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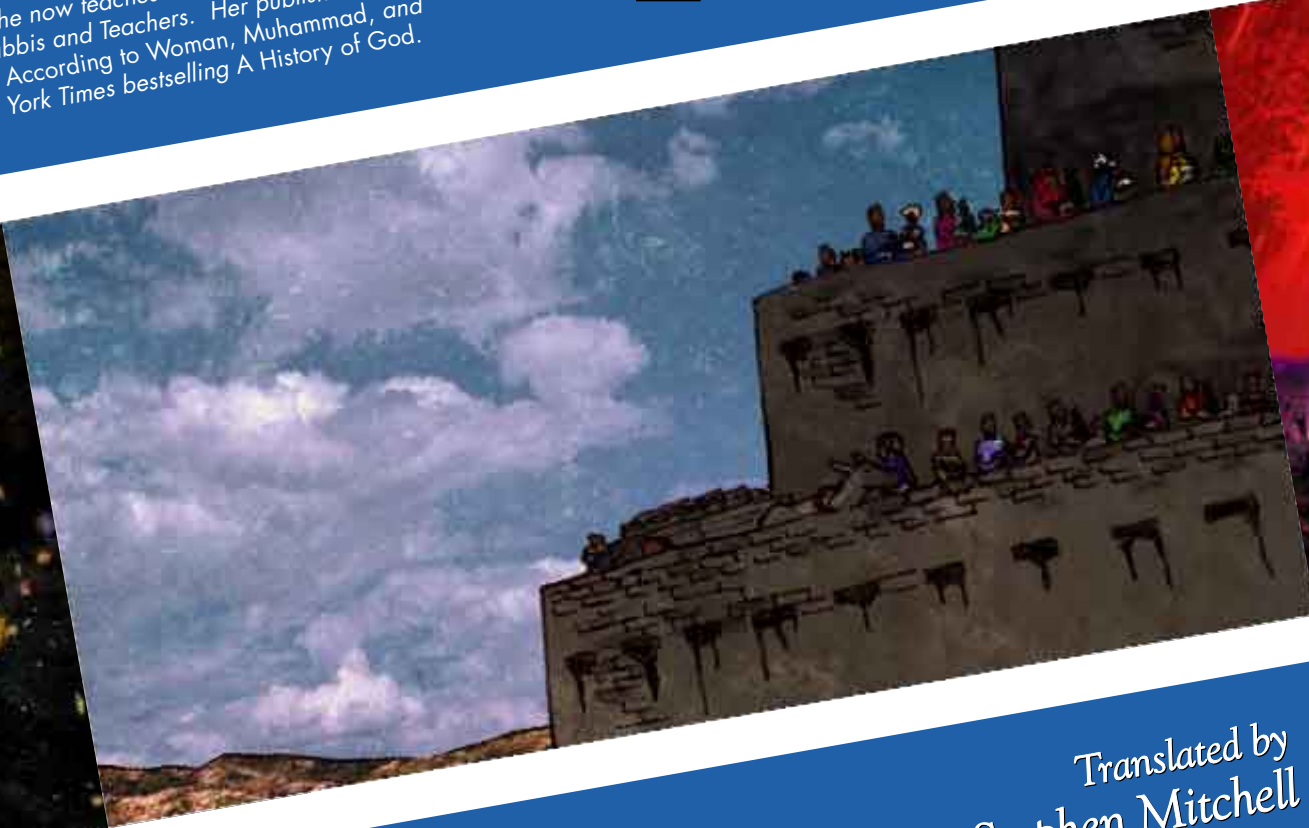
1: Genesis

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The Book of
GENESIS



1 The Creation

According to P, circa 600 BCE

1:1 **I**N THE BEGINNING, God created the heavens and the earth. 2 And the earth was chaos, and there was darkness over the abyss, and the spirit of God hovered upon the waters. 3 And God said, “Let there be light.” And there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. 5 And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.

“**God**” – P uses the word *Elohim*, an apparently plural word summing up everything which we might call “divine.”

Alternatively, Everett Fox points out that verses 1-3 could read: “At the beginning of God’s creating of the heavens and the earth, when the earth was wild and waste [*tohu va-vohu*], darkness over the face of Ocean, breath of God hovering over the face of the waters, God said: ‘Let there be light!’ [And there was light.]” Curiously, this implies that God did not actually *create* the waste and chaos or the primal seas, but that he only imposed order upon them.

“**waters**” – *tehom*, related to Tiamat. In Babylonian myth, the goddess Tiamat is the primal sea from which Marduk, the god of Babylon, splits in two to form the earth and sky.

And there was evening, and there was morning: a first day.

"dome" – or, firmament or expanse

1:6 And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, to separate waters from waters." 7 And it was so: God made the dome, and it separated the waters below it from the waters above it. And God saw that it was good.

8 And God called the dome Sky. And there was evening, and there was morning: a second day.

1:9 And God said, "Let the waters below the sky gather into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. 10 And God called the dry land Earth, and the gathered waters he called Sea. And God saw that it was

good. 11 And God said, "Let the earth sprout with green things: plants that bear seeds, and every kind of tree that bears fruit with its seed in it." 12 And it was so: the earth became green with plants and with every kind of fruit tree.

And God saw that it was good. 13 And there was evening,

It is interesting to note the order in which God creates life on Earth, and to compare it with the order described in J's Creation story (GEN. 2:4-3:24, the second chapter of this volume). In P's story, the plants are followed by the animals, and man has his own, separate creation on the fifth day. However, in J's Creation story, Man (Adam) is created "before there were any plants on the earth," and creates the animals and birds afterwards, defying a consistent, literal interpretation of the two stories.

and there was morning: a third day.

1:14 And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome **"lights"** – alternatively, luminaries of the sky, to separate the day from the night. 15 And let them shine on the earth, and mark the set times, the days and the years." And it was so: 16 God made the two great lights— the greater one to rule the day, and the lesser one to rule the night — and also the stars. 17 And God set them in the dome of the sky to shine on the earth, 18 and to rule the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. 19 And there was evening, and there was morning: a fourth day.

1:20 And God said, "Let the waters teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the **"creatures"** – or, souls dome of the sky." And it was so: 21 God created the great whales, and every kind of creature that the waters teem with, and every kind of bird. And God saw that it was

good. ²² And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters of the sea, and let the birds multiply on the earth.” ²³ And there was evening, and there was morning: a fifth day.

^{1:24} And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living things of all kinds — animals and reptiles and every kind of creature.” ²⁵ And it was so: God made animals of all kinds, and every kind of reptile, and every kind of creature. And God saw that it was good. ²⁶ And God said, “Let us make humans, in our own image, similar to us; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and the animals and the reptiles and every creature on earth.” ²⁷ And God created humans in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. ²⁸ And God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and govern it,

and rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and every creature on earth.” ²⁹ And God said, “Here: I give you every plant that bears seeds and every tree that bears fruit; they will be your food. ³⁰ And to all the animals and to all the birds of the sky and to all the creatures on earth, I give every green plant as their food.” ³¹ And God saw everything that he had made, and indeed it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning: the sixth day.

^{2:1} Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and everything in them. ² And on the seventh day God saw that his work was completed, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. ³ And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy because on it he rested from all the work of creation.

COMMENTARY

WHEN WE TURN to the first chapter of Genesis, which describes the creation of the universe, it seems to be providing us with exactly the sort of God and worldview that conventional religion teaches us to expect. We find a single God in center stage, the sole source of power and life, totally in control of his creation. God is isolated and unique, entirely distinct from the natural world, which is wholly subordinate to him. God has simply to speak and his words articulate the formless waste of chaos, giving it grammar, shape, and form (GENESIS 1:3-5).

This masterly account, written by a member of the Priestly school (and therefore known by scholars as P) in the sixth century BCE, emphasizes the purposefulness of God's creativity. This deity does not, in Einstein's famous phrase, play dice. Key words are repeated throughout the chapter. God "said," "saw," "separated," and "called." The stately rhythm and repetition make us feel that events are following a serenely ordained pattern. Similarly, God's pronouncement that each stage of his creations is "good" emphasize the excellence, rightness, and wholesomeness of the universe. This God is not only powerful but completely benevolent. The structure of the text rises to a crescendo: the author devotes more time and space to each successive day. Finally everything converges on the sixth day, when humanity is created, and God pronounces his work "very good" (1:31).

There seem to be no surprises in the Priestly account of creation, therefore. This is the omnipotent, transcendent, and benevolent God of classical theism. The world that he created has pattern and meaning. It is also hierarchically arranged, with God at the apex of the pyramid and human beings as his deputies on earth, granted dominion "over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and the animals and the reptiles and every creature on earth" (1:26). The repeated motif of separation—of light from darkness, sea from dry land, day from night—shows that this is a world where boundaries are important. Plants, animals, and fish are all classified according to their species. Everything must keep to the place allotted to it and must morality of so much religion which seems designed to preserve the status quo.

Yet many of P's first readers would have found the first chapter of Genesis rather a shock. In the ancient Near East, this vision of the creation was radically new. God appears in the very first sentence without any introduction. P uses the formal divine title "Elohim," a term that sums up

everything that the divine can mean for humanity. In a world where there were many deities, a reader would be likely to ask, "Which god are we talking about?" or "What is Elohim?" Most of the Near Eastern deities had parents and complex biographies that distinguished them from one another, but P introduces his Elohim without telling us anything about his origins or past history in primordial time. The page world found the timeless world of the gods a source of inspiration and spirituality. Not so P, who ignores God's prior existence. As far as he is concerned, his God's first significant act is to create the universe. Again, the very notion of a wholly omnipotent deity was a new departure. All gods in the Near East had to contend with other divine rivals. None had a monopoly of power. It was a belief that expressed the tragic realism of the pagan vision, which recognized life's complexity and could not admit the luxury of a final resolution. Pagans could not imagine a deity who could set all things to rights. P's claim that his god can provide the *only* solution to life's ills is daring; his strict monotheism is also a new departure in Israel, since hitherto most Israelites had recognized the existence of other gods.

When pagans reflected on the creation of their tragic world, they could not imagine the gods creating the cosmos without a good deal of effort. Marduk, the god of Babylon, for example, only managed to bring the earth into being after fighting a mighty battle with the goddess Tiamat, the primal sea. He had split her carcass in two, as though she were a giant shellfish, in order to form the earth and sky out of her body. The myth expressed the pagan conviction that no ontological gulf separated the sacred sphere from the mundane. The gods, human beings, and the natural world were all composed of the same divine substance and shared the same predicament. The primordial violence of chaos and formlessness could always return, and human beings had to share in the gods' endless struggle to keep them at bay. We know that the Israelites told similar stories about their God's battles with a sea monster called Leviathan and a fearful dragon named Rahab when he had created the world. (1) But P apparently cannot countenance the idea of his all-powerful Elohim having to contend with rivals. In his poem, the sea monsters are simply God's creatures, and instead of having to slaughter them, he gives them his blessing. Indeed, P seems to be embarked on a polemic against dominant religious ideas of his time. Since the eighth century BCE, some Israelites had worshipped a host of astral deities and stars are given a purely functional role, "to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years" (1:14).

At the end of the creative process, God, having expended no effort, was not exhausted by his labors. He brought his work to an end, and on the seventh day he rested and contemplated his creation. Other creator gods built temples as a sign of their victory over the wild forces of chaos, but P imagines his God instituting the Sabbath as an image of stability, but it also marked the essential distinction between God and the cosmos he had brought into being. Elohim is separate from the world and from humanity; he can regard them in rather the same way as a craftsman surveys the work most Jews and Christians today, of course, it is a familiar picture: God is in his heaven and all is right with the world.



2 The Creation of Man

According to J, circa 875 BCE

2:4 AT THE TIME when the Lord made earth and heaven — 5 before there were any plants on the earth and before any grasses had sprouted, for the Lord had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, 6 but a stream would well up from the earth to water the whole surface of the ground — 7 the Lord formed a man from the dust of the ground and blew into his nostrils the

“The Lord” — J uses the more traditional name *Yahweh*, but in the spirit of the Jewish custom of refusing, out of reverence, to speak the name of God, this has been translated as “The Lord.”

“the earth” — *adamah*. Note the similarity to *adam*, or “man,” who is created from the earth.

“the man” – *adam*, literally meaning breath of life, and the man became a living being.

2:8 And the Lord planted a garden in Eden, to the east, 9 and he grew from the ground every kind of tree that is beautiful to look at and good to eat from, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. 10 A river arises from Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides into four. 11 The name of the first is Pishon, and it winds through the whole land of Havilah, where the gold is. 12 (The gold of that land is good; there is fine resin there, and onyx.) 13 And the name of the second river is Gihon, and it winds through the whole land of Ethiopia. 14 And the name of the third river is Tigris, and it flows east of Asshur. And the fourth river is Euphrates. 15 And the Lord took the man he had formed and put him in the garden of Eden, to work it and care for it. 16 And the Lord

Verses 10-14 are a later addition. “man” or “mankind.”

said to the man, “From all the trees in the garden you are allowed to eat. 17 But from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you are not allowed to eat; for as soon as you eat from it, you will die.”

2:18 And the Lord said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make him a partner to help him.” 19 So from the ground the Lord formed all the animals and all the birds and brought each one to the man to see what he would call it. And whatever the man called it, that was its name. 20 And the man gave names to all the birds and to all the animals; but for the man no partner was found.

2:21 So the Lord caused a deep trance to fall upon the man. And as the man slept, the Lord took out one of his ribs and closed up his side with flesh. 22 And he built the rib into a woman, and he brought her to the man.