

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat B'reishit

GENESIS 1:1–6:8

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Parashat B'reishit Study Guide Themes

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INTRODUCTION



Parashat B'reishit, the first parashah in the Torah and in the book of Genesis, describes the origins of the world and its inhabitants. In the creation stories of other ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean cultures, the world comes into being through violence and through the actions of heroic and semi-divine protagonists. In contrast, Genesis presents the peaceful creation of a good world by a supreme God, a world inhabited by God's prized creation—human beings—who will play a decisive role in this world. Human beings, according to *parashat B'reishit*, exist in relationship with four related spheres: the earth, from where we come and to which we will return; each other, as women and men who share equally in God's blessing and in the responsibility of caring for God's world; the animal world, over which we have responsibility; and God, in whose image we are made and whose breath gives us life. The narrative in *parashat B'reishit* moves from a wide-angle lens that focuses on the creation of the entire world to a zoom lens that focuses on the personal and intimate relationships those human beings have with the God who creates them.

Parashat B'reishit's two creation stories have had a great impact on women's identity. These narratives have been interpreted throughout the ages in ways that de-emphasize the equality between the sexes in the first creation story (Genesis 1) and focus instead on the more ambiguous nature of women's roles in the second creation story (Genesis 2). Such interpretations overlook the context in which the text presents the first woman, resulting in depictions of the woman that make her creation seem like an afterthought and her behavior responsible for subsequent human suffering. A close reading of *parashat B'reishit* portrays a world in which both women and men are essential to God's plan and equally responsible for its fulfillment.

BEFORE GETTING STARTED



Before turning to the biblical text and the questions presented below, use the introductory material in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* to provide an overview of the parashah as a whole. Draw attention to a few key quotations from the introduction to the Central Commentary on pages 3–4 and/or survey the outline on page 4. This will help you highlight some of the main themes in this *parashah* and give participants a context for the sections they will study within the larger portion. Also, remember that when the study guide asks you to read biblical text, take the time to examine the associated comments in the Central Commentary. This will help you answer questions and gain a deeper understanding of the biblical text.

THEME 1: CREATION REDUX



Genesis 1 portrays God's orderly creation of the world in six days. God fashions the world through a series of separations from chaos to differentiated entities. On the first three days, God establishes the conditions necessary for life. On the last three days, God creates both heavenly and earthly bodies for the world and all living creatures, culminating in the formation of human beings on the sixth day. Genesis 2 provides a second view of creation, one that focuses on human beings. While Genesis 1 seems at first to make the gender identity of the first humans clear, a closer look reveals that it is far from clear. And Genesis 2 is no more clear, presenting the gender identity of the first human being in even more ambiguous terms. Throughout centuries of Jewish and Christian tradition, the emphasis on the second rather than the first creation story has led to interpretations that view woman as secondary and subordinate to man. A careful reading of the text shows the first woman to be both "other" and "alike" her male partner and as a fitting counterpart for the man.

1. Read Genesis 1:24–30, which describes how God forms animals and human beings on the sixth day of creation.
 - a. The Hebrew noun *adam*, translated in verse 27 as "human beings," is singular. What interpretive challenge does this create? A more literal translation of this verse might read: "And God created the *adam*. In the image of God He created him/it; male and female He created them." The translation used in our text puts the word "them" in brackets. This reflects an understanding that the plural object pronoun *otam* ("them") at the end of the verse applies to the singular object pronoun *oto* (him/it) earlier in the verse. How does this help you to understand why "man" is an inaccurate translation of *adam* in this verse?
 - b. Compare the use of the word *adam* (translated here as "human beings") in verse 27 to its use in Genesis 5:1–2, in which the word *adam* appears twice. How does this comparison help you to understand the word *adam* in 1:27? What does the preceding verse (1:26) add to your understanding of the meaning of the word in this verse?

- c. According to the Central Commentary on verse 27, how does the translation of the word *adam* as “human beings” avoid using misleading masculine pronouns? In your view, why is this necessary from the standpoint of the narrative? What are the pros and cons of this translation choice?
 - d. What attributes does God bestow on human beings in verse 27? What are the implications of these attributes for how God will be manifest in the world? According to the Central Commentary on this verse and on the prior verse (v. 26), how does this view of human beings differ from that of other ancient Near Eastern traditions?
 - e. The words *zachar* (male) and *n’kevah* (female) occur at the end of verse 27 (after “and God created *adam*”). In your view, what does the text’s placement of “male” and “female” after the “*adam*” say about the relationship between our humanity and our sexual identity? What does verse 27 reveal about the attitude of the biblical text toward the creation of female and male?
 - f. What commandment does God issue to both the male and female in verse 28? What is the significance of this commandment—the first issued by God in the Torah? The words *n’kevah* and *zachar* are both singular in verse 27. Do you understand these words to refer to a single woman and man, an androgynous being, or to multiple women and men? How does the literal translation of verse 27 support your view?
 - g. In your view, what are the implications of God’s instruction in verse 28 that humankind should “hold sway” over fish, birds, and animals? How does this charge compare with the one God gives humans after the Flood in Genesis 9:1–4? What limitations do these later verses establish? What might account for these qualifications?
2. Read Genesis 2:4–7, which provides another account of the creation of human beings.
- a. How does the chronicle of *adam*’s creation in these verses compare with that in 1:27? What do you think accounts for the differences between the two narratives? The Hebrew word *adam* is translated as “man” in 2:7 and as “human beings” in 1:27. How do you understand the difference in translation between these two verses?
 - b. The word *adam* and the word *adamah* (translated as “soil”) appear a total of six times in these verses. What point does this word communicate? What is the impact of this repetition on the reader?
 - c. What is the significance, in your view, of the knowledge that God breathes *nishmat chayim* (translated in 2:7 as “the breath of life”) into the *adam*?
 - d. Although early readers probably understood “the *adam*” to be a male, the second creation story, according to the Central Commentary, is

ambiguous about the *adam's* gender. How does “*ha-adam*” provide an etiology (explanation of origin) not just for human beings, but for a lineage? What does this say about how the text presents women? According to the Central Commentary on verse 7, gender-neutral or non-gendered progenitors were known in the ancient world. What can this knowledge, coupled with the ambiguity in the text about *adam's* gender, teach us about the position of female and male in God's plan?

3. Read Genesis 2:18–24, which describes the creation of woman.
 - a. The phrase “God saw how good” repeats in similar form six times in the first 25 verses of Genesis in response to what God has created. In 2:18, for the first time, God proclaims, “It is not good,” in regard to the solitary status of *ha-adam*. In your view, what is the reason for this proclamation, and what is its significance?
 - b. How does the literal meaning of *ezer k'negdo* described in the notes on verse 18 (“helper as if opposite [or: in front of] him/it”), as explained in the Central Commentary on this verse, change your understanding of the phrase translated as “helpmate”? Where does *adam* fit in the hierarchy of the world God is creating? What does *adam's* position in this hierarchy help you to understand about the role of his partner?
 - c. The word translated as “ribs” (v. 21) is more accurately rendered as “sides,” as in the side of a building. What does this add to your perception of the role of woman?
 - d. What can we understand from *adam's* words in verse 23 about what the creation of the woman means to him? How does *adam's* giving of a name to the woman differ from his naming of the animals in verses 19–20?
 - e. In verse 23 the terms *ish* (man) and *ishah* (woman) are used for the first time. In your view, why are these gender-specific terms used at this point and not in 1:27 and 2:7? What point is made by the wordplay involved in the similar-sounding Hebrew terms?
4. Read Post-biblical Interpretations by Judith R. Baskin (pp. 28–29).
 - a. How do women share in the divine image, according to the Rabbis, quoted in the comment on “In our image, after our likeness” (1:26)?
 - b. In the comment on 2:18, how does *B'reishit Rabbah* 17:2 interpret Genesis 9:6–7 to connect the divine image and procreation? What does this interpretation teach us about the Rabbis' view of reproduction?
 - c. How does the phrase “this time” (2:23) give rise to rabbinic legends concerning the “first Eve”? How was this legend combined with ancient folk traditions around the night spirit Lilith? What is your reaction to the views of Lilith in these legends?

5. Read the Contemporary Reflection by Rachel Adler (pp. 29–31).
- According to Adler, how does the creation narrative in Genesis 1 differ from that of the foundational Babylonian story of creation? How does the drawing of distinctions and boundaries shape the biblical creation narrative?
 - How does the creation of human beings in this parashah continue the themes of distinction and similarity?
 - Adam* is the only creation whose sexuality is noted in the text. According to Adler, how does this fact point toward how sexuality can serve as a metaphor for the divine image?
 - How do the verbs used in this parashah to describe the creation of woman differ from those used to describe other creations? Do you agree or disagree with Adler’s view that the verb used to describe the creation of woman indicates that her creation is an afterthought?
 - How does Adler interpret the phrase *ezer k’negdo*? How does this interpretation foreshadow an ambivalent relationship between man and woman?
6. Read “Awakening” by Lynn Gottlieb, in *Voices* (p. 32).
- In the poem’s first line, Gottlieb uses the only feminine-gendered name for God (Shekinah), one that describes God’s Presence on earth. How does this help to frame the rest of the poem?
 - How is Gottlieb’s description of the “sleeping form” (line 1) as “HeShe” rooted in the biblical text?
 - The phrase “loving companionship” (line 3) echoes the phrase “loving companions” (*rei-im ha-ahuvim*) that is part of the *Sheva B’rachot*, the Seven Blessings traditionally chanted at Jewish weddings. How does this add to your understanding of the reason for the Shekinah’s actions in line 2?
 - In the poem, the Shekinah chooses attributes of women in Jewish tradition to instill in the woman. In your view, which of these characteristics are more associated with women than with men, if any? What attributes would you add to this list?

THEME 2: TRANSGRESSION AND TRANSFORMATION IN THE GARDEN



The good world that God creates is almost immediately replete with adversity and injustice. Genesis 3 seeks to resolve this dilemma by making human beings accountable. The text presents God as both a protective parent—hesitant to present human beings with the ramifications of knowledge before they are ready to absorb it—and as the divine bulwark against the human appetite to have more than is allowed. This narrative of transgression is the first of several confrontations between God

and God's human creations in which both parties seek to understand the potential and the pitfalls of life on the earth God has created. The woman plays a central role in this transgression, yet the text holds both the woman and the man equally responsible.

1. Read Genesis 2:25–3:7, which describes how the woman and the man come to eat the fruit of the tree in the middle of the Garden of Eden.
 - a. The word *arumim* (“naked”) in 2:25, which describes the human couple, sounds like the word *arum* in 3:1 (“cunning”), which describes the serpent. Although these are different words, what can we understand from the wordplay that results from their proximity to each other in the text?
 - b. The narrator in the text tells us in 3:1 that the serpent speaks to the woman. When the serpent begins to address the woman, it speaks in the plural (“You [plural] may not”), yet only the woman responds. In your view, what is the significance of the serpent speaking in the plural here?
 - c. Compare what the text says regarding human beings and the fruit in the Garden of Eden in 2:17, 3:2, and 3:22. As you compare these verses, notice who is speaking and to whom. How might you account for the discrepancies between these verses? In your view, what role might the serpent’s question to the woman in 3:1 play in her response to the serpent?
 - d. What new information do 3:4–5 provide about the consequences of eating the prohibited fruit? How is this confirmed in 3:22?
 - e. What motives does the text ascribe to the man for eating the fruit? At what point in these verses do we learn that the man is with the woman? According to the Central Commentary, how do earlier translations of verse 6 differ from the present one? What is the impact on the reader if the phrase “who was with her” is left out? How does Genesis portray the culpability of the woman and the man?
 - f. What do we learn from these verses about the type of fruit that is prohibited? The only fruit specified in the narrative is in 3:7, which refers to the fig leaves the woman and man sew together to make skirts for themselves. How does the absence of a specific type of fruit contrast with what later traditions espouse?
 - g. According to the Central Commentary, how is the woman a bringer of civilization in these verses rather than a bringer of death? What does Carol Meyers’ observation about the role of women in Israelite agrarian families help you to understand about the woman as the giver of the fruit? How do these interpretations change your perception of this biblical story?
 - h. How does the text present the immediate consequence of the woman and man eating the fruit (3:7)? How does the word “naked” in this verse

compare with its use in 2:25? What is the impact of repeating this word at this point in the narrative?

2. Read Genesis 3:8–13, which describes God’s confrontation with the man and woman in the Garden of Eden after they eat the fruit.
 - a. In your view, why do the man and woman hide themselves (v. 8) when they hear God walking in the Garden?
 - b. What is your interpretation of the question God asks the man in verse 9? In your view, why does God direct this question to the man and not to the woman?
 - c. How does the man respond to the questions God asks in verse 11? What does this reflect about his character?
 - d. How does the woman respond to God’s question in verse 13? What does she communicate in her response?
 - e. The next section outlines the repercussions of the human beings’ actions. How do you think the responses of the man and woman will influence God’s reactions?

3. Read Genesis 3:14–19, which describes the consequences God metes out to the serpent, man, and woman for their transgressions.
 - a. What is the primary difference between the way God frames the consequences for the snake (v. 14) and for the human beings (vv. 16–17)? How does this comparison help you to understand who God holds most culpable for the transgression?
 - b. Compare the pronouncements God makes to the woman (v. 16) and to the man (vv. 17–19). What are the similarities and differences?
 - c. According to the Central Commentary, older translations (and some recent ones as well) of the phrase translated here as “your toil and pregnancies” (v. 16) support the notion that the woman’s culpability is greater than that of the man. In what ways do these older translations place greater responsibility on the woman for the transgression? How is “toil” a more appropriate translation for the Hebrew *itzavon* than “your pangs in childbirth” or “your pains in pregnancy”? What does the translation of *itzavon* as “toil” help us to understand about the work in which women in ancient Israel were engaged?
 - d. In what ways does the woman’s “desire” (v. 16) place her under the man’s control? What is the relationship between a woman’s “desire” and the pronouncement that the man “shall rule over you”? How have both Jewish and Christian traditions misread these words?
 - e. How does the phrase “the soil is now cursed” (v. 17) serve as an etiology (explanation of origin) that explained to Israelite farmers the conditions

of the land they farmed? How does the word *itzavon* (“anguish”) emphasize the conditions Israelite farmers faced? How does its use in this verse compare with its use in verse 16?

4. Read “Another View” by Carol Meyers (pp. 27–28).
 - a. According to Meyers, how is the usual translation of Genesis 3:16 (“your pains in [or: of] pregnancy) problematic?
 - b. Based on Meyers’ interpretation, how does the translation “I will greatly increase your toil and your pregnancies” more accurately reflect both the Hebrew wording and the agrarian lives of the ancient Israelites?
 - c. According to Meyers, how does the phrase “to your man is your desire” reveal the conflict between women’s sexual passion toward their spouses and their reluctance to face numerous pregnancies?
 - d. How can we more broadly understand the phrase “and he shall rule over you” in 3:16?
 - e. How does Genesis 3:16 serve as an etiology, according to Meyers?
5. Read the passage on “And to the woman [God] said” in *Post-biblical Interpretations* by Judith R. Baskin (p. 29).
 - a. According to *Avot D’Rabbi Nathan* B 42, what additional punishments did Eve receive? How do these punishments reflect the Rabbis’ views of who was responsible for the expulsion from the Garden of Eden? How does the rabbinic treatment of Eve compare with the biblical account?
 - b. In your view, how did such ideas, which are widespread in rabbinic literature, influence Jewish and Christian views of women?
6. Read “A God Once Commanded Us” by Lea Goldberg, in *Voices* (p. 33).
 - a. How does the poet’s image of the “tree of life” compare with the use of this phrase in Genesis 2:9? How does God’s command in the Genesis text differ from the one imagined by the poet?
 - b. How do you understand who is waiting and for what they are waiting in the poem’s first stanza?
 - c. What is revealed to those waiting under the tree “on the day of secret reckoning”?
 - d. In your view, why does the poem’s protagonist take “a few steps only” on her “day of freedom”? What does she find once she takes these steps? In your view, why does the poet shift at this point in the poem from the plural to a singular protagonist?
 - e. Can you think of a time in your own life when freedom felt like “a cold wind blowing”? What helped you to take the steps you needed to take?

OVERARCHING QUESTIONS

As you study these parts of the *parashah*, keep in mind the following overarching questions. If time permits, conclude the class with these broader questions:

1. The story of creation in *parashat B'reishit* is one with which most people are familiar and one that many people think they know. What assumptions did you have about the creation story prior to this study of the text? How did these assumptions influence your views of the biblical creation narrative as well as your views of how the text presents the creation of human beings? In what ways has your understanding of the creation narrative changed as a result of this text study? Can you think of a situation in your own life when you held certain views based on assumptions that you later found were not accurate? How did being presented with a broader view help you achieve a fuller understanding of the situation?
2. It is possible to see the woman and man's transgression in Genesis 3 as a warning against what the Central Commentary calls "premature knowledge." In what ways can "premature knowledge" be hazardous? Can you think of a time in your own life when you were not equipped to handle certain facts? If you are a parent, what are the challenges you faced or are facing in shielding your children from "premature knowledge"?

CLOSING QUESTIONS

1. What new insight into the Torah did you gain from today's study?
2. What other new insights did you gain from this study?
3. What questions remain?



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