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With Scissors and Paste

The Sources of Genesis

Primary Reading: Genesis 1–3.

Division of the Bible into Chapters

We are used to works of fiction and nonfiction being divided into chapters. Each chapter is supposed to be, in some sense, a self-enclosed unity. The divisions between chapters offer the ideal time to take a break—to reflect on the meaning as a whole of the unit you have just completed reading, a chance to get a drink or a snack, etc. Taking a break between Genesis 1 and 2 would seem natural for any of these purposes—but anyone who did this would be misreading the first unit of Genesis. That's because this chapter break is located in the wrong place.

The chapter numbers now found in Bibles are not integral to the text. Rather, they date from the thirteenth century C.E.[1] They first appeared in manuscripts of the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Bible that the early Church father Jerome had written. By the mid-sixteenth century, Jewish editors introduced chapters into printed Hebrew Bibles as well. Thus, the chapter divisions are relatively recent, representing one particular understanding about how the Bible may be subdivided. The "standard" chapter divisions have no authority, especially for Jews, and they are best ignored.

Division of the Bible into Paragraphs

Torah scrolls divide the Pentateuch into the equivalent of paragraph units by placing white space between units.[2] These white spaces are of two types: short ones called *setumah* (סְתוּמָה, "closed"), where the next unit continues on the

same line; and longer ones called *petuchah* (פְּתוּחָה, "open"), where the rest of the line is left open and the following unit continues only on the next line. This tradition of leaving spaces dates back at least to the Dead Sea Scrolls (mostly from the third century B.C.E. to the first century C.E.). However, the Dead Sea Scrolls do not always agree with the divisions found in contemporary Torah scrolls, which the great medieval Jewish scholar Maimonides (1135–1204) established on the basis of a highly accurate tenth-century biblical manuscript called the Aleppo Codex. In other words, spaces or paragraph divisions—which vary somewhat even among medieval Hebrew manuscripts and printed editions of the Bible—have never been entirely uniform. They do, however, represent a significant early interpretive tradition.

Unfortunately, these divisions are not reflected in English Bible translations. Rather, each translator has independently decided where units begin and end. The typesetters have set the type accordingly. Thus, for example, the paragraph breaks in the JPS translation represent the places where three committees working in the second part of the twentieth century felt new units should be demarcated. As with any translation, their decisions deserve consideration—but are not definitive.

Division of the Bible into Verses

Various rabbinic sources from the Mishnah (approximately 200 C.E.) attest to the division of the Bible into *pesukim* (פְּסוּקִים, literally "breaking points"), what we would call verses.[3] No early comprehensive list exists of where these breaking points were perceived to be. However, some evidence suggests that they were largely the same as the later divisions found in medieval Hebrew manuscripts, which indicate verse endings by a musical note (called a *silluk*—a vertical line) under the final word, as well as what looks like a colon (*sof pasuk*) after each verse. Thus, of the three divisions noted in manuscripts—chapters, paragraphs, and verses—the latter should be seen as the most ancient and authoritative. Yet, there are sometimes differences in how the same words are divided into verses in different biblical contexts; some medieval manuscripts reflect these differences in their verse counts. Given the variants that we find, the verse divisions should not be seen as fully authoritative. Occasionally, weighty evidence suggests that a unit of thought really ends midverse while the second part of that verse starts a new unit, or that a word at the end of one verse belongs at the beginning of the next, or vice versa.

Discerning the Bible's Literary Units

The foregoing conclusions concerning chapter, paragraph, and verse divisions have significant implications for how we read the Bible. We have to discover and use textual clues other than these "late" formal markings to decide where units begin and end. Thus, the Bible should be envisioned as a text punctuated only by word spaces[4]—with nothing to indicate sections, paragraphs, or even verses. Our first step when reading *all* biblical texts must be to subdivide that biblical text into these kinds of units.

An analogy illustrates this procedure and why it matters. Let's imagine that a typesetter made a mistake in laying out the type of a collection of poems, and printed them all as one long poem. Someone with modern or postmodern interests might enjoy reading the result as a unified work. But most of us would prefer to divide the long poem into separate poems. To do so, we would use stylistic and content-based criteria. If, for example, an E. E. Cummings poem followed an Emily Dickinson poem, this would be easy; in other cases, it would be more difficult.

The Bible should be treated like this imaginary poetry book. Even though our printed version shows chapters and verses, these should be ignored. It must be imagined as a single, continuous text. Furthermore, we must develop robust criteria for distinguishing the compositional units embedded in it. Otherwise, we might do the equivalent of reading the first two lines of a Cummings poem as the conclusion of the preceding Dickinson poem!

The criteria used for separating biblical sources are similar to those used to analyze poetry. We read carefully, attuned to changes in style and content, looking for contradictions between verses.

None of these criteria is airtight or *absolutely* objective. There is no consensus about how much variation a text may contain in order to be considered a unified work. Nor do scholars always agree on whether or not a larger text is self-contradictory. Thus in some cases we find real debate about where a unit begins and/or ends. In most cases, however, there is widespread agreement.

Genesis 1–3 as a Unit

Genesis 1–3 is inconsistent. It recounts several events twice—for example, the creation of humankind is narrated first in 1:26–28 and then in 2:7–23. These episodes cannot be seen as a general description of the creation of humankind

in chapter 1, which is elaborated and filled in chapter 2, because these two accounts differ significantly in their detail. In chapter 1, on day six, first the land animals are created (vv. 24–25), and then man and woman are created simultaneously (vv. 26–28). In contrast, in chapter 2, first man is created (v. 7), then the animals are created (vv. 18–20), and only after these are found unsuitable to be man's partner (v. 20) is woman created (vv. 21–23). A single story, written by a single author, would not be self-contradictory in such a significant matter.

This might be the most significant difference between these stories, but once it is noted, other distinctions quickly become apparent. Each individual difference by itself might not be convincing, but cumulatively, they become compelling. Other differences include the fact that in Genesis 1 the deity is called God (אֱלֹהִים), whereas in much of chapters 2–3 the deity is called *YHWH Elohim* (יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים, "the LORD God").[5] The units use different words for crucial terms like "creation"—thus in 1:27, the first human is "created" (ברא, *b-r-'*), whereas in 2:7 the human is "formed" (יצר, *y-tz-r*). In fact, the word translated as "create" (ברא) is used a total of seven times in 1:1–2:3, but not at all in 2:4–3:24.

Additionally, the style of chapter 1 is unlike the style of most of chapters 2–3. Genesis 1 is highly structured into "days," each with a recurring set of formulas (e.g., "God said . . . it was so," "And God saw that this was good. And there was evening and there was morning, X day."). In contrast, most of chapters 2–3 is free flowing, with a much looser structure, and none of these formulaic phrases. This is connected to another distinction: the structure of chapter 1 portrays a powerful, majestic God, while the God of much of chapters 2–3—who "mov[es] about in the garden" (3:8), talks to people (3:9–11), and even tenderly clothes them (3:21)—has a fundamentally different nature. These two pictures of God are the work of different authors.

Giving the Text a Break

Where is the literary break between these two stories? In other words, where does the story that begins with Genesis 1:1 end? Verse 1:1 and the first half of 2:4, namely 2:4a, frame the story. The word pair "heaven . . . earth" (הַשָּׁמַיִם . . . הָאָרֶץ) as well as the verb "to create" (ברא) appear together in these two contexts only. This repetition forms a frame or envelope around the story. Genesis 2:4a, "Such is the story of heaven and earth when they were created," therefore concludes the first story.

This device—in which a phrase or several words indicate the limits of a unit—is called an "inclusio," and it is common in biblical writing. For example,

the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11 begins וַיְהִי כָל־הָאָרֶץ, "The whole earth was," and concludes עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ, "over the face of the whole earth" (v. 9; transl. adapted). Similarly, Psalm 8 begins and ends with the very same verse: "O LORD, our Lord, How majestic is Your name throughout the earth" (vv. 2, 10).

In general, the word *eileh* (אֵלֶּה, "such is") may be used either to point backward (as a conclusion) or to point forward (as an introduction). In this case, however, it cannot be an introduction for two reasons: (1) Its use of "heaven and earth" specifically refers back to Genesis 1:1 and other instances in that chapter, while this phrase is never found in 2:5–3:24; and (2) it uses the verb *b-r-'* (ברא, "to create"), which is characteristic of chapter 1 but absent in 2:5–3:24.

Genesis 2:4b, the second part of 2:4, thus introduces a new story, which continues past chapter 3. In fact, the vocabulary of 2:4 further suggests that it is composite; it is unlikely that a single author would refer to the created world first as "heaven and earth" (2:4a) and then as "earth and heaven" (2:4b). This explains why many Bibles, including the JPS translation, begin a new paragraph with 2:4b, breaking in the middle of a verse.

Two Stories and Their Relationship

Once the division between these two stories is determined at the middle of Genesis 2:4, a final difference between them jumps out—they are not both creation stories of the same type. The first story describes the creation of the world, in which people play a role alongside all else that is created. In contrast, the second creation story has people as its main focus, narrating the creation of parts of the world only to the extent that they are relevant to people. Thus 1:1–2:4a is an ancient Israelite story about the creation of the world, while 2:4b–3:24 is a different story, by a different Israelite author with different ideas, and its focus is the creation of humankind.

This analysis raises two issues: If Genesis 1:1–2:4a and 2:4b–3 are telling different stories, then why not read the second story as an elaboration of the first, thus reading chapters 1–3 as one long story? In addition, if we insist on reading them as two stories, is the model propounded here, of two stories being woven together, a plausible model for how literature was produced in the ancient world?

The possibility of reading Genesis 1–3 as a compositional unity is vitiated by the fundamental differences in vocabulary, style, and content between the two stories. While in theory, a story about the creation of humankind might come as an elaboration or culmination of a general creation story, in practice we could only claim that this were the case if the two largely agreed in content, style, and

vocabulary. Given the significant differences in all of these areas, the stories should be separated, and viewed as written by different authors.

The second question, concerning the blending of the two stories together into a single story, highlights one of the main differences between much of ancient and modern writing—a difference that we must simply accept and get used to, or we will be like Marta (see chapter 3). In most modern societies, the name of the author is closely linked to the literary work he or she has produced; through copyright control, the author can protect that work. Ancient writing was quite different. Much writing in the ancient Near East was anonymous. Beyond that, there was no conception that a work must be copied over exactly. The copyist typically played a creative role in the transmission of texts, often adding to them. This may be seen most clearly in a variety of Mesopotamian texts, most especially the Gilgamesh epic, which expanded over time, and even incorporated large sections from other compositions.[6] It may also be seen in various Dead Sea Scroll manuscripts of the Torah as well.[7] In fact, in many ways the Bible is like modern texts that circulate on the Internet—their original author is often unknown, and many users who forward the texts revise them or add to them in significant ways. We must get used to this different notion of "text" as we approach the Bible.

Source Criticism of the Torah

The stories in Genesis 1:1–2:4a and 2:4b–3:24 should not be viewed as fragments that became incorporated into the Torah. Rather, they are each introductions to a much more extensive document, or "source," that may be found in the Torah. It is called "source criticism" when we use this type of analysis to divide the Torah text into earlier written documents that have been combined by editors or redactors. When applied to the Torah as a whole, it suggests that the Torah is comprised of four main sources—four originally separate, (more or less) complete documents—that have been woven together.[8] The date of these documents, called J, E, D, and P, has been the subject of much debate in recent biblical scholarship. The oldest document is most likely J, which was given this name since in Genesis it typically uses the four-letter name of God, *YHWH* (יהוה), which some Christian translators have transcribed as "Jehovah." The JPS translation represents this name as "the LORD," while other translations use "the Eternal" or Yahweh or YHWH. Probably of Judean authorship, this source was written in the first half of the monarchic period. Next is E, the Elohist document, so named because it typically refers to God in Genesis using the term *Elohim*

(אֱלֹהִים, "God"). It may originate from the Northern kingdom, and is likely slightly later than J. E is relatively short, and unlike the J and P, it is unclear if it should be viewed as an originally separate document. P refers to the Priestly source, which also uses *Elohim* and other divine names (but not *YHWH*) in Genesis. This document is shaped by Priestly concerns, including order, purity, and assuring the divine presence among Israel. Its date has been an issue of great debate in biblical scholarship. Most likely, this source represents a school of thought that was active over a long period of time, both before and after the Babylonian exile of 586. The D source stands for Deuteronomy, the final book of the Torah. With the exception of parts of the final chapters, which contain a diversity of material, most of Deuteronomy features a special vocabulary and particular theological concerns—especially the proper worship of a single God in the proper way in the proper place (Jerusalem), where His "name" resides. Like P, D is not a totally unified composition from a single time and place, but represents a stream of tradition that is more or less coterminus with P. With the exception of the D source, which more or less has its own book, the Torah as it is now structured represents a careful combination of these sources.

Putting the Pieces Together

Given the apparent existence of individual sources, they must have been edited together, or "redacted," at some point. Most likely this occurred in stages. Scholars call the final editor R, for redactor. In this form, the work of the Priestly source has a particularly strong voice, and even introduces the Torah. (Gen. 1:1–2:4a is P; Gen. 2:4b ff. is J.) For this reason, some scholars equate R with the final voice of P.

Exactly why the sources were intertwined in this way is unclear. Exploring this issue really involves asking two questions: (1) Why were all of these sources retained, rather than just retaining the latest or most authoritative one? (2) Why were they combined in this odd way, rather than being left as complete documents that would be read side by side, much like the model of the four different and *separate* gospels, which introduce the Christian Bible or New Testament?

Since there is no direct evidence going back to the redaction of the Torah, these issues may be explored only in a most tentative fashion, with plausible rather than definitive answers. Probably the earlier documents had a certain prestige and authority in ancient Israel, and could not simply be discarded.[9] Additionally, the redaction of the Torah from a variety of sources most likely represents an attempt to enfranchise those groups who held those particular sources

as authoritative. Certainly the Torah does not contain *all* of the early traditions of Israel. Yet, it does contain the traditions that the redactor felt were important for bringing together a core group of Israel (most likely during the Babylonian exile of 586–538 B.C.E.).

The mixing of these sources by intertwining them preserved a variety of sources and perspectives. (Various methods of intertwining were used—the preferred method was to interleave large blocks of material, as in the initial chapters of Genesis. However, when this would have caused narrative difficulties, as in the flood story or the plagues of Exodus, the sources were interwoven—several verses from one source, followed by several verses from the other.) More than one hundred years ago, the great American scholar G. F. Moore called attention to the second-century Christian scholar Tatian, who composed the Diatessaron.[10] This work is a harmony of the Gospels, where most of the four canonical gospels are combined into a single work, exactly the same way that scholars propose the four Torah strands of J, E, D, and P have been combined. This, along with other ancient examples, shows that even though the classical model posited by source criticism may seem strange to *us*, it reflects a way that people wrote literature in antiquity.[11]

The first step for reading the beginning of Genesis is complete. We know that the story that begins in 1:1 ends at 2:4a. This is a significant step, since it allows us, encourages us, or perhaps even forces us to read Genesis 1:1–2:4a apart from the story that follows. But this is only a technical, preliminary step to interpreting this material. The following chapter will address the meaning of each of these stories.

6

Creation vs. Creationism

Genesis 1–3 as Myth

Primary Reading: Genesis 1–3.

Genesis 1–3 as Science

Defining the boundaries between different biblical units, and thus understanding where one story ends and another begins, is a means toward an end, rather than an end in itself. The next stage, interpreting the story, or in this case, independently interpreting the two creation stories embedded in Genesis 1–3, is a more difficult and a more subjective task than determining that two stories have been combined. Interpretation depends on genre. Thus, as we begin to explore the meaning of these texts, we are no different than Marta (see "The Rules of the Game" in chapter 3), who is confronting the newspaper—and its comics section—for the first time.

We may even be worse off than Marta. We naturally make foreign stories fit the genre that they most resemble from our experience. The stories in Genesis 1–3 deal with creation—with the origin of the world, of vegetation, of human life, of the animals. At first blush, they look like science, a genre interested in answering basic questions about the *real* structure of the *real* world and its constituent features. If we subscribe to mainstream science, Genesis 1–3 looks like wrong, bad, or primitive science.

Particularly in America, many people understand the Bible to be science; in fact, they understand it to be more correct than mainstream scientific assertions, which are, after all, just theories. This book is not the place to explore in detail this position, often called "creationism" or even "creation science."[1] This movement has two primary problems: (1) it begins with an assertion, not explicit in the Bible itself, that the Bible must be understood as literally true—as science,

natural history, or history; and (2) it ignores evidence within the Bible that biblical texts should not be read in the same way as modern scientific literature.

The first words of the Bible are: "When God began to create heaven and earth"; they are not: "This is a scientific treatment of the origin of the world." In general the Bible does not introduce works with genre labels; it does not explicitly mark the distinction between, for example, history and historical fiction. This is problematic for anyone who wants to interpret the Bible as an ancient Israelite, reading it as they did. Indeed, this is perhaps the biggest problem we confront in interpreting the Bible, since no section contains a library call number, telling us whether it belongs on the fiction or the nonfiction shelves. Nor may we automatically assume that the text, which is over two millennia old, may be read the same way as the contemporary genre that it is most similar to.

These observations have important implications for Genesis 1–3. They do not begin with a genre label "science," and there is no reason why we should presume that the author wanted them to be viewed as such. The difficult task of assigning their genre must follow an internal analysis of these texts, and must take into account ancient, rather than modern, ways of reading texts.[2]

Most people understand the goal of science as describing *the* way a particular phenomenon or object works or develops. In chapter 5, I raised problems about reading Genesis 1–3 as science, since it showed that this passage incorporates two mutually exclusive accounts of creation. Such contradictions are not acceptable in science; this suggests at the very least that the redactor who opted to combine these two stories did not understand them as *the* definitive, scientific account for how the world was created. The job of the scientist, like the modern historian, is to analyze competing theories, and on the basis of evidence to determine which *one* is correct.

Genesis 1–3 as Myth

The two creation stories incorporated into Genesis 1–3 should be understood as myths, not as science. "Myth" is an ambiguous term. Colloquially, it is often understood as wrong or bad science, as a fundamentally primitive and incorrect way of understanding the world that has no place in modern society. In fact, in everyday speech, the statement "That's a myth" is synonymous with "That's false."

The scholarly world, particularly within anthropology and classical studies, views myth—its significance and its interpretation—in a fundamentally different way. Though there are almost as many understandings of myth as scholars who

explore this issue, there is a consensus that myth is an essential, and constructive, element of all cultures.

The classicist Walter Burkert, in *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual,* developed some of the most valuable insights concerning myth.[3] Most useful is Burkert's observation that "myth can be defined as a metaphor at tale level."[4] Let's imagine that Marta overheard someone say to a lover, "You are a rose." Marta would object, or might at the very least be bewildered, noting, "Your lover isn't green, doesn't have thorns, and is lacking a flower!" But metaphors, unlike nonfigurative language (e.g., "you are reading a book"), are neither right nor wrong.[5] Metaphors can be classified in other ways: helpful or unhelpful; original or standard; etc. Yet all metaphors are literally false—by definition. We can say the same about myths: they may be literally false, but like metaphors, they are true—often profoundly so—on a figurative level. Both metaphors and myths play an important role in society because of the limitations of nonfigurative language.

The more technical definition offered by Burkert of a myth is "a traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance."[6] Let us focus on the core of this definition: "something of collective importance." The job of the interpreter of myths is to discover how the myth is using mythological/metaphorical language to convey "something of collective importance." All of the typical tools of interpretation must be used to understand what this "something" is, and how the myth is constructed to develop its ideas about this something, or in the case of more complex myths, these "somethings."

Not only words and their individual meanings determine a literary work's interpretation. The way in which the words are patterned—their structure—is often as important in shaping meaning.[7] One question that helps us understand the structure of the first creation story of Genesis 1:1–2:4a is: Where does day one of creation begin? Various pieces of evidence suggest that it begins in verse 3, and that in terms of structure, there are six primary days of creation, which cover verses 3–31. At first, the idea that day one begins in verse 3, and not with verse 1, seems illogical, but every day of creation from day two onward begins with the formula: "God said, 'Let there be . . .'" (vv. 6, 9, 14, 20, 24). This suggests that the description of day one begins only in verse 3: "God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light."

The significance of the preceding two verses and their place in the narrative become clearer in relation to the concluding verses, Genesis 2:1–4a. The intervening material, 1:3–31, is characterized by structure. Each day begins "God said, 'Let . . .'" The phrase "(And) God said" characterizes the initiation of creative activity, occurring in eight verses (3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26). Surely this is

the story that the psalmist is referring to when he states, "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, by the breath of His mouth, all their host" (33:6). Six times after God creates "by the word," we read "it was so" (vv. 7, 9, 11, 15, 24, 30). Six times God sees that what He created was good (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25; with a modification of "very good" in v. 31).[8] Six times we have the refrain, "And there was evening and there was morning, day . . ." (vv. 5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31; transl. adapted). All of these phrases are missing in both 1:1–3 and in 2:1–4a; the fact that those verses do not fit the pattern of the central creation story establishes them as "other," as not part of the actual story. Instead, they should be seen as an introduction and conclusion—or better, a prologue and an epilogue—to that story.

This prologue and epilogue are joined together not only through the elements that they lack, but also through the prominent use of alliteration that distinguishes these small units. The Bible opens alliteratively: *bereishit bara* (בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא, "When . . . began to create"); the second verse describes the earth as *tohu va-vohu* (תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ, "unformed and void") and mentions a *ruach merachefet* (רוּחַ מְרַחֶפֶת, "[divine] wind hovering"; transl. adapted). This attention to sound is echoed in verses 2:2–3, which seem to revel in the play among the repeating words *ha-shevi'i* (הַשְּׁבִיעִי, "seventh"), *shavat* (שבת, "to cease"), and *asah* (עשה, "to do"). Along with the phrase "create . . . heaven and earth" (found in 1:1 and echoed in 2:4a; see "Giving the Text a Break" in chapter 5), this alliteration helps to define 1:1–2:4a as a unit.

The Meaning of Genesis 1:1–2:4a

But what does this unit mean? The structural elements are not repeated for aesthetic purposes; rather, these repetitions encode a key message of this chapter: God is a highly organized, powerful creator. He says: It is so, it is good.[9] There are no ifs or buts—the world is completely responsive to His commands.

This aspect of the God of this creation story is further reflected in another aspect of the story's structure: the manner in which these six days of creation may be divided into two triads, where elements A, B, and C of each triad are connected.[10] The following diagram illustrates this structure:

<table>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Precreation</td><td>Day 1
Light</td><td>Day 2
Sky, water bodies</td><td>Day 3
Land, vegetation</td><td rowspan="2">Postcreation</td></tr>
<tr><td>Day 4
Luminaries</td><td>Day 5
Birds, fish</td><td>Day 6
Land animals</td></tr>
</table>

On day one God creates light,[11] and on day four, the luminaries; on day two God creates heavens and water, and on day five, its inhabitants, birds and fish; on day three God creates land and vegetation, and on day six, land animals, including humankind. The symmetry, which is striking, highlights the orderliness of creation. It is even present in the alliterative mirroring of the precreation (1:1–2) and postcreation (2:1–4a) story.

This emphasis on order is not surprising given that this is a Priestly story. The Priestly School in ancient Israel concerned itself with order and ordering, and how this reflects on God.[12] Such concerns may be seen, for example, in Leviticus 20:25–26, which deals with things that are being *b-d-l* (בדל, "set apart" or "separated"):

> *So you shall set apart* the clean beast from the unclean, the unclean bird from the clean. You shall not draw abomination upon yourselves through beast or bird or anything with which the ground is alive, which *I have set apart* for you to treat as unclean. You shall be holy to Me, for I the LORD am holy, and *I have set you apart* from other peoples to be Mine. (emphasis added)

That same verbal root is used five times in Genesis 1 (vv. 4, 6, 7, 14, 18).

The opposite of structure is chaos, and it is thus appropriate that 1:1–2 describe primeval chaos—a world that is "unformed and void," containing darkness and a mysterious wind. This story does not describe creation out of nothing (Latin: *creatio ex nihilo*). Primeval stuff already exists in verses 1–2, and the text shows no concern for how it originated. Rather, it is a myth about how God alone structured primordial matter into a highly organized world. Only upon its completion is this structure "very good." And only then can God "rest" (2:1–3).

Much of the activity of God throughout this story is described using the verb *bara* (ברא), typically translated "to create," a word used more than fifty times in the Bible. Unlike other creation words, however, it always has God as its subject. That is, so to speak, God may *bara* but humans can never *bara* (at least according to the attested evidence). This verb appears to be part of a small class of Hebrew words that are used in reference to God only, thereby suggesting that in certain respects, God is totally other.[13] Use of the verb *bara* accentuates God's majesty. It also fits the depiction of God elsewhere in this myth.

Language that sets God apart is unusually difficult to translate. In most cases, when biblical authors ascribed actions to God—like "to see," "to do," "to hear," "to fashion"—they used the same verb typically used for people: they modeled their understanding of God after their real-life experiences. Where the authors avoided depicting God through human analogy, they pointed to the

incomparability of God—whom normal language cannot portray. Thus, Genesis 1:1 might (awkwardly) be translated: "In the beginning of God's creation (which is different from human creation, but "creation" is the closest English word to describe this action) of heaven and earth . . .."

Humankind in the Priestly Creation Story

Myths, like many other narrative genres, not only describe, but also prescribe. Few are neutral, and most make value judgments. Some of the value judgments made by the first creation story are obvious and have been noted already: the world is very good, and God is powerful and is heeded. The structure of our chart (above) might suggest that each of the boxed elements, representing what was created on each day, are of equal value. Is this so—or as a creation myth, does the text also establish value judgments concerning the most important or significant element(s) of creation?

This story highlights the creation of humankind. This is not surprising in a text written by people. The creation of humankind is the longest section, comprising verses 26–30. Only after people are created is the world "very good" (v. 31), rather than simply "good," as in all of the earlier days of creation. Only people "rule" and "master" (v. 28). Only for people is the act of creation expressed using the plural "Let us" (v. 26). And only with people does the text express itself in poetry (v. 27).

These last two points require further clarification. Let us look more closely at Genesis 1:26–27, which reads:

> And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth." And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

The meaning of the first person plural "us" and "our" has been the focus of great debate and polemic even in antiquity.[14] The suggestion that here God is speaking in the "royal we" is often propounded. However, this is unlikely, since such usage is otherwise unattested with verbs in the Bible.[15]

More likely, the text is implicitly portraying God in terms of a human king: God is talking to his royal counselors or cabinet.[16] Such imagery appears clearly in other biblical texts, such as Job 1–2, Isaiah 6, and especially 1 Kings 22:19: "I saw the LORD seated upon His throne, with all the host of heaven standing in

attendance to the right and to the left of Him." The creation of people is so significant that this creative act alone demands that God consult his cabinet, comprised of angels or other heavenly figures. But as the next verse makes clear via a singular verb, consultation is their only role: God creates people without their assistance.

In several respects, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation better captures the essence of Genesis 1:27 than the JPS translation. The NRSV prints the verse indented, as poetry:

> So God created humankind in His image,
> In the image of God He created them;
> Male and female He created them.

Though a more thorough discussion of Hebrew poetry will wait until we study the more poetic texts such as prophecy and psalms (see "The Poetry of Isaiah" in chapter 17), this verse has obviously nonprosaic features: its division into distinct sections of roughly equal length, and its use of repetition (e.g., "God," "created," "image," "them") among its various lines. This poetic interlude in the middle of an otherwise prose passage heightens the significance of the creation of humankind.

In the Image of God

A close look at the Hebrew wording resolves the meaning of the phrase "image of God"[17] as well as whether it is "man" or "humankind" that is being created. Genesis 1:27 uses the word *ha-adam* (הָאָדָם). Generally this is a gender-neutral term, used to convey the meaning "humankind" as well as "a person" of either gender. The last part of the verse, "Male and female He created them," makes it clear that *ha-adam* refers to "humankind" rather than "man." (Largely under the influence of Genesis 2—which first describes the creation of a man, and then the creation of a woman—Gen. 1:27 has sometimes been understood as "God created man. . . ." But as we have seen, these are two separate creation stories, and Genesis 2 sheds no light on the meaning of *ha-adam* in 1:27, which is gender-neutral.)

The word *tzelem* (צֶלֶם, "image") elsewhere always refers to a physical representation. For example, the Book of Ezekiel uses *tzelem* when it refers to "men sculptured upon the walls, *figures* of Chaldeans drawn in vermilion" (23:14) or when it accuses Israel of fornicating with "phallic *images*" (16:17). The word often refers to idols (e.g., Num. 33:52; Ezek. 7:20; Amos 5:26; 2 Chron. 23:17).

It always signifies a concrete entity rather than an abstract one. This is not surprising since the Bible (in contrast to most medieval philosophical traditions, both Jewish and Christian) often depicts God in corporeal terms, as in Exodus 24:10: "and they saw the God of Israel: under His feet. . . ." Ezekiel, a priest whose writing shares many features with that of the Priestly school, describes God in highly corporeal terms in his initial vision (Eze. 1:26–28a):

> Above the expanse over their heads was the semblance of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and on top, upon this semblance of a throne, there was the semblance of a human form. From what appeared as his loins up, I saw a gleam as of amber—what looked like a fire encased in a frame; and from what appeared as his loins down, I saw what looked like fire. There was a radiance all about him. Like the appearance of the bow which shines in the clouds on a day of rain, such was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. That was the appearance of the semblance of the Presence of the LORD.

God is here depicted as a physical being, who has an image in "the semblance of a human form." Furthermore, the gender of God cannot be distinguished, since from loins down, God is encased by fire. This may fit quite neatly the possible implications of Genesis 1:27: that humankind, created male and female, mimics God.[18]

However we interpret the creation of humankind, these creations are unlike any other. Various elements in Genesis 1:26–30 highlight the significance of humankind's being created in God's (physical) image, with male and female equal. The conclusion of this myth, however, describes the Sabbath in a manner that even surpasses humankind—only the Sabbath is "declared holy" (Gen. 2:3).[19] Holiness is especially important within the Priestly system, in which the Holy Sabbath plays a leading role (see especially Exod. 31:12–17). Thus, in offering these evaluations, the first creation story highlights the importance of both humankind and the Sabbath.

The Meaning of Genesis 2:4b–3:24

Critical biblical scholarship allows us—perhaps even forces us—to see Genesis 1:1–2:4a and 2:4b–3:24 as two distinct stories that should be interpreted separately. Of course we cannot easily forget the preceding story as we read the Garden of Eden story. However, it is even harder to put aside all that we already

"know" about this story itself. No biblical story is more familiar in Western culture.

As it happens, the story as widely known has been filled out through various (Christian) interpretations. For example, nowhere does the text itself tell us what the forbidden fruit was. In early Christian tradition it was generally understood as an apple, whereas early Jewish tradition offered several opinions as to the fruit's identity, with the fig being the most popular—and contextually the most appropriate (see especially Gen. 3:7).[20]

Other dearly held views of this text are also not borne out by a close reading. Thus, we might believe that its main theme is the curse received by the woman (and all women), yet the word "curse" is absent in God's comments to her (Gen. 3:16), while it is present in God's statements both to the serpent (3:14) and to the man (3:17).[21] Moreover, the doctrines of the Fall of Man or original sin are nowhere to be found in this passage, though they appear in early Christian interpretation of the text.[22]

The Garden Story is about immortality lost and sexuality gained.[23] It begins from a simple premise: originally, people were immortal. In fact, the huge life spans recorded in the early chapters of Genesis are part of an effort to make a bridge between that original immortality and "normal" life spans. As immortal beings, they were asexual; in the Garden story God does not tell them to "be fertile and increase" as they were told in the first creation story (Gen. 1:28). Sexuality is discovered only after eating from the tree, when "they perceived that they were naked" (3:7). In fact, the divine command of 2:17 should not be understood as often translated—"for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die" (so the JPS translation)—but rather "for as soon as you eat of it, you shall become mortal." The connection between (procreative) sexuality and mortality is compelling and was well understood even in antiquity—if people were to be both sexually procreative and immortal, disastrous overpopulation would result.[24]

Many details within chapters 2–3 support this interpretation. The tree that is first forbidden is (literally) "the tree of knowledge of good and bad." Here *da-at* (דַּעַת, "knowledge") is being used in a sense that it often has in the Bible: intimate or sexual knowledge. "Good and bad" is being used here as a figure of speech called a "merism": two opposite terms are joined by the word "and"; the resulting figure means "everything" or "the ultimate."[25] (A merism is likewise used in Genesis 1:1, "heaven and earth," which there means the entire world.) The words "good and bad" have no moral connotation here.

Only after the primordial couple eat from the tree do they gain sexual awareness. Indeed, immediately after this story concludes, we read "Now the man

knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain" (Gen. 4:1). That is, eating from the tree of "knowledge" leads to a very specific type of "knowing." Nowhere in the text is this knowledge depicted as intellectual or ethical.

This reading also explains why the tree of life is mentioned only toward the end of the story (Gen. 3:22). Early in the story, people were immortal, so that tree offered no advantage, and thus was not mentioned. However, only after eating from the tree of ultimate "knowledge," becoming sexual, and becoming mortal, does the tree of life come into focus. Eating from this tree would allow people to become both immortal and sexual, creating an overpopulation problem. The first couple was expelled not as punishment, but so that they might not "take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever!" (3:22).

The renaming of the woman as Eve, *chavvah* (חַוָּה, "progenitress"), "because she was the mother of all the living" (Gen. 3:20), happens only after eating from the tree. This too bolsters the "sexual" reading of this story—eating of the tree of ultimate "knowledge" turns the wife of Adam from *ha-ishah* (הָאִשָּׁה, "the woman") into a (potential) mother.

God's response to the woman after she eats from the tree is *not* a curse. The words "And to the woman He said, / 'I will make most severe / Your pangs in childbearing; / In pain shall you bear children. / Yet your urge shall be for your husband, / And he shall rule over you'" (Gen. 3:16) are a description of women's new state: procreative, with all the "pains" connected to procreation in the premodern world, including the natural pain of childbirth. This verse is not stating (as a harmonistic reading of Genesis 1–3 might imply) that before eating the fruit women gave birth painlessly, but now they would have labor pains. Furthermore, it notes that women will not do what most people do—try to avoid pain at all cost—because "your urge shall be for your husband, / And he shall rule over you." The meaning of this last section is ambiguous. The root *m-sh-l* (מׁשל, "to rule") has a general sense, so that its use might suggest an overall hierarchy of male over female. However, the context of this verse suggests that it means merely that men will determine when couples engage in sexual intercourse.[26]

It is difficult to determine the attitude of this mythmaker toward the new state that he is describing.[27] Is he happy that a boring life as asexual immortals in Eden has been traded for a challenging, sexual life outside of Eden? Or does he miss immortality? Or is he being merely descriptive, noting how humankind moved from an earlier stage to its current one? The Bible (in contrast to much of Victorian and post-Victorian society) has a generally positive attitude toward human sexuality, as may be seen most clearly from the Song of Songs (see "Sex in the Song . . ." in chapter 25). In various places, it sees women in particular

(in contrast to men) as very sexual beings (see especially Proverbs 1–9). Thus, it is quite reasonable within a biblical context to see Eve as a type of Pandora figure,[28] who is to be commended for bringing sex into this world.

Implications and Conclusions

Genesis 1:1–2:4a and 2:4b–3:24 are two separate stories, written by different authors using different styles. They are both myths—neither aims primarily at offering a scientific description of "the earth and everything upon it" (Neh. 9:6). They are metaphors on the story level, traditional tales dealing with issues of collective importance. As such, they are "creating" worlds.

The first story describes a very good world, which is highly structured and controlled by a most powerful God who in some ways is so dissimilar from humans that he even has his own word, *bara* (ברא), to express his creative activity.

The world of the second story is much more ambiguous. Its God, a master potter (Gen. 2:7),[29] is much more humanlike, walking and talking, even sewing (3:21). Also this world is unlike that in the previous story: it lacks the gender equality of the previous story, and it is not "very good."

Modern "critical" biblical scholarship fosters these observations by allowing the stories to be disengaged from each other, allowing each to be seen as an independent story, reflecting its author's perspectives. It understands them as constructive myths, which helped to frame the very essence of Israelite self-understanding, as well as their understanding of their relationship to their God, and to the world that they believed He had created.