BIBLICAL COSMOGONY:
A SYMBOLIC INTERPRETATION OF GENESIS 1-4

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The report of the Creation of the world in the first chapter of Genesis, if taken literally, raises so many questions that many readers are likely to be drawn to a metaphorical interpretation. This potential has been well documented by Shubert Spero in his article "The Biblical Stories of Creation, Garden of Eden and Flood: History or Metaphor."[1] It is my belief that the details of this chapter, if understood symbolically, emerge as a revelation that the purpose of the entire Creation was its last step, the creation of man.[2] All that precedes this ultimate act serves solely to convince the readers that this was the Creator's purpose. The text through its symbolism accomplishes this task by arranging the order of the six-day Creation in accordance with the importance each object of Creation has for man.

The light of Day One and its rhythmic interchange with darkness represent the concept of time. The invisible heavenly span of Day Two represents the concept of space. Additionally, the expanse separating the waters above and below makes life possible on earth.

What follows is: dry land, vegetation as the symbol of food,[3] heavenly bodies as the providers of light, warmth and seasons, and finally animalistic life which begins as primitive animal life and ultimately becomes the carrier of a God-given soul.

Thus, the chapters on Creation in Genesis unfold as an account of *why* God created the world, not *how* He created it. What means He chose to create the universe is unimportant; after all, the Torah is not a textbook of natural sciences. The Torah differs from the intent of modern physics, the subject of which is how the universe developed. The Torah implies that this development was guided toward a goal. And God's purpose was to have man inhabit the earth and dominate it.

The division of God's work into six days is one indication that we deal here with the pronouncement that the purpose of Creation is man. It cannot be said

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that omnipotent God needed six days to do the job, or that *He* needed to rest on the seventh day. Rather, the seven-day cycle is a preparation for *man,* who will need that periodic rest from his labors.

THE NATURE OF MAN

Man was created on the same day with the animals, which tells us that his physical emergence preceded his acquisition of potential as a superior being. He must therefore:

1. spiritually rise above the animals with whom he is physically associated;
2. accept his position vis-à-vis God;
3. assume social responsibility towards his fellow Man.

The reprise of this story (Chapter 2) starts with the words: *This is the history of heaven and earth as they were being created.*[4] The entire universe remains in the state of *being created* until man will have completed his spiritual evolution. To begin with, *No shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted* (v. 5). The Ramban explains the significance of the use of the word "field": a field is the product of human planting and planning. It was not vegetation per se that was missing, only the vegetation of *the field,* because God had not sent rain. And rain, in biblical writing, is generally the symbol of God's blessing to man.

But *there was* [as yet] *no man to till the soil*. A man was there – but not yet the type of man to start human civilization; that is, to take the step from food gathering to food planning.

This man whom God had physically created (Gen. 2:7) finds himself advanced to live in God's garden – a planted and cultivated area – *to till and tend it* (v. 15). However, he is without a fit companion necessary to complete his spiritual evolution. For the proper understanding of the next important symbol in the story of Creation, we must correct a faulty popular translation, which, unfortunately, has gained almost universal acceptance. The first woman was not made from one of man's ribs. The Hebrew word is *metzalotav* [his side] (2:21).[5] The picture that is drawn is one of man as a dual person, similar to conjoined twins, who was presently separated into two individual beings. The symbolism that unfolds is man's new awareness of the duality of his nature, the animal body and the soul of Godly origin (2:7).[6] Woman becomes the symbol of man's evolutionary rise over the animal; a symbolic

meaning which she retains throughout the allegorical story of early civilization.

This symbolic picture comes into focus more clearly in verse 23, where Adam exclaims: *'This one at last is bone from my bones and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called* [yikara] isha *for from* ish *was she taken*.' This common translation, however, fails to take into account the fact that the text uses the masculine passive form of *kara,* so that the translation more properly should read, ***he*** *shall be called*. Furthermore, it is very peculiar that the man should have called the woman *isha*, since never before had he been called *ish* – and will never be called so again.

The peculiarity points to the fact that the synonyms "*adam*" and "*ish*" in Hebrew have different meanings. "*Adam*" is the man formed from "*adamah*" [earth], the physical flesh and bones.[7] "*Ish*," on the other hand, refers to a man as a civilized human being, and at times the word assumes the meaning of a title.[8] The rest of his life is overshadowed by his humble beginning as an *adam*. Woman, on the other hand, is an *isha* throughout – except at the time of their downfall, when she acquires the name *Hava* [Eve]. This part of the allegory comes to an end in Genesis 2:25 with the announcement that this man – now called *adam* again – and his wife were nude but unashamed.

Nakedness in this story stands as the symbol of "being an animal." Thus, this observation expresses the fact that man, whom we have just seen rising above his animal condition, remains, nevertheless, in part an animal. This verse serves as the bridge to a new allegory about to commence.

Chapter 3 of Genesis introduces a new character: the snake, who was more "*arum*" [naked], than all the other animals. If we interpret nakedness as the symbol of being an animal, then the verse tells us that the snake was more animalistic than the other animals. The physical features of man's evolution are his upright position, the dexterity of his hands, and the acquisition of language. In contrast, the snake moves prostrate, has no limbs, and makes hardly a sound. It should be noted that the biblical text does not say that the snake *lost* his limbs, only that he is condemned to *having* no limbs.

Moreover, although most translations offer the alternative meaning of *arum* as "cunning," referring to the way he seduces the woman by speech, I find that the very animalism of the snake conveys the other meaning. His communication with the woman cannot have been a vocal expression, since this

would destroy the discrepancy between animal and man, contrary to the spirit of the allegory as I read it. The snake's nakedness is, in essence, his "body-language." The confrontation between the snake and the woman symbolizes the clash between man's ambition for unlimited elevation of mind and the limitation of his physical body. The very primitiveness of the snake's physical condition as it represents animal life evokes in the woman a desire to liberate herself completely from this kind of existence

To draw our attention to this point, the Torah begins their communication with the words "*af ki*," which correctly translated means "*even more so*" (as in Deut. 31:27). Continually desiring to separate him/herself from animal life, the woman, looking at the nude snake, feels that God should have proscribed *all* the trees of the garden; that she should not need food at all. Indeed, she is not able even to decide which food to eat and which not. This reduces her to something akin to the snake, nothing like being God-like on earth:

> *When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight unto the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom* [according to what she "'heard" from the snake], *she took from its fruit and ate*. . . . (3:6).

In this allegory, the two attractions are interwoven. By freeing herself from God's words, she hoped perhaps to usurp the role of God Himself.

With the symbolic status of the woman as the instrument of man's spiritual evolution, as the first rung on the ladder leading to higher goals, it is allegorically imperative that she seduce her husband to follow her to what she believes would be a higher wisdom, and so the verse concludes: *She also gave some to her husband, and he ate.*

It is then that the eyes of *Adam* and *Isha* (she is not yet *Hava*) open to their nakedness, the symbol that identified the snake. The fruit that was supposed to make them equal to God gave them the understanding of nakedness instead. The animal body refuses to disappear. They see it, and they recognize it as a permanent barrier toward becoming a god. And they are ashamed of their physical and symbolic nakedness.

The text elaborates this point by the two types of garments featured after the eating of the fruit. *Adam* and *Isha* make loincloths of fig leaves. But when God challenges them, *Adam* says that he hid because he felt ashamed to be naked. Evidently, though fig leaves served as a covering of their physicality,

they were no less symbolically naked. Then God Himself, no doubt to underline the point, made *garments of **skins** for Adam and his wife and dressed them*. To the extent of having the permission and capability to utilize the animal world – to that extent are they considered dressed; that is, above the animal world. Only in their relation to God do they remain nude, even when they wear clothes.

Now God delivers the sentence for the transgression, but what is often understood as a punishment is actually only a clarification of status. With pain, man will reproduce, with sweat will he procure the food his body needs, and to dead matter will his body ultimately return. Pain, reproduction, food and death – these man must share with the animals. Nevertheless, man's superiority is not ignored here, and the symbolic status of woman as well. The cursed snake, which cannot rise above the dust of man's heel, will envy man's elevation, while man will hate this reminder of the primitive animal life he must share. The snake will hate woman and her offspring (3:15), for she is the symbol of man's progress and ambition, the target of the snake's envy.

It is at this point that the woman, known heretofore as *Isha*, receives the name *Hava* (perhaps analogous to *haya* – animal), and she is about to give birth to the sequel to the Creation story.

Two addenda to the story before we go on to the next generation:

The Garden of Eden also contained the Tree of Life, but no injunction against eating from it had been originally issued. Only now, when man had acquired the awareness of death, does God fear that man may once again overstep his status and eat its fruit, too. The Tree of Life symbolizes Eternity and Timelessness, the very opposite of the First Day of Creation. For man to eat from it would trespass the ultimate boundary between himself and his Creator. This is the reason that Adam and Eve had to be exiled from Eden, and the road to the Tree of Life guarded by God's angels.

It should be noted how the appellations of the Deity fit into the allegory of Creation. In the first chapter, He is called *Elohim*, [God, in translation], whereas in the subsequent chapters this name has the ineffable Tetragrammaton [Lord, in translation] attached to it. In the first chapter, *God* was sufficient to identify the Creator because there was no challenger to Him; in the second chapter, when man tried to encroach upon His domain, the God of Creation had to define Himself more sharply, and so He added the name of *Lord*.

MAN'S RELATIONSHIP TO MAN

The allegorical dimension of the story of Creation and man's place in it, where he discovers his relationship to animals and his potentiality in his relationship to God, does not end with Adam and Hava. In the allegory of Cain and Abel, the second generation, man discovers his relationship to fellow man.

When Hava gives birth to her first son, she calls him Cain (a derivative of the Hebrew word *koneh,* to buy) *'because I bought an* ish *from God.'* (4:1) Having paid the price, she was entitled to have a son, an *ish*. She did not know that yet another stage of development, social responsibility, had to be undertaken. The name, naturally, had to be given by the *isha* of Adam's education. This son and his brother Abel bring sacrifices to God, an affirmation that they understood and accepted their proper relationship to the Deity. *The Lord paid heed to Abel and his offering, but to Cain and his offering, he paid no heed. Cain was much distressed and his face fell* (4: 4 ff.).

Does man's elevation from the animal world prevent him from giving vent to rage towards a fellow man, as in the animal world? The story of Creation and the Garden of Eden make no mention of any such restriction, concerned solely with the relationship of man to God. Now Cain receives a warning in verses 6-7: *'Why are you distressed and why is you face fallen?'* God asks him. *'Surely if you do right there is uplift, but if you do not do right, sin couches at the door; its urge is towards you, yet you can be its master'* (4:6-7). The word "*couches*" is a translation of "*ravatz*," denoting the lying, lurking position of an animal. Sin is thereby symbolically related to the animal – the animal within man, which, if given free rein, takes over the entire individual. *'Yet you can be its master*,*'* God says. This part of the verse in Hebrew is an almost exact parallel to Genesis 3:16, where God says to the *isha*: *' – your urge shall be to your husband and he shall rule over you.'* [9]

The connection between these two verses is evident. God's admonition to *Hava* is part of the clarification of man's resemblance to the animal. Woman, though the symbol of spiritual evolution, is made aware of the primitive sexual passion which draws her to her husband. That *he will rule over you* is not necessarily an inequality of roles. It is a proclamation of the inhibiting effect that this passion can have. It is certainly not godlike; it is part of an animal's

functions, and therefore needs to be mastered. Cain, however, as the symbol of man who wishes to allow his animal passion to become the guideline of attitude and behavior towards fellowmen, is being admonished to place this animal-like passion under control.

The warning falls on deaf ears. The *passion* of *Hava* limits her ascent toward God, while the *passion* of Cain descends in the opposite direction. The assassination of Abel is carried out with the feeling of absolute righteousness. The Torah describes the act thus*: Cain said to his brother Abel and when they were in the field Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him* (4:8). What had he said to him? Actually, it does not matter. The Torah wants to imply that he slew him with same ease that he had spoken to him. Further, when God asks Cain where his brother is, his reply has echoed through the millennia: *'Am I my brother's keeper?'* The answer, I suggest, was not an insolent parry: Cain had previously brought offerings to God: could he now believe that God did not know where Abel was? Rather, Cain's answer is an expression of professed innocence. It stems from his erroneous philosophy that animal passion was permitted to rule the relationship between brothers. *'Am I my brother's keeper?'* expresses the idea that it is not man's obligation to keep his fellowman alive: I need not protect him from the outside world nor from the hate within myself. Cain now is taught that innocently spilled blood *'cries from the earth . . . which opened its mouth to accept your brother's blood from your hand'* (4:11).

Where does Cain's stark individualism lead to? What kind of society would emerge if his philosophy were universally accepted? Two short notes draw this picture: Cain begot a son and then built a city which he called Enoch [Hanoch] after his son. The significance of naming the city after his son lies in the implication that it is for his son only. His fellow-man has no part in it. Cain, as we already know, was neither the keeper of nor provider for his brethren.

Lamech, a descendant of Cain, invokes for himself the Mark of Cain, the protection against revenge. It is not for him to accept the ordeal of his ancestor, only to reject punishment for murder: *'I have slain a man for wounding me and a lad for bruising me'* (4:23), declaring thereby that Cain is avenged sevenfold. The future of man cannot be left to these types.

So in Genesis 4:25 we are told that Adam fathers a third son, Seth. His name derives from the declaration of his mother Hava, *'Because God provided me with another offspring in place of Abel,' for Cain had killed him* (4:25). Seth's name is the first recorded after the death of Abel and the failures of Cain's descendants. It is he, therefore, who is destined to initiate generations like his son Enosh, in whose generation *men began to invoke the Lord by name* (4:26). The first cycle of Creation has reached its end.

NOTES

1. Shubert Spero, "The biblical stories of Creation, Garden of Eden and Flood: History or Metaphor?" *Tradition,* Vol 33, No. 2.
2. Compare Ibn Ezra's comment on Genesis 1:26.
3. See the commentary of Sforno on this verse.
4. My interpretation necessitates a deviation from the JPS translation.
5. Cf. Rashi, Ibn Ezra, S.R. Hirsch, Radak.
6. Cf. Ramban on Gen. 2:24. Also, Talmud Bavli Eruvin 18a, where the two opinions on the translation of צלעותיו should be considered as complementary rather than as opposite. The one alluding to Adam as a person with two faces runs parallel to the symbolism expressed here; the other opinion, which translates the word as "tail" emphasizes the same thought, namely, that the creation of the first woman simultaneously eliminated the last typically animal feature on the man.
7. The source of *Tumah* is always the body of an *adam.* Similarly, it is the *adam* that is the carrier of leprosy, and the resultant *tumah.*
8. See Num. 9.6, 9.7, 29.11, 14, 16 etc.
9. The JPS translation, regrettably, does not reflect this parallel.