

Thoughts on Genesis

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September 1, 2024

When many of us think about Genesis, our minds immediately go to the miracles of Creation. Everything is created in six days!

Everything! In six days! Then there are the incredibly long life-spans: 930 years for Adam, 365 years for Enoch, 950 years for Noah, and 969 years for Methuselah. (By the way, if you add up all those years, it turns out that Noah's son, Shem, and great-great-grandson, Eber, lived long enough to know—and according to Jewish legend—teach their great-great-great, etc. grandsons, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob!)

There were some unexpected and miraculous pregnancies— perhaps the most famous being Sarah giving birth to Isaac at age 90. There was an incident of fire and brimstone falling on some cities—and a overly curious lady being turned into a pillar of salt. Perhaps the greatest miracle of all, however, was the fact that the Eternal God of the Universe found some human beings interesting enough to chat with them and offer them guidance.

There is a lot more to the book, but many of us find it hard to get past the miracles, and we are not the first ones to get stuck on their sheer unbelievability. Back about a thousand years ago, the French Rabbi known as Rashi, Solomon son of Isaac, a very devoted and pious scholar, a man who took the Bible very, very seriously, gave the following advice. If you find the miracles of Genesis unbelievable, don't believe them. Don't worry about them. If necessary, just skip the whole book of Genesis and go straight to Exodus 12 where we have the first mitzvah, the first commandment: "This month shall be the beginning of months for you." The point of Genesis is simply to set the stage for God's presentation of the mitzvot, the commandments which define holiness and morality in life. Pay attention to the mitzvot, not the miracles.

I think that Rashi's message is that, in looking at a document like the Bible, we need to consider its purpose and its context.

Why would God give it to us, and what did God hope to accomplish with this mix of stories and genealogies and explanations?

Though the subject is serious, perhaps an old joke can help set the stage. It's the one about a little boy who asks his parents a question they did not yet expect. "Mommy, Daddy, where did I come from?" Resolving to do right by their son, they take a deep breath and present all the relevant biological details. He listens attentively for a long time and then says, "Interesting, but Tommy says he comes from Pittsburgh."

Is Genesis the scientific text book that some seem to think it should be, or is it a much simpler document—one much more attuned to instructing our ancient ancestors in some basic facts: their Source, their purpose, and some helpful guidance for navigating the human condition? God could have written a scientific explanation of physics and chemistry and fluid dynamics and electro-biology; God did invent them all. But, God chose to write a different kind of book. Realizing that concepts like billions of years and molten plasma and atomic structure were technical details far beyond the understanding of our ancient shepherding ancestors, God chose to write a book more relevant to their lives—one with a simple explanation of the creative process and examples of human strength and weakness, morality and the lack thereof. This book was never intended to be a physics textbook or chemical treatise. It was a simpler book that was relevant for their understanding of life, and I trust God. I trust that God knew the audience and knew what we needed.

Another thing about God: I believe that God is at least as good a writer as William Shakespeare. God invented language and is able to use it in all sorts of illustrative and inspiring ways—many of which are not literal. Take, for example, Genesis 4 where Cain gets jealous of Abel and, projecting his own disappointment, kills his brother. In writing of the cosmic outrage of such a terrible thing, God chose two literary techniques. First, God asks a rhetorical question: “What have you done? God knows the answer, but such a question is asked for the sake of the reader and focuses our attention. Then God selects two metaphors: “Hark, your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground...which opened its mouth to receive it...”. Scientifically, the ground does not have a mouth nor can liquid like blood speak, but that is not the point. The metaphor and anthropomorphism are intended to communicate that an outrage has occurred—one so poignantly sad and tragic that even the inanimate world is overwhelmed with shock and grief.

Reading this literally and as though it were a scientific explanation misses the author’s point completely, denying God’s message and method. We need to pay attention to God’s wisdom—and not just words disconnected from their context.

A similar usage of metaphor can be found frequently in the Psalms. When Scripture says, “The heavens declare the Glory of God,” it is not speaking literally. What it means is that the marvels of creation are so profound that the sky—if it could—would burst out in song. The message is also instructive. If inanimate objects can see and respond to God’s wonders, then shouldn’t we pay attention too and respond with praise?

A large part of Genesis deals with the difficulty of being human. Many of the stories present the human predicament and give us examples of the kinds of challenges life presents. Whether it is conflict between family members, desires that are greater than our possibilities, situations where we are derailed by self-sabotage, or moments when noble aspirations compete with other noble aspirations, this human life is fraught with choices that are not always easy. Think about Adam and Eve. Usually curiosity is good. It is, in fact, our birthright as incredibly intelligent creatures. But, there are times when we need to back off and respect boundaries, when forbidden fruit tasted cannot be untasted. Protect us, O Lord, from overstepping.

Think about Cain. He does not understand why God rejects his sacrifice—or he refuses to consider that perhaps his own lack of enthusiasm or generosity has self-sabotaged his efforts. In any event, God warns him: “If you do right, there is uplift. But if you do not do right, sin couches at the door. Its urge is toward you, but you can be its master.” Can we push away the sin and temptation that are always lurking? Can we focus on the real cause of our problems and not project them onto others? Cain’s is a counter example we should endeavor to avoid.

Think about Abraham and Sarah, faithful servants of God who must wait and wait and wait. As one of my teachers, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, used to quip: “God is not like Domino’s Pizza, guaranteed delivery in thirty minutes.” We follow God because it is right—realizing always that the rewards may be a long time in coming. Or, as Geoff Duncan, former lieutenant governor of Georgia said at the Democratic National Convention the other night—perhaps quoting Mark Twain or Ted Lasso, “Doing the right thing is never the wrong thing.” Countless servants of the Lord have followed Abraham’s and Sarah’s example, doing the Lord’s work because it is important and it is right—even if the rewards are not immediate.

We can look at the story of Isaac, a man of great spiritual power but one who is retiring and quiet, a man whose wife “wears the pants in the family,” and whose family is blessed by her strength and determination. Not all patterns are meant to be replicated. And not all institutions are to be unquestioned. When Rebekah pushes her insights and her son Jacob above and beyond the decision of her husband and the hopes of her other beloved son Esau, she knows that this hard choice is the right one—that Jacob is the better leader for the religion, that Esau’s gifts lead in a different direction, and that her beloved husband’s thinking needs some reorientation. This is a not a soap opera. This is life, and Genesis teaches us about the difficulty and necessity of strength.

We can also look at the conflict between Jacob’s tribe and the neighboring tribe led by Hamor and Shechem. Was the joining of Dinah and Shechem voluntary, or was it a first

step of oppression, exploitation, and violation to come? And, given a rapacious neighbor who does not respect boundaries, what are the most effective ways to work things out? Is peace possible, and, if so, how? And, if peace is not possible, what is one to do?

These situations described in Genesis are noteworthy because they show great people—people touched by God and fate—nonetheless struggling to come to grips with the challenges that God and life put before us. We are given principles, and we are given aspirations—goals of holiness and morality. But these are not easily reached, and we find ourselves hampered and distracted by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune... We, like our Biblical forebears, must wrestle.

The Book of Genesis informs us of the challenges and opportunities of life in this world, and it bids us to be strong and resolute and holy. We look to it for wisdom and insights and for possibilities to ponder.

Let me conclude with piece about the guidance Genesis gives us—and wrestling. We who are called “The Children of Israel” should always remember how we got the name. It was the name given to our grandfather Jacob—Jacob who wrestled the angel, Jacob who would not let go. “Israel” they called him for he was a wrestler. “Israel” they call us for we are wrestlers, too. We wrestle with God as we search for wisdom. We wrestle with people as we struggle for justice. And, we wrestle with ourselves as we make ourselves better and more holy. Yes, we are the Children of Israel, the children and grandchildren of a man who wrestled an angel.¹