

The Jewish Theological Seminary

An Anthology of Beginnings

Bereishit

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“In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth.”

These opening words of the Torah in most translations are clear, straightforward, and well known. But they don't render the Hebrew original correctly. As Rashi already pointed out, the first verse of the Torah is not, by itself, a grammatical sentence. Instead, it is part of a longer sentence that continues through the end of verse three. The opening of the Torah is correctly rendered in the JPS translation:

^{1:1}When God began to create heaven and earth—²the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—³God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.

Rashi argued for this understanding of the Torah's opening on the basis of his outstanding command of the syntax and style of biblical narrative. More recently, biblical scholars have discovered additional support for Rashi's claim: other creation stories from the ancient Near East begin with a very similar sentence structure, consisting of a temporal phrase, then a long parenthetical phrase describing what things were like in the cosmos before the real work of creation began, and finally the main clause.

Thus *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian epic of Marduk the creator-god begins:

When the heavens above did not exist,
And earth beneath had not come into being --
There was Apsû, the first in order, their begetter,
And demiurge Tiāmat, who gave birth to them all;
They had mingled their waters together
Before meadow-land had coalesced and reed-bed was to be found --
When not one of the gods had been formed
Or had come into being, when no destinies had been decreed,
The gods were created within them;
Laḥmu and Laḥamu were formed and came into being.

(Translation from W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 51)

And another Babylonian creation story, *Atrahasis*, begins:

When the gods like men
Bore the work and suffered the toil --
The toil of the gods was great,
The work was heavy, the distress was much --
The Seven great Anunnaki,
Were making the Igigi suffer the work.

(Translation from W.G. Lambert and A.R. Millard, *Atra-Ḥasīs: The Babylonian Story of the Flood*, 43.
“Anunnaki” are the high-ranking gods, and “Igigi” are lower ranking gods.)

As in the three examples just quoted, texts that belong to the same genre often follow certain conventions, especially in their opening lines. Thus epics in the Western literary tradition typically open with an invocation to the muses. (We find this as early as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer and the *Theogony* of Hesiod, and as late as John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.) We find this in creation stories in the ancient Near East. The lengthy and rather complex syntax of the opening sentences quoted above mirrors the plot of all three stories, which describe how God or the gods moved the cosmos from chaos to order.

Biblical scholars have often discussed what the opening sentence of Genesis implies regarding the theology of creation in the Bible, and how the correct translation of Genesis 1:1-3 presents a view of God's relationship to the world that differs from that of the more typical, if less defensible, translation. I would like to point out a different implication that emerges from recognizing the Torah's use of this convention. When we read a little further in this week's parashah we discover that the very next story opens with the exact same sentence structure found in the first. I quote again from the JPS translation: When the LORD God made earth and heaven—when no shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the LORD God had not sent rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the soil, but a flow would well up from the ground and water the whole surface of the earth—the LORD God formed man from the dust of the earth. (Gen. 2:4b-7)

What follows, as biblical scholars have long observed, is another creation story, which differs in crucial respects from the preceding one.

The Torah, then, seems to begin twice, in a way not paralleled by any other creation narrative from the ancient Near East. It uses the conventions of ancient literature in a new way. By beginning twice, the Torah announces what sort of a work it intends to be: it is less a book than an anthology, a compendium of numerous viewpoints and competing teachings. Modern biblical critics have long noted that the Torah is the product of more than one author, and the Torah never tries to hide its composite nature. On the contrary, by beginning in Genesis 1:1-3 and then blatantly beginning once more in Genesis 2:4b-7, the Torah announces clearly: *I am not providing you with one narrative voice; I am supplying several voices. The Torah is about counterpoint, not just melody. And I am not afraid of dissonance—sometimes my counterpoint will be more like Schoenberg than Bach.*

Of course, traditional Jews are quite familiar with this sort of text. Works of rabbinic literature always provide us with multiple opinions. The Mishnah opens by asking what time we can begin reciting the Shema prayer every evening, and then it gives three possible answers (Berakhot 1:1). In its presentation of more than one answer to a question, the first paragraph of the Mishnah is a good introduction to the Mishnah as a whole. The Mishnah goes on to tell us which answer is correct in this case, but elsewhere the Mishnah simply lets more than one opinion stand. Debates about these opinions are even more common in the Talmuds, which intensify the already impressive level of multivocality found in the Mishnah.

Similarly, classical rabbinic collections of biblical interpretation such as *Midrash Rabbah* often consist of a long list of varied, sometimes conflicting readings of biblical verse, each one introduced with the words, *davar aher*—"another word." Judaism is not apologetic about its sacred literature's penchant for presenting several viewpoints that contend with each other. As Mishnah Avot 5:17 tells us, each of these

controversies is a *mahloket leshem shamayim*, an argument for the sake of heaven. Classical Jewish thought teaches that we bring glory to God when we exchange ideas about the Torah, when we contend with ideas with which we differ, and also when we listen to those other ideas and consider them seriously. Indeed, rabbinic Judaism regards this dialectic process of learning through discussion, debate, and disagreement as a form of worship, in some ways even more important than conventional prayer.

This love of varied opinions does not start with the Rabbis. It can be traced back to the two beginnings of the Torah itself. By announcing from its opening narratives that it will provide more than one approach to a subject, the Torah identifies itself as what we might call a prototypical rabbinic text. We might even say that in the first two *aliyot* of this week's parashah, the Torah creates rabbinic Judaism.

However, both classical rabbinic texts and the proto-rabbinic text we find in the Torah sponsor debates that have fairly clear limits. The opening paragraph of the Mishnah allows us to discuss when, exactly, we recite the evening Shema, but it does not countenance the possibility that we might decide to skip reciting it. The same tractate of the Mishnah goes on to allow flexibility in the exact phrasing of our daily prayers, but it does not suggest that any of us can make up the overall structure of the service ourselves. Similarly, Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 disagree about what exactly was created when, and, more importantly, about the relationship between Creator and created. But no text in the Torah would allow us to entertain the possibility that more than one deity created the world, or that there is no God at all.

This week's parashah then, presents us with a model for our own Judaism, a Judaism that displays both multiplicity and limits. This week we begin once again to hear the Bible's many voices in the annual cycle of Torah reading, and we begin a new year of observing the Torah's laws. As we do so, I hope we strive to achieve the balance between flexibility and structure that rabbinic texts—starting with the Torah itself—encourage us to pursue every day.

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