



DENNIS
PRAGER

GENESIS
*God, Creation, and
Destruction*



THE RATIONAL
BIBLE



THE ALPERSON EDITION

THE RATIONAL BIBLE: GENESIS

THE RATIONAL
BIBLE

GENESIS

God, Creation, and Destruction

DENNIS PRAGER

EDITED BY JOSEPH TELUSHKIN

THE ALPERSON EDITION



Copyright © 2019 by Dennis Prager

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system now known or to be invented, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who wishes to quote brief passages in connection with a review written for inclusion in a magazine, newspaper, website, or broadcast.

Regnery Faith™ is a trademark of Salem Communications Holding Corporation

Regnery® is a registered trademark of Salem Communications Holding Corporation

All Scripture taken from New JPS Translation, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, PA 1985. Used by permission.

Cataloging-in-Publication data on file with the Library of Congress

ISBN 978-1-62157-898-7

ebook ISBN 978-1-62157-899-4

Published in the United States by

Regnery Faith

An imprint of Regnery Publishing

A Division of Salem Media Group

300 New Jersey Ave NW

Washington, DC 20001

www.Regnery.com

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Books are available in quantity for promotional or premium use. For information on discounts and terms, please visit our website: www.Regnery.com.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Why This Commentary?	xviii
Who Is This Torah Commentary For?	xix
The Torah Is Not Man-Made	xxii
Man-Made or God-Made: Why It Matters	xxiv
How Was the Torah Transmitted?	xxvi
Reason, Torah, and God	xxvi
Why Read This Commentary?	xxvii
A Few Details	xxviii
Acknowledgments	xxix

PREFACE

XXXV

CHAPTER I

I

Essay: The First Verse—a First in Human History	1
On the Question “Who Created God?”	3
Essay: God’s Existence	4
Essay: Do Science and Genesis Conflict?	6
Essay: Why God Is Depicted in Male Terms	9
Boys Take Rules From Men	10
Males Need <i>Male</i> Role Models	12
The Male Is More Rule-Oriented	12
God Is Not within Nature. God Created Nature.	13
God’s Name	13
The Bible Begins with the God of All the World, Not the Story of the Jews	14
Disorder—the Natural State of the World without God	14
God Speaks and His Will Is Done	16
Why Does God Declare His Creation “Good”?	17
Essay: What Does “Day” Mean in Genesis 1?	18
Plants before the Sun?	21
The Sun and the Moon Dethroned as Gods	22
Why “Sea Monsters” Are Mentioned	23
The Creation of “Man”	24
The Creation of “the Man”	25
The Male-Female Distinction Is Part of God’s Order	26
Either Man Will Rule over Nature, or Nature Will Rule over Man	27

CHAPTER 2	29
From Creating to Making	29
Holy Time—Unique to the Torah	30
Two Words for “Work”	30
A Second Description of Creation—Details about Man’s Creation	31
The Only Time (but One) the Torah Conjoins Both of God’s Names	32
The World Needs Both Mercy and Justice	32
Essay: Does the Torah Advocate Vegetarianism?	36
Essay: It Is Not Good for Man to Be Alone	39
Animals Cannot Replace Humans	42
Essay: Marry and Become a Man	44
CHAPTER 3	47
Is the Garden of Eden Literally True?	47
Misquoting God or Man Can Lead to Catastrophic Consequences	48
The Unique Power of the Eye	50
We Are All Adam and Eve	51
The Woman’s Desire for a Man	54
Essay: Woman’s Desire for a Dominant Man	55
What Does It Mean When Man Becomes like God?	59
Why Didn’t Adam and Eve Protest Their Expulsion from Eden?	60
CHAPTER 4	63
When Do Intentions Matter?	64
Do We Envy or Emulate Those Who Surpass Us?	65
Goodness and Happiness	66
Essay: The Most Empowering Idea in Life	67
CHAPTER 5	77
Male and Female Are Equal—and Constitute a Divine Distinction	77
Essay: The Problem of the Long Lives	81
CHAPTER 6	83
We Need Both the Good Urge and the Bad Urge	85
People Are Guilty for Their Bad Actions, Not Their Bad Thoughts	86
Does God Know the Future?	86
God: “The Most Tragic Figure in the Bible”	87
Essay: Why Would a Good God Destroy the World?	88
Essay: Why Were Animals Destroyed in the Flood?	89
Essay: People Are to Be Judged by the Standards of Their Time, Not of Ours	91
The Uniqueness of the Torah’s Flood Story	93

Noah Was Not a Jew	94
Is There a Relationship between How People Treat Animals and How They Treat People?	96
Why Didn't Noah Argue with God?	97
 CHAPTER 7	 99
 CHAPTER 8	 103
God Made Nature for Man	103
Unlike Pagan Gods, God Doesn't Need Food	107
God's Three Attempts to Have Man Do Good	108
Essay: The Belief People Are Basically Good Is Foolish and Dangerous	109
 CHAPTER 9	 117
Essay: On Having Many Children	117
Man May Eat Animals	119
Humane Treatment of Animals Is Universally Binding	119
The Ban on Consuming Blood	120
Essay: The Death Penalty for Murder Is a Moral Cornerstone of Society	121
Essay: When Good People Have Bad Children	129
 CHAPTER 10	 137
The God of the Torah Is the God of All Nations	137
Seven Sons of Japheth	138
Seven Grandsons of Japheth	139
Four Sons of Ham	139
Seven Grandsons of Ham	139
And the Mighty Nimrod	139
Seven Sons of Mizraim (Egypt)	140
Eleven Descendants of Canaan and Their Land	140
Descendants of Shem	140
 CHAPTER 11	 143
Essay: The Self-Destructive Pursuit of Fame	144
Essay: Is World Unity a Good Idea?	148
The Torah Mistrusts Cities	150
 CHAPTER 12	 155
Why Did God Choose Abram?	155
Abram's First Test	156
All Nations Will Be Blessed through One Nation	156
Those Who Bless and Those Who Curse the Jews . . .	157
The Torah's View of Wealth	158

It Is OK for Believers to Have Doubts—Even Abram Did Essay: Abram Tells Sarai to Lie: Was That Moral?	160 161
 CHAPTER 13	
Abram Was a Man of Peace, Not a Pacifist	166
God Gives the Land of Israel to the Jews Forever	168
The Torah Is Earth-Bound (as Well as Heaven-Bound)	169
 CHAPTER 14	
The Term “Hebrew”	172
A Man Who Loves Peace Goes to War	173
 CHAPTER 15	
The Only Antidote to Fear	177
Essay: The Importance of Both Faith and Works	179
A Torah Inconsistency?	182
The Torah Implies an Afterlife	183
Only Abraham Dies in Peace	183
The Moral Basis for the Expulsion of the Canaanites	184
 CHAPTER 16	
Sarai’s Well-Intentioned, but Bad, Idea	187
The Torah Does Not Hide the Flaws of Its Heroes	189
God Cares about Everyone—Non-Jew as Well as Jew	190
Hagar, an Egyptian, Receives a Unique Gift from God	190
 CHAPTER 17	
The Covenant: Jews Are to Keep God Alive in the World and God Is to Keep the Jews Alive	194
Essay: The Case for—and Meaning of—Jewish Circumcision	198
What Is a Miracle?	206
 CHAPTER 18	
Abraham’s Character	209
The Patriarchs and Later Jewish Law	210
The Divine Messengers Hint Who They Are	211
Why God Changes Sarah’s Words	213
The Purpose of Jewish Chosenness	214
The Great Torah Innovation: A Moral God	215
Why Didn’t God Call on the People of Sodom to Repent?	216
God Is Morally Challenged—a First in Human History	217
It Takes More Than One to Do Great Good; But a Single Person Can Do Immense Evil	219

CHAPTER 19	221
There Weren't Even Ten Righteous People in Sodom	222
The Men of Sodom Seek to Rape the Strangers	223
What Was the Great Sin of Sodom and Gomorrah?	224
It Is the Sin That Causes the Suffering—Not the Punishment	226
No Matter How Bad, Most People Don't Leave Their Homelands	227
Why Did God Save Lot?	228
Why Did Lot's Wife Stop Fleeing?	230
What Does God "Remembered" Mean?	231
Why Did Lot's Daughters Sleep with Him?	232
Once Again, the Perils of Alcohol	232
CHAPTER 20	235
God-Fearing Is a Moral Label and Can Apply to People outside of One's Own Faith	238
CHAPTER 21	241
We Choose When to Feel Hurt or Insulted	246
The Number Seven	247
CHAPTER 22	249
The Ultimate Test of Abraham	249
God Says "Please"	250
Why Didn't God Just Say, "Take Isaac"?	250
Why Did Abraham Awaken Early to Go and Sacrifice His Son?	250
Why Didn't Abraham Argue with God?	251
Why God Tested Abraham This Way: The Universality of Human Sacrifice	252
Good People Must Be as Willing to Sacrifice as Bad People Are	253
Essay: Faith Demands Sacrifice	258
CHAPTER 23	263
CHAPTER 24	269
The Longest Chapter in Genesis Is about...a Marriage	269
Essay: Goodness Is More Important Than Anything Else	274
Life's Three Mirrors	275
Observe How a Person Treats Strangers	276
Gratitude: The Root of Both Goodness and Happiness	280
The Bible's First Reference to Love	287

CHAPTER 25	289
Essay: The Afterlife	291
To Ishmael's Credit	296
Once More, to Ishmael's Credit	297
Isaac, the Unknown Patriarch	297
Once Again, the Younger Outshines the Older	299
Is Hunting a Moral Issue?	300
Was Jacob Morally Wrong in Getting Esau to Sell the Birthright?	301
CHAPTER 26	303
What Does Belief in God Mean?	303
Humanity Will Be Blessed through the Jews	304
On Trusting Strangers	306
To Envy or to Emulate the Successful? That Is the Question.	307
CHAPTER 27	313
Human Intervention May Be Warranted to Bring about God's Plans	315
The Woman in This Family Is the Strongest Person in It	316
A Plausible Defense of Jacob's Deceptive Behavior	319
Younger Brothers in the Torah	321
CHAPTER 28	329
On Favoring One Child over Another	330
Human-God Contact	331
God in Our Lives	331
Essay: Can We Expect God to Protect Us?	333
Essay: On Making Deals with God	335
CHAPTER 29	339
The Unfair (but Undeniable) Importance of Female Beauty	342
Working for—and Sleeping with—an Illusion	344
CHAPTER 30	351
Essay: Is Life Meaningful without Children?	351
What Is a Man to Do When His Wife Lashes out in Pain?	354
CHAPTER 31	365
Belief in Idols and Belief in God	369
Essay: On Lying	371

CHAPTER 32	381
Everyone Has Crises of Faith	383
Essay: The Meaning and Importance of the Name “Israel” (“Struggle with God”)	386
How to Preserve National Memory	391
CHAPTER 33	393
Why Did the Brothers Weep?	394
Jacob Owes Esau Amends	396
CHAPTER 34	399
Rape Followed by Loving Words	399
CHAPTER 35	409
Physical Reminders to Be Grateful	409
Monotheism Was Not Adopted Overnight	410
How Torah Monotheism Changed the World	410
On Regarding God as Provider	411
God Directly Affirms Jacob’s Name-Change to Israel	413
Why Does Reuben Sleep with His Father’s Concubine?	415
Esau Was Not a Bad Man	416
CHAPTER 36	417
God and the Torah Care about All Nations (and Individuals)	417
The Torah and Later Judaism’s Attitudes toward Conversion	419
CHAPTER 37	423
If People Learned from Others’ Mistakes...the World Would Be a Beautiful Place	424
When Family Communications Break Down	425
The Brothers’ Resentment of Joseph	426
Is Jacob’s Apparent Reference to Joseph’s Dead Mother a Torah Inconsistency?	427
Envy and Festering Anger Lead to Bad Outcomes	428
Jacob Tries to Have His Sons Get along	429
God or Coincidence: Faith Is a Choice	430
CHAPTER 38	439
“Brother-in-law” (Levirate) Marriage	440
What Was Onan’s Sin?	441
Deceptions in Genesis	442
Tamar’s Acting like a Prostitute	443

CHAPTER 39	449
Joseph as a Paradigm of the Jewish People	449
Essay: Why Was Joseph Considered Particularly Righteous?	451
Why Joseph Refused Mrs. Potiphar	453
Did Potiphar Believe His Wife?	455
CHAPTER 40	457
Seeing One's Talents as Gifts from God	458
We Cannot Rely on Miracles	460
Memory Must Be Deliberately Kept Alive	463
CHAPTER 41	465
Essay: In Our Personal Life It Is Good to Forget	471
CHAPTER 42	475
CHAPTER 43	485
Essay: Does "Chosen" Mean Superior?	491
CHAPTER 44	495
Another Pre-Torah Practice	495
"Love the Stranger" and "Love Your Neighbor"—Both Begin with Family	500
CHAPTER 45	503
Essay: God and Free Will	504
CHAPTER 46	511
Essay: How Not to Be Afraid	511
Why Few Women Are Listed	515
CHAPTER 47	521
The Moral Power of Empathy	521
Life Is a Journey—to Where?	523
Jacob Describes His Life as Brief and Hard. He Speaks for Most of Us.	524
Lifespans in Genesis Mean Much More Than the Number of Years Lived	527

CHAPTER 48	529
CHAPTER 49	535
The Importance of Jacob's Condemnation of Simeon and Levi	536
On Controlling Anger	536
CHAPTER 50	543
NOTES	549

To Sue

*“It is not good for a man to be alone.
I will make him a helper who is his equal.”
—Genesis 2:18 (literal translation)*

INTRODUCTION

To the reader: This introduction will greatly enhance your understanding and enjoyment of this commentary.

GENESIS IS THE FIRST BOOK OF THE BIBLE. THIS COMMENTARY ON GENESIS, however, is the second volume of my five-volume commentary on the first five books of the Bible (the Torah).

The beginning of Genesis is probably the best-known story in world history, containing, as it does, God's creation of the world, Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden, Cain and Abel, the Flood and Noah's ark. What is not well-known is how this story changed the world. The first verse, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the Earth," alone changed the world. As I explain, this verse asserted for the first time in history that that there is one God; that this God is universal (as opposed to tribal); and that God is not within nature but is its sole creator—unlike every other god in history.

Genesis also contains the story of the beginning of the Hebrews, the Israelites—the Jews, as they later became known—the people who, through the Hebrew Bible, most influenced the world. From the first Hebrew, Abraham, we are taught that arguing with God is not only acceptable, it is expected. The very name of this people, "Israel," means "struggle with God."

Genesis is filled with human drama that touches and helps every one of us on a personal level. For example, every family in Genesis is what we today would call dysfunctional. I regard this as a divine gift. If your family is dysfunctional,

the fact that all the families in Genesis are dysfunctional should provide you with some solace. I think the Bible is telling us that family dysfunction is a normal—though not necessarily inevitable—part of the human condition. Indeed, all of Genesis is a statement of how troubled the human condition is. The rest of the Bible, especially the next four books, provides solutions to the troubled human condition. To put it in medical terms, Genesis describes the patient’s (the human being’s) pathology, and the books that follow offer the wisdom and moral instruction necessary to cure the patient.

Some of the following appeared in the Introduction to Exodus:

WHY THIS COMMENTARY?

I have been teaching the Torah all of my adult life and have devoted decades to writing this explanation of, and commentary on, the Torah. I have done so because I believe if people properly understand the Torah and attempt to live by its values and precepts, the world will be an infinitely kinder and more just place.

Since childhood, I have been preoccupied—almost obsessed—with the problem of evil: people deliberately hurting other people. At the age of sixteen, I wrote in my diary that I wanted to devote my life “to influencing people to the good.” That mission has animated my life. In a nutshell, I love goodness and hate evil. My favorite verse in the Bible is “Those of you who love God—hate evil” (Psalms 97:10).

Because of my (and the Torah’s) preoccupation with evil, in this commentary I frequently cite the two most recent examples of mass evil—Nazism and Communism. I assume all readers of this commentary have some acquaintance with Nazi evil. Too few people have much knowledge of Communist evil. So I should note here that Communist regimes murdered about a hundred million people and enslaved and destroyed the lives of more than a billion. If you hate evil, you must confront what Nazis and Communists wrought in the twentieth century (and what others wrought before them and are doing at this time).

I have had one other mission in life: to understand human beings as best as possible. These two missions—promoting goodness and attaining wisdom—

are linked, because it is impossible to do good without wisdom. All the good intentions in the world are likely to be worthless without wisdom. Many of the horrors of the twentieth century were supported by people with good intentions who lacked wisdom.

Here, too, because it has so much wisdom, the Torah—and the rest of the Bible—is indispensable. However, we live in an age that not only has little wisdom, it doesn’t even have many people who value it. People greatly value knowledge and intelligence, but not wisdom. And the lack of wisdom—certainly in America and the rest of the West—is directly related to the decline in biblical literacy. In the American past, virtually every home, no matter how poor, owned a Bible. It was the primary vehicle by which parents passed wisdom on to their children.

In the modern period, however, people have increasingly replaced Bible-based homes and Bible-based schools with godless homes and with schools in which no reference to the Bible is ever made. As a result, we are less wise and more morally confused. As I showed in Exodus, in my discussion of secular education as a potential “false god,” the best educated people in the West have often both lacked wisdom and been among the greatest supporters of evil ideologies and regimes.

Given the supreme importance of goodness and the indispensability of wisdom to goodness, the Torah, the greatest repository of goodness and wisdom in human history, is the most important book ever written. It gave birth to the rest of the Bible, to Christianity, and to Western civilization. It gave us “Love your neighbor as yourself,” the Ten Commandments, a just and loving God, and other bedrocks of humane civilization.

WHO IS THIS TORAH COMMENTARY FOR?

I have written this book for people of every faith, and for people of no faith. Throughout my years teaching the Torah, I would tell my students, “The Torah either has something to say to everyone or it has nothing to say to Jews.” The idea that the Torah is only for Jews is as absurd as the idea that Shakespeare is only for the English or Beethoven is only for Germans.

That is why, over time, half the people taking my Torah classes—at a Jewish university, no less—were not Jews.

Nevertheless, I would like to address some groups specifically.

To Jewish Readers:

Because the Torah has formed the basis of Jewish life for three thousand years, there are very many Jewish commentaries, a good number of which have passed the hardest test: the test of time. However, the modern world poses intellectual and moral challenges that did not exist when the classic Jewish commentaries—most dating to the Middle Ages—were written. Therefore, most modern Jews read neither those commentaries nor the Torah. I hope this commentary will address nearly all the intellectual and moral objections of these Jews.

In general, it has not gone well for Jews (or for the world) when Jews ceased believing in the Torah. Belief in the Torah as a divine document has probably been the single most important reason Jews have stayed alive for three thousand years and it has formed the core of Jews' moral values. When Jews abandoned belief in the Torah, they or their offspring almost always ceased being Jews; and, too often, they created or joined social movements with non-Torah, or even anti-Torah, values.

To Jews who already believe in the Torah as a divine document: I hope this commentary gives you *chizuk* (strengthened faith). And I hope it encourages you to go into the world to teach Torah-based values. To all other Jews, I hope this commentary leads you to an intellectual appreciation of the Torah's unique greatness and consequently causes you to at least entertain the possibility that God is its ultimate author.

To Christian Readers:

One cannot be a serious Christian without being familiar with the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament, as the Christian world named it). Nor can one understand Jesus, a Jew who was not only observant of Torah law, but asserted he came to change not “one jot or one tittle” of it.

For the many Christians who already believe the Torah embodies the word of God, I hope this commentary strengthens your faith in the Torah. As Maimonides, widely considered the greatest Jewish philosopher, wrote nine hundred years ago, his differences with Christian theology notwithstanding, it is Christians who have been primarily responsible for disseminating knowledge of the Torah to so much of the world.

I should also add I have greatly benefitted from reading Christian Bible scholars. In this volume, I frequently cite Victor Hamilton (1941-), Professor of Old Testament and Theology at Asbury University from 1971 to 2007. Hamilton's masterful two-volume commentary on Genesis enormously contributed to my understanding of this great book of the Bible.

At the same time, the Bible scholar who most influenced my understanding of Genesis and Exodus was a Jew, the late Professor Nahum Sarna (1923-2005), Professor of Biblical Studies at Brandeis University from 1967 to 1985. His Jewish Publication Society commentaries on Genesis and Exodus are extraordinary.

To Non-Religious Readers:

I have had you most in mind when writing this commentary. With every passing generation in the West, fewer and fewer people believe in God, let alone in the Bible. This is a catastrophe for the West, and it is a tragedy for you. Having God, religion, a religious community, and a sacred text in one's life enables one to have a far deeper and happier—not to mention wiser—life. If you keep an open mind when reading this commentary, that life will, hopefully, become appealing to you.

To readers outside of the West, the Torah has as much to say to you as to anyone in the West. Just as Beethoven has as much to say to a Japanese as to a German, and Shakespeare has as much to say to an Argentinian as to an Englishman, the Torah as much to say a non-Jew and a non-Christian as to a Jew or a Christian.

I look forward to your reactions. They will surely influence my writing of subsequent volumes.

In writing this commentary, I have no hidden agenda. My agenda is completely open: I want as many people as possible to take the Torah seriously, to entertain the possibility it is God-given, or, at the very least, to understand why many rational people do.

Nor do I have a parochial agenda. I am a believing Jew, but neither God, nor the Torah, nor later Judaism ever obligated Jews to make non-Jews Jewish. Jews have always welcomed—and until prohibited (when the Roman Empire adopted Christianity) from doing so, even sought—converts; but what God and the Torah obligate Jews to do is to bring humanity to the God of the Torah, to His basic moral rules, and to the Torah’s values and insights. People can and have lived according to the Torah’s moral values as members of other faiths (most obviously Christians), or simply as non-denominational believers in God (“ethical monotheists”—such as the American Founding Father Benjamin Franklin).

THE TORAH IS NOT MAN-MADE

For reasons I develop throughout the commentary, I am convinced the Torah is divine, meaning God, not man, is its ultimate source. The Torah is so utterly different—morally, theologically, and in terms of wisdom—from anything else preceding it and, for that matter, from anything written since—that a reasonable person would have to conclude either moral supermen or God was responsible for it.

To cite just a few examples of what the Torah introduced to the world:

- A universal God (the God of all people): This began the long road to human beings believing that with one “Father in Heaven,” all human beings are brothers and sisters.
- An invisible, incorporeal God: Therefore, the physical is not the only reality. Life is infinitely more than the material world in which we live during our brief lifetime on earth.

- A moral God: All gods prior to Torah's God were capricious, not moral. A just and moral God meant, among other things, ultimately justice will prevail (if not in this life, in the next). It also meant human beings, imbued with a sense of justice, can argue with, and question, this just God (the name "Israel" means "wrestle—or struggle—with God.")
- A God beyond nature: God made nature, and is therefore not natural. This led to the end of the universal human belief in nature-gods (such as rain-gods). And sure enough, as belief in the Torah's God declines, nature-worship seems to be returning.
- A God who loves and who wants to be loved: This was another world-changing concept introduced by the Torah to the world.
- Universal human worth: Every human being is "created in God's image." Nothing like this had ever been posited prior to the Torah.
- Universal human rights: Another world-altering consequence of universal human worth.

I do not believe some people made all of that up. In the words of a contemporary Jewish thinker, Rabbi Saul Berman: "The more I study the Torah, the more I am convinced that it is the revealed word of God. The more I study ancient cultures, the more I see the absolutely radical disparity between the values of pagan civilizations and the values which Torah brought into the world. Torah was God's weapon in the war against idolatrous culture; and war it was."

I would only add that the Torah's battle, and sometimes war, with many of the dominant ideas of our time is as great as it was with the cultures of three millennia ago, when the Torah came into the world.

The other major reason I am convinced the Torah is not man-made is it so often depicts the people of the Book, the Jews ("Israelites," "Hebrews") in a

negative light. Had Jews made up what is, after all, their book and their story, they would never have portrayed themselves as critically and even negatively as the Torah (and the rest of the Hebrew Bible) often does. There is no parallel to this in any ancient national, or any religious, literature in the world.

MAN-MADE OR GOD-MADE: WHY IT MATTERS

What difference does it make if the Torah is man-made or God-made? I can best answer this question by recounting a personal experience.

Most people, especially in their younger years, pass through a difficult time with one or both of their parents. In my teen years and twenties, I was one of them. But no matter how I felt, there was never a time I did not honor my parents. For example, from the age of twenty-one, when I left my parents' home, I called my parents every week of their lives.

I treated my parents with such respect because I have always believed God commanded me to do so: "Honor your father and mother" (The Fifth of the Ten Commandments). The Torah—as the first five books of the Bible have always been known in Hebrew—commands us to love our neighbor, to love God, and to love the stranger; but we are never commanded to love our parents. We are commanded to honor them (and we are not commanded to honor anyone else).

There is no comparison between "God commanded" and "Moses (or anyone else) commanded." If I believed the Ten Commandments were written by men, I would not have honored my parents as much as I did during periods of emotional ambivalence. Those who believe God is the source of the Torah's commandments are far more likely to obey them than those who believe they are all man-made.

A second difference is that only because I believe the Torah is God-made have I worked to understand and explain difficult passages of the Torah. If you believe the Torah is man-made, when you encounter a morally or intellectually problematic verse or passage, you have an easy explanation: Men wrote it. (Ancient men, at that.) And you are then free to dismiss it. But those of us who

believe God is the source of the Torah don't have that option. We need to try to understand the verse or passage morally and intellectually.

Let me offer one of many examples. There is a Torah law that says if you have a particularly bad—a “wayward”—son, you may take him to the elders (the court) of your city; and if they find him guilty, they are to stone him to death. When modern men and women read that, they dismiss it as morally primitive: “What do you expect from something people wrote three thousand years ago?”

But since I don't believe it is “something people wrote,” I don't have that option. Consequently, I have had to look for rational explanations for seemingly irrational laws and passages and for moral explanations for seemingly immoral laws and passages.

And I have almost always found them. In this case, for example, I came to understand this law was one of the great moral leaps forward in the history of mankind. In this law, the Torah brilliantly preserved parental authority while permanently depriving parents of the right to kill their child, a commonplace occurrence in the ancient world and even today (such as “honor killings” in parts of the Muslim world). The law permits only a duly established court (“the elders”—not parents—to take the life of their child. And we have no record of a Jewish court executing a “wayward” son.

My belief in the divinity of the Torah led me to seek a moral explanation of what appears to us to be an immoral law and, solely because of that belief, I found one. This has happened repeatedly regarding seemingly immoral or irrational laws, verses, and passages.

A third difference is only those who believe in the text as God-given will continue to live by it, carefully study it, and try to impart its wisdom generation after generation. There will always be a few individuals who believe the Torah is man-made who will nevertheless diligently study it. But it is doubtful their grandchildren will. If Jews long ago believed the Torah was man-made, there would be no Jews today.

I would go further: If you believe in God, but you don't believe in any divinely revealed text, how do you know what your God wants of you? How do you know what God wants of humanity? Of course, you or your society can

make up laws and values, including some good ones the Torah would approve of. But if God told us nothing, we become our own gods when it comes to determining moral values.

HOW WAS THE TORAH TRANSMITTED?

I take no position on how God revealed the Torah. What concerns me most is *who* authored the Torah. That is infinitely more important than *how* it was written.

REASON, TORAH, AND GOD

The title of this commentary is “The Rational Bible.” There are two reasons for this.

First, my approach to understanding and explaining the Torah is reason-based. I never ask the reader to accept anything I write on faith alone. If something I write does not make rational sense, I have not done my job. On those few—thankfully, very few—occasions I do not have a rational explanation for a Torah verse, I say so.

Second, reason has always been my primary vehicle to God and to religion. My beliefs—in God, the revelation at Sinai, the Torah, etc.—are not rooted in faith alone. *We Have Reason to Believe*, the title of a book written in 1958 by the British Jewish theologian Louis Jacobs, had a deep impact on me.

The title has an important double meaning. The obvious one is there are reasons to have religious faith. The less obvious meaning of the title is the one I cherish: we human beings have the faculty of reason—and are to use it *in order* to believe.

Of course, there is a faith component to my religious life. The primary example is the foundation of this commentary—my belief in the Torah as a divine document. While reason has led me to this belief, I acknowledge there are a few verses or passages that challenge this belief. Whenever I encounter such passages, however, I am not prepared to say, “‘Love the stranger’ is divine, but this difficult part is man-made.” Once one says that, the Torah not only ceases to be divine, it

ceases to be authoritative. When you say, “this part is divine, but that one isn’t,” you become your own Torah. As I put it in a number of public dialogues with a secular Jewish scholar, Professor Alan Dershowitz of Harvard Law School:

“I think I can sum up our basic difference this way: When Professor Dershowitz differs with the Torah, he thinks the Torah is wrong and he is right. When I differ with the Torah, I think the Torah is right and I am wrong.” Professor Dershowitz agreed with that summation.

My approach is to abandon neither faith nor reason. I neither abandon the claim of reason because of the dictates of faith, nor abandon the faith claim because of reason. In the Torah, faith and reason nearly always live together in harmony, but when they do not, I do not deny either.

Moreover, there is a faith component to everyone’s, including the atheist’s, life. Any atheist who believes good and evil really exist, or that life has a purpose beyond one he or she has made up, or that free will exists, or, for that matter, that science alone will explain how the universe came about, or how life arose from non-life, or how intelligence arose from non-intelligence, has taken a leap of faith.

WHY READ THIS COMMENTARY?

Why should people devote time to reading my explanation of the Torah?

Here is my answer: I have devoted more than fifty years to studying and teaching the Torah. That includes a life-long immersion in Torah Hebrew—both its grammar and its vocabulary. I could not have written this commentary without this extensive knowledge of Hebrew. But most importantly, I have sought to make the Torah completely relevant to my life and to the lives of others.

In my case, “others” means millions of others. Every good teacher learns from his or her students, and I am no exception. But I have been blessed to have something very rare among teachers or scholars: millions of “students”—of almost every nationality, ethnicity, religion, and philosophy.

For over three decades, I have been a radio talk show host, broadcasting for more than half of that time on radio stations throughout America and on the internet internationally. This has enabled me to discuss virtually every

subject imaginable with a very large number of people—live on the radio and through tens of thousands of emails. It also has enabled me to dialogue about religious matters with many of the leading theologians and scholars—especially Jewish and Christian—of my time; and to debate many contemporary leading atheists. I have been able to bounce ideas off, and learn from, lay people and scholars of every background.

Given this uncommon, if not unique, background, I decided, after much soul-searching, to write this commentary from the first-person perspective where appropriate. I became convinced that showing how the Torah's ideas and values have played themselves out in one individual's life makes the commentary more interesting, more real, and more relevant.

Shortly before finishing the first volume (*Exodus*), I had the great honor of being invited to speak about my Torah commentary to the Bible faculty and students of Israel's religious university, Bar-Ilan University. They did not invite me because they thought I know more than, or even as much as, any one of them does about the Torah. They invited me because they believed I bring a fresh understanding of the Torah. That is why I wrote this commentary.

A FEW DETAILS

Why Exodus Was Volume 1

The primary reason I began my commentary with the second book of the Torah, Exodus, and not the first, Genesis, is Exodus contains the Ten Commandments, the most important moral code in world history, and the central moral code of the Torah. If people lived by those ten laws alone, the world would be almost devoid of man-made suffering.

In addition, Genesis is almost all narrative, while Exodus is, in equal parts, narrative, laws, and theology.

BC or BCE?

Some readers will wonder why I use the letters “BCE” rather than the more familiar “BC” in dates. I struggled with this issue because I have no problem

with “BC.” But virtually all academic works and many general works now use “BCE.” BCE stands for “Before the Common Era,” but any reader who prefers to read the letters as “Before the Christian Era,” is certainly welcome to—that is, after all, what “Common Era” denotes.

God as “He”

I refer to God as “He” because that is how the Torah refers to God. I explain why the Torah does so in an essay in chapter 1 of Genesis.

On How to Read This Commentary

The reader can benefit from reading this commentary in any way he or she desires. It can, of course, be read straight through, or be used as a reference work for one’s own Bible study. But those are not the only ways to read it. Readers can equally benefit from choosing to read any subject heading that strikes them as interesting. And that is made easier by simply perusing the table of contents to see the subjects covered.

The Use of Post-Biblical Jewish Sources

I often cite non-Jewish sources, but more frequently I cite Jewish sources such as the Talmud. The Jews, after all, had the Torah for more than a thousand years prior to the rise of Christianity. The Talmud is the encyclopedia-sized compendium of Jewish law and philosophy that reflects those thousand-plus years of Jews’ studying and living the Torah.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is the most difficult part of this introduction because so many people have influenced me with their insights into life and the Bible that I am certain to unwittingly omit names that should be included.

I attended yeshivas (all-day religious Jewish schools) from first grade until twelfth; and I continued formal study thereafter as well. That formal education made my Torah teaching possible. Two teachers at the Yeshiva of Flatbush

High School in Brooklyn, New York, who particularly influenced me were the principal, Rabbi David Eliach, and my Torah teacher, Rabbi Amnon Haramati. I also obtained a superb knowledge of Hebrew language and grammar there. All my religious studies teachers were from Israel, so we students spoke Hebrew half the day. Unlike most mortals, I loved studying grammar, and soaked in every grammatical rule these teachers imparted. My Hebrew was also greatly abetted by spending a half-dozen summers at a Hebrew-speaking camp, Camp Massad in Pennsylvania.

In my late twenties and early thirties (1976-83), as the director of the Brandeis-Bardin Institute, a Jewish educational center in California, I had the unique opportunity to meet and have extended dialogues with most of the influential Jewish thinkers of the time—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and secular, from North and South America, Europe, and Israel. They included (in alphabetical order) Yehuda Bauer, Eliezer Berkovits, Saul Berman, Eugene Borowitz, Emil Fackenheim, Norman Frimer, Martin Gilbert, Arthur Hertzberg, Louis Jacobs, Norman Lamm, Julius Lester, Hyam Maccoby, Jacob Milgrom, Pinchas Peli, Jakob Petuchowski, Gunther Plaut, Emanuel Rackman, Richard L. Rubenstein, Uriel Simon, David W. Weiss (the Israeli immunologist), and Elie Wiesel.

From 1982 until 1992, I was given another unique opportunity—a true gift—to discuss religion for two hours every Sunday night with clergy and spokesmen of virtually every religion in the world. I was the moderator of a radio show, “Religion on the Line,” broadcast on the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) radio station in Los Angeles. This constituted a decade-long immersion in religious conversation with people who devoted their lives to their respective religions—Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Reconstructionist rabbis; mainstream and evangelical Protestant ministers; Roman Catholic priests; Eastern Orthodox priests; Mormon bishops; Muslim imams; Seventh Day Adventist ministers, Buddhist priests, and others. It was a life-shaping and life-changing experience.

I not only learned from all these people; I was also able to test my religious beliefs with lucid minds of all faiths. And of no faith: I regularly invited atheist

and humanist spokesmen on the show as well. And I ended up speaking in at least a hundred synagogues, in scores of churches, and at the largest mosque in the Western United States.

After 1992, I continued to raise religious issues on my daily radio shows and to discuss religious matters with highly knowledgeable Jewish friends such as Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, Izzy and Rita Eichenstein, Allen and Susie Estrin, Rabbi Leonid Feldman, Rabbi Mordecai Finley, Rabbi Michael and Jill Gotlieb, Drs. Stephen and Ruth Marmer, Rabbi Eyal and Tzippy Ravnay, Rabbi David Wolpe, and Rabbi David and Beverly Wozniczka. I would be particularly remiss if I did not mention the role Chabad rabbis around the world have played in my religious life. I would like to mention all of them, but I must at least mention my family's three Chabad rabbis at whose homes I have spent Shabbat evenings talking about God, Torah and just about everything else—Rabbi Moshe Bryski of Agoura Hills, California, Rabbi Simcha Backman of Glendale, California, and Rabbi Yosef Lipsker of Reading, Pennsylvania.

Special mention must be made of a man who combines uncompromising intellectual honesty, Jewish religious faith and practice, and extraordinary biblical scholarship: Professor Leeor Gottlieb of the Department of Bible at Bar-Ilan University. He read every word of this commentary, and his contribution—including more than a few corrections—has been indispensable. We do not agree on everything, which makes his help all the more helpful and admirable.

I also wish to express my gratitude to the distinguished scientist and theologian Gerald Schroeder for his scientific explanations of the early chapters of Genesis.

Knowledgeable and wise Christian friends such as Father Gregory Coiro, Joshua Charles, Gregory Koukl, Dr. Wayne Grudem, Pastor John Hagee, Eric Metaxas, and Msgr. Jorge Mejia, Michael Nocita, and Dr. Hugh Ross (who has written extensively on Genesis and science, and generously given of his time to me), and Ravi Zacharias have helped me form my thoughts on the Bible and religion generally.

I wish to thank Benjamin and Tiferet Telushkin for all their help in preparing this manuscript. May your newborn child and children hopefully yet to come study the fruit of your labor.

Ilana Kurshan, a prominent writer and serious thinker, edited the hundreds of hours of tapes of my eighteen-year teaching of the Torah verse-by-verse. She was instrumental in making this commentary a reality. I cannot thank her enough. She was indeed an editor of this commentary.

I cannot thank Barney Brenner of Tucson, Arizona, enough. He caught so many typos, punctuation mistakes, and stylistic errors that no one else caught, I am embarrassed to think how this book would read were it not for him.

Then there is Joel Alperson. Aside from being a close friend since 1982, when we met at a speech I gave in Kansas City, Kansas, I want to first acknowledge that without Joel there would be no commentary. It was Joel who found a company to transcribe my Torah tapes, resulting in the creation of five thousand pages of text. Debbie Weinberger was one of the transcriptionists who did a magnificent job, and this work is written in her memory. Joel then searched for an editor and ultimately found Ilana Kurshan, whose work he carefully reviewed.

Joel was determined that my Torah commentary be put into print. But I knew, as it stood, even after Ilana's superb editing of my lectures, I had much more to say. So one day, Joel—not one to ever give up—put the question to me directly: “What would it take for you to complete and publish the commentary?”

I told him I would do so if Joseph Telushkin served as editor. He is a fount of biblical, rabbinic/Talmudic, and historical knowledge; no one knows my thinking on the Torah as well as Joseph; and we had already written two books together. If Joseph worked with me, I would put all other writing aside for years to write this commentary.

I did not think that would happen, but Joel makes things happen. He not only brought Joseph on board, he has overseen every detail of the highly complex process of putting this vast commentary together, and has played a critical role in the intellectual input. He has also relentlessly insisted that I always

live up to the name of the commentary—the name he came up with—*The Rational Bible*.

Joseph Telushkin and I met in our second year of high school at the Yeshiva of Flatbush. We met one day after school at a nearby bookstore. We both loved books because we loved ideas—we wanted to understand life. That was an immediate bond. And there was one other: Neither of us did almost any school-work. Instead, we read books and magazines (and, in my case, attended classical music concerts and studied orchestral scores).

At the age of twenty-six, we wrote and published our first book, *Eight Questions People Ask about Judaism*, which was soon thereafter expanded and published as *The Nine Questions People Ask about Judaism*. The book became one of the most widely read introductions to Judaism and remains in print forty-five years later. Working with him on this commentary was a reminder of the joy we experienced when we wrote our first two books together at the outset of our careers. Joseph constantly contributed information that influenced and deepened my arguments—even on those occasions when we disagreed.

From the earliest days of our friendship, people would often say about Joseph and me: “They’re as close as brothers.” And we have always responded: “Would that all brothers could be so close.”

Finally, a word about the person to whom I have dedicated this book—my wife, Sue. She was the final editor of every word of this book. Not just for grammar and syntax, but primarily for her specialty: logic. She is trained as a lawyer, but her ability to think rigorously is an innate gift—as rare a gift as perfect pitch is to the few musicians who have that innate ability. The number of less than clear assertions she uncovered is so great I am almost embarrassed to think this commentary might have been published without her input. And that is only one of the many reasons everyone who knows Sue knows how blessed I am to have her in my life.

And while on the subject of blessings, I must make mention of my two sons, David and Aaron. Not a day passes without my thinking how lucky I am to be their father. And, for that matter, to be the grandfather of Daniel and Jack

Prager, the father-in-law of Myriam Prager, and the stepfather of my two wonderful stepsons, Brandon and Reed. My cup truly runneth over.

I will end with a thank you to my late parents, Max and Hilda Prager, who raised my brother, Kenneth, and me to take the Torah and God seriously. My love of the Torah is in no small part due to them. And, the aforementioned difficulties notwithstanding, I loved them. I wish I could hand deliver *The Rational Bible* to them.

DENNIS PRAGER
FEBRUARY 2019

PREFACE

Joel Alperson

I'VE ALWAYS TRIED TO FIND THE ANSWERS TO THE BIG QUESTIONS OF LIFE.

When I was all of nine years old, after a close friend showed me some magic tricks, I found the magic book he had read so I could perform the same tricks.

Later, as a college freshman, I discovered Plato, who addressed many of the “big questions” I deeply cared about, with arguments that were linear and well thought through. Later, as a college senior, I studied one-on-one with a professor who told me of a legend which held Plato had written a book on “the good.” I was so excited. I thought if I could only read this book, I could learn “the secret” of leading a good life. Unfortunately, the legend also held that this volume had been lost in a great fire. So, my search for “the good” began and ended in the span of that one-hour study session.

Who would have guessed that decades later I would not only find myself reading a brilliant explanation of what I have come to regard as the greatest book ever written, but that I also would have helped to make this work possible? My Sunday school and Hebrew school teachers certainly would not have guessed. Given my awful grades and even worse behavior, they’d be shocked.

My grandfather, who was Orthodox, would also be shocked. He had given me a five-volume set of the Torah when I was a teen, but whenever he would open one of those volumes, he would hear the binding crack. He knew I hadn’t even touched the books.

My story is hardly unique. The majority of those living in the West have dismissed the Torah and the rest of the Bible as little more than ancient religious fairy tales. And why not? Ten plagues? The creation of the world by a

supernatural God? A giant flood wiping out virtually all of mankind? Ten Commandments from three thousand years ago? Why would people choose to study, let alone think their lives could be transformed by, such stories?

I certainly didn't.

Then, one weekend in 1982, I heard Dennis Prager speak at a retreat outside of Kansas City. I remember arguing with him all weekend. But he had answers. And they stayed with me. So began my long journey of realizing that the Torah had more meaning than I ever imagined.

Eventually, Dennis taught the Torah to a class in Los Angeles, line-by-line, over eighteen years, and I started listening to recordings of those classes in my car as I drove around my hometown of Omaha, Nebraska. Realizing that I couldn't focus on the material and my driving at the same time, I asked him if I could transcribe some of those recordings. That was in 2002. Little did I know at the time, his agreement would start the process of creating this remarkable work. I was able to enlist the help of Ilana Kurshan, a very talented student of the Torah. For one year she took approximately five thousand pages of Dennis's Torah class transcripts and converted them into a first draft of this commentary. Her work was excellent and enormously helpful.

It was also our very good fortune that Rabbi Joseph Telushkin was available to help with this project. For all the reasons Dennis listed in his introduction, no one else could have added to this great work as Rabbi Telushkin has. The finished product, as Dennis is the first to acknowledge, was made possible because of Rabbi Telushkin's passionate involvement.

Helping Dennis Prager author this work has been an honor for me. I helped the wisest man I know comment on the wisest book ever written. Having carefully and repeatedly listened to Dennis's Torah lectures, I expected this book to be an edited version of all the wonderful ideas he offered over the years. But I was surprised by the many new and important insights he added to this project. I think even he was surprised. This work captured him. It was obvious from his tremendous investment of time, thought, and research this was not another book. This is arguably his greatest work, and his legacy.

You have only to read a few essays or a single chapter to see the profundity of his writing.

Dennis has repeatedly said how grateful he is to me for helping to make his, as he likes to put it, “magnum opus” possible. He says it is one of the greatest gifts he’s ever received. Ironically, after working so closely with him over so many years, I believe the greatest gift I’ve given was to myself.

I’ve come to realize the book on “the good” was not lost in a fire.

It’s here for you to read.

Acknowledgments: This remarkable project could never have been completed without the help of so many wonderful and devoted individuals. In addition to Dennis’s acknowledgments, I would like to thank some of those individuals with whom I worked. I can’t possibly give them all the credit they’re due, but these individuals’ efforts were indispensable in creating this book:

Talia Gordis, Emily Sirotnik, Helen Lin, and Katrina Chen devoted many hours to reviewing lecture transcripts to identify and organize the essay topics which were used throughout this commentary.

Thanks to Scott Dugan for carefully and accurately accounting for the expenses related to this commentary.

Thanks to Pete Sirotnik, whose great work at our office in Omaha allowed me the freedom to work on this book. I would also like to thank him for his important insights on and intimate understanding of Genesis 38. He is an exemplary human being and exemplary Christian—and he believes this is the greatest Bible commentary he’s ever read.

While many people were involved in transcribing hundreds of Dennis’s Torah lecture recordings, one transcriptionist stands out. Debbie Weinberger lived in Israel and transcribed much of Dennis’s work. Very sadly, this remarkable young woman died of cancer in 2007. Her feelings about being remembered in this work were expressed in the following email:

“When he said it was Dennis Prager on the line, I think my heart stopped for a nanosecond! We had a lovely conversation and we agreed that our biggest

prayer is that I get to see or receive a copy of Leviticus personally—in other words, that I stick around...So very touched deep in my soul that Dennis wants to add a note about me and my working on the project/book."

When I was struggling to decide whether to devote the necessary time and expense to this commentary, my dear friend Ron Carson asked how I would feel on my deathbed if this book were never published. Thank you, Ron, for helping me to make the right decision.

To my dear friend Dr. Howard Gendelman (Howie), who constantly amazes me with his tremendous courage, passion, and persistence. His life has been a Kiddush Hashem (a sanctification of God's name).

To my dear friend Dennis Prager: There is no one else on the planet for whom I would have involved myself so deeply in such a project. It is your life-changing ideas and the promise they hold of making so many people better human beings that continue to inspire and excite me. What greater goal could one have and how many others could make such a goal attainable? Thank you for allowing me to share in your remarkable dream.

And finally to Conny—my beautiful wife and the mother of our children. Thank you so much for your encouragement, for listening to me endlessly discuss the details of this work, and for celebrating its many successes with me. As I've told you so often, no one's support and enthusiasm means as much to me. How can I possibly thank you for your endless love, kindness, and devotion? May we spend many happy hours teaching our children, Hannah, Rachel, Aaron, and David, the lessons contained within this great work. And may our children teach them to their children.

JOEL ALPERSON
JANUARY 2019

CHAPTER



I

ESSAY: THE FIRST VERSE—A FIRST IN HUMAN HISTORY

1.1 In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth.¹

The first verse of Genesis is, in some ways, the most important verse in the Bible. While many Torah verses influenced history, Genesis 1:1 changed history in monumental ways.

- First, the verse posits a Creator of the universe. That means, among many other things, there is meaning to existence. If there is no Creator, there is no ultimate purpose to existence, including, of course, human existence. We humans can make up a meaning because we are the one species that cannot live without meaning. But the fact remains that we made it up.

Of course, atheists argue that believers in God made up God; therefore, God does not really exist. But they don't always apply this rule to the existence of what they acknowledge they made up: meaning. If what we make up (God) doesn't exist, what atheists make up (meaning) doesn't exist.

If there is no God, we know there is no ultimate meaning or purpose to life: that all existence—including, of course, our own—is the result of random chance. But

we do not know there is no Creator. So, unlike those who know they make up meaning, neither we who believe in God nor atheists know we made up God. On the contrary, there are very strong arguments for a Designer of the world, but there are no arguments for an ultimate purpose to life if there is no God.

- Second, the word “created” (*bara*) implies nothing preexisted Genesis 1:1. When *bara* is used in the Torah, it is used only with reference to God—because only God can create from nothing. Human beings cannot create; they can only “make,” like making something from something, such as wood and paper from trees.
- Third, everything—with the exception of God—has a beginning. Prior to God’s creating, there was nothing. That includes time. Thanks to Einstein, we know that time, too, had a beginning. God, therefore, also created time, which means God exists not only outside of nature but outside of time. God precedes time and will outlive time.
- Fourth, for the first time, a creation story has but one Creator. The moral and intellectual consequences of the Torah’s monotheism have changed the world. They are listed in detail in the commentary to Exodus 8:6 (and summarized in the commentary to Genesis 35:2).
- Fifth, unlike pre-Bible creation stories, there is complete silence regarding a birth of the deity. The God of Genesis 1:1, the God of the Bible, is not born.
- Sixth, for the first time in history, we are presented with a god who is completely separate from nature—because God created nature. God, for the first time, is not part of nature.

- Seventh, for the first time in history, the Creator and the act of creation are completely desexualized.

All of that is contained in this opening verse of the Bible.

ON THE QUESTION “WHO CREATED GOD?”

As noted above, Genesis 1:1 is completely silent with regard to God’s origins. All prior creation stories contained descriptions of how the gods came into existence (these are called “theogonies”). Therefore, Genesis 1:1 begins not with God’s origins—because He has none—but with God acting (creating the world).

For this reason, the question “Who created God?” while meaningful regarding pagan religion, is meaningless with regard to the God of the Bible. If God were created, God wouldn’t be God. God’s creator—we’ll call him God’s Dad—would be God. But the same people who ask “Who created God?” would then ask “Who created God’s Dad?” And after that, they would ask “Who created God’s Dad’s dad?” *Ad infinitum*. People who ask this question would feel intellectually at home in the pagan world where this question was meaningful.

*If God were created,
God wouldn’t be God.
God’s creator would
be God. But the same
people who ask “Who
created God?” would
then ask “Who created
God’s Dad?”*

The question is akin to asking, “What is the highest number?” and after being told “googolplex,” asking, “What about googolplex plus one?” It is playing with words, not serious thought. The God of Genesis—the God the Western world came to affirm—is the First Cause, Who always was and always will be. That cannot be said about any other ancient god.

Skeptics will respond that just as the theist posits God always existed, the atheist posits the universe always existed. But this is untenable on both scientific and logical grounds.

Regarding science, the predominant view at this time is the universe did indeed have a beginning, what is popularly known as the Big Bang. This has disturbed scientists committed to atheism. Some have therefore posited an infinite number of Big Bangs and/or the existence of the “multiverse,” an infinite number of universes. But this is truly a statement of faith because there is no possible way of finding another universe. Nor is there evidence for an infinite number of Big Bangs.

The logical argument is this: How does the atheist explain existence? *Why is there anything?* To that, the atheist has no answer. The theist has a plausible—not provable, but easily the most logically compelling—answer: A Creator. God.

ESSAY: GOD'S EXISTENCE

Given the supreme importance of Genesis 1:1—that is, of God’s existence—to life, to meaning, and to morality; and given the Bible rests on this verse and its premise of God’s existence, a brief review of the rational arguments for God’s existence is necessary.

The most compelling rational argument is, as noted, the question “Why is there anything?” Science and atheism have no answer to this question. Nor will either ever have an answer. It is outside the purview of science. Science explains what is. But it cannot explain why what is came about—why

Science cannot explain why something, rather than nothing, exists.

something, rather than nothing, exists. Only a Creator of that something can explain why there is something

rather than nothing.

It is true that the existence of a Creator cannot be scientifically proved. Given that a Creator is outside of nature and that science can prove only that which is within nature, the fact that science cannot prove God’s existence is not meaningful.

Moreover, a Creator remains the only rational explanation for existence. And if only one thing can explain something, it is overwhelmingly likely that one thing is the explanation. The only alternatives are a)

creation created itself from nothing or b) creation always existed. But each of these propositions is considerably less rational than a Creator, and neither can ever be proved.

Nor can science explain the emergence of life on earth. It is as mystified by the emergence of life from non-life as it is by the emergence of non-life from nothing. Again, only a Creator can explain that.

And science cannot explain consciousness. Why are human beings (and perhaps, to a much lesser degree, some animals) self-aware? To the best of our knowledge, nothing else in all the universe is self-aware. How did self-aware creatures emerge in a universe of non-awareness?

To be an atheist is to believe the universe came about by itself, life came from non-life by itself, and consciousness came about by itself.

On purely rational grounds—the grounds on which I believe in God—the argument for a God who created the world is far more intellectually compelling than atheism.

It is not belief in the existence of a Creator God that most troubles intellectually honest people; it is the existence of unjust suffering—both natural (diseases, earthquakes) and man-made (murder, torture). In other words, the intellectually honest atheist should acknowledge that the existence of the universe, of life, and of consciousness argue for God; and the intellectually honest believer should acknowledge that the amount of unjust suffering challenges faith in a good God.

However, I have never met a believer in God who has not acknowledged this challenge, whereas atheists, by definition, do not acknowledge the overwhelming evidence for a Creator. If they did, they would no longer be atheists; they would be believers or agnostics. To paraphrase the American rabbi and theologian Milton Steinberg (1903-1950), the believer has to account for the existence of unjust suffering; the atheist has to account for the existence of everything else—for the world, life, consciousness, beauty, love, art, music. It would seem the believer has the upper hand.

So, then, how do believers in the good God of the Bible rationally affirm their faith?

The primary rational arguments are these:

It does not make rational sense that the Creator wouldn't care about His creations.

It does not seem likely that the Creator of beings who care about good and evil does not Himself care about good and evil.

It does not seem likely caring beings were created by an uncaring Creator.

I believe the most intellectually honest response to all the unjust suffering in the world is not to deny God exists, but to be occasionally angry with God.

If Genesis described exactly how the world was created, it would be unintelligible to us, let alone to all those who preceded us over the past three thousand years.

That is, in fact, one of the reasons I believe in the God of the Bible—because the name of God's People is “Israel,” which means “Struggle with God” (see the commentary to Genesis 32:29). The very Book that introduced God to humanity invites us to fight with and even get angry with that God.

Finally, I believe God is good because this Book—the Bible—makes such a compelling case for God’s goodness. If after reading this commentary, the reader is not persuaded the world is governed by a just and

good God, I will have failed my primary task in writing this commentary.

ESSAY: DO SCIENCE AND GENESIS CONFLICT?

A major barrier to many modern men and women taking the Bible seriously is the belief that science and Genesis conflict and, consequently, that religion and science conflict.

Therefore, this subject needs to be addressed.

First, the notion that the Genesis Creation story must agree with science is itself untenable. If Genesis described exactly how the world was created, it would be unintelligible to us, let alone to all those who preceded us over the past three thousand years. It might not even be in intelligible language but in yet-to-be-discovered mathematical or physics equations.

The Torah must speak in language that is intelligible to human beings—in every past generation as well as in every future generation. Clearly, then, it cannot speak in scientific terms. At the same time, it should not violate essential scientific truths (for example, it accurately depicts human beings as the last creation).

Moreover, we have no idea what science will say about cosmology (the beginning of the universe) in a hundred years. In my lifetime alone, science went from positing a universe that always existed to positing a universe that had a beginning (the Big Bang). So, in just one generation, the Torah, in describing a beginning to the universe, went from conflicting with science to agreeing with science. But this is not necessarily a comment on the Torah because science—to its credit, I might add—is always changing.

Second, while Genesis 1 must accord with what is true, the purpose of Genesis 1 is not to teach science. It is to teach about God, man, and nature. That is why the Torah is eternal—and why few scientific claims are.

Among other things, Genesis 1 teaches:

- God is beyond nature (all previous gods were gods of nature or part of nature).
- Therefore, there is a reality outside of nature. And that has incomparably important ramifications for us humans. It means this physical world is not all there is.
- God is not a sexual being (all previous gods engaged in sex—with other gods and/or mortals).
- There is only one God of humanity (all pre-existing gods were attached to one tribe, religion, or nation—there was no god of all humanity).

The believer has to account for the existence of unjust suffering; the atheist has to account for the existence of everything else.

- God represents order versus the forces of disorder and chaos, which are the norm—both in nature and in human society.
- God has a special role for the human being.
- God is moral and has a moral will.
- Because of all of this, there is a transcendent purpose to life.

Science, on the other hand, teaches none of that. Science teaches science, which is no small thing—a vast number of people, myself included, are alive thanks to science. But science doesn’t teach right from wrong—or even that there *is* a right and wrong. Nor does it provide ultimate purpose: Science is the study of the physical universe, which, without God and religion, is bereft of ultimate purpose. If there is no God, we humans spend an infinitesimally tiny period of time between oblivion (before we are born) and extinction (after we die).

Genesis 1 does not seek to teach science. It seeks to teach wisdom. While the present generation knows more science than any generation in history, I believe it possesses less wisdom than many preceding generations. And the biggest single reason is that it has decided God, the Bible, and religion are not necessary and that only science is.

Finally, it is worth noting many scientists believe in God and the Bible.² In 2010, Oxford University published a book titled *Science vs. Religion: What*

Science doesn't teach right from wrong—or even that there is a right and wrong.

Scientists Really Think by Elaine Howard Ecklund, a Rice University professor of sociology. This was her finding: “After four years of research, at least one thing became clear: Much of what we believe about the faith lives of elite scientists is wrong. The ‘insurmountable hostility’ between science and religion is a caricature,

a thought-cliché, perhaps useful as a satire on groupthink, but hardly representative of reality.”

ESSAY: WHY GOD IS DEPICTED IN MALE TERMS

The complete desexualization of God and of religion was a radical innovation of the Torah. In religions before the Torah and in its own time, gods were depicted as celestial men and women, and those gods engaged in sexual activity—with human beings and with other gods. In the Torah, God is never depicted either as a man or as a woman and is completely removed from any sexuality.

Before the Torah, religion had never before been wholly removed from the sexual realm.

However, the Torah does depict God in the masculine. Hebrew is one of the few languages in the world in which verbs are masculine and feminine. They must, therefore, agree with the noun to which they refer in gender and in number. For example, the verb “created” in the first verse of the Torah is in the masculine and in the singular. So, we immediately know there is not more than one God and there is no goddess.

Gender-wise, the Torah had three choices in depicting God:

- a) Masculine
- b) Feminine
- c) Neuter

We can readily rule out the third choice. First, a neutered depiction of God is simply impossible in Hebrew. Unlike English and most other languages, there are no neuter verbs or nouns in Hebrew.

Second, the biblical God is a personal God to whom we can and must relate. We cannot relate to, let alone obey or love, an “It.”

Moreover, if one wants to depict a genderless God, “he” is closer than “she.” When people hear the word “she,” they immediately imagine a female. But that is not always the case with “he,” which is often used to cover an entire population. For example, when people kill a fly, they say “I killed him,” because they have no idea—or interest in—whether the fly was male or female.

*The purpose of Genesis
1 is not to teach science.
It is to teach about God,
man, and nature.*

Any discomfort one feels with a masculine depiction of God is not comparable to the pain one will feel if boys are not civilized into good men.

And no one who heard “I killed him” would think about the fly’s gender. But if a person said, “I killed her,” everyone would immediately think of gender.

Nevertheless, it would be disingenuous to argue the Torah uses the masculine solely because using neuter was not possible. The depiction of God in masculine terms is deliberate because it is essential to the Torah’s fundamental moral purposes.

To understand why, we have to acknowledge three premises:

1. The Hebrew Bible’s primary concern is a good world.
2. A good world can be achieved only by making good people.
3. The primary perpetrators of evil (of a violent nature) are males.

Given these premises, it is in both men’s and women’s best interests to depict God in the masculine.

BOYS TAKE RULES FROM MEN

When males are young, they need to feel accountable to a male authority figure. Without a father or some other male rule-giver, young men are likely to do great harm. If there is no male authority figure to give a growing boy rules, it is very difficult to control his wilder impulses.

In 2008, then-U.S. Senator Barack Obama told an audience, “Children who grow up without a father are five times more likely to live in poverty and commit crime; nine times more likely to drop out of schools, and twenty times more likely to end up in prison.” Commenting on that speech, Dr. Alvin Poussaint, a psychiatrist with Harvard Medical School, confirmed Obama’s statistics: “The absence of fathers corresponds with a host of social ills, including dropping out of school and serving time in jail.”³

The data are overwhelming:⁴

A report released by the Minnesota Psychological Association, concluded:⁵

“The more opportunities a child has to interact with his or her biological [or adoptive] father, the less likely he or she is to commit a crime or have contact with the juvenile justice system.⁶

“In a study of female inmates, more than half came from a father-absent home.⁷

“Youths who never had a father living with them have the highest incarceration rates.⁸

“Youths in father-only households display no difference in the rate of incarceration from that of children coming from two-parent households.” (Italics added.)⁹

In other words, if one’s primary goal is a good world—specifically, a world with far less murder, child abuse, theft, rape, and torture—a God depicted in masculine terms (a Father in Heaven), not a goddess (a Mother in Heaven), must be the source of moral and ethical commandments such as “Do not murder” and “Do not steal.”

If the father figure/rule-giver that boys need is not on Earth, a morally authoritative Father in Heaven can often serve as an effective substitute.

Any discomfort one feels with a masculine depiction of God is not comparable to the pain one will feel if boys are not civilized into good men.

MALES NEED MALE ROLE MODELS

To transform a wild boy into a good man, a male role model is as necessary as a male rule-giver. When the Bible depicts God as merciful, compassionate, and caring for the poor and the widow, it is not so much interested in describing God as in providing a model for humans, especially males, to emulate. If God were

If one’s primary goal is a good world—specifically, a world with far less murder, child abuse, theft, rape, and torture—a God depicted in masculine terms, not a goddess, must be the source of moral commandments.

depicted as female, young men would deem traits such as compassion, mercy, and care for the downtrodden as feminine and would not identify with them. But if God, their Father in Heaven, who is strong—on occasion even a warrior—cares for the poor and loves justice, mercy, and kindness, these traits are also masculine and to be emulated. The argument that girls equally need female role models to avoid violence is not true—because the problem of mayhem and violence is overwhelmingly a male one. Of course, girls need female role models, but not to avoid violence. Like boys, girls are also more likely to obey a male authority figure.

It is ironic that any women are attempting to render the God of Western religious morality less masculine. If their goal is achieved, it is women who will suffer most from lawless males.

THE MALE IS MORE RULE-ORIENTED

A third reason for depicting God in masculine terms is the indispensability of law to a just and humane society. “Law and order” can be code words for repression, but they are in fact the building blocks of a decent society. That is why the Torah identifies God with the gender that is more naturally disposed to rules and order—the male. Females are more naturally inclined toward feelings and compassion, which are also essential qualities for a decent life. But a male depiction of God helps make a law-based society possible. And the Torah is nothing if not law-based. It is ironic that any women are attempting to render the God of Western religious morality less masculine. If their goal is achieved, it is women who will suffer most from lawless males.

We have too many absent fathers on Earth to begin to even entertain the thought of having no Father in Heaven.

GOD IS NOT WITHIN NATURE. GOD CREATED NATURE.

Another completely new innovation of Genesis 1:1 is that, because the world was created by God, God exists independently of the world. God is therefore

not part of nature. We do not worship trees—because trees are created, not creators. We worship the Creator of trees. Unlike the other religions of the ancient world, biblical religion never worshipped nature.

Another reason not to worship nature—if another is necessary—is that nature, unlike God and human beings, is amoral. That is why we think of a human being who commits murder as evil, but we don’t think of an earthquake or a hurricane, which may inflict far more suffering and destruction, as evil.

God is good. Man can be good and/or evil. Nature is neither good nor evil.

GOD'S NAME

The word used here for “God” is *Elohim*. It is a plural noun. But the word used for “created,” *bara*, is in the singular. The Torah says “Elohim created” using the singular of the Hebrew verb “create.” If Elohim were plural, it would utilize the plural of the verb. The verb therefore tells us God is a singular entity. English provides an example—the word “fish.” It can be used in both the singular and plural—and only the verb tells us whether “fish” is in the singular or plural: “The fish swim” means “fish” is plural; “the fish swims” means “fish” is in the singular.

Any number of theories have been offered to explain why God’s name is in the plural. The one that make the most sense to me is that “God” (Elohim) encompasses all gods.

THE BIBLE BEGINS WITH THE GOD OF ALL THE WORLD, NOT THE STORY OF THE JEWS

The Torah doesn’t begin with Jews, and God didn’t begin with Jews. Jews make no appearance in the Torah until Abraham, whose birth is related at the end of chapter 11 (verse 27). The Torah and God are preoccupied with all of humanity,

not just Jews. No other ancient national history began with the creation of the world (and I do not know of a modern national history that does so either).

DISORDER—THE NATURAL STATE OF THE WORLD WITHOUT GOD

1.2 The earth being unformed and void,

Genesis describes the original state of the earth as *tohu* and *vohu*, translated here as “unformed and void.” Robert Alter, professor of Hebrew and comparative literature at the University of California, Berkeley, writes in his commentary on Genesis, “*Tohu* by itself means emptiness or futility, and in some contexts is associated with the trackless vacancy of the desert.” The King James Version translates the terms as “without form and void.” University of Georgia Professor Richard Elliott Friedman, who has translated the Torah into English, uses “shapeless and formless.”

One may infer from this description that God’s work was not only creating and making, but composing order out of chaos. Genesis 1 is about Divine Order as much as it is about Creation. God is the Maker of Order and Distinctions. Order and distinctions are fundamental characteristics of the Torah’s worldview. As we shall see in Genesis 1, God distinguishes between light and dark, day and night, land and water, and humans and animals; and, as we will see else-

Genesis 1 is about Divine Order as much as it is about Creation. God is the Maker of Order and Distinctions.

where in the Torah, God distinguishes between man and God, good and evil, man and woman, the holy and the profane, parent and child, the beautiful and the ugly, and life and death.

Preserving God’s order and distinctions is one of man’s primary tasks. But, like the unformed chaos of this verse, undoing God’s order and distinctions is the natural state of man. The battle for higher civilization

may be characterized as the battle between biblical distinctions and the human desire to undo many of those distinctions. As Western society abandons the Bible and the God of the Bible, it is also abandoning these distinctions. I fear for its future because Western civilization rests on these distinctions.

1.2 (cont.) with darkness over the surface of the deep

Theories about the earth's earliest atmosphere are in flux. Some scientists conjecture that earth's early atmosphere was much thicker than our present-day atmosphere; other scientists have theorized it was much thinner than today's.¹⁰ But there is a consensus that the young earth was bombarded by collisions with other celestial bodies; a dense mixture of gases, dust, and debris enveloped the early earth; and the sun was a considerably dimmer star than it is today. All that rendered the earth's atmosphere essentially opaque—the “darkness” described in this verse. “You would not have been able to see much, just clouds covering everything,” is how the early earth was described by Dave Stevenson, a Caltech professor of planetary science.¹¹

It is also generally believed the earth was nearly or completely covered with water from a very early point. “Early earth was covered in a global ocean and had no mountains” reads a headline from the British science magazine *New Scientist*.¹² This is the “surface of the deep” described in this verse. And that raises an interesting question: how did Genesis know, more than three thousand years ago, that the nascent planet was submerged in darkness and water?

1.2 (cont.) and a wind from God sweeping over the water.

With these words, a subtle—so subtle almost all readers miss it (including me until writing this commentary)—but extremely significant transition occurs: The perspective has shifted from outside the world—the level of the cosmos or God’s perspective, as it were—to Earth’s surface. Why this is important will be made clear in the commentary on the next verse.

The Hebrew word translated here as “wind” (*ruach*) is the same word as “spirit,” which is the word most other translations use. The King James Version and, among modern translations, the previous JPS translation (1917) and Richard Elliott Friedman use “spirit.” The more common translation therefore reads, “and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters.”

Many scholars, including Leeor Gottlieb, professor of Bible at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, understand *elohim* here as meaning “powerful”

or “mighty.” This accords with the present translation—“a mighty wind.” In the Hebrew Bible, *Elohim* almost always refers to God. But on occasion, it means “mighty” or “great” (see, for example, Genesis 30:8 and Jonah 3:3).

GOD SPEAKS AND HIS WILL IS DONE

1.3 God said, “Let there be light” and there was light.

This verse is another radical innovation in history: God’s will alone is all that is needed for something to happen. There are no cosmic battles, no mating with humans, no consultation with other deities.

Throughout history, people have understood “Let there be light” to mean “God created light.” And that is an entirely legitimate translation—“Let there be” (*yihee*) can mean “Come into being.” But there is no verb here meaning “create,” “make,” or “form.” And that may strongly suggest another meaning. There are scientists who believe in the Bible who understand “Let there be light” to mean that God did not create or make light in this verse; *He made light appear*. These scientists focus on the shift in perspective from God’s view at the level of the cosmos in verse 1 to the *view from the surface of the earth* in verse 2 (as noted, many translations render the last part of verse 2: “and the Spirit of God hovered over the surface of the waters”).

No light had yet appeared on earth because in earth’s earliest period, the earth’s atmosphere was opaque, either from clouds or cosmological dust and debris, or both. In the words of former MIT physicist and member of the United States Atomic Energy Commission Gerald Schroeder: “There was light, but no sources of light were visible from the earth due to the cloud cover over the still-warm earth. Warm earth = high vapor pressure = clouds.”¹³ Now, as God hovered over the waters, with His words “let there be light,” the atmosphere began to clear, and the light of the sun (but not the sun itself) became visible from the surface of the earth—just as it is visible to us when the skies are overcast: we see the light, but not its source. Thus, in the opinion of Schroeder, Ross

and other scientists who reconcile science with Genesis, the sun already exists (but is not seen until Day Four).

WHY DOES GOD DECLARE HIS CREATION “GOOD”?

1.4 God saw it was good

This is the first of seven occasions in the opening chapter of Genesis that states God saw what He created was good (the others are verses 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, and 31). Such repetition of this phrase “God saw that it was good” can only mean the Torah considers it very important.

It means the world God created was good. In addition to meaning Creation and Order are good, it may be expressing an inherent optimism to life and existence. That the world God created is good gives all of us who believe in the Bible a reason for optimism, even when our life is troubled. Ultimately, this world is good, and good will eventually prevail (here or in an afterlife).

God took pleasure in seeing how well His work had turned out. This is also a human teaching moment. God’s expressing admiration for, and taking pleasure in, His work teaches the meaning of humility. If you do good work—meaning the work was good and it was done to achieve good—you are allowed to say you have done good. We are not to be falsely humble by minimizing, let alone denying, our good accomplishments. Humility means knowing your strengths but not allowing them to make you arrogant.¹⁴

1.4 (cont.) and God separated the light from the darkness.

As explained above, in verse 2, distinctions are central to the biblical worldview. Separating is the first thing God does after creating the world. God is now in the process of shaping *tohu* and *vohu*—chaos—into order.

1.5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, a first day.

Evening precedes morning for the simple and even obvious reason that darkness preceded light. Prior to the universe, all was dark. Light needed to be created, not darkness. Darkness is the absence of light. Light is not the absence of darkness. The description of each day—“there was evening and there was morning”—is why days in the Hebrew calendar begin at sunset (not midnight). The weekly Sabbath, for example, commences on Friday evening.

In Professor Gottlieb’s view, there is another important meaning to “darkness” and “light” and to “night” and “day.” God works during the day, not at night. This is so significant because there will be only one “day” when God does not work: the Sabbath. *The Sabbath is central to creation.* It is so important, it is the only ritual commandment in the Ten Commandments.

ESSAY: WHAT DOES “DAY” MEAN IN GENESIS 1?

Nothing in Genesis appears to present as irreconcilable a conflict between science and the Bible as the claim in Genesis that the world was created in six days and the scientific claim that the universe is 13.8 billion years old.

This seems to present those of us who believe in both the Bible and science with this dilemma: If “day” in Genesis 1 is a twenty-four-hour period, six days of creation cannot be reconciled with science.

Can one reconcile science, which dates the universe at about fourteen billion years, with six twenty-four-hour days? Dr. Gerald Schroeder, who taught physics at MIT and the Weizmann Institute in Israel, reconciles science and “day” in Genesis 1 in this way:

“We look back and measure fourteen billion years from today back to the creation. The Bible looks forward and sees six days from the beginning looking forward to Adam.... Two views of one reality and both are true: six days and fourteen billion years. In an expanding universe they both are mathematically true.”¹⁵

I respect the views of religious scientists such as Schroeder and Hugh Ross (Ph.D. in astrophysics and a postdoctoral research fellow at Caltech), and I also

recognize most readers throughout history understood these days as literal days and that a substantial number of believers today continue to do so. I will explain why “day” in the Hebrew Bible does not necessarily mean a twenty-four-hour period, but I do not disparage those who do believe it means a twenty-four-hour period. Despite their rejection of science regarding creation, these people should not be dismissed as “anti-science.” I know some of these people, and they are highly respectful of science; some of them study science (and all of them go to doctors). People who truly reject science would forego modern medicine. I know no one who does. They go to doctors when ill, they vaccinate themselves and their children, esteem physicians and other scientists, and build hospitals.

Nevertheless, “day” (*yom*) does not always mean “twenty-four hours.” In the very next chapter of Genesis, the Torah states: “These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, *on the day* God made the earth and the heavens” (Genesis 2:4—italics added). Clearly “day” in that verse alludes to the entirety of God’s creating the world, so in that verse *yom* cannot mean one twenty-four-hour period. “Day” in the Bible can mean an indefinite period of time just as it can when we use the word in English: “In that day and age....” “in our day....” etc. And the Bible itself later asserts, “A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night” (Psalm 90:4).

I find those examples persuasive. But I do not ascribe great importance to this particular debate for another reason: What matters is not *how long* it took God to create the world; what matters is *that* God created it. What matters is that, if there were no God, there would be no world. All existence, not to mention all life, and intelligent life in particular, is a miracle. When I look at the world and recite the words of Psalm 92:5—“How great are your works, Lord, how profound your thoughts”—it does not occur to me think how long it took God to make His great works. Genesis 1 teaches God created the world, not chance. That is what matters.

1.6 God said, “Let there be expanse in the midst of the water that it may separate water from water.”

The Hebrew word *rakiya*—translated here as “expanse”—is found only here in the Bible. Whatever *rakiya* literally means, it is the “expanse” between the waters on earth and the waters above—such as cloud cover. The waters below are *mayim* (the Hebrew word for “water”), and waters above are *sham-mayim*—which some, but by no means all, scholars believe means “water there” (*sham* is Hebrew for “there”). It is ultimately referred to—as verse 8 states—as the “sky.”

1.7 God made the expanse, and it separated the water which was below the expanse from the water which was above the expanse. And it was so.

Genesis 1 teaches God created the world, not chance. That is what matters.

1.8 God called the expanse Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day.

On the second day, God engaged in separating—the waters above from the waters below, making order—and life on earth possible. Separations and distinctions are essential elements in Genesis 1, the building blocks of the divine order.

1.9 God said, “Let the water below the sky be gathered into one area, that the dry land may appear.” And it was so.

According to Schroeder, this coincides with the scientific record: “When the molten earth formed, as it cooled from its initial molten state, it was relatively smooth, not like a billiard ball, but also without the deep ocean trenches of today. The water was distributed over the entire earth. The amount of water in the oceans today would cover such a ‘smooth’ earth by one and half miles. Only as the earth cooled and the continents formed did dry land appear.”

When the earth’s tectonic plates moved, the trenches of the ocean were formed, enabling the waters that had covered the earth to recede—thereby enabling land to appear.

1.10 God called the dry land Earth, and the gathering of waters He called Seas. And God saw that this was good.

1.11 God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation: seed-bearing plants, fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so.

PLANTS BEFORE THE SUN?

1.12 The earth brought forth vegetation: seed-bearing plants of every kind, and trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And God saw that it was good.

Schroeder says this: “People constantly ask me, ‘How can we have plants when the sun doesn’t appear until the next day?’ There were the sun, moon, and stars—but they were not visible from the earth’s surface. The earth was still hot at this time and therefore high vapor pressure enveloped it in thick clouds.

“I have personally measured photosynthesis, the growth of plants and the production of oxygen from that photosynthesis on days when the overcast was so heavy no sun or even hints of a sun could be seen through the clouds, but there was plenty of light and the plants were doing fine with their photosynthesis. By the time of Day Four, the earth had cooled; the clouds were opened and the sun, moon, and stars could be visible from the earth. Obviously there were no humans, but the Bible’s view is from the earth: We know this because the sun and moon are called ‘great bodies’ (verse 16), and the only location in the universe where the sun and moon seem the same size is earth. That is because the sun’s diameter is 400 times greater than the moon’s diameter but the moon is 400 times closer to the earth than the sun. Parallax gives the visual impression of equal sizes.”

To summarize Professor Schroeder’s response to the question “How can there be vegetation before there was a sun?”—there was a sun (plausibly the light referred to in verse 3), but it was not visible from Earth until Day Four. And vegetation can take place when the sun is covered (by clouds, for example). Again, the narrative’s perspective is from earth, not from above, as most people understandably assume. And verse 16 will make this earth-perspective clear: It calls both the sun and the moon “great bodies” even though the sun is four hundred times larger than the moon—because *from the earth* they appear of equal size.

1.13 And there was evening, and there was morning, a third day.

1.14 God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to divide the day from the night and to be signs for seasons, for days and years.

1.15 and they shall serve as lights in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth.” And it was so.

The Hebrew word for “lights” here is not the same as the word for *light* on Day One (verse 3). There, the word is *ohr*; here it is *mi-ohrot*, meaning illuminators, “bodies that give light.” According to scientists who believe in the biblical narrative, this does not mean new celestial bodies were made in this verse; what was new was the clearing of the earth’s formerly opaque atmosphere enabling the bodies giving light—the sun, moon, and stars, which had been previously created—to be visible from earth.

THE SUN AND THE MOON DETHRONED AS GODS

1.16 God made the two great lights, the greater light to dominate the day and the lesser light to dominate the night, and the stars.

This verse does not describe the making of something new; it offers further details regarding verse 14. More important, it provides a superb illustration of the primary purposes of Genesis 1—to teach humanity about God and man. Regarding God, the purpose of verse 16 is to *teach humanity that the sun and moon are not deities*. The sun and the moon, which were worshipped throughout the ancient world, are not even mentioned here by name. This served to dethrone these two gods while reemphasizing God is the only god. In fact, the sun is not even mentioned by name until Genesis 15:12; and Deuteronomy 4:19 explicitly forbids the Israelites from worshipping the sun, moon, and stars.

The other purpose of the verse is to explain *why* the two luminaries were made; not *that* they were made. They were made for man—“the greater light to dominate the day and the lesser light to dominate the night.” The world was made for the human being.

Changing the way humanity saw the universe is what Genesis 1 is about. It succeeded.

1.17 And God set them in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth,

1.18 to dominate the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that this was good.

This is another debunking of all beliefs contemporaneous with the Torah. The pagan worldview regarded the lights in the sky as astrological signs governing the fate of the world. In contrast, the Torah describes these lights as celestial bodies that separate night from day (and delineate time cycles—verse 14). In other words, *God made them*—to serve His (and man’s) purposes.

1.19 And there was evening and there was morning, a fourth day.

1.20 God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and birds that fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky.”

WHY “SEA MONSTERS” ARE MENTIONED

1.21 God created the great sea monsters and all the living creatures of every kind that creep, which the waters brought forth in swarms, and all the winged birds of every kind.

The Hebrew *taninim*, translated here as “great sea monsters,” refers to a sea creature worshipped by other nations in biblical times. The Torah singles out this creature to emphasize that these animals, which were worshipped as gods, are not gods but were created by the One True God. As biblical scholar Nahum Sarna puts it, “By emphasizing that ‘God created the great sea monsters’ ... the narrative at once strips them of divinity.”¹⁶

The purpose of verse 16 is to teach humanity that the sun and moon are not deities. The sun and the moon, which were worshipped throughout the ancient world, are not even mentioned here by name.

This verse contains the second use of the word “created” (*bara*). Something new was created—the animals, the “living *nephesh*” (“soul”) creatures. Again, there are three things created in this chapter: The world, the animals, the human being.

1.21 (cont.) And God saw that this was good.

1.22 God blessed them, saying, “Be fertile and increase, fill the waters in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.”

1.23 And there was evening, and there was morning, a fifth day.

1.24 God said, “Let the earth bring forth every kind of living creature: cattle, creeping things, and wild beasts of every kind.” And it was so.

1.25 God made wild beasts of every kind and cattle of every kind, and all kinds of creeping things of the earth. And God saw that this was good.

THE CREATION OF “MAN”

1.26 Then God said, “Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness.

Genesis 1 describes the human being—*Adam*—in two ways: *Adam* and *Ha-Adam*, “man” and “the man.”

In this verse, the word is *man* (*Adam*). In the next verse it is *the man* (*ha-Adam*). *Man* may be understood to denote man-like creatures that lacked a human soul. This *man* is physiologically both animal-like and man-like. But it is not necessarily *Ha-Adam*, *The Man*, the human being with a human soul, which is a different creation, as we shall see in the next verse.

Regarding the question “To whom is the verse referring when it says ‘Let us...in Our image?’” there are Jewish and Christian faith answers, but there is no definitive one. It may be the “royal we” that has been used historically by kings in referring to themselves (and by popes to this day). Indeed, one

doesn't have to be royalty; I have used this term for decades on my radio show: "We'll be back right after this break." It may connote celestial bodies such as angels. And it may refer to the animals—an explanation that comports with the creature "man" referred to here—as opposed to "the man" referred to in the next verse.

"For some medieval commentators," writes Orthodox Jewish writer Scott A. Shay, "[man] is both a creature descended from animals and different from them.... Rambam and Abarbanel explain that man originally resembled an animal and was created along with the rest of creation before the sixth day."¹⁷

Whether or not one accepts this last explanation—which I first heard from an Orthodox rabbi—the human being could indeed be regarded as part animal and part divine because human life is a constant battle between the animal and the divine.

1.26 (cont.) They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth."

THE CREATION OF "THE MAN"

1.27 And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him;

This verse seems to describe precisely what the previous verse described—the creation of man in God's image. But it does not.

There are four differences—each of which is highly significant:

1. In the previous verse, God "makes." In this verse, God "creates." "Makes" implies something preexisting; "creates" implies something new is made.
2. In the previous verse, God makes *man* (*Adam*). In this verse, God creates *the man* (*ha-Adam*). (This translation does not note this.)
3. In the previous verse, *man* is made in "Our image." In this verse, *the man* is created only in "God's image."

4. In the previous verse, no mention is made of the creation of male and female. This verse says, “male and female He created them.”

THE MALE-FEMALE DISTINCTION IS PART OF GOD’S ORDER

1.27 (cont.) male and female He created them.

“The man” is described as having been “created” as “male and female.” This is an example of the Divine Order in Creation. *The male-female distinction is part of God’s order.* It is that important. (This is discussed in detail in the commentary to Deuteronomy 22:5.)

There are ancient and modern readers who believe this statement suggests the human being (Adam) was created androgynous (both male and female). Such a reading cannot be reconciled with the plain text. If Adam were created as a male and female being, the last word of the verse would not be the plural “them”—“male and female He created *them*.” It would read “him” or “it.”

1.28 God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it,

To have children is the first commandment in the Torah. One obvious reason is the world’s continuity depends on people having children. Today, young people in many European countries and Japan are having so few children that the continued existence of some of those nations is at risk. This phenomenon is almost exclusive to highly secular societies. See the essay “On Having Many Children” at Genesis 9:1.

EITHER MAN WILL RULE OVER NATURE, OR NATURE WILL RULE OVER MAN

1.28 (cont.) and rule the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.”

God grants man dominion over the animals and all of nature (“the whole earth”) because man is a higher being. He alone is created in God’s image; and,

though obviously a physical being, he is, like God, outside of nature. Nature is not sacred; human life is.

God intended for man to dominate the natural world (“they shall rule”). This does not mean humans have the right to abuse nature—or to inflict unnecessary suffering on animals—but it does mean the world was created for human use.¹⁸

That man is depicted as ruler over the animal kingdom and the “whole earth” means he is to rule over nature, which is in stark contrast to the pagan worldview, according to which nature ruled over man and man worshipped nature. All the pagans could do in the face of nature’s great power was offer sacrifices and perform incantations.

This biblical instruction to rule over nature has profoundly influenced those societies touched by the Bible. Among other things, it opened the way to finding cures for diseases. It is no coincidence that the Western world essentially developed modern medicine. In order to develop medicine, the first requirement is to understand human beings must learn how to conquer nature—*conquer*, not pray to natural forces (like rain gods) or try to propitiate them.

That is one reason diseases like smallpox and polio were eliminated in those parts of the world influenced by the Bible.

Human progress is not possible unless humans rule over nature. Many secular people in our time romanticize nature, perhaps not realizing—or not wanting to realize—that either humans rule over nature or nature will destroy humans. Either we conquer natural diseases, or they conquer us. Either we rule over (not abuse) the animal kingdom, or it rules over us. Until the very modern age, people everywhere feared being eaten by animals. Most of us no longer give this a moment’s thought because most of the human race has come to successfully rule over the animal kingdom.

*Nature is not sacred;
human life is.*

1.29 God said, “See, I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food,

God's original intention was for both human beings and, as the next verse makes clear, animals, too, to be vegetarian. The theme of universal vegetarianism is returned to again by the prophet Isaiah: "The wolf and the lamb shall graze together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and the serpent's food shall be earth. In all My sacred mount nothing evil or vile shall be done, said the Lord" (Isaiah 65:25; see also Isaiah 11:6-9). For reasons explained in the commentary to Genesis 9:3, human beings were subsequently permitted to eat meat.

For a much fuller discussion of this subject, see the essay "Does the Torah Advocate Vegetarianism?" in Genesis 2:16.

1.30 And to all the animals on land, to all the birds of the sky, and to everything that creeps on earth, in which there is the breath of life, [I give] all the green plants for food." And it was so.

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