



9

# Shema Israel

Bible Correspondance Course

A background image showing a hand reaching out towards a starry night sky, with a white banner at the bottom.

Creation

### *What is Truth?*

A strange question perhaps, yet one that expresses both our confusion and our skepticism regarding truth. Confusion, because with a multiplicity of religions and a diversity of beliefs around us we may genuinely wonder, “*Where is the truth?*” Skepticism, for it suggests that truth does not exist; in fact, there really is no objective truth.

The Hebrew Bible, the *Tanakh*, answers the question clearly. “*Hashem, God is the truth*” (Jeremiah 10:10; literal translation). For the Bible then, truth does exist; truth *is* association with God Himself. In fact, truth, *Emeth*, in the Hebrew language, is one of the 13 attributes of God. It falls seventh in the list in the exact center of the 13 attributes listed in Exodus 34:6; literal translation, a passage that is recited in the liturgies of Rosh Ha-Shanah Yom Kippur (Jewish New Year, Day of Attonement).

If truth is identified with God’s character, it does not come from us but is to be found outside of us – in God. This recognition implies that in order to find the truth we should not approach it with the preconceived idea that we know what the truth is. Instead, we should approach the truth with a question, “*What is it?*” This is the very same question, in fact, the ancient Israelites asked when confronted with the *manna*, the bread of God in the wilderness. “*What is it?*” they asked, and the question gave the name to this heavenly bread, for the Hebrew word *manna* means “*What is it?*” The meaning of the word *manna* suggests an important lesson regarding how we should approach Biblical truth. We should approach it with the question: “*What is it? What is truth?*” We should approach it with the same humble and honest mindset as the ancient Israelites approached the *manna* in the wilderness, asking “*What is it?*” Asking the question from this frame of reference no longer suggests confusion or skepticism. Instead, it implies sincere questioning from one who expects a true answer from above.

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Mail: *Shabbat Shalom*  
Andrews University  
Berrien Springs, MI 49104-1535  
Fax: (269) 471-6202  
e-mail: [sshalom@andrews.edu](mailto:sshalom@andrews.edu)

## Bible Study – Lesson # 9\*

### Creation

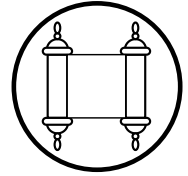
#### *The Unbelievable Belief*

**T**o believe in Creation is not just a matter of faith, it is also common sense. The French philosopher Voltaire was compelled to recognize that a watch could not exist if there were not a watchmaker. Before Voltaire, Rabbi Akiba also noted: “A house could not have existed if there were not a builder, a garment if there were not a weaver, and a door if there were not a carpenter, so does the Universe which could not have existed if there were not a Creator” (*Midrash Temurah*, Ch. 5).

Yet, faith and common sense are not enough on this matter. Many believers, Christians and Jews, not to mention many reasonable and intelligent people, do not believe in Creation. For Creation is the most unbelievable belief. For, Creation is the only event in human history that had no human witness!

The Creation story makes sense, however, for it is the only rational explanation for our faith and the only reasonable key to our mystery.

*\*Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references are taken from the New International Reader's Version of the Bible, Copyright 1998, by the Zondervan Corporation.*



notes

**1. Why does the Bible begin with the Creation story?**

*God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1).*

*Faith is being sure of what we hope for. It is being certain of what we do not see. (Hebrews 11:1).*

- Creation is the first “article of faith” in the *Ani ma amin* Jewish creed, written by Maimonides: “I believe with a firm and perfect faith that God is the Creator of all things.”

**2. What is the first lesson of Creation?**

*Come, let us bow down and worship him. Let us fall on our knees in front of the Lord our Maker (Psalm 95:6). (cf. Revelation 14:7)*

- “*Aleinu lesabeiah le Adon ha-kol. Lateit gdulah leyotser bereisheet.* It is our duty to praise the Lord of all, to proclaim the greatness of the Creator of the universe” (*Aleinu* prayer).

**3. What is the most compelling evidence of God’s existence?**

*The heavens tell about the glory of God. The skies show that his hands created them* (Psalm 19:1). (cf. Genesis 1:1)

- Upon observing the syntax of the first verse (Genesis 1:1), the Midrash concludes that the creation (*bara*) leads to the encounter with God (*Elohim*). See Yalkut R. Samuel ISP 184: “*I exist, therefore God exists.*”

#### 4. How did God create the world?

*He spoke, and the world came into being. He commanded, and it stood firm.* (Psalm 33:9).  
(cf. Genesis 1:3)

- “God created the world by a word, instantaneously, without toil and pains” (*Bereshit Rabbah* 3, 2). “The world was created by ten divine words . . . for the first act was enough for all the creation” (*m. Pirkey Abot* 5.1).

#### 5. How long did God take to create our universe?

*“In six days I made the heavens and the earth. I made the oceans and everything in them. But I rested on the*

*seventh day. So I blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (Exodus 20: 11).*

**6. How does the Bible describe each work of creation?**

*God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered into one place. Let dry ground appear.” And that’s exactly what happened. God called the dry ground “land.” He called the waters that were gathered together “oceans.” And God saw that it was good (Genesis 1:9-10). (cf. vs.12, etc.; Genesis 1:31)*

- “Everything that God fashioned was perfect, as all His dealings with men are just and right. It is not for men to imagine improvements in His creation” (Sifre Deuteronomy, per. 397).

**7. What kind of days are the days of the Creation week?**

*God called the light “day.” He called the darkness “night.” There was evening, and there was morning. It was day one (Genesis 1:5). (cf. vs.8, 13, etc.)*

- See Rashi (in *Miqraoth Gdoloth*): “The symmetry of the text would have required

first day, like for the following days, second, third, fourth. Why was it written 'one'? because God was one."

**8. How did God proceed to mark days and seasons?**

*God made two great lights. He made the larger light to rule over the day. He made the smaller light to rule over the night. He also made the stars (Genesis 1:16). (cf. Genesis 1:4-5)*

**9. What lessons about God can we learn from the Creation story?**

*God (Elohim) created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1).*

*At that time, bushes had not appeared on the earth. Plants had not come up in the fields. The Lord God (YHWH) had not sent rain on the earth. And there wasn't any man to work the ground (Genesis 2:5).*

- "Elohim is the name of God when He exercises justice . . . YHWH is the name of God when He exercises mercy" (see Rashi, *Miqraoth Gdoloth*).

**10. What was God's purpose in creating the world?**

*God saw everything he had made.*

*And it was very good. There was evening, and there was morning. It was day six (Genesis 1: 31).*

- “Rabbi Aibo said of God: ‘It is like a king who has filled his palace with enjoyments; if he has no visitors, what pleasure does he derive from them? Thus when the angels objected to the creation of man, God replied: “And of what use are all the good things I have created, unless men are there to enjoy them?”’” (*Bereshit Rabbah* 8, 5).

**11. What should be the human response to the fact that God created the world?**

*You love your wife. So enjoy life with her. Do it all the days of this meaningless life God has given you on earth. That’s what he made you for. That’s what you get for all of your hard work on earth (Ecclesiastes 9:9). — Enjoy life!*

*God blessed the seventh day and made it holy. He rested on it. After he had created everything, he rested from all of the work he had done (Genesis 2: 3). (cf. Exodus 20:10-11) — Keep the Sabbath!*



**12. How did the Marcionite rejection of the God of Creation affect the Jewish-Christian separation?**

- “There were, in Marcion’s view, two gods. The one, creator of the world and all that is in it, was the god of the Jewish Bible” (Steven G. Wilson, *Related Strangers*, p.211).
- “The other, the redeemer deity, was radically different: a god of mercy rather than justice, of love and compassion, utterly separate from the creator god and wholly unknown until revealed by Jesus” (Steven G. Wilson, *Related Strangers*, p.211).
- “The separation of law and gospel is the primary and principal exploit of Marcion” (*Marc.* 1.19).

**13. How is faith in creation implied in the Biblical hope?**

*“I will create new heavens and a new earth. The things that have happened before will not be remembered. They will not even enter your minds. So be glad and full of joy forever because of what I will create. I will cause others to take delight in Jerusalem. They will be filled with joy when they see its people”* (Isaiah 65:17-18).

**14. What is the Jewish or the New Testament ritual that points to the Biblical event of creation?**

*Jesus answered, "What I'm about to tell you is true. No one can enter God's kingdom without being born through water and the Holy Spirit" (John 3:5). (cf. Romans 6:1-4) Tevilah: Yevamot 46b; Keritot 9a*

- In both traditions the total immersion of the person is required for the proselyte before he or she joins. In both traditions the act of immersion symbolizes recreation and new commitment to God and the Torah (see Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Issuaray Biah* 13:5 and Colossians 2:12).

**15. What lesson is suggested through the way the Bible begins and ends?**

*God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1).*

*Cyrus, the king of Persia, says, "The Lord is the God of heaven. He has given me all of the kingdoms on earth. He has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any one of his people among you can go up to Jerusalem'" (2 Chronicles 36: 23).*

*“I will send you the prophet Elijah. He will come before the day of the Lord arrives. It will be a great and terrifying day. Elijah will teach parents how to love their children. He will also teach children how to honor their parents. If that does not happen, I will come. And I will put a curse on the land” (Malachi 4: 5-6).*

*In the beginning, the Word was already there. The Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1: 1).*

*He who gives witness to these things says, “Yes. I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus (Revelation 22:20!*

## *Bereshit: The Mystery of Creation<sup>1</sup>*

**T**he Bible proclaims that the universe and its content – landscape and mountains, rivers and seas, trees and flowers, animals which walk, swim or fly, and men and women who think and sing – all these did not come about by accident but were created by God.

### *In the Beginning God*

**I**t is not an accident that the Bible begins with this affirmation. The first article of faith of Maimonides' *Ani maamin* states: "I believe with a firm and perfect faith that God is the Creator of all things; for He guides and supports all creatures; that He alone has made everything and that He still acts, and will act during the whole eternity." This position at the beginning of the prophetic word suggests the priority of Creation over any other theological consideration. Even before the appearance of Adam and Eve and later Israel, we encounter the event of God's Creation. Rashi wondered about this fact: "Why didn't God start with the Exodus, the most important event, the first event of the history of Israel?" he asked. The reason he suggested, is that all may know that the God of Israel is the God of *all* nations.

The first lesson of Creation is to reveal to us that God is, before all of us. It is noteworthy that the Masoretic Text puts an *athnach*, the most powerful disjunctive accent, on the word *Elohim* (God) in order to mark

an emphasis: God is the Creator. God did it. Nothing came by accident. The most compelling evidence of God's existence lies in His Creation. Upon observing the syntax of the first verse, the Midrash made the same observation. "*In the beginning created God.*" The order of the words in the Hebrew text, putting the verb describing Creation (*bara*) before the mention of God (*Elohim*), inspired the ancient rabbis who concluded that the Creation leads to an encounter with God (see Yalkut R. Samuel ISP 184).

In other words, the very fact that I exist is evidence of God's existence. "*I am, therefore God is*" we could say paraphrasing Descartes. I breathe, I think, I wonder, I pray, I see the world; therefore God exists. You may question everything, including the rigor of that philosophy, the truth of religion, or the validity of that opinion. But you cannot question your own existence, for as you are questioning, you exist. And since you exist, God exists. Because I am, there must be someone before me. The Bible starts with this awareness; God was in the beginning.

### *The God of Creation*

**T**hrough His work God defines Himself both as a great and Almighty God, who transcends humankind and as a personal God who came down and created persons and related to them.

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Doukhan, "Bereshit: The Mystery of Creation," Shabbat Shalom, Spring 2000, 14-17.

The Biblical story of Creation attests to these two complementary faces of God. In the first Creation story (Genesis 1:1-2:4a) God is described as the Great God of the Universe (Genesis 1:1). He is called by the name *Elohim*, which is derived from the Semitic root *alah* that expresses the idea of power and preeminence, and is used in the plural form (*-îm*) to suggest the idea of superlative and majesty. In the second Creation story (Genesis 2:4b-25), God is instead described as a God who comes close to humans and takes care of them. Here also, the name of God YHWH corresponds to this accent on God's proximity. The name YHWH is derived from the Semitic root *hwh* that means to "exist with" or "exist for." YHWH is the God who walks with and fights for. He is the God of history (Exodus 3:13-14), the personal God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exodus 3:16).

From the first pages of Scripture, God reveals Himself as the unique God who exists within Himself, absolute and independent; but He is also the personal God who exists and works for us. Because He is the Creator, God will always remain beyond human understanding; any attempt to represent Him, or even to conceive of Him is bound to fail and is blasphemous (Exodus 20:4-6). On the other hand, because He creates, God makes Himself known and we are able to approach Him and love Him. God is both far and near (Jeremiah 23:23), "in heaven" but also "our Father."

Faith in the Creator implies a religion of tension between two poles, where the worship experience includes both the awareness of the power and transcendence of God along with the assurance of His love. This is why Creation is often given in the Bible, especially in the Psalms, as the main reason for worshipping God: *“Come, let us bow down and worship him. Let us fall on our knees in front of the Lord our Maker”* (Psalm 95:6).

### *The Work of Creation*

**T**he very fact that it was God who worked at Creation should deter us from any attempt to speculate and explain its mystery. It is interesting that the Biblical Creation story does not provide us with the “scientific” mechanism of the divine work of Creation. God did not use an assistant, a special tool, or a secret formula. The entire mystery resides in Him. *He spoke, and the world came into being. He commanded, and it stood firm* (Psalm 33: 9). Indeed, the work of Creation is described as the result of God’s word. Ten times God spoke, suggests that it took God a minimal number of words to produce the Creation (compare Genesis 18:32). The Midrash comments on this miracle: *“God created the world by a word, instantaneously, without toil and pains”* (*Bereshit Rabbah* 3, 2). Yet the Creation story tells us that it took God seven days to complete the whole work – one week. He could have done it in a second or even less. Why then did God choose to create in seven days? The number seven in the Bible and in the ancient Middle East symbolizes the idea of fullness—a way of saying that God created everything and that

everything was perfect and complete. As the *Sifre Deuteronomy* states: “Everything that God fashioned was perfect, as all His dealings with men are just and right. It is not for men to imagine improvements in His creation” (*Sifre Deuteronomy* 397).

Also, God used a time unit that belongs to the human sphere. When God created, He entered the time frame of our universe. It is indeed interesting that for each stage of the week of Creation it is said “*There was evening, and there was morning. It was day one..It was day two*” (Genesis 1:5, 8). It is remarkable however that this phrase that is repeated six times to mark each new day of Creation, does not appear in relation to the seventh day, the Sabbath. The reason for this omission is quite simple. Only the seventh day is the first full day for human beings (Adam and Eve). Now that humans are here, it is no longer necessary to specify “evening and morning” for the day. Their presence is enough to indicate that the day which is now involved is a human day of “evening and morning,” in our words “a twenty-four-hour day.” It was, on the other hand, necessary to specify “evening and morning” for the other six days since humans were not yet an inherent part of the rhythm of the cosmos. The intention of this six fold repetition is clear: to emphasize that the days of this week were indeed human days, even though humans were not yet present. In fact, the clue is given from the first day (Genesis 1: 5). Instead of using the expected ordinal number *rishon* (first) as is done for all the other days (second, third, etc.), the Biblical author uses the cardinal number *ahad* (one). The day he has in mind then is “one day,”



one “unique day.” The same word is used in fact in the Shema to characterize the uniqueness of God (Deuteronomy 6:4). As the famous medieval Jewish commentator Rashi observed: “The symmetry of the text would have required first day, as for the following days, second, third, fourth. Why was it written ‘one’? Because God is one?”

The mystery remains total. The Biblical author insists: It took God just one week, one literal human week to complete the entire work of Creation. This may sound unbelievable today considering the “scientific” claim of evolution that speaks of billions of years. Yet the second Creation story (Genesis 2:4b-25) that parallels the first, confirms the truth of the first Creation story. The text tells us that God created the garden with its trees and that the humans He put among them were *adult, mature*. The second Creation story provides us with a key to interpret the first Creation story. Just as man was created adult, so the world was created adult. Adam was not created immature, as a baby or a sperm. God created him “grown up” just as the trees and everything around him, so that he could not only survive but also *enjoy* all the divine gifts.

A strong affirmation of the goodness and the perfection of Creation, marks the conclusion of the Creation week: *God saw everything he had made. And it was very good* (Genesis 1:31). The “very” added to the “good” at the end of the work shows that Creation is not just a good work that meets our basic needs and helps us to survive. Creation is both beautiful and abundant so

that we may enjoy it. This ultimate purpose has been pointed out by Rabbi Abo in the Midrash *Rabbah*, “It is like a king who has filled his palace with enjoyments. . . . When the angels objected to the Creation of man, God replied: ‘And of what use are all the good things I have created, unless men are there to enjoy them?’” (*Bereshit Rabbah* 8, 5). The implication of the goodness of Creation is that humans are allowed and even required to enjoy it.

This positive appreciation of Creation has characterized the Jewish response of joy in life, in contrast to the Marcionite dualism that has often affected Christians. This dualism has encouraged Christians to despise Creation and the physical world as something negative and evil. In Christianity the spiritual domain has therefore prevailed over the physical and material domain. The God of salvation, the spiritual God of the New Testament, has replaced the God of Creation, the concrete and historical God of the Old Testament. Along the same lines, the first day of the week, Sunday, that celebrates the resurrection and deliverance from the world, has replaced the Seventh-day Sabbath that celebrates Creation and the goodness of the physical world.

The shift from Creation to Salvation, from concrete history to the call for spiritual experience, has played a major role in the forging of two different mentalities leading ultimately to the separation between Jews and Christians. The dichotomy between Creation and Salvation is unfortunate. From the perspective of the Bible, Salvation and Creation are related. Salvation is

understood as a Creation, a deliverance from nothingness and darkness.

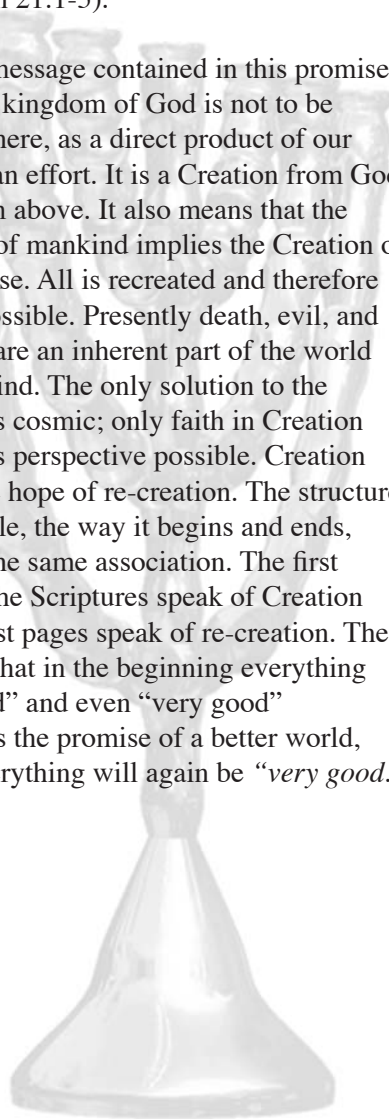
Interestingly, when the ancient Israelites were delivered from Egypt they experienced a creation. The song of Moses that celebrates that event uses the very language of the Creation story to describe it (Exodus 15:8). Likewise the prophet Isaiah speaks of the return from the exile in the same language of Creation (see especially Isaiah 42-45). Also in the New Testament Jesus describes salvation as a creation: “*No one can enter God’s kingdom without being born through water and the Holy Spirit*” (John 3: 5; compare Romans 6:1-4). This connection is even present in the Jewish rituals that mark the entry of the proselyte into Judaism. Both the Jewish *Tevela* and Christian baptism require total immersion in the water, recalling the event of Creation in order to suggest new commitment, new life, and the hope of a new world.

When the Bible speaks about the hope of God’s new kingdom and the New Jerusalem, it does so by reference to Creation. The prophet Isaiah, as well as, the book of Revelation, concludes with the same vision of the new city that God promises to create for the happiness of humankind. Hope is the hallmark of Creation.

*“I will create new heavens and a new earth. The things that have happened before will not be remembered. They will not even enter your minds. So be glad and full of joy forever because of what I will create. I will cause others to take delight in Jerusalem. They will be filled with joy when they see its*

*people. And I will be full of joy because of Jerusalem. I will take delight in my people. Sobbing and crying will not be heard there anymore”* (Isaiah 65:17-19; compare Revelation 21:1-5).

The first message contained in this promise is that the kingdom of God is not to be expected here, as a direct product of our own human effort. It is a Creation from God, a gift from above. It also means that the salvation of mankind implies the Creation of the universe. All is recreated and therefore hope is possible. Presently death, evil, and suffering are an inherent part of the world and mankind. The only solution to the problem is cosmic; only faith in Creation makes this perspective possible. Creation allows the hope of re-creation. The structure of the Bible, the way it begins and ends, conveys the same association. The first pages of the Scriptures speak of Creation and the last pages speak of re-creation. The very fact that in the beginning everything was “good” and even “very good” guarantees the promise of a better world, where everything will again be “*very good.*”





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בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים  
אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת  
הָאָרֶץ

*"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."*

Genesis 1:1