

The Hebrews Explain Creation Book of Genesis (ca. 950-450 B.C.E.)

The following passage is the beginning of Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew Bible, or Torah. The range of dates given for this selection reveals something about the hotly debated issue of how the Hebrew Bible was created. Modern historians believe that by about 450 B.C.E., the Book of Genesis existed in something close to the form we now possess. At the same time, it is known that some passages of Genesis are much older. As you read the passage, think about other Near Eastern creation stories to which you have been exposed (for example, the Mesopotamian creation myth included in Chapter 1 of this sourcebook). How is Genesis similar to those stories? What aspects of it are unique?

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and He separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning-the first day.

And God said, "Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water." So, God made the expanse and separated the water under the expanse from the water above it. And it was so. God called the expanse "sky." And there was evening, and there was morning-the second day.

And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." And it was so. God called the dry ground "land," and the gathered waters he called "seas." And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds." And it was so. The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning the third day.

And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years and let them be lights in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth." And it was so. God made two great lights- the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. God set them in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth, to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning-the fourth day.

And God said, "Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky." So, God created the great creatures of the sea and every living and moving thing with which the water teems, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth." And there was evening, and there was morning-the fifth day.

And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind." And it was so. God

made the wild animals according to their kind, the livestock according to their kind, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kind. And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

So, God created man in his own image; in the image of God, he created him; male and female, he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground-everything that has the breath of life in it-I give every green plant for food." And it was so.

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning-the sixth day.

Thus, the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so, on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created. When the Lord God made the earth and the heavens-and no shrub of the field had yet appeared on the earth and no plant of the field had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no man to work the ground, but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground-the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

READING QUESTIONS

1. Consider the stages of creation. What does their order reveal about the Hebrew faith?
2. God creates man on the sixth day, but a few verses later the text states that "there was not a man to till the ground," then a mist watered the earth and God formed man from the dust of the ground. Why does God seem to create man twice, and what could this indicate about the way the text was created?
3. Explain the following passage: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it." What does this indicate about how the Hebrews understood the relationship between their God and humanity?
4. Given that all of God's creations through the sixth day are described as "good," what does that suggest about the source of evil in the world? Does evil come from nature, from God, from human beings?