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The Genesis of Time

The simple meaning of Genesis 1–2:4 is that God created the world out of primordial elements. And yet, one important new initiative was the construction of time, embracing the day, the month, the year, and the week. The week, however, does not depend on a cosmic phenomenon but served to introduce the concept of a people holy to a creator God.

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Four Primordial Elements

Before there was nothing, there were many *things*; actually, just four of them; but their nature was so inchoate that Hebrew theosophists used commonplace words to label them.^[1] Donning their most omniscient garb, they speculated that when God decided to shape a space in which to place humankind, “he”—let me use for now a hardly applicable masculine pronoun—turned to four pre-existing elements for building blocks of a universe that would eventually stretch from heaven (שָׁמַיִם) to earth^[2] (אֶרֶץ).

As it was told, there was an *earthy* ingredient (אֶרֶץ) that had neither function nor future, for it was תהו ובהו, a pair of alliterative words that together give a meaning distinct from their constituent parts (a *farrago*). Something like our “topsy-turvy” or “hodge-podge” might do for them. There was also *darkness* (חֹשֶׁךְ), set all about a watery mass so primordial that only a poetic word תהום (“the deep”), itself derived from absorbed lore, could come close to express it. These *waters* (מַיִם) were constantly churning, whipped by a mighty (or divine) *wind* (רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים) that was sweeping over it.

The Greek Translation: Against Pre-existing Elements

This is not how the opening is commonly understood. We owe the more usual reading to interpreters of the Greek (Septuagint) translation of Gen 1:1, ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν, (“In the beginning, God made the heaven and the earth”).^[3] It is difficult to determine why the third century B.C.E. Jews of Egypt (presumed to be the first of many other Mediterranean Jews that sought a Greek translation of Scripture) decided on this take for the opening verses.

Most likely, they were trying to produce a work that directly connected with their contemporaries, by emphasizing the uniqueness and transcendence of the Hebrew God.^[4] In this way, the translators sought to shield their readers from Hebrew passages that might hint of anthropomorphism or anthropopathism. They might also be veering away from the prevailing Hellenistic notions of a cosmos with components predating the gods.^[5]

In this sense, the Jewish translators were following the cautionary dictates of Deutero-Isaiah who expresses discomfort with the possibility that elements pre-existed creation:

ישעיה מה״ח יוצר אור ובזר א חשך עשה שלום ובזר א
רע אני יהוה עשה כל-אלה.

Isa 45:7 I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe—I YHWH do all these things.

ישעיה מה״ח כי כה אמר יהוה בורא השמים הוא
האלהים יצר הארץ ועשה הוא כוננה לא תהו בראה
לשבת יצרה אני יהוה ואין עוד.

Isa 45:18 For thus said YHWH, the Creator of heaven who alone is God, who formed the earth and made it, who alone established it—he did not create it a waste, but formed it for habitation: “I am YHWH, and there is none else.”

Still, the LXX translation is an attempt to undo the basic meaning of the opening verses of Genesis which introduce primordial elements into the creation story.

Medieval Exegetes: In Support of Primordial Elements

The simple meaning was understood by a number of Jewish exegetes, who treated the opening words of the Torah as either a circumstantial or a temporal clause.^[6] In effect, not until verse 2 (Ibn Ezra) or verse 3 (Rashi) do we begin the initial description of what existed primordially.^[7]

If we follow Ibn Ezra, we would translate the beginning of Genesis something like:

בראשית א׳:א בראשית ברא אלהים את השמים ואת
הארץ. א׳:ב והארץ היתה תהו ובהו וחשך על פני
תהום ורוח אלהים מרחפת על פני המים. א׳:ג
ויאמר אלהים יהי אור...

Gen 1:1 When at the beginning God created the heaven and the earth, 1:2 the earth was formless and void, with darkness over the deep, and a divine wind sweeping over the waters. 1:3 God said, “let there be light”

Rashi’s gloss suggests the following similar translation:

1:1 When at the beginning God created (Or: When God began to create) the heaven and the earth (Or: The universe) – 1:2 the earth being formless and void, with darkness over the deep, and a divine wind sweeping over the waters – 1:3 God said, ‘let there be light’...^[8]

According to either of these translations, then, God utilizes pre-existing elements to create the world as we know it. This is the simple meaning of the text. In fact, depending on what era in antiquity you imagine the Hebrews were writing, they might actually be the first to report on a cosmological wisdom broadly shared in antiquity that was best articulated among Greek philosophers such as Empedocles of Sicily (5th c. B.C.E.). They spoke about earth, water, air, and fire, as the primordial building blocks of the universe.^[9] As succinctly stated by Parmenides (slightly earlier), *ex nihilo nihil fit*, “From nothing, nothing arises.”

The Creation of Time

Here is how the biblical version differed: As God began to muster futures for all these purposeless elements, he first conjures up a component *ex nihilo*, “from nothing,” merely by pronouncement. This component is אור, “light.” God judges it to be good; yet by itself, this “light” too had no definition. So God contrasts it (יבדל) with one of the primordial elements, חֹשֶׁךְ, “darkness.” With that act, “light” becomes יום, “day,” (an unfortunate term, since it will eventually have several applications) while “darkness” becomes לַיְלָה, “night.”

As these two entities course after each other—primordial darkness as עֶרֶב, “evening,” then newly generated “day” as בֹּקֶר, “morning”—something entirely new comes to be: יום אֶחָד. These two words ought not be translated “first day” or “day one,” for which יום ראשון (ה) might be expected, but “one day.” That is, “one day” as a measure for time as well as for its sequential alternation of nighttime and daytime, our civil day.^[10]

Brief though it may be, this passage introduces a God who is multi-faceted beyond the normal potential of any single pagan national deity: He summons, creates out of nothing, reorders and gives new shapes to existing elements. Above all, God pre-existed time, an instrument of his own devising (when he constructed “one day”), and so he cannot be assigned a pre-history, let alone a genealogy, as was common in ancient mythologies.

Shaping a Universe

With time serving as instrument, the real work divides into two phases. In the first, God dedicates *Days 2 and 3* to preparing a world in which inanimates will come into realization. *Day 2* follows the earlier pattern: God generates a second element out of nothing, a hammered object (רָקִיעַ) that serves to split primordial waters into two bodies, thus defining the space familiar to us.^[11]

Day 3 shapes our planet Earth. First, the lower waters shrink back to form Sea, allowing primordial, hodge-podgy, earth, to harden into Land. Then Land acquires its potential to generate vegetation (not animate, in Hebraic conception), setting the stage for the next phase (*Days 5 and 6*) in the creation process, the production of animates.

In preparation for those momentous events, God consecrates *Day 4* to deliver the means by which animates could calibrate their own existence. *Day* remains a major unit of time; but in the vault (רָקִיעַ) that was also invoked *ex nihilo*, two orbs are set, the larger one (the Sun) controlling a major chunk of time we now call *Year*, and the smaller one (the Moon), defining a briefer interval we now call *Month*. God assigns them control of the diurnal oscillations that will chart for future creations a rhythm for life and a pattern for worship.^[12]

We need not detail here how, on *Day 5*, rivers and seas spawned living creatures nor how primordial air swarmed with insects and birds. Nor need we catalogue the richly detailed events of *Day 6* that brought into

being land animals, among them (and in favored position) humans, as a pair, in stark contrast to the uniqueness of the God after whose contours they were cast. What is worthy of notice is that we are still missing the *Week* from the other major calendric measures.

The Innovation of the Week

This missing unit, in fact, proves to be a clue for the motivation, if not also the inspiration, behind opening Hebraic history on creation. (In antiquity, this way of initiating the past is not at all germinal to the historiographic traditions.) For, by launching the saga of their people on a creative act, Hebrew historiographers were advancing a very distinctive myth: that the fashioning of the entire cosmos was just preparatory for the selection of Israel as a *עַם קָדוֹשׁ לַיהוָה*, “a people holy to YHWH” (Deut 26:19).

Having generated in six days all that there was cosmically to be, the Hebrew God consecrates *Day 7* in which to celebrate the cessation (verb: *שָׁבַת*) of the creation process. This notice is by no means an afterthought, for it is anticipated throughout the text of Genesis 1 where crucial sentences and words had been couched in sevens or multiples of seven.

Yet, unlike the year, the month, and the day, each of which had birth in some celestial motion, the week is a very artificial construct; like the hour and the second, the week is based on no recurring stellar or planetary movement. Not surprisingly, until the triumph of Abrahamic religions in the West, none of the neighbors reckoned the passage of time with such a seven-day interval.^[13]

However, the Hebrews also knew of a recurring seven-day sequence independent of the lunar cycle or the civil month, a period that crested on the Sabbath, a culturally vital day.^[14] We can speculate endlessly on the etymology and origin of the Sabbath (*שַׁבָּת*), the special name Israel has given to its seventh-day consecration; in fact, the Hebrews themselves gave contradictory lore about its origins and goals.^[15]

Nonetheless, by opening the long story of “a people holy to YHWH” on a drama divinely choreographed to display the birth of a sanctified seventh-day that is uniquely Hebraic, Hebrew historiographers were able to glorify the special link between their people and a unique God— a rapport that is a principal theme in Hebraic theosophy.

Mythic Prose or Ancient Cosmology?

Faithful readers of *TheTorah.com* contributions need no reminding that all biblical narratives worth their salt are open to diverse and compelling interpretations, many of them barometers of cultural and intellectual concerns of their times. The more so regarding verses as seminal as those opening Genesis. As we saw, the Septuagint’s translation has prompted an understanding of a course of human affairs that has come to be traditional over the centuries.

In the modern era, academia has spawned a flourishing assortment of methodologies by which to unlock Hebraic notions of creation(s), among them textual, documentary, literary, and a horde of other constructs. Influential since the early days of the decipherment of forgotten scripts are comparisons with Mesopotamian lore, particularly *Enūma eliš* (“Babylonian Creation Epic”), a myth from the late Second Millennium B.C.E. that justified the primacy of Marduk, consequently also of his city Babylon.

A widely held opinion is that Hebrew cosmographers came to be adapters of a shared mythopoetic that was best represented in Mesopotamia. I have my doubts.^[16] I think of them, instead, as immensely sophisticated scientists (in most senses), rigorous and disciplined of mind, who found a daring way by which to argue primordial links between cosmology, theology, and the fate of their own people.^[17] These thinkers had traditions (rather than facts) by which to assess the validity of their own construction; but they also had a vision by which to weave their beliefs into a dramatic whole, granting their ancestors a privileged linkage to their one and only true God. And they did so without breaking into poetry by which to camouflage their conviction.

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Footnotes

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1. The bibliography on the opening chapters of Genesis is hirsute and only the fearless (or foolish) would want to delve into it. For the purpose of this essay, see my downloadable recent study that gives basic entry into its mystery: [“Time and Mortality: Creation Narratives in Ancient Israel and in Mesopotamia,”](#) in *Papers on Ancient Literatures: Greece, Rome and the Near East*, ed. Ettore Cingano & Lucio Milano (Padova: S.A.R.G.O.N. Editrice e Libreria. 2008), 489–509. A bonus for readers is a treatment of Genesis 2–3 as a series of interlocking etiologies (so *not* a second creation narrative) that justifies the birth of death and the transfer of immortality from individuals (Adam and Eve) to the species.
2. Neither “heaven” nor “earth” is equivalent to the land, sea or sky that is familiar to us. At this stage, the two terms form a *merismus*, a contrasting pair that stands for the soon-to-develop cosmos.
3. It might be too pedantic to note that *ἐν ἀρχῇ* needs not be taken as temporal phrase, but as instrumental, something like “by design” or the like, as is done by many church fathers.
4. They were not especially antiquarian and certainly no anthropologists, so they would not have been aiming to fossilize the holy text as it may have meant to its earliest audiences.
5. See below. In turn, this particular understanding became dominant under Christianity, for until the Reformation, it adopted the Greek (or Latin) translation of the Bible as its Scriptures.
6. All examples of בְּרֵאשִׁית are arguably in temporal clauses; those in the absolute state (as in Gen 1:1) are found only when the term is used in ceremonial context, normally establishing sequential priority rather than temporal precedence. Grammatically, a better suited phrasing for the traditional understanding of the opening words might have been בְּרֵאשִׁית אֱלֹהִים* בְּרֵאשִׁית הַבְּרָאָה. The choice of בְּרֵאשִׁית in initial position may be guided by a desire to duplicate the consonants in בְּרֵאשִׁית, the second word in the sentence. There could also be an esoteric reason: בְּרֵאשִׁית contains the first two (*aleph, bet*) and the last three consonants (*reš, shin, tav*) of the Hebrew alphabet, as well as the tenth (*yod*), the last often used as abbreviation for the name of God, יְהוָה. Here again, there may be a learned comment on a notion invoked in Isa 44:6, “Thus said the LORD...‘I am the first and I am the last, and there is no god but me’.” (This sentiment is repeatedly invoked in the New Testament, among them Revelation 1:8.)
7. Editor’s note: For another discussion of how the text has been interpreted by traditional Jewish commentators, see James Diamond, [“In the Beginning There Is the Question,”](#) *TheTorah* (2016); Warren Zev Harvey, [“Rashi and the Timaeus on Creation,”](#) *TheTorah*.

8. Rashi's approach is increasingly espoused today among Jewish and Protestant translators.

9. See Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 321–326.

In early antiquity, Jews were sensitive to the charge of plagiarizing from their neighbors (*Genesis Rabbah* 1:9):

<p>פלוסופוס אחד שאל את רבן גמליאל אמר לו צייר גדול היה אלהיכם אלא מצא לו סמנים טובים שסייעוהו, אמר לו מה אינון, אמר ליה תהו ובהו וחשך ומים ורוח ותהומות, אמר ליה תיפח רוחיה דההוא גברא כולם כת' בהם בריאה.... (תיאודור-אלבק)</p>	<p>A certain philosopher asked R. Gamaliel, saying to him: "Your God was indeed a great artist, but surely he found good materials which assisted him?" "What are they?" said he to him. 'Tohu, bohu, darkness, water, wind, and the deep,' replied he. "Woe to that man," he exclaimed. "The term 'creation' is used by Scripture in connection with all of them!"</p>
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Worthy of notice is that If you convert those elements into what today some consider as primary states—solid for earth, liquid for water, gas for air (or wind), and plasma for fire—you might find this division still has resonance, though not as an explanation for the primordial state of the universe.

10. The Septuagint also has ἡμέρα μία, "one day," prompting Philo to imagine it as uniquely named for establishing "the nature of the limit" (*On Creation*, 15). Origen goes further and thinks that it cannot be "first day" because time has yet to be established (*Genesis: Homily I*; excerpted [here](#)). The issue of the precedence of time over creation had been in dispute long before *Genesis Rabbah* (3.7) among others, sided with it.

11. Editor's note: For a discussion of the *raqia'*, see Oren Fass, "[My Encounter with the Firmament](#)," *TheTorah* (2018).

12. Editor's note: For a discussion of the relationship between the light on day one and the orbs on day four, see Zev Farber, "[If the Sun Is Created on Day 4 What Is the Light on Day 1?](#)" *TheTorah* (2015).

13. Hebrews also spoke of a ten-day interval (עשור לחדש), thus also reckoning with a thirty-day month. Generally, the Babylonians counted thirty-days for a month, periodically intercalating a full month to line up with the solar cycle. Regionally, they also cited periods of five-days (*hamuštum*) or of fifteen-days (*šapattu*). Ditto the Egyptians, who regularly added 5 days to their 360-day year. The so-called "planetary" week, in which each of 7 days had an individual name (of planets, themselves named after deities), did not become common until Rome adopted Christianity.

14. Editor's note: For some speculation on the origins of Shabbat, and its relationship to the idea of resting every seven days, see Jacob L. Wright, "[Shabbat of the Full Moon](#)," *TheTorah* (2015); *idem*, "[How and When the Seventh Day Became Shabbat](#)," *TheTorah* (2015).

15. In Exod 20:8–11, the Sabbath celebrated the cessation of God's work after creation. In Deut 5:12–15, however, it is a periodic memorial for God's role in the Exodus. (Eventually, the two notions were conflated in the *kiddush* blessings of the Sabbath.) For the prophet Isaiah (58:13–14), the Sabbath was indicative of God's sovereignty over his people.

16. The comparison rests largely on comparative outlines with highly accommodatingly parallel displays of Akkadian and Hebrew sequences of divine actions (Marduk vs. the Hebrew God), as well as on a lexical equation between Hebrew *tehôm* and Mesopotamian Tiamat. I find it far-fetched, however, that Hebrew mythographers would ferret out *Enûma eliš* just to develop a polemic against it. Mesopotamian priests jealously guarded it and invoked it in deep recesses of their temples at the wee hours of a sacred festival (*akītu*). (You have to wait until the Hellenistic period to read summaries of it in Berossus.) *Tehôm* (Ugaritic *thmmt*) itself could be related linguistically to Tiamat, but only indirectly and from a common lexical storehouse rather than from a heard or read source. In addition, in Gen 1 as elsewhere, *tehôm* is hardly an adversary for God (as was Tiamat for Marduk). Too, it is not featured in biblical combat metaphors, as is Leviathan, Rahab, or the like.

17. Editor's note: For a similar view, see Ziony Zevit, "[Before the Beginning: Appreciating the Thought of an Ancient Cosmologist](#)," *TheTorah* (2014).



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