. Or it may be because the opening day involves the birth of creation itself. Or it may be that the first unit involves the creation of a day as an entity.

**9.** The two acts of this day are interconnected, the first being the prerequisite of the second. below the sky That is, the terrestrial waters. the dry land The terrain now visible to man.

**11. Let the earth sprout** This creative act constitutes an exception to the norm that God's word directly effectuates the desired product. Here the earth is depicted as the mediating element, implying that God endows it with generative powers that He now activates by His utterance. The significance of this singularity is that the sources of power in what we call nature, which were personified and deified in the ancient world, are now emptied of sanctity. The productive forces of nature exist only by the will of one sovereign Creator and are not independent spiritual entities. There is no room in such a concept for the fertility cults that were features of ancient Near Eastern religions.

**vegetation** Hebrew *deshe'* is the generic term, which is subdivided into plants and fruit trees. A similar botanical classification is found in Leviticus 27:30. The function of these productions is revealed in verses 29–30.

**seed-bearing** That is, endowed with the capacity for self-replication.

of every kind That is, the various species that collectively make up the genus called *deshe'*. That this is the meaning of Hebrew *l'mino* is clear from several texts.

12. The earth brought forth vegetation [grass—OJPS, RA; sprouting-growth—EF; plants—REF]: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good.

13. And there was evening and there was morning, Day Three [a third day—OJPS, REF]; third day—EF, RA].

14. And God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years,

15. and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.” And it was so.

16. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule by day and the lesser light to rule by night—and the stars.

**[REF] 12. vegetation that produces seeds of its own kind.** The fact that plants (and later, animals) not only reproduce but also propagate offspring like themselves, rather than random production of new lifeforms, is not taken for granted. It is treated as both fundamental and a wonder of life, which needed an explicit creative utterance by the deity.

**13. third day.** On the third day the divine attention turns from the cosmos to the world: first land, then the vegetation that the land yields. On the fourth day the attention turns back to the skies: the creation of lights in the sky. The alternation between skies and earth continues as the deity turns back to the earth on the fifth day. This conveys that the earth and the skies are not conceptually separate. Understanding the nature of the universe is essential to understanding our place as humans on earth. We have especially come to realize this through the discoveries in astronomy and physics of the last century.

**[NS] 14. Let there be lights** This pronouncement corresponds to verse 3, “Let there be light.” The emergence of vegetation prior to the existence of the sun, the studied anonymity of these luminaries, and the unusually detailed description have the common purpose of emphasizing that sun, moon, and stars are not divinities, as they were universally thought to be; rather, they are simply the creations of God, who assigned them the function of regulating the life rhythms of the universe. With regard to the particulars, apart from the alternating cycle of day and night, there is some uncertainty as to interpretation.

**signs for the set times** Hebrew *’otot* and *mo’adim* are here treated as hendiadys, a single thought expressed by two words. The “set times” are then specified as “the days and the years.” It is also possible to take *’otot* as the general term meaning “time determinant,” a gauge by which “fixed times” (*mo’adim*) such as new moons, festivals, and the like are determined, as well as the days and the years.

**[REF] 15. they will be for lights in the space.** Note that daylight is not understood here to derive from the sun. The text understands the light that surrounds us in the daytime to be an independent creation of God, which has already taken place on the first day. The sun, moon and stars are understood here to be light sources—like a lamp or torch, only stronger. Their purpose is also to be markers of time: days, years, appointed occasions

**[NS] 15. to shine upon earth** To focus their light downward, not upward upon heaven.

**16.** Here the general term “luminaries” is more precisely defined. Significantly, no particular role is assigned to the stars, which are not further discussed. This silence constitutes a tacit repudiation of astrology.

17. And God set them in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth,
18. to rule by [have dominion over—RA; regulate—REF] day and by night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good.
19. And there was evening and there was morning, Day Four [a fourth day—OJPS, REF]; fourth day—EF, RA].
20. And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.”
21. So God created the great whales [sea-monsters—OJPS, RA; sea-serpents—EF, REF] and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good.
22. And God blessed them saying, “Be fruitful and increase [multiply—OJPS, RA, REF]; fill the waters in the seas and let the birds increase on the land.”
23. And there was evening and there was morning, Day Five [a fifth day—OJPS, REF]; fifth day—EF, RA].

**[NS] 20. Let the waters bring forth swarms** Water does not here possess inherent, independent generative powers as it does in the pagan mythologies. It produces marine life only in response to the divine command.

**living creatures** Hebrew *nefesh chayyah* means literally “animate life,” that which embodies the breath of life. It is distinct from plant life, which was not considered to be “living.” It is unclear why the formula “and it was so” is omitted here. It appears in the Septuagint version.

**across the expanse of the sky** Literally, “over the face of,” that is, from the viewpoint of an earth observer looking upward.

**21. God created** This is the first use of *bara’* after verse 1. Here it signifies that a new stage has been reached with the emergence of animate beings.

*the great sea monsters* This specification expresses an unspoken antipagan polemic. Hebrew *tannin* appears in Canaanite myths from Ugarit, together with Leviathan, as the name of a primeval dragon-god who assisted Yam (Sea) in an elemental battle against Baal, the god of fertility. Fragments of this myth, in a transformed Israelite version, surface in several biblical poetic texts in which the forces of evil in this world are figuratively identified with Tannin (Dragon), the embodiment of the chaos that the Lord vanquished in primeval time. By emphasizing that “God created the great sea monsters” late in the cosmogonie process, the narrative at once strips them of divinity.

**[REF] 21. sea serpents.** Hebrew *tannin*. This is generally understood to refer to some giant serpentlike creatures that were formed at creation but later destroyed, associated with the monsters Rahab (Isaiah 51.9) or Leviathan (Isaiah 27.1). Later, Aaron’s staff (and the Egyptian magicians’ staffs) turns into such a creature (not merely a snake!) at the Egyptian court.

**[NS] 22. God blessed them** Animate creation receives the gift of fertility. Plant life was not so blessed, both because it was thought to have been initially equipped with the capacity for self-reproduction by nonsexual means and because it is later to be cursed. The procreation of animate creatures, however, requires individual sexual activity, mating. This capacity for sexual reproduction is regarded as a divine blessing.

24. And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." And it was so.

25. God made wild beasts of every kind, and all kinds of creeping things of the earth. And God saw that this was good.

26. Then God said, "Let us make *ha'adam* [man—OJPS; humankind—EF; human—RA. REF] in our image, according to our likeness; and they shall rule [have dominion—OJPS, EF; dominate—REF; hold sway—RA] over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

#### [NS] DAY SIX

The drama of Creation is moving toward its final act, the production of animate beings whose natural habitat is dry land. The unusual expansiveness of this section, the enhanced formula of approbation, and the exceptional use of the definite article with the day number indicate that the narrative is reaching its climax. The section is divided into two parts. Verses 24-25 describe the emergence of the animal kingdom, which is classified according to three categories: cattle, creeping things, and wild beasts. The drama then culminates in verses 26-30 with the creation of the human being.

**26.** The second section of the sixth day culminates the creative process. A human being is the pinnacle of Creation. This unique status is communicated in a variety of ways, not least by the simple fact that humankind is last in a manifestly ascending, gradational order. The creation of human life is an exception to the rule of creation by divine fiat, as signaled by the replacement of the simple impersonal Hebrew command (the jussive) with a personal, strongly expressed resolve (the cohortative). The divine intent and purpose are solemnly declared in advance, and the stereotyped formula "and it was so" gives way to a thrice-repeated avowal that God created the man, using the significant verb *b-r-'*. Human beings are to enjoy a unique relationship to God, who communicates with them alone and who shares with them the custody and administration of the world.

At the same time, the pairing of the creation of man in this verse with that of land animals, and their sharing in common a vegetarian diet, focuses attention on the dual nature of humankind, the creatureliness and earthiness as well as the Godlike qualities.

The mysterious duality of man—the awesome power at his command and his stark and utter insignificance compared to God—is the subject of the psalmist who, basing himself on this narrative, exclaims: "When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, / the moon and stars that You set in place, / what is man that You have been mindful of him, / mortal man that You have taken note of him, / that You have made him little less than divine, / and adorned him with glory and majesty; / You have made him master over Your handiwork, / laying the world at his feet" (Pss. 8:4–7).

**Let us make** The extraordinary use of the first person plural evokes the image of a heavenly court in which God is surrounded by His angelic host. This is the Israelite version of the polytheistic assemblies of the pantheon—monotheized and depaganized. It is noteworthy that this plural form of divine address is employed in Genesis on two other occasions, both involving the fate of humanity: in 3.22, in connection with the expulsion from Eden; and in 11.7, in reference to the dispersal of the human race after the building of the Tower of Babel.

**man** Hebrew *'adam* is a generic term for humankind; it never appears in Hebrew in the feminine or plural. In the first five chapters of Genesis it is only rarely a proper name, Adam.

The term encompasses both man and woman, as shown in verses 27-28 and 5.1-2, where it is construed with plural verbs and terminations.

**in our image, after our likeness** This unique combination of expressions, virtually identical in meaning, emphasizes the incomparable nature of human beings and their special relationship to God. The full import of these terms can be grasped only within the broader context of biblical literature and against the background of ancient Near Eastern analogues.

The continuation of verse 26 establishes an evident connection between resemblance to God and sovereignty over the earth's resources, though it is not made clear whether man has power over nature as a result of his being like God or whether that power constitutes the very essence of the similarity. A parallel passage in 9.6-7 tells of God's renewed blessing on the human race after the Flood and declares murder to be the consummate crime precisely because "in His image did God make man." In other words, the resemblance of man to God bespeaks the infinite worth of a human being and affirms the inviolability of the human person. The killing of any other creature, even wantonly, is not murder. Only a human being may be murdered. It would seem, then, that the phrase "in the image of God" conveys something about the nature of the human being as opposed to the animal kingdom; it also asserts human dominance over nature. But it is even more than this.

The words used here to convey these ideas can be better understood in the light of a phenomenon registered in both Mesopotamia and Egypt, whereby the ruling monarch is described as "the image" or "the likeness" of a god. In Mesopotamia we find the following salutations: "The father of my lord the king is the very image of Bel (salam bel) and the king, my lord, is the very image of Bel"; "The king, lord of the lands, is the image of Shamash"; "O king of the inhabited world, you are the image of Marduk." In Egypt the same concept is expressed through the name Tutankhamen (Tutankh-amun), which means "the living image of (the god) Amun," and in the designation of Thutmose IV as "the likeness of Re."

Without doubt, the terminology employed in Genesis 1.26 is derived from regal vocabulary, which serves to elevate the king above the ordinary run of men. In the Bible this idea has become democratized. All human beings are created "in the image of God"; each person bears the stamp of royalty. This was patently understood by the author of Psalm 8, cited above. His description of man in royal terms is his interpretation of the concept of the "image of God" introduced in verse 26. It should be further pointed out that in Assyrian royal steles, the gods are generally depicted by their symbols: Ashshur by the winged disk, Shamash by the sun disk, and so forth. These depictions are called: "the image (salam) of the great gods." In light of this, the characterization of man as "in the image of God" furnishes the added dimension of his being the symbol of God's presence on earth. While he is not divine, his very existence bears witness to the activity of God in the life of the world. This awareness inevitably entails an awesome responsibility and imposes a code of living that conforms with the consciousness of that fact.

It should be added that the pairing of the terms *tselem* and *demut*, "image" and "likeness," is paralleled in a ninth-century B.C.E. Assyrian-Aramaic bilingual inscription on a statue at Tell Fekheriyeh in Syria. The two terms are used interchangeably and indiscriminately and obviously cannot be used as criteria for source differentiation.

**They shall rule** The verbs used here and in verse 28 express the coercive power of the monarch, consonant with the explanation just given for "the image of God." This power, however, cannot include the license to exploit nature banefully, for the following reasons: the human race is not inherently sovereign, but enjoys its dominion solely by the grace of God. Furthermore, the model of kingship here presupposed is Israelite, according to which, the monarch does not possess unrestrained power and authority; the limits of his rule are carefully defined and circumscribed by divine law, so that kingship is to be exercised with responsibility and is subject to accountability. Moreover, man, the sovereign of nature, is conceived at this stage to be functioning within the context of a "very good" world in which the interrelationships of organisms with their environment and with each other are entirely harmonious and mutually beneficial, an idyllic situation that is

clearly illustrated in Isaiah's vision of the ideal future king (Isaiah 11.1-9). Thus, despite the power given him, man still requires special divine sanction to partake of the earth's vegetation, and although he "rules" the animal world, he is not here permitted to eat flesh (vv. 29-30; cf. 9.3-4).

There is one other aspect to the divine charge to man. Contrary to the common beliefs of the ancient world that the forces of nature are divinities that may hold the human race in thralldom, our text declares man to be a free agent who has the God-given power to control nature.

**[REF] 26. Let us make.** Why does God speak in the plural here? Some take the plural to be "the royal we" as used by royalty and the papacy among humans, but this alone does not account for the fact that it occurs only in the opening chapters of the Torah and nowhere else. Others take the plural to mean that God is addressing a heavenly court of angels, seraphim, or other heavenly creatures, although this, too, does not explain the limitation of the phenomenon to the opening chapters. More plausible, though by no means certain, is the suggestion that it is an Israelite, monotheistic reflection of the pagan language of the divine council. In pagan myth, the chief god, when formally speaking for the council of the gods, speaks in the plural. Such language might be appropriate for the opening chapters of the Torah, thus asserting that the God of Israel has taken over this role.

**[RA] 26. a human.** The term *'adam*, afterward consistently with a definite article (*ha*), which is used both here and in the second account of the origins of humankind, is a generic term for human beings, not a proper noun. It also does not automatically suggest maleness, especially not without the prefix *ben*, "son of," and so the traditional rendering "man" is misleading, and an exclusively male *'adam* would make nonsense of the last clause of verse 27.

**hold sway.** The verb *radah* is not the normal Hebrew verb for "rule" (the latter is reflected in "dominion" of verse 16), and in most of the contexts in which it occurs it seems to suggest an absolute or even fierce exercise of mastery.

27. So God created *ha'adam* in his image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them.

28. And God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fruitful and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and all the living things that creep on earth."

29. And God said: "Behold, I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food.

30. And to all the land animals, and to the birds in the sky and to everything that creeps on the earth in which there is a breath of life, I give all the green plants for food." And it was so.

31. God saw everything that He had made, and indeed, it was very good [exceedingly good—EF]. And there was evening and there was morning, the Sixth Day.

**[NS] 27. male and female He created them** No such sexual differentiation is noted in regard to animals. Human sexuality is of a wholly different order from that of the beast. The next verse shows it to be a blessed gift of God woven into the fabric of life. As such, it cannot of itself be other than wholesome. By the same token, its abuse is treated in the Bible with particular severity. Its proper regulation is subsumed under the category of the holy, whereas sexual perversion is viewed with abhorrence as an affront to human dignity and as a desecration of the divine image in man.

The definition of the human community contained in this verse is solemnly repeated in 5.1-2, an indication of its seminal importance. Both sexes are created on the sixth day by the hand of the one God; both are made "in His image" on a level of absolute equality before Him. Thus the concept of humanity needs both male and female for its proper articulation.

**28. God blessed them and God said to them** The difference between the formulation here and God's blessing to the fish and fowl in verse 22 is subtle and meaningful. Here God directly addresses man and woman. The transcendent God of Creation transforms Himself into the immanent God, the personal God, who enters into unmediated communion with human beings.

**[REF] 31. everything that He had made, and, here, it was very good.** The initial state of creation is regarded as satisfactory. Things will soon go wrong, but it is unclear if that means that the "good" initial state becomes flawed, or if there is hope that the course of events will fit into an ultimately good structure in "the length of days." One of the most remarkable results of having a sense of the Tanach as a whole when one reads the parts is that one can experience the overwhelming irony of God's judging everything to be good in Genesis 1 when so much will go wrong later. Above all, the struggle between God and humans will recur and unfold powerfully and painfully. The day in which the humans are created is declared to be good, but this condition ends very soon. No biblical hero or heroine will be unequivocally perfect. Individuals and nations, Israel and all of humankind, will be pictured in conflict with the creator for the great majority of the text that will follow. Parashat Bereshit is a portent of this coming story; which is arguably the central story of the Tanach, because its first chapter contains the creation of humans that is divinely dubbed good, and its last verses contain the sad report that God regrets making the humans in the earth (6.6ff.). Importantly, Parashat Bereshit ends not with the deity's mournful statement that "I regret that I made them," (6.7) but rather with a point of hope: that Noah found favor in the divine sight (6.8) And this note, that there can be hope for humankind based on the acts of righteous individuals, is also a portent of the end of the story.

## Genesis Chapter 2:1-3

1. The heaven and the earth were finished, and all their array [the host of them—OJPS].
2. On the seventh day God [*Elohim*] finished the work that He had been doing, and He ceased [rested—OJPS] on the seventh day from all the work that He had done.
3. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy [hallowed it—OJPS, EF, RA; made it holy—REF], because on it God ceased from all the work of creation that He had done.

### Chapter 2: THE SEVENTH DAY (vv. 1–3)

The ascending order of Creation, and the “six-plus-one” literary pattern that determines the presentation of the narrative, dictates that the seventh day be the momentous climax. Man is indeed the pinnacle of Creation, but central to the cosmogonic drama is the work of God, the solo performer. The account of Creation opened with a statement about God; it will now close with a statement about God. The seventh day is the Lord’s Day, through which all the creativity of the preceding days achieves fulfillment. The threefold repetition of the day number indicates its paramount importance within the cosmic whole. The seventh day is in polar contrast to the other six days, which are filled with creative activity. Its distinctive character is the desistance from labor and its infusion with blessing and sanctity. This renders unnecessary the routine approbation formula. An integral part of the divinely ordained cosmic order, it cannot be abrogated by man. Its blessed and sacred character is a cosmic reality entirely independent of human effort.

The human institution of the Sabbath does not appear in the narrative. Indeed, the Hebrew noun *shabbat* is absent, and we have only the verbal forms of the root. There are several possible reasons for the omission. First, the expression “the seventh day” is required by the conventional, sequential style of the creation narrative in which numbered day follows numbered day in an ascending series. Further, the term *shabbat* connotes a fixed institution recurring with cyclic regularity. This would be inappropriate to the present context and, in general, inapplicable to God. Finally, as we read in Exodus 31.13, 16, and 17, the Sabbath is a distinctively Israelite ordinance, a token of the eternal covenant between God and Israel. Its enactment would be out of place before the arrival of Israel on the scene of history.

Nevertheless, there cannot be any doubt that the text provides the unspoken foundation for the future institution of the Sabbath. Not only is the vocabulary of the present passage interwoven with other Pentateuchal references to the Sabbath, but the connection with Creation is made explicit in the first version of the Ten Commandments, given in Exodus 20:8–11. “Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God....For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day...and hallowed it.” The biblical institution of the weekly Sabbath is unparalleled in the ancient world. In fact, the concept of a seven-day week is unique to Israel, as is also, so far, the seven-day cosmogonic tradition. Both these phenomena are extraordinary in light of the widespread use of a seven-day unit of time, both as a literary convention and as an aspect of cultic observance in the ancient Near East. The wonderment is compounded by additional data. The other major units of time—day, month, and year—are uniformly based on the phases of the moon and the movement of the sun, and the calendars of the ancient world are rooted in the seasonal manifestations of nature. Remarkably, the Israelite week has no such linkage and is entirely independent of the movement of celestial bodies. The Sabbath thus underlines the fundamental idea of Israelite monotheism: that God is wholly outside of nature.

It is still a moot point whether the noun *shabbat* is derived from the verb *sh-b-t*, “to cease,” or vice versa. Attempts have been made to connect it with the Babylonian-Assyrian calendrical term *shapattu*, which is described as *ūm nūkh libbi*, “the day of the quieting of the heart (of the god),” that is, the day when he is appeased. This day, however, is defined as the fifteenth of the month, the day of the full moon. It is not certain that every full moon was called *shapattu*, nor is it clear how the term would have been transferred to the Israelite cyclical seventh day freed of any lunar association. The etymology and exact meaning of that term still remain problematical. In fact, the likelihood exists that *shapattu* is itself a loan word in Akkadian. In addition, there is no evidence that the day entailed a cessation from labor. Whatever its etymology, the biblical Sabbath as an institution is unparalleled in the ancient world.

**[REF] 2. the seventh day.** The seven-day week is found in cultures around the world, presumably because of the association with the sun, moon, and five planets that are visible to the naked eye. Hence, the English Sunday (Sun-day), Monday (Moon-day; cf. French *lundi*), and Saturday (Saturn-day), and French *mardi* (Mars-day) and *mercredi* (Mercury-day). It is fundamental to creation in the Torah, again relating the ordering of time to the very essence of creation. The reckoning of days and years is established by the creation of the sun and moon on the fourth day. The reckoning of weeks is established by the very order of divine activity in the creation itself. This may suggest that the week is given a special status among units of time, and this appears to be confirmed by the singular status given to the Sabbath. It is blessed by the creator, sanctified, and later will be recognized among the Ten Commandments.

**ceased.** The word (Hebrew *shavat*) means to “stop,” not to “rest” as it is often taken. The explicit association of the Sabbath with rest will come later, in the Ten Commandments.

**3. made it holy. (Hebrew *kadesh*)** This word is commonly understood to mean “separated,” in the sense of being set off from the usual, rather than denoting a special spiritual or even mysterious quality, but there really is little linguistic justification for that understanding. Holiness in the Torah seems indeed to be a singular, powerful quality that certain objects, places, and persons acquire.... It means much more than just “separate.”

What does it mean to make a day holy? The creation of humans toward the end of the account is both a climax and, at the same time, a small component of the universe. Their creation is not the culmination of the story. The culmination, as the story is arranged, is the Sabbath, a cosmic event: the deity at a halt and consummation. A. J. Heschel wrote that the special significance of the concept of the Sabbath is that it means the sanctification of time. Most other religious symbols are spatial: sacred objects, sacred places, sacred music, prayers, art, symbolic foods, gestures, and practices. But the first thing in the Torah to be rendered holy is a unit in the passage of time. This powerfully underscores the Torah’s character as containing the first known works of history. In consecrating the passage of time in weekly cycles, the institution of the Sabbath at the end of the creation account in Genesis 1 is itself a notable union of the cosmic/cyclical and the historical/linear flow of time. It sets all of the Bible’s coming accounts of history in a cosmic structure of time, just as the story of the creation of the universe in that chapter sets the rest of the Bible’s stories in a cosmic structure of space. Thus Genesis 1 is a story of the fashioning of a great orderly universe out of chaos in which everything fits into an organized temporal and spatial structure.

## Introduction to Genesis Chapter 2:4-24

**[FOX]** From the perspective of God in Chap. 1, we now switch to that of humankind (note how the opening phrase in 2:4b, "earth and heaven," reverses the order found in 1:1). This most famous of all Genesis stories contains an assortment of mythic elements and images which are common to human views of prehistory: the lush garden, four central rivers located (at least partially) in fabled lands, the mysterious trees anchoring the garden, a primeval man and woman living in unashamed nakedness, an animal that talks, and a God who converses regularly and intimately with his creatures. The narrative presents itself, at least on the surface, as a story of origins. We are to learn the roots of human sexual feelings, of pain in childbirth, and how the anomalous snake (a land creature with no legs) came to assume its present form. Most strikingly, of course, the story seeks to explain the origin of the event most central to human consciousness: death.

**[RA]** In this more vividly anthropomorphic account, God, now called YHWH 'Elohim instead of 'Elohim, as in the first version, does not summon things into being through the mere agency of divine speech, but works as a craftsman, fashioning (*yatsar* instead of *bara'*, "create"), blowing life-breath into nostrils, building a woman from a rib. Whatever the disparate historical origins of the two accounts, the redaction gives us first a harmonious cosmic overview of creation, and then a plunge into the technological nitty-gritty and moral ambiguities of human origins.

**[REF]** A second account of creation starts here. What is the relationship of the two creation accounts: In the scholarship of recent centuries, the two creation stories have come to be attributed to different authors....[P]lacing the cosmic conception first creates the impression of the wide camera view narrowing in. This feeling of narrowing in will continue through the coming stories, contributing to the rich-in-background feeling that will persist through the rest of the Bible.

[The Torah: A Women's Commentary] Genesis is unique in ancient Near Eastern literature in giving special attention to the formation of woman. In Greece, however, Hesiod (8th century B.C.E.) claimed that the first woman, Pandora, was created to ensnare men to their death. In contrast, Genesis 2 envisions the creation of woman and man for mutual benefit: "It is not good for the adam to be alone" (2.18). In contrast to Genesis 1, here the gender identity of the first adam is ambiguous; therefore, the status of woman in Genesis 2 remains open to different interpretations.

Many Jews and Christians over the centuries have interpreted the early portions of Genesis to mean that woman was secondary and thus subordinate, created merely for man's benefit. Three factors argue against such interpretations. (1) The term *adam* is generic, not specifically "a man," complicating the notion of the gender identity of the first person. (2) Even if one interprets this particular *adam* as male, last does not mean least. (Indeed, in Genesis 1 human beings are created last, a sequence that some interpreters consider a sign of superiority.) (3) God creates human partnership, not hierarchy, in Genesis 2.

Regarding the ambiguity with respect to the first person's gender, on the one hand, it can be presumed that early readers understood *ha-adam* to designate the first human being as male: all patrilineages originated in this first human being, and in biblical genealogies, the typical initiator of any lineage is male. This presumption works well with the narrative flow—in which even after the creation of woman, the term *ha-adam* continues to be used to refer to the man.

### Guide to the Translators and Commentators used here

**FOX & EF:** Everett Fox

**REF:** Richard Elliott Friedman

**RA:** Robert Alter

**NS:** Nahum Sarna

**SRH:** Samson Raphael Hirsch

**RASHI:** Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak

**CS:** Chaim Stern

**The Torah: A Women's Commentary**, published by the URJ Press

**OJPS:** Old Jewish Publication Society version

According to this view, woman—in terms of lineage, but only in those terms—is indeed presented as second and derivative. Nonetheless, this story presents, as Phyllis Bird notes, "a portrait of humankind in which the two sexes are essential to the action and are bound together in mutual dependence" (*Phyllis Ann Bird is a feminist biblical scholar. She is Professor Emerita of Old Testament Interpretation at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary and McCarthy Professor of Biblical Studies at the Pontifical Biblical Institute.*)

On the other hand, when viewing the individual designated by the term *adam*, the usual inclusive meaning of that term cannot be ignored. A gender-neutral or non-gendered progenitor was not unknown in the ancient world; it appears, for example, in Sumerian literature and in the work of Plato.

Through this gender ambiguity, the text seems to be expressing complex ideas about the position of female and male in God's plan, and about the tension perceived in cultural reality.

**[NACHUM SARNA]** While God the Creator was the primary subject of the previous chapter, the focus of attention now shifts to humankind....The almost unique expression "earth and heaven" suggests pride of place for terrestrial affairs. Information about the physical world is offered only to provide essential background for the understanding of the narrative, which seeks to explain the nature of man and the human condition.

*Chapter 2 is not another creation story. As such, it would be singularly incomplete. In fact, it presupposes a knowledge of much of the preceding account of Creation. Many of the leading ideas in the earlier account are here reiterated, though the mode of presentation is different. Thus, in both narratives God is the sovereign Creator, and the world is the purposeful product of His will. To human beings, the crown of His Creation, God grants mastery over the animal kingdom. In chapter 1, this idea is formulated explicitly; in the present section it is inferred from the power of naming invested in man. Both accounts view man as a social creature. Both project the concept of a common ancestry for all humanity. The notion that the human race was originally vegetarian is implied in 2:16-17, as in 1:29. Finally, one of the most serious questions to which the present narrative addresses itself—the origin of evil—would be unintelligible without the fundamental postulate of the preceding cosmology, repeated there seven times: the essential goodness of the divine creation.*

The startling contrast between this vision of God's ideal world and the world of human experience requires explanation. How did the pristine harmony between God, man and nature come to be disturbed? How are we to explain the harsh, hostile workings of nature, the recalcitrance of the soil to man's arduous labors? If God ordered man and woman to procreate, why then does woman suffer the pangs of childbirth in fulfilling God's will? If God created the human body, why does nudity in the presence of others instinctively evoke embarrassment? In short, how is the existence of evil to be accounted for?

The biblical answer to this fundamental question, diametrically opposed to prevalent pagan conceptions, is that there is no inherent, primordial evil at work in the world. The source of evil is not metaphysical, but moral. Evil is not transhistorical, but humanly wrought. Human beings possess free will, but free will is beneficial only insofar as its exercise is in accordance with divine will. Free will and the need for restraint on the liberties of action inevitably generate temptation and the agony of choosing, which only man's self-mastery can resolve satisfactorily. The ensuing narrative demonstrates that abuse of the power of choice makes disaster inescapable.

## Genesis Chapter 2:4-24—Translations and Commentary

4 Such is the story of [the generations of—OJPS; the begettings of—EF; the tale of—RA; the records of—REF; the chronicle of—CS] heaven and earth when they were created. When the Lord God made earth and heaven—

5 when no shrub [bush—EF; produce—REF] of the field was yet on earth and no grasses [plant—EF/RA/CS; vegetation—REF] of the field had yet sprouted, because the Lord God had not sent rain upon the earth and there was no adam/human [not a soul—CS] to till the soil,

6 but a flow would well up from the ground [a mist from the earth—OJPS; a surge would well up—EF; wetness would well from the earth—RA; a river had come up from the earth—REF] and water the whole surface of the earth—

**[NS] 4. Such is the story** The *'eleh toledot* formula is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Book of Genesis. In each of its other 10 occurrences, it introduces what follows, invariably in close connection with someone already named in the narrative. Its use indicates that a new and significant development is at hand. Deriving from the verb *y-l-d*, "to give birth," the noun form would mean "begettings" or "generations," and it usually precedes genealogies that are sometimes interspersed with narrative material. In 25:19 and 37:2, where no family tree follows but only stories of subsequent events, the formula is used figuratively for "a record of events." This is its meaning here. In this sense, the entire verse may be understood as a unity referring to what follows.

**[NS] the LORD God** This combination of the personal divine name YHVH with the general term *'elohim* appears twenty times in the present literary unit, but only once again in the Torah, in Exodus 9:30. It is exceedingly rare in the rest of the Bible. The repeated use here may be to establish that the absolutely transcendent God of Creation (*'elohim*) is the same immanent, personal God (YHVH) who shows concern for the needs of human beings. Admittedly, however, the remarkable concentration of the combination of these divine names in this narrative and their virtual absence hereafter have not been satisfactorily explained.

**[REF] 4 records.** This verse is sometimes taken to be the conclusion of the preceding seven-day account. That is wrong. The phrase "These are the records" always introduces a list or story. It is used ten more times in Genesis to construct the book as continuous narrative through history rather than as a loose collection of stories.

**[FOX] 5 human/adam ... soil/adama:** The sound connection, the first folk etymology in the Bible, establishes the intimacy of humankind with the ground (note the curses in 3:17 and 4:11). Human beings are created from the soil, just as animals are (v.19). Some have suggested "human . . . humus" to reflect the wordplay.

**[NS] no man to till the soil** Agriculture is considered to be the original vocation of man, whose bond to the earth is an essential part of his being.

**[NS] 6. a flow** The idea seems to be that the primordial, subterranean waters would rise to the surface to moisten the arid earth, thereby making it receptive to the growth and survival of vegetation and providing the raw material with the proper consistency for being molded into man.

7 the Lord God formed *ha-adam*/the human from the dust of the earth/*ha-adamah* [humus from the soil—EF]. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living being.

8 The Lord God planted a garden in Eden [Land of Pleasure—EF], in the east, and placed there the human whom He had formed.

**[NS] 7.** Nothing was said in 1:27 of the substance from which man was created. Here it is given as “dust,” a word that can be used synonymously with “clay.” The verb “formed” (Heb. *va-yitser*) is frequently used of the action of a potter (*yotser*), so that man’s creation is portrayed in terms of God molding the clayey soil into shape and then animating it. This image is widespread in the ancient world. Mesopotamian texts, in particular, repeatedly feature this notion. The same is found in the Greek myth about Prometheus, who created a man, and about Hephaestus, who molded the archetypal woman Pandora from earth.

The poetic imagery evoked by the Genesis text is graphically explicit in the Book of Job: “Consider that You fashioned me like clay” (10:9); “You and I are the same before God; / I too was nipped from clay” (33:6). The human body is a “house of clay,” and human beings are described as “those who dwell in houses of clay, / Whose origin is dust” (4:19). Here in Genesis, the image simultaneously expresses both the glory and the insignificance of man.

**[NS] the breath of life** The uniqueness of the Hebrew phrase *nishmat hayyim* matches the singular nature of the human body, which, unlike the animal world, is directly inspirited by God Himself.

**[FOX] 7. the human, humus.** The Hebrew etymological pun is 'adam, "human," from the soil, 'adamah.

**[REF] 7. a human, dust from the ground.** A pun: The word for human in Hebrew is 'adam (sometimes translated in English as "Adam"), and the story reports that he is formed from the ground (Hebrew 'adamah). And this in turn began with a river ('ed) coming up. So we have in vv. 6-7 the sequence אד, אדם, אדמה.

**[FOX] 8 Eden/Land-of-Pleasure:** The usage here may be a folk etymology. For another use of the Hebrew root [ג-ד-נ], we have Gen. 18:12: “And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment [ednah עדנה]—with my husband so old?”

**[NS] a garden** The Greek version, the Septuagint, translated this word by *parádeisos*, a term that originated in the Old Persian *pairi-daeza*, meaning “an enclosed park, a pleasure ground.” The translation was taken over by the Vulgate version and so passed from Latin into other European languages. Because Hebrew 'eden was interpreted to mean “pleasure,” “paradise” took on an exclusively religious connotation as the place of reward for the righteous after death. Such a meaning for 'eden is not found in the Hebrew Bible. Other biblical references indicate that a more expansive, popular story about man’s first home once circulated widely in Israel. Ancient Near Eastern literature provides no parallel to our Eden narrative as a whole, but there are some suggestions of certain aspects of the biblical Eden. The Sumerian myth about Enki and Ninhursag tells of an idyllic island of Dilmun, now almost certainly identified with the modern island of Bahrain in the Persian Gulf. The Gilgamesh Epic likewise knows of a garden of jewels. It is significant that our Genesis account omits all mythological details, does not even employ the phrase “garden of God,” and places gold and jewels in a natural setting.

9 And from the ground the Lord God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and bad [evil—OJPS/EF/RA; of all knowledge—CS].

**[NS] 9.** The verse tells nothing about the greening of the earth in general, only about the garden, which is pictured as a tree park. The idea is that man's food was ever ready at hand. The attractive, nutritious, and delectable qualities of the fruit are stressed with the next episode in mind. The human couple will not be able to plead deprivation as the excuse for eating the forbidden fruit.

The two special trees are brought to our attention in a deliberately casual manner; their significance will become obvious later on. The "tree of life" is mentioned first, the "tree of knowledge" second. Only the first is given prominence in the garden, while the second gives the appearance of being an appendage to the verse. Yet as the narrative unfolds, the sequence is reversed. Only the "tree of knowledge" comes into focus, only its fruit is prohibited, only it is mentioned in the subsequent dialogues. This shift in emphasis signals another breach with the central pagan theme of man's quest for immortality, as illustrated, for example, in the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh Epic. It is not the mythical pursuit of eternal life, but the relationship between God and man that is the main concern.

**the tree of life** It is clear from 3:22 that the fruit of this tree was understood to bestow immortality upon the eater. The text presupposes a belief that man, created from perishable matter, was mortal from the outset, but that he had within his grasp the possibility of immortality.

**the tree of knowledge of good and bad** The interpretation of this enigmatic designation, which is unparalleled anywhere outside the present narrative, hinges upon the definition of "knowledge" and the scope of "good and bad." Ibn Ezra, followed by many moderns, understood carnal knowledge to be intended since the first human experience after eating the forbidden fruit is the consciousness of nudity accompanied by shame; moreover, immediately after the expulsion from Eden it is said, "Now the man knew his wife Eve." Against this interpretation is the fact that at this stage woman is not yet created, that sexual differentiation is made by God Himself (cf. 1:27), that the institution of marriage is looked upon in verse 24 as part of the divinely ordained order, and that, according to 3:5, 22, "knowledge of good and bad" is a divine characteristic. Thus, it will not do to take "good and bad" as the human capacity for moral discernment.

Aside from the difficulty of understanding why God should be opposed to this, there is the additional argument that a divine prohibition would be meaningless if man did not already possess this faculty. Indeed, from 3:3 it is clear the woman knows the meaning of disobedience—she is already alert to the difference between right and wrong, which can have no other meaning than obedience or otherwise.

It is more satisfactory, however, to understand "good and bad" as undifferentiated parts of a totality, a merism meaning "everything." True, man and woman do not become endowed with omniscience after partaking of the fruit, but the text does seem to imply that their intellectual horizons are immeasurably expanded. It should also be noted that "good and bad," exactly in the Hebrew form used here (*tov va-ra'*), occurs again only in Deuteronomy 1:39: "Moreover, your little ones who you said would be carried off, your children who do not yet know good from bad...." There, the context leaves no doubt that not to know good and bad means to be innocent, not to have attained the age of responsibility. In the present passage, then, it is best to understand "knowledge of good and bad" as the capacity to make independent judgments concerning human welfare.

**[REF] 9. tree of life.** Ancient Israelites believed in an afterlife, but it is not part of the creation account. Even in the combined picture of the two parts of the creation account there is no reference whatever to the creation of a realm for afterlife—no heaven or hell. On the contrary, there is a tree of life in the garden which enables one to live forever. Humans are not forbidden to eat from this tree. (Only the tree of knowledge of good and bad is prohibited.) So death, life after death, heaven and hell, eternal reward and punishment are not yet elements of the account. After the humans are expelled from the garden, and thus cut off from the tree of life, death will enter the story. But there still will be no account of the establishment of any realm of afterlife.

**9. tree of knowledge of good and bad.** Not good and "evil," as this is usually understood and translated. "Evil" suggests that this is strictly moral knowledge. But the Hebrew word (*ra'*) has a much wider range of meaning. This may mean knowledge of what is morally good and bad, or it may mean qualities of good and bad in all realms: morality, aesthetics, utility, pleasure and pain, and so on. It may mean that things are good or bad in themselves, and that when one eats from the tree one acquires the ability to see these qualities; or it may mean that when one eats from the tree one acquires the ability to make judgments of good and bad. The meaning is not clear to us in the text of the narrative. The only immediate consequence of eating from the tree is that before eating from the tree the humans are not embarrassed over nudity and after eating from it they are. This is not sufficient information to tell us what limits of "good and bad" are meant, nor does it tell us if absolute good and bad are implied, or if it is the more relative concept of making judgments of good and bad. The wording, "the eyes of the two of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked," may imply awareness of an absolute value. On the other hand, great numbers of commandments, as articulated in later accounts in Genesis and especially in the following four books of the Torah, suggest that few things are treated as good or bad acts in themselves in these texts. Rather, there is only that which God commands or God prohibits.

**[SRH] The Tree of Knowledge** Some suggest that only by partaking of the fruit of this tree was man enabled to know good and evil. Man knew only theoretical differentiation—truth from falsehood; but the concepts of "good" and "bad," which belong to the realm of practical reason, were foreign to him. This interpretation, however, cannot be correct. Freedom of choice distinguishes man as man; man would not be worthy of his name, without the concept of good and bad. Had he been unaware of the concept of good and bad, God could not have assigned him a prohibition; and once man had violated the prohibition, God could not have punished him. It must be, then, that he could distinguish between forbidden and permitted—and this is none other than the knowledge of good and evil, knowledge that belongs to the realm of practical reason, not to the realm of theoretical reason.

It appears, then, that the tree's name derives from its subsequent role: Through it, knowledge of good and evil will be acted upon and decided; through its fruit, man will choose what is good or bad in his sight.

Moreover, it appears this tree derives its name based on its initial role in shaping man's knowledge of good and evil. For this tree taught man how he should distinguish good from bad. As we shall see later, this tree appealed to man's taste, imagination, and contemplative mind, thus drawing him to this tree and tempting him to eat of its fruit. Nevertheless, God forbade man to eat of its fruit. In other words, partaking of this fruit was defined as being bad for man. This tree, then, was to remind man of that teaching on whose observance man's whole eminence depends. A person's senses, imagination, and intelligence may lead him astray. From this tree we learn that in judging what is good or evil, man should not rely on his own senses, his own imagination, or his own intelligence; rather, he should obey the revealed Will of God and follow the lead of His wisdom. Only then will he fulfill his purpose on earth and be worthy of having the world shaped into a paradise for him.

10 A river issues from Eden to water the garden, and it then divides and becomes four branches.

11 The name of the first is Pishon [Spreader—EF], the one that winds through the whole land of Havilah, where the gold is.

12 The gold of that land is good; bdellium is there, and lapis lazuli [onyx stone—OJPS/REF/CS; camelian—EF] [NOTE: *camelian is a semi-precious brownish-red gemstone.*]

13 The name of the second river is Gihon, the one that winds through the whole land of Cush.

14 The name of the third river is Tigris, the one that flows east of Asshur [Assyria—EF/REF/CS]. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

**[NS]** The story of the first human is abruptly interrupted by a description of the geographical setting of the garden. This pause functions as a tension-building device, for the reader is left wondering about the role of the two special trees. The identical literary stratagem is employed in the story of Joseph, where the digression of chapter 38 heightens the reader's suspense at a critical moment in the development of the plot.

**10** A single river “issues from Eden.” Its source appears to be outside the garden, which it irrigates as it passes through. The garden is independent of the vagaries of seasonal rainfall. Somewhere beyond the confines of the garden the single river separates into four branches that probably represent the four quarters of the inhabited world. In other words, the river of Eden also nourishes the rest of the world with its life-giving waters. While the Tigris and the Euphrates are well known, the other two names defy positive identification. They may stand for another great river civilization corresponding to that of the Mesopotamian plain, perhaps the Nile Valley.

**11-12.** Pishon is an unknown name. It is said to be a meandering river associated with “the land of Havilah.” If this latter name is Hebrew, it means “sandy land.” There are two biblical sites identified by the name Havilah, one within the Egyptian sphere of influence, the other in Arabia. Here, the place is described as a source of gold and precious materials.

As far as Egypt is concerned, its primary sources of bullion and jewels were the mines of Nubia, a region south of Egypt that corresponds roughly to present-day Nilotic Sudan. In fact, the name Nubia is derived from Egyptian *nb*, meaning “gold.” The term “good gold”—that is, high-grade ore—was used in Egyptian commercial transactions. It is also possible the mention of gold in connection with the river refers not to lode or vein mining, but to alluvial gold and reflects the ancient method of washing gold-bearing sands and gravel deposited by streams and rivers. The description in verses 11–12 might also fit an Arabian location. In 10:29, Havilah is stated to be a “brother” of Ophir, which is the name of a country celebrated for its gold. It is not certain, however, that Ophir was in Arabia.

**Bdellium** is mentioned again only in Numbers 11:7, where it is assumed to be a well-known substance. From ancient times, opinion has been divided as to whether it was a precious stone or a much valued aromatic resin called bdellion by the Greeks and mentioned in Akkadian sources as budulhu, which corresponds to Hebrew bdolah. This product was an important export of Nubia.

**13.** Gihon is the name of a spring in a valley outside of Jerusalem. The stem *g-y-h* means “to gush forth.” No river of this name is otherwise known. The association with “the land of Cush” complicates the identification because in 10:6-10 Cush is a “brother” of Egypt, and is also connected with South Arabia and with Mesopotamia. There also seems to be another Cush in Midian on the northeastern shore of the Gulf of Akaba. Generally in the Bible, Cush refers to Nubia. If this is the case here, too, then Pishon and Gihon may be terms for the Blue Nile and the White Nile. These two rivers unite at Khartoum to form the mightiest river of Africa, which finally empties into the Mediterranean Sea.

**[REF] 13. Gihon.** The name is a pun, because later the snake will be cursed that it (and all snakes) must crawl on its "belly," which in Hebrew is *gehon* (Gen 3:14). The names of the other rivers may contain puns as well, for the letters of Euphrates (Hebrew פרת) occur in the next words of the snake's curse: עפר תאכל; Pishon (Hebrew פישון) contains the same root letters as the word that describes the human's becoming "a living being" (Hebrew נפש); and the letters of Tigris (Hebrew חדקל) occur in a similar jumble (a metathesis) at the end of the story: יד וליקחו (3:22). So the rivers that all derive from Eden both convey geography and hint at the coming events there.

**[NS] 14. east of Asshur** Hebrew *kidmat* means literally “in front of,” that is, eastward, from the vantage point of one facing the rising sun, which is the standard orientation in the Bible. “Asshur” may be either the city of Ashur, which lay west of the Tigris, or the larger region of Assyria, to which it gave its name. The parallel with “the land of Cush” would favor the second possibility, but the Tigris actually bisects Assyria, so here the city itself, not otherwise mentioned in Scripture, is more likely intended.

Euphrates To an Israelite, this was the river par excellence and, therefore, required no topographical description.

*Continued on the next page*

15 The Lord God took the human and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it [to dress it and keep it—OJPS; to work it and to watch it—EF; to till it and watch it—RA; to work it and watch over it—REF; to work it and keep it—CS]. [Note: Hebrew has no neutral pronoun—Shammai]

16 And the Lord God commanded the human, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat [you may surely eat—RA; you may eat, yes eat—EF];

17 but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad [good and evil—OJPS/EF/RA/; Tree of All Knowledge—CS], you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die [doomed to die—RA/CS]."

18 The Lord God said, "It is not good for the human to be alone; I will make a fitting helper [ezer k'negdo] for him [a help meet for him—OJPS; a helper corresponding to him—EF; a sustainer beside him—RA; a strength corresponding to him—REF; a help-mate—CS]."

**[RA] 18. sustainer beside him.** The Hebrew *‘ezer kenegdo* (King James Version "help meet") is notoriously difficult to translate. The second term means "alongside him," "opposite him," "a counterpart to him." "Help" is too weak because it suggests a merely auxiliary function, whereas *‘ezer* elsewhere connotes active intervention on behalf of someone, especially in military contexts, as often in Psalms. [Also, consider these two texts: (1) Exodus 18:4 — "And the other was named Eliezer, meaning, 'The God of my father was my help [lit. my *‘ezer*—*Shammai*], and He delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh." (2) Deuteronomy 33:7 — "...Hear, O Lord, the voice of Judah, and restore him to his people. Though his own hands strive for him, help him [lit., be an *‘ezer* to him] against his foes."]

**[REF] 18. a strength corresponding to him.** Woman is usually understood to be created as a suitable "helper" (Hebrew *‘ezer*) to man in this account. The Hebrew root, however, can also mean "strength." (See cases of *‘ezer* in parallel with *‘oz*, another word for "strength," as in, for example, Ps. 46:2.) The Hebrew phrase *‘ezer kenegdo* therefore may very well mean "a corresponding strength." If so, it is a different picture from what people have thought, and an intriguing one in terms of recently developed sensitivities concerning the sexes and how they are pictured in the Torah. In Genesis 1, man and woman are both created in the image of God; in Genesis 2, they are corresponding strengths. However one interprets subsequent stories and laws in the Torah, this essential equality of worth and standing introduces them.

**[NS] 18ff** The present narrative is therefore unique. curiously, the literature of the ancient Near East offers no other account of the creation of woman. Moreover, whereas the human's creation is told in a single verse, the creation of woman is described in six verses. This detail is extraordinary in light of the generally nondescriptive character of the biblical narrative and, as such, is indicative of the importance accorded this event. With the appearance of woman, Creation is complete.

**18. It is not good** The emphatic negative contrasts with the verdict of 1:31 that everything was "very good," this after the creation of male and female. The idea here is that the human is recognized to be a social being. Celibacy is undesirable. Genesis Rabbah 17:2 expresses this point as follows: "Whoever has no wife exists without goodness, without a helpmate, without joy, without blessing, without atonement..., without well-being, without a full life...; indeed, such a one reduces the representation of the divine image [on earth]." [continues on the next page]

19 And the Lord God formed out of the earth all the wild beasts and all the birds of the sky, and brought them to the human to see what he would call them; and whatever the human called each living creature, that would be its name.

20 And the human gave names to all the cattle and to the birds of the sky and to all the wild beasts; but for the human no fitting helper was found. [a help meet for him—OJPS; helper corresponding to him—EF; sustainer beside him—RA; a strength corresponding to him—REF; help-mate—CS]

21 So the Lord God cast a deep sleep upon the human; and, while he slept, He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that spot.

**a fitting helper** Literally, “a helper corresponding to him.” This term cannot be demeaning because Hebrew *‘ezer*, employed here to describe the intended role of the woman, is often used of God.

**[SRH] 18 *ezer k’negdo***. Even looked at quite superficially, this designation expresses the whole dignity of Woman. It expresses no idea of subordination, but rather complete equality, and on a footing of equal independence. Woman stands to Man *k’negdo*, parallel, on one line, at his side.

**[REF] 20. the human gave names**. The human, who is created in the image of the creator, is now given a function that the creator performed in Genesis 1: bestowing names on parts of the creation.

**[NS] 20**. The Bible offers no hint about the origin of language, only a theory about the diversity of languages, which is presented in chapter 11. Here the first man is assumed to have been initially endowed with the faculty of speech, with a level of intellect capable of differentiating between one creature and another and with the linguistic ability to coin an appropriate name for each.

**Adam** The Hebrew vocalization *le-’adam* makes the word a proper name for the first time, probably because the narrative now speaks of the man as a personality rather than an archetypal human.

**no fitting helper was found** The review of the subhuman creation makes the man conscious of his own uniqueness, of his inability to integrate himself into that whole biological order or feel direct kinship with the other animate beings. At the same time, by observing the otherwise universal complementary pairing of male and female, he becomes aware of his own solitariness.

**[SRH] 20**. Thus Man tested all living creatures in their characteristics and listed them in his mind according to what they impressed him as being, and so gave them names..., [but] for an "*Adam*...", God’s vice-regent on earth, none could parallel himself, none could share his obligations with him.

**[SRH] 21. *Tsela*** does not occur elsewhere in Tanach as a "rib", *but always as a "side."* With Woman, the material for her body was not taken from the earth, as it was with the first human. God formed one side of the human into Woman, so what was previously one creature was now two, *and thereby is the complete equality of women forever attested*. Our sages also ascribe all the special characteristics of the female voice, the female character and temperament, as well as the earlier spiritual and mental maturity of women, as being connected with this formation of Woman out of the already feeling, sensitive living body of the first human, whose body was created out of earth.

**[RASHI] “The rib’** — ...the meaning is that of side [rather than the anatomical definition of rib], as in ‘the second side of the Tabernacle (Exodus 26)....He divided him [the adam] into two, for he was male on one side and female on the other.” [*Comment to BT Eiruvין 18a*]

22 And the Lord God fashioned the rib that He had taken from the human into a woman; and He brought her to the human.

23 Then the human said, "This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called Woman [*ishah*] for from man [*ish*] was she taken."

24 Hence [*al ken*] a man [*ish*] leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife [*ishah*], so that they become one flesh.

**[REF] 23. [NS] shall be called Woman** The terminology used here differs from that employed in verse 20 for naming the animals. Here the man offers a generic, not a personal, name, and that designation is understood to be derived from his own, which means he acknowledges woman to be his equal. Moreover, in naming her *'ishah*, he simultaneously names himself. Hitherto he is consistently called *'adam*; he now calls himself *'ish* for the first time. Thus he discovers his own manhood and fulfillment only when he faces the woman, the human being who is to be his partner in life.

**Woman. . . man Hebrew 'ishah... 'ish**, though actually derived from distinct and unrelated stems, are here associated through folk etymology by virtue of assonance.

**man.** Now, after woman has been formed, the word "man" occurs for the first time instead of "human."

**[SRH] 24. Al ken, Therefore.** Because as long as the human was alone it was not yet "good," and because once the division had been made, it was no longer at all possible for the *ish* to fulfil his calling by himself, because his wife was to be *ezer k'negdo*; without her he was only half a human, and only together with her did he feel himself a whole being. Therefore, an *ish* leaves his father and his mother and attaches himself to a wife, and they become one single body. Just as before the division, originally, the man's body subordinated itself under one spirit and under one Divine Will, so after the reunion Man and Woman become one single body. *But that can only take place if at the same time they become one mind, one heart, one soul, and this again is only possible if they subordinate all their strength and efforts, all their thoughts and desires to the service of a Higher Will.* But herein lies the great difference between the sexual life of all other living creatures and that of human marriage. All the rest of the living world is also divided into sexes. But in their case both sexes sprang at the same time independently from the earth. They do not require each other for the fulfillment of their lives' calling, and only for the purpose of breeding, and for the time necessary for perpetuating the species, do they seek and find each other. But the human female is a part of the human male, is *ezer k'negdo*. The man is helpless and lacking independence without his wife. Only the two together form a complete human being. Life in its entirety, in every phase, demands their union. Only of men does it say "cleave unto his wife."

**[NS] 24. 'al ken** introduces an etiological observation on the part of the Narrator. In this case, some interrelated and fundamental aspects of the marital relationship are traced to God's original creative act and seen as part of the divinely ordained natural order. The fashioning of the woman from the man's body explains why a man's bond to his wife takes precedence over his ties to his parents. It accounts for the mystery of physical love and the intense emotional involvement of male and female, as well as for their commonality of interests, goals, and ideals.

## Introduction to Genesis Chapter 3: The purpose of the serpent

**[NS]** There is abundant evidence that [a variety of pagan] cosmologies once existed in Israel. Scattered allusions to be found in the prophetic, poetic, and wisdom literature of the Bible testify to a popular belief that prior to the onset of the creative process the powers of watery chaos had to be subdued by God. These mythical beings are variously designated Yam (Sea), Nahar (River), Leviathan (Coiled One[; or Serpent]), Rahab (Arrogant One), and Tannin (Dragon). There is no consensus in these fragments regarding the ultimate fate of these creatures. One version has them utterly destroyed by God; in another, the chaotic forces, personalized as monsters, are put under restraint by His power. [Thus, Isaiah 27.1 states, “In that day the Lord will punish, with His great, cruel, mighty sword, Leviathan the Elusive Serpent—Leviathan the Twisting Serpent; He will slay the Dragon of the sea.”]

These myths about a cosmic battle at the beginning of time appear in the Bible in fragmentary form, and the several allusions have to be pieced together to produce some kind of coherent unity. Still, the fact that these myths appear in literary compositions in ancient Israel indicates clearly that they had achieved wide currency over a long period of time. They have survived in the Bible solely as obscure, picturesque metaphors and exclusively in the language of poetry. Never are these creatures accorded divine attributes, nor is there anywhere a suggestion that their struggle against God could in any way have posed a challenge to His sovereign rule.

This is of particular significance in light of the fact that one of the inherent characteristics of all other ancient Near Eastern cosmologies is the internecine strife of the gods. Polytheistic accounts of creation always begin with the predominance of the divinized powers of nature and then describe in detail a titanic struggle between the opposing forces. They inevitably regard the achievement of world order as the outgrowth of an overwhelming exhibition of power on the part of one god who then manages to impose his will upon all other gods.

The early Israelite creation myths, with all their color and drama, must have been particularly attractive to the masses. But none became the regnant version. It was the austere account set forth in the first chapter of Genesis that won unrivaled authority.

This brings us to the serpent’s appearance in Chapter 3.

The serpent has always been a creature of mystery. With its venomous bite, it can inflict sudden and unexpected death. It shows no limbs, yet it is gracefully and silently agile. Its glassy eyes—lidless, unblinking, strangely lustrous— have a fixed and penetrating stare. Its longevity and the regular, recurrent sloughing of its skin impart an aura of youthfulness, vitality, and rejuvenation. Small wonder that the snake simultaneously aroused fascination and revulsion, awe and dread. Throughout the ancient world, it was endowed with divine or semidivine qualities; it was venerated as an emblem of health, fertility, immortality, occult wisdom and chaotic evil; and it was often worshipped. The serpent played a significant role in the mythology, the religious symbolism, and the cults of the ancient Near East. As noted above, biblical poetic texts such as Isaiah 27.1 demonstrate that there once existed in Israel popular compositions in which the serpent, a monster representing primeval chaos, challenged, to its own ruin, God’s creative endeavors.

This background is essential for an understanding of the demythologizing that takes place in the present narrative. Here the serpent is introduced simply as one of “the creatures that the Lord God had made.” In the wording of the curse imposed on it in verse 14, the phrase “all the days of your

life” underlines its mortal nature. Of the three parties to the transgression, the serpent alone is summarily sentenced without prior interrogation—a token of God’s withering disdain for it. Further, the voluble creature does not utter a word—a sure sign of its impotence in the presence of the Deity.

In sum, the serpent is here reduced to an insignificant, demythologized stature. It possesses no occult powers. It is not demonic, only extraordinarily shrewd. Its role is to lay before the woman the enticing nature of evil and to fan her desire for it. The serpent is not the personification of evil; in fact, its identification with Satan is not encountered before the first century B.C.E., when it appears for the first time in the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon 2.24.

There is more here, however, regarding demythologization.

The two outstanding features of the Garden of Eden are the “tree of life” and the “tree of knowledge of good and evil.” They possess no magical properties which operate independently of God. They are in no wise outside of the divine realm, and their mysterious powers do not exist apart from the will of God. The eating of the fruit of the “tree of knowledge” did not endow the man and his wife with any special supernatural powers. They were unable to hide from God, to conceal their sin. They made no effort to oppose the divine judgment; the absolute sovereign will of God is never called into question. The magical element, so constant in ancient myths, is entirely and conspicuously absent here.

However, the most remarkable break of all with Near Eastern mythology lies in the subtle shift of emphasis. As far as is known, the “tree of knowledge” has no parallel outside of our biblical Garden of Eden story. Yet it is upon this tree, and not upon the well-known to ancient mythologies of the “tree of life,” that the narrative focuses its main attention. The divine prohibition makes no mention of the “tree of life.” The dialogue of the serpent and Eve likewise ignores it, as, too, does God’s questioning of Adam after the latter had eaten from the forbidden fruit. It is mentioned again only at the end of the narrative in explaining the expulsion from Eden. All this cannot be accidental, particularly in view of the great prominence of the “tree of life” motif in Near Eastern religion and the absence of the “tree of knowledge” idea outside of the Bible. We shall shortly offer an explanation of this phenomenon, but first we must turn our attention to the symbolism of the serpent.

The serpent figures prominently in all the world’s mythologies and cults. In the Near East, the serpent was a symbol of deity and fertility, and the images of serpent-goddesses have been found in the ruins of many Canaanite towns and temples. This tradition probably explains why the serpent is introduced in our story as simply one of “the wild beasts that the Lord God had made” (3.1).

This reduction of the serpent to natural, insignificant, demythologized stature is further pointed up in the difference between God’s dialogues with Adam and Eve and his monologue to the serpent. God does not interrogate the serpent, and the voluble reptile utters not a sound in the presence of the Deity. The role of the creature is that of seducer, laying before the woman the enticing nature of evil and fanning her desire for it. The use of the serpent symbolism in this situation has most likely been conditioned by the place of the serpent in the old cosmic combat myth described earlier.

This brings us back to the shift of focus from the “tree of life” to the “tree of knowledge.” The quest for immortality seems to have been an obsessive factor in ancient Near Eastern religion and literature. The preoccupation with death was the most characteristic feature of Egyptian civilization to the prominence of which the mighty pyramids still bear eloquent testimony. The Gilgamesh legend of Mesopotamia, to name but one, is the best known literary expression of this recurring theme in that part of the world.

By relegating the “tree of life” to an insignificant subordinate role in the Garden of Eden story, the Bible dissociates itself completely from this pre-occupation. Its concern is with the issues of living rather than with the question of death, with morality rather than immortality, Its problem is not the mythical pursuit of eternity, but the actual relationships between man and God, the tension between the plans of God and the free-will of man.

Not magic, it proclaims, but human action is the key to a meaningful life.

The sin of Adam and Eve thus has implications far beyond the immediate context of the narrative. The conversation between the serpent and the woman shows that the most seductive attraction that the creature could offer was the potentiality of the forbidden fruit to make humans like God.

Now the imitation of God is indeed a biblical ideal. Man was fashioned in the divine image, and “to walk in God’s ways” is a recurring admonition of the biblical writings. But true godliness is an expression of character, an attempt to imitate in human relationships those ethical attributes the Scriptures associate with God. The deceptive nature of the serpent’s appeal lay in its interpretation of godliness which it equated with defiance of God’s will, with power, rather than with strength of character.

God Himself testifies that “man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil” (3.22). In other words, man does possess the possibility of defying the divine word, and therein lies the secret of his freedom. The Garden of Eden incident is thus a landmark in the development of the understanding of the nature of man, his predicament and destiny. Man is a free moral agent and this freedom magnifies measurably his responsibility for his actions.

## Genesis Chapter 3—Translations and Commentary

1 Now the serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild beasts [more subtle—OJPS; most cunning—RA & CS; slier than—REF] that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say: You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?”

2 The woman replied to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the other trees of the garden.

3 It is only about fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said: ‘You shall not eat of it or touch it, lest you die.’”

**[REF] 1. slier.** A pun: The snake is introduced as the most “sly” (*'arum*) of the animals (3:1). In the subsequent dialogue between God and the man, the man says, after eating from the tree, that he is *'erom*, naked. His condition is spelled with the same consonants as the snake’s characteristic. The paronomasia may be purely a play on the root letters. Or it may be a pun of content, since the man now uses the word *'erom* when he is in fact no longer naked but is attempting, like the snake, to mislead.

**[NS] the shrewdest** The serpent’s cunning reveals itself in the way it frames the question, in its knowledge of the divine proscription, in its claim to be able to probe God’s mind and intent, and in the selection of its victim.

**[NS] to the woman** She, rather than her husband, is approached because she has not received the prohibition directly from God. She is, therefore, the more vulnerable of the two, the more susceptible to the serpent’s insidious verbal manipulation.

**[REF] Has God indeed said you may not eat from any tree of the garden?** A confusing formulation, conceivably to throw the woman off.

**[RA] 3.** As many commentators have observed, Eve enlarges the divine prohibition in another direction, adding a ban on touching to the one on eating, and so perhaps setting herself up for transgression: having touched the fruit, and seeing no ill effect, she may proceed to eat.

**[REF]** God is not quoted as having given any instruction to the woman. The natural understanding is that she has learned it from the man. So it may suggest that he adds it to protect himself (or her), or that she adds it herself. Either way, it is a caution concerning human oral transmission of a divine command.

**[NS] or touch it** In correcting her enquirer, she either unconsciously exaggerates the stringency of the divine prohibition or is quoting what her husband told her. Either way, she introduces into her own mind the suggestion of an unreasonably strict God.

**[AVOT OF RABBI NATAN]** What is the fence that Adam placed around his words? Lo, it says, “And the Lord God commanded the man, saying: Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it; for in the day that you eat thereof, you shall surely die.” Adam, however, did not wish to speak to Eve the way the Holy One, blessed be He, had spoken to him. Rather, this is what he said to her: “But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said: You shall not eat of it, neither shall you touch it, lest you die...” What led to Chava’s touching the tree? It was the fence that Adam put around his words. Hence, it has been said: If a man puts an [excessive] fence around his words, he shall not be able to stand by his words. Hence, it has also been said: Let no man add to what he hears.

### Guide to the Translators and Commentators used here

**EF:** Everett Fox    **REF:** Richard Elliott Friedman    **RA:** Robert Alter    **NS:** Nahum Sarna    **CS:** Chaim Stern  
**SRH:** Samson Raphael Hirsch    **RASHI:** Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak    **OJPS:** Old Jewish Publication Society version  
**WGP:** W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*<sup>4</sup>    **TWC:** *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*

4 And the serpent said to the woman, "You are not going to die, [shall not surely—OJPS; die, you will not die—EV; shall not be doomed to die—RA; you won't die!—REF; you most certainly will not die—CS]

5 but God knows that as soon as you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like [divine beings] [God] who know[s] good and bad."

6 When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes [lust to the eyes—RA; an attraction to the eyes—REF; alluring to the eyes—CS], and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom [desirable to contemplate—EV; lovely to look at—RA; desirable to bring about understanding—REF; how desirable the insight was that the tree would bring—CS], she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave some to her husband with her, and he ate.

7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked [Heb. 'arummim, play on 'arum "shrewd" in 3.1]; and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loincloths [skins—CS].

**[REF] 3:5. you'll be like God.** Whatever is meant by creation in the image of God, it means that humans are understood to participate in the divine in some way that animals do not. Only humans would aspire to the divine. And that is the basis of the snake's appeal to the humans here.

**[NS] like divine beings** Hebrew *'elohim* is a comprehensive term for supernatural beings and is often employed for angels. Any possible ambiguity inherent in the use of the same word for "God" and for "divine beings" is here removed by the plural form of the verb "know" (*yode'ei*) and by verse 22 ("one of us"). As BT Sof'rim 4:5 notes, "the first 'elohim [here] is sacred, the second non-sacred."

**[WGP] 3.6. Fruit.** Jewish tradition suggests wheat, grape, fig, or citron—all prominent Near Eastern fruits. In Christian tradition, the fruit is generally thought to be an apple—because it was a popular fruit in Europe and because the Latin translation of *ra* (evil) is *malum*, which also means "apple."

**[REF] 3:6. its fruit.** I think it is meaningful that the text does not tell us what it is. This may suggest that it is a unique fruit, the fruit of this unique tree. Or it may convey that the kind of fruit is not the point. In its extraordinary economy of detail, the Torah gives us only what is crucial to the story. What matters is not whether the fruit is a grape or a banana—but that it is forbidden, that it gives one the knowledge of good and bad, and that the humans are attracted to take it.

**[RA] 6. lust to the eyes.** There is a long tradition of rendering the first term here, *ta'avah*, according to English idiom and local biblical context, as "delight" or something similar. But *ta'avah* means "that which is intensely desired," "appetite," and sometimes specifically "lust." Eyes have just been mentioned in the serpent's promise that they will be wondrously opened; now they are linked to intense desire. In the event, they will be opened chiefly to see nakedness. *Ta'avah* is semantically bracketed with the next term attached to the tree, "lovely" *nechmad*, which literally means "that which is desired."

**[RA] to look at.** A venerable tradition renders this verb, *lehaskil*, as "to make one wise." But Amos Funkenstein has astutely observed to me that there is an internal parallelism in the verse, "lust to the eyes...lovely to look at." And in fact, the Aramaic Targums of both Onkelos and Yonatan ben Uziel render this as "to look at." At least one other biblical occurrence is almost certainly in the sense of look, the beginning of Psalm 41: "Happy is he who maskil to the poor man"—surely, who looks at, has regard for, the poor man. A correlation between verbs of seeing and verbs of knowledge or understanding is common to many languages.

8 They heard the sound of the Lord God moving about in the garden at the breezy time of day; and the man [human—EF, RA, & REF] and his wife hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

9 The Lord God called out to the man [human—EF, RA, & REF] and said to him, "Where are you?"

**[NS] 7. the eyes. . . were opened** Just as the serpent had foretold! But, ironically, the new insight they gain is only the consciousness of their own nakedness, and shame is the consequence.

**fig leaves** The fig tree has unusually large and strong leaves. Incidentally, it is indigenous to the Land of Israel, where it was cultivated very early, but it was not known in Babylon; hence, this detail reflects a West Semitic, not a Mesopotamian, cultural background.

**[REF] 7. fig leaves** they picked fig leaves and made loincloths. Humans do not yet fashion or invent anything new themselves. They do not actually make clothing. They only cover themselves with leaves. The first clothing is made by God (3.21).

**[NS] loincloths** Their pristine innocence is gone. In a sense, this action has already taken them outside Eden, for clothing is a characteristic of civilization. In the Gilgamesh Epic, putting on clothes is one of the tokens of the wild Enkidu's abandonment of his outdoor life with the beasts of the field.

**[EV] 8 breezy-time:** Evening.

**face of YHWH:** The "face" or presence of God is a dominating theme in many biblical stories and in the book of Psalms. People seek God's face or hide from it; God reveals it to them or hides it from them.

**[WGP] 8 Walking about.** God is pictured in human terms as inspecting the divine creation.

**[NS] 8. hid from the Lord** The foregoing dialogue and action had proceeded as though God were backstage. Now, prompted by a guilty conscience, the disobedient couple suddenly becomes aware of the Divine Presence. God reemerges and moves to the center of the stage. The attempt to evade God is tantamount to an admission of guilt.

**[NS] 9. God called out to the man** Not the woman, because only he had heard the prohibition directly from God.

**Where are you?** The question is merely a formal civility, often used as a way of opening conversation.

**[REF] 9. Where are you?** The conversation between God and the two humans in the garden is a masterpiece. God says, "Where are you?" (a strange thing for a deity to say). The man answers, "I hid because I was naked," and his creator pounces like an attorney who has caught a witness in a stupid mistake on the stand: "Who told you that you were naked?! Have you eaten from the tree...?" To which the man replies, unchivalrously, "The WOMAN," and ungratefully, "whom YOU placed with me," and trying to escape responsibility for his own actions: "SHE gave me from the tree, and I ate." The creator turns to the woman, who also tries to pass the responsibility down the line: "The SNAKE tricked me." God pronounces a curse on the snake (and on all snakes)—no dialogue, there's no one left for the snake to blame—but then God turns back to the woman and pronounces a painful fate for her (and all women). During this pronouncement one should consider the tension in the man, who does not know if the pendulum of recompense will swing all the way back to him. Did his blaming the woman excuse him? Clearly not, as God next turns back to him and says, "Because YOU listened..." and pronounces a hard fate for him (and all men), as well. This first divine-human dialogue in the Torah is remarkable—at times humorous and at times fearfully serious—but the point is not merely a literary one; it is a psychological one (showing the sexes reacting to guilt and fear) and a spiritual one (showing divine-human confrontation), as well. This exchange is a powerful introduction to the coming account of the relationship between God and humans in the Torah.

10 He replied, "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid."

11 Then He asked, "Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat of the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat [commanded you not to eat—EF; RA; REF]?"

12 The man [human—EF, RA, & REF] said, "The woman You put at my side [others, that You gave me]—she gave me of the tree, and I ate."

13 And the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done!" The woman replied, "The serpent duped [beguiled—OJPS & RA; enticed—EF; tricked—REF & CS] me, and I ate."

**[NS] 10.** The man's evasive words contain a hint of irony, for in Hebrew the words "I heard the sound of You" can also be translated "I obeyed You," which, of course, is the opposite of the truth. **I was afraid because I was naked** Another evasion of the truth. The statement itself voices the Israelite ethos that it is improper for man to appear naked before God. This finds practical expression in the laws of Exodus 20.26 and 28.42-43 that regulate the proper dress code for the act of worship. *There is probably an underlying protest here against pagan fertility cults and a reaction against a Near Eastern practice of priests, such as in Sumer, where the cultic ritual was performed in the nude.*

**[NS] 11.** Man's self-awareness discloses the radical change that has taken place in the human condition. The consciousness of nakedness can have meaning only in contrast to the consciousness of being clothed, a new condition that came about only because of his sin. **forbidden** Literally, "commanded not to," in contrast to the softer verb used by the serpent in verses 1 and 3.

**[NS] 12-13.** The confessions are compromised by each shifting the blame onto the other. The man does not say why he ate. He stands self-condemned, for he unquestioningly did what his wife told him to do but did not do as God told him.

#### **[NS] THE PUNISHMENT (vv. 14–19)**

Human beings have arrogated the right to make decisions concerning human welfare independently of God and in defiance of His norms. They have lost their innocence and must assume full responsibility for their actions. Accordingly, God now metes out punishment on each transgressor in turn, in the order of their original appearance on the scene. In each case, the judgment is of a twofold nature: it affects what is of central concern in the life of each entity, and it regulates a basic relationship.

The snake is punished in its manner of self-propulsion and in its contacts with human beings; the woman is doomed to suffer in childbearing, and her relationship to her husband is defined; the man is fated to a life of arduous labor, and his interaction with the soil is to be disagreeable.

14 Then the Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you did this, More cursed shall you be than all cattle and all the wild beasts: On your belly shall you crawl and dirt [or dust as per OJPS, EF, RA, REF, & CS] shall you eat all the days of your life.

15 I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; They shall strike at your head, and you shall strike at their heel." [bruise you on the head and you will bruise him in the heel—OJPS & EF; boot your head and you will bite his heel—RA; strike you at the head and you will strike him at the heel—REF & CS]

**[NS] 14. more cursed. . . than** Hebrew *'arur mi-kol* evokes the description in verse 1, *'arum mi-kol*, "more shrewd than," in a kind of literary framework expressing the idea of measure for measure.

**On your belly** This reflects a popular notion, often represented in the art of the ancient Near East, that the serpent originally walked erect. Having arrogantly aggrandized itself in a challenge to God, it is now permanently doomed to a posture of abject humiliation.

**[WGP] 14 Under a curse.** Condemned to wriggle and slither rather than walk and run.

Paleontologists have found evidence (already attested in iconographical depictions) that the earliest serpents had hind legs. The Christians bible identified the dragon, "that serpent of old," with Satan.

**[NS] dirt shall you eat** The transgression involved eating, and so does the punishment. As the serpent slithers on its way, its flickering tongue appears to lick the dust.

**[REF] 14. you'll go on your belly.** Scholars often refer to the "economy" of wording in biblical stories, but even by the Bible's obviously economical standard the story of Eden stands out as a showpiece for accomplishing so much in just 24 verses. Stories in Genesis frequently develop etiologies—explanations of the origins of names and practices—but none comes close to the number of origins accounted for in Genesis 3. Namely:

1. It is the story of why snakes do not have legs. Contrary to the vast majority of depictions of this story in art—which have the snake coiled around the tree while addressing the woman—the text states explicitly in v. 14 that the fact that snakes crawl on their bellies is the punishment imposed on the snake (and its descendants) for the offense that it has committed. Before v. 14 the snake must be pictured as having legs.
2. The story is the etiology of what was perceived to be the natural enmity between humans and snakes (v. 15). Presumably, the human phobia even of harmless snakes was as common at the time of this story's composition as it is to this day.
3. It is the etiology of man's domination of woman in the world in which this story was composed (v. 16).
4. It is the author's etiology of woman's being drawn to man (v. 16), and:
5. man's mating with woman ("On account of this a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his woman, and they become one flesh," 2.24).
6. The story contains the etiologies of clothing (and embarrassment over nudity), 2.25; 3:7,10-11,21;
7. labor pain in childbirth (v. 16);
8. work (vv. 17-19);
9. knowledge of good and bad;
10. death. The humans have access to the tree of life initially, which would make them immortal (v. 22). They are denied only the tree of knowledge of good and bad. It is as a result of eating from the tree of knowledge that they lose access to the tree of life. They are driven from the garden of Eden, in which the tree of life is located, and cherubs and a flaming sword bar the way back.

**15. enmity** This curse seeks to explain the natural revulsion of humans for the serpent. Clearly, when it entered into conversation with the woman, it could not have been so regarded; indeed, it posed as her friend, solicitous of her interests. *The imprecation may also carry antipagan undertones, as if to say that the serpent is neither a fertility symbol, as in Canaan, nor a protective emblem, as among Egyptian royalty, but a hostile object of aversion.*

16 And to the woman He said, "I will make most severe Your pangs in childbearing; in pain shall you bear children. Yet your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." [I will multiply, multiply your pain (from) your pregnancy, with pains shall you bear children. Toward your husband will be your lust, yet he will rule over you—EF; I will terribly sharpen your birth pangs, in pain shall you bear children. And for your man shall be your longing, and he shall rule over you—RA; I'll make your suffering and your labor pain great. You'll have children in pain. And your desire will be for your man, and he'll dominate you; REF; I am doubling and redoubling your pains of pregnancy; / with pain shall you bear children, / yet your craving shall be for your man, / and he shall govern you—CS]

**[WGP] 16-19** These four verses serve to explain the basic condition of humanity: in the case of the woman, her problems in childbearing and delivery, as well as her relationship to her husband; in the case of the man, the universal need to work for a living. Though serpent and earth are cursed, the two humans are not.

**[NS] 16. Your pangs in childbearing** This verse, like the preceding, presupposes the blessing of 1.28, "Be fertile and increase." Now, however, its fulfillment is to be accompanied by pain and suffering, which include the disorders occurring during pregnancy as much as the rigors of parturition itself.

Intense pain in childbearing is unique to the human species and generally unknown to other female mammals. It, therefore, calls for explanation. While the rigors of childbearing are presented here as a consequence of partaking of the tree of knowledge, modern biology traces the woman's condition to the enlargement of the human skull that was entailed by the evolutionary increase in the size of the human brain, especially that part of the brain, the neocortex, that is associated with human intelligence.

**your urge** The import of this phrase is unclear. Rashi understood this, together with the next clause, to refer to the satisfaction of female sexuality being traditionally dependent upon the husband's initiative. Ramban (Nachmanides) took it to mean that despite the discomforts and pain attendant upon childbearing, the woman still longs for the sexual act that brings about this condition.

Another possibility is to see the two provisions as a reflection of social reality. Historically, the woman was wholly dependent for her sustenance upon what her husband could eke out of the soil, in striking contrast to the situation in Eden where her food was readily and independently available at all times. It should be noted that the "curse" is used in connection with the judgments on the serpent and the man, but not in relation to the woman.

**he shall rule over you** *It is quite clear from the description of woman in 2.18, that the ideal situation, which hitherto existed, was the absolute equality of the sexes.* The new state of male dominance is regarded as an aspect of the deterioration in the human condition that resulted from defiance of divine will.

**[TWC] 16.** God's words to the woman have been misinterpreted in ways that disadvantaged women dramatically. The pronouncements to the woman (v. 16) and to the man (v. 17) are largely parallel, which implies parallel consequences. But for several centuries the key term has been typically rendered one way regarding the woman and another regarding the man, in a manner that intensifies the punishment for the woman, prompting the claim that her culpability must have been greater than the man's. Genesis 3.16 neither imposes physical pain upon the woman nor condones it. Unlike the pronouncements to the serpent, which speak of perpetual enmity, nothing suggests that this etzev is a continual condition. "desire. " God's words should not be read (as they have in both Jewish and Christian traditions) as an unqualified mandate for males' general control over females.

17 To Adam [the human—RA & REF; the man—CS] He said, "Because you did as your wife said and ate of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed be the ground because of you; By toil shall you eat of it [Damned be the soil on your account, with painstaking-labor shall you eat from it— EF; cursed be the soil for your sake, with pangs shall you eat from it—RA; the ground is cursed on your account. You'll eat from it with suffering—REF; the soil is now cursed on your account: Only through pain shall you eat of it—CS] all the days of your life:

**[NS] 17.** God's longest address is reserved for the man, for his is the greatest share of culpability since it was he who received the prohibition directly from God. His cowardly shifting of the blame is rejected. The individual is morally autonomous and must bear responsibility for his actions.

**Cursed be the ground** Once again, the punishment is related to the offense. The sin of eating forbidden food results in complicating the production of goods. The man himself is not cursed, only the soil. *The matter from which he sprang turns against him. His pristine harmony with nature is disturbed by his transgression.* This notion of moral ecology is a major biblical theme; it is explicitly formulated in Leviticus 18.24-28 and 20.22.

**[EF] 17. the ground is cursed on your account.** As a consequence of human behavior, the environment suffers. This phenomenon will recur in the Torah.

**[WGP] 17 Soil is now cursed.** The earth was thought to share in humanity's guilt. "When we corrupt our way the land is corrupted."

**[EF] painstaking-labor:** Heb. *itzavon*. Man and woman receive equal curses (see v.16).

**[RA] with pangs shall you eat.** The noun *itsavon* is the same used for the woman's birth pangs, confirming the lot of painful labor that is to be shared by man and woman.

**[NS] By toil** The man's backbreaking physical labor is regarded as the male equivalent of the labor of childbearing. The curse lies not in the work itself, which is decreed for man even in Eden (2.15), but in the uncooperative nature of the soil, so that henceforth the wresting of subsistence from it entails unremitting drudgery.

**[WGP] Only through pain shall you eat.** The need to work appears to be part of God's curse. The Rabbis, however, interpreted God's dictum as a concession: By work we are able to fend for and feed ourselves. The Rabbis further observed that the task of providing human sustenance is God's greatest problem.

**[NS] All the days of your life** The same phrase as used of the serpent in verse 14. Man and beast were created mortal from the start. The formula is absent in verse 16 because childbearing does not occur all the days of a woman's life.

18 Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you. But your food shall be the grasses of the field;

19 By the sweat of your brow shall you get bread to eat, until you return to the ground— For from it you were taken. For dust you are, and to dust you shall return.”

20 The man [human—EF, RA, & REF] named his wife Eve [Chavah], because she was the mother of all the living [kol chai].

21 And the Lord God made garments of skins for Adam [the human—RA & REF] and his wife, and clothed them.

**[NS] 18. Thorns and thistles** Weeds that rob the cultivated plants of light, water, and the soil's nutrients and that require much effort to control. And this occurs in the face of mankind's need to subsist on the grasses of the field! Humankind is once again viewed as being vegetarian, and agriculture is taken to be man's earliest occupation.

**[RA] 18.** The vista of **thorn and thistle** is diametrically opposed to the luscious vegetation of the garden and already intimates the verdict of banishment that will be carried out in verses 23-24.

**[NS]19.** The sentencing ends on an ironic note. Human beings had attempted to elevate themselves to the level of the divine. All they achieved was to condemn themselves to a ceaseless, brutal struggle for subsistence, with the consciousness of the fragility of life ever hanging over them.

#### **[NS] A MEASURE OF RAPPROCHEMENT (vv. 20–21)**

These verses interrupt the flow of the narrative, which draws to its logical conclusion in verses 22–24. Such apparently intrusive data is one of the recurring literary features of the Genesis narratives. Generally, their function is to provide the background for the understanding of future developments. Verse 20 signifies a restoration of relationships between man and wife, indispensable to the development in 4.1; verse 21 indicates a measure of reconciliation between human beings and God. Both are essential for survival after the expulsion from Eden.

**[NS] 20. The man named his wife** Previously he had given her a generic name (2.23). Now she acquires a personal one that expresses her nature and destiny positively and sympathetically. The woman's procreative role is implied in verse 15 and made central in verse 16. It is appropriate that she now receive a name that symbolizes its actualization, which is shortly to take place. The man's act is thus an affirmation of life.

**[RA] 20. Eve . . . all that lives.** Like most of the explanations of names in Genesis, this is probably based on folk etymology or an imaginative playing with sound. In the Hebrew here, the phonetic similarity is between *chavah*, "Eve," and the verbal root *chayah*, "to live." It has been proposed that Eve's name conceals very different origins, for it sounds suspiciously like the Aramaic word for "serpent" [*chivyah* in the targum]. Could she have been given the name by the contagious contiguity with her wily interlocutor, or, on the contrary, might there lurk behind the name a very different evaluation of the serpent as a creature associated with the origins of life?

**[NS] mother of all the living** This description is closely paralleled in Near Eastern mythology, where it belongs to the mother goddess. Here it is demythologized and naturalized to express the biblical concept of the unity of the human race and of woman's primary role—motherhood.

**[EV] 21 God . . . clothed them:** Once punishment has been pronounced, God cares for the man and the woman. Both aspects of God comprise the biblical understanding of his nature, and they are not exclusive of each other.

22 And the Lord God said, "Now that the man [human—EF, RA, & REF] has become like one of us, knowing good and bad, what if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever!"

23 So the Lord God banished him from the garden of Eden, to till the soil from which he was taken.

24 He drove the man [human—EF, RA, & REF] out, and stationed east of the garden of Eden the cherubim and the fiery ever-turning sword [the winged-sphinxes and the flashing, ever-turning sword—EF], to guard the way to the tree of life.

**[NS] 22.** Man, having already exceeded the limits of creaturehood, has radically altered the perspective of human existence. He lives henceforth in the consciousness of his mortality. He may therefore be tempted to change his condition by artificial means, rather than by restoring the ruptured harmony between divine will and human will, the harmony that is ultimately the definition of paradise.

**[EV] 24 winged-sphinxes:** "Cherubim," the traditional English rendering, has come to denote chubby, red-cheeked baby angels in Western art, an image utterly foreign to the ancient Near East.

**[NS] cherubim** The function of these creatures, as stated in 3.24, is to secure the Garden of Eden from intrusion. "The fiery ever-turning sword" is an additional and separate deterrent and not a weapon in their hands. The manner in which they are introduced shows that they are well known and require no definition. It reflects their unique position in the religious art of ancient Israel.

Two golden cherubim with outstretched wings overshadowed the cover of the Ark in the Tabernacle in the wilderness, and from the space between them issued the divine Voice that spoke to Moses. Pictorial representations of them were also worked into the cloth curtains of that Tabernacle. The same cherubic motif decorated Solomon's Temple and was envisaged by Ezekiel. One of the epithets of God, especially in poetry, is "The One Enthroned on the Cherubim." Biblical poetic texts also imagine the cherubim bearing the invisible throne of God from place to place. By the end of the Second Temple period, reliable traditions about their nature no longer existed.

Their frequent portrayal as beautiful winged children in Renaissance art has nothing to do with biblical notions.

Archaeological findings in the Near East have shed some light on the mystery of the cherubim. The name would appear to be connected with the *kuribu*, the Akkadian term often applied to the composite figures—man-headed bulls with eagles' wings—that frequently stood outside Mesopotamian temples. The name seems to derive from Akkadian *kara-bu*, "to pronounce formulas of blessings, to pray." The *kuribu* was an advocate for the faithful before the god and an advisor to the great gods, but it also guarded the entrance to the temple. The motif of the composite human-animal-bird figure is widespread in various forms in art and religious symbolism throughout the Fertile Crescent, and the biblical cherubim would seem to be connected with this artistic tradition.

An examination of the various scriptural passages in which cherubim occur leads to the conclusion that they filled multiple conceptual roles. First, they symbolized the invisible Divine Presence. The divine epithet "Enthroned on the Cherubim" expresses His sovereignty. Ezekiel depicts these creatures as composites of man-lion-ox-eagle, and each of the components is king in his respective domain. Finally, they guard the Ark and its sacred contents inside the Holy of Holies. The only pictorial representation permitted in an otherwise aniconic religion, the cherubim do not violate the prohibition against the plastic arts decreed in the Ten Commandments. Purely products of the human imagination, they do not represent any existing reality in heaven and earth. Moreover, whether in the Tabernacle or in Solomon's Temple, they were hidden from public gaze.

## Introduction to Genesis Chapter 4: Birth, Jealousy, and Violent Death

**[NS]** The narrative now turns to the fortunes of humankind in the harsh world outside Eden. The flow of time that separates the events of chapter 3 from those about to be described is of no consequence and therefore goes unmentioned. The focus of the narrative is not history, but the human condition.

The previous and present chapters are closely linked by several common themes: free will, personal responsibility, and inevitable punishment for wrongdoing. The opening verse harks back to 3.16, 20 as the woman begins to fulfill her appointed destiny: propagation of the species—the continuity of life through the constant regeneration of the human race. Outside of Eden, this is the answer of humankind to the quest for immortality; it is a perpetual triumph over death.

The preceding narrative focuses on the role of greed and unbridled ambition, and the present chapter deals with the place of the irrational in human conduct. The former offense was against God; now it is man against his brother, which also is an offense against God. It was the “fruit of the tree” that led to the downfall of Adam and Eve; it is the “fruit of the soil” that leads to Cain’s undoing. The first human was worried about death; now the experience of death becomes a reality.

Apart from these thematic parallels, several other correspondences tighten the bond between the two chapters: the name Eve occurs here too and never again in the Bible; the verb “to know” appears four times in each chapter; verse 7 here virtually reproduces 3.16; the divine question to the culprit in each case—“Where?”— receives an evasive reply in both chapters; the wording of the curse upon Adam in 3.14 is echoed in that upon Cain in 4.11; the son, like his parents in the previous chapter, is “banished” and settles to the east of Eden.

The present chapter divides into four distinct units: Cain and Abel (vv. 1–16), the Genealogy of Cain (vv. 17–22), the Song of Lamech (vv. 23–24), and Seth and Enosh (vv. 25–26). Tying together these apparently discrete units are notices about the developments in civilization that each contains. These developments number seven in all: agriculture, sheep-breeding, urbanism, pastoralism, music, metallurgy, religion. The symbolic number seven is featured repeatedly: sevenfold vengeance is invoked (vv. 15, 24); Lamech is the seventh generation from Adam; his song refers to “sevenfold” and “77”; the number of souls mentioned in all, from Adam to Lamech’s offspring, is 14 (twice seven); and the name Abel appears seven times, as do also the words “brother” and “name.”

### **CAIN AND ABEL (vv. 1–16)**

This narrative has often been interpreted as a reflection of the traditional conflict between the farmer and the nomad, and its supposed bias in favor of the latter is seen as representing a nomadic ideal in Israel. This is unlikely. The evidence for such an ideal in biblical literature is extremely flimsy. Further, there is not the slightest suggestion in the text of any comparative evaluation of the vocations of Cain and Abel, nor is there the slightest disparagement of the tiller of the soil. On the contrary, agriculture is regarded as the original occupation of man in the Garden of Eden as well as outside it. The sentence upon Cain is restricted to him alone; his sons are not made into vagrants or stigmatized in any way. Finally, the three pillars of semi-nomadic culture, as set forth in verses 20–22, are actually said to have originated with the descendants of Cain.

The narrative, which is extraordinarily terse and sketchy here, gives no explicit reason for the unacceptability of Cain’s offering and no explanation for the manner by which this is revealed. Cain

lived in an unpopulated world. Of whom was he afraid? And who was there for him to marry? The presumption is inescapable that an independent narrative, in which these details presented no problem, was once well known in Israel. The difficulties now apparent arose when the Torah chose only the bare bones of the story as a vehicle for the expression and inculcation of certain fundamental truths about some of life's most perplexing problems.

### **[WGP] FARMER AND SHEPHERD**

Much of Israel's early history is connected with shepherds, the nomadic life, and experiences encountered in traveling through wilderness lands. The Ancestors were nomads or semi-nomads, and both Moses and David were shepherds. The Bible exhibits two contradictory opinions about the nomadic life. On the one hand it appears as a punishment for rebelliousness—Cain being the first example, and the Israelites in the wilderness the most important. On the other hand, withdrawal from the settled life appeared conducive to spiritual illumination—Moses at Mount Sinai and Elijah in the wilderness being the prime illustrations.

Nomads considered settled people, such as farmers or city-dwellers, as slaves to possessions and prone to corruption, a tradition that even in modern times has considered rural morals as superior to those practiced in the city.

The Cain-and-Abel struggle contains both traditions: Cain is condemned to live in the Land of Nomads, which is the punishment for his offense; but he is also credited with having built the city of Enoch, possibly reflecting a negative opinion about urban, settled life.

### **[WGP] THE REJECTED SACRIFICE**

Both Cain and Abel bring sacrifices to God—only Abel's is accepted; the biblical writer offers no explanation for God's choice.

Some commentators maintain that the key to God's preference may be found in the intent of the two worshipers. While Cain brings merely "an offering," Abel brings "the choicest" of his flock. One performs outward motions, the other offers the service of his heart.

A better interpretation, however, is that God's rejection of Cain's offering is inexplicable in human terms. God acts in accordance with divine wisdom: "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious" (Exod. 33.19). God's reasons are un-known to us. The inexplicability of divine preferment marks Cain as an essentially tragic character; he reacts with blind violence to a rejection he cannot comprehend. As Cyrus Gordon notes, "We are accustomed to think of him with revulsion: but the text of Genesis aims rather at evoking our sympathy for a man who atoned for his crime with homelessness and fear—a fate worse than death."

### **[WGP] AM I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER?**

Few phrases have been quoted more often than this bold counter-question that Cain flings back at God. But the meaning is far from clear. The following explanations have been suggested:

- The question implies the answer, for by asking the question of God, Cain acknowledges a higher moral authority. There is someone to whom we must answer for our deeds. The theme is human responsibility. God, by the punishment meted out, asserts that Cain is indeed his brother's keeper.

• Cain's question is essentially defiant: "How would I know—or care?" Cain, the first product of the post-Eden world, is a man who defies God. "The idea of...rebelliousness, by which Genesis explains the origins of the human condition," writes Yechezkel Kaufmann, "is a fundamental idea of biblical literature and of Israelite religion in general. One might call the Bible a chronicle of human rebellion."

• According to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, when God asked Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" Cain answered, "Am I my brother's keeper? You are God. You have created me, and it is Your task to watch him, not mine. If I ought not to have done what I did, You could have prevented me from doing it." Thus, Cain makes God responsible or at least co-responsible for his own actions. Note that God does not reply. The question "Am I my brother's keeper?" remains unanswered and has remained so despite the questions of succeeding generations. Why is God silent when people kill each other? Where does divine power begin and where does it end? God asks us to account for our deeds. We turn the question back to God and ask: Am I alone my brother's keeper? Are You not as well? If my brother's blood cries out against me, does it not cry out against You, too?

Rabbi Shimon emphasizes this by pointing out that a slight shift in Genesis 4:10 (xxx instead of xxx) would make God, who now accuses Cain by stating, "Your brother's blood cries out to Me," say sorrowfully, "Your brother's blood cries out against Me." Rabbi Shimon, aware of the implications of his comment, says: "It is difficult to say such a thing [that is, to read the text as it ought to be read] and the mouth cannot utter it [as it would imply the blaming of God]." He compared the God-Cain-Abel triangle to two gladiators fighting before a ruler, who could stop the contest any minute, but who lets it proceed to the bitter, deadly end. Is that one not, by maintaining silence, involved in the killing?

This last interpretation is appealing not only because it asks questions of great urgency today, but also because it allows for a direct continuation of the Eden story. There, the human choice was essentially between life and death; now, in the post-Eden world, God offers us a new choice, the choice between good and evil. Cain chooses murder, the ultimate evil. And having granted humanity moral freedom, God, in a sense, shares in its transgressions. But though we may ask where God was at the hour of violence, God's failure to answer does not reduce our responsibility.

## Genesis Chapter 4—Translations and Commentary

1. Now the man knew [*yada*, often used in a sexual sense—JPS] his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, “I have gained [*kaniti*, connected with “Cain”—JPS; “I have created”—REF] a male child with the help of the Lord. [Both I and the Eternal have made a man”—CS]
2. She then bore his brother Abel. Abel became a keeper [sheperd—EF, REF, CS; herder—RA] of sheep, and Cain became a tiller of the soil.

**[NS] 1. the man knew** “Knowing” in the Bible is not essentially intellectual activity[; it is] not simply the objective contemplation of reality. Rather, it is experiential, emotional, and, above all, relational. For that reason, the Hebrew stem *y-d-‘* can encompass a range of meanings that includes involvement, interaction, loyalty, and obligation. It can be used of the most intimate and most hallowed relationships between man and wife and between man and God. Significantly, the verb is never employed for animal copulation. The Hebrew construction here employed usually indicates a pluperfect sense; that is, it would normally be rendered “the man had known.” This leads Rashi to conclude that coition had already taken place in the Garden of Eden before the expulsion, an interpretation that finds support in 3.20. There is nothing to sustain the idea that sexual activity first occurred outside Eden. The Hebrew phrase in our text does not need to imply that we have here the first occurrence of sexual experience.

**I have gained** Hebrew *kaniti*, which derives from a stem *k-n-h*, is here connected with the name “Cain,” which can only be related to *k-y-n*. The former verb (*k-n-h*) usually means “to acquire, own,” while the latter, in several Semitic languages, denotes “to form, fashion, forge.” In fact, in Arabic and Aramaic, *kayn* means a “smith.”

**a male child** Hebrew *‘ish*, “man,” never otherwise refers to a newborn babe. The usage here is influenced by Adam’s jubilant cry in 2.23 at the creation of woman. Eve now says, in effect: “I, woman (*‘ish(sh)ah*), was produced from man (*‘ish*); now I, woman, have in turn produced a man.”

**with the help of the Lord** In Hebrew *‘et Adonai*; the sign of the accusative *‘et* often has the sense of “together with.” A similar phrase is used in the Akkadian Atranasis Epic when the mother goddess Mami, who has been ordered to create man, replies that she can do so only with the help of the god Enki (*itti Enki-ma*). The role of God in human procreation is frequently acknowledged in the Bible. As BT Niddah 31a expresses it, “There are three co-partners in the production of a human being: God, father, and mother.”

**the Lord** The most sacred divine name Adonai is here uttered by a human being, a woman, for the first time.

**2. his brother** The absence of the formula “she conceived and bore” led to the tradition that Cain and Abel were twins.

**Abel** No explanation for this choice is given. Hebrew *hevel* means “breath, nothingness.” The name may augur his destiny; or it may be a reflection of his fate. Hevel is often used to express the fleeting nature of life.

**keeper of sheep. . . tiller of the soil** Adapting to the new ecological conditions encountered outside Eden, human society produces a mixed subsistence economy based on stockbreeding and agriculture. Labor becomes specialized. Cain, the firstborn, follows his father’s occupation, while Abel branches out to new areas. The two parts of the economy supplement each other. *Since, in the biblical view, mankind was vegetarian until after the Flood, the function of animal husbandry at this point was to supply milk, hides and wool.*

### Guide to the Translators and Commentators used here

**EF:** Everett Fox    **REF:** Richard Elliott Friedman    **RA:** Robert Alter    **NS:** Nahum Sarna    **CS:** Chaim Stern  
**SRH:** Samson Raphael Hirsch    **RASHI:** Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak    **OJPS:** Old Jewish Publication Society version  
**WGP:** W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*<sup>4</sup>    **TWC:** *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*

3. In the course of time, Cain brought an offering to the Lord from the fruit of the soil;  
 4. and Abel, for his part, brought the choicest of the firstlings of his flock. The Lord paid heed to [paid attention to—REF; approved—CS] Abel and his offering],  
 5. but to Cain and his offering He paid no heed [had no respect—OJPS;. Cain was much distressed [was very wrath—OJPS; exceedingly upset—EF; was very incensed—RA; was filled with rage—CS] and his face fell.

6. And the Lord said to Cain,

“Why are you distressed,  
 And why is your face fallen?

7. Surely, if you do right, There is uplift.

But if you do not do right  
 Sin couches at the door;  
 Its urge is toward you,  
 Yet you can be its master.”

**EF:** Is it not thus: / If you intend good, bear-it-aloft, / but if you do not intend good, / at the entrance is sin, a crouching-demon, / toward you his lust— / but you can rule over him. **RA:** Why are you incensed, / and why is your face fallen? / For whether you offer well, / or whether you do not, / at the tent flap sin crouches / and for you is its longing, / but you will rule over it." **CS:** "Why are you so angry? / Why your fallen face? / Would you not do well to lift it? / For if you do not do well— / sin is a demon at the door; / you are the one it craves, / and yet you can govern it."

**3–5.** The two sons, unlike their parents in Eden, subsisted through the toil of their hands. In the fruits of their labors, they recognized divine blessing, and they felt gratitude to God for His bounty. Their offerings were spontaneous, not a response to divine command. The reason for God’s different reactions may be inferred from the descriptions of the offerings: Abel’s is characterized as being “the choicest of the firstlings of his flock”; Cain’s is simply termed as coming “from the fruit of the soil,” without further detail. *Abel appears to have demonstrated a quality of heart and mind that Cain did not possess. Cain’s purpose was noble, but his act was not ungrudging and openhearted.* Thus the narrative conveys *the fundamental principle of Judaism that the act of worship must be informed by genuine devotion of the heart.* It also teaches that the two aspects of divine worship—the cultic act and the verbal element—are separate in origin. Further on, in verse 26, prayer is said to be a later development, independent of sacrifice. *This constitutes a revolutionary development in the religious thinking of the ancient world, where the two elements were inextricably interconnected, the one inoperative without the other, because the religious act was essentially magical and required for its effectiveness both the spoken word and the praxis.* By severing the two, the religion of Israel stressed the exceptional, non-magical nature of prayer. In the same vein, the official priestly sacrificial ritual prescribed in the Book of Leviticus is not accompanied by prayer. Tradition consistently ascribes the institutions of sacrifice to Moses and the introduction of the recitation of psalms to David.

**4. paid heed** Based on such passages as Leviticus 9.24, Judges 6.21, 1 Kings 18.38, and 2 Chronicles 7.1, ancient and medieval commentators imagined fire descending from heaven and devouring Abel’s offering but leaving Cain’s untouched. **6. distressed** Cain’s mood is depression, not anger. Hebrew *charah l’* expresses despondency or distress, as opposed to *charah ’af*, which means “to be angry.”

8. Cain said to his brother Abel...and when they were in the field, Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him. [NOTE: Ancient versions, including the Targum, read “Cain said to his brother Abel, “Come, let us go out into the field.”—JPS; RA adds this phrase to his translation]

**8. Cain said to his brother Abel. . .** The three dots draw attention to the lacuna. The Aramaic Targums, like the Greek, Syriac, and Latin versions of the text, add: “Come let us go into the field.” This is also the reading of the Samaritan text. Ramban (Nachmanides) also took this to be the sense of the passage. On the basis of the usage in Exodus 19.25 and Esther 1.18, many Jewish commentators took the unexpressed object of the verb to be the foregoing words of God. Others took Hebrew *va-yo’mer* to mean “He had words with him.”

**in the field** Hebrew *sadeh* refers to the open, uninhabited country away from the settled areas. It was often the scene of crime.

**killed him** Cain’s depression gives way to an irrational act of aggression. The first recorded death is not from natural causes but by human hands, an ironic comment on the theme of chapter 3. Man and woman had striven to gain immortality, but their first-born brings the reality of death into the world. The narrative illustrates one of the most lamentable aspects of the human condition, one that is a recurrent theme in the Bible—namely, the corruption of religion. An act of piety can degenerate into bloodshed.

**[REF] 8. it was while they were in the field.** What is the significance of informing us that they are in a field at the time? Early biblical commentators searched for the meaning of this seemingly inconsequential detail. But to understand it, we must observe, first, that fratricide recurs repeatedly in the Tanach. It begins here with Cain and Abel and ends with King Solomon executing his brother Adonijah; and in between these the issue of fratricide comes up in the stories of Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, Abimelech killing seventy of his brothers (Judges 9), the war between Benjamin and its fellow tribes of Israel (Judges 20), the struggle between Israel and Judah (2 Samuel 2:26-27), and King David’s sons Absalom and Amnon (2 Samuel 13-14).

The word “field” repeatedly occurs in these stories. In Absalom’s case, the “wise woman of Tekoa” comes and tells David a fake story about her own two sons, claiming that one of them killed the other. In the course of her tale, she mentions a seemingly unrelated detail: they fought “in the field” (2 Samuel 14.6). The same “inconsequential” detail that occurs in the Cain-Abel story occurs there. Likewise in the story of the rivalrous brothers Jacob and Esau, Esau comes to Jacob “from the field” (Genesis 25.29). Joseph begins his report of his dream that offends his brothers with the words “here we were binding sheaves in the field” (Genesis 37.7). The recurring word, therefore, appears to be a means of connecting the many instances of brother killing brother. It recognizes that sibling rivalry is felt by nearly all humans, and it warns us to be sensitive to keep our hostile feelings in check—and to be sensitive to our siblings’ feelings as well. This will be developed through this chain of sibling stories in Genesis, culminating in Joseph, who offends his brothers in his youth (Genesis 37:2-11) but who learns to show them understanding and kindness in his mature years (50:15-21).

**Cain rose against Abel his brother.** It never tells why, exactly, he kills him. Many suggestions have been made. But it is significant that the text never tells what the reason is. It implies, of course, that it is his anger over God’s favoring Abel’s sacrifice, but it never says this explicitly. Sometimes a silence in the Torah is revealing. In this case, it suggests that the concern is not Cain’s immediate motive, but rather the deeper, essential fact of sibling rivalry. Everyone with children learns that it is not the specific content of their fights that matters so much as the fact of the fight. The issue is the existence of the sibling. As the first humans to have a sibling, Cain and Abel are the archetypes for sibling rivalry. The whole world was Cain’s until Abel came along.

9. The Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" And he said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper [watchman—REF]?"

10. Then He said, "What have you done? Hark, your brother's bloods cry out [your brother's blood is crying—REF] to Me from the ground! [is shrieking to me from the ground—CS]

11. Therefore, you shall be more cursed than the ground [damned be you from the soil—EF], which opened its mouth to receive your brother's bloods from your hand.

12. If you till the soil, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. You shall become a ceaseless wanderer on earth." [wavering and wandering must you be—EF; a roamer and rover in the earth—REF; a rootless wanderer on the earth—CS]

**[NS] 9. Where. . . ?** As in Genesis 3.9, the question is a means of opening the conversation, perhaps eliciting confession and contrition. The implication is either that Cain at once fled the scene of his crime or that he immediately buried his victim.

**I do not know** Cain defiantly lies, stifling all conscience and expressing no remorse.

**Am I my brother's keeper?** The sevenfold stress in this chapter on the obvious fraternal relationship of Cain and Abel emphatically teaches that man is indeed his brother's keeper and that all homicide is fratricide.

**10. What have you done?** Not a question, but a cry of horror.

**Hark** Hebrew *kol* is here used as an exclamation. Being singular in number, it cannot be the subject of the following plural verb.

**bloods** Hebrew *damim* is plural, a usage that, with rare exceptions, appears in a context of bloodshed or bloodguilt. The Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5, so the Targums, takes the plural to include, apart from the blood of the victim, also that of the potential offspring now doomed never to be born: "Whoever takes a single life destroys thereby an entire world."

**cries out** The Hebrew stem *ts-'k* has a legal setting. It connotes a plea for help or redress on the part of the victim of some great injustice.

**[REF] 4:9. Am I my brother's watchman?** It is hard to give up the famous English translation, "Am I my brother's keeper?" but I think it is important to convey the continuing play on forms of the word for "watch" (Hebrew *sh-m-r*). Humans had been put in the garden "to watch over it" (2.15), but in the end the cherubs are put there "to watch over" the way to the tree of life (3.24). Now the first human to murder another questions cynically his responsibility to watch out for his brother. The development of this term climaxes when God declares that the promises to Abraham will be upheld, including that "all the nations of the earth will be blessed through your seed because Abraham listened to my voice and kept my watch" (26:4-5). This phrase (which in the Hebrew uses the root *sh-m-r* twice, emphasizing it by using it in the verb and in its object) thereafter becomes a standard expression in the Torah for conveying loyalty to God.

**4:10. What have you done?** These are the same words that God had said to Cain's mother in the preceding story (3.13). By opening with a question (even if one already knows the answer!) one gives a person a chance to tell the truth and admit to a wrongdoing.

**Your brother's blood is crying.** Older translations make this "The voice of your brother's blood is crying," but that is wrong. The word for "voice" or "sound" is singular. The word for blood is plural and must therefore be the subject of the plural verb "crying."

13. Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment [my crime—REF] is too great to bear!

14. Since You have banished me this day from the soil, and I must avoid Your presence and become a restless wanderer on earth—anyone who meets me may kill me!"

15. The Lord said to him, "I promise, if anyone kills Cain, sevenfold vengeance shall be taken on him." And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest anyone who met him should kill him.

**[NS] 14. I must avoid Your presence** A crime against another human being is simultaneously a sin against God. The spiritual ties that unite man to his Maker have become severely strained. Cain fears that he can no longer receive God's providential care.

**anyone who meets me** In the present context of the narrative, this can only be understood to mean that future offspring of Adam and Eve would feel free to exact blood vengeance.

**15.** The manner in which God responds to Cain is of special interest. The initial Hebrew *lakhen*, here rendered "I promise," frequently introduces a solemn declaration, while the formulation of the reassurance derives from the realm of law.

The unusually emphatic language is directed first to Cain, in order to allay his mortal fear, and then to the world at large, as a kind of royal proclamation that has the force of law. It states that despite his crime, Cain still remains under God's care.

**sevenfold** Saadiah, Bekhor Shor, and Radak [Rabbi David Kimchi] take this simply as a figure of speech meaning "abundantly" or "severely." Others take the number literally, meaning that seven of the assailant's family would be killed or that vengeance would continue to the seventh generation.

**vengeance** This is one of the few passages in which the biblical Hebrew stem *n-k-m* has its primitive meaning of exacting revenge. Otherwise, it has the sense of redressing the imbalance of justice.

**a mark** This phrase has been persistently misunderstood. The reference is not to a stigma of infamy ["the Mark of Cain" is considered a mark of shame], but to a sign indicating that the bearer is under divine protection. Hebrew *'ot* here probably involves some external physical mark, perhaps on the forehead, as in Ezekiel 9.4-6, serving the same function as the blood of the paschal lamb smeared on the lintels and doorposts of each Israelite house in Egypt. It is also possible, though less likely, that the "sign" consists of some occurrence that serves to authenticate the divine promise as being inviolable. In that case, the text would be rendered: "The Lord gave Cain a [confirmatory] sign that no one who met him would kill him."

16. Cain left the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod [wandering OJPS and EF; roving—REF; Land of Nomads—CS], east of Eden.

17. Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. And he then founded a city, and named the city after his son Enoch.

#### [NS] THE GENEALOGY OF CAIN (vv. 17–22)

The first killing has taken place, and justice has been done. A human life has been extinguished, but life must go on. Humankind proliferates. Cain and his descendants are now listed, seven generations in all. The genealogy is linear, with only the first-born mentioned until the seventh generation; then the list becomes segmented, and more than one branch is included. Brief narrative material about the development of the arts of civilization is interspersed throughout the list. It is possible that at one time all the names were associated in popular traditions with stories about their achievements. The Torah has chosen to highlight only a few.

The list constitutes a silent polemic against the mythological concepts of the ancient world, which attributed the advance of culture to divine or semidivine figures. Mesopotamian tradition knew of the seven Apkallu, or mythical sages, half-fish and half-man, who rose out of the sea to reveal to man the sciences, the social system, writing and art. Enki-Ea, god of watery chaos, was closely associated with magic, wisdom, the arts and crafts, and music. For Egyptians, Osiris taught humans agriculture and the arts of life; Ptah was the special patron of artists, artificers, and men of letters. In the Ugaritic-Phoenician area, the god Koshar, the divine artisan and smith, was credited with the discovery of the use of iron and fishing tackle. In the Greek sphere, Athena invented the plough and the rake and who taught both the useful and the elegant arts, while Apollo founded towns and invented the flute and the lyre.

This phenomenon, known as euhemerism or the divinization of the benefactors of humanity, was common to the ancient world. In this chapter it is tacitly rejected. The development of human culture is demythologized and historicized. The seven-day divine creation of the cosmos is paralleled by these seven generations of human creativity. Man became a copartner with God in the world of creation. At the same time, the ascription of the origins of technology and urban life to Cain and his line constitute an unfavorable, or at least a qualified, judgment of man's material progress on the part of the Narrator, a recognition that it frequently outruns moral progress and that human ingenuity, so potentially beneficial, is often directed toward evil ends. The line of Cain is not mentioned again in the Bible. No details are given of his span of life, and even the fact of his death is not noted. The same is true of the list of his descendants. The entire line passes into oblivion.

**17. his wife** A tradition mentioned in Jubilees 4.9 and BT Sanhedrin 58b has Cain marrying his sister. Actually, in the present narrative context no other possibility exists.

**Enoch** The basic meaning of the stem *ch-n-kh* has to do with initiation, dedication, and education. Thus the name may be symbolic, signifying the regeneration of life.

**he then founded a city** He was the founder of urban culture. The soil, being accursed and unproductive for Cain, is put to use by him for wholly new purposes. This notice exhibits a consciousness of the importance and prominence of the city as a political and social unit. The notion that the farmer originated the city is consistent with the fact that the rise of urban centers historically followed in the wake of the development of agriculture.

The association of Cain with settled urban existence seems to contradict his fated life of vagrancy. Accordingly, the Narrator must have had in mind that the city served his son, not Cain himself. For another suggestion, see Comment to verse 18.

18. To Enoch was born Irad, and Irad begot M'chuyael, and M'chuyael begot M'tusael, and M'tusael begot Lamech.

19. Lamech took to himself two wives: the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other was Zillah.

20. Adah bore Yaval; he was the ancestor of those who dwell in tents and amidst herds.

21. And the name of his brother was Yuval; he was the ancestor of all who play the lyre [harp—OJPS; lute—CS] and the pipe [the long flute—CS; NOTE: A lyre is a stringed instrument like a small U-shaped harp with strings fixed to a crossbar]

22. As for Zillah, she bore Tubal-cain, who forged all implements of copper and iron [the forger of every cutting instrument of brass and iron—OJPS; burnisher of every blade of bronze and iron—EF; who forged every tool of copper and iron—RA]. And the sister of Tubal-cain was Naamah.

**[NS] 18. Lamech** A similar word in Arabic means “a strong young man.”

**19.** Lamech is apparently the first polygamist, though his two wives are identified only in order to make the following poem intelligible. It is uncertain whether the ascription of polygamy to a descendant of Cain is meant to be a tacit condemnation of the institution.

**Adah...Zillah** The names may respectively mean “dawn” and “dusk,” the first being connected with Arabic *ghadāt*, the second with Hebrew *ts-l-l*, “shade.” Adah may also derive from Hebrew *‘adi*, a “jewel,” and Zillah from Hebrew *ts-l-l*, “to tingle.” This name would then be the equivalent of the modern English name Melody.

The seventh natural-born generation comprises three brothers, and to each of them a major advance in material culture is attributed. By this time, labor has become still more specialized, and an artisan class has arisen.

An intriguing question is the reason for highlighting only the three ingredients of civilization mentioned here. The similarity of sound between the three personal names and the common fatherhood suggests a closeness of relationship between the pastoral, musical and metalworking arts, which in fact is well founded. The name Cain, which means a “smith,” also means “to sing” in several Semitic languages, though Hebrew *kinah* is restricted to mournful song. The Cypriot god Cinyras, to whom was attributed the invention of the lyre, was revered by the Greeks both as a musician and as the archetypal smith. Pan, Greek god of flocks and shepherds, was the inventor of the flute. Similarly, Apollo, the deity who protected flocks and cattle, was also the god of song and music, and still another tradition has Hermes, god of shepherds, as inventor of the lyre.

23. And Lamech said to his wives,  
 "Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;  
 O wives of Lamech, give ear to my speech.  
 I have slain a man for wounding me,  
 And a lad for bruising me.

24. If Cain is avenged sevenfold,  
 Then Lamech seventy-sevenfold."

**[NS] THE SONG OF LAMECH (vv. 23–24)**

This is the first true example of biblical Hebrew poetic style. It possesses neither meter nor rhyme in the present sense of these terms, but it does have an undeniable rhythmic quality. Its essential formal characteristic is "parallelism," that is, the featuring of a couplet in which the second line may restate the thought of the first in different words, as here, may supplement it, may be antithetical to it, or may be climactic. The parallelism of the Song of Lamech is illustrated as follows:

**Clause a**

Adah and Zillah  
 hear  
 my voice  
 a man  
 for wounding me  
 Cain  
 sevenfold

**Clause b**

wives of Lamech  
 give ear  
 my speech  
 a lad  
 for bruising me  
 Lamech  
 seventy-sevenfold

The Song of Lamech probably originally belonged to a larger poetic composition about the exploits of this hero, and the inclusion of this here serves several purposes. First, it forms an envelope structure that enables the genealogy to end as it begins, with mention of Cain, thus linking the genealogy to the preceding episode. Moreover, the lust for revenge exhibited by Lamech is a lamentable commentary on the moral state of *homo faber* [creative man].

Because of the brevity of the poem and the loss of its original context, the interpretation of the verses is uncertain. An attractive suggestion is that they constitute Lamech's taunts, threats and boastings, which are of the kind customarily uttered in ancient times by those about to engage in combat. The story of David and Goliath, as told in 1 Samuel 17, especially verses 10, 36, and 43-46, is an excellent biblical example of this genre. Alternatively, Lamech may be describing some incident that has already taken place in which he actually shed blood to avenge a previously inflicted wound. The translation of the tenses of the verbs in verse 23 will, of course, be affected by the interpretation adopted.

**23. a man. . . a lad** Such a pair in parallelism is unique. If the two are synonymous here, then Hebrew *yeled*, usually a "child," is to be understood as derogatory: "This man, my antagonist, is but a mere child in combat!" The two nouns could also express degree, as in verse 24. Lamech boasts of recognizing no restraints in exacting revenge.

**for wounding me** In this and its parallel term the Hebrew suffix could be either objective, as here, or subjective, in the sense of, "My mere wounding/bruising of my combatant is fatal."

25. Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth [*shet*; granted one—EF], meaning, “God has provided [*shaht*; granted me—RA] me with another offspring in place of Abel,” for Cain had killed him.

26. And to Seth, in turn, a son was born, and he named him Enosh. It was then that men began to invoke the Lord by name.

**25-26. Seth . . . Enosh** The name Seth is here connected with the stem *sh-y-t*, “to place, put, set.” The birth of Seth compensates for the loss of Abel. Since the noun *shat* means “foundation,” as in Isaiah 19.10 and Psalm 11.3, there may lie behind the name the notion that, as Numbers Rabba 14.20 has it, “With him the world was founded [anew].” It is probably no coincidence that Seth, in turn, named his son Enosh, which, like Adam, means “man” but which puts the emphasis on the basic frailty of man because the stem *'-n-sh* means “to be weak.”

**26. men began to invoke the Lord by name** Prayer, as noted above, is seen as a development independent of sacrifice. It is the consciousness of human frailty, symbolized by the name Enosh, that heightens man’s awareness of utter dependence upon God, a situation that intuitively evokes prayer. The coupling of prayer with the divine proper name Adonai is understandable because this name, the simplest interpretation of which is “He Who Causes To Be,” expresses God’s personality, His relationship to humans, His immanence in the world.

This text takes monotheism to be the original religion of the human race, and the knowledge of the name Adonai to be pre-Abrahamic. In conformity with this notion, Adonai is freely used throughout the patriarchal narratives.

On the other hand, it is significant that of all the proper names listed in the Torah, none is constructed of the divine element based on this name, whether prefixed *yeho/yo* or suffixed *yahu/yah*, until the birth of Moses. Yocheved, the Hebrew name of Moses’ mother, is the first such. This accords with the tradition of Exodus 3:13-16 and 6:3, which clearly implies that the divine name Adonai only came to prominence as the characteristic personal name of the God of Israel in the time of Moses. It was only then that the people as a whole experienced the essential character of God as it revealed itself through His direct intervention in history.

# Introduction to B'reishit Chapter 5.1-6.8: From Adam to Noah

## [WGP] The Early Generations

The reader will look in vain for an explanation of how the world suddenly became filled with people, the men and women of whom Cain was apparently afraid and who would build cities. The ancients tried to solve this difficulty by suggesting that twin sisters were born to Cain, Abel, and later Seth, and that in this fashion the earth was populated.

There is, however, no need for the modern student of the Bible to follow this line of speculation. If the text is silent on the matter, it is probably because it is not the purpose of this chapter to present humanity's ongoing story as much as it is to present an explanation of our spiritual state. Thus, the Bible should here be understood as speaking of prototypes, not of actual people.

The Torah preserves two genealogical traditions, one in 4.17-22 (from Adam's son Cain), and a more elaborate list in 5.1-32 (from Adam via his son Seth). A comparison between the names of Cain's and Seth's descendants reveals a startling similarity and some duplication:

Adam	1	Enosh
Cain	2	Kenan
Enoch	3	Mahalalel
Irada	4	Jared
Mehiyael	5	Enoch
Metushael	6	Methuselah
Lamech	7	Lamech
Naamah	8	Noah

Adam and Enosh both mean "human being." Other names in the two lists are like-sounding, and by exchanging the places of Enoch and Mehiyael we arrive at a single basic list, which in the biblical tradition is presented in two variants. Humanity has one ancestor (Adam or Enosh) and one line of descent. [The inclusion of Seth and the change from Cain to Kenan was probably due to the understandable disinclination to have all humans appear to be descended from a murderer. It may also be that for this reason the term *tol'dot* is denied the Cain line.] Noah appears when the seven prehistoric human generations have run their course.

There are strong parallels between these biblical genealogies and the Babylonian lists of antediluvian kings and their counselors. In both cases, they name "culture-heroes" responsible for basic contributions to civilization, including the first cities. In both cases, they end with the protagonist of the Deluge story. The genealogical interest was characteristic of the Western Semites. "To dedicated guardians of sacred traditions, unbroken lineage meant a secure link with the remotest past and hence also a firm basis from which to face the future. These were vital statistics in more ways than one" [Speiser, B'reishit].

While the parallels between the biblical and Babylonian traditions are clearly visible, there are also significant differences. The Babylonians attached these traditions only to their royal lists, but the Bible treats the antediluvians as ancestors of one another and ultimately of all humanity. It eschews all mythological allusions in these lists; it deals with human and not with semi-divine rulers. Even the longevity attributed to Seth's line must be compared with that of the Babylonians, who were reputed to live for many thousands of years. In the Bible, a thousand years is regarded as a day of God (Psalm 90.4), and no one of the ancients in the biblical account reaches the millennial age.

The longevity of the antediluvians should, therefore, be seen in the context of such ancient traditions. To say that Methuselah's 969 years were meant as shorter units, such as months, merely subjects the Torah to artificial interpretation. The Bible presents the list of the primevals and their long lives as an intermediate stage in human development. The first humans possessed potential immortality; their immediate descendants had, by our standards, very long life spans; Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, Joseph and Joshua, all lived past the century mark; thereafter, however, people have only the "normal" life span. In the biblical view, their longevity is limited severely at some stage between prehistory and history, and only in the messianic days will they again reach the high ages of old (Isaiah 65.20).

### **The Message Behind the Numbers**

While the Near Eastern context provides the general background for the antediluvian lives that the Torah records, the numbers fit certain astronomical schemes and convey a specific religious message.

The ancients measured time in two ways: by the moon and by the sun. The lunar cycles were observable and easily countable, and the solar year determined the agricultural cycles. The relationship between the two revolutions was analyzed by the Athenian astronomer Meton (5th century BCE) and has become known as the "Metonic Cycle." It is based on the recurrence of 19 solar year spans, which equal 235 lunar months. Though it was Meton who gave the cycles his name, there is little doubt that the major astronomical facts were known long before him, and these underlie many, if not most, of the antediluvian figures. Thus, the oldest antediluvian, Methuselah, is said to have lived for 51 cycles of 19, or 969 years, dying the year the old era ended and the Flood extinguished all life. Thereafter, life spans decreased. Noah—who bridged the two worlds—lived 50 cycles or 950 years.

A number of other antediluvian data precisely reflect the Metonic Cycle, and some others do nearly so, which suggests that the oral traditions upon which the text was based were no longer sure of the underlying scheme. Still..., none of these old numbers were random creations, but reflected careful sequences and interrelationships....

At one time, no doubt, these relationships were clearly understood, as was the unifying message: God had arranged each person's days on earth, and special care was given to the early generations, as well as to the progenitors of the Chosen People. They were all under the watchful care of the Almighty, and their years of life and death were the clearest sign that Divine Power controlled their fate.

### **[NS] THE BOOK OF GENEALOGIES (5.1-6.8)**

Having disposed of the line of Cain, the narrative now takes up the idea of a fresh start for humanity, as implied in the preceding verses. Commencing with Adam, it presents a vertical genealogy that covers ten generations spanning the period between the creation of the world of man and the advent of Noah, who witnessed its destruction.

Parallel to the traditions in the present chapter is the list of Sumerian kings who reigned before the flood, as recorded by Berossus, a Babylonian priest of the third century B.C.E. who wrote a history of Babylonia in Greek. He too details ten antediluvians, the last also being the hero of a flood. There is reason to believe that the ten-generation pattern for genealogies was favored by Western Semites in general and that the convention left its mark on the historiography of Israel. We meet this phenomenon again in the genealogy of David from Perez, as set forth in Ruth 4.18-22 and 1 Chronicles 2.5, 9-15.

In the Bible this pattern is utilized for theological purposes. It so happens that, following the Flood, ten more generations separate Noah from Abraham, whose birth is projected as being another climactic turning point in human history. The genealogical chain that registers this development in 11.10-26 follows almost the identical literary pattern as that of the present chapter. The conclusion is unmistakable: we have here a deliberate, symmetrical schematization of history, featuring neatly balanced, significant segments of time as a way of expressing the fundamental biblical teaching that history is meaningful. It is not a series of haphazard incidents but the unfolding of a divinely ordained, meaningful design, the corollary being that human activity lies under the perpetual scrutiny of God.

The present chapter also serves other functions in ways that are more specific to its immediate context. The biblical Narrator does not seek to present a comprehensive history. Rather, his is a highly selective and episodic presentation in conformity with larger theological purposes. Hence, the genealogy enables him to bring together otherwise disconnected occurrences and smooths the transition from Adam to Noah. At the same time, it demonstrates how the divine blessing of 1.28, "Be fertile and increase," is being fulfilled. Finally, it again emphasizes the great teaching of the first two chapters that the entire human race is traceable to common ancestry and thus constitutes a unity.

The present genealogy appears to share several items in common with the Cainite list of chapter 4. The names Enoch and Lamech occur in both; Cain and Kenan are almost identical in Hebrew; and Irad sounds like Jered, as does Methusael like Methuselah. Also, the last entry in each list is segmented so that three sons are mentioned in each case. These similarities have led some scholars to regard the two lists as doublets, either one being a reworking of the other or both deriving from a common source. Supporting this claim is said to be the additional fact that the Mesopotamian lists of early kings exist in several recensions that vary in number from seven to eight to ten generations. Yet it should be pointed out that in all the latter, the flood is the epochal dividing line, whereas the Cainite genealogy of chapter 4 is not so oriented.

Moreover, only two names are really identical, while the similarity in other names is more superficial than real. It is also difficult to understand why an editor should arbitrarily have rearranged the order of the generations. [See above for Gunther Plaut's discussion of this.]

There is a stereotyped pattern in the genealogy. For each personality, the age at which he first became the father of a son is noted, then the number of his remaining years, then the fact that he fathered sons and daughters, and, finally, the age when he died. The formula is varied in the case of the first and the last on the list, Adam and Noah, so that these constitute a literary framework for the entire list. The seventh, Enoch, is also singled out for special attention, meriting four verses instead of the three uniformly assigned to each of the other personalities.

The remarkably long lives enjoyed by the patriarchs before the Flood accord with the widespread folkloristic notion that associates ancient heroes with extraordinary longevity. Compared, however, with Mesopotamian ideas, the biblical figures give the appearance of moderation. The combined total of the years reigned by the ten antediluvian kings in the list of Berossus comes to 432,000; that of the Sumerian King List adds up to 241,200. By way of contrast, in B'reishit the years from Adam to the Flood number 1,656. What the specific figures represent individually and collectively, whether they are invested with symbolic meaning or are the constituents of some comprehensive schematization, is presently unknown. If any such exists, it has not yet yielded its secret. The matter is further complicated by the variations in the numbers found in the Samaritan recension and in the Septuagint version of the Torah.

# B'reishit Chapter 5.1-6.8—Translations and Commentary

## Chapter 5

1. This is the record of Adam's line [EF— This is the record of the begettings of Adam/Humankind; REF— This is the Book of Records of the Human].—When He created man [EF— Adam/Humankind; RA, REF, CS—the human], He made him in the likeness [OJPS, RA—image] of God;

2 male and female He created them. And when they were created, He blessed them and called them Man [EF— Adam/Humankind; RA, REF, CS—the human].—

**[NS] 1. This is the record of Adam's line** The Sifra to Leviticus, K'doshim 4.12, reports on a discussion between Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai (mid 2nd century C.E.). Akiva declared Leviticus 19.18's "Love your neighbor as yourself" to be a cardinal principle of the Torah. Ben Azzai proclaimed the present opening phrase, "This is the record of the line of ha-adam," to express a superior rule. By tracing all humanity back to a common parentage, this phrase conveys the idea that the "Golden Rule" is logically indefensible without the presupposition of the absolute unity and equality of the human race as created by God.

**2. and called them Man** That God Himself gave the human race its name is not mentioned in chapter 1, but it is implied there in verse 26. It is made explicit here because inherent in the genealogical concept is human replication of divine creativity. Each act of procreation is an imitation of God's original creation of man. Hence, there is need to assert man's creatureliness, that is, his absolute subordination to God.

### ANTHOLOGY

**1. This is the book.** *Sefer* does not always mean a volume; it may be used of any written document. Rabbinic tradition states the Torah is not one continuous work, written at one definite moment. "The Torah was given to Moses in separate scrolls."

**the book of the generations of adam.** Not black, not white, not great, not small, simply *adam* (human). In these Scriptural words, we have a concept quite unknown in the ancient world—Humanity. Only the belief in One God could lead to such a clear affirmation of the unity of mankind.

*Rabbi Menachem M. Kasher, Torat Shelemah to B'reishit 5*

Rabbi Shimon said: Adam alienated himself from Eve for 130 years after Abel was killed, saying, "Why should I beget children who are accursed?" But when Seth was born, Adam addressed his sons: "I did not give the genealogy of my first sons (Cain and Abel), because they were under a curse. But this one's genealogy I will give, because he ranks first of the generations that are to follow."

*Tanchuma Yashan B'reshit*

**Male and female created He them.** For King Ptolemy, the 72 elders wrote, "Male and female He created him," not them, lest it be thought that they were separately created from the very beginning.

*BT Megillah 9a*

Rabbi Eleazar said: A man without a wife is not a man; for it is said, Male and female created He them..., and called their name Man.

*BT Y'vamot 63a*

Rabbi Yirmiyahu b. Eleazar said: The Holy One, blessed be He, originally created Adam as a hermaphrodite, for it is said, Male and female created He them and called their name Adam.

*Midrash B'reishit Rabbah*

### Guide to the Translators and Commentators used here

**EF:** Everett Fox **REF:** Richard Elliott Friedman **RA:** Robert Alter **NS:** Nahum Sarna **CS:** Chaim Stern

**SRH:** Samson Raphael Hirsch **RASHI:** Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak **OJPS:** Old Jewish Publication Society version

**WGP:** W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*<sup>4</sup> **TWC:** *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*

3 When Adam had lived 130 years, he begot a son in his likeness after his image, and he named him Seth.

4 After the birth of Seth, Adam lived 800 years and begot sons and daughters.

5 All the days that Adam lived came to 930 years; then he died.

6 When Seth had lived 105 years, he begot Enosh.

7 After the birth of Enosh, Seth lived 807 years and begot sons and daughters.

8 All the days of Seth came to 912 years; then he died.

9 When Enosh had lived 90 years, he begot Kenan.

10 After the birth of Kenan, Enosh lived 815 years and begot sons and daughters. 11 All the days of Enosh came to 905 years; then he died.

12 When Kenan had lived 70 years, he begot Mahalalel.

13 After the birth of Mahalalel, Kenan lived 840 years and begot sons and daughters.

14 All the days of Kenan came to 910 years; then he died.

15 When Mahalalel had lived 65 years, he begot Jared.

16 After the birth of Jared, Mahalalel lived 830 years and begot sons and daughters.

**[NS] 3. a son in his likeness after his image** What constituted “the image of God” in the first two human beings was transmitted through procreation to all future generations.

**Seth** Cain and Abel are ignored, not because this list represents another tradition that had Seth as the first-born, but because the sole concern of the document is to trace a linear genealogical chain from Adam to Noah. For an analogy, see the line of Aaron as given in 1 Chronicles 6.35ff., which ignores the two older sons Nadav and Avihu, whose deaths are reported in Leviticus 10.1-2. 2

**4. After the birth of Seth** The continuity of the line is in jeopardy until the birth of the first son, who becomes, for that reason, a child of destiny. Hence, this event marks a meaningful point of demarcation in the measurement of a human lifetime.

**[REF] 4. he fathered sons and daughters.** This is the presumed answer to the question of where Cain’s wife came from.

**5. 930 years.** The long life spans in the early portions of the Torah are an old question. Some assume that the ancients must have counted years differently. But that is not correct. (If we divide Adam’s 930 years by 10 to get it within normal range, then how shall we divide Moses’ 120?) It is clear that this author thought of a year as a normal solar year because that is how long the flood lasts. The point to note is: life spans are pictured as growing shorter. The 10 generations from Adam to Noah approach ages of 1,000. But the last one to live more than 900 years is Noah. The next 10 generations start with Shem, who lives 600 years, and life spans decline after him. The last person to live more than 200 years is Terah. Abraham (175), Isaac (180), and Jacob (147) live long lives, but not as long as their ancestors. And Moses lives to be 120, which is understood to have become, at some point, the maximum for human life. (See REF’s comment on B’reishit 6.3.)

17 All the days of Mahalalel came to 895 years; then he died.

18 When Jared had lived 162 years, he begot Enoch.

19 After the birth of Enoch, Jared lived 800 years and begot sons and daughters.

20 All the days of Jared came to 962 years; then he died.

21 When Enoch had lived 65 years, he begot Methuselah.

22 After the birth of Methuselah, Enoch walked with God 300 years; and he begot sons and daughters.

23 All the days of Enoch came to 365 years.

**[NS] 18. Enoch.** He is singled out for special mention. The allusive brevity of this biographical note suggests the one-time existence of some well-known story connected with his life and death. In postbiblical Jewish literature, he became the focus of legends connecting him with a knowledge of the secrets of heaven, with the invention of mathematics and astronomy, and especially with the devising of a solar-based calendar. Curiously, in the Sumerian King List, the seventh, Enme(n)duranna, enjoyed an intimate relationship with the sun god, according to Mesopotamian legend, and was initiated into the arts of divination, astrology and mathematics. walked with God The regular formula, "he lived," is replaced by a description of how he lived. The idiom is used again only of Noah in 6.9 and, in a slightly varied form, of the ideal priest in Malachi 2.6. It is expressive of a life spent in full accord with God's will and in closest intimacy with Him.

**23. 365 years** Whether this figure is actually inspired by the solar year and reflects the legend about Enoch's calendar, or whether it became the source of that legend, cannot be determined. If there is a connection with the Mesopotamian tradition in which the sun god is featured, then the number 365 would be significant. What is important is that our biblical text is wholly devoid of pagan elements. It is not caprice that determines Enoch's relationship to God but the quality of his chosen lifestyle.

**24. Enoch walked with God** This is repeated, as B'chor Shor noted, so that the brevity of Enoch's life not be misinterpreted as a punishment for sin.

**[REF] 5.24. Enoch walked with God.** This expression is used in ancient Near Eastern texts to express continuous fidelity. So here it would mean that Enoch was faithful to God.

**[NS] then he was no more** The regular formula, "then he died," is replaced by a description of how he died. The term is most frequently used of sudden, unexpected, and unexplained disappearance. for God took him A euphemism for death, as is clear from such passages as Ezekiel 24.16, 18 and Jonah 4.3. It is most likely used here, as Rashi noted, with the sense of premature death. It was the narrative about Elijah's transference to heaven without dying, as told in 2 Kings 2, that gave rise to the popular legend that Enoch too underwent this experience of apotheosis.

**[REF] 24. and he was not, because God took him.** I do not know what this means. It was traditionally understood to mean that Enoch does not die. Alternatively, it could be the report of his death. It comes at the point at which all the other entries in this list say "And he died." The same word is used later by Joseph's brothers to express the fact that he is gone (B'reishit 42.13). At that point, the brothers do not know whether he is alive or not. It may possibly mean something like that in the case of Enoch, as well. his fate was unknown. At minimum, it means (as with the case of Elijah later) that there is something distinctive and unusual about the man, his relationship to God, and his departure from life among humans.

24 Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, for God took him [EF— Now Hanokh walked in accord with God, then he was no more, for God had taken him].

### ANTHOLOGY

**Enoch walked with God.** When Enoch saw the evil ways of mankind, he turned away from them, and built a house for himself where he worshipped the Lord with all his heart, and prayed to him, saying, “O Lord God, create in mankind a pure heart, to love good and hate evil, that men may serve You and do what is right in Your sight.” And as Enoch was praying to God and pleading with Him for the people of his generation, an angel of the Lord called to him, “Enoch! Enoch!” and Enoch answered, “Here I am!” And the angel said to him, “God has sent me to say to you, ‘Arise, come out of the place in which you have hidden yourself and go to the people of your generation and teach them how they should live.’” Then Enoch came out from his hiding-place and went to the people and taught them the ways of lovingkindness, righteousness and mercy. At that time all the 130 kings of the earth gathered together and came to Enoch, and bowing before him, said, “We have seen that God is with you, and has given you of His wisdom, therefore come and reign over us.” And he was persuaded by them and made them acquainted with the ways of God, and made peace among them, and there was peace throughout the whole earth all the days of Enoch, who reigned over all mankind 243 years and executed justice and righteousness over all the people and led them in the path of the Lord.

*Book of Jubilee; B’raitā di Rabbi Yishmael, 23, 11. Levner, Legends of Israel, pp. 36-37.*

**And he was not; for God took him.** Because Enoch was a righteous man, God removed him from the world of mortals and translated him into the Angel Metatron. Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues disagree on this subject. The latter maintained Enoch was righteous only intermittently, vacillating between righteousness and sinfulness. Said the Holy One, blessed be He. “I will remove him from the earth (that is to say, I will let him die) while he is righteous.” Rabbi Chama b. Rabbi Hoshaya said. And he was not means that he was not inscribed in the register of the righteous, but in that of the wicked. Rabbi Aibu said. Enoch was changeable, at times righteous, at others wicked. Said the Holy One, blessed be. “While he is righteous I will remove him from the world, so that he will be judged as a righteous man.” Rabbi Aibu also said. He judged and condemned him on New Year, when He judges the whole world.

*Midrash B’reishit Rabba*

It was taught. Three men ascended to heaven and ministered there before God. They were Enoch, Moses and Elijah. The proof lies in the following texts. Enoch: “And he was not, for God took him.” Moses: “And he ascended from the plains of Moab....And no man knows of his sepulcher unto this day” (Deuteronomy 34.1, 6.) [since he did not die, there was no sepulcher]. And Elijah ascended into heaven by a whirlwind (2 Kings 2.11).

*Midrash Hagadol B’reshit*

Sectarians asked Rabbi Abbahu. “We do not find that Enoch died?” “How so?” he asked. “Scripture speaks of God’s taking him,” they replied, “while the same is said in connection with Elijah, ‘Know you that the Lord will take away your master from your head today’” (2 Kings 2.3). “If you interpret the word ‘taking,’” he answered, “then ‘taking’ is employed here, while in Ezekiel it says, Behold, I take away from you the desire of your eyes in a plague” (Ezekiel 24.16—there it obviously means death). Rabbi Tanchuma observed. He answered them well. A matron asked the same question of Rabbi Yosi, to which he replied. “If Scripture only said, And Enoch walked with God, and nothing more, your deduction would be correct. Since, however, it adds, And he was not, for God took him, it means that he was no more in this world (having died), for God took him.”

*Midrash B’reishit Rabba*

25 When Methuselah had lived 187 years, he begot Lamech.

26 After the birth of Lamech, Methuselah lived 782 years and begot sons and daughters.

27 All the days of Methuselah came to 969 years; then he died.

28 When Lamech had lived 182 years, he begot a son.

29 And he named him Noah, saying, "This one will provide us relief from our work and from the toil of our hands, out of the very soil which the Lord placed under a curse"

[EF— He called his name: Noah! saying: *Zeh yenamenu* /May this-one comfort-our-sorrow from our toil, from the pains of our hands coming from the soil, which YHWH has damned; RA, REF, CS, "will console us"].

30 After the birth of Noah, Lamech lived 595 years and begot sons and daughters. 31 All the days of Lamech came to 777 years; then he died.

32 When Noah had lived 500 years, Noah begot Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

**[NS] 25. Methuselah...begot Lamech** The one who lived the longest life span is fathered by the individual who had the shortest. His death coincides with the onset of the Flood, according to the present chronological scheme. His name has variously been interpreted to mean "the man of the weapon" or "the man of the infernal river."

**28. he begot a son** The arrival of the tenth generation marks a critical turning point in human history and so brings the list to completion. The formulaic style is therefore varied. The text is expanded to focus upon the one who is to become the illustrious hero of the age.

**[REF] 29. Noah.** The name is connected here to the Hebrew root נחם, meaning "console," though we would naturally connect it to a different root, נוח, meaning "rest," which matches the name Noah and does not have the extra Hebrew נ at the end. Biblical names, like contemporary naming of Jewish children, are not necessarily based on precise etymologies, but rather may be based on similarity of sounds, involving only some of the root letters.

**[NS] 32. had lived 500 years** The extraordinarily advanced age at which he begets a child, as compared with his forebears, is required by the fact that, according to 7.11, he is 600 at the time of the Flood, and there are no grandchildren in the ark. Noah is also the only personage in the list who has no daughters. This must be connected with 6.1-2, which tells how fallen angels consort with the daughters of men. The idea is that his immediate family remained uncorrupted.

**Shem** Its meaning is "name, fame, renown," and it is probably abbreviated from *sh'muel* or the like.

**Ham** Its origin is obscure, despite attempts to connect it with Hebrew *cham*, "a wife's father," *cham*, "hot, dark-skinned," and Egyptian *chm*, "servant." Ham is synonymous with Egypt in Psalms 78.51; 105.23, 27; and 106.32.

**Japheth** The name may be the same as that of Iapetus, which appears in Greek mythology but has no Greek etymology. Its meaning is unknown.

## Chapter 6

1 When men began to increase on earth and daughters were born to them,  
2 the divine beings [OJPS—the sons of God] saw how beautiful the daughters of men were [OJPS—that they were fair] and took wives from among those that pleased them [OJPS—whomever they chose].—

### [NS] CELESTIAL-TERRESTRIAL INTERMARRIAGE (vv. 1-4)

At the beginning of history, humans strove to rise to the level of divine beings, and God intervened. Humankind cannot be immortal. Here, divine beings lower themselves to the level of humans, and God intervenes. A severe limitation on human longevity results.

The account given in these few verses is surely the strangest of all the B'reishit narratives. It is so full of difficulties as to defy certainty of interpretation. The perplexities arise from the theme of the story, from its apparent intrusiveness within the larger narrative, from its extreme terseness, and from some of its vocabulary and syntax. The passage cannot be other than a fragment of what was once a well-known and fuller story, now etched in the barest outline.

While the picture here presented of celestial beings intermarrying with women on earth may partake of the mythical, it does not overstep the bounds of monotheism; there is only one God who passes judgment and makes decisions. The offspring of such unnatural union may have possessed heroic stature, but they have no divine qualities; they are flesh and blood like all humans. They are not only mortal, but their life span is severely limited as compared with the personages listed in chapter 5. The one God is recognized as holding sole title to the breath of life, which He controls as He wills.

[EF] Perhaps this fragment, which initially seems difficult to reconcile with biblical ideas about God, has been retained here to round out a picture familiar to ancient readers, and to recall the early closeness of the divine and the human which, according to many cultures, later dissolved. It is also possible that the episode serves as another example of a world that has become disordered, thus providing further justification for a divinely ordered destruction. The stage is set for the Flood by means of a powerful sound reference. In 5.29 Noah was named, ostensibly to comfort his elders' "sorrow" over human "pains" in tilling the soil. Here (6.6), however, the meaning of the name has been ironically reversed. The one who was supposed to bring comfort only heralds God's own being "sorry" and "pained" (vv. 6-7). A similar ironic wordplay, where the audience knows what the name-bestower does not, occurs in Sh'mot 2.3; curiously, the hero of that passage, the baby Moses, is also connected with an "ark"—the term for the little basket in which he is set adrift.

[RA] This whole passage is obviously archaic and mythological. The idea of male gods coupling with mortal women whose beauty ignites their desire is a commonplace of Greek myth, and Ephraim Avigdor Speiser has proposed that both the Greek and the Semitic stories may have a common source in the Hittite traditions of Asia Minor. God sees this intermingling of human and divine as the crossing of a necessary line of human limitation, and He responds by setting a new retracted limit (three times the formulaic 40) to human life span. Once more human mortality is confirmed, this time in quantitative terms.

[NS] **2. the divine beings** The definite article points to a familiar and well-understood term. The context in Job 1.6; 2.1; and 38.7 unmistakably proves the reference to be to the angelic host, the celestial entourage of God. This is a poetic image drawn from the analogy of human kings surrounded by their assemblage of courtiers. Occasionally, as in 1 Kings 22.19, "the host of heaven" is used to the same effect.

**saw how beautiful** The implication is that they were driven by lust, so that external beauty, and not character, was their sole criterion in the selection of mates.

3 The Lord said, “My breath [EF—My rushing spirit] shall not abide in man forever, since he too is flesh [CS—fallible flesh]; let the days allowed him be one hundred and twenty years.”—

4 It was then, and later too, that the Nephilim [EF—the giants] appeared on earth—when the divine beings [OJPS—the sons of God] cohabited with the daughters of men, who bore them offspring. They were the heroes [OJPS—the mighty men of old], the men of renown.

5 The Lord saw how great was man’s wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind [OJPS— every imagination of the thoughts of his heart; RA—every scheme of his heart’s devising] was nothing but evil all the time.

**[REF] 3. their days shall be 120 years.** God sets a maximum of 120 years for a human life. The reduction takes place gradually from a peak in the 900s (Methuselah and Noah) to ages in the 100s for the patriarchs. At the end of the Torah, Moses is said to have lived the full 120 years.

**[RA] 4. Nephilim.** The only obvious meaning of this Hebrew term is “fallen ones,” perhaps, those who have come down from the realm of the gods; but then the word might conceivably reflect an entirely different, un-Hebraic background. In any case, the notion of semidivine, heroic figures—in B’midbar the Nephilim are thought of as giants who are offspring of miscegenation between gods and women—again touches on common ground with Greek and other mythologies.

**[REF] 4. Nephilim.** The issue is that there are giants: uncommonly big, powerful persons, who are frightening. The first question is: from where did they come? Answer: “*b’nei elohim*” have relations with human women, and they give birth to giants, Nephilim. Whatever the biblical author thought *b’nei elohim* were, we can say at minimum that it refers here to some sort of (male) creatures from the divine realm. As in an extremely common mythological theme, such mixed divine-human breeding produces beings who are bigger and stronger than regular humans. This does not come up again in the story until thousands of years later. When Moses sends men to scout the promised land, they see the giants: “the Nephilim.” That is what scares the scouts, and their fear infects the Israelites, changing the destiny of the wilderness generation. A generation later, Joshua eliminates all the giants from the land except from the Philistine cities, particularly the city of Gath. And later still, the most famous Philistine giant, Goliath, comes from Gath, and David defeats him.

**[NS] 5. The Lord saw** This phrase has juridical overtones, implying both investigation of the facts and readiness for action.

**how great** The use of the same Hebrew stem רב here as in verse 1 suggests that the measure of evil grows in proportion to the growth in population.

**every plan devised by his mind** Literally, “every product of the thoughts of his heart.” In biblical psychology, mental phenomena fall within the sphere of the heart, which is the organ of thought, understanding, and volition, not of feeling. In later Hebrew, *yetzer*, “the thing devised, the product,” is the term for the innate impulses or drives in human beings that dispose them to good (*yetzer tov*) or evil (*yetzer ra*) and that can be controlled and directed by the exercise of the will. God’s observation is a judgment on the moral state of man at that specific time.

6 And the Lord regretted [OJPS—repented] that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened [OJPS—it grieved Him; CS—was heartsick].

7 The Lord said, “I will blot out from the earth the men whom I created—men together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them.”

8 But Noah found favor [OJPS—found grace] with the Lord.

### [NS] The Prologue to the Flood

The few notices interspersed with the genealogies of chapters 4 and 5 suggest a situation of generational regression from a moral point of view. Endowed with free will, man has used God’s gift to mischievous ends. The limit of divine tolerance in the face of increasing evil has been reached. These verses are by way of theodicy; that is, the Narrator is careful to stress that the universal cataclysm into which the world is about to be plunged is not the result of blind fate or the workings of divine caprice, but the considered judgment of God made inevitable by human evil.

**[NS] 6. regretted ... saddened** This is an anthropopathism, or the ascription to God of human emotions, a frequent feature of the biblical narrative. The need for such usage arises from the inherent tension between God’s transcendence and His immanence. On the one hand, He is conceived to be wholly outside of nature, omniscient and omnipotent, sovereign over time and space, and not subject to change. On the other hand, He is also immanent in the world, not withdrawn from it, a personal God who is actively involved in the lives of His creatures, approachable by them, and responsive to their needs. God’s transcendence requires formulation in abstract, philosophical language that poses the danger of depriving Him of personality and relevance. God’s immanence must unavoidably be expressed in concrete, imaginative terms that entail the risk of compromising His invariability. The biblical writers frequently took that risk for the sake of emphasizing God’s vital presence and personality; otherwise, the God idea would have lost all meaning for them. Statements like that in B’midbar 23.19, “God is not man to be capricious, / Or mortal to change His mind,” and 1 Samuel 15.29, “He is not human that He should change His mind,” serve as a corrective to the misunderstanding that may arise from a passage such as this one. In both instances, the Hebrew uses the same verb, here rendered “regretted.”

**[REF] regretted.** What could this mean? If God knows the future, how God regret something once it has happened? Compare what the prophet Samuel says about God: “He’s not a human that He should regret” (1 Samuel 15.29); yet it says twice in that same chapter that God does regret making Saul the king of Israel! This word is commonly understood to mean “repented,” especially when referring to human beings, but the question still remains what it would mean for God. The problem may be more linguistic than theological, as a result of a lack of a satisfactory word in English to capture the wider range of the Hebrew word. It refers to a change of heart or making a reversal of direction. The nature of this change may vary according to the situation, so that it may mean “repent” or “regret” or “relent,” and in biblical terms it may apply to either God or humans.

**[NS] saddened** God’s decision is made in sorrow, not in anger.

**[REF] 8. Noah found favor.** Parashat B’reshit ends not with the deity’s mournful statement that “I regret that I made them” (6.7), but rather with a point of hope: that Noah found favor in the divine sight.