

CREATIONS

CHAPTER

Genesis 1–3

1

The Bible begins with the book of Genesis, which means “beginning,” and, more literally, “birth.” The book of Genesis is a narrative about beginnings: of the world as the ancients understood it, of the first humans, and especially of the ancestors of Israel. The entire narrative is tied together by a series of genealogies, or births, beginning with the “generations of the heavens and the earth” (Gen 2.4) and continuing through Abraham and Isaac to the descendants of Israel’s ancestor Jacob (37.2; see also 46.7–27). We will start where the Bible does, with the very beginnings of the cosmos, in Genesis 1–3. In our examination of these opening chapters, we will see how the biblical writers adopted, adapted, and sometimes rejected myths from the rest of the ancient Near East.

THE BOOK OF GENESIS

Genesis can be divided by its content into two major sections. Chapters 1–11 are a series of accounts of cosmic origins, including accounts of the creation of the world, the garden of Eden, and the first humans until after the Flood. Linked to these chapters by genealogies, chapters 12–50 are the beginnings of the story of the Bible’s princi-

pal focus, that of ancient Israel; in them we read of Israel’s ancestors Abraham and Sarah; Isaac and Rebekah; and Jacob and Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah and their children.

Like most of the books of the Bible, Genesis is a complex work. It was compiled over many centuries by ancient writers who made use of all sorts of historical and literary materials; it was given its final form during the second half of the first millennium BCE, long after the occurrence of the events it narrates. A major accomplishment of modern biblical scholarship has been the identification of many stages of this development. Because of its importance and its complexity, Genesis will be treated in the next several chapters.

In this chapter we will examine two narratives (chaps. 1–3) about how the world as the ancients perceived it came to be, two distinct creation myths (see Box 1.4). Careful examination of these myths will show both their differences from one another and their similarities to other ancient Near Eastern texts.

GENESIS 1 AND THE SABBATH

The first account of creation, with which the Bible opens, is in Genesis 1.1–2.4a, that is, the

first chapter and the first few verses of the second (see Box 1.1). It begins:

When God began to create the heavens and the earth—the earth was a formless void, and darkness was on the face of Deep and a wind from God was swooping over the face of the waters—then God said, “Let there be light!” and there was light.

The more familiar translation of the opening words—“In the beginning God created”—is influenced by the beginning of the Fourth Gospel (Jn 1.1: “In the beginning was the word”) but is incorrect according to a strict grammatical interpretation of the original Hebrew, which should be translated “When God began to create” or, more literally, “In the beginning of God’s creat-

ing.” The verse thus does not describe “creation out of nothing,” a later theological notion, nor does it address more modern questions such as the ultimate origins of matter; rather, it deals with the formation of a cosmos, an ordered universe, out of preexisting but chaotic matter—an unformed earth and an unruly sea over which a wind from God (see Gen 8.1) swoops like a large bird (see Deut 32.11).

The process of creation begins with the divine command “Let there be light!”, a command that is immediately fulfilled—“and there was light.” God separates the light from the darkness and names them “Day” and “Night.” Thus ends the first day. The process of creation continues, with a kind of liturgical rhythm, through six days in all.

Box 1.1 CHAPTER AND VERSE

Since ancient times the Bible has been separated into books. In the late Middle Ages each book was divided for easy reference into larger units, or chapters, and a few centuries later the chapters were further divided into smaller units, or verses. Modern printing convention usually puts a period or colon between the numbers designating the chapters and the verses, so that Genesis 1.2 (or 1:2) means the book of Genesis, the first chapter, the second verse. That is the system used in all Bibles, and the one we will use in this book.

The divisions do not always correspond either to the natural divisions of the text or to modern understandings of it. The opening chapters of Genesis actually consist of two separate accounts of creation. The first of these continues from the first chapter into the first few verses of the second, and the second begins in the middle of the fourth verse of the second chapter. Thus, in shorthand notation, the first account is found in Genesis 1.1–2.4a, and the second in Genesis 2.4b–3.24.

Different print editions also have some variation in numbering. The system used in this book is that of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), which follows the tradition of the ancient translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek. Hebrew manuscripts sometimes have a different numbering. For example, in Genesis Hebrew manuscripts start chapter 32 after 31.54, while in Greek manuscripts, followed by the NRSV, chapter 32 ends with verse 55; there is thus a one-verse discrepancy between the two systems, so that NRSV 32.1 = Hebrew 32.2. Similar discrepancies are found throughout the Bible and are noted in the textual notes to the NRSV.

The sequence of events can be outlined as follows:

Day 1	light	Day 4	heavenly bodies
Day 2	dome	Day 5	aquatic creatures and birds
Day 3	land plants	Day 6	land animals humans

This arrangement is a literary one, with creations on each of the first three days paralleled by successive creations on each of the next three. Thus, corresponding to the creation on the first day of undifferentiated light is the creation on the fourth day of the heavenly bodies that produce light; corresponding to the creation on the second day of the dome that keeps back the waters is the creation on the fifth day of those creatures that inhabit the regions nearest the dome, the birds and sea creatures; and corresponding to the double creation on the third day of land and plants is the creation on the sixth of animals and humans, who live on the land and eat the plants.

Each act of creation is described by a formula: “God said . . . it was so (or God created) . . . God saw that it was good.” As the repetition of the formula on the third and sixth days indicates, on each of them are two separate acts of creation. This may be a literary device, or it may indicate that an eight-act scheme has been fitted into a six-day chronology so that the seventh day may be highlighted (see Box 1.2).

The last act of creation is that of humans, made “in the image of God,” whose role in the universe is to be its rulers—to “fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over . . . every living thing” (1.27–28). But that is not the conclusion of the narrative. Rather, it ends with the divine rest on the seventh day, and thus one of its purposes is to highlight the sabbath, the day of rest (see Box 1.3).

Enuma elish

Although at first reading Genesis 1 is apparently monotheistic, with a sole creator responsible for everything that exists, a number of ancient polytheistic texts have similarities to the Genesis ac-

count. One of these is *Enuma elish*, a work in seven tablets that describes how the god **Marduk** became the king of the gods and the chief god of Babylon. Although often called “the Babylonian creation epic,” in fact *Enuma elish* is a kind of epic in praise of Marduk, reflecting the rise to power of Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar I in the late second millennium BCE.

The poem opens with a description of the world before creation:

When above the skies had not been named,
Nor earth below pronounced by name.

The opening words are also the conventional title of the poem, for *enuma elish* means “when above.” Then, we are told, two primeval realities, Apsu, the god of the fresh water, and Tiamat, the goddess of the salt waters, “mixed their waters together,” and from their union the first generation of gods was born; among these were earth and sky. The myth thus explains how, in southern Mesopotamia, the land and hence the horizon, the sky, came into being where the fresh waters of the Tigris and Euphrates issue into the salt water of the Persian Gulf, and a delta was formed.

Subsequent generations of gods were born, and their noisy gatherings disturbed Apsu, who, despite Tiamat’s objections, decided to kill the younger gods. They, however, learned of the plan and killed Apsu. Enraged, Tiamat then decided to kill the younger gods, and they were apparently powerless to stop her. Finally, one of the youngest of the gods, Marduk, the god of the storm, proposed that he would defeat Tiamat on condition that he be given supreme power among the gods. They agreed, and Marduk set out to battle Tiamat with his weapons—a bow, lightning bolts, a net, and various winds:

Face to face they came, Tiamat and Marduk, sage
of the gods,
They engaged in combat, they closed for battle.
The Lord spread his net and made it encircle her,
To her face he dispatched the evil wind, which
had been behind:
Tiamat opened her mouth to swallow it,
And he forced in the evil wind so that she could
not close her lips.

Box 1.2 GENESIS AND SCIENCE

Ever since the Bible came to be considered authoritative, the account in the opening chapter of Genesis of creation in six days has often been taken as a scientifically accurate account of the beginnings of our universe. Using biblical chronology literally, it was calculated by some that the world was created in six days, from October 18 to 23 in 4004 BCE. As scientific understanding advanced, astronomers, geologists, paleontologists, and other scientists were frequently denounced because their discoveries were inconsistent with the biblical account.

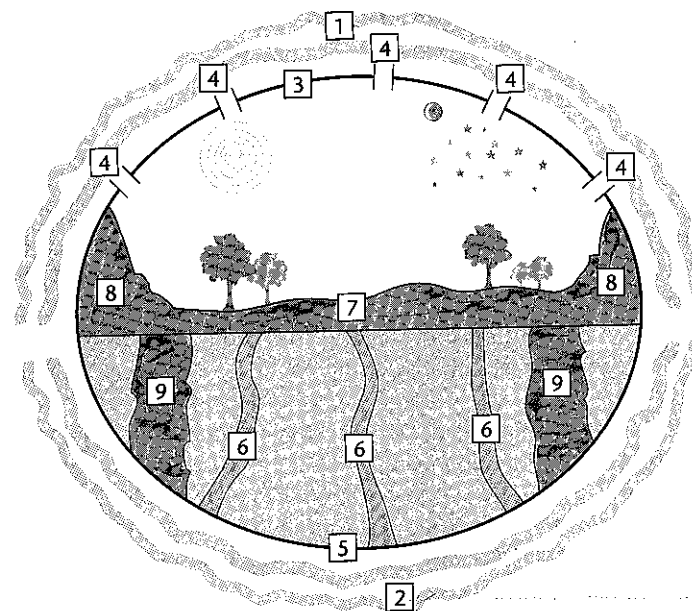


FIGURE 1.1. The ancient Israelite view of the world as described in Genesis 1. In this view, which was shared by many ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean peoples, surrounding the world is water, shown here as the waters above the earth (1) and the waters below the earth (2). The waters are kept in place by a double "dome" or "firmament." In the upper dome (3), the sky, are "windows" (4) through which rain is released, and from the lower dome (5) springs and rivers (6) flow upward to the earth (7). Into the upper dome are set the heavenly bodies, which rise in the east and set in the west. According to other biblical passages, "pillars" or mountains (8) support the upper dome, and other pillars (9) support the earth.

Whatever the character of the inspiration of the Bible, however, it was written by men (and, probably, women) whose knowledge was that of their times, not ours. In their understanding, like that of their contemporaries, the earth was the center of the universe, and the heavenly bodies revolved around the earth (see Figure 1.1). But they were writing a religious rather than a scientific text. One of the religious messages of the first account of creation is the importance of the *sabbath*, whose observance is part of the very fabric of the universe. Since the sabbath lasts for one day, and also since the word "day" elsewhere in the Bible means what we would call a twenty-four-hour period, it is misguided to attempt to identify the first six days of Genesis 1 with geological eras, so that modern science and the narrative of creation are in harmony. Moreover, it is impossible to reconcile the account given here with that which follows in Genesis 2–3, which suggests that even for ancient readers the two accounts of creation were not taken as literally true.

Fierce winds distended her belly;
Her insides were constipated and she stretched her
mouth wide,
He shot an arrow which pierced her belly,
Split her down the middle and extinguished her
life.

The mythic battle also has a correlation in nature, in a dark thundercloud over the sea, roiling it and exposing its depths. (See Figure 1.2.)

Marduk then proceeded to take Tiamat's body and to form the cosmos from it:

He divided the monstrous shape and created marvels from it.
He sliced her in half like a fish for drying:
Half of her he put up to roof the sky,
Drew a bolt across and made a guard hold it.
Her waters he arranged so that they could not escape.

In the sky he established the constellations as "stands for the great gods," which would determine the calendar—the twelve months of the year and the phases of the moon. Then, having established Babylon as his own home, he rewarded the gods for their support by creating humans. With the consent of the divine assembly, Tiamat's ally Qingu was killed, and from his blood humans were created:

He created mankind from his blood,
Imposed the toil of the gods (on man) and released
the gods from it.

The epic concludes with a divine banquet at which the gods celebrated Marduk's victory and acknowledged his supremacy by reciting a litany of his fifty epithets; this comprises about one-seventh of the epic, another indication of its character.

Enuma elish and Genesis

Like *Enuma elish* and other ancient Near Eastern texts that include accounts of creation, or *cosmologies*, Genesis begins with a temporal clause describing realities that existed before the process of creation began; the next account of creation in the Bible, which begins in Genesis 2.4b, also has the same syntax. Neither the biblical writers nor their counterparts elsewhere were interested in the abstract philosophical question of ultimate origins. Rather, both myths offer an explanation of the structure of the cosmos, an account of how the creator deity ordered already existing matter. "When God began to create," the earth was "a formless void," and there were also turbulent waters; creation was the process by which these already existing realities were transformed into an orderly cosmos.

The second verse of Genesis seems to allude to the battle between the storm-god and the primeval sea, found in *Enuma elish* and in other ancient Near Eastern sources: "[D]arkness was on the face of Deep and a wind from God was swoop-

Box 1.3 THE SABBATH IN JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN TRADITION

The word "sabbath" in Hebrew (*shabbat*) is related to the verb meaning "to rest," as in Genesis 2.2–3, which also makes it clear that it is to be the seventh day of the week. In the ancient system of reckoning, the seventh day of the week was Saturday (see, for example, Mt 28.1, where the first day of the week was the day after the sabbath). As in Genesis, the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments) in Exodus 20 connects the sabbath with creation:

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. (Ex 20.8–11)

Another version of the Decalogue, however, gives a different motivation:

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day. (Deut 5.12–15)

This humanitarian motivation is anticipated in one of the earliest biblical law codes: "Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed" (Ex 23.12). These variants, however, share the notion that the Israelites are to imitate God—by resting as he did or by treating their slaves as he had treated them in Egypt.

The origins of the sabbath are obscure, and no convincing parallels in other ancient Near Eastern cultures exist. It is mentioned only infrequently in biblical narratives concerning Israel's earlier history, and the earliest reference in the Bible to the sabbath apart from the Decalogue is Amos 8.5. By the time of the exile to Babylon in the sixth century BCE, however, sabbath observance had become a hallmark of Jewish observance, as it is today. In Jewish tradition, the sabbath, like all days, begins at sundown, as Genesis suggests in its phrasing "There was evening and there was morning," and thus runs from Friday at sunset to Saturday at sunset.

The earliest Christians continued to observe Saturday as the sabbath, but soon also observed Sunday, the first day of the week, as a day of religious assembly (Acts 20.7; this day is called "the Lord's day" in Rev 1.10), and by the second century CE they had abandoned the seventh-day observance in favor of the first day, in part to distinguish themselves from Jews. Some Christian groups, however, such as the Seventh Day Adventists, continue to observe the seventh day, Saturday, as the day of rest, since there is no biblical authorization to change it to Sunday.



FIGURE 1.2. Marduk standing victorious on Tiamat, who is depicted as a dragon whose home is in the waters. This drawing is based on a mid-second-millennium BCE relief.

ing over the face of the waters." Moreover, the Hebrew word for "deep," *tehom*, is linguistically related to the name of the goddess Tiamat, and in the Bible *tehom* never occurs with the definite article; thus it should probably be translated "Deep" rather than "the deep" wherever it occurs. Genesis 1.2 thus seems to be setting the stage for a retelling of the battle, but instead we are told simply that God spoke.

The notion that the word of a deity was creative and powerful is not confined to Genesis; it

is found elsewhere in the Bible (Ps 33.6; see also Isa 55.10–11); in an Egyptian creation myth in which the god Ptah created other gods "through what the heart thought and the tongue commanded"; in a hymn to the Mesopotamian moon-god Nanna, whose creative and fruitful word is praised; and in *Enuma elish* itself, in which Marduk's command can both create and destroy (4.25).

In the last act of creation, the second on the sixth day, the formula by which God creates human beings varies significantly from that used for earlier creations: "God said: 'Let us make humans, in our image, according to our likeness'" (Gen 1.26). The use of the plural here, as elsewhere in the primeval history (Gen 3.22; 11.7), probably refers to the divine council, the assembly of the gods, which is invoked here for the last, climactic, and most significant act of creation. In *Enuma elish* the assembly of the gods also ratifies Marduk's decision to execute Qingu and from his blood to make humans. The biblical writers shared the widespread concept of a supreme deity presiding over the other gods, and the Bible contains frequent references to the divine council (for example, Job 1.6; Ps 82.1; Jer 23.18).

Finally, like *Enuma elish*, the Bible begins with a series of births. This first account of creation ends with the summary phrase: "These are the generations of the heavens and the earth" (2.4). The word translated "generations" means something like "genealogy," but etymologically it has to do with giving birth or begetting. The same word is used throughout Genesis to introduce the lists of descendants of various individuals, beginning in 5.1: "These are the generations of Adam" (see also 6.9; 11.10, 27; 25.19; 37.2). The begetting of the elemental aspects of the cosmos—the heavens and the earth—by the creator deity is also found in Egyptian myth.

The first account of creation in Genesis both employs and alludes to mythical concepts and phrasing, but at the same time it also adapts, transforms, and rejects them. Thus, while in *Enuma elish* and other ancient Near Eastern creation myths such realities as the sun, moon, constellations, and even the primeval sea are deities,

in Genesis there is only one god, who creates what for other cultures are divine. To avoid even the hint that these other deities are present, the authors of Genesis 1 use circumlocution to designate the sun and moon—"the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night" (1.16), although "sun" and "moon" are common words elsewhere in the Bible; and among the creatures created on the fifth day are "the great sea monsters" (1.21), the singular form of which elsewhere even in the Bible is a mythological being (the "dragon" of Isa 27.1; 51.9; Ps 74.13; Job 7.12).

Moreover, in *Enuma elish* and other ancient Near Eastern cosmologies human beings were created to do the work that the gods had previously been doing for themselves—it was now humans who would build the gods' houses (their temples) and grow and prepare their food (sacrifices), so that the gods would have a life of ease. In this understanding humans were essentially the slaves of the powers that control the cosmos, but in Genesis 1 human beings are its rulers, given dominion over every living thing (1.28; see also Ps 8.5–8).

Thus, while alluding to older mythic traditions, the first account of creation in Genesis also partially demythologizes them. This account, as we will see, is probably to be dated to the time of the exile in Babylon in the sixth century BCE. Its authors are in effect giving an alternative to the account found in *Enuma elish*, which other Babylonian texts, also of the sixth century, inform us was recited annually during the spring new year festival in Babylon. At the same time they stress the importance of the sabbath, which the exiles could continue to observe even in Babylon.

The Battle before Creation Elsewhere in the Bible

Although the first account of creation in Genesis 1, while alluding to the battle between the storm-god and the sea that preceded creation, also partially rejects that mythic motif, other biblical passages from different periods retain the mythological language. Psalm 74 is typical:

God my King is from of old,
working salvation in the earth.
It was you who drove back Sea by your might;
who broke the heads of the dragons in the waters.
It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan;
who gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.
It was you who cut openings for springs and torrents;
it was you who dried up ever-flowing streams.
Yours is the day, yours also the night;
it was you who established the luminaries and the sun.
It was you who fixed all the bounds of the earth;
it was you who made summer and winter.
(vv. 12–17)

Here the primeval chaotic sea—also called a multi-headed dragon and Leviathan (see Box 28.3)—is defeated by the creator before he begins his work of creation. Similar language is used in Job 38.8–11; Psalm 104; and Psalm 89.5–12, in which the primeval watery adversary of the deity is also given the name Rahab, as in Isaiah 51.9–10. (See further page 103.)

Thus, in other parts of the Bible not only is there often no reference to the six days of creation, but there is also a much more explicit mythology that the biblical writers shared with their ancient Near Eastern contemporaries (see Box 1.4). For the biblical writers, of course, the deity who was victorious over the primeval chaotic waters was the god of Israel:

By his power he stilled Sea,
and by his skill he crushed Rahab,
by his wind the heavens were made clear,
his hand pierced the fleeing serpent.
Lo, these are but glimpses of his power;
what a faint whisper we hear of him:
who can comprehend the thunder of his might.
(Job 26.12–14)

THE SECOND ACCOUNT OF CREATION (GEN 2.4B–3.24)

Like Genesis 1, *Enuma elish*, and a number of other ancient Near Eastern accounts of creation,



Box 1.4 MYTH AND THE BIBLE

Ancient cultures were as intrigued as we are by beginnings, and they constructed elaborate myths—narratives in which the principal characters are gods—to explain their own prehistory. The establishment of the natural and social orders is typically presented in these myths as the work of a deity, usually the principal god or goddess of the city or region in which they were written. Like their ancient Near Eastern neighbors, biblical writers made use of myths to explain the origins of their world. For both groups, however, the narratives of origins were not just myth, but history too. The modern distinction between myth and history probably is drawn too sharply, since mythic conventions informed the interpretation of the past in ancient historical writing, and accounts of origins were the beginning of the record of a historical process that was guided divinely.

The early chapters of Genesis deal with prehistory and are largely mythical. In these Israelite expressions of the origins of the world, of society, and of civilization, the principal agent is the god of Israel. Although intended as a prologue to the larger historical narrative that follows in Genesis and beyond, these chapters are not historical in any modern sense: that is, they do not accurately represent what astrophysics, geology, paleontology, and other disciplines show took place, whether in terms of chronology or the origin of species. (See Box 1.3.)

the second account of creation begins with a temporal clause:

On the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens—no wild shrub was yet on the earth, and no wild plant had yet sprouted, for the LORD God had not yet made it rain on the earth, and there was no human to work the ground . . . —then the LORD God formed the human, from the soil of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. (Gen 2.4–7)

But while the grammatical structure of this introduction is roughly parallel to that of the preceding creation account in Genesis 1, it is also significantly different, and those differences are more apparent as this narrative of creation and the events in the garden of Eden unfold (see Box 1.5).

First, the style is different. Whereas the first account is formally structured and somewhat ab-

stract, the second is less repetitious, is more dramatic and spontaneous, and employs frequent plays on words. The vocabulary used is also different: Instead of "the heavens and the earth," we now have "the earth and the heavens"; instead of "male and female," we now have "the man and his wife"; instead of the verb "to create" we now have "to make" and "to form."

Most significantly, as we will see, the deity is called "the LORD God" instead of "God" (see Box 1.6), and the character of this deity and the ways he is described are also not the same in the two accounts. In the first, God is somewhat remote, even transcendent, and he creates effortlessly, by his word alone. In the second, by contrast, the LORD God is down to earth, immanent, and described in vividly anthropomorphic language, as if he were human. He is depicted as a potter who shapes the lifeless figure of the first human from

Box 1.5 THE GARDEN OF EDEN

The garden of Eden appears to be precisely located in the Bible: It is at the source of four great rivers (Gen 2.10–14). Two, the Tigris and Euphrates, are well known as the major watercourses of Mesopotamia. A third, the Pishon, cannot be identified (one ancient suggestion is that it is the Ganges, although that seems far removed from the biblical writers' frame of reference). The fourth, the Gihon, has a name that means "gusher," and it is used in the Bible only of the intermittent spring that was the main water supply of ancient Jerusalem (2 Chr 32.30), which still produces as much as 300,000 gallons (over 1,000,000 liters) of water per day. But the Gihon in Genesis is further described as flowing around the land of Cush, which is either Nubia or Ethiopia in east Africa (Gen 10.6; 2 Kings 19.9) or Midian in northern Saudi Arabia (Hab 3.7), both a considerable distance from Jerusalem.

It is more likely that the geography of Eden is an ideal geography. It is the divine home, "the garden of God" (see Ezek 31.8–9), from which, as in many ancient mythologies, all of the major rivers of the world flow. There are probably four rivers named in Genesis because for many ancient peoples, as for us, the world could be divided into four quarters, as in the four points of the compass.

the clayey soil and then breathes life into him (2.7). He plants a garden in Eden (2.8) in which the man works (2.15), just as in *Enuma elish* and other texts humans do the work that the gods had formerly done, and in this garden the LORD God habitually takes a walk in the late afternoon, like a country gentleman on his estate (3.8). Later, he makes clothes for the man and his wife (3.21).

There are also important differences in content. For example, the first account of creation opens with a watery chaos; in the second, the world is a rainless landscape. In the first, animals are created before humans, and humans are created "male and female," apparently at the same time; in the second, the first human is made, then the animals, and finally the woman is formed from the human.

Finally, in the second account no mention is made of seven days, heavenly bodies, or divine rest, just as in the first no mention is made of the garden of Eden, the tree of life, the tree of knowledge, disobedience, or divine punishment.

This second account of creation and its sequel in the garden thus seems to be from a different author. One of its purposes is to answer, in a somewhat folkloric way, some perennial human questions: Why are humans afraid of snakes? Why do they wear clothing? Why are the sexes attracted to each other? Why is life so difficult and childbirth so painful? Why do we have to die?

Thus, for example, the question of sexual attraction is explained by the story of the creation of the woman. In a remarkable clustering of anthropomorphisms, the LORD God, recognizing that the human is alone, by a kind of trial and error makes all the animals and birds as potential partners for him, but none is suitable. Finally, like an anesthesiologist, the LORD God casts the man into a deep sleep; like a surgeon, he removes one of his ribs and closes up the incision; and then, like a builder, he makes the rib into a woman. The man reacts jubilantly, yet with a touch of annoyance: "This one, this time, is bone of my bone

Box 1.6 "GOD" AND "THE LORD (GOD)"

Various titles are used for the god of Israel in the Bible. One of the most frequent is the Hebrew word *elohim*, which is used in Genesis 1. Although plural in form, when referring to the god of Israel it is treated as a singular, and correctly translated "God." In other contexts the word can be plural, as in the commandment "You shall have no other gods (*elohim*)" (Ex 20.3). Beginning in Genesis 2.4, the deity is called "the LORD God," and later simply "the LORD." The alternation between "God" and "the LORD" will continue throughout Genesis, and will be an important datum in analyzing different sources (see further pages 22–25).

The term "the LORD" is not really a translation. Rather, it is a pious substitution for the sacred and personal name of God, written *yhwh*. Although this name was used throughout much of ancient Israel's history and occurs thousands of times in the Bible, by late in the biblical period it came to be considered sacred, and eventually was not pronounced at all. Rather, for the sacred name various substitutions were made in reading, most commonly *adonay*, which means approximately "the Lord." The oldest translation of the Bible, that into Greek in the third century BCE (the Septuagint), followed this practice and used "the Lord" in place of the divine name, and most translations ever since have done the same. So far-reaching was this substitution that although the four consonants *yhwh*, also called the **Tetragrammaton** (see Figure 1.3), continued to be written in biblical manuscripts, their actual pronunciation was lost, and so the conventional vocalization of the divine name as "Yahweh" is likely but not absolutely certain.

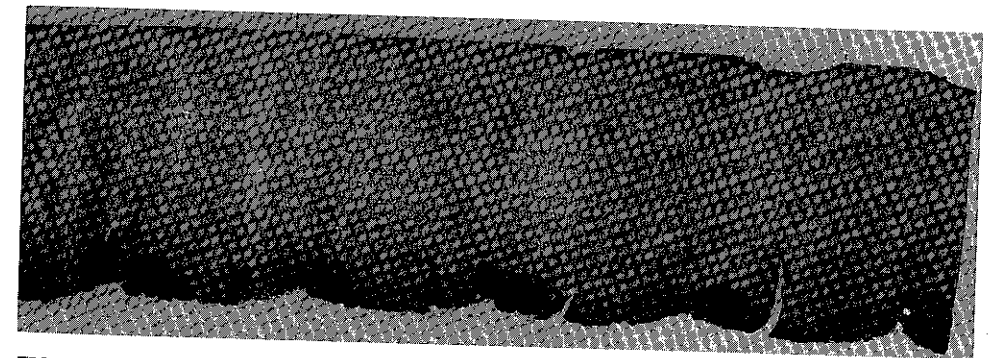


FIGURE 1.3. A section of a text of the book of Psalms among the Dead Sea Scrolls, dated to the mid-first century CE. The divine name *yhwh*, the Tetragrammaton, is written in an archaic script, indicating its sacred character.

and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2.23). In one of the several examples of wordplay that are used in this second account, she is called "woman" (*ishshah*) because she came from "man" (*ish*). That is why,

the narrator tells us, "a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife and they become one flesh." An apparent suggestion is made here that, as in Plato's *Symposium*, there was originally

an androgynous being who was split into two parts, man and woman, and ever since their separation they have been trying to get back together. That is the explanation of the power of sexual attraction.

The first human is called *adam* because he is formed, as by a potter, from *adamah*, the reddish soil that characterizes the Levant. Generally in the Hebrew Bible the term *adam* means humankind, the human species in general; an individual male is called *ish*. Beginning in Genesis 4.25, and in the genealogy that follows in 5.1–5, but only once or twice elsewhere, *adam* is the personal name of the first human, hence Adam.

The fashioning of humans from the soil is a well-attested motif in the ancient Near East. In one Egyptian myth the god Khnum formed animals and humans from clay on a potter's wheel, and in the Mesopotamian myth of *Atrahasis*, which includes a variant of the flood story found also in *Gilgamesh*

(see pages 40–41), humans are made by the birth-goddess from a mixture of clay and the blood of a slain god, so that, as in *Enuma elish*, the gods will no longer have to work. The biblical narrative shares this widespread notion of the divine origin of all things and the related idea that humans have a divine component: Thus, the LORD God breathes life into the clay figure that he had formed.

Two trees are singled out as of special importance in the garden, the *tree of life* and the *tree of the knowledge of good and evil*. The tree of life is an example of a theme found in many cultures, something that will give immortality and even eternal youth. It is frequently depicted in art (see Figure 1.4), and the seven-branched candlestick of Jewish tradition, the menorah, is probably a stylized representation of the tree of life. We will return to the other tree in a moment, but first we will consider an ancient Near Eastern text that sheds some light on the narrative as a whole.

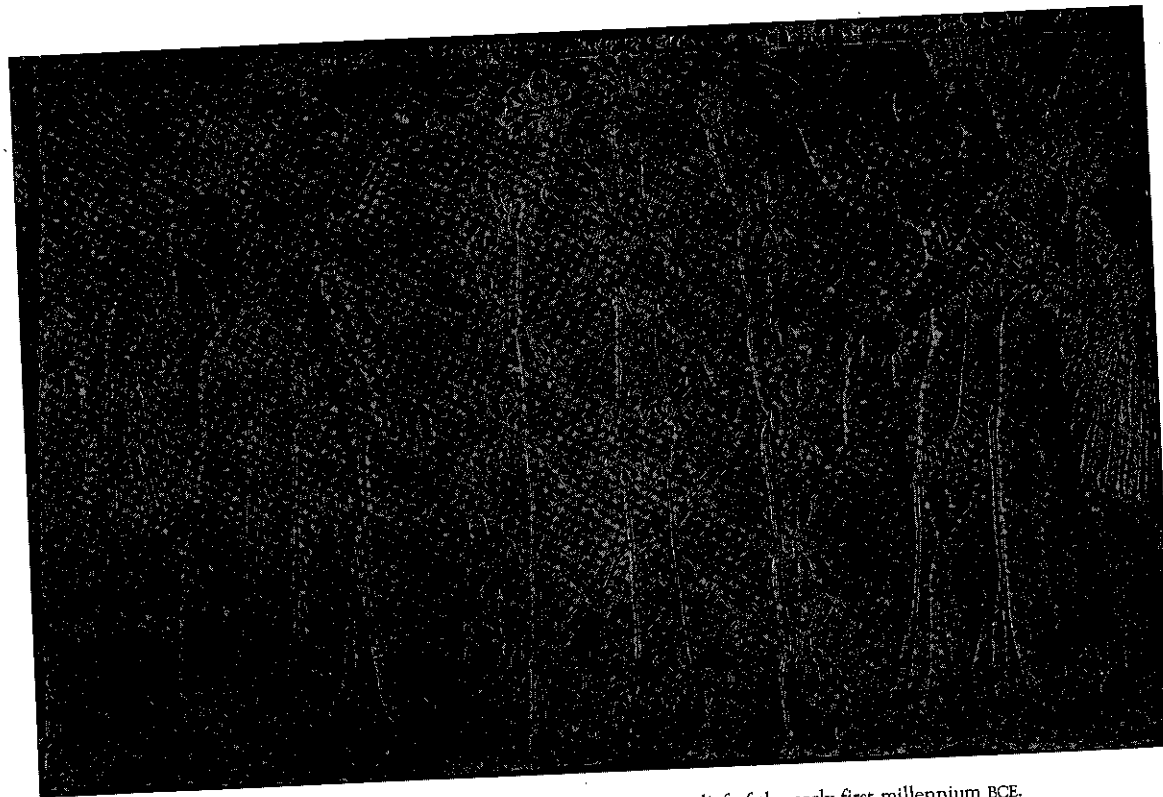


FIGURE 1.4. Divine guardians of a stylized tree of life on an Assyrian relief of the early first millennium BCE.

Gilgamesh

Neither the questions implicitly asked in the second account of creation nor the language used for the answers given to them is unique to the Bible. A clustering of similar motifs is found in the epic of *Gilgamesh*, one of the oldest and most popular tales in the ancient Near East. The earliest surviving versions of the epic date as far back as the third millennium BCE, and a very late version comes from the second century BCE. The epic is also widespread, with copies found at many sites in Mesopotamia proper and also in Turkey, Syria, and Israel, where a fragment of the epic was found at the site of Megiddo. Its hero, named *Gilgamesh*, is mentioned in many other sources, including in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, where he is included among the giants who existed before the Flood.

Gilgamesh was a legendary ruler of the central Mesopotamian city of Uruk. Whether or not he was a historical figure is debated, but if he was, his literary character has embellished the historical record greatly, much as in the case of King Arthur. As the epic opens, we are introduced to Gilgamesh as an unpopular king, one who forced his soldiers to participate in athletic contests and who also insisted that it was his right to sleep with brides on their wedding night. The citizens of Uruk complained to the gods, and their response was a complicated plan. The mother-goddess Aruru made a new creature out of clay, named *Enkidu*. Enkidu lived on the fringes of civilization, a kind of abominable snowman, a yeti or sasquatch, naked and with hair uncut:

His locks of hair grew luxuriant like grain.
He knew neither people nor country; he was
dressed as cattle are.
With gazelles he eats vegetation,
With cattle he quenches his thirst at the watering
place.
With the wild beasts his heart delights in water.

As time passed, a hunter glimpsed the creature and discovered that he had been freeing the animals that the hunter had trapped. He went to Uruk for Gilgamesh's help, and Gilgamesh sent

back with him a prostitute, Shamhat. Following instructions given, the prostitute seduced Enkidu:

Shamhat spread open her garments, and he lay
upon her.
She did for him, the primitive man, as women do.
His love-making he lavished upon her
For six days and seven nights. . . .
When he was sated with her charms,
He set his face toward the open country of his
beasts.
The gazelles saw Enkidu and scattered,
The beasts of the open country shied away from
him.

Enkidu returned to Shamhat, and she addressed him:

You have become wise Enkidu, you have become
like a god.
Why should you roam open country with wild
beasts?
Come, let me take you to Uruk.

She then clothed him with part of her clothing and led him back toward Uruk, where they met Gilgamesh at a house where a marriage was about to be consummated, and he was about to exercise his royal prerogative of sleeping with the bride. Shocked, Enkidu blocked the door of the house, and he and Gilgamesh fought. The fight, which Gilgamesh won, apparently distracted him from his purpose, and he and Enkidu embraced and became friends.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu then set out on a series of adventures together. This section of the epic has parallels with the *Odyssey*, and in fact there are many connections between *Gilgamesh* and the Homeric epics. At one point in their journeys the goddess Ishtar attempted to seduce Gilgamesh, but he rudely rejected her advances, and in punishment it was decreed that Enkidu must perish. Afflicted with a terrible disease, Enkidu finally died, and Gilgamesh was grief-stricken.

Enkidu's death made Gilgamesh realize that he too was mortal, and so he set out on a quest for immortality. His journey eventually led him across the ocean and beyond the waters of death to the only humans whom the gods had made immortal, the hero Utnapishtim and his wife. Gil-

gamesh inquired how they achieved such status, and Utnapishtim replied with the long story of the Flood, which takes up the entire eleventh tablet of the epic's twelve tablets in its best known ancient edition. We will return to the close relationship between this account of the Flood and that found in Genesis 6–9 on pages 40–41. Here we will note by way of summary that although the gods had decided to destroy all humans by a flood, Utnapishtim survived with his family in a boat that he built according to the instructions of one of the gods, and after the Flood immediately offered a sacrifice of thanksgiving. The smell of the roasting meat reminded the gods why humans had been created in the first place, so that the gods would not have to perform such labor themselves, and in gratitude they made Utnapishtim and his wife immortal. Thus, explained Utnapishtim, his attainment of immortality was an unrepeatable event.

As Gilgamesh was leaving, Utnapishtim, at the urging of his wife, gave him directions about how to get a plant from the bottom of the sea, which would restore youthful vigor. Gilgamesh retrieved the plant, but on his journey home, as he was taking a refreshing swim, a snake carried off the plant. Gilgamesh lost the plant, but the serpent shed its skin, having restored its youth. Gilgamesh finally returned home to Uruk, a sadder but wiser ruler.

Gilgamesh and the Garden of Eden Narrative

This summary of the epic of Gilgamesh has highlighted a number of plot elements that are also found in the garden of Eden narrative in Genesis 2–3. These include the presence of a snake, its association with a plant that gives a kind of immortality, and a preoccupation with the inevitable fact of death. Perhaps most significant are the parallels between the account of the seduction of Enkidu and the changes in the situation of the man and the woman in the garden. Like Enkidu, at first the man and the woman are in harmony with nature. Enkidu loses his own closeness to nature through intercourse with the prostitute, but in doing so he also becomes humanized—wise, like a god—and thereafter is no

longer naked but clothed. Similarly, after having eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the man and the woman realize that they are naked, cover themselves up with fig leaves, and are eventually clothed by the LORD God. At the same time, however, they have become like God (see Gen 3.22), and among their punishments is that the soil from which they were formed becomes resistant to their efforts.

But what of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? The phrase “knowledge of good and evil” has been interpreted in a number of ways. It is probably a mistake to look for only one meaning, for literature allows for multiple interpretations. On one level, “knowledge of good and evil” may be a figure of speech known as merism, in which a totality is expressed by mentioning the opposite extremes (for example, “young and old,” meaning everyone). Thus, in 2 Samuel 14, the king is described as “like a messenger of God, discerning good and evil” (v. 17), and this is paraphrased a few verses later as “wise like . . . a messenger of God knowing all things that are on the earth” (v. 20). In this sense, prohibiting the man and the woman from eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil would be equivalent to barring them from acquiring divine omniscience.

“Knowledge of good and evil” can also mean moral knowledge or intellectual maturity; thus, children are described as not knowing good and evil (Deut 1.39; Isa 7.15–16). While this meaning is possible, however, it is difficult to see why the humans should be prevented from acquiring such knowledge, except perhaps to say that they are still innocent, and that this innocence is somehow a better condition.

A third level of interpretation understands the phrase to have sexual connotations, as the parallels with Enkidu's seduction also suggest. In Hebrew, the verb “to know” can sometimes refer to that intimate knowledge that is a part of sexual intercourse (hence the phrase “‘to know’ in the biblical sense”). In Genesis 4.1 we are told that “the man knew his wife Eve, and she became pregnant.” And in at least one case, “to know good and evil” seems to have a sexual connota-

tion (2 Sam 19.36; perhaps also Isa 7.15). Moreover, eating is a metaphor for sex in many cultures, including ancient Israel; note, for example:

This is the way of an adulteress:
she eats, and wipes her mouth,
and says, “I have done no wrong.” (Prov 30.20;
see also 9.17)

Again, however, it is difficult to see how the narrator could have wanted to imply that the first couple was not sexually active; that is inconsistent with Genesis 2.24. Rather, taking into account other data, it is possible that the episode functions as a warning not to participate in forms of worship by which humans attempted to gain control of fertility, which was a divinely held prerogative. Among the common representations of goddesses in the Near East is that of a goddess who is nude, and thus presumably a fertility-goddess, and who is sometimes depicted holding one or more snakes. The snake has plausibly been interpreted as a phallic symbol. (See Figure 1.5.)

What then is the moral of the narrative? What precisely was the offense for which the man and the woman were punished? On one level, of course, it was simply disobedience to an explicit, if somewhat arbitrary, divine command. Yet on another level, the offense of the man and the woman had a sexual component. Eating the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil can be interpreted sexually, and by subtly associating serpents, divine knowledge, and nakedness, the authors of this episode may be giving a polemic against some types of ancient Near Eastern rituals by means of which humans attempted to participate in the divine prerogative of fertility, and also of eternal life. Thus, for their attempt to “become like God, knowing good and evil,” the man and the woman are expelled from the garden of Eden and are barred access to the tree of life, which would give them immortality and make them fully divine. (See Box 1.7.)

RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

The first three chapters of Genesis are a kind of prologue or overture, introducing themes that will



FIGURE 1.5. A gold pendant from Ras Shamra (ancient Ugarit), dating to the fourteenth or thirteenth century BCE. It depicts a nude fertility-goddess flanked by snakes, standing on a lion, and holding ibexes in her hands. The background probably represents a starry sky.

be developed as the narrative of Genesis and the rest of the Bible proceeds. Among these themes are the divinely established order of the cosmos, the observance of the sabbath, the importance of strict obedience to divine commands, and the experience of exile.

The interpretation of these chapters also provides a sample of some of the interpretive strategies or methodologies that will be used throughout this book. Two are especially im-

Box 1.7 ADAM AND EVE IN JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN TRADITION

The garden of Eden is occasionally referred to elsewhere in the Bible as a marvelously fertile kind of oasis (for example, Isa 51.3; Ezek 36.35). In very late biblical writings, once the concept of an afterlife has been developed (see page 495), Eden, also called "paradise" (originally a Persian word meaning "enclosed garden"), becomes a symbol of the eternal reward that awaits the elect in the world to come. Adam too is mentioned occasionally in the Bible as the first human (1 Chr 1.1). But despite its importance in later Jewish and Christian tradition, the narrative of human rebellion in the garden of Eden is alluded to rarely in the Hebrew Bible. We see a reference to a myth like that of Genesis 2–3 in Ezekiel 28, a prophetic attack on the king of Tyre, a city on the Mediterranean Sea just north of ancient Israel. Although he had once lived in Eden, the garden of God, this king's hubris led him to equate himself with God, and so he was expelled from the divine home. This parallel suggests that the story of rebellion in Eden was more widely known, but it is the only explicit reference to the story in the Hebrew Bible.

In subsequent tradition, however, the narrative becomes a kind of archetype to which later theological developments are attached. Thus, the serpent becomes identified with the devil or Satan, the "father of lies" (Jn 8.44), although in Genesis the serpent is not only clever (Gen 3.1) but also truthful: He tells the woman that eating from the forbidden fruit will make her and the man "like God," and that is precisely what happens (see Gen 3.22). Moreover, the disobedience of the man and the woman becomes the "original sin" responsible for the "fall" of the human species, whose punishment is a difficult life ending in death (see Rom 5.12).

The punishment includes subjection of the woman to the man because she was the first to eat of the forbidden fruit, and thus the episode is used in support of a patriarchal order in which women are inferior to men (see 1 Tim 2.11–14). In later references to the narrative, Eve is frequently singled out:

From a woman sin had its beginning,
and because of her we all die. (Sir 25.24)

This attribution of guilt to Eve is perhaps hinted at in the text. Adam names her (Gen 3.20); a sign of his rule over her (3.16), and the name he gives her, Eve, is related to the word for life. Yet while, as "the mother of all the living" (3.20) she is the mythical maternal ancestor of all humans, her name is also ironic, for she was the agent of death, much as in Greek myth, Pandora, whose name means "all gifts," was responsible for all human woes. This will become a frequent interpretation of early Christian writers, for whom "the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning" (2 Cor 11.3).

As familiar as many of these developments are, however, it is important to remember that none is explicitly stated in the text. The second creation story makes no mention of Satan, an afterlife, original sin, or even sin. All of these are later developments, as is the identification of the forbidden fruit as an apple, because in Latin the words for "evil" (*malus*) and "apple" (*malus*) are homonyms.

portant. First, to understand the meanings of a word or concept in a particular biblical passage, it is necessary to examine how it is used elsewhere in the Bible. Second, because the biblical authors did not live in a vacuum, it is essential to look at other writings from the ancient Near East, which will often provide par-

allels and sometimes contrasts with the biblical text.

The opening chapters of Genesis have also introduced us to the issues of repetition, inconsistency, and contradiction within the Bible, and in the next chapter we will begin to examine how modern scholars have explained these phenomena.

IMPORTANT TERMS

anthropomorphic	Gilgamesh	tree of life
cosmology	Marduk	tree of the knowledge of good and evil
divine council	myth	Yahweh
elohim	sabbath	
Enkidu	Tetragrammaton	
Enuma elish	Tiamat	

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. What levels of meaning can be found in Genesis 1.1–2.4a?
2. What are the similarities and differences between the biblical and the Babylonian presentations of cosmic beginnings?
3. What levels of meaning can be found in Genesis 2.4b–3.24?
4. Compare the two accounts of creation in Genesis 1–3. What are the differences in order, style, and vocabulary?
5. How did the biblical writers make use of ancient Near Eastern mythology in their accounts of creation?

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