

SESSION ONE



he Story of Temptation: Adam and Eve and After

*And then God said, "Let us make [earthperson]—in our image."
(Genesis 1:26)*

The Lord formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. (Genesis 2:7)

Immediately, in the midst of the power and the glory of creation, it is clear that there is no simple description of how it all came to be. The story of creation is told in Genesis 1 and again, in a second, longer, account, in Genesis 2 and 3—and the stories are different! Even in the original source, there seems to be no definitive text, at least not on the surface. What a wondrous beginning for the study of the Bible. In a text that is considered by some to be revelatory, there is only the meaning that we give to the contradictory narratives that tell us how it all began.

To come to an understanding of creation and the loss of paradise is to come to know oneself better. The subject is grand, and the biblical text is fertile with possible meaning. Each of us forges our own understanding, based on our own personal history and the questions that press us into searching for answers. We are limited and enriched as well by the sociocultural assumptions we feel most comfortable with. So, before our exploration of the meaning Elie Wiesel draws from the text, it is worthwhile to do our own grappling, to read the four chapters upon which Wiesel bases his midrash, and to acquaint ourselves with some other ways of entering the text.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

(Genesis 1:1)

And God said: "Let us make [earthperson] in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth." And God created the [earthperson] in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them.
(Genesis 1:26-27)

Then the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. And the Lord God planted a garden eastward, in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed.
(Genesis 2:8)

The Creation Stories

The first story of creation, with its emphasis on celestial and environmental elements, contains many of the central myths of the Western tradition (Jewish, Christian, and Islamic). Philosophers ponder the idea of creation *ex nihilo* (from nothing). Creationists as well as evolutionary theorists struggle with the Bible's report that the world was created in a six-day sequence. Theologians and philosophers are among those who have built theories around the idea that from the word (logos) of God the world was created: "And God said: 'Let there be light.' And there was light" (Genesis 1:3).

Having populated the cosmos with all the celestial and terrestrial bodies and all the flora and fauna we can imagine, God then creates earthperson(s)¹ "in His own image," a phrase whose meaning has been the subject of discussion ever since. God blesses the earthpersons and commands, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that creepeth upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28). He gives them "every green herb for food," a suggestion of primeval vegetarianism that was superseded ten generations later during the time of Noah—and, having finished creation in six days, He rests and blesses the seventh day, the Sabbath.

The second creation story is also the source for many of our culture's longstanding images. The pace in this narrative is slower, and is focused more on the doings of the first humans than on the celestial bodies and the metaphysics of the new-born environment. Man is created of the dust of the earth. God breathes the breath of life into him and creates a living soul. Man is placed in the Garden of Eden and advised to eat freely from all but the tree of knowledge

¹ The Hebrew word *a-dam* is typically translated as the common noun "man" or the proper noun "Adam". However, *a-dam* is directly linked to the word for earth, *a-da-mah*, and may suggest a more gender-neutral meaning. Thus the translation *earthperson*, suggested by Phyllis Trible, is both a more literal translation and a better reflection of the complexity of the text. Throughout this chapter, it is given as an alternative reading in the first creation story, in which the separate creation of the sexes is not explicit.

of good and evil. There is no explanation for the interdiction.

There, in the Garden, God observes that "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a help meet for him" (Genesis 2:18). Although Adam "gave names to all the beasts, and to the fowl of the heaven, and to every animal of the field," he could not find a help meet for himself (Genesis 2:20). Only then does God create woman from Adam's rib. Dwelling in the Garden, "they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed" (Genesis 2:25).

The stage is now set for the appearance of the serpent and all that follows from the temptation. By the end of chapter three, Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden.

Ways of Dealing with Variant Texts

For the rabbis, the words of Torah were God's words provided for our interpretation. Every letter, every grammatical construction, every apparent irregularity lent themselves to that interpretation. Nothing is accidental or extraneous. So when Rashi asks why there are two creation stories, he answers that the second is an elaboration of the first.

Variant texts have been a boon for modern academic scholars of biblical critical studies. They seem to provide evidence that the Bible was made up of various sources put together well after the time of Moses, most likely during the exilic period following the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E. These critics discern four major sources that make up the Torah.

For Robert Alter, a contemporary scholar of literary criticism of the Bible, the existence of various strands in the text does not explain how or why the narrative we have came to be. He wants to know: Why these strands? Why this particular weaving? Why any weaving at all? Alter suggests that alternative renderings and variations in the text have been deliberately included, part of the "essential aim of the innovative technique of fiction worked out by the ancient Hebrew writers . . . to produce a certain indeterminacy of meaning. . . . Meaning, perhaps for the first

It is, of course, true that the two accounts of the creation of man differ considerably. This incongruity was not discovered by the Bible critics. Our sages of old were aware of it. However, the answer lies not in an alleged dual tradition but in dual man, not in an imaginary contradiction between two versions but in a real contradiction in the nature of man. (Soloveitchik)

Then the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. (Genesis 2:7)

time in narrative literature, was conceived as a *process*, requiring continual revision—both in the ordinary sense and in the etymological sense of seeing-again—brooding over gaps in the information process.” Alter may not accept the Torah as the word of God, but, like the rabbis, he accepts the text, as we have it, in all its contradictions.

Rav Joseph Baer Soloveitchik, the great twentieth century rabbinical scholar, obviates the problem of the two stories altogether. The text is not contradictory. Rather, it a faithful reflection of the contradiction in the nature of human beings. In his book *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Soloveitchik writes of the Adam created in chapter one (Adam the First) and the Adam created in chapter two (Adam the Second) as emblems for the paradox in our existence. Adam the First is born with a ready-made peer, all but indistinguishable from him except by gender. Created in the image of God, he is master of other creatures and a creator himself: an achiever, a great theoretician, a clever politician, a brave explorer, and a brilliant scientist. Adam the First is the majestic side of human nature. Adam the Second, however, is humble and introverted—a walking contradiction created from dust but with the breath of the divine in him. Unlike the gregarious Adam the First, Adam the Second is born without a companion, and he suffers his loneliness and uniqueness while he reaches through the distance to form a profound faith relationship with Eve and with God.

The Origin of Species—Torah Style

Rav Soloveitchik follows a long tradition; the earlier rabbis already wondered about man's dual origins. On one hand, Adam was created from dust; on the other, he was brought to life through the breath of the divine. The rabbis did not take this dual origin to signify an opposition between the physical body and the spiritual soul. Rather it was a metaphor for the unity and complexity of human nature.

With an appeal to humor as well as imagination, Rabbi Elazar explained: “God created humanity with four characteristics from above and four from below. From below: humanity eats and drinks as do the animals,

procreates as do the animals, defecates as do the animals, and dies as do the animals. From above: humanity stands erect as do the angels, speaks as do the angels, understands as do the angels, and sees as do the angels. But don't animals see? Yes, but humans have stereoscopic vision."

The idea of the creation in God's image transfixed the rabbis. "In God's image." What could it mean? In God's *physical* image? Impossible in a tradition that forbids making images. No, not impossible. Some exegetes visualized an anthropomorphic God. They created God in their own image! The mystics spoke of God sitting on a throne; they gave him sexual parts. Even the Bible speaks of the "strong hand and outstretched arm" of God (Deuteronomy 4:34) and describes him in such anthropopathic terms as jealous, angry, loving, forgiving, and merciful. Still others obviated the problem by understanding the verse to mean that God created man in *man's* own image, in some Platonic ideal of man-ness.

Just as we do, the rabbis tried to understand the origins of sexuality and the nature of gender relations. For the most part, they assumed that the creation of man preceded that of woman—following the sequence explicit in the second creation story. Some rabbis, however, were intrigued by the idea of original bisexuality that seems suggested in the first creation story. R. Jeremiah ben Eleazar was of the opinion that "when the Holy One created [earthperson]², He created him hermaphrodite" (*Genesis Rabbah* 8:1).

Another sage, Rabbi Samuel bar Nahman, understands the word "rib" to mean "side" and attempts to reconcile the two creation stories based on the idea that the first human was created with a male side and a female side. God separates the sides to create two independent genders. (Plato and Freud number among the great thinkers who have entertained this idea of original bisexuality.)

Needless to say, the rabbis were not feminists. But they were not necessarily sexists. The nature of the relationship between man and woman perplexed and fascinated them as it continues to perplex and fascinate us. Often the rabbis

*And the Lord God said: "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a help meet for him." . . . And the man gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found a help meet for him.
(Genesis 2:18, 20)*

²The subject of bisexuality in this context is a strong argument for substituting *earthperson* for *Adam* or *man* here.

*And the Lord God commanded the man, saying "of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it; for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die."
(Genesis 2:16-17)*

showed a psychological sophistication that anticipated our modern theories. For example, in the second creation story God resolves to make for Adam *â-zer k'negdo*, a difficult expression awkwardly translated as *help meet* and literally meaning *help against him*. R. Eliezer's interpretation of the term is "If he is worthy—a *help*; if he does not show himself worthy—*against him*" (*Yevamot* 63a).

Aviva Zornberg, a modern commentator, observes that the parade of animals with their mates (as Rashi understands the text) makes Adam aware of his aloneness and his desire. She suggests that Adam dreams Eve in a sleep that God causes to fall upon him.

The Tree of Knowledge

Up to a point, the stories of creation provide an idyllic model of our origins. Then, Eve and Adam eat the forbidden fruit and are cast into the real world that we all live in. There is something about the expulsion from the Garden of Eden that seems inevitable, something inherently part of our nature that sets us against God's interdiction. What that something is remains debated.

The rabbis called it "the evil inclination" and conceived of it as an inherent part of our being. When left unabated, it wreaks havoc and destruction, even evil; but it is not an ontological evil like the Christian Satan. (The Jewish Satan appears periodically as a concrete projection of the "evil inclination.") In fact, when balanced and combined with other human forces, the "evil" inclination helps make the world go around: R. Samuel says, "But for the Evil Desire . . . no man would build a house, take a wife, and beget children" (*Genesis Rabbah* 9:7). "R. Judah said, "The world endures because of three things: rivalry, lust, and mercy" (*The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan* 4).

Over the centuries, the tree has become linked with morality, with sexuality, with consciousness, and with curiosity. Mortimer Ostow, a psychoanalyst, says, "The myth tells us that a paradisiac existence is incompatible with a sense of reality, with self-consciousness, and with values. Curiosity is vital for the human but nevertheless its price is the forging of immortality."

Others have argued against such a view. According to Rambam, Adam was created with intelligence and moral awareness by virtue of being created in God's image. And although many have understood the origins of free will to be in this act of disobedience, Rambam felt such a reading also inconceivable. After all, he argues logically, we know that Adam was created with free will—otherwise it would have been irrelevant for God to command him not to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

So it remains unclear exactly what the tree of knowledge is and why it was forbidden to us. In the end we still have questions. Something is gained, however, by “brooding over the gaps,” as Alter says.

Wiesel's Story of the Temptation, Adam and Eve and After

The stories of the beginning of the universe, the creation of man and woman, and the loss of paradise are bold and comprehensive and yet sparse and vivid. Details are telescoped. Light years are scanned. For millennia, the rabbis have been gilding the story with their understanding. Any one particular person's rendering of these texts is only a snapshot, taken on a particular day, in a particular century. Sometimes what that person, in this case Elie Wiesel, has to say reveals as much about him and his century as it does about the text studied. And sometimes new meanings are forged that have never been understood before.

The very first thing Wiesel tells us about Adam is that he was alone, as only God is alone, and that this loneliness is still in all of us. He does not elaborate on the loneliness. It seems assumed, like the air we breathe. Using the interpretations of the rabbis, Wiesel teaches us what God's purposes were in creating man alone. Because we are all equal, we must not humiliate each other. Because each of us is equal to the entire world, we are all responsible one to the other.

But, like the sages before him, Wiesel turns to the text for more than moral precepts. He turns there for reflection and solace. He also tells us of Adam's existential sensibility. What did it mean to be the first man? Adam had no past, no

In the beginning man was alone, as only God is alone. Still, something of his loneliness is in all of us. Something of Adam is in every one of us. (Video)

memories. "And those memories feed everything in us. What creation, what creativity could exist without memories . . . ? In the act of looking back, in that process our creativity is born. . . . Adam had no memories. When he looked back, what did he see? Nothing but himself." This is not the voice of an earlier midrash. This is the voice of Elie Wiesel, master storyteller and survivor of the Holocaust—a man alone, who looks for the lost Eden of his childhood and sees nothing, a man who finds creativity in his memory and loss.

A sense of nostalgia permeates Wiesel's discussion of the text. He remembers that earlier time when Adam was perfect and filled the world, when Adam and Eve fell in love and the angels planned their wedding, when everyone knew their purpose and place. There remains an Old World insistence in his attitude toward Eve. He cites faults in her that may strike viewers as perpetuating some old-fashioned stereotypes: she talked too much, she committed her husband without his knowledge, she could not be trusted on her own. But Wiesel also defends Eve and blames God. "Too many sources place the blame on Eve. I don't agree," he says. "It was God's decision. . . . He is the one who allowed the serpent to come and see her. . . . So, I would rather say that it was not Eve's fault. It was a little bit the Creator's fault."

Ultimately Wiesel cannot find an explanation or a cause that matches the magnitude of the cataclysm. Unlike Christians who find in these stories the idea of an original sin and a fall that permanently damns us generation after generation, Elie Wiesel (along with Jewish tradition) finds no metaphysical or theological explanation. "In Jewish tradition we don't believe in original sin. Everyone is responsible for his own deeds or misdeeds." That is why he warns, "the problem is that Satan appears as an angel and if he could seduce our grandmother Eve, of course, he could seduce us as well." Eve is not the originator of sin. She is the model of how it happens. What Elie Wiesel finds in these stories is what the sages before him found, models and imperatives.

For Elie Wiesel, the survivor, the story of the expulsion from paradise is a model for living in the world after catastrophe. The Adam who does not know any more

And then we know what happened later on. They had children. And of course to us it is even more troublesome. Adam and Eve, who had seen already the capricious aspects of life, they had seen already what can happen to human beings. It was enough for one serpent to come out of nowhere and change everything, and change even the structure of the universe, to change human destiny. And yet they decided to wager on the future and to have children. And they had two sons, Cain and Abel. (Video)

where he is in the world, who has been knocked out of his familiar garden and thrust into chaos, is the same Adam that Wiesel described earlier, only with a difference. He is lonely, perhaps more lonely than ever, because unlike the pristine loneliness of his creation, Adam now has a past, a lost past, a painful past, a past in ruins. Wiesel, a survivor of our century's most unimaginable catastrophe, takes a lesson from Adam. It is given to us to live among our ruins and build on them. It is given to us to start again. It is our act of creativity.

"One must," Wiesel states, "have faith in the future in spite of everything."

While you watch, consider . . .

- ◆ The freedom, even the pleasure, that interpreters take with the text, to embellish it and even to alter it. For example, Wiesel (and some midrashim) speak of Adam philosophizing with God while the serpent seduces Eve. In the actual text, Adam is with Eve.
- ◆ How thin, and sometimes invisible, the lines are between the biblical text, the midrash, and the interpretation presented.
- ◆ Wiesel's humanistic focus—the way he is more interested in emotions and personality than theology.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ◆ Not only does the text sometimes contradict itself, but two millennia of midrashic interpretation also contains conflicting understandings. Yet, the rabbis still regard the text as sacred and revelatory. Can you explain how this can be?

- ◆ Loneliness is experienced in many ways. How do you understand Adam's loneliness? Does Eve's presence relieve it? If so, how?

- ◆ The Jewish image of God is of a personal God. Why did this God create the world? Why were we created in God's image? What about our dual origin from dust and from God's breath?

- ◆ What was the tree of knowledge of good and evil? Why were Adam and Eve prohibited from eating its fruit?

- ◆ Can you imagine human beings in the Garden of Eden?

- ◆ Is the difference between the way Christians and Jews read this story really significant? In what ways?

Suggestions for Reading and Viewing

Reading

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- ◆ Kovacs, Maureen Gallery, trans. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1989.
- ◆ Milton, John. "Paradise Lost" in *The Complete Poetry of John Milton*. Edited by John T. Shawcross. New York: Doubleday, 1990.
- ◆ Nissenson, Hugh. *The Tree of Life*. New York: Harper & Row, 1985.
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- ◆ Visotzky, Burton L. *Reading the Book*. New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1991.

Viewing

- ◆ "Temptation," in *Genesis: A Living Conversation*, with Bill Moyers, Episode 1.