

Ramban's Genesis

1. Through[1] the Ten Sefirot,[2] God created, from absolute nothingness, the prime matter of the heavens and all it would contain and the prime matter of the earth and all that it would contain.[3]
2. The lower prime matter, after its creation from nothingness, was completely prime matter, that is matter without substance.[4] God then clothed it in four forms:[5] fire[6] was above the water-earth,[7] and air[8] was above the water.
3. God thoughtfully willed that, from the upper prime matter, light should pass from potentiality into existence;[9] and it was so forever.
4. God confirmed the light in its existence in God's will.[10] God set the measure of the light and of the darkness.[11]
5. God differentiated "day" from "night." [12] The prime matters, the elements, and the light existed separately for twelve hours; then, God allowed the light to shine forth to the elements;[13] day one.[14]
6. God thoughtfully willed that, in the upper prime matter, an expanse should pass from potentiality into existence,[15] and that it should set the measure[16] for the upper and lower parts of the upper prime matter.
7. God set the expanse in its proper setting, giving forms to the upper prime matter.[17] It set the measure[18] between the waters above the expanse and the waters below the expanse;[19] and it is so forever.
8. God differentiated the upper spheres from the lower spheres of the expanse, giving the whole the name "heaven." [20] The diurnal sphere revolved once; a second day.
9. God thoughtfully willed that, below the heaven, the mixture of water and earth should be separated by the water gathering in one place, even though its nature is to cover all that is around it; by the earth rising above the water, even though its nature is to sink; and by the earth's drying out;[21] and it is so forever.
10. God differentiated the "dry land," by giving it the form of habitable earth, from the water to which God gave the form of the "sea" which contains water. God confirmed them in their existence in God's will.[22]
11. God willed that, in the four elements, there be a force which makes things grow and produce seed so that each species be able to reproduce; and that, from that force,[23] there grow small plants and shrubs[24] as well as large, seed-bearing plants and fruit-bearing trees;[25] and it is so forever.
12. The force in the four elements brought forth small plants and shrubs, as well as large seed-bearing plants and fruit-bearing trees. God confirmed them in their existence in God's will.
13. The diurnal sphere revolved; a third day.

14. God thoughtfully willed that, within the realm of the spheres,[26] crystal bodies[27] should pass from potentiality into existence.[28] Their three-fold purpose shall be to distinguish day from night; to serve as miraculous signs,[29] as the signs of the change of seasons, as the measure of day and night, and as the measure of the cycle of the sun which is 365 days and the cycle of the moon which is 30 days;
15. and to be luminous bodies in the realm of the spheres which shed light on the earth; and it is so forever.
[30]
16. God in-formed[31] the realm of the spheres with the forms of the two large crystal bodies, the larger crystal body to rule the day and the smaller crystal body to rule the night; he also in-formed the realm of the spheres with the forms of the stars and planets.
17. God put these bodies in the realm of the spheres by in-formation[32] to shed light on the earth,
18. to rule the day and the night through the astrological forces in the heavenly bodies,[33] and to distinguish between the light and the darkness. God confirmed them in their existence in God's will.
19. The diurnal sphere revolved once; a fourth day.
20. God thoughtfully willed that, from the power of continuous movement inherent in the waters,[34] beings which have souls and which move continuously[35] and birds that would fly over the earth across the face of the heavens[36] should pass from potentiality into existence.
21. On the first day, God created from nothingness[37] Leviathan and his mate, killing the latter lest the two overwhelm the earth and salting away her flesh for the righteous in the world-to-come[38] and, on the fifth day, God set Leviathan into its proper place in creation. God also generated all the beings which have souls and which move continuously, which the waters had generated by their continuous movement, each according to its kind, together with each bird according to its kind. God confirmed them in their existence in God's will.
22. God decreed a blessing on all the animals that each should give birth to many of its kind[39] and that the sea animals should fill the waters in the seas while the birds, although their origin was in the sea, should reproduce on the land.
23. The diurnal sphere revolved once; a fifth day.
24. God thoughtfully willed that, from the power inherent in the earth, beings which have souls and which move continuously should pass from potentiality into existence, each according to its kind -- herbivorous animals, animals which travel using their whole bodies, and carnivorous animals[40] -- each according to its kind; and it is so forever.
25. By in-formation[41] God generated the carnivorous animals according to their kinds, the herbivorous animals according to their kinds, and the animals which travel using their whole bodies according to their kinds. God confirmed them in their existence in God's will.
26. To show the importance of humanity, God thoughtfully willed that God and the earth, with its power to

generate beings which have souls which move continuously,[42] should cause humanity to pass from potentiality into existence.[43] Humanity would be like the earth in its corporeal manifestation and in its having a soul which allows movement, and it would be like God in form, that is, in the capacity for thought, wisdom, and action.[44] Human beings will have complete control over the fish of the sea, the birds of the heavens, the herbivorous and carnivorous animals,[45] the earth itself,[46] and over all things which travel over the earth.

27. On the first day, God created humanity from nothingness like God, that is, God created the upper soul[47] of humanity from nothingness -- like God, God created the upper soul of humanity from nothingness; male and female God created them from nothingness -- and on the sixth day, God set the upper soul into its proper place in creation.

28. God blessed them directly saying,[48] "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and have control over it,[49] and have control over the fish in the sea, the birds in the heavens, and all the animals which travel over the earth."

29. God commanded[50] them, "I give you as food all the grains of the seed-bearing plants which are on the face of the earth and all the fruit of the fruit-bearing trees, but not the non-seed-bearing plants and shrubs nor the trees themselves.

30. As to all the carnivorous and herbivorous animals of the earth, all the birds of the heavens -- indeed all the animals which travel across the earth because they have souls which move continuously and hence can move toward food and pleasure and away from death and pain -- I give them the non-seed-bearing plants and shrubs as food." [51] And it was so until the flood of Noah.[52]

31. God confirmed all that God had done in its existence in God's will, even the evil within creation -- death, the evil impulse, and punishment -- for evil requires the existence of good.[53] There was one revolution of the diurnal sphere; the sixth day.

1. The heavens -- together with the sun, the moon, the stars, the separated Intelligences,[54] and the souls of humanity -- and the earth -- together with all the animals, including humanity -- were finished.

2. On the seventh day, God finished God's creation from nothingness which was done on the first day, as well as God's creation by in-formation which was done on the other days.[55] On the seventh day, God ceased God's creative work, whether from nothingness or by in-formation.

3. God made Shabbat the fountain of blessings, the foundation of the world, and the partner of the assembly of Israel. God sanctified the Shabbat by enabling it to draw from the realm of holiness.[56] For on this day, God ceased from all God's creative work, whether from nothingness or by in-formation.[57]

[1] Ramban notes that the Torah begins with the narrative of the creation because creation is the root of Jewish faith. He, thus, knowingly disagrees with Rashi. [back](#)

[2] The Ten Sefirot of Jewish mysticism are: Keter, Hokhma, Bina, Hesed, Gevura, Tiferet, Netsah, Hod, Yesod, and Malkhut (Shekhina). They are aspects of the inner being of God; they are, thus, "intra-deical" and precede the creation of all parts of the universe. The sources always refer to them through a complicated set of symbols and images which need to be deciphered. Through study, one can learn the process by which the

sefirot were generated and, through meditation, one can attain mystical contact with them. The *Zohar* is the best known source for this theosophic-mystical theology, though Ramban, who preceded the *Zohar* by a generation, was familiar with this system of thought. On the realm of the sefirot, see D. Blumenthal, *Understanding Jewish Mysticism*, vol. 1 (New York, Ktav: 1978) part two.

In his interpretation of this passage, Ramban reasons that the first word, *be-reshit*, means "with *reshit*." The latter alludes to Hokhma since Hokhma is called *reshit* (Prov. 3:19). Another biblical use of *reshit* refers to the heave-offering, which represents Malkhut. Yet another *reshit* refers to Israel, which represents Malkhut. And yet another *reshit* refers to Moses who, according to rabbinic tradition, look at the "shining speculum" (a reference to Tiferet) and saw *reshit*, again a reference to Hokhma. Several sefirot, then, are alluded to with the word, *bereshit*. It is *be-reshit*, through, or with, these sefirot that God created the world.

Later in this commentary, Ramban notes that the crown on the word *bereshit* alludes to Keter while the word *Elohim*, the third word in the sentence, represents Bina. This yields the most esoteric interpretation which, however, Ramban does not mention at all: Through Hokhma, Keter created Bina (the rest of the sefirot correspond to the six days of creation plus the Shabbat). In this interpretation, Keter is the ineffable subject of *bara'* ("created"); *Elohim* is the object; and *bereshit* designates the means. This interpretation appears in the *Zohar* and elsewhere. Ramban, however, considered it too profound to state explicitly, though it is clearly present in his commentary.

Alt.: In the beginning. Ramban, thus, provides an alternate, non-mystical rendering. [back](#)

[3] In medieval physics, all matter has a substrate. The heavenly spheres and the heavenly bodies are derived from the "fifth (quint-) essence," i.e., they have one common substrate; it is called a "prime matter" (Greek, *hyle*; Arabic, *hayula*; Hebrew, *golem*). The four elements -- fire, air, water, and earth -- and therefore all terrestrial beings also have a substrate; it too is called a "prime matter" (same terms). Some theorists thought there was only one prime matter but Ramban clearly states that, since the two types of matter -- supernal and sublunar -- are different, so must their substrates be different; hence, there are two prime matters, an upper and a lower. These two substrates were created *ex nihilo*, from absolute nothingness, in contrast to the rest of creation (see below). [back](#)

[4] Hebrew, *tohu*, with supporting verses. [back](#)

[5] Hebrew, *bohu*, derived as two words: *bo hu*. In medieval physics, in addition to matter, there are "forms" (the neoaristotelian term) or "ideas" (the platonic term). These are "put" into matter to make it into whatever the form is. Thus, the form of "dog" put into the proper substrate generates a real dog. The process of "putting forms" into substrate, called "in-formation," constitutes the other acts of creation. The first stage of creation is putting the forms of the four elements into the lower prime matter. That is the activity of *bohu*. The work of in-forming the upper prime matter is left to the second day. [back](#)

[6] Hebrew, *hoshekh*, taken as the element of fire. Elemental fire is invisible; hence, *hoshekh*, "darkness." On the elements, see the commentary of Ibn Ezra to v. 3. [back](#)

[7] Hebrew, *tehom*, is a mixture of water and earth, like the sea floor. [back](#)

[8] Hebrew, *ruah*. The elements are actually invisible spheres around our earth and, in the verse, they are arranged in their natural hierarchical order. The creation of the angels is not recorded in Scripture. [back](#)

[9] Hebrew, *`amar*, always means: After thoughtful consideration, God willed that a given being pass from potentiality into existence, i.e., that it come into being. [back](#)

[10] Hebrew, *ra'ah*, always means: God confirmed that a given being continue to exist according to God's will. [back](#)

[11] Hebrew, *vayavdel*, always means: God set the measure / limits of. [back](#)

[12] Hebrew, *vayikra'*, always means: God differentiated. [back](#)

[13] There was, thus, a period of (co-)existence equaling one "evening" (night) followed by a period of existence equaling one "morning" (day) in which the light shined in the realm of the elements. With this, Ramban aligns himself with those who say that the day begins at evening. For more on the light, see the

fourth day.

Alt.: The prime matters and the elements existed for the length of one night; then the light existed for the length of a day. Again, Ramban preserves the precedence of evening (night).

Alt.: The diurnal sphere revolved once, generating a period of twenty-four hours: evening, morning, and evening. Again, Ramban preserves the precedence of evening (night) though he must posit that, on the first day, the diurnal sphere was in-formed into the upper prime matter, just as the four elements were in-formed into the lower prime matter. [back](#)

[14] Ramban notes that, since there is no second day yet, it would be inappropriate for the text to say "a first day." This obviates Rashi's elegant explanations. [back](#)

[15] Hebrew, *`amar*. [back](#)

[16] Hebrew, *mavdil*. [back](#)

[17] Hebrew, *vaya`as*, in the sense of in-forming the proper substrate with the proper form. [back](#)

[18] Hebrew, *vayavdel*. [back](#)

[19] Ramban writes: "This is a matter of the Works of Creation. Do not expect me to write anything about it, for it is one of the secrets of the Torah. The verses must not be explicated. Scripture does not enlarge on the matter. And the interpretation of it is forbidden to those who know it and certainly to such as us." In this, Ramban follows the general instruction of the rabbis. In spite of this, however, Ramban goes on to explain in the next verse what happened. [back](#)

[20] Hebrew, *kara'*. These are ten spheres in medieval astrophysics, which must not be confused with the sefirot which are part of the Godhead. On the heavenly spheres, see the commentary of Ibn Ezra to v. 5. The work of the second day, according to Ramban, was the differentiation of the upper prime matter into the nine upper spheres by in-formation. All the spheres are, thus, in a hierarchy; i.e., they are "above" and "below," though all are derived from the upper prime matter and all, together, comprise the "expanse," now called "heaven."

Ramban adds, however, that there are heavens above the heavens (with Ps. 148 and elsewhere). These refer to the realm of the angels, which is not mentioned in the creation narrative, though the angels are clearly created and, therefore, extradeical. There are also, Ramban notes, heavens and thrones even higher up. These refer to the sefirot, which are alluded to in the first verse and which, being part of the Godhead, are intradeical.

Knowledge of them constitutes esoteric knowledge and Ramban only alludes to this realm. [back](#)

[21] Alt.: that part of the globe of the earth should be water and part of it be dry land. [back](#)

[22] Hebrew, *kara'* and *ra'ah*. [back](#)

[23] By mixing and in-formation, i.e., the elements are mixed in various proportions and form is put into this substrate; the process is simultaneous (see the commentary of Ibn Ezra to v. 3). [back](#)

[24] Hebrew, *deshe'*, which includes the trees which did not bear fruits, differing with Rashi. [back](#)

[25] Hebrew, *`esev* and *`ets peri*, differing with Rashi. [back](#)

[26] Hebrew, *bi-rqi`a ha-shamayim*. See the second day. [back](#)

[27] They, thus, refract light and do not generate it. [back](#)

[28] Alt.: should take on corporeal existence. [back](#)

[29] With the appropriate verses. [back](#)

[30] Ramban notes that the creation of light, then, is as follows: On the first day, the light was created along with the prime matters and later that day, it was permitted to shine upon the elements which had meanwhile been generated by in-formation of the forms of the elements into the lower prime matter. On the second day, the realm of the spheres was generated by in-formation of the upper prime matter and the light shone through that realm but still reached only down to the realm of the elements. On the third day, the dry land, seas, and vegetation were created but it was still dark on earth itself. Only on the fourth day were the luminary bodies generated in the realm of the spheres. One of their purposes was to shed light on the earth itself, this light being divided between the sun and the moon, i.e., between day and night.

Ramban, referring to *Talmud*, Sanhedrin 42a, adds, by allusion, an esoteric meaning: The differentiation of the light refers to the differentiation of the sefirot: Keter (Ateret) into Tiferet into Malkhut. Referring to Is. 30:27, he notes that, ultimately, the seven lower sefirot will be united and, then, the light of the moon (Malkhut) will equal the light of the sun (Tiferet). [back](#)

[31] Hebrew, *vaya`as*. [back](#)

[32] Hebrew, *vayitten*. [back](#)

[33] Ramban points out that, in verses 14-15, a three-fold purpose is set for the heavenly bodies and that, in verses 17-18, each of the three is mentioned again. The first is to distinguish the day from the night (light from darkness); this is done by having the two main luminaries of different sizes. The second is to shed light on the earth; this is done by both the sun and the moon. And the third is to serve as various signs; this is done by serving as seasonal and cyclic signs and by serving as astrological and supernatural signs. Ramban believed, as did many medievals, that the heavenly bodies, in the course of their natural movements, do affect the events that happen on earth. Astrology was, thus, a natural science, not a superstition, in medieval times. Of course, Ramban asserts that these heavenly influences do not act on their own but act within the will of God, i.e., under the influence of the sefirot which are high above them in the hierarchy of being. [back](#)

[34] Hebrew verb, *yishretsu* and noun, *sherets*, present a complicated linguistic problem. Ramban rejects Rashi's approach which gives preference to the noun form and renders, "beings which are close to the earth," and aligns himself with Targum Onkelos who gives preference to the verb form and renders, "beings which move continuously." Ramban also adds the popular etymology, "*sherets* = *shehu rats*; that it runs." The waters, here, act through their own continuous movement to generate beings that have continuous (restless) movement. [back](#)

[35] Hebrew, *nefesh haya*. Ramban points out that the animals have a soul, called *nefesh*, which permits them to move, in contradistinction to humanity which also has a soul, called *neshama* (Gen. 2:7), which allows us to think and cogitate. The plants, Ramban notes, have no soul at all, none of the appropriate words having been mentioned on the third day, contrary to the theory of Greek science which posited a "vegetative soul." [back](#)

[36] Ramban notes that, according to Gen. 2:19, the birds were created from the earth. This creates three possibilities: that the birds were created from the waters, from the land, or from the mud at the bottom of the sea. Ramban aligns himself with those who say that the birds were created from the sea though they were destined to fly in the air. [back](#)

[37] Ramban is consistent in maintaining that *bara'* always refers to creation *ex nihilo*, here as in v. 27 in reference to humanity. The reason he gives here, drawing on Greek science and rabbinic literature, is that these beings were so great in size that God had to create them specially. (The reason for humanity being created from nothing is its very high status in creation.) I am not sure Ramban was convinced of the reasoning here because size alone does not seem to be an issue in his view of creation, but he did choose to remain consistent in his usage. All creation *ex nihilo* was accomplished on the first day and later set into its proper place in creation. [back](#)

[38] On this, see Rashi, *ad loc*. [back](#)

[39] Ramban points out that the plants did not need to be blessed because they were created in large numbers while the animals were created in pairs only, like the humans. He also points out that no separate blessing was necessary for the earth-based animals of the sixth day since all animals without a rational soul (i.e., all except humanity) are of one category.

Alt.: Since humankind hunts the animals, God blessed them. [back](#)

[40] Rather than domesticated and wild animals, Ramban uses herbivorous and carnivorous eating habits as the criteria for distinguishing *behema* from *haya*. Ramban understands Hebrew, *romes*, to designate locomotion; hence, the animals whose locomotion is accomplished with their whole bodies, and not just with their appendages, are called *remes*. [back](#)

- [41] By mixing and in-formation, i.e., the elements are mixed in various proportions and form is put into this substrate; the process is simultaneous. [back](#)
- [42] This is Ramban's solution to the problem of the plural verb. [back](#)
- [43] Hebrew, *na'aseh*. [back](#)
- [44] Hebrew, *tselem* and *demut*, but see below. [back](#)
- [45] Ramban explicitly includes the latter, though they are not specifically mentioned in the text. [back](#)
- [46] Ramban: to tear out, to uproot, to dig, and to mine it. [back](#)
- [47] Humanity has two souls: The first is called *nefesh*. It is the soul which enables movement and it is received from the earth, as all creatures which have the power of movement receive a *nefesh* either from the power inherent in the waters or from that inherent in the earth. The second soul is called *neshama*. It is the soul which has the power to think and to act consciously. It was created *ex nihilo* specially for humanity by God. Ramban indicates, then, that v. 26, using the Hebrew *na'aseh*, refers to the generation of the human body with its animal capacity for movement by mixing and in-formation, paralleling the use of Hebrew *yatsar* in Gen. 2:7a, while v. 27 refers to the creation *ex nihilo* of the upper soul, paralleling Gen. 2:7b. In this, Ramban is very consistent in his use of terms. Since, however, all creation *ex nihilo* took place on the first day, he teaches that the upper soul was set into its proper place in humanity on the sixth day. (The Hebrew, *tselem*, thus, refers to the corporeal and moving dimension of humanity in v. 26 but refers to the upper soul in v. 27. This double meaning is also maintained by Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, 1:1.) In Maimonidean thought, the form of each animal is its "species-form," i.e., the idea of "dog-ness" or "human-ness." This species-form is an Aristotelian "universal" and, hence, not subject to corruption. This means that, while individual dogs die and wink out of existence, the idea of dog-ness remains forever. The same holds true about humanity. In this sense, species are "immortal" though, according to Maimonides, human immortality is also a function of other matters. Using this thought, Ramban proposes an alternate to v. 27 though he does not consider it the primary sense of the verse: God and the earth created the species-form of humanity which makes humanity immortal like God; like God, God created humanity with a species-form; male and female [the means by which individuals propagate the species], God created them. In this alternate, Ramban takes creation of the species-form as *bara'* and distinguishes it from the formation of the human body from the elements, *yatsar* and *asah*. [back](#)
- [48] Ramban points out that, in v. 22, the text reads, God blessed them saying, while here it reads, God blessed them and God said to them; hence, he interprets that this is a direct blessing. Since this *vayomer* is not a creative word but a command, I render "saying." Ling. alt.: God blessed them directly, giving them the power to be ... and to have control. [back](#)
- [49] Ramban specifically takes *vektivshuha* and *uredu* as synonyms. [back](#)
- [50] Since this *vayomer* is not a creative act but a command, I so translate. Ling. alt.: God thoughtfully ordained that. [back](#)
- [51] Hebrew, *yerek 'esev*. The distinction between what humanity and the animals could eat until the flood is very clear in Ramban. [back](#)
- [52] Ramban notes that, after the fall (Gen. 3:18), humanity had to eat the non-seed-bearing plants as well. He also points out that the slaughter of animals was later permitted because that is their purpose in creation: to be food for humanity. But, there are still several restrictions: First, one may not tear limbs from live animals even for food. Second, one may not eat the blood of animals since the blood contains the soul which enables the animal to move (Lev. 17:14). And third, one must use proper slaughter because it drains the blood quickly and is as painless as possible (with the commentaries cited in Chavel). [back](#)
- [53] Alt.: To show the importance of humanity, God confirmed all that God had done in its existence in God's will, especially humanity. [back](#)
- [54] The "separated Intelligences" (or "Intellects") are pure spiritual beings, emanated from God. This was standard medieval neoaristotelian metaphysics (see *Understanding Jewish Mysticism*, vol. 2, part 1).

Maimonides and other medievals took the Intelligences as the angels; hence, Ramban includes the angels here in the narrative of creation. Human souls, too, are specially created (as noted above) and are also included here in the word *tseva'am*, "hosts." [back](#)

[55] Ramban connects Hebrew, *melakha*, with *bara'* and takes all references to *`asah* as referring to work by in-formation. [back](#)

[56] This is esoteric doctrine in usual sefirotic code language. It means that God blessed Yesod (usually known as the "fountain of blessings" and the "foundation of the world") because it can draw spiritual energy from Hokhma (the "realm of holiness") through Tiferet. With this blessing, Malkhut (the "assembly of Israel") becomes its (sexual / spiritual) partner. The "blessing" is that Yesod becomes the point where all spiritual energy concentrates itself and the "sanctification" is its ability to draw energy from Hokhma. [back](#)

[57] Ramban adds an historical-eschatological note here, working from the common rabbinic idea that the six days of creation correspond to six millenia in Jewish history:

The first millenium (0 - 1000 A.M. = 3758 - 2758 B.C.E.) is the day of light and the era of Adam who, even after the sin, knew God most intimately.

The second millenium (1000 - 2000 A.M. = 2758 - 1758 B.C.E.) is the day of separation of the waters and the era of Noah, who embodies the separation of the righteous and the wicked.

The third millenium (2000 - 3000 A.M. = 1758 - 758 B.C.E.) is the day of dry land, vegetation, and fruits and it is the era of Abraham, Sinai, and the beginning of the first temple; this is the age of instruction and spiritual fruits.

The fourth millenium (3000 - 4000 A.M. = 758 B.C.E. - 242 C.E.) is the day of the heavenly bodies and the era of the first and second temples, i.e., an era of light.

The fifth millenium (4000 - 5000 A.M. = 242 - 1242 C.E.) is the day of fish and creeping things; the era when humanity multiplied quickly but did not know God.

The sixth millenium (5000 - 6000 A.M. = 1242 - 2242 C.E.) is the day of beasts and humanity. It is an era which begins in beastliness and terrible persecution but which will end in the redeemer, the ultimate human being who is truly in the image and likeness of God. Ramban predicts here that 118 years after the beginning of this sixth era (5118 A.M. = 1358 C.E.) the true human, i.e., the messiah, should come. The burning of the Talmud in 1244 C.E. and the flourishing of the inquisition certainly could have confirmed the first part of Ramban's prediction but, since Ramban died before 1358 C.E., he could not know that he was wrong on the second half of his calculation. Of course, there is still room for his larger prediction about the ultimate image to come true.

The seventh millenium (6000... A.M. = 2242... C.E.) is open-ended. It is a period of complete Shabbat. As Ramban concludes: "May God watch over us in all periods and cast our lot in with those of God's pure servants." [back](#)