

Genesis - The Primeval History

If we open a version of the Bible the first book we meet is 'Genesis' or 'Origins' and the first verse reads;'in the beginning God created heaven and earth.'[heaven here refers to the sky and all it appears to contain whether by night or day.] Then after an account of other aspects of the world we see around us, we hear that God resolved to 'make human beings in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves,etc'.This then is the biblical scene.Now a modern reader will be aware that the universe has been around for about 14 billion years.It is not at all clear how things began but the prevailing view is that everything [including time and space or spacetime] originated in a gigantic burst of energy.This was the origin of absolutely everything in our experience at least all of physical reality.So here we seem to have two apparently conflicting accounts of what happened at the beginning of time.The question is, are they irreconcilably different?That is one of the burning issues of our day - excuse the pun.The first point to be made is that if we took the bible literally or in a fundamentalist sense then indeed there would be a conflict - particularly when we come to the creation of humankind.There is an apparent time frame in the bible which conflicts drastically with the findings of science. For example in the past the Church of Ireland Archbishop Usher totted up the ages of the biblical generations from Adam to Christ and came up with the figure 3,974 years,6 months and 10 days! Add to this 2,000 yrs since birth of Christ and you have approx 6,000 years.Science suggests however that the earth is about four and a half billion years old.The great mistake made by earlier Christians and by fundamentalists today is to think that accepting an evolutionary view of the universe and of life undermines the bible,or worse still proves that the bible is a huge deceit. It does nothing of the sort! Biblical statements and scientific statements cannot be incompatible because the former begins where the latter ends.The two areas do not overlap.Science deals in precise and absolute detail about the world of our experience.In many areas it makes predictions and waits for experiments to back up these predictions.The Bible on the other hand says nothing about the make up of physical reality but tells us that all reality proceeds from the creative hand of God.Furthermore it tells us that God is always present sustaining everything in existence.

So let us now look at what the Bible says about the world. The first 11 chapters of the Book of Genesis contain what is called the primeval history, that is an account, (or accounts) of the creation of the world, the first human beings and their subsequent fall from God's favour. The reality of sin and suffering in the world is attributed to disobedience to God. As we read through these first chapters of Genesis we should notice two different or separate accounts of creation, coming from what are known as the Priestly and the Jahwist tradition respectively. Genesis then opens with the priestly or 'P' account, ie Ch. 1 v1 - ch 2v,4b. It looks as if it was a priestly writer who edited all the sacred traditions of the chosen people in about the 5th century B.C after the Jews returned from exile in Babylon. In the editing of the traditions he obviously gave priority to the theological reflections of his own priestly school in presenting the accounts of creation.

The plan of the work is simple: God created the world of nature and human beings. Evil intervened to spoil the divine plan, but God then took steps to remedy the situation. The Jews didn't make much distinction between the creation of the world and the redemption of the world; both were aspects of God's power and good will. The story of creation then acts as an introduction and prologue to the story of redemption.

Gen.Ch1- ch2 v4b is then an account of creation from the 'P' source. In form it resembles a hymn and this reflects liturgical usage at the Temple in Jerusalem over the centuries. It contains hymn-like refrains which would aid memorising for public worship. 'and evening and morning came on the [] day, etc. It goes without saying that this is not a scientific account of the origin of the world. Even the most primitive science would not state that the earth was created before the sun or light created before the lamps in the heavens!. As a commentator has very observed if it were a scientific account it would be out of date pretty quickly as all science becomes dated. But the theology of the bible is a different matter and is always relevant. The message of the 'P' writer is that everything comes from God and everything depends on him. God is supremely free and all-powerful. The word used for 'created' is 'bara' in Hebrew. This term implies that there was no effort or labour on the part of God and it indicates the later Christian doctrine of

'creation ex nihilo'. This is by way of contrast with the pagan accounts which suggest that the gods had a tough time knocking things into shape. Unlike the pagan accounts too, there is no attempt to tell us what God is like. Admittedly however the sacred writer had an eye on stories such as the Babylonian, creation myths when writing his account. We do in fact find many similarities in the Hebrew and Babylonian accounts. In the Babylonian account Tiamat is the dragon of the deep who is in conflict with the god Marduk. This pagan story is known as the Enuma Elish. In the bible the deep is called 'Tehom' or chaos. However we may say that there the similarity ends. Chaos or Tehom is not an powerful force with which God has to struggle - rather it is the raw material for his creation.

The next important theological point is that God is not identified with his creation or confused with matter. Creation does not emanate from God but proceeds from his will by a sovereign word of command. This means that dualism, the conflict between good and evil that was rampant in pagan religions is completely ruled out by the bible. Creation is in fact not alone 'good' but very good or 'marvellous', as we are told many times.

You notice that only the light is called good not the darkness. Darkness will always be a symbol of evil in the bible. God called the 'light' 'day'. Here, as elsewhere the fact that God bestows a name on something implies ownership and lordship over that object.

In v 14 - notice that the sun and moon are referred to merely as 'lamps'. This was intended to downgrade them, because the surrounding people worshipped the sun and moon. They themselves don't create light but merely transmit the light that God has created.

The climax of the hymn comes in v26. "Let us make humankind in our own image". This is indeed a marvellous statement; it means that although humankind are not born of God yet they are made in his image. "Made a little less than God" as Psalm 8 states. This assertion certainly implies that men and women have a capacity for a life of union with God through the gift of grace. God's creation finds its highest expression in the creation of humankind. The 'P' writer places this act of God at the end of his narrative to highlight its importance. Humankind is the 'image' of God, that is a living representative of God's sovereign rule on earth. God made man 'male and female' and

pronounced a blessing on love and fertility ,so that he could multiply and fill the earth and have dominion over all other living creatures.

The account of creation ends, as we might expect from a priestly author with an emphasis on the Sabbath, the day of rest.God rested from his creative work and so humankind ought also rest at the end of the week in imitation of the creator and also in order to have time to praise and worship God.The reason why the Jews had such veneration for the Sabbath was because it was an integral part of the creation.

The Yahwistic primeval history.

We now take a look at what is called the second creation account, which is known as the Yahwist account.When we compare it with the Priestly account we find that there is much less detail and teaching here.The theology evidently belongs to a very ancient period indeed. The style of the Yahwist is concrete and down to earth. The `J' account is informed by a very penetrating psychology.This writer tries to give an answer to all the great problems that trouble and torment humans ; there is the presence of evil in a good world created by God; there is the inevitability of death, the pains of childbirth,the toil and sweat of humankind.He also asks why nations are dispersed and why there is so much misunderstanding.

Throughout this epic, God is shown to be unfolding a plan of salvation.God is depicted as being very close to humans ,even intimate with them.The language is very antropomorphic -God appears in human form,he has human feelings and acts in human fashion.He shapes humankind as a potter shapes his clay.He walks with man in the garden in the cool of the evening.Still behind these apparently naive ideas there is a very elevated picture of God.God is completely above mere people and he remains supremely holy.The Yahwist begins his theology with an account of the creation and fall of the human race through the sin of Adam.Then there is the ensuing corruption of all flesh that leads to the Flood. Following that there is the punishment involved in the dispersal of mankind after the abortive attempt to build the Tower of Babel.The growth in corruption is presented as a growth in pride.But against all that there is the Lord's response.He takes steps to remedy the evil.God chooses out from the human race individuals who will be the instruments of his salvation.He preserves Noah from destruction;later on he chooses

Abraham and after that Israel as a whole. The promises made to the patriarchs realise their fulfilment in the Exodus from Egypt and the subsequent settlement in the promised land. Together with the promise of land there is the promise of a large posterity. Though the Yahwist deals mainly with the promise to Abraham and the chosen people after him, still his scope is universal. God's salvation is destined for the whole world.

The Yahwist account of creation begins at C 2 v4b and continues to Ch 2v2'4 We have a long opening sentence leading up to the creation of humankind. The story differs greatly from the foregoing priestly version.

The plants and trees are the setting for the paradise or Eden which is home for the new human beings. The formation, of the animals leads up to the creation! of humankind. There is very little about the creation of the world as such. Humans are shaped like potters clay and into the clay figure God then breathes the breath of life. Thus they become a living creature. The sacred writer underscores the complementarity of man and woman by the words, 'It is not good for man to be alone' Again we see the significance in namegiving; the man is asked to bestow names on the animals thus showing his sovereignty over them. We see that the human vocation is to work and cultivate the park, so this is destiny even in the original state. The tree of the 'knowledge of good and evil' means the tree of omniscience. Humans are presented to us as creatures in dependence on God and in a partnership with other human beings- the woman. So here the dignity of women is underlined by the sacred writer. This could not have been presumed at the time when the tradition was being formed. The first human beings are exposed to temptation which comes along in the form of a snake or serpent. The serpent here is not a symbol of the devil though in later times this is how it was interpreted. The man is tempted to rebel against his dependence and disobey God. He is tempted by the possibility of 'knowing good and evil' which would be to assume a prerogative of God alone. God in his omniscience decides what is good and evil and legislates accordingly. Humans cannot create their own moral categories. Isn't this exactly what we presume to do today. Instead humankind is meant to follow the laws laid down by God.

There is a threefold element discernible in the temptation of the woman;

1. There is the sensual desire - she sees that the fruit is 'good to eat.'
2. There is the element of aesthetic desire - it is 'pleasing to the eye'

3. There is the intellectual desire - it promises a knowledge of good and evil.

One of the consequences of the first sin was that the relationship of the man and the woman was strained and the original harmony was shattered. The sexual attraction between them can now become a source of conflict and sin. Instead of loving one another as persons they are tempted to use each other as things. This state of affairs certainly has an unpleasantly familiar modern ring about it. But even though the man and the woman have moved away from the providence of God he still cares for them and turns dressmaker. In Ch. 4:1 we have the story of Cain and Abel. Although Cain and Abel are represented as being direct sons of Adam and Eve this is not meant to be taken literally as the earth is assumed to be populated. The story of the two brothers is closely related to the story of the fall. The idea here is to show how sin proliferated after the first sin. We now have the account of the first murder, and it is fratricide. Cain is a type of the person who resents the success of another, he is really feeling that life is being unfair to him. Cain, like Adam is also faced with temptation. Satan is now like a lion crouching at the door ready to pounce on him. But instead of mastering it as he ought to do, Cain is himself mastered by the evil beast of sin. There is now a new dimension to sin, the social dimension, "Where is your brother". Cain is the type of all those who have sinned against their brothers right down to the victims of the Nazis into our own day. But in spite of such evil the point is made that God is still concerned about man and is determined to save him from himself and his evil inclinations. A mark is put on Cain. The sign of the cross is now our sign of protection. It is the seal of God's complete forgiveness, for again we resemble Cain in some way. The Epistle to the Hebrews says, (Ch 12 v24-5) "The sprinkled blood of (Christ) whose message is nobler than Abels".

It is symbolic that Cain leaves the presence of God and goes to settle in a place called 'Nod', which literally means 'wandering'. In condemning Cain Scripture isn't condemning all progress but it does seem to suggest that civilisation has inherent dangers of greed and exploitation. The story of Cain and Abel has sometimes been explained as a parable of the conflict between the settled agricultural or urban communities and the nomadic pastoral life. Another explanation was that Cain accounted for the warlike Kenite tribe.

Ch. 4- ends with a fragment of a very ancient war song ,the hymn of Lamech, a verse which glorifies vengeance.

In the last verse of Ch ;- we are introduced to Seth,the third child of Adam.Kis name means 'appointed'.He is born in the image and likeness of his 'father Adam,gust as Adam had been created in the image and likeness of God.It is interesting that Seth's son _Enosh, is said to be the first to invoke the name of Yahv;eh after the preceding accounts of estrangement from God.In a way too we are all like Seth,made according to a holy plan of God but sharing in Adam's weakness.But at the same time we can all open ourselves to God again and call upon his name. Seth could be considered as a founder member of a people of God.He belongs to and lives in a fallen world as we do.The line does in fact pro-ceed from Seth to Noah,from Noah to Abraham and from Abraham to Christ. Seth in himself is not really a historical figure but he is a type of the minority,made in God's image but with tendencies to sin who nevertheless try to listen to God's voice., Here in the early chapters of the bible there is an option which will be repeated again and again, an opt-ion between the way of the murderous Cain and the way of the obedient son, the way of Abraham, Moses, the prophets, Christ and his Church leading finally to the heavenly Jerusalem.

The story of the 'angel marriages ' at the beginning of Ch,6 is a mythological account of the deterioration of things. These demonic liaisons would suggest that evil now seems to be more than human; it is uncontrollable. The story is placed here as a prologue to that of the Flood. Iahweh is shown as having second thoughts on the wisdom of having shared his creativity with humans in the first place! There was only one thing holding him back from the universal suppression of his creation, and that is the exceptional nature of Noah - Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord. The story of the Flood is a way of demonstrating God's judgement on sin. Noah and the ark are symbols of God's intention to save a minority from destruction. So Noah is in direct descent to those who walk with God. In that sense he is neither a Jew nor a Christian:he is a symbol of the righteous man of every race - Hindu,Mohammedan or Buddhist. Noah is also a symbol of Our Lord's sacrifice - one good life accepted in place of many sinful lives. The ark is a type of the church and also of the waters of baptism. (I. PetJ

the story of the Flood is based on the Babylonian myth of which the central figure is Utnapishtim as we find it in the Gilgamesh Epic. There is some archaeological evidence for a very extensive flood in the Persian Gulf area in ancient times. The memory of such a flood could certainly have lived on in folklore. The story points up a moral; there will always be a divine judgement; on human activity. God now arrives at a compromise :he realises that humankind will inevitably misuse their freedom and thwart the beauty of the divine plan, so God decides to adapt to the new circumstances. This time round there won't be the same tranquility or order that God intended,

Humans may kill animals for food and so we will find that the peace of paradise will not return until the latter days. (Is.Ch11...)

This then is the world of our experience , not an ideal world as God intended it to be. In this new situation if man transgresses a law he must be punished. The bible here recognises capital punishment .The Hebrews thought that life resided in the blood and that was why life belonged to God. The picture is grim enough. The writer sees people refraining from evil or murder through fear of the law, or fear of the consequences. But all along the line and on to this rather gloomy picture the image of God's grace is superimposed. Now we find that Noah, good man though he is, falls from his pedestal - he is guilty of indiscretion in his use of wine, the fruit of the vine

So even Noah. has his limitations, which possibly suggests to the writer that God does indeed need to do something more such as giving renewed spiritual impetus in the person of Abraham. God needs a warmer response from his creatures, he wants to restore the fellowship that had been impaired.He wishes to recall the prodigal son.Moreover he wants to reveal to the world his true nature,a God of love and mercy.Now the divine plan begins to take shape.A nucleus will be formed on which God will work to realise his designs.He will choose from one particular race an individual,Abraham son of Terah, and he will make him the foundation of his people.This people will have the tremendous task to show in their lives and fortunes what God is like and so mankind will be recalled to their original state. A series of covenants with God will serve to further this plan and reveal to the world the face of God.It will be an uphill struggle; some of the greatest prophets will meet with hostility but eventually God will even send his only son to reconcile the world to himself. So the covenant with Noah is a covenant of grace and

hope and the rainbow in the sky will remind people of this mercy by contrast with the war-bow a symbol of vengeance.

At the beginning of Oh 11 we read the par-able of the Tower of Babel. This provides fresh evidence of the sinful state of mankind. The story in itself is aetiological - it explains in a popular way the origin of nations and languages. The idea for the story would seem to have been suggested by the Babylonian temple or ziggurat and the name Babel is synonymous with Babylon.

Ch. 11 includes a genealogy which serves to bridge the gap between the primeval history and the age of the Patriarchs to which we turn next.