

Genesis, Chapter One: A Theological Statement

by Herold Weiss

Seventh-day Adventists have always seen the conflict between science and religion as especially involving them. Adventists have understood that they are responsible for a distinctive defense against evolution — the continual observing of the fourth commandment. I have nothing against placing the Sabbath as a standard against evolution. Indeed, I think that evolutionary faith must be combatted with all the means at our command as a basic evil that stands in opposition to our faith in God as the Creator. But I do think that if we are to perceive the significance of the Sabbath for understanding the relation of God to His creation and of religion to science, we need to approach the Sabbath within the context of a careful exploration of the general theology of Creation in the Old Testament, particularly the first chapter of Genesis.

To start with, I need to point out what is already obvious, and that is that I am talking about God's creation and not God's world. There is a reason for this. The word

“world,” the concept “cosmos,” is not found in the Old Testament. This is of supreme significance and must never be overlooked. The notion “cosmos” is a Greek notion that entered Judaism in the second century B.C., but which was unknown to the early historians and prophets of Israel.

The “world,” the “cosmos,” is an abstract term; it is a system held together by its own internal order. It is a totality bound together by rationally comprehensible relationships of law. As a result, there is a unified structure holding together not only heaven and earth, but also all the things in them including the gods in heaven. When the universe is conceived as “cosmos,” gods and men are also bound by law. “Cosmos” first of all implies order. It also implies beauty. We still use the word in an English version: “cosmetics” are the beautifying agents. But order and beauty are abstract notions foreign to the Hebraic ancient mind. Classical Hebrew is very poor in its vocabulary for abstract notions.

I am using the word “world” and not the word “universe” because in the New Testament “cosmos” is translated “world.” But in the Old Testament, the notion is unknown, for it knows nothing about a world system held together by its own internal order out-

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side of which there is no other consciousness. For the Old Testament, what is out there is not seen as a self-contained whole. It *does* at times speak of “the all,” but it is always thought to be composed of created parts, primarily “heaven and earth.” God, however, is definitely not included in this “all.”

It is most important to keep this in mind and not to let the concept “cosmos” come in the back door when one talks about creation in the Old Testament. It is when one thinks of creation as “cosmos” that it is possible to think that the Old Testament reduces creation to something that happened in some distant past. Moreover, in terms of “cosmos,” it becomes a problem to show what role God plays in the world now, for then creation and providence are considered two separate acts of God. By means of one, God organized the world long ago; by means of the other, God still has something to say about it even now.

But to do this is to destroy one of the most significant achievements of the Old Testament. I refer to the fact that the Old Testament represents man’s capacity to think about the world in a nonmythological way by making clear that creation did not happen in a timeless past, and then it was done, but that the heavens, the earth and the sea keep their places and their limits not because that is the order of creation established by God in the past, but because God is holding each created element where it belongs. He is in control, and the moment he would let go, the different created parts could disappear or go away where they wished.

This Old Testament view continued to influence Judaism even after the Jews learned from the Greeks about the cosmos and about reasonable ways of constructing arguments. At the time of Christ, the rabbis were engaged in lengthy discussions as to whether or not God kept his own laws, particularly the fourth commandment. How could He cease from creating on the Sabbath? As a matter of fact, He could not, because if He did creation would cease to be.¹ Having to explain the Genesis account to people now trained in Greek logic, it became difficult for the rabbis

to explain how God could rest on the Sabbath and at the same time continue to “create” the world.

To separate creation from providence is to destroy the Old Testament view of the world. That is the first thing that must be kept clearly in mind for an understanding of our topic. The second thing to be kept in mind is that the Old Testament knows of at least two ways of speaking about creation. One is poetic, hymnic. The other is didactic. Of the two, the second is theologically more precise, but the first is found more often in the Old Testament.

When Israel spoke poetically, the poetic imagery was many times quite loose. Since poetry is a universal language, it travels easily. Thus, in her poetic expression, Israel many times uses imagery from other cultures — or at least uses imagery known in other cultures and contexts. It is quite obvious that Israel knew of the way in which her neighbors spoke of creation.

Characteristic of this way of talking is the notion that at creation Yahweh had to impose His will over against the forces of chaos which tried their best to prevent the accomplishment of His will. Usually, this is described in terms of the waves of the sea rising, or roaring, against God (Ps. 46:2, 3; 89:9). But Yahweh rebuked chaos (Ps. 104:7), smote the monsters of chaos (Ps. 74:13), and now keeps them under guard (Job 7:12). In one prophetic passage (Ezek. 32:2-8), the downfall of the king of Egypt is described in language reminiscent of a Babylonian creation story. In it, Marduk struggles against Tiamat and creates the world with different parts of her body. The language of the Babylonian story rings bells behind the description of Ezekiel.

When we wish to understand the more precise, didactic statements of the Old Testament on creation, we should see them in context, so that we may clearly set forth their teaching over against what Israel’s neighbors were saying. What were they saying about creation? The best preserved story comes from ancient Babylon about the time of Abraham — certainly older than the Mosaic period. It is called *Enuma Elish*:

When on high the heavens had not been
named,
Firm ground below had not been called by
name,
Naught but primordial Apsu, their beget-
ter,
and Mummu-Tiamat, she who bore them
all,
Their waters co-mingling as a single body;
No reed-hut had been matted, no marsh
land had appeared,
When no gods whatever had been brought
into being,
Uncalled by name, their destinies unde-
termined—
Then it was that the gods were formed
within them.²

The story goes on with all sorts of episodes about the generations and the lives of the gods; finally, the young god Marduk, the god of the Babylonian empire of Ham-murabi's time, confronts the ancient divinities of chaos. Marduk kills Tiamat and out of the two halves of her severed body builds heaven and earth. Man is eventually created out of clay and the blood of Tiamat's lover, the god Kingu.

A study of different selections from the Biblical world of antiquity reveals three different approaches to the origin of the world and its contents, which are also designated, as we saw in the *Enuma Elish*, "the heaven above, and the ground below."

One approach quite common in these stories is to see the origins of the world in terms of the process of generation. *Enuma Elish* uses this image for the origin of successive generations of divinities out of Tiamat. In stories coming from Sumeria and Egypt, the same generative process serves to bring about different elements within the world.

A second motif present in these stories is that creation is the outcome of a victorious struggle. The creator god has to subdue the representatives of chaos in order to be able to impose his will and bring about the state of order now known. Thus, as in *Enuma Elish*, creation comes about in a theogony, or a theomachy. After a struggle, the conquered

divinity is killed and her body provides the essential materials for the world.

A third motif present in these stories is that the creator is a real craftsman. He knows how to use his tools and materials in order to bring forth heaven and earth. In the *Enuma Elish*, man is made of clay and the blood of Kingu. In a story from Egypt, Chnum, the ram-headed god, forms Pharoah and his Ka on the potter's wheel.

The language and imagery of these stories are found in the creation poetry of the Old Testament. But this has to do only with style; we have not said anything about content. Certainly, this poetic imagery is very ancient and, therefore, we had to set it forth first. Before we move on to look at what the Old Testament says about creation when it sets down its own account in the first two chapters of *Genesis*, I would like to draw attention to the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament.

How did the wise men of Israel look at creation? Creation does not constitute a major element in the faith of the prophets, at least they do not anchor their faith here. Their faith is anchored primarily in God's election of Abraham, and God's saving activity in the Exodus. In the prophetic view of things, creation is the first step in the historical process that leads to the Exodus. The wise men, however, stood somewhat removed from the theological traditions that saw God's activity taking place primarily in the activities of man, that is, in history. In their eyes, history was less revelatory of God's will than of the prophets.

Solomon — the cosmopolitan king — stands as the patron saint of these wise men. They participated in the cultural life of ancient civilizations, and they were aware of the possibility of understanding creation. Thus, within Israel, there developed also the search for the "how" hidden in nature. The rational interests of man were applied to nature in order to understand it. The wise men asked, how can the world be stable when founded on the unstable? (Ps. 104:5; Job 26:7; 38:6). How do meteorological phenomena happen? (Job 38-40). This led to the notion, best expressed in Proverbs 8, that the world was created by Wisdom. In other words, Wis-

dom holds within herself the secret hidden in the world's structure. The wise men set forth, therefore, to discover the secret of creation in the hope that in it they would find the secret of God's being. In other words, Wisdom contained revelations into the secret of God.

The hymns of the Wisdom literature are characterized by the movement from intelligent contemplation to adoration (see Proverbs 8 or Job 28). The wise men are the first ones who, in the contemplation of the world, see in its design God's wonders exposed to man's eyes. For them, revelation is not primarily in history but in nature. God's wonders are not seen in the opening of the

proach to knowledge of the world, also prevented mythological stories to find a home in Israel in their pagan dress.

We now come to what the Old Testament says about creation didactically on the basis not of physical observation, but of theological reflection. Any Bible student can see that in the first two chapters of Genesis are found two accounts, and that their style is quite different. In contrast to the very formal style and ponderousness of Genesis 1, the lively imagery and immediacy of Genesis 2 sets up a familiar world in which man clearly occupies center stage. In truth, Genesis 2:4b-25 is not an account of the creation of the world. Here "the world" is not being considered, just man and his garden home — no background is provided. The story presupposes a barren, parched desert into which God brings His power to bear by making water spring up into rivers that water the land. The creation of man and animals is related to the ground. Man and beasts come from clay. But unlike the animals, man is animated by the breath of God Himself, not the blood of a killed divinity as in the *Enuma Elish*. The story as we have it leaves open the gap between the assertion that the Lord God made heaven and earth and the story's point of departure. We never find out where that barren wasteland came from.

Examining the story a bit closer, we are impressed by the artless lack of concern in describing how God created those things the author is interested in. The only thing described carefully is the creation of man and the creation of Eve; the rest is told with great economy of words and a sure command of the storyteller's art. After creating man by shaping mud of the ground and breathing into it, God planted a garden. Then He created all the animals from the ground, and He brought them to Adam to see if one would serve him as a helper. Adam named the animals, thus describing their basic characteristics and making clear that none quite suited him. Then, we hear God musing with Himself, "It is not good for man to be alone, I will provide a partner for him." Thus, for the creation of woman, God

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Red Sea, the entering into the promised land, or the holy wars of conquest. Rather, they are to be seen in nature, in the systematic arrangements, the technical problems involved in its production, the wonderousness of its design. In these things, all creation transcends itself toward God. Creation is wrapped in a secret that points the intelligent beholder toward God.

Wisdom represented, in a way, a less theologically committed way of thinking. It was tied rather to the cultural cross-currents, the "scientific" knowledge of the time. It trusted in observation; it was a search. It represented the spirit of inquiry, a form of humanism, a trust in man's ability to find out. As said before, the historians and prophets of Israel had already kept Israel from mythological ways of thinking. But part of the credit for this must also go to the wise men who, by their strong rational ap-

changes His material. Instead of clay, He uses man's rib. After opening man's thorax and taking the rib, like a good mason He closes the hole in the wall of man's chest.³ Now, the goal of creation has been reached. Everything needed by man, he has at hand. The thrust of the story is to establish relationships in man's world. Everything is for man: the garden, the beasts, the woman. From God, man receives also a responsibility and a prohibition. He is to till the ground (2:15), and he is to abstain from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:17). God has not created evil, but evil is a possibility in a world characterized by man's freedom and knowledge. This account is sometimes called patriarchal because of its parochial concerns with man.

By contrast, Genesis 1 represents a carefully worked-out statement with definite aims in view. Its style is certainly architectonic, even if somewhat monotonous. Its symmetry is not quite perfect, but its intention is clear. It sets forth a doctrine and a law: the doctrine of creation and the law of the Sabbath rest. Even a quick reading of the story makes clear that it has been told in order to establish the sanctity of the Sabbath. The story starts with the creation of time, the creation of a day, and ends with the creation of Holy Time, the Sabbath.

Before we look more closely at the peculiarities of the story, we may notice some points of contact between this story and the one in Genesis 2. Like the patriarchal story, this one (for convenience, let us call it sacerdotal) also has a headline, only that now the order of the created parts is reversed. In Genesis 2:4b, we read God made "the earth and the heavens"; in Genesis 1:1, we read that He created the "heaven and the earth." Whichever the order, the headline is here; serving as a clef sign on a musical score, it sets the stage for what is to follow.

Most significantly, when the two headlines are compared, we find not only the change in the order of the parts but also the change of verbs. In 2:4b, we read that God "made." The verb means to make, manufacture, fix, put up. The participial form of the verb is used to say "My Maker." In Genesis 2:7 and 19, we read that God formed, or

"shaped," man and the animals with mud of the ground. In contrast, Genesis 1:1 affirms that God "created." This is a pure theological word reserved for God's creative activity. It is never used with a subject other than God. *Bara'* makes clear that in order to create, God is not dependent upon matter. In creating, God is independent of His creation; He is not limited by the kinds of material available to Him. This is a magnificent declaration, but its full splendor is somewhat dimmed because the author does not quite close the gap between the headline and the story.

Just as the patriarchal story fails to close the gap between the statement that God made the earth and the heavens and the description of God's creative activity as the bringing forth of water into an arid, wasted, desert, so also the sacerdotal story does not close the gap between Yahweh's incomparable act of creation out of nothing and the primeval waters of darkness which are there waiting for, or opposing, the spirit of God that broods over them like a chicken over eggs.⁴

By its magnificent headline, Genesis 1 makes impossible any infiltration of the world of mythology into the world of the Bible. Here God and the world He creates are related and yet kept apart by God's world. We do not see here God working over clay like a potter, we do not have here God closing over man's thorax like a mason who closes a breach in the wall. Here God touches nothing and is dependent on nothing. He only proclaims His will and the word that leaves His lips, like an arrow that is sent forth from an outstretched bow, accomplishes its appointed task. By the theology of the word, Genesis puts aside theogony and pantheism by one effective stroke. The world is not the outcome of a struggle between gods, neither is it made out of divine matter. The world is the expression of God's will, so that God can pronounce it good, but it is in no sense divine. This insight given to us by the Old Testament is never surpassed by the New Testament. One after another, different parts of the world are brought into existence by the divine Word: heaven, earth, sea, stars, plants and animals. They all come forth at the call of

God. But God remains in perfect isolation within Himself over against all of them.

As I said before, the story is told in order to establish a doctrine and proclaim a law. But before we analyze these two, I would like to point out two other things that are clear in the story. One is that the story is polemical; it carries on an argument against false gods. The other is that it represents the best scientific knowledge of the time and presents us with a fully secular world.

The polemic is quietly waged against the sun, the moon and the stars. It would seem to everyone that it is impossible to have light without the sun, and even more so it would seem impossible to have a day without the solar system. But the story makes clear that a day, the basic unit of time, is not the creation of the solar system. The sun, the moon and the stars do not create days and nights; they

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only serve to count them. They are not the powers that create time; they are only the instruments for its measuring. Their function is not to rule over man's destiny, but only to serve man as he worships God at the appropriate times weekly, monthly and yearly. The polemical thrust is most apparent in that their names are avoided. We only read the rather derogatory designations, “that greater” and “that lesser” light.

The secular world is apparent in that God leaves His imprint in the world by creating the Sabbath, but He is essentially absent from the world. The world is presented according to the best cosmological knowledge of the time. But the amazing thing here is that it is futile and counterproductive to try to separate the theological from the “scientific.” On

account of our own difficulties, it is difficult for us to appreciate that here the scientific and the theological are interwoven without tensions. The two things are interwoven in such a way that there is not one “purely scientific” or “purely theological” statement. Here theology and science can work together in harmony. At least, we are unable to detect any tensions. The point is not that the scientific knowledge of that time is the ultimate and true description of the natural world. It certainly is not. As a matter of fact, the cosmology of Genesis has to be judged “pre-scientific” and primitive. But by means of this pre-scientific knowledge, the men of faith in the Old Testament were able to destroy the mythological world view with all its false gods. And, ultimately, that is what it is all about: a struggle against idolatry.

I call this world secular because it is a world in which God is not *naturally* present. I call this world scientific because it represents the best kind of logic based on observation of the reality in which man lives. It is based on the understanding of the firmament as a solid vault that keeps the waters above stored. The vault has windows through which water or light may come through. The story has a logic of its own. It has separated three spaces which three kinds of beings occupy. It has separated fish and fowl from land animals. Thus, the logic of the story is that three kinds of things, in order to be, must have three homes. Thus, on the first three days, God created three homes, and on the second three days, God created the inhabitants of those homes. If we were to write the story today in terms of our scientific knowledge, we would use a different logic. Scientific logic would prevent us from having days before the solar system and would prevent us from having vegetation before the sun. In fact, it would prevent us from having a solid firmament separating the waters above from the waters below. Ours is a scientific logic based on better instruments for observation. But ours is also a logic that refuses to allow theology to inform it. In the creation story, man is made in the image of God. In modern science, man is made in the image of the biological world. When man is presented in this way by a “scientific faith,” then the struggle between faith

and science is unavoidable. Unlike God, science cannot legitimately claim to be the object of faith.

This brings us back to the two main points of the story: the doctrine of creation, and the law of the Sabbath. The story makes clear that God's presence in the world is to be found in the "image" of man and the "sanctity" of the Sabbath. The "image" stands for what it is an image of. Because of this characteristic, the "image" tends to attract unto itself that which should be given to that for which it stands. Thus, in the story of Nebuchadnezzar's image (Dan. 3:1-30), the three Hebrew youths were required to worship the image that stood for Nebuchadnezzar. The point, for our purposes, is that the image stands for what it represents. Thus, man as the "image" of God stands for God within heaven and earth while God remains outside. Man within creation is a signal that points outside to the Creator. Genesis 1:27

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clearly interprets the role of man as God's image: He has dominion over the fish of the sea, the fowl of the air, and over the cattle and over all the earth. Here all things in nature have been divested of domain or power. That was the characteristic way of seeing the world for ancient man. Among Israel's neighbors everything in nature had a mysterious divine power — especially the sun, the moon and the stars. But here, they are all servants of man. Man is presented free from the powers of nature.

Two things are particularly striking. On

the one hand, man is very much part of the created world. Like the whole of creation, he owes his existence to the Creator. He is made the same day the other animals of the land are made. He receives with the animal world the blessing of fertility. He eats the same food that the other animals eat as God bountifully provides. But on the other hand, man is set apart from the other animals. Throughout the story, God acts forcefully and without second thoughts. His word forthrightly accomplishes its mission. But for the creation of man, God stands aside and reflects within Himself. After some deliberation, He announces: "Let us make man in our image." In the whole process of bringing heaven and earth into being, the decision to give man God's image was the hardest one to make. To set man apart within creation and to give him dominion over it involved a risk that needed to be carefully considered. As a result of God's decision, however, man is bound to the world in two ways: he is part of the world, and he is ruler of the world.

But he is ruler of the world for God. He is not the Creator: he is His "image," His representative; he is the one standing in for the Creator. That is the doctrine of creation in the Old Testament. It establishes a clearly defined relationship between God, the world and man within the world. Man's life is part of the life of the world, but man stands in the world as the "image" of God. Nothing within heaven and earth has life or dominion in or by itself. There are no powers hidden in nature controlling the world. Neither impersonal laws nor personal divine intermediaries run the world. God creates the world and man in His "image."

We now find ourselves in a position from which to see the relationship of the Sabbath to God's creation. There is no question that the logic of the story of creation in Genesis 1 is to bring out the role of the Sabbath rest. But in order to understand this role, we needed to see that God's creation is not a "cosmos." God's presence in creation was not a past event. The moment God would cease from creating, the world would instantly desintegrate. The mountains, the sea, the stars would leave their appointed functions and limits and go their merry way. The

doctrine of creation in Genesis 1 is a carefully considered didactic, theological statement, to be distinguished from poetic imagery, or “scientific” investigation also found in the Old Testament. Also to be kept in mind is that the story of creation carries on a clear-cut polemic against a mythological understanding of the world where brooks, mountains, animals, stars or trees have “powers” of their own. Here we have a secular world. God is clearly outside of it, but He left His mark in it when He trusted man with His image.

The story starts with the creation of time, a day, and ends with the creation of holy time, the Sabbath. On the Sabbath, God finishes His work and rests. How is this to be understood? Is not this a contradiction? As noticed above, Greek logic already found it to be such. Did He finish His work in the morning and rest in the afternoon? No, God’s creation was completed with the blessed day. In other words, by resting on the seventh day, God placed within creation holy time for man to rest in. That is the logic of the story: first God creates places or homes, and then, in the corresponding second set of three, He creates what inhabits those homes. As a capstone for the two series of three, He creates a home for man to remember that he is the “image” of the Creator (see figure p. 62). Or better yet, He creates the Sabbath in order to guarantee to man that God’s creation stands on the basis of God’s blessing.

The Sabbath is the sign of God’s effective creative power. Just as the rainbow was the sign of the covenant with Noah, and circumcision was the sign of the covenant with Abraham, the Sabbath is the sign of the covenant with creation. God’s creation is not a self-sustaining system maintained by inner self-winding mechanisms, eternal laws or personal intermediaries. Nature, as such, is an abstraction about which the Old Testament knows nothing at all. Theologically speaking, there is nothing in the world that guarantees that a minute from now what we call “the universe” is to be organized the way it is organized this minute. To believe in creation is not to believe that God created the world some years ago in some golden age of

the past. This is to deny the Old Testament triumph over mythology. To believe in creation is to believe that God creates “the world” each moment, and that if He did not, the world would collapse any moment. The world is not an organism running on its own ruled by natural law. To believe that the world is ruled by natural or psychological laws is idolatry, and that is what Genesis 1 is against! The world is created by God. His rule is what keeps the stars in their orbits, the sea within its limits and the waters above divided from the waters below. Man, living in the space between the waters, may rest secure; he need not worry about Creation’s falling apart. Mankind may rest because God is doing His work. The world is secular; no divine power within it keeps it running. God does. Therefore, people who trust God may rest.

The literature of antiquity has many versions of the story of the flood. The flood serves as a warning that chaos is an ever-present possibility. In the mythological world of antiquity, the flood is associated with some divine oversight. Here the set limits assigned to the waters are broken, and the waters above and the waters below break loose and destroy humanity. In the Old Testament story, however, it is quite clear that in the flood God has in no way lost control of His creation. It is not the case that things went berserk because God got distracted from His job of keeping the world going. God was engaged in a work of judgment. It is not insignificant that the one used by God to save humanity through the waters of destruction was called Noah. All Hebrew names had significant things to say about their bearers. Noah means “rest.” The significance of the name is obvious. At a time when the forces of chaos seemed to be robbing the world away from God’s effective control, Noah was at ease. He rested. Contrary to all circumstantial evidence, God was still upholding His creation, even in the midst of the invasion of the waters of chaos. That is why Noah was called Noah. He was the personification of God’s covenant with His creation. He rested secure in a world that was still in God’s control.

The seas may try to roar, the forces of

chaos may wish to break the ordinances of the Creator, but God rests, and men and women may rest, because the power of God still upholds His own creation. The Sabbath is the sign that this secular world, where God is absent, still is ruled by God.

**The Biblical Story of the Creation of the World:
A Literary Analysis of Its Structure
“Science” at the Service of Theology**

1st Day Gen. 1:3-5 Light and darkness God creates a day	4th Day Gen. 1:14-19 The inhabitants of light and darkness God creates the greater light, the lesser light and the stars to count days, seasons and years
2nd Day Gen. 1:6-8 The firmament God creates the air space between the waters above and below	5th Day Gen. 1:20-23 The inhabitants of the water and the air God creates the fish and the fowl
3rd Day Gen. 1:9-13 The land to stand on God creates that which stands on the ground:vegetation	6th Day Gen. 1:24-31 The inhabitants of the land God creates all land animals and man, and gives to all animals vegetation for food
7th Day <div>Holy time - the Blessed Day God finishes his work and rests</div> <div>Gen. 2:2-3</div>	

Gen. 1:1	Headline:	In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth
Gen. 2:1	Summary:	Thus the heavens and the earth were finished
Gen. 2:4a	Colophon:	These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created
Gen. 1:2		A poetic digression

NOTES AND REFERENCES*

1. As is well known, the Old Testament has two versions of the ten commandments. In the Deuteronomic version, the Sabbath is not related to

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creation, but to the Exodus experience under God’s saving power. Deut. 5:12-15.

2. Different rabbis worked out different solutions. See Philo, *On the Cherubim*, 86-90, and *Allegorical Interpretation of the Law*, I. 5-6. Also *Exodos Rabbah*, 30.9.

3. James B. Prichard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), pp. 60-72.

4. The image is found in the original Hebrew.

5. Gen. 2:2 is a very obscure text, most difficult to translate with certainty. It is clear, however, that there are ancient poetic expressions informing the text.