

# When the Beginning Began Short Guide

## When the Beginning Began by Julius Lester

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## Overview

When the Beginning Began: Stories about God, the Creatures, and Us opens as a midrash, Hebrew for to inquire. Midrashim (plural of midrash) are inquiries into the gaps in the narratives of the Bible. Lester gives as an example the passage: "And Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and killed him."

Lester points out that what Cain said to Abel is not explained and that Abel's reaction is also not recorded. A midrash could fill in those gaps, and there is a long Jewish tradition of doing just that. The use of imagination in composing midrashim is an accepted, perhaps even expected, tradition, and Lester's efforts to imaginatively fill in gaps in Genesis expanded to become a happy, funny, account of God and His Creation.

## About the Author

Julius Lester is a best-selling author of books for young people, as well as an author for young adults. Born in St. Louis, Missouri, on January 27, 1939, Lester grew up amid the African-American traditions that form the basis for much of his work. He wrote his first book for young adults *To Be a Slave* at the suggestion of an editor. In an effort to fill some gaps in American history as taught in America's schools, this nonfiction work offers an account of the lives of American slaves. The book became a bestseller, attracting a worldwide audience and winning a 1969 Newbery Honor. Much of Lester's subsequent writing for young adults has focused on African-American folk tales, but the stories of *Long Journey Home: Stories from Black History* are inspired by factual accounts of the African-American experience. *Long Journey Home* won the 1972 Lewis Carroll Shelf Award and was a finalist for the National Book Award.



## Setting

There is Heaven. At first all was darkness: All they [the angels] did was sit. It was so dark they didn't even know they were sitting. Since they couldn't see anything or go anywhere, there was nothing to talk about—except how dark it was. Once a day or once every million years—what did they know?—Moe, Aviva, Jennifer, or one of the other angels would say, "Sure is dark."

Then God said "light" and everybody could see. This became the beginning of God's Creation, which eventually included a world that God populated with creatures.

This world, Earth, was the subject of debate among the angels, some of whom were not sure they liked God creating it. Satan claimed that anyone could have created Earth, if he or she felt like it. Others admired Earth for its colors and life. Then God created human beings, and the plot begins to thicken.



# Social Sensitivity

Lester says, "My intent is to invite the reader into a new experience of the Divine." Lester takes his religion very seriously, as his account of his conversion in *Lovesong: Becoming a Jew*, shows. Thus *When the Beginning Began* is meant to enhance the experience of reading Genesis, not to trivialize it. "Play expresses the holy as surely as solemn piety. Maybe more so, sometimes," he says.

Lester makes it clear that he applies a modern Jewish interpretation of Genesis rather than a Christian one, and he cites God's driving Adam and Chavah out of Paradise. For many Christian theologians, Adam and Eve lose Paradise by disobeying God's command that they not eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. According to Lester, a Jewish interpretation is that the eating of the fruit was not a sin—in his midrash of the event, God says that he expected the humans to rebel and eat the fruit—but that man and woman blamed someone else for their transgression and did not apologize was the reason for losing Paradise. They were supposed to admit that they had disobeyed and ask for forgiveness. "Your sin was not taking responsibility and asking forgiveness," God says to Woman.

One of the important elements in the creation of humans in *When the Beginning Began* is the soul. What would make humans rivals of the angels, special in a way no other being is? It would be that the soul is a part of God: "It [the soul] is my breath," God answered, "I blow a little of me into each human being. Just as I fill the world, the soul fills the body. As I see everything but cannot be seen, the soul sees but is not seen. As I guide the world, the soul guides the body.

Just as I am pure, so is the soul, and just as I live in secret, so does the soul."

This view does not follow every religious group's idea of the soul, and if *When the Beginning Began* is used in the context of teaching religion, instructors may wish to point this out. It has something of an Eastern tint; for instance, the idea that there is God in everyone is typical of Hindu beliefs.

For some Christian denominations, souls are said to have existed with God before the Creation, which would be incompatible with God creating souls late in the process of Creation.

*When the Beginning Began* also briefly suggests that animals may have souls of their own. This is part of the argument in *When the Beginning Began* that all life has a divine element, having been created by God, and should therefore be respected. Two chapters, "Sun and Moon" and "Cat and Mouse," exemplify the idea that all are created equal. Both Moon and Mouse transgress by wanting to be greater than others—Moon envies Sun, and Mouse wants to be better than Cat. The Moon is reduced in size and its light diminished because it wanted to be better than Sun; the Mouse ceases to be Cat's friend and instead becomes food for Cat. The narrator of *When the Beginning Began* remarks, "Maybe if people [humans] remembered that everything else was in the



world before they came along, then maybe they wouldn't think being special was the same as being better."

This is a subtext in *When the Beginning Began*, an environmentalist plea for preserving life, suggesting that plants and animals have their own God-given rights to existence and do not exist merely to serve human beings.

An even touchier issue is the fallibility of God. Many religious denominations insist that God is infallible, that everything exists as it does for a purpose chosen by God.

Even so, nearly every denomination has had theological dissenters, and the debate over God's fallibility continues. One modern argument maintains that good people suffer because God is somehow limited in the aid he can give; His occasional use of angels as intermediaries is cited as evidence of this. In *When the Beginning Began*, God is thoroughly capable of exercising His will on Earth anytime he wishes. His imprecision comes in the surprises Creation gives him.

For instance, He was sure that Adam and Woman would apologize for their eating of forbidden fruit. He had hoped that all of Creation would recognize its equality and that no one would want to be better than anyone else. These surprises are not so much indications of God's fallibility, although they suggest that He can make mistakes, as they are expressions of God's playfulness and the delight he takes in making the universe. A Creation that moved only rigidly would not be as much fun as one in which life goes its own way. In this context, even the fall of Adam and Woman (also called Chavah) does not seem entirely bad; Chavah says: "I think God played a trick on us."

"Oh?"

"Why just look! The world is more beautiful than the garden."

"Even though we will know death?"

"And that is the reason why," she said.

"That is the reason why."

The issue of fallibility raises another nettlesome issue, that of Satan. At the start of *When the Beginning Began*, Satan is chief among angels, even though most angels do not trust him. God gives Satan assignments best left to someone else. Satan is soon busy trying to subvert God, trying to persuade others that he could do what God does if he wanted. God soon treats the angel Sara as his confidante, rather than Satan. God appoints her Angel of Mercy, and He listens to her counsel. When he angrily tells someone to get out of His sight, Sara reminds Him "Words are actions," for the miscreant is instantly gone.

Satan is portrayed as a small-minded fool—someone who is always saying that he could do what others do, but he just does not care to do so. He and his followers are

sent deep into the Earth, from which they may try to lead God's world astray. The mere issue of Satan's existence can make for a lively, angry debate among Americans.

Many people believe that there is no Satan, that he a scary invention of imagination.

Others regard his existence as a necessary opposition to God's goodness. Others contend that there was a war in Heaven in which Satan and his followers were cast out by God, with Satan taking the form of a serpent and tempting Eve to violate God's commandment. In *When the Beginning Began*, Satan comes across as a mean-spirited angel who spends his time taking credit for other people's work, and Snake exists apart from him, although the two were seen conversing.



## Literary Qualities

Lester says that *When the Beginning Began* was originally intended to be a retelling of the midrashim of others, but instead he found himself so caught up in the tradition of midrashim that he created his own. His subject became the story behind the Creation, a fanciful expansion of cryptic passages, asserting, "Where there is no possibility of arriving at a rationally definitive answer, we use our imagination because it can go where reason cannot." In *When the Beginning Began*, imagination is a tool for understanding difficult concepts and for creating rational explanations for the mysteries of creation. The playful language, gentle humor, and African-American folklore motifs are part of Lester's imagination, and thus they are reflected in his midrashim.

Several of the chapters of *When the Beginning Began* open with Biblical quotations.

These quotations are Lester's own translations from Hebrew and are shaped somewhat by the needs of his story. He expresses frustration at not being able to convey all the subtleties of the original Hebrew, settling instead for images that approximate the intents of the Hebrew. These are then expanded upon in the narrative. This may account for his referring to God as "He" and other times as "She." He asserts that the different names for God in Genesis refer to different qualities of God such as merciful God versus judgmental God, without implying gender.



## Themes and Characters

"Without gratitude, there is nothing," says God to the moon. This is a theme that binds When the Beginning Began together into a whole. From the beginning, God's Creation is a joy to Him (or Her), and all He creates is meant to take joy in existence.

Even at the end, when Adam and Chavah, otherwise known as Eve, are sent out of Gan Eden, Chavah takes pleasure in the world God has made. The Angel of Mercy sums it up: Sara looked down at the world shining in the blackness of space like a jewel. "I wish I were human," she said softly.

"Why?" Moe put in. "You're an angel.

Humans die!"

"I know. But they get the chance to finish what God began. Isn't that incredible?"

Much of the action in When the Beginning Began is motivated by gratitude or the lack of it. One form of ingratitude is envy, as shown by Moon, which wishes to outshine Sun. Another form is the desire to be better than others. When Mouse wants to be exalted above Cat, God ends their friendship and makes Mouse prey for Cat. Envious Snake is brought low for his spiteful behavior. Satan and his followers are unable to see the glory in God's Creation because of their envy of God. On the other hand, most animals take pleasure in parading for God and the angels, and angels such as Sara are delighted by what God has made.

Another theme that binds When the Beginning Began is God's creative power. This theme helps to drive the plot, as God day-by-day creates amazing things, including the Internet and bagels (Moe is the Angel of Bagels), as well as plants and animals. God is delighted by what He creates, and He makes Earth a complex place full of surprises. Further, He wishes to let everyone in on the fun. Therefore, he appoints angels to be in charge of different aspects of Creation.

"He made Sara Angel of Mercy, Jennifer Angel of Clouds, Moe the Angel of Bagels, and Aviva Angel of Bugs. (She was weird, anyway.)". And poor clumsy Meshabber is in charge of death (and tricked by a cat).

There are plenty of angels, "In fact, a number big enough to count all the angels has never been invented," and every person, including those yet to be born for thousands of years, has a personal guardian angel.

There are two sources of tension in When the Beginning Began. One is the mystery of what God is doing. At any moment, He could say a word and that word would become reality. When He says "Light!" everything becomes lit, enabling angels to see each other for the first time. Most of the tension derived from the mystery of God's creating is happy



and humorous; the animals He creates are usually wonderful. The other source of tension comes from characters that oppose themselves to God's will.

The most obvious such figure is Satan, a snobbish angel who thinks far better of himself than anyone else does. "Any of us could have made a world—if we had wanted to," claims Satan. This is a lie, but events win him some foolish supporters.

One problem is God's seeming remoteness, as well as His volatility. Why does He sometimes seem distant, remote from His angels and His Creation? "Sometimes you need to stay in the darkness for a long time because of the magnitude of what you are going to create," God explains to Aviva.

Another problem is His insistence that all be equal in value. Satan does not want to be equal; he plainly wants to rule.

Dissatisfaction with Creation receives a focus with the creation of Adam, the first man. He looks like an angel, as if he could be someday exalted above angels. Furthermore, God breathes some of Himself into Adam and all humans, giving them souls.

Satan says what God has done was bad; a few others agree with him, and they choose to accept banishment into the Earth, from where they try to ruin Creation. However, nearly all the angels remain with God, determined to do as He says out of love and respect.

The matter of respect is an interesting aspect of Lester's account of the fall of man and woman. Adam is something of a fool.

When God makes Lilith, Adam tries to boss her around, but she thinks they should be equal (God backs her up on this), and suffers an existence of loneliness rather than submit to Adam. God tries again, creating Woman, and Adam manages to be a little more circumspect in his behavior, although he exaggerates his relationship with God, making it seem to Woman as though she cannot talk to God even though she really can if she tries. On the other hand, she can talk with every animal in existence, something Adam cannot do, even though Adam knows every animal's true name.

When Woman eats the forbidden fruit, she does so partly because the Snake talked her into it and partly because she is peeved with Adam, who has not been honest with her. He said that even touching the tree would bring death, but she touches it and nothing happens. Adam, who is not as smart as Woman, is easily tricked into eating the fruit. When God comes calling for them (even though He knows where they are and what they have done), they have an easy way out of their dilemma, but they fail to recognize it. Adam says Woman was at fault. Woman blames Snake. "I wanted you to be angry and upset with me, to feel a little rebellious," God says to Woman, pointing out that His placing the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the center of Gan Eden was obviously calculated to call it to her attention. He says to her, "Your sin was not taking responsibility and asking forgiveness." Lester gives a fine turn to these events: Adam and Woman are to die, whereas they would not have died before, but Woman becomes Chavah, "Mother of All Living," so their mortality becomes the beginning of new life.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Is it appropriate to make God a character in a story? Is it acceptable the way Lester does it in *When the Beginning Began*?
2. Why would Lester mix elements of African-American folklore into *When the Beginning Began*?
3. Why does Lester jump back and forth between calling God "He" and calling God "She"? Is it a good idea?
4. What is the importance of gratitude in *When the Beginning Began*?
5. Lester says, "My intent is to invite the reader into a new experience of the Divine." Does he succeed?
6. In *When the Beginning Began*, Satan says, "Any of us could have made a world— if we had wanted to." What does this tell the reader about him?
7. "Play expresses the holy as surely as solemn piety. Maybe more so, sometimes," says Lester. Is this true? How well does *When the Beginning Began* exemplify this idea?
8. What is the significance of Sara, Angel of Mercy, becoming God's closest angel?
9. What point does Lester make with "'It [the soul] is my breath,' God answered, 'I blow a little of me into each human being'"?
10. Why does God not destroy Satan?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What are midrashim? Where can one find them? What is their history?

2. Where does Satan appear in the Bible?

How is he portrayed by different religious denominations?

3. Why does Lester draw a distinction between eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and not taking responsibility for it? How is this an important part of Jewish tradition?

4. When the Beginning Began has a section titled "Sources," in which Lester chapter-by-chapter lists the publications that inspired his story. Pick a chapter and read the sources Lester lists and then compare them to Lester's chapter. How has Lester incorporated his sources into his narrative? Where does he part company with his sources, moving into his own imagination?

5. Lester has written several collections of stories based on African-American folk tales. Read one of these collections and then see whether you can identify passages in When the Beginning Began that reflect African-American folklore.

6. In his bibliography, Lester cites David Stern and Mark Jay Mirsky's *Rabbinic Fantasies* (1998). Compare these stories with *When the Beginning Began*? Where are they similar? Where do they differ?

Does the comparison help to identify Lester's own voice in *When the Beginning Began*?

7. *When the Beginning Began* has several striking illustrations by Emily Lisker.

Who is she? What other books has she illustrated? How do these other illustrations compare with those in *When the Beginning Began*?

8. Who is Lilith? Where does she fit in Biblical tradition?

9. In *When the Beginning Began*, God insists that man and woman are created equal. Is this a part of tradition, or does it reflect recent ideas?

10. The chapters of *When the Beginning Began* are good for reading aloud. Prepare a reading of one of the chapters, including visual aids.

## For Further Reference

Lester, Julius. *All Is Well*. New York: Morrow, 1976. This work chronicles Lester's early life.

———. *Lovesong: Becoming a Jew*. New York: Arcade, 1988. A spiritual journey that reveals some of Lester's motivations for writing.

Townsend-Hudson, Shelley. Review of *When the Beginning Began*. *Booklist* (April 15, 1999): 1529. In a very favorable short review, Townsend-Hudson says, "A remarkable pilgrimage is in store for readers of these compelling creation tales."

## Related Titles

Lester has long been one of America's masters of the short story, having established himself in that genre early in his literary career with *Long Journey Home: Stories from Black History* (please see separate entries for "Ben" and "Louis"). Before the publication of that book, he had already published *Black Folktales* and *The Knee-High Man and Other Tales*, revealing what would become a long-term interest in African American folklore. Many of his books have been retellings or expansions of folk tales: *Tales of Uncle Remus: The Adventures of Brer Rabbit*, *More Tales of Uncle Remus*, *How Many Spots Does a Leopard Have: And Other Tales*, *Further Tales of Uncle Remus*, *John Henry*, and *The Last Tale of Uncle Remus*. Given his passion for his chosen religious faith, it seems only natural that he would wish to write a book that retells midrashim the way his Uncle Remus books retell folktales in a modern idiom. That *When the Beginning Began* would become more than a retelling of other works is foreshadowed in Lester's earlier works, particularly *The Knee-High Man and Other Tales* and *How Many Spots Does a Leopard Have: And Other Tales*, in which Lester's playful embellishments not only enhance the humor of the tales but reflect his own imaginative creations. Even in *Long Journey Home*, which has stories based on historical records, Lester's ability to take his material and turn it into something that would appeal to modern young adults is evident. Thus *When the Beginning Began*, in spite of its overall narrative structure and its religious subject matter, is a creative extension of what Lester has been doing throughout his career—using his imagination to make cultural traditions come alive for modern readers.



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