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Genesis 1:1–6:8

Creation and Transformation

WHO ARE WE? The question is answered in the first portion of Genesis as follows: We are God’s prized creation, inhabiting a good world that God has made. We are a constellation of four relationships: with the earth from whence we came and whither we return (Genesis 2), with each other as women and men equally blessed and jointly commissioned to care for the world (Genesis 1), with the animal world toward which we have responsibility (Genesis 1 and 2), and with God in whose image we are made (Genesis 1) and whose breath animates us (Genesis 2). Human disobedience complicates these relationships but does not destroy them.

Genesis 1 emphasizes the power of language and the reality of goodness. Humankind is embedded in a larger world over which God reigns supreme, but within which human beings can and do play a unique, decisive role.

A wide-angle lens that encompasses the whole world in Genesis 1 is augmented in Genesis 2–3 with a zoom lens that discloses an “up close and personal” relationship with God. This split-screen view characterizes the Torah as a whole and introduces a biblical practice of offering more than one perspective on important events.

The subsequent narratives, through Genesis 11, continue to respond to universal human questions about origins. They account for human suffering and inequality while affirming the sovereignty of a God who deeply cares for the world and its creatures.

Genesis 1–11 depicts God as still discovering the qualities of the material at hand (humankind) and (re)assessing its potential. Despite repeated disappointments, God remains faithful and hopeful, adjusting expectations and offering humankind new tools and guidance.

The parashah concludes at a nadir, with God’s disappointment in humankind when violence corrupts goodness (6:6). However, the text also makes clear the possibility of renewal despite decline (a theme throughout the Bible). Goodness and connectedness persist.

No biblical story has had more influence on women’s lives and identity. Such scholars consider Genesis to be a tapestry woven from several sources, sometimes labeled as J, E, and P (see Women and Interpretation of the Torah, p. xxxvi); they suppose that the book is the work of later generations who retroject into the past the tensions and circumstances of their own time. Thus, a careful reading of Genesis offers insights into how ancient Israel constructed its identity at different points in its history. For example, Jacob’s sons apparently represent clans that at some point banded together and then sought to account for their unity by constructing a shared genealogy. Likewise, stories such as the tale about Lot’s daughters (Genesis 19) try to account for both affinity and tension with surrounding cultures.

Considering Genesis in its broader ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean context—where stories of origin feature violent creation and heroic and semi-divine figures—highlights Genesis’ distinctive worldview. Genesis begins with a peaceful creation and then concentrates on an ordinary, aged couple (Sarah and Abraham, who become extraordinary as their story unfolds), with whom God enters into a covenant, and on their somewhat confusing offspring. Far from promoting fame and fortune through great feats of might, Genesis illustrates how persons walk with God (17:1) dialogue with God (Genesis 18), and also wrestle with God (Genesis 32) in the pursuit of blessings.

The theme of sibling rivalry runs through Genesis from beginning to end (in contrast with Greek mythology, in which intergenerational conflict often occupies center stage). Beginning with the first murder (Abel by Cain; Genesis 4), competition between siblings plagues every generation. Eventually, the persistent, murderous impulse is channeled into repentance and reconciliation when Joseph unites tearfully with his brothers (see 45:1–15 and 50:18–22). Sibling rivalry and competition also characterize the story of the book’s two prominent sisters, Leah and Rachel (Genesis 29–30 and 35:16–20). Remarkably, however, their competition results in producing children, jointly building the “House of Israel” (as the community affirms in Ruth 4:11).

Beginning with daring Eve, resourceful women are central to the book of Genesis. Women are key, not merely because they give birth, but because they shape their family’s destiny; there would be no “Israel” without the matriarchs. Their stories belie any claim that Genesis privileges males at the expense of females. Rather, the book privileges the ones who secure the continuity of the family and perpetuate God’s blessings. In addition to Eve (Genesis 1–4), Sarah (Genesis 12–23), Hagar (Genesis 16 and 21), Rebekah (Genesis 24–28), Leah, Rachel, and their descendants Bilhah and Zilpah (Genesis 29–31), Genesis devotes attention to the dilemma of Lot’s daughters (Genesis 19), the tragic fate of Dinah (Genesis 34), the triumph of Tamar (Genesis 38), and the seductive Potiphar’s wife (Genesis 39). Together, these women represent the biblical understanding of humans as God’s partners in maintaining God’s good world.

—Tamara Cohn Eskenazi