

By Faith or by Knowledge: Mystery of Creation in Rabbinic Literature

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During the last half of the 20th century many scholars have recognized the differences between Hebrew and Greek thinking.¹ The problem of the origin of this world serves as the best example that illustrates the clash between the Hellenistic and Jewish mentalities. Greek natural philosophers were the first physicists that attempted to resolve the problem of the origins of the universe. They attempted to search for the beginning of every matter and substance. Using their sophisticated creative thinking Greeks produced multiple hypotheses trying to describe and explain the origins of the visible world.²

For example Thales (ca. 624-547 BC) believed that the beginning of everything was water. He taught that all things arose from water and will turn into water. A century later Heraclitus (ca. 530-470 BC) taught that the fire represents a primeval substance, from which all other things arise through thickening and dilution of the fire.³ The fundamental advancement in the Greeks' worldview arose with the introduction of the concept of 'matter.' The founding fathers of the Ancient Greek atomistic

¹ For a detailed discussion see Thorief Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1960).

² Ferdinand Rosenberger, *Geschichte der Physik in Grundzugen* (Braunschweig: Vieweg und Sohn, 1882), 3.

³ For a detailed historical account of the development of the physical sciences see Mario Gliozzi, *Storia della Fisica*, in *Storia delle Scienze*, v. 2 (Torino, 1965, Russian edition) and B. I. Spasskiy, *Istoria Fiziki* (Moskva: Vysshaya Shkola, 1977).

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theory Democritus (ca. 460-370 BC) and his teacher Leucippus defined matter as something preexistent that cannot be created or destroyed.⁴

In one way or another all these ideas of the Ancient Greek natural philosophers were summarized and developed by Aristotle (384-322 BC), who was the teacher of Alexander the Great responsible for the spread of Hellenism throughout the Ancient world.⁵ Aristotelian teaching about the movement presented in his work *Physica* became the starting point of the predominant worldview for more than fifteen centuries.⁶ One of the foundation postulates of the Aristotelian physics was a fear of emptiness, ‘horror vacui.’⁷ This concept stemmed from the controversy between Aristotle and his teacher Plato.⁸ Aristotle was definitely influenced by the early atomists who established the concept of absolute matter, which became preserved and perfected during the following centuries.

On the contrary, Hebrew thinking as represented in the works of the Biblical authors was never concerned with the issues that preoccupied the minds of the ancient Greek thinkers. The Biblical picture of creation significantly differs from either Aristotelian or Platonic worldviews.⁹ It is evident that the opening section of Genesis is not a scientific account of the actual process through which the universe originated.¹⁰ Judaism was virtually the only culture that resisted the encroachment of Hellenism. Therefore, the power of this movement can be seen in the degree to which it permeated Judaism.¹¹ While from the outset

⁴ Spasskiy, 46.

⁵ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 956.

⁶ Gliozzi, 9.

⁷ *Physika*, IV:6-9 (Russian edition).

⁸ Plato presented his views about the origins of the world in the tractate *Timaeus*. Unlike his teacher, Aristotle ‘is treating from a physical point of view what Plato deals with metaphysically.’ See R. D. Archer-Hind, *The Timaeus of Plato* (Cambridge University Press), 118.

⁹ Boman, 172-175.

¹⁰ John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (New York: Scribner, 1910), 5.

¹¹ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 956. For the Christianity that sprang out of the first century, Judaic Hellenistic philosophy presented an even bigger threat. Unlike Judaism, Christianity was by definition opened to embrace all people who seek eternal life promised

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Hellenistic thought on the matter of the origins of the world appears to be armed with strong arguments based on observation and philosophical reasoning, Judaism was able to fight back using some unconventional methods.

The goal of this paper is to present some examples of Rabbinic arguments and views in regards to the issue of Creation. The issues of our human ability to know and comprehend the universe, its origins and its inner structure lie at the heart of the ancient debates that existed between Jews and Hellenists during the first ten centuries of the Christian Era. The objective of this research is to investigate several passages from ancient rabbinic homilies that expound on Genesis 1 found in Midrash Genesis Rabbah. These old sermons provide unique perspectives on the interpretation of the Creation Story.

Genesis Rabbah:

An Example of Rabbinic Exegesis and Homily

The entire corpus of Rabbinic literature can be subdivided into two distinct genres: *aggadic* and *halakhic*. While *halakhic*¹² literature deals with the legal issues in the life of the Jewish community and often does not have direct references to Scripture, the *aggadic* genre contains a strong component that focuses on the exposition of the Bible.

Early Judaic scholars believed that Genesis (Bereshit) Rabbah represents a compilation attributed to Rabbi Oshayah Rabbah¹³ that belonged to the first generation of the Palestinian Amoraim who flourished in the third century. Present scholarship holds the view that this Midrash was finally completed in the middle of the fifth century¹⁴ in the Byzantine period.

Genesis Rabah offers some simple explanations of words and sentences, as well as short or elaborate *haggadic* interpretations and

by YHWH through the blood of Jesus. That is why when the ideas of Christianity began to spread throughout the Hellenistic Roman Empire they encountered stiff intellectual resistance from all schools of Hellenistic thought.

¹² From the Hebrew *halakha* which literally means 'the way of walking.'

¹³ Leopold Zunz, *Die gottesdienstlichen Vortrage der Juden historisch entwickelt* (Frankfurt am Main: Hildesheim, 1966).

¹⁴ H. L. Strack and Gunter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

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expositions often loosely tied to the text which are frequently interlaced with maxims and parables. The work is particularly characterized by the proems, which often represent citations from the homilies of a particular rabbinic authority possibly spoken at the synagogue during the exposition of the weekly torah portion on Sabbath. These proems (or *petikhtot*) do not directly expound on the corresponding phrase from the book of Genesis. Instead, they often take the verse from the Ketubim (Writings) and tie it with the pericope phrase from Genesis. Proems that elaborate on the same biblical phrase represent a part of a larger structural unit of the Homiletical Midrash called *parasha*¹⁵ whose pericope phrase represents the first words of the Torah אֵרַב מִהֵלֵא 'in the beginning God created.'

Each *parasha* of Genesis Rabbah has a standard literary structure. It starts with the set of homiletical proems. The proems are followed by an *aggadic* discourse, which includes a parable or another type of commentary that specifically interprets the pericope text. In this study, we will consider several examples of proems and comments that represent a part of the first *parasha* of Genesis Rabbah¹⁶ that illustrate the tension between the Hellenism¹⁷ of the early centuries CE, and Rabbinic Judaism in the areas of creation, the Creator, and the human ability to know.

Genesis Rabbah 1:1

R. Oshaya opened *his exposition thus*: וְלִצָּא נִוְמָא הִיְהָאֵוּ מִיַּעֲשֵׂעַשׂ מִוּי מִוּי הִיְהָאֵוּ. Then I was by Him, as a נִוְמָא (amon); and I was delight every day (Prov. VIII, 30). . . . Another interpretation: נִוְמָא (amon) is really נִוְמָא (uman), a craftsman. *In other words* the Torah declares: 'I was the

¹⁵ From the Hebrew root שָׂרַפ meaning 'to interpret or to comment.' Printed edition of Genesis Rabbah has 100 *parashiyot*, whereas different manuscripts contain between 97 and 101.

¹⁶ According to Theodor's critical edition based on the Codex Add. 27169 of the British Museum.

¹⁷ Besides the Aristotelian world view the Hellenism of the early centuries CE presented itself with Gnostic and Neo-Platonic schools. Both of these groups drew their cosmogonies from Plato. The creator of the visible *Cosmos* Demiurge became a key figure in Gnosticism whereas the Universal *Logos* was the major component of Neo-Platonism. For a detailed description of the Jewish-Gnostic controversies see Alan Segal *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 244-259.

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working tool of the Holy One, blessed be He.’ In human practice, when a mortal king builds a palace, he builds it not with his own skill but with the skill of an architect. The architect moreover does not build it out of his head, but employs plans and diagrams to know how to arrange the chambers and the wicket doors. Thus God consulted the Torah and created the world, while the Torah declares, IN THE BEGINNING GOD CREATED (I,1), BEGINNING referring to the Torah, as in the verse, The Lord made me as the beginning of His way (Prov. VIII, 22).

The author of this homily selects a difficult passage from Proverbs 8 upon which to expound. The entire chapter elaborates on wisdom and ascribes personal qualities to it. Jewish tradition interprets the term ‘wisdom’ as the Torah. The verse used by R. Oshaya contains a difficult word, חכמה.¹⁸ *Petikhta* provides several possible meanings of this word. The last one seems to be favored by the *darshan* (presacher) as he expounds on it. Personalized Torah, the apex of God’s revelation that contains eternal principles of His character and governance represents the ultimate source for God’s inspiration in His works of Creation.

While it is unrealistic to expect from the Rabbis of the third century any Christological interpretation of Proverbs 8, the first words of the Gospel of John in the light of this homily could be viewed with a slightly different emphasis. Especially the ambiguous words of vs. 3 ‘πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν ὃ γέγονεν’ (all things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made), where the pronoun αὐτός refers back to λόγος from vs. 1.

Even though a detailed analysis and dating of the Jewish interpretative tradition is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to indicate that the rabbinic view of the personalized Torah as a foundation of the world definitely dates back much earlier than the words spoken by Oshaya Rabbah, who quotes it from an anonymous source. It is very plausible to suggest that the Johanic *logos* could well have come from the Jewish understanding of the personalized Torah, that became flesh in the person of Jesus from Nazareth, rather than the

¹⁸ Besides this passage it occurs only in Jeremiah 52:15. Many English translations such as the NIV and NASB adopted a traditional Jewish interpretation of this noun as found in Gen. Rabbah.

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Platonic impersonal transcendent LOGOS that decided to personify itself by coming down from its inaccessible state of emanation.

The first proem of Genesis Rabbah 1 sets up the stage for the crucial debate between the Hellenistic and Hebraic trends of thought. From the very beginning of its commentary on the Creation story found in the Torah, the editors of Genesis Rabbah strive to instill within their readers an understanding of the Creator as a Person. This was definitely done in order to counteract the influence of the Hellenistic Neo-Platonic understanding of the Creator that the Jews of the Diaspora were exposed to in their every day interactions.

Genesis Rabbah 1:5

R. Huna in the name of Bar Kappara commenced with the words from Ps 31:19 הַנְּמַלְאֵת יַתְּפֹשׁ רֶקֶשׁ תּוֹרְבָדָה לֵעַ קִידֵץ קָתַע הוֹאֲגַב זֹבּוּ “Let the lying lips הַנְּמַלְאֵת (*te’elamnah*).” This means let them be bound, made dumb and silenced... Let them be silenced means “Which קָתַע (‘tak) against the righteous” in a sense of the Righteous One, the Life of The Universe. Who קִיתְעָה (*he’etik*, concealed) from His creatures, so that they would not speak in their pride ‘I discourse on the issues of תִּישְׂאֲרַב הַשְּׁעַמ (*ma’aseh bereshith*, Creation Story).’

The compiler of the Midrash presents a proem spoken by another rabbinic authority, who ties Gen.1:1 with the words of Ps. 31:19. Without a complete analysis of the complex exegetical technique involving both Hebrew and Aramaic word plays, it will suffice to note Bar Kappara, who represents an early generation of the Rabbis in his exposition, sharing a definite example of the Hebraic principle of silence.¹⁹ That is why he chose this passage which mentions lying lips. These lips misrepresent the Story of Creation by attempting to elaborate on what is hidden by God, Himself. In other words, rabbinic thought views Creation as a mystery that cannot be comprehended beyond what is written in divine revelation.

However, a position is also held by so-called classical Judaism. In his proem Bar Kappara mentions תִּישְׂאֲרַב הַשְּׁעַמ (*ma’aseh bereshith*). He does not mean just a creation story. In mystical Judaism תִּישְׂאֲרַב הַשְּׁעַמ

¹⁹ See J. Doukhan, *Hebrew for Theologians* (University of America Press, 1993).

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(*ma'aseh bereshith*) represents a kabbalistic theme which is discussed only by the ones who were granted access to the hidden meaning of the Torah. Mystics of השעמ תישארב (*ma'aseh bereshith*) are systematically presented in the book *Sefer Yetzirah*. This short 2500 word work consists of six chapters and rarely quotes any texts from Scripture.²⁰ The author of this book²¹ introduces ten *sefirot* (a derivative from Hebrew letters) that compose the foundation of the Universe. According to Gershom Sholem,²² *Ten Sefirot and Thirty-two Mystical Paths of Wisdom* mentioned in *Sefer Yetzirah* 1:1 represents nothing but a reworked and 'Hebraized' Neo-Platonist philosophical view of the triads.

It appears that the fascination with the usage of mystics in order to uncover the mystery of creation existed among the Jews even during the early rabbinic period. Unfortunately, these mystical esoteric trends slowly gained ground in Judaism during the Middle Ages. Fueled by the Hellenistic mentality they become a source of what is known today as *kabbalah*, which in essence represents the apostasy from the core principles and values outlined in the Torah. This is why in the body of the *parashah* a discourse about Hebrew letters presents an alternative position to the concept of *sefirot*.

Genesis Rabbah 1:10

Rabbi Yonah spoke in the name of R. Levi "Why is it the world was created with *letter* ך? Only because letter ך is closed from all sides and opened *only* from the front, so you do not have permission to speak about what is below and what is above; what is before or what is behind—only from the day, on which the world was created and onwards.

Bar Kappara *having quoted from Deuteronomy 4:32* 'Indeed, ask now concerning the former days which were before you, since the day that

²⁰ Aryeh Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation* (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 1997), xi-xiii.

²¹ According to Saadia (Xth century Jewish commentator), the book belongs to the Patriarch Abraham. Scholarship is divided on the matter of the dating of the book. While Lazarus Goldsmidt dates it to 100 BC, Leopold Zunz and Heinrich Graetz date it to 800-900 CE.

²² Gershom G. Sholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Moscow: Gesharim, 2004), 79-113.

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God created man on the earth', said 'about the days that were created you may enquire but you may not enquire on what was before.' 'And from one end of the heavens to the other' you may enquire and investigate but you may not investigate what was before that.

Another interpretation.

Why is it the world was created with *letter* ך? Only because letter ך has two projecting points, one is pointing upward and another is pointing backward. So when we ask who created you, it will point with its projecting point upward saying 'from above He created me.' *And to the question* 'what is his name?' it will point them with its *other projecting point* backward saying 'His name is *Adonai*..

Rabbi Eliezer bar Hanina in the name of R. Aha "Twenty six generations of א plead before the throne of the Holy One Blessed Be He and said to Him 'Sovereign of the Universe I am the first letter of the *alphabet* but You did not create the world without me!' Holy One Blessed Be He answered to her 'The Universe and everything in it were not created without the merits of the Torah for the Scripture says 'The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding He established the heavens' (Prov. 3:19).

This discourse that contains rabbinic sermons and a parable definitely reflects the trend that already existed in early rabbinic Judaism. Jewish tradition has four levels of interpretation of the Torah: *pshat*, *remez*, *drash* and *sod*. While the first three levels deal with the text of the Scripture, the fourth one seeks the hidden meaning of the biblical text employing numerical values of the Hebrew letters. The agenda of the compiler of Genesis Rabbah is clear. There is no place for the secret meanings of the text beyond what is revealed by the Almighty, Himself. While the Rabbis quoted in the parable do not explicitly use the word 'faith,' it is definitely implied here. This is why the letter ך with its rear projecting point does point back to the letter א, which is the first letter in the word אלהים.

The homilies presented in Genesis Rabbah 1 clearly indicate that the influence of Hellenism on the interpretation of the Torah was the main concern of the Rabbis. These homilies definitely were spoken in the synagogues of Palestine and throughout the Byzantine Empire. It appears that in spite of the emergence of Christianity, Greek philosophy presented a major threat to the Jewish mind. In fact, throughout the

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entire collection of the *aggadic midrashim* only a few instances of the debates with the Christians are recorded, whereas debates between rabbis and philosophers occur in every single *parasha*.

Genesis Rabbah 1:9

One philosopher asked Rabban Gamliel, “God is a great artist but he surely found good materials, which assisted Him, such as *Tohu Va-Bohu*, darkness, wind and abyss.” Rabban Gamaliel replied, “This man has decaying spirit. All these words refer to the Creation *from nothing*. About TOHU VA-BOHU the Scripture teaches “The One forming light and creating darkness, causing peace and creating calamity; I am the LORD who does all these”(Isa 45:7). About water the Bible teaches ‘Praise Him, highest heavens, and the waters that are above the heavens!’ (Ps 148:4); and about the wind ‘For behold, He who forms mountains and creates the wind’ (Amos 4:13); and about the abyss ‘When there were no depths I was brought forth’ (Prov 8:24).

It is definitely a staged debate between the Teacher of Paul and so called philosophers who attempted to interpret the Scripture using the philosophical categories. This philosopher here communicates to Rabban Gamaliel the typical Hellenistic view of the world that can be traced back as far as Thales of Miletos, to whom Aristotel refers in his *Metaphysics*.

“That from which is everything that exists (*ἅπαντα τὰ ὄντα*) and from which it first becomes (*ἐξ οὗ γίγνεται πρὸς τὸν*) and into which it is rendered at last (*εἰς ὃ φθίρεται τελευτᾶ ὄντος*), its substance remaining under it (*τὸ ὅτι μὲν οὐσίας ὑπομενούσης*), but transforming in qualities (*τὸ ὅτι δὲ πάθει μεταβαλλούσης*), that they say is the element (*στοιχεῖον*) and principle (*ἀρχήν*) of things that are. For it is necessary that there be some nature (*φύσις*), either one or more than one, from which become the other things of the object being saved.”

In other words, in the mind of Aristotle nothing comes out of nothing. It was Aristotle who authored the concept of ‘matter’ that until these days remains a fundamental component of every scientific discourse.

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For the Rabbis cited in Genesis Rabbah, this concept was not acceptable. In spite of the Christianization of the Roman empire, Hellenism during the Byzantine period had been a source of significant concern for the Jewish community. The Jerusalem Talmud written during the 4th century in Byzantinian Palestine cites an interesting statement of Rabbi Joshua who lived at the beginning of the second century. When R. Joshua was asked, ‘May a man teach his son Greek?’ he replied, ‘He may teach it to him at a time that is neither day nor night, for it is said, Though shalt meditate (on the Torah) day and night’ (Hosh 1:8), (Pea 1:1).

Philosophy was definitely viewed by the Rabbis as something that is not compatible with the study of the Torah. The philosopher in this story suggests to Rabban Gamaliel that he has found scriptural justification for the Hellenistic philosophical concept. God, in his words, also had some materials with which to work. In fact he sees *tohu va-bohu* as a premieval chaos from which, according to the Greek view, everything has originated. Gamaliel, based on the Scripture, clearly points out to the philosopher that Judasim and Hellenism work in absolutely different frames of reference and therefore scriptural philosophical categories can never be reconciled with Hellenistic philosophical categories.

Conclusions

Current debates between creationists and evolutionists did not start with Darwin’s theory. The questions about our human ability to know and comprehend our world, its origins and its inner structure lie at the heart of the ancient debate that existed between the Rabbis and the Hellenists during the first ten centuries of the Christian Era. From Thales of Miletus and Aristotle with their concept of the original substance-matter, to Neo-Platonistic impersonal Logos, Hellenism has influenced human thinking with the idea that everything in the universe can be and should be understood. These Hellenistic ideas have been at the core of the Dialectical Materialism and Cartesianism that in turn served as a philosophical foundation for the conclusions and interpretations made by Darwin and his followers.

It is clear that philosophy represents the ultimate tool for the interpretation of scientific data. However, over the centuries philosophy became the tool that traditional Christianity also uses for the interpretation of the Scripture. For this reason traditional Christianity is

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often unable to effectively defend its principles in the context of the faith-science debate. Having imposed Hellenistic philosophical concepts upon the Biblical principles, traditional Christianity considers faith as a vice rather than a virtue, thus surrendering to modern claims about the inferiority of the faith approach.

While the examples of the homilies presented above may look exegetically primitive, the agenda of rabbinic preachers during the Roman period is clear. They demonstrate an internal struggle within emerging rabbinic Judaism over the issue of the usage of philosophy in the interpretation of the Scripture. Genesis Rabbah definitely represents the anti-philosophical camp. In the minds of the rabbis cited by Genesis Rabbah there is no common ground between Hellenism and Scripture and there is no place for philosophical curiosity in the fundamental issues of creation. Humans must accept the revelation of God as is and avoid inquiries about what is not revealed. By making such statements rabbis make open admission that faith in divine revelation represents the core of their biblical interpretation.

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