

BOOK I · NUREMBERG 1493

The Nuremberg Chronicle

*The Creation and
the First Ages of the World*



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The Nuremberg Chronicle

Book I. The Creation and the First Ages of the World

Hartmann Schedel's history of the world, from the
Nuremberg edition of 1493, in modern English

BlusaBooks · MMXXVI



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Source: Hartmann Schedel, *Liber Chronicarum* (the Nuremberg Chronicle),
printed by Anton Koberger, Nuremberg, 12 July 1493. Translated from the
Latin from images of a hand-coloured copy. Woodcuts from the same copy
(workshop of Michael Wolgemut and Wilhelm Pleydenwurff).

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FOREWORD

The history of the world in one book. In the summer of 1493 a book appeared in Nuremberg that set out to tell everything — from the creation of the world to the year of its own printing, and beyond that to the end of the world. In Latin it was called *Liber Chronicarum*, "the Book of Chronicles", but the world came to know it as the Nuremberg Chronicle. It was one of the largest and most splendid books of the early age of printing: a great folio volume of more than six hundred pages in which text and pictures are woven into a single whole.

Who made it. The Chronicle was written by Hartmann Schedel (1440–1514), a Nuremberg physician, humanist and one of the great book collectors of his time. He was not a historian in the modern sense. Schedel gathered and reworked everything his age knew about the course of the world — the Bible, the Church Fathers, the ancient authors and the newest Italian chronicles, above all the *Supplement to the Chronicles* of Jacopo Filippo Foresti of Bergamo and the writings of the humanist Enea Silvio Piccolomini, later Pope Pius II. The book was printed by Anton Koberger, perhaps the greatest publisher in Europe at the time, and paid for by two wealthy citizens of Nuremberg, Sebald Schreyer and Sebastian Kammermeister. The Latin edition was completed on 12 July 1493, and on 23 December of the same year a German translation by Georg Alt followed.

A book of pictures. The Nuremberg Chronicle is remembered first of all for its pictures. The woodcuts were made in the workshop of Michael Wolgemut and his stepson Wilhelm Pleydenwurff. In those very years the young Albrecht Dürer was an apprentice in Wolgemut's workshop, and it is often thought that his hand may have taken part as well. The book contains 1,809 pictures, yet they were printed from only 645 woodblocks: one portrait of a king or a prophet serves for many different people, and one view of a city sometimes stands for several cities.

Still, many of the great city panoramas — Nuremberg, Venice, Rome, Jerusalem — are the first views of these cities in print on such a scale and with such life. Some copies were coloured by hand in the fifteenth century at the buyer's wish.

The seven ages of the world. Following medieval tradition, Schedel divided history into seven ages: from the Creation to the Flood; from the Flood to Abraham; from Abraham to David; from David to the Babylonian Captivity; from the Captivity to the birth of Christ; from Christ to the author's own day; and the seventh — the time of Antichrist and the Last Judgement. A description of the lands of Europe was added at the end. Schedel even left a few pages blank, so that readers could write in the events still to come.

What is in this book. This is the first book of a series of six. It covers the opening of the Chronicle: the prologue and the seven days of Creation, and the first four ages of the world — from Adam and Eve to the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian Captivity. Beside the stories of the Bible, Schedel tells here of the ancient gods and heroes, of the Trojan War, the Sibyls and the first philosophers, and of the beginnings of Rome, Carthage, Venice, Paris and many other cities. For ease of reading we have divided the book into six parts; the third age, the longest in the Chronicle, is split in two at Moses.

Our translation. We translated from the Latin edition, working from images of the pages of a hand-coloured copy. The translation is complete — sentence by sentence, with nothing left out and nothing retold. Here and there we divided Schedel's long sentences, but we did not change their content. Where a word had faded in the print or an abbreviation was unclear, we restored the sense from the context and from the sources Schedel himself drew on. Where the Chronicle gives a year in the margin — the year of the world and the year before Christ — it is kept at the head of the entry. The book also exists in a Latvian edition.

How to read it. Place names, peoples, lesser-known persons and things no longer familiar today are explained in footnotes on the same page, where they first appear. Schedel writes as a man of the fifteenth century: his numbers and dates often disagree with what we know today, and he tells legends as seriously as

history. We have left his mistakes in the text untouched and explained them briefly in the notes. At the end of the book each part has a commentary, *In plain words* and *What history tells us*.

The pictures. The woodcuts in this book are the originals — cut from the pages of the same hand-coloured copy and placed where they stand in the Chronicle. There are 91 of them: the days of Creation, Adam and Eve, Noah's Ark, the Tower of Babel, family trees and great city panoramas. At the beginning of each part there is a colour illustration in the manner of late fifteenth-century manuscript miniatures — this is modern work, not part of the Chronicle.

The Nuremberg Chronicle series.

- I. The Creation and the First Ages of the World
- II. From the Babylonian Captivity to Constantine
- III. From Constantine to the Year One Thousand
- IV. Emperors, Popes and Crusades
- V. The Last Times and the Last Judgement
- VI. The Description of Europe

This is the publication of a historical source. Schedel writes with the faith, knowledge and prejudices of his time. We leave his words untouched; our explanations are only in the footnotes and the commentary.

PART I

PROLOGUE AND THE SEVEN DAYS OF CREATION



Illustration in the manner of 15th-century manuscript miniatures

Prologue. A Brief Account of the Works of the Six Days, or of the Fabric of the World

Among the most learned and eminent men who have handed down to us the true account of nature and of history, of the fabric of the world and the first generation of mankind, two opinions are found. They go back to those ancient times, and we shall write of them very briefly, as far as is possible in matters so remote because of their antiquity. Some held that the world was unbegotten and imperishable, and that the human race had existed from eternity, having had no

beginning at all. Others, on the contrary, judged that the world was begotten and perishable, and said that men received the beginning of their generation in time.

And the most famous men among the Greeks who gathered histories affirm that before the beginning of all things heaven and earth, all mingled together, had a single form. Afterwards, when the masses had separated and divided, the world began to take on this order that we see. The air took up a ceaseless motion, and its fiery part, because of its lightness, sought the higher regions; for this reason the sun and the multitude of stars are carried round with the revolution of the whole. The turbid and earthy part, together with the moist, sank by its weight to the lowest places, where they had been mixed together. From the moist parts the sea was formed, and from the harder ones an earth that was muddy and altogether soft. When this, at first, had grown denser in the heat of the sun, putrid ferments stirred within it, covered by a thin skin. At last from this slime there burst forth various forms of living creatures. Those that had received a greater share of heat flew off into the upper region; the drier and heavier became creeping things and land animals; and those that took on a watery nature hid themselves in the element of their own kind. Afterwards, when the earth had been dried out by the blaze of the sun and by the winds, more perfect creatures came to be born through the union of the sexes. That this was so is attested by Euripides the tragic poet, a disciple of Anaxagoras¹ the natural philosopher. In the same way, they say, men too were brought forth at the beginning: they roamed the fields in search of food and lived a wild and unordered life, and the grasses and the fruits of the trees gave them nourishment of their own accord.

As we see, many Latins and Greeks have laboured over this explanation, and besides them the Chaldeans and Hebrews, ancient and modern. Leaving aside, therefore, the errors of the ancients, we shall go through the mysterious books of Moses on the fabric of the world and the celebrated works of the six days recorded in them, in which all the secrets of nature are contained. For Moses the prophet,

1. Anaxagoras — Greek natural philosopher (5th century BC) at Athens; this account of the world's origin is taken from the Greek historian Diodorus of Sicily.

the father of historians, was full of God and received all these things at the dictation of the heavenly Spirit, the teacher of all truth. The testimonies of our own writers, of his own people and finally of the gentiles have proclaimed him the most expert of men in human wisdom and in all learning and letters. Among the Hebrews there is the book of Solomon entitled *Wisdom*, in which that interpreter of natural things confesses that he drew his learning from the depths of the Mosaic law. Among our own there are Luke and Philo, most weighty authors, who write that Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. Hermippus² too testifies that Pythagoras carried over a great deal from the law of Moses into his own philosophy. Well known is the saying of the philosopher Numenius³, that Plato is nothing other than an Athenian Moses. Finally, at the very beginning of his work — on nature and on the making of the whole world — Moses buried, as in some field, all the treasures of true philosophy. And this above all in that part where he philosophizes most loftily on the coming forth of all things from God, on their degrees, their number and the order of the parts of the world. For this reason the ancient Hebrews had a rule — Jerome also mentions it — that no one should approach this teaching on the creation of the world until he had reached a mature age.

What the most holy men Ambrose and Augustine have written on this book, and likewise Strabo⁴, Bede and Remigius, and among later writers Giles⁵ and Albert, and among the Greeks Philo, Origen, Basil, Theodoret, Apollinaris, Didymus, Gennadius, Chrysostom and others, we shall leave entirely untouched. Nor shall we make any mention for the present of what was handed down in Chaldean by Jonathan or Onkelos⁶ or the ancient Simeon, or of what was written

2. Hermippus of Smyrna — Greek biographer (3rd century BC) who wrote lives of the philosophers.

3. Numenius of Apamea — Greek Platonist philosopher (2nd century AD); his famous saying runs: “What is Plato but Moses speaking Attic Greek?”

4. Walafrid Strabo — 9th-century Benedictine abbot of Reichenau and commentator on the Bible.

5. Giles of Rome (Aegidius Romanus) — 13th-century Augustinian theologian who wrote on the six days of creation.

6. Onkelos and Jonathan — authors of the Aramaic translations of the Bible (the Targums); in the Middle Ages Aramaic was called Chaldean.

by the Hebrews — whether by the ancients, Eleazar, Abba Johanan, Nehonia, Isaac and Joseph, or by the later ones, Gersonides⁷, Saadia, Abraham and others. We shall set out in the form of an epitome, following Moses, the sequence of the six days concerning the divine fabric of the world, as it is handed down in the mysterious writings of our holy religion.

When God, then, began the building of the world, he set his first and greatest Son over this immeasurable work, and used him at once as counsellor and as craftsman in devising, adorning and making things, since he is perfect in wisdom, in reason and in power. One must not ask out of what God made these works, so great and so wonderful, for he made all things out of nothing. How much more right it is, then, to leave aside what is senseless and vain and to turn our eyes to where the seat and dwelling of the true God is — of him who hung the earth in unmoving steadfastness, who adorned the heavens with shining stars, who kindled the sun, the brightest and singular light for human affairs, as a proof of his own sole majesty. Around the earth he poured the seas, and bade the rivers flow in an everlasting course; he commanded the plains to spread out, the valleys to sink, the woods to be clothed with leaves and the stony mountains to rise. None of all this was made by Jupiter, but by that craftsman of things, the source of a better world, who is called God; his beginning, since it cannot be grasped, ought not even to be sought. For perfect wisdom it is enough for a man to understand that God exists, so that he may receive and honour him as the common father of the human race and the maker of wonderful things.

Antiquity pictures three worlds. The highest of all lies beyond the world; the theologians call it the angelic world, the philosophers the intellectual one. Next to it is the heavenly world, and last of all the sublunary⁸ world, this one that we inhabit. This is the world of darkness, that one the world of light, while the heavens are tempered of light and darkness. Besides these there is a fourth world,

7. Gersonides (Levi ben Gershon, 1288–1344) — Jewish philosopher, astronomer and Bible commentator in southern France.

8. Sublunary world — in medieval cosmology everything below the sphere of the Moon: earth, water, air and fire, the realm of coming-to-be and passing away.

in which are found all the things that are in the others; and that is man himself. It is a common saying in the schools that man is a lesser world, in which may be seen a body mixed of the elements, a heavenly spirit, the growing soul of plants, the senses of the beasts, reason, an angelic mind and the likeness of God. Of these four worlds Moses discoursed sufficiently, showing how God the craftsman ordered them, so that the writing of Moses is truly an image of the world expressed — just as we read that he too was commanded on the mountain, where he learned these things, to make all things after the pattern he had seen on the mount. What, then, the word of Moses teaches about the celebrated works of the six days we shall now set out briefly.

He spoke, and they were made; he commanded, and they were created. (Psalm 32)



God the Creator Enthroned

In the Beginning

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep, and the Spirit of the Lord moved upon the waters.

Moses, the divine prophet and historian, who preceded the Trojan War by almost seven hundred years, teaches that God, the contriver and ordainer of things, when he set about this work, first made the highest heaven of all and hung it on high, so that it might be the seat of God the Creator himself; then he founded the earth and placed it beneath the heaven. Darkness he set upon the earth, for it holds no light of its own unless it receives it from heaven. In heaven he placed everlasting light, the beings above and everlasting life; and over against them, on earth, darkness, the beings below and death.

In recording that God created, Moses refutes three errors — those of Plato, Aristotle and Epicurus. For Plato asserts that God, the ideas and *hyle*⁹ existed from eternity, and that in the beginning the world was made out of *hyle*. By *hyle* the Greeks mean the first, still unformed matter of things, from which these visible elements were formed, which arise out of a certain harmony. The others say that the world was made from matter and form, or from atoms. But God created the world without any pre-existing or prepared matter, since he was most wise in devising and most skilful in making even before he began this work of the world, for in him was the fount of full and perfect goodness, so that from that goodness all things might flow forth as a stream. The angels he made in the beginning, the first of all creatures, and he made them out of that which is not; for in his eternity he is strong, and in his strength he is of immeasurable power, which has neither end nor measure, like the life of the Maker. What wonder is it, then, if, being about to make the world, he first prepared the matter from which to make it, and prepared it out of what did not exist? The Saracens perhaps understood this too, saying that the angels were led by God out of darkness into light and filled with

9. Hyle (Greek) — “matter”; in Greek philosophy the unformed primal stuff from which all things arise.

eternal joy. In some of them, however, the nature of their divine origin did not endure. The author of this thing, who of himself became evil out of good, the Greeks call *diabolos*; we call him the accuser.

The earth was void (as Saint Jerome translated it, or invisible, as the Septuagint¹⁰ has it) and without order. Because of its confusion Moses calls it the deep, which the Greeks call chaos. By the deep he means the earth, that is, matter stretched out in three dimensions into the lowest depths. Ovid too mentions this:

Before the sea and lands, and the sky that covers all,
nature wore a single face throughout the whole world,
and men called it chaos: a rough, unordered mass,
nothing but lifeless weight, and heaped together there
the warring seeds of things that did not fit as one.
No Titan¹¹ yet gave light to the world.

And the Spirit of the Lord — that is, the instrument of the divine art — moved upon the waters, like the will of an architect as he arranges everything for the work. When the works of God were completed, the creation was unfolded in the number six. Its parts are one, two and three, which together rise into a triangle. In the first Moses shows the creation, in the second and third the setting in order, and in the rest the adornment, through the works of the six days.

10. Septuagint — the Greek translation of the Old Testament (3rd–2nd centuries BC), said by legend to be the work of seventy translators.

11. Titan — in poetry the sun god (Helios, of the race of the Titans); here simply “the Sun”.



In the Beginning: the Creation of the Angels

Of the Work of the First Day

And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good; and he divided the light from the darkness, and called the light day and the darkness night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

In his book Moses displays a wonderful work which, with a divine rather than a human skill, answers to all the secrets of nature — a work that surpasses all learning, eloquence and wit. For God is glorious; he is the true light and loves

light, making all things in the light. Most rightly he began the fabric of the world with light, which for three days, until the fourth (when the lights of heaven were formed), made the natural day by its circuit. Light is the noblest of all bodies, nearest and best to spiritual creatures, and it shares its beauty with all things. For although its point is the smallest, it fills the whole space of the world. Therefore light alone, like the whole world, is good and beautiful, pure, and spreads without corruption. And rightly God saw the light, that it was good, for it is nothing other than a delicate image and shadowy likeness of the first good.

As soon as the Spirit had worked upon those waters and penetrated the subject matter, light arose at the command of God the craftsman — glory and splendour — like a bright cloud that lights up the upper parts of the world with its brightness, as happens at dawn; it moved after the manner of the sun and lit up the upper hemisphere and then, in turn, the lower. And afterwards God divided them, so that darkness and light might claim different hemispheres. He called the light day for the brightness that drives out darkness, and the darkness night, from the word for “harm”, because it harms by keeping the eyes from seeing¹². By the measure of these parts he made the day and the night, which, succeeding each other in turn, bring about the spans of time and the ever-turning circles we call years. And there was one day, which was the first day of the world; yet it was not the first of all days, and therefore it is not called the first, but one. And so on that day God made unformed matter, the angels, the heaven, light, earth, water, air and other things.

To the earth itself he assigned two parts, contrary and different from each other, namely the east and the west. Of these the east is linked with God, because he himself is the fount of light and the illuminator of things, and because he makes us rise to everlasting life. But the west is ascribed to that disordered and wicked spirit, because it hides the light, because it always brings on darkness, and because it makes men sink and perish in their sins. For as light belongs to the east, and in light lies the principle of life, so darkness belongs to the west, and in

12. A Latin play on words: *nox* (night) supposedly from *nocere* (to harm); the etymology is fanciful.