

COMMENTARY ON GENESIS

Bereisheet בְּרֵאשִׁית In the Beginning “Return to Foundation”

Genesis 1:1-6:8
Isaiah 42:5-43:10 (A); 42:5-21 (S)

With the joy of celebrating the Fall high holidays and *Simchat Torah* immediately behind us, we now have the privilege of once again returning to the weekly Torah portions for regular spiritual nourishment. For Messianic Believers such as myself, who have been taking advantage of the discipline of consistent Torah study over the past decade (1995-2005), the arrival at “In the Beginning” presents yet another opportunity to dig deeper into the mysteries of God, but also important lessons for life. Genesis 1:1-3, as we all know, are some of not only the most well-known verses of the Bible, but they present us with a considerable degree of questions to be asked and subjects to be probed:

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.”

Also foundational for understanding the Holy Writ is the uniqueness that human beings possess among all of God’s creatures. This is established in *Bereisheet* when God asserts His intention to make the man and woman in His image:

“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:26-27, NRSV).

Much theological discussion and application has centered around the creation of people in God’s image, *b’tzelem Elohim* (בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים), precisely over human dignity, value, and the distinct abilities that we possess like sentient consciousness, a mind and reason, and complex memory—in contrast to the animals.¹ The Psalmist actually describes that humanity has been created a little lower than God, *not* a little higher than the animals:

¹ Editor’s note: For some useful discussions and subjects for consideration, consult Fazale Rana with Hugh Ross, *Who Was Adam? A Creation Model Approach to the Origin of Man* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2005), and J.P. Moreland & Scott B. Rae, *Body & Soul: Human Nature & the Crisis in Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000).

“What is man that You take thought of him, and the son of man that You care for him? Yet You have made him a little lower than God², and You crown him with glory and majesty! You make him to rule over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet” (Psalm 8:4-6).

God made us as His unique image-bearers so that we could not only reflect key attributes of Him as our Creator, **but also that He might commune with us** and demonstrate His great love and generosity to us. Even with the introduction of sin into our world, as we encounter in the first Torah portion, He has always demonstrated great bounty to His human creations (cf. Acts 14:15-17).

Wisdom and Light

I believe it is important to review the first five books of the Bible, the Torah (תּוֹרָה),³ if we want to please our Heavenly Father—but **most importantly** to know His plan and intentions for His Creation. The Jewish people, who were entrusted with the oracles of God (Romans 3:2), understood the need to *at least try* to understand the mind of God, and accordingly developed a systematic way of studying the Torah. Today’s broad Messianic community, aside from its many internal differences in emphasis in how the Torah may be approached or applied, on the whole still follows the annual Torah cycle. Jewish Believers who have recognized Yeshua as their Savior continue to partake of this edifying tradition from their upbringing, now being able to recognize the Messiah in the Torah. Non-Jewish Believers embracing their Hebraic Roots and being enriched by their heritage in Judaism, get to see how Moses’ Teaching foretells of the Lord Jesus and how He was truly Torah obedient. *The wisdom, in a repetitive study of this often overlooked part of the Bible, should be self-explanatory.*

Acknowledging the importance of the weekly Haftarah too is something which we can all benefit by, as God’s plan does not just involve the Books of Genesis-Deuteronomy, but continues in the Prophets and Writings. In this week’s corresponding Haftarah selection, the Prophet Isaiah makes it abundantly clear how God’s people—most exemplified in the ministry of the Messiah Yeshua—have a responsibility to be a light to the world and be conduits of His goodness to all:

“Thus says God the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and its offspring, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it, ‘I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you, and I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations, to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon and those who dwell in darkness from the prison. I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, nor My praise to graven images. Behold, the former things have come to pass, now I declare new things; before they spring forth I proclaim *them* to you’” (Isaiah 42:5-9; cf. Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47; 26:23).

² Heb. *m'at m'Elohim* (מֵעַט מֵאֱלֹהִים).

The Greek Septuagint did render this as *brachu ti par' angelous* (βραχύ τι παρ' ἀγγέλους) or “a little less than angels” (LXE), but nonetheless the lot of humanity is cast with the Heavenly host and not with the animals.

³ Also more commonly referred to as the Law of Moses, the Pentateuch, or the *Chumash*.

One term that our ministry will often employ, Moses’ Teaching, is derived from John Goldingay’s *Old Testament Theology: Israel’s Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003).

Followers of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—but most especially *Messiah followers*—are to be a light to the nations of the world. Yeshua said that we are to be out making disciples of Him (Matthew 28:19-21). With these as our primary responsibilities, would it not then be prudent to have a deeper working knowledge about the foundational building blocks of our faith, starting with the Torah?

I relish the opportunity to see what the Holy Spirit is going to teach me during my next journey through the Torah this year. Inevitably, I have discovered in past yearly readings that it is often never the same. After all, if we are diligently pursuing a closer relationship with the Almighty with all of our hearts, minds, souls, and strength—then where we are today in our respective walks with Him should be further along than from where we were one year ago. Hopefully, with each passing year (and this should be true even if you do not put as much concentration into the weekly Torah portions as I do) we have each grown more mature in our personal faith, and can increasingly handle a greater degree of God’s light within our hearts. This should be most especially present in our attitude and demeanor, and in how our love and affection are most concerned with the things of the Lord. The Apostle John details,

“The one who says he is in the Light and *yet* hates his brother is in the darkness until now. The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes. I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name's sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father. I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one. Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and *also* its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:9-17).

John describes three levels of maturation in a person’s walk with the Lord, defined in terms of: a child, a young person, and a parent. Those who are “little children” of the faith do know the Heavenly Father, but how far they have progressed in knowing His ways and His intention for their lives is uncertain. Those who are “young people” (NRSV) in the faith have matured to a point where they are able to overcome the Adversary, and they can take on a large degree of spiritual challenges. Those who are “fathers” or parents in the faith have matured to a place where they “know Him who has been from the beginning.” While this is a very high level of spiritual development, it doubtlessly includes a person who has been taught and disciplined from the Scriptures, and is able to understand what the Lord’s purposes are *from the beginning*. Such “parents” within the Body of Messiah have an important responsibility in teaching and mentoring the younger Believers in what it means to live a godly life.

The Severe Challenges of Sin

Much of the attention of those who read through *Bereisheet* (Genesis 1:1-6:8) is understandably focused on some of the issues and controversies of Genesis chs. 1-3. While

these things are important to consider, we should never overlook the main events of the Fall of humanity, the introduction of sin, and some of the immediate consequences of Adam and Eve's ejection from the Garden. And, for some reason or another, Messianic Torah readers can have a tendency to overlook the fact that with the birth of Cain and Abel, we see the definite example of at least one person who had some rather serious problems:

"Now the man had relations with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain, and she said, 'I have gotten a manchild with *the help of* the LORD.' Again, she gave birth to his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of flocks, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the LORD of the fruit of the ground. Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard. So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell. Then the LORD said to Cain, 'Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not *your countenance* be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it'" (Genesis 4:1-7).

The infamous account of Cain and Abel is the first recorded fratricide, as Cain's inability to control his urges caused him to murder his brother (Genesis 4:8-11). We can certainly speculate as to the specific circumstances or reasons as to why Cain murdered Abel, but the general circumstances are simply seen in the fact that every person is affected by the disastrous consequences of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit. A part of the curse issued against humanity to Eve was, "your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you" (Genesis 3:16b). When you look closer, this is not at all a good thing, as the Hebrew *teshuqah* (תִּשְׁוּקָה) or "**urge, craving, impulse**" (*CHALOT*),⁴ is precisely what appears in the Lord's admonition to Cain: "Sin couches at the door; its urge [*teshuqah*] is toward you, yet you can be its master" (Genesis 4:7b, NJPS). Just as the curse would inaugurate an ungodly battle of the sexes, with the woman wanting to dominate the man and the man wanting to control her—so does sin want to dominate all people, and people need to be able to control the influence of evil over their lives.

For all to read in the first Torah portion, as we encounter the Cain's violent and most heinous action against his own brother, Abel, is what can sometimes be **the epitome of unredeemed and sinful man**. Many Christian readers think that the reason Abel's offering from the flocks was accepted before the Lord (Genesis 4:4), but Cain's offering from the fruit of the ground was not accepted (Genesis 4:5), has to do with how a blood sacrifice is necessary to cover sin, and it is obvious that plants cannot do this. Yet as we encounter later in the Torah, various grain and cereal offerings, as well as those of oil and wine, become an important part of the Levitical institution and in the Ancient Israelites demonstrating their thanks to God for His provision. The Lord would not have rejected an offering of plants simply because they were plants.

What might be more notable is how Abel presented "the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions" (Genesis 4:4), and Cain only "brought an offering to the LORD of the fruit of the ground" (Genesis 4:3). This would mean that Abel gave God the finest of his flocks, and Cain may have given God some rather standard or even sub-standard produce.⁵

⁴ William L. Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, the Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1988), 396.

⁵ Cf. Nahum M. Sarna, "Genesis," in David L. Lieber, ed., *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2001), 25.

Lamentably, Cain did not understand how our Creator expects the best of us. But even more lamentably, Cain took God's disapproval of his offering before Him most personally, and he lashed out in great violence, slaying another of his own flesh and blood. He could have instead simply asked God for forgiveness, and made an effort to present the best of his crops at a future time.

In our human condition, we each have the potential to be as sinful as Cain. Thankfully, though, as we read the Scriptures and understand the history of our planet, none of us ever has to be like Cain or any of his successors. But in order not to fall into the pattern of Cain: **we must master sin.** We must each make the conscious choice to overcome any temptations or negative spiritual influences that surround us. If we are born again Believers filled up with the Holy Spirit, the ability to overcome the power of sin should be something that is accomplished much easier than some of the figures we encounter in the Scriptures, who either did not look to the Savior to come, or chose to reject Him when He arrived.

Recognizing this, perhaps we can better realize why the Jewish Rabbis often spend an inordinate amount of time referring to the good inclination versus the evil inclination in their teachings.⁶ Human beings need to choose good over evil! Even those who have recognized the salvation available in the Messiah Yeshua need to be disciplined, so that they can never fall prey to temptation. James the Just gives us a critical admonition we should never forget:

“Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic” (James 3:13-15).

Return to Foundation

One of the main reasons that I appreciate studying the Torah, on an annual basis, is because I know it challenges me not only to rest upon the foundation of our faith, but that I have to consider whether or not I have heeded its warnings. *Am I going to act like Cain? Will I be able to overcome a culture of sin, representing a culture of righteousness?* While there is a tendency at times to want to read a Torah portion like *Bereisheet* and find some ethereal or symbolic meanings in the Creation, the most important lessons to heed are often staring right at us from the text. How many of us fail to recognize these lessons, and are allowing some kind of sin or ungodliness get the better of us?

As we prepare to begin another year of focusing on the Torah, I encourage you to really seek the Lord and His ways. Do not settle for a mediocre level of spirituality, where you are only looking through the Holy Writ for information. **How can you better emulate what the Torah teaches?** How can you better understand God's plan from the beginning, and live forth as His light in a darkened world?

May we all take refuge in Him as we learn not only more about Him, *but as we learn to be closer to Him*, this year! Let us establish a right foundation, as we aim to accomplish His purposes and shine forth Yeshua's goodness and salvation in a world marred by sin.

⁶ BDB notes how the term *yetzer* (יֵצֵר) is used “in sense of impulse: יֵצֵר הַטּוֹב [*yetzer ha'tov*] and יֵצֵר הַרָע [*yetzer ha'ra*] of good and bad tendency in man” (Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979], 428).