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THE SEVEN-DAY STORY*

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That which is concealed belongs to the Lord our G-d, but that which is revealed belongs to us and our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this *torah*.

Deut. 29:28

According to an ancient story, the grandest music, the music made by the heavenly bodies as they trace out their proper paths, is not heard by us because, its sound being in our ears from the moment of birth and never failing, we cannot attend to it. Our condition with respect to the text we mean to study together is comparable: It is so familiar, even to those who have never turned to it, that a special effort is required to hear what it says. I therefore propose that we move very slowly, docilely, noticing especially the formal features, and curbing our impatient impulse to construe, appraise, summarize.

The first thing we notice is that the most frequently repeated unvarying word in the seven-day story is G-d: thirty-five times by my count.

Most verbs—hovering, saying, seeing, separating, calling or calling out to, making, placing, creating, blessing, giving, completing, abstaining from, hallowing—attach to G-d as their subject. Yet some of these verbs—dividing (vss. 6, 14, 18), making (vss. 1, 12)—are, so to say, “shared” between the Creator and his creatures; others—being fruitful, multiplying, filling—are shared between different types of creatures (vss. 22, 28); one, the word “rule,” though not strictly shared between, on the one hand, the greater and the lesser light of the fourth day, and on the other, the last creature of the sixth day—mankind masculine and feminine—yet seems almost shared because “dominion” (a different word also in the Hebrew) is assigned to the latter. Finally, though this shines through the King James version only by way of alliterative phrasing, in certain verses a peculiarly intimate connection between noun and verb is suggested,

*In these pages I adhere to the custom of not writing out G-d's name unless he is addressed (second person) rather than being talked about (third person).

sometimes through the use of a grammatical construction technically known as the cognate accusative.¹ Thus, in vs. 11 the earth is commanded to “grass grass” (*tadshe haarets deshe*), in vs. 20 the waters are commanded to “swarm swarms [of] living creatures” (*jishretsu hamajim sherets nefesh chajah*) and fowl are commanded to fly in the region between earth and the heavenly expanse (of *jeofef al haarets al pne rekia hashamaim*).

Thus far I have spoken of nouns and verbs. Next we observe a much more blatant feature of the text, its use of certain phrases as punctuating refrains, chief among these being “and there was evening and there was morning, one day, second day, third day . . .,” although the recurrent sequences of G-d’s seeing the goodness of his creature, setting it apart, giving it a name, or the curious “and it was so” (*vajehi chen*), which set off the “and it was evening. . . one day, second day, third day . . .” precisely because *they do not cumulate*,² are equally deserving of notice.

Let us now focus on the work of the first day, postponing for a while consideration of what might be meant by the opening verse.

G-d’s prime act is to call light into being, other things, or perhaps no-things—lack of form, lack of fullness, darkness, and water—having been mentioned (vs. 2) and being mentioned subsequently (vss. 4, 6ff, 9ff), yet if to be understood as “creatures,” dealt with as complementary creatures.

In the case of light (that ‘in the light of which’ we discriminate one thing from another?), G-d’s imperative is tantamount to the indicative without any mediating act or process, but this holds true for the creature of the day called *one* alone.

G-d looks upon his first creature, light, and notes the fact that it is good, as though to say that, while he made it, its goodness is seen by him as inherent.

Only after he has found it to be good does he separate it from the dark that had been on the face of the abyss. Thereupon the dark’s domain is shrunk to night-time. Nevertheless, strangely, the new creature, light, to which G-d called out “day” as though to assign it its province, is said to be *one* only after, or perhaps as a result of, first, the *commingling* of the new (light) with the seemingly old (dark) at *evening* and, second, the *discerning* of the new from old and old from new at *morning*.³

While the refrain “and it was evening and it was morning . . .” is

what makes the seven-day story a *story* with beginning, middle, and end, the refrain is sounded with a small variation on the day of light's creation: instead of being referred to ordinally, as first, it is spoken of cardinally, as one.⁴

Why?

One plausible reason, to which the medieval exegetes called attention, is that counting ordinally presupposes that the recurring unit has been fixed upon. To put this somewhat paradoxically, only in retrospect can the day called "one" be recognized as first in a series.

But there may be an additional reason: The day of light's creation may be called "one" to indicate that the work of that day is to be understood as *paradeigmatic*: vss. 2-5 are to be registered as furnishing the "basic beat" of the creation story. Just as in a poem, divergencies from the basic beat would not be heard nor their meaning sought if the beat were not reverberating in the hearer, so divergencies from the sequence "let there be; and it was; seeing as good; dividing new from old; calling of new and old by name" could not be noted and their sense appreciated if that sequence as it occurs in the description of the *one* day were not remembered and taken as standard for comparison.

Umberto Cassuto, from whose *Commentary on Genesis*⁵ I learned the slow-motion, emblematic reading to which I'm seeking to win you, after making a list of what was done on each day and studying the list, proposes something like the following arrangement of the seven days' works:

- | | | |
|---------------|---|---|
| 1. light | 2. sky as separator
between waters above
and waters below | 3. earth with its
skin of vegetation |
| 4. luminaries | 5. fish and fowl | 6. land animals and man |
| | 7. completion of the completed
through abstention from work
and the hallowing of the day
of abstention | |

This setting-out calls attention to the fact that the work of the fourth day pairs with that of the first, the work of the fifth day goes with that of the second, the work of the sixth day with that of the

third: On the second day the *locale* for fowl (the birds as “go-betweens”) was made and, although the water below the sky does not become fully itself until the third day, when the opposite of the wet, earth as dry, emerges as the result of the wet’s concentration, still the locale for fish is already about-to-be on the second day. Similarly, the third day’s work furnishes the locale for the sixth day’s creatures, animals and man. The luminaries of the fourth day clearly go with the light of the first day, although the principle of affiliation between them is not the same as that which binds the second to fifth and third to sixth, *unless*—following the clues to *genesis eis ousian*⁶ furnished by the *tadshe deshe* of vs. 11, *jishretsu sherets* of vs. 20, and *of jeofef* of vs. 20—these seeming mere *regions* of sky, sea, land are to be understood *on the pattern of light*, as a form of energy which, via verb, is to concreate into nouns. Wild as this reading may sound, vs. 24, where the earth is commanded to “send out” land animals after vs. 12 had shown that it could not, strictly, obey the command of “grassing grass,”⁷ and the sequence light (*or*), lighter (*meora*), to light (*lehair*) in vss. 3, 14, 15 respectively, may support it.

Mulling over Cassuto’s schema a little longer, it begins to look as if the seven-day story should be read as falling into three portions: the first three days, the second set of three, the day of abstention from work.

The principle that rules over the first set of three appears to be *separating* or *distinguishing*.⁸ It remains with us to the end, since the seventh day of abstention from work which concludes the work of creation is as distinct from the nothing before creation as the beats of rest in a musical composition are from the silence of no music and, whatever else may be meant by “hallowing,” the minimal Biblical idea of holiness is that the holy is something *set apart from* the common.⁹ Yet, *prima facie* at least, it seems as though another principle gets added from the fourth and pivotal day on, that of *movement*.¹⁰ It is by their recurrent patterned motions that the big and small lights and the stars serve as “signs” of days, and seasons, and years (vss. 14ff); and when the creation of the water animals and birds of the fifth day is described and that of the land animals and man on the next, a great variety of verbs of motion (swarm, fly, creep, tread down) is used, as if to emphasize both that it is as moving beings that the works of fourth, fifth, and sixth day are akin

and that they differ as their species of movement differ.

If you continue to study the Cassuto-inspired pattern on p. 92, you may find that there are also important affiliations between second and fourth, third and fifth, sixth and seventh, first and seventh days. And this prompts a major question: Could it be that the seven-day story with which Genesis opens uses time intervals and sequences musically rather than chronologically? Is the intent, perhaps, to convey *orders of affiliation* among the constituents of the visible world rather than to tell “what happened” at times t_1 , t_2 , t_3 ?

When, at the beginning of this essay, I said the Bible, like the music of the spheres, is *too familiar* for us to hear it, I meant, for example, that only by dint of “research” into non-Hebrew tales of Beginnings could the strongest argument in favor of such a musical reading of the seven-day story be appreciated.

Everybody knows that the Bible is chock-full of genealogies. Sometimes whole chapters are given over to recording that so-and-so begat so-and-so who, marrying this other, in turn begat. . . . But sexual affiliation and ancestral or sibling relations are reserved strictly for and only for human beings, whether dealt with as individuals, as clans, or as nations. In non-Biblical stories of Beginnings, however, the most prevalent method of conveying *order relations* is, precisely, genealogy. Some other symbol for connection, sequence, sub- and super-ordination had to be chosen by the Bible.

Temporality and hearing seem in the Bible to play the role of sexuality and seeing in, for instance, Greek tales.^{1 1} But musicality might be a better choice of words.

Let us now try to move from the preceding text phenomenology to interpretation. What does the seven-day story mean to teach the reader (or hearer, since the text is to be chanted) about G-d, man, and world?

G-d is the prime grammatical subject, but his nature and attributes are not explained. Only his deeds are reported. Not only are the theological epithets which the modern reader brings to the text *ab extra* (omnipotence, omniscience, benevolence) not mentioned;^{1 2} some features of the text to which I have called attention seem to block their application. For example, when on the second day G-d says “Let there be a firmament. . . and let *it* be a divisor. . . .” *this* “let there be,” unlike the first, is mediated by “G-d made” before it

issues in the designated creature, and the same holds true for the creative word spoken on every day except the first and, perhaps, the seventh. Does this not indicate some stay to the divine power?

Again, the refrain "and G-d saw that it was good," culminating in the sixth day's seeing of the totality of his creation and finding it "very good," seems to suggest that even G-d must look back upon his work's *outcome* to learn whether it is good and whether it is complete.

As for the attribute of benevolence, we may, indeed, by the Gospel principle of inference (Matthew 7:16f), conclude to it, seeing that it is only after G-d has found the issue of his work good that he permits the evening of commingling of new with old to set; but this is a conclusion.

We are, perhaps, given one further hint as to G-d's nature in relation to his creation: G-d did not choose to abstain from work until after he had made a being that was to be his image. Apparently, not until after there was *in* creation something that stands to G-d as big and little light and stars¹³ stand to Light did he regard creation as complete.

Yet what exactly G-d *meant* in saying "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness," what he intended man to be or to become, and to what extent the bi-sexual creature¹⁴ that comes to be is true to G-d's plan we are not (yet?) told. We *are* told, apparently in explanatory apposition to the beginning of vs. 26, that man is to have dominion (from a root that means "tread down" or "govern") over sea, air, and land animals, but since it is not as ruler but as creator that we learn of G-d in this opening chapter, there is something puzzling about this respect of likeness.

Another strange feature of vs. 26 has been noted for as long as the Bible has been studied, namely, that G-d says: "Let *us* make man in *our* image after *our* likeness." The plural can not betoken majesty since classical Hebrew lacks this type of construction.¹⁵ It has therefore been suggested that the plural verb and pronouns are the result of the fact that the Hebrew word for G-d consistently used in the seven-day story has a plural form (the standard masculine plural of the noun being *-im*). E. A. Speiser and others, pointing to analogies between the Akkadian creation epic *Enuma Elis* and the Biblical creation story,¹⁶ elaborate this hypothesis to mean that G-d, in saying "us," is addressing the Council of the Gods. Yet as the

medieval Jewish exegete Rashi points out (in response to a pious reading which seems to me just a different form of words for the modern impious one),¹⁷ verse 27 (where the verb *create* rather than *make* is used), reverts to the singular, as do the succeeding verses. Using what I observed earlier (p. 90) about the “being shared” of certain verbs, it makes better sense to understand this odd plural as expressing G-d’s invitation, addressed to his preceding works, to collaborate with him in the making of the creature which is to be their ruler.¹⁸ It is as though, from vs. 11 on, G-d is continually urging his creatures to burst into further fulness but helps out their insufficiency. Indeed, even earlier, in vs. 6, was not the sky to be, like G-d in vs. 4 end, a “dividor”?

Many of the things we are taught about man have already emerged in the course of the attempt to discern what is to be learned about G-d. But two features of the text have not as yet been brought into explicit focus.

The first, to which Leo Strauss among others called attention (in the lecture mentioned in footnote 10) is this: Though vs. 31 assures us that “all” that G-d had made, the “system of creation” if you will,¹⁹ is “very good,” yet two members of this system, the sky and mankind, are not each separately called good. Does this likeness between sky and man in terms of a shared lack tell us something about man?²⁰ And are we to infer that the indeterminateness of the creature that divides “up” from “down” (the sky as holding waters on high apart from the waters down below) and the indeterminateness of the creature that is to acquire knowledge of good and bad is somehow a condition for the outstanding excellence of creation as a whole?

The other requires registering the implications of vss. 28 and 29 being juxtaposed. Verse 28, as mentioned earlier, seems to say that one ingredient at least of man’s being made in the image of G-d is that he and he alone is assigned authority over the other moving creatures below the sky. Verse 29 tells us that this authoritative creature is to eat none of his “subjects” but, as vs. 30 continues to say, is to share the food of these subjects. Man and beast are designed to be vegetarian.²¹ Is not the implication that, whatever the nature of the authority which G-d assigned to mankind, however difficult it may be to make out G-d’s original design, human authority was not meant to be exploitative.²² Further, so long as we

adhere to the seven-day story, it appears that G-d's original intention was, at most, for mankind masculine to be the "big light" and mankind feminine to be the "little light," both rulers, but not of one another nor even of the stars.

What are we told about the world? Note, first, that no such word occurs. The dyad heaven-and-earth seems to take its place, G-d alone being one.

They have not always been as we now know them, articulated, populated, and integrated. Yet vs. 1 is quick to tell us, it is not Father Sky and Mother Earth to whom, as original Begetting Pair, we owe chief gratitude for fulness of being. There is One beyond them. This warding off of "natural piety" I take to be the true intent of the verse with which the Bible begins.^{2 3} I belabor the point to prevent the common misreading according to which the story runs: "The first things G-d created were heaven and earth. *Then* he created light. . . ." Such a reading obviously makes nonsense of the fact that later on we are told that the earth does not become distinct until the third day, while the heavens, as a separator, had been called into being on the second day.

Not only are sky and earth not the primordial couple, they were themselves not begotten, not did they and their parts emanate from G-d as in some philosophic theories, nor did they gradually come to be by the chance collision of atoms or what-nots. They are the result of deliberate divine planning, differentiating, making. As a whole they are "very good." And not only as a whole, but also considered severally, the subordinate wholes *in* the world are good, with the possible exception of those things in the world most nearly like the creator himself, sky and mankind.

The question why G-d created this world is never raised by the text, and nothing in it suggests that we ought to ask the question,^{2 4} but each being *in* the world, not only mankind, is assigned a station and a job of work—the earth is commanded to bring forth its stationary and moving population; seas their fish; the sky its fowl; sun, moon, and stars have their function, and so does mankind. Often the assigned job of work is self-perpetuation merely, which may seem disappointing, until it is realized that the seven-day story's theme is that G-d seeks perpetuation of *variety of kinds*.

In other words, according to the Biblical narrator, whoever he be, effort and blessing are required to prevent what is from reverting to

that homogenized state of being which might as well be called non-being because it is no longer or not yet any *definite* being.^{2 5}

¹I owe much to Robert Sacks and to his unfortunately as yet unpublished book *The Lion and the Ass*.

²Contrast the effect of the wonderful recurring lines in Homer's *Illiad*, "wine dark sea", "pitiless bronze", "they put their hands to the good things before them", but above all, "rosy-fingered dawn". C. S. Lewis, in his *Preface to Paradise Lost* (London: Oxford University Press, 1943), p. 23, described the effect of the Homeric lines to perfection:

What is really in our minds when we first catch sight of the sea after a long absence, or look up, as watchers in a sickroom or as sentries, to see yet another daybreak? Many things, no doubt—all manner of hopes and fears. . . . But under all these, like a bass so deep as to be scarcely audible, there is something which we might very lamely express by muttering "same old sea" or "same old morning." The permanence, the indifference, the heartrending or consoling fact that whether we laugh or weep the world is what it is, always enters into our experience and plays no small part in that pressure of reality which is one of the differences between life and imagined life.

It is as though the Biblical narrator each time he lets dusk set in and morning break were catching the reader saying "same as always," only to shock him into awareness that, along with cyclic recurrence there is the newness of history, which adds up, conspires to something yet to become.

³I give an expanded version of Ibn Ezra's etymological comment on vs. 5 as reported in the *Soncino Chumash* (edited by A. Cohen, London: Soncino Press, 1969), p. 2.

⁴I cannot fathom why the New Oxford translation eliminates the contrast between *echad* and *rishon* in its English rendition.

⁵Jerusalem: Magnes Press, English edition 1961.

⁶I lift the phrase from Plato's *Philebus*.

⁷It is as if the pangs of expulsion (the word here used is the same as the thematic word of Exodus) were felt as early as the third day of creation. On the cabalistic theme of expulsion or departure as the very process of creation, see Gershon Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken paperback edition, 1961), chapter 7.

⁸Compare the prayer said at the conclusion of the Sabbath, the so-called *Havdalah*, p. 223 of Ben Zion Bokser's edition of the *Prayer Book for Weekday, Sabbath, and Festival* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1961).

⁹See Leviticus chapters 19 and 20.

¹⁰I owe the suggestion to a lecture by Leo Strauss given at the University of Chicago in January, 1957 and circulated in manuscript by some of his students.

¹¹Compare Hans Jonas' essay "The Nobility of Sight" (in *The Phenomenon of Life*, New York: Harper and Row, 1966), Father Ong's *Ramus and the Decay of Dialogue* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), and Auerbach's famous study of the contrast between the style of Homer and that of Genesis in *Mimesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953). Whether my suggestion that the seven days should be understood as though they were the seven notes of

a musical scale, the eighth note and day being "a return to the beginning and yet an advance," is something read out of or read into the text is, of course, hard to determine. Much depends, obviously, upon what sort of scale, a pentatonic or a heptatonic, was in use among the people to whom the seven-day story was first addressed. While it used to be thought that they had a pentatonic scale, a snippet in the *New York Times* of March 10, 1974 (iv., 5:3) reports the decipherment of a clay tablet from Ur (Abraham's city) as yielding our heptatonic scale, with 3 to 4 and 7 to 8 as half-steps.

¹² See Max Kadushin's *The Rabbinic Mind* (New York: Bloch, 1972) for an unusually helpful setting out of the philosophers' distortions of the Torah.

¹³ Compare Joseph's second dream and its interpretation at Genesis 37:9ff.

¹⁴ It can hardly be ignorance of the facts of life that leads the Biblical narrator to identify man alone as masculine and feminine, although all creation is urged to be fruitful and to become many. In 7:19 (the story of the flood) bi-sexuality is emphatically seen as a mark of "every living thing of flesh."

¹⁵ Just as it lacks the *tu/vous* distinction. For an illuminating commentary on what goes with this distinction and its elimination, see "The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity" by R. Brown and A. Gilman in T. A. Seboek *et al.*, *Style in Language* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1960).

¹⁶ See his translation and commentary on Genesis in the Anchor Bible series (New York: Doubleday, 1964).

¹⁷ According to the pious reading, G-d was addressing the angels.

¹⁸ Compare Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1909-38), i, 50: "G-d now bade all beings in heaven and on earth to contribute to the creation of man. . . ."

¹⁹ This interpretation of the words "all that he had made" goes back at least to the Renaissance commentator Sforno. It contains *in nuce* Leibniz' famous thought that ours is the best possible world, that is, the best one the constituents of which are compossible.

²⁰ Compare Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), p. 215.

²¹ Not until this is recognized can the grim sternness of the opening verses of chapter 9, or the meaning of the Prophet's vision of an era when the wolf will again lie down with the lamb, be appreciated.

²² I caught myself thinking in terms of the Marxist word, and let it stand because it seems to me that Marx's early writings about alienation sound strangely like a new telling of the tale of creation through exile.

²³ Just as the second Biblical story cycle, which begins with Abraham, detaches him from land, birthplace, and father's house—all that normally concretizes "ancestral piety."

²⁴ Thus it seems to me that when Leibniz (and after him Heidegger) ask "Why is there something, why not rather nothing. . .?" they are violating the prohibition which, according to an old story, is contained in the creation chapter's opening letter: If you looked at the Hebrew text, you would see a letter that looks like this, , as an opener. Looked at merely as a drawing, the motion suggested is headed towards the left which, in Hebrew, is forward