

Exceptionalism in the Bible:¹ There Is Less Than Is Thought, and What There Is, Is Biblically Problematic

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When in the biblical narrative a thing is on theological grounds assigned a special status among things of its kind, students of the chapters and the verses apply to it the word “exceptional.” Few would contest that the following three things qualify: the actual world among possible worlds; men and women among creatures; the nation of Israel among nations (“the chosen people”). These three are also widely regarded as foundational pillars of the Bible’s worldview.

Before I get down to the main business of this essay – namely, to show that from the Bible’s own perspective the exceptionalist credentials of the first two things are invalid and the stamp of approval on the third is smudged – let me field a couple of questions. One: Since, as Matthew puts it, “even the hairs of your head are all counted” (10:30), is not everything in God’s world exceptional? The prepositional phrases in the characterizations of the three indicate how this flattening can be resisted. Granting that all things are exceptional is compatible with characterizing the ones that are *elevated* from among things of their kind as exceptional in the primary sense. Two: Does the sabbath day not qualify as much as the

1. Throughout, “Bible” refers to the five Books of Moses, also (although usually in the devotional context) called “the Torah.” Biblical quotations draw upon the New Revised Standard Version [NRSV] translation.

three listed? The sabbath is elevated among the days of the week, is it not? As reasonable as this line of questioning may be, it is easy to see that the sabbath is not as basic as the three. The final day of the primordial creation, it is designed for men and women among creatures, and its observance is singled out in the Ten Commandments as incumbent on the Israelites. I imagine that the same could be argued for other presumptive candidates.

The conception of persons dramatized in the picture of God vivifying the first man with his breath of life – in my view a conception of persons as *non-exceptionally* special – is the Bible’s foundation.² As I see it, the Bible was written *because* the thinkers behind it came to understand themselves in this unprecedented way. Does it follow that a book devoted entirely to Israel’s career would not have been produced if chosenness had the significance that many adherents to Judaism non-negotiably ascribe to it?³ It doesn’t. All that follows is that such a book, a religious history of the nation, would not sort with works that are consulted for answers to the questions that reflective people ask about what they are and about how they are to live their lives. To western culture such a book would not be what the Bible is: its charter document.

Here is the biblical status of exceptionalism as I see it:

	Actual world	Men and women	Nation of Israel
Special status	X	√	√
God-backed status	X	X	√

2. Obviously, I must show that it is interpretively mistaken to assign to God an active role in what is pictured. Otherwise, the man (and by descent from him each one of us) would qualify as *exceptionally* special. “Why, if so, is the conception unavailable to worshippers of what the Bible calls ‘other gods’?” The essay in its entirety provides the answer.

3. One can cobble up such a book by selecting from biblical materials. This, we shall soon see, is what Rabbi Isaac would have us do.

With the overarching goal of establishing that the middle column is the Bible's pillar, I turn now to the task of justifying the ticks and the crosses. To begin, I put under the microscope a rabbinical disagreement about two items of my three.

Rashi Answers Rabbi Isaac

“The Torah should have begun with Exodus 12,” says Rabbi Isaac. This assertion, along with Rabbi Isaac's reasoning for it, is reported in the opening entry of Rashi's commentary on the Bible:⁴

The Bible is the charter of the Israelites, and verse 2 of Exodus 12 – “This month [Nissan, the month of liberation from Egypt] shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you” – promulgates the first law to, specifically, the nation. By contrast, the first chapter of Genesis applies as much (or as little) to the Ammonites and to the Moabites as it applies to the Israelites.⁵

4. See Rashi on Genesis 1:1, in *Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary*, trans. and annotated by M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silbermann in collaboration with A. Blashki and L. Joseph (London: Shapiro, Vallentine and Co., 1929–1934), https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Genesis.1.1?lang=bi&with=About&lang2=en. Rabbi Isaac is unknown to us apart from Rashi's mention.

5. Rabbi Isaac selects a verse that is about the children of Israel and that, like Genesis 1:1, is about a beginning. Usefully for Rabbi Isaac, on the traditional understanding of the calendar the creation does not take place during the month referred to in Exodus 12:2. Would God's call to Abraham not have done Rabbi Isaac's job equally well – even, for coming a good deal earlier, better? “I will make of you a great nation,” God says to Abraham in verse 2 of Genesis 12. Is not the appeal of the verse augmented by the fact that “lekh lekha” (go forth) (in verse 1) resembles “bereshith bara” (in the beginning created) both in its repetition of consonants and in announcing a fresh start? There is a good reason, which I will discuss later, for Rabbi Isaac not to choose 12:1–2 as his 1:1.

In Rabbi Isaac's view, the Israelites know *bereshith* (in the beginning) that they will be the heroes of their story. This advance knowledge is based in an article of theology. *God chooses the Israelites for a favoured position, a special mission, a unique destiny.*⁶ Accordingly, or so Rabbi Isaac is committed to say, if in composing *their* scriptures the scribes of other nations place Israel elsewhere than at the center, the accounts that they offer skew away from the truth.

Rashi, although in agreement that the basis of the Bible's Israel-centricity lies deeper than the fact that the chapters and the verses are by Israelites, of Israelites, and for Israelites, resists Rabbi Isaac's strictures on the creation story. "Had the Bible not commenced as it does, the people of other nations would have scoffed when the Israelites cited the Bible to back up their territorial ambitions. 'The world came into being independently of the deity who chose you. Your claim to have a God-given right to the Promised Land isn't therefore worth the parchment on which it's inked.'"⁷

Chosenness – Israelite election – is, according to Rabbi Isaac, the basic biblical doctrine. So unqualified is his commitment that he

6. God identifies the basis for his differential treatment of the Israelites. "It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you [...]. It was because the Lord loved you" (Deuteronomy 7:7–8). I take it to be true that A's love for B, not C, is not favouritism towards B and bias against C.

7. Don't temporal rulers deed lands? A high level of control, that is to say, seems to be sufficient for deeding. It's possible that Rashi endorses the stronger view for a broadly political reason. His dates, 1040–1105, enclose the dates of the First Crusade, 1096–1099. "The First Crusade," Daniel J. Lasker states, "was the occasion of the initial widespread massacres of Jews in western Europe" ("The Impact of the Crusades on the Jewish-Christian Debate," *Jewish History* 13 [1999], 23). Under the circumstances, the stronger the claim on the Promised Land the better, even if the effect was mainly for co-religionists. This interpreting of the interpreter, needless to belabour, is conjectural. It implies, however, that Rashi does not at the deepest level connect the two exceptionalisms so closely.

is prepared in its name to purge God's creative work from Holy Writ. It may seem that Rashi's response – that the account of creation has a bearing on the subject and its biblical importance derives from that – enables Rabbi Isaac to have his cake and eat it too. Since the emergence of humankind is part of the creation story, it may seem, also, that those who go along with Rashi do not have to make a choice between the view of men and women as special and the view of Israel as favoured. This happy-sounding outcome is, however, as unreal as cake had when eaten. Missed is the significance of the fact that what I referred to as “the creation story” has two parts: one in Genesis 1, and the other in Genesis 2. Factor the two-parts in, and it turns out that Israelite exceptionalism must be denied basic doctrinal status.

Removing Genesis is for Rabbi Isaac removing, and retaining Genesis is for Rashi retaining, the story of the creation of the world in which we find ourselves. The legitimacy of the deeding of a piece of this world to the Israelites is what is at issue. But world-generative activity continues past the seventh day. The fashioning and enlivening of the man and woman are described in Genesis 2. It is in the course of *this* account of beginnings that the specialness of men and women emerges, not in the course of Genesis 1. Under the sun that God is said to make on the first Wednesday, either everything is special or (in my view) nothing is.

A Widespread Mistake

Rashi *mistakenly* treats the creation story in Genesis 2 as a magnification of a component of the Genesis 1 story. He has lots of company. Here, speaking the majority view is Richard Elliot Friedman:

Like some films that begin with a sweeping shot that then narrows, so the first chapter of Genesis moves gradually from a picture of the skies

and earth down to [in the second chapter of Genesis] the first man and woman.⁸

In what Friedman refers to as “the first chapter,” the man and the woman *are never mentioned*. In fact, the move from the first picture to the second, far from being gradual, is abrupt. So far as the treatment of men and women goes, Friedman, we see, *assumes* that the shift from Genesis 1 to Genesis 2 is no more than one of focus – from wide angle (“humankind”) to close-up (“the man”).

In what remains the best general introduction to the Book of Genesis, E. A. Speiser describes Genesis 1’s relation to Genesis 2 thusly:

The account before us [chapter 2 of Genesis] deals with the origin of life on earth, as contrasted with the preceding statement about the origins of the universe as a whole. The contrast is immediately apparent from the respective initial sentences. The first account starts out with the creation of “heaven and earth” (1:1). The present narrative begins with the making of “earth and heaven” (2:4). The difference is by no means accidental. In the other instance the center of the stage was heaven, and man was but an item in a cosmic sequence of majestic acts. Here the earth is paramount and man the center of interest [...].

Yet despite the difference in approach, emphasis, and hence also in authorship, the fact remains that the subject matter is ultimately the same in both versions.⁹

Speiser’s assertion that Genesis 2 deals with “the origin of life on earth” embodies the same mistake that Friedman commits. Men and women apart, the only living things that rate a mention in Genesis 2

8. Richard Elliot Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 2012), Kindle Edition.

9. E. A. Speiser, *Anchor Bible Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1964), 18–19.

are plants and herbs. The earth figures as a source of material for making the man and a locale where, once made, he can go about his business. True, in Genesis 2:19 God also forms “every animal of the field and every bird of the air.” This does not happen, however, until the man’s need for companionship is noticed.

“[T]he origin of life on earth” referred to in the passage above is the origin described in Genesis 1. Like Friedman, Speiser does not allow Genesis 2 to speak for itself.

Commenting on the inversion of Genesis 1’s “heaven and earth” to Genesis 2’s “earth and heaven,” Robert Alter describes Genesis 2 as “more vividly anthropomorphic”:

Whatever the disparate historical origins of the two accounts, the redaction gives us a harmonious cosmic overview of creation and then a plunge into the technological nitty-gritty and moral ambiguity of human origins.¹⁰

Again, we have a bird’s eye view, Genesis 1, and a worm’s eye view, Genesis 2. Again, also, uniformity of subject-matter is assumed.

How does the error affect Rashi’s answer to Rabbi Isaac? It makes good sense to say that if the world is God’s product, he has the right to apportion it as he wishes. And so, for the reason that Rashi gives, it looks like the Genesis 1 part of the creation story supports chosenness. The fly in the ointment is the if-clause. The complex forces behind Genesis 1, when resolved, resolve to a naturalistic, God-free, story.¹¹ The Bible only appears to hold that the world in

10. Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 7n4.

11. Thus, my claim that the biblical account does not mark the creation as exceptional (the reference is to Genesis 1). One can read Maimonides to support a reading on which the Bible says what the thinkers behind the text do not mean. An exoteric story of the creation of the natural world *for the masses* is laid atop an esoteric story of the natural world’s eternity *for the learned*. In *Judaism as Philosophy: Studies in Maimonides and the Medieval Jewish Philosophers of*

which we live and breathe is special; that it has a non-natural origin; that it is, for its being, beholden to God. Plainly, if this world is not God's handiwork, it cannot be argued that he can deed it to this nation or to that nation because he created it. As to the part of the creation story in Genesis 2, for a reason that I adumbrate in a moment, it too cannot support chosenness.

The account of the advent of men and women in Genesis 2 is *not* naturalistic. The arguments that work to establish that the story of the emergence of humankind in Genesis 1 is naturalistic do not transpose to the second chapter. If so, it may seem that Rashi can use the distinction between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 to his advantage. But although non-naturalism and theology *are* linked in the minds of the thinkers behind the Bible – quite apart from the interest in the Bible that we have, are they not linked in our minds too? – in the case of Genesis 2 the link is fragile. Under analysis it emerges that Genesis 2's non-naturalism, the position in the text that readers casually express in the words “men and women, qua inspired with God's breath, are partly outside nature,” has *no* theological content. That, I mean, is the position that analysis uncovers in the Bible itself.¹² Also, this time more directly, given that what Genesis 2 says goes no less for individual Ammonites and for individual Moabites than it goes for individual Israelites, how could the Genesis 2 case,

Provence (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2015), 49, Howard Kreisel offers this telling remark. “Maimonides had every reason to present his true [Aristotelian] position on this issue in a [...] veiled manner [...]. By proving creation, Maimonides has removed the philosophic obstacles to a literal reading of Scripture on these issues, though he nevertheless rejects such a reading on many points quite explicitly.”

12. What kind of position does the Bible hold about human specialness? It's a philosophical position, sorting with what is found in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. The thinkers behind the Bible are advancing a thitherto unrecognized category of being. Their revolution is ontological, not theological. The god of the Bible, God, thitherto unrecognized, serves as the vehicle for introducing the category and functions as its emblem.

whether or not it has theological content, lend support to Israelite exceptionalism? So Rashi's middle option has to be excluded from a list of real possibilities.

In giving strong precedence to one of the positions about special status, the reading that I sketched resembles, formally, Rabbi Isaac's. As I indicated a few paragraphs back, the creation story of Genesis 1 does not in my understanding assign special status to the world whose coming-into-being is narrated in Genesis 1. As for chosenness: since it conflicts with the special status of men and women, defence of the Bible's integrity requires that *it* be shunted to the margins, perhaps even purged.

Important to establishing the primacy of the view of men and women as special in the Bible; to showing, as the Rabbis would put it, that among all the things in creation individual persons are nearest and dearest to God; is showing how sharply the account of human origins in Genesis 2 differs from the corresponding thing in Genesis 1.¹³

PART I: GENESIS 1 AND GENESIS 2

A Wrong Answer to *the* Question

This question arises for those who view the Bible as Israel-centric. *What is it that makes the nation of Israel special among*

13. The focus of the argument in this essay is the proposition that Genesis 1's treatment of *living things* is naturalistic. A similar interpretation of Genesis 1's treatment of *the non-living part* of the creation is given in several discussions of mine. An early version is found in "Artificial Respiration: What does God really do in the beginning?" *New Blackfriars* 99, no. 1083 (September 2018): 578–600. A fuller version is the (as-yet unpublished) essay "Genesis 1 and Genesis 2: Interpreting the Beginnings."

nations? The answer given is *God's choice*. A similar question arises for those who, like me, view the Bible as person-centric.

God made the other creatures. God made the species that comprises men and women. The nations differ one from the other. The species differ each from each. It is only to be expected that men and women will have top billing in their own story. This does not however mark them as special – not, that is to say, other than on their own marquee. If cows had a charter, it, the Greek philosopher Xenophanes quipped, would be vaccocentric. *What is it in the Bible that makes men and women special among creatures?* An answer that corresponds to “God’s choice” in the case of the Israelites is needed, and from this answer it must follow that men and women are at the center of the story of the cow in the way that the Israelites are according to Rabbi Isaac and to Rashi at the center of the story of the Ammonites and of the story of the Moabites.

Readers will say that verse 26 of Genesis 1 contains the answer, and the answer, they will say, *is* a version of “God’s choice.” *God gives dominion to humankind*. In the usual reading, it follows that the vaccocentric scripture *would* be faulty.

Here are three grounds for questioning the reading, two of them text-based, the third conceptual. One: The verse does not say what readers always say that it says, namely that God gives dominion to humankind. Written is “let them [sc. humankind] have dominion.” True, “letting A have B” often means “giving B to A.” But there’s another sense that often attaches to the phrase: “not taking B away from A.” Johnny’s parents hear a muffled ring. They find one of the devices in his school bag. “Honey, let him have the cellphone,” says the mother to the agitated father. “Let them keep the dominion that they have.” That, in fact, is what God is saying in verse 26. Two: Dominion, whatever the possession of it comes to (what it comes to will be made clear shortly), has nothing to do with the position that individual persons are special in the creation. It has to do only with

human difference. Specialness with regard to our sector of being does not appear until Genesis 2, whose story about men and women differs fundamentally from the Genesis 1 story. Three: The claim is easily understood that the Israelites would not have a special status if God had not chosen them. Obviously, this does not mean that the nation of Israel would not have existed independently of God's election of it. It means that the nation of Israel would have been just one nation among the many. What however could it mean to say that men and women would have been just like the other animals if God had not given them dominion? In imagining the truth of what the if-clause states, we are not imagining men and women who are deprived of something that we men and women have. We are imagining a world in which there are no men and no women.¹⁴ Such a world is possible. Evolution might have taken a different path. This, however, is not a world in which the Bible has any interest. "Couldn't God have given dominion to cows?" Had he done that, the species would have comprised boviniform persons rather than persons of simian appearance.

The difference between the case of the nation and the case of the human species is clear. Being chosen is not essential to being Israelite. Like the singing ability of the Welsh, it's an add-on. Having dominion is by contrast constituent to humankind.

God, we may conclude, has nothing to do with what, in Genesis 1, is described as the characteristic that sets men and women apart. It is no objection that the text puts the words "Let humankind have dominion" into God's mouth. Indeed, we now appreciate better how good a thing it is that "let them have" can have the meaning that I specified with the vignette about Johnny. "Let the world be structured in a way that allows such a species to emerge." The world,

14. In footnote 20, I try to give sense to what not letting men and women keep the dominion that they have would amount to.

of course, is that way. Not that the thinkers responsible for the text could have predicted the emergence of our species from the initial chaos. Rather, they have the benefit of hindsight. Here the species in fact is! *Ab esse ad posse valet consequentia*.

Genesis 1 and Darwin

The opening chapter of Genesis involves no divine contribution in regard to men and women. “Let them have dominion” does not express a donation from on high. To determine what if anything God does do to and for men and women, I will now examine more closely the relations between the two cosmogonic chapters of Genesis.

Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 do not relate as would two different perspectives on the same thing. They are two quite different stories of the beginning, neither dispensable.

Observe a pair of reversals as between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. One: In Genesis 1, first come the locations for things to occupy. Only afterwards do the occupants appear. In Genesis 2, only after the man is “formed” (6) is his initial abode, the garden, “planted” (8). Two: In Genesis 1, humankind comes into existence on the afternoon of the sixth and final day of activity. In Genesis 2, the primary creative effort consists in fashioning the man and then in fashioning the woman.

A reflection of Rashi’s answer to Rabbi Isaac is discernible. In Genesis 2 the world is made for its human inhabitants. This is the point whose denial Rashi advances as underlying the position.¹⁵ The implication is that the case in Genesis 1 differs.

15. Rashi’s answer, transposed to this context, might only give men and women justification for living in a tamed, artificial, cultivated, place. Their position in the wilds would not *ipso facto* be secured. Other animals might have an equal place (in the Genesis 1 account) in it. Obviously, this would also have

Up until Friday morning, is not the world as a whole the location created for the things that first see the light later that day? It is not. Genesis 1's story can be reconstructed along Darwinian lines. In the story, the locations precede the occupants. Sticking to living things, this, dimly, is the point that nature abhors squatters.¹⁶ Each species comes to occupy the niche that it occupies because its members can flourish there at least as well as, and usually better than, the members of other species. Genesis 2 resists being read thus. Here, the order, both temporal and logical, is the reverse.

If Genesis 1's story of humankind is a naturalistic (i.e., God-free) story, what is it doing in the Bible? Part of the answer is that the thinkers behind it cannot believe that accounts like Darwin's are explanatorily fit to deal with the non-human world. The selection of occupants for locations does not, they think, come about naturally. Since God's role in Genesis 2 is not dispensable in this way – the creation of the man and of the woman, and the creation of the garden, are, ineluctably, purposive acts – they run the two accounts together. Might *this* be the underlying, tactical, thought? Given that the non-naturalism of Genesis 2 is basic, the more weak spots there are in the naturalistic story the better.

Look again at the fact that the Genesis 1 account first gives the locations, and only afterwards the location-fillers. The text does not describe God as fitting out the locations for the locals. I doubt that anyone would say that God, an omniscient deity, knows without trial-and-error that fish would do poorly aloft. In Genesis 2, by contrast, God plants the garden for the man and the woman to live in.

implications for how extensively men and women enclose and for how intensively they tame and cultivate.

16. The Bible would characterize the Canaanites as squatters in Israel.

The garden, a cultivated place, is the product of design.¹⁷ Absent an agent to “[t]ill it and keep it” (Gen. 2:15), it reverts to wilderness.¹⁸

Prior to Darwin, the mechanism was a mystery. There are signs enough in the text to discourage immediately taking the mystery as a final biblical thing. The questions needing answers are these. *Where* is this fundamental difference stated in the Bible? *What* is this fundamental difference?

“Have you not,” I expect some readers to complain, “passed over the fact that in the Genesis 1 account God intervenes on behalf of men and women? Them, and them alone among creatures, God fashions (26) ‘in [his] image, according to [his] likeness.’” I have not passed it over. The likeness of which verse 26 speaks is the commodity referred to as “dominion.” To shake the thought that “being according to God’s likeness” and “having dominion” name two things, suffice it to do two things. Attend to the fact that verse 27, the poetic reprise of verse 26, mentions “image and likeness” but not “dominion.” Consider that “dominion” is cognate with “Dominus,” a Latinate denomination for God.

When we – men and women – reflect on our condition in the world, we perceive ourselves as oddities. Our species is odder relative to the other species than any one of the latter is odd relative to any other. Certainly, we stand over-and-against the rest; not in the sense that we rule (a pitched battle has been waged with quite a few viruses over the centuries: to the next we might fall), but in the sense

17. The garden turns out not to be a place that is ideal for the man. Here, God does experiment, as we do with our dwellings and acreages. A major issue in Genesis, once the garden is in the rearview, is whether the city is a habitat in which men and women, understood as per Genesis 2, can flourish. There is no such “whether” about trees in the natural world. They are not found where they are unable to flourish.

18. In the debate that William Paley started, it is not disputed that watches are products of design. Only the alleged parallel between (say) the human eye and a Rolex is disputed. That the garden aligns with the Rolex is agreed.

that we do not fit. The mentioned features of Genesis 1, although they seem to have theological anchorage, are in the first instance used to flesh out that antecedent sense of difference. Men and women are represented as standing to the rest of the creation as God stands to the creation as a whole. How does God stand to the creation as a whole? He stands *outside* it. Could there be a clearer way of not fitting in than to be located on the outside? God, qua creator of nature, is in virtue of that very fact apart from nature, essentially so. Thus God is (by the reflexivity of likeness) Godlike, and God, qua creator, dominates. It is clear, however, that the coming-into-being of humankind in Genesis 1 is understood to be the coming-into-being of a natural species. Men and women, then, belong to a natural species with a striking difference. *The fitness of the species is its misfitness.* The theological characterizations (“likeness and image,” “dominion”) are attempts to bring out the difference, which is *antecedently* understood.

Observe in this regard that God lets humankind have dominion only after the whole is created. Were the rest adjusted to their needs, this would be coal to Newcastle. Moreover, men and women would merely displace the creature highest at noon on Thursday.

Indubitably, the text wavers. The representation in Genesis 1 reacts to the strong (extra-scriptural) feeling that we, men and women, are more different from lions than lions are different from wolves; even more different from lions than lions are different from earthworms. The strong (extra-scriptural) feeling is that we are qualitatively different. Neither theological note helps here, however. To say that men and women are like God is not to say that they, men and women, have creative power over the rest of nature. They do not. To say that men and women have dominion is not to say that men and women are dominators of the rest of nature. They are not. Those who appeal to theology explanatorily would agree that theology does not

account for there being a difference. A main point of contrast has to do with the matter of location and occupant. *Only the non-human creatures have distinctive habitats.* This feature of men and women, their cosmopolitanism, can be characterized as Godlikeness: God is above the whole, and in that sense ranges over all of it. Do not Darwinians say that the evolution of higher intelligence is what fits men and women to depart their native land and their parental home in a way that no other creature does, or can? This is the idea to which the Bible is putting words with the theological infusion. I said, “higher intelligence.” We could say, “dominating intelligence” and then opposable-thumb a ride on the etymology of “dominion” to construe this, correctly I maintain, as “intelligence that extends the domain.” To have dominion, then, is not to dominate. To have dominion is to be unrestricted to a specific domain. And this *is* to be Godlike.¹⁹

After the human species is up and running, God, it is written, “blessed them” (Gen. 1: 28). “Does this not,” some readers will ask, “count against the naturalistic reading of the creation?” In what I see as a *deliberate* move to prevent the question from being asked, the Bible, just six verses earlier, had applied the same words to fish. “God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply’” (Gen. 1: 22). “Do you really think,” I ask these readers, “the Bible is suggesting that we are mistaken to treat fish in a naturalistic way?”

19. To the criticism that “dominion” and its cognates are too distant from the Hebrew to be enlisted interpretively, I respond thus. In the original, the word that I am glossing with “dominion” and its cognates is based on the infinitive “r-d-h”: literally, “to descend.” In its biblical use, the word carries the sense “to come down [hard] upon.” This is entirely consistent with what I’m saying: 1) The claim is that by virtue of their character, men and women affect the equilibrium of non-human things. Which indeed they do, usually by interfering in a way that has negative consequences: destruction of habitat, mass predation, etc. 2) And men and women do “enter the niches/domains of non-human things” from outside. “From above” is the theological version of “from outside.”

The giving of the blessing to humankind responds to the fact that the species does not have a specific niche, domain, or habitat, and hence, since the members by nature move from the known into the unknown, propagating their genes requires some luck. Applying the blessing to fish is a clever way of making the point that not having a niche does not take the species out of nature. The point is that one natural species, the one to which we belong, exhibits a plasticity lacking in all other species. Oysters have their shells. The world, heavens and earth, dry land and wet areas, is *our* oyster.²⁰

Genesis 2: The Fundamental Difference

This concludes the brief for the proposition that humankind is no less natural than everything else dealt with in the Genesis 1 story. In Genesis 2, the shakiness about the <location, things for location> structure in Genesis 1 is gone. It's <thing, location for

20. The fish move *every which way* in their watery world: up and down, left and right, forward and backward, diagonally. Of men and women too, it can be said that they have no set course, as by contrast do the sun and the moon. The world of the fish is in this respect a model. Men and women, for lacking a set course, can go wrong without outside interference. (See Robert Sacks, *The Lion and the Ass: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* [n.p.: 1970], 43, <https://archive.org/details/RobertSacksACommentaryOnTheBookOfGenesis/mode/2up>). Having dominion, I said, is an essential feature of humankind, and on the basis of its having this status I concluded that God could not give it to men and women. Being what they are, they (cannot fail to) have it. Cognizant of the difficulty of drawing the line between the invariant and the variable, the philosopher in me is prepared to pressure this claim. *Could* God have made men and women in such a way that they would lack dominion? What if men and women needed to be at longitude A or at latitude B to survive? That would keep them out of the niches of (many) other creatures. But would it not then have to be the case that their intelligence and resourcefulness would not provide them with the wherewithal to wander? Maybe they would have to be stupider, so much stupider as literally to be hairless apes. The multiple counterfactuals here signal how difficult it is to evaluate the suggestion.

thing>. And the only thing is a creature whose sort (species) is brought into being on the afternoon of Genesis 1's day six.

All this, important though it is for extracting the Bible's message, is only preparatory. The underlying difference between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 explains the reversal of order. The difference is implicit in the shift from the plural syntax of Genesis 1 to the singular syntax of Genesis 2.

Genesis 1 operates on the level of the species. It does this both for non-human things and for men and women.²¹ In Genesis 1, God says "Let us make humankind in our image" (26). "Humankind" is not, grammatically, plural in number. But it is not, semantically, singular. It is a type term, a generic term, as is the subject phrase in "The turkey is America's national fowl." "Humankind" is a compendious label for all men and women.²² In this sense, it is semantically plural. Here is the NRSV's verse 27: "so God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male

21. The death of all the non-human animals, save for those aboard the ark, is not viewed in the Bible with dismay. This is not because biblical thought is Cartesian, classifying animals as machines. According to the Bible, non-human things are correctly thought of in species terms. No species perishes due to the Flood. When it comes to our species, the text is problematic. The description of Noah as "blameless in his [wicked] generation" (Gen. 6:9) is, we feel, an attempt to get away with murder. How can we not think of particular people, including innocent children, drowning? The same unease grips us regarding the sulphureous destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Speaking for us, Abraham pleads with God (Gen. 18:23): "Will you [...] sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" The thinkers behind the Bible, with their complex agenda, are trying hard to disarm our human sympathies. If some species is harmful to us, we would not object to its deliberate extinction even if there are a few members who do us no harm. Surgeons remove healthy tissue at the margins of a malignancy. The case of the Amalekites does not fit what I am saying here. But despite heroic rabbinical attempts to finesse it, the injunction to remove them from the earth down to the last animal comes from a place that is hard to access.

22. "The X is Y," where "the X" is a type term, has more or less the logical character of the typical analytic philosopher's claim "A necessary condition for being an instance of X is being an instance of Y."

and female he created them.” The original has the Hebrew (third person) singular pronoun in place of the first “them,” and it has the Hebrew (third person) plural pronoun in place of the second. There is no inconsistency. *Pace* the NRSV, the first pronoun is in apposition to “humankind,” the type term, not to the same plural “male and female” to which the NRSV’s second “them” refers back. Although the singular pronoun is, therefore, syntactically accurate, the whole sentence is, semantically, plural. The subsequent verses are clear of all this pronominal shifting.

In Genesis 2 God creates “the man.”²³ The word that serves as the type term in 1:26 appears here with the definite article.²⁴ It remains thus throughout the chapter. The NRSV is far off target here. Obviously, the translation is bad. Worse follows. The NRSV of Genesis 2 continues using the type term. Here is verse 7. “[T]hen the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living thing.” The Hebrew word translated as “man” in “formed man” is the same as the word translated as “the man” in “the man became a living thing.” In both cases, we have a definite article + common noun. The verse should be translated “[T]hen the Lord God formed the man & co.”

The NRSV fosters the impression that the acts of creation described in 2:7 and in 1:26 are identical. Genesis 2’s whole point is

23. Even when it would be natural to use the plural, e.g., in verse 18 where God says, “It is not good that the man should be alone,” the Bible sticks to the usual singular form.

24. English translations render as “Adam” what, in Hebrew, is almost always the definite description “the man.” Although the proper name is often a mistake, use of it won’t necessarily mislead, since the definite description refers to a particular. In “Splitting the Adam: The Usage of *’Ādām* In Genesis I-V,” *Studies in the Pentateuch*, Series: *Vetus Testamentum*, Supplements, Volume 41 (1990), Richard H. Hess identifies proper/personal name uses of “Adam” in Genesis 4:25 and in the genealogy of chapter 5.

however that men and women do not comprise a species among species. Men and women are a set of individuals.²⁵

The NRSV's rendering – misrendering – corresponds to the understanding – misunderstanding – of Rashi and of Rabbi Isaac. Running Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 together,²⁶ they miss the biblical point.

This, then, is the basic view of the Bible. It lays bare the root meaning of the claim in Genesis 2 that God breathes his breath of life into the man whom he forms. The constituents of the human sector of being are autonomous individuals. *The autonomous person is the rock on which the Bible is based.* Why God's breath? Because God is one. To have God's kind of life is to be genuinely one.²⁷ This

25. Speiser's translation, *Anchor Bible Genesis*, 14, gives both occurrences of "ha-adam" in verse 7 as "man." But then, in verse 8, the same Hebrew is rendered "the man." This, in reverse, elides the theoretical difference between Genesis 2 and Genesis 1.

26. Rashi knows Hebrew, does he not? Heirs to massive scholarship, the NRSV's translators probably know it even better. Actually, there is a pertinent difference, but it only makes Rashi's commission of the error seem worse. The NRSV's translators are native English speakers, as were those behind the Authorized Version. In English, the second person singular personal pronoun is identical to the second person plural pronoun: "you." Too, the possessive pronominal forms are the same: "your." Like Hebrew, the non-Hebrew languages with which Rashi had direct contact distinguish the forms.

27. Being one is not the same as being unique, i.e., being one of a kind. Genesis 1 contains several things, like the sun and the moon, which are (thought of as) unique. A mark of one-ness is non-fungibility. Consider the \$20 bill in your wallet. Any other \$20 dollar bill would serve you equally. The same goes for the cashier at the supermarket or your plumber. Neither the sun nor the moon is in this sense one. Consider now a marital partner, or a child. God, in the Book of Job, is said to make the protagonist whole again. He remarries. He fathers more children. But the person who was Job's wife before he was afflicted, and the persons who were Job's children, are gone forever. To be sure, the restoration cannot realistically occur in any other way. The writers seem sensitive to this, sticking to relational terms ("brothers," "sisters," "children") in describing the successor persons. If persons were fungibles, our sense of the problem here would be merely sentimental.

one-ness is absent from Genesis 1. Genesis 1's (natural) world is a system: a place for everything and everything in its place. That is what God's declaration at the end that it is "very good" (1:31) means.

In Genesis 1, the creation of human beings is the creation of the biological species, with its striking difference. Everywhere is *its* (really: "their") place.

In presenting the case against Rashi, I remarked that the doctrine of human specialness is a position about the kind of being that individual men and individual women have; an ontological doctrine, it lines up with the project of categorial analysis that Aristotle pursues in *Metaphysics Z*. I can now return to this.

The Bible tells the Genesis 2 story as a story about how individual men and individual women come to be. Its operative content lies, however, in the specification of what each human person is. The position is that each of them is something that no natural thing is or can be: one. Obviously, to say that God imparts to each of them his one-ness presupposes an understanding of one-ness. The fact that one-ness is associated in the biblical story with the central subject of (Western) theology does not make it a theological concept. In fact, it would be truer to say that the antecedent understanding of *our* one-ness – understood as a characteristic that sets us apart from all the other creatures – dictates the biblical characterization of the deity than to say the reverse.

To cap this off, here are a few lines about how the treatment of dominion in Genesis 1 and the treatment of one-ness in Genesis 2 differ and how they are alike. Differ: God-likeness in Genesis 1 has an analogical sense. A non-physical thing cannot literally be "above," or "outside." In Genesis 2, men and women have exactly what God has. God is one, and so is each of them. Each of them – each of us – is in the Bible's view God in miniature. Alike: In neither case does the relationship require that God give anything to the world.

Rabbi Isaac is right about Genesis 1. But his reasoning is not. The Bible is not Israel-centric. It is particular-centric.²⁸ Genesis 1, particular-free, does not have to do with men and women as at the most basic level each of us conceives themself. Genesis 2 does.

In my philosophical reading over the last while, I have come across the error. This signals how broad the misunderstanding of the Bible is spread about. I will give one instance.

G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, commenting on their compilation of passages from the Presocratic philosophers, remark on a similarity between Greek and Babylonian cosmogonies and Genesis.²⁹ “[T]he abstract Elohim of the [Genesis 1] is replaced by the fully anthropomorphic and much cruder Jahweh of [Genesis 2].” Since Greek “rational” thinking moves in the direction of the general and the abstract, Kirk and Raven find the “anthropomorphic” god in Genesis 2 “much cruder” and “more primitive.” But the two chapters are *not* perspectives on the same thing. Genesis 2 is making the ontological point whose theological expression is monotheism. The deity of Genesis 2 is the monotheistic deity. The monotheistic deity is the principle of particularity.

Among the Believers

I quoted, critically, several commentators/interpreters who, as Rashi does, run Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 together. But there are

28. My preferred word for an autonomous entity is “particular.” The choice is not ideal, since “particular” calls up “part” and “particle.” But the *prima facie* preferable alternative, “individuals,” has a recognized philosophical use. “Particular-centric” and “human-centric” are effectively interchangeable, since men and woman are the only particulars in creation.

29. *The Presocratic Philosophers* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 35–36.

those whose treatments do not steam-roller the distinction. Here is Robert Sacks:

[T]he author or redactor thought it necessary to include both [Genesis 1 and Genesis 2]. This decision implies that he did not believe either one of the accounts to be literally true [...]. Two possibilities remain open. Either he believed one of them to be true but was not sure which, or, as seems more likely, the author [...] presented us with two accounts, each of which reveals certain aspects of the foundations while obscuring others. Perhaps he thought it was not possible for man to give a single and complete account of the beginning.³⁰

Like the other commentators/interpreters, Sacks endorses the Documentary Hypothesis (DH) as the model which best explains the origins and composition of the Bible. The question for interpreters who accept DH is a pointed one. “How could a text assembled from documents produced at different times by different hands for different purposes in different parts of the Israelite world have a single meaning?” As we’ve seen, Friedman, Speiser and Alter maintain that the whole comprising Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, which all DH-ers assign to different sources, is interpretable. But this – interpretability – they take to require that the two chapters differ only superficially, in emphasis, for instance. Sacks is at least open to the idea that whoever put the whole together was imparting with the whole, the message that reality lacks unity at the most basic level. A distant parallel would be quantum theory and relativity theory. To say that physical theory needs both is not to say that the physical world is uninterpretable. It’s to say that the complexity of the physical world goes right to the bottom.

30. Sacks, *The Lion and the Ass*, 48. Although Sacks appreciates that the two stories are not in harmony, he is hard-pressed to locate the dissonance outside the mind.

I explained why I take that view about the Bible. The anthropology of Genesis 1, which deals with the species, humankind, is fundamentally different from the anthropology of Genesis 2, which deals with individual men and individual women, and neither is dispensable.³¹ I will return to the explanation after indicating how the view can help us understand better the Bible's position on a few crucial matters.

The Bible has been accused of placing men and women so much at the center as to ignore the environment, except as it impinges on their welfare. A high-profile prosecutor is the American historian and ecologist Lynn White Jr., who argues that a main root of current environmental problems is Judeo-Christian arrogance towards nature.³² The Bible, as I just said, distinguishes humankind as a biological species (Genesis 1) from individual men and women (Genesis 2). Does White (who has the Genesis 1 giving of dominion in mind) think that humankind's niche-freedom is arrogance? We are talking about a species characteristic, and there is nothing anthropocentric about that. Would White say that it is a nerve on our part to have opposable thumbs? Indeed, individual men and women, inspired with God's breath of life, can limit the effects of (God-like) humankind's niche-freedom by restricting men and women from encroaching on certain habitats. It is not the species that is

31. Leo Strauss seems to take such a view: "human nature is composed of two root tendencies in tension with one another." But, as I will argue, Strauss misunderstands the character of the tension in Genesis. (My discussion of Strauss draws on Jonathan Cohen's "Strauss, Soloveitchik and the Genesis Narrative: Conceptions of the Ideal Jew as Derived from Philosophical and Theological Readings of the Bible," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 5 [1995]: 99–143. The quotation about human nature is from page 102 of Cohen's essay. For reasons of space, I will not discuss Soloveitchik.)

32. See Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967), 1203–1207. See also footnotes 15 and 17.

behind attempts nowadays to emulate Noah in attempting to prevent endangered species from going extinct.

The distinction between the two chapters is also relevant to the vexed problem of evil. The Book of Job does not examine human-caused evil. The issue is natural evil: being struck by lightning, contracting a terminal illness, and so forth. The distinction enables us to absolve God of responsibility or of complicity. (Note that the harm to Job is inflicted “out of the presence of the Lord” [1:12].) In fact, there’s no evil in nature. The death of an antelope in the jaws of a lion is good for the antelope *and* for the lion. Should the antelope evade the lion, that too benefits the herd *and* the pride. The natural world, described as “very good,” is a system in dynamic equilibrium.³³

Sacks’ reading, which is receptive to (if not acceptive of) such applications, is indebted to Leo Strauss. But Sacks steers clear of Strauss’s defence of (as Strauss sees it) the Bible’s revelatory character, and so do I. Drawing on the preceding analysis, I will distill what Strauss says and indicate how I diverge.

The Bible, for Strauss, is, axiomatically, a religious work. Thus the contrast, with which Strauss’s name is so closely associated, of Jerusalem and Athens. And thus, his defence of revelation. In my reading of Genesis, the issue of a revelatory source of truth simply does not arise. Genesis 1 is a naturalistic account, and God’s role in Genesis 2 is a dramatized way of saying something ontological that can be said without reference to a deity. The something may not be Athenian, but that only makes it non-philosophical if we cede reason to Athens.³⁴ Indeed, I have an answer to the question that Strauss thinks unanswerable: “‘Who states ‘In the beginning?’” It is the

33. See Mark Glouberman, “‘Where Were You?’ God, Job, and the Quinizer,” *The Heythrop Journal* 56, no. 1 (2014): 1–14.

34. In “Deities and Categories,” *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 8 (2023), I identify what Athens

person who first comes reflectively to understand the new categorization. Among the Bible's *dramatis personae*, that person is Abraham. (See footnote 42.) To understand Abraham's insight, one needs here to keep Genesis 1 apart from Genesis 2. As the naturalized reading of Genesis 1 indicates, the chapter gives us a version of the (pagan) creation story that was accepted in Abraham's native land and in his father's house.³⁵ It is in Genesis 2 that the narrator offers the new view, the view that involves departing that land and that house and setting out on God's way.³⁶ In effect: Abram : Abraham :: Genesis 1 : Genesis 2.

Strauss sees in the Bible's story of the genesis of men and women an account not only of how we came to be but also of what we, essentially, are. And what he finds in the two opening chapters are two different aspects of human nature.

The description in Genesis 1 of humankind as uniquely among creatures fashioned in God's image contains, Strauss maintains, the characterization of men and women as "the most quickened and enlivened of the creatures – the most like the living God Himself."³⁷ But what do we have in these words other than a turbo-charged description of the niche-freedom to which the Bible's attribution of dominion to humankind boils down? Moreover, qua species characteristic, it is not something that individuals can (choose to) emulate or shun, any more than they can (choose to) emulate or

(represented by Aristotle) is missing. God, in being "one," is, as I said earlier, the emblem of the missing category.

35. All interpreters recognize that Genesis 1 borrows motifs from Babylonian materials. What is not recognized is that Genesis 1 de-mystifies this material. It does not replace it. See the remark about Maimonides quoted in footnote 11.

36. An early development of this line is found in my essay "The First Professor of Biblical Philosophy," *Sophia* 52 (2013): 503–519.

37. Cohen, "Strauss, Soloveitchik and the Genesis," 108.

deviate from having a functionless vermiform appendix.³⁸ I suppose that we might, in a poetic mood, describe as “more lively” a (kind of) creature that lives in more places than other (kinds of) creatures; whose life shows great variety of locale. (Have we not descended to the ocean floor and walked on the moon?) This does not mean that a person uninterested in travelling is turning their back stiff-necked on their god-likeness.

In his reading of Genesis 2, Strauss singles out the “inclination for untrammelled inquiry.”³⁹ Needless to say, many persons are very little so inclined, and perhaps not very much the worse for that. But it is a characteristic of each and every person who lives a normal span to set out on their own; to depart the parental fold, and one can read the story of Adam and Eve as a story of having one’s nose rubbed in some harsh realities as one takes control of one’s life. *Pace* Strauss, disobedience is not therefore what Genesis 2 denounces. Reverent subservience is not being pitted against prideful self-assertion. God says to the woman: “What is this that you have done?” (2:13) Although this is always read as accusatory, it can be read as voicing regret and dismay – regret at the end of innocence and dismay at the difficulties that impend for the newly-enlightened

38. Strauss applies unmodified “man” to the human sector of being in both Genesis 1 and of Genesis 2. Consider Cohen’s paraphrase, “In [Genesis 1], it appears that man and woman were created simultaneously; in [Genesis 2], man was created first and woman fashioned from one of his ribs” (“Strauss, Soloveitchik and the Genesis,” 107). This commits the error that I charged against Friedman, Speiser, and Alter. It is not man who is created in Genesis 2; it is the man, “Adam” we call him. And since the topic of Genesis 1 is the origin of species, how could male and female not come as a package? Indeed, in Genesis 1, *the sex difference is stated only of human beings*. This falls into place once we appreciate that men and women are also thought of as individuals – the topic of Genesis 2. Pets aside, we do not think of non-human animals in this way. The Bible’s point would therefore get lost if in Genesis 1 it were said of them too that they are sexed.

39. Cohen, “Strauss, Soloveitchik and the Genesis,” 111.

as a result. “Look what you have gone and done. That part of your life is now over. You are on your own, and you will have to face the music.”

I will lower the curtain on this perfunctory description with two comments. One: The act of disobedience is a dramatized way of accentuating the autonomy that being inspired with God’s breath imparts. That inspiration is the giving of one-ness which would otherwise not be present in the physical world.⁴⁰ Two: To follow God’s way is to break free of the thitherto dominant way. Abraham is enjoined to depart his native land and his father’s house. This, *mutatis mutandis*, is what the enjoiner had done.

PART II ABRAHAM AND CHOSENNESS

The Goldilocks Zone

Cosmologists speak of *the Goldilocks Zone*: the region in the field of a star in which from the standpoint of temperature life as we know it is possible. Framed in these terms, the position that I endorse is that the natural is too cold, the national, too hot, to support biblical life. The Bible’s center lies in the character of individual men and individual women. Individual men and individual women are the only things in the creation inspired with God’s breath – whatever, ultimately, that comes to. But this inspiration is as true of individual Ammonites and of individual Moabites as it is of Reuben, of Simeon, of Levi, and of Judah. Nations, if Godlike, can be Godlike only in the same borrowed sense.

Exceptionalism with regard to the actual world is not a position that the Bible takes, however much it seems to be one on a quick reading. In this part of the essay, Israelite exceptionalism,

40. I elaborate on this in Part II. See footnote 53.

although it is certainly a position that the Bible takes, will be shown to be advanced in a highly ambiguous and even, ultimately, self-undermining way.

Often it is prudent, even necessary, for the originators of a new way to focus their mission on a small, tightly-knit, group. Unless nurtured for a time in a nursery, the delicate shoots might quickly perish. Abraham, (represented as) encountering resistance in his early attempts to spread the word, does in fact turn kinwards. But if this *situational* need is what lies at its basis, chosenness is, from the Bible's own perspective, a stop-gap. Which is how I see the Bible to be. But rather than being replaced as it should when the time comes, the nursery becomes the permanent domicile. And as is only to be expected, in that domicile a large number of customs and usages develop that are peculiar to its dwellers.⁴¹

At the center of the Bible's center is a combination of Genesis 2 (the creation of the first man and of the first woman), Genesis 12 (the beginning of Abraham's mission), and Exodus 20 (the Commandments). Together, the three – the first in ontological terms, the second in a historical register, the third in practical terms – set out the basic principle.⁴²

41. The representation (in Genesis 12) of Pharaoh as appropriating Abraham's wife Sarah, whom he, Pharaoh, finds "very beautiful" (14), inflects the idea of an outsider's receptivity to the group as immorality – a violation of Commandment Ten. This seems to signal an unwillingness to transplant the shoots outside the hothouse even after they have become sturdy enough to make a go of it on their own. The story is of course enigmatic. It can also be read as a hostile takeover. When we add context, some of the ambiguity is removed.

42. I can now identify the good reason for Rabbi Isaac not to choose Genesis 12:1 over Exodus 12:2 as his beginning. Moses's mission is national throughout. Abraham's anti-paganism, a philosophical thing, is the idea that individual persons are autonomous. I would say that Abraham's following God is (=) his acting on this idea. The idea, I would also say, is *his* discovery – which explains why he would leave his native land and his father's house in answer to a call from, as it first seems, he knows not who. How did the idea come to him?

In stating his position, Rabbi Isaac refers to the first verse of Genesis 1. But Genesis 2 also contains a bringing-into-being story. The similarity between Genesis 1:1 and Genesis 2:4 is impossible to miss. “In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens.” Why does Rabbi Isaac not (also) make his claim about Genesis 2? It is because he *does not* distinguish between them. Like Rashi, like the majority of interpreters, Rabbi Isaac regards the chapters as thematically uniform.

My position is that Genesis 1, the account of the natural creation, is external to the center of the Bible’s center. The development in thought that precipitates the Bible is advanced in Genesis 2. The negative implication for the doctrine of Israel-centricity is clear. Superimposing Genesis 2’s account of the human sector of being upon Genesis 1’s account can create a false sense of unity here. Imbued with something of God, men and women, as described in Genesis 2, are un-natural. Intermix the treatment with the account of humankind in Genesis 1, and it can seem as if the collective thing, humankind, is also imbued with that something. And this supplies a (specious) opening for the thesis of Israelite exceptionalism.

Abraham Hits the Road

Monotheism is the theological face of the view that each person, each man and each woman, is a particular, and that this ontological condition has implications for the conduct of human affairs. God’s appeal to Abraham in Genesis 12 is an appeal for one man to spread the word. The word is not that God should be worshipped because God is the only deity. God should be worshipped because that worship is linked to a proper human self-understanding, and hence to proper, productive, behaviour. The word is the truth about the condition of men and women.

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation” (Genesis 12:1–2). Abram (as he is called at that juncture) accepts God’s call. “So Abram went, as the Lord had told him” (4). We must distinguish the call that Abraham receives and Abraham’s departure.

A recurring feature of the Bible is that when action B follows action A, this is not to be understood as the B’s resulting causally from the A or the B’s occurring temporally after the A. It is more like “Having travelled to Egypt, Abraham left his place” than it is like “Having travelled to Egypt, Abraham encountered Pharaoh.” The B-ing is not what the A-ing leads to; it is what the A-ing comes to. Here are two instances from early in Genesis. One: The man and the woman, having disobeyed, are expelled from the garden. Are they shown the door because they transgressed? In reality, for them to disobey, to assert their autonomy is (=) for them to be no longer under God’s tutelage. God says it plainly: “Because *you* have *done* this” (3:14, my emphasis). Two: “[Y]ou will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth” (12) God says to Cain after he kills his brother Abel. Appreciate that the “killing” is the snuffing out of Abel’s tried and tested way of life, and we understand that Cain’s wandering is not geographical. To have killed Abel is (=) to be anthropologically and ethically in limbo.⁴³

Likewise, Abraham. He does not depart Haran because he accepts God’s offer. To have accepted the offer is (=) to have left Haran. To be a Mesopotamian is not (≠) to accept God, possibly because of never having heard about God.

In the subsequent chapters, Abraham is geographically very much beyond the borders of Haran. Scrutinizing his conduct, we see that he *is* holding up his part of the bargain. His actions are sensitive

43. The nomadic shepherd does not wander; the stationary farmer does!

to the particularity of men and women. Seeing that, we see that there is, on God's side, a deviation from the agenda of Godlikeness. *This deviation is the national element.* As a crude generalization, it would be accurate to say that Abraham, in resisting God, is acting in the name of the basic divine call; he is struggling to remain within the Goldilocks Zone. The particularistic basis of Genesis 2 might, he fears, get sunk back into the collectivistic one of Genesis 1.⁴⁴

Willing Covenanter, Reluctant Patriarch

Abraham is a willing party to the covenant. He is prepared to break with the culture in which he first saw the light of day. God says that in return for leaving his native land and father's house, Abraham will become "a great nation." At the point in time when God speaks these words, Abraham is on his own. The words must therefore mean that the way that he inaugurates will flourish. But is it not also a prophecy about Abraham's bloodline? Does national existence inhabit the Goldilocks Zone?

Abraham's career probes this issue. Usually, commentators and interpreters treat the various episodes as stages in a growing understanding on Abraham's part of what agreeing to the covenant with God entails. In fact, they explore a tension, even a clash, between Abraham's (as I see it *accurate*) understanding of what being God's man comes to, and the issue of chosenness.

In Genesis 11, Abraham's father, Terah, is said to have departed Ur of the Chaldeans and to have travelled as far as Haran. "Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot, son of [Terah's deceased son, Abram's brother] Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife" (31). In Genesis 12, God is said to have

44. "On what grounds," it will be asked, "is the fear attributed to Abraham?" The question is answered in footnote 42.

appeared to Abram, and to have made the crucial offer. Then (verse 5) “Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, [...] and they set forth [from Haran] to go to the land of Canaan.”

Lot, Abraham’s nephew, is from one perspective a competitor. The text telegraphs that Abraham will prevail. Nevertheless, Lot is represented as an entrant in the race. A salient difference between the two is that while Lot during the biblically most significant part of his career is an urbanite, Abraham throughout dwells in a tent. Lot, that is, has departed the less stationary ways. “Lot settled among the cities of the Plain and moved [...] as far as Sodom” (Gen. 13:12). Through Lot the Bible explores city life as a way of life. It does this as a sequel to the exploration, with Abel and Cain, of shepherding and farming as earlier post-gathering ways.

After their visit to Abraham in “his tent” (Gen. 18:1), the angels “went towards Sodom” (Gen. 18:22). There “in the [city’s] gateway” (Gen. 19:1), they encounter Lot. The purpose of both visits is to gather information about how things are with the ex-Haranites. What the visitors find in Sodom is the last straw, at least for this phase of the anthropological exploration.

Why was the potential of city life not resolved in a sequel to the life of Cain, i.e., as part of the straight(er) anthropological enquiry? Why is the issue addressed directly only *after* the issue of God’s new way is raised?

A pertinent difference between what the angels find is that *chez* Lot the family has been disrupted. Sarah plays an active role in hosting the visitors; Lot’s wife is nowhere to be seen. The point is proto-national: the family is a natural collection and the city is artificial.⁴⁵ And the Bible thinks of nationhood in the former way.

45. Having taken up residence in Sodom, Lot does not dwell among his own. Abraham interacts regularly with other peoples and tribes. But he lives apart from them.

The nation is an extension of the family. Sodom represents a certain kind of supra-family entity; one that the Bible disapproves of. Its idea of nationhood is different.

When Abraham departs Haran for Canaan, he is “seventy-five years old” (12:4). His wife is only a decade younger. Why doesn’t he leave Lot in the care of the other relatives? Having been told that God will make him a great nation, Abraham harbours a doubt as to whether he will father any children. Sixty-five is post-viability for a woman. What is God’s view of all this? God, we know, will arrange a “proper” son for Abraham. Consider now Abraham’s redemption of Lot (Gen. 14). Lot, although just a bystander, is taken captive in the war of “four kings against five” (Gen. 14:9) that rages in the Jordan River Valley. Hearing that his nephew has been imprisoned, Abraham rides forth with a tiny retinue – “three hundred and eighteen” (Gen. 14:14) – and redeems him. A number of points are enfolded here. Abraham displays a great deal of bravery. This, I think, is a secondary point, however. Primary is the point that he proceeds on his own initiative.⁴⁶ It could be, again, that Abraham, childless, still considers Lot the instrument of continuation. But, as in the preceding case, God again takes the idea of “mak[ing] you a great nation” more literally. From God’s viewpoint, Abraham is like a runner who stops to lend a hand when a competitor stumbles. Think how Nike might react. “Nice guys finish last. Let’s back someone less sentimental.”

Throughout his career, Abraham exhibits the best of traits: courage, derring-do, loyalty, steadfastness, perseverance, generosity. But on one occasion his behaviour seems shockingly out of character. The reference is to the misrepresentation of Sarah in Pharaoh’s court. How can he who sallied forth against the combined armies of several

46. The parallel between Abraham’s liberation of Lot from captivity and God’s/Moses’s liberation of the Israelites is impossible to miss.

kings to liberate a nephew be so spineless in a confrontation with one king in regard to a wife? The response that Abraham does not like his chances does not work. The odds in the Jordan Valley were long too. There, with tactical savvy, Abraham “divided his [outmatched] forces” (Gen. 14:15) and, in a lightning attack from two directions, prevailed. What he tries, in this case, is no brainwave to protect Sarah. “[T]hey will kill me” (Gen. 12:12) he says, taking cover behind her skirts.⁴⁷ “Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account” (Gen. 12:13). In the event, Pharaoh turns out not to be a Paris at all, which makes Abraham look even worse. This Helen the Egyptian king returns, complaining that Abraham was (again against the text’s grain) deceitful.

A literal reading is hard to accept. But, of course, the stories are not reportage. We are supposed to read them as moral tales. What could the moral here be?

Think back to the Lot case. Abraham was prepared to pass his nephew off as a son – as the next in line, the person to inherit the patriarchal mantle. Here he is prepared to misrepresent his wife as a sister. How, relevantly to the case, do a wife and a sister differ? A sister is available to another. A wife isn’t. The message is plain. Being God’s man does not require so rigid a defence of bloodlines.

The story of spousal misrepresentation is told twice more; once (Genesis 20) involving Abraham, once (Genesis 26), with Isaac in the lead role. In both cases, God steps in. The message seems clear. Should a patriarch show signs of deviating, God will see to it that the national agenda is adhered to. It is most revealing about the text that the examination of patriarchy and nationhood should be slanted

47. We would have expected something like this: “Let’s try to outfox Pharaoh. Say you are my sister, which, in a loose sense, is true. Then we’ll see what happens.” Compare Exodus 1:10.

heavily in the Bible by portraying the patriarchs as cowardly, not to say as pimps, when their resolve slackens.⁴⁸

The negative inflection in the stories dissipates when the issue is seen from the standpoint of Genesis 2, the Bible's core. The matter comes to concentrated expression in the episode called "the Akedah," the sacrifice of Isaac. It is productive to let this story interact with the story of the banishment of Ishmael.

In the case of Ishmael, we are dealing with a conflict between the national agenda and the more general issue of spreading God's word. Once again, Abraham is torn. Without offspring by Sarah, he pleads with God for Ishmael (Gen. 17:17): "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" He then goes on beseechingly (Gen. 17:18): "O that Ishmael might live in your sight!" God is unmoved: "No" (Gen. 17:19). It is not just that Abraham believes that he will have no more offspring. Rather, he has no objection to Ishmael. This comes out in the Akedah.

God appears to Abraham and, the text says, "tested him" (Gen. 22:1). "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will show you" (Gen. 22:2). But Isaac is *not* Abraham's only son; nor has Abraham exhibited towards Isaac the fatherly feeling that he displayed towards Ishmael. The fact is that Isaac is Abraham's only son from *God's* point of view; and he is the beloved son from, again, that Abraham-displaced position. No one

48. One might just see Lot, whose wife is not present when the angels come calling, as a pimp. The episodes are pre-plays of the descent of the children of Israel into Egypt. Jacob is also made to confront, and to fail, a similar challenge. The story of Shechem the Hivite confirms that the text wants us to think of Abraham as pandering. "Should our sister," Simeon and Levi ask rhetorically (Gen. 34:31), having murderously prevented Shechem from taking Dinah as a wife, "be treated like a whore?"

would suggest that because a parent is cool towards a child, the sacrifice of the child is made easier. But once we appreciate the distinction between the two viewpoints, God's and Abraham's, and add in the lessons of the other episodes, the story takes on a new look. Abraham was prepared to give up Sarah. Why not take one's cue from this for reading the sacrifice of Isaac? The question, if so, is whether Abraham is willing to give up God's designated Abrahamic offspring, the offspring of Abraham as a patriarch. Is he willing to abandon the national enterprise as God conceives it? The answer that the story delivers is clear. *God* steps in and saves the child. Abraham does not see the revolutionary change in human self-understanding that he is associated with as requiring a national agenda.

Someone behind the text is of a different opinion, and continues to express it. The episode of Shechem the Hivite brings it all to a head. Here we have a sister and a potential wife; a deception; a shocking betrayal; a patriarch represented as weak because he bends to outsiders. Jacob, apprised of what Simeon and Levi have done to the Hivites, says: "You have brought trouble on me by making me odious to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizites; my numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed. Both me and my household" (Gen. 34:30). This is an explicitly national version of Abraham's fear in the land of Pharaoh. "[T]hey will kill me" (Gen. 12:12). The dramatic change from one episode to the other leaves the message intact: the patriarch who does not defend the nation needs help. Also, the nation has here to be interpreted narrowly, as the extended family, the bloodline.

Somehow, the idea of Godlikeness has come to be associated with the nation. Abraham is craven in Pharaoh's court. God must step in. But Abraham does know what Godliness is. It, the idea advanced in the creation story of Genesis 2, is *his* idea.

Think of it from God's perspective. God (being one) is the principle of particularity. God imparts some of this mode of existence to the items in the human sector of the creation. For God to prefer one group of humans over another for more than local or temporary reasons violates that principle.

A turn of the screw is performed in Exodus. Here, God's word is again imparted. But the recipients in this case are the newly liberated Israelites. From a propagandistic viewpoint, this is an excellent way of soldering God's word to the Israelite collective.⁴⁹ Abraham was one man. Receiving the word, he left his native land. There is no sign that he was under pressure. The Israelites have just been through generations of enslavement. Their survival depends on internal solidarity and group resolve. Is the message of Genesis 2, Abraham's departure from the culture in which he grew up, biblically emblematic, or is it the Israelites' flight from a culture that enslaved them? The Commandments are given to the Israelites at Sinai. But the ordinances, stated in imperatives directed at (singular) "you," are obligatory on each and every man and woman, including, if there were any, the strangers in the midst of the throng assembled at the mountain. This is something that Rabbi Isaac appears to have overlooked.

In Genesis 2 God creates a man and a woman, and from the pair, all of us derive. Let us try to say about Genesis 2 what Rashi says about Genesis 1. "Because God created you and created me, he can [...]." What can he do? He can give all of us dominion over some or all of the (other) animals. How are distinctions *within* the set of particular men and women justified?⁵⁰ To be sure, as long as there

49. The story of the relations between the Israelites and the Moabites, told in Numbers 25, is a grisly replay of the story of the Hivites, with Aaron's grandson Phinehas playing the part of Jacob's sons Simeon and Levi.

50. After discovering the transgression in the garden, God states to the woman: "Because you have done this [...] your husband [...] shall rule over you" (3: 14,

are nations, an individual's flourishing might require their nation's forceful defence. But chosenness in the Bible goes beyond secular politics. In the absence of an ontological basis, the only other non-instrumental or non-prudential basis available is emotional, and the Bible well knows (as do we all) how unstable that is.⁵¹

Here, again, are God's words to the children of Israel (Deut. 7:7–8): "It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you [...]. It was because the Lord loved you." But God disapproved of Jacob's passion-based preference for Rachel over Leah.⁵²

The Bible's Disunity and a Perennial Question

"At the center of the Bible's center," I wrote earlier, "is a combination of Genesis 2, Genesis 12, and Exodus 20. Together, the three – the first ontologically, the second historically, the third practically – set out the unifying principle." The second creation story introduces the idea of particularity that the theologically

16). But the subordination is because of what she does, not because of what she is.

51. I said earlier that A's love for B and not C is not favouritism towards B or bias against C. The other side of the coin is that the brand of love of which God speaks is not based on reasons. (I would say that it's a-rational; not irrational. There's nothing irrational about one's tastes in food, although it may be irrational, given the health effects, to indulge them.) This is relevant to understanding "because the Lord loved you."

52. The story of David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel) displays God's attitude towards the forcible dispossession of an owner. We're presented in the episode with a multiple violation of the Commandments: theft, adultery, covetousness, murder. Might not the nations of the world grieve against God for taking Israel from among them? Does David not lose the child of the adulterous union because of what he did? God has come close to suffering the same loss on several occasions over time.

unprecedented idea of a deity as one reflects.⁵³ Abraham's story sets in motion the process of spreading the new understanding of human nature and of developing ways of living that accord with it. The Commandments blueprint the basic practical rules, the rules that govern the comportment, personal and interpersonal and social, of beings who understand themselves to be as Genesis 2 describes their originals.

Genesis 1, a de-mythologized version of the cosmogonic story told in the pagan cultures whose view of men and women the Bible is attempting to supersede, is also an indispensable entry in an encyclopedic account of things. So even after correcting for the problematic status of chosenness, erstwhile adherents of the Bible's teachings confront the question of how to reconcile what Genesis 1 says about all with what Genesis 2 says about each. They need not feel that this criticism leaves them exposed. For the question remains a live one for each and for all. "What is man?"⁵⁴

53. The effective contrast between a pagan pantheon and the Bible's pantheon is not that the former comprises several deities. In the former, rather, there are no true unities. A blob of mercury can bead into smaller blobs or merge to form larger ones. A pagan pantheon is like that. When a blob divides, are the smaller blobs "really" fragments of a monoblob? When a number of blobs merge, is the larger blob "really" a clumped polyblob? The implication is that pagan ways of rationalizing the world cannot make proper sense of the human sector qua comprised of particulars, true unities.

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