



THE PARSHA EXPERIMENT: PARSHAT BEREISHIT

SABBATH TABLE OUTLINE

- I. Start with a question: What kind of book is the Torah?
 - a) An anthology of moral stories and cautionary tales?
 1. Try to be a good guy like Moses, don't disobey God like Adam
 2. Many of us treat the laws and stories of the Torah just like that, like isolated episodes
 - Week after week, we hear about sacrifices, the story of the Golden Calf, stories about Joseph and his brothers
 - Maybe these stories weren't meant to be read in isolation
 - What if they all hang together to tell a larger tale?
 - b) This is the Parsha Experiment
 1. Some of the parshas in the Torah connect to each other in surprising ways
 - Parallels to the Tree of Knowledge pop up everywhere - sins and their redemption
 - Wonder if there are more than just a handful of connections
 2. What if the Torah, like any good book, has a plot with each story flowing seamlessly into the next with climaxes and epic resolutions
 - c) Problem - Just like George Orwell doesn't begin *Animal Farm* by explaining that it's a metaphor, God doesn't come out and tell us what His book is about - That's why this is an experiment - Just because the author doesn't spell out the plot doesn't mean it's not there waiting to be discovered
- II. This week's parsha, Parshat Bereishit, has a couple of famous episodes
 - a) Seven Days of Creation, Garden, Tree of Knowledge Story, Cain and Abel, and a bunch of random genealogies down to Noah
 1. Why are all of these stories here?
 2. How do these stories fit together? Why are these stories the ones that the author, God, chooses to tell?
 - b) Maybe the Torah is just telling history
 1. While the Torah is largely written in chronological order, it is very specific about which stories are included and which are not
 - We never heard about when Adam learned to make fire or anything about the cultural revolution
 - The Torah covers about 2000 years, and these are the only stories that God chooses to tell us
 2. Maybe these stories are what are most essential to the overall storyline of the Torah - they are not just historical events
 - Is there a way to ask the text itself if it's isolated stories or a unified story?
 - How could we ask the text? Are there any clues?

- c) There is only one part of the parsha where it looks like the text comes out and tells us that it's definitely a unified story
1. Something in the aftermath of the Cain and Abel story seems to clearly point to an earlier part of this week's parsha
 2. It all starts in an uncomfortable conversation between God and Cain
 - Cain had just murdered his brother, and God confronts him
 - He asks a pretty straight-forward question: "Where is your brother, Abel?" (Genesis 4:9-14)
 - Cain answers, "Am I my brother's keeper?"
 - God punishes Cain, and Cain cries out in anguish
 - It seems as if Cain and God's relationship is pretty much over
- d) This story might seem like an isolated incident, but is there anything about the aftermath of this event that reminds you of anything?
1. Is there another time in the parsha when a human sins, and God punishes him?
 2. The sin of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil
 - After Adam and Eve eat from the Tree, they hide from God (Genesis 3:8)
 - We just saw hiding in Cain's story - Cain said that he is now hidden from God's face
 - When God asks Adam where he is and how he got to this point, Adam hides from responsibility and points fingers
 - Adam says it was Eve's fault, and Eve says it was the snake's fault (Genesis 3:12-13)
 - We saw the word אִי הָבַל אָחִיךָ (Genesis 3:9) with Cain and Abel - אִי הָבַל אָחִיךָ (Genesis 4:9)
 - The response of Cain, shrugging off responsibility, echoes the response of his parents
 - God curses the ground, using the same words in both situations
 - Finally, in both situations, God expels Adam/Eve and Cain from their homes
 3. There is clearly a strong connection between these stories

III. There is something odd about these parallels - they are not identical

- a) For example, when Adam and Eve point to others, they are really just quibbling with God about whose fault it was
 1. Adam blames Eve
 2. Eve blames the snake
 3. Cain doesn't even acknowledge the sin, playing dumb that there's even anything wrong
- b) The ground is cursed for Adam, and he'll have a hard time working it
 1. For Cain, he is cursed from the ground, and his curse is much worse
 2. God makes it so that the land won't even produce for Cain at all
- c) The parallels are there but more severe
- d) Seems as if things are getting worse in the generation after Adam
- e) What are these connections telling us?
 1. Is it just that God is not very creative when it comes to His punishments? Or is there some way that these stories are connected?
 2. Maybe if the aftermath is similar, it would stand to reason that the thing that provokes them is similar too

3. Cain's sin might be connected to the sin of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil - What would that even mean?

IV. It looks like the story starts with the sin of the Tree

- a) Maybe the story actually starts way back at the beginning
- b) Genesis 1:1 - Introduced to the character of God
 - 1. All we really know is that He existed before the world was created
 - 2. Yet, He makes a decision to bring humanity and everything needed to survive into the picture
 - God does seem to go out of His way for humanity
 - During each day of creation, God goes out of his way to declare that what He made is good
 - Each day is another layer of creation that needs to be declared as good before God can introduce man into the picture
- c) In Chapter 2, God declares that it is not good for man to be alone (Genesis 2:18), and He creates Eve
 - 1. We see that God is the knower of what is good and what's not good for mankind and that God seemingly creates the world for mankind and tells him to be fruitful and populate the earth
 - 2. But why does God create the world for man? What is the meaning of life?
 - God doesn't come out and tell us, but it does seem that God's creation of the world is a great act of kindness, like He wants to have a relationship with mankind
 - The first two chapters are all about what God gives to man
 - There is only one restriction - The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil
- d) God says that man may eat from all of the trees except this one (Genesis 2:16-17)
 - 1. It sounds like such a strange command - why create a tree from which man is not supposed to eat?
 - 2. It also seems like a pretty easy command not to mess up
 - They have access to everything except that one tree
 - Still, they eat from the tree
 - What is going on here?
 - Why create the tree in the first place?
 - How did Adam and Eve so egregiously fail?

V. God wants to have a relationship with man

- a) He created the Garden as a sort of paradise where man could live together with Him, a gift for humanity - But God wants man to understand that it comes from Him
- b) When a parent gives a child a gift, the parent wants the child to enjoy it in the context of the relationship
 - 1. When the child forgets that the parent gave it, it damages the relationship
 - 2. God wants Adam and Eve to enjoy the Garden while still knowing that it comes from Him
 - 3. He wants to have a relationship
 - 4. How is man going to show he understands and wants to be in the relationship?
By honoring the prohibition not to eat from God's one tree
 - That's how we convey our understanding that we are guests in the garden

- We don't make the rules; God does
 - As long as Adam and Eve realize that, they can have that relationship with God, but they failed
5. The temptation is to see yourself as the owner of the Garden
- If I am a guest, I owe gratitude
 - It is much easier if it's all mine; I make the rules, and not God
- c) Until that point, God was the decider of good and evil, knowing what was good for humanity and what was not
1. When Adam and Eve broke God's rule and ate from the Tree, they took good and evil into their own hands
 2. The text says that Eve saw that the Tree was good to eat from (Genesis 3:6)
 - This is the first time a human declares something to be good
 - But that was her perspective on good and evil, not God's
 - Eve meant that it was good as in tasty, not morally good
 - When people decide what is good, it's always tainted by desire
 - What we want becomes good, and what we don't like becomes bad
 3. We are able to forget that we are guests in this world and to think that we are the owners, and we should make the rules

VI. What happens next is incredibly tragic

- a) When Adam sins, God responds by cursing the ground that He formed for man
 1. Almost as if to say, "I gave you the world to enjoy, but if you cannot remember that I am the owner, let's see what you make of it on your own."
 2. They are kicked out of God's home
 3. Yes, they can still live in the world that God created, but the closeness is gone
- b) Now back to the story of Cain and Abel - things get much worse
 1. When Cain saw that his offering was accepted, and his own wasn't, he gets really angry
 - But God lovingly reached out to Cain, telling him not to be so angry and advising him to do what's good (Genesis 4:6-7)
 - He uses the word "good" to mean what is morally good
 2. Cain took God's advice, but did what was good according to his own desires, just like Adam
 - He ignored God and took matters into his own hands and ended up killing his brother
 - Cain falls further than Adam and Eve, totally denying that anything was wrong
 - His curses are all the more harsh and devastating
 - What started as Adam hiding from God turns into God hiding from Cain
- c) That is the link that ties the parsha together

VII. Parsha begins with a loving God, shaping the universe for mankind

- a) It ends with the broken relationships of humanity, moving further and further away
- b) The final part of the parsha lists the genealogy from Adam to Noah, fast-forwarding over a thousand years as they continue a downward spiral where things get even worse
 1. Parsha begins with seven mentions of "good" and ends depressingly with the first time God declares something to be "evil" (Genesis 6:5)
 2. The text says that God became sad and regretted having made man

3. In the span of one parsha, we are presented with an ideal world and its rapid decline

c) The story has only just begun

1. In next week's parsha, things get worse before they get better
2. God has a plan to turn it all around
3. The themes uncovered in this week's parsha appear all over the Torah
4. They present the challenges with which generations need to deal
5. The Torah seems to be a guidebook that teaches the way back to closeness and the relationship with God