

13 Much ink has been spilled over the first verse of Genesis, even though the first words appear fairly basic: *bereshit* (in the beginning) *bara* (created) *elohim* (God). Their order is what complicates everything. Presumably, the marker of time precedes the deed, and only then does the doer make a belated entrance. The deity stands at a suspicious distance from the beginning. This is an odd grammatical construction, not only in English (compare “Yesterday walked Joseph”) but also in Hebrew. There is, however, a different, more straightforward way to understand this opening statement.

בראשית ברא אלהים

14 Allow *Bereshit* to introduce itself as the clandestine subject of the sentence, the one who is responsible for the initial work of creation. Such a move makes God the sentence’s object. Put simply, and probably shockingly, “Bereshit created God.” This is not to suggest that Bereshit is another metaphysical entity—a god or goddess—operating above nature. It is not meant as a challenge to monotheism. Instead, think of Bereshit as

הויה על-אלהית

what is called a “meta-divine” realm that exists beyond God. Start by imagining some ancient and shadowy force that precedes and transcends the single deity.

15 This heterodox reading gives the impression that Bereshit went missing in action soon after the creation of God. We never again hear about this realm. The word is used only this once in the entire Torah. After Genesis 1:1, Bereshit seems to be inoperative, at rest, or in some kind of retirement. Perhaps it exists in deep, tranquil sleep for what feels like eternity. Maybe it merely stares blankly at the world and wonders about its mysterious ways. This meta-divine being appears to have nothing to do with doing, not to mention legislating, judging, governing, punishing, or forgiving.

16 Grammatical gender is pervasive in Hebrew. When Bereshit is used as a name, it is naturally treated as a feminine noun. Nevertheless, the creative deed appears in the first verse of Genesis as a masculine verb. This discrepancy or tension between the actor and the act is not necessarily a contradiction. There is something queer about the first two biblical words: because they display both masculine and feminine features, they do not give in to an either/or logic. By contrast, virtually every mention of God in a Hebrew sentence must fixate, and hence limit, his identity—as just happened in this sentence through the use of the word *his*.

בראשית ברא

- 17 Granted, we have almost lost track of Bereshit's existence, just as Bereshit has almost lost track of ours. At the same time, the God who was put in charge of maintaining the order of the created world, the God who may or may not be an image and likeness of this meta-divine realm, is the one who receives the ultimate praise of much of humanity. Though Bereshit is the first cause, it has been almost completely eclipsed by the divine effect.
- 18 There is, however, no need for repentance. This argument is not a request for a new sacrifice, or the recitation of a new prayer, or the observance of a new law. Bereshit does not await the construction of some spiritual home in physical form. Its commemoration can only be dedicated to the inevitable failure to recall what was and no longer is. Bereshit represents this sealed, inaccessible, and incomprehensible past that exists beyond the limits of language.
- 19 Genesis 1-11 is the product of a culture that cherished the tireless work of memory as a central pillar of its shared existence. Nevertheless, this form of life points to the bottomless pit, or black hole, from which it came. This lacuna, or its remnant, is named Bereshit once and for all. Bereshit is not an actor with agency or will. It is simply a time that left a pale trail. Bereshit, in a nutshell, is the *immemorable*. Hence, an inconvenient necessity presents itself: to remember that so much was forgotten, rather than just to let it go. It is ultimately a doomed attempt to bear witness to the failure of testimony.

- 20 The composition of Genesis did not begin with a blank slate. Whoever fashioned this text in its written form used existing mythologies whose exact origin was mostly unknown, repurposing familiar stories that even at the time seemed ancient. Yet people surely wondered where these tales had come from. One possible reply is that they came from an immemorial past, that is, from Bereshit.
- 21 Bereshit, then, which is the Hebrew name of the first book of the Bible (Genesis), and possibly the name of its hidden protagonist, turns out to be the code name for its anonymous author(s) as well. Early readers did not necessarily think that the text evolved from an oral tradition, but from a tradition out of memory's reach. It is conceivable that the text was treated as the word not of God, but of Bereshit.
- 22 As a consequence, the most rudimentary faith could have pertained to Bereshit, to the genesis of Genesis, which is where the words in the book come from. What a potent way to substantiate the authority and ineluctability of this text. A belief in a deity can only be secondary, since its force can be traced back to its primordial origin, to the tacit understanding that it is Bereshit that begot God.
- 23 Imagine God meditating day and night on I-II, studiously pondering the different interpretations of each verse, because in a way his very existence depends on

these words. They give him life, and not vice versa. For a culture shaped by the invention of writing, the pre-Abrahamic Genesis may prescribe God, rather than merely describe him. For the people who treat this ancient text as a founding document, what we call Bereshit, which is the source of the one and only deity, may also simply be understood as the book itself.

- 24 There is no access to the beginning, but there are still ways to get closer to the origin. The originality of 1-11 has little to do with novelty. Everything has already been said, and there is nothing new under the sun. To be original means to linger by the origin and insist on it. The task is to avoid the progression toward a future or an end, and to stop the narrative before it develops any further. In this sense, and in this sense alone, the origin is a worthwhile goal. Hence in Hebrew forward (*kadima*) is related to what is ancient (*kadum*), just as backward (*achora*) is linked to what is last (*acharon*).

קדימה / קדום
אחורה / אחרון

- 25 Bereshit is not a constituent power that can establish a new world order. Genesis 1-11 teaches that the basis of everything is an abyss. Bereshit is not the ground on which things stand but the hand that pulls the rug out from under them. The first chapters of Genesis do not resemble a constitution of any sort. On the contrary, they convey a distinct sense of destitution. Consequently, an organized religion runs a considerable risk by acknowledging Bereshit as its groundless ground. Under Bereshit's spell, the religious apparatus

that purports to *bind* together (*religare*) the human and the divine can easily fizzle out.

26 The beginning is not a sovereign demand, such as “Let there be light” (1:3), but a pregnant silence. This is not where time begins but the realm from which wisdom hails. Wisdom can still be attained, even in these shallow times, by getting frighteningly close to the unspeakable. Hence, just as, in the Psalms (111:10), human wisdom entails a fear of God, it appears that God himself must be Bereshit-fearing, which explains his superior wisdom. Humanity’s more restricted access to wisdom also depends on grasping that the beginning has vanished. Wisdom comes from an acknowledgment of this erasure and an acceptance of some lack. It cannot arise from propositions about what is or should be. In fact, knowledge tends to drown out wisdom, just as information usually drowns out knowledge.

27 Like a drawing of footsteps on a beach that have been washed away by the waves, Bereshit’s forgotten biography can begin with the words, “It brought God about.” The genesis story then ends rather abruptly with the further generation of “heaven and earth.” This is a figure of speech meant to indicate everything that there is, from one extreme end to the other. In sum, the most minimalist rereading of the first verse can be reconstructed thus: “Bereshit created God and the world.”

יהי אור

ראשית חכמה יראת ה'

בראשית ברא אלהים את השמים
ואת הארץ

28 Unlike “creation” in English, which has artistic and other connotations, the Hebrew word only applies to the creation of the world. After the conclusion of the seventh day, it is said that heaven and earth “were created” (*be’hibaram*), in the passive voice (2:4). But there is no indication as to who should get the credit for this creative act. The only thing for certain in this verse is that God “made” both earth and heaven (*asot* is a much weaker verb that is also freely used outside the cosmogenic context). But it is never explicitly stated, either here or anywhere else in Genesis, that God was indeed the creator of the world.

אלה תולדות השמים והארץ
בהבראם ביום עשות ה' אלהים
ארץ ושמים

29 This subtle evasion also explains why God’s four-letter name (usually rendered in English as *Lord*) is first introduced in the canonical text at this very moment. After the seventh day comes to a close, God’s special name is announced on what could be the eighth day since he came into existence. Is it only a coincidence that this is also the traditional day of circumcision, when the infant is given his proper name?

30 It has been observed that the days of creation are ordered in perfect symmetry: the first corresponds to the fourth (light and darkness—sun and moon), the second parallels the fifth (sea and sky—fish and birds), and the third mirrors the sixth (dry land and vegetation—land animals and humans). In each couple, the formation of a setting prepares the way for the establishment of the actors who will come to occupy this

0. Bereshit’s work

1. light, darkness

2. sea, sky

3. dry land, vegetation

4. sun, moon

5. fish, birds

6. land animals, humans

7. God’s rest

מעשה בראשית

set. Now is the time to add that the seventh day echoes day zero (whatever happened before the introduction of light in 1:3). God's rest on the Sabbath does not glorify his own work but Bereshit's deed (what the mystics slyly call *mā'aseh bereshit*.)

א

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31 It is also argued that the reason why the first letter in Genesis is not *aleph* is that the shape of that letter points in four different directions, while *bet* has a single opening forward in the right-to-left script. The other three directions symbolize proscribed paths of investigation: what lies above, what lurks below, and what came before. But consider the possibility that, like virtually every other exposition throughout the text (2:4, 5:1, 6:9, 10:1, 11:10, 11:27), once upon a time it all began with three additional words, now lost, the first of which indeed begins with the first letter: "This is the genealogy of Bereshit" (*eleh toldot bereshit*, 1:0): "Bereshit created God, the heavens and the earth" (1:1), and so on.

אלה תולדות בראשית

32 In the beginning was formless life. Instead of creating the universe, God finds himself in a position to give it some order. He does not bring about *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, a world external to his divine being. Rather, he imagines *ex anihilo*, out of the abysmal and chaotic rubble with which he was entrusted, a cosmos, an organized and articulated form, mainly through a series of divisions, distinctions, and definitions. This process, as described in the first chapter of Genesis, is surprisingly

akin to what contemporary biologists aptly call *ontogenesis*: the organism's development through cell division. The first sentence alone already differentiates Bereshit from God, God from the world, while the world is separated into heaven and earth.

- 33 Structurally, the cosmogenic story does not give an impression of either progress or regress, expansion or contraction. There is also no apparent movement in any specific direction. Every new concept introduced by the text can be represented schematically as either a bifurcation (the splitting of a single point into two) or an interpolation (the marking of an additional point in between the already existing ones). This rule allows the foundational starting points—Bereshit and God—to persist as the fixed, outer limits of every possible thought.

bifurcation



interpolation



- 34 The book of Genesis sparks the monotheistic revolution not by canceling or refuting the pagan system, but by converting it into a new conceptual scheme. Hegemonic ways of thinking are rarely toppled through critique but, rather, via translation. The basic principles are replaced by another set, although what was continues to haunt what is. In this way, the old matrix of thought becomes a shadow of its former self, like a discarded coin that has lost its face value and is no longer in circulation. In short, the thing that fades away is not truthfulness but usefulness.

35 First in line is the meta-divine realm that is prior to the gods and above them. In many mythologies, it is described as a kind of womb that contains the seeds of all being. For the ancient Greeks, for example, the meta-divine was the idea of fate, by which everything and everyone with no exception—even the almighty Olympians—must abide. But the seat previously reserved for this hallmark of paganism is not abolished in 1-11 (as Yehezkel Kaufmann claims). The meta-divine realm is now occupied by Bereshit: the idea of a vacant, looming past.

36 Prior to Genesis, different natural forces were identical to or imbued with different divinities. Nature was neither mute nor dead. Everything was alive. Monotheism's second move concerns the exchange of this multiplicity of deities that animate every corner of the universe for a single one that contains them all. But although the Hebrew God encompasses or monopolizes the entirety of nature, he is not equivalent to it. Instead of being the life of the sun or the sea, he now functions as the life of the whole world: he is *how* the world is; the fact *that* it exists is beyond him. Only Bereshit can rightly be called the origin of this world.

37 The strong polytheistic tendency to approach the creation of the universe as a mythical battle also left its distinct mark on Genesis. Heaven and earth can be seen as two belligerent military forces ready to engage in a war for world domination. After the sixth day, the two an-

tagonistic realms are explicitly depicted as troops readied in their set positions before the fight commences: “the heavens and the earth were completed, with all their armies (*zvu'am*)” (2:1). The heavenly host is said to include the sun, the moon, and the stars (1:16). With a striking symmetry, the earthly host consists of the first human couple and the rest of the animal kingdom.

ויכלו השמים והארץ וכל צבאם
את המאור הגדל לממשלת היום
ואת המאור הקטן לממשלת
הלילה ואת הכוכבים

38 Nevertheless, the winner of this world war was already decided upon much earlier, even before the first day. It is as if time were flowing backwards and the fighting taking place in reverse. The chapter begins with its *a priori* conclusion: heaven triumphed and earth was destroyed. The anguished earth is therefore described as a devastated battlefield: “unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep” (1:2).

והארץ היתה תהו ובהו וחשך
על פני תהום

39 Despite this destruction, “God’s wind” still prefers to sweep over the water (1:2). It does not ascend to heaven. It is earthbound. The divine being identifies with the vanquished while snubbing the victor. Soon after, God will separate the seas from dry land in order to rehabilitate the earth, which appears to be weak, confused, and even shell-shocked. But as the narrative of 1-11 unfolds, God comes to regret these acts of early compassion, even though his commitment to the earth never falters, not even during the flood.

רוח אלהים מרחפת על פני
המים

40 The defeat of the earth by heaven means that humans, animals, and plants all have one thing in common:

their surrender to the “enlightened” enemy of celestial bodies. Although certain living beings have power over others, no one has a cure for being here on this miserable earth. Every yearning for heaven is a case of identification with the aggressor. The rumor that God built an ethereal city there is unfounded. Frankly, it verges on propaganda.

וירד ה' לראות את העיר
וימצאו בקעה בארץ שנער

41 The earthly kingdom may be under the custody of humanity, but the one in the sky does not belong to God. In the sole possible allusion in 1-11 to his heavenly abode, it is indeed written that God “came down” to survey Babel (11:5). But it is also plainly mentioned that the city was located in a valley (11:2). From this perspective, his decision to destroy its tower is meant to punish the builders, as well as the readers, for wrongly assuming that he resides high above.

42 The simplistic assumption that God is *beyond* the world, as if looking at it from a distance, stems from misunderstanding the idea that he is the *life* of the world. Life in this context has nothing to do with vitalism or animism. Life is not some nebulous force but simply the *way* the world is. So now is the time to correct a possible earlier misconception: the only truly metaphysical entity above nature is Bereshit, whose proper expression is stupefaction. Any attempt to speak about it, such as the present one, must hit a wall. But isn't there some value in the bruises we procure while trying to explain the inexplicable?

43 The eventual transformation of God from a figure immanent to the world into an abstract, ineffable, and transcendent being that is utterly distinct from nature was meant to make him more *Bereshit-like*. It also helped keep Bereshit under wraps. However, to borrow a phrase, you can take God out of the world but you can't take the world out of God. Only the meta-divine is truly and fully not of this world.

44 At this point, it becomes clearer why the only day on which God does not express his satisfaction with his own work is the second, which is when heaven was established by name (1:8). On the fourth day, he out-sources to the heavenly bodies the task of governing night and day (1:18). From that moment on, the basic polarity in the world is not that between light and darkness, or between life and death. The deeper conflict is the one between *lights* and *lives*, which reflects the opposition between heaven and earth (which devolves over time into the antithesis between heaven and hell). To repeat, life is not light, but its diametric opposite.

45 The fundamental concepts in the first verse of Genesis make an appearance according to their rank. The number of letters in each Hebrew word is telling: six in Bereshit, five in God, four in heaven, and three in earth. The primordial pecking order, which God prefers to undermine by tending to the earth and letting heaven be, is the first indication that birthright is a privilege, rather than a biological, chronological, or

ויקרא אלהים לרקיע שמים
ולמשל ביום ובלילה

בראשית
אלהים
שמים
ארץ

hierarchical given. It can also signify a divine decision that challenges the preordained laws of nature. Such a reversal of fate is a recurring biblical theme: an exception becomes the rule, the last becomes first, and the premonition of an approaching disaster intensifies. And don't forget: humans worship God, not Bereshit.

46 Reading through the pre-Abrahamic book of Genesis can give an impression that it is written from the position of the oppressed; that its deepest interest is neither in God nor in man but in the stage on which they both act: the earth. The earth's suffering knows no bounds, and the deeper its pain, the stronger the temptation of its inhabitants to escape to some higher and lighter realm. But please be patient. The coming flood will offer a modicum of catharsis.

47 Nevertheless, the underlying problem remains: heaven and earth, a blessed realm and a cursed one, were set before God. And he chose the earth, which henceforth receives his (and the text's) undivided attention. It is where he preferred to create life, in the form of fish and birds (1:21) and finally humans (1:27). Only those three were brought into being through the distinct act of creation, which is an exclusive power that God borrowed from Bereshit.

48 The Hebrew *bara*, created, was meant to signify a one-off action reserved only for Bereshit. This can be summarised by glossing on the fact that Bereshit's first three

ויברא אלהים את התנינים

ויברא אלהים את האדם

letters (*bet, resh, aleph*) are identical to this verb. So when God is said to create life, a job for which he seems to be unqualified, it should be understood as a sort of overreaching or even mutiny on his part. It can be compared to humanity's occasional attempts to act like the deity. Divine creation, which should not be conflated with meta-divine creation, may therefore be perceived as the *original* original sin.

ברא

בראשית

- 49 The living beings on earth do not wait long before they demonstrate the deeply problematic nature of their existence. It is their very creation on the fifth and sixth days, not their subsequent compromised actions in Eden and beyond, that is the true source of their continuous suffering. It is the creation in the “image of God” (1:27) that makes human life particularly difficult. This is less a badge of honor than a price tag; humanity is about to pay dearly for its special inception. God concurs: “As such, it is not good to be human” (2:18).

בצלם אלהים ברא אתו

לא טוב היות האדם לבדו

- 50 The likeness between divinity and humanity is also a reminder that both are first and foremost subordinate to Bereshit. The evolution of the complicated relationship between God and man is secondary. Since the two are answering the same mute call, their being remains indeterminate and their identity is destined to be indistinct. Humans, like God, have no definite end (in the sense of goal).

נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ

51 Whenever God uses the first-person plural—for example, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (1:26)—he is not talking to other divinities, nor is he speaking to himself with the royal “we.” Since there is only one God, he must be addressing Bereshit. But God knows perfectly well that his prayers fall on deaf ears. So without waiting for a reply, which will never come, he proceeds with his risky plan and produces the first human couple. Here and elsewhere, his actions can be seen against the background of his tenuous, unresolved relationship with Bereshit.

וִירָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי טוֹב

52 The absence from divine life of the meta-divine being, which can lead to a sense of abandonment and groundlessness, may elucidate God’s uneasy relationship with the world in general and humanity in particular. With this in mind, consider the seven occasions in the first chapter where he feels the need to reassure himself that his own work is good (1:10, for example). Notice as well his excessive involvement with the lives of certain humans throughout Genesis. Also note his prolonged withdrawals. Those partial to psychological explanations for theological quandaries may detect here manifestations of troubled object relations. Are God’s efforts hampered by the retreat of Bereshit? Do humans carry a transgenerational trauma inherited from their creator?