

Parashat Bereshit בראשית

Torah: Genesis 1:1–6:8

Haftarah: Isaiah 42:5–43:11

The Garden Above and The Garden Below

General Overview

The Hebrew title for this first book of the Bible is *Bereshit* (בראשית). It is also the first word in the Hebrew text, as well as the name for the first Torah portion. *Bereshit* is actually a compound word comprised of two Hebrew words: *bet* (ב) the preposition meaning “in” and *rosh* ראש(), which means “beginning.” Hence, the title for this first book of the Torah means “in the beginning” and therefore, indicates to us that the book describes the beginnings of things. Another ancient Hebrew name for the first book of the Torah is *Sefer Ma’aseh Bereshit*, “Book of Creation.”

The English name, “Genesis,” is derived from the Septuagint (hereafter referred to as simply: LXX). The LXX is the first known translation of the Hebrew Bible into another language. In this case, it is Greek. A committee of seventy rabbis in Alexandria, Egypt accomplished it sometime around 250 BCE. The LXX employs the Greek word “genesis,” which means “origins,” as the title for this book. Hence, the Greek/English title also speaks of creation or beginnings.

Judging, therefore, from both the title of the book, as well as from this first *parasha*, we can expect to learn much about the beginning of things, especially the creation accomplished by God. While this sounds exciting and fascinating to all of us, it poses an immense problem to any commentator. The problem is simply that there is such an abundance of material on which to comment! Where do we start? What are we to include? What can we leave out? This will also be a continual problem throughout this Torah commentary when we approach each Torah portion (*sidra*). Unfortunately, time and space do not permit an in-depth comment or study on every word, phrase, verse, or even paragraph. We must pick and choose.

To help us narrow down our material, we have decided to use the same approach to this *sidra* as the writer of *Bereshit* chose in 1:1. In this verse, the author, (whom we assume to be Moses), states without apology, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” This statement presupposes God’s existence and does not attempt to offer any proof of it. Accordingly, we will do the same with the entirety of chapter 1. We will assume that, as the text states, God created the heavens and the earth just as chapter 1 describes.

Instead of dwelling on the creation account, therefore, we will move on to the account of the first great tragedy, and conclude with the account of the first great promise of hope found in the Bible.

Exposition

There are a number of different methods whereby we can break down Bereshit. In this excerpt, we will look at Bereshit from a geographical standpoint. A geographical outline might look like this:

- I. Eden Chapters 1–3
- II. Mesopotamia Chapters 4–11
- III. Canaan Chapters 12–36
- IV. Egypt Chapters 37–50

In this excerpt from Parashat Bershit, we will focus on section I, Eden.

I. Eden

A. *The Garden Above?*

We are told in 2:8 that God created a garden in which to place man. There are a few thoughts that need unpacking from the Hebrew for this verse.

First, the word *eden* (עֵדֶן) in Hebrew means “delight.” The garden in which God placed Adam was a place of delight. Why was this garden such a delight for man? The text does not say specifically. However, it is reasonable to assume that man was in pure delight because he was in total harmony and unity with God; with Eve, his God-given partner and with himself! What else could cause such utter delight?

Secondly, we are informed where Eden, the place of delight, was located: “to the east.” The Hebrew here is very enlightening. It is the word *mikedem* (מִקְדָּם). Most bibles translate *mikedem* as “in the east.” “In the east” is certainly a legitimate translation of this word; however, *mikedem* can also have a *time* quality about it. As such, it would have the sense of “before” or “from ancient times.” To reinforce this understanding, we should note that the *Targum Onkelos*¹ translates it as “before time” and uses an Aramaic word equivalent to the Hebrew term *kedemin*, קִדְמִין.

This is especially clear when we understand that before the word *kedem*, is the Hebrew preposition, *min* (מִן). This means “from,” instead of “in.” Hence, a legitimate rendering of *mikedem*, therefore, would be “before the east,” or “from the very beginning.” This phrase has a definite time element to it. It speaks of sometime very long ago. Even before the creation of the world, God had His place of delight, which He reflected here on planet earth in a garden called Eden.

Question: What is it that existed before the creation of the world? The Rabbis have several ideas, as we see in the opening midrash. But let us suggest that at least part of the answer is God Himself and the delight of unity (*echad*, אֶחָד) that exists between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Moreover, we are told in the Scriptures that it is in the midst of this delight that we were placed before the

¹ A *targum* is a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Aramaic which began in the late Second Temple period in Israel. Onkelos was one who made such a translation and his has come to be regarded as having authoritative status in the traditional Jewish world

foundations of the earth. This is the thrust of Ephesians 1:4 when we are told that God chose us in Messiah before the creation of the world.

We were created to exist in the midst of the delight of unity and perfect harmony, resting in Him and experiencing no form of separation (from God, from self, or from each other). Therefore, it is possible to say that 2:8 represents a place, or garden of delight, in which God placed man before the actual physical Garden of Eden was created on earth. If this is true, and there is a good possibility that it is, then we see a huge principle unfolding here which will be repeated throughout the Bible: ***That which is above is to be reflected on Earth below.***

In 2:8 God informed us that there was a heavenly “Eden” that existed from the very beginning. God intended that this divine Eden be reflected on earth in actual creation, in order that life here might reflect realities in heaven. This leads us to 2:15.

B. The Garden Below

The text says that God took man and placed him in the garden. The Hebrew word usually translated “placed,” should better be rendered “caused him to rest.” It is a word from the root *n-ch* (נ-ח), which means, “rest.” It is in the *hiphil* stem, giving it a causative thrust. Thus, the translation should read, “God caused man to rest”

What was man to do in this rest? Was he completely inactive? No, not at all. 2:15 continues by saying that man was “to work it” and “to take care of it” or “guard it.” Although man was instructed to “work” in the Garden, it was a work that was effortless. Ironically, we can say that he worked in a rest. Or, should we say, his work was a rest, because it was a work for God.

There is one additional thought about the work. When the word usually rendered “work” (*ʾavdah*, לעבדה), from the root *ʾa-b-d* (ע-ב-ד) is used in connection with God, it can carry the idea of “to sacrifice,”² which was to worship the Lord. Moreover, the word translated “to till” means “to guard” or “to protect.” The work man did in the garden was, therefore, a form of worship of His Maker. All the time protecting or guarding the Garden from the imminent danger that lurked there: the snake.

Putting this all together, we can say that man was caused to rest by God in the literal garden called Eden in such total delight from before time. So much so that in later Jewish literature, the phrase “Garden of Eden” (*Gan Eden*, גן עדן) has become a phrase used for the blissful, eternal state.

There is an interesting parallel we can draw from the Scriptures at this point. In the fall of mankind, separation from God, self, and each other became the natural condition of man. In other words, a radical change took place in man’s environment, his intrinsic make-up (his spiritual “DNA”), and in his experience. We were created to exist in the total delight of union and unity. We were never intended to experience the trauma of separation.

² *The New Brown, Driver, Briggs, Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (“BDB”), 713.