

Creation

THE STORY OF BEGINNINGS



Michael Scharf Publication Trust
Yeshiva University Press



Jonathan Grossman

בְּרֵאשִׁית
CREATION
THE STORY OF BEGINNINGS

The Noam Series

Translated by Sara Daniel

The Michael Scharf Publication Trust of
Yeshiva University Press

Maggid Books

Creation: The Story of Beginnings

First English Edition, 2019

Maggid Books

An imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.

POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA

& POB 4044, Jerusalem 9104001, Israel

www.maggidbooks.com

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Cover art: *4 Seasons*, by Ofra Friedland (ofrafriedland.com)

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ISBN 978-1-59264-503-9, *hardcover*

A CIP catalogue record for this title is
available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the United States

The Noam Series
is dedicated to the memory of
Dr. Noam Shudofsky z"l
by his family and friends

Noam loved the study of Tanakh
and enabled generations of students to
*“Understand and discern, to listen, learn and teach, to observe,
perform and fulfill all the teachings of the Torah with love.”*

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Foreword

In Jewish tradition, *peshat* or “plain sense” exegesis is often regarded as a gold standard for interpreting the Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*). Much ink has been spilled defining *peshat* exegesis. By now it is clear that *peshat* is not simply “the literal sense.” After all, the Bible – like any literary work – often employs figurative language. Is *peshat* the “original intention”? Is it the way the text was understood by its original audience? Is it the sense determined through philological analysis? How does *peshat* relate to midrash? These questions can hardly be answered in this context. Yet they are relevant to consider when reading Jonathan Grossman’s *Creation: The Story of Beginnings*, which to my mind illustrates the potential richness of *peshat* interpretation in a contemporary setting. Firmly rooted in the multi-faceted tradition of *parshanut hamikra* (Jewish Bible interpretation), this work also engages fully with modern scholarship while opening new avenues in understanding the cultural-religious significance of the Hebrew Bible. Through Grossman’s insightful and often creative literary analysis, we are made to appreciate ethical and theological dimensions of the first eleven chapters of the Torah in the spirit of “the way of *peshat*” prized in Jewish tradition.

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For some readers it may be surprising to associate *peshat* with theology, ethics, or even contemporary applications of the ancient text of Scripture. It may also seem unusual to characterize *peshat* as a creative form of interpretation. All of these are features typically associated with midrash. Indeed, Jonah Fraenkel, a contemporary scholar of rabbinic literature, avers that *peshat* is a type of interpretation largely devoid of creativity since it aims to reveal only the original meaning of the Bible. On the other hand, *derash* or *darshanut* is innovative by definition, as it connects Scripture to new ideas with contemporary religious relevance. As noted by James Kugel, the Rabbis of the midrash did not view the Bible as a book of history, but rather a “Book of Instruction” for readers in all ages, teaching them how to behave and think – in ways not necessarily connected to the original meaning.

Yet recent scholarship of the tradition of Jewish interpretation has shown that there are seventy faces to *peshat* – which, in fact, calls for exegetical creativity and innovation. The great *pashtan* Rashbam reports that his grandfather Rashi was revolutionary in introducing a *peshat* program within Ashkenazic learning. More importantly, Rashi also acknowledged “the *peshat* interpretations that newly emerge every day” (*hapeshatot hamithadeshim bekholyom*) – further interpretive innovations within his circle of students and beyond. (See Rashbam’s commentary on Genesis 37:2.) As Rashbam, and perhaps even Rashi before him, came to learn, other schools of *peshat* interpretation had already emerged in faraway centers of Jewish learning in the Muslim East, in Spain, and in the Byzantine orbit. The multiplicity of *peshat* rather than its singularity was already evident in the formative medieval period – and continues to this day.

Indeed, modern critical theory questions the very notion that “the text itself” ever has a singular meaning. As the British literary critic Frank Kermode has remarked, “the plain sense... must be of the here and now rather than of the origin,” since “the body of presuppositions which determines our notions of the plain sense is always changing.” The plain sense thus depends on the imaginative activity of interpreters who provide Scripture with a variety of contexts, some imposed by authority and tradition, others by the need to make sense of the ancient text in a different world (“The Plain Sense of Things,” *Midrash and Literature*,

ed. G. H. Hartman and S. Budick [New Haven 1986], 190–191). While *peshat* exegesis aims, in some sense, to illuminate an original meaning, it also necessarily bridges chronological and cultural gaps between the Bible and its readers.

Both the classical tradition of Jewish *peshat* interpretation and modern critical theory inform Jonathan Grossman's *Creation: The Story of Beginnings*. This rich and highly learned volume also incorporates midrashic material, modern Bible scholarship, and contemporary Jewish thought. Grossman extracts new meaning from the biblical text, drawing upon the words of the sages and the great medieval commentators, such as Ibn Ezra and Nahmanides, both of whom recognized the symbolic dimensions of the opening chapters of Genesis. Grossman lays the theoretical groundwork for his readings of Genesis 1–11 by discussing the representational nature of the Creation, Eden, and Flood narratives, which “depict ... the raw materials, the basic elements, of our familiar world as they come into being.” In the opening chapters of Genesis, as Grossman observes, we witness “a world where primal boundaries have not yet been stabilized, where giants walk and terrorize all around.” These chapters are “the stuff of myth and legend, of a wild prehistorical age, where heaven seeps into earth, and men live for centuries alongside giants. The world has not yet been tamed into the familiar, natural, mostly realistic setting of the rest of the Bible.” Maimonides advanced this sort of approach in the twelfth century, drawing upon rabbinic learning and Greco-Arabic philosophical and literary conceptions; Grossman offers a twenty-first-century account using the tools made available by contemporary scholarship and the rich Jewish tradition.

According to Grossman's reading, the opening narratives of Genesis depict humanity gradually achieving independence from God – a theme that continues throughout the Book of Genesis, as Grossman himself has argued in earlier published works. While the lineage of Abraham becomes the focus of Genesis from chapter 12 onward, its first chapters “are universal stories, and there is therefore room for comparison between biblical etiology and parallel stories from the ancient Near East that depict the creation of the world and humanity.” Within these stories Grossman finds universal messages in the Bible relevant for all of humanity.

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A fine example of Grossman's insightful reading of the biblical narrative relates to the Garden of Eden episode, which endows the familiar story with new meaning through literary-structural analysis. According to Grossman, it is a "story of autonomy achieved by rebellion," through which every person stakes his or her own path, becoming "aware of his or her own body and its mortality." Grossman cites Sigmund Freud, who describes how an individual achieves freedom from the authority of his parents at the cost of the pain of independence. Within this reading, the serpent represents an internal voice aroused within mankind – bringing him out of the innocence of childhood into turbulent adolescence. Placed at the Tree of Knowledge, the serpent invites Eve to become "like God, knowing Good and Evil." Were it not for the serpent, Eve would not have even taken notice of the forbidden tree. The serpent induces her to perceive its bold, bright colors – and succumb to their temptation.

Adam and Eve believed that rebelling against God by eating the forbidden fruit would bring them independence, autonomy, and control over their own lives. Their punishments, however, reveal the harsh truth adolescents inevitably learn as they become adults: freedom comes at the cost of the heavy – sometimes even crushing – burden of adult responsibilities. Rebellion leads to a new sort of enslavement, not the absolute liberation initially imagined. Informed by the perspective of modern psychology, Grossman offers the following paraphrase of the biblical text:

Woman will long for man, and he will rule over her; man will toil away at the earth, and reap in sorrow for the rest of his life. Woman's freedom is handed over to others; man no longer controls the ground that he must work and keep, and it will bring forth thorns and thistles along with man's hard-earned bread. The serpent's promise of godlike power and freedom is eclipsed by the daily struggle of survival this freedom exacts.

And as Grossman concludes:

In this narrative, maturity is presented as a painful process.... Knowledge comes at a heavy price, shattering the child's world

of blissful ignorance. The rebellious teenager leads himself to a world tainted with sin and burdened with toil, but the ground is waiting for him, waiting for him to break the crust of the soil and tease out its fruits . . .

In this way, the Garden of Eden plays a dual role in the narrative: it is a physical site, the source of four mighty rivers and the setting of humanity's first drama, but it also functions as a symbolic site that every person passes through over the course of his or her development.

Grossman here echoes Nahmanides, who wrote that "the Garden of Eden exists somewhere in this world," along with "the four rivers and the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge," since "everything appearing in Scripture in the Creation section is true in its literal sense." Yet Nahmanides goes on to say that "the matters are twofold in meaning": they "all are literal (*kemashma'am*) . . . true and firmly established, but also are written to convey a wondrous mystery (*sod*)" (*Kitvei Ramban*, Chavel ed., II:295–297). Nahmanides in the thirteenth century evinced the symbolic meaning of the Creation narrative through Kabbalah. Grossman does so using tools provided by contemporary scholarship and thought – both Jewish and non-Jewish.

The serpent in the Garden has long been identified with the "evil inclination" (*yetzer hara*) in Jewish (and Christian) tradition. Grossman's nuanced reading of this myth-like creature is based more directly on Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook's depiction of the "evil inclination hidden deep in the depths of the soul" as "a bone-rotting envy that drenches any hint of light in dismal darkness." This "is *envy of God*," as "humanity envies God for His infinite joy, His absolute perfection. This envy," continues Rabbi Kook, "distorts reason and plunges sense into darkness . . . It results in utter heresy" (*Shemona Kevatzim*, 1:129). Grossman takes this "heresy" as a reference to Nietzsche, for whom the ideal man (*Übermensch*; "over-man" or "super-man") must break the shackles of religion, effectively replacing God. Yet Rabbi Kook's characterization implies a spark of light in this darkness, since the desire to be "like God" is a creative force that at once is the source of rebellion and idealism. As Grossman writes:

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Moved by the serpent's words, the woman sees the tree through new eyes. It is now seen as a source of temptation, hiding a promise within. This promise is the promise of "becoming like God." Each and every teenager effectively aspires to be like God, to be unlimited, all powerful, unstoppable, and, at the same time, perfect, magnanimous, idealistic.

This psychological insight about the teenage spirit speaks to us vividly in the twenty-first century and infuses the Garden of Eden narrative with new and contemporary significance.

The Torah was given at Sinai over three thousand years ago. The Genesis narratives held profound religious meaning for their original audiences living in the ancient Near East. Two thousand years ago the *Tanakh* would become a source of support, inspiration, and guidance for the Jewish people throughout their long exile. In modern times, with the advent of the State of Israel, the *Tanakh* relates to the Jewish people, both in its homeland and in the Diaspora, in yet other new ways. Representing the best of modern Israeli scholarship, Grossman's literary-theological analysis exemplifies what Rashi referred to as "the *peshat* interpretations that newly emerge every day."

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Preface

Chapters 1–11 of Genesis are as mysterious as they are familiar; a secret dimension always seems to be hiding beneath their well-known surface. These primordial tales of beginning are both seed and root of everything that follows after, and they offer a glimpse of what was before – of the how and why of existence itself.

A book devoted to a literary analysis of these stories, therefore, can hardly avoid delving into issues of theology, psychology, philosophy, and religious experience. While these questions do accompany the narrative analysis in this work, I have attempted to extrapolate them from the text itself and the subtle hints in its narrative design. This methodology is born from the simple – some might say naïve – motive of unearthing the narrative’s own intentions: to detect, with the limited tools and capacity of the interpreter, the text’s own cues, and to be guided by them. At the same time, my adherence to the text is also due to more practical limitations; a deep philosophical exploration of the first few verses of the Creation narrative could easily fill more pages than the present work. For these reasons, the reader may sometimes be left with the impression of a rough sketch rather than a full-blown landscape. Please consider the following discussions an invitation to deeper exploration of each biblical scene.

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Genesis 1–11 paints the challenging portrait of a lost world, a once-mighty world swept away by the sins of humanity and built anew. The literary structure of this section draws a parallel between the old world and the new world, a parallel that invites close scrutiny of humanity's role in the world and its relationship with its environment and God. The very notion of a first divine attempt and its failure designates humanity's free will as the crowning glory of this section. Humanity has the power to do as it sees fit, and God Himself is forced to shape history through these actions. Yet at the same time, this section hints again and again at the limits of human power, at how pushing the boundaries too far brings about self-destruction. Through this piercing tension the world progresses; it may even emerge that the key to progress is enclosed in a husk of sin, so that new paths are breached as the sinners themselves are destroyed by inevitable punishment.

This book was written in memory of Dr. Noam Shudofsky (1933–2005), an accomplished man whose entire life was devoted to the world of Jewish education, both formal and informal. Noam began his career as a Bible teacher and advanced to become the administrator of the Ramaz School of Manhattan for approximately forty dedicated years. He was extraordinarily devoted to the students, faculty, and administration. His love for the Bible did not wane even after he was no longer actively teaching, and he was especially drawn to the literary approach of Bible study, an approach embraced by this work. Judaism was an inextricable part of his identity, and he held that every person must fulfill himself not only in an intellectual sense, but in life itself. And indeed, Noam was deeply involved in the international Jewish community with a love for the State of Israel. His intense efforts – both overt and covert – for the plight of Soviet Jewry, who were persecuted solely because of their Judaism, deserve special mention. Writing this book in his memory was a singular privilege for me, and I was also privileged to become acquainted with his entire family, people whose lives are deeply rooted in love of Torah and love of humanity, and imbued with humility and devotion.

This past year saw the passing of Dr. Shudofsky's beloved wife, Nechi, and it is with sorrow that we devote this book to her memory as well. Her warmth and generosity enveloped me from our first encounter, and I am glad that I was able to present her with this book in its original Hebrew.

With great pleasure, I wish to thank everyone who helped bring this book to light, from its first conception to its final design. First and foremost, I wish to thank my dear friend Binny Shalev, who made this journey together with me, a journey that taught me so much about humility and kindness. We were accompanied on our journey by Rabbi Dr. Itamar Eldar, whose contributions to the ideas expressed in this work were indispensable.

Translating a work of literary analysis is a complex task; literary analysis requires careful attention to each word and its nuances and connotations, and the challenge of rendering an analysis written in one language into another language speaks for itself. To my great pleasure, Sara Daniel undertook this task, and did it well. I am grateful for her literary sensitivity and keen knowledge of Bible study, and I thank her with all my heart.

I am privileged to send this book out into the world through Maggid Books, as part of their Maggid Tanakh Companions series. Matthew Miller and Rabbi Reuven Ziegler have brought about a revolution in Tanakh study, setting new standards for the rare, often incompatible combination of accessibility and caliber in the world of Jewish publishing. I thank them both for their dedication and ambition, and I hope Maggid Books will continue to soar.

This book has been published through the cooperation of Maggid Books and the Michael Scharf Publication Trust of Yeshiva University Press. This reflects the work's ambition to speak in two dialects, appealing to scholars and *Ohavei Torah* alike. These worlds do not contradict each other; on the contrary, at their best they enrich each other.

Special thanks go to Rabbi Dr. Stu Halpern, the Senior Advisor to the Provost of Yeshiva University, who oversaw this book's publication from Yeshiva University's end. His expertise and broad experience made every consultation a creative, original learning experience, and I thank him for his friendship and partnership. My appreciation is also extended to Dr. Mordechai Cohen for his foreword to this book. His broad, profound experience in Jewish Bible interpretation is like none other, and I am honored that his words serve as a gateway for my own.

My sincere thanks also go to Maggid's dedicated publication team: assistant editors Shira Finson and Tomi Mager, whose generosity and professionalism guided this book's publication from start to finish; and to Aryeh Sklar and Debbie Ismailoff, who worked diligently and thoroughly

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on the book's language editing and proofreading – I am indebted to them for their careful attention to detail.

Last but not least, of course, thanks are due to my wife and children, who accompany me on every journey into the world of reading, writing, and study, who so patiently and so fruitfully hear out every thought and dilemma, who color every ordinary day with joy.

יבואו כולם על הברכה.

Jonathan Grossman

Tishrei 5779

Introduction

REALITY AND SYMBOLISM

Everything follows its beginning,”¹ quotes Rabbi Haim Vital in the name of Rabbi Isaac Luria, the Ari, and even without delving into deep kabbalistic secrets, we intuitively feel its truth in many realms of our lives. The root of something reveals much about its nature, and exposing its point of origin often illuminates its entire process. This is certainly true when we shift our gaze to how the world came into being, indeed how being itself began. These primeval narratives reveal the nature of the world and its purpose, and the nature of humanity and man’s role in the world. At the same time, they reveal those first primordial conflicts and failures that are imprinted deep, deep within the world’s formation and being.

The primordial nature of these narratives affects their style and design. The first eleven chapters of Genesis are clearly distinct from the rest of Genesis and the Bible as a whole, in regard to their content, style, and atmosphere. Beginning with God’s revelation to Abraham in chapter 12, the narrative takes on the classic biblical historical style. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are realistic, fleshed-out characters, whose lives resemble the paths our own lives take. While most of us, of course, are not approached by God, or even

1. Rabbi Haim Vital, *Etz HaHayim*, 4:4.

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visited by angels, such interactions are a normal part of the biblical narrative, and they are an integral part of the more routine aspects of the forefathers' lives, such as birth, marriage, and death. This kind of biblical realism is not present in Genesis 1–11. These narratives present an entirely different biblical reality. For example, when the serpent opens up its mouth and speaks to the woman in the Garden of Eden, she is not surprised, and casually responds. In contrast, when Balaam is addressed by his donkey, the narrator explains that this is a miracle, that “God opened up its mouth,” and Balaam recoils in shock, just as we would if we were to witness it ourselves. The serpent’s capacity for speech, however, seems part of life in Eden, and loss of speech is not mentioned as part of its punishment, which implies that the text views its uncanny ability to speak as nothing unusual.

Nahmanides notes this phenomenon and views it as proof that the serpent is also a symbol of something mystical:

Know, believe, that the Garden of Eden is within the Land, and so is the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge, and from there the river flowed out and separated into four rivers we are familiar with, for the Euphrates is in our own land and within our own borders, and the Pishon is the Nile of Egypt, as the sages say. But while they are on earth, they all have heavenly counterparts, which are their elemental counterpart, as it says, “Let the king bring me into his chamber”.... These are the chambers of Eden, from here they said, the work of the heavens is like the work of the Garden of Eden (Song of Songs Zuta 1:4). The rivers are parallel to the four heavenly camps, from where the powers of earthly rule are drawn... and the serpent does not have the power of speech today, and if it had in the first place it disappeared with its curse, for it was the fiercest curse of all! But all these are double entities, truly revealed and secret together.²

Nahmanides emphasizes that not only can the serpent be read as a mystic symbol, but also the rivers, and the entire narrative.

2. Nahmanides on Gen. 3:22.

While the sages made various attempts to identify the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge as actual species, suggesting that the forbidden fruit was either the citron, the fig, wheat, or grapes, the most straightforward reading is that of Ibn Ezra:

Many hold that the Tree of Knowledge was a fig tree, as they “sewed fig leaves.” However, if this was so, it would have read this way: “And they sewed the leaves of the Tree of Knowledge.” Many also say that it was wheat. I believe that these two trees were inside the Garden of Eden, and cannot be found anywhere else on earth.³

As we will see below, Ibn Ezra is generally wary of charging the text with symbolism, but his approach towards the Tree applies to the wider context of the story, which is painted in the bold, bright colors of ancient myth.⁴ This is a vastly different palette than the realistic shades of the rest of the Bible.

This is true not only of the Eden narrative, but of the rest of the stories in this section. The Creation narrative depicts the raw materials, the basic elements, of our familiar world as they come into being; the Flood narrative paints a world immersed in primal waters, a world where primal boundaries have not yet been stabilized, where giants walk and terrorize all around.⁵ This is the stuff of myth and legend, of a wild prehistorical age, where heaven seeps into earth,

3. Ibn Ezra on Gen. 3:6.

4. On symbolic readings about the Eden narrative, see the comprehensive discussion of Terje Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden: Genesis 2–3 and Symbolism of the Eden Garden in Biblical Hebrew Literature* (Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology 25: Leuven, 2000), 81–104. This is recognized in traditional commentary; see Deborah Schechterman, “The Doctrine of Original Sin in the Jewish Philosophy of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries,” *Daat* 20 (1988): 65–90; T. Horowitz, “The Garden of Eden Story (Genesis 3) – Reality or Parable? – an Interdisciplinary Debate,” *Sha’anani* 9 (2004): 39–88.

5. It is worth mentioning that in ancient Near Eastern records, the ages of ancient kings who ruled before the Flood are much more advanced than the ages recorded in the Bible. In those records, kings lived around thirty thousand years, and some even lived as long as 72,000 years. The difference between the Sumerian royal dynasties

and men live for centuries alongside giants.⁶ The world has not yet been tamed into the familiar, natural, mostly realistic setting of the rest of the Bible.

This does not mean, of course, that the first chapters of Genesis are tantamount to the myths of the ancient world. In fact, a comparison with myths from other cultures reveals yawning disparities, not only in content but in moral and theological premise and atmosphere.⁷ Yet, these first stories should be read as a unique biblical genre in themselves, as stories that predate and illuminate familiar history, its premises, and its purpose.

This paradigm has several implications. I especially wish to focus on the question of interpreting these stories as vehicles of symbolic meaning. This substantial question can be applied generally to the rest of the Bible as well: When should something be read as a symbol for a more abstract concept?

This question is exemplified in a fascinating midrashic debate about the Burning Bush, in the form of a dialogue between R. Yehoshua b. Karha and “a certain non-Jew”:

A certain non-Jew asked R. Yehoshua b. Karha, “Why did the Holy One, blessed be He, decide to speak to Moses from within a bush?”

and the biblical genealogies is that Genesis presents the names of people, not rulers, and Genesis’ purpose is religious, not political, as claimed by Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis* (NAC: Nashville, 1996), vol. 1, 98.

6. While Nahum Sarna is correct that the description of the tributaries of the rivers flowing out of Eden – Euphrates and Tigris – give a realistic sense (Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* [The Heritage of Biblical Israel Series 1: New York, 1966], 25), there is much more actual real geographic information provided in the rest of the Bible, which highlights the meta-territorial, unrealistic nature of Eden even more (compare in Yairah Amit, “Biblical Utopianism: A Mapmaker’s Guide to Eden,” *USQR* 44 [1990]: 11–17). Moreover, the names and descriptions of the other two rivers lend a fairy-tale quality to the episode.
7. See a general survey of connections and disparities in Mathews, *Genesis*, vol. 1, 86–101. Yehezkel Kaufmann devoted impressive efforts to the essential differences between pagan myth and Genesis 1–11 (Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* [Jerusalem, 1953], vol. 1, 303–350), and see further below.

He said to him, “Had it been from a carob or sycamore, you would have asked the same question. But as I cannot leave you without an answer, why from a bush? To teach you that there is nowhere without Divine Presence, even a bush.”⁸

The fact that the Midrash places this question in the mouth of a non-Jew undermines its legitimacy. R. Yehoshua’s initial response cautions against loading symbolic meanings onto narrative elements. Yet his next statement is somewhat confusing. Why does he feel compelled to further answer him if he believes that the bush does not necessarily have symbolic meaning in itself? Moreover, his answer is a typical midrashic didactic answer, one without any show of contempt for the questioner. And strangest of all, this midrash is part of a series of midrashim where various sages ask the very same question as that non-Jew and propose various answers, and the midrash itself goes on to list *eight* different explanations that charge the Burning Bush with symbolism. To cite just two of them:

- R. Yoḥanan: Just as the bush serves as a fence for a garden, Israel serves as a fence for the world.
- Another option: Just as a bush can flourish only with water, Israel can flourish only with the Torah, which is called water, as it says [regarding the word of God], “All who are thirsty, come to the water” (Is. 55:1).

The logical flow of this midrash, therefore, has a keen effect, where the initial impression is that this question lacks legitimacy, but is then swiftly echoed and thereby legitimized by Israel’s own sages. While the question of when and whether narrative elements can be ascribed a symbolic meaning exceeds the scope of this discussion,⁹ in the context of Genesis 1–11, this issue has special weight. I wish to recall Nahmanides’ interpretation of the serpent in Eden in light of the polar debate between medieval commentators.

8. Exodus Rabba 2:5.

9. See further in Jonathan Grossman, *Text and Subtext: On Exploring Biblical Narrative Design* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 2015), 15–33.

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Rabbi Obadiah Sforno begins his commentary of the Eden narrative with a declaration that the serpent is merely a metaphor:

The serpent is the devil, the evil inclination For some entities are described in ways that are similar to it, just like the king is called a “lion,” as it says, “The lion has come up from its copse” (Jer. 4:7), and dangerous enemies are called “poisonous serpents,” as it says, “I am about to unleash poisonous serpents against you” (Jer. 8:17). In the same way, the Omnipresent refers to the enticing Evil Inclination as a “serpent,” because it is similar to the serpent, whose benefit is minimal and whose harm is great.¹⁰

Following the sages, Sforno identifies the serpent with the devil, with the evil inclination. Note, however, that he is not merely claiming that the evil inclination is *like* a serpent. Rather, he considers the serpent an actual metaphor, and its narrative a parable. Just as a king is referred to as a lion, or an enemy is likened to a snake, without any real lions or snakes involved, the evil inclination is referred to as a serpent in this narrative, without any actual serpents present in the scene. The advantage of this reading is that it easily justifies the serpent’s human speech and intelligence, and the fact that it lures the woman to sin, since real serpents do not speak any human language, nor lure people to sin.

In contrast to Sforno, the Ibn Ezra writes:

Some say that the woman understood the language of animals . . . while others said it is the devil. But then how can they explain the end of the scene? How will “the devil” crawl on his belly, and eat dust? And what is the point of the curse “He will strike your head”? . . . Rather, it seems to me that things are as they are, and the serpent originally walked upright, and He who made humans sentient beings also made it a sentient being. As the verse itself testifies, it was craftier than any other creature, just not as much as a human.¹¹

10. Sforno on Gen. 3:1.

11. Ibn Ezra on Gen. 3:1.

Ibn Ezra is opposed to the idea that the serpent is an embodiment of the evil inclination, and he supports his position with the fact that the actual serpent – the familiar snake that crawls on its belly and bites people – is cursed at the end of the story. Why would such a curse be relevant if the serpent were merely a symbol of the evil inclination?

This dispute is a good example of the deliberation that accompanies the reading of the Eden narrative, and the first eleven chapters of Genesis in general. Do the regular rules of allegory apply, or does the unique mythical nature of these narratives invite a reading more heavily inclined towards symbolic understanding? Even those who believe that the historical narratives (beginning with Abraham) should be read as historical accounts with minimal symbolic weight must admit that the question is more complex when applied to Genesis 1–11.

I believe that a certain compromise can be reached between Ibn Ezra and Sforno. Sforno is correct that these narratives have substantial metaphorical weight; the creation account is not merely a historical event, but reflects a fundamental approach to reality. We will yet explore how the story of Eden takes place in every generation, within every individual. From this perspective, it is an archetypal narrative that certainly tends towards the allegorical. Yet these primeval stories are not merely theological allegory. If this were the case, its allegorical nature would presumably have been more obvious. And, with the exception of the Eden narrative, there are no scenes of a fantastical nature. These narratives function on the premise that they actually took place.

The solution lies in a simple semantic substitution with great implications: rather than the term “parable” or “allegory,” the appropriate term to use is “symbol.” Unlike a parable, which dissipates with interpretation, the literary symbol remains substantial, adding another layer of significance on top of the literal meaning of the text. To claim that the Burning Bush is a symbol does not negate its actual existence – its leaves and branches, its color and shape, its form. It only means that this bush, beyond its botanical existence, also represents certain abstract ideas. The same is true of the first eleven chapters of Genesis. To paraphrase the aforementioned words of Nahmanides, while these narratives take place on earth, they *also* have heavenly counterparts. Each historical event, and each element of these narratives, express certain abstract concepts as well.