

TIME . . . TO BEGIN

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In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope.

M. M. Bakhtin¹

As he pondered one more mystery of life, Ben Sira once asked, "Why is one day better [or: more important] than another, when every day in the year has its light from the sun?" He answers, "It was by the Lord's decision that they were distinguished; he appointed the various seasons and festivals; some days he blessed and made holy, and others he assigned to the common run of days" (Sir 33:7-9; NEB, slightly altered). Ben Sira is, of course, commenting on Israel's religious calendar, but most especially he is musing over the Genesis account wherein after extraordinarily creative days God paradoxically chose to sanctify a day when divine omnipotence is not at all exhibited.²

Author's note: Shemaryahu Talmon, to whom this paper is affectionately dedicated, may recognize the arguments I advance in this paper for we discussed them when he was a fellow of the National Humanities Center (1987-1988). Moreover, he had read and annotated an earlier draft of the study which became the text of my 1988 Southeast Region Society of Biblical Literature Presidential address, delivered in Macon, GA. I have altered slightly the introductory paragraph of that address, since it alludes to information of local interest only. I am beholden to B. Schmidt for improving my phraseology.

1. Cited by P. Michalowski, "Mental Maps and Ideology: Reflections on Subartu," *The Origins of Cities in Dry-Farming Syria and Mesopotamia in the Third Millennium B.C.* (ed. H. Weiss; Guilford, CT, 1986) 130. The full text of the quotation is in M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin* (ed. M. Holquist; Austin, 1981) 84.

2. On the argument that Ben Sira is referring to the Sabbath, see M. Tsevat, *The Meaning of the Book of Job and Other Studies* (New York, 1980) 52.

The Sabbath

In this paper, I reexamine the Genesis verses upon which Ben Sira bases his answer and urge that we turn to Greek "scientific" speculation rather than to Near Eastern mythmaking when looking for comparative material for the first four days of creation. In the process, I try to demonstrate that the Hebrew text did not begin the world's history until that fourth day. What happened during the first three days will soon become clear.³

Frequent in Scripture, but absent from the Book of Genesis is the term שבת. The word has so far defied the philologist's grasp. It is peculiar not only in having a double middle radical, but also in doubling the third one as well when a suffix is attached to it. It is certain that שבת cannot mean what the Hebrew implies: a day in which either God's work stops or God stops work. Most likely שבת means 'the day which stops', or 'the day which marks a limit'.⁴ Both the etymological distortion and the various scriptural explanations of this institution cast doubt on how much the Hebrews really knew about the origins of שבת.⁵ Consequently, when among other early exegetes Theophilus of Antioch sought another solution for the name שבת, he derived it from the number 'seven' שבוע.⁶ Although this theory too is hardly credible philologically, it is not much worse than a spate of contemporary learned hypotheses which link the word and the institution to alleged Mesopotamian prototypes.⁷ At the very least Theophilus's solution recognizes the overpowering control that the number seven and its multiples

3. Much has been written on this subject. Good overviews are available in J. Barr's *Biblical Words for Time* (Studies in Biblical Theology 33; London, 1962); J. H. Wilch, *Time and Event* (Leiden, 1969), Introduction.

4. See R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (New York, 1961) 475-76. Such etymological and etiological difficulties are of course not unknown to Scripture; consider the name משה, for example, which means 'the retriever' when the narrative in Exodus implies 'the retrieved'.

5. About this uniquely Hebraic and obviously ancient institution, Israel's redactors retained various explanations, operating on a widely shared assumption that truth is more potent when observed from multiple perspectives. The Deuteronomist (at 5:14-15) speculated that שבת perpetuated a testimonial to God's involvement in the Exodus. Various hands contributing to Exodus agree on the seventh day as a sign of a covenant between God and his chosen fold or as a day in which human beings may vicariously participate in creation by emulating divine satisfaction at its completion (Exod 20:8-11; enlarged in 31:12-17; cf. 23:12).

6. Actually, Theophilus wanted to show that the Greeks labeled their seventh day from שבת, which he derived from the Hebrew for seven. On the theology of Theophilus and his polemic against Hesiod's cosmology, see P. Nautin, "Genèse 1,1-2, de Justin à Origène," in *In Principio: Interpretations des premiers versets de la Genèse* (ed. P. Vignaux; Paris, 1973) 69-79.

7. The hopelessly muddled debate about the Sabbath's Babylonian origins is, however, finally coming to a sane end, with a clear rejection that Israel had (to use a quaint but commonly used term) "borrowed" the concept and the institution from Mesopotamia. See the conclusions of W. W. Hallo, "New Moons and Sabbaths: A Case-study in the Contrastive Approach," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 48 (1977) 15-18.

have on the Genesis account.⁸ This leads us to look at another institution, the week, which binds seven days into a calendar unit.

The Week

No less than the Sabbath, the week, שבוע, also proves to be a curious and arbitrary convention. It is a subdivision which has absolutely no reference to celestial motions. While the moon periodically completes cycles, these differ substantially in length according to how they are calculated. When measured as successive new moons or successive conjunctions with stars, the cycle takes about 29½ days to complete. However, when measured by successive perigees or nodes, the cycle can be two days shorter.⁹ Thus, while the month is not an exact fraction of the solar year, the week also is not an exact fraction of the month.

The Month

In fact, because Israel's culture was neither uniform nor homogenous even during the monarchic period, a number of calendars prevailed at one and the same time. The Hebrews as well as their neighbors apportioned the month into thirty or so days. The Hebrews could divide it into three units, each of ten days (עשוריה), a reckoning also known to ancient Greece; but they were alone in recognizing the week as a regular and meaningful subdivision for the month. Israel conferred ordinal numbers as names for a series of seven days and repeated the roster when reaching the seventh, which as often as not, was called the Sabbath. There is an attractive theory that the Hebrews arrived at this heptad because they knew seven major celestial bodies: five planets plus the moon and the sun. (In fact, this is how we have names for our own days of the week.) This theory is perfectly plausible but is beyond proof due to the paucity of biblical information. All that we have, however, is a biblical tradition which explains why we have a seven-day sequence. This tradition gathered authority and came to dominate the Hebrew calendar because it justified the existence of the Sabbath day.¹⁰ I refer, of course, to the Priestly creation narrative in Genesis 1:1-2:4a.

8. On the number seven as a controlling device in the P account of creation, see U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem, 1961), 1:12-15.

9. Respectively, 27.55 or 27.21 days. The numbers come from the *Random House Dictionary*, s.v. "month".

10. While we can indulge in endless speculation on how Israel invented the Sabbath, for our purpose it is enough to note that at least by the exilic period, the שבת had come to represent God's sovereignty over his people. This is succinctly stated by Second Isaiah, a prophet who rejected the implication that God needed to rest on a given day but wholeheartedly supported the Sabbath as God's gift to humankind (58:13-14): "If you restrain your

Creation in Genesis 1

The commentaries commonly observe that this creation narrative follows a sophisticated and symmetrical design. The pattern of creation for the first three days is said to parallel that of the next three.¹¹ However, this balanced scheme seems plausible because it reflects our own sense of symmetry. The commentaries themselves record so many doubts about its validity that if we want to unlock the narrative's design we should best turn to the Hebrew's own vocabulary for clues.¹² Once we remove the verbs **בָּרָא** and **עָשָׂה** as useful criteria because they obviously function *here* as synonyms, the language of creation permits us to divide the narrative into two major phases.¹³ The controlling idiom in the first phase is **לָקַח לְ** 'to assign a name [to something]'. This block lasts three days and I call it the "cosmological phase." The second segment, which I name the "animate phase," covers two days: the fifth and sixth. Because this phase deals with living creatures, **נֶפֶשׁ** is its critical term. However, its controlling language is **בָּרַךְ** 'to bless', a word which becomes increasingly significant as God selects Israel and its ancestors.

The fourth day is pivotal and the narrator pays it more attention than all other days with the exception of the sixth. Although this fourth day has no vocabulary which is singular to itself, I nevertheless assign it to the "cosmological phase" because it repeats the vocabulary crucial to the first day. In locating **אֹר**, **חֹשֶׁךְ**, **יוֹם**, **לַיְלָה**, and the verb **הִבְדִּיל** in both days, the Hebrew thus invites us to treat as one unit everything bracketed between their occurrences.

movement during the Sabbath, and avoid doing whatever pleases you on my Holy Day . . . then you can seek the LORD's favor. I will place you on top of the world, and will let you savor Jacob's inheritance."

11. The first and fourth days feature the creation of light and the luminaries; the second and fifth days focus on the isolation of waters on either side of the firmament and on the creation of fish and birds to fill the spaces thus obtained; finally, the third and sixth days, which are unique in containing double activities, feature the segregation of the dry land and the creation of earth creatures—beasts and human—to fill the soil.

12. What about the doubling of activities on the third and sixth days, which in fact leaves us not with six but eight units of activities? Why are logically dependent activities (e.g., the creation of water) divided over two separate days? What logic lay behind the creation of plants in the third day, but of sun and moon in the fourth? How is light born at least two full days before there were luminaries? See J. Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (ICC; Edinburgh, 1930) 10–11.

13. This is so despite the fact that in Hebrew the subject of **בָּרָא** is God, while human beings as well can be subjects for **עָשָׂה**; see A. Caquot, "Brèves remarques exégétiques sur Genèse 1,1–2," in *In Principio: Interpretations des premiers versets de la Genèse* (ed. P. Vignaux; Paris, 1973) 9–21. Notice how the LXX (but not Aquila or Josephus) uses **ἐποίησεν** 'he made [i.e., **עָשָׂה**]' when translating **בָּרָא** in 1:1; see A. Paul, "Le Récit de la création," in *Hellenica et Judaica* (ed. A. Caquot; Paris, 1986) 131. On distinguishing among these verbs as well as **הִבְדִּיל**, see S. Talmon, "Biblical Understanding of Creation and Human Commitment," *Christian/Jewish Relations* 20 (1987) 69–89. **בָּרָא**, however, fosters a pun when the opening words **בָּרָא** **בְּרֵאשִׁית** are made to share the same sequence of three consonants.

The complete account of creation features ten **ויאמר** statements, the first of which occurs at v. 3. These expressions are allocated over six creative days and are punctuated by seven expressions of satisfaction. They are themselves flanked by a two-verse prologue and an epilogue of about three verses. The epilogue tells us that God ceased to work on the seventh day. Because the number six has little symbolic meaning in Scripture except as precursor for seven; because the Genesis creation account replays words such as day, night, earth, heaven, and God seven times or multiples of seven; and because the Hebrew *may* well be establishing harmony between the length of creation and the number of known planets, this epilogue is structurally neither an addendum nor a later insertion. Instead, it logically resolves previously stated information. Notice also how the crucial **ברא אלהים** 'God created' frames the whole creation narrative by its presence at its beginning and end: at Gen 1:1, **בראשית ברא אלהים את השמים**, and at 2:3, **אשר ברא אלהים לעשות**, **ואת הארץ**.

The vocabulary of the prologue is equally protean. Because Hebrew is concrete when seeking to achieve the abstract, the prologue's vision is couched in a seemingly prosaic vocabulary. However, its syntax and its virtuoso use of paronomasia allow these brief verses to surmount the language's limitation, and invites us to share the narrator's imaginative recreation of the unconceived.

"In the Beginning"?

Most Bible translations offer two radically different renderings for the first two verses. Up until recently we read only, "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth." However, a translation based on an exegesis long espoused by medieval Jewish sages has recently won many followers. This translation recognizes that the first word of Genesis, **בראשית**, must be dependent on the verb following; this forces us to treat the whole phrase as a temporal sentence, "When God began to create. . . ." More importantly, when we analyze **בראשית** as in construct to the verb following, we are required to treat the whole of v. 2 as a parenthetical statement. Although there are competent philologists who still defend the traditional translation, I personally think that this exegesis is really beyond dispute: first, because it is supported by grammar and syntax;¹⁴ second, because other creation

14. All the examples of **בראשית** are in temporal clauses, and the examples of **ראשית** in the absolute state (with or without prefixed propositions) are found only when the term is used in ceremonial context; see Skinner, *Genesis*, 12-13. A bibliography on the traditional exegesis of Gen 1:1 can be found in B. W. Anderson, "Introduction: Mythopoeic and Theological Dimensions of the Biblical Creation Faith," in *Creation in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia, 1984) 23-24. For more details on the controversy, see C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, 1984) 93-98. The Book of Hosea begins with a similar construction (v. 2): **תחלת דבר יהוה בהושע ויאמר יהוה אל הושע**, which is correctly rendered in NJPSV: "When the LORD first spoke to Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea. . . ."

narratives similarly open with temporal or circumstantial clauses; and third, because the first of God's creative injunctions does not come until v. 3.

Verse 1, then, offers the premise that "when God began to create *the universe*, earth was in a state of *תהו ובהו*."¹⁵ Despite some learned protest to the contrary, I nevertheless treat "heaven and earth" (*שמים* and *וארץ*) as a *merismus*, that is, as one unit of thought formed of two juxtaposed opposites. (We meet with the same rhetorical device in Gen 2:17 when "total knowledge" is given as "the knowledge of good and evil.") Those who inspect the twenty or so occurrences of *תהו* are doubtlessly right in showing how it invariably connotes 'desiccation' or 'devastation'.¹⁶ Because *תהו* is linked to *בהו*, however, the phrase *תהו ובהו* must be treated neither as another merismus nor even as a hendiadys (as suggested by Speiser and Westermann); rather, it should be understood as a *farrago*, wherein two usually alliterative words combine to give a meaning other than their constituent parts. I would certainly avoid the common rendering 'unformed and void', poetic though it may seem, at least because it would stress the negative, whereas the Hebrew is referring to a definite condition. I would also resist Westermann's 'desert waste' because it conveys much too concrete a vision to the English reader. As it happens, *תהו ובהו* is manifestly onomatopoeic, and we are lucky to have its equivalent in a nice English onomatopoeic farrago, 'hodgepodge' (originally meaning a 'goulash'). So, the earth was 'hodgepodge'. But there was also *חשך על פני תהום*.

Darkness upon the Deep

חשך has a crackly sound to it; but there is nothing sinister in this first mention of 'darkness'. As with neighboring cosmogonies, darkness merely emphasizes how indistinct was the primordial. We do something similar when we speak of a "black hole" to suggest a celestial body of impenetrable density. What I find more impressive is the way the Hebrew links this articulation of the unfathomable with another expression for the undifferentiated.

תהום has become an interpretive *bête noire* ever since cuneiform documents introduced the Tiamat of Babylonian myths; so much so that it is now practically impossible to locate a biblical commentary which does not devote many pages to *Enuma Elish* and its influence on the Genesis creation account. I doubt, however, that Israel was much interested in the theologies of other nations, if only because its own theologians did not have ready access to Pritchard's hefty *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating*

15. Notice how the Hebrew begins with "earth," thus promoting it as the creation's principal objective.

16. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 102-3.

to the *Old Testament* from which to mount their polemics.¹⁷ Linguistically, *tehom* could be related to Tiamat only indirectly, through a link which is missing from the evidence at hand. *Tehom* as an adversary for God makes fullest sense only in creations where the combat metaphor is dominant. While this particular metaphor appears frequently in Scripture, it is not featured in Genesis where there are metaphors of rearrangement and of craftsmanship.¹⁸ Therefore, we should recognize that here, as elsewhere, *tehom* is a poetic term for bodies of water.¹⁹

The dictionaries show that על פני is a complex preposition which refers to the movement over and around something rather than just to an arrested condition above a specific surface.²⁰ In v. 2, darkness envelops *tehom*. However, in the next phrase, ורוח אלהים מרחפת על פני המים, a divine or awesome wind (both adjectives have merits) is to sweep the waters.²¹

The Hebrew writer has so far adopted a lapidary style by which to communicate his information about the primordial. If inclined to do so, we may imagine ourselves in a photographic exhibit where we can only see what the camera can frame. Because chronology and movement cannot be part of the illustration, the portraits we inspect seem frozen beyond time. We therefore react neutrally to the series of sharply focused likenesses the Hebrew has left for us to inspect: images of earth, darkness, air, and water.

“Creatio ex nihilo”?

Already in antiquity, the Hebrew concept of the primordial was identified with Greek notions regarding the four hylic elements—sea, air, earth, and fire, the last manifested primarily as the brightness in the sky.²² Modern

17. That *Enuma Elish* was kept away from nonpriestly hands and that it was recited only in the inner recesses of Mesopotamian temples are also reasons why the text was not likely available to Israel’s own priests.

18. These distinctions are nicely developed in L. G. Perdue, “Job’s Assault on Creation,” *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1986) 295–315.

19. See conveniently Caquot, “Brèves remarques exégetiques sur Genèse 1,1–2,” 17–18.

20. In the fifth day birds are to flutter over the earth *across* the heavens (v. 20). In the sixth day, earth creatures are to partake of all seed-bearing plants found *all about* the earth (v. 29).

21. Because the darkness and wind clauses share the same preposition as well as pair of words referring to water, I would not be averse to collapsing the two clauses as follows, “Darkness and an awesome (or divine) wind whipped about the watery Deep.”

22. For the Greek material, see M. C. Stokes, “Heraclitus of Ephesus,” *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (ed. P. Edwards; New York, 1967), 3:478–79. Hellenistic Jewry also was alert to this equation, as is obvious from the following Genesis Rabbah anecdote: “A philosopher said to Rabban Gamaiei that God found good materials which He used in the creation of the world, ‘Tohu, Bohu, darkness, water, wind, and the deep,’ to which Gamaliel vigorously replied, ‘Woe to that man! The term creation is explicitly used of them’” (quoted by L. I. Rabinowitz, “Creation and Cosmogony: Rabbinic View of Creation,” *EncJud* 5:1063).

scholars who make a similar suggestion implicitly doubt that the Hebrews had the capacity to imagine a creation from nothing.²³ I want here simply to point out that in Genesis the preexistence of earth, water, air, and darkness in no way deters God from creating many things out of nothing. For example, light is neither a primordial element nor does it evolve from it. It is created *ex nihilo*, and then simply contrasted with darkness. Neither is the רָקִיעַ 'firmament' of v. 6 created out of any preexisting element; nor are the מְאֹרֹת 'lightmakers' of v. 14 concocted from anything previously available. In fact, no item which God orders into being by using the jussive יְהִי within a יִאמַר statement can be said to emerge from preexisting materials.²⁴

God's first command is that there be light. I do not believe that the Hebrew wants us here to find a polemic against light-centered theologies; nor do I find it necessary to worry about the nature of a sunless or moonless lighting. Rather, the Hebrew is solving a difficulty in the same way that we would when forced to formulate what is beyond our language's capacity to describe: witness how physicists speak of the "Big Bang" when referring to a creative moment, without ever implying that it involves sound, big or small for that matter. In fact, this light has no future and achieves no role until God establishes a contrast between it and darkness. Therefore, we are told, "When God perceived how appropriate 'light' was, he sets it apart from darkness."

What the Hebrew is striving for, however, comes in v. 5. Here occurs the first of three successive appeals to the idiom לָקָרָא 'assigning a name to something'. We are told that "God named the light 'day,' whereas he named darkness 'night.'" The Hebrew is again struggling with an ambiguous vocabulary; יוֹם is as imprecise in what it denotes as is the English word "day." To solve the limitation of language and to achieve a precise connotation for what is now meant by יוֹם, the Hebrew immediately provides

23. The debate commonly posed under the rubric *creatio ex nihilo* is fought almost exclusively around the first twenty words or so of Genesis. The controversy does not properly belong to our field of research because it is fundamentally theological and apologetic, not philological or exegetical. Among these concerns are the following: (1) to harmonize the opening lines in Genesis with those in John ("In the beginning was the Word . . ."); (2) to establish sharp demarcation between Hebrew and pagan concepts of God; and (3) to neutralize scientific speculation on the origins of the universe by placing God beyond nature. Interesting remarks on these matters can be found in A. Momigliano, "Time in Ancient Historiography," in his *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* (Middletown, CT, 1975).

24. Second Isaiah states, "I am the LORD and there is none else, I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe—I the LORD do all these things" (45:6-7). Far from reflecting a rejection within Israel of Genesis 1:1-5 and its implication, such a quotation shows a deep understanding of how complex and enriching is the message. See M. Weinfeld, "God the Creator in Gen 1 and the Prophecy of Second Isaiah," *Tarbiz* 37 (1968) 105-32 [Hebrew]. M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford, 1985) 321-26, also lists Deut 4:16b-19a, among other passages, which carry on a debate with Gen 1.

contrast with “night,” the name now assigned to primordial darkness. The writer pauses in the narrative briefly to tell us parenthetically that “it was evening, it was morning.” This sequence faithfully proceeds from what there was (i.e., darkness) to what ensued (i.e., light). The phrase becomes formulaic to the rest of the creation narrative and thus reinforces the deliberate and methodical pace of God’s activity; it ought not, therefore, be cited as relevant evidence that Israel began its day on the evening previous.

The writer concludes by assessing this alternation between darkness and daylight as equivalent to “one day.” Here we must be particularly careful not to fudge, not to declare this reckoning as equivalent to “first day.” Indeed, while for calendar purposes the Hebrew writer does use the cardinal number to modify the word “day,” this is invariably followed by the word “month”; for example, *ביום אחד לחדש*.²⁵

Time

By telling us that God is responsible for one day, the writer does not want to declare light as God’s first creation; rather, we are being alerted to the invention of time, a medium forged out of darkness, decidedly the least promising element available to the universe. And by choosing one day as the primary scale for the passage of time, the writer acutely observes how the day is the only period in Israel’s calendar to depend exclusively on celestial motions. In contrast, the nonsolar year, the lunar month, the week, the (seasonably variable) hour, the minute, and the second are but conventions fixed and accepted by tradition.

Initially, then, “one day” is just a *measure* for time, an alternation between light and day; it is only retrospectively, at the end of another similar stretch of divine creativity, that the formula begins to function as the *unit* of time which is equivalent to our own civil day.

The verses which tell of the invention of one day also make sweeping claims. They maintain that as long as God had not made available to human beings a mechanism for chronology, human beings cannot effectively discuss the relationship among God and primordial substances. From this perspective, theogony or the birth and emergency of God from preexisting matter is a theme which the Hebrew writer could not profitably discuss. It is this reluctance which makes the Hebrews so different from their more mythopoeic neighbors who repeatedly retold how deities emerge either from unformed matter or from each other.²⁶ Rather than espousing a form

25. Additionally, I have great respect for the narrator’s paronomastic prowess; “first day,” *יום (ה) ראשון**, would have so perfectly served to bracket the opening word, *בראשית*, that if the Hebrew resisted it, something much more challenging was at stake.

26. It is not surprising therefore that when a document such as the Sumerian king list speaks of the descent of kingship as a gift from the gods, its author does not seem particularly

of mythmaking wherein time is elastic and thematic progression is more crucial than historical chronology, the Hebrew adopts a more abstract yet more controllable illusion. Time becomes a cosmological feature of God's own devising and its mysterious flow is not entirely beyond human understanding.

For the ancient Hebrew, then, time is no mirage of the human mind nor is it the riddle which so embarrassed St. Augustine; time is not beyond adequate definition and measurement, as the nearly contemporaneous Pythagoreans would have it. Its rules can be explained theologically—I would say “scientifically”—allowing human beings thereby to chart adequately their own future. It is not surprising therefore that when Israel's sages imagine the other side of beginnings, namely the closing of historical time, they return to this paradigm and initiate apocalyptic unfolding with another “one day” period, namely the “Day of the Lord.”

As far as I can tell, in the ancient Near East these positions are unique to Israel.²⁷ They are not, however, unknown to the nearly contemporaneous Classical Greece of the sixth and fifth centuries. In *Timaeus* §38, Plato crystallizes earlier speculation on time, history, and cosmology:

For before the heavens came into being there were no days or nights or months or years, but [the father] devised and brought them into being at the same time as the heavens were put together; for they were all parts of time, just as past and future are also forms of it, which we wrongly attribute, without thinking, to the Eternal Being. . . . So time came into being with the heavens in order that, having come together, they should also be dissolved together if ever they are dissolved; and it was as like as possible to eternity which was its model.²⁸

Plato continues, “As a result of this plan and purpose of [G]od for the birth of time, the sun, and moon, and the five planets as they are called came into being to define and preserve the measure of time.” The ancient Hebrew writer, however, does not immediately move to the creation of the luminaries, but proceeds instead to define space and mass. Not surprisingly, these two dimensions of nature are commonly linked to time in modern scientific literature.

interested in the management of time and its allocation to various city-states. He may simply have had no tradition wherein the emergency of time was an event of singular significance.

27. As two sets of paired deities (Dūri/Dari; Halma/Hallama) time occurs as a component in Mesopotamian cosmogony, but it plays a negligible role there. See W. G. Lambert, “Kosmogonie,” *RLA* 6 (1983) 218–22.

28. H. D. F. Lee, *Timaeus and Critia* (New York, 1971) 51–52. In *Biblical Words for Time*, 75–76, Barr refers to Plato's speculations in connection with Genesis 1, adding, “It remains likely that Genesis 1 and other sources would be read as suggesting that time began with creation” (p. 79).

Space and Mass

During the second day God maps out space within which to set future creations. God generates through divine fiat a רִקיעַ, a hammered item—perhaps a dome—which then splits the primordial waters into two entities. God names the uppermost “heaven.” The nethermost is set aside for the next day’s task.

The third day, God forms the two physical masses which will be home for human beings. Manipulating a cherished tradition wherein waters are said to retreat at God’s order, the narrator establishes a rigid distinction between the seas and the hard land. God gives a second command on that selfsame day, investing this hard land with generative powers. However, by recording this order for the earth to seed itself, the Hebrew writer is not endowing plants with life-giving potential; in fact, this capacity will not be a feature until the “animate phase,” when animals and human beings are placed on the earth. Rather, the narrator treats the event as a cancellation of a primordial condition when earth, being תהו ובהו, could not bear any seed or fruit, let alone living beings.²⁹

Only at this stage, during the fourth day, does the writer introduce the luminaries, and we can understand why he labors to avoid calling them by name; for the names of the sun, the moon, and the stars can easily suggest the existence of foreign deities. God sets them in space and then surrenders to them control of the diurnal oscillations.³⁰ Henceforth, human beings need no longer scrutinize the acts of God to realize a pattern for cultic behavior; rather they turn to these astral bodies to compute the yearly festal calendar.

The fifth day is about to dawn. The universe is in harmony: time is charted, space is mapped out, land and sea masses are now ready; the

29. Westermann seems to be alone among modern scholars to recognize the importance of time and space as features of the Genesis creation account: see *Genesis 1–11*, 112, 114. However, he hardly develops his views and offers neither an explanation nor an intellectual context for the phenomenon. These insights are made more prominent, albeit still short of adequate discussion, in a more sharply focused restatement of his conclusions, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, 1987) 8–9. Throughout the ages, “one day” has elicited interpretations which depended on the then current philosophical debates. For Augustine’s Plotinian understanding, see A. Solignac, “Exégèse et Métaphysique: Genèse 1,1–3 chez saint Augustin,” in *In Principio: Interpretations des premiers versets de la Genèse* (ed. P. Vignaux; Paris 1973) 164–65. On pp. 37–45 of the same volume, C. Touati studies the mystical interpretation of Gersonides: “La lumière de l’intellect, création du Premier Jour; L’exégèse de Genèse 1,1–3 chez Gersonide.” A useful collection of Greek primary material on the issue is found in S. Sambursky and S. Pines, *The Concept of Time in Late Neoplatonism* (Jerusalem, 1971).

30. Here, the vision of the narrator is Janus-like, albeit its sequence reverses what we might expect: it skips toward the sixth day in which appears the only creature for whom the luminaries can serve as religious clock, then lurches backward to emulate vocabulary essential to the first day.

luminaries, infinitely more convenient to fathom than is God, are now measures for human existence. As with those dreamers who lived in Qumran, we may be justified, therefore, in believing that it is only on this one day—the fourth—that the history of Israel, indeed our own history, truly begins.³¹

Our response to Ben Sira's query has led us to reassess the import of Genesis's earliest verses. But it has permitted us also to realize better how uncommonly sophisticated and rigorous is the mind of one cosmologist in ancient Israel. I can pay it no better tribute than to apply to it what Thomas Gilby said in appreciation of another fine theologian, Thomas Aquinas:

[His] style remains an instrument of precision once we appreciate that he was not writing a mathematical treatise or a legal document where single terms can be treated as atoms of discourse or forced into their fixed univocal sense. . . . He was addressing himself as a philosopher to the things first shown us through the senses and not to disembodied essences, and as a theologian to the works of God in history. . . . He had to render things that were at once dark and shimmering, deep and on the surface, single and complex, firm and supple, irreducibly individual yet sharing in the common whole; and he paid them the compliment of attempting to do so without breaking into poetry.³²

31. S. Talmon, "The Calendar Reckoning of the Sect from the Judaean Desert," in *Aspects of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. C. Rabin and Y. Yadin; ScrHier 4; Jerusalem, 1958) 176.

32. Cited by A. Mandelbaum, "Introduction," in *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno: A Verse Translation* (New York, 1982) xv.