

GENESIS



TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY

~ ROBERT ALTER ~

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CHAPTER 1

When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth then was
welter and waste and darkness over the deep and God's breath hovering
over the waters, God said, "Let there be light." And there was
light. And God saw the light, that it was good, and God divided the
light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the dark-
ness He called Night. And it was evening and it was morning, first
day. And God said, "Let there be a vault in the midst of the waters,
and let it divide water from water." And God made the vault and it
divided the water beneath the vault from the water above the vault,
and so it was. And God called the vault Heavens, and it was evening
and it was morning, second day. And God said, "Let the waters under
the heavens be gathered in one place so that the dry land will appear,"

2. *welter and waste*. The Hebrew *tohu wabohu* occurs only here and in two later biblical texts that are clearly alluding to this one. The second word of the pair looks like a nonce term coined to rhyme with the first and to reinforce it, an effect I have tried to approximate in English by alliteration. *Tohu* by itself means emptiness or futility, and in some contexts is associated with the trackless vacancy of the desert.

hovering. The verb attached to God's breath-wind-spirit (*ruah*) elsewhere describes an eagle fluttering over its young and so might have a connotation of parturition or nurture as well as rapid back-and-forth movement.

5. *first day*. Unusually, the Hebrew uses a cardinal, not ordinal, number. As with all the six days except the sixth, the expected definite article is omitted.

6. *vault*. The Hebrew *raki'a* suggests a hammered-out slab, not necessarily arched, but the English architectural term with its celestial associations created by poetic tradition is otherwise appropriate.