



***Biblical Studies***

## **Creation: Making Distinctions**

### **Bereshith: The Matrix of Life in Covenant**

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Bereshith, or Genesis, the first book of the Torah, establishes the setting for the constitution of the Jewish People that follows in the next four books. It introduces the central Biblical idea of covenant, through a series of covenants between God and humanity and the Israelite forefathers. It also provides the linguistic and conceptual basis within which to understand covenant and covenantal systems. In this respect it is like a long definitional preamble to a statute, only rather than being presented as a dry list of definitions it is set in a historical framework that after the Creation itself locates the unfolding history in a particular spatial-temporal-cultural location. It is this concreteness of biblical thought that is so striking. We are not dealing with abstract definitions but with meanings that arise out of particular contexts and which can be understood and developed only by understanding the context in which they are set. Thus, Bereshith is an introduction to the covenantal perspective of ancient Israel that was to be so influential in the Western world and its constitutional extension.

### **Creation as Making Distinctions**

The first chapter of Bereshith presents a picture of creation in its entirety, emphasizing God's role as Creator in relation to all the various parts of the visible universe. It is devoted to making distinctions and separations, to teach that distinctions and separations are the basis of all creation. The chapter begins with the distinction and separation between God the creator and His creation (v.1). There follow the distinctions within the creation itself, such as the separation of heaven and earth (v.1), light and darkness (v.3),

day and night (v.4), firmament and seas (v.6), the dry land and waters (vv. 9-10). Third, there is the distinction between the immobile elements of creation and those possessing locomotion (v.10ff). Fourth, there is the distinction between those elements which can only move in fixed courses (the heavenly bodies) and those which can move as they please (living creatures) (v.14ff). Finally there is the distinction between man who can even move away from the right way (i.e. has the power of moral choice) and other living creatures (vv.26-28). We are told, in effect, that the way of the universe rests upon proper distinctions whose roots go back to creation, thereby setting the stage for the subsequent discussion of the first concern of ethics and politics, namely what is the right way and how do humans organize themselves to follow it.

God creates by speaking. The Bible begins (v.3) by indicating the creative power of words, an idea repeated in various contexts through subsequent chapters. Here God does not command, He speaks, calls things into being, or blesses. Nor does He command His human creations but speaks to them as well (v.28). God blesses and instructs them to be fruitful and multiply but they must respond. At first, then, they are spoken to, not commanded. At any place where the term commandment could have been used, the word used is *vayomer* (said or spoke), suggesting God's use of His word is sufficient. Later interpreters of the Bible saw this as evidence that God had already covenanted with Adam even though the first actual use of the term is in connection with Noah (6:18). Since speaking demands a response freely given, it already suggests the mutuality of covenant. Humans, separated so thoroughly from God by the separations of creation, are to be reunited with Him through covenant.

This first chapter of Genesis introduces two important political terms as well as a geographic term that is to have political implications. The geographic term is *aretz* (earth, land), used first for earth as distinct from heaven (v.1) and later for land as distinct from water (v.12). In neither case does it include the kind of geographic specificity that it later acquires, but the term is introduced. The first political term is *memshelet*, the construct of *memshala*, which in turn comes from the root *mashol*, meaning governance (v.16). It is used in reference to the role of the sun and the moon, the first governing the day and the second governing the night and the stars. The second political term used is *redu*, from *rado*, dominion (v.28). God grants man dominion over all other creatures.

*Memshala*, the general term for governance in biblical and post-biblical Hebrew, implies the rule of like by like, if not equals then at least potentially equals in some important and relevant way. From the context we immediately learn that such rule can be shared; i.e., the sun rules by day and the moon by night, and is limited, as sun, moon and stars are limited in their courses. *Redo*, on the other hand,

6/11/2009

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deals with the dominion of unequals over unequals, in this case of humans over non-humans (indeed sub-humans). Out of it grows the later term *rodan* (dictator), a ruler who exercises human dominion based on the principle of inequality. From the context here, however, we learn that such rule is not a fitting relationship between humans, who are, above all, equals or potential equals, all having the same common parentage. It is therefore a usurpation when applied within the human community. Even God does not rule humans as a *rodan* according to Scripture. Thus the introduction here of the two terms is accompanied by the implicit distinction between the two principal forms of rule.

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