



Genesis and the Unfinished Business of Creation: The World as Liminal

Dr. Benjamin Sommer

Benjamin D. Sommer joined The Jewish Theological Seminary faculty as professor of Bible in July 2008. Previously, he served as director of the Crown Family Center for Jewish Studies at Northwestern University, where he had taught since 1994. Dr. Sommer has been a fellow at the Israel Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the Tikvah Center for Jewish Law and Civilization at the New York University School of Law, and the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. He has served as a visiting faculty member in the Department of Bible of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and at the Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas. He has received fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies and the Yad Hanadiv/Berakha Foundation.

Dr. Sommer's most recent book, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* received the prestigious Goldstein-Goren Prize in Jewish Thought from Ben Gurion University for the years 2014-2016 and was a finalist for both for the National Jewish Book Award for 2015 and the Association for Jewish Studies' Jordan Schnitzer Prize for 2014-2016. A Hebrew edition of the book, *התגלות וסמכות: סיני במקרא ובמסורת*, was published by Carmel Publishing House in Jerusalem in 2022. An earlier book by Professor Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*, received the Award for Excellence in the Study of Religion in 2010 awarded by the American Academy of Religion, as well as the Jordan Schnitzer Award from the Association for Jewish Studies for the years 2006-2009. The first book Dr. Sommer published, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40-66*, was awarded the Salo Wittmayer Baron Prize by the American Academy of Religion. Dr. Sommer has long been active as a lecturer and scholar-in-residence, teaching rabbis, Jewish educators, and laypeople in a variety of settings in the United States and Israel.

All of the texts in this source sheet have been translated by Dr. Benjamin Sommer.

The opening lines of a Babylonian creation text, *Enuma Elish*:

<p>At the time when, up there, sky had not been named, and down here stable earth had not been called by any term, And Apsu, the primeval one, the progenitor, And Ti'amat, the creator, who gave birth to all, Had mixed their waters together, But neither pastures nor thickets had been formed, At the time when no gods had been brought forth, None was called by name, no destinies were decreed, Gods were born then, within them; Laḥmu and Laḥamu were brought forth, were called by name.</p>	<p><i>enūma eliš lā nabû šamāmū</i> <i>šapliš ammatu šuma lā zakrat</i> <i>apsûm-ma rēštû zārûšun</i> <i>mummu tiamat muallidat gimrišun</i> <i>mêšunu ištēniš ihīqqū-ma</i> <i>gipāra lā kišsurū šuṣâ lā še'û</i> <i>enūma ilū lā šûpû manāma</i> <i>šuma lā zukkurū šīmatu lā šīmū</i> <i>ibbanû-ma ilū qerebšun</i> <i>laḥmu u laḥamu uštapû šumī izzakrū</i></p>
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The opening lines of a Babylonian creation text, *Atraḥasis*:

<p>At the time when the gods were human — They did the labor, they bore the workload, Great was the workload of the gods, The labor was heavy, the drudgery too much! — The great Anunnaki forced The Igigi to bear a seven-fold workload.</p>	<p><i>enūma ilû awīlum</i> <i>ūblû dulla izbilū šupšikka</i> <i>šupšik ilī rabima</i> <i>dullum kabit mād šapšāqum</i> <i>rabbatum^d Anunaku sibittam</i> <i>dullam ušazbalū^d Igigi</i></p>
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Genesis 1.1-3:

בראשית א' א'-ג':

<p>At the beginning, when God created sky and earth —the earth had been a muddle and a jumble; only darkness on the surface of the deep; God's wind was hov'ring on the water— God said, "There should be light," and there was light.</p>	<p>בראשית ברא אלהים את השמים ואת הארץ: והארץ היתה תהו ובהו והשך על־פני תהום ורום אלהים מרחפת על־פני המים: ויאמר אלהים יהי אור ויהי־אור:</p>
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Genesis 2.4b-7:

בראשית ב' דב'–ז':

At the time when Yhwh God made earth and sky
—no field-growth was yet on earth, and no field-grass had yet
sprouted, because Yhwh God had sent no rain to the earth, and
there was no human to work the soil; but groundwater would
well up from the earth and moisten all the topsoil—
Yhwh God fashioned the human, dust from the soil. He blew
into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a
living, breathing person.

בְּגֹם עָשׂוֹת ה' אֱלֹהִים אֶרֶץ וְשָׁמַיִם:
וְכָל אֲשֵׁי הַשָּׂדֶה טָרֵם יְהִי בָאָרֶץ וְכָל־עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה טָרֵם יִצְמַח כִּי לֹא הִמְטִיר
ה' אֱלֹהִים עַל־הָאָרֶץ וְאָדָם אִינוּ לַעֲבֹד אֶת־הָאֲדָמָה:
וְאֵד יִעֲלֶה מִן־הָאָרֶץ וְהִשְׁקָה אֶת־כָּל־פְּנֵי־הָאֲדָמָה:
וַיִּצְרֶה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם עֹפָר מִן־הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נְשֵׁמַת חַיִּים
וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה:

Selected verses from Genesis 1.1–2.4a:

פסוקים מספר בראשית א' א-ב' ד':

<p>1.4: And God saw the light—indeed, it was good! And God divided between light and darkness.</p>	<p>א' ד' וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאֹר וְכִי-טוֹב וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ:</p>
<p>1.10: And God called the dry land, “earth,” but he called the massing of waters, “ocean,” and God saw that it was good.</p>	<p>א' י' וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לַיַבֹּשֶׁה אֶרֶץ וּלְמַקְוֵה הַמַּיִם קָרָא יַמִּים וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי-טוֹב:</p>
<p>1.12: And the earth brought forth grass that seeded its own seed for its own kind and trees that produced fruit with its seed in it for its own kind, and God saw that it was good.</p>	<p>א' י"ב וַתּוֹצֵא הָאֶרֶץ דָּשָׁא עֵשֶׂב מִזְרִיעַ זָרַע לְמִינֵהוּ וְעֵץ עֹשֶׂה-פְּרִי אֲשֶׁר זָרַע-בוֹ לְמִינֵהוּ וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי-טוֹב:</p>
<p>1.17–18: And God put them in the expanse of the sky to illuminate the earth, to rule it during the day and then night and to distinguish between light and dark. And God saw that it was good.</p>	<p>א' י"ז וַיִּתֵּן אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים בְּרַקִּיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם לְהָאִיר עַל-הָאֶרֶץ: ח"י- וְלִמְשַׁל בַּיּוֹם וּבַלַּיְלָה וּלְהַבְדִּיל בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי-טוֹב:</p>
<p>1.21–22: And God created the giant sea-monsters and each living creature that creep, which swarmed in the waters, all of them in their kinds, and every bird with wings, each in its kind. And God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the oceans, and birds should multiply on the earth.”</p>	<p>א' כ"א וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הַתַּנִּינִם הַגְּדֹלִים וְאֵת כָּל-נֶפֶשׁ הַחַיָּה הַרְמֹשֶׁת כ"ב- אֲשֶׁר שָׁרְצוּ הַמַּיִם לְמִינֵהֶם וְאֵת כָּל-עוֹף כָּנָף לְמִינֵהוּ וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי-טוֹב: וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים לֵאמֹר פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלאוּ אֶת-הַמַּיִם בַּיַּמִּים וְהָעוֹף יִרְבַּ בָּאֶרֶץ:</p>
<p>1.25: And God made the land-animals on the earth, each in its kind, and the creeping-things of the ground, each in its own kind, and God saw that it was good.</p>	<p>א' כ"ה וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת-חַיַּת הָאֶרֶץ לְמִינֵהָ וְאֶת-הַרְמֹשֶׁת לְמִינֵהָ וְאֵת כָּל-רֶמֶשׂ הָאֲדָמָה לְמִינֵהוּ וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי-טוֹב:</p>

<p>1.31–2.4a: And God saw all that He had done, and—look!—it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning, the sixth day. And the skies and the earth were completed, with all their multitude. And on the seventh day God completed the work that He had done, and on the seventh day He rested from all the work that He had done. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, for it was then that He rested from all the work that God, by doing it, had created. This is the story of the how the earth and the sky were engendered, when they were created.</p>	<p>א' ל"א - וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְהִנֵּה־טוֹב מְאֹד וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב ב' ד" וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם הַשְּׁשִׁי: וַיִּכְלּוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ וְכָל־צְבָאָם: וַיְכַל אֱלֹהִים בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מְלַאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וַיִּשְׁבֹּת בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מִכָּל־מְלַאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה: וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־יוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וַיְקַדְּשׁ אֹתוֹ כִּי בּוֹ שָׁבַת מִכָּל־ מְלַאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר־בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים לַעֲשׂוֹת: אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ בְּהִבְרָאָם:</p>
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Selected verses from Exodus 39–40:

פסוקים מספר שמות ל"ט-מ':

<p>39.32: All the labor for the Dwelling, the Tent of Meeting, was complete, and the children of Israel did it; in accordance with all the Yhwh had commanded Moses, so they did.</p> <p>39.33: And Moses saw all the work, and—look!—they did it; just as Yhwh had commanded, so they did it, and Moses blessed them.</p> <p>40.9–13: Take the anointing oil, and anoint the Dwelling and everything in it, and make it holy along with all its tools. Anoint the altar for the whole-offering and all its tools, and make the altar holy... Anoint the basin and its pedestal, and make it holy. Bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance of the</p>	<p>ל"ט ל"ב וַתִּכָּל כָּל־עֲבֹדַת מִשְׁכַּן אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֶת־מִשְׁחָה כֵּן עָשׂוּ: ל"ט מ"ג וַיֵּרָא מֹשֶׁה אֶת־כָּל־הַמְּלָאכָה וְהִנֵּה עָשׂוּ אֹתָהּ כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' כֵּן עָשׂוּ וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם מֹשֶׁה: מ' ט' וַלְקַחְתָּ אֶת־שֶׁמֶן הַמִּשְׁחָה וּמִשְׁחָתָה אֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּן וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־בּוֹ וַקְדִּישְׁתָּ אֹתוֹ וְאֶת־כָּל־כֵּלָיו וְהִנֵּה קֹדֶשׁ: וּמִשְׁחָתָה אֶת־מִזְבַּח הָעֹלָה וְאֶת־כָּל־כֵּלָיו וַקְדִּישְׁתָּ אֹתֵיהֶם זָבָח... וּמִשְׁחָתָה אֶת־הַכִּיֹּר וְאֶת־כַּנּוֹ וַקְדִּישְׁתָּ אֹתוֹ: וְהִקְרַבְתָּ אֶת־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶת־בָּנָיו אֶל־פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד... וּמִשְׁחָתָה אֹתוֹ</p>
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<p>tenet of Meeting...annoint him, and make him holy, and he will serve as My priest.</p> <p>40.33: And he set up the courtyard around the Dwelling and the altar, and he put the screen at the entrance to the courtyard, and Moses completed the work.</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">וְקִדְשֵׁתָּ אֹתוֹ וְכָהֵן לִי:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">מ' ל"ג וַיִּקַּם אֶת־הַחֲצָר סָבִיב לַמִּשְׁכָּן וְלַמִּזְבֵּחַ וַיִּתֵּן אֶת־מָסַךְ שַׁעַר הַחֲצָר וַיִּכַּל מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הַמְּלָאכָה:</p>
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These parallels between Genesis 1–2 and Exodus 39–40 have been widely noted. In midrashic literature, see פסיקתא דרב כהנא, פיסקא א' חלק ד' (=Bernard Mandelbaum, ed., *Pesikta de Rav Kahana*, 2 vols. [New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary, 1987], 1:9), concerning which see the discussion in Peter Schäfer, “Tempel und Schöpfung: Zur Interpretation einiger Heiligtumstraditionen in der rabbinischen Literatur,” *Studien zur Geschichte und Theologie des rabbinischen Judentums* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 131–33.

For these parallels in modern scholarly discussions of Genesis and Exodus, see Franz Rosenzweig, “Scripture and Luther” [1926], in *Scripture and Translation*, eds. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 18–19; Martin Buber, “People Today and the Jewish Bible” [1936], in *Scripture and Translation*, 62; Umberto (Moshe David) Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967 [1944]), 476–77, 483; Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951), 9–10, 96; Moshe Weinfeld, “Sabbath, Temple Building, and the Enthronement of the Lord,” [in Hebrew], *Beit Miqra* 69 (1977), 188–93; Erhard Blum, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1990) 306–11; Bernd Janowski, “Tempel und Schöpfung: Schöpfungstheologische Aspekte der priesterschriftlichen Heiligtumskonzeption,” *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* 5 (1990), 11–36; Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 111.

Avot 2:16:

אבות ב' ט"ז

<p>He [Rabbi Tarfon] used to say: You are not responsible to complete the work, but you are not free to relinquish it.</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">הוא [רבי טרפון] הִזָּה אומר: לא עליך המלאכה לגמר, ולא אתה בן־חורין לבטל ממנה.</p>
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