

Studies in Genesis

Creation

The Creation accounts in the first two chapters of Genesis are obviously the most famous and widely-known texts of the OT. Most people are understandably confused by them, and their interpretation provoked the most famous series of controversies Biblical understanding has known in modern times. It is therefore worthwhile to study them carefully and to have something to say about them.

The P Source

Gen 1 is priestly. It is not a saga, but a piece of massively influential priestly theology, whose roots go back into the mists of time; a moment to remember the truth that, although the literary construction of the chapter is datable to the Exile, yet the truths and modes of thought expressed here are of far older lineage. Every line of this writing, and every editorial act of arrangement, is worthy of our reflection. There is nothing redundant in this first chapter of *toledot*.

We should reflect on the first sentence as establishing a theological principle, superior to all the statements which follow: it is that of the first epithet of the Creed: *God created all*. The description of the chaos stirred by the divine breath or storm does not precede the act of creation, nor does it describe the act of creation, which is by a sovereign word. Rather, it introduces into the story of creation the constant possibility of its negation, its sinking back into senselessness without the sustaining power of God to raise it from the depths. We exist, the universe exists, because God continuously chooses to *separate* cosmos from chaos.

A good point for reflection would be what von Rad says about verse 3:

It is an expression of ultimate cosmological knowledge for P to begin the series of creative acts with light streaming into chaos. Light, as the "sublimest element", "the finest of all elementary powers", is the first-born of creation

Materialist questioning of the veracity of this writing could concentrate on the illogicality of created light that is so far without a source. The writer does not begin with the creation of heavenly bodies, however, because he does not wish to confuse his readers with the middle-eastern tendency to deify sun, moon, or stars, and to ascribe to them an active rôle in the destiny of the cosmos. Here light is a creature, although it floods the world where there is chaos as an opening act of positive and creative power. From the beginning, the world is not God, is not an overflowing of divine life, but is a creature, distinct from and obedient to the will of the Creator. The one link between the Creator and the creation is *the word*.

The separation of light from darkness is an act of sovereignty. Think now of the separation of day and night. Here day, the time when the world is resplendently visible, is *separated* from a time - night - when the chaotic order, darkness, returns to blur and hide the work of the Creator; yet both under the ordaining power of the Maker. Specifically His *naming* of the night displays his power over it. The onset of darkness still provokes our vesper-hymns

asking for power over the forces of darkness, just as the Lauds-hymns salute the dawn as a daily reminder of the perennial victory of God, of his creation itself. The sacred author delivers a sustained theme, carried by the concept of separation, of the cosmic and chaotic forces always present to each other: it is the sovereignty of God which holds them in balance, and to this sovereignty the Creation constantly and obediently responds. In the backcloth to the creation of humanity, therefore, we can detect a framework against which the deeds of men and women will be judged.

The creation of the firmament preserves an older form of the creation-story, because it speaks of a more concrete physical building by God: the commanding word has momentarily receded. In this we can see the P source valuing and refusing to eliminate an older way of thinking about the relationship between God and the way things are, a more concretely realistic thought about God the Maker. The separation theme is still present, since the waters above the firmament and the waters beneath are still visible, and occasionally are permitted to irrupt into the cosmos. The Jews always mistrusted and feared the sea. The presence of the waters, visibly surrounding the cosmos with their newly-restricted chaotic power, bears witness to the authority of the God who commands the waters. We cannot forget that a very different saga-source will depict this power in history, in the parting of the waters of the Sea of Reeds; the same quality will constantly be evoked in the Psalms in praise of God who commands the mighty waters, and will settle around the divine figure who walks on the water and stills the storm in the Gospels.

Note that the creation of the plants happens with no explanation - those they will later feed have not yet been created. But the creation of the stars is clearly subordinated - they are to be signs (ie signs for humanity) of times and seasons. Once more the heavenly bodies, worshipped as gods among the Babylonian pantheon, are relegated and subordinated even to humans.

The creation of human beings is especially signalled by an act of divine resolution, as befits the entry onto the scene of the vice-gerent of God, created in his image. The principal consequence of the image of God relates humans to the sub-human world, in the function of domination. The creation of sexuality is described here with complete simplicity. Brunner says:

That is the immense double statement, of a lapidary simplicity, so simple indeed that we hardly realise that with it a vast world of myth and Gnostic speculation, of cynicism and asceticism, of the deification of sexuality and fear of sex completely disappears.

The fruitfulness of procreation also appears in the form of a special divine blessing. This is in sharp contrast to the Canaanite view of procreation, in which sacred prostitution can function as an orgiastic participation in the being of the gods. Here procreative ability is itself the fruit of a specific act of blessing from the Creator. Thus everything about man points to God: with regard to the origin of both his nature and his destiny, man is completely referred to and understood from God.

We can surely sense in this account not a myth, not a saga, but *doctrine* at every step of the way. Behind these thirty-five verses lie centuries of carefully collected reflection. Surely we should think of all this unified body of cosmological and theological knowledge as reposing in the several sanctuaries of Israel, and in the custody of the priestly traditions of Israel; if it waited until the Exile before being put into written form, its roots lie far in the past.

The J Source

The Yahwist account of Creation in Gen 2 is the one which proceeds to narrate the Fall and Expulsion. It works now, not as doctrine, but through narrative. The facts it narrates are dark and mysterious, but they are nonetheless presented in story-form, and despite the towering demands of the theme - the relationship between God and humanity - it is by story that the writer proceeds.

Note first of all the difference between the mighty cosmic stage of Gen 1:1, and the simple account of Gen 2. There, the transformation from chaos to cosmos; here, the movement from desert to sown, tilled land, with water appearing as the element of fertility. Humanity and humus are close together: adam and adama, man from the earth. The breath of God makes the difference between the body and life. We should not go so far as to isolate a concept of "soul" here, but read it as it was written, in a Hebrew thought-world where the life of the body is a sacred miracle involving God. We shall sense here the delicate vulnerability of the gift: it will be possible, from the beginning, for God to call home the breath as first he gave it (Ps 104:29ff).

Note here the usage (nearly unique - only occurring once in the Pentateuch outside Gen) of the epithet *Yahweh-Elohim*; its use here is sustained, almost certainly by the editor who wishes us to identify the *Yahweh* of the original source with the *Elohim* of Gen 1.

Eden, the garden, is planted specifically for the man. It is not to be thought of as God's garden or as his place of residence. This gracious atmosphere is certainly meant to symbolize the gift of life itself and the relationship with God which it carries with it.

The Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge are a confusing couple of notices. They read less like a story, more like a piece of mythology, which is out of keeping with the narrative tone of the surrounding document. Indeed, there are not really two rôles for the two trees, as the only fruit that is eaten comes from the tree of knowledge. Scholars think that the trees bear witness to a secondary tradition which has entered the stream at this point; we do not know at what period, but it is quite likely to have been *pre-literary* - in other words, contained ineradicably in the oral tradition long before anyone edited it in written form. In many places the Yahwist account of Creation and Fall have been exhaustively subjected to *literary* criticism, but without resolving certain stubborn questions satisfactorily. So here, the question "Why are there two trees?" is to be asked *not* of the Yahwist, as if he had planted them here for reasons of his own, but of anterior oral tradition, whose workings are far less penetrable by modern methods of criticism.

The command to the man gives him a function in the garden, and a relationship with his Maker. Temper your notions of pre-and post-lapsarian life with this text. Work appears as a sort of sentence at the end of the story, but it is still here as a privilege before the fruit is eaten; and the sense of the man as a custodian of the garden, in which performance will be demanded of him, is unmistakable. The command about the single tree whose fruit was not to be eaten should not be subjected to moral analysis. It simply symbolizes the whole relationship with the sovereign God that there is a prohibition as well as a permission in their relationship, and thus a subjection to the command of God which demands observance.

Note that the discussion about the meaning of the command is opened, not by human beings, but by the snake. Knowledge of "*good and evil*" does not mean merely moral

discernment in the Bible, but connotes the knowledge of *everything*; such knowledge is an image of comprehensive and immediate awareness of all that is. *Knowledge*, too, carries a quite special resonance in the Bible, and is used in a sexual context; far from mere intellectual knowing, it implies an experience that is penetrative and total.

The analysis of the serpent and its doings is best kept clean of subsequent Christian commentary. It is one of the animals created to help the man, and it is synonymous with wisdom, or at least cleverness, greater than any other animal's. Its casual conversation offers a cruel and unreasonable report of the Lord's ruling about the trees. The woman, in her haste to correct the serpent, goes too far and wrong-foots herself by a misreporting of the commandment; there was never a divine injunction that the tree should not be *touched*. The serpent responds by a straight denial of what God said, and for the first time a human being is freed to criticize the command of God from another point of view. The innocent obedience of the previous period is replaced by a critical and fundamentally Godless mode of thought. The god drawn by the serpent is criticized as jealous, venal, and envious - inimical, finally, to humans. The woman is invited to *understand* God better than would be possible by a free submission to the word of God; she begins to think of him as an object in her world. The possibility looms up that humans might find a great and dazzling transformation by throwing off the shackles of a God who is holding them back. Note that this is in direct contradiction of the theme adopted by the Church, that the Fall is a chosen descent into subhuman sin. The various suggestions - that it represents a young girl's awakening to sex, or that it represents some other simply recognisable seduction on account of weakness, do not do justice to the sophisticated exactitude of the story. The fall is a reaching up to a state beyond the human condition as God had ordained it - an ambition which von Rad properly calls Titanism, and which is describable in terms of pride or *hubris*. One cannot accuse the serpent of lying or of speaking the truth. But its words permit the woman to take liberty with the command of God. Perhaps humans will be better off as autocrats than as creatures obedient to God.

The narrator draws a wonderful picture in v 6, a scene without words in which the woman stands before the tree reflecting and then decides. With it we rush through an entire scale of emotions. *Good for food* - that is the coarsely sensual aspect; *a delight to the eyes* - that is the finer, more aesthetic stimulus; and *desirable to make one wise* - that is the highest and decisive enticement. And then follows the plucking and eating. The narrator expresses no shock; he does not expect his reader to become indignant either. On the contrary, the unthinkable and terrible is described as simply and unsensationally as possible, completely without the hubbub of the extraordinary or of a dramatic break, so that it is represented from the human standpoint almost as something self-evident, inwardly consistent. (*Gerhard von Rad*)

The feeling of shame which comes on them is to be identified with disjunction at the very deepest place of their being. They are no longer at home with the body, they experience guilt and disorder. The blame of "the woman *you* gave to be with me" shows that the human community is riven as much as the community with God. The sin has not produced solidarity within the human, but disintegration and disloyalty. The blaming of the serpent demands a further denial of truthfulness on the part of the woman. The lot of the pair from now on relates to their origins; she will give birth in pain, and yet be constantly attracted to the husband from whom her life first began, and yet she will find no rest in him. He is similarly alienated from his natal element, the earth (*adama*) and finds it yielding thistles and hard labour. These symbolic alienations are to culminate in the mystery of death, though there is no suggestion that this is a new possibility for humans; we saw that it was present in the description of the gift of the breath of life. Rather it is the natural term of a life which is

henceforth infected with failure, where the door to evil choices will never again be closed. The sentence of the couple is not that they shall now become mortal, but that they are to experience contrariety *until the day when they die*. Of course, death was always the term for one created from the dust; but this sentence creates a dominance of death over the days and years of life. It has to be confessed that the sentence is at odds with the original commandment, which announced that *on the day you eat of it you shall surely die*. This does not happen; but the experience of death is no longer notional, but actual; in this the “knowledge of good and evil” comes home devastatingly.

At every point in the narrative, there is the presence of the urge to aetiology - the explanation in the story of known facts in the present. With these aetiological statements the narrative is anchored in experience: this is why a man leaves his parents and is joined to his wife, this is why the serpent crawls on its belly and eats dust, this is why human relationships are so often in crisis, this is why there is exhaustion, enmity between man and the earth, hatred between man and the serpent. This tendency to pin down the narrative in known actuality will persist through the Pentateuch.

Sara

Gen 12:10ff: cf 20, and 26.

The story of the peril of Abraham because of the beauty of his wife, and the lie offered to a local king, is regarded as very important by the ancients - so much so that it is repeated, and transferred to the story of Isaac too. Note how our text is placed immediately after the first solemn expression of God's covenant with Abraham, coupled with the promise of the land (v 7). In contrast to this, the deeds of Abraham in Egypt and Gerar seem like the actions of one who has no belief in God at all; if the promises in 12:1-9 were reliable, Abraham's deeds of deception should not have been necessary. We should compare this story with that of Gen 16 (Hagar) where, to cope with the fact that Sara is now definitively past the age of child-bearing, Abraham resorts to human expedients to replace the promises of God.

The confusion and perplexity evoked in the humans by the promises of God is realistic and very clear; but that is not the principal point. This is the endless faithfulness of the Lord, who stands by the plan of salvation especially when it is disbelieved and betrayed by men. The character of Ishmael is an appropriate reward for the people who had resorted to human engineering to replace the plan of God; he is a misbegotten, brutish parody of a child of God, and all attempts to find him the fulfilment of divine promise are doomed.

Abraham and Isaac

Temptation is a constant theme in the Abraham cycle, as is the surprising recurrence of Abraham's failure in his tests (12:10ff, famine & Sara; 18:1ff, promise of a son). We should accept from the tenor of the tradition at large that such a reality is not *probative towards God* - who as Creator needs no revelation about what he has made - but *pedagogical towards man*. The whole relationship between God and humanity demands this disciplined

understanding. For instance, the story of Abraham interceding for Sodom and Gomorrah would appear superficially to display the power of a human mind over the resolve of God - a human being reminding God that injustice would be unworthy of him. Closer inspection reveals that it is Abraham who shifts his ground in this encounter, whilst the response of God remains perfectly consistent. Coming further into the Pentateuch, the story of Moses "standing in the breach" before the anger of God in the Golden Calf episode looks far more like a sustained power of intercession diverting the divine intention. We must ask ourselves who is being educated in the story of the Scriptures; does the story of Moses' intercession describe a modification of the anger of God, or a modification of the attitude of Moses, as prophet, to the people he had thought he was leading, over whom he had thought he wielded effective authority? His prayer dramatizes a potential *divine* repudiation of this people, *in which an angry and revolted Moses might have participated*, which turns by an exercise of moral conversion - and surely not on the part of God - into an occasion for forgiveness, for rebuilding of relationships, for renewed effort (on the part of Moses) to act as a minister of pardon and an embodiment of the Covenant.

The great temptation of Abraham is the command which enjoins the sacrifice of Isaac (22:1ff). The author is the Elohist, but the story must have existed long before him and his work. We should note that the sacrifice of children was relatively common in Canaanite religion; Israel would have to have faced the question of whether their relatively insignificant animal sacrifices were really adequate to the greatness of their God. But such an explanation does not do justice to the real seriousness of this story. We are told at the beginning that this is a story about a test given by God; this from the beginning enables us to see the story from two angles: that of Abraham and that of God. We may like to register the fact that God is never going to take this test to the wire; but for Abraham the demand is totally serious and real. Another symmetry flows from the fact that in 12:1 Abraham was called to give up his whole past; in this test he is called to give up his only hope of fulfilment, in other words his whole future. The sharpness of this demand ("*your only son Isaac, whom you love*") is unremitting.

The drama of the journey up the mountain after the dismissal of the servants is magnificently created: they walk in an oppressive silence, broken only by the dramatic irony of the child's intelligent question; his clear voice demands an answering honesty. The old man's heartbreaking response leaves room for the eventual outcome of the story - the ram caught by its horns - but also for the threatened catastrophe: Isaac as a lamb of sacrifice provided by God. Notice the division of labour: Abraham carries the things which might have caused Isaac to hurt himself - fire and knife; but only so that he can himself hurt the child and destroy him.

The ram is introduced to close down the testing, which has been successfully concluded. Note how there is no interest in the reaction of the human beings to this resolution of a story which has been filled with terror. There is no one explanation offered for the meaning of the story; it is not the mere acting-out in story-form of any theological principle or moral attitude. It is left to the reader to respond, it is a piece of narrative which claims its basis only in the sacred history; once told, the story will evoke its own response in the reader.