

Genesis, Commentary to Chapter 1:1-2:3

Robert Alter

2. welter and waste. The Hebrew *tohu wabohu* 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.

hovering. The verb attached to God's breath-wind-spirit (*ruach*) elsewhere describes an eagle fluttering over its young and so might have a connotation of parturition or nurture as well as rapid back-and-forth movement.

5. first 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.

6. vault. The Hebrew *raki'a* suggests a hammered-out slab, not necessarily arched, but the English architectural term with its celestial associations created by poetic tradition is otherwise appropriate.

24. wild beasts. Literally, the phrase would mean "beast of the earth," but the archaic construct form for "beasts of," *chayto*, elsewhere regularly occurs in collocations [word arrangements] that denote wild beasts. In verse 25, the archaic form is not used, but given the close proximity of *chayat ha'arets* there to *chayto 'erets* here, it seems likely that the meaning is the same.

26. a human. The term *'adam*, afterward consistently with a definite article, 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

the wild beasts. The Masoretic Text reads "all the earth," *bekhol ha'arets*, but since the term occurs in the middle of a catalogue of living creatures over which humanity will hold sway the reading of the Syriac Version, *chayat ha'arets*, "wild beasts," seems preferable.

27. In the middle clause of this verse, "him," as in the Hebrew, is grammatically but not anatomically masculine. Feminist critics have raised the question as to whether here and in the second account of human origins, in chapter 2, *adam* is to be imagined as sexually undifferentiated until the fashioning of woman, though that proposal leads to certain dizzying paradoxes in following the story.

Genesis, Chapter 1:1-2:3, Commentary

Richard Elliott Friedman

Introduction

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 Tanakh). 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 difference between the Torah's conception of God and the pagan world's conception not merely arithmetic: one versus many. 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. To know Yamm, contemplate the sea.

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 does not know God through nature, but 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 Bereshit establishes this by beginning with accounts of creation and by then flowing through the first ten generations of humankind. (Those "begat" lists are thus 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.

Commentary to Chapter 1

1:1. In the beginning of God's creating the skies and the earth. Rashi began his commentary with the remark that the Torah could have begun with the first commandment to Israel—the commandment to observe Passover—which does not come until Exodus 12, rather than with creation. He answered that it begins with creation in order to establish God's ownership of all the world—and therefore God's right to give the promised land to Israel. I suggest that the lesson that we learn from the fact that the Torah does not begin with the first commandment is precisely that the commandments are not the sole purpose of the Torah. The Torah's story is no less important than the commandments that it contains. Law in the Bible is never given separately from history. The Ten Commandments do not begin with the first "Thou shalt," but with the historical fact that "I brought you out of the land of Egypt...."

Another lesson is that, in the Torah, the divine bond with Israel is ultimately tied to the divine relationship with all of humankind. (Rashi did not refer to the first commandment, which is "Be fruitful and multiply" and is given to all humankind, but rather to the first commandment to Israel, which is Passover.) The first eleven chapters establish a connection between God and the entire universe. They depict the formation of a relationship between the creator and all the families of the earth. This relationship will remain as the crucial background to the story of Israel that will take up the rest of the Torah.

1:1. In the beginning of God's creating the skies and the earth. The Torah begins with two pictures of the creation. The first (Gen 1:1-2:3) is a universal conception. The second (2:4-25) is more down-to-earth. The first has a cosmic feeling about it. Few other passages in the Hebrew Bible generate this feeling. The concern of the Hebrew Bible generally is history, not the cosmos, but Genesis 1 is an exception. There is a power about this portrait of a transcendent God constructing the skies and earth in an ordered seven-day series. In it, the stages of the fashioning of the heavenly bodies above are mixed with the fashioning of the land and seas below.

The translation of the Torah's first phrase is a classic problem. Even at the risk of a slightly awkward English, I have translated this line 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 Gen 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.

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.

1:2. shapeless and formless. The two words in the Hebrew, *tohu* and *bohu*, are understood to mean virtually the same thing. This is the first appearance in the Torah of a phenomenon in biblical language known as hendiadys, in which two connected words are used to signify one thing. ("Wine and beer" [Lev 10:9] may be a hendiadys, as well, or it may be a merism, a similar construction in which two words are used to signify a totality; so that "wine and beer" means all alcoholic beverages.) The hendiadys of "tohu and bohu," plus the references to the deep and the water, yields a picture of an undifferentiated, shapeless fluid that had existed prior to creation.

1:2. God's spirit. Or "wind of God." Words for "soul" or "spirit" in Hebrew frequently denote wind or breath (likewise in Greek: *pneuma* means both wind and spirit). This suggests that, in the ancient world, life was associated, in the first place, with respiration, as opposed to later determinations of life in terms of blood circulation or brain activity. Thus the animation of the first human will be described this way: "And He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living being."

1:2. God's spirit/wind hovering on the face of the water. The parallel with the ancient pagan creation myth of the wind god (Enlil, or Marduk) defeating the goddess of the waters (Tiamat; compare Hebrew *tehom*, translated "the deep," in this verse) is striking. The difference between the two is striking, too: in the Torah the water and all other components of the universe are no longer regarded as gods. Nature is de-mythologized. [See Page 58 of the Essays section for Hertz's refutation. Or is it a refutation at all? — Shammai]

1:3. 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.

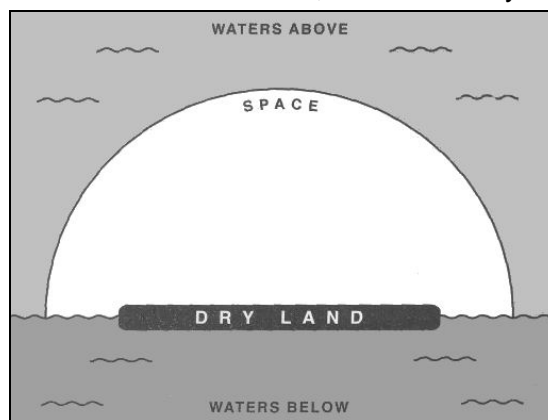
1:4. God separated. Initially there is only the watery chaos: shapeless and formless. Then creation is the making of distinctions: "And God separated between the light and the darkness," "And separated between the water that was under the space and the water that was above the space." Then more distinctions: between dry land and seas, among plants and animals "each

according to its kind," between day and night, and so on. In each case, creation is the act of separating a thing from the rest of matter and then giving it a name.

1:5. God called the light "day" and called the darkness "night." The first day also includes the creation of the ordering of time. Before the invention of day and night, time no less than space would be undifferentiated: "formless." Light, the one thing that is totally *ex nihilo*, is thus essential to all that follows: the separating between light and dark in an ordered arrangement initiates a sequence of distinctions of time and space, and these distinctions embody creation.

1:5. And there was evening, and there was morning. It is sometimes claimed mistakenly that Genesis 1 is poetry. True, the wording is powerful and beautiful, and the recurring words "And there was evening, and there was morning" and the chronology that they reflect lend a formulaic order to the chapter. But that does not make the text poetry. It is prose.

1:6. 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, and 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. See the comment on Gen 7:11.

1:6. 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 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 commit the etymological fallacy. That means: we should not automatically derive the meaning of a word from its root. People commonly make this mistake because the Hebrew

of the Tanakh 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.

1:8. God called the space "skies." The space (or "firmament") and the sky are the same thing. This appears to be an explanation of what the sky is. It is a transparent shell or space that holds back the upper waters.

1:8. 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. A more mundane explanation—which is presumably the *peshat*—would be that this simply is a known biblical form, which has no special meaning for the matter of creation, because it occurs elsewhere as well. See the numbering of the four rivers of Eden, which likewise uses the cardinal "one" and then the ordinals "second, third, fourth" (Gen 2:11–14; see also 2 Sam 4:2).

1:10,12. God saw that it was good. God observes the day's product to be good on every day except the second day. Instead, the text says "it was good" twice on the third day. Rashi suggested that this is because the task of the division of the waters was begun on the second day but not finished until the third. But, in that case, one might still ask why the task had to be thus split between two days. The reason why the second day's work—the formation of the space, with water above and below—is not pronounced "good" may rather be that God will later choose to break this structure (in the flood story, Gen 7:11). The double notice that "it was good" on the third day may be because (1) the formation of land and (2) the land's generation of plants are each regarded as creations worthy of notice.

This explanation is based on the Masoretic Text (MT). The Greek text (Septuagint), on the other hand, includes the words "And God saw that it was good" on the second day as well. It may be that these words were simply omitted from the MT by a scribe whose eye jumped from the first two letters of this line (Hebrew vav and yod) to the beginning of the next line ("And there was evening ..."), which begins with the same two first letters (vav and yod). This is called haplography.

1:12. 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.

1:13. 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.

1:15. 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.

This also implies an answer to an old question: People have questioned whether the first three days are twenty-four-hour days since the sun is not created until the fourth day. But light, day, and night are not understood here to depend on the existence of the sun, so there is no reason to think that the word "day" means anything different on the first two days than what it means everywhere else in the Torah. People's reason for raising this is often to reconcile the biblical creation story with current evidence on the earth's age. But it is better to recognize that the biblical story does not match the evidence than to stretch the story's plain meaning in order to make it fit better with our current state of knowledge.

1:16. the bigger light. The sun. **1:16. the smaller light.** The moon.

1:21. 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 (Isa. 51:9) or Leviathan (Isa. 27:1). Later, Aaron's staff (and the Egyptian magicians' staffs) turns into such a creature (not merely a snake!) at the Egyptian court.

1:26. 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.

1:27. He. In the present age many people choose not to conceive of the deity as male or female. In the Torah, however, there are passages in which one cannot help but understand and translate a divine reference as masculine. The Torah depicts God as male. Rather than impose a present view on an ancient text, I feel bound to leave the masculine references to the deity as they are, although I urge those who study the Torah to contemplate what this has meant through the ages from the time of the writing of the Torah to their own respective times.

1:27. in the image of God. We argue but truly do not know what is meant: whether a physical, spiritual, or intellectual image of God. (Some light may be shed on this by Gen 5:3. See the comment there.) Whatever it means, though, it implies that humans are understood here to share in the divine in a way that a lion or cow does not. That is crucial to all that will follow. The paradox, inherent in the divine-human relationship, is that only humans have some element of the divine, and only humans would, by their very nature, aspire to the divine, yet God regularly communicates with them by means of commands. Although made in the image of God, they remain subordinates. In biblical terms, that would not bother a camel or a dove. It will bother humans a great deal.

1:27. in the image of God; He created them male and female. Both men and women are created in the divine image. If the physical image of God is meant, it is difficult to say what is implied about the divine appearance.

1:28. Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. This commandment has now been fulfilled.

1:28. subdue it and dominate. Incredibly, some have interpreted this command to mean that humans have permission to abuse the earth and animal and plant life—as if a command from God to rule did not imply to be a good ruler!

1:31. 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 Tanakh 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. The deity notes on every working day that what was created in that day is good (except on Monday, but it compensates, saying "God saw that it was good" twice on Tuesday; see the comment on 1:10,12). And at the end of the six days God observes that everything is very good. But before we are even out of Parashat Bereshit, we read that God begins to see "that human bad was multiplied in the earth" (6:5). 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 Tanakh, 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. In the last installment in the narrative, the book of Nehemiah, God does not speak, there are no extraordinary reports of miracles, no angels, dreams, talking animals, or *Urim and Tummim* (see comment on Exodus 28:30¹); but humans, now having to live without these things, behave better and appear to be more committed to the Torah than perhaps any other generation in the Bible. (Nehemiah comes last in the Leningrad Codex, the oldest complete manuscript of the entire Tanakh. Printed editions of the Hebrew Bible generally have the books of Chronicles last, but the story ends with Nehemiah.) Nehemiah ends by asking his God to "Remember me for good" (13:31). The fact that the Hebrew Bible's story concludes with the word "good" is an exquisite, hopeful bookend to the opening chapter of Genesis, in which everything starts out being good.

2:1. the skies and the earth and all their array were finished. Attempts to reconcile this seven-day creation story with evolution and geological and cosmological evidence of the age of the universe are absurd, requiring a twisting of the words of the text in ways they never remotely meant. Arguments over whether the biblical or the scientific picture is correct are pointless. Of course the biblical picture is not a factual, literal account of the universe's origin. The evidence to this effect is overwhelming. It is, however, a meaningful, valuable, instructive account: It conveys a particular conception of the relationship between humans and the cosmos, of the

¹ *Urim and Tummim*. We have pondered for centuries what these are. They have something to do with inquiring of God for an answer to a question. They may contain letters that can spell out long answers, or they may provide only a "yes" or no," or they may also provide a third option of "no response." They are mentioned four times in the Torah, twice in 1 Samuel (14:41, where the Greek text differs from the Masoretic Text by a full line; and 25:6), and then never again in Israel's history until the narrative of Ezra and Nehemiah, where it is noted that answers through the Urim and Tummim are not available (Ezra 2:63; Neh 7:65). We must admit it: we just do not know what they are. What is important is that several different biblical sources indicate that there was a belief that it was possible to ask questions of God and get an answer, and that this was done through a priest, not a prophet. It was a mechanism other than prophecy to learn the will of God. And it is known as a practice only in Israel's earliest era.

relations between the sexes, of the linear flow of time, of the Sabbath. It sets the Bible's story in a context of a universe that starts out as good, with God being initially very close to humans....

2:2. 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.

2:2. 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.

2:3. 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."

2:3. made it holy. 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.

Creation (1:1–2:3)

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

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

1. When God began to create This rendering of the Hebrew looks to verse 3 for the completion of the sentence. It takes "verse 2 to be parenthetical, describing the state of things at

the time when God first spoke. Support for understanding the text in this way comes from 2:4 and 5:1, both of which refer to Creation and begin with “When.” The Mesopotamian creation epic known as Enuma Elish also commences the same way. In fact, enuma means “when.” Apparently, this was a conventional opening style for cosmological narratives. As to the peculiar syntax of the Hebrew sentence—a noun in the construct state (*be-re’shit*) with a finite verb (*bara’*)— analogies may be found in Leviticus 14:46, Isaiah 29:1, and Hosea 1:2. This seems to be the way Rashi understood the text.

The traditional English translation reads: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” This rendering construes the verse as an independent sentence complete in itself, a solemn declaration that serves as an epitomizing caption to the entire narrative. It takes the initial word *be-re’shit* to mean “at the beginning of time” and thus makes 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.*

In favor of the traditional English translation are the arguments that *be-re’shit* does not have to be in the construct state and that the analogies of 2:4 and 5:1, as well as of Enuma Elish, are inexact. In each instance, the word translated “when” is literally “in the day,” which is not the case in this verse.

God Unlike the pagan cosmologies, Genesis exhibits no interest in the question of God’s origins. His existence prior to the world is taken as axiomatic and does not even require assertion, let alone proof. There is no definition of God or any mystical speculation about His nature. God’s nature finds expression not in philosophical abstractions but through His acts and through the demands He makes on human beings.

The term for God used here and throughout the present account of Creation is *’elohim*. This is not a personal name but the general Hebrew word for deity. It can even refer to pagan gods. Although plural in form, only rarely is it not constructed with a singular verb or adjective. The plural form may signify majesty or serve to intensify the basic idea. The preference for the use of *’elohim* in this chapter, rather than the sacred divine name YHVH, may well be conditioned by theological considerations; the term *’elohim*, connoting universalism and abstraction, 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. The verb always refers to the completed product, never to the material of which it is made. As Ibn Ezra observed, *bara’* does not of itself denote the creation of something out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*). This doctrine seems to have been first articulated in the late Second Temple work, 2 Maccabees: “Look up to heaven and earth and see all that is therein, and know that God made them out of things that did not exist” (7:28). However, the Genesis narrative does contain intimations of such a concept. Precisely because of the indispensable importance of pre-existing matter in the pagan cosmologies, the very absence of such mention here is highly significant. This conclusion is reinforced by the idea of creation by divine fiat without reference to any inert matter being present. Also, the repeated biblical emphasis upon God as the exclusive Creator would seem to rule out the possibility of pre-existent matter. Finally, if *bara’* is used only of God’s creation, it must be essentially distinct from human creation. The ultimate distinction would be *creatio ex nihilo*, which has no human parallel and is thus utterly beyond all human comprehension.

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. We are not told how the cosmos came into being, but other texts point to a tradition of its creation by means of divine fiat. Thus, Psalm 33:6 and 9 declare: “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, / by the breath of His mouth, all their host. . . / For He spoke, and it was; / He commanded, and it endured.” The postbiblical 2 Esdras 6:38 has the same notion: “I said, O Lord, You have indeed spoken from the beginning of creation; on the first day You said: ‘Let heaven and earth be made,’ and Your word accomplished the work.”

2. Following the general comprehensive statement comes a detailed description of the primordial state of the world.

unformed and void Hebrew *tohu va-vohu*. This compound phrase appears again in the Bible in Jeremiah’s prophetic vision of the return of the primal chaos (Jer. 4:23–27), thus leaving no doubt that the phrase designates the initial chaotic state of the earth. That God should create disorganized matter, only to reduce it to order, presents no more of a problem than does His taking six days to complete creation instead of instantaneously producing a perfected universe. The quintessential point of the narrative is the idea of ordering that is the result of divine intent. It is a fundamental biblical teaching that the original, divinely ordained order in the physical world has its counterpart in the divinely ordained universal moral order to which the human race is subject.

darkness Throughout the Bible darkness is often a symbol of evil, misfortune, death, and oblivion. Here it seems to be not just the absence of light but a distinct entity, the origin of which is left unclear. Isaiah 45:7, however, explicitly ascribes its existence to divine creation.

the deep Hebrew *tehom*, the cosmic abyssal water that enveloped the earth. The text says nothing about how or when this watery mass came into existence. Proverbs 8:22–24 makes it one of God’s creations. In many unrelated mythologies water is the primal element, a notion that most likely arose from its amorphous nature. To the ancients, this characteristic seemed to represent appropriately the state of affairs before chaos was reduced to order and things achieved stable form. It is instructive that *tehom* is treated as a Hebrew proper name; like all such names, it never appears with the definite article. Although not feminine in grammatical form, it is frequently employed with a feminine verb or adjective. At times it is personified. In Genesis 49:25 and Deuteronomy 33:13 it “couches below,” and in Habakkuk 3:10, “Loud roars the deep” in panic at the wrathful approach of God. Lastly, *tehom* appears in Isaiah 51:10 in a mythic context. All these facts suggest that *tehom* may once have been the name of a mythical being much like the Mesopotamian Tiamat, the female dragonsque personification of the primordial salt-water ocean, representing the aggressive forces of primitive chaos that contended against the god of creativity. Here in Genesis, *tehom* is thoroughly demythologized.

a wind from God Hebrew *ruach* means “wind, breath, spirit.” “Wind” is the most popular rendering of the word in ancient and medieval Jewish sources. As a physical phenomenon, wind conforms to the general picture of primal chaos evoked by this verse, except that, unlike darkness and water, it is not mentioned again in the Creation story. One possible explanation may be that wind reappears as the agent by means of which the water is separated—that is, blown back—as in Genesis 8:1 at the conclusion of the Flood and in Exodus 14:21 at the crossing of the Sea of Reeds. Wind often functions as a divine agent in the Bible. Another interpretation takes *ruach* in the sense of God’s creative, life-giving, sustaining energy. Still a third possibility lies in its use as a term heralding the arrival of God, expressing His immanence, or symbolizing His presence. The last two explanations connect the phrase with the following verse, thus alerting us to an imminent, dramatic development: God is about to transform the inert, disorganized matter, to affect it by His presence, to animate it with His spirit.

sweeping The Hebrew stem *r-kh-f* appears otherwise in Deuteronomy 32:11, where it describes an eagle hovering over its young, a meaning it also possesses in Ugaritic; but in Jeremiah 23:9 it refers to bones trembling or shaking. The basic idea of the stem is vibration, movement. Hitherto all is static, lifeless, immobile. Motion, which is the essential element in change, originates with God's dynamic presence.

water This is either the cosmic ocean believed by the ancients to surround the earth or the same water referred to in verses 6, 7, 9, and 10, namely, the water covering the solid mass of earth. It is doubtful that the two were really differentiated in the Hebrew mind.

THE FIRST GROUP (vv. 3–13)

DAY ONE

3. God said The divine word shatters the primal cosmic silence and signals the birth of a new cosmic order. Divine fiat is the first of the several modalities of creativity employed in this account. "God said" means "God thought" or "God willed." It signifies that the Creator is wholly independent of His creation. It implies effortless and absolute sovereignty over nature.

Let there be The directive *yehi*, found again in verses 6 and 14, is reserved for the creation of celestial phenomena. Its usage here may be an allusion to the divine personal name YHVH.

light The first creation by God's utterance is fittingly that which serves in the Bible as a symbol of life, joy, justice, and deliverance. The notion of light independent of the sun appears again in Isaiah 30:26 and Job 38:19-20. Most likely it derives from the simple observations that the sky is illuminated even on cloudy days when the sun is obscured and that brightness precedes the rising of the sun. The source of this supernal, nonsolar light of creation became a subject of rabbinic and mystical speculation. Genesis Rabba 3:4 expresses the view that this light is the effulgent splendor of the Divine Presence. Psalms 104:2, with its theme of creation, describes God as "wrapped in a robe of light."

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.

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.

God separated Separation, or rather differentiation, is the second modality of creation. Light, like darkness, is viewed as a discrete entity, a notion made explicit in Isaiah 45:7 and Job 38:19.

5. God called According to the conceptions of the ancient Near East, possessing no name was equivalent to nonexistence. An Egyptian text describes pre-creation as the time "when no name of anything had yet been named," and Enuma Elish similarly designates primeval chaos as the period "when on high the heaven had not [yet] been named, and below the firm ground had not [yet] been given a name." Name-giving was thus associated with creation and, by extension, with domination, for the one who gives a name has power over the object. In the present narrative, day and night, the sky, and the earth and sea are all named by God. This is another way of expressing His absolute sovereignty over time and space, the latter in both its

celestial and terrestrial dimensions. It should be noted that in Genesis name-giving finalizes the creative act but does not initiate it or cause it to come about.

evening. . . morning Hebrew *'erev* and *boker* mean, strictly speaking, the “sunset” and the “break of dawn,” terms inappropriate before the creation of the sun on the fourth day. Here the two words, respectively, signify the end of the period of light, when divine creativity was suspended, and the renewal of light, when the creative process was resumed. As Rashbam noted, the day is here seen to begin with the dawn. The same idea dictates the order of words in the oft used phrase “day and night,” and it underlies the regulations of Leviticus 7:15 and 22:30, which mark off the morning following the bringing of certain sacrifices as the time limit by which they may be eaten. This accords with the Egyptian practice of reckoning the day from one morning to the next. On the other hand, the Mesopotamian concept of the day as beginning at eventide also has its counterpart in the Bible in the phrase “night and day” and in the observance of the Day of Atonement “from evening to evening,” as laid down in Leviticus 23:32. This is the system that governs the Jewish religious calendar, by which the Sabbath and festivals commence at sunset and terminate at the start of the following night.

a first day Hebrew *'echad* functions both as a cardinal number (“one”) and an ordinal number (“first”) in many texts.

DAY TWO

6. an expanse The Hebrew noun *rakia'* is unparalleled in cognate languages. The verbal form is often used for hammering out metal or flattening out earth, which suggests a basic meaning of “extending.” It is unclear whether the vault of heaven was here viewed as a gigantic sheet of metal or as a solid layer of congealed ice. The latter interpretation might be inferred from Ezekiel 1:22, which is how Josephus understood it as well.

water from water The purpose of the expanse is to create a void that separates what was taken to be the source of rain above from the water on earth.

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. Ibn Janah observed that the formula should follow verse 6 by analogy with verses 24-25. In fact, each occurrence immediately follows the divine speech, which is how it appears in the Septuagint version of the text. 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.

DAY THREE

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 *le-mino* is clear from several texts. 17

THE SECOND GROUP (vv. 14–31)

DAY FOUR

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.

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. Jeremiah 10:2 reads: “Thus said the LORD: / Do not learn to go the way of the nations, / And do not be dismayed by portents in the sky; / Let the nations be dismayed by them!”

DAY FIVE

The process of Creation is now sufficiently advanced to sustain life, which is classified according to its habitat: creatures that colonize the waters and creatures that populate the sky.

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 cosmogonic process, the narrative at once strips them of divinity.

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.

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.

24. Let the earth bring forth It is uncertain whether the production of animals from earth is a reflex of the concept of “mother earth” or is simply a figurative way of expressing the natural environment of these creatures.

25. The execution of the divine utterance reverses the order of verse 24 so as to juxtapose *'adamah*, “earth,” to *'adam*, “human being,” in the next verse.

creeping things A general term for creatures whose bodies appear to move close to the ground. Here it seems to encompass reptiles, creeping insects, and very small animals.

The absence of a blessing upon these categories of animals is striking. It may be that, whereas the natural habitat of fish and fowl allows for their proliferation without encroaching adversely upon man’s environment, the proliferation of animals, especially the wild variety, constitutes a menace. This idea is actually expressed in Exodus 23:29 and Leviticus 26:22.

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 the starkness of his utter insignificance as compared with God—is the subject of the psalmist who, basing himself on the present 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. Such a celestial scene is depicted in several biblical passages. 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 (Isa. 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.

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.

It is noteworthy that the recurrent formula “of every kind,” hitherto encountered with the emergence of every living thing, is here omitted. There is only one human species. The notion of all humankind deriving from one common ancestry directly leads to the recognition of the unity of the human race, notwithstanding the infinite diversity of human culture. The sages of the Mishnah, in Sanhedrin 4:5, observed that mankind was created as a single unit in order to inculcate the idea that the destruction of a single life is tantamount to the destruction of the

entire world and, conversely, the preservation of a single life is the preservation of the entire world. The sages further understood that God, in order to promote social harmony, intended that no person have claim to unique ancestry as a pretext for asserting superiority over others.

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.

Be fertile and increase Some commentators have understood this blessing of fertility to encompass a religious duty of procreation as well. However, only in its repetition in 9:7, following the depopulation of the earth by the Flood, is it clearly prescriptive. 24

30. God makes provision for the sustenance of man and beast—a reminder that man is still a creature totally dependent on the benevolence of God. The narrative presupposes a pristine state of vegetarianism. Isaiah's vision of the ideal future in 11:7 and 65:25 sees the carnivorous animals becoming herbivorous.

very good A verdict on the totality of Creation, now completed.

the sixth day The exceptional definite article here and with the seventh day points to the special character of these days within the scheme of Creation.

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. *[Emphases here are mine: Shammai]*

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.

1. all their array Hebrew *tsava’*, in the sense used here, is strictly speaking applicable only to “heaven”; but, by the figure of speech known as zeugma, it is extended to apply to the “earth” as well.

2. On the seventh day This phrase caused embarrassment to ancient translators and commentators, for it seems to be out of harmony with the context, implying some divine activity also on this day. However, the preposition can easily mean “by,” and the verb can be taken as a pluperfect, “had finished,” or as a declarative, “pronounced finished,” just as “he declared it holy” in verse 3.

He ceased This is the primary meaning of *sh-b-t*; the idea of resting is secondary.

3. God blessed...declared it holy Unlike the blessings of verses 22 and 28, which are verbal, specific, material, and relate to living creatures, this blessing is undefined and pertains to time itself. The day becomes imbued with an extraordinary vital power that communicates itself in a beneficial way. That is why the routine day-formula is here omitted. God, through His creativity, has already established His sovereignty over space; the idea here is that He is sovereign over time as well. Through his weekly suspension of normal human activity, man imitates the divine pattern and reactualizes the original sacred time of God, thereby recovering the sacred dimension of existence. Paradoxically, he also thereby rediscovers his own very human dimension, his earthliness, for the Sabbath delimits man’s autonomy, suspends for a while his creative freedom, and declares that on that one day each week nature is inviolable.

holy This first use of the key biblical concept of holiness relates to time. This is in striking contrast to the Babylonian cosmology, which culminates in the erection of a temple to Marduk by the gods, thereby asserting the sanctification of space.

all the work of creation that He had done This smooth English conceals a difficulty in the Hebrew, which literally translates “all His work that God created to do.” Ibn Ezra and Radak understood the final verb as connoting “[for man] to [continue to] do [thenceforth].” Ibn Janah and Ramban connected the final verb with the preceding “ceased,” thereby taking it to mean: “He ceased to perform all His creative work.”