

Parashah One

Genesis 1:1-2:3; Isaiah 42:5-9; Colossians 1:1-23

Notes by Tim Hegg

In the beginning God . . .

Perhaps no text of the Tanach is better known than the first verse of B'reishit: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." But in its familiarity there still remain many mysteries, not the least of which is exactly how it should be translated. The opening word, בְּרֵאשִׁית, *b'reishit*, is actually not so easy to understand. The grammarians wonder whether the opening line (v. 1) is an independent clause, acting as a kind of opening statement, or a subordinate clause, anticipating the core sentence in verses 2-3. If it is an independent clause, then the traditional "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" is the proper translation. But if it is a subordinate clause, then the translation would be "When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was formless and void. . . ." In the first case, the opening phrase would appear to state the biblical fact that God created out of (or into) nothing. That is, nothing existed before He began to do the creative work described in Genesis 1. The second option, however, clearly indicates that the earth existed when He began to create, even though it was formless and void.

Which option is right? Unfortunately, there is no clear way of telling. Both options have grammatical and linguistic support, and scholars have supported both views. Some notable scholars of recent years have supported the second view, and thus a number of modern English translations have incorporated the opening line of the Bible as a subordinate clause: "When God began to create. . . ." It appears, in fact, that the overall structure of the creation narrative favors the view that the first sentence is an independent clause, not subordinate and most likely functions as a general title describing what follows, i.e., the six days of creation.

First, it should be stated that whether or not the opening line is an independent clause or subordinate clause, the fact that God created out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) is not only attested elsewhere in Scripture (John 1:3; 1Cor 8:6; Col 1:16; Heb 1:2) but is required from the very nature of matter, since it is impossible that matter could be eternal (without beginning). The very fact that matter always moves from a higher state of energy to a lower state of energy necessitates that it must have had a beginning. So the fact that God created out of or into nothing is obvious to any who affirm His existence as described in the Bible.

But it does not appear to me that an explanation for how the "stuff" we call "matter" came into existence is the purpose of the opening chapters of Genesis. Rather, the purpose of this opening story of the Bible is to identify the One God (Who will soon be seen in the biblical narrative to be the God of Israel) as the Sovereign King of the universe Who alone is able

to make order out of chaos by establishing separation of those things that essentially differ (light/dark; space above/space below; water/dry land; plant life/animal life; animal life/mankind).

The Sages hint at this same idea in a whimsical way. They ask why the first letter of the Torah is a bet (ב, the second letter of the Aleph-bet) rather than an aleph (א, which is the first letter). Their answer is insightful: they say that God was reserving the aleph for an even higher purpose than the physical creation. The Torah is eternal since it embodies the eternal truth and revelation of God. Yet it was revealed in the course of Israel's history as we stood at Mt. Sinai. God, the Sages teach us, reserved the aleph for the giving of the Torah, and thus the Ten Words (Commandments) begin: "I am Adonai your God Who brought you out from the Land of Egypt," and in Hebrew the word "I" (אֲנֹכִי, *anochi*) begins with the letter aleph. But the Sages give us this nice little midrash not only because they want to exalt the value of the Torah, but because they also intended to teach us that God's creative acts in making the physical universe were not an end in themselves, but had an even higher purpose: the friendship of God with man. The covenant of the Torah bound the eternal God to finite man in an eternal covenant of friendship. The physical creation is therefore simply the place where this friendship can take place. So the focal point is not on the created world, as beautiful and spectacular as it is, but on the people who inhabit the earth and their calling to be friends with God.

When the story begins, the earth is formless and void. Something had happened to bring about this chaos, but what exactly that was is not stated. Nonetheless, it becomes very clear that such chaos—such lack of order, is not in concert with God's character and His way of doing things. So at the very beginning of time, we see our Creator forming and filling, overcoming the chaos of "formless and void." In fact, the structure of the narrative (we could almost call it poetry for it reads with a much greater rhythm than normal narrative) emphasizes this very thing: God first overcomes the situation of "formless" by forming the various things of the world, and then He overcomes the chaos of "void" by filling the world with that which He had formed. Note carefully how the first three days correspond to the following three days in this scheme of things:

Day	Formed	Day	Filled
1	Formed light; separated light from darkness	4	Filled the heavens with the lights: sun, moon, stars
2	Formed water above(atmosphere) and water below (oceans)	5	Filled waters below with fish; waters above with birds
3	Formed dry land; filled land with vegetation	6	Filled dry land with animals; created man to rule for Him
Sabbath			

Note carefully how God goes about His work in forming and filling: He separates. One of the first acts we find God doing is separating—making a distinction between light and dark. Our *havdalah* service (the word *havdalah* comes from the very Hebrew word [בדל] used in Gen 1 and translated “separate”) to emphasize this separation—the need to separate between things that differ, and ultimately between the holy and the profane. God is a God of distinction—He does not mix things that essentially differ. As those who want to emulate the righteousness of God, we must also be willing to make distinctions—to separate between those things that please Him and those things which do not.

Not only does God separate within the physical universe, but He also separates in the sphere of time: the six days of creation are separated from the seventh day of rest. While the work carried out on the six days of creation is all stated to be “good” (a phrase found twice on the 3rd day, which is why the Sages considered the 3rd day especially propitious for a wedding), no day is blessed except the Sabbath—the seventh day: “And God blessed the seventh day and set it apart . . .” (2:3). What is the meaning of blessing a day? It is possible that we should understand the text to mean: “God blessed the Sabbath *by setting it apart*, that is, He gave special honor to the Sabbath by separating it from the other days of work. Or it could mean that in blessing the seventh day God intended us to know that in some way that day would bring a blessing. Both are no doubt true. A well known saying: “it is not so much that Israel has kept the Sabbath, as that the Sabbath has kept Israel.” This day of rest, initiated by God Himself, and a foreshadow and revelation of the rest that mankind would have in God’s

mercy and redemption, would become the very sign of the covenant made between God and His people Israel (Ex 31). Thus, the creation as described in Genesis 1 looks forward to the covenant that God would make with His people. Once again, the focus is not upon the physical creation, but upon the plan of God to dwell among His people. The world was created as the platform for God's drama of redemption, and thus the Sabbath, set apart from the beginning, becomes the covenant sign between God and Israel.

The Sabbath is God's gift to His friends. In the physical world the times and seasons are clearly marked by the sun and moon. Even if one had no modern timepiece, he could calculate the month (by the moon) and the year (by the sun). But one simply cannot find a week etched into the time-frame of the universe. If one were alone on an island, one could determine the span of a day, a month, and a year, but one could never know what day of the week it was simply by observing the created world. No, the week with its ordered days, and the Sabbath as the week's completion, is the gift of God to His own children. And thus, in this way, it is blessed and set apart. Only through the gracious revelation of God is the Sabbath known.

And what does the Sabbath teach us? That there is a rest indeed if one knows God. There is a promised place of solitude, of refreshing, of companionship, if one knows God. But only if one takes God at His word, and strives to pattern one's life after the very God Who created—only then is the gift of the Sabbath enjoyed. For ultimately the Sabbath (like all of the appointed times) points to God's Messiah, Yeshua. In Him we find our rest, for only in Him is there forgiveness of sins. In all of our striving, and all of our efforts, we never can rid ourselves of the penalty of sin, that is, death. But in Yeshua there is life, for by His sacrifice we are redeemed and brought back to Eden where we can be restored to our creative purpose: friendship with God. Thus, in Yeshua we rest—we cease our striving, and by faith we anticipate the fulfilment of the covenant when time will be no more, and the eternal Sabbath will be ushered in.

The most significant aspect of God's creation, however, is mankind. Yeshua would teach "Sabbath was made for mankind, not mankind for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). So even the Sabbath was not something existing unto itself, but it was blessed and sanctified for the sake of man.

The glory of mankind is seen in the fact that they are created in God's image. We encounter the plural "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness" (1:26). What should we make of this plural? Onkelos translates the verse directly from the Hebrew, with the plurals. And in the next verse (1:27) he translates: "And Adonai created mankind in His likeness, in the image of ׀ He created him, male and female He created them." Thus, according to the Targumist, mankind bears some resemblance to Adonai (׀). Genesis Rabbah 8:3 offers a number of viewpoints: that God took counsel with mercy, with Himself, or with the ministering angels. This final suggestion became the standard rabbinic answer to the plurals of 1:26ff. Rashi is representative: "Let us make man: the modesty of the Holy One, blessed

be He, we learn from here: because man in the image of angels was to be created and they would be jealous of him; therefore, He took counsel with them.” Rashi goes on to cite 1Kings 22:19 and Dan 4:14 as proof texts for the presence of the ministering angels in matters of Divine decisions.

But the introduction of angels into the narrative at this point, while surely possible, seems unlikely. The most natural reading of the text is simply that God is represented in some form of plurality. That an early Sage such as R. Ammi (80-110 CE) would interpret this as meaning that God consulted with Himself may indicate that the later Sages, who sought to find another explanation, were motivated in some measure by the ongoing polemic with the emerging Christian Church. Indeed, the early church fathers saw in this text a warrant for their view of the trinity.

What may we say about the use of the plural here, from a strictly grammatical standpoint, and from the structure of the context itself? First, this is the only place in the Tanach where the verb attached to אֱלֹהִים is plural. Yet in the structure of this opening chapter of the Torah, such a phenomenon is very striking. Each of God’s actions in the creation narrative is introduced by “God said” (וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 29). In each case, except for vv. 26 and 29, the verb that immediately follows is a jussive (“let such and such happen”). Thus, the cohortative “let us make” (נַעֲשֶׂה) breaks the pattern, and in so doing, arrests the attention of the reader. Whereas in the previous actions of God the divine initiative is cast in an indirect mode (e.g., “let there be light”), in the creation of mankind, God is seen as directly involved (“let us make”). It is not as though the previous actions of creating are any less the clear work of the Almighty. It is only that in the creation of mankind, the grammar itself heightens the direct and close involvement of God. In so doing, it alerts the reader to the fact that mankind is the pinnacle of the narrative, and that in which all the previous actions of God culminate.

Secondly, the fact that the plurals continue in the matter of man being created in God’s image is significant: “Let us make man in *our* image, according to *our* likeness.” The idea that mankind is created in the image of the ministering angels is far-fetched. It is the image of the invisible God that is mysteriously stamped upon mankind. And this image involves the multiplicity of the Creator Himself (“our image”).

Thirdly, this multiplicity, while surely implied in the plural verbs and pronouns, is never explained. Unlike the other Ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies, which detail the gods who, in conflict with each other, bring about the creation of mankind and the world in which he lives, in the biblical account, the One God, while represented in some plurality, is always and only revealed as One. No other gods exist. The creation of the world and mankind is the sole work of God and none other. Thus, the multiplicity represented in the plural verbs and pronouns is left as an unexplained reality. Indeed, this mystery of the Creator, that He is at once the only God, but manifests Himself in plurality, is introduced at the very beginning of the

story. And it remains the unexplained mystery throughout the remainder of the story. The more we attempt to unravel the mystery, the more we tangle its intricate design.

But we must ask ourselves what is involved in this matter of the “image” or “likeness” of God in mankind. “Image” translates Hebrew **צֶלֶם**, a word used often of things carved or sculpted. It is used of idols (e.g., Num 33:52) or of replicas of objects (1Sa 6:5, 11). God intends to “sculpt” mankind to “look like Him.” Most likely this means that man is to *represent* God in the created world, even as a viceroy represents the Sovereign who sends him. “Likeness” translates Hebrew **דְמוּת**, “shape, model.” This Hebrew word may have as its base meaning “an indistinct outline of a figure or an object.” If this is, in fact, its basic meaning, then mankind displays (in a metaphoric sense) the general “shape” of God. That is, when one looks at mankind, he should see an indistinct outline of God.

What exactly is it, then, within mankind, that displays this “indistinct outline of God,” that shows forth His image? I would suggest that it is nothing less than the very mystery of God as at once One and the Only One, while at the same time mysteriously plural. For immediately in our text we have the stunning conclusion to the divine proposal “Let us make mankind in our image”: “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; *male and female He created them.*” Mankind is one: “He created him,” yet mankind is two: “male and female He created *them.*” The fanciful explanation of the Sages that God created a being that was both male and female is simply an attempt to make sense of this surprise turnabout. Mankind is at once male and female, but not in a single entity, but diverse—in plurality. The oneness comes through the divine gift of marriage (2:24): “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave unto his wife, and the *two* shall become one flesh.” In the mysterious and wonderful ability to produce children, mankind as male and female, through their becoming one, mimic God as the Creator. The image of God in mankind is their ability to be at once two (plural), yet one. Perhaps Paul had a similar idea in mind when he wrote of marriage as a “mystery” that ultimately reveals the relationship of Yeshua and His bride (Eph 5:25ff).

The opening chapters of the Torah, then, present a clear central message (even if all of the details are not so clear), namely, that God desired to create a universe in which mankind, bearer of His own image, would rule and reign, and in this position as God’s appointed viceroy, would reflect the glory of the Great King. While the universe is beautiful in its own right, and stands itself as the display of the Almighty’s power and wisdom, in an ultimate sense, the universe was created for mankind. For it is with mankind that God is primarily concerned. This is not to deny His keen concern for the rest of creation, but it is to put the emphasis where the Scriptures themselves do—upon mankind as the bearer of God’s image. Thus even the Sabbath as a day of rest and joy is set apart for mankind; it is God’s gift, not to the animal kingdom (though domesticated animals rest because

mankind rests), nor to the plant kingdom, but to mankind. This priority of mankind in the overall plan of God is also demonstrated by the fact that while our *parashah* tells the whole story of creation in a kind of overview fashion, the next section “zeros in” on mankind alone. The focus of God’s interests is clearly upon mankind.

This priority of mankind within God’s plan for the universe yields a number of all-important principles. First is the matter of mankind’s purpose. As the viceroy of the Almighty, and the one who bears His image, mankind can find their fulfilment only in their ongoing relationship with God. Endowed with intellect and creative powers themselves, mankind realizes their full purpose only when they use these powers in the service of their Creator. This is emphasized in the *Shema*, when Israel is commanded to love Adonai with all one’s *heart, soul, and might*. The heart is the seat of the intellect and volition. The soul is the collective individuality with which each person is created. And the might is the ability to affect others. All of these must be combined in the service of the Creator. Then, and only then, will mankind be satisfied that they have fulfilled the purpose for which they were created.

Secondly, it sets mankind apart from the rest of creation, even though they are a significant part of the whole. Since mankind stands as the sole image bearer of God, they also, in that respect, stand above and apart from the rest of creation. Mankind may utilize the created world for their own good, but the opposite is not true. Mankind’s life is more precious than that of either the plant or animal kingdom. Mankind is to rule over them, subduing them, and utilizing them for his own purposes as God’s viceroy. Unfortunately, in our time and in our world, the life of animals and plants has usurped the priority of the life of mankind. Many who think nothing of aborting a child, seem willing to nearly give up their own lives to protect animals and plants. But the glory of the Creator is seen primarily in the image of mankind. When, however, the image of God is effaced through sin and rebellion, the purpose of mankind is diminished, and so is his distinction from the rest of the created world. They willingly exchange the glory of the Creator for the image of created animals (Rom 1), and in so doing, they lose their way.

Thirdly, the priority of mankind in the created world teaches us that God has an ordained purpose for mankind, which in turn teaches us that there are no human beings who come into this world without purpose. It is when mankind comes to the erroneous belief that the events in our world are random (without purpose) that mankind loses their own value. What could be wrong with aborting a “fetus” that came into existence via random events? From this perspective, the best way to deal with an “accident” is to get rid of it. But this is not the message of our *parashah*. Mankind is created with a divine purpose: to bear the image of God and in so doing, to guard and rule over the earth. Each child born into this world enters into this divine purpose, because each child bears the image of his or her Creator.

It is on this basis that the law of capital punishment is later enacted in the Torah (Gen 9:6). Murder is first and foremost an attempt to erase the image of God in mankind.

Finally, the grand message of this opening *parashah* of the Torah is that God intends to establish a relationship with His creation through mankind. Since He endowed mankind with His own image, and since mankind clearly acts as His representative within the created universe, God and mankind are partners, meaning that an ongoing relationship has been established. Here, encapsulated in a few short paragraphs, is displayed the heart of our Creator. For why would He have created the universe in the first place? Surely He was in need of nothing (He wasn't lonely!), and in His infinite wisdom, He knew what this creation-enterprise would cost Him. Yet He willingly, and purposefully creates a universe, and mankind within it, as His image bearer. Why? We actually are left without an answer to this most profound of questions except for this: the very fact that God would act as a Creator reveals His essential character as a God Who makes Himself known for the purpose of relationship. In His own sovereign and self-determined being, He created mankind for the sake of relationship—a friendship that would ultimately require an infinite sacrifice on His part. That is the final and ultimate purpose of creation, and each of us within it: that we should be friends with the Almighty. Herein lies our true worth, that we should be called the “sons of God.” And in Messiah, we are!

“See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us,
that we would be called children of God;
and such we are.” (1Jn 3:1)

We understand, then, that other explanations for the existence of the universe, and particularly Darwin's theory of evolution, are not only poor science, but are even worse, bad theology. Instead of reckoning with the image of God in mankind as the very purpose for our existence, alternate theories of how the universe came into being attempt to create god in man's image—to make mankind the divine entity in the universe (humanism). They turn the whole thing on its head! In fact, these non-biblical theories are an attempt to overcome the obvious conclusion of creation by God: that if God did indeed create the universe, then the universe has an obligation to both acknowledge God and bow before Him as the Sovereign of the universe. In fact, the entire remainder of the Scriptures takes as their starting point that the God of Israel is the Creator, and that as such, He has the sovereign right and ability to order His creation for His own purposes. And as the One and only King, He has the right to require His creation to conform to His ways.

The rebellion of mankind in the next chapters of Genesis is, then, nothing less than an attempt to dethrone the King. The story of redemption, however, is that God, as the sovereign, is willing to restore mankind rather than annihilate them. And in this restoration, mankind returns to the place of freedom and nobility with which they were originally created (Col 3:10).