



# Hebrew Scriptures

## Bereshit: The Mystery of Creation

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The Bible says that the universe and its content—the landscapes and the mountains, the rivers and the seas, the trees and the flowers, but also life, the animals which walk, swim or fly, and the human persons, men and women who think and sing—all that did not come by accident: they were created by God.

### In the Beginning God

It is not an accident either that the Bible begins with this affirmation, the first article of faith of Maimonides' *Ani maamin*: "I believe with a firm and perfect faith that God is the Creator of all things; for He guides and supports all creatures; that He alone has made everything; and that He still acts, and will act during the whole eternity." This position at the start of the prophetic word

marks the priority of Creation over any other theological consideration. As we enter the Bible, even before the appearance of Adam and Eve and later of Israel, we must remember the event of God's Creation. Rashi wondered about this fact: "Why didn't God start with the Exodus, the most important event, the first event of the history of Israel?" he asked. The reason he suggested is for all: that we may know that the God of Israel is the God of all nations.

The first lesson of Creation is to tell us that God is before all of us. It is noteworthy that the Masoretic Text put an *athnach*, the most powerful disjunctive

phasis: God is the Creator. God did it. Nothing came by accident. The most compelling evidence of God's existence lies in His Creation. Upon observing the syntax of the first verse, the Midrash made the same observation. "In the beginning created *God*." This order of the words in the Hebrew text, putting the verb describing Creation (*bara*) before the mention of God (*Elohim*), inspired the ancient rabbis who concluded that the Creation leads to the encounter with God (see Yalkut R. Samuel ISP 184).

In other words, the very fact that I exist is an evidence of God's existence. "I am, therefore God

*Since you exist, God exists.*

accent, on the word *Elohim* (God) in order to mark an em-

is" we could say paraphrasing Descartes. I breathe, I think, I

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wonder, I pray, I see the world; therefore God exists. You may question everything, question the rigor of that philosophy or the truth of that religion or the validity of that opinion. You cannot question your own existence; as you are questioning, you exist. And since you exist, God exists. Because I am, there must be someone before me. The Bible starts with this awareness: God was in the beginning.

#### **The God of Creation**

Through His work God defines Himself both as a Great God, the Almighty, who transcends humankind, and as a personal God who came down and created persons and related to them.

The biblical story of Creation attests to these two complementary faces of God. In the first Creation story (Genesis 1:1-2:4a) God is described as the Great God of the Universe (Genesis 1:1). He is called then with the name *Elohim* which is derived from the Semitic root *alah* that expresses the idea of power and preeminence, and is used in the plural form (*-im*) to suggest the idea of superlative and majesty. In the second Creation story (Genesis 2:4b-25) God is instead described as a God who comes close to humans and takes care of them. Here also, the name of God YHWH corresponds to this accent on God's proximity. The name YHWH is derived from the Semitic root *hwh* that means to "exist with" or "exist for."

YHWH is the God who walks with and fights for, He is the God of history (Exodus 3:13-14), the personal God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exodus 3:16).

From the first pages of the Bible, God reveals Himself as the unique God who exists in Himself, absolute and independent, but also the personal God who exists and works for us. Because He is the Creator, God will always remain beyond human understanding; any attempt to represent Him or even to conceive of Him is bound to fail and is blasphemous (Exodus 20:4-6). On the other hand, because He creates God made Himself known and we have been able to approach Him and love Him. God is both far and near (Jeremiah 23:23), "in heaven" but also "our Father."

Faith in the Creator implies a religion of tension between two poles, and the worship experience is made of both the awareness of the power and transcendence of God and the assurance of His love. This is why Creation is often given in the Bible, especially in the Psalms, as the main reason for worshipping God: "Oh come, let us worship and bow down, Let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker" (Psalm 95:6).

#### **The Work of Creation**

The very fact that it is God who worked at Creation should prevent us from any attempt to speculate and explain the mystery of Creation. It is interesting that the biblical Creation story does

not provide us with the "scientific" mechanism of the divine work of Creation. God did not use an assistant, or a special tool, or a secret chemical formula. The whole mystery resides in Himself. "For He spoke and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast" (Psalm 33:9). Indeed, the work of Creation is described as the result of God's word. Ten times God spoke. This rhythm of the number ten suggests that it took God a minimum of words to produce the Creation (compare Genesis 18:32). The Midrash comments on this miracle: "God created the world by a word, instantaneously, without toil and pains" (*Bereshit*

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*Rabbah* 3,2). Yet the Creation story tells us that it took God seven days to complete the whole work: one week. He could have done it in a second or even less. Why did God choose to create in seven days? The number seven in the Bible and in the ancient Middle East symbolizes the idea of fullness—a way of saying that God created everything then and that everything was perfect, complete. As the *Sifre Deuteronomy* states: "Everything that God fashioned was perfect, as all His dealings with men are just and right. It is not for men to imagine improvements in His creation" (*Sifre Deuteronomy* 397).

Also God used a time unit that belongs to the human sphere. When God created He entered

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the time of the human universe. It is indeed interesting that for each stage of the week of Creation it is said “So the evening and the morning were the first day. . . . the second day, etc.” (Genesis 1:5, 8). It is remarkable however that this phrase that is repeated six times to mark the new day of Creation does not appear in relation to the seventh day, the Sabbath. The reason for this omission is quite simple. Only the seventh day is the first whole day of the human beings (Adam and Eve). Since now humans are here, it is no more necessary to specify “evening and morning” for the day. Their presence is enough to indicate that the day which is now involved is a human day of “evening and morning,” hence in our words “a twenty-four-hour day.” It was on the other hand necessary to specify “evening and morning” for all the other six days since humans were not yet an inherent part of the rhythm of the cosmos. The intention of this six-fold repetition is clear: to emphasize that the days of this week were indeed human days, even though humans were not yet present. In fact, the clue is given from the first day (Genesis 1:5). Instead of using the expected ordinal number *rishon* (first) as it is done for all the other days (second, third, etc.), the biblical author uses the cardinal number *ahad* (one). The day he has in mind then is “one day,” one “unique day.” The same word is used in fact in the Shema to characterize the uniqueness of God

(Deuteronomy 6:4). As the famous medieval Jewish commentator Rashi observed: “The symmetry of the text would have required first day, as for the following days, second, third, fourth. Why was it written ‘one’? Because God is one?”

The mystery remains total. The biblical author insists: It took God just one week, one real human week to complete the whole work of Creation. This computation may sound unbelievable today in regard to the “scientific” claim of evolution that speaks of billions of years. Yet the second Creation story (Genesis 2:4b-25) that is written in parallelism to the first confirms the truth of the first Creation story. The text tells us that God created the garden with its trees and the humans He put among them *adult, mature*. The second Creation story provides us then with a key to help us interpret the first Creation story. Just as man was created adult, so the world was created adult. Adam was not created incomplete, as a baby or a sperm. God created him “grown up” just as the trees and everything around him, so that he could not only survive but also enjoy all the divine gifts.

A strong affirmation of the goodness at the perfection of Creation marks the conclusion of the Creation week: “Then God

saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). The “very” added to the “good” at the end of the work shows that Creation is not just a good work that meets our basic needs and helps us to survive. Creation is beautiful and tasty so that we may enjoy it. This ultimate purpose has been pointed out by Rabbi Aibo in the Midrash *Rabbah*, “It is like a king who has filled his palace with enjoyments. . . . When the angels objected to the Creation of man, God replied: ‘And of what use are all the good things I have created, unless men are there to enjoy them?’” (*Bereshit Rabbah* 8, 5). The implication of the goodness of Creation is that humans are allowed and even required to enjoy it.

This positive appreciation of Creation has characterized the Jewish Yes to life and joy of life in contrast to the Marcionite dualism that has often affected Christians and encouraged them to despise Creation and the physical world as something negative and evil. In Christianity the spiritual domain has therefore prevailed over the physical and material domain. The God of salvation, the spiritual God of the New Testament, has replaced

the God of Creation, the concrete and historical God of the Old Testament; and along the same lines the first day of the week, Sunday, that celebrates the resurrection and the deliverance from the world, has replaced the Seventh-day Sabbath that celebrates Creation and the goodness of the physical world.

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concrete history to the call for spiritual experience, has played a major role in the forging of the two different mentalities leading ultimately to the separation between Jews and Christians. The dichotomy between Creation and Salvation is unfortunate. From the perspective of the Bible Salvation and Creation are related. Salvation is understood as a Creation, a deliverance from nothingness and darkness.

Interestingly, when the ancient

### *Hope is the mark of Creation.*

Israelites were delivered from Egypt they experienced a creation. The song of Moses that celebrates that event uses the very language of the Creation story to describe it (Exodus 15:8). Likewise the prophet Isaiah speaks of the return from the exile in the same terms of Creation (see especially Isaiah 42-45). Also in the New Testament Jesus describes salvation as a creation. "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" (John 3:5; compare Romans 6:1-4). This connection is even present in the

Jewish rituals that mark the entry of the proselyte. Both the Jewish *Tevela* and the Christian baptism require total immersion in the water, recalling the event of Creation in order to suggest new commitment, new life, and the hope of a new world.

When the Bible speaks about the hope of the new kingdom of God, the new Jerusalem, it does so by reference to Creation. The prophet Isaiah as well as the book of

Revelation concludes on the same vision of the new city that God promises to create for the happiness of humankind. Hope is the mark of Creation.

"For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things will not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem *for* rejoicing and her people *for* gladness. I will also rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in My people; and there will no longer be heard in her the voice of weeping and the sound of cry-

ing" (Isaiah 65:17-19; compare Revelation 21:1-5).

The first message that is contained in this promise is that the kingdom of God is not to be expected from here as the direct product of our own human effort. It is a Creation from God, a gift from above. It also means that the salvation of mankind implies the Creation of the universe. All is recreated and therefore hope is possible. Presently death, evil, and suffering are an inherent part of the world and mankind. The only solution to the problem is cosmic: only faith in Creation makes this perspective possible. Creation allows the hope in recreation. The structure of the Bible, the way it begins and ends, conveys the same associations. The first pages of the Scriptures speak of Creation and the last pages speak of recreation. The very fact that in the beginning everything was "good" and even "very good" guarantees the promise of a better world, when everything will again be "very good."

## The Duty to Enjoy

*Rabbi Aibo said: God's Creation is comparable to a king who has filled his palace with enjoyments; if he has no visitors, what joy does he derive from his palace? Thus, when the angels objected to the creation of man, God replied: "And of what use are all the good things I have created, unless men and women are there to enjoy them?" (Bereshit Rabbah 8,5).*