

GENESIS IN POETRY

Background to the Commentary

In our Introduction we have referred to the great indebtedness of this work to the rabbinic literature of Talmud and Midrash, as well as to medieval and modern commentaries. The Midrash – a distillation of rabbinic expositions - on the book of Genesis (Midrash Bereshit Rabba) was the reservoir from which most of my creative ideas were borrowed. In the notes that follow, I consistently point out where I have diverted from the literal implication of those sources, or used them ‘creatively.’

A poem is also a commentary; and many of my own insights, fruits of a lifetime of biblical research and publication (see www.rabbijeffrey.co.uk), are subtly embedded within the text. For this reason, as well as to justify and support any new slant or interpretation offered, I decided to accompany the poem with these background notes.

I trust that they will serve as an educational tool. When used as such, and to get the best results, the student is encouraged to compare the poetic version with the biblical text. As it is much easier to read the poem than the English translations, the former should be read first, by way of introduction to the biblical narrative.

The rich, imaginative and spiritually arousing comments of the Midrash are well worthy of study and analysis; and a further objective of these notes is to introduce the reader to that particular genre of biblical commentary. If read in a classroom or study circle, the teacher might deal more fully with the sources I employ, perhaps through an in-depth textual analysis and/or by reference to the commentary of R. Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040-1105), popularly referred to by the acronym of his name, *Rashi*. He is regarded as the supreme master of rabbinic commentary, and, with the arrival of printing (15th cent.), his commentary was always accorded prominence in every edition of the Hebrew Bible, as was the case with his voluminous commentary on the Talmud.

It is hoped that these background notes will prove an interesting educational tool. Perhaps it might also reveal how it is that Judaism’s ancient biblical and rabbinic literature continues to challenge and inspire after over two millennia, attracting more and more male and female students to study it each year at seminaries, especially in Israel, as well as laymen and women who throng adult education programmes throughout the Jewish world.

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COMMENTARY

CREATION

1:2 *Those who would morally cower:* This sentiment echoes the psalmist's exclamation, 'Lord, what is man that you (desire to) know him, or the son of man that you even consider him' (Ps.144:3-4). These verses, which constitute a most appropriate introduction to the Memorial Prayers for the Departed, recited in synagogues on festivals, draw attention to the problem of how weak and sinful man can possibly justify his own creation and his Maker's concern, indulgence and forgiveness. The opening stanzas of the poem address this problem, with the heavenly beings cast in the role of accusers, questioning God as to the logic of his purpose.

1:3 *The angels of the heavenly host:* 'R. Simon said: When God came to create Adam, the ministering angels were divided into various factions, some saying, "let him be created," and others saying "let him not be created." This is the sense of the verse: *Kindness and truth meet; righteousness and peace kiss* (Ps. 85:1). Kindness said, "Let him be created, for he will dispense kindness;" truth said: "Let him not be created, for he is essentially false. Righteousness said: "Let him be created, for he will perform deeds of righteousness;" peace said, "Let him not be created, for he is naturally inclined to strife" (Ber. Rab. 1[8]).

1: 4 *A cheery cherub:* 'Cherub' is a translation of the biblical Hebrew word *keruv*. This refers to a category of angels that are supposed to surround the divine chariot, as referred to in the famous vision of Ezekiel (10:14). They appear for the first time in Gen. 3:24, as angelic beings, armed with flaming swords, and charged with barring the way of Adam's re-entry into the Garden of Eden. A less threatening, though similarly protective mission was fulfilled by the two golden cherubim, with out-stretched wings, that sat atop the Ark of the Sanctuary in Israel's desert sanctuary (see Ex. 25:20). Later Jewish tradition had it that those latter cherubim had the faces of a little boy and girl, respectively. It was probably that association which invested the term 'cherub' with its connotation of child-like innocence. It is with this connotation that I employ the notion of the 'cheery cherub' whose innocence enables him to chide God with impunity.

1: 5 *Manifest fact:* 'R. Huna, Rabbi of Sepphoris, stated: While the ministering angels were busy, locked in debate over the issue, God went ahead and created Adam. God thereupon said to them: "What is the use of your discussion; man is now *manifest fact*" ' (Ber. Rab. 8 [5]).

2:1 *Let there be light!:* See Gen.1:3.

A measured time for day and night: See Gen.1:3-5, 14-18.

Let rain descend from skies above: Curiously, although Gen. 1:7 refers to God having created a space, or 'firmament,' to separate the waters above from those below, there is no mention in chapter 1 of clouds or of rain descending on the earth. It is only in chapter 2 that this matter is clarified. There we are told that after Creation was completed, but before the appearance of man, God 'caused a mist to ascend from the earth (dew?) to moisten its surface (Gen. 2:5-6). The Talmud explains that, although God had already created all the vegetation on the third day (Gen. 1:11-13), he kept it submerged beneath the surface of the earth until after the arrival of man. For that reason he did not cause rain to fall at that time;

and hence the absence of any reference to it. God's purpose in so delaying the rain – which caused the vegetation to spring forth – was so that man might discover for himself the necessity for rain, and pray accordingly for it to be sent to activate vegetation (Tal. Hullin 60b; Rashi on Gen. 2:5).

That vegetation was not, literally, 'brought forth' (v.12) on the third day is obvious from the fact that the sun, which is vital for the growth of vegetation, was not created until the fourth day! This consideration alone is proof that the Genesis account was never meant to constitute a scientific statement of the 'how' or precise chronology of Creation, but rather is to be understood as a poem of praise to its grandeur and awesome complexity, and to the Creator who designed its integrated components in order to facilitate human life and to provide a comforting and welcoming environment for human life.

2:2 *Zigzag the space:* The image of rivers 'zigzagging' countries designated for human habitation is suggested by Gen. 2:10-14.

2:3 *Cool and cold and warmth and heat:* See Gen. 8:22.

2:5 *Seraph:* This term occurs in Deut. 8:15, as a description of a 'viper'. In the later biblical books it is the popular name for 'a fiery angel', on account of its root *s-r-ph*, 'to burn'. Hence, Isaiah's vision of 'a Seraph flying towards (him) with a burning coal in its hand' (6:6).

3:2 *Is that what you'd bless?:* The idea of man and the angels in perpetual contention on the issue of man's creation, with the latter ever eager to dissuade God from his purpose, reached its most explicit expression in the book of Job, where Satan wrests permission from God so that he may prove that even the faith of the most righteous among men, as exemplified by Job, can evaporate in the face of severe trial and tribulation. See Job 1:6-12.

A world of darkness: Darkness, in biblical literature, is a metaphor for moral chaos, as in the verse, 'The eyes of the wise man are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness (Eccl. 2:14). Isaiah viewed the mission of Israel as that of becoming 'a light to the nations, opening eyes that are blind, bringing forth the prisoner from his dungeon and those that dwell in darkness out of their constraints' (42:7). In the later literature of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Essene writers referred to the final confrontation, at the end of time, between the forces of good and evil, as the war between 'The Sons of Light' and 'The Sons of Darkness.'

3:3 *"Regret" is a term of man's invention:* Although we have confined the concept of 'regret' to man, there is no denying that the Bible does employ the term in relation to God, as in the verse, 'And God said: I will destroy the man I have created from off the face of the earth...for I regret that I have made him (Gen.1:7. See also Gen. 6:7). The difference is that human regret follows the realization that the path previously trodden was wrong. God's regret is not based on any previous error of choice. For God, 'everything is foreseen' (Ethics of the Fathers 3:19). His 'regret' is simply that, in their exercise of the free choice bestowed by God, men frequently act in a misguided manner, contrary to His will, forcing Him to express his displeasure and impose punishment.

What's beyond their ken: That God's intentions are beyond man's understanding and in defiance of his logic is a recurring theme in later biblical literature. See, for example, Is. 40:28.

3:4 *I'm from the first until the last:* See Is. 44:6.

I never, ever, act in haste: The object of the protracted account of the events of each day of Creation in chap.1 may well be to reinforce this notion of God never acting in haste, but labouring, carefully and lovingly, over every single aspect of the creative process.

3:4 *I am its place:* This is based on the rabbinic concept of the relation of God to His world: 'The universe is not (the extent of) His place; He is the place of the universe' (Mid. *Pesikta Rabb.*, sec. 21). The first part of the quote refutes Spinoza's pantheistic identification of God with nature. The second part suggests that God's transcendence does not mean that he is detached from the world. In fact, His Spirit attaches itself to it with a kind of spiritual gravity.

3:5 *And stilled forever will be strife's sound:* This optimistic vision of the future is majestically expressed by Isaiah:

Thus said the Lord, He that created the heavens and stretched them forth, He that spread forth the earth and that which issued from it; He that gives breath unto the people upon it and spirit to them that walk in it. I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness, and have taken hold of your hand, kept you and set you for a covenant of humanity, for a light to the nations (42:5-6).

ADAM

5:7 *There've been other worlds before this one:* This concept is inspired by the statement of R. Abbahu in the Midrash: 'God created worlds and destroyed them, created worlds and destroyed them, until he made ours. Then He said: "The previous worlds found no favour with me; this one does"' (Ber. Rab.9 [2]).'

Many fundamentalist believers, who reject the scientific view of the antiquity of the world, and take literally the traditionalist view - rooted in Midrash - that it is only some 5,770 years, seek to explain away the remains of dinosaurs and other fossils by claiming that they are relics of those earlier worlds that God created and replaced. Some have suggested that the creation of the great sea-monsters (Gen. 1:21) also refers to those inhabitants of earlier worlds. The problem with such an identification is that the account in Genesis is of the creation of *our* world alone.

Rashi identifies those monsters with the great Leviathan and his mate. In order to prevent them procreating and inundating the world, God is credited with having slain the female and preserved her as food to be provided for the righteous in the World to Come (Mid. Ber. Rab. 7 [4]).

6:2 “*Shalom, brother*”: Hebrew, *Shalom chaver!* This popular Modern Hebrew greeting became popularized when it was used, in November 1995, by the American President, Bill Clinton, in a eulogy to the assassinated Israeli Premier, Yitchak Rabin.

6:4 *Who, mysteriously, was making him wait*: While there is no biblical source for this particular episode, yet, on the verse, ‘And God saw all that he had made, and behold it was very good (Gen.1:31), the Midrash states that, at that moment, God said to his world: “World, world, O that you would forever find such favour in my eyes as you do at this time” (Ber. Rab. 9 [4]). Adam’s desperate wish to discern whether his offspring would live up to this challenge is clearly within the spirit of that Midrash.

In the same vein, another Midrash states that God showed Adam a vision of every future generation of leaders and sages (Ber. Rab. 24 [2], perhaps with a view to reassuring him with regard to the merit of his offspring and the accumulated wisdom that might help them avoid sin and secure eternity.

6:6 *I will not move from my place*: In Judaism there is a long tradition of leaping to the defense of any condemned group or nation, whether deserving or otherwise, on even the slimmest chance of success. The first chronicled example is Abraham’s spirited and courageous appeal against God’s decision to destroy the wicked inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah.

We have credited Adam with having refused to move from his place until God reassures him that his offspring will merit divine grace and will never suffer destruction.

Slipped into an induced sleep: We have attempted here to bring out the full force of the biblical expression, ‘And God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam’ (Gen. 3:21). Our version departs from the text by suggesting that Adam, through the exhaustion of crying out the whole night, simply fell into a deep sleep. We have employed the vague term ‘induced sleep’ in order to bridge the gap between the two versions of events.
