NOTES TO THE TEXT

SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

In our Introduction we have referred to the indebtedness of this work to the creative imagination of Judaism's ancient sages of the Talmud and Midrash, as well as to the works of some medieval and modern commentators.

The Midrash Bereshit Rabba— a distillation of rabbinic expositions on the book of Genesis (2^{nd}-5^{th} centuries CE)— was the primary source both for the many textual insights we have borrowed as well as for some exotic ideas extracted from rabbinic folklore. This mélange should not surprise, as many of those sages comfortably synthesized their critical linguistic acumen with a propensity towards mystical speculation.

A poem is also a commentary; and not a few of my own insights, fruits of a lifetime of biblical research and publication (see www.rabbijeffrey.co.uk), are also embedded into the narrative. Hence the decision to include these background notes, not only to identify and discuss the sources we have employed but also to explain our own motivation and justification for seeking refuge in poetic license.

It is to be hoped that these notes—like the poetry itself— will excite the imagination of our readers by exposing them to an abundance of new material and issues for consideration and discussion. This process has indeed grown apace over the past half century which has witnessed a renaissance of interest in the study of Judaism's ancient biblical and rabbinic literature. This has attracted an unprecedented number of students to the vast number of seminaries and courses that have been created to meet the demand, especially in Israel, and why an increasing number of laymen and women are also thronging adult educational programmes throughout the Jewish world.

References and abbreviations

The bracketed references under the heading of each main section are to the biblical passages covered by the poetry.

The left-hand references, at the beginning of each note below, are to the page, stanza and line numbers of the poetic phrases being commented upon. Thus, our first note (1-2:2), denotes page 1, stanza 2, line 2. Where the end part of a stanza is carried over to a new page, we have numbered the continuation as stanza 1. Each chapter of a Midrash is divided into sub sections. Thus 8 [5] refers to chapter 8, section 5 of its standard edition.

The following abbreviations have been employed: Gen., for Genesis; Ex., for Exodus; Lev., for Leviticus; Deut., for Deuteronomy; Eccl., for Ecclesiastes; Is., for Isaiah; Jer., for Jeremiah; Ps., for psalm; Mish., for Mishnah; R., for Rabbi; Rab., for Rabba; Tal., for Talmud; Av. Zar., for Talmud Avodah Zarah; B.B., for Talmud Baba Batra; B.M., for

Talmud Baba Metzi'a; Eiruv., for Talmud Eiruvin; Hul., for Talmud Hullin; Nid., for Talmud Niddah; San., for Talmud Sanhedrin; Shabb., for Talmud Shabbat; Mid., for Midrash; Ber. Rab., for Midrash Bereshit Rabba; Shem. Rab., for Midrash Shemot Rabba; Bem. Rabb., for Midrash Bemidbar Rabba; Koh. Rab., for Midrash Kohelet Rabba; Mid. Tan., for Midrash Tanchuma; Tar. O., for Targum Onkelos; Tar. Y., for Targum Yonatan; Yal. Shim., for Midrash Yalkut Shim'oni; n., for note; p., for page; v., for verse; vv., for verses.

N O T E S

CREATION

1-2:2 *Those who would morally cower:* This sentiment echoes the psalmist's exclamation, ''Lord, what is man that you (desire to) know him, or the son of man that you even consider him''(Ps.144:3-4), and articulates the problem of how weak, warmongering and sinful man can possibly justify his own creation and his Maker's concern, indulgence and forgiveness. The opening stanzas of the poem address this conundrum, with the heavenly beings cast in the role of accusers, questioning God as to the logic of his purpose.

1-3:1 *The angels of the heavenly host:* This notion derives from the imagination of the Midrashic sage, R. Simeon, who observed, 'When God came to create Adam, the ministering angels were divided into various factions, with some saying, "let him be created," and others, "let him not be created." This is the sense of the verse: *Kindness and truth meet; righteousness and peace kiss* (Ps. 85:1). Kindness said, "Let him be created, for he will dispense kindness"; truth said: "Let him not be created, for man is fundamentally false.'' Righteousness said: "Let him be created, for he will perform deeds of righteousness;" peace said, "Let him not be created, for he is naturally inclined to strife"' (Ber. Rab. 1[8]).

1-4:2 *A cheery cherub:* 'Cherub' is a translation of the biblical Hebrew word, *k'ruv*. This refers to a category of angels that are supposed to surround the divine 'chariot', as referred to in the famous vision of Ezekiel (10:14). Cherubim appear for the first time in Gen. 3:24, as angelic beings, armed with flaming swords, and charged with barring the way of Adam's re-entry into the Garden of Eden. A less threatening, though similarly protective, mission was discharged by the two golden cherubim, each with out-stretched wings, that sat atop the Ark of the Sanctuary in Israel's desert sanctuary (see Ex. 25:20). Later Jewish tradition had it that those cherubim had the faces of a little boy and girl, respectively. It was probably that association which invested the term 'cherub' with its connotation of child-like innocence. It is with this connotation that I employ the notion of the 'cheery cherub' whose innocence enables him to chide God with impunity.

1-5:5 *Manifest fact:* 'R. Huna, Rabbi of Sepphoris, stated: While the ministering angels were busily locked in their debate with God over the issue, he pre-empted them and created Adam. God thereupon said to them, "Your discussion is of no avail; man is now *manifest fact*"' (Ber. Rab. 8 [5]).

2-2:1-3 *Let there be light!* See Gen.1:3.

A measured time for day and night: See Gen.1:3-5, 14-18.

Let rain descend from skies above: Curiously, although Gen. 1:7 refers to God as having created a 'firmament,' or space, to separate the waters above from those below, there is no mention in that chapter of clouds or of rain descending on the earth. It is only in chapter 2 that they are referred to. There we are told that after Creation was completed, but before the appearance of man, God ''caused a mist to ascend from the earth (dew?) to moisten its surface'' (Gen. 2:5-6). The Talmud attempts to rationalize this by suggesting that, although God had already created all the vegetation on the third day (Gen. 1:11-13), he kept it submerged beneath the surface of the earth until after the arrival of man. God's purpose in so delaying the rain—required in order to enable the vegetation to spring forth—was so that man might discover for himself the necessity for it, and accordingly offer regular prayer for it to be sent to germinate vegetation (Tal. Hullin 60b; *Rashi* on Gen. 2:5). Ancient Judaism introduced such prayers for rain (on the festival of Tabernacles) and for dew (on Passover) into the liturgy of the early synagogue; and the above exposition might well have been created in order to provide context and authority for such prayers.

That vegetation was not, literally, 'brought forth' (v.12) on the third day is obvious from the fact that the sun, which is vital for the growth of vegetation, was not created until the fourth day! This consideration alone demonstrates that the Genesis account was never meant to constitute a scientific statement of the 'how,' or the precise chronology, of Creation. Rather, it is to be viewed as a paean to its grandeur and awesome complexity, and to the Creator who designed its integrated components in order to facilitate human life and to provide a comforting and welcoming environment for man.

2-3:2 *Zigzag the space:* The image of rivers 'zigzagging' countries designated for human habitation is suggested by Gen. 2:10-14.

2-3:6 *Cool and cold and warmth and heat:* See Gen. 8:22.

2-5:1 *Seraph:* This term occurs in Deut. 8:15, as a description of a 'viper'. In the later biblical books, it is the popular name for 'a fiery angel', on account of its root, *s-r-ph*, 'to burn'. Hence, Isaiah's vision of ''a Seraph flying towards (him) with a burning coal in its hand'' (6:6).

3-5:2 *Is that what you'd bless?:* The idea of man and the angels in perpetual contention on the issue of man's creation, with the latter ever eager to dissuade God from his purpose, reached its most explicit expression in the book of Job, where Satan wrests permission from God so that he may prove that even the faith of the most righteous among men, as exemplified by Job, can evaporate in the face of severe trial and tribulation. See Job 1:6-12.

3-5:3 *A world of darkness:* Darkness, in biblical literature, is a metaphor for moral chaos, as in the verse, ''The eyes of the wise man are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness'' (Eccl. 2:14). Isaiah viewed the mission of Israel as that of becoming ''a light to the nations, opening eyes that are blind, bringing forth the prisoner from his dungeon and those that dwell in darkness out of their constraints'' (42:7). In the later literature of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Essene writers referred to the final confrontation at the end of time, between the forces of good and evil, as a war between 'The Sons of Light' and 'The Sons of Darkness.'

3-6:3 "*Regret" is a term of man's invention*: Although we have confined the concept of 'regret' to man, there is no denying that the Bible does employ the term in relation to God, as in the verse, ''And God said: I will destroy the man I have created from off the face of the earth…*for I regret* that I have made him'' (Gen.1:7; See also Gen. 6:7). The difference is that human regret follows the realization that the path previously trodden was wrong. God's regret is not based on any previous error of choice. For God, 'everything is foreseen' (Mish. Ethics of the Fathers 3:19). His 'regret' is simply that, in their exercise of the free choice bestowed by God, men frequently act in a misguided manner, contrary to His will, forcing Him to express his displeasure and impose punishment.

3-6:4 *What's beyond their ken:* That God's intentions are beyond man's understanding and in defiance of human logic is a recurring theme in later biblical literature. See, for example, Is. 40:28.

4-1:8 *I'm from the first until the last:* See Is. 44:6.

4-1:13 *I am its place:* This is based on the rabbinic concept of the relation of God to His world: 'The universe is not (the extent of) His place; He is the place of the universe' (Mid. *Pesikta Rabb*., sec. 21). The first part of the quote refutes Spinoza's pantheistic identification of God with nature. The second part suggests that God's transcendence does not mean that he is detached from the world. In fact, His Spirit attaches itself to it with a kind of spiritual gravity.

4-2:9 *And stilled forever will be strife's sound:* This optimistic vision of the future is majestically expressed by Isaiah:

> ''Thus, said God the Lord, He that created the heavens and stretched them forth; He that spread forth the earth and that which issued from it; He that gives breath unto the people upon it and spirit to them that walk in it. I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness, and have taken hold of your hand, kept you and set you for a covenant of humanity, for a light to the nations'' (42:5-6).

ADAM

7-5:3 *There've been other worlds before this one:* This concept is inspired by the statement of R. Abbahu in the Midrash: 'God created worlds and destroyed them, created worlds and destroyed them, until he made ours. Then He said: "The previous worlds found no favor with me; this one does"' (Ber. Rab.9 [2]).

Many fundamentalist believers, who reject the scientific view of the age of the world and take literally the traditionalist view that it is under 6,000 years, seek to explain away the remains of dinosaurs and other fossils by claiming that they are relics of those earlier worlds that God created and replaced. Some have suggested that the creation of the great sea-monsters (Gen. 1:21) also refers to those inhabitants of earlier worlds. The problem of seeking biblical authority for such an identification is that the account in Genesis refers indubitably to the creation of *our* world alone!

The great 11th century Bible commentator, R. Solomon ben Isaac (acronym, *Rashi*) identifies those monsters with the great Leviathan and his mate. In order to prevent them procreating and inundating the world, God is credited with having slain the female and preserved her as food to be provided for the righteous in the World to Come (Mid. Ber. Rab. 7 [4]).

8-1:7 '*Shalom, brother':* Hebrew, *Shalom chaver!* This popular Modern Hebrew greeting became popularized when it was used, in November 1995, by the American President, Bill Clinton, in a eulogy for the assassinated Israeli Premier, Yitzchak Rabin.

8-3:5-6 *Who, painfully, was making him wait:* While there is no biblical source for this particular episode, yet, on the verse, ''And God saw all that he had made, and behold it was very good'' (Gen.1:31), the Midrash states that, at that moment, God exclaimed, "World, world, O that you would forever find such favor in my eyes as you do at this time!" (Ber. Rab. 9 [4]). Adam's desperate wish to discern whether his offspring would live up to this challenge is clearly within the spirit of that Midrash.

In the same vein, another Midrash states that God showed Adam a vision of every future generation of leaders and sages (Ber. Rab. 24 [2]), perhaps with a view to reassuring him as to the merit of his offspring and the accumulated wisdom that might help them avoid sin and secure eternity.

8-5:1 *I will not move from my place:* In Judaism there is a long tradition of leaping to the defense of any condemned group or nation, whether deserving or otherwise, at even the slimmest chance of success. The first chronicled example is Abraham's spirited and courageous appeal against God's decision to destroy the wicked inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Hence, we have credited Adam with having refused to move from his place until God reassures him that his offspring will merit divine grace and will never suffer destruction.

8-5:5 *Slipped into an induced sleep:* We have attempted here to bring out the full force of the biblical expression, 'And *God caused* a deep sleep to fall on Adam' (Gen. 3:21). Our version departs from the text by suggesting that Adam, through the exhaustion of crying out the whole night, simply fell into a deep sleep. We have employed the vague term 'induced sleep' in order to bridge the gap between the two versions of events.